

Life of Pi

This is a fascinating story about a 14 year old boy whose nickname is Pi. To cut the story short, his ship sank and he was on a lifeboat with a hyena, an orangutan, and a zebra. The hyena killed the zebra and then the orangutan. At this point, Pi discovered that there was a tiger in the boat.

The tiger killed the hyena. Pi was frightened and he constructed a small raft and floated alongside the boat, so that the tiger could not harm him. He then learned to feed the tiger with fish he caught, and rock the boat to make the tiger seasick whenever the tiger threatened his life. Later, the tiger was conditioned to tolerate Pi and they lived on the boat together, floated on the sea for 227 days. The boat landed in Mexico and the tiger ran off.

Pi was later rescued by a Japanese ship. He was interrogated by the marine officers about the shipwreck, so Pi told them the story. They could not believe the story of Pi.

So Pi told them another version of the story. The ship sank and he was on the boat with his Mom, a cook and an injured Japanese sailor. The cook killed Pi's mother and the sailor. Pi killed the cook for survival.

At the end, the officers believed the "unbelievable" animal story instead of the human story.

The story is about religions, beliefs and humanity. Whether you believe the animal story or the human story, it does not affect the shipwreck. One interpretation of the story of Pi is that whenever there is any doubt, turn to humanity and you will see the light. Sometimes, what is unbelievable is all in your head.

There are a few less known stories of Pi.

Political economics story of Pi

Pi was born on July 1st, 1997, and the 16 yrs old boy was on a boat with a hyena from Korea, a zebra with a hurt leg from Japan, and an Orangutan from Singapore. The hyena killed the zebra then the orangutan. Pi found a tiger called China, and of course the tiger killed the hyena. Pi out of survival had to make a small raft and floated alongside the boat. Pi also learned to feed the tiger and rock the boat to condition the tiger by making the tiger seasick whenever it threatened the life of Pi.

The sad story of Pi

When Tung Chee Hwa was the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, he commissioned Professor Tien Chang Lin [田长霖] to provide an overall framework for the development of the science and technology for HK. The Innovation and Technology Commission [ITC in short] was found to spearhead HK with science and technology. The logo of the ITC is

the symbol Pi [$\pi = 3.1416\dots$] . It is chosen as it is the letters ITC compact together, and Pi is used in mathematical and physical applications and many more. Another hidden meaning is that science and technology will bring prosperity to HK [三三不盡，六六無窮]. But this story of Pi is a bit sad.



A Steering Committee for Science and Technology was created to advise the Chief Executive on science and technology policies. The Chairman of the Steering Committee for Science and Technology reports to the Chief Executive directly. It somewhat copied the experience of Taiwan when Li Kwoh-Ting [李国鼎] was in charge of all science and technology policies of Taiwan and reported directly to Chiang Ching-Kuo [蒋经国]. Under Li Kwoh-Ting [李国鼎], ITRI [工研院], Tsinchu Science Park [新竹科技园] were found, and many Taiwanese scholars and engineers returned to Taiwan and started their businesses. One very successful industry was silicon foundry represented by TSMC and UMC. UMC was a tech transfer from Philips Semiconductors. It started as an IC fabrication line no bigger than a few hundred square meters. Later, Morris Chang [张仲谋] started TSMC. TSMC is now the best silicon foundry in the world and the pride of Taiwan. During the eighties on top of the list of Commonwealth 100 [天下一百强] were companies like Far East [远东纺织], Taiwan Cement [台泥] and many large corps of traditional industries. Today, many companies on the top of the list are technology companies with market capitalization much bigger than the top companies in the eighties.

For the story of HK, Professor Tien died of brain cancer two years after his report was finished. The first Chairman of the Steering Committee was diagnosed to have cancer too. So, nobody wanted the job, as it seemed spell struck. When Donald Tsang became Chief Executive of HK, he turned the Steering Committee into a useless assembly. The ITC is now with no directions and hidden under layers of bureaucracy. Needless to say, the ITC was practically defunct under Tsang and now still at a limbo under CY Leung.

But the sad story of Pi does not end here. One day Pi will bring HK out of a stagnant economy and HK will prosper.

The economics "Pie" - our reality

Japan dominated Asia for 100 years in the 20th century, and it was because of their strength in science and technology. Korea is already at a par with Japan in consumer electronics, entertainment, cars, chemicals, batteries and etc. They are now even challenging Apple. Taiwan has taken a different path of competition, by providing the world's best EMS [electronic manufacturing services] and silicon foundries. Singapore

which is comfortably distant from China has chosen a path of high tech propelling Singapore into a regional centre of ASEAN. [note 1]

The political and economical landscapes have changed in the past twenty years, and the 21st century is a totally different ball game. The four little dragons are all threatened by a tiger called China. Whether you want to believe in the political economics story of Pi is your personal choice. The reality is HK has to be Pi and leverage on the tiger and to live with the tiger on the same boat.

HK used to be the bridge between China and the World. Trading companies had prospered when China was sleeping. But import/export trade of HK have come to a wall since China entered WTO. Even supply chain giant Li & Fung is facing immense pressures these days.

Liberalization of the RMB will bring growth to the finance sector of HK for a while, but when the RMB becomes a world currency, the role of HK to China will become minimal. We have seen this in trading, and we will see the same in RMB financing.

Our sea port is threatened by Yantian, our airport is competing with four airports situated within 100 km from HK.

Tourism has been growing healthily but we are facing many issues caused by resource limitations and imported inflation.

If we do not make our economics pie bigger, we will not be able to cope with the aging population and the decreasing competitiveness of HK. We see that the four pillar industries of HK not growing bigger, but facing smaller marginal returns every day. How to grow our pie is the pressing issue, and we have to find a way forward.

In the past decades we have already invested a lot on infrastructures. In this 21st century, our neighbours have caught up with us building mega scale infrastructures. The age of infrastructure driven growth for HK is ending. Although science and technology is the chosen path for many economies, Hong Kong has been slow and hesitant to take this path.

The skeptics

Many civil servants believe in “factual” statistics. As there are practically no science and technology industries in HK, then why spend money on science and technology? They keep saying that this is public money so must be spent wisely.

Some economists say governments should not intervene, and this belief has almost developed into a religion.

The bankers say we cannot support the weak and poor. They lend to property purchase and development at lower interest rates, but penalize SME's with higher lending rates, and even more so if they are engaged in science and technology.

Many conservative politicians say we should be fair to everybody and should not pick cherries to support. They say "What about us? We came so far without any supports from the government!" In reality they have all benefited from government policies in the past 50 years.

The poor, the needy and the elderly say "What about us?" They are the neglected, and they need immediate solutions to their predicaments.

Our skeptics cannot see science and technology bringing prosperity tomorrow. Some have good memories of our past and believe the good old days would sustain. They live in yesterday and cannot see tomorrow.

Everyday we wake up to a new day and a new world. **Whether you are the skeptics or the advocates, all of us cannot see our future, but it is how we work for our future, which makes a difference.**

Give hope a chance

The Life of Pi is a story about religions, beliefs and humanity. It is also a story about survival and hope. For the 227 days on the sea, Pi has never given up hope. Even when Pi and the tiger landed on a small island and had plenty to eat, Pi had not given up hope to return to civilization.

About 25% of our children will choose to study science and technology in schools and at universities afterwards. They are often our best students. In the last four decades, many scientists and engineers originally from HK have decided not to stay in HK because they could not find jobs here. It is plausible that the number of emigrants with science and technology background is in the range of two hundred thousand and more [note 2]. This is a workforce as big as our workforce in the finance and insurance sector, standing at about 206,000 people [note 3]. If we do not do anything about it, we will continue to see brain drain of our best talents. So give them a chance and give them hope. We need to create an environment to keep our best brains.

We are facing limits to growth on all our pillar industries. If we want to enjoy healthy growth in our economy, our hope is to take the path of science and technology. Many skeptics do not believe this. Believe it or not, if this two hundred thousand emigrated workforce is working in HK, their contribution to our economy would have been as big as our finance sector. There are five stories of Pi, which story of Pi you want to belief in is entirely your personal choice. It makes no differences which story you belief in. It is how we work for our future which makes a difference. We cannot just sit and wait for miracles, we must work for our future.

To take the path of science and technology will not be easy, and the way forward is to "learn by doing". It is like walking across a river, it takes courage and determination, and the path will not be a straight path across. You have to find the way, one step following another. The situation of Pi was even more difficult than crossing a river, he floated on the open sea, but he had never given up hope. So let's start walking across, and don't turn back.

Let's support the establishment of the Innovation and Technology Bureau.

Remember, it is how we work for our future which makes a difference. Establishing the I&TB is the first step, and there is a long way ahead of us. So let's work for it.

Sunny Cheng

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Dr Cheng was a Senior Manager at the Innovation and Technology Commission from 1999 to 2003.

Notes:

1. Readers can read about Singapore's scope of efforts on science and technology at http://www.a-star.edu.sg/Portals/0/media/otherpubs/STEP2015_1Jun.pdf
2. A ballpark estimate : 10% emigrated, 70,000 high school graduates a year, for 30 years.
3. Census and Statistics September 2012 : 206,674
<http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/so30.jsp>