

Alumnus profile: The Hon Chief Justice Geoffrey Ma



Programme: **Bachelor of Laws (1977)**

Current position: **Chief Justice of the Judiciary in Hong Kong**

This July the University will honour The Hon Chief Justice with the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at our summer graduation ceremony.

Geoffrey Ma is Chief Justice of the Hong Kong Judiciary. He was called to the English Bar (Gray's Inn) in 1978, the Hong Kong Bar in 1980, the Bar of the State of Victoria, in Australia, in 1983 and the Bar of Singapore in 1990. He was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1993 and made an Honorary Bencher of Gray's Inn in 2004.

We spoke to him for the 2008 edition of our [Holdsworth](http://schools/law/alumni/newsletter.aspx) newsletter:

What made you choose the University of Birmingham?

Although born in Hong Kong, much of my schooling was in England, near Manchester. Like many teenagers, I did not know what I wanted to do when I left school. My school was very strong on sport and both I and my older brother represented the school in just about everything, including chess. I became and still am a firm supporter of Lancashire (for cricket) and Manchester United (for football). Cricket is and has remained a life-long passion!

I enjoyed history particularly and thought that I might study that at university, but my father dissuaded me. The idea of studying law then came from my older brother, who was at the time studying medicine at Oxford. I then became rather attracted by the idea and spoke to various people about law and where to study it. The careers department at school were particularly helpful. Obviously, Oxbridge and London were mentioned, but other top law schools were thought to be Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool. Of these, Birmingham had the best reputation.

Which memories of Birmingham really stand out?

Lots of things are still fresh in my mind, not least the sheer quality of the teachers. They made the study and discipline of law interesting, and instilled in me a keenness that has never left. My personal tutor was a New Zealander, Peter Warren. He had, like me, just started at Birmingham in 1974. He was a fine tutor. I also remember Bryn Perrins, who interviewed me for my place at Birmingham. I thought he was particularly generous: the letter from him following my interview required me only to obtain two E's at A-level!

Looking at particular subjects and their teachers, from my first year, I remember Gordon Borrie, the then Dean of the Faculty (1974-76), who lectured in Tort (and later went on to become the Director General of Fair Trading), and Ian Scott, who taught English Legal System. Two clearer lecturers there could not have been. I also remember Graeme Sneath QC, who taught Criminal Law. He was an interesting chap, not least because of his Hong Kong connection; he had been Solicitor-General in Hong Kong from 1967-1973. He helped me to get in touch with practitioners in Hong Kong. In my second year, it was again Bryn Perrins who stood out for his lectures on Equity. In my final year, my subjects included Family Law, Jurisprudence, Revenue Law and Company Law. I was glad I was required to take Jurisprudence – lawyers ought to know something about the theory of law and how everything fits in. Bob Pennington of course taught Company Law; he was very clear and generated a real interest in his subject. He also knew a thing or two about advocacy: he assisted greatly in the University moot against Cambridge at Gray's Inn (which we won).

Did your studies shape the direction of your legal career?

My time at Birmingham stimulated my interest in the law and provided a professional stepping stone. To be a good barrister, you need to know the law well, ideally through three years of full-time law study.

Tell us about the earlier part of your career after graduating in 1977?

Purely by chance, I joined Gray's Inn in my third year, after a fellow student needed another person for a moot competition. After graduating, I attended the one-year bar course at the College of Law in Chancery Lane, but I learned more law at Birmingham than I did for my Bar Finals. Of course, I had to attend dinners as well (I think there were 24 of these). I am now an Honorary Bencher of the Inn.

In 1979 I started pupillage at what was then 4 Essex Court (now Essex Court Chambers). My first six months were under my pupil master, V V (Jonny) Veeder QC. I then moved to 1 Brick Court (now Brick Court Chambers) for my second six months. Here my pupil masters were Roger Buckley and Richard Aikens (Buckley J and Aikens J).

I returned to Hong Kong in 1980 and undertook a further three months pupillage here, although it was not compulsory. I was called to the Hong Kong Bar in March 1980 and obtained my first brief the very next day! Initially I joined one set of chambers before moving to Temple Chambers at Pacific Place where I remained (and became Head of Chambers) until I became a judge.

My practice in my first year was general (in the very widest sense of that word), being both civil and criminal. In my second and particularly third year I began to concentrate purely on my civil (especially commercial) practice. My practice was mainly in shipping, company law, insurance, and arbitration. From 1990 onwards I qualified to practice in Singapore and did a number of cases there right up to the time I was appointed a judge in Hong Kong. When I took silk (as a QC) in 1993, my practice remained mainly in civil law, albeit with a commercial focus. However an important part of my practice as a silk was in the area of constitutional law,

Could you explain your current role as Chief Judge of the Hong Kong High Court and how you were appointed?

“ I took the usual route to being a judge. I became a Recorder in 2000 and was elevated to the Court of First Instance in 2001. I was appointed to the Court of Appeal in 2002 and on the 14th July 2003 was appointed Chief Judge of the High Court, which in Hong Kong comprises both the Court of First Instance (confusingly, the former High Court) and the Court of Appeal. In judicial terms, I am the President of the Court of Appeal, although I spend less than fifty per cent of my time in court. Much of my time is concerned with the administration of the High Court. At the present time I am heavily engaged in the reform of the Civil Justice system in Hong Kong. Although this owes something to the Woolf Reforms in England, it will not reproduce all the features of the CPR.

“ In terms of working hours I would say that, as a judge, I have never worked harder. Barristers work fewer hours but there is more pressure. There is pressure from the client, the instructing solicitor and so on. As a judge, the worrying part is removed. I enjoy my work as a judge – most of the time. Indeed, I feel rather privileged to do it. Although I miss the collegiality of practice, I do not yearn for it.

If you still had your career ahead of you, would you do anything differently?

“ Birmingham gave me my start in law and a keenness for it, which was the most important thing. I am happy with what I have done and with what I now do. If I had my life again, I would want my family for sure and most probably the law too. Yet I remember the words of my late father: if you have another life, keep your family but otherwise for heaven's sake, try something different and new!

