

Interview with Mr. Moses Cheng

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MC: Thank you so much for this interview which is very meaningful to me. It is not very often that two classmates are serving together in the same cohort of the Executive Council for the government. One can see that many of us in the Class of 1972 are actively involved in public service. While we may hold diverse opinions and perspectives, there is one commonality among us: we are all incredibly grateful to the university for having trained and nurtured us to be contributing members of the community. This, I believe, is of paramount importance.

Moreover, as many are aware, pursuing a legal education before our cohort was quite challenging. Unless you came from a wealthy family, in which case you could afford to study and get qualified in the UK before returning to Hong Kong to practise, otherwise you would need to go through a five-year articleship training at a Hong Kong law firm which involved passing a two-part qualification examination. Starting from our cohort, we had two paths to enter the profession: the two-parts qualifying examination, which was eventually abolished, and the new route – the LL.B and P.C.LL. at HKU. Currently, the Law Society of Hong Kong is advocating the reinstatement of the “dual-path system”.

Q: Before studying law at HKU, what family or personal background drove your interest in studying law?

MC: In fact, many people may already know that I did not originally plan on studying law. There were no lawyers in my family, and I was the first person in my family to enter the legal profession.

I studied at St. Paul's Co-educational College, where it is widely known that the students are academically exceptional. I, however, was an exception, which led to my unimpressive performance in the matriculation examination. Having been raised in a Christian family, I felt a strong desire to choose a career that would enable me to help others, which I believed would be a fulfilling endeavour. At the time, I was particularly interested in pursuing social sciences, majoring in Social Work. Unfortunately, my grades were not good enough. Fortuitously, the Department of Law was a part of the Faculty of Social Sciences at that time. Students who were not admitted to their first-choice programmes, like myself, had the opportunity to join the Law programme. I recall that we were required to complete an aptitude test and undergo an interview before being accepted.

I remember during the interview, I had to face two professors who were native English speakers. Hong Kong students in those days generally had limited opportunities to be trained to be eloquent English speakers nor converse with native English speakers, let alone being bombarded with questions from two expatriate professors during an interview. My interview lasted for about 50 minutes, and I was unsure how to answer most questions.

Most of the questions were quite difficult, and I didn't know how to answer them. I have a vivid memory of being asked about my background in music since I was very avid in music at St. Paul's Co-Ed College. I recall that Professor Evans, our then-department head, asked me about jazz, which happened to be one of his favourite music genres. He wanted to discuss Dixieland and big band music, which I had never heard of. I had no prior exposure to jazz at that time as my background was in classical music. Looking back, I imagine that he intended to gauge how well I could cope with these challenging questions in an unfamiliar scenario. I ended up talking about a lot of things which I was not familiar with during the interview. I was disappointed and disheartened afterwards, believing that I had no chance of being accepted. I then looked for a phone, as no one had mobile phones during that era, and called my father who was at work. I asked him to prepare for the possibility that I might not get into the university and help to get me a job.

Being accepted into the University of Hong Kong's law programme was a tremendous blessing for me. As a Christian, I believe that my university admission is an act of God's grace. I was overjoyed to receive a big envelope from HKU, which contained my offer letter and relating information. Our Bachelor of Laws (LLB) course was for three years. At that time, our degree was not yet recognised by anyone; of course, a University of Hong Kong degree is still a University of Hong Kong degree, and a Bachelor of Laws is a Bachelor of Laws. Yet no one recognised HKU LLB as an accredited programme, as its status had yet to be confirmed by the Law Society of Hong Kong. I distinctly remember that the Law Society of England was the first to recognise our LLB degree. As a result, many of my classmates went off to the UK for further studies after graduation. Many pursued master's degrees, others studied to become barristers, and some took the Solicitor Qualifying Examination. Among our first cohort of graduates, if I am not mistaken, only 32 people graduated. Only 20 went on to pursue the Postgraduate Certificate in Laws (PCLL). The others, including Edward Chan, Andrew Liao, and Ronnie Tong, went to the UK.

Initially, I applied for a Master of Laws (LLM) programme in the UK. However, I remember one day I ran into Professor Evans, and he asked me, "Moses, what are your plans after graduation?" I told him that I had been accepted into the master's program at Queen Mary College. He asked why I wanted to pursue a master's degree, knowing that I was not particularly academically gifted. He inquired whether I was preparing for an academic career, to which I replied no. I had never considered becoming an academic, and my academic level would never be good enough in any event. He then further explained that obtaining a postgraduate degree would not help me stand out, but it would delay my qualification as a lawyer by a year compared to my fellow classmates. Being a year late in getting qualified would mean being a year late for job hunting, making it even more difficult. As a result, I was dissuaded from pursuing a master's degree. Instead, I stayed in Hong Kong and studied for the PCLL.

During my time in PCLL, I was already working at P.C. Woo & Co. After my third year, I was fortunate to know a senior partner of the Firm who is a member of my church, Mr Roland Chow Kun Chee, who later became my mentor. I asked him if I could be a summer intern at the Firm after completing my LLB degree. It could be a good

opportunity to broaden my horizons and get a taste of what it is like being a lawyer. At that time, the firm had not taken on any trainees or summer interns for ten years. I joined as an intern during the summer of 1972. I absolutely enjoyed it because there was so much to learn and so many things to work on.

When I told him I was going to pursue my PCLL, he told me to continue working at the firm instead of going back to school. The firm would support me in taking the second part of the Solicitor Qualifying Examination. However, my father disagreed, so I had to go back to university for that year. During that year, I continued to work at the firm for one and a half days per week: a full day on Saturday and half a day on Wednesday afternoon, as there were no classes on Wednesday afternoons.

I remember during the PCLL year, there was a course on conveyancing. At that time, no one was teaching conveyancing, and the UK had already switched to the title registration system. A professor from Ireland was hired to teach us conveyancing. It transpired that I had more exposure to conveyancing than my classmates and I even demonstrated to the professor how conveyancing was done in Hong Kong. I was more familiar with the registration process at the Land Registry than he was.

Upon completing my PCLL curriculum I started my training at the Firm and thereafter I joined the profession and became a lawyer for several decades. That was how it all started.

Q: At that time, you were among the first cohort of law graduates from the University of Hong Kong. What was your impression of HKU at that time? And how did it influence your future practice?

MC: I think the standard of our courses was quite good. Professor Evans had a keen interest in researching and teaching Chinese Law and Customs, providing us with the invaluable opportunity to learn from his expertise. We got to study land law in Chinese law and custom which had wide application in many cases. We also covered quite a bit of Chinese family law, such as customary marriage and adoption, which I believe are not as common in foreign countries. I think these remain rare for today's legal education. I remember in almost every exam paper we had a question related to Chinese law and customs. That was why I enjoyed working on these matters the most.

It subsequently got even better because Dr. P. C. Woo, the senior partner of P.C. Woo & Co. was the first Hongkonger to graduate with a PhD in Law from the King's College, University of London. His thesis involved research in and compared English family law with Chinese family law under the Great Qing Legal Code. As such, I had a lot of common topics to discuss with him. Later, when I started practising, I handled many cases in this area that other firms were not ready to take on.

I can share an interesting case with you all. In this case, an adopted son, after inheriting the estate of his adoptive family, sued his own son as he wanted to go back and inherit his own family estate. We represented his son in this lawsuit. At the end, the court ruled that, according to Chinese law and custom, upon being adopted, one becomes a

descendant of the adoptive family, and he is no longer regarded as a member of his own family, even if he is the only son in that family. In this case, the inheritance could skip a generation. At that time, the argument was that as he was still alive, how could the inheritance pass to the next generation i.e. his son. However, this is how Chinese customary law works -- after one is adopted by another family, his son becomes the first male in line in his biological family, and the inheritance would skip a generation. These cases are quite interesting, but not many people would have the opportunity to handle them.

Nevertheless, these cases have had a significant impact on many areas in the New Territories. As you may remember, the colonial government recognised and preserved the Chinese law and customs in the New Territories.

At that time, there were many courses. As mentioned earlier, I was more familiar with local conveyancing practices than our professor. Of course, he could teach me the principles, but we often learned how to put them into practice together during tutorials. I was usually very nervous about the tutorials, which were small in size, with the smallest having only three students. On two or three occasions, some classmates seemed unprepared and were sent off to the library by the tutor, who told them not to waste time and that it would be better to spend the time catching up with the reading rather than sitting there not knowing what we were talking about.

I believe that I learned more from the tutorials than from attending lectures. While lectures certainly offered some inspiring perspectives, I think we learned the most from tutorials. Over those three years, a lot of interesting legal principles were covered and thoroughly discussed. More importantly, I transformed from someone who did not enjoy reading to someone who spent most reading in the library during the third and fourth years.

If you do not enjoy reading, you will not excel in law. You must have a strong interest in it to truly immerse yourself in the discipline. I remember a very impressive junior from St. Paul's Co-ed who had excellent grades and wrote beautiful English. She eventually became a writer, but after completing her first year, she applied to withdraw from the programme. At that time, it was not just about having good grades to advance; it was more about whether you were the right fit, and whether you had an interest in it and possessed the right professional attitude.

I have encountered many students from different universities in the course of the years. Regrettably, while the number of law graduates is ever-increasing, quite a few of them do not actually appear to me to share a passion for studying law. They choose to study law simply because of their good grades in examination. After graduation, their performance as a lawyer is often mediocre, and I have to teach some of them from scratch. I once encountered a trainee who requested to transfer his training articleship to another lawyer simply because I had edited his work so much that his self-esteem was compromised. He told his father that he had always been a top student, but his work could never satisfy me, his demanding principal. I do not think this is the right

attitude. I have no idea if he had had a successful career subsequently. He might even be earning more than me. Nevertheless, I believe this attitude is not the right one.

I often advocate that universities must consider the applicant's attitude and interests when considering applications for law school and medical school. I went from not understanding the basics to enjoying studying law, spending a lot of time in the library during my third and fourth years, and eventually developing my own practice. I enjoy practising law, and I genuinely love my legal career because, in the end, I found that being a lawyer offers more opportunities to help people in various aspects. I can help people who are truly in need.

I remember when I first started practising law and handling litigation cases, I helped many people from the church who could not afford engaging a lawyer in litigation. I was overjoyed to help them, as I felt it was very rewarding. I believe that God gave me the ability to help these people. Being able to help them was the best reward, much better than the money I earned.

That is why I encourage students to do internships. But I do not recommend students to do it during their first or second year, because they would not have already covered the essential areas of law that would enable them to understand the practice and yield any substantive benefits. When I was a senior partner, I would personally meet with all the interns, who came from all three universities in Hong Kong, unless I was not in town. I always talked to them about the virtues of being a lawyer and a person, and I wanted them to understand that being a lawyer is not just about making money. The first thing I told them was that if you want to get rich, please do not choose to become a lawyer. Many lawyers who desire wealth may achieve it, but they often end up on the wrong side of the law due to the temptations. If you lack a strong sense of integrity and the right mindset, you can easily succumb to temptations.

Back then, many professors in the law department emphasized the importance of integrity, how to help others, understand people, know their needs and help them. They taught us interpersonal skills. They would even invite us to their homes for dinner during Christmas and holidays, and they even taught us the etiquette and how to communicate with people sensibly during dinner. We learned a lot from these experiences.

Besides, half of our class, which consisted of around a dozen students, was sent to a language remedial course at the language centre on the main campus. I remember it was a professor from UCLA who taught that course that lasted for about 8-10 weeks. On the first day, we had to take a written test, after which he said he did not understand why our professor sent us there, as our English proficiency might be better than that of the average university students he taught back in the United States. However, since we were there, we might as well make good use of the upcoming weeks. As a result, he trained us in public speaking, imparting skills on how to think while we were standing on our feet and how to organise our thoughts. This helped me tremendously in my later practice. In the first 15 years of my career, I handled numerous litigation cases. During the hearing in court, I had to respond on the spot and think while speaking. Those weeks

of training helped me significantly, in terms of how to organise my speech and my thoughts, how to make my presentations more interesting, and how to capture the audience's attention at the right time. I believe it was an excellent training for lawyers.

I find that period of my life to be unforgettable, those memorable four years, from playing sports games and singing in the hostel to participating in the Second Union Night, which no longer exists now. During our time, the First Union Night was a competition between hostels, while the Second Union Night was an inter-faculty competition. It was when the Law Department was first recognised as a Faculty that we put together a musical with music that we composed together, some of lyrics we wrote ourselves. I collaborated with Ronnie Tong and other classmates on the music. Those experiences left a deep impression on me and were the unique aspects of my university life.

In fact, working for this law firm is most rewarding. I have worked here throughout my professional career and continue to do so. I often share with the younger generation that despite the traditional Chinese saying that “a fish cannot grow fat without changing ponds”, however why bother to change when you have found a law firm that gives me the good working environment, exposure and opportunities? Why seek for another employer? Perhaps you could earn a bit more money, but there is no such thing as a free meal in this world. If they offer you more money, your workload will inevitably increase accordingly. However, I feel totally different in this law firm. Firstly, I enjoy great autonomy in handling my tasks. Secondly, they respect my time distribution and management. No one is going to put me under close scrutiny and check the time I come to or leave the office. We do not judge our lawyers simply for their attendance in office. Instead, we look at their performance and the quality of their work, such as whether clients are satisfied with their advice and work. Moreover, this law firm is keen to encourage everyone to participate in pro bono community legal services, which makes your life more fulfilling. You often work hard in a law firm without being aware of the changes in the world outside. As a lawyer, especially a solicitor, you must be on the ground and understand social trends in order to contribute to developing the place that you call home.

In my generation, everyone seemed to share a sentiment that we ought to contribute to society in some way. Perhaps this was because our society was not as affluent as it is today, and we were relatively impoverished. Everyone felt that Hong Kong would have fallen behind had we not walked that extra mile. However, in today's society, as I see it, and I might be wrong, there is a shared apathy, with the belief that certain issues are societal in nature and the responsibility to resolve them falls on others. On the other hand, those who care about social issues tend to view society as fundamentally flawed, warranting complete destruction. That's wrong. If you think something is not right, you should go and try to make it right rather than destroying it. Regrettably, many people have become increasingly confrontational, resulting in a less collaborative environment. We genuinely valued collaboration, particularly during my four years at HKU. The Law Department was united, and we were all well-acquainted with one another, primarily because we spent a considerable amount of time together in the library.

There is another aspect I would like to discuss, that you might be unfamiliar with. In our time, there were no classes during the first two weeks of school. In my first year, the initial two weeks were dedicated to what was called the 'library exercise'. The faculty designed an excellent training programme that taught us how to conduct legal research and familiarise ourselves with locating cases and relevant laws. This two-week training proved invaluable throughout my career. However, with the advent of artificial intelligence, things have changed dramatically. Recently, I used AI to search for authority and judgments relating to charity tax exemptions, and the results were generated in less than two minutes. Yet, a third of those results were irrelevant. I was thankful that my past experience and training on legal research enable me to discern what was right or wrong. Although the focus has shifted in today's world, I believe a solid foundation in legal research skills remains fundamental and essential. Without this foundation, one would struggle to analyse and distinguish between accurate and erroneous information.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you did more litigation work in your early career. Did your expertise change at the later stage of your profession?

MC: I initially started my practice as a litigation lawyer. While conveyancing was the most lucrative practice area at the time, junior lawyers seldom had the opportunity to engage in it. P.C. Woo & Co. was one of the most renowned property conveyancing firms of that era, representing numerous property developers and housing estates. The oldest and most famous one we dealt with was a major estate in Hung Hom. Our firm, along with another local firm, worked on the project. Many early property conveyancing cases were handled by just a few law firms, but I had limited opportunities to be engaged in that area, as I was assigned to work in the litigation team. At the time, I handled litigation involving land rights issues, and clients sought my assistance when they did not know how to rectify property titles or even needed to apply to the court for rectification. For the first 15 years of my career, I focused on litigation, including general litigation and trials at the Magistracy and District Courts, as well as handling relatively straightforward criminal cases.

Subsequently, Hong Kong experienced rapid industrial development. Our law firm served as the honorary legal adviser for some of the trade associations whose members consisted of numerous small and medium-sized manufacturers. These manufacturers faced various challenges, such as acting as original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) or developing their designs while facing allegations of intellectual property infringement. This was the time I delved into intellectual property rights, despite not having studied the subject at university. I mainly acquired the relevant knowledge through practice. At that time, Anton Piller Orders had just been introduced, which are *ex parte* injunctions that allow the seizure and preservation of relevant infringing articles of the defendant by the plaintiff's solicitors as evidence. Anton Piller Orders must be executed by lawyers and cannot be delegated to others. During the execution of these orders, we encountered various interesting incidents, such as being chased by dogs, having people release their dogs to attack us, or facing extremely hostile people. In some

cases, we even encountered individuals affiliated with triad organizations who brandished knives to intimidate us. These experiences were quite intriguing.

Precisely because I handled numerous such cases, I became acquainted with many manufacturers. As these manufacturers grew alongside the booming economy, their needs became diversified. When they required financing, needed to borrow money from banks, or sought to form joint ventures with foreign companies, my professional service came into play. Gradually, I dealt with less and less litigation, as junior lawyers took over the bulk of this work. I found myself switching gradually to commercial and corporate practice. In my opinion, a background in litigation offers the most comprehensive training and a strong foundation for solicitors.

Q: When you first joined PC Woo, did your mentors have a significant impact on you? Could you share some experiences or teachings from them that were memorable or worth learning from?

I was deeply impressed by my seniors on my first day of work. On that day, Dr. Woo asked me, 'Mr. Chow told me that you are a good kid and grew up in the church. How do you distinguish yourself as a Christian lawyer?' I was taken aback and unsure of how to respond.

He then said it was quite simple, and there was one English word I should always remember: 'care'. The word 'care' has two meanings. Firstly, it means being careful. As a lawyer, you must be cautious and cannot afford to make mistakes. After completing a task, you should check it thoroughly to ensure its accuracy. Why? Clients hire you because of your professional training. They expect you to safeguard their interests. If you are not careful, how can you act in the best interest of your clients? The second meaning of 'care' is showing concern (i.e. caring). As a Christian lawyer, you should be empathetic and patient. You have to be willing to sit and listen attentively to your clients. Understand and try your best to ease their worries. I learned this important lesson from Dr. Woo.

I must also say that Mr. Roland Chow has been an excellent mentor. I was the only trainee who had the privilege of sitting in his office with a small desk for six months. During those six months, I learned how to handle clients and other people, how to ask clients questions and how to cope with different situations.

Sometimes, after meeting with clients, Mr. Chow would tell me what information I could trust and what I should be sceptical about. He provided valuable insights on how to deal with people and clients. These are things that cannot be learned from textbooks, and I gained a great deal of knowledge from observing and learning from him.

Another important lesson I learned was to be very careful with word choice. The choice of words is indeed crucial. A solicitor must think carefully about which word to use and always strive for accuracy. These are the lessons they taught me.

Last but not least, I was instilled with the importance of contributing to the community. Starting from Dr. Woo himself, every senior partner in this firm dedicated a portion of their time to public service. There are two main reasons. Firstly, it allows you to stay connected with the world and keep abreast of what is happening in Hong Kong. Secondly, it helps you build connections and expand your network. In the past, lawyers were not allowed to advertise or proactively promote their services, so how could people get to know you? . Although it is often said that clients will seek for your services if you are good. However, it is still important to be known and recognised in the community. In my opinion, engaging in public service is an effective way to broaden your network and build up your reputation.

Another aspect to consider is that participation in public service can showcase your professional expertise and credibility. The most significant turning point in my career occurred in 1991 when the then-Governor of Hong Kong, Sir David Wilson, contacted me. I was away and working in Singapore at the time, and my office received a call saying that the Governor wanted to meet with me the following week. My office called to make sure I came back to Hong Kong on time.

During the meeting, the Governor told me that he had reviewed my CV, possibly through the government's record system, and was well aware of my track record in public service. Despite my extensive involvement in church activities and the education sector, it appeared that I had not made a similar contribution to work of the Hong Kong Government. When questioned about this, I found it difficult to respond. I had no choice but to assure the Governor that I would be more than happy to contribute my services if the right opportunity presented itself.

Later, I received a call from the Governor's aide, informing me that the Governor was about to appoint me as a Legislative Councillor. While I was eager to seize this opportunity, I had to obtain approval from the senior partner of my law firm first. I was told that they expected an answer by 7 pm that same evening, even though the phone call took place at 5 pm.

If you may recall, 1991 was the last cohort in LegCo with appointed members as well as the first one having members from direct election. The Governor's aide told me that the list of appointees was to be announced that evening. As a result, I did not have the opportunity to meet with the senior partner in person and had to speak with him over the phone. At that time, Dr. Woo had already retired, and the senior partner was Mr. Wong Chung Hin. He asked me rhetorically if I thought I could turn down the appointment, implying that it would be practically impossible to do so. Mr. Wong offered his support, assuring me that he and the other partners would be able to cope with other related matters. I was lucky to have the unwavering support from my wife also on this appointment.

As a result, I served as an appointed member of the Legislative Council for a single term. During my four years in the Council, I learned a great deal. Firstly, I became familiar with the structure of society; secondly, I gained insights into the functioning of the government; and thirdly, I realised that I was not particularly keen on being involved

further with politics. Consequently, I decided not to run for election for the LegCo after that first term. Nonetheless, this experience led to many subsequent government appointments in public service.

Interestingly, you would notice that my first appointment after I left Legco was as the chairperson of the Board of Education. From there, I held numerous positions in the education sector. I served for ten years as the chairman of the council of the Hong Kong Baptist University, and subsequently, Hang Seng School of Commerce invited me to steer their transformation to Hang Seng University of Hong Kong (HSUHK), which involved transitioning from a secondary school to a university. I had also served for three terms as member and chairman of the Education Commission. Besides, I have been involved in many other significant public education roles too. The experiences we encounter in life often influence our subsequent trajectory.

Q: You mentioned that the senior partner as well as the ‘senior partner’ at home were very supportive. At that time, how did you balance between public service and private practice?

MC: In simple terms, I spent a third of my time on my professional practice, a third on my public service positions, and another third serving as an independent non-executive director for listed companies. The third part is quite interesting. I was fortunate to have a good friend working at the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC). On her nomination, I began my involvement with the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, and to my surprise, I was elected as a council member on my first attempt. At the same time, I also joined the Listing Committee, where I served for ten years, including the last three years as its deputy chairman and chairman. Later, they changed the rules, stating that no one could serve in the same position for more than six years. Consequently, I had to step down, but the government retained me there by appointing me as a non-executive director of the Stock Exchange.

At that time, I also recognized the importance of corporate governance in Hong Kong. After leaving the Legislative Council, I joined the Hong Kong branch of the UK Institute of Directors. As we all know, the mission of the Institute is to enhance the professionalism of company directors, which I found very interesting and meaningful. They mentioned that with the 1997 handover approaching, they could no longer operate as a branch of the UK Institute of Directors. They needed some Chinese faces on the board, so they invited me to join them. As the expatriate members gradually faded out, I was left as the representative of the Hong Kong branch to negotiate with the UK Institute of Directors. On one hand, we were able to maintain our independent status, and on the other, we preserved our affiliation with the UK Institute of Directors. This was how I entered the field of corporate governance.

I felt that I was merely promoting corporate governance theories without understanding how they were implemented on the ground. From that moment, I believed that I should join different Boards of Directors of companies to observe their practices and how different companies' boards operated, such as Chinese state-owned enterprises, construction companies, developers, family-controlled firms, those with diverse public

elements, as well as mainland companies. My intention was to understand how the best practices of corporate governance could be effectively applied and implemented in these companies. So, I spent a third of my working time serving on these boards. My wife often asks how I can spend time with her and other members of my family. My response is that a third of my time is dedicated to work, another third to her, and the remaining is my sleeping time! This is how I roughly split my time (laughs).

For many years, this arrangement continued until recently, when I began to devote less time to the legal practice. At the end of 2015, I stepped down from my position as the senior partner in accordance with the arrangements of our firm. I decided to continue with my practice, but without the burden of managing the firm. From 2016 to 2018, I gradually transferred my shares to the current partners. I now no longer have any shares in the firm. They often joke that the years after my retirement were the halcyon days of the Hong Kong economy, while they faced many challenges after taking over the firm. In fact, in the 22 years in which I served as the senior partner, there had been many economic downturns, which were often not felt by those outside of the management. However, as long as everyone does their job and there is a good management team to drive the firm forward, there is little to worry about. Although I do have worries and concerns in my career as a lawyer, yet they have never caused me to lose sleep.

Q: Given the many public positions you have held, have you ever thought about giving up private practice and working full-time in the public sector?

I believe that my decision not to run for election as a member of LegCo in 1995 was influenced by my desire to maintain my professional career as a lawyer. Even as of today, I still believe that if you opt to be a full-time legislator in a functional constituency, although you will be well connected with the general public, you will not be able to maintain close ties with your profession and risk losing your professional angle.

I believe that while there is no perfect parliamentary system, having some legislators maintaining their profession link is beneficial to the operation of the government and legislature. Of course, the value of full-time legislators in the legislature remains unquestionable. On that note, I think there is no problem with functional constituencies, which happen to be very controversial. Some people believe that legislators should be elected entirely by direct election in order to truly hold them accountable. Accountability can be seen from different perspectives and interpreted differently. Directly elected legislators are responsible to all voters, but when you are a legislator elected by a functional constituency, you are responsible not only to the legislature but also to your professional sector. Our society is meant to be multifaceted. Therefore, it would be ideal if the legislature is representative of the different facets of the community.

Q: Since you entered the legal profession, Hong Kong has undergone significant transformations. What aspects of the changes in the legal profession do you think are remarkable?

I believe that the biggest change in Hong Kong's legal profession occurred when the Americans came to Hong Kong and demanded that Hong Kong open its doors to foreign lawyers. Although Hong Kong is a free society, the competition remains relentless and often suffocating. Compared to mainland China and other jurisdictions, our legal profession is a free-for-all, and the competition is much more intense. Despite such stiff competition, I believe the key is for Hong Kong lawyers to understand our niches and to stand tall on our ground. If we just jump on the bandwagon to follow the trend blindly, it will be difficult for us to survive the competition.

Have you noticed that many local law firms in Hong Kong have experienced the boom-bust cycle; with some of them flopping heavily and disappearing now, precisely due to their inability to withstand fierce competition? When others pursued certain areas of practice, they blindly followed suit, resulting in a battle for the best talent and resources. Those who were financially well-equipped naturally had an edge and could easily overpower their competitors. However, I have been able to achieve what others cannot, as I understand the importance of flexibility. International law firms are like massive ships, and as we know, it takes longer for aircraft carriers to turn around. In comparison, I am more like a small fast boat, meant to be agile and adaptable. That is precisely what we need. Of course, the influx of foreign law firms has undeniably played a significant role in Hong Kong's development as an international financial centre.

I recall my boss once advising me to be cautious as we engage in commercial and corporate transactions. We are required to report the number of cases on mergers and acquisitions we handled in the previous year for the assessment of premium of our professional indemnity insurance each year. The percentage of our income derived from M&A activities necessitates higher premiums since they are prone to claims. It is important to understand that when foreign firms enter the market, they bring their expertise with them. I have no issue with fair market competition. Having a level playing field is the most important consideration. It is through competition that we make progress. In the past, our legal industry focused primarily on property conveyancing and litigation, with only minimal development in family law cases. Nowadays, the legal sector in Hong Kong has diversified significantly, and the contribution of foreign law firms cannot be understated. As local law firms, it is vital for us to understand how to compete and survive within this environment. That is of utmost importance.

Furthermore, I felt that had P.C. Woo & Co. remained stagnant in the same position as when I first joined the firm, we would have undoubtedly found ourselves being overtaken by other law firms. Over these years, we have been constantly exploring alternative approaches and how to improve upon ourselves. We have attempted to venture into mainland China for legal practice to some extent. We have devised plans to expand into the Southeast Asian market, but unfortunately, we have not been successful. It is challenging because the legal industry in every jurisdiction tends to favour protectionism. Although I have obtained the qualifications to practise law in Singapore and Australia, I have never actually practised there all these years. I believe that even if I were to be present physically in those locations, I would still face significant limitations.

Q: Are there any skill sets which law students nowadays must possess to survive amid such stiff competition?

MC: I believe that the first and foremost requirement for being a lawyer is to possess excellent language proficiency. Without strong language skills, we simply could not stand out. It is essential to be able to think critically, articulate thoughts clearly, and effectively communicate and share ideas with others. Currently, I know numerous individuals who are highly intellectual. Yet, I have no idea what they are trying to tell me. Hence, having a strong command of language is absolutely imperative. Second, you must know how to interact with people. Interpersonal skills are essential. Third, integrity is also crucial. It takes a long while to build a reputation for a lawyer. If you are careless, you could lose it overnight. Fourth, as I mentioned before, being caring is essential. I have passed on Dr Woo's teachings to generations of law students. Lawyers need to be caring, compassionate and cautious.

Furthermore, it is important to be adaptable to the ever-changing world. One must embrace technology on one hand, yet not be led by it on the other. I have noticed that many young colleagues nowadays are being led by technology without truly embracing it. Without a proper understanding and effective utilisation of technological advancements, one may find oneself struggling. For instance, I might receive an overwhelming amount of messages on WhatsApp in a single day, but I often selectively choose which ones to respond to. Otherwise, I would hardly have time for anything else. Besides, I would carefully limit the time I spend on browsing social media. We must not forget that life goes far beyond WhatsApp and the social media. Life is multi-faceted and so we have to live our lives fully before we can become successful lawyers.

I aspire to teach students by imparting upon them these principles. In addition, they must be prepared to continue learning. I believe that the most gratifying aspect of being a lawyer is that every day presents new opportunities to learn. If they find the process of learning unbearable, then they may not be a good fit for this profession. As I tell them, when I first began my career, there was no Prevention of Bribery Ordinance, Basic Law, or National Security Law. If one fails to learn and adapt to the ever-evolving landscape, then they will not go too far.

I perceive that artificial intelligence has the potential to replace certain aspects of our work. More importantly, how do you acquire the knowledge to write programs that generate algorithms and interact with AI to accomplish the tasks you desire? You must possess the knowledge and skills relevant to that particular task. Unfortunately, most of us who have attended law school have not been exposed to these concepts. In my time, we did not even have word processors. As a law student, I recall that I never had an electronic calculator, let alone a computer.

However, I was the first individual at our law firm to learn how to make use of computers in the workplace. I was the first few people in the firm told to learn how to use the so-called "word processors" of that era, a term unfamiliar to most of the younger generation. My first computer was an Apple portable computer, featuring a tiny screen and a pair of sizable hard drives. Unfortunately, it has already been discarded. I

embarked on the journey of learning and mastering the use of computers. As we stand today, it seems that everyone has become wholly reliant on these machines. We possibly could not carry on with our work during power outages. How would we cope without computers?

How should one advance if they remain uneducated in these matters while managing their legal practice? What steps can be taken to effectively position oneself for success in a competitive environment? As others gain the expertise to develop algorithms and utilise the power of artificial intelligence to expedite their work, those who lack such skills may find themselves at risk of being outpaced by the competition.

I yearn that after all these days when I emigrate from this planet, I hope someone will still remember the values and virtues that have shaped me as a person. I vividly recall the promise I once made to my father. He had asked whether pursuing a legal career as a Christian would challenge or be in conflict with my faith. I assured him that, having learned many ethical principles as well as the importance of integrity, I could promise him that I would live up to be a good Christian lawyer. Up to this moment, I can still tell you that I have been able to do that and I pray every day that I will be able to continue to do so.

Most importantly, being a lawyer is indeed a rewarding profession, but you must have the ability, passion, and attitude for it. It would be extremely hard to force yourself to pursue a legal career if you do not enjoy doing it. All of you are probably more diligent than me. I consider myself lazy when it comes to studying. However, my passion and love for the work as a lawyer have motivated me to keep learning and reading throughout my career as a lawyer.

Thank you very much!