

Chinese New Year Reception in Prague
10 February 2014

Welcome Remarks by Ivan K B Lee
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Mr Jančárek, Ambassador Ma (馬克卿大使), Stephen, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure in welcoming you to our traditional reception to celebrate the Chinese New Year. This year is the Year of the Horse. Those who had joined us in previous years will know that I usually start my welcome remarks with a prediction of the coming year. But I have to confess I am not a professional fortune-teller. I can only tell you what I read on the internet.

2. Fung Shui masters say that the Year of the Horse will be a year of high energy, with excellent opportunities for those bold enough to seize them. In Chinese culture, the Horse is equated with speed, power, elegance and endurance. The Horse gives us a ride to our destination, so it is not only a symbol of travel, but also of speedy success. If you have not already done so, this year offers good opportunities for you to think Asia, think Hong Kong.

3. Another category of “fortune-tellers” is the economists. In 2014, the World Bank forecasts a 3.2% growth in the global economy, and 7.7% growth for China. The forecast by the International Monetary Fund is similar – 3.7% for the world and 7.5% for China. The consensus seems to be that Asia, particularly China, will continue to enjoy above average growth and be the engine for global economic recovery. Hong Kong continues to benefit from such growth in the region. The real GDP growth for 2013 is estimated to be around 3%, and we expect a better growth in 2014.

4. These encouraging figures mean that there would be more business opportunities for our friends here. Last year, bilateral trade between Hong Kong and the Czech Republic saw a 7.3% growth, and we see great potential for further growth.

5. One reason is our booming tourism. Last year, we received over 54 million visitors, including over 40 million visitors from Mainland China. And they come to shop. We also regularly host trade fairs well-attended by people from across the region. This makes Hong Kong a perfect showcase for quality consumer products from the Czech Republic, because you can reach a wide audience in our part of the world. Let me give you one example: last November,

the Wine Fund of the Czech Republic showcased quality Czech wines at our annual International Wine and Spirits Fair, the flagship event for the wine sector.

6. Another advantage is our close ties to Mainland China and at the same time our position as an international city. Hong Kong has a unique role as a super-connector between China and the rest of the world. Our free trade pact with Mainland China, what we call the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, or CEPA, is nationality neutral. This means that Czech companies set up in Hong Kong can tap the benefits of the liberalisation measures under CEPA.

7. At the same time, Hong Kong continues to build on our traditional strength as a major international financial centre. Our stock market is the second largest in Asia and sixth largest in the world. We also remain the world's largest offshore Renminbi centre. Total Renminbi deposit reached one trillion Renminbi at the end of last year. Hong Kong provides a well-established platform for Czech enterprises and financial institutions doing business with China to carry out Renminbi payments, financing and investments.

8. The close ties between the Czech Republic and Hong Kong reach beyond economic and trade. Three bilateral agreements on reciprocal juridical assistance were signed last year. There were also frequent cultural exchanges between the Czech Republic and Hong Kong. I was in Prague last November to host the Hong Kong Focus of the FILMASIA Film Festival. In Hong Kong, the acclaimed Czech play "The Memorandum" and two Czech films were showcased at the World Cultures Festival.

9. Hong Kong is rapidly developing as an international cultural metropolis. The construction of our world-class West Kowloon Cultural District is in full stream. We are also among the world's largest art auction markets, with top-tier galleries and auctioneers setting up in Hong Kong. There is certainly room for further collaboration between Hong Kong and the Czech Republic in this area.

10. Let me conclude by wishing you and your family members two traditional Chinese New Year greetings related to horses: 龍馬精神 to be as healthy as a horse; and 馬到功成, to gallop to your destination for a speedy success in all your endeavours in the Year of the Horse. Thank you.