

Ambassador Dr. Karunasena Kodituwakku's Speech

Good morning!

Distinguished guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I am delighted to attend the opening ceremony of the One Belt One Road Language and Culture Summit and to speak a few words congratulating the First Beijing International Language and Culture Expo, which will feature language-related intangible cultural heritage artifacts, language and culture products from participating countries.

As you may be aware, I am the Ambassador of Sri Lanka, which is known to all of you, I believe. China and Sri Lanka are friends. Our friendship is not a new one. There are historical records in both countries that indicate that the friendship between our two countries has existed for more than 2000 years, particularly through people's movement on the historical maritime Silk Road. The well-known Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-xian visited Sri Lanka 1,600 years ago and spent two years learning Buddhism in the ancient capital Anuradhapura. When he returned to China, he brought with him a number of Buddhist manuscripts and wrote and published a book about his experiences. I am aware that it is now available even in English. It should be exhibited at this kind of expo.

Another well-known exchange between China and Sri Lanka occurred about six hundred years ago when the Chinese navigator Zheng He visited Sri Lanka seven times. A stone inscription in Chinese, Persian, and one of Sri Lanka's languages, Tamil, that he erected in Sri Lanka can still be seen at the Colombo Museum. This stone tablet is a worthy artifact to be seen by all Chinese who visit Sri Lanka in the future. These two ancient visits by Chinese individuals are only two of many similar exchanges between the two countries over the past 2,000 years.

Since time is limited, I do not want to elaborate on the excellent modern political relations between Sri Lanka and China since 1950. Briefly, I will state that our contemporary relations in all fields, such as trade, culture, education etc. are moving positively to the satisfaction of both countries.

Now, since this event is a Culture Expo and the organizers have received support from UNESCO, I would like to speak about UNESCO-declared World Cultural Heritage sites in Sri Lanka.

Since 1980 Sri Lanka has worked very closely with UNESCO to restore its historical cultural heritage sites. Not only were we able to restore these sites, most of them have now been declared as World Cultural Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Among these are:

- 1) Anuradhapura, the first capital of Sri Lanka from the third century BC till about the tenth century AD. Two important locations here are: (a) Abhayagiri Monastery, which was founded in the second century BC. This monastery had attracted

scholars from all over the world including China. This was where the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa - Xian studied for two years from 411 to 413 AD. The 112-meter high Stupa of this monastery was fully restored, and it has now become part of world cultural heritage; and (b) Jethawana Monastery, which is another important Buddhist monastery built around third or fourth century AD. The most important cultural heritage in this monastery is a 120-meter high Stupa, which is the tallest Stupa in the world. Moreover, it is both the tallest brick building ever completed by humankind, as well as the tallest Buddhist monument in the world, containing approximately 93 million baked bricks. In addition to these two very important archaeological monuments, many image houses, residential quarters, and fence stone railings built several centuries ago have been restored in this ancient capital.

2) Polonnaruwa, the second capital of Sri Lanka from the tenth century AD to the thirteenth century. This too is the location of an ancient Buddhist monastery where you can find a number of cultural monuments such as two large Stupas known as Rankothvehera and Kirivehera, an image house known as Lankatilaka, and many other important edifices. Of the latter, the most exceptional are four images of the Lord Buddha cut out of the living rock. This site is known as Galviharaya. Many more ancient artifacts such as moonstones, lotus ponds, tea bowls, which have been described by archaeologists as “Chinese Timeku tea bowls” belonging to the Sung period, have been excavated in this world heritage city.

3) Sigiriya Rock Fortress is another unique national cultural treasure due to its colourful paintings, town planning, landscaped garden, hydraulic technology, etc. This unique royal palace complex was built 200 meters above the surrounding plains sixteen centuries ago. One of its most well-known features is its fifth-century paintings of beautiful female figures, which are known as Sigiri Apsara and the poems written by visitors admiring the beauty of these women dating from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries AD. One poem explains that the dresses worn by these women were woven from Chinese Silk. These poems have now been published both in their original Sinhala and in an English translation. The large picture gallery is the most popular cultural site among both Sri Lankan and foreign visitors to Sigiriya.

4) Dambulla is another world heritage site due to its largest collection of ancient mural paintings. While some of these may date from as far back as the second century, the bulk of the paintings were created during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5) Kandy, which was declared as a world cultural heritage site in the 1980s, was the last capital before European colonization of the whole island of Sri Lanka. Per a centuries-old tradition, a tooth relic of the Lord Buddha was kept in the custody of the king, which turned the tooth relic into a symbol of sovereignty. Owing to this, religious rituals connected to the Temple of Tooth have created the most splendid cultural performance every year in Kandy. It is one of the most important intangible cultural heritages of Sri Lanka. This annual performance to venerate the tooth relic has been

done for many centuries. Even Rev. Fa - Xian mentioned the occurrence of this annual event in 411 - 413 AD, when he was in Sri Lanka.

6) Galle Fort, a military fortress built by the Portuguese at the beginning of the sixteenth century on the southern sea coast of Sri Lanka. This military fortress, which includes a Christian church built two centuries ago, has now become one of Sri Lanka's most popular destinations among both foreign and Sri Lankan visitors.

7) Language Heritage: Sri Lanka has two indigenous languages, Sinhala and Tamil, as well as English, which became popular after British occupied Sri Lanka at the beginning of the 19th century. Most ancient records, including inscriptions made 20 centuries ago, are in Sinhala in addition to the Pali language, which was used to record Buddhism since Lord Buddha gave his sermons in this language 25 centuries ago. Today we are able to display here some of our manuscripts (new prints) written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as a number of poetry collections written in the fifteenth century. Some of these publications have been translated into English and one such translation is also here on display.

I believe that I have been able to present a summary of Sri Lankan cultural heritage to this distinguished audience. The subjects of language and culture are very vast, as every country and every ethnic community has its own cultural and language heritage. Therefore, if one is aware of only one's own culture and language, and does not see, observe, and experience cultures and languages of communities scattered around the world, one would not be able to understand the true depth of the world's culture and language heritage.

Thank you everyone for your kind attention.