

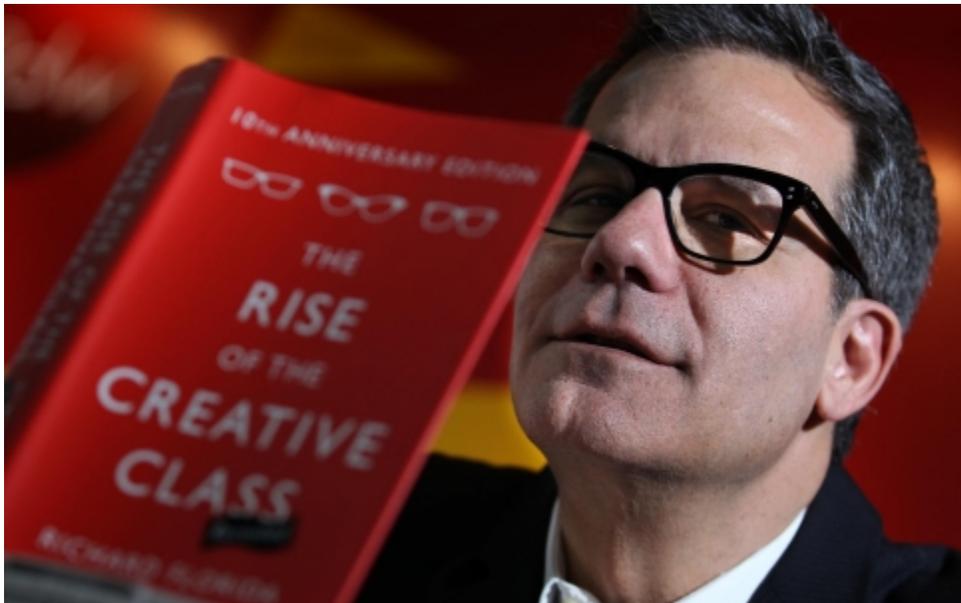
Freedom of expression key in Hong Kong's race to the top: US scholar

US scholar says allowing people the right to be themselves will improve Hong Kong's economy

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Richard Florida says creativity needs freedom. Photo: Nora Tam

Hong Kong must uphold freedom of expression if it wants to develop the kind of creativity that is required in the vigorous race to be Asia's top global city, a renowned American scholar says.

Economist and social scientist Richard Florida warned that if restrictions were imposed on freedom of expression, "creativity would be expressed in a more revolutionary or rebellious way".

Speaking at a media interview after the Business of Design Week forum that ended on Saturday, he said: "All my research points to the fact that creativity requires freedom. If you can't have personal freedom to express yourself ... you can't have the creativity of the sort you will have in a free society."

Florida rose to international fame with his 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, in which he argued that the "creative class" - those whose professions were to create new ideas, content and technology - would be the post-industrial era's new economic driving force, and that creativity was the new resource.

He put forth a 3T model - talent, tolerance and technology - to measure a city's attractiveness to the creative class, ranking Hong Kong at 20th place.

Florida's theory drew global attention, and the city's first chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, was reportedly a fan of it.

In 2004, the government commissioned a creative index to measure the city's creativity and economic competitiveness in Asia, drawing references from the scholar's theories.

Asked how his theories could apply to Asia, where freedom of expression was not necessarily guaranteed in many countries, Florida stressed that he was referring to personal freedom and a society's openness rather than a country's political system.

But he admitted that the latter defined the types of freedom citizens enjoyed.

"It's about being in a society where you can express yourself, be what you want to be ... Even in bureaucratic societies, people can still freely express themselves. The ability for self-expression is key," he said.

Florida added that a society's tolerance towards its minorities - such as new immigrants and those of different sexual orientations - was directly related to its economic development.

Hong Kong has shown little progress in outlawing discrimination based on sexual orientation. Still, Florida believes the city has a bright future, despite the pressure it faces in competition against other Asian cities.

"Hong Kong isn't just competing with Shanghai or Tokyo. It's going toe-to-toe with New York and London," he said.

"At the top, if that's where Hong Kong wants to be, is a very vigorous competition."

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as Freedom of expression 'key in global city race'