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Seriously Considering a ‘Gap Year’? – It’s About Time

*On October 10, 2012, I published in these pages an article entitled **Do You Need a ‘Gap Year’? - Why and Why Not?** (Issue No. 135).*

In the following week, Prof. Cheng Kai Ming of University of Hong Kong commented on the article in his regular column in Hong Kong Economic Journal. Basically he supported the idea of having a gap year for young people before they enter university, although he was aware that Hong Kong parents would find it hard to accept. He was fascinated by Harvard University’s official policy to encourage all students accepted by the University to take a gap year before commencing study. Reading between the lines, he would very much like the University of Hong Kong to do the same. But he was not optimistic that any local universities have the courage to do such a thing. Towards the end of the article, he mentioned that he was often asked by people inside China what makes a first class university. “The courage to do what other universities dare not to do” was his response.

Prof. Cheng wrote another article on the same topic in the following week, elaborating on why it is essential for young people to have the time and freedom to think through their personal values and goals before entering university. He sounded like a strong advocate of ‘Gap Year’.

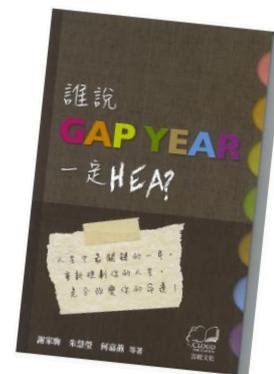
Prof. Cheng’s articles were widely read in China. I hope it would have a positive impact on the young minds there. But his articles are also attracting local attention. One reader, the famous movie director, Cheung Kin Ting (張堅庭), was so impressed by Prof. Cheng’s words that he himself wrote and published an article in Ming Pao on his own experience in ‘gap year’.

I was so encouraged by all these responses that I joined the discussion by publishing an article in Hong Kong Economic Journal entitled “從「休學年」到「轉捩年」：一點不 **Hea**” (信報 **3/11/2012**). My main points were:

- a) Gap year is now taken not only by young people between high school and university, but also by many who are already in university, or after university, or after working for a number of years;
- b) Taking a Gap Year might appear ‘expensive’, but those who are taking it see it in a different light; they treat it more like ‘investment’ – investing in one’s own future;
- c) As far as Hong Kong at this moment is concerned, those who are most likely to take a Gap Year are young people who have worked for a number of years but do not feel that their work or working life is fulfilling, and want to have some time to rethink what they want to do with their lives.

A book was born

Amazing as it may sound, all these exchanges gave birth to a book on Gap Year. At the same time as these articles were appearing in press, a number of young people who were taking Gap Year were writing something on their experience: what motivated them to take the Gap Year, how they made the decisions, what obstacles they encountered, what they have learnt on the way, what their next steps would be, etc. etc.



How wonderful it would be if we could put all these pieces in a single volume! Indeed, why not?

So we enlisted the help of a core team member of Education for Good who has had a lot of experience in publishing. The result was a full-length and inspirational book published at the end of November 2012, just in time for the Social Enterprise Summit. Come to think of it, it is quite a record: the first article published by me was on October 10, 2012 and the book was ready for sale on November 29, 2012. The credit goes to our editor and publisher - Cloud Publishing Co. Ltd.

Below is a case of a young man enjoying his Gap Year:

The Sabbatical So Far...

By Kenny Cheung

My gap year didn't start off very typically.

After three years of dreaming and a year struggling with myself, I decided I would quit my job. Inspired by Dr. Muhammad Yunus, Grameen Bank and the impact of microfinance and social innovation on the lives of the poor, I conceived of an 18-month journey through the developing world of South Asia, Africa, and South America. I wanted to see it for myself, to meet these amazing social entrepreneurs and to help out where I could. The trip would also satisfy a deep-rooted wanderlust. No one else I knew was contemplating such craziness, so there was little guidance or support, but I wasn't deterred. Planning and research was separated into world travel and social enterprise. I found contacts in various countries to speak to about their local situation, and looked at different internship and volunteer experiences abroad.

While preparing for this 'social enterprise world tour', I uncovered some health issues during routine medical checks, forcing me to delay my trip by ten months. Thus the start of my 'gap year' was focused on health, and when I recovered I continued my planning. Part of the process was attending every social enterprise event in Hong Kong that I could, and I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. K K Tse along the way. It was encouraging to meet like-minded individuals and organizations, and to know that a gap year programme was being planned for people like myself.

I left Hong Kong on 16 November 2012. The first five weeks consisted of nearly nonstop travel through Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. Step by step, I accustomed myself to the traveler's lifestyle: the backpacks and hostels, the trains and buses, the never-ending sea of new faces and new sensations. As much as I'd planned, there was a lot of room for improvisation and spontaneity. After plotting a rough route through Asia, the details materialized as I went along. Such freedom comes with a lot of uncertainty, and each traveler has a different approach. I've met people who planned every single ticket, visa and hotel reservation for months at a time; others knew only their next destination, carefree spirits that traveled wherever the winds took them. I seem to fit somewhere in the middle.

Introduction to Grameen

The first big stop was Bangladesh, my initial source of inspiration and a good a place as any to learn social entrepreneurship firsthand. I enthusiastically signed up for Grameen study tour organized by Education for Good in conjunction with the Yunus Centre.

The study group consisted of young changemakers from Hong Kong and Shanghai, each with a different background and united by common aspirations. Strangers at first, we became fast friends and shared our life stories. Ultimately, the complementary skill sets, perspectives and personalities enriched the experience for everyone. I feel blessed to have met these incredible people, with whom I could collaborate in the future.

Our program started on Christmas Eve Day, and the first presentation gave an overview of social business. We were also introduced to the concept of a Social Business City, leading to conversations of one day turning Hong Kong into a Social Business City as well. This was followed by a surprise meeting with Dr. Yunus himself, the best Christmas (and for some, birthday) present we could have asked for. The 75-minute discussion reignited our passion to make the world a better place, and I was humbled at meeting my hero and role model. Afterwards we walked through the Nobel Peace Prize exhibit, coming to the full realization of Grameen's impact on the world.

During the six-day study trip, we visited several Grameen social businesses in Bogra and Dhaka, interviewing the Grameen managers while touring the premises. After the rest of the team left, I stayed to study more social businesses on my own. Though we'd all read about Grameen Danone's fortified yoghurt to battle child malnutrition (for example), it was something else to see the collection points where farmers brought their milk, to interact with the villagers and to see the factory where the yoghurt was made and packaged. Similarly, we got to witness a group meeting of the Grameen Bank women borrowers, the heart of microfinance itself. Each social business started small, and slowly scaled up as the teething problems were solved. By the end of our program we had a blueprint for how to identify a problem, test a solution and expand. Not all the social businesses had broken even yet—a reminder that execution is everything.

The Social Entrepreneurs of Bangladesh

It was just as telling to observe the social entrepreneurs themselves. I wanted to know what made them tick, how they were different from normal people, and how they were similar to each other. Dr. Yunus is perhaps the most famous social entrepreneur, and introduced (to me at least) the concepts of microfinance, social enterprise and social business. He now operates at the visionary / chairman level, steering the direction of social business globally and seeing beyond the horizon. In between extensive travel engagements, he remains directly or indirectly involved with the 64 Grameen sister organizations. The man is a paperwork machine, going through stacks on his desk efficiently, with comments for each document.

The hospital manager for Grameen GC Eye Care Hospital was a great example of an *intrapreneur*, starting and running businesses within the Grameen umbrella. Clearly capable, he is sharp and ambitious, yet calm and controlled. The first hospital broke even ahead of schedule, and the second hospital became easier to start and run. There are plans for ten hospitals in five years.

Through the Geili network, we also met with a local social entrepreneur at the startup level. This remarkable young lady was still in university, but operated a social enterprise called Toilet+ that installed sanitary toilets in poor villages, paying the people for their biowaste. This was then converted into fertilizer, to be reused in farming or sold on the market.

Side Projects

Shortly after the New Year, opportunities arose to make a change, and I jumped on them. Early January brought an unusual cold wave that killed 82 people in rural areas, with millions at risk and a second cold

front on the way. So I worked with a local partner to distribute 900 blankets in schools for the children of the 'hardcore poor' in Gaibandha, northern Bangladesh. Members of the EFG study group helped out with fundraising in Hong Kong, and by March had successfully raised the necessary funds.

Our study group visited a local slum in Dia Bari that left a lasting impression on me. The conditions were horrible, but the children were amazing and showered us with love. Many rooms had no electricity, and we encountered an 8-year old girl named Sunni who was studying in the scant daylight from her doorway. I thought it would be a simple solution to install a solar bottle light in her tin roof to provide 50 watts of daytime light, and then extend it to every family in the slum. The Liter of Light movement first installed these Coke-bottle lights in the slums of the Philippines. It's now an idea spreading across the world.

Going back to Dia Bari slum weeks later, we implemented the same. However, after installing one light in Sunni's house and six others, our 'orders' dried up. People claimed the real problem was light at night, not during the day. It just so happened there was a boy inventor from the slum named Akash, who showed me a battery light he'd built using materials from the garbage. Impressed by his ingenuity, I bought him the tools he needed and commissioned him to build rechargeable battery lights for the whole slum. We subsidized the lights and sold them for a cheap price, and what started out as charity slowly started resembling something of a social business. By the time I left, we'd installed 14 night lights while Akash was building 16 more. My local partner Feroz is overseeing things in Dia Bari, and the CHANGE organization is studying our pilot project, hoping to expand our battery light to other areas.

While it was incredible to do research at Grameen, all the hard lessons learned were from the hands-on experience. We planned and delivered both projects under severe time constraints, and it was as fulfilling as it was challenging.

The journey now leads to India. Let's see what happens next.

You can read more about Kenny's world travels and social entrepreneurship experiences on his blog at: <http://pair-a-dimes.blogspot.com/>

Who is Kenny Cheung?

Kenny Cheung joined HSBC in Hong Kong as a Management Associate in 2006. In 2009, as a Vice President in the International Corporates division, he managed a portfolio that included corporate customers from four continents. He steered client relationships through the global financial crisis by making credit decisions based on financial analysis.

Long inspired by the impact of microfinance and social innovation, he left HSBC in 2012. Currently he is traveling through the developing world to learn more about social enterprise and explore opportunities in social entrepreneurship.

He recently spent eight weeks in Bangladesh, researching the Grameen social businesses and BRAC. During this time, he initiated and managed a rural blanket distribution in northern Bangladesh as well as a slum development project in Dhaka, with funds raised in Hong Kong.

Kenny holds a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Toronto.

Education for Good is offering a 12-month Gap Year program. To know more, please write to info@education-for-good.com