

TEACHING & LEARNING

# Nobel Laureate James A. Robinson Speaks at NTU on Why Nations Fail

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Group photo of Prof. Robinson, NTU faculty, and students.

As part of National Taiwan University's Raymond Soong Chair Professorship of Distinguished Research Lecture Series, NTU welcomed James A. Robinson, recipient of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, to present a lecture at NTU on December 17, 2025. His talk, titled *Why Nations Fail*, drew a large audience of faculty and students eager to engage with one of the world's leading intellectuals on political economy and institutional development.

Prof. Robinson is widely recognized as a preeminent scholar in political economy, institutional economics, and comparative development. His research has fundamentally reshaped how scholars understand the causes of national prosperity and poverty by demonstrating how political and economic institutions—rather than geography or culture alone—determine long-term development outcomes. In 2024, he was awarded the Nobel Prize jointly with Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, in recognition of their pioneering contributions to the theory



James A. Robinson, a Professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, has long examined the relationships among power distribution, democratization, colonial legacies, and economic development. His research has made a profound impact not only within academia but also throughout public discourse and policy practice, addressing some of the most pressing issues facing societies today.

of institutional formation and evolution, and their influential analysis of how political institutions shape economic growth and inequality.

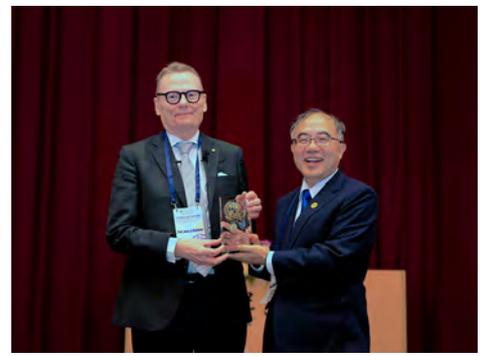
In his lecture, Robinson traced the institutional roots of economic growth through vivid historical examples, beginning with the British Industrial Revolution. He urged the audience to look beyond technology and ask a deeper question: *Why are some societies more capable of innovation and technological dynamism than others?* Economic growth, he argued, depends not just on scientific breakthroughs, but also on whether societies create institutional environments that encourage and protect innovation.

To illustrate this point, Robinson turned to the invention of the light bulb, emphasizing that the patent system is itself a critical institutional design. Its central function, he explained, is to provide clear and credible incentives for innovators—ensuring that creativity and effort are rewarded, thereby sustaining long-term technological progress. Such systems exemplify inclusive economic institutions, which expand participation, uphold the rule of law, maintain fair competition, and allow talent and ingenuity to flourish.

Robinson further argued that inclusive economic institutions cannot exist in isolation from political structures. Durable innovation incentives, he noted, require political systems in which power is sufficiently constrained, and yet where the state is capable of enforcing laws and protecting property rights. Drawing a stark comparison between North and South Korea, Robinson demonstrated how two societies with similar geography and cultural origins can diverge dramatically due to institutional choices—underscoring that economic success is, at its core, a product of political and institutional decisions.

The lecture, hosted by NTU's International School of Political Science and Economics, was followed by an in-depth discussion moderated by Spyros Maniatis, Dean of the School. The lively exchange between Robinson and the audience fostered deep reflections on the role of institutions in shaping global development trajectories.

Currently a Professor at the Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, Robinson continues to explore the intersections of power distribution, democratization, colonial legacies, and economic development. His research continues to make a profound impact not only within academia, but also in public discourse and policy debates worldwide today.



NTU President Wen-Chang Chen (right) presents the Raymond Soong Chair Professorship of Distinguished Research trophy to Prof. Robinson.



Highlights of Prof. James A. Robinson's public lecture "Why Nations Fail." Intro-video of Mariana Gabrielle Cangco Reyes.