

Closing Session
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Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum 2006

“The Pluralistic Approach to Culture”

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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Earlier this year, I attended a conference held in the City University of Hong Kong, organized by the Chinese Civilization Centre, in which Professor Pan Gong-kai, President of China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, presented his ideas on “The Road of Chinese Modern Art”. I came away from the conference with a motivation to reach deeper into our cultural pocket in search of a realization of our modern mission in Hong Kong.

And I wish to thank the Chinese Civilization Centre of the City University for its inspiration and efforts in making this Forum a reality and a resounding success.

We have met here in the past few days to give collective thought to a common objective; namely how to preserve our distinctive cultures in an age of accelerated modernization and increased globalization.

The theme of this year’s Forum is “Asian Arts, Culture and Modernity”. 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 form of artistic expression over another form, 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, cultural values.

Professor Ambrose King, speaking of *The Emergence of Alternative Modernity in South East Asia*, tells us that what global modernization brings about is not a single modern civilization, but *different* modern civilizations.

The very success of modernization in non-Western societies, in this case in East Asia, has stimulated the revitalization of our search for identity and cultural expression of modernity.

Professor King has also pointed out that East Asia's quest for identity is inseparable from our search for modernity. It is this region's very success in modernizing that has created in Asians a new awareness and assertiveness.

We are not just *in* the New Age. We *are* the New Age. Just as the world's centre of gravity has shifted to this side of the planet, the "epicenter" of modernity is also tilting from Northern America towards East Asia. What is happening today in East Asia is alternative Asian modernity in the making.

But while we are not obliged to dance to anyone else's tune, we cannot ignore the sea changes that were already set in motion in the last century, when the rising tide of Westernization at first seemed as if it threatened to engulf us all, to the point where we viewed Westernization as an inevitable consequence of globalization.

We changed that initial perception. Instead of viewing the combination as a threat, we have seen it as a challenge. And we have, if I may add, collectively benefited as a result. Because that challenge has acted as a stimulant to our own individual efforts to preserve, fortify, strengthen and renew the – in many cases much older – cultures of the East.

The West has promulgated what it describes as the "universal values" of individual rights, personal achievements, efficiency, equality, freedom and justice.

We in the East have consistently stressed collective rights and responsibilities, strong sense to the community, tolerance, acceptance, charity, collective solidarity, discipline and harmony. The essence of the Asian alternatives is a society built not around individualism, but around a deeply

engrained moral code that is the basis for strong family ties, resilient social structures, and closely-knitted community life.

We espouse Western values, but with commitment and responsibility aimed at society rather than the individual. The Western and Eastern values are not mutually exclusive. They complement one another, and make the other set of values more meaningful, more complete, and more sustainable in the long run. Matching the two sets of values would complete a picture of a multi-polar modernity to the global world.

For that reason, modernization is no more a battlefield between two opposing forces than it is a united front that speaks for all. Rather it is a no man's land in which we can adopt a pluralistic approach, each carving out our own space, learning – even borrowing – from each other, yes, but building our own cultures based on the strong roots that have laid our respective foundations. We can think of them as “Alternative Modernizations”.

Looking back in history, in the Han Dynasty 2,000 years back, we had the first Silk Road set out by Zhang Qian; and in the 15th Century, we had the second Silk Road at sea championed by Zheng He. But in the 13th Century, from the opposite direction, we had Venetian geographer Marco Polo striding across Asia for 24 years in search of the then modern values of the Orient.

The 21st Century will see us embarking on the third Silk Road. The two previous Silk Roads traded tea, silk, spices, exotic fruits, jewellery and gold. The 21st Century Silk Road trades for, apart from creative ideas, creative products and creative talents, it trades values.

This modern Silk Road travels neither by sea nor on land, it doesn't go from one place to another, but travels through the inner workings of the human minds driven by a desire to captivate the advantages of peaceful competition in this globalized world.

My friends, the world is round. If we go east, there are always Eastern destinations ahead of us. No matter how far one goes, there will always be an East to where one is standing. It also applies to those who travel in the opposite direction. East and West are not places or destinations, they are directions. The modern Silk Road points a direction to the meeting point where Eastern and Western values converges, co-exists, interacts and merges. You may call it the *Middle Ground*, or even *Middle Earth*, stealing from the map of *The Lords of The Rings*. It is a grey zone neither East nor West, but a blending of both. Once we travel freely and flexibly in and out of this zone of comfort, we can then claim to have become the modern men of the century incorporating

the “cutting edge” values of the West and at the same time with consideration for the tolerant embracing values of the Orient.

This modern Silk Road merges creative markets and aligns cultural policies to form alliances in exploring the commonality among cultures and community values.

This Silk Road sees citizens of different cities and countries sharing common aspirations and inviting one another into their dreams that life is celebrated through cultural pursuits, and our people are enchanted by the arts, enlightened by cultural differences and enriched by social diversity.

This Silk Road teaches people to learn with mutual respect that despite our different backgrounds and upbringings, there are some fundamental values we all hold dear, some basic principles we all respect and certain core understanding we all embrace.

This Silk Road is our answer and response to globalization of our cultural needs. The purpose of this Silk Road is not to establish an empire of might but to extend our empire of minds.

The reshuffling of the global order that has accelerated in recent years has given rise to increasing tensions between East and West, between the cultures of Western Christianity and Middle-Eastern Islam.

In this arena of potential conflict, we of Asia serve as the third alternative. We can provide room for arbitration by interceding from our standpoint of oriental wisdom and tolerance. As Mr A-cheng remarked yesterday in Session 9 of the Forum, the word “culture” in Chinese (文化) can be metaphorically be deciphered as “civil personal relationship” (人文教化) which is tolerant, amicable, embracing and inclusive, as contrast to “martial relationship” (武化).

For our cultures were never monolithic, but always permeated and leavened by those of others. Francis Fukuyama said there was no theoretical reason why Confucian social structures could not coexist perfectly well with democratic political institutions.

We can argue against a dichotomy between black and white, by pointing out that there are innumerable shades in between. We can remind others that we do not have to choose between this road or that road, but can

elect to pursue our own courses while still remaining, as it were, “fellow travellers”, engaged on the same journey to a common destination.

China is a very embracing race celebrating diversity and tolerating and accommodating different elements no matter how foreign they are. For centuries, China has as its constituents 56 different races. As one looks at history, races came and went, and took turn to rule China. But at the end of the day, 56 races remained intact and coexisted in modern China. China can play a major part in shaping modernity. For China, it is a role it is destined to play after returning to the world cultural arena.

Hong Kong, which has over 160-year history of modernization and embraces all the elements of a modern society while upholding the old traditions of the place, can be a vital part in the process.

Indeed, Hong Kong itself is a perfect example of embodiment of the new and the old, the modern and the traditional, the East and the West. The arrangement of “one country, two systems” itself, is another manifestation of this duality of systems of values at play. It will be the day, if Hong Kong can neither be the East nor the West, and can neither be one country nor two systems, but a distillation of the quintessence of both.

Hong Kong provides a safe and fair platform for moulding modernity in this part of the world, for a second chance. Together we can rejuvenate and add values to both Asian and Western cultures. I call it Renaissance in pair. Apart from rejuvenating Western values, we can, at the same time, reinvent the Asian values. Hand in hand we could set the world trend and sweep aside second-rate Hollywood movies and counterfeit McDonalds we used to copy from the West.

Ladies and gentlemen, the alternative modernity unfolding in this part of the world is part and parcel of the truly dynamic drama of the globalization of modernity, or more precisely, the globalization of East-Asian modernity.

In conclusion, I have the pleasure to share with you that on this day, 12th of November, 140 years ago, Dr Sun Yat-sen was born. As we celebrate his 140th birthday, I remember his words :

“Once our goal of modernizing China is accomplished, the dawn of a new century will shine upon our beautiful country, and the whole of humanity will enjoy a more brilliant future.”

In response Dr Lin's remarks, I have come to realize that Chinese modernity is a mission to derive from sufferings a new meaning, to establish a new direction amidst bewilderment and to transform confusion into an awakening.

Dear friends, I wish that all of you have had a very pleasant stay here in Hong Kong, and I look forward to receiving you back in Hong Kong next year in 2007, when we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the return of sovereignty to our motherland, with the fifth Cultural Cooperation Forum when "Culture is coming home".

Thank you very much.