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

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank you for your presence at this Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum. From a gathering of so many honoured speakers, addressing so large and concerned an audience this afternoon, even a layperson can tell that culture has become a serious, if not necessarily a popular, business. Once again, on behalf of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government I extend to all of you a very warm welcome.

The topic this year is Asian branding. We live at a time in which even distilled water is bottled and branded. We meet brands every day and consume products and services according to their brands. Our factories make branded products to meet OEM orders; we patronise franchised services, chain stores and retail branches. Our cities are full of iconic buildings and signature monuments designed by global architectural firms. But very few of these are our own brands. Foreign brands make our cities accessible, recognisable and user-friendly, but we are paying for this day by day, not only in franchise fees but in the loss of our cultural pride. Even our cities are tagged with nicknames such as the Venice of Asia, the Las Vegas of the East, or Paris in China. Soho here, West End there and Manhattan everywhere. Heaven knows, we are liable to forget that we are in Asia.

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 secure a place in the world, cities compete with each other, but in the end they look very much alike in appearance because everyone has settled for copying the most successful example. To please our importers, we cut prices to a point where it begins to hurt ourselves and our neighbours alike. We compete in such a way that we may all become less expensive and sometimes, even cheap.
Branding has different meanings for the economically advanced West and the developing economies in Asia. Instead of being an act of revitalisation, developing economies make use of branding to fight against unfavourable stereotypes and to eliminate misleading and undesirable name-tags. In some economies, branding helps restore consumer confidence and survive the tough competitions.

It's high time that we look inward to see who we actually are and how we should position ourselves. Only through cultural depth and content that is both original and inspiring can a city's fame rise far above icons and slogans. On positioning and placing oneself, Confucius once said, "You should not be concerned about your place, you should be concerned about how you may fit yourself for one. You should not be concerned that you are not known, you should seek to be worthy of being known." Confucius was referring to the fact that once integrity was achieved, the brand name followed. In search for brand integrity is to understand our key strengths and guiding principles beheld by our communities.

Unlike brand names which are easily recognisable, innate qualities and indigenous values are not readily discernible. But for me the most important and meaningful part of the branding game is community involvement, for I have always believed the most powerful tool of cultural policy is the civil society. For example, 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. But still, I firmly believe in the wisdom of the community in arriving at a common realisation, through active and open debates, of the cultural values that underpin our city brand. Without sharing the aspirations of a city or a nation among its citizens, branding will only become empty slogans.

Just as we aimed to discover through our Creativity Index launched last year, we must measure our creative abilities in our own terms and examine our cultural capital in our own calibre. Just as creative industries are also known as content business, so branding should also be a business about content, and the core principles and cultural values that underline the content. Cultural products, numerous; creative products,
abundant; and creative contents plentiful, but brand-names few. It is high time that we should gird up our loins, and roll up our sleeves, reach deep into our cultural pocket and come up with a series of creative products which can be identified with similar integrity, and measured up to respective benchmark of quality in performance and conduct. Creative products evolving from similar fundamental values constitute the Brand integrity. Our cultural depths and the core essentials of community values actually provide for the very foundation through which brand names emerge with all the glory and splendour.

I always believe that a new branding of Asia will come about one day, when we, citizens from the neighbouring cities and nations share each other's aspirations and invite one another into our dreams that life is celebrated through cultural pursuit, and our peoples are enchanted by the arts, enlightened by cultural differences, and enriched by social diversity. We must come to learn with mutual respect that despite our different backgrounds and upbringings, there are some fundamental values that we all hold dear, there are some basic principles which we all respect, and there are certain core understanding that we all embrace, and which bring all of us together, and together under one brand - Brand Asia.

Thank you.

Ends/Thursday, November 10, 2005
NNNN