
Something Extraordinary Happened in China

The Growing Shift in Global Consciousness

Luke Dallafior - October 19, 2019



The World's Largest Entrepreneurial Competition No One Knows About

For the last five years, China has been quietly building the world's largest entrepreneurial and technology innovation event. Named the College Students' "Internet Plus" Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition, the event is held over the better part of a year and culminates in an Olympic style final, which just concluded in Hangzhou, China. This year, a staggering 4.6 million college students participated in the competition, with over 1.19 million project entries. This mind-boggling number is reduced down to approximately 300 ventures across four separate tracks that compete for the final prize.

This is the third year, the competition has been opened to international universities. Over 1,000 submissions piled in from 120 countries around the globe. The 60 "student-led" finalists in the international track spanned virtually every continent and included ventures born out of the likes of Harvard, MIT, Oxford, and Cambridge University. I use the term "student-led" lightly because the rules state that you can be out of school for up to 5 years and still compete. With many ventures led by PhD students, the average founder's age for the finals I estimate to be somewhere between 27 and 33 years of age. Most of the ventures had been incubating for at least a year and already have received at least one round of investment. Many ventures had already filed multiple patents and have some paying customers.

As one of 15 judges invited to pick a winner from the 60 international finalists, I was awestruck by the quality of the submissions and the brilliance of these young minds. The projects spanned virtually every tech segment, including biotech, new materials, financial tech, and AI-based software applications. Unfortunately, most had nothing to do with the biggest problems facing the planet - the growing environmental crisis and the increase in social inequities. The lack of focus in these areas was particularly disconcerting to me given this was the "international" track of the competition. Sadly, I believe the submissions were a direct reflection of the world's current innovation paradigm - bigger, better, faster, cheaper technologies inside of enormous markets. The judging criteria also did nothing to help shape a new narrative. Contestants could receive up to 35 points for innovation, 30 points for team composition, 25 points for commercial potential, and in the case of the international track, a mere 10 points for social impact.

A Moment of Great Hope

This is where the story gets interesting. The 60 international ventures were divided into three groups, with five judges assigned to score 20 ventures each. The top two ventures from each group were then scored by all 15 judges to pick a champion to compete against the winners of the 3 Chinese tracks. If you judged strictly on the point criteria provided, there were several projects that one could argue should have eclipsed all others. They were all highly disruptive or differentiated technologies, supported by multiple patents, and targeting huge markets where they could either dramatically improve or replace existing technologies. I have no doubt that out of our total field of 60, one or more unicorns (billion-dollar companies) will emerge.

In stark contrast, our group of diverse judges, with absolutely no previous communication or collusion, choose the two ventures with the highest *social impact*. Neither of the enterprises had the most advanced technology, the largest addressable market, or the biggest margins. To add to the drama, both of the ventures received the same number of collective points - 148. This required a tie-breaker, which ended in a 13-12 winner and a standing ovation. I was very proud to be among these distinguished judges and share such a moment because we listened to our hearts and voted for the greater good. A clear sign of the growing shift in global consciousness around the world.

Our winner was a an Indonesian venture called *iHe@r*. The company provides technology that converts sign language to speech between and across languages through small, inexpensive devices that can be placed in virtually any room or environment. Our runner-up was a company called *key2enable* which uses exponential technologies to give autonomy and multiple vocational possibilities to people with motor and intellectual disabilities. Together these two technologies could help bring tens of millions of disabled people into mainstream society.

As an Indonesian resident, I was particularly excited to learn that our International track winner *iHe@r* came from Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology (ITS) in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. Our runner up *key2enable* was born out of Universidade Cruzeiro do Sul in São Paulo, Brazil. Both of these lesser know universities beat out ventures from some of the top educational institutions in the world including those previously mentioned. I also

believe that it is no coincidence that they are both located in countries at the forefront of some of the largest social and ecological battles in the world.



The Beauty of a Staggering Defeat

In the final championship event, 140 judges, including our 15 international judges, decided the winner. With no surprise, our international venture experienced a crushing defeat. Not only did we present first, which is always a disadvantage, we were also the only socially focused venture. I believe the contrast of our enterprise to the other finalists was both stark and shocking to viewers. Especially eye-opening was the colossal difference from the winner, a high tech drone attack helicopter that flies higher and faster than currently available Chinese technology. Yes, an instrument of destruction won out over a technology that could bring millions of deaf and mute people into mainstream life. To my mind, there could be no better example of the choices we are making around the world each and every day. Might over Right! Ego over Eco! Profit over Compassion!

Following the end of the competition, several high ranking Chinese officials wanted to understand the decision of the international judges, especially in light of the number of bigger, better, faster, cheaper ventures in our field. Several of which, the Chinese government has an interest in making an investment. My answer to the committee was that as the international track, our focus is and should be on the needs of the planet. To that end, there is now a new effort underway to reshape the international track along those lines for next year. Further, I have put forth a suggestion that our judging criteria also needs to send a clear and vital message through the implied values in our scoring method. In my view, future scoring should include points for sustainability, social impact, and ethical technology, along with innovation and commercial potential. Too long have we held that business and social

enterprise are mutually exclusive. The most powerful and valued companies of the future will be those that do well by doing good and hold themselves to a higher social and environmental standards.

If we open the eyes of our best and brightest to what is important, perhaps they will start dreaming about building drone helicopters that can fly undetected into war-torn areas to drop aid packages or deliver fire suppression to burning rain forests. Perhaps *“the why”* will become as important as *“the how”* and the ethics behind their products will be as important as the products themselves.

No matter what one may think of China or this competition, we should all be mindful that while the rest of the world is trying to close its borders and put up walls, the Chinese are building the new Silk Road and trying to unite the whole of Asia. They are the only country that is attempting to join the world's best and brightest young entrepreneurs and put them on a world stage, elevating them to the status of pop stars or professional athletes. While this competition may not be optimally aligned with the needs of a planet in crisis, the organizers are listening, and what was clear is that China is a country trying to build a bridge of hope through innovation and entrepreneurship.