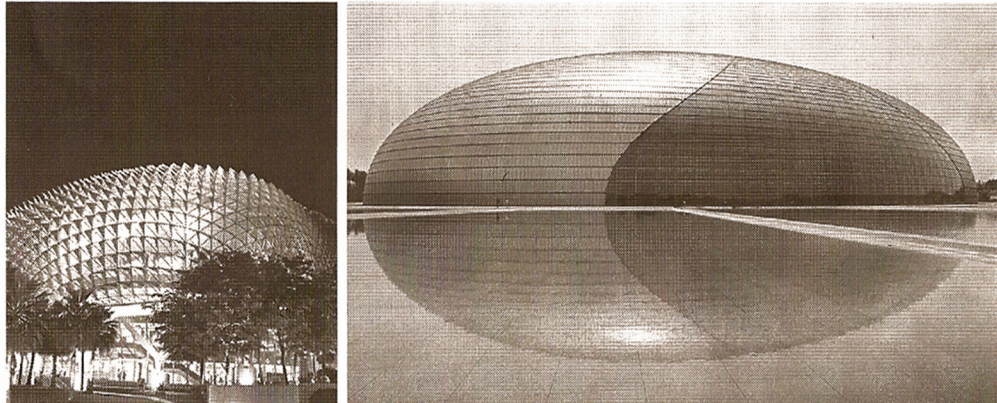


GETTY IMAGES/JoSon; AFP/Teh Eng Koon



The Esplanade theater complex in Singapore (left) and the National Grand Theater in Beijing.

By **Alejandro Reyes**

**O**N A BALMY May evening along Hong Kong's fabled antiques row on Hollywood Road, the traditional celebratory sound of crackling fireworks and the beating of drums overpowered the din of traffic as lion dancers celebrated the opening of the local branch of the New York-based Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Inside, an eclectic international crowd mingled, most stopping to view an exhibit centerpiece: a portrait of the late Mao Zedong in a black tailcoat and Red Army cap, twirling a cane while dancing with a coquettish Marilyn Monroe dressed in a black gown.

"We know that Hong Kong has an incredibly international and culturally sophisticated audience from all over the world," Sundaram Tagore, 46, a descendant of Indian writer and Nobel laureate Rabin-dranath Tagore, said in a statement made in advance of his gallery's grand opening. "This has always been among the world's truly international cities, so with our global philosophy and the 24 artists [whom we represent] who each explore inter-cultural dialogue, it's a perfect fit."

Mr. Tagore's arrival in Hong Kong came less than a week before a major five-day international art fair, ART HK 08, which offered for sale works by more than 850 artists, including Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol and Francis Bacon, from more than 100 galleries from 17 countries. Their estimated value: about US\$65 million. The event attracted over 19,000 visitors, a third more than expected and while no official figure has been released for the value of sales, at least three galleries say they sold everything they exhibited and one work, an untitled oil on canvas by Chinese artist Yue Minjin, sold to a South Korean collector for \$1.5 million.

The emergence of Hong Kong and other Asian cities as thriving

commercial centers with populations that have considerable spending power has not been lost on impresarios of the arts such as Mr. Tagore. The growing interest in Asian culture in the West and the rising sophistication of Asian art lovers have fueled the rapid expansion of cultural activities and opportunities in the region.

London-based auction houses Sotheby's and Christie's have posted record sales in Hong Kong and Singapore in recent years. PaceWildenstein, a New York art dealer, is launching a \$20 million gallery in Beijing in a renovated munitions factory that is located in a former industrial neighborhood that has morphed into a precinct for art studios and galleries.

Consider, too, the opening in 2002 of the Esplanade theater complex in Singapore or the recent completion of the shiny egg-shaped National Grand Theater in Beijing.

**Cultural explosion**

Does the explosion of cultural life in Asia's dynamic economies signal the region's deepening cultural development, or is it merely an indication of the rise of the middle classes and the enormous disposable income of the newly wealthy? Both, of course. But the question is whether economic growth is spawning societies focused more on material wealth and status symbols and less on strengthening cultural identities.

Certainly, across Asia, many are aware of the need to balance commercial progress with cultural preservation but achieving that has always been difficult for developing countries. There will always be tensions between those who see economic and political order and power as priorities and those who believe that to be truly summer be the focal point of global fascination when its capital city hosts the Olympics.

"When we talk about the rise of China, everybody focuses on eco-

nomical growth and political clout," says Vishakha Desai, president of the Asia Society, the New York-based organization that aims to promote Asian culture and broaden the understanding of Asia in the U.S. "But when we look back a hundred years from now, what will be remembered? This is where culture comes in. The legacy of a society is what it leaves behind."

According to Ms. Desai, throughout China's history, its leaders have recognized the power of artists, thinkers, promoters and protectors of culture, even more than their counterparts in the West. From the emperors to Mao and his successors, Chinese rulers either welcomed and cultivated intellectuals and creative people or felt threatened by their influence and sought to halt their work or eradicate them entirely.

Today, the unprecedented prosperity that many Chinese have enjoyed over the past three decades of the open-door policy appears to have led to a blossoming of modern Chinese culture in tandem with a renewed interest among some in preserving China's ancient heritage. At the same time, there are numerous examples of places where traditional neighborhoods have been destroyed to make way for shiny office towers and nondescript apartment blocks.

To be sure, while flashy new buildings by well-known architects are popping up across the country — notably in Beijing, where the Olympics has inspired the construction of eye-catching masterpieces of design — there are efforts to conserve old arts and crafts. In the northwestern corner of the Forbidden City, for example, the not-for-profit China Heritage Fund, spearheaded by Hong Kong property tycoon Ronnie Chan, has managed the rebuilding of a garden and pavilions built by Emperor Qianlong in 1740, almost entirely using traditional materials and methods.

**Differing priorities**

But such reverence for the past may not be widespread in a nation where filling the rice bowl remains an urgent priority for millions of its citizens and millions of others have only just begun to enjoy the fruits of economic prosperity. Among the main worries: that China's relentless drive for economic growth has been at the expense of cultural development. "The problem today is that when left entirely to market forces you risk creating a culture that is entirely about consumption," says the Asia Society's Ms. Desai. "The question is one that the Chinese have always asked — whether culture gets bottled up or is allowed to flourish."

This is an issue not just for China but for all of Asia as countries become richer, Ms. Desai adds. Often in the region, cultivating culture is equated with turning an old building into a pretty tourist site. More important are the traditions and customs that make each culture distinct.

"While India or China are relatively new countries on the economic scene, culturally they are thousands of years old," Ms. Desai points out. "Though one shouldn't be nostalgic and seek to preserve everything, we should be asking what is to happen to indigenous ways and knowledge of making things."

Perhaps modern Asia, with its on-the-edge cities such as Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai, is more focused on creating new traditions and adopting fresh perspectives. The region's leaders have begun to understand that as their citizens enjoy higher living standards and as they seek to attract tourists and talented workers to settle, they must meet the growing demands for a more open and vibrant cultural life. Culture, after all, can be a key driver of economic growth.