A hidden treasure in Tsim Sha Tsui

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.

RECENTLY, I HAD the opportunity to visit the Hong Kong Observatory. Most people would be surprised to learn that it is located in one of the busiest districts in our city, in the center of Tsim Sha Tsui.

This hidden treasure, founded in 1883, is a historical gem of Hong Kong. It is a pity that it is not open to the public because its grounds have many well-preserved historical artifacts, including the now discontinued typhoon signals from my youth.

The idea for the visit came up when Hong Kong Observatory director Shun Chi-ming and I both spoke at the Innocarnival last October.

I learned that our life stories share many similarities: grass-root families (his father was a waiter in several restaurants), a passion for science, inspired by the 1969 first human moon-landing, and a desire to study physics overseas.

But he decided to stay and study at the University of Hong Kong, giving up scholarships to study at Caltech and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, because as the only child he did not want to leave his parents alone.

He has no regrets since the observatory has given him many learning and innovation opportunities, benefitting society with high job satisfaction – even though he sometimes wonders if he might be involved in the discovery of the Higgs Boson or gravitational waves.

The Hong Kong Observatory is divided into four branches: administrative and research; radiation monitoring and assessment (mostly for the Daya Bay nuclear power plant); weather forecasting and warning services; and aviation weather services (which works closely with the Hong Kong International Airport. A recent project is to provide Cathay Pacific aircraft with in-flight weather information.)

Weather forecasting is very demanding work.

In addition to conducting its own regional forecasts, the observatory also compares five global weather forecasts to arrive at the most accurate prediction.

While many in Hong Kong often complain when forecasts go wrong, the truth is there could never be a 100 percent accurate forecast. Hata, the devastating typhoon that hit Macau hard last year, could have struck Hong Kong just as hard, had it moved 10 to 20 kilometers nearer to us – a difference that is beyond the highest resolution forecasts available today.

Somewhat to my pleasant surprise, the observatory is very science-oriented. Not only is its core work naturally science-based, each of its seven core values corresponds to one of the characters in the word science (eg, S is for serve, I for innovate).

With a workforce of nearly 300, many of whom science and math majors, the observatory easily qualifies as one of the bigger employers of STEM graduates in Hong Kong.

Hence, it came to me as no surprise that a former director of the observatory, Lam Chiu-ying, went on the offensive when HKU decided to shut down its astronomy and joint math-physics major last year, based primarily on dropping enrolments.

Besides the fact that he himself was a graduate from those programs in the 70s, he argued that such a move can only pour cold water on the budding enthusiasm of young STEM talents and that our society’s need for such talents is not diminishing (like the Hong Kong Observatory).

Alas, Hong Kong society indeed has much to do to revive interest among our youth in these subjects. The Chinese name for the observatory is天文台 – which literally means astronomy, rather than meteorology. Curious, I asked how it got its name.

As it turns out, the Chinese name was a brilliant idea from one of the first directors in the colonial era, who was also a professional astronomer.

The observatory has won many accolades in Hong Kong and abroad for its inventions; it developed the world’s first Short Range LIDAR in Windshear Alerting System, which is widely recognized by weather service organizations around the globe.

As we concluded the visit, I pondered about the fate of the observatory. With an ever-growing population and consistent calls for more housing lands, the site of the observatory, despite its status as a recognized heritage site, is surely a prime target for commercial development, sooner or later.

Perhaps a good way to preserve it is to make it more accessible to the public, so that more can develop an awareness and appreciation to what the observatory has done throughout the history of Hong Kong.

Given its century-old colonial buildings and its glorious greenery, the observatory will also contribute to preserving the cultural heritage of Hong Kong – sadly a rare and fast disappearing commodity today.