

14 July 2010

Honourable Finance Secretary, dear John,
Monsieur le Premier Ministre,
Dear colleagues,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour, and a true challenge, to deliver a speech on the National Day.

You always wonder how you will avoid boring the audience. You always wonder: what could I say which has not been already said, about Hong-Kong and its remarkable intensity, energy, efficiency? I'm tempted to simply refer to the many speeches already done by my colleagues in similar occasions, some of them being present here today, who all depicted, better than I could, why Hong-Kong is so attractive and successful.

I would have dreamt to celebrate today the success of the French soccer team at the World Cup, but our team, as you could see, sank at a very early stage of the competition and made the headlines of TV news for its quite innovative behaviour. So what's left to be proud of for us, French? Well few things and Wine in particular, a market where thanks to John and his colleagues, who lifted the levies on wine trade, we stand on a very high profile. You will discover tonight a vineyard of France which is not so well known, but remarkable, Languedoc, whose wines are being served to you.

France has not only lost its football. It is also losing its Budget, like many other European countries. Without our main sponsors, namely New World group and Pernod-Ricard, who I thank warmly for their generous support, this ceremony would not be the same.

Let me address briefly three topics: the growing relationship between France and Hong-Kong; the rich destiny of Hong-Kong; and the ways to democracy.

1-France and Hong-Kong have never been so close together than in 2010.

1-1- One, the French presence here has never been so huge.

The number of French citizens registered at the Consulate has doubled since 2002. Our estimate is that there are, at least, 12 000 French living in Hong-Kong now.

Mirror of that huge community, the French International School welcomes more than 2000 pupils, and takes a leading position among the French schools in Asia.

1-2- Two, the French presence has never been so diverse.

France is very active in all the fields which are close to the hearts of the hongkongese.

- We have strong positions in the finance industry, the retail market, in the wine market, in the food market, in the major infrastructures and main public goods;

- Our business community gathers 700 companies under the umbrella of a dynamic Chamber of commerce and industry;

- On the cultural scene, France does a lot, notably through the “French May Arts Festival”, which is now part of Hong-Kong patrimony. It is a multidisciplinary Festival, expanding to gastronomy, with the “French Gourmay” and fashion, with the “Fashion May”;

- Last but not least, French language is the first Foreign language being taught in Hong-Kong, with around 15 000 learners.

1-3- Three, the French presence has never been so productive.

There is a short way to assess productivity in that case: the trade balance. Our trade surplus with Hong-Kong is our first trade surplus in Asia, reaching around 2 billion Euros. It will climb up to more than 3 billion Euros in 2010, thanks to new sales of planes and large-scale infrastructures contracts.

1-4- Our relationship is two ways, not single way. The Hong-Kong direct investments in France amount to 1,5 billion euros in 2009. There are more than 180 000 hongkongese travelling to France every year. And the current exchange rate with the euro will probably boost these trends.

2- But Hong-Kong and France, is far more than the simple addition of interests, figures, statistics. It is a more sentimental and complex alchemy: a mutual attraction.

Yes, Hong-Kong likes what France does best, and enjoys the gallic flavours, whatever form they take. Yes, the hongkongese prize our luxury goods, our wines, our gastronomy. Yes, they also favour French technologies in the fields of water, waste, transport, green economy, aeronautics. Yes Hong-Kong loves French arts, culture, cinema.

But France also sees Hong-Kong as a special destination, with a taste of adventure and exoticism, an exceptional place where West and East get intermingled and hold a fecund dialogue. The French come to settle in Hong-Kong at a constant pace of 100 more per month. They respond to the call of an Asia international City, a multi-entries hub, a Port to South East Asia and mainland China, a high ranking City of the World, a core place of what the historian Fernand Braudel called the “Material civilization”.

Those French coming to Hong-Kong know well that they will find here a fighting spirit, a vibrant Community, a business friendly context, which qualify Hong-Kong as a land of opportunities.

They bet on Hong-Kong. And they are right.

3- Because Hong Kong has a rich and promising future ahead.

The success story of this City is not only the one of a Harbour, with a conglomerate of diasporas, where trading companies have accumulated assets helping to shape a robust financial platform.

Hong-Kong's foundations are similar to the pillars of Athenes, on 6th century before Christ, or Venezia at the eve of the Renaissance, or more recently, New-York on 19th century. Like New-York, Hong-Kong could not be so wealthy, fast and growing, without the support of a robust real economy around. Mainland China has become for Hong-Kong a sort of Hinterland, as the US economy is for New-York.

A key for the future will probably lie in the flexibility of the Hong-Kong economy, and the outstanding mindset of the people here. Resilience, integration, dedication: three tickets for success!

What makes me confident for Hong-Kong as a top world City is its extraordinary capacity to integrate newcomers. As a famous businessman said to me once: "A Foreigner, or a Mainland Chinese coming to Hong-Kong, after 10 years here, is hong-kongese"...

Just a few words about politics.

4- Today, the so-called Bastille day, tells us also about democracy and the various ways, from one country to the other, to build a political society, a modern Community.

France has a rich and peculiar history, like many old Nations. The 14th of July is the day of a Revolution, whose impact went well beyond the French boundaries. It's been a sudden, bloody and sharp movement, leading to a radically new regime. To build our Republic, we had to take a heavy toll: many deaths, many wars, many breaks. Our national anthem is a war song. It's full of the tensions and energy of a Revolution, it's a call to take the arms and fight the enemies.

Nothing like that in Hong-Kong.

Debates, uncertainties, controversies: yes.

But no blood, no violence, no Revolution, no breaks.

Hong-Kong is finding its way towards a wider democracy, through a peaceful dialogue, a compromise mood, a pragmatic approach. We celebrate today, dear John, Monsieur le Premier Ministre, the various paths to democracy, more or less easy or harmonious according to the countries, but converging, ultimately, around the pivotal role of differences, tolerance, and debate in Political societies.

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I wish to conclude on a more personal address. I would like to pay a special tribute, publicly, to my wife, Gabriella, who is not only an artist, the mother of three very energetic kids, and my close my close companion. Italian born, and truly Italian, she does not spare her time and energy to host our guests in the best possible manner, for the sake of the French flag. She stands with me in the many functions which are so typical of the Hong-Kong social system. I'm not sure she knew what it would mean for her to marry a French diplomat. But I do know that Italy plus France make a smashing blend and a good team. After all, there are other examples of successful Italo-French unions in the French Republic...

Thank you very much for not falling asleep!

Let me now carry a toast to the people of the People's Republic of China and the people of the Hong-Kong Special Administrative Region.