

## **Interview with Mrs Jennifer Wong Cheung King Yu**

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

### **Q: Why did you choose to study law at HKU?**

JW: I was born and raised locally, attending kindergarten, primary school, and secondary school in Hong Kong. My alma mater is St. Stephen's Girls' College, where I completed my entire education from childhood through secondary school. In those days, one had to finish Form 7 to be eligible for university admission. As one of six siblings, my father, a physician trained in Western medicine, harboured aspirations for all of us to pursue medical careers. Unfortunately, my aptitude for the sciences was mediocre, prompting me to choose the humanities as my area of study instead.

I recall my father once expressing that if medicine proved unattainable, law would be an acceptable alternative. To the layperson, the role of a lawyer appeared relatively simple - merely signing documents in front of clients to collect fees. Coincidentally, upon my secondary school graduation in 1969, HKU had just inaugurated its law program. Given that all my siblings were studying in the United Kingdom, my father hoped that I would be accepted by HKU such that I did not have to study abroad. Fortunately, I was one of the 40 students admitted to the program.

This marked a pivotal juncture in my life, primarily because, during the first year, we were plagued by the concern that we might be 'guinea pigs'. To the best of my knowledge, the admission standards for the law program were not stringent in my year, but they were substantially elevated in subsequent cohorts.

In our inaugural year, we were under the guidance of only three instructors. Namely, they are Professor Dafydd Evans and Mr. John Rear and Mr. Bernard Downey. The first two could be regarded as the progenitors of HKU's law program. Our cohort consisted of 40 students, and our classrooms were devoid of televisions - a stark contrast to the hundreds of students and technologically equipped classrooms of today. Bereft of televisions, iPhones, and iPads, we diligently took notes by hand. In reality, class attendance rarely reached 40, as many struggled with early morning wake-up calls and attendance often hovered just above 30.

At that time, our cohort included some mature students - those who had already obtained their first undergraduate degree or had prior work experience. One such classmate, Barbara Eng, obtained her first undergraduate degree from HKU and possessed exceptional

shorthand skills. In every class, she meticulously transcribed comprehensive notes and generously shared them with her peers. Our classes operated in this manner, and I recollect that our tutorial sessions typically consisted of a mere four to five students, with various subjects forming distinct teaching groups.

**Q: How was the learning experience like back in the days, prior to the relocation of HKU Law to the Cheng Yu Tung Tower?**

JW: During our four years, the then Department of Law was not based at the HKU main campus, as there was no dedicated campus for the department at that time. We were not considered a faculty but rather a department, and our location was on Caine Road. At the time, Caine Road housed a police dormitory, a red-brick building, situated at the intersection with Seymour Road. That is where we spent all four years of our studies. The building, if I recall correctly, had three floors: one for offices, one for classrooms, and one for the library.

Although modest in size, our teaching building was well-equipped with a library, a library administrator, and excellent teachers. Our relationships with our teachers were quite intimate, as they knew each of us by name. I even remember being invited to their homes for meals. I assume the situation is quite different now, not because professors and tutors are unwilling to invite students, but because there are simply too many students to accommodate.

In our first year, the department had three teachers. By the second year, we had added a few more, including Mr. Alan Smith and the perhaps lesser-known Mr. Leonard Pegg. In our third year, we gained even more teachers, such as Mr. Ronnie Wong SC, Mr. Richard Field, and the now-deceased Mr. Ray Faulkner. In our final year, I remember having Mr. Robert Ribeiro among our teachers, who later became a permanent judge of the Court of Final Appeal.

I can confidently say that throughout our four years, the quality of instruction provided by our teachers was exceptional. Many of our classmates went on to achieve great success. We remain deeply grateful to our professors, as well as the senior lecturers and lecturers of our time.

**Q: Given your well-achieved legal career, did the legal education at HKU inspire your career direction?**

JW: Indeed, my major was in the humanities. Why did I choose to study law? Because at that time, more than fifty years ago, the most common profession for graduates with a humanities

background was teaching. However, I had never been particularly fond of teaching, so I opted for law, which was quite a novel field for me.

During our fourth year, there was no accounting course offered, perhaps due to the fact there might not have been a teacher available to teach accounting at that time. As a result, after completing our PCLL, we were required to undertake a two-year articleship. During this period, we had to pass an accounting exam. Given my humanities background and average mathematical ability, I was quite apprehensive about this. As soon as an opportunity to take the exam arose, I immediately registered. Fortuitously, I passed the exam on my first attempt. Thus, two years later, I was able to graduate smoothly and begin working officially at a law firm.

Our wages at the time were indeed not high. I remember that during our articleship, we had to seek employment, and the salary was only HKD 1,000. This must be far off from your current salaries. Even after obtaining my practicing qualification, my salary was just HKD 3,000.

Of course, with the passage of time, salaries and other aspects have evolved. I consider myself quite fortunate, having joined my current law firm, Gallant, not long after graduation. At that time, Mr. Gallant Ho Yiu Tai was planning to establish his own firm, having previously worked at another law firm. I joined the firm in 1977, and by 2027, my tenure at this firm will reach 50 years - an achievement I find quite extraordinary, having spent half a century at the same law firm.

I chose to specialize in what we call conveyancing, or real estate, because I was not too keen on litigation, and I felt that the real estate industry suited me better. We represented many banks at that time, and there was a charging method called scale charge for conveyancing. I remember it very clearly: if your property was worth HKD 1 million, you would charge HKD 10,000, and the fee would increase incrementally, up to a maximum of more than HKD 200,000. No client would haggle with you, as this was a fixed fee standard. However, this charging method disappeared after some years.

I have always been involved in real estate, but that is not my only area of expertise. I eventually became an administrative partner at Gallant and am now a consultant. My relationship with the firm remains excellent. The current senior partner was interviewed by me when he first joined the firm – he was once a trainee at our law firm but has since become a senior partner, which is something I find deeply gratifying.

Although it was newly established at the time, Gallant was founded by two highly experienced lawyers, Mr. Gallant Ho and another partner. However, our law firm was somewhat unique in certain aspects. What prompted Mr. Ho Yiu Tai to establish his own firm in 1977? It was because, in addition to the main office, we had three branches in Kowloon and the New Territories. At that time, legal services were unavailable in the New Territories. Thus, Mr. Ho conceived an idea – he aimed to provide services to the entirety of Hong Kong, encompassing Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, including remote areas such as Yuen Long, Tuen Mun, and Sha Tin. We established branches in these locations to ensure the provision of legal services throughout Hong Kong. However, as times have changed and the transportation network has improved, we have ceased operating other branches and now concentrate all operations at the main office.

**Q: Can you share with us some of the difficulties and challenges when you first started your legal career?**

JW: Indeed, there were significant differences. As I mentioned earlier, we did not use computers at that time. I clearly recall that when writing a letter or drafting a property contract, if there was a single mistake, we had to start over and retype the entire document. This is vastly different from the ease of making edits on computers today. As a result, this cultivated a habit in us – whenever we read a document or a letter, if we found a mistake, we would thoroughly review it from beginning to end.

Additionally, I remember that our colleagues had to proofread property agreements or mortgage documents, which often had numerous pages. Since there were no computers, if you made a mistake on one page, one person would have to read the document while another would verify it. For letters, if there was a typo, you would have to retype the entire letter. As letters were generally shorter, the typist could proofread them themselves. We then had to ensure the content was accurate when the lawyer reviewed it.

Later, upon the advent of computers, I found that sometimes issues would arise, such as editing one part of a document without updating other sections. Significant errors might hence be created. I think this is one of the problems that came with the advent of computers. Although computers have their advantages, they can sometimes cause issues like these, where we might not be as meticulous in reviewing documents, leading to complacency.

**Q: Was there anyone who mentored you at the beginning of your legal career?**

JW: Mr. Ho was undoubtedly the person who influenced me the most in my career. He was a highly astute and intelligent lawyer who excelled not only in the legal field but also demonstrated great foresight in establishing and operating a law firm. When founding Gallant in 1977, he already had his own development plan.

I remember he once reminded us that no matter how good a person's memory is, we cannot rely solely on memory to work. For example, when handling property conveyancing, I could not just rely on my memory to know the dates of contract signing, formal agreements, transaction completion, and deadlines. We needed to have a backup system and a product system. This is something I've always kept in mind – we can be error-prone without a good system.

Mr. Ho was a very strict lawyer, so when I joined the firm, he gave me many tests. For instance, he would ask me to find five key points in a certain document. I clearly remember on my first day at Gallant, he gave me a stack of documents, including a mortgage form, an assignment, and a power of attorney. In our previous assignments, the seller and buyer would be at the front, the property description in the middle, and the entire contract would be printed from beginning to end.

Mr. Ho asked me to move all the details into a schedule, with a standard form at the front. The schedule could be one or two pages, and if there were any errors, you would only need to print the schedule. So, why do all mortgage forms and powers of attorney use this work model today? I think it might be because many law firms recognize that this is a highly efficient and reliable work model and have emulated our approach.

**Q: Besides this work model, were there any work items, transactions, or cases which you find memorable?**

JW: As I primarily handled banking business, I had to review numerous files daily, including those representing banks, buyers, or sellers. Back then, it was possible for us to represent both the vendor and the purchaser. This was different from the subsequent implementation of separate representation requirements. When representing both the buyer and the bank, we had to be very careful.

My approach involved creating a table of all the special terms in the Deeds of Mutual Covenant (DMC), which were known to be quite lengthy. For example, I would include information such as the prior lease of the property, when the occupation permit was issued, and any stipulations regarding what activities were allowed on the ground floor and whether

the upper floors were for offices. I would organize this information into a table. For any specific terms in the DMC that the bank or the buyer needed to be aware of, I would also include them in the table. The advantage of this approach was its convenience; for example, when I reviewed the same property estate for the second time, like Taikoo Shing, the DMC and occupation permit would be the same, so I wouldn't have to spend time reviewing them from scratch.

Of course, when reviewing documents for the first time, you need to be very careful and thorough. This is also a valuable insight when handling conveyancing business. In addition, if we had any requests or comments, we would write them down and put them in the file so that my trainees and all assistant lawyers could review them. Our firm's training includes regular meetings for different departments, such as monthly meetings for the real estate department. During these meetings, we would share special matters and cases to keep our colleagues informed of the latest developments. This was an essential driving force for the continuous progress of the firm.

**Q: Based on your experience handling the affairs of the Association of China-Appointed Attesting Officers, did you observe any changes following the enhanced interactions between Hong Kong and the Mainland?**

JW: In our era, after serving as a lawyer for about ten years, we would be eligible to apply to become a notary public. It's worth mentioning that in our time, becoming a notary did not require passing an exam; rather, it was through recommendations. In other words, we needed to find multiple people to recommend us and prove that we were qualified for the position. Once approved, we could officially become a notary. Thus, the first few batches of commissioned notaries did not have to pass any exams, but I know that the current assessments are quite rigorous.

Before China's reform, the origin of the Chinese notary system was closely related to the Xinhua News Agency at the time. Back then, the process of signing domestic documents was quite challenging, so the Xinhua News Agency commissioned ten prominent senior lawyers from Hong Kong to assist. This included lawyers such as Gallant Ho Yiu Tai, Dorothy Liu Yiu-chu, Lin Chung-Pak, and Cheung Wing-In. These lawyers were appointed as the first batch of commissioned notaries, responsible for signing documents in Hong Kong so that they could be used in mainland China. At that time, only documents prepared by these ten lawyers were recognized in mainland China, while those signed by other lawyers were not acknowledged. This was how the system of China-Appointed Attesting Officers came into place.

Every three years, the Xinhua News Agency would appoint some new lawyers, but the number would not be large, no more than ten. Up to the fourth batch of notaries, there were no exams required. However, when the fifth batch came, Mr. Ho told me that I could apply to become a notary and advised me to find peers to recommend me. However, after I found the recommenders, Mr. Ho told me the unfortunate news that from that year on, notary applications would require an exam.

I was quite surprised at the time because I had been unfamiliar with exams since obtaining my lawyer qualifications years ago, especially exams in Chinese. At that time, I mainly engaged in the real estate business and rarely dealt with Chinese documents. But I still wanted to give it a try. Therefore, during the fifth batch of notary applications, the Chinese Ministry of Justice arranged for professionals to train us. After two or three classes, we had to take the exam the following week. Fortunately, the law firm I worked at had some lawyers from mainland China who could help me understand the system. The exam at the time consisted of true or false questions, and we also had to write an essay, where we could use our creativity. Perhaps because it was the first exam, and I was among the first graduates of HKU and the first batch of commissioned notaries, the exam was not that strict. As a result, I was fortunate to pass the exam. I cannot remember which year I took the exam, but it should have been more than twenty years ago.

When I was about to step down as a partner at Gallant, a good classmate of mine, Ms Lucy Yen, invited me to join the Association of China-Appointed Attesting Officers. Ms. Yen had been serving as a director in the Association. So I joined the Association of China-Appointed Attesting Officers and worked there for a few years. About ten years ago, I became the president of the Association and served for several years. I genuinely appreciate this Association because we do not have many members, with just over four hundred lawyer members in the whole of Hong Kong. Moreover, only after serving as a lawyer for ten years can one be eligible to apply to become a China-Appointed Attesting Officer. The application requirements demand that the applicant be fluent in Mandarin and love both the country and Hong Kong since the attesting officer position is formally appointed by the Chinese Ministry of Justice.

In addition to the written test, there is also an interview process, which is an oral exam. The oral exam requires applicants to answer questions in Mandarin. Currently, there have been 13 batches of attesting officers, and exams are held every three years. The Association of China-Appointed Attesting Officers has always prioritized quality over quantity, so each

batch of exams has only about 30 to 40 successful candidates. However, after so many years, the current membership has grown to over 400 people.

**Q: Given the differing legal systems between Hong Kong and the Mainland, were there any unique stories from your experience on this issue you can share with us?**

JW: The legal systems in the Mainland and Hong Kong are quite different. Therefore, if our power of attorney or other documents are signed in Hong Kong, we must adhere to Hong Kong's laws. For instance, some documents require a certificate, while others necessitate a declaration, which in turn requires an oath. Consequently, we must handle matters in accordance with Hong Kong's Oaths and Declarations Ordinance. Moreover, when reviewing company registration information, we also need to follow Hong Kong's laws. As such, as a Chinese notary commissioned in Hong Kong, all documents signed in Hong Kong are in compliance with Hong Kong's legal system.

**Q: Did you consider becoming a barrister, instead of a solicitor?**

JW: I never thought about becoming a barrister. I always wanted to be a solicitor. This may have been influenced by my father, who once said that being a solicitor only required a signature. However, when I started working in practice, I discovered that things were far from that simple. Every day, I had to painstakingly review contracts. In reality, we had to examine many documents and do a lot of preparatory work for client signatures. Behind the client signatures, we put in a great deal of effort and time. Therefore, I never considered becoming a barrister, but rather felt that being a solicitor, focusing on the real estate business, was more suitable for me.

**Q: You hold legal qualifications from several jurisdictions other than Hong Kong. Why did you obtain them and how did they help your career development?**

JW: In fact, at that time, we did not need to take exams to obtain legal professional qualifications in places like Singapore, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Before 1997, once we had lawyer qualifications in Hong Kong, we only needed to register directly in those jurisdictions. The only exams required were for the Chinese commissioned notary I mentioned earlier and the current notaries. Of course, now many arbitration-related qualifications also require exams.

The reason for obtaining these qualifications was mainly the possibility of relocating. If in the future I would like to move to Singapore or Australia and want to practice there, I can make

good use of these qualifications. Doing so is indeed for convenience, but at the time, we did not think too much about it and were just worried that this convenient measure would be cancelled later. Just like now, if you obtain qualifications in the UK and want to return to Hong Kong, you still need to take the PCLL exam to become a trainee solicitor in Hong Kong. The same goes for medicine. In the past, there was no need for exams, and no matter whether you completed your medical education in the UK or Hong Kong, you could practice directly without taking an exam. However, now, regardless of the circumstances, you need to pass a qualification exam to start practicing.

**Q: Given the focus of your practice on property transactions, were there any changes in your areas of practice in your career?**

JW: When we talk about property transactions, we actually deal with many probate issues, as many contracts in the property transfer process may indeed be related to inheritance. So, when handling matters related to will or tenancy, these are essentially real estate issues. In this regard, I also have relevant experience.

**Q: Did you think about changing your job over the years at Gallant? Why did you decide to stay and spend the best time of your career here?**

JW: The reason I've remained at Gallant is primarily due to its excellent reputation and professionalism. We take on tasks we can handle and firmly refuse those we cannot, regardless of the client's willingness to pay. This aligns with my personal values. Secondly, my family played a significant role in my decision. Working at Gallant did not require me to work around the clock, allowing me to spend evenings with my family. Naturally, my workload increased as I became a partner, but this coincided with my children going to study in the UK, providing me with more time to assume additional management responsibilities.

During my tenure as an administrative partner, Hong Kong's economy was thriving. Our law firm had over 200 members, which demanded a considerable amount of time devoted to administrative tasks. As a result, my legal professional work decreased correspondingly. I never considered moving to another law firm because I prefer stability in my work environment, and Gallant has been a perfect fit for me.

In fact, our current managing partner, Mr. Philip Wong, also began as a trainee at our law firm. Many people follow a similar path, starting as trainees, becoming associate lawyers, then administrative partners, and eventually advancing to senior partners or managing partners.

This progression reflects the unique culture of our law firm, which has been preserved and valued to this day.

**Q: Were there any turning points in your career?**

JW: When I first joined Gallant, I treated it as just a job and did not expect to become a partner at this law firm, let alone envision myself in a managerial position one day. However, many things happened over time, and opportunities presented themselves. I believed that these opportunities were worth seizing, which led to my accomplishments today. I never imagined that I would work at this law firm for half a century, making it a truly remarkable experience.

**Q: Upon graduating from PCLL, where did you complete your articleship?**

JW: I initially worked at a small law firm called Wang & Co, which specialized in providing services to banks. I spent two years there as a trainee, followed by one year as an associate. At that time, Gallant was looking for a lawyer who specialized in property transactions, and I happened to fit their requirements. I felt that Gallant Law Firm, with its larger scale, offered more room for my professional growth, so I accepted their invitation and joined their team. Back then, our English name was Gallant YT Ho & Co. Later, we simplified our name to just Gallant.

**Q: Did you already know Mr. Gallant Ho when you worked at Wang & Co, when he invited you to join his law firm?**

JW: In fact, Mr. Ho approached me as he knew my husband, who is a barrister. We had some former colleagues and classmates who had interned at his law firm, and they might have known that my expertise was in real estate and property. Therefore, Gallant inquired if I would be interested in joining his law firm. At the time, he wanted to expand the scale of the law firm and needed to recruit more people. As a result, I joined the firm, and the rest, as they say, is history.

**Q: Have you ever thought about delivering lectures to law students?**

JW: We did teach at Gallant, but I never had the chance to teach at a university. I think it might have been for the lack of time. If I had the time, I might have been interested in this aspect as well. Although I do not particularly enjoy teaching, sharing my practical knowledge with students can be quite rewarding and interesting.

**Q: What advice would you give to our law students of today?**

JW: I am now several decades apart from all of you, and I wonder if there is a generation gap. However, at the Law Society, I have the opportunity to meet students from HKU every year. As I mentioned earlier, we offer scholarships to PCLL and MCL (Master of Common Law) students. I think the competition nowadays is very intense, even more so than during our time. I believe you are always competing with your peers, which is inevitable. Especially when I see MCL students coming from mainland China, I admire them greatly. Their English proficiency is excellent because they study and take exams in English. It's truly admirable that these students can stand out in a highly competitive environment while overcoming language and cultural barriers.

Many of them have already studied at prestigious law schools in mainland China, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University. Some students pursue an MCL after achieving success in their careers. Some aim to develop their careers in Hong Kong, while others hope to return to mainland China after graduation. Last month, I met some PCLL students, and I have such opportunities every year. I found that their competition is very intense now, with hundreds of PCLL graduates each year.

I think this is not only a suggestion but a practical idea - after years of hard study, if you want to become a solicitor, it's best to be a trainee at a more conventional law firm. The internship should cover various aspects, allowing you to gain a comprehensive understanding of a lawyer's work. For example, at our law firm, interns need to rotate through at least four departments, including litigation, business, and property. Through this rotation, you can better understand your interests and determine which area you'd like to specialize in the future.

There are indeed some differences between large law firms and small and medium-sized law firms. For some people, small and medium-sized law firms may be more suitable because, like a general practitioner, they can gain an understanding of various fields, which is an advantage. However, if you work on litigation in a large law firm, you might focus only on that. When others ask you about property or business matters, you may not be very familiar with them.

Therefore, where you work is not the most important factor. Instead, the most crucial aspect is learning the correct legal knowledge, ensuring that your legal understanding is accurate and you have applied the right laws. The focus of legal education is not on memorization but on building a solid foundation. I have always believed that a strong foundation is essential,

and this view has not changed in fifty years. A solid legal foundation is crucial for future career development.

**Q: Looking back to Hong Kong's legal profession, given its development and interaction with China in light of the latter's progression, such as the blooming of the Greater Bay Area. Do you find them as challenges or opportunities for Hong Kong's legal industry?**

JW: In fact, as a lawyer in Hong Kong nowadays, you cannot overlook the need to have a basic understanding of Chinese law, regardless of which department you work in. For example, if you are working in litigation, this understanding is even more essential because many cases now involve mainland Chinese law. So, I don't see this as a threat or an opportunity, but rather as an inevitable reality to face. Practicing law in Hong Kong requires a basic understanding of Chinese law.