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Dear Friends,

I am writing this post-conference letter to all of you who sponsored, attended, prepared and intervened in the Shanghai April 25 conference on “cultural resources for sustainable development.” The first purpose of this letter is to express to you our heartfelt thanks, since it was your support, interest, contribution and participation which made this event a meaningful and creative one. I also wish to draw some lessons from the experience so as to ensure that our common efforts may bear even more fruits in the future.



Long tribulations, great support....

As many of you know, the preparation of the event had taken a long time and was far from easy. Its genesis goes back to November 2005,



when BNP Paribas and the Ricci Institute associated in inviting Michel Camdessus for a series of conferences in Beijing and Hong-Kong on sustainable development and the role of China in global governance. The insights drawn from these conferences and contacts, the adoption of the Eleventh Plan by the

Chinese People's Congress in March 2006, and rising global concerns on sustainability and cultural diversity, all of this concurred for deciding us to come up with a follow-up initiative. Again, BNP Paribas and its Foundation generously sponsored our project, for which I wish to thank in a very special way Martine Tridde – who is the head and the heart of the Foundation –, Francois Cristofari, the bank's head of territory in China, the public relations division of the bank in Hong-Kong, and also various dear and old friends from the bank, with whom I have been working since many years on the *Grand Ricci* dictionary – a mega project that testifies to the fact that the role of culture in shaping the future of the relationships between China and the world is a long-term concern of ours.

The idea was (a) to assess the way our cultural resources (corporate culture, educational models, spiritualities and traditional wisdoms, civil society's modes of action) could be mobilized for shaping a more sustainable model of development in China, (b) to



see whether the Chinese experience in this field could bring in lessons for Asia and the world, and (c) to stress the fact that the very diversity of these resources constitutes by itself a factor of sustainability. An additional concern was to provide a forum where Chinese and foreign entrepreneurs, social actors, academics and officials could meet together around these issues. A third priority was to give a prominent role to **storytelling** so as to inspire potential actors through the example and initiatives of individuals and associations having already

achieved something in these fields.



The idea was sound. Its implementation was not so easy... An ever-evolving context, successive changes in keynote speakers and difficulties in

coordinating organizations diverse in nature and concerns made our task far more difficult than foreseen. We had to somehow scale down our ambitions and the size of the event, while stubbornly preserving the quality of the content that we wanted to provide participants and decision-makers with. As you all know too well, the context and events of the weeks that immediately preceded the event complicated further our task.

This is where I have to express our utmost gratitude to a number of friends and partners who have shown remarkable confidence, tenacity and spirit of adaptation as we were struggling to hold down: Annette Girard, Wang Li and their generous team of volunteers in Shanghai, as well as the remarkable Chengdu team organized and led by Liang Zhun; all our Chinese speakers who never wavered in their support, with special mention for the generosity of the professors and academic units of Fudan University and also to the team of the Xinjiang-based “New Loulan Project” (Professor Tian Changyan and Dr. Yang Wende); the Chirac Foundation, especially Michel



Camdessus and Valerie Terranova; Henri-Claude de Bettignies at CEIBS; Lafarge India which allowed and supported the coming of Jeremie Rombaut; Jean-Luc Chereau from the Carrefour Foundation; Norani Abu Bakar from “Home Sweet Home” who

also provided us with the environmentally-friendly conference bags, Corbett Wall and his team who helped us with last minute preparations and contacts; Nick Chen at Pamir Law, who brainstormed with us on this project from the start and is already planning other conferences in the same range; and, last but not least,



the (exceptionally resilient) Ricci/Renlai team, Tsai Mei-fang, Cerise Phiv and Alexandre Chen. The Ricci/Renlai team also benefited from the support of Thibaut Camdessus who taught us the art of making flash-animations

and helped us with their production. Most of the pictures shown during the conference day had been taken by Liang Zhun over a number of years.

I still have to pay two special tributes; the first one goes to Michel Albert who readily and most generously agreed to deliver the keynote speech when a health incident prevented President Chirac to do so. The second one goes to the Chinese official units which gave approval and support to this conference. The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs was represented by its Vice-president, Ambassador Chen Yonglong who keenly participated in our exchanges. The Shanghai Institute for International Studies and the Shanghai Bureau for International Affairs also showed their support in various ways. Tongji University was also represented during the conference.

Was it worthwhile? Your comments:



The time taken by the preparation as well as the efforts involved in the process cannot but raise a question: was all of this worthwhile? Is there no better way in today's world to spend one's time and money than organizing yet another conference? Let me start answering by quoting some of your post-conference messages (some of them translated from Chinese or French):

"Many, many thanks for the terrific conference last Friday. It really was very moving and like no other conference I've been to. I wanted to ask you if you thought it might be possible to organize some sort of informal gathering with some of the younger conference attendees, who I regret I didn't have a chance to meet. It's rare that I meet others in this field in Shanghai and I think it would be great if we could all come together."

"Congratulations for this great success. You came up with an excellent program and have created a unique opportunity to give all of us food for thought on two topics (sustainable development and cultural diversity) that are rarely associated."

"During this forum, I was struck by the tonic effect of the presentations, the force of the testimonies, the attention attached to the reality of the problems and the will to answer it in a concrete, direct, and immediate way. "

"I hope that there will be chances in the future to make some ripples and waves for a better future together."

"I spent a truly wonderful day. The content was most original and thought-provoking, I met with a lot of wonderful and creative people, and, as Nick Chen said at the end, it showed us how much a butterfly can achieve just by making a few ripples."

"I have to confess that, before last Friday, 'sustainable development' and 'cultural diversity' were just empty words to me. Beyond all the content I discovered during the day I left with a new-gained confidence in the capacity of China to confront its challenges. When it comes to its



future and ours, I now feel much more optimistic... I was truly impressed by the flash animations showing traditional Chinese water works. Could you send me more information on these works, I truly want to increase my knowledge on such resources now"

"Thank you very much for inviting me to present this lecture. It was such a wonderful event in Shanghai to promote the universal value of cultural diversity in China. Thank you for doing this for Chinese and China, especially in 2008 this very important moment."

"The content of Michel Albert's speech as well as the ones of the Fudan professors (a Chinese friend living in Delhi confirmed to me how

well-known these professors are) struck me by their depth and precision. During the recess, I had extremely interesting conversations with the other participants."

«"I sincerely believe that the network you have contributed to create can go far beyond what you are presently doing and change the course of events so that we may ultimately avoid to enter a world such as the one described by Cormac McCarthy in 'The Road'."



Lessons to be drawn



Apologies for quoting these laudatory comments at length, but, together with other reactions, your messages confirm us in the idea that, today more than ever, social and economic actors need to be provided with fresh ideas and concrete examples that can help each of us assume in a more confident way his or her own responsibilities while associating with others in "knowledge networks" conducive to new initiatives. The volatility of public opinions, the stress on identity issues, the anguish generated by loss of cultural and environmental resources, all of this testify to the need to answer accrued challenges by a new flow of inventiveness, the effect of which can be multiplied through encounters and networking.

Let me also come with ten “theses” that the interventions heard during the conference helped me to formulate. I am just sketching the ideas that came to my mind while listening to the participants, but I am sure that each of you will be able to assess, correct and enrich these little insights:

- 1 - China will be able to correct its developmental challenges insofar as it relies on its regional, spiritual, linguistic and



intellectual diversity, while interpreting anew these resources and contributing their riches to the global community; this requires from China to understand one’s culture and mission within a

truly international outlook (*intervention of Li Tiangang.*)

- 2 - Sustainable development can be fostered only through the nurturing of a humanistic culture and education; “Humanism” takes different shapes in time and space but it always induces individuals and societies to develop ethical and productive relationships, among peoples, among nations, cultures and regions, and also between humankind and nature. Sustainability is just a new name given to a truly integral, humanistic developmental process, a process to which China is called to contribute (*intervention of Michel Albert.*)



- 3 - Regional development is always based on characteristics that make it impossible to simply repeat a developmental model from one area to another. A severe hindrance in China’s developmental strategy has been to repeat the process that extended Chinese



civilization from North to South by “going West” on the same premises (*intervention of Yao Dali.*)

- 4 - Conversely, in desolate Western areas (the Xinjiang frontier between two deserts), retrieving traditional lifestyle and cultures, restoring biodiversity and inventing a new “pastoral” developmental model could become an integral and systemic endeavor (*intervention of Tian Changyan.*)

- 5 - Nurturing networks of solidarity is not equivalent to creating sustainability and sustainability *per se*. However, the development of such networks is a prerequisite to further reflection and action



towards sustainability insofar as it makes all sectors of society (including the marginal ones) contribute in the endeavor; it also progressively fosters a new social consciousness about issues larger than the ones

defined by one’s immediate environment, and, through the power of internet, allows new resources to be mobilized where they are lacking most (rural education and hygiene, ecotourism in regions struck by deforestation...)

(*interventions of Wang Li and Norani Abu Bakar.*)

- 6 - In the same vein, anti-pollution efforts, the development of bio-agriculture and ecotourism, and (maybe even more important) the mitigation of the consequence



of the rural exodus can succeed only if they are rooted into “community sustainability”, i.e. the shared consciousness and sense of mission of local communities able to discern, debate and act together, thanks to a knowledge of their past and a vision of their future (*intervention of the “Anlong sustainable village” team.*)

- 7 - “Education” is a prerequisite but educational efforts have



proven to fail when local communities lack confidence in their own capacity to build up their future, and when their culture is challenged or denied in a way that

deconstructs their capacity to come together as stakeholders of a given territory. Deforestation and erosion, exodus towards cities and the death of traditional cultural resources and knowledge are symptoms of the same phenomenon. Sustainability can be achieved only from the grassroots level, provided that existing local resources are nurtured and enhanced (*intervention of Zhang Xuemei.*)

- 8 - Conversely, local communities that have achieved a reasonable level of economic success and self-organization shift naturally their concerns towards environmental protection and collective decision-making process (*intervention of Fan Lizhu on Wenzhou.*)
- 9 - "Safety" is intrinsically linked to sustainability and it is often through safety concerns that companies enter into a global vision of what their social responsibility is about. "Work safety": and "food safety", to cite two examples, are not only about the shaping

of technical regulations, they are eventually ensured thanks to (a) the education of workers and consumers, (b) the way companies envision and enrich their own mission, and (c) the progressive mobilization of resources, images, symbols and



values through some form of story-telling (*interventions of Jeremie Rombaut and Jean-Luc Chereau.*)

- 10 - "Spiritual empowerment" at the personal and collective levels (the way individuals and groups are able to discern and decide in a reflexive and prejudice-free way) as well as "knowledge network" (the mutual enrichment of one's experience through sharing, feedbacks, debate and support) are eventually what allows all of us



to make "ripples": with proper follow-up, networking and capacity for collective assessment, small-scale experiences and events have an impressive multiplying effect (*conclusions by Nick Chen and Benoit Vermander.*)

Press coverage and other immediate results

Due to the absence of Jacques Chirac and a troubled international context, the conference did not achieve the kind of media coverage it would have deserved. However, the Chinese-press coverage was most interesting, as it focused on the presence and testimonies of two peasants from the Chengdu area in an international conference of this standing, giving the organizers and the conference a most positive image – one of listening and diversity. Here are some links about the conference, all in Chinese:

<http://www.sichuandaily.com.cn/2008/04/25/20080425709334442258.htm>

<http://www.newssc.org/gb/Newssc/meiti/cdrb/rdxw/userobject10ai1399756.html>

<http://www.takungpao.com/news/08/04/22/ZM-895204.htm>

http://cdwb.newssc.org/html/2008-04/27/content_102621.htm

http://www.cdwb.com.cn/html/2008-04/27/content_102621.htm

<http://ms.newssc.org/system/2008/04/25/010803493.shtml>

<http://www.pixian.gov.cn/detail.asp?id=26851&lan=big5>

<http://www.pixian.chengdu.gov.cn/detail.asp?id=26851>

http://big5.news365.com.cn:82/gate/big5/www.news365.com.cn/jj/200804/t20080422_1842424.htm



Besides, several Chinese monthlies are preparing in-depth coverage on the conference and the issues raised and we are still conversing with them. *Shanghai Finance Journal* is also preparing an in-depth article and analysis. We will try to come to you with additional links and material later on.

More importantly, all projects showcased during the conference have found potential partners during the conference itself or in its immediate aftermath. Two Chinese companies will send volunteers and give financial help to the Napa village presented by Wang Li. The

bags made by handicapped people that we used during the conference are attracting a growing number of clients. The products of Anlong and the attractiveness of the village have been much enhanced by the positive coverage just mentioned. New volunteers will go to Yangjuan during the summer, and we might be able to plan and start a center for Yi migrant workers in Chengdu. The 'New Loulan project' is the one that has attracted most attention and support, with, notably, an endorsement and pledge from the Chirac Foundation.



Follow-up and prospects.

On eRenlai you can already share some of the results of the conference with friends and colleagues. Read excerpts of the contributions of [Michel Albert](#), [Li Tiangang](#), [Yao Dali](#), [Wang Li](#), [Norani](#) or [Jeremie Rombaut](#) among others... Audios and videos will be added very soon.

Also, you can watch again on eRenlai the flash animations featuring

- [Anlong village](#)
- [Dujiangyan](#)
- [Yi migrant workers](#)
- [Yangjuan village](#)
- [Panzhihua](#)
- [A Hakka town](#)
- [Forests in China](#)
- [Terra Preta](#)

More importantly, we will be preparing a CD rom on the topic of the conference, comprising a video of the conferences, additional video interviews and stories, and a collection of flash animations. The completion of the project will take a few months, so, just be patient...

Finally, we remain at the disposal of those among you who would like to know more about the projects we are promoting or would be interested in content and events about the issues raised during the conference. We also thank in advance all among you who, understanding and sharing the mission that the Ricci Institute and Renlai monthly are trying to fulfill, are ready to come to us with grants, contracts for research projects and other forms of support.

With very warm regards,

Benoit Vermander

