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Translation:

At the crossroads of cultures and worlds

Bianka Siwińska speaks with Prof. Tony Chan, President of Hong Kong University of Science & Technology.

Q--Professor, your University, founded only in 1991, is now one of the best in Asia and the world. According to the QS rankings you've placed 40th in the world, 5th in Asia, and 1st in the world ranking of young universities (existing less than 50 years). Similarly, in the THE rankings you are 4th in THE Under 50. Equally excellent is your position in the Shanghai Ranking (252-300), with 39th under the Engineering group. Additionally, your school also locked up the 14th place in the world in the prestigious Global MBA Ranking publication published by the "Financial Times". Rankings are our compass in the intricate reality of global academic quality. How important is this statement to you?

A--Very important. They are [a] very comforting, even if sometimes insufficiently precise, calibrating tool. They are also an invaluable help in establishing international cooperation. For example, if we consider the University of Warsaw, or the Warsaw University of Technology—and we don't know each other—then rankings provide us with at least a general sense of who we're dealing with. For HKUST, we often look to rankings: global and national. However, we do not blindly follow rankings, especially in case of managing the university. We do not set objectives on the basis that this year we have to go up five times in any of the [previously mentioned] statements. We tell our faculty, that their responsibility is to do the best research and to teach the best way [they can]. Our rankings are a result of this process.

Q--What is your recipe for an excellent university?

A--This recipe must harmonize many factors together. Certainly one of them, and very basic, is funding. Importantly there is permanent government support, but we still need support from the private sector—not just from business and industry, but also from individual donations. Money is a necessity, but alone is insufficient for the development of world-class universities. The university should be properly positioned. The university must also be responsive to today's demands.

Q--How [do we] understand this?

A--HKUST is the youngest university in Hong Kong. It was founded in 1991. We knew, that when China would open up to Hong Kong—and it did 6 years later—many factories and crafts would move there. And so it happened—very quickly indeed. Hong Kong needed to bet on its knowledge and build its intellectual capital. HKUST became the first research university. We wanted to have a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), we wanted to have a Stanford University—for it was only this way we could build a foundation for the next Google or Apple. That's how we saw our future—instead of sewing clothes or making cheap versions of other simple products. This was our motivation and inspiration, upon which we built our university.

Another part of positioning is the fact that Hong Kong enjoys a unique status in the global context. Many citizens of Hong Kong are Chinese. We are culturally in tune with Asia—we watch Korean and Japanese films, and deeply understand Asia's engagement to Confucianism. It is equally definitive as is Christianity to the West. Simultaneously, we are very Western in our aims and aspirations. Thus we, inevitably, position ourselves as the most important research university in Hong Kong, the most open and international. A place where East meets West.

Q-- So you don't feel like (HKUST) is an entirely Chinese university?

A-- If we defined ourselves as a Chinese university, we would have never come so far. [On the other hand,] if we based ourselves solely on Western patterns, we also would not be what we are today. There are many—more or less successful—universities based on Stanford. We are aware of our unique position at a crossroads of cultures and worlds, and we try to implement this thinking into every level of our actions.

Q-- [Can you give] an example of such implementation?

A-- For example, when we recruit [our] research staff, we consider applicants from around the world. There are barely 20% Hong Kongers here [in our faculty]. There are many Chinese who left China many years ago, got their doctorate from Harvard or Stanford, worked there in the research or industry sectors for 15 years, and now returned because the terms we offer them are outstanding. [Our terms] can compete with the best universities in the world. Other professors come from all over the world, with a significant part of our lecturers coming from the United States. We hire only the best, utilizing outsourcing services from professional headhunters. And thus we are able to “intercept” a few outstanding researchers: deans and heads of institutes at Columbia University in New York, or from Singapore's NTU. Of course, this works both ways and the best universities in the West employ some of our professors as well.

Q-- This means that a strategy of openness to the world and investing in quality has brought good results?

A-- When we started this university 30 years ago, nobody knew what would happen to China—would they fail? Now, China is the second most powerful economy in the world. They heavily invest in universities, science and innovation. HKUST is in a great position to benefit from this. 30 years ago we could say to ourselves: we would be a local university to cover the needs of Hong Kong people. We would employ local professors and teach in Chinese. [Had that happened], when we became a part of the People's Republic, we would've been buried by the mass of other universities. Now we have our own system, complete freedom of action, ability to exchange ideas and academic freedom.

Q-- To what extent is this freedom important?

A-- Tremendous. It is absolutely necessary to establish learning at the highest level. In contrast to many other Chinese universities, we do not have to ask anyone for permission if we want to come to Poland. Without freedom, we could not gain the best researchers. They won't go somewhere where they feel like they can't do what they want—with absolute liberty. This is a problem for many newly established universities in ambitious countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, where investment have been lacking.. Both countries benefit from a growing global economy, and their governments are able to invest more in human capital, but the system will always define these universities as part of the ministry. Alas, best universities in the world do not belong to the government. This [kind of thinking] just does not work.

Q-- In the world there is a debate about the need to increase the participation of women in science and technology. Will HKUST endeavor in this direction?

A-- We believe in this need one hundred percent. We encourage our staff and the administration to pay attention to the needs of women. We are committed to their broader employment—wherever it is possible. The traditional image of the scientist in Asia is firmly masculine. We still have much room for improvement, but we are leading our peers in Japan and Korea in this regard. Women constitute approximately 40% of our student body, and for strictly engineering approximately 20%. This does not satisfy us, so we do a lot to encourage women to science and technology. We even have a special program WISE (Women In Science and Engineering)—where we offer summer science camps for students of secondary schools and scholarships for talented students interested in science and technology.

Q-- What is your vision for the development of your university?

A-- Our vision is simple and precise. We want not only to be one of the best universities in the world. We want to be in the Top 20. We cannot become a Harvard, because we are not a full university; we do not have a medical or law school, and we do not have an enormous investment fund.. Nor do we have a Silicon Valley yet, which grows symbiotically with Stanford University. Our nearest standard and role model is MIT. And in this way we will go.

Q-- What unique values do you want to build upon?

A-- We want to be a Western university in China—and this makes us unusual. We want the best from all over the world to come to the Chinese people, and experience studying this world with us so we can further understand, build and grow it together. Our goal is to produce the next faces of powerful innovative companies and political leaders in our graduating classes, and for HKUST to be at the heart of the next Silicon Valley. We have indisputable advantages: [The City of Hong Kong has] a good legal system, and access to the largest market in the world. We have access to a huge talent pool. We speak two global languages—English and Mandarin. Hong Kong is a powerful financial center. We also have easy access to resources that are on the other side of the political border—research institutions and centers of innovation. It is only 45 minutes from us. Hong Kong will play a huge role in the true integration of China with the rest of the world. We will contribute to this process in the context of science and technology.

-- Thank you very much for the interview and good luck in establishing contacts with Polish universities.

Prof. Tony Chan is a mathematician and engineer. He completed his Ph.D. in computer science at Stanford University. He conducted research at Caltech and UCLA, and taught at Yale. He was the Director of Mathematics and Physical Sciences at the National Science Foundation. He has been the President of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology since 2009.