Distinguished Guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been a great honour for Hong Kong to play host to cultural ministers, policymakers, artists and scholars from so many countries. "Brand Asia" was the theme of this year's forum. In the past four days, we have discussed issues on branding, intellectual property as well as the crux of Asia's creative business.

We live today in a world full of brands. We encounter them every day. We consume products and services by brands. Branding is with us all the time. We are looking more and more alike nowadays because we go after copying successful examples from developed economies in the West.

If we look behind successful brands - principally from the West - it is not difficult to identify the values they represent. They convey to us the authority, styles, fashions and ethos pertaining to their places of origin, which we have been in danger of slavish imitation simply because we have accepted that these must be the prevailing norm, the criterion against which we measure ourselves.

But copying the brands from the West simply does not work, for, we are only replicating icons and symbols without fully understanding and capturing the underlying spirit and substance. Merely imitating the superficial features of a successful brand renders us hollow at our core, and borrowing from TS Elliott, it is only adopting the shape without its form, shade without its colours, and gestures without motion.

The Hippie movement of the 60's and 70's is a good case in point. It failed to catch on in this part of the world because it did not identify well with our local upbringing background, history, legacy and traditions. What is more, copying successful examples involved paying a price either in terms of a franchise, or if we choose to ignore the copyright, we would draw heavy penalty, backfire and ultimately hurting our own creative industries and talents.

But copying from our neighbours in the East is another story. As we share our common family values, social norms, cultural aspirations and understanding, replicating from, say,
Japanese music and Korean TV series are frequent occurrences as we can all say that what were pleasing to Japanese ears are often pleasing to those in this part of the world, and the Korean TV story lines appeal to the tastes of the Asian TV watchers at large.

But is branding bringing us benefits in Asia? This is just one of the questions we have explored, knowing that we have reached a crucial juncture, when Asian economies and Asian industries are making such rapid progress, when Asian products, trends, arts and fashions are exerting a growing influence on western markets.

"Globalisation" is the "in-word" these days. But globalisation at what risk? Must globalisation come hand-in-hand with uniformity? Must we lose that distinctive ingredient of who we are in order to merge into the great homogeneity of what we seek to be? It is true - and indeed a comforting fact - that our underlying cultural values are shared by most - if not all - members of our great global community, but we each bring to these common values our own means of expression, our distinctive features, unique to our own particular value and how it has evolved.

We need to develop a branding specific to Asia, something of which we are proud of and something that is deeply and intricately bound up with our collective identity and what we ourselves can contribute. Something, in other words, that stems from within our own respective cultures and common legacies.

Fortunately, many of us have begun to realise that creative industries should be seen in the larger context of the revival of indigenous cultures to go along with global entrepreneurship. For many decades we in Asia have spent time learning, imitating and assimilating ideas from the modernized West. Now it's time that we look inward within ourselves, to consolidate our own cultural vision and to contribute something of that to the world. The blooming creative industries of Asia, the film industry for instance, are in part the expression of this trend.

Such soul-searching endeavours of our cultural commonality speak more powerfully than towering icons and expensive advertising campaigns in identifying a country or a city, because they come from the roots of the community and carry its history.

However, comparing tangible cultural centres and opera houses, these works of less overtly material influence cannot be achieved by government budgets alone. They have to be brought forth by collective self-awareness and the revival of collective cultural identity. The state, the civil society and individual artists and writers, all have a role to play.
Take Chinese culture as an example. Like in many ancient civilizations, it has been exposed to outside influence, but has avoided the danger of that infiltration of foreign adulterations becoming an inundation in which we are swamped and swept away. We have judged each new product by its quality, not its label. We assess new concepts and philosophies not on the basis of how great they are stamped to be, but by how virtuous their practitioners are.

That is why diverse religions have co-existed for thousands of years in China without any significant religious wars. Even in the weakest days of the Ching Dynasty, and during the warring times and the trying years of the twentieth century, China never ceased to learn from the West. It was tenacity and perseverance, or was it obstinace and arrogance rather, that was in our trait and that has always prevented us from losing our innate pride in ourselves and our integral identity.

Likewise, China has as its constituents 56 different races. As one looks at history, races came and went and took turn to rule China. But at the end of the day, 56 races remained intact and co-existed in modern China. China is a very embracing race celebrating diversity and tolerating and accommodating different elements no matter how foreign they are. Looking back in history, in the Han Dynasty 2000 years back, we had the first Silk Road kicked off by Zhang Qian; and in the 15th Century, we had the second Silk Road at sea championed by Cheng He.

The significance of the two silk routes was when China was at its height of prosperity and military might, it cherished peaceful missions of trade the result of which was the establishment of centres and stations along the routes through which cross fertilization of different cultures flourished.

Ladies and gentlemen, the 21st Century will see us here embarking on the third Silk Road. The two previous Silk Roads traded tea, silk, spices, exotic fruits, jewellery and gold. The 21st Century Silk Road trades for creative ideas, creative products and creative talents. This modern Silk Road travels neither by sea nor on land, but travels through the inner workings of the human minds driven by a desire to captivate the cutting edges of peaceful competition in this globalized world.

Along this modern Silk Road we have witnessed heated discussions on the safeguarding of world cultural diversity in the context of economic conformity and integration.
Along this modern Silk Road, we have seen many rewarding explorations in regional cultural cooperation with a realization that equal attention should be paid to political, economic and cultural cooperation in the Region. For instance, this Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum has been held here three years in a row; ministers of ASEAN plus China, Japan and Korea responsible for culture and arts (AMCA plus three) were held twice, and the Asia Cultural Ministers' Forum is now just being held in Foshan, not to mention the nine Memoranda of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation that the Hong Kong SAR Government has concluded during the last three years with countries including Singapore, the Philippines, Korea, Egypt, Netherlands, Hungary and Croatia, and one with our own Ministry of Culture.

Along this modern Silk Road we will see communities merging creative markets and aligning cultural policies to form alliances in exploring the commonality among cultures and community values in answering to the modern needs of the 21st Century.

Along this modern Silk Road we will see citizens from neighbouring cities and nations sharing one another's aspirations and inviting one another into their dreams that life is celebrated through cultural pursuits, and our people are enchanted by the arts, enlightened by cultural differences and enriched by social diversity.

And along this modern Silk Road, we will come to learn with mutual respect that despite our different backgrounds and upbringings, there are some fundamental values we all hold dear, some basic principles we all respect and certain core understanding we all embrace.

My friends, the third Silk Road of the 21st Century is our answer and response to globalization of our cultural needs. Make no mistake, the purpose of this Silk Road is not to establish an empire of might but to extend our empire of minds.

After all, brand names, like individuals, come and go, but civilization must live on.

I look forward to seeing you all again, same time, next year.

Thank you very much.

Ends/Saturday, November 12, 2005
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