

Asia Cultural Ministers' Meeting
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Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum 2006

“The Nature of Cultural Identity”

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Fellow Ministers, Heads of Delegations, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again, welcome to Hong Kong and welcome to 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. The success of this Forum highlights the ever-increasing importance our respective Governments, and our respective communities place on cultural development in this part of the world amidst economic growth and regional cooperation.

When we put politicians in charge of cultural policy, we make them “keepers of the sacred flame”. And it is our painful duty to remind ourselves that it is – perhaps all too frequently – a flame that does not burn as brightly as it should.

Alongside the blazing ambitions that drive our economic prowess in this age of increasing competition, on this seemingly unavoidable path to greater globalization, ours is but a flickering candle, in danger of being overlooked and undernourished.

But such neglect can carry a heavy price, paid too late when the damage is already done. “Culture” has become a label much misread and sorely misunderstood. We may see it as a luxury, a fringe requirement for which we spare a nod when other priorities have been met. We may be in danger of failing to recognize it for what it is – a core element of our national ethos, essential to our very nature because it defines who we are.

The mere fact that we are on this road to greater globalization should underline, all the more starkly, the importance of preserving our individual identity. And what else can better define our identity than the culture we have come to represent?

Without our respective cultures we are in danger of being subsumed within the ever-mounting tide of “global culture”. And I might point out here that nobody understands that better than the French, who valiantly resist this maelstrom by clinging to, and bravely asserting, their Frenchness. I admire them for it, and I believe we should all follow their example.

We take pride in our variety, in the spectrum of our colouration, in the richness of our diversity. Like an orchestra, we all play our different instruments and different tunes, and together we make beautiful music.

What each of us contributes to the harmony of the whole is the product of our individual culture. None of us were born yesterday. Our culture is the product of generations, of aeons, of millennia. It has developed over immeasurable distances of time. It is our duty to preserve it, to safeguard its uniqueness.

Which is indeed why we are all gathered here today for this Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum, and why we are sharing our thoughts and ideas on this vital issue. This year the spotlight is especially focused on the concept of modernity in Asian cultural; on what that means and how we define it. There may never be a more crucial time for such debate.

With the advent of globalization, 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 economy to thrive and advance in the face of fierce competition from different parts of the world.

Creativity is the flame that has blazed our trail throughout history. For a very long time, Asia was the world’s centre of creativity. Then our Western counterparts overtook us, in their age of “Renaissance”, in which their artistic, social, scientific, and political thought turned in new directions.

Asia, fallen from the leading position, has been busy catching up until now, when we are witnessing a third wave of awakening. We need to revitalize our own creativity and build our future firmly on the foundation of a creative, knowledge-based economy, a creative society and, ultimately, a creative Asia, just as our ancestors did in the ancient past.

The theme of this year's Forum is "Asian Arts, Culture and Modernity". The term "modernity", at the outset, seems very formidable, abstract and often too theoretical or academic, but it nonetheless 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. Modernity is molding 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.

In the process of global modernization, Western values tended to become dominant, and the Westerners tend to promote universal Western culture, believing that non-Western people should commit themselves to Western values of democracy, freedom, individualism, equality and justice, and should embody these values in their institutions. As a Chinese scholar, Dr Ambrose King once put it : "The prevailing definitions of "modernity" have been premised on a set of values which were predominantly Western, male, white, oriented to the individual, and ecologically innocent."

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, collective solidarity, harmony and discipline. As Asia is determined to search for its cultural identity, we are also pursuing Asia's own vision of modernity.

Indeed, China's incredible success in its "modernization with Chinese characteristics" contributes to the making of an alternative modernity in East Asia. 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."

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. 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.

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

In one of his plays, "*Twelfth Night*", Shakespeare tells us, "If music be the food of love, play on." Well this is our twelfth hour, our midnight hour, when we stand in the rising waters of a dangerously all-engulfing tide of globalization. So I shall bend that quote a little to say, "If culture be the food of life, feast on."

But let each of us play on our own distinctive instrument, so that we continue to achieve that richness of harmony that our global symphony merits, and this time, it is an oriental tune.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish that all of you can have a very pleasant stay 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 with the fifth Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum.

Thank you very much.