**SCMP Article**

**A Nobel of their own for leading educators**

If you have never heard of the Yidan Prize, you probably will in the years to come. It was founded in 2016 by Charles Chen Yidan, co-founder of Tencent, to honour individuals worldwide for forward-looking innovations in education.

I attended the inaugural awards ceremony here in Hong Kong earlier this month. Among the speakers were Cherie Blair, founder of the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, who made some powerful points about the importance of educating girls.

The prize is a big step towards giving education innovators the type of status they deserve. Not only that, the event also opened my eyes to the growing role that mainland Chinese business figures now play in philanthropy and global social development.

In the mainland, business leaders are involved in the central government’s renewed campaigns on rural poverty alleviation. Big tech companies like Tencent, Alibaba and JD.com are entering agreements with local officials to support development in specific rural areas in China.

Mainland tycoons are also becoming increasingly involved in charitable activities overseas. These tycoons for the most part have humble origins, and some went through real hardship early in life. They have seen their businesses expand at home and, increasingly, overseas. Successful entrepreneurs with a global outlook, they seem to genuinely want engagement with and to contribute to the wider world.

Jack Ma, the founder of the Alibaba Group (which owns the South China Morning Post), started the Jack Ma Foundation in 2014 to promote educational, environmental and other causes as far away as Africa. He is also behind the Alibaba Entrepreneurs Fund (I sit on its Hong Kong governing board), which invests in and mentors start-ups here and in Taiwan.

As for Chen, he has endowed his Yidan Prize with HK$2.5 billion. International judges and advisers will select two laureates (individuals or small teams) per year. These winners will share HK$60 million a year in prizes, half in cash and half for research funds.

We all follow the Nobel Prize and other international awards that bring fame to the people responsible for breakthroughs in medicine or physics. But surely education is at least as important as, for example, genetics or astronomy, and individuals doing pioneering work in education deserve a high profile.

The first two laureates were psychologist Carol Dweck of the US, for work on students’ motivational mindsets, and Vicky Colbert of Colombia, founder of the Escuela Nueva (“New School”) movement of innovative primary schools in Latin America. By highlighting achievements by relatively unknown figures, the awards remind us how we usually overlook education as a key to the well-being of humanity.

Dweck’s work has been crucial to furthering understanding of how kids rise to challenges and enjoy learning. Her ideas could be stimulating in Hong Kong, with its rigid attitudes about what makes a child “intelligent” or “hard-working”.

Colbert’s achievement was creating a model of school management, teaching and community involvement that has spread through poor areas in Latin America, India and the Philippines. Designed for less developed countries, her methods are an impressive reminder that money is just one part of what makes a school successful.

The Yidan Prize Foundation has commissioned a study on the effectiveness of education systems around the world. Rather than focus on test scores, it looks at the inputs. The resulting Worldwide Educating for the Future Index is a reminder that Hong Kong’s own record is mixed. Despite what some think, we do very well in terms of teacher quality – ranking with Finland and South Korea.

However, Hong Kong lags in curriculum and assessment methods. This will not surprise anyone who has followed the ups and downs of education reform over the years.

The Yidan Prize is a major addition to initiatives like the WISE Prize for Education launched in 2011, and the Global Teacher Prize launched in 2014. Hopefully, it will build on their work in giving advances in education worldwide recognition and a “Nobel” status.