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.

A recent report on mainland households planning to recruit Filipino domestic helpers with three times the common wage in Hong Kong has caught the attention of the public. Domestic helpers have been, and are, a big part of our society and many families rely on them to take care of housework and children while both parents continue their careers.

Some look at the news with dismay, thinking that this is yet another example of the mainland marginalizing Hong Kong.

First, they came and bought our properties and drove land prices high; then, local shops were all squeezed out in favor of tourist ones catering to mainland travelers. And now, they are taking away our domestic helpers too! Unification has brought Hongkongers nothing but misery, they would say.

This is a legitimate concern, but I believe it is purely an economic, rather than a political, issue. It is supply meeting demand, on a global scale.

And such competition is not new—many developed English-speaking countries have been competing with Hong Kong for maids for a long time (Singapore and Middle Eastern countries, for example).

If we do not want to lose out, we should be ready to compete with better wages, better legal protection for the maids, better medical coverage, freer access to the internet, among others.

Maybe we should be better employers as well, in terms of treating the maids well while employed.

In the history of our city, we have always been able to adapt and find ways to cope with competition.

When the mainland’s cheap labor force took away our factory jobs, we shifted to tertiary industries and, today, we are Asia’s financial and service hub.

Competition leads to better ideas and innovation, and instead of worrying about what others do, we should look hard at ourselves and ask, what can we do better, and improve our city, to attract talent at all levels, from investment bankers to maids, to come here.

Look at the United States (before Trump, that is)—a highly open society, where everyone is given an equal opportunity to achieve success, is key to attracting and retaining talent. Free flow of information and ideas, a sound legal system where rights and ownership are respected, are also as important.

Do all these sound familiar? Yes, Hong Kong already has some of these traits. We also have world-class universities, a trilingual talent pool, and a huge geographical advantage with proximity to China’s large-scale production facilities and labor force.

Our universities are already allowed to recruit globally, both students and faculty wise, and we have seen leaps and bounds in our rankings as a result.

But we must do more. If we do not have innovation and technology industries on our own yet, we should actively seek to recruit others to set up branches here.

Hong Kong can only benefit from them and the experience may inspire our own daring and ambitious young minds.

Our mind-set will have to remain open and pragmatic. Openness brings both good and bad, and that will put our society to the test in hard times. Populist ideals today call for governments to close their doors, thinking that will keep harm at bay.

But that is simply naive.

As delicate as an issue it is, it is perhaps time for our city to discuss what kind of immigration policies we want to have as an international city. Introducing policies targeting talents who are expected to bring a positive impact to Hong Kong, in sectors including education, information and technology, and businesses, would be a welcoming start.

More importantly, our society needs to keep an open mind-set and accept talents who want to come here, and be smart enough to realize that in the long term this is good for the development of Hong Kong itself. In the short term, there will be competition for jobs, housing, university places, etc, but such is the nature of competition. If we can build an environment where all are free to thrive and pursue their dreams, then I am sure Hong Kong will always find enough talent to fill the needs of our society.