

08/03/1997

## Festival of Asia in New Zealand

Sharon Bong

THE Festival of Asia, a week-long travelling gala of Asian arts forms that will visit several cities in New Zealand, is more than just a cultural exchange.

It is an attempt to sensitise the Kiwis to the diversity of Asian cultures, and in so doing may result in the building of social, political and economic bridges.

The Festival of Asia, which will run from March 16-23, is the most elaborate cultural celebration of the Asia 2000 Foundation of New Zealand since its inception in 1994.

The travelling gala will feature in several Kiwi cities including Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.

Amid the myriad exhibitions, lectures, musical performances, street fairs, library and school studies, and national events, Malaysia distinguishes herself through the aesthetic contributions of Marina Mahathir, the managing director of Mosaique Communications, and Sim Tan, director of Nusantara Arts.

The festival is given added distinction through the patronage of Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud. Sulaiman, who received his tertiary education in New Zealand, serves as honorary adviser to the Foundation, and is an avid supporter of its bilateral programmes.

As part of the festival, Marina will be staging the "Eyes on Asean", a photographic exhibition of 120 prints in Auckland.

Since its premiere in Kuala Lumpur in 1992, this display has toured the major capitals in Asean, as well as Melbourne and Tokyo.

The exhibition is featured permanently in the Asean Secretariat in Jakarta and presently, in Auckland.

Although not an avid photographer, Marina's contribution in this instance is noteworthy. The selection of prints - which encompasses childhood, leisure, work, rituals and traditions - depicts the faces of Asia in all its uniqueness and humanity.

"It is not merely a collection of pretty pictures," she asserts, as it avoids romanticising the labour and strife of Asians.

The impulse to exhibit this impressive array of images, is a "democratic" one, she adds, in its accessibility to the peoples across Asia.

Sim Tan has generously loaned two exquisite Straits Chinese ceremonial 'Dragon' collars to the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch for the exhibition titled 'The Phoenix and the Dragon'.

His other prized exhibits include textiles, ranging from the indigenous to the traditional and courtly. The textiles lend great form to the visual art in all their abstract, symbolic and figurative designs, yet significantly retain their sacred value as artifacts of religious rituals.

Sim Tan's complementary address entitled "From the Jungle to Court: An Introduction to Southeast Asian Textiles" should prove to be enlightening.

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