This is President Rosenberg’s sixth annual blog chronicling the TUC-FIU partnership, the annual China Commencement and our students in China. To read his first entry from 2015, click here.

How nice to settle in to another graduation in Tianjin, this bustling industrial city of 14 million just a two-hour drive east of Beijing. There we were on stage with our soon-to-be graduates, facing us from their seats in front of the stage, and behind them their proud and aging parents and grandparents, most of whom in an earlier era had endured the worst days of Maoist extremes.

New and old were in sharp contrast at this commencement. Tianjin University of Commerce is now graced with a new president, an optics engineer who is a veteran teacher and administrator — Baozhen Ge. In earlier meetings with the university leader, he stressed the importance for the university of expanding programs at the graduate level and emphasized the significance of ties to FIU as a critical element of the globalization and internationalization of TUC. (TUC’s approachable leader was proudly wearing one of our FIU ties at the commencement ceremony!)

A founder of the program, Vice Mayor Wang once again showed his pride in the program by reciting the accomplishments of recent TUC-FIU graduates. The vice mayor is a big-hearted man who beams with pride about the good things that have happened as a consequence of the TUC-FIU partnership. His presence complemented that of FIU veteran Professor Percival Darby, who serves as the FIU senior officer on site in Tianjin. I first met “Val” in the go-go years (1980s) of Caribbean programming for the Latin American and Caribbean Center. And here he is now in China, making our program there “go” with the same grace and sense of humor that I remember from our first meeting back in the day!

In the robing room shortly before the ceremony began, I spoke with several student ushers who were either first- or second-year students in the program. I asked each how they liked the TUC-FIU partnership and what they planned to do after graduation. For the most part, they were reserved in their responses, perhaps because it may have been the first opportunity they had to speak English in an informal setting.
Among the some 225 graduates this year is Shanshan Wu, the class valedictorian. She is typical of this generation of Chinese students — hard working, driven and proud. One foot in the future, ready to compete, and one in the tradition that is a key driver of Chinese culture — reverence for parents and family. Her commitment to her family derives from the Confucian value of “xiao” or filial piety.

As recently reported in a major foreign affairs publication (Foreign Affairs, Vol. 94, No. 3, 2015) there is considerable debate over whether China will grow “old” before it grows “rich.”

Here’s a number: China can expect more than 450 million people over the age of 60 by the year 2050. Who will take care of this army of elderly in China?

As President Ge and I stood on stage for the obligatory photo with each graduate, I could not help but notice right in front of me two seated would-be graduates who were sobbing uncontrollably. I had not seen this at earlier graduations there in Tianjin. Clearly for them, a new day was dawning with the graduation and the cascading emotions of our ceremony had gotten the best of them. I tried not to let their tears dampen what was an otherwise happy and fulfilling day for the entire FIU team.

Special kudos to Shu Fang, a popular and charismatic young member of Dean Mike Hampton’s excellent team. He managed commencement proceedings and support staff from our program there as if he were a veteran of hundreds of these complicated ceremonies.

So on this layered but happy day in Tianjin, as more than 200 families celebrated their FIU milestone, and parents and grandparents rejoiced in their child’s and grandchild’s accomplishment, we all stood on the precipice of a new era for our graduating students. Like so many proud parents, I get charged up with anxiety and expectations generated when so many hopes and opportunities collide in a brief, relatively intense moment such as graduation. I feel very blessed to have a small role in the lives of these and so many other students, and this graduation was no exception!