

Speech by SHA at Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum 2009 (English only)

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Following is the opening speech by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, at the Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum (ACCF) 2009 today (October 8):

Minister Cai (Cai Wu), heads of delegations, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. First, a warm welcome to Hong Kong to all our guests. Also thank you for joining us here in Hong Kong for the Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum 2009. Championing the idea of "The Cultural Asian", this year's ACCF will explore topics of cultural co-operation against the backdrop of new international and regional developments.

The rise of Asia has been a topic of conversation around the world in recent years. Asia owes its progress to the enhancement of the quality of its people. To quote the Japanese philosopher Ikeda Daisaku, "The way people act and the system according to which they act are rooted in culture". In other words, culture defines people. This is how the idea of "The Cultural Asian" comes about.

Asia is the largest and most populous continent in the world. It is also home to a kaleidoscopic variety of cultures. From east to west and south to north, it spans a huge tract of land where vastly different cultures meet and flourish. Countries and regions across the continent speak, dress and eat in different yet unique ways, creating a broad spectrum of rich cultures. Hence, Asian is first and foremost a notion of variety.

Over the course of history, peoples in the region have intermingled and have been under the profound influence of one another, so much so that every Asian culture borrows certain elements from its neighbours. Some say languages and words are the greatest manifestations of a culture because they are richest in cultural content. They practically embody the culture of their people. For example, Chinese culture has been prospering for thousands of years, but Hanyu, as the dominant language of the Chinese people, has been constantly evolving phonetically and lexically by absorbing countless vocabularies and ideas from other cultures.

Nowadays, very few cultures from around the world can be regarded as indigenous. Instead, they are more or less mixtures, assimilating facets of other

cultures in one way or another. The greater the differences between two cultures, the more powerful the chemistry generated when they come in contact. In Asia, different cultures meet and mix on a daily basis. As Asia has long been a land of diverse cultures, Asians have learnt to live and respect others' lives.

Asia has given rise to some of the most advanced human civilisations. Studies on history and contemporary civilisations have all taken a special interest in Asia. Ji Xian-lin, the late Chinese scholar who passed away not long ago, said human civilisation has so far fallen into two cultural systems - Oriental and Occidental. Their differences originated and are derived from their different modes of thinking - the East is inductive while the West is deductive.

The inductive mode of thinking has made Asian civilisations more tolerant and ready to learn from others. Since the 16th century, Asian countries have all fallen under the influence of Western civilisations to some extent. Although colonialism was gradually stamped out during the last century, the Western culture did not go down with it. On the contrary, it acquires global influence as the economy becomes increasingly globalised. Most Asian societies embrace Western civilisations with open arms rather than trepidation. Everywhere in Asia, you will see people learning from the technological and cultural advancement Europe has achieved since the Industrial Revolution with a strong sense of humility. We may say that Asians are adept at equipping themselves with the combined wisdom of all humanity, or the best of the East and the West.

Take Hong Kong as an example. The meteoric rise of Hong Kong is the result of merging the best of both worlds. Leveraging our vibrant and diverse culture and unique location in Asia, we have a vision of positioning Hong Kong as an international cultural hub through, inter alia, the development of a massive cultural district on a prime harbourfront site. The West Kowloon Cultural District, or WKCD, will be an integrated arts facility spanning 40 hectares. The Government has already committed an upfront endowment of almost HK\$21.6 billion to the WKCD project. When completed it will include 15 performing arts venues including a main performance venue and theatres, concert halls and music halls of varying sizes. There will also be a modern museum and outdoor piazzas for people to enjoy the atmosphere. In the WKCD we also have arguably the most ambitious single arts development project in the world to look forward to in the years ahead.

Similar scenarios can occur in other parts of the world, but Asia seemingly is better

prepared to benefit from the intermingling of different cultures and translate the experience into innovation and progress.

As we can see, Asians are facing a lot of cultural issues that call for in-depth study and discussion. These issues have to do with re-acquainting ourselves with our own cultural traditions and sorting the wheat from the chaff in dealing with foreign cultures. Asian cultures are known for their richness, diversity, heritage and inclusiveness. By holding fast to these values and taking Asian cultures to their next level, we will find ourselves in a favourable position to meet the various challenges emerging in this new era.

I wish you all will have fruitful discussions and a very successful ACCF. Thank you.

(Note: Ikeda Daisaku and Ji Xian-lin's quotes are extracted from "Conversations on Eastern Wisdom with Ji Xian-lin, Jiang Zhong-xin and Ikeda Daisaku", The Commercial Press (H.K.) Ltd., 2004.)

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