

The forum for International Cooperation between the Brest Region of the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China

By Dr. Johnny Hon, Belarus, 23rd April 2024

Dear Friends and Colleagues

It is a great pleasure to be here in the Republic of Belarus and, in particular, in the historic city of Brest. On behalf of all the members of our delegation, from both the Association for the Promotion of Hong Kong Heilongjiang Economy along with the Hong Kong St. John Ambulance Brigade Youth (Hong Kong Island and Kowloon), as well as on my own behalf, I would like to express our deep thanks and appreciation for the warm hospitality we have been accorded since the moment of our arrival – a hospitality and kindness that we know has been ingrained in the culture of Belarus over many centuries.

We also know that Brest is one of the oldest cities in your country and a historical site for many cultures – something that reflects Europe's complex history, embracing both tragic conflicts as well as the interchanging, mingling and blending of peoples, cultures and civilisations.

Our two countries, Belarus and China, are close friends. We are active partners and we share many similar outlooks. This friendship finds its highest expression in the exceptional relationship between our two heads of state, President Xi Jinping and President Alexander Lukashenko.

We are separated by thousands of miles and numerous time zones, but we are drawn together by historical experiences and future opportunities.

Belarus is a heroic nation and Brest is a heroic city. Your people indeed bore the brunt of the world people's resistance to fascism. We know that your small country lost some two to three million people, that is between 25-30 per cent of your entire population, during the three years of Nazi occupation.

The Brest Hero Fortress, a title bestowed on it in recognition of the heroism of its defenders in the face of the Nazi onslaught in June 1941, is symbolic of the heroism of this whole city and of all your people.

And the 2008 US feature film, *Defiance*, drew the attention of world cinema goers to the heroic resistance of your partisans.

China was the first participant in the world anti-fascist war, from the time that Japan attacked and seized the northeast of our country in 1931. China's casualties in that epic conflict are numbered in the tens of millions.

In the closing days of the war, soldiers of the Soviet Red Army made an important contribution to the liberation of northeast China, including Heilongjiang province.

Eighteen years old Mihayel Zhukovsky from Belarus was among the Red Army soldiers who entered China in August 1945. In 2005 he was back to mark the 60th anniversary of the common victory over fascism. At a Beijing press conference, he recalled:

““Many Chinese people stepped out of their homes to welcome our troops. They smiled as if we had been good friends.”

32,000 Red Army soldiers died in the liberation of northeast China, in the course of a week, more than 10,000 of them at the Battle of Mudanjiang, in the southeast of Heilongjiang, in which Zhukovsky participated. In his words:

“The forts of the Japanese were very firm and their firepower was strong. Many of my comrades-in-arms lost their lives in our gunnery position. But eventually we overcame the Japanese because we fought for peace. Many of my old companions were buried there. The Chinese people have preserved their tombs well. They gave their lives, but it was worthwhile. With their struggle and blood, China has become such a booming and prosperous country.”

It is with such deep emotions of friendship and history that our mission comes today with the goal of making the bonds between Belarus and Heilongjiang still tighter for the benefit and prosperity of both our peoples.

For the Association for the Promotion of Hong Kong Heilongjiang Economy, and for myself as its President, as a Standing Committee member of the 13th Heilongjiang Provincial Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and Convenor of the Heilongjiang Provincial Committee (Hong Kong) of the CPPCC, Hong Kong has always been a key window for the province’s foreign economic ties, with many investment activities held there as we work to encourage Hong Kong businesspeople and entrepreneurs to visit the province and learn about its possibilities and opportunities.

Over the years, such bilateral exchanges have brought together a group of like-minded and enthusiastic people dedicated to further promoting economic cooperation between Hong Kong and Heilongjiang Province, expanding Hong Kong investment in Heilongjiang and participating in its modernisation.

Our association was incorporated in November 2004, with the founding presidents being Mr. Lam Shu Chit, former member of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the CPPCC and Mr. Lau Chung Ming, former member of the National Committee of the CPPCC. Our members come from various professional fields in Hong Kong, many of them are elites in their respective industries, and the number of members has reached nearly 1000 at present. Upholding the motto of "love for the country and Hong Kong, mutual benefit and assistance", we have played an active role and made positive contributions to the revitalisation of Northeast China.

Over the past 19 years, our Association has actively organised various economic and trade promotion activities in Heilongjiang Province to promote two-way investment. Our members have invested and financed more than RMB 50 billion (some 7 billion USD) in the province.

We are actively promoting not only the development of Heilongjiang, but also participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, and other regional projects, including organising Hong Kong

business delegations to participate in the China-Russia Expo, the Harbin International Economic and Trade Fair, and the China International Trade Fair, hosting the 2nd Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao-Russia Cooperation and Exchange Conference, and co-organising the 1st Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao-Greater Bay Area Finance Matchmaking Conference to facilitate the high-quality development of Heilongjiang.

And we are not only committed to expanding Hong Kong business's investment in Heilongjiang and participating in its modernisation, we also participate in various social, public welfare and cultural activities. We are committed to promoting the sustainable economic progress and harmonious social development of Hong Kong in accordance with the policy of "one country, two systems".

Belarus is one of the first countries to board the Belt and Road train and we believe that both Heilongjiang and Hong Kong are your natural partners in this endeavour.

We are greatly looking forward to our visit to your capital city Minsk and not least to the Great Stone China-Belarus industrial park. When we study the work of this flagship of the Belt and Road, we find that many of its key priorities, such as electronics and telecommunications, biotechnology, new materials, pharmaceuticals, E-commerce, storage and processing of big data, and medical devices and services, not only accord with the interests and specialisms of many members of my delegation, but also with key areas where Hong Kong, as one of the world's four great financial centres, along with New York, London and Singapore, is ideally equipped to assist.

Moreover, the high educational, scientific and technical level and expertise of your younger generation in particular forms a perfect synergy with the historic task and challenge facing Heilongjiang as it makes a leapfrog development from one of China's old industrial heartlands to take its rightful place in the development of new high quality productive forces at the cutting edge of the fifth industrial revolution.

That is why I particularly look forward to our discussions on such areas as crypto and blockchain, where Belarus has already proved itself to be a pacesetter, and also, as someone whose primary studies in higher education were in medical science, learning more about your scientific work and its practical application in such fields as surgery, transplantation, and haematology.

Medical science and treatment cannot, of course, be separated from social responsibility and the duty of care that we as human beings owe to one another. I think these are qualities cherished by both our peoples and ones that remain firmly rooted in our young generations. I know our delegates from the St. John Ambulance would love to learn and engage with the young people in your voluntary sector, who are also dedicated to service.

The St. John Ambulance has had its presence in Hong Kong since 1884, with the Youth Command formed as Cadets in 1948. With the return of Hong Kong to the motherland in 1997, our St. John Ambulance also gained its independence, with the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, currently Mr. John Lee, serving as our President.

As the President of the Hong Kong St. John Ambulance Brigade Youth (Hong Kong Island & Kowloon) Presidents' Club (Hong Kong), I know that Belarus also has a fine culture, tradition and active practice of youth voluntary service and there is indeed much room for productive exchanges and cooperation between us on this level as well.

Allow me to conclude my remarks by thanking you again for your exceptional welcome and warm hospitality. We look forward to reciprocating in both Hong Kong and Heilongjiang, to visiting your beautiful country again many times in the future and to ever growing friendship, practical cooperation and exchanges.

Thank you very much.

Dr. Johnny Hon

23/04/2024