ATTENDED THE SCIENCE and Technology in Society Forum in Kyoto in early October to represent HKUST in the University Presidents session, as well as the Hong Kong Academy of Engineering Sciences in the forum’s session on engineering academies. This was the second time I attended the forum since 2009.

The STS forum was first launched in 2004, when its founder, Koji Omi, saw the need to organize a high-level meeting on science and technology among policymakers, business leaders, academics and researchers around the globe to discuss and address issues facing mankind in the 21st century.

Dubbed the “Davos of Science and Technology,” it is well attended by the science and technology elite from around the world. This year, there were many ministers, CEOs and scientific laboratory directors from Japan, Asia, the United States, Europe and other countries. Also present were several Nobel laureates, including Lee Yuan-tseh (former president of Academia Sinica in Taiwan) and the president of the UK’s Royal Society. There were also about 50 university presidents, and 30 presidents of national academies of science and engineering, from around the world.

Omi, a career politician and a former science and technology minister of Japan, is a longtime friend and mentor of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

Six or seven years ago, he visited me at my office to personally invite me to the forum. I was glad that I attended. Relatively few Chinese officials attended in recent years, probably reflecting deteriorating relationship between the countries. But this time, Huawei was a sponsor and its CEO Guo Ping also attended.

Abe’s opening speech on the changing landscape of innovation in Japan left a deep impression on me.

He said that under his watch, Japan has loosened its regulations on auto-pilot cars, and that it is in Japan that the regulations governing self-driving are kinder to innovators than in any other country, and that “no other country has regulations as kind as Japan for innovators.”

According to Abe, BMW, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Bosch, Continental, and all Japanese automobile makers are doing experiments in self-driving cars in Japan because it is the most “free.”

In his bid to open Japan up to innovations and ideas around the world, Abe said he has been “pushing all the line-ministries to change their regulations to catch up with new technologies,” and quoted the pharmaceutical industry as another example. “Because my government changed the regulations, it’s in Japan that you can develop drugs and put them into the marketplace as fast as in any other country,” he said.

That was quite surprising to me, especially because my impression of Japan was that it is very well run but quite conservative with rigid regulations.

As I was listening to his speech, I couldn’t help but think about Hong Kong’s recent reaction to new technologies: Uber, Airbnb and Tesla. In each case, the government has put up roadblocks, saying these new technologies are not obeying the existing laws (or maybe enjoying special tax benefits), which they may well be, but there is little from the government on whether it will update regulations in response to these new disruptive trends. There is little discussion in local media about open innovation.

I am cautiously optimistic that our new administration will turn things around as the policy address indicated a shift in government attitude toward laws and regulations regarding IT.

It seems Abe is realizing that for Japan to compete in this new world of innovation and technology, his government must update its regulations to accommodate the new technological disruptions, and try to balance the need for protecting versus providing added value to its citizens, or else Japan will be left behind in competition with other countries making up ground fast.

It is a matter of attitude and mind-set, a matter of having a vision of the future, and a willingness to make changes to accommodate new trends.

Will and can Hong Kong do the same? I think Japan should serve as an inspiration for Hong Kong.

If a country like Japan – with a historical track record of innovation, technology and success in commercialization – has to react in this way, shouldn’t Hong Kong, a self-proclaimed international city and without such a strong track record of innovation as Japan, be doing the same? I have a feeling that our conservatism is getting the best of ourselves.