Tycoon Li Ka-shing said in Singapore that nurturing a responsible citizenry is an essential requirement before democracy can lay down its roots and flourish.

Speaking at the official opening of Singapore Management University’s $15 million (HK$71.58 million) Li Ka-shing Library, East Asia’s wealthiest person said: “In Asia, we have all benefited from a mass change, under a new context of ‘reform and openness,’ a wave so forceful that it ushered in hope and optimism.”

But “how to build in the hearts and minds of progressive young men and women the will as well as the means to carry our true hope for the future... is a commitment that goes far beyond equal participation, individual rights and economic opportunities, but must be attended by a spirit of public duty.”

Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was also at the opening.

In 2002, Li, together with his listed ports-to-property global conglomerate Hutchison Whampoa, donated $19.5 million to the university — at the time the largest ever gift to a Singapore university.

In addition to funding the library, money was set aside to fund scholarships for eight students from Hong Kong and the mainland.

Li said that if a society wants to mirror the sustainable dynamism and the flexibility in other successful democracies, it will not be enough to just introduce a democratic mechanism that serves the rights of their citizens. He said freedom and democracy are values cherished by every nation, but the road to true liberalism is always a long one.

“I love freedom, and I support democracy, but freedom and democracy must be built on a foundation of law and order,” Li said.

“Democracy is a most noble cause. Thus we must not succumb to the belief that by merely providing the mechanism of participation we have achieved our goal. After all, approximated truth is not a species of truth but a species of falsehood.”

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