



UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC
AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Intervention by

H.E. Mr. Zhang Xinsheng
Chairman of the Executive Board of UNESCO

on the occasion of the
First session of the General Assembly
of the UNESCO Convention for the
Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Paris, 27 June 2006

Respected distinguished Guests,
Director-General of UNESCO,
President of the UNESCO General Conference,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Distinguished members of the General Assembly,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and a pleasure for me to participate in this exceptional event.

This first session of the General Assembly of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage indeed has a very special meaning. It symbolizes the fruit of long-lasting efforts by UNESCO's Member States to protect and safeguard the intangible cultural heritage.

Over 60 years of reflection, debates, innovative programmes and projects, and pioneering standard-setting activities, I am so happy to see our Organization has worked out a holistic vision of our heritage, first developing the tangible heritage and from there on moving to the intangible heritage, now defining the role of both these forms of heritage, which often are interlinked, in terms of the protection and promotion of cultural diversity and human creativity.

The adoption of the new Convention marks the culmination of a long process of development of ideas and of awareness-raising that UNESCO has been pursuing with fervour for more than 30 years. The Proclamations of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, in 2001, 2003 and 2005, considerably stimulated interest in the intangible cultural heritage and brought a greater understanding of its essential role for the sense of identity and continuity of communities, peoples and nations.

Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The rich diversity of cultures is increasingly recognized as a source of mutual enrichment and innovation in a globalizing world, and was mentioned in the World Summit Outcome document last year. Much is done to promote and protect the cultural heritage: UNESCO should continue to promote a better understanding of the contribution of each culture, as well as the benefits which can be derived from intercultural exchange. As the Oriental philosophy believes, That means : "Mono makes things unsustainable, while diversity in harmony makes things productive. The development of respect for the values and the history of other cultures and societies are essential in our struggle for peace, reconciliation and harmony.

On this occasion, I would like to congratulate the Member States and the Secretariat for the joint efforts which have led to the exceptionally rapid entry into force of this Convention, less than two and a half years after its adoption by the General Conference at its 32nd session. It is another testimony of the great interest aroused by intangible cultural heritage throughout the world and of the urgent need to contribute to its viability through an appropriate international instrument that takes into account the threats with which our living heritage is confronted. Particularly in today's world of globalization, more and more people express their worries about the extinction of our cultural heritage.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the 21st century, information technology shortened the physical distance of different countries, but without real understanding of one another, not only understanding “what” but also understanding “why” – its context and underlying reasons – people close at hand will still feel far apart. Then, the interpretation of the term “Global Village” will seem to be much too farfetched.

The Convention states that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is of general interest to humanity and underlines its invaluable role in bringing human beings closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among them. Let us work together to make this come true, and thus return to the fundamentals of UNESCO's mandate: building peace in the minds of men, through common efforts and understanding, the very reason for the creation of the Organization 60 years ago. This assembly shows the importance of UNESCO in mandates such as standard setting to promote the cultural diversity and the dialogue among the civilisations.

The entry into force of the Convention is a major step forward in protecting our cultural heritage, as it bridges a serious gap in the international legal system. The present meeting of the States Parties of the Convention will mark another important step forward as this General Assembly of States Parties will discuss many vital subjects regarding the implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This assembly is very meaningful and significant in the current situation where the UN reform process has now reached a level of unprecedented urgency, being pursued at the highest levels of Government. UNESCO is an integral part of this challenge. The character of the UN system may well be transformed in the process from one that has been created to preserve peace and promote international cooperation in the wake of major conflagrations and economic depression to one that will derive its legitimacy from international cooperation pursuing the dialogue among the civilisations and ensuring international understanding. In that process, special attention must be paid, as the Director-General, Mr Matsuura, has so eloquently put forward, to instilling a balance and

productive linkage between normative and operational activities which are the hallmark and strength of specialised agencies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am conscious of your very hard work that is waiting for you these days. Please allow me to express my very best wishes for your efforts in what may be qualified as one of UNESCO's most challenging and visionary undertakings. I wish you a most successful meeting.

Thank you.