CHINA'S SPACE PROGRAM, a relative unknown until recent years, has been making headlines around the world lately.

Two weeks ago, China launched its second space station, Tianong-2, which carried the world's first cold atomic clock, and back in August, it launched the Micius, which sent the world's first quantum-communications satellite into orbit. Now for the first time, the Hong Kong public can actually get close and see these inventions in person at InnoTech Expo 2016, which opened over the past weekend and will run till October 1.

InnoTech Expo 2016, co-organized by Our Hong Kong Foundation, The Academy of Sciences of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Academy of Engineering Science and The Hong Kong Institute of Science, features many breakthrough inventions that are more than meet the eye. The Expo features the latest technologies in space exploration and the Chinese Lunar Exploration Project, the precise-positioning of BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, homegrown Comac C919 large passenger jet, life-saving vaccine against Ebola virus, cutting-edge technologies in the exploitation of oil and gas fields, and also the Jiaolong, a deep-sea research manned submersible that can dive to a depth of over 7,000 meters. China's world famous high-speed train that broke the world's train speed record eight times will also be on display. (China's high-speed railway network now covers more than 19,000 kilometers, which is more than the entire network in Europe.)

Then there is the Supercomputer Tianhe-2, which held the record as the world's fastest supercomputer for three years until June this year (the fastest supercomputer now, the Sunway Taihu Light, is made by Chinese too).

As an advisor to the Expo, and having worked as an assistant director to the US National Science Foundation for three years, I am most impressed by the pace of China's scientific ascension. China is not only borrowing a page out of the US playbook, but is actually going to become better at the very game. In the US, it is always a challenge to justify funding through the Congress for investment in basic science research. Like the US, China is investing in both basic as well as applied science, but just as the US is stalling in its investment, China is spending more and more. In 2015, China spent 2.2 percent of its GDP in R&D, and it is widely assumed that China's spending on science will surpass that of the US in 2020. The fact that China is investing so much in science is not only a reflection of the country's belief that science and economic development are intertwined; more important, it has attracted many world-class talent to join its cause, and is preparing itself to lead the world in technological advances for years to come.

In the past 20 years, China has made many unprecedented breakthroughs in different frontiers, such as supercomputers, space exploration, plasma physics, light sources, neutrino physics (at the Daya Bay Nuclear Power Plant) and astronomy. In 2018, China will open the nation's first neutron scattering platform. The system, dubbed the China Spallation Neutron Source, will be located in Dongguan, Guangdong province, and bring upon advances across many disciplines and industries. And the Chinese people are thirsting for more. Its cellphone market, already the largest in the world, has 1.2 billion registered users nationwide. China's tech giants, Tencent and Alibaba, are the two most valuable technology companies in market capitalization in Asia today.

In the age of technology, Hong Kong has always played a bystander role. This is reflected in our spending in science and technology every year; currently, Hong Kong's science research spending only accounts for 0.7 percent of our GDP, and government-funded spending only accounts for a mere 0.4 percent of GDP, lagging behind our neighbors like South Korea, Japan and Singapore.

Hong Kong has a lot of advantages to develop itself as a base for R&D, not least of which is China's big investment in science, but also the big market that China offers for commercialization of science and R&D. Together we must take concrete action to make things happen. Opportunity only comes to those who are prepared.