The price of greatness

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.

WORLD-RENOWNED MOLECULAR BIOLOGIST, geneticist and zoologist James Watson visited Hong Kong last month, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology was very fortunate to have him pass by and give our students and faculty a lecture on cancer treatment.

Watson is a living legend in the science world; he and his colleagues Francis Crick and Rosalind Franklin are credited for co-discovering the structure of DNA in 1953, when he was just 25.

Their discovery would later win them the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1962 "for their discoveries concerning the molecular structure of nucleic acids and its significance for information transfer in living material."

I had a breakfast meeting with Watson on the day of his lecture, and I was impressed by how energetic and quick-thinking he was when we discussed innovation and science, even at the age of 89.

Having previously served as the director of the US's Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, a world leader in research into cancer and genetics, for almost 40 years, he is still very fond of his time and accomplishments there – he even gave me an autographed collector's book on the lab as a gift.

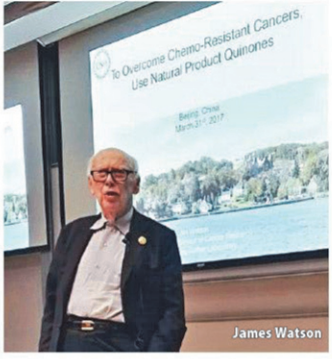
Watson's best-known publication is the *Double Helix*, where he details the sometimes painful story of not only the discovery of the structure of DNA, but also the personalities, conflicts and controversy surrounding their work.

One of our postdoctoral researchers brought an original copy of the *Double Helix* and Watson gladly signed it – I believe this copy is a collector's item now.

Indeed, Watson is a man who never shies away from controversy: a confident and opinionated man, he is always willing to tell what he thinks is the truth about controversial subjects, and knows that other people may not agree with him.

In 2007, he dropped a bombshell suggesting that race and intelligence might be interrelated – which saw him immediately ridiculed by the world and would cost him his job at the lab.

Three years ago, he sold his Nobel medal to raise



US$4.1 million (HK$31.98 million), partly to help his personal finance.

But the person who bought it – who happened to be one of Russia's richest men, Alisher Usmanov – promptly returned the medal to him, saying that he deserved his award and it was unacceptable that a man of his caliber should be compelled to sell it.

Immediately before his visit to HKUST, Watson visited some institutions in Shenzhen to explore whether he would participate in some of the city's ambitious plans in developing science.

Shenzhen is trying to bring top science leaders in to spur their science and technology development.

I know several other Nobel Laureates who have already been signed up by Shenzhen, including Robert Grubbs (Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 2005), Shuji Nakamura (Nobel Prize in Physics, 2014), Arieh Warshel (Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 2013), and Brian Kobilka (Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 2012).

I have a feeling that if Hong Kong does not take a proactive approach in the race, we will soon be left behind.

I was most struck by Watson's honesty during his visit, and a number of difficult philosophical questions come to mind.

Is it right for a wider community to label someone as an outcast simply due to our differences in views and values? Is it right to boycott his science because of his controversial position on unrelated matters?

How do we reconcile such reactions with the notion of academic freedom and freedom of speech? And how do we preserve innovation in the course of doing so?

Are we ready to embrace the controversy that comes with greatness?

These are all soul searching questions for us.