

Interview with Mrs. Amy Liu

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Interviewers: Sean Shun Ming Yau and Edward K. F. Chan

Q: How did you decide to study law? What influenced or motivated you?

AL: We were pioneers as the first law graduates from HKU. During my application, I was simultaneously accepted into the Faculty of Social Science and the Faculty of Law. Ultimately, I chose law, intrigued by its novelty and potential to impact and connect with a wider demographic, considering it was not taught at the secondary level. This decision, which led to an enriching university experience, remains unregretted. It has paved the way for a life I am immensely proud of. An added delight during these university days was meeting my current husband, truly a remarkable bonus.

In those early days, our law department was small, consisting of just three lecturers: Professors Evans, Downey, and John Rear, fondly known as “The Three Musketeers”. Our tight-knit cohort of 40 students was regularly invited to their homes for social gatherings, where we became acquainted with their families. Our bond extended to their children too. One grateful classmate initiated a regular reunion every five year, where we invited our esteemed professors back to Hong Kong. However, the passing of Professors Evans and Downey, and the declining health of the remaining Professor John Rear, put a halt to these events. Despite this, I have personally maintained contact with Mrs. Evans.

Professor Evans, who devoted his career to establishing the law department and the PCLL in Hong Kong, was particularly inspiring to me. In honour of his memory, our class of 1972 set up the Professor Evans Scholarship, of which I am the convenor. Reviewing the recent applications, I am heartened to see the calibre of talent coming from HKU, a testament to the high-quality education at the Faculty of Law. It fills me with pride.

As pioneers of the law program, we were initially housed in a repurposed residential building of the former Hong Kong Police Headquarters. Despite its basic amenities, the transformation into classrooms, tutor rooms, and common areas, including a library, made it a memorable and enjoyable space for us. Beyond academics, our daily routines were pampered with visits to nearby bakeries and eateries. The casual setting, in contrast to the formal main campus, contributed to a fantastic and unique university experience.

Q: How did you settle on the specialisation in your legal practice? Does it have to do with your academic interest back in the days?

AL: My interest in civil proceedings began during my school days and was further nurtured during my article clerkship at Johnson, Stokes and Masters (JSM), where I was exposed to various departments, including civil litigation. After marrying my husband, who is a doctor, we relocated to Australia for his surgical training. During this period, I pursued a Master of Laws degree at the University of Melbourne and concurrently served as a research fellow at the law faculty. My

studies allowed me to delve into Australian subjects like mining, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a student. It was also a rewarding experience to connect with many Asian students during my time at the University of Melbourne.

Upon returning to Hong Kong for work, I found myself part of an Australian alumni network. Initially, it was just the Melbourne University alumni, but over time, other Australian university alumni groups joined. Today, all these universities fall under the umbrella of the Federation of Australian Alumni Associations, comprising around 24 alumni universities. We maintain a close relationship with the Consulate General of Australia in Hong Kong, along with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Australian-Chinese Association. These bodies serve as key local contacts for the Australian Consulate General, a connection that persists to this day. Whenever a new Australian Consulate General is appointed, the Federation of Australian Alumni Associations invites them for a dinner, and they reciprocate by hosting a barbecue or dinner at their residence. This strong bond with Australia is primarily due to the Australian Consulate's efforts to promote Australian education in Hong Kong.

I initially worked for Fairbairn Catley Low & Wong before partnering with Charles Yeung to establish our current firm. At the beginning in 1983, our team consisted of Charles Yeung, Clement Lam, Peter Yip, and myself. My focus has consistently been on civil litigation. Our firm has represented banks and finance companies in various civil and commercial litigation matters. In addition to this, I am a member of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators in the UK, an accredited mediator for family and general mediation, and a notary public.

Q: How do you find the differences between these four, being a solicitor, notary public, arbitrator and mediator?

AL: In civil litigation, the approach tends to be more adversarial. However, mediation requires a different strategy, serving as a facilitator, helping the parties to reconcile their differences and resolve disputes, particularly in family cases. My experience in family litigation has been extensive and often heart-wrenching, particularly when children become pawns in their parents' disputes. I always advocate for the children's interests by reminding parents not to use them as tools against each other. Although I have shifted my focus away from family law recently, I still handle family cases from time to time. Nowadays, I often work on probate and succession cases.

Q: Did you find legal practice challenging at the beginning after coming back from Australia?

AL: During my articleship at JSM, most of the lawyers were British. They would assign a task with a specific deadline, be it two days, two hours, or one day. Complying with these timelines was challenging, especially because it was difficult to ask questions due to their busy schedules. As trainees, we had to solve our problems independently. Unlike today, where information is readily available on the Internet, we had to rely on books, references, and discussions with peers for solutions. The process was quite challenging, but since we wanted to impress our superiors, we strived to solve problems on our own without resorting to further queries.

Q: Were there any figures or persons at work who guided you or inspired you in any way?

AL: Yes, Charles Yeung was still an associate at the time, and I often turned to him with questions. Several other solicitors who are now prominent were also article clerks at JSM then. We worked together to troubleshoot issues. I learned a great deal from Charles. He had numerous clients from financial institutions, which required me to go to court nearly every day. It was a practical learning experience.

Q: While working as a research fellow in Australia, did you contemplate an academic career at that time instead of legal practice?

AL: Upon my return, one of the professors asked me if I would consider becoming an academic. I thought I might, but then I received job offers from various solicitor firms. So, naturally, I accepted a position in legal practice and left the idea of academia behind.

Q: Could you share with us a bit more about the organisational structure of your firm, such as its division of work and communications between partners?

AL: Indeed, we have a division of labour in our firm. Charles is in conveyancing, and we have two more conveyancing solicitors, two commercial lawyers, and I am in litigation. So, we had a clear division of labour. If a client needs help with a conveyancing transaction, I would naturally pass the case to the appropriate colleague. However, I would remain in contact with the client, as they would trust me to ensure that my colleagues were handling their matters correctly.

Q: How would you describe the culture of this firm? How is it different from, say, Fairbairn or JSM?

AL: Our firm is very friendly, much like a family because it is medium to small sized. We have eight solicitors, and we hold partners meetings occasionally. These meetings are not very formal, and we might not need to give advanced notice. Whenever a question arises, we simply sit down together and discuss it. This is unlike big firms with scheduled partners' meetings say once every week which were formal. But our approach is more flexible. I understand that some people might prefer the structure of a large firm, but I am accustomed to and prefer this friendly, family-like environment. It is cozier.

Q: Has the scale of this firm changed over time? Are there challenges in terms of running a medium to small size legal firm?

AL: We have maintained a small to medium size throughout our operation. Currently, the economy is declining, so there is less work. This applies not just to law firms but also to medical practices, restaurants, and all types of businesses in Hong Kong. We are looking forward to the day when the economy improves and we have more work. There was a time when we were overloaded with work due to a good economic climate and a high number of conveyancing transactions. In fact,

we represented a developer in selling several blocks. This was a challenging time in a way because we were overloaded. Now, as the economy declines and work decreases, we are still comfortable and able to spend more time on each case.

Q: How would you describe your day-to-day work? Have there been any changes over times?

AL: Yes, during my early days in this profession, I used to put in a lot of effort and long hours. I would start work very early in the morning and would not leave before 7 or 8 in the evening. That was a long time ago. Now, my working hours have been reduced, but I still love my work. I enjoy going to the office and I have a passion for law. However, I do not go to court as frequently as before because we have younger solicitors who now handle court appearances and deal with the judges.

Q: Back then when you had to go to court frequently, did you find it challenging or exciting or sometimes a little bit too dramatic?

AL: No, during that time, the courts were dispersed in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories. There were different courts everywhere, and you had to travel long distances, even by taking the train to attend trials. But these experiences are part of the reason why I love practicing law so much. Each case is like a book that changes every day, and the conclusion might be unexpected, which makes it very challenging. I also enjoy interacting with people. In fact, some clients have become good friends of mine over the years because I have been representing them for so long. So, I believe this is a very rewarding profession.

Q: How would you describe the specialised areas of this firm?

AL: Actually, most law firms offer the same types of services, including conveyancing, corporate law, criminal law, and so on. We have lawyers who specialize in criminal litigation, civil litigation, corporate law, wills and probate and succession work. These areas of specialization are essential in order to effectively serve our clients.

Q: Could you share with us some of your excellent record of public service?

AL: I believe my legal qualifications led the government to ask me to sit on various appeal panels. I have served on statutory bodies such as the Immigration Tribunal, the Passport Tribunal, Housing Appeal Tribunal, the Estate Agents Authority (EAA), etc. I have also sat on the Buildings Appeal Tribunal. I recall a case where the Buildings Department had issued an order for a building owner in the New Territories to demolish a building because the owner had not obtained approval from the Buildings Department. He claimed there was no structural change as he had only altered the facade. However, upon inspection, the structure was entirely different from the one the Buildings Department had ordered it to be demolished. As the chairman, along with two other members, we decided the building owner had to comply with the Buildings Tribunal's order to demolish the said building. The owner subsequently appealed to the Court of Appeal and the

Court of Final Appeal, but our decision was upheld. The owner was represented throughout the proceedings. We always strive to do our best, knowing that our decisions may be appealed.

In my tenure at the EAA, I served as a member, chaired the disciplinary committee, and eventually became the vice chairman. It was an intriguing experience, given the EAA's oversight of a substantial number of estate agents - currently over 10,000, though I do not have the precise figure. This oversight led to numerous disciplinary hearings and busy days. We engaged in meetings with all the estate agents, conducting town hall sessions about new policies, among other things. Due to the EAA's status as a statutory body, we also had to liaise with the government, which had a say in our operations. In fact, one of the board members was a government representative.

Apart from my work at the EAA, I have contributed my time to devote in other voluntary, community work and education work. For example, I was appointed as an Honorary Lecturer of the Department of Professional Legal Education at the University of Hong Kong from 2002 to present. Besides, I am the convenor of the Disciplinary Tribunal of Hong Kong Society of Notaries from 2022 and also a member of the Assessment Panel of the Social Workers Registration Board under Sub-group of Non-Social Work Professionals from 2024 to 2027. In the past ten plus years, I have focused on education work as well by sitting as the School Manager of IMC of various schools. Furthermore, in 2024, I was appointed by the Chief Justice as the convenor of the Notary Public Disciplinary Tribunal.

Q: Do you think these public services consume much of your time in professional work? How did find the right balance between public work and your solicitor work?

AL: That is an excellent question. I owe much of my ability to balance my responsibilities to my partners, who have generously allowed me to dedicate considerable time to voluntary work for the public. They were incredibly understanding, permitting me to focus on these public services. However, as any professional in private practice knows, it is crucial to justify your worth. This includes not only turning in the bills but also bringing in costs for the firm to keep our business growing. Therefore, achieving a balance is essential.

Q: Given the amount of your professional work, how did you manage to balance your family time?

AL: My husband is a surgeon, my son a lawyer, and my daughter a doctor. Both my children pursued their education in Australia, attending boarding schools there before moving on to the University of Melbourne. My son specialized in law and finance, while my daughter joined the medical faculty. Now, my daughter works as a specialist physician, and my son had worked for various international firms, the last being Clifford Chance. Currently, he holds the position of Executive Director at Morgan Stanley. Both of them are incredibly hardworking who fill us with immense pride. As a family, we prioritize spending quality time together, especially on weekends. Every night, I strive to have dinner at home with my children, even though my husband often works late due to his clinic hours.

Q: Could you tell us about your work at the Solicitor's Disciplinary Tribunal?

AL: I served on the Law Society Council from 2002 to 2005. During that time, the opportunity arose to join the Solicitor's Disciplinary Tribunal. As this position required appointment by the Chief Justice, I had to leave the Council to take on the role of convenor for the Tribunal. I served as the convenor from 2005 to 2011. That was a period when the solicitor profession was facing challenges, resulting in numerous disciplinary cases against solicitors. My responsibilities as convenor included familiarizing myself with all the cases and Tribunal members. I was in charge of assigning cases, a task I was prepared for due to my extensive experience as a panel member and having presided over Tribunal cases myself.

Q: Do you think the professional standard of solicitors in Hong Kong is improving?

AL: During my time as a member of the Solicitor Disciplinary Tribunal, we understood our role as gatekeepers. We were vigilant about maintaining high standards, which I believe, if not improved, have at least remained consistent. I am a firm believer in the independence of the judiciary. I trust in the judges and members of the legal profession to uphold the independence of the profession, free from the influence of politics and social issues. This is crucial for maintaining Hong Kong as a place where East meets West, largely due to our legal system. The common law system we practice is trusted by Western societies, contributing to our stability. If we were to become just another Chinese city practicing Chinese law, I believe many large companies would leave. Currently, we are promoting Hong Kong as a dispute resolution centre. Our practice of common law and our independence are integral to this effort.

Q: What do you think are the most important moral characters for solicitors? Do you have any words of wisdom to share in this respect?

AL: Well, I think the most important characters are honesty and integrity. We must safeguard our profession. Yes, we must be honest and work with integrity.

Q: Back then when you were first qualified, was there prejudice against women in the legal profession?

AL: When I first started, the gender ratio in our field was heavily skewed, with nine men to every woman. Today, however, it is much more balanced, with an equal number of men and women. This could be due to the fact that women often show a keen interest in language, which is a crucial aspect of law. Reflecting on my early days as a solicitor in Family Law dealing with non-contested divorce, there was only one session held on Saturday mornings. We used to work on Saturdays back then. But now, there are several sessions a week dedicated to non-contested divorce. This shift indicates a change in societal attitudes towards divorce - from it being viewed as a stigma, to it now being widely accepted as part of life. The concept of stepfathers, stepmothers, and stepsiblings is much more common today. While it is not as prevalent as in the United States, divorce is no longer an unusual or stigmatized concept.

Personally, I did not face many constraints or limitations as a young female solicitor. My colleagues were very friendly towards women, and perhaps the area in which I specialized, civil litigation family law, favoured female lawyers. In contrast, clients involved in criminal cases might have preferred male lawyers. From my perspective, the reasons are straightforward. My female clients, especially those dealing with family cases, felt more comfortable discussing their difficulties with me. I was able to empathize with them and understand their situations better than a man might. They felt more at ease expressing their emotions openly with me. Being a wife and a mother myself, I could put myself in their shoes and comprehend their problems more deeply.

Q: Since you first qualified in Hong Kong, do you see any major monumental changes in the legal profession or in general in the Hong Kong society?

AL: While there have been many changes in Hong Kong society, I believe the legal profession has remained relatively stable. I have always upheld the principles of independence and integrity in my practice. I have not heard of many instances of our colleagues compromising the virtues of our profession. In fact, I believe such instances are becoming less frequent, in part due to the active role of the Law Society. The Law Society issues circulars every week, and it is always concerning to see a firm being intervened. Such interventions, which indicate serious issues, seem to be happening less these days. One recent case involved a firm that mishandled conveyancing money, leaving the vendors unpaid and the purchasers unable to complete the purchases. When a firm is intervened, all its accounts are frozen. As a result, the Law Society, the Monetary Authority, and banks are trying to develop a policy where transaction monies do not pass through solicitors. For instance, if there is a mortgage of 10 million, the money would go straight from the mortgagee bank to the client, rather than passing through us. They are formalizing this policy, but whether it is a good change remains uncertain. It might suggest a decrease in public trust in the legal profession.

I am very optimistic about the future of the Hong Kong legal profession. I believe it will continue to uphold its professionalism, integrity, and independence while working towards the betterment of the Hong Kong people. I have faith in this. I also trust in the future of Hong Kong. I envision it remaining as a hub for China and the West, and I believe its future is bright.

Q: What would be your words of wisdom to the Hong Kong law students nowadays?

AL: I would advise anyone entering the legal profession to work hard, be honest and true to themselves, and to always keep the interests of the community at heart. As a law student, you are among the best and brightest in society, and every member of the Hong Kong community has contributed to your education. Once you are qualified and have developed a specialty, it is time to give back in whatever way you can. I am personally very happy and proud to be a member of the legal profession. I believe every student should seek to find their own unique abilities within the profession and strive to do their best. Hard work is paramount. I am confident that the profession will be proud of you.