

The tables have turned

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.



TWO WEEKS AGO, I attended the Association of Pacific Rim Universities APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) University Leaders' Forum in Danang, Vietnam.

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology is a member of the association (whose headquarters recently moved from Singapore to the HKUST campus) and I am on its steering committee.

The theme was sustainability and employability challenges posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

About 60 university presidents and vice presidents and corporate leaders from around the globe attended the forum – including Tsinghua University, CUHK, Vietnam National University at Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, KAIST, Seoul National University, the Far Eastern Federal University (in Russia), Elsevier, Wiley, Johnson & Johnson, and Malong Technologies.

Vietnam is a young and developing country with a median age of around 30, and I have a feeling that it will become a prime student recruitment target for Hong Kong universities soon.

After the forum, I attended the APEC CEO Summit, which was well covered by the media.

Here I just want to give my own impressions. First, I noticed that even though many heads of states were listed in the program, not all actually showed up to speak – for example, Shinzo Abe (Japan), Vladimir Putin (Russia) and Enrique Pena Nieto (Mexico).

But many did, including Xi Jinping (China), Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor (Hong Kong), Donald Trump (USA), Malcolm Turnbull (Australia), Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand) and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines).

Many CEOs and COOs were also there: WalMart, FedEx, UPS, Airbnb, WTO, World Bank, PwC, JPMorgan, and AIB.

Our CE represented Hong Kong well; she was talking at ease and her stance on free trade won her much applause.

But the most anticipated speeches were by Trump and Xi. This was the first time I got to listen live to Trump speaking, and, content aside, I think he is a very effective speaker and communicates well.

I was impressed by his speech writer, who had the difficult task of crafting his tough messages in diplomatic terms. The following quotes are typical: "I have to take care of America first, just as you have to take care of your countries first too" and "America has been taken advantage of in the past, but I don't blame you, I blame my predecessor."

Whether such rhetoric was received as Trump intended is anybody's guess.

The biggest rounds of applause went to Xi; some of them were probably due to the fact that the Chinese presence at the summit was big (simultaneous translation was provided in three languages only: Chinese, Vietnamese and English).

While I felt that the energy level of Xi's speech was not quite at the same level as his speech at Davos earlier this year, there is no denying that his message struck a chord with those present.

Maybe his speech had some repetition from that, as well as the one at the 19th national congress of the Communist Party of China.

I could tell that the audience genuinely agreed with his message that free trade and openness are keys to global development.

Leaders in the APEC region were all looking to build better economic and political relationships with China.

The venue in Danang was newly built and it could barely host enough seats for the participants. A number of Hong Kong reporters told me that they were allowed in only when Lam got to speak.

I had never visited Danang before and my only memory of the city was that it was where the Vietnam War began, almost exactly 50 years ago.

When the United States pulled out in the 1970s, few thought that the United States and Vietnam would be on talking terms again.

China was Vietnam's ally during that war. America, back then, was the champion of a free world, while China was seen as a backward, closed country.

How things have changed today!

The irony was not lost on many participants, with Vietnam being a closer ally with the United States than China, and Trump talking about "fairness" and "being taken advantage of," while Xi preached collaboration and openness on the same stage. What will happen in another 50 year time? That's anybody's guess.



Tony Chan attending Donald Trump's speech.