

Transcript: 2017 Lahore International Conference on Culture Opening Address by Peter Mousaferiadis

People came up to me and they said to me “Why do you want to go to Pakistan? It’s full of Arabs, it’s only a desert. Everyone is shooting everyone. There’s nothing to see there.”

And of course, that couldn’t be further from the truth.

I took the bold step to come here last year in 2016. And everything, everyone told me, even the other day when I was in Bangkok, someone said to me “You’re going to Pakistan? What job is it that you do?”

My father thinks that I’m a spy [laughs]. He’s 89 and he goes, “Everyone is asking questions about you.”

But the truth is this country is standing in each culture. More culture than any other part of the world that I know. This is the truth. And I don’t just look at the history of civilizations and the history of worldviews that have come to this part of the world, but even in modern day times, because we’re talking about culture, we’re not only talking about archaeological sites, we’re not just talking about music, but we’re talking about the deep aspects of culture, how we relate to each other. The values, the ethics – this is culture.

And this country had a great human being, who passed away about 15/16 months ago. One of the greatest humanitarians of the 20th and 21st century. And the truth is for any who can achieve what he achieved, it would not have been possible if there wasn’t a nation of people who embodied and reflected the values of him.

There is a reason why they call Pakistan, Pakistan – the land of the pure, because when I come here, there’s generosity. The hospitality -- I’m of Greek heritage. And we talk about Greeks being hospitable. You’re even more hospitable than my culture [applause]. And I don’t say this lightly

So when you talk about yourself, you focus on the positives. You focus on the positive cultural aspects because I can tell you stories about my country and I can tell you stories about my heritage. And every country can do the same. I was in Bosnia ten days ago. There was a war there in Yugoslavia. There is more fragmentation in Yugoslavia today than what there was before the war. But do you think that stops them from reaching out to the world, do you think it stops them from taking their culture to the rest of the world? They turned around the country. Tourism is blooming in these parts of the world.

Thailand, just a few kilometers down the road, 35 million tourists. Cambodia had the killing fields. They have 5 million tourists every year. Pakistan has 130 thousand. India received nearly 10 million tourists.

When you think of tourism, do not think it as dollars. Dollars will come later. You have many opportunities – CPEC. Think of the advantages. Think of how you’re going to bridge build culture of peace. Think of tourism as intercultural understanding. This is very important. Think of the great things that come naturally to you. You don’t need to work hard at it. Your culture doesn’t need to work hard at being generous and being hospitable. This will go a long way. And then people will come back again and again and again to explore your culture, to be part of your culture and take the culture from here to the rest of the world. This year we brought a small delegation of 6 Australians. I know next year, we can bring 300 people with some forward planning.

I have connections at the United Nations and WISE, the World Innovation Summit for Education which I'm presenting at next month. Those people want to build bridges with your country. Don't think for a moment they don't. But it's important that you only focus on the positive. Don't feel sorry for yourself, feel proud of yourself. If you think of something like the Badshahi Mosque, this wasn't one culture that contributed to this. Study the history of it. And you'll see Hindu-Parthian, Arab, the Mongol, the Greek influences in it. If you go to the Lahore museum, one of the great museums in the world, four weeks ago, they opened a new wing there. A good friend of mine, one of the few Greco Buddhist coin scholars in the world. They have a coin in there which is very special. I'll tell you about it and how influential it is.

There was a general from this part of the world, called Menandros, a fierce general and he heard this story of this Sage, Nagasena. He's scared of him and eventually he went to visit him with his chariot and 500 horsemen. And he saw this little old man there and he had a conversation with him. And that conversation changed history. King Menandros became a Buddhist and the book that published was called Questions of Malinda which is often referred to as Malinda Pania, the second most important book after the Tripitaka, which all Theravada Buddhists from Laos, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka use.

And I tell my Sri Lankan friends 'You know your book Malinda Pania, that's a Greek book.' And they laugh hysterically. They say "Everything you say is Greek".

The point I'm trying to make is that we all exist because of each other. So when you go to the Lahore museum, you'll see something there, a coin, you'll see the first bilingual coin in the world. On one side it's Greek, it says the word King Demetrius the Invincible. On the other side, it has the Kharosthi, an Aramaic script that was used for one of the Sanskrit dialects. That exists here, in this part of the world.

This is one of many, many stories you can share with the rest of the world. Not only ancient stories, but modern stories. There are lots of archeologists that want to explore this part of the world. I know young people want to come here. My son, who's 16 years of age, has a book full of poetry and he's influenced by a lot of the mystics from this part of the world. And he has a big interest in Sufi poetry. And I've introduced to him to the teachings and sayings of Edi.

So over the next few days, I want you to think of those deep aspects of culture, I want you to focus on the positives. You can look at the glass any way you want. You can look at it in an empty way. Or you can see it as an opportunity to turn things around because many civilizations have come here throughout history.

When Alexander the Great arrived here around 328 BC, he said this is the connector to the world between the East and the West, but something was in his way. When he went to the Kewra mountain range, which I visited on my last trip, he said 'We're not going any further.' He had heard stories of China, he wanted to go to China but he couldn't. He knew if he conquered that, he would connect the world.

But of course today, there's a big project that's happening here. One of the six economic corridors has been built that's going to slide through the heart of Pakistan. This is going to transform the world. China is actually achieving something that every empire has tried to achieve. And it's going to be up to you, not up to me, to take advantage of that.

You're going to use your culture because culture is a great enabler of sustainability. It's an enabler of building peaceful and socially cohesive communities. It's a great enabler of reducing poverty. It's a great enabler of education. Last of all, it's a great enabler of innovation because knowledge is the diversification

of ideas. And this is coming back to what I said at the beginning, diversify, we grow. When we bring ideas together, we create something new.

So on behalf of Rizwan, on behalf of all the supporters, minister Rana Mashood and everyone else who has been working on this event, I want to thank them all very much. A big round of applause [applause]. I want to wish you all the best over the next three days. Thank you very much.