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Taking charge

In a recent lecture at HKDI titled "Kungfu, Techne and the Future of Work" the author CHAN KOONCHUNG, *whose recent novel* The Fat Years *was an international bestseller, dissected the nature and evolution of our working lives. Here he lays out his thoughts in a thought-provoking essay.*

Taking CHARGE

The social and anthropological context of "work" has recently become a hotly debated topic. Many books and papers have discussed the influence of technology on the work place, the consequences of technological advancement on employment rates and how the education of the next generation will adjust to these changes.

I began reflecting on the nature of work when I was a teenager. My first article was published in the culture pages of the *Sing Tao Daily* when I was in the third year of high school. I was spending a large amount of time studying and preparing for exams and I wondered if my future employment would be relevant to the knowledge I was learning at school. Also inspired by Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, I put down these thoughts into words and was deeply encouraged by seeing them in print.

During college, the poem *Two Tramps in Mud Time* by Robert Frost led me to think about the important distinction between a job and personal interests. Perhaps only when work and hobbies, vocation and avocation unite into one activity can human kind truly reach its potential. Yet in reality only a few people manage to have their personal interests or hobbies and work combined. It is a goal that people struggle to achieve.

With technology greatly impacting the nature of work, I wonder what will be needed to make this goal achievable for the next generation. Before addressing this question, I am going to first discuss two words – *techne* and *kungfu*. Few people understand that they have very similar original meanings that have been narrowed down over the past millennia.

In ancient Greek, *techne* stood in opposition to fate. It means the techniques that people use to take charge of their lives, to increase the possibility of survival, and to move civilisation forward. People building houses to keep themselves safe and warm, making weapons to protect themselves and farming food are all examples of *techne*. The word also referred to mastering language, social manners, and even personal cultivation. Its meaning is now associated only with technology, to the advancement of machines and devices.

Kungfu is a Chinese word that initially meant any technique that progressed the quality of people's lives. With time, philosophers selected and promoted certain techniques to educate people on how to lead a better life. They considered moral cultivation crucial in improving the quality of life. Subsequently, the meaning of *kungfu* has become narrowed down to mean practice and cultivation. Since the Song Dynasty, *kungfu* refers to personal and moral cultivation in classic literature. However, its original rich meanings are kept in daily conversations.

The reasons behind the altered meanings of each word are fundamentally rooted in social transformations, especially those brought about by the industrial revolution, which has transformed societies by the emergence of finer division of labour in factories, enterprises and governments. To adjust to these changes, education was divided into different academic majors so that every student only learned a narrow part of *kungfu* or *techne*.

Today technology is taking over the skills that this form of education was tailored for, as shown in its impact on the rate of employment. With the advancement of technology, certain types of work either have been or will soon be going through great upheavals.

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EDITORIAL

So what skills are irreplaceable by machinery and digital software? The book *The Second Machine Age* by two MIT professors reads that only three skills are irreplaceable: creativity, complex communication and large frame pattern recognition. Both creativity and complex communication are fairly easy to comprehend. To understand what is meant by large frame pattern recognition, we can use processes implemented at Zara's flagship stores in Europe as an example. The store directors observe what customers wear and try on, deduce what they truly enjoy buying and predict the next fashion trends, and then pass the information to their designers. This is a complex

« WHAT SKILLS ARE IRREPLACEABLE BY MACHINERY AND DIGITAL SOFTWARE? »

process that not everybody possesses.

Schools are not yet ready to take these three skills as criteria to reform the curriculum and practices to train the next generation. Alongside the development of technology the workforce of today need to keep learning and re-training to keep up. As such, schools need to re-think how to help students to adapt to the advancement of technology and the fluid nature of the workplace.

The education system in Finland encourages students to pursue their interests, to form study groups voluntarily and to conduct research projects. As passion is believed to be the biggest motivation for studying

and learning, Finnish students are among the top achievers in international academic competitions.

Moreover, there is abundant resources available online with which users can learn the skills they need. With a flare for creativity and entrepreneurship, they can also use the Internet to initiate and establish projects cooperating with people all over the world. Proficient language skills and effective communication skills are basic requirements for such work and are essential in a counter-attack against any future negative impacts brought by new technologies.

Recently, another trend has also developed. It is to combine machinery with human creativity to make personalised products. In the post-Fordism era, products with originality are proving highly popular with consumers. Although they are not part of mainstream

consumer society, it is an interesting feature of emerging enterprises that combine traditional skills and technology that is not to be neglected.

In general, it is predicted that there will be no such thing as full employment in the future. Scholars at Oxford University have even predicted that 47% of jobs in the US will be eliminated by technology advancement within the next ten years. This makes it unpredictable to foresee the future development of any industry as well as difficult to establish job security. We are entering into an era where there will be no stable jobs as it is hard to predict if and when skills learnt will be challenged by new technologies. We therefore need a new education system.

Future education should focus not only on developing IQ and rational thinking, but also on other aspects such as emotion and passion, proficient communication skills, transferable skills and the art of coordinating hand and brain. Returning to the primary meanings of *kungfu* and *techne* could foster skills that help students adjust to advances in technology and the changing nature of work, as well as to foster more entrepreneurs who combine aptitude with personal interests. ⬓

LEFT CHAN KOONCHUNG AT HKDI CAMPUS
OPPOSITE CHAN KOONCHUNG'S LECTURE "KUNGFU, TECHNE AND THE FUTURE OF WORK" AT HKDI

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