

Hong Kong high on the world stage

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.



THE ANNUAL WINTER World Economic Forum took place recently in Davos. Despite the name, the WEF is way more than “economic.” Founded in 1971, it is today the most media-covered event in the world.

Aside from senior business figures, political leaders as well as educators, artists and socially-oriented non-governmental organizations all attended to discuss a variety of matters concerning the world today.

I attended for the sixth time as the president of HKUST to the Global University Leaders Forum.

The theme for this year’s Davos was “Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World.”

As many speakers noted in the forum, the world we live in today is as divided as ever; technological and knowledge divides have split many societies wide apart, and many are worried about the changes globalization and technological advances bring upon them.

What role do universities play to that end? At the

GULF meeting, more than 30 presidents from world renowned universities – such as Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Princeton, University of Tokyo, Tsinghua and Fudan – spoke on the need for universities to be part of the solution, instead of the problem.

We must engage the society we serve, and lead the way to address inclusiveness and inequality as disruptive innovations have displaced many.

The rise of populism and anti-intellectualism threatens to shake the very ground that universities are built on. These problems cannot be solved by any party alone and we must work together.

French president Emmanuel Macron’s speech was one of the major highlights this year. When he spoke, the room was packed; many see him as the new leader of Europe, and he sounded like one.

“Disruption from digital businesses will destroy millions of jobs, and if those companies do not help finance retraining of people affected, how can I explain that [to those people],” he declared.

That came in stark contrast with Theresa May, who preached an open Britain to a half empty room.

There could only be so much substance and enthusiasm when the audience wasn’t interested in an isolated, post-Brexit Britain.

Even Trump, who spoke in the WEF for the first time as president of the United States (he was never invited as a businessman before), sounded less provocative and protectionist than usual. The audience clearly did

not show too much affection for him; when Charles Schwab introduced him as someone “[whose] strong leadership is open to misconceptions and biased interpretations,” the room was filled with hisses and boos.

Nevertheless, Trump was a very good communicator, thanks in no small part to probably having an excellent speech writer. “America first does not mean America alone”, he said. “America is open for business, and we are competitive once again.” He took credit for the recently passed tax reform, as well as the roaring stock market, saying: “Millions of workers have received tax cut bonuses from their employers in amounts as large as US\$3,000 (HK\$23,400).”

Apple has only recently pledged to invest US\$350 billion over the next five years in the United States.

What about Hong Kong? Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor led a delegation to the WEF – the first time in six years that our chief executive attended – and participated in forums with the central bankers of England and Japan, as well as the head of the IMF.

She presented a strong message that Hong Kong was open for free trade and global investment. If Hong Kong wants to continue its claim as a world city, our leader ought to be present at where the global influencers are. Our chief executive did that.

Perhaps it is time for our media friends to be less critical and recognize that such trips are essential for our city’s stature.



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