

Interview with Madam Justice Bebe Chu SBS

12 September 2025, Senior Common Room, The University of Hong Kong

Interviewers: Albert Hung-yee Chen, Edward K. F. Chan, Emma Chow

Q: Could you tell us about your family background? What drew you to the law back then?

BC: I came from a working-class background. My father's parents were from an island, which used to be called Dinghai, but now it's called Zhoushan, and it's opposite the city of Ningbo, in Zhejiang province. And my mother's parents were from Shanghai and Jiangsu. My parents were married in Chongqing in 1945. After the Second World War, they moved back to Shanghai, and my father worked for a textile company there. In 1949, the textile company where my father was working decided to relocate its entire operation, and that's how my parents got to move to Hong Kong. In a way, they are immigrants as well.

I was born in Hong Kong three years later. In the early days of my childhood, we were living in the top flat of an old tenement walk-up building (colloquially known as "Tong Lau"). And on the second floor, there was a very nice American elderly man living there. We used to call him our "American uncle". He took a liking to me and insisted on taking me to see the nuns of a well-known school, Maryknoll Convent School in Kowloon Tong. I was accepted into kindergarten at the Maryknoll Convent School where I received my education up to A levels.

In those days, I was academically bright. I wanted to study medicine and become a doctor, so I took all the science subjects. Unfortunately, I didn't do well in my science subjects, and didn't get into medical school. I found out that there was a new department, namely the Law Department, which was then two years old. I decided to give it a try because I scored a distinction in English language, and I also did fairly well in my Chinese language. I applied and attended an interview held by John Rear and Bernard Downey. Luckily, I passed, so that was how it all began in 1971.

Q: How did you perceive law as a subject before you entered law school?

BC: Well, just before I entered law school, I was doing science subjects, but I felt that there was some similarity in the sense that my science studies had helped me train my thinking to be logical and practical. That's how I also perceived law, because I found law also requires a very practical, logical, and analytical approach.

Q: When you were studying law in HKU, which subject was your favourite?

BC: I cannot remember that now, but I remember the lecturers more than what I studied. And I remember when 1971, Richard Field, William Stone, and Ray Faulkner had all just joined HKU. Alan Smith was there too. He was teaching what was in those days called mercantile law. Now it's called commercial law.

Ray Faulkner was teaching contract law. There was also Ronny Wong, who was teaching property and trust. All those are the subjects of which I enjoyed, because I actually got on very well with them, and most of them have become my friends and we still stay in contact.

Bob Ribeiro joined later. And he was my personal tutor and was teaching me criminal law, but that was never a favourite subject of mine.

Q: Do you have any fond memories you like to recall from those days?

BC: Yes, I learned a lot, but it was more from talking and discussing with my lecturers. They were excellent teachers and they were very willing to hear us, to exchange ideas, and to exchange our views and to listen to our views.

Q: And when you were studying LLB, did you have any struggle choosing between being a solicitor and a barrister?

BC: I've always been interested in advocacy, and I wanted to become a barrister. In the third year, I was a summer student with Charles Ching. Charles Ching was involved at that time in a big-money divorce case.

Charles then told me that I should meet the instructing solicitor in that case, and that was Helen Lo. She was at that time a very well-known solicitor in Hong Kong, because there were not too many women solicitors in those days. This was in the 1970s. And she was also one of the few women solicitors who actually started her own firm. Her father was Mr Lo Hin-shing, a well-known magistrate, in fact, the first Chinese magistrate in Hong Kong. Helen took a liking to me. She offered me a training contract, which I accepted. So that was how I decided to become a solicitor.

Q: So this is how you started your career in family law?

BC: Yes, mainly because of Helen. Her brother was also in the firm, and he was doing conveyancing. In those days, conveyancing was where most solicitors wanted to build up a career, because that was the area where you could make lots and lots of money. But I decided I didn't want to do conveyancing. I do not like dealing with deeds and properties, and in those days, I preferred going to court.

Q: After joining Helen's firm, did you switch firms during your career?

BC: I completed my two-year articleship there. I was there as an assistant solicitor for two years, then I was made a partner. At that time, Helen decided to join the judiciary. So she simply left me with the firm. I was a bit worried because I don't think I was even 30 at that time, and suddenly, I was given a firm to run. I managed to find my other friends as partners. One was Bruno Chan,

who also became a Family Court judge later. And then Peter Hui, who joined the Judiciary as a magistrate.

Q: What kind of cases did the firm specialise in?

BC: Mainly family and property. In those days, there were not that many commercial cases. There were no IPOs. We're talking about the late '70s, and life at that time was quite different. There were no international law firms in Hong Kong, and then of course, gradually, Hong Kong started to become the international financial centre. The top British and American law firms wanted to come to set up, and the rest is history.

Q: And what was the scale of your firm back then?

BC: When it started, it was very small. There was Helen Lo. There was Clement Lo, her brother, who was in property. Then, in the year I joined, I think there was another solicitor called Michael Cheuk who joined. He is Malaysian. They were the three major equity partners, and there were about 20 staff. I was the first assistant solicitor, and then there was another assistant solicitor. By the time Helen left the firm to me, that was mainly me, because the other male partners left as they were not given the firm. So I took the firm over with about 20 staff.

Q: Did your firm grow as time went by?

BC: Yes, as I mentioned earlier, I invited Bruno Chan and Peter Hui to join me. I also invited a friend to join as a conveyancing partner to do some property work. And then also Sharon Melloy. She was also a family court judge, but before that, she was my assistant. So we expanded a bit, and I think we got to the stage that was about maybe 30 staff.

We were coming up to 1997. And I faced difficulty in keeping some of my staff because of 1997 and a lot of my staff were emigrating to elsewhere.

I decided that maybe I needed to expand, but I didn't want to expand on my own, and I decided to join my husband's firm Stevenson Wong & Co. I moved my entire firm to merge with Stevenson Wong & Co., which was quite a medium-sized local firm.

Q: Is there any challenge transitioning from a small firm to a medium-sized firm?

BC: Fortunately, it went smoothly. Of course, some of my staff decided not to move with us. And as I said, eventually Bruno and Peter didn't actually enjoy working at a bigger firm, and they decided to leave as well.

After I joined Stevenson Wong, I helped set up their matrimonial department. I was also doing some mainland work at that time, because of my Putonghua ability, as in the firm, there was only

I who could speak Putonghua in those days. I then became a China-appointed attesting officer, and I was helping the firm to do some mainland property work.

Q: Throughout your career, would you say that family law is always your favourite?

BC: Yes, almost 80% of the work I did was family law, although I also did work on succession, probate work, inheritance, and some of the property, general trust cases, and also some general litigation. Some of them were closely related to family law.

Q: What in family law cases appeals to you the most? What features shaped your interest in family law cases?

BC: In the 1970s, when I joined Helen's firm, the firm was already specialised in family law. The moment I joined the firm, I already had a career goal of specialising in that field. One of the reasons was that in those days, divorce was still regarded as very much a taboo subject. A divorced woman would face a lot of social stigma. I've always supported equality, or DEI, as you call it nowadays. And I believe in equality for women. I just wanted to do whatever I could to help achieve equality — in fact, for both sexes, both men and women.

Q: And talking of being female in the legal industry, were there any particular challenges back then?

BC: I'm sure there were, but because most of the male solicitors in those days were all doing either property work or commercial work, family law became more like a field for women solicitors. So in that sense, I did not have any big problem, apart from the fact that I was very young in those days and inexperienced.

Q: Do you think, being a female solicitor, you will be able to earn their trust more easily, especially in family law cases?

BC: Yes. But surprisingly, I ended up with quite a lot of cases acting for husbands.

Q: Did you benefit from any mentors throughout your career?

BC: Yes, of course. When I was at Helen's firm, I met Jacqueline Leong, who later took silk. She's only about three or four years older than me. And we have remained very good friends. She has been a great mentor to me, because after Helen passed away, Charles Ching, who was also a mentor, also passed away. Jacqueline remained as my mentor up till now. She subsequently became the Chairperson of the Bar Association and the Chairperson of the Family Law Association.

Q: Did you get to instruct her in some cases?

BC: Yes, and also Charles Ching. One of our most well-known cases was *C v C*, which was before the *LKW v DD* case.

The *C v C* case, from 1990, was the leading case for some 20 years prior to the equal division principle brought in by the CFA judgment in *LKW v DD*. And for those 20 years, in almost every case, we had to have an expert to work out a capital sum for the applicant spouse's reasonable needs in accordance with the Duxbury calculation.

Q: Could you share with us other memorable cases in your private practice?

BC: *C v C* was one of them, and there was also, I think, after 1997, the first case under the Hague Convention on Child Abduction. In the first case in Hong Kong, I was instructed by the Department of Justice, which is the Central Authority under the Hague Convention for Hong Kong.

Q: What was your main consideration in moving to the bench back then?

BC: In 2002, I was already in private practice for 25 years. And I was 50 years old. So I was really thinking of retirement. Then, of course, by that time, my two former colleagues, Bruno and Peter, had already joined the judiciary. And I met the then-Chief Justice Andrew Li, who was keen in "beefing up" the Family Court in Hong Kong, and persuaded me to put in an application. I decided to join to try to make my contribution to the Family Court.

Q: You were one of the few judges who practised as a solicitor before joining the bench. Do you think it made any difference as a judge?

BC: I did a lot of advocacy work when I was in private practice. My practice was not too different from a typical barrister's.

Q: Do you think your background as a solicitor was able to bring a fresh perspective to your judicial practice?

BC: As a solicitor, I was used to listening carefully and patiently to my clients. I always try to give everyone sufficient time to make their own submission. I think being a solicitor has helped me to become more tolerant and more patient, and a good listener.

Q: Did you find any particular challenge in the transition between private practice and joining the judiciary?

BC: The most difficult part is when you are in private practice, you only listen to one side: your client. Whatever your client tells you must be right, because you are fighting the case based on what your client has told you. When you become a judge, you listen to both sides. That is perhaps one of the biggest differences and one of the first challenges, because when you listen to A, you

think A is right. Then you listen to B, and you might think what B says also makes sense, and B is also right. So now what do you do? Then you have to decide. That remained a great challenge to me, especially in family cases. We have sayings in Chinese: one is that *there are two sides to every story* (“公說公有理婆說婆有理”), and another is that *even upright officials find it hard to settle family quarrels* (“清官難審家庭事”).

Q: What was the most memorable case during your service in the judiciary?

BC: I wrote so many judgments that I could not remember. Probably the most recent ones. About the last year before I retired, I was asked to sit up in the Court of Appeal as an additional judge. *In the case of LCC v LTLA*. It was a case where the marriage lasted for nearly 30 years. But the husband had always been very fond of gambling. The issue was whether the money that he lost should be added back to the family pot before division. I was responsible for writing that judgment. I thought that case would go up to the Court of Final Appeal, but it did not. So my judgment was the final decision and became an authority on “add backs” in matrimonial finance.

Another case was *Chan Wing Tong v The Incorporated Owners of Kam Chung Building (Jaffe Road) & Others*. It was about adverse possession. It concerned a building in Wan Chai, and there was a food stall (茶水檔). It was very common in Hong Kong, where you get a little food store attached to a building. The claimant alleged that he had adversely possessed that site for 40 years. I found in his favour, but at that time, the issue was that the whole building was about to be taken over by a developer. When the majority owners of the building tried to sell to a developer for the redevelopment of a site, they would have to go to the Lands Tribunal to work out the compensation. And the issue was whether the claimant’s possessory title was only an encumbrance of the land title, or whether he actually could be considered as a minority owner, who had a beneficial share and ownership in the building. That was quite a novel issue. I wrote a judgment on that. They went on to appeal, but I just heard that the case was settled. These are the two more recent cases that I can remember.

Q: Throughout your judicial career, how would you describe your caseload? Were they mostly on family?

BC: I was in Family Court for 9 years. I was in the High Court for 12 years. During the family court years, it was 100% family. During my last 12 years in the High Court in the last 12 years. I ended up doing quite a lot of children’s cases, like the surrogacy cases. I would say 90% general civil, and the other 10% would be family/children cases.

Q: We also like to know more about your service in the Law Society before you joined the bench.

BC: Yes, I was on the main Council for one year. And then I was the Chairperson of the Family Law Subcommittee for many years. I can’t remember for how long. Probably all the way until I

joined the Judiciary. As the Chairperson of the Family law Subcommittee, I was consulted on almost all major legislative changes in the family law area. I sat on the Law Reform Committee, also on the legislation on child custody and guardianship, and also on domicile.

I used to give a lot of talks to different organisations, like social welfare, family welfare associations, when I was Chairperson of the Family Law Subcommittee of the Law Society.

Q: I think you also represent Hong Kong in many aspects when you were part of the bench. For instance, you signed a memorandum of understanding between Hong Kong and Singapore.

BC: That scheme actually arose out of one of the Court of Appeal cases, the judgment was written by Mr Justice Johnson Lam. In short, it involved both Hong Kong jurisdiction and Singapore jurisdiction. And Mr. Justice Lam, in his judgment, indicated that it would be beneficial if there could be cooperation between the two jurisdictions. So that led to the beginning of the talks between the Singapore Chief Justice and the Hong Kong Chief Justice as to whether there could be a higher degree of cooperation, and that also led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding.

Q: I noticed that you also served in the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC).

BC: I was a member of the EOC when Anna Wu was the chairperson. It was very memorable, and it was quite an experience working together with Anna and others, especially when we had quite an interesting case against the Director of Education. We took the Director of Education on judicial review because we took issue with the Education Department's policy of banding and the quota for boys and girls in secondary schools. The EOC took the view that those procedures might not comply with the legislation. We recommended some changes, which were not followed up on. We then decided to take out a judicial review action against the Director of Education. That was during my time. It was quite a memorable case.

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

BC: Maybe I should quote from my principal, Helen Lo. When I was an assistant solicitor, she told me that money was not everything, and that I should never do anything that my conscience would not allow just to make money.

I followed Helen's wisdom, I enjoyed litigation, I wanted to do family law, and it was not easy because it didn't bring me lots of money.

We owe a duty to protect the rule of law. Everyone should also have a dream. Don't be afraid to have a dream. And then you work hard towards your dream. And if you work hard enough, success will come. I would also add that when success comes, don't forget the underprivileged

or the underrepresented. I always believe in doing *pro bono* work and charitable work to help those less fortunate than us.