Interview with Ms Janet Hui
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Q: Would you please introduce your family and educational background and share why you chose to study at the Faculty of Law at the University of Hong Kong?

JH: I was born and raised in Hong Kong during the 1960s, with an upswing of the city's economy. One aspect of Hong Kong's education system that I really appreciate is its inclusiveness—regardless of whether a student comes from a wealthy family or just an ordinary background, one will have the opportunity to attend institutions like HKU or CUHK as long as he or she works hard. Hong Kong only had these two universities back then, so gaining admission usually meant a stable career path and a secure future. However, I must admit that during that period the entry requirements, especially for law, were quite stringent and competitive.

I come from an ordinary family. My parents ran small businesses, but they weren't wealthy by any means. Still, I've always believed in Hong Kong's 'Lion Rock Spirit'—the idea that through perseverance in studies and work, a better life is possible. High school education in Hong Kong wasn't accessible to everyone at the time. We followed the British education system, which meant taking public exams after five years of secondary school; many students couldn't continue to the sixth or seventh grade, so only a small minority had the opportunity to enter university.

For most young people, the main choices were either to enter the workforce or to strive for a university degree. Most aspired to attend HKU, mainly because it used English for instruction and held a high reputation both locally and internationally. We were divided into arts and science streams; I was in the arts stream, which meant my career options were somewhat limited—either to the Faculty of Arts or the Faculty Social Sciences. Some students might choose to go into the Faculty of Social Science to study translation or other specialized fields.

Among all my options, studying law stood out because of its unique appeal. However, getting into the Faculty of Law was quite challenging. I was very fortunate to be accepted. Although other institutions also accepted me, I ultimately chose to enrol in the Faculty of Law. At the time, I was not an adult yet and didn't have a deep understanding of the legal profession. My impression of lawyers was mostly shaped by television programmes, and I knew very little about what the actual work entailed. My parents weren't involved in the legal field either, so I lacked any relevant background or guidance in that regard.

Q: Did you have any intention of studying abroad at the time?

JH: No, I didn't. At that time, I felt that HKU was already excellent. Studying abroad was quite expensive, so our options were basically either Oxbridge or HKU, since we believed their academic standing was comparable. Interestingly, there was also a notable phenomenon in the Faculty of Law back then: after completing undergraduate

studies and the Postgraduate Certificate in Laws (PCLL), few students considered pursuing a Master of Laws. To this day, I still believe that a master's degree is not essential for a lawyer's career. However, the situation on the Mainland is very different. I have worked in Beijing for twenty years and rarely received a CV from applicants with only an undergraduate degree; most candidates held postgraduate or even doctoral qualifications. This illustrates the significant differences in academic and professional expectations between the two regions.

After entering the HKU Faculty of Law, we almost celebrated with champagne because it represented a relatively smooth career path—graduating naturally led to becoming a lawyer. The market was astonishingly favourable at that time. Even before graduation, each of us had at least three job offers. Law firms showed extraordinary patience, often extending offers a year or two in advance, even though they knew we might not accept. It was common for firms to wait until we officially joined before making a final choice. Internships were quite flexible, partly because the number of law graduates was small—fewer than a hundred—so it was very easy to find job, simply by choosing a suitable law firm. Today, the situation is very different.

When we graduated, the prospects seemed almost too good to be true. After finishing HKU, we had to do a two-year training period of practical legal training. During this time, salaries doubled each year—an impressive rate of increase. I vividly remember that I graduated in 1988; my first-year monthly salary was HK$7,500, and by the second year, HK$15,000. After qualifying as a lawyer in my third year, I initially chose to work as in-house counsel in a company because I enjoyed leisure activities. According to normal expectations, my salary should have doubled again, reaching HK$30,000. Although the growth slowed somewhat after that due to the high base, it still could have increased by another 50%. Those prosperous days are now a thing of the past. Overall, at graduation, I felt no worries about my future.

Q: Could you share what daily life was like at HKU Law?

JH: When I was there, HKU had relatively few students, which created a distinctive atmosphere. Senior and junior students interacted very frequently because our circle was quite small; most people knew each other well. If we had questions—whether about borrowing lecture notes, studying certain subjects, or even job advice—we would support each other. The student body was small—less than a hundred—and interactions across different years were far more frequent than what we see today. The overall environment was very harmonious; everyone knew each other. We also had tutorial groups; because of the small class size, that you were either in this or that group, it fostered close relationships and mutual understanding. After graduation, most of us joined large law firms. It might be very different from today's scene.

The teaching team at HKU Law was quite stable. I recently spoke with some senior alumni and faculty members, and I learned that some professors are still teaching at HKU. We got their updates even after their retirement—like Professor Roda Mushkat, who teaches legal philosophy and still lives near the campus. This sense of familiarity and belonging is very strong. Even after many years, professors like Albert Chen and Johannes Chan still remember us. This warmth and sense of community are

particularly strong in the law faculty.

Because dormitories housed only a small number of students, friendships formed there are especially deep. Many of these friendships have lasted over the decades, and even now, over thirty years later, we still keep in touch. The small size and close bonds created a lively environment, full of interesting stories.

Q: Were there any particularly memorable experiences?

JH: Yes, campus life back then was filled with small gossip—who was dating whom, that sort of thing. We all entered HKU around age 18 or 19, so these little stories seemed quite exciting to us. HKU was relatively fair—we had students who actively participated in various activities, but if they performed poorly in the first or second year, they risked dropping out. Passing the PCLL was very difficult—about a 50% failure rate. I remember sharing a dorm with a girl; I passed on my first attempt, but she had to retake it. Fortunately, the job market was very good then; firms were patient and willing to wait for her response, unlike today, where opportunities can slip away in an instant.

At that time, we also liked to gather some gossip about professors; these little tidbits made campus life more interesting. Skipping classes was quite common back then. We often debated whether it was worth attending certain lectures because we placed a high value on teaching quality. If a course seemed impractical or not useful, we would discuss strategies to skip it. For example, in a group of four, each person would take turns attending the class and share notes, so we wouldn't have to attend every session and could avoid the boredom. As a result, skipping classes was quite prevalent among us. It seemed that PCLL courses took attendance, while LLB courses did not. These experiences have now become precious and amusing memories.

Q: Was there a course that left a particularly deep impression on you?

JH: All the courses in my first year left a strong impression, especially the foundational ones. I believe these were the most useful. I remember courses like Contract Law, Tort Law, Criminal Law, Commercial Law, Civil Procedure, and Constitutional Law. There were only four courses per year, so the workload felt manageable.

What left a particularly deep impression on me was the first day I went to pick up the study materials for photocopying. At that time, the materials were still in paper format, and it felt like a huge pile of documents pressing down on us, making it hard to breathe. Most of them were court decisions. You'd notice that within these judgments, not a single sentence had a period—except for the statutes. The statutes were somewhat better, after all, they weren't as long. When we turned to the second page, the judgment still wasn't finished, which seemed a bit exaggerated, but it was truly very lengthy. Each judge's writing was so long-winded that it was difficult to grasp the main point. The initial learning process was indeed intimidating. We tried our best to find effective strategies for reading, memorizing, and exam-taking, often consulting senior students for advice. They suggested that we didn't need to read all the materials thoroughly. At that time, there were also books like Nutshells, which we knew that reading could help us pass the exam. To achieve excellent results, however, we had to study all the

materials carefully. I think it was a very interesting experience.

Professors from Hong Kong, like Albert Chen and Johannes Chan, left a particularly deep impression because they were quite young and inspired us. Most other professors were foreigners. Tutorial classes were also quite fun—if unprepared, we would be nervous about being called on. We had to prepare well for tutorials, and sometimes we would share notes among the group. Those days were adorable. One professor who made a strong impression was Professor Mushkat, who taught legal philosophy—her classes were very challenging, and I often felt I couldn't understand her. Trusts law was also difficult. I also remember Professor Wilkinson, who was excellent. These senior professors left a lasting impact because of their teaching quality. Conversely, I often skipped some classes, and I've forgotten who the instructors were, since their content was often disappointing, and they provided little guidance for exams.

Q: During your four years studying for the LLB, do you have any regrets?

JH: Yes, I have a deep realization that I should have spent more time and effort on my studies. When I was young, I was quite rebellious—some might call a bad student. It wasn't until high school that I started to take my studies seriously. This change, to some extent, was influenced by the words of my secondary school principal. He once encouraged me, saying that university was a paradise of enjoyment, where one need not work too hard, and as long as I put in effort during high school, I could relax and have fun in university. I believed him wholeheartedly at the time, thinking that if I couldn't relax in university, then all the previous hard work would have been pointless.

After entering university, I lived in dorms, where I became a hall member and an executive committee member. I organised and planned many activities. Balancing these busy extracurricular commitments with my studies was indeed challenging. However, I always believed that participating in various activities was an essential part of life. Whether it was law school societies, the HKU student union, or dormitory events, these experiences helped me develop many skills. These skills proved to be crucial later in my career as a lawyer, especially after I became a partner. Ultimately, these university experiences taught me that learning and activity participation are not mutually exclusive—they can complement each other. The knowledge and skills I gained enriched my life and became invaluable assets in my professional journey.

During university, besides engaging in dorm activities, I was also active in the Mandarin Toastmasters Club of Hong Kong, similar to the internationally renowned Toastmasters Club. The experience there left a lasting impact on me. Although I couldn't devote enough time to my academic work, these activities greatly enriched my university life. We met every two weeks, and the atmosphere was lively and stimulating.

On the other hand, compared to current law students, we could often get away with less effort because the standards then were not as high. The law school had a relatively small number of students, and each of us had multiple job offers—there was no need for exceptional grades to secure employment. Working as a lawyer then was comparatively stable. Today, the situation is very different with fierce competition. I

often think that for future law students aiming to become excellent lawyers, a solid foundation in core legal skills is essential. HKU trained us to develop independent learning, analytical, and judgment skills, and I believe this remains true today.

In our studies at HKU, we were taught to cultivate independent insights and viewpoints. We understood that in the legal field, there are no absolute right or wrong answers—what matters is providing reasonable arguments and legal justifications. This principle is especially important, as it requires us to develop the ability to form independent conclusions. For example, I used DeepSeek technology to answer a question on the spot at an International Bar Association conference. I asked the system a question during the discussion and received an immediate response. Just yesterday, I demonstrated this technology to my audience—DeepSeek provided an answer within thirty seconds. But these tools are not infallible. Without a solid legal foundation—understanding legal bases, case law, and overall logic—relying solely on AI would lead to inaccurate judgments.

Moreover, clients today are much more knowledgeable than in the past. In earlier years, legal clients might have been less informed than private practitioners, but now, many clients are industry experts and have a deep understanding of the law. If you do not have a strong foundation during your student years, learning on the job later becomes exceedingly difficult. I have worked at JunHe for twenty years, leading one of the M&A and general corporate teams. I've hired many young lawyers and recognised the importance of graduating from a reputable law school with good grades—this forms the basis of your position in the legal market. If you don't choose to be a lawyer, that's another matter; but if you do, a good educational foundation is critical. I believe that a solid learning base is essential—balancing work and play is not easy, but it's very important. I am especially grateful to HKU and other top law schools for laying this foundation for our future.

Q: Where did you complete your two-year traineeship after graduation?

JH: I trained at a local law firm, which seems no longer exists today. Back then, it was a well-known firm, and my career path was quite interesting. We called our trainee lawyers 'articled clerks', and every six months, we would transfer to a different practice area. The two-year training required us to experience four different practice areas before choosing a specialisation. This system was very valuable and difficult to find in Mainland China. When I first joined JunHe, I suggested adopting such a system.

When we graduated, we were only about 22 years old and still unsure about what we wanted to do. During those two years, I was somewhat lucky—or perhaps unlucky—I worked in the trademark department for half a year and then transferred to the M&A team. My partners didn't treat me as a trainee but as a full lawyer, which gave me opportunities to draft many documents and participate in negotiations. One of our clients completed an M&A and listed in Hong Kong. This client was quite unique—a Japanese company, the one handling its IPO was a foreigner. There were frequent disputes and almost no effective communication. My boss told me, 'Janet, you should coordinate this. The client likes you, and you're good at communicating with foreigners. Plus, because you're a woman, at least the men won't shout in front of you.' This

experience left a deep impression on me. It gave me an in-depth understanding of the M&A process and helped me successfully assist the company with its listing. After completing my training and obtaining my legal qualification, I worked in the real estate sector for five years, as it was the most profitable area at that time.

During university, I didn't study as diligently as I should have. Dorm activities and Mandarin speech clubs took up a lot of my time. Many senior members of the speech club came from well-known companies like IBM and Apollo—they were about ten years older than me. They often advised me that I shouldn't pursue a career as a lawyer but should consider joining their companies in marketing. At that time, lawyers in Hong Kong enjoyed high income and social status. My first job was in-house legal counsel for a real estate subsidiary at Jardine Matheson, which I did for two years. This career path was quite uncommon among my classmates, who typically went straight into law firms after graduation and took seven or eight years to become partners. I was more rebellious and didn't like following the conventional route. Thanks to the advice from senior colleagues, I worked in corporate legal affairs for two years.

While at Jardine, I gained some valuable insights. I was appointed head of a real estate subsidiary at a young age. They didn't expect me to do much legal work—the majority was outsourced to law firms. My main roles were coordinating legal needs across departments and managing internal conflicts and office politics. This taught me the importance of internal communication. I am also grateful to Jardine for offering our batch of HKU graduates a management training programme. Each subsidiary selected one or two employees to participate in a two-year programme designed to understand the company culture and foster friendships. These experiences deepened my understanding of corporate teamwork and coordination. However, I realized I didn't want to spend too much time dealing with office conflicts and politics. After two years, I returned to a law firm—Johnson Stokes & Master (JSM)—and resumed my focus on real estate/conveyancing practice. From that point, I felt I was back on the right professional track.

Q: How was JSM in the early 1990s? Were most of the lawyers from the UK at that time?

JH: Yes, the majority were from the UK. I remember JSM had a partnership with Norton Rose, which lasted until 2008, when they separated due to the merger with Mayor Brown. Back then, JSM was very well-known; we didn't have to actively seek clients. The real estate/conveyancing business was quite interesting—whether it was commercial or residential property purchases, the major banks would select five law firms they trusted, and commercial loans could only be handled by these firms. The legal market was almost monopolistic because JSM was one of the largest firms. Lawyer's fees were usually calculated based on the loan amount or property transaction value, which is what we call 'scale fees'. For example, even a HK$1M property purchase could generate legal fees as high as HK$50k. If the deal involved both the property sale and mortgage, the fees would increase further. Due to the limited number of law firms and the fee structure, competition was quite low—there was little need to actively attract clients or expand business. This was very different from today. Back then, the legal profession was highly respected, and clients generally trusted

lawyers' professionalism and advice. This made my work in real estate/conveyancing practice relatively relaxed—my workload was not heavy. I also loved to have fun, so I hardly worked overtime and could usually finish by 5 pm.

But I am someone who fears boredom, so I did two things. First, I pursued an MBA. We Hongkongers have a trait—always being on the path of continuous learning. I found this quite interesting. My classmate Richard Wu has seven degrees; he often criticised me for not having a PhD. I told him that I am in private practice, have two children, and am involved in social services—it's more than enough just to survive. However, studying for an MBA at that time was very helpful. It made me more business-minded. Earlier in my career, I was an M&A lawyer; commercial awareness is crucial regardless of your practice area, as clients ultimately care whether their business issues can be solved. I found that very helpful. So, during my time at JSM, I felt I was back on the right track as a lawyer.

Our partners were very professional, meticulous, and comprehensive. They placed great emphasis on professional ethics—these are core values we all shared. In that era, overtime was uncommon, mainly due to technological limitations in the work environment. We used typewriters, lacked modern communication tools like mobile phones—those were large and bulky—and relied on landlines, telegraphs, and even early fax machines, which weren't widespread yet. Because of that, working late into the night was almost impossible. Those years were quite pleasant—I had more free time to explore my interests. I also pursued my MBA and actively participated in the Mandarin Speech Club. Soon after I started teaching at the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong. So I felt that life had always been splendid and I was very happy.

Q: Can you share your experience in New Zealand?

JH: Before 1997, we decided to leave Hong Kong and live in New Zealand for four years. There, I passed the law and practice examination, had two children, and successfully obtained a New Zealand passport. However, those years were extremely dull for me. I often told my husband that those four years were the unhappiest of my life—so boring that I could only pass the time by playing Mahjong. I enjoyed entertainment, but every weekend was just Mahjong; there was nothing else to do. I didn't like fishing, cooking, or gardening. Although work and caring for two children occupied part of my time, I still felt life was dull. Eventually, we decided to return to Hong Kong.

After returning, I didn't go back to a law firm but chose to work in a telecommunication company. Hong Kong's economy was sluggish at the time. When I came back during Christmas 1998, I hoped to find a job. Fortunately, my tenant was a New Zealander working as a senior engineer at Wharf T&T. At that time, the legal director was looking for legal staff, and my tenant recommended me. We communicated via email, and he invited me for an interview. When I returned during Christmas, I took the opportunity to attend the interview. I also found the Hong Kong economy was weak—hardly anyone went to Lane Crawford even with 20% discounts. After the interview, I was fortunate to receive a job offer, and I returned to Hong Kong in 1999.

I noticed a strong demand for legal services at the telecom industry once I entered it. Headhunters often called me, and my salary could increase by 20% or more at any time. I also taught telecom law at HKU, even though I didn't have an LLM. I believe I was more familiar with telecom law than most. I worked as legal counsel at Wharf T&T, which I think was very important for me as a woman—because after marriage and having children, it's very difficult to balance private practice and family life. So I chose a stable environment, where I didn't have to work overtime and could care for my children—two and four years old at that time. I thought that if I joined an international telecom company, I'd need to travel frequently, so working at a local telecom firm was more stable. I had a good relationship with my boss and management, so I worked there until I moved to Beijing.

I was reluctant to go to Beijing. Honestly, it was almost unthinkable for a Hongkonger to move there. My husband is from Beijing; he came to Hong Kong at age twelve and has done many business trips to Mainland China, for which he even received hardship allowances. Early on, flights between Mainland China and Hong Kong had no air conditioning, and they gave us fans. We would even write wills before trips—seriously I'm not joking. During my time at JunHe, I remember once on a bumpy flight in the Mainland, my colleague and I actually started writing wills. China's economy was extremely difficult in those early years—hard to believe. When I first went to Beijing in 2004, friends and classmates cried because they thought I was being unfairly treated. I felt very upset and shed many tears.

But the truth is, China's development had begun way before; we just didn't fully realise it at the time for some reason. Its infrastructure, economy, and culture are very different from Hong Kong. The real turning point started with accession to the WTO, and Beijing's rapid transformation was driven by the Olympics—these signified two very different worlds. In short, after returning to Hong Kong in 1999, my husband initially wanted to find a job here but was unsuccessful. Eventually, he found a long-term position in Beijing, with frequent demanded trips to Shanghai. By then, he saw China's potential—he told me to come over quickly because there were countless business opportunities. He believed China was our future.

Q: You were raising two children alone at that time. It was tough, wasn't it?

JH: Yes, it was. I am quite a driven person. Besides caring for my children and working, I also pursued a degree at Tsinghua University. I think Chinese law is very interesting, and I wanted to learn more about China. I have a genuine Chinese heart—I love my country and wanted to understand it better. Our Mandarin was quite good, or else many of my Hong Kong classmates couldn't understand lectures. When I attended Tsinghua, all the teachers knew me—including Dean Wang Baoshu and Professor Wang Zhenmin—because they sometimes couldn't deliver good Cantonese, so I told them I could help translate for them.

My husband was in Beijing. I told him I wanted to go to Beijing, but I also wanted to study Chinese law. We were separated for five and a half years. Doing long-distance is not good for a family or children—one could only foresee separation, divorce or reunion. So eventually, I decided to go to Beijing, and I didn't realize how fast China

was developing back then. In 2004, I went to JunHe, recommended by a professor who taught at Tsinghua. At that time, the two most prominent law firms in Mainland China were JunHe and King & Wood—one would choose either one. The teacher said JunHe might be a better fit for me, and it turned out to be true. The interview was only half an hour, and they offered me a position right away.

Q: Could you share your experience upon joining JunHe?

JH: For me, joining JunHe and moving to Beijing marked a pivotal turning point in my professional career. Although I was known within the firm as a workaholic—so much that JSM was aware of my enthusiasm—the importance of family was equally ingrained in my values, reflecting traditional Chinese perspectives. Consequently, I made the decision to bring my children to Beijing with me. Looking back after twenty years, I believe that this decision was indeed the right one. Moreover, I was very fortunate; at that time, China's legal market was thriving.

The legal market was remarkably active during those years. Clients actively sought us out, and the workload was so heavy that it was difficult to handle everything. I recall that clients would even plead with me to take on their cases. Almost daily, I received requests from clients asking me to represent them, saying 'If you don't take this case, we don't know which law firm to turn to.' That period was truly the golden age of the legal industry—until the 2008 financial crisis.

When I first joined JunHe, we haven't had specialised practice groups. We were expected to handle all types of legal work, so I dealt with lease agreements, real estate, M&A, litigation, and even IPOs. If you had the time, the entire firm would find something for you to do—anything was possible. It wasn't until 2007 that JunHe created separate practice groups. Even then, the structure was somewhat flexible; lawyers could work across two groups. Later, the firm adopted a more specialised approach, emphasising that lawyers should focus on a single practice area. At that point, I concentrated on M&A and capital markets. After the Anti-Monopoly Law was enacted at the end of 2007, I began to focus exclusively on anti-monopoly practice. In my early years, I led both the M&A and anti-monopoly teams. Over time, the firm required us to specialise further, as client demands grew increasingly sophisticated.

Q: During the early days at JunHe, as the only Hong Kong lawyer in the Beijing office, what stories or experiences stand out to you? How did your professional journey differ from that of other JunHe lawyers?

JH: The internationalisation of JunHe left a deep impression on me. We had many partners from overseas—those who studied abroad and accumulated extensive internship and work experience. Some partners had worked in the US or the UK for eight to ten years before returning to China, which broadened our team's perspective and elevated our professional standards. At that time, there was a noticeable gap in English proficiency within the firm. I often found myself editing documents because some English expressions were difficult to understand. It was a challenge—though I didn't want to be just a proofreader or a language trainer—but such was the reality, much like the difference between Hong Kong-style Putonghua and standard Mandarin.

Furthermore, the professionalism within the legal industry then was quite different from today. Now, regulations are more mature, but back then, many transactions still relied heavily on ‘guanxi’ (relationships). Some people valued connections more than legal knowledge or competence. I believe this was a common phenomenon in the Chinese legal profession at that time. However, due to JunHe’s foreign-related background, most of our clients were foreign-invested companies, which demanded high standards of professionalism and compliance. We had to uphold these standards consistently.

Culturally, the differences between Beijing, Shanghai, and other regions also left a mark on me. When I first joined JunHe, within just two months, the entire firm knew about me—mainly because I worked very long hours. In those early days, I would arrive at the office at 7:15 am—earlier than the cleaning staff—and often stayed until 10 pm, 11 pm, or even midnight. There were no advanced technological tools back then; we had to work in the office. This ‘workaholic’ attitude was uncommon in Beijing’s culture at the time.

Cultural clashes were quite significant. China is a society rooted in personal relationships, and I am very direct—an archetypal Hong Kong style. I would tell my assistants, ‘Complete this by 3 pm today’, ‘Submit this document tomorrow’, or ‘Your English is so poor—I’ve already revised it three times, and you still haven’t corrected it. Check the dictionary—what does this word mean? If you don’t understand this kind of English, how can you use it?’ I see this as a cultural conflict—as I received British style education with the local cultural background. .

Q: Over the past twenty years, has JunHe changed greatly?

JH: The firm has grown significantly, of course. From a time when we didn’t need to actively seek clients to today’s highly competitive market, the entire legal environment has transformed dramatically. The good days in Hong Kong—where we didn’t need to chase clients, had sufficient business, and enjoyed high profit margins—have ended. The fee standards were once quite high but were abolished later, leading to full market competition. Similarly, China’s legal profession was booming early on, but around 2008–2009, things started to change. More overseas-returned lawyers joined, and the number of lawyers increased steadily. Today, there are over 700,000 lawyers nationwide, and competition is fierce. Client demands have also risen sharply. For lawyers with over ten or fifteen years of experience, adapting to these changes has become crucial; failure to do so risks being left behind, which is quite a harsh reality. In the past five years, especially since the onset of the pandemic, the legal profession’s landscape has shifted further: the differentiation between Red Circle firms and others has blurred, as even high-end clients seek to cut costs and improve efficiency. Large clients, regardless of their strength, are actively controlling costs and optimizing processes. As a result, competition extends beyond Tier 1 cities and top-tier firms. Many second-tier firms, often founded by former partners of top firms, have emerged with strong capabilities and aggressive pricing, causing the market to become oversaturated and highly competitive.

The advent of AI will profoundly impact legal education and practice worldwide. I

believe we should embrace this change. Decades ago, we faced challenges in learning to use computers and smartphones, but now we've adapted. The legal profession must continuously innovate; otherwise, it risks obsolescence. I often encourage students—both online and offline—not to fear these technological advances. Over thirty-five years ago, even without computers or mobile phones, I was already practicing as a lawyer. As long as you genuinely enjoy your work and study diligently, anyone can adapt to these changes. While competition is intense, to excel and be appropriately rewarded, lawyers need to find their unique advantages. Every industry emphasises value for money, and the legal sector is no exception. We must keep pace with the times and adapt to the evolving landscape.

Q: Were you involved in the establishment of JunHe's Hong Kong office?

JH: Yes, I joined JunHe in 2004. As for why it was willing to accept Hong Kong lawyers, it was because no Hong Kong lawyers would enter mainland law firms for a long time. Firstly, the remuneration at that time was quite low. Secondly, I observed a significant gap in support systems and resources between Chinese domestic law firms and foreign-invested law firms. Foreign firms typically had abundant resources—such as secretarial support, knowledge management teams, and other infrastructure—whereas Chinese firms lacked these. When they recruited me, they had never previously hired Hong Kong lawyers, so both sides hesitated. But they had already been thinking of establishing a Hong Kong office, which is why they eventually hired me. When I joined in 2004, the Hong Kong office had not yet been established; it was founded in 2005. Initially, there was a three-year period during which the Hong Kong office was to form an alliance with the mainland firm. They told me that once everything was in place, my name would be officially listed with the Hong Kong office. Since Beijing was the headquarters, this arrangement allowed the headquarters to have a partner based in Hong Kong, facilitating better integration between the two locations.

Today, our Hong Kong office handles a wide range of business—including IPOs, M&A and general corporate work, banking and finance, dispute resolution, fund formations, Bitcoin, compliance, etc. Our scope is quite extensive. Currently, we have around fifty to sixty members, including thirty to forty lawyers, plus administrative personnel. The office has become quite full; we operate not only in Jardine House but also in another location in Central. Over the past few years, many Mainland law firms have established branches in Hong Kong.

Q: Have you been based in Hong Kong office frequently over the years?

JH: Not so much. I think it's quite challenging to practice both Hong Kong law and Mainland Chinese law simultaneously. Hong Kong law is inherently complex, requiring us to keep up with numerous cases and regulations. Mainland law, on the other hand, changes extremely rapidly. To practice Mainland law effectively, you must dedicate substantial effort to stay current with case law, legal updates, and practical application. That's why some of my friends did LLM abroad and practiced overseas for a year or two, then found it much harder to re-enter the Mainland market after two or three years—compared to the Hong Kong market. I believe that if I spend some time practicing in Hong Kong, I can catch up. Although the legal principles are similar, given

that Hong Kong's legal system is common law-based, the core principles are not too different. However, in Mainland China, the legal framework can change entirely within just two to three years.

Q: Recently, over thirty Mainland law firms have entered the Hong Kong market. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon?

JH: I believe this trend is inevitable, given the development of our country and its enterprises. In the early days, there was mostly foreign investment entering Mainland China or companies engaging in Mainland business. But over the past decade, many Chinese companies have begun international expansion and overseas investments. Historically, they would have chosen international law firms for cross-border work. However, many have found it increasingly difficult to communicate effectively with international firms—sometimes even misunderstanding the same terms or concepts. As a result, many Mainland clients now prefer to work with Chinese law firms when expanding abroad. Even for investments in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, they tend to choose Chinese firms to coordinate international legal affairs. These Chinese law firms, besides operating domestically, also need a global hub to establish investment vehicles. Hong Kong and Singapore are the most popular choices for such hubs. Consequently, firms like Fangda and Han Kun not only established Hong Kong but also Singapore offices. I see this as a clear trend in business development. Additionally, policies have become more open. Previously, there were no talent or high-skilled immigration schemes, making it difficult for Mainland lawyers to come to Hong Kong. Now, with the easing of these policies, I believe this is a normal and ongoing trend of integration.

Q: Meanwhile, US law firms are withdrawing from the market. How do you think this will impact Hong Kong's legal market over the next three to five years?

JH: I think the withdrawal of foreign firms could actually present opportunities for us. Other firms besides JunHe will benefit as well. The work previously handled by these departing foreign firms will likely shift toward Chinese firms, and we have already absorbed many partners from those firms; other big red-circle firms will do the same. This process is beneficial for the entire legal profession in my opinion because many of these lawyers have ten to twenty years of international experience or backgrounds from international firms—they grew up in China and possess extensive China-related legal expertise. Their integration will have a substantial positive impact on Mainland lawyers and the profession as a whole. I strongly welcome this development; it's a positive trend for the market.

Q: Hong Kong and Singapore are both considered global legal hubs. Do you think Hong Kong lawyers have an advantage over Singaporean lawyers?

JH: I believe the comparison isn't limited to Singapore. In fact, I see Hong Kong lawyers having certain advantages over Mainland lawyers, thanks to our stronger critical thinking and analytical skills. Our two-year training period is also a key strength—I am confident that Hong Kong's training quality exceeds that of Mainland China, where it might take a longer period of time to reach a similar level. This is a nice situation. I

haven't done a detailed comparison between Hong Kong and Singapore lawyers although the two have similar educational and cultural backgrounds, but I think both are quite capable. The main difference is in their familiarity with clients. Hong Kong lawyers are generally more familiar with Chinese clients and the Hong Kong–Mainland cultural nuances, making them more suited to serve Chinese clients. Singapore lawyers, on the other hand, are often more familiar with other Asian markets and cultures. Also, I've heard from friends who moved to Singapore that life there is relatively monotonous, with fewer social activities compared to Hong Kong's vibrant environment.

Q: For a recent HKU LLB graduate applying to JunHe—whether for its Hong Kong or Beijing office—what qualities or attributes are you looking for?

JH: For candidates aiming to join a Mainland Chinese law firm, I think fluency in Mandarin is essential—bilingual ability is a must. The range of applicants is large, so good academic performance is important. We also prefer candidates who have interned at Chinese law firms, because the culture, working environment, and expectations differ significantly from foreign firms. Having internship experience can make a real difference. The interview process and actual work experience can be quite different. Currently, the number of positions is limited, and the competition is intense. There are many applicants aiming even just for internships, not to mention the competition for trainee solicitors and solicitors. Therefore, excellent academic records, a reputable university background, language skills, and emotional intelligence are crucial. Diligence and flexibility are also vital. For example, willingness to work overtime, or to be reachable at flexible hours, is important. I find it hard to accept candidates who refuse to answer calls after office hours, or who are unavailable during weekends or trips. It's not about requiring employees to work all the time, but about being responsive when needed—addressing urgent issues or providing updates. Not all young lawyers have this level of flexibility as they very much value work-life balance, and this balance is particularly important in the Beijing office—otherwise, employees might choose to leave. But in emergencies, if someone can't be reached for three consecutive days, that's unacceptable. So, flexibility is a key criterion. Additionally, interview performance is important, and HKU students usually possess better basic qualifications. Lastly, I advise against arrogance; candidates should not show that they turn to Chinese firms only because they couldn't secure a position in international firms. We invest significant time in training our people, with the hope that they will stay long-term, we do not want to be merely a training ground.

Q: The development of artificial intelligence may disrupt the talent training structure within the legal profession. Previously, assuming that JunHe recruited around twenty lawyers annually, cultivating them over time, perhaps four to five of them would eventually become partners. However, now it's possible that five lawyers can handle what twenty did, which fundamentally changes the talent pyramid and training model.

JH: I actually see this as a positive development. It emphasises the importance of law schools, because the foundational legal knowledge is established during those formative years. If legal education merely focuses on technical skills, then it must be

aligned with market needs and keep pace with legal developments. PCLL serves as a bridging platform, since not all law firms provide extensive training. JunHe, in particular, functions as an excellent training house—we conduct training almost daily, with all online resources available for unlimited watching, and we have a precedent system in place. Many firms, however, lack such resources. In earlier years, lawyers were required to perform many repetitive tasks due to business demands, which we believed served as an important training pathway. But this should not be rigidly fixed; one should not be bound to follow the same path indefinitely. I believe there are multiple ways to develop a legal career, and it's not necessary to stick to one traditional route. For example, holding a law degree as a foundational qualification also makes it easier to enter other industries. Isn't that a good thing? I have a client who studied law but then started his own hotel business—he chose not to be a lawyer.

Our mindset remains somewhat traditional. Many people still believe that after graduation, one must work as a senior executive in a large corporation. But the reality isn't necessarily so. I have a friend who, under immense peer pressure, chose to work in retail at Lululemon. I will share these ideas at the HKU alumni event in Beijing. I've also invited a guest—someone who used to be an executive in a major corporation but later transitioned to become an astrologer, and he will share his star chart analysis during the event. I believe this talk will be very popular. Such choices are not necessarily bad. One of my clients, for instance, studied astronomy and now oversees large M&A projects. This shows that learning is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about training your thinking. Law graduates can pursue a wide variety of careers.

Q: Would you encourage your children to study law?

JH: I believe they should choose their own life. They have expressed from a young age that they don't want to follow my footsteps after seeing my being so exhausted. During my early years at JunHe, I used to sleep for three to four hours each day for six consecutive years—including all weekends and holidays, even at Spring Festivals. Within those six years I only took one annual leave, a nine-day trip to Africa, and that was it. I felt this lifestyle was meaningless for them. However, everyone's preferences and satisfaction levels with work differ. For me, I still feel very happy and fulfilled. But nowadays, young people have their own pursuits—not just work—and that's a good thing. Societal expectations and circumstances are always changing, so I think things tend to adapt to social change.