

The Honourable Chief Justice Geoffrey Ma Tao-li, GBM

Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*

Citation

A work of art hangs on the wall of Chief Justice Geoffrey Ma's office in the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal. In elegant Chinese calligraphy, it reads, "Discipline yourself before disciplining others (律己律人)". Given to Chief Justice Ma by his mother on his becoming a judge in 2001, it captures the principles that have guided him during his twenty years serving the city's Judiciary, ten of which he has spent as chief justice: impartiality, rigour, and balance, always bearing in mind the strict requirements of the judicial oath.

Born in Hong Kong in 1956, as a child Justice Ma spent several years in the Philippines, where his father's job had taken the family. They then relocated to England, where he completed his secondary and university education. He came to a legal career through the liberal arts. "There were no lawyers in my family," he says, though his older brother, a medical student, suggested law as a potential profession to him. In secondary school Justice Ma was keen on history, and when not playing cricket or football he kept busy studying for A-levels in history, French, and German. It was good preparation for a legal career, training him to value the discipline of relevance and to consider situations from multiple perspectives. Justice Ma also credits his early experiences overseas with broadening his horizons and nurturing his capacity to formulate independent judgments. "There's no doubt that if you have the opportunity to study abroad, that opens your eyes" to different cultures and points of view. He attended law school at the University of Birmingham, graduating with a Bachelor of Laws degree in 1977, and after completing the bar exam and pupillage in London, he returned to Hong Kong in 1980.

Before joining the Hong Kong Judiciary, Justice Ma spent two decades in private practice in Hong Kong and Singapore, gaining experience in a wide range of civil-law fields, especially commercial and constitutional law. He became a Queen's Counsel in 1993.

On the bench, Justice Ma has been known as a steady advocate for the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. He explains that particularly in the area of public law, the courts often have to balance rights which can pull in different directions. Individual rights are to be seen against broader public-interest considerations, and the rights of minority groups have also to be respected.

When asked about the changes that have transformed Hong Kong during his decade as chief justice, Justice Ma notes that people are more interested in the law than they were previously, which has generated animated public discussion and debate. “That’s a good thing,” he says, adding that “we must, however, take the rough with the smooth.” The rough part, he explains, is that many people view the law as being wholly about upholding their point of view, particularly their political views, and are intolerant of any other perspective. He cautions against such politicised interpretations of the judicial process: The rule of law means that judges only apply the law and decide cases free from pressure by anyone including the government, and that every person is equal before the law. Justice Ma’s advice for Lingnan’s new graduates reflects the values that have shaped his own career: “Broaden your mind with an end in sight. Be fair. Respect the rights of others as well as standing up for your own rights. Cultivate tolerance.”

Justice Ma’s professional accomplishments are numerous. He holds honorary doctorates from the University of Birmingham (where he is an Honorary Chair and Professor in the Birmingham Law School); The Chinese University of Hong Kong; and The University of Hong Kong (where he has also been an Honorary Lecturer at the Faculty of Law for several decades and will be an Honorary Professor upon his retirement). In 2012 he became an Honorary Fellow of Harris Manchester College at Oxford. Also in 2012, he was awarded the Grand Bauhinia Medal, Hong Kong’s highest honour for public service. In 2015 he was named Officier de la Légion d’Honneur (Officer of the Legion of Honour) by the government of France for his commitment to preserving judicial independence. However, he considers his greatest professional achievement to have been “the honour of being Hong Kong’s chief justice — to have had the opportunity to serve the Hong Kong community.”

Mr Chairman, in recognition of his vital contributions to upholding the integrity of the judicial process in Hong Kong, his longstanding service to the local and international legal communities, and his commitment to furthering public education about the law, may I now present the Honourable Chief Justice Geoffrey Ma Tao-li for the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

Citation written and delivered by Professor Diana Lemberg