

**Opening Session**  
**Friday 10 November 2006**  
**Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum 2006**

*“Culture and Asian Modernity”*

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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Hong Kong and welcome to the Fourth Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum 2006. The Forum, now held four years in a row, has grown from strength to strength with your support and participation. In 2003, we discussed “Capitalizing on Creativity”; 2004, the theme was “Creative Asia”; 2005, it was “Brand Asia”; and this year, 2006, we focus on “Asian Arts, Culture and Modernity”. The success of the Forum highlights the ever-increasing importance our respective communities and authorities place on cultural agenda and development in this part of the world amidst economic growth and regional cooperation.

But culture is not a by-product. It stands at the very foundation of our civilization. It binds us together and cements our identity. It is therefore incumbent upon each of us to remind our fellow citizens that culture is the concrete on which we stand, laid down by the generations who have preceded us. It defines who we are.

But how is culture related to the concept of “modernity” which is a term often too academic, too abstract and theoretical? Understanding “modernity” points to the centre of our concern in our discourse on culture, be it arts policies, or cultural implications of political consideration. As we construct strategies and policies to answer to the needs and aspirations of a modern society, our communities are in turn driven by a modernity which is a collective system of values and a set of moral codes that govern thoughts, establish identity, drive economies, set agendas, dictate choices, and inspire expectations. Most importantly, it underpins how our respective communities of consumers prefer one type of creative product over another type, or choose certain categories of cultural goods, or watch films expounding particular direction of story-line. These are the values that motivate our communities in the consideration of what make them happy, beautiful, artistic, creative and what can result in a sense of well-being and national pride. Modernity is moulding our creative industry market which is culturally dependent, and can be

influenced and affected by other forces, such as advertisements, mass trend, and various types of persuasions. Simply put, discussions on modernity are a debate of values.

For a very long time, Asia was the world's centre of creativity and cradle of cultures. Then our Western counterparts overtook us, in their age of "Renaissance", in which their artistic, social, scientific and political thought turned in new directions. The industrialization in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century further confirmed the leading position of the West in formulating and setting the agendas of human developments in the modern world. Western culture, Western thoughts and values have been driving and influencing modern developments in other parts of the world, and some may even equate modernization with westernization. Then, is Asian modernization westernization?

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the power and influence of a place hinges not entirely on military might or economic strength in its traditional sense. The defining force has shifted gradually to the cultural depth that a territory is able to generate. We need to build a community that is creative, cohesive, and resilient through creativity in arts and culture, science and technology, through preservation of our heritage, and through articulation of our historicity, so as to provide us with a constant source of inspiration to propel our society and economy to thrive and advance in the face of fierce competition from different parts of the world.

But at the same time, we are also faced today with the threat of our cultural fundaments being inundated by the rising tide of globalization. Professor Ambrose King, writing on the *Emergence of Alternative Modernity in East Asia*, has pointed out that, in the process of global modernization, Western values have tended to become dominant.

He argues that Westerners, consciously or unconsciously, tend to promote a universal Western culture, believing that non-Western people should commit themselves to the Western values of democracy, free markets, human rights, and individualism, equality and justice, and should embody these values in their institutions.

He goes on to suggest that Asia's rallying call for "Asian values", in the late decades of the twentieth Century, should be seen as Asia's determined search for its cultural identity, an Asian search for Asia's own vision of modernity.

And so we meet here to exchange thoughts, ideas and experience in pursuit of this quest, in the hopes that we can adapt to globalization without surrendering our individuality, without succumbing to, as some observers had put it, the “Americanization” of Asia.

Our Asian values – our collective strength we derive from who we are – have served us well, helping us withstand other challenges of every conceivable kind, from natural disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes and tsunamis, to epidemics and plagues such as SARS and bird flu. In times of stress, our common values and common cause – all of which stem from our cultural roots – reign paramount over personal interest.

Culture is the wall against which we place our backs when we confront such threats. Today, however, it is the wall itself, the very structure that each of our societies has built, that is being challenged, and so it is now our obligation to return the favour, to protect, to reinvigorate and to re-examine the culture that has so long stood us in good stead.

The globalization of modernity today can be largely understood as the spread, expansion, or diffusion of Western modernity. We must not let globalization chip away at the fabric of our intrinsic identity and indigenous values.

How then, in the face of globalization, can our respective Asian culture respond to the needs of the modern world and rise to the challenges posted by the global tide of Westernization? We have witnessed the episodic spasms of intellectual awakening and internal reflection in the form of May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in China in 1919. But the age of modern Asian enlightenment has yet to come. How would our indigenous traditions stand to brave the wind of change?

Professor Pan Gong-kai, President of China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing China, describes in his book “The Road of Chinese Modern Art”, four possible alternatives that we can consider as a consequence to this awakening or enlightenment :

1. to embrace Western values as prevailing benchmarks of modernization and to align our tradition with the enlightenment values resulting from a universalization of Western culture; or
2. to increasingly emphasize on both the distinctive cultural identities of Asian countries and the traditional commonalities of Asian cultures and sharply distinguish them from Western culture; or

3. to understand and develop a healthy relation between Western culture and other Asian cultures in an effort to select from among our indigenous values the most congruous elements to synthesize with the modern Western wave resulting in a new paradigm which is both East and West, and also at the same time not East and not West; or
4. to go along with the masses and let the community decide what it wants to behold as the value of the day and of the time.

Asian modernity then, can be interpreted as any one, or any combination, or all of the above considerations put together. Indeed, what is happening today in East Asia is the alternative modernity, or Asian modernity in the making.

East Asia has long been marginalized on the world stage and its voice has not been heard in the global discourse of modernity. However, East Asia's success in modernizing and in creating wealth has rekindled Asia's faith and confidence in Asia, and in Asian cultures and values. Values having to do more with strong families, education, hard work, discipline, commitment, harmony and collective solidarity.

As Francis Fukuyama has observed, "This modernity in Asia, is not only built around individual rights, but around a deeply engrained moral code that is the basis of strong social structures and community life."

Nowhere else in the world do we find greater cultural diversity than exists here in East Asia, and if that diversity, which is tolerant, all-embracing, and harmonious, is confronted with the need to further evolve, and to modernize, let it be to our own distinctive and inimitable tunes.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in the midst of a very exciting time, for we bear witness to the emergence of multiple modernities in the process of global modernization. As Ambrose King put it, "The modernity unfolding in East Asia is part and parcel of that truly dynamic drama of the globalization of modernity, or more precisely, the globalization of East Asian modernity."

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this topic in the following three days of this Forum.

Thank you very much.