

Speech by SJ at Mayer Brown's 160th anniversary cocktail reception (English only)
(with photo)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Paul Lam, SC, at Mayer Brown's 160th anniversary cocktail reception today (October 19):

Mr Jon Van Gorp (Chair, Mayer Brown LLP), Mr Terence Tung (Senior Partner, Mayer Brown LLP), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to speak on this special and important occasion in celebration of the 160th anniversary of Mayer Brown.

Terence has just given us an excellent summary of the firm's 160 years' history in Hong Kong. The large turnout at this event, I was told that more than 400 guests present today, consisting of client representatives and friends from different sectors, is the best evidence of Mayer Brown's success. I bet most, if not all, people in Hong Kong, whenever they hear the Chinese name "孖士打", they would immediately recognise and say that this is a very big and famous law firm with a long history in Hong Kong. Mayer Brown "孖士打" is indeed already a household name, in Chinese I would say "家傳戶曉".

It is often said, which is true, that one of Hong Kong's strengths, and bedrocks of its success, is its rule of law based on our common law system. Such strength was the result of hard work by generations of judges and lawyers for over a century, I would say almost 200 years. Having regard to Mayer Brown's long-standing presence in Hong Kong, one would and could not doubt the firm's incomparable contribution to the development of Hong Kong's legal profession and its rule of law.

Mayer Brown's success is well renowned, which could be illustrated by the firm being named 11 years in a row as "Hong Kong Law Firm of the Year" by the Asian Legal Business. Mayer Brown's remarkable achievement, in my opinion, is attributable to its dual character, which is very rare among other law firms in Hong Kong – first, its long history and strong tie to Hong Kong; second, its international connections. With such dual character, Mayer Brown is in a unique position to bring

betterment to Hong Kong.

To maintain a thriving legal practice in Hong Kong, it is essential to keep abreast of the latest updates on the important national development plans of our country and grasp the historic opportunities offered by them.

Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang at the 8th Hong Kong Belt & Road Summit held last month expressed the hope that Hong Kong shall gather professional services to leverage its wealth of talents; and in particular, the Central Government supports Hong Kong to speed up the establishment of an international legal service and dispute resolution centre. I just returned this morning from Beijing after attending the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. I spoke in two different sessions to promote Hong Kong's rule of law and legal services.

I am very pleased that Mayer Brown has been extremely supportive of the Hong Kong Government's efforts in this respect. I wish to name a few recent examples, first, Hannah Ha (Asia Chair, Mayer Brown) joined me in a trip to Beijing in August this year and spoke in a seminar for state-owned enterprises and private enterprises on legal compliance and risk management issues against the latest international landscape. In a trip to Hainan last month, my deputy DSJ (Deputy Secretary for Justice), Horace Cheung, was joined by Mr Tom Fu (Partner, Mayer Brown), who shared his experiences in capacity building with our Hainan counterparts. I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Mayer Brown's unfailing support to our various initiatives over the years.

Admittedly, Hong Kong law firms, particularly international law firms, have been facing various challenges in recent years. First, the economy, whether at the local, national or global level, is not at its most promising phase at the moment. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the volatile geopolitics has created unprecedented issues. It is indeed critical to navigate through these uncharted waters very carefully with a high degree of sensitivity.

I would venture to suggest that, very often, it will be useful to remind ourselves of a few fundamental principles which can be found in The Hong Kong Solicitors' Guide to Professional Conduct. A solicitor, unlike a barrister, is not subject to the cab-rank principle; and is therefore generally free to decide whether to accept instructions from any prospective client. That said, a solicitor should not refuse to accept instructions based upon race, ethnic or national origins, or political beliefs of a prospective client.

Once instructions are accepted, a solicitor must of course provide its best possible service in the best interests of his client. Lastly, subject to any express term of the retainer agreement, a solicitor must not terminate his retainer with his client except for good reason and upon reasonable notice, or with the client's consent. These basic principles are essential to maintain the independence of the legal profession, which is in turn an essential element of the rule of law. I trust and hope that Mayer Brown can and will take the lead and set a prime example for fellow solicitors in Hong Kong.

Amid all challenges over the years, Mayer Brown's ability to maintain its reputable presence in Hong Kong has special relevance to me on a personal level. After obtaining my law degree from the University of Hong Kong about 30 years ago, I was once offered a trainee contract by JSM (Johnson Stokes & Master) back then, and was in fact the only offer that I received. Given your firm's reputation and perhaps more importantly the very attractive salary, I was very much tempted and had to think very hard whether I should accept the offer and become a solicitor or, alternatively, join the Bar. At the end, I decided on the latter, and the rest is history. Frankly speaking, it was a very close call that I could have been one of your colleagues. I am a big fan of Dr Strange, a famous character in Marvel Movies; and I am very obsessed with the ideas of multiverse and parallel universe. Had there been a parallel universe, I would and could have been among you guys, holding a glass of champagne, and listening to a more inspiring speech given by a much better-looking SJ. Unfortunately, Dr Strange is a fiction; and so, you are stuck with me.

Back to this universe, although I did not join JSM, I had received an invaluable consolation prize from your firm. After I joined the Bar, I was very lucky to have the chance of working with JSM, or later Mayer Brown, until I joined the Government last year. In particular, I worked very closely with your Healthcare team, which I dare say is the best one in Hong Kong, on many medical-legal cases. I have made many good friends in the team, like Woody Chang (Partner, Mayer Brown), Jaime Lam (Partner, Mayer Brown), William Chan (Partner, Mayer Brown), Sally Wong (Senior Associate, Mayer Brown), and Warren Seto (Senior Associate, Mayer Brown), and we still maintain contacts. I am also very grateful to friends in other departments, like Geoffrey Chan (Partner, Mayer Brown), Tom Fu, and, of course, Terence Tung, for their support provided to me, no matter during my private practice or my public service.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I am able to convince you by now that, out of personal reasons and reasons due to my present capacity, I would very much like to

see that Mayer Brown may continue its success and contribute even more to the rule of law in Hong Kong and our country China in future. On this note, I would like to congratulate Mayer Brown once again on this 160th anniversary. I wish Mayer Brown and all of you all the best! Thank you.

Ends/Thursday, October 19, 2023