

Scholarly pursuits

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheung 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.



HAVE ALWAYS BEEN an admirer of the Rhodes Scholarship, which seeks to bring the world's best and brightest minds to the best university in the UK.

The list of Rhodes Scholars features many prominent names, such as former US president Bill Clinton. Several years ago, I heard about a new project in the making – the Schwarzman Scholarship, which seeks to bring the same excellence of Rhodes to China in a partnership with Tsinghua. I was curious.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the newly built Schwarzman College in Beijing, and I was very impressed. Starting its first class this year, SC houses around 100 master-level students (three are from Hong Kong), and its full array of facilities makes it almost feel like a luxury enclave.

Tuition and lodging are all free, made possible with a generous donation from US businessman Stephen Schwarzman, one of the world's richest men.

The scale of SC is immense – its target endowment is US\$500 million (HK\$3.9 billion), with US\$300 million already raised. SC's advisory board features prominent names such as former British PM Tony Blair, and its academic advisory committee also features many luminary academics, some of whom I

know personally. By happy coincidence, shortly after my visit SC executive director Nigel Thrift reached out to me and arranged a meeting with Schwarzman.

To my surprise, Schwarzman and I do share a few common traits in our backgrounds; we both spent time at Yale (he as an undergrad and I as a professor, at a later date), and we have some common acquaintances, eg, Yale presidents Rick Levin and Peter Salovey, and Hong Kong's Antony Leung, who used to work at Blackstone.

The goal of SC, for Schwarzman, is to give the world's best minds the opportunity to develop their leadership skills and professional networks with their peers. US-China relations, for him, will be a subject of paramount importance for many years to come, and young leaders of tomorrow should learn as much as they can on China.

Tasked Schwarzman whether the Scholars would be in a sheltered environment and whether a one-year stay would be enough to explore the many aspects of Chinese society. He said he had thought about this: every Schwarzman Scholar is assigned a local "buddy" and the Scholars are themselves very proactive in traveling to see different regions of China.

In any case, I suggested HKUST would be happy to host the Scholars to visit Hong Kong to experience a different dimension of China and in return perhaps SC can also host short visits from our students. One year is also the ideal length for most applicants as a gap year to broaden their horizons between undergraduate and further professional studies and careers.

After visiting SC and meeting with Schwarzman, many thoughts have crossed my mind. First, Schwarzman choosing China to be the destination for this grand project speaks volumes on the importance



Tony Chan with Stephen Schwarzman.

of China globally. The project also has the support from the top of the Chinese government, none other than President Xi Jinping, who has said that China intends to build one to two world class universities within a decade, and that it needs something like SC to get it there. Hong Kong can be inspired or be envious.

Second, the elite Scholars have decided to take a year out of their life and career to learn about China. The concept of a gap year is still alien in Hong Kong, as our culture is that this would be either a waste of time or a lost opportunity to pursue one's career (and the associated income).

But the Scholars are pursuing a higher ambition – to learn about a rising nation and be a future leader.

This is what university education should be all about. It is much bigger than grades, and the dollar sign in the first pay check!



I am happy to see that MIT has recently set up its first global Innovation Hub in Hong Kong, but I also noticed that Apple just announced that it is setting up an R&D center in Shenzhen (instead of Hong Kong).

Will the next Schwarzman set up a similar project in our city?

In this ever competitive world, we cannot be sitting on our past laurels or we risk being marginalized.