

Speech of Mr C.M. Chan
President of The Law Society of Hong Kong
at the 53th High Table Dinner of the Law Association, HKUSU
on 31 January 2023

Good evening, Professor [Hualing] Fu, Mr [José-Antonio] Maurellet, Ms [Esme] Lee, fellow students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to join you all at tonight's High Table Dinner. I am particularly delighted that, after years of COVID restrictions, I am able to meet with our promising law students in person here. First of all, let me express my gratitude to the organiser for making this event happen.

The values of being a lawyer

I am pleased that young talents like you have chosen to study law. I wish you all a fruitful university life and a bright future. As law students, here is an important question for you to think over, that is, why do I study law and why do I want to become a lawyer?

Law study is a well-rounded training. In addition to learning legal knowledge, it offers the opportunity to develop a wide range of practical skills, such as analysis, problem-solving, logical thinking, negotiation, presentation and mediation, etc. Such skills prepare students not only for careers as lawyers but also for diverse careers, and help them settle daily issues in an effective way.

Some chose to study law or become a lawyer because of a promising career path. The Law Society conducted a membership survey in 2019, in which we found that 92.7% of respondents secured their first job in the legal profession even before their admission as lawyers. Further, according to an employment survey conducted by a Hong Kong recruitment portal in 2020, 80% of the respondents with a specialisation in "legal or compliance" secured a job after participating in only two to three job interviews. This is encouraging to law graduates.

Many people also believe that lawyers and barristers are well paid and have a high social status. They are good driving forces for aspirations and I have no qualms about them. What I would like to highlight, however, is that the legal profession is far more than just a money-earning job. As a lawyer or a law student, we need to see further and wider as this is the key to a successful career. This also echoes the theme of tonight's dinner, "Visio", which means "vision" in *Latin*.

Do think about the functions of law, the fundamental role of lawyers and how they form an integral part in the development of society.

The function of lawyers and law students is to help others with their legal issues as well as find solutions to complex problems. According to the membership survey I just mentioned, I am glad that almost half of the respondents (45%) indicated that helping those in need to solve their problems is among the factors that attracted them to continue working in the profession.

Further, as the officers of the court, solicitors owe special duties. We are accountable not just to our clients, but also to the law and to the court. Solicitors owe a special duty to the judicial system. This special duty elevates the interests of the judicial system or of the general public above those of the client or solicitor himself or herself. It is the obligation of the legal profession to uphold the rule of law and judicial independence which are the core values of our society. They form the cornerstones of Hong Kong's success as a leading international commercial and financial centre, providing a secure environment for individuals, organisations and business activities. In the 2022 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, Hong Kong's overall ranking was 6th in East Asia and the Pacific, and 22nd out of 140 countries and jurisdictions worldwide.

However, such achievements cannot be taken for granted. Our robust legal system is built on the efforts of every member of the legal industry. It can be undermined if we do not maintain our integrity and professional conduct as our predecessors have done in the past century.

“One Country, Two Systems” and common law system

Let's get to know where we stand in terms of our legal system.

We should be grateful that Hong Kong has a sound and mature common law system. This important tradition has been constitutionally retained after year 1997. Article 8 of the Basic Law provides that the laws previously in force in Hong Kong, including common law, shall be maintained.

Under “One Country, Two Systems”, Hong Kong is the only common law jurisdiction in China and the only truly bilingual common law system in the world. Common law is favoured by many international businesses because it is flexible but yet predictable. Further, our legal system is internationally renowned for its independence, efficacy and quality. We also adopt an open-door policy which has attracted legal talents from around the world, enriching the diversity of our legal services market. All these advantages make Hong Kong the best place for doing business and settling disputes. I believe Hong Kong will continue to take the unique advantages under the “One Country, Two Systems” to capitalise on the opportunities arising from national policies.

Prospects for young lawyers – national policies

Next, let's look ahead. I believe it suffices to say that huge opportunities await us.

The 14th Five-Year Plan, among other things, continues to support Hong Kong to enhance its status as an international financial, transportation and trade centre, a global offshore Renminbi business hub, an international asset management centre and a risk management centre; establish itself as a centre for international legal and dispute resolution services in the Asia-Pacific region.

The 14th Five-Year Plan, together with the opportunities brought by the Belt & Road Initiative and the Greater Bay Area development, translates into great demand for a steady supply of quality legal services.

I would like to highlight the Greater Bay Area Legal Professional Examination, which was launched in 2021. The exam allows Hong Kong legal professionals who have passed the exam to provide legal services in the nine Greater Bay Area cities on specified civil and commercial matters to which the Mainland laws apply.

Hong Kong lawyers are common-law trained lawyers. Once they get the Greater Bay Area practice licenses, it means that they can practise civil law in the Mainland. With that dual qualification, Hong Kong lawyers are best positioned to advise international clients if they want to do inbound activities into China, or outbound when mainland enterprises want to invest in overseas countries, providing a one-stop-shop for both inbound and outbound investments.

Against this favourable background, Hong Kong can capture the abundant opportunities arising from national policies, which young lawyers and law students cannot afford to lose sight of. So, the message is clear, Mainland China is a huge market and the prospect is promising, if you broaden your horizons and dare to take up new challenges.

Prospects for young lawyers – LawTech

Apart from that, the application of technology will be the future norm.

Using the Judiciary as an example, since April 2020, the Judiciary has been conducting remote hearings in civil proceedings where appropriate through using video conferencing facilities or phones. An integrated Court Case Management System that allows e-filing and related electronic payments has been implemented in certain courts. Recently, the Chief Justice announced the proposed introduction of live broadcasting of selected court proceedings.

More examples include the formation of online dispute resolution platform “eBRAM”, the Hong Kong Legal Cloud and the LawTech Fund, etc.

More than just a tool that facilitate our work, LawTech helps improve access to justice by promoting the use of law and enhancing the Judiciary's efficiency and ability to handle trials. During the COVID pandemic, the aforementioned measures have enabled the Judiciary to continue operation despite physical disruptions.

Young people are fast learners. If you stay tuned in the digital era, equip yourselves with the up-to-date knowledge and technologies, I believe that you will become the pioneers in the industry.

Closing

To conclude, we are living in a fast-changing and challenging world. You need to broaden your visions, be open-minded and open to new knowledge, move out of your comfort zone and dare to face new challenges. This will enhance your global competitiveness.

The Law Society attaches great importance to youth development, and we have been actively involved in youth engagement work over the years. If you have not become our student members yet, do subscribe to our membership to receive the latest news about the profession and to join a wide range of our profession-based or social activities. I welcome any of you to come to me if you have questions regarding your study and career path, or recommendations on the development of the legal industry. We will always be here for you.

Last but not least, university life is of equal importance for law students. Make friends, expand your network, learn from your peers and the faculty, and enjoy this evening.

Thank you.