The following is a speech by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Dr Patrick Ho, at the Asian Cultural Ministers’ Meeting of the Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum 2005 today (November 10):

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning and welcome to Hong Kong. This is the third time we meet, but perhaps your first time in Hong Kong Disneyland. Meeting in such a globalised theme park, selling mainly cultural products with mostly American icons and values, gives me mixed feelings. After negotiating over 12 months, the Hong Kong SAR Government signed the contract for Disneyland in December 1999, and the park opened in September 2005, almost a year ahead of schedule. On the other hand, our West Kowloon Cultural District was conceived in 1998 and is still engaged in the sophisticated public consensus building exercise and tendering process. Seven years have passed and the most expensive piece of land by our harbour is still a barren lot. It's so easy to imitate, so difficult to create. So easy to borrow brands, so difficult to create our own.

To borrow or not to borrow; that's the question we must ask ourselves in regard to globalisation. We learned a lot from Disneyland and Hollywood but that should not be the end of our efforts. Globalisation has not only influenced our economy but also affected our culture to an unprecedented degree. The formation of a universal consumer society, through free trade and transnational companies, has demanded convergence in our ways of handling business and organising our daily life. In past decades we surrendered a lot of our traditions and indigenous values in exchange for an imagined world culture, and we expected this to bring us progress and growth. To compete for the export market and to attract foreign investment, we copied success formulas and imitated our neighbouring competitors. To please our importers, we cut prices to the point where it begins to hurt ourselves and our neighbours alike. We compete in such a way that we may all become less expensive but not necessarily cheap.

For the economically advanced West, branding is an act of revitalisation. For
us developing economies, branding may be a fight against unfavourable stereotypes, an elimination of bad name-tags we don't like or want. We need branding because it secures consumer confidence and it helps us survive the price wars. We may either start with a natural packaging of the images we enjoy or create new images through painstaking cultural engineering. But I think the most important and meaningful part of the branding game is community involvement, as I have always believed the most powerful tool of cultural policy is the civil society. Only with citizens sharing the aspirations of a city or a nation can branding have its impetus and real content. And with the citizens of our neighbouring cities and nations sharing each other's aspirations, I look forward to a new branding of Asia that will come about one day.

Ladies and gentlemen, meeting in this brand new hotel, built next to the greatest natural reserve of Hong Kong, I dream of a creative Asia, an Asia with ideas and values to inspire humanity, an Asia where people live in prosperity and in harmony with nature. Since the last time we met, we have talked, we have argued, we have agreed and disagreed, and we all want these meetings to continue, because this dream will one day come true. Thank you very much.

Ends/Thursday, November 10, 2005
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