

Remarks by H.E. Paul Kavanagh
Ambassador of Ireland to China
at the Han Ban Open Day in Beijing
Friday, 25 September, 2015

Cultural Exchanges and Building World Peace

Madam Director General of Han Ban, My Good Friend, Ms Xu Lin

President of the International University of Business and Economics, Mr. Shi Jianjun

Distinguished Guests

Colleagues of the Diplomatic Corps, Friends

Ladies and Gentleman

It is a great pleasure to join you this afternoon at Han Ban's World Headquarters for this wonderful Open Day as we celebrate the theme of "Cultural Exchanges and World Peace". In doing so, we will all want to recognize the seminal contribution of Hanban –precisely to cultural exchange worldwide, and therefore also to the building and sustaining of peace between countries and peoples.

I am honored to have been invited - alongside a colleague from Senegal - to address you, in a certain sense, in the name of the Beijing Diplomatic Corps.

Director, Ladies and Gentleman. When we think of China, and of what it means, almost automatically we come to focus on this country's immense and venerable culture. It is largely this culture, continually evolving, and not least China's unifying language, a written language since millennia, that has kept this country and the Chinese people together, through thick and thin.

It is this culture that unites Chinese people the world over and across the centuries.

This great culture of China has played a key role in enabling the Chinese people to emerge into the modern world, dignified, proud and united looking to an ever brighter future, following centuries of challenge and adversity, the severity of which we can hardly imagine.

Many of us here today from all corners of the world come from, or indeed have the honor to represent countries and peoples which also have received from our ancestors rich, diverse and enduring cultures of our own. Many of us have ancient languages - and literature in those languages - which define us as peoples, and to a considerable extent as individuals.

These cultures give us our individuality as peoples. But they also equip us to recognize and embrace the universal, the shared situation on earth that shapes our common humanity.

They equip us to step beyond the specificity of our own situation, to embrace the essential worth and dignity of the other, to overcome divisiveness, including that which flows from difficult history.

Our cultures enable us to exchange ideas, values and creations. Such exchanges allow us to grow. As has been said: if I come and you come, and we each trade an apple with the other, then we each leave with one apple; on the other hand, if we each come with an idea and we exchange ideas, then we each leave with at least two ideas.

Our cultures may be ancient, but they should also be modern, creative, dynamic, and open.

Cultural exchange ought to make us more tolerant, and in this way, helps us to avoid, or overcome conflict, and to build peace and reconciliation.

This is why Hanban is a builder of peace. It is why we too, Hanban's friends and partners, too are engaged in building peace together.

The founding charter of UNESCO is eloquent in this regard: 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that peace must be constructed'

Madam Director, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My country, Ireland, has excellent relations with China. This is true in the political field, in economic, financial, trade and investment terms, in education and research, and of course in the cultural domain.

We are delighted that there are three Confucius Institutes on the island of Ireland; and that the Chinese government is about to establish a major Chinese Cultural Center in Ireland's capital.

I was honored, Madam Director, to join you and Mr. Liu Yunshan in 2014 to help lay the foundation stone of the new model Institute in Dublin. It is gratifying that our two governments are sharing the cost of this institute and that the sister institute in Cork is thriving and highly successful.

Let me mention that in the past year in Ireland the Government have introduced two modules and only two for pupils in the junior cycle of secondary school. We are talking of twelve to fifteen year olds. The two modules are:

- Software coding; and
- Chinese language and Culture

You can see from this the way our mind is working in Ireland.

In Ireland, degree-level programmes in mandarin, combined with commerce, international studies, intercultural studies, computer science, marketing and so for are being taught in a range of our universities, and other institutions.

The Irish government provides financial support to a voluntary group of teachers who are already qualified in other subjects and who wish to qualify and to teach Chinese. This group has strong links to the Dublin Confucius Institute. The Cork Institute meanwhile is legendary in its outreach.

These collaborations with Hanban have enabled Ireland, the better to build educational as well as cultural exchanges with China over the past decade. Together we have developed a mature and sophisticated relationship encompassing student mobility between Ireland and China, close collaborations in higher education and research, language learning and cultural awareness raising.

I look forward, Madam Director, to joining you next month here when Ireland's Minister for Education and Skills pays her annual call on this headquarters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ireland is fortunate to have a culture that is widely recognized. Language and literature are a key part of who we are. Our four Nobel Laureates in Literature are well known: Yeats, Shaw, Beckett and Heaney. But several of Ireland's most famous writers never received the Nobel Prize, I think of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde for example. There are many more.

Music and Dance too are an essential part of what makes the Irish people Irish. For many Chinese, Riverdance or Enya may be their first encounter with Ireland and things Irish.

Irish artists have made seminal contributions to world art in the past century. I think of Francis Bacon, for example.

Ladies and Gentlemen

We Irish know from our history that mutual respect, tolerance and forgiveness are important to the building of peace and reconciliation. We know too that this is greatly facilitated when peoples embrace each other, and not least when they embrace each other's culture.

Of course China and Ireland will never enter conflict, one against each other. Have no fear!!

At global and regional level, however, absence of conflict is not enough. We are obliged, each of us, from every country, our various asymmetries notwithstanding, and despite the complications of the past, to contribute to building peace, real peace, in our own regions and more widely in the world.

We in Ireland are happy to work with China to this end.

And we are happy to work with one of China's leading peace builders, Hanban!

Thank you.