

Innovation through my lens

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.



MY NEW BOOK *Out of the Box*, a compilation of my last year's articles from *East Weekly* and *The Standard*, was released last month at the travel-themed Hong Kong Book Fair.

To mark the launch, event organizer HKTDC invited me to co-host a seminar on global innovation culture with Hang Lung Group CEO Philip Chen, in which we discussed the different innovation ecosystems in places I have visited during my career and their connection with local culture and traditions.

The seminar began with Chen's curiosity about my serving on academic boards and advisory committees at universities around the world.

One was Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah University of Science and Technology.

Though Saudi Arabia holds some of the world's biggest oil reserves, the king decided that the kingdom needed modernization, especially in

innovation and technology, which led to the founding of KAUST. Despite its youth (it was founded in 2009), it is steadily gaining a reputation for innovation and social development.

Its faculty and student body is very international and it is leading the country in liberalizing female education by relaxing rules about the wearing of hijabs and allowing girls to study in formerly boys-only classrooms.

By contrast, in nearby Israel, heavy government investment in innovation over the past 30 years has transformed the country into a "start-up nation."

Investment money from Hong Kong in Israel has increased dramatically over the past few years.

It has been observed that Jewish and Chinese cultures are very similar in their outlooks on education and family, but differ significantly in their approach to innovation and challenging authority from a young age.

That may be one of the reasons why, despite being roughly the same size as Hong Kong in terms of

population and number of universities, Israel's tech industry is growing much faster than our own. The lesson for us? Better late than never!

Chen and I then shifted our focus to Japan, long a favorite destination for Hong Kong tourists.

Despite being an undisputed global tech leader and having nurtured many Nobel laureates, Japan is currently falling behind the international innovation and internalization pace. When I was still a university student, I was envious of how easily my Japanese classmates were able to join large corporations in their home country.

Unfortunately, having long resisted internationalization so locals could more easily find jobs, such resistance has undermined Japan's long-term economic development. A recent survey shows the business start-up rate in Japan stands at a sluggish 4 percent.

This indicates that the country has yet to step outside its comfort zone when attempting to rejuvenate its economy.

Aside from

innovation, Chen and I also tied in with the fair's theme by sharing some of our travel experiences.

My most unforgettable trips were undoubtedly those I made to India and the now defunct USSR in the 1980s and 1990s, when I witnessed first hand political drama at a national scale.

When I visited the USSR in the late 1980s, shortly before the August coup of 1991, the country was already in disarray.

The resultant food shortages meant that tourist restaurants could serve only caviar, eggs and tomatoes – despite a rich selection in the menu!

When I was in India in 1992, religious violence between Hindus and Muslims swept the whole country with hundreds being killed. I learned something about India's long history as a result.

Having been privileged to visit so many different places over the years, I can't help but notice that the speed of innovation and technological development in many countries is outpacing that of Hong Kong.

How can we best anticipate rather than miss out on such trends?

As there has never been a winning formula for cultivating innovation, we must strive to stay competitive by creating an innovation ecosystem and a global view of innovation.

Ultimately, only by learning from other more innovative and technologically thriving countries can we begin to accelerate our economic growth.



Tony Chan with Hang Lung Group CEO Philip Chen.