

So close and yet so far

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



Photo by Hector Yanez

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RECENTLY, I HAD the honor to join a visit to Shenzhen, led by former chief executive Tung Chee-hwa, under the auspices of Our Hong Kong Foundation. The purpose is to better understand the recent development in Shenzhen, especially in innovation and technology, and the opportunities available to Hong Kong.

When I was living in the United States, I had always admired Tung's dedication to Hong Kong. He is close to 80 years old and can easily choose to live comfortably in retirement but instead he is dedicating himself to seek what he thinks is the best for the SAR's future.

My first visit to Shenzhen was 38 years ago, while en route from Hong Kong to Guangzhou to visit universities there right after obtaining my PhD. Since then I have visited the city many times and have witnessed the dramatic growth and transformation of the city from a stopover en route from Hong Kong to Guangzhou to the current mega-city and Silicon Valley of China.

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology developed an Industry, Education and Research building in Shenzhen with Peking University and the Shenzhen government in 1999, the first Hong Kong university to do so.

I had also visited Huawei's headquarters, the Hong Kong-owned hard-drive maker SAE TDK's factory, the Southern University of Science and Technology of China, and of course DJI, the world leading drone company founded by a HKUST alumnus, Frank Wang.

Despite all that, this recent visit had some interesting surprises for me.

We visited the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Shenzhen campus, which opened a mere two years ago but has already recruited many top-notch faculty members from around the world, and now has more than 2,000 students. It offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees, and despite charging almost twice the regular tuition of other Chinese universities, has seen both number and quality of applications on the rise every year.

After visiting the university, we went to Mission Hills, which is known to many in Hong Kong mainly as a golf resort, but its developer now has even grander dreams of turning the resort into something bigger.

The MH mall, one of the largest in Shenzhen, houses a dedicated space for creative arts for Hong Kong entrepreneurs, many of whom are commuting from Hong Kong. With the huge difference in rent between the two, opening a shop in the latter seems to be an easy decision for many.

Another first for me was a visit to BGI, one of the world's leading genome sequencing centers and contributors to scientific breakthroughs. BGI played a key role in identifying the genomic sequence for SARS and the H7N9 virus.

Its branch center in Tai Po is now the world's



largest genomics data bank, partly because of Hong Kong's special status as being an international city but also part of China. Its chief operating officer is from Hong Kong.

Is Hong Kong set to lose out with Shenzhen rising at such a break-neck pace? Instead of a threat, I see the rise of our neighbor as a prime opportunity for us to shine and prosper together.

Hong Kong's close proximity to Shenzhen is a blessing. Many Hongkongers are already taking advantage of the creative and entrepreneurial opportunities in Shenzhen by simply commuting there.

A number of ambitious Chinese technology companies who are seeking to expand to the world have set up research and development centers in Hong Kong, and are keen to use the SAR as a base to recruit English-speaking world class talent.

Then there are other well-known Hong Kong advantages: low tax, mature legal system and free

flow of information. DJI's flagship shop is set to open in Causeway Bay this month, and it has rented substantial space in the Hong Kong Science and Technology Parks. Founder Wang and I are serving together on the Advisory Committee of Hong Kong's new Innovation and Technology Bureau.

After this trip, I can't help but have a feeling of "so close and yet so far" – both in geographic proximity and development in innovation and technology in the two cities.

But I am also more optimistic about opportunities for the two cities to work together. The challenge, is how to follow up: our government and society in general but our young people in particular, must find the courage to seize the opportunity. Yes, Shenzhen is a growing threat and potential competitor. But threats can be turned into opportunities.

Maybe a little threat is exactly what we need to keep our city going.