

Speech by Secretary for Justice at reception to celebrate Emperor Akihito's birthday and Japan National Day (English only)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Wong Yan Lung, SC, at the reception to celebrate Emperor Akihito's birthday and Japan National Day today (December 17):

Honourable Consul General [Mr Shigekazu Sato], distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour and privilege to be joining you in celebration of His Majesty Emperor Akihito's 74th Birthday. On behalf of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, I have the honour to extend to you, Honourable Consul General and the people of Japan our warmest congratulations.

天皇陛下の お誕生日 おめでとう ございます。

I agree with the Honourable Consul General that this is a special year marked by the 10th anniversary of our reunification with our Motherland. In the past decade, Hong Kong has experienced ups and downs. The challenges we encountered have strengthened our fundamentals, and today Hong Kong is standing on a high point in terms of our economy and stability. This is made possible not only through the perseverance and dynamism of the Hong Kong people, but also through the strong support of our country and cooperation with our international partners like Japan.

I recall Premier Wen Jiabao said at the Japanese Diet this April, the length, scale and influence of China-Japan friendly exchanges were rarely seen in the course of world civilisation. These exchanges were our shared historical and cultural heritage which we should hold in great value, enrich and pass on from generation to generation.

As the Honourable Consul General has mentioned, this year marks the 35th anniversary of the normalisation of diplomatic ties between Japan and China. Apart from launching the high level economic dialogue mechanism, 2007 has also been designated as the "China- Japan Exchange Year of Culture and Sports", and a wide array of exchange programmes have been jointly organised. The healthy and steady development of bilateral ties has also been strengthened by reciprocal top-level visits highlighted by the Honourable Consul General.

I am pleased to say that Japan and Hong Kong have also enjoyed close ties in various areas. Last year, Japan was Hong Kong's 3rd largest trading partner, only after Mainland China and the United States. And Hong Kong was Japan's 6th largest trading

partner. Over the past five years, our bilateral trade has seen an impressive annual growth of 9.9%.

Japanese companies have a strong and active presence in Hong Kong. There are about 2,100 Japanese companies in Hong Kong. Many of them are using Hong Kong as their regional headquarters or regional offices to oversee their business activities in Asia. As at 1 June 2007, there were 232 Japanese companies with regional headquarters in Hong Kong, while another 516 had regional offices here. They are active in many sectors, including banking, insurance, wholesale, retail, trading and professional services.

We are also delighted to note that Hong Kong has been rated highly by the Japan Centre for Economic Research in its Potential Competitiveness Ranking 2006. The study released in January this year ranked Hong Kong first in overall competitiveness among 50 economies for the second consecutive year. Hong Kong was also ranked first in "internationalisation" and "finance". I am sure drawing on each other's strengths, we will be able to promote our respective development and growth in close collaboration.

Apart from trade links, there is immense flow of people between the two places. More than 27,000 Japanese citizens are living in Hong Kong. Over 32,000 people in Hong Kong are learning Japanese, and the number of Hong Kong students studying at Japanese universities is on the rise.

Japan stands out as one of our most popular tourist destinations. There are different attractions for different seasons, be it cherry blossoms, autumn leaves, snow or Onsen. It is amazing how ancient cultural heritage and the most avant-garde designs co-exist in Japan in harmony. Last year, over 350,000 Hong Kong people visited Japan to enjoy the beauty and wonders of your country. It is of course not one-way traffic. More than 1.3 million Japanese visitors travelled to Hong Kong to experience the vibrancy of our city. These frequent exchanges have certainly enhanced mutual understanding and friendship between the peoples of the two places.

As the Honourable Consul General mentioned in his speech, Japanese culture has penetrated into different facets of our daily lives in Hong Kong, ranging from Japanese pop songs and films, delicious Japanese food to fashionable Japanese electrical appliances. Japanese performances have also added colour and variety to the local art scene. The latest highlights include the harmonica performance given by Mr Yasuo Watani last month, the "2007 Asia Ethnic Cultural Performances" featured local Japanese performing groups earlier this month and the "Japanese Tea Ceremony Utensils Exhibition" held in the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware.

As you celebrate your National Day and your Emperor's birthday, may I sincerely wish the people of Japan prosperity and happiness, and that the friendship between the peoples of Japan and Hong Kong would be closer than ever.

天皇陛下 と 日本国民 の 皆様 の ご多幸を 心から お祈り申し上げます。

May I now propose a toast "To His Majesty The Emperor and the People of Japan".

Ends/Monday, December 17, 2007