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Minister CAI, the leader of the Home Affairs of Hong Kong, distinguished ministers, ambassadors, colleagues, delegates and friends of the arts attending this Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum 2009,

On behalf of the Philippines Government headed by president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, we extend our warmest greetings to our family of nations in Asia, and particularly thank our host, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region for this significant event in drawing attention to the need for Asian cultural cooperation focused on Arts in Living, Living in Arts. We applaud this gathering, designed to give consideration to the importance of culture as a womb for birth, sustaining, and nurturing life. We are all in agreement that culture is an increasingly important engine for economic growth, a building block of our social creation, an asset of our national pride, and of course for education and social transformation and especially an effective tool for cultural diplomacy. The National Commission for Culture and the Arts, headed by chairman Labrador, is an agency of government focused on democratising the right to culture. Arts are for all, not just for the elite.

Instead of billions spent on arms and missile deployment and bombs that destroy life, and as we face the global crisis of economic downturn and climate change disasters, we must mobilise our diverse cultural traditions and heritage, artistic resources and talents to affirm life, to interest, inform and motivate people to help our common goal of achieving the fullest realisation of our human resources and the achievement of the UN millennium development goals: cutting poverty into half by 2015, to which all member countries of the United Nations are committed to undertake. Yes, we can be considered poor, when we are perhaps in deficit or lacking in Dollars and Euros in bank accounts. But we are wealthy, we are rich with our cultural diversity and its artistic manifestations, which is a catalyst for social change, to create the womb of values from greed and indifference, to caring and sharing. To fight poverty we must build the heart of compassion. That is what artists can do. Build the sensitivity to be heard and to cry when people are suffering and in pain, because they are victims of war and environmental disasters; but to be happy as well, when people are blessed with good fortune. This heart of compassion will underscore our common humanity, and the importance of the gift of life.

In the Philippines, we have designed our cultural care-giving program as a poverty alleviation project of government to reach the marginalised groups: those in prison, in the haven of abused women and children, in centres of drug rehabilitation victims. The physically handicapped are joined together, the blind, the deaf, the crippled, the mentally challenged – they are synergised with street kids and indigenous youth, victims of trauma, who are given the opportunity by socially committed artists, when they are trained in all aspects of the arts, from martial arts, visual arts, dance, drama, poetry, to discover and mine the gold of talent and dig the well, the oil well of their abilities to cope and transform their social reality. The result of such a creative strategy is electric. A composite of these sectors were integrated as our earth savour's dreams assembled and was honoured by the UNESCO as artists for peace. For example, a 16-year old crippled, angry, desolate, pretty girl, eyes downcast, lips tight, clammy hands – in an orthopaedic hospital was transformed through a theatre workshop almost like the butterfly out of a cocoon, acting with a voice, ringing like a bell in a hall like this without a microphone. A 33-year old man born blind postponed killing himself after hearing the good news of these training schemes. He found his life useless, because he feared the coming home of his drunk father and the consequent abuse he would inflict on him. Going through the workshop, he found out that he could play the guitar, sing, mimic voices, learn all of this and use it as an employment means for living. He is now married and socially adjusted.

Nikki, a cerebral palsy victim was told it was hopeless for him to stand up and walk. But now, as a member of the Earth Save Your Dream ensemble, he's not only a writer, but he moves in a dance piece with his speech impaired partner. Seen by a UNEP official, he was hired and serves as a researcher on the environment, earning a regular monthly salary; otherwise he would have been kept in the house as a dishwasher. A lot of our blind comprise from rondalla music groups that are hired in restaurants and play in malls. Rico, a blind keyboard artist and singer, supports two children as a regular musician in a hotel.

Besides employment opportunities through the arts for our transformed and recycled – we call them handicapables – we have also encouraged the creative industries of our 110 indigenous peoples that must be mainstreamed through the curriculum, the media and for venues for partnership with the business sector, the civic and religious groups, who can help them with micro lending, cooperative development, and marketing schemes. Cultural highways must be paved within nations and among continents to parallel infrastructure for economic growth that will reach intercultural dialogue for

peace and sustainable development. People must be informed through cultural symbols they can relate to; empathise and not be alienated; involve, and not disinterested; to understand the issues and connected to their daily existence; they must be motivated to respond, to act and do something to shift the balance; to be passionate in solving their problems; to confront hunger, drugs, terrorism, environmental degradation, ignorance and injustice.

More than speeches, a painting, a poem, a song, a play, a dance piece, animated legends, inspiring stories of love, heroism and courage of commitment, can bring the message across and carry the cries of children, especially orphans and widows, to stop the violence against mankind and Mother Earth. Just like our endangered species, equally threatened are our indigenous communities. We must preserve bio-cultural diversity for the continuation of a meaningful life on Earth. Culture is an essential ingredient for development. Development plans are retarded or accelerated dependent on the creative and dynamic integration of culture in development planning. Currently, culture is now a chapter by itself in our medium term development plan. The Philippines' experience of developing the arts in a developing country may have propelled a ripple. We are synergised with a number of colleagues in different continents, with the imprimatur of UNESCO. And we hope we are creating the huge wave that will turn into a tsunami of change. Where politics almost certainly divides, arts can unite and heal, bond and cement a nation together and forge our global family.

Arts recharge memory. Without memory we will never learn from the mistakes of the past! And we wouldn't know where to draw our strength as a springboard to reach our goals and realise our dreams of sustainable development. This is where we draw lessons for a better tomorrow. After the process of decolonisation these encounters provide a venue to appreciate culture in a new and different light. A crucial element in claiming and affirming our independence assuring an undeniable existence on the international map with a security net amidst globalisation.

There is a rebalancing of emphasis now, as we meet with those who have been our colonisers on equal footing, while we underscore our common heritage, for respect for endogenous development. There is recognition of mutual borrowing that could open the way to a new way of partnership and reaching a real international cooperation, taking account of our cultural aspirations and foundations in building democratic societies that can address discrimination and exclusion suffered by immigrant communities, as well as indigenous peoples. The cultural heritage encompasses the

entire spirit of a people. It is a memory of our living evolving culture. It is expressed in many different forms, of tangible monuments, landscapes, objects and intangible language, know-how, performance, literary arts, ritual, folk arts, media arts. The origins of this heritage are multifarious. In retracing our own cultural lineage, in recognising the many different influences that have marked every country's history, and shaped its identity, a people is better able to build peaceful relations with other peoples, to pursue it is often an age-old dialogue and to forge its future and in the case of Asia make us realise our kinship and build solidarity through our common cultural roots. We are Indo-Malayan, Polynesian, Moslem and most of our families have Chinese blood. Our national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal has connections in China. My great grandfather came from China with long braided hair. To value the cultural heritage and to care for it as a treasure bequeath by our ancestors, and it is our duty to transmit it wholly and dynamically to our children. This is a sign of wisdom. The biggest challenge is to make public authorities, the private sector and civil society as a whole realise that cultural heritage is the essence of our soul and is an instrument for peace and reconciliation. There are numerous examples in which a new approach to the management of cultural heritage has promoted economic growth by creating employment opportunities for local populations, whether through crafts, eco-cultural tourism, and the emergence of new trade or new forms of activity. It is a weapon to fight poverty, to displace greed and ignorance and we must share knowledge and always commit ourselves to affirm life. We therefore encourage every member of society to become actively involved in the conservation and enhancement of our common Asian heritage in the Philippines, with the support of former ASEAN director general Ong King Yong from Singapore, we held an ASEAN media arts and performance workshop on cultural diversity for MDG's. It is through the heightening of public awareness and increased mobilisation and action to forge the powerful symbol of the people's identity that is the unifying factor for social cohesion. And to mark and acknowledge past and a foundation for a shared future.

Again let us reiterate our thanks to our host for providing a laboratory of ideas, a lighthouse to design appropriate strategies and policies. This forum is gifting all nations in Asia with a mirror to reflect on our struggles, conditions and dreams through an exchange of information, where facts, understanding, good practices, can be gathered, forwarded, diffused and shared – a mechanism for capacity building to tackle our mission of protecting cultural diversity, to ensure that people and groups with a varied and dynamic plurality of cultural identities interact harmoniously with the readiness to live together. We must join hands in protecting our heritage. Antiquities are open to pillage and illicit trafficking; indigenous cultural survival is

threatened like our endangered species and eco-systems. Our battle cry to fight climate change is bio-cultural diversity. Culture is the meeting ground of all of the arts: on stage, through its electronic off-springs, broadcast, webcast, cinema, to be applied as a great asset in recharging memories, and again strengthening the womb of values to build a better world. Culture is the mirror of our identity and vision and conscience; an armour to fight the ills of society, an anchor for our traditions, a factory of thought, and most of all: a temple, a mosque, a church, to affirm our common humanity and our commitment to life. Thank you.