

Towards A Creative Asia

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The Hong Kong SAR Government must be saluted for taking the leadership to host the 2004 Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum. This initiative provided an opportunity for cultural leaders from the governments, academia and business sectors from Asia and the world to reflect on how to move forward towards a creative Asia. It is heartening to note the interests and openness in the discussions, especially among the provincial officials from mainland. The forum heard different shades of opinion and reflected on various views towards the role of culture in economic development and the strategy forward. A dialogue has indeed begun. Culture and creative activities are to be promoted and seriously nurtured as a strategic and high growth sector that can foster international peace and co-operation, trade and economic prosperity. The stage is now set for more business leaders, entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and bankers to join in the conversation.

Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Taipei and Singapore; these more developed urban capitals in Asia, in their search for a new source of growth, have embraced culture as the next big thing. These cities, as an economic driver, have returned to tourism with culture as the new dress.

CULTURE MOVES CENTRE STAGE

Asia is ready to declare the arrival of the creative era.

Since more than half century ago, Asia has been the workshop for the world, and China is expected to continue to play this role for more decades to come. Elsewhere in Asia, an awareness to embrace a new role in reaching out to the world with its own version of modern chic is growing. At various levels, culture defines the people, their place, their community and their city. Taking that further, products, cities and societies project their personalities across with their culture; the design and the story implicit in them. Asia is ready to go from 'Made in Asia' to 'Created by Asians'; it is time that the world gets to share the joy of Asians in their own version of the good life offerings, and the forum brings forth this vision and desire.

There are legitimate reasons for this swift and excitement. A growing middle class with rising wealth, Asian baby-boomers reaching mid-life, have wealth made from the region's first boom; these have created the market for culture. While the excitement may have originated from its economic significance, we must not lose sight of a more powerful, perhaps a more fundamental reason for developing culture. Cultural development is human development; it is only with human development that we build the capital for further social and economic development. An economically prosperous nation is also a nation with a huge reservoir of cultural capital. It is too simplistic to say that culture now drives economic value creation; in fact, it is the other way round. As Richard Engelhardt, Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO said, 'Beyond economics, cultural industries produce cultural and social meanings and thus have the potential to induce wider social and human development, both in industrialised and in developing societies. Cultural diversity is the source of creativity and innovation, not only within the arts but for the society at large. Creativity is one of the key

forces structuring development. Promotion of cultural industries is the way to release the economic potential of creativity for sustainable and equitable human development.' [See Open Forum Session 1; pp.136]

Before Asia could embark on a take-off in this new development path, there are still some important sorting-outs that must be done. Among other things, a new paradigm must emerge; the scope of culture needs to be redefined, the relationship between culture and business needs to be examined and the partnership models of governments, business and the artistic communities need to be determined. Going forward, consensus needs to be spread and more questions need answers: How do we transition art and culture into the mainstream lives of the people? How do we guide public resources towards the nurturing and development of culture? What kind of culture should receive public funding? What kind of partnerships and cooperative models could be effective and efficient between the stakeholders?

CULTURE, REDEFINED

The diversity in Asia makes it a mosaic, intermixing and not unifying. Cultural diversity is embodied in the traditions, ethnicities, religion and language diversities found in abundance throughout the Asia Pacific region. It is also embodied in the new social diversities emerging as a consequence of the region's rapid urbanisation, uneven levels of growth and each community's different response to the exigencies of globalisation. Culture is broader than the traditional song and dance, theatre and ceremonies; lifestyle, fine art, street music and pop should all be on the spectrum; they make up the diversity of our society. Every strata of society has its unique culture; they have their favourite songs, places and food.

Culture is everything. High, fine, local, colloquial, foreign and global. It is not just the exhibits in the Museum of Modern Arts but also the bargaining at the street night markets. It is not just the theme cuisines of fine restaurants but also food on sticks. It is not just the symphony orchestra playing in multi-million dollar concert halls but also rock and rap gyrating in open stadiums or street parties. It is performing arts and lifestyle conveniences, which is what people enjoyed alone, or with family and friends. Culture is not just for the elite, each social group in society has their own unique culture.

It is important that we first discover and appreciate our own culture. Culture is about who we are and what we stand for at this moment in time, an image that we want to express to the whole world. How we live, work and play, how we deal with our emotions, our joy and tribulations, through various media available. Culture is not about 'cookie-cutter' stereotypes, although businesses often standardize certain features for ease of operation. Taste and liking are very subjective; but they are all part of the entire cultural eco-system.

Asia has risen to middle class and with technology and sophisticated production methods, very ordinary items can be made to become extraordinary, elegant and presented in good taste. A Sam Hui's concert is a rock and populist gathering; it uses colloquial language that resonates with the audience; there is such a strong connection between the singer and his fans. Isn't that culture? You bet. Well known Chinese painter Wu Guanzhong has this to say about good art in a famous narration: 'Art and culture must remain anchored with the people, there must be this connectivity with the masses...like a kite that must not be detached.'

Cultural development therefore should not discriminate. Democratic societies must be inclusive, not just

chasing the high and fine culture, making these the privileges of the rich and famous. Instead, it should reach out to understand what makes the large majority of the masses tick by providing inspirations, making people to aspire to higher levels, providing the impetus for further growth and development. Immersing in aesthetics for example, helps one to cultivate good taste. Cultural development broadly means picking out the appealing and desired, and then devotes further resources to its further development.

Should we have traditional and classical and the more serious art forms? The answer is that we can have both, sometimes more of one and sometimes more of the other. The classical and popular can and should exist side by side. Those who have prospered and profited from the promotion of popular arts and culture can contribute to support the development of the classical. The government could help by putting in the right tax incentives. Some art forms and art activities can generate huge amounts of profit while some just will not. A whole range of models exists.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS

Undoubtedly, it is individuals who bring forth the creativity for they possess the talent and motivation. While we cannot disagree with David Tang's assertion that the great artists in history rose from poverty and many succeeded by self help; 'Bach was just trying to earn a living in order to write music, Mozart had practically no money; Rimsky-Korsakov was suffocating as a doctor. I can think of hundreds of people who have been monumentally creative, and all have not been led by the so-called economic, social leadership,' Tang said at the forum. While no government in the world can make you a genius; the right institutional help can help you get smarter and help you with a career break. With the right teacher and tools, one can be a better writer, better musician and better artist. With better managers, value is added to one's work and brought to a wider audience. Such help can enhance the success rate, and we are not just talking about production of content, but a whole supply chain of getting valuable creative work to a sizeable audience.

What role should the government play in the nurturing and development of the creative/ cultural industries? One guiding principle emerged from the discussions is for the government to gradually build up capacity with the private sector and then step back. The government plays a bigger role including being manager and financier in the early stages; then make way for the private sector when the stage is set. Learning from the experiences and conditions of the various Asian countries, it is clear that the role the government assumes should respond to the needs of the situation and times.

Let's consider the following experiences and observations:

The experience of South Korea is perhaps instructive for those who join the cultural bandwagon later. First, the Korean Government played a major role in setting up infrastructure, erected protectionist policy to create a space for local players. After more than a decade of nurturing the industry, the policy framework basis has now shifted from regulation-centred to a promotion-oriented one. In addition, the government is providing assistance to enable the private sector to fully exert its capacity, as well as in domestic audience development. Long-term development plans tailored to different sectors, including film, games, broadcasting video and characters and regional focus on different artform. Korea has also been emphasising the linkage between arts and cultural industry, for example, there is a project to transform the original form of traditional Korean culture into digital contents and the story bank project.

What this project strives to do is to restore the original form of clothing, weapon, music, fables, legends and old books through digital technology so that they can be utilised in content development. The government supports incubation, research and development and fostering of human resources. [See Asian Cultural Ministers Meeting; pp.84]

Singapore has the most integrated and coordinated approach to the nurturing of the cultural industry. Besides a well-articulated vision, 'Renaissance City 2.0', 'Design Singapore' and 'Media 21', one of the most remarkable features of the Singapore experience is the government's single-mindedness and steadiness in execution. The government, through various agencies, has built an integrated mechanism that brings the various stakeholders together into partnerships. It also devotes tremendous effort in both the supply and demand side of the spectrum by strengthening and enhancing art education, from the professional levels down to the primary and secondary levels, and attracting talents from abroad to 'realize their dreams' in Singapore. They are applying the management know-how in building the industrial economy to the cultural industries. The decade long effort is transforming Singapore into a lifestyle city. [See Asian Cultural Ministers Meeting; pp.96]

In China's transitional economy, the mindset of some of the leadership remained locked in the old paradigm, albeit rising voices to hand over power to the private sector. The private sector has yet to gain influence, especially the small and medium sized enterprises are still on the margin. Many provincial leaders are still talking about government led-large enterprises in the cultural area. The transition will take time. However, what is heartening in the mainland is the dedication to cultural industry development has prompted effort to erect enormous public architectures, the new museums and theatre halls. We are witnessing what may be termed as the biggest building boom in public cultural architectures in China's recent 500 years of history. These wonderful architectures rising in the key urban capitals of the new China represented perhaps the greatest opportunity of all times for indigenous Chinese, Asians and other great architects and artists from around the world to collaborate and build a new generation of architectures that could define the new century. Knowing that they will be leaving an everlasting imprint on the cultural and artistic landscape of Asia, let's hope that the sponsors and the artists make full use of this historic opportunity.

Finding the development model for heritage: While a fine balance is needed between preservation of the heritage site and its exploitation for tourism dollars, the education of site managers needs to be increased. For now, the attention on heritage sites in China is focused on regulatory protection and China has introduced a law on the protection of cultural heritage. China has an enormous wealth of heritage sites. 1,271 of them were accorded national status and 30 of them have been inscribed on the UNESCO Heritage Listing. With nationwide tourism being promoted as a source of domestic consumption, regrettably some of these fragile sites now suffer from overcrowding and exposure to high risks of degradation. Management expertise of heritage sites need to trickle down to the lowest local level possible so that the county officials are educated on the difference between mass and valued tourism, and a right model found for each particular site. For example, the provincial authority needs to understand that an airport at the Shangri-la will immediately take away its allure and mystery.

Global Vision: While cities and societies go about discovering themselves, global vision could help to articulate who they are. It is in trying to share with the world that we look hard at ourselves and our heritage to find what is valuable about us, and what we can offer to the world. In today's crowded world, it helps if cities or countries can articulate a clear vision of their distinct cultural uniqueness. For example, The Philippines has a strong self image of its own dance and music potential. Thailand too has done well in articulating a clear strategy, with the 'Bangkok Fashion City', 'Kitchen to the World' and

'One Tambon One Product (OTOP)'. [See Asian Cultural Ministers Meeting; pp.101] In terms of systematically exporting its culture, the leadership of the Thai Government is most commendable. Through aggressive promotion and diligent effort, the Thai Government is ahead of its target to build 8000 Thai restaurants globally. The export revenue connected with the Thai Kitchen project has reached USD10 billions in 2004. The Thais have also taught the world how to enjoy Thai food. Today, Tom Yum Kung and Pad Thai sits along with Sushi and Tofu in the global culinary vocabulary.

GOOD BUSINESS IN CULTURE SPEAKS

In the US, for the last 100 years, culture and the arts were very much a part of the market place where proprietary and commercial organizations were responsible for the arts. In Confucian Asia, scholarship and artistic endeavours were only confined to the upper echelon of society. It is unimaginable to link these high priests of culture with the merchant's class at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Moreover, scholarship and art is noble, profit is disdained. To operate cultural industries in the market context, Asians need a new paradigm on the social value of profit and fame.

There is nothing wrong about profit and fame, so long as they are outcomes and not motives of an endeavour. Profit is generated as a result of efficient and effective operation. The Taiwanese great entrepreneur Wang Yungqing used to say, 'Lack of profit is immoral, as you have not effectively and efficiently utilized the resources allotted to you.' In the case of cultural products, there is no need for over-reaction as profit will remain as an outcome as cultural products are not consumption of necessities. Consumers have a choice as they are not must-buys. Cultural products are not necessities for living; but nice things to have to please the soul. The true measure of value and worth is when someone is willing to pay for it, where the quantum of course will be left to the law of demand and supply. In today's world dictated by the purchasing power of the middle class, and no emperors and courts to dole out generous grants to support creative ventures, the best available mechanism is the market.

Artists create because they have a message and it is in them to create. They do not create because they want to sell to a mass and broad public, but they can create something for the mass audience to enjoy. Liuligongfang has achieved a fine balance, they are a studio producing hand-made high quality crystal art. They produce museum pieces and limited editions which are collectors' items. They also have reasonably priced items that an average office lady can afford. Does anyone objects to Liuligongfang's USD30 million turnover? [See Open Forum, Session 3; pp.172]

The fact remains that great artists are highly disciplined. Otherwise, they cannot produce such great work of art. Labour of the heart is not just strokes of inspiration or genius, although some people's artistic DNA is more superior and need not try so hard. Introducing the business manager beside the artists can help them focus their energy to what they do best, besides making sure that there is food on the table. The business manager introduces discipline and market relevance to inform the creative person; putting order into the artist's realm of imagination and freedom, by introducing disciplines in the form of top-line, dateline and bottom-line into the artists' free space.

TOWARDS AN ASIAN CULTURAL COMMONS

A 'Creative Asia' begins with each Asian society appreciating the others. In the large family of the global community, Asia can coalesce and be presented to as one category. That big step has to begin

with tiny steps of regional co-operation. Regional co-operation can be likened to stringing the pearls of each Asian nation's unique cultures or to weave unique components together in a harmonious tapestry of a beautiful experience.

Cultural industry plays an important role in regional co-operation. The EU has leveraged on culture to overcome the barriers and differences in its effort to accelerate the economic and political integration of the region, it is also promoting appreciation of regional culture in the 'European Cultural Capital of the Year' project. Mr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts of Singapore advises that, 'The Asian region should also recognise that in order to advance regionalism and integration of the economy, cultural exchanges and co-operation in the cultural industry can be a critical medium. I believe that the cultural infrastructure that builds trust among people and countries within the region are as important as the physical infrastructure like airports, road and rail.'

LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM

Up to 2000, Asia was known to the world for its prowess in manufacturing. Into the 21st century, we are going to see how Asians mine their cultural heritage and turn them into capital for creativity. Asian ingenuity is going to offer the world a different version of the good life that hopefully will bring low pollution, low consumption of energy and high added value. The diligent, intelligent, striving and resilient Asians have given the world magnificent past grandeurs. Asia should and can make outstanding contributions to enrich the culture of the world. With globalisation and the ubiquitous spread of the information technology platform, walls are coming down in the minds and hearts of the people. Cultural exchange will further speed up the formation of the commons in the global village, but first we have to create that commons at home, right here in Asia. It is happening.

The world is holding its breath on the economic rise of China, concerned with how China is going to impact their own well-being. China is eager to persuade the world that its rise in global influence will benefit the world and will bring greater peace and prosperity to all. China will demonstrate this through heightened cultural exchanges and encourage the promotion and export of Chinese cultural products and services, imagine the Spring festival celebrated universally right after Christmas. It is only when we successfully popularise China chic in lifestyles around the world that we can win the hearts of the global community. An important message we need to send the world is that China is a peace loving nation and a unique and timeless central philosophy of the Chinese, with the emphasis of harmony between nature, man and earth, perhaps an appropriate theme for the Beijing Olympics 2008.

The task ahead is to deploy Asia's rich cultural capital to create a distinctive Asian feel in our lifestyle, with modern products and services to go with it: Asian chic in style of living, working and playing. As Mr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts of Singapore proposes, 'We can customise, we can repackage, we can re-present these new products and services to suit the increasingly sophisticated world market.'

We are at the dawn of an unprecedented time for renaissance.

A 'Creative Asia', stay tuned.

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