

# Overseas Education



## 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.



**SPENT MY LUNAR** New Year holiday in the United States mainly to see family and friends. But my visit was overshadowed by the US government announcement on January 27 that it would ban people from seven primarily Muslim countries from entering the United States: Iran, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia.

Dubbed the “Muslim ban,” this policy sent shockwaves through the world and American society.

Many friends I met were disturbed by the ban. One is Michael Moritz, chairman of Sequoia Capital, one of the world’s premier venture capital firms, and HKUST’s commencement speaker three years ago.

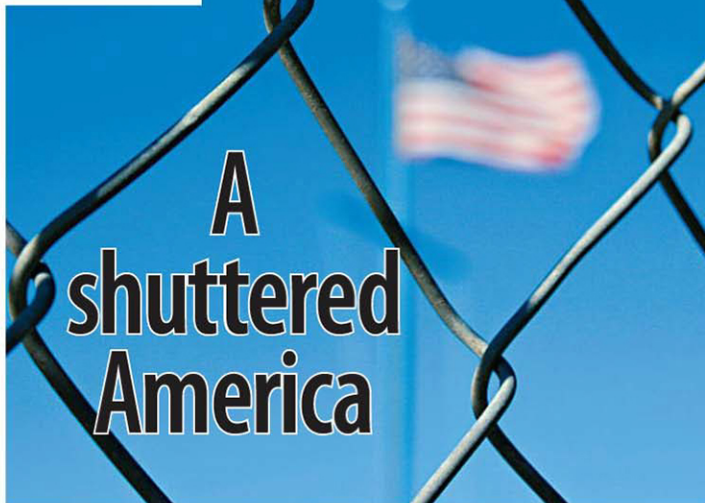
Our conversation quickly turned to the ban. Moritz is a US immigrant (from the UK), but more importantly he has funded many start-ups founded by immigrants, including people from the banned countries. He had just published an article in the *Financial Times* criticizing the ban.

In the article, he said that many Silicon Valley leaders were also alarmed by the ban, including CEOs of Facebook, Google, Tesla and Uber (among others).

Their employees are worried about their own status and the CEOs have to reassure them, but above all they have to reassure their employees of their companies’ principles, and their public opposition to the ban.

Moritz bluntly called the executive order a “destructive order.” Many great inventions and innovations in Silicon Valley were made by immigrants from these banned countries. Steve Jobs’ biological father was a Muslim from Syria!

While it was claimed the ban would protect national security, the irony is that the perpetrators of past terrorist attacks on the United States, such as 9/11 and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, were either not from these banned countries, or not Muslims. Moritz quoted famed US novelist Philip Roth from a recent *New Yorker* article that President Donald Trump is “ignorant of government, of history, of science, of phi-



losophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency.”

It is quite remarkable that a leading figure in Silicon Valley has chosen to speak out against the ban, not only from humanistic grounds, but also from an economic perspective, stating that such a ban is not only against US traditional values, but also will hurt its long-term economic future.

While some in Hong Kong may find the whole controversy irrelevant, the truth is not quite so simple.

The Committee of 100 (founded by Yo-Yo Ma and IM Pei among others, and of which I am a member), an organization of Chinese Americans for the promotion of better relationship between the two countries, and also to advocate for the rights of Chinese Americans in the United States, issued a statement opposing the ban, referring to the infamous US “Chinese Exclusion Act” — which banned Chinese from becoming US citizens in 1882 and was only revoked in the 1960s.

“Because of that history, we always remember the Chinese Exclusion Act as specific communities are deemed unwelcome ... As the nation considers how to define itself, the C100 urges our leaders to make good on our profound experiment in self-governance that

continues to inspire peoples the world over.” These are very timely and appropriate words indeed.

In addition, many senior US academic leaders (including several I met) have publicly indicated their grave concern about the ban.

They are opposed to it on principle, but are also afraid that their universities will fall behind in international recruitment. Some even say that, given the recent rhetoric and animosity between the United States and China, a ban on Chinese students is not as farfetched as it may have appeared only a few months ago.

What does this mean for Hong Kong? I think there are some parallels. Immigration has been a political issue in Hong Kong recently, primarily as it relates to mainlanders. Hong Kong needs talents just like the United States does, and like the United States, there are people in our community who would like to be exclusive, rather than inclusive. But history has taught us that societies which close themselves off will not do well in the long run. Unfortunately, there are far too few amongst us, like Michael Moritz and C100, who are brave enough to speak up on such controversial issues.

That is what true freedom of speech and democracy should enable us to do.