

# **PACIFIC NEIGHBORHOOD CONSORTIUM**

## **The Second Meeting**

### **KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**Dr. Wang Gungwu**

Vice-Chancellor, the University of Hong Kong

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It is with the very greatest of pleasure that I welcome you all to Hong Kong today for this second organizational meeting of the Pacific Neighborhood Consortium. It is not always possible to detect the actual process of history in the making as it happens. Yet I, and I am sure all the other delegates present at this Consortium, feel a growing sense that we are indeed taking part in what will be seen by future observers as historic developments in academic cooperation by universities in this crucial part of the world, developments which will eventually also play their part in further helping make this Pacific Neighborhood one of the most dynamic on earth.

We are immensely proud to have been chosen to host this second Consortium because we think the economic growth of Hong Kong in recent years is the very best example of the tremendous potential of dynamism and energy contained in the Pacific Rim region.

Last year Dr. Charas Suwanwela, President of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, gave the very first keynote address in Honolulu. On that occasion he talked about the questions of Why, What and How with regards to the Pacific Rim, the Consortium's future and how to develop and manage the initiative which it has begun.

Since then a great deal development and progress have followed in the wake of his remarks. So today I would like to add to that momentum by speaking further, against a background of the increasing prosperity and progress I see ahead for the region, of how academic institutions such as ours can contribute by multilateral cooperative action and by the establishment of readily accessible databases which must ultimately be available to every other member institution and nation. For as we all here realize very well, information provides the very core building blocks on which modern society both rests and depends on, now and in the future.

One part of the background which enables us to be so optimistic and to have all these bright hopes for tomorrow is that the Pacific Region is fortunately in having suffered less conflicts than other parts of the world in recent years. We have had our problems of course, but compared with those experienced by some regions elsewhere they have been relatively minor. This has been coupled with a tremendous willingness to work hard by the many citizens of these Pacific Rim countries and the remarkable degree of initiative which they have shown in many diverse fields as increasing technology and expertise has become available to them.

It is this resulting tremendous expansion of business and industry which has led to the rapid development of the Pacific Rim nations, which have in turn over the course of time additionally had the capacity and foresight to create the educational institutions we represent here today.

The creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation declaration in Seoul in 1991 paved the way for much closer regional contact between Pacific Rim countries. Although primarily an economic agreement, its emphasis on interdependence between Pacific nations at all levels, and a future which saw them converging in diverse fields, was a forerunner of many similar accords which have been reached subsequently.

Of course, this has also included moves towards greater academic linkage. The University of Hong Kong has been a core member of the Pacific Rim Presidents Conference, which has met four times so far, in Berkeley, Bangkok, Seoul and Canberra, and which is a keen supporter of the Consortium. The spirit of cooperation generated there has led to many bilateral agreements and academic exchanges.

But that we have now gone on to form this Pacific Neighborhood Consortium is a significant further step along that path to the expansion of education which essential to the development of a higher human condition.

Institutions of higher education which make up the Consortium have played an important role in the growth of technology, and particularly information technology, which has become such an essential part of the activities of modern universities throughout the world. If information is the key to tomorrow's progress, then universities have an increasingly indispensable role in exchanging and making available to the world at large that information which represents their highest endeavours.

In the highly international community of Hong Kong, at several active and growing institutions of higher learning, we participate in and benefit from the transfer of technology from the West. Hong Kong therefore, as in so many other areas, is ideally placed to contribute to and benefit from the Consortium, from this revolution in learning which is taking place today and of which databases are such an important part. With the skills in both local and international human resources we have in our community, we consider we have a great contribution to make to the organization.

Hong Kong's ability to make use of information technology has meant that we ourselves will be offering databases in such diverse areas as Chinese law, Chinese material media, health science literature, human rights, Hong Kong census, as well as much valuable information about Hong Kong itself.

The scope for such databases is virtually endless. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Admiral Cheng He led a maritime expedition and struggled to reach Africa. By comparison, today's navigators daily navigate online databases, searching out information gold. Geographers have for centuries measured distances in miles. But instead of using miles, if one uses the comparative ease of modern online connections between key cities of the world, Hong Kong is much closer to London than to Lhasa in Tibet.

Now there is an overwhelming demand here for data storage and retrieval in libraries and information agencies facilitating communication, planning and research. We have kept pace, as I said, with technological development and a wealth of data exists, scattered as it may be among various institutional files. But though currently international directories of online databases abound, none has yet been compiled for Hong Kong.

This new order has in turn created a geography where neighborhoods are created not by proximity but by the ease of communications. It is the use and development of this technology, and the pooling of all this knowledge amassed by universities in the Pacific Rim region, that constitutes the very heart of what the Consortium is about.

As you know, the Consortium has already produced a potentially powerful tool, the Pacific Rim Databases Directory, listing databases in 19 countries, together with information about their contents and availability. This Directory has been made available by electronic access at the university of Hong Kong and other member institutions of the Consortium.

I consider it should be the earnest endeavour of the Consortium to produce an upgraded version of the Directory which provides full information about the availability and accessibility of the databases as well.

But language is certainly one of the first hurdles we need to cross because many databases are not machine readable and are therefore unavailable. The majority of western countries have built up their databases over the years and they are open and accessible to all would-be users. But in the Pacific region there is the pressing necessity of making standard the means of accessing any particular database, so that perhaps non-speakers of English can access English language databases and vice-versa, together with the need to develop a common interface to all library catalogs or OPACs.

At the university of Hong Kong, users can access the PNC database in our Campus Wide Information Service. It is a database of databases and tries to list all machine readable online databases in and around the Pacific. At the moment little use is made of it because none of the entries describes how access can be made – either by modem or by Internet.

Very many more people at our university would use it daily if only each database had a description of how access could be made, which is, of course, one of the goals of the Pacific Neighborhood Project. But as a first step of the Project this database is still a significant move in the pooling of information and over the coming years I am sure great progress will be made at overcoming these initial problems.

Looking ahead to those times, then, I think we can see before us the vast potential of the endeavour in which we are now all united. The prime benefit will be the increased communication and contact among academics in the Pacific Region, of which this second organizational meeting of the Consortium is itself positive proof. Such academic interchange is at the very heart of making available to our different communities the information that we in our different universities generate.

Then there is also the benefit of technology transfer and the help the more advanced nations can give to those who are less developed in establishing databases and in managing them. The current list of countries included in the PNP Directory includes the richest, such as Japan and the United States, all the way through the social range to the developing nations such as the Philippines and Mexico. With this development of databases, the day will certainly come when academics throughout the Pacific can

have the resources of the Pacific world on their desk and just a button away from the shared information of their own local libraries and databases.

As I said earlier, there are many hurdles still to be overcome. We have the problems of different standards of wealth among member states which will allow some academic communities to proceed faster in some countries than others. Planning closer links between Consortium members has to be flexible because some institutions are at various diverse stages of development so strategies have to be adaptive to accommodate such factors.

We are composed of universities from a wide range of countries, with an equally wide range of social norms and habits. All sorts of issues such as national security to intellectual property rights may be raised over the coming years as shrinking intellectual borders make us all more and more members of the global village.

Whatever the prevailing economic conditions which apply, the advancement of knowledge in both rich and poor countries depends on efficient access to and management of information. That has been the same throughout the history of mankind no matter where human beings have found themselves. But today modern communications and data storage have resulted in borders, in the electronic sense, all but disappearing.

The process we are continuing in this second organizational meeting of the Consortium will in future generations I think be seen as a pivotal development. The bringing together of all our Pacific nations in making more freely available the key ingredient of information will mark the achievement of a new level of human development in this part of the world.

We are still in the early stages of that momentous task. But that we are here today in Hong Kong shows once again that the process is well and truly under way. I have talked about ways in which the Consortium can have a positive influence in a neighborhood made up of such diverse neighbors and at such various stages of development.

There remain, however, many who have not joined us yet and many other academic institutions which should be encouraged to join. After all, that is what a neighborhood is all about because it should ideally include everyone, no matter what their economic or social status.

So let us expand this neighborhood. And by so doing, let us hopefully make a further contribution to the learning and knowledge of the world, towards the day when the global village in which we all live is one large neighborhood of both peace and prosperity.