

## The Asian Cultural Cooperation Forum: Hong Kong as a Nexus of Soft Power

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The **Asian Cultural Cooperation Forum** (ACCF) was established in 2003 by Patrick Ho, then the Secretary for Home Affairs for the Hong Kong, SAR. The name is obviously a play on the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC). Like APEC, the ACCF brings together political leaders from throughout Asia, but to talk directly about cultural affairs rather than economic and political affairs. Unlike APEC, however, the ACCF does not bring together heads of state – only ministers of culture. Nor does it rotate from country to country – it has always been held in Hong Kong. Participants come from S. Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore – and of course from the PRC, including Hong Kong and Macau. This year there were 36 delegates from Mainland China, including representatives from 17 different provinces and municipalities, as well as representatives from the central government.

The ACCF serves various purposes. The most important probably is to give the region's cultural officials a chance for networking. Another purpose is to establish Hong Kong as a nexus of soft power in Asia. The fact that the ACCF was conceived in Hong Kong and is always hosted by Hong Kong serves a representative function for Hong Kong identity – an identity as a cosmopolitan city firmly grounded in commercial values.

The content of the Forum reflects these dimensions of Hong Kong identity. The first four years focused on the commercial uses of culture: “capitalizing on creativity” (2003), “creative Asia” (2004), “brand Asia” (2005). But starting last year, there has been more of a focus on basic values. In his opening speech to the 2006 Forum, Patrick Ho said: “Understanding modernity points to the centre of our concern in our discourse on culture, be it art policies or cultural implications of political consideration. As we construct strategies and polities to answer to the needs and aspirations of a modern society, our communities are, in turn, driven by a modernity which is actually a collective system of values and a set of moral codes that govern thoughts, establish identity, drive economies, set agendas, dictate choices, and inspire expectations.” He attempted to direct participants to a search for Asian values, to restore Asia's historical place as “the world centre of creativity and cradle of cultures.” He speaks of “Asia's determined search for its cultural identity, an Asian search for Asia's own vision of modernity. So we meet here to exchange thoughts, ideas, and experience in pursuit of this quest, in the hopes that we can adapt to globalization without surrendering our individuality, without succumbing to, as some observers put it, the Americanization of Asia.”

The most recent ACCF was held in July of this year (2007) and the discourse about Asian Values continued, perhaps with an even darker edge than before. I was a “participant observer” at this event – I gave a keynote speech on “Asian Modernity and Cultural Diversity” to the meeting of the culture ministers. At this meeting, the leader of each delegation made a statement. The tone was not one of celebrating Asian values, but of

concern over the alienation and anomie faced in all Asian countries. From Indonesia: “Super-industrialization as manifestation of logical advances in social and economic sphere of societies’ life has become human resources exploitation and dehumanization process. It interactively puts mankind as factor and production functionaries without creating social relations that balance with human dignity and pride.” From Japan: “the modernization process often times tears the social fabric apart. It makes individuals ‘atomized’ beings.” This leads to a dangerous “nationalism that is markedly on the rise throughout the resurgent Asia as both a driver and a by product of the rapid economic growth...” The delegates had different approaches to meeting the challenges posed by this modernization. The delegate from Vietnam talked about the need to more fully “implement the industrialization and modernization of the country.” In effect, solving the problems of modernization by more modernization. The minister from Thailand talked about the need for government regulation to suppress bad tendencies. “The Ministry of Culture concerns with moral principles and ethics in society aiming at people in general particularly youngsters to improve their morals. The Vigilant Centre at the Ministry of Culture is to protect the nation’s culture and values through the process of surveillance guarding against four particular cultural offences: inappropriate representation of national or religious symbols, offensive language, violence, and sexual content.” But most other delegates saw the solution to the problems as consisting in providing more opportunities for cultural innovation and exchange. The delegate from Singapore, for example, spoke proudly of the Esplanade, Singapore’s performing arts center, which has been “actively showcasing the culture and heritage of Asia through collaborations with leading Asian artists.” The other delegates talked of developing similar forums for exchange of creative work.

Interestingly, none of the delegates from mainland China gave a formal statement. They had had their own closed meeting on the day before the opening session.

Following the ministers’ meeting, there was a two day long “open forum.” The first day included panels on cultural creativity, on preservation of architectural heritage – all in English. During the second day, the main language was Mandarin. The main panel was on “Asian core values” and it was a discussion of different aspects of Confucianism, with speakers like Tu Wei-ming and Yu Dan. The concluding panel was on popular culture, with talks from leading talent agents from Hong Kong and Shanghai on “how to manufacture a star.” After the high minded talk about intercultural dialogue and core Confucian values, therefore, the last word of the forum was thus about commercialization and commodification of culture.

There is a lot of talk in Hong Kong about what it means to be a “Hong Kong person.” The ACCF – at least the sessions that I observed -- is a good expression of a particular version of that identity: Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan meeting ground of different cultures, especially Asian cultures, grounded in a basic way in (flexibly interpreted) Confucian values, but in the end driven by commerce.