

Celebrating Cultural Diversity

Organised by the Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, the Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum (ACCF) 2017 was a two-day event held recently in the territory. High-level officials from ten Asian countries converged in Hong Kong to mark the Forum's tenth edition.

The delegation heads included representatives from China, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Republic of Korea, Japan, as well as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic. As first timers in the ACCF, the latter two Central Asian states brought to the Forum an added level of diversity befitting the planet's largest and most populous continent.

This year's Forum carried the theme of "Cultural Sustainability in a Dynamic World: Connecting Diversity," a celebration of the harmonious co-existence of cultures and the region's established ties in cultural exchanges.

Representing the host city, the Secretary for Home Affairs, Lau Kong-wah, said: "Hong Kong has for centuries been the place where people from all over the world connect. While Hong Kong is a cultural melting pot itself, we do encourage our people to reach out to diverse cultures." Lau shared with the audience the SAR's experience in fostering cultural exchanges, through various social programmes, funding schemes and the statutory body of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. One notable experience early this year, highlighted by Lau, was the sponsorship of some 1,000 students to engage in cultural exchanges in 18 Belt and Road countries.

Lau further noted that Hong Kong, as a major cultural exchange hub itself, will continue to make efforts to enhance co-operation with other countries.

Following Lau onto the stage was Luo Shugang, China's Minister of Culture. While Lau emphasised Hong Kong's role as a cultural hub in Asia in his speech, Luo took a broader, macro view of cultural exchanges.

He said: "The trends of global multi-polarity, economic globalisation, IT application and cultural diversity are surging forward, and countries are becoming increasingly interconnected and

interdependent. The fusing of different cultures has become more and more dynamic through extensive cultural exchanges." China, he noted, is ready to facilitate more in-depth regional cooperation under the umbrellas of 'Asia community of common destiny' and the 'Belt and Road' Initiative.

Making reference to the traditional Chinese philosophy that values "harmony without uniformity," Luo noted that mutual appreciation of each other's cultures will make the world a better place where people — regardless of their religious backgrounds and traditions, can share a harmonious world.

In addition, the Minister of Culture believes that a society can only be progressive and vibrant if it constantly absorbs new elements from other cultures through exchanges and mutual learning. Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, Luo proposed five points to sustain different Asian countries' rich cultures, and to promote cultural connectivity and diversity. The far ranging ideas encompass intergovernmental cultural cooperation arrangements to international networks establishments, as well as deepened cooperation and intellectual dialogues.

Many of the guest speakers appreciated the fact that the Asia-Pacific region is vast and with many diverse cultures. Said Professor Virgilio Almario, Chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts of the Philippines: "The region is home to thousands of ethnolinguistic groups and sub-groups. This innate diversity remains the very core of our identity as a region." He added that globalisation "poses an intricate web of sudden alterations in the dynamics" to the ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines, and that it is the role of the country to remind its people of the significance of culture to nation-building."

As two of Asia's leading international



The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR Government Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor (centre), and the Secretary for Home Affairs Lau Kong-wah (fifth from left) pose for a photograph with ten delegation heads including representatives from China, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Republic of Korea, Japan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic

cities Singapore and Hong Kong may be fierce competitors in multiple fronts, but their rivalry does not prevent cultural exchange. In fact, the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong SAR was commemorated in Singapore with a wide array of cultural activities, and the Singaporean audiences were awed by the splendid performances by Hong Kong cultural groups, according to Grace Fu, Minister of Culture, Community and Youth of Singapore.

"Culture has the power to bring people together as a universal language that transcends boundaries and across cities," Fu said, adding that Singapore is privileged to have many extensive partnerships with international counterparts to create opportunities for people with diverse backgrounds to appreciate and showcase excellent art.

Proud of the country's rich heritage and culture, Vira Rojpojchanarat, Minister of Culture of Thailand brought to the audience vivid images of the country's wonders: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, plus the archaeological sites of Ban Chiang and Phu Phra Bat. He said many of these traditional events, and identity-defining cultural activities, have aroused people's curiosity, stating "Thai

people keep the traditions alive in the modern world." And the people seem to have a new found passion for technology.

The Cultural Minister added: "The government promotes the use of technology as a means to enhance creativity." Noting that while the use of computer graphics also helps to transform traditional knowledge into digital formats, citing the immense improvement and updating of the country's national museums, archives and libraries.

Sokun Som, Secretary of State, Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia shared with the audience of the Cambodian government's national policies in relation to culture, including using culture to preserve heritage, and to use the power of culture to push for socio and economic development. Som said: "Art and culture have been integrated into school curriculums. Local people take pride in preserving and disseminating [traditional Cambodian] culture." The top official pledged more international cooperation including the ACCF, so the countries involved can share and learn from each other how to ensure cultural diversity. This can ultimately which lead to regional peace, friendship and prosperity.

The Cambodian Minister's remarks were echoed by his Laos counterpart. Said Laos' Deputy Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, Bouangeun Xaphouvong: "The Laos government realises that culture is the key for the survival of the country and it is considered to be a driving force for social development. Culture also plays an important role in nurturing national identity." He took the chance to tell the audience that the year 2018 is a Visit Laos year, and wished to receive more people who are drawn by the country's rich heritage.

As shown by Laos' Deputy Information Minister Xaphouvong, the ACCF 2017 was an excellent opportunity to promote key international events. And Republic of Korea's Deputy Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Lee Woosung, also made the best of the ACCF platform to introduce the Cultural Olympiad, a year-long

initiative designed to facilitate the development of cultural infrastructure, as well as to develop and preserve cultural legacies.

The Cultural Olympiad will welcome visitors to the country alongside Pyeong Chang 2018 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. Over 150 culture and arts focused exhibitions and performances by both professional artists and non-artists are planned, under the guided vision of the Olympiad's "Passion. Connected."

Meanwhile, Japan's Director of International Cultural Exchange, Agency for Cultural Affairs, Mari Akiyama chose to discuss the use of technology in her speech. Embracing technology, she said: "The globalisation and the dynamic world offer a chance to preserve and promote our cultural diversity. Modern information technology has extended the reach of contents to the outside world. The entire world can now enjoy the same content in real time. This allows our local culture, once out of reach for most, to be reached on the international level."

Compared to many a popular tourist destinations in East Asia and South East Asia, the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic may not be familiar places to a lot of Hong Kong people.

However, as shown by the top officials from the two countries, some wonderful cultural events have been organised to welcome visitors from around the world.

Almat Suyunov, Kazakhstan's Director General of the Department of Education, Science and External Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Sports summarised his nation's "Ethnic Village," an event held together with the Astana EXPO-2017 of the Future Energy Forum, which took place early this year in the country's modern capital city of Astana, was "designed to inform, inspire and innovate."

The Ethnic Village proved to be an international event of significance, where world-class exhibits from Russia's celebrated Hermitage Museum and precious relics from ancient Egypt were on display for the public, while an

Opera competition were held attracting the participation of world's celebrated artists. The Village also offered visitors a close-up glimpse of the Kazakh culture and what Director Suyunov called the "sacred geography" of his proud country.

The ACCF Ministerial Panel concluded with an impressive presentation delivered by Kyrgyz Republic's Damira Alyshbaeva, Head of Department of Art Development and Professional Education, Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism.

In order to preserve and develop national values, as well as to maintain authentic culture, and dignity of Kyrgyz people, Alyshbaeva said large international projects have been held in the Kyrgyz Republic over the past few years. Since 2006, these include the World Epic Festival, the World Nomad Games since 2014 and the Altai Civilisation Forum early this year. These international events, she said, "engaged large parts of the population and foreign tourists and created conditions and access to cultural values, encouraging people to participate in the implementation as well as to develop their cultural potential." Alyshbaeva also plays an important role of chief coordinator of Kyrgyzstan exhibitions at overseas venues. And she proudly presented the audience a wonderfully produced video showing the essence of her ruggedly beautiful country.

In addition to the Ministerial Panel, the two-day ACCF 2017 comprised two other plenary sessions entitled "Engagement of the Youth for the Sustainable Development of Culture" and "Cultural Development in the New Technological Era."

The huge number of delegates also had the opportunity to join cultural visits, and roundtable hosted by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, as well as a gala dinner held by the Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR Government Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, plus a welcome lunch by the Chief Secretary for Administration Matthew Cheung Kin-chung.



The Secretary for Home Affairs, Lau Kong-wah joins hands with high-level representatives for the year's Forum themed "Cultural Sustainability in a Dynamic World: Connecting Diversity"