

SHA's speech on cultural significance of HK at St Petersburg University of Humanities and Social Sciences

Following is the translation of the speech on "Cultural Significance of Hong Kong" by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, during a guest lecture at the St Petersburg University of Humanities and Social Sciences in Russia today (September 29):

Dr Zapesotsky, Honourable Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and privilege to be invited to the St Petersburg University of Humanities and Social Sciences, to speak at the Lecture Series on International Dialogue of Cultures.

I have great admiration for the city of St Petersburg, for its distinguished history and galaxy of talents in arts and culture. It was also where the first shot was fired in the 1917 October Revolution. What happened here had a tremendous impact on the course of world history, including inspiring and encouraging the revolution in China. After a long hard struggle, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949. And in 1997 - 48 years after its establishment - the PRC resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong and implemented the new model of "One Country, Two Systems".

This is my first visit to St Petersburg. I have found this city to be a place of great hospitality and friendliness. Aleksandr Pushkin once described St Petersburg as Russia's "Window to the West". Similarly, Hong Kong has long been regarded as China's window to the world and the world's window to China. So, in opening up to the world and embracing diverse cultures, the two cities of Hong Kong and St Petersburg do share a lot in common including our common development as a major port, shipping centre and trading economy.

For those of you unfamiliar with our city, let me just set the scene.

Hong Kong is relatively small in terms of area - just over 1,100 square kilometres, or about 300 square kilometres less than the size of St Petersburg.

Hong Kong is a highly open and pluralistic society. We have a population of some 7 million people, and last year welcomed 36 million visitors from our country and

around the world. Our population is largely ethnic Chinese, but we have a very diverse and eclectic mix of people from all around the world who call Hong Kong home.

There are 121 foreign consulates in Hong Kong - one of the highest concentrations of diplomatic missions in the world for a non-capital city. Many different cultures thrive and co-exist peacefully in our open, liberal and welcoming society. Churches, temples, mosques and synagogues representing all religions and faiths are dotted around the city. And we celebrate with great enthusiasm traditional Chinese and international festivals throughout the year.

I am sure you have all heard of Bruce Lee, and also Jackie Chan and John Woo. Bruce Lee epitomised Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s. He had starred in Hollywood movies and then returned to make his own. Through his movies, he brought Chinese kung fu to the world. His elaborate fighting scenes could be traced to the highly stylised martial art movements in traditional Chinese opera, and indeed in descriptions in classical Chinese literature. One may see kung fu as fantasies of the human body, in contrast to the fantasies of weapons manifested in Hollywood movies.

Hong Kong's pop music scene has had a similar impact in Chinese communities around the world, as well as with Asian audiences in Korea and Japan. Similarly, Hong Kong's food culture has been exported to all corners of the globe.

Services account for almost 95 per cent of the GDP of Hong Kong, which is why we are one of the most important business and professional services hubs in Asia. We have been consistently rated as the world's freest economy, and also one of the most competitive economies in the world. With the exception of some products including petrol and tobacco, we are a duty free port. We are strong believers in free and open trade.

We are one of the major financial centres of the world, and have played a pivotal role in the opening up and reform of China's financial markets. In 2009 and 2010, Hong Kong ranked first globally in terms of Initial Public Offerings issued on our stock exchange.

Recently, the Central Government of the PRC has given its clear support for Hong Kong to develop as the offshore Renminbi centre. For such a role, Hong Kong has a separate legal regime, an independent banking system and our own currency, the

Hong Kong Dollar, is freely convertible in the international market.

That's just a snapshot of Hong Kong today. What I'd like to talk about now is how we got to where we are today, and the cultural significance of Hong Kong in the world.

The first thing we need to understand is that Hong Kong is, and always will be, a predominantly Chinese society. That is, our culture, language, traditions, thinking and outlook on life have deep and ancient roots. If we can understand this aspect of Hong Kong - and indeed the way in which China has developed over the millennia - then we can come to appreciate why Hong Kong has been such a successful example of the integration of East and West, a melting pot of cultures, and a crucible of creative endeavour.

In Chinese culture, there is an important concept of "he" ("harmony"). This can be traced back to the 3,000-year-old Chinese classics Yi Jing ("Classics of Change"). Yi Jing presents a holistic view of how nature works in yin yang ("the two contrary forces") and how various elements in the world complement one another to achieve completeness and harmony. "He" can be regarded as a fundamental Chinese thinking. "He" brings harmony and peace.

"Tong" ("sameness") is a concept similar to "he". Around 2,000 years ago in ancient China, there was much debate on the difference between "he" and "tong". It was argued that "he" comprised of yin yang, and hence differences; but "tong" contained no diversity. Hence, "he" can accommodate diversity and, as such, provide the impetus for, and acceptance of, progress; while "tong" is more concerned with uniformity, which stifles creativity, adaptation and further development.

Confucius later gave his views on the matter in his famous saying, "harmony in diversity", meaning that "harmony" must embrace recognition of, and respect for, differences.

To some Europeans and Americans, "harmony" is more like "tong" - the more conformity or similarity, the more harmony. Some may even take the pursuit of this view of "harmony" as an impediment to the exercise of individual rights and freedoms.

However, in Chinese culture and society we see differences as the major feature of "harmony". That is, the essence of "harmony" is to allow and accept differences.

Imagine listening to a glorious Shostakovich symphony by the famous St Petersburg Symphony Orchestra. It takes all of the varying sounds of each different instrument to create such a rich and beautiful piece of music. The harmony of the music is only complete when all the different instruments play their part.

More and more scientific evidences show that biological diversity is essential to the sustainable development of the world. Any inconspicuous species can have a vital role in the biological chain that has a bearing on the destiny of the world. Loss of any single species would result in long term ecological imbalance. Men's pressing task is to protect bio-diversity in the world, for ourselves and future generations.

Many of you here will know that for over 150 years in its recent past, Hong Kong had been under British rule. It was during that period that Hong Kong's development diverged from that of the Mainland - and this had a profound impact on our culture and way of life.

In 1842, after defeating the Qing Government in the Opium War, the British took possession of Hong Kong and made it her base for extorting wealth from China. While the Chinese have a civilisation unbroken over several thousand years, China was not yet a modern nation state and was no match for the British expeditionary force. The American political scientist Lucian Pye had once remarked that China was "a civilisation pretending to be a state". Nevertheless, patriotism has always been a core element deeply rooted in our culture. With a legacy of several thousand years, the Chinese civilisation has a strong capacity for unity and solidarity. The many revolutionary movements in China over the past century have had the support of Chinese in Hong Kong and overseas. While Western culture and values had penetrated institutionally or subtly into Hong Kong for the period under British rule, the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 was peaceful and smooth because most Hong Kong people embraced the fact that Hong Kong has always been a part of China.

Over recent history, Hong Kong has thrived as a trade and business entrepot. We have learnt that global markets are fickle and that we have to be fast, flexible and efficient if we want to remain competitive. In other words, change and adaptation has been our constant companion. While we have remained a Chinese society rooted in Chinese culture, we absorbed, adapted and applied to full advantage the systems that the British brought with them. Hong Kong society also came to understand the vital

importance of certain systems and philosophies that underpinned our stability and prosperity. That is, the rule of law upheld by an independent judiciary, a clean and efficient government totally opposed to corruption, a level playing field for business, and the free flow of news and information.

Thousands upon thousands of Hong Kong people have studied abroad. The access to international education in Hong Kong, and the experiences gained while studying overseas have provided fertile ground for our young people to explore new horizons and experience different cultures and lifestyles. All of this is adapted and integrated into Hong Kong society when they return. It is another way in which creativity and innovation is nurtured, takes root and subtly changes the DNA of our society and economy over time. In recent years more local youngsters also go for studies in the Mainland China.

Chinese people do not reject foreign cultures; rather, we cherish opportunities to learn from others. Democracy, freedom, human rights etc. from the West are good and we would be glad to acquire. But what previously puzzled many Chinese revolutionaries was why those who supposed were our teachers bullied us? Apparently, there were other considerations at play. As a generation who has lived under British colonialism, we know how things in reality may go contrary to those noble values.

I think you know better than I do that the series of changes happened in this part of the world in the 1990s have had far reaching political impact and has completely reshaped the global political setting. The world has entered the post-Cold War era. "The End of History" theory emerged which argued that history has reached the end with the triumph of liberal democracy and western values. Then later, another American academic has proposed that clash of different political systems in the past would be replaced by clash of different civilisations.

While "The End of History" predicts global sameness in political system and values, "The Clash of Civilisations" implies that differences cannot conciliate. However, what are happening tell us that history has not ended, it is evolving and exploring in new dimensions. Globalisation also stimulates diversity. Hence, modernity is not homogeneous; it may be in different forms. Different cultural heritages have their own roles in shaping modernity. Thrived for several thousand years, the strong and rich culture of China certainly has its justifications and legitimacy. It is now defining our own Chinese

style modernity, which will not be the same as the American's.

The Russian culture is also a rich heritage. The Russian culture, such as music, art and literature, has its influence on both China and Hong Kong. Lovers of Russian culture are never short in Hong Kong and we have welcomed many brilliant Russian arts groups. Here in Russia I see that modernity has developed with a character of its own. The impression it gives me is very different from that of Western Europe or the United States.

Cultural diversity is a fact. Could clash of civilisations be avoided and different cultures co-exist in harmony? This concerns world peace and the future of humankind. It is precisely in addressing this question that I see the cultural significance of Hong Kong.

When you understand the concept of "he" that I mentioned earlier, you begin to understand more deeply why Hong Kong people have been so successful in bridging the needs between international businesses and investors, as well as those of China businesses and investors. The adaptation and adoption of new ideas is a natural fit for Hong Kong because it is part of our culture and outlook on life. We have been able to absorb the best of East and West to create a dynamic, vibrant, free, open and pluralistic society that is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and tradition that welcomes - and indeed has thrived - interaction with the global village.

The concept of "he" can also be seen in Hong Kong's development since our Reunification in 1997.

The "One Country, Two Systems" principle that has guided our development for the past 14 years is all about making progress through integration while respecting differences. When first espoused in the 1980s, many in the West saw this as a novel solution to the question of how an open, capitalist society such as Hong Kong could be absorbed into the closed, socialist economy that prevailed in our country at the time. But in fact it is a new application of an ancient philosophy to address the reality of Hong Kong.

Ladies and gentlemen, Hong Kong, though a very small place, is embarking on an exciting venture in this new epoch. Different values, customs and practices of major civilisations meet in Hong Kong. We shall endeavour to bring about harmonisation and transcend possible conflicts. We realise that we face many problems and

difficulties, but we also believe we are uniquely placed to tackle the issue.

I do hope that you will be able to come and experience Hong Kong for yourselves and to see "One Country, Two Systems" at work. One manifestation is the unique development of our culture.

Following our Chief Executive's visit to Russia last year, and President Medvedev's landmark trip to Hong Kong earlier this year, the friendship and links between Hong Kong and Russia have entered a new and positive phase.

There are ample opportunities for exchange and co-operation between St Petersburg and Hong Kong - and for Russian culture, ideas, and know-how to become part of the Hong Kong success story. I hope that together we can make the world a more beautiful and colourful place.

Thank you.

Ends/Thursday, September 29, 2011

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