THE LAW SOCIETY
OF SINGAPORE

LAW GAZETTE

MASS CALL MAGAZINE 2026

Celebrating Our Bicentennial Year

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Chief Justice's Foreword

Sundaresh Menon
Chief Justice
Supreme Court of Singapore

The Bicentennial is an occasion not only for commemoration and celebration, but also for reflection. It invites us to look back with pride and gratitude on the efforts of our predecessors, who laid the foundations of the robust legal system we have today. But it also invites us to look ahead and ask what the rule of law will require of us in the years to come. We stand at a moment of profound technological change. Artificial intelligence, and in particular generative AI, is advancing at a pace that is remarkable but in many respects also unsettling. It is beginning to reshape the way legal work is done, the way legal knowledge is accessed, and perhaps, in time, it may even impact the way lawyers and judges reason. In doing so, it presents not only opportunities, but also some risks.

Those risks can potentially go to the heart of the rule of law.

The first concerns transparency. The rule of law depends not only on the production of legal answers, but on the giving of reasons that can be understood, scrutinised and evaluated. Yet one of the central difficulties with AI systems is that even their designers cannot always explain, in any meaningful sense, how a particular answer has been reached. The output may appear persuasive, but the path by which it was generated often remains obscure. If we do not know how a conclusion has been reached, our ability to test it, defend it, or accept it as legitimate would be correspondingly weakened.

The second risk concerns consistency and predictability. The rule of law requires that like cases be treated alike, and that legal rules operate with sufficient consistency to guide our conduct. But AI does not necessarily function in that way. A prompt framed slightly differently, or posed at a different time, may yield a different answer. That may be tolerable in some domains. It is far more troubling in law, where order, coherence and predictability are essential. Citizens must be able to organise their affairs on the basis that legal questions will be resolved in a principled and predictable way. A system that cannot do so, however sophisticated, sits uneasily with this foundational requirement of the rule of law.

The third risk is perhaps less obvious. It lies in the hollowing out of the junior ranks of the profession, and with that the weakening of the pipeline by which legal talent is formed. The rule of law depends not only on sound institutions and legal rules, but on lawyers and judges capable of understanding the law, reasoning with care, and exercising judgment. For generations, young lawyers have learnt their craft by undertaking the foundational work of legal practice: reading widely, researching carefully, checking authorities, and preparing drafts. But if AI increasingly takes over this work, and if it becomes uneconomic or unnecessary for junior lawyers to perform it, then a serious question arises: how will the next generation acquire the skills and instincts on which the profession, and ultimately the legal system and the rule of law, have traditionally depended?

None of this is to suggest that AI should be resisted. AI is already capable of remarkable feats. It can synthesise large bodies of information, improve access to knowledge, reduce the burden of repetitive work, and free lawyers and judges to focus on higher-order questions. Used wisely, AI has the very real potential to materially enhance the administration of justice. But precisely because its capabilities are so significant, the central challenge is not whether it should be used, but how.

That, to my mind, is where our focus should lie. If AI presents risks to transparency, consistency, and the nurturing of legal talent, our response must be to deepen our understanding of these systems and to build the capacity to work with them responsibly. Lawyers and judges will increasingly need to understand what AI can do, where its limitations lie, how its outputs should be critically evaluated, and how we can develop ways to work safely and productively with AI as our workplace team-mates.

At the same time, we must also ensure that we do not lose sight of the fundamentals of justice. In an age of increasingly powerful machines, the distinctly human qualities of the legal profession will become not less important, but more so: judgment, conscience, moral courage, and a deep appreciation of what is at stake for the human beings whose lives are shaped by the law.

Each generation is called upon to meet the challenges of its own time. Ours may well be called upon to ensure that, as AI comes to play a larger role in the administration of justice, it is harnessed in ways that strengthen rather than erode the rule of law. But this is not the first time that we have been called to respond to profound change. Over the past two centuries, we have shown, time and again, our capacity to adapt to new circumstances with clarity, steadiness and resolve. If we bring that same sense of purpose to the present moment, there is every reason to be confident that the rule of law will not only endure but be strengthened.

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Message from the President, The Law Society of Singapore

Professor Tan Cheng Han SC
President
The Law Society of Singapore

It is with much pride and happiness that in my first message as President in this Gazette, I have the pleasure of congratulating and welcoming to our fraternity the new members of the Law Society of Singapore who were admitted in the Mass Call ceremony of 2026. All of you have been admitted at a special time as this year also marks the 200th year since the Second Charter of Justice was issued on 27 November 1826. This charter established a common legal framework, introduced English law, and founded the Court of Judicature for the Straits Settlements. It marked the beginning of Singapore's modern legal system based on the rule of law.

Notwithstanding the objectives of the Second Charter, this did not preclude the English judges from occasionally giving effect to the customs of the other inhabitants where this did not undermine English law. Decades after its introduction, in an 1883 case between *Lim Guan Teet v. Yew Boh Neo*[1] on a promissory note, a consent order was recorded that if the plaintiff "goes to swear according to Chinese custom by cutting off head of a cock, and burning joss sticks before the temple in Pitt Street, he shall have verdict, if plaintiff refuses to do so, there will be verdict for defendants". The interpreter of the Court was directed to accompany the parties but apparently the agreement tumbled through because the priest of the temple declined to allow it!

More significantly, for reasons of culture, language and inadequate resourcing, the formal legal systems were largely inaccessible to much of the population in the decades after the Second Charter was introduced. Amongst the Chinese, for instance, the first person from the community to be called to the Singapore Bar was Song Ong Siang in 1893. Accordingly, for a considerable period of time, dialect associations helped maintain law and order within the Chinese community, including settling minor disputes.

The Singapore legal system has come a long way from those earlier days. Today, the rule of law in Singapore is strong and very much embedded in the DNA of the country. We have a world-class judiciary, a highly respected legal profession with many Singapore lawyers featuring prominently in annual international rankings of leading lawyers, and good law schools with NUS Law being ranked as one of the best law schools in the world since the inception of global rankings in 2010. As the Chief Justice has also reflected in his address at the Opening of the Legal Year this year, this strong foundation has been built through the collective efforts of the Bench, the Bar and the wider legal community. All of you are now part of this proud tradition that has evolved over the last 200 years and on your shoulders will also rest the continued development of our legal system. It is my hope that each of you will leave your imprint and contribute positively to Singapore's legal system.

To do so will require commitment and dedication to the legal profession. But this is not all. To fulfil your potential, humility and strength of character are also essential. A good lawyer must have the humility to know that we need to continue to learn. We need to be mindful to the prospect that we may be wrong so that we are open to alternative perspectives and views. Law is a complex social science and an overly dogmatic approach to it is unhelpful. In the course of your practice, you will often be confronted with difficult scenarios and choices and must have the strength of character to hold fast to the moral and ethical underpinnings of our profession and not be swayed by what expediency may apparently offer. If nothing else, holding fast to your principles, however tempting it may be to do otherwise, is the best guarantee of a fruitful career.

At the same time, I hope that for those of us previously called to the Bar, particularly the senior members of the profession, the Bicentennial will remind us that we have benefited from what previous generations have done and so we in turn ought to be mindful of how we can contribute to the development of our legal system. In the context of the Mass Call, I hope we can reflect on whether we can do more to mentor the new and younger members of our profession. Is there a danger that in the midst of the strain of managing a business, we are placing less emphasis on what it means to be a noble fraternity where younger members are nurtured and guided? Do we treat our younger colleagues in a manner that we would have liked to be treated when we were ourselves new to the practice of law?

To conclude, as we celebrate this Bicentennial year, we look forward to at least another 200 years of a vibrant and strong legal system in Singapore that continues to be underpinned by the rule of law. It is our responsibility now to do our part in this journey and this is a shared responsibility of all members working in collaboration with other stakeholders such as government and the judiciary. I am confident that with the strong foundation built over the last 200 years, we can look with great confidence to the future.

[1] Kyshe, *1808-1884*, vol 1, at xxxv.

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Milestones in Singapore's Legal History

Since the founding of Singapore, the legal system has evolved in line with the nation's historical developments. The Singapore courts have come a long way to what it is today, from adopting British laws in the colonial era, to having Japanese military law during the Second World War and to coming under Malaysian laws during the brief merger with Malaysia.

Below are the milestones in the history of the courts.

Supreme Court History

The Founding of Singapore and The First Charter of Justice

Modern Singapore was founded on 6 February 1819, when Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles signed a treaty of friendship and alliance with Sultan Hussein of Johor and Temenggong Abdu'r Rahman, the governor of a Malay settlement at the mouth of the river.

For proper administration of the island, Raffles declared a code of law known as the "Singapore Regulations". This put in place a basic legal system with a uniform law that applied to all inhabitants.

After Raffles left Singapore in 1823, Dr John Crawfurd from the East India Company took over the government of Singapore. Crawfurd replaced the Singapore Regulations with a Court of Requests for minor civil cases overseen by an assistant resident, and a Resident's Court for all other cases which he presided over.

The Second Charter of Justice

In 1825, the British Parliament passed Statute 6 Geo IV c 85, enabling the King to administer justice in the British colonies of Singapore and Malacca.

The Second Charter of Justice was issued on 27 November 1826. This Charter established the Court of Judicature of Penang, Singapore and Malacca. In criminal proceedings, the court was to administer criminal justice as the courts did in England, with due attention given to the religions and manners of the native inhabitants. In civil proceedings, the court was to give judgment and pass sentence according to justice and right.

The Governor and the Resident Councillor acted as two judges of the court. The third judge was the Recorder, who was based in Penang and had to travel the circuit to Malacca and Singapore.

The Third Charter of Justice

The Third Charter of Justice was granted on 12 August 1855 to cope with the increased judicial workload due to Singapore's rapid development.

Under this Charter, the Court of Judicature was re-organised into two divisions. The first division had jurisdiction over Singapore and Malacca and comprised the Recorder of Singapore, the Governor and the Resident Councillors of Singapore and Malacca. The second division had jurisdiction over Penang.

New developments in the judicial system (1867 - 1941)

Refer to the following for key legislation that further shaped Singapore's legal system during its colonial days:

- The Judicial Duties Act of 1867 changed Singapore's judicial system further.
    - The governor of the Straits Settlements ceased to be a judge of the Court of Judicature, although the resident councillors continued to preside over cases under their new title of lieutenant-governors.
    - This Act also renamed the "Recorder of Singapore" to the "Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements". Sir Peter Benson Maxwell, then-Recorder of Singapore, became the first Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements in 1867.
- The Supreme Court Ordinance 1868 abolished the Court of Judicature of Penang, Singapore and Malacca and replaced it with the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements.
- The Courts Ordinance of 1878 was passed in response to the United Kingdom Judicature Acts of 1873-75, which modified the court structure in England.
    - One division of the court sat in Singapore and Malacca, whilst another sat in Penang.
    - The Ordinance also conferred on the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements the jurisdiction to sit as a Court of Appeal, with final appeals lying to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England. Previously, appeals had lain only to the King-in-Council.
- The Courts Ordinance of 1873 reconstituted the court, so that it now comprised the Chief Justice, the Judge of Penang, a Senior and a Junior Puisne Judge.
    - Under the Ordinance, the jurisdiction for the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements was aligned with the new English High Court.
- The Courts Ordinance of 1907 allowed Judicial Commissioners of the Federated Malay States to be appointed from time to time to perform the duties of a judge in the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements.

- The Court of Criminal Appeal Ordinance of 1934 established a Court of Criminal Appeal. Previously, the Court of Appeal only heard appeals for civil cases.

The Japanese Occupation during the Second World War

The courts ceased to function when the Japanese invaded Singapore in 1942. The Japanese established a Military Court of Justice to administer military law.

In a Proclamation dated 27 May 1942, the courts were re-opened. They were allowed to follow the former system of laws as long as they did not interfere with the military administration.

The Syonan Supreme Court or "Syonan Koto-Hoin" opened on 29 May 1942. A court of appeal was also created, but it never sat.

Developments during the post-war years leading to independence

Following the surrender of the Japanese on 12 September 1945, the British military temporarily administered Singapore. They declared that all Japanese proclamations and decrees ceased to have effect, and that all laws and customs existing immediately prior to the Japanese occupation will be respected.

The British military administration ended on 31 March 1946. The Straits Settlements were also disbanded and Singapore was made a separate Crown Colony on 1 April 1946. The Singapore Colony Order in Council established the Supreme Court, consisting of a High Court and a Court of Appeal. The Court of Criminal Appeal continued to function. Final appeals lay to the judicial committee of the Privy Council.

On 2 May 1955, Mr Tan Ah Tah became the first local to be appointed a judge of the Supreme Court. Mr Frederick Arthur Chua and Mr Wee Chong Jin were subsequently appointed on 15 February 1957 and 15 August 1957 respectively. Mr Wee Chong Jin was the first local member of the Singapore Bar to be appointed to the Supreme Court Bench. Mr Tan Ah Tah and Mr Frederick Arthur Chua were both from the Colonial Legal Service.

On 5 January 1963, Mr Wee Chong Jin became the first Asian to be appointed the Chief Justice of the State of Singapore. His appointment marked a break in the long-standing tradition of appointing British Chief Justices for Singapore, the last of whom was Sir Alan Rose.

Singapore's judicial system was altered once again following her merger with Malaysia on 16 September 1963. The Federation of Malaya Act came into force, establishing the Federal Court of Malaysia and the structure of the Malaysian judicial system. The Malaysian Courts of Judicature Act 1964 repealed the provisions relating to the Singapore Supreme Court in Singapore's Courts Ordinance and also the whole of the Singapore's Court of Criminal Appeal Ordinance.

The High Court of Malaysia replaced the Supreme Court of the Colony of Singapore, while the Court of Appeal was assimilated into the Federal Court. The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council continued to be the final appellate court.

Post-independence developments

Although Singapore became independent on 9 August 1965, the ties between the judicial systems of Singapore and Malaysia were not severed until 1969. The Supreme Court of Judicature Act 1969 re-established the Supreme Court of Singapore, comprising the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Court of Criminal Appeal.

Jury trials were abolished in 1969, by an amendment to the Criminal Procedure Code which provided for trials of capital offences to be heard by two judges. This arrangement continued until 18 April 1992, when the Criminal Procedure Code was amended to allow for trials of capital offences to be heard before a single judge.

The next milestone for Singapore's judicial system was the introduction of Judicial Commissioners to the Supreme Court Bench. Mr Chan Sek Keong, became the first Judicial Commissioner on 1 July 1986. A Judicial Commissioner is appointed for specific periods of time and may exercise the powers and perform the functions of a judge. In this capacity, he enjoys the same immunities as a judge.

On 28 September 1990, Mr Wee Chong Jin retired as Chief Justice, and Mr Yong Pung How succeeded him.

The first female to be appointed to the Supreme Court Bench was Ms Lai Siu Chiu, who was appointed a Judicial Commissioner on 2 May 1991. Thereafter, Ms Judith Prakash was appointed a Judicial Commissioner on 1 April 1992. They were appointed Judges of the High Court on 2 May 1994 and 1 April 1995 respectively.

In 1993, the existing appellate court, which comprised the Court of Appeal and the Court of Criminal Appeal, was reconstituted into a single Court of Appeal for both civil and criminal appeals. The present Court of Appeal normally comprises the Chief Justice and the Judges of Appeal, who rank above the High Court judges. A judge of the High Court may also, on the request of the Chief Justice, sit as a judge of the Court of Appeal.

The first Judges of Appeal appointed were Justice M Karthigesu and Justice L P Thean, both of whom were appointed on 1 July 1993.

State Courts History

Enactment of Subordinate Courts Act 1970

The Subordinate Courts Act 1970 designated the District Courts, Magistrates' Courts, Juvenile Courts and Coroners' Courts as subordinate courts. Mr Abdul Wahab Ghows, who was then leading these courts as the district judge and first magistrate, became the first senior district judge.

In 1973, construction began for a new courthouse to consolidate the District Courts, Magistrates' Courts, Juvenile Courts and Coroners' Courts which were then located in different parts of Singapore. On 15 September 1975, the Subordinate Courts Building opened its doors at 1 Havelock Square to provide the public with one-stop access to justice.

Key developments in the State Courts

Refer to the following for key developments that further shaped the State Courts:

- The Subordinate Courts Act 1970 required all district judges and magistrates to be legally qualified persons:
    - A district judge must be a qualified person for at least 5 years and a magistrate must be a qualified person for at least 1 year.
    - In 2014, the requirements were raised. A district judge must be a qualified person for at least 7 years and a magistrate must be a qualified person for at least 3 years.
- Under the Subordinate Courts Act 1970, the Magistrates' Courts, which used to have jurisdiction over criminal matters only, could hear civil matters. Over the years, the jurisdiction of the District and Magistrates' Courts have also gradually increased.
    - While the Magistrates' Courts could hear claims below $1,000 under the Subordinate Courts Act 1970, they can now hear claims of up to $60,000. The District Courts, which had jurisdiction for claims up to $5,000 under the Subordinate Courts Act 1970, can now hear claims of up to $250,000 or up to $500,000 in the case of road traffic accident claims or claims for personal injuries arising out of industrial accidents.
- To provide quicker, cheaper and more informal processes to resolve low-value claims and relational disputes, the State Courts established specialist tribunals for different types of disputes such as the Small Claims Tribunals in 1985, Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals in 2015, and Employment Claims Tribunals in 2017.
- The Court Mediation Centre was set up in 1995 to provide court-annexed dispute resolution (CDR) services to parties with civil matters. Over the years, CDR has become an integral part of the State Courts' case management strategy. In 2015, the Centre for Dispute Resolution was established as a division of the State Courts to facilitate the efficient resolution of civil, community and relational disputes.

Renaming of Subordinate Courts to State Courts

On 7 March 2014, the Subordinate Courts were renamed as the State Courts. The name, which combines dignity with gravitas, recognises the key role that these courts play within the community as the primary dispensers of justice.

In addition to the renaming to State Courts, the apex post in the State Courts was redesignated as "Presiding Judge of the State Courts". This was to reflect the critical role of the presiding judge who has overall responsibility for the leadership and management of the State Courts and is also a judge or judicial commissioner of the Supreme Court.

Relocation to the new State Courts Towers

With the increased demand for legal services by the community, the State Courts Building was assessed to be unable to support the needs of the State Courts over the next 50 years. On 28 May 2014, construction began for a new 35-storey courthouse which was to be situated beside the old building. Meanwhile, the iconic octagonal building was gazetted for conservation in 2013.

On 13 December 2019, the State Courts Building closed its doors and the State Courts commenced full operations in the new State Courts Towers on 16 December 2019. The State Courts Towers is fitted with 53 courtrooms and 54 hearing chambers.

Learn more about the history of the State Courts and the former and current State Courts buildings through the commemorative publication One Havelock Square.

Family Justice Courts History

Origins of the Family Courts

On 1 March 1995, the Family Courts were established under the structure of what was then known as the Subordinate Courts, to hear maintenance and family protection matters under the Women's Charter. The courts, presided by district judges, were then located at the Paterson Complex at 25-H Paterson Road. On 1 April 1996, proceedings relating to divorce, nullity, separation and guardianship were transferred from the High Court to the Family Courts.

In 1999, works began to retrofit and convert the former Ministry of Labour building at 3 Havelock Square to house the new Family Courts. The new building was designed to include purpose-built courtrooms and hearing chambers fitted with the latest technology then, including electronic retrieval and filing, video conferencing facilities and integrated security systems. It also had counselling and mediation rooms, with segregated and protected waiting areas for victims and witnesses. There was also a childcare centre and facilities for teenagers.

The Family Courts' last day at Paterson Road was on 28 September 2001. It reopened its doors at the new Family Courts building on 1 October 2001. On 11 January 2002, the new building named Family and Juvenile Court Building was officially opened. To commemorate the occasion, a time capsule was buried in the building.

In September 2011, the Child Focused Resolution Centre (CFRC) was set up to conduct mandatory counselling and mediation for divorcing parents with at least one child. The CFRC operated at Central Mall, 1 Magazine Road.

Co-location of Family Courts and Juvenile Court

The then-Juvenile Court also operated at the Paterson Complex while a new courtroom and additional facilities were being constructed in the Subordinate Courts Complex at 1 Havelock Square. The Juvenile Court moved back to Havelock Square on 1 April 1999 with a bigger courtroom, a larger holding area for remand and a family conferencing room. The court subsequently relocated to the current building at 3 Havelock Square in September 2001.

The refurbished building at 3 Havelock Square was subsequently named the Family and Juvenile Court Building. Having the 2 courts under one roof was part of the Subordinate Courts' plan to have a unified family and juvenile court system given that a family may be involved in multiple proceedings in both the Family Court and the Juvenile Court simultaneously.

Establishment of the Family Justice Courts

In 2014, the Family Courts was restructured to exist as a separate judicial body known as the Family Justice Courts under Family Justice Act. Established on 1 October 2014, the Family Justice Courts comprise the Family Division of the High Court, the Family Courts and the Youth Courts (formerly the Juvenile Court). The apex post in the Family Justice Courts is the Presiding Judge of the Family Justice Courts who is either a Supreme Court Judge or Judicial Commissioner.

In 2015, the Family Justice Courts relocated the CFRC and some of its services and registries to a new facility at the Ministry of National Development Complex at 5 Maxwell Road to better serve the community and to consolidate mediation and counselling services for divorce-related matters. The new facility includes hearing chambers and courtrooms.

In November 2017, an inter-agency committee, the Committee to Review and Enhance Reforms in the Family Justice System (the RERF Committee) was formed. It built on the work of the Committee for Family Justice, which culminated in the establishment of the Family Justice Courts.

The RERF Committee was co-chaired by the then Presiding Judge of the Family Justice Courts, Justice Debbie Ong, and the Permanent Secretaries for the Ministry of Law and the Ministry of Social and Family Development and made recommendations that aimed to further strengthen the family justice system. This included incorporating principles of therapeutic justice in the resolution of family disputes and promoting the use of multi-disciplinary approaches and processes.

Judiciary Bicentennial Calendar of Events

To commemorate 200 years of upholding the Rule of Law, the Judiciary has lined up a series of flagship events and exhibitions held throughout 2026 to mark this historic milestone.

Bicentennial Exhibition - The Charter and the Courts: 200 Years of the Rule of Law in Singapore

Curated by the Singapore Academy of Law (SAL) at the Supreme Court, this year long exhibition traces Singapore's legal evolution and the courts' role in upholding the Rule of Law.

Admission: Open to public (Free entry)
Exhibition Period: 12 January to 31 December 2026
Location: Level 2, Supreme Court, 1 Supreme Court Lane, Singapore 178879
Opening Hours:
Monday to Thursday: 8.30am to 5.30pm (Last entry at 5.30pm)
Friday: 8:30am to 5.00pm (Last entry at 5.00pm)
Saturday: 8.30am to 1.00pm (Last entry at 12.30pm)

Bicentennial Celebration Week (November 2026)

Global Rule of Law Conference - Fortifying the Rule of Law in an Age of Transformation

Date: 24 - 26 November
Venue: Shangri-La Hotel *[Open to public, registration fees apply]*

The conference convenes judicial leaders, policymakers, legal practitioners, and scholars to examine the role that the Rule of Law plays in facilitating international cooperation and development, supporting economic growth, shaping societies and sustaining social cohesion while confronting the challenges posed by a shifting global landscape.

Gala Dinner and Publication Launch

Date: 26 November
Venue: Shangri-La Hotel *[By invitation only]*

The Bicentennial Gala Dinner will feature the launch of the commemorative publication, "The Singapore Judiciary - A Bicentennial History," co-edited by Senior Judge Andrew Phang and Deputy Attorney-General Goh Yihan SC.

Bicentennial Sitting

Date: 27 November
Venue: Supreme Court *[By invitation only]*

A historic sitting of the Court commemorating the Bicentennial of the Second Charter of Justice. The Supreme Court bench will be joined by local and international representatives of the legal community and foreign judicial leaders to observe this significant anniversary in Singapore's legal history.

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The Second Charter: The Making & Unmaking of a Template for Justice

Introduction

Since the beginning of this year, Singapore's legal fraternity has been celebrating the Bicentennial of the Second Charter of Justice, dated 27 November 1826. While the Second Charter is perhaps the most important milestone in the establishment of Singapore's modern legal system, we should avoid the temptation to view its promulgation and arrival as a singular 'big bang' moment in our legal evolution. It was, after all, the 'Second' Charter, the first having been issued for Penang in 1807. Even though the Charter is a rather long document, running into some 62 printed pages,[1] we remember it for two main things: its establishment of the first court in Singapore and the introduction of English law to Singapore. In this brief article, I would like to consider two little-known facets of the Charter. The first is its origins, form and template; and the second is how it came to be superseded by other legislation by 1868.

Origins: From Bengal to the Straits

The 'template' for the first two Charters of Justice in the Straits Settlements may be traced to British India. The template grew out of the struggle between the East India Company's (EIC's) need for administrative control and the British Parliament's desire for independent judicial oversight. By 1765, the EIC (established in 1600) had morphed from a trading company into a massive corporation exercising sovereign powers. The EIC had grown so powerful and financially precarious that the British Parliament felt compelled to intervene in its affairs. This was done by the British Parliament passing the Regulating Act of 1773,[2] which imposed the first formal legal framework over the Company's vast territorial acquisitions. Through this legislation, Parliament sought to check the unbridled 'despotism' of the EIC's officials by installing a professional judiciary, independent of the Company's payroll and directly answerable to the King.

To operationalise this, Parliament used a form of Letters Patent called the Royal Charter. Letters Patent are open legal instruments by which the Crown legislates to confer a public right, office, monopoly, or title. When such Letters Patent serve the specific purpose of incorporating a body politic or establishing a formal system of governance—such as a court or a colony—they are historically referred to as a 'Charter'.[3] The first Royal Charter establishing a professional judiciary was promulgated in 1774. Under this Charter, a Supreme Court consisting of a Chief Justice and three puisne judges – all qualified barristers appointed and knighted by the King –was established in the Presidency of Bengal.[4]

In 1786, the EIC acquired Penang (Prince of Wales' Island) from the Sultan of Kedah. While the island was initially largely uninhabited, it quickly attracted a diverse population of Europeans, Chinese, Malays, and Indians. The EIC soon realised that it had insufficient authority under its extant charters to maintain order, protect property, or repress crime in a growing settlement.[5] However, it was exceedingly difficult to procure a charter of justice for the settlement as its administrators and rulers in Calcutta considered Penang insignificant and unimportant. From 1786 to 1800, Penang was governed by a series of Superintendents, after which Calcutta appointed George Leith as Lieutenant-Governor of the island. In the same year that Leith was appointed, the Governor-in-Council in Calcutta also appointed John Dickens, an English Barrister, as 'Judge and Magistrate of Prince of Wales' Island'.[6]

Dickens, who arrived in 1801, was appointed under the EIC's general governing powers rather than by Charter, leaving him on a tenuous legal footing since his authority, and that of his court and its jurisdiction, was not properly defined. Furthermore, there was no 'code of civil municipal law… enacted by due and competent authority as the law' of the island 'for the government of the Judge and Magistrate in pronouncing a judicial opinion in this cause.'[7]

By 1805, Penang had grown to such an extent that the EIC decided it was time for Penang to cease being a dependency of Bengal and become a separate Presidency. Concomitant with this upgrade in status, it was felt that a proper judicial establishment be instituted for the new presidency. The EIC's Court of Directors accordingly petitioned the Crown for a 'Charter for the administration of justice' on the island.[8] The First Charter – Letters Patent Establishing the Supreme Court of Judicature at Prince of Wales' Island in the East-Indies – was accordingly promulgated on 25 March 1807. However, it only arrived in Penang in 1808, and the Court of Judicature sat for the first time in Fort Cornwallis on 31 May 1808.

By 1824, following the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty (the Treaty of London), the Penang Presidency had acquired two more settlements. Malacca was transferred from the Dutch to the British under the Treaty of London, and the EIC immediately purchased Singapore outright from Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman. In 1826, the three territories were organised as the Straits Settlements, which lasted until 1946. Quite obviously, the First Charter, which had been crafted for Penang, was territorially constrained and could not apply to the two new territories. A new Charter was necessary. I have discussed the great legal uncertainty leading up to the grant of this Charter in 1826 elsewhere[9] and will thus focus on its effects and evolution.

The Template

For our purposes, I shall focus on clauses used to establish what I consider to be the four main pillars of the English Charters of Justice. The first pillar is the establishment of the court itself and its composition. Second, we have the jurisdictional clause setting out the ambit of the court's competence; and third, the 'applicable law' clause which instructs the court on the law to be applied in cases brought before the court; and finally, the clause on who might be admitted to have the right of audience in the court. Let us now examine and consider the wording of the Bengal Charter of 1774[10] and compare it with that used in subsequent Charters. I will argue that while the words used in the different Charters differ over time, the 1774 Royal Charter nevertheless served as the base template for subsequent charters of justice – including the Second Charter.

Establishment and Composition of the Court

The Bengal Charter established 'within the Factory of Fort-William at Calcutta, in Bengal, a Court of Record which shall be called The Supreme Court of Judicature, at Fort-William in Bengal'[11] as a Court of Record. The Court would 'be holden by and before One principal Judge, who shall be, and be called, the Chief Justice … and Three other Judges, who shall be, and be called, the Puisne Justices' all of whom 'shall be Barristers in England, or Ireland, of not less than Five Years standing.'[12]

This phrasal formula is also used to establish the Court of Judicature at Penang in 1807: 'That there shall be within the Factory of Prince of Wales' Island, and the places now, or any any Time to be subordinate or annexed thereto, a Court of Record, which shall be called *The Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales's Island'* which would be constituted as a Court of Record.[13] A professional Recorder, being 'a Barrister in England or Ireland, of not less than Five Years standing' was also appointed for the Court.[14]

However, the Penang court was not constituted as a fully professional tribunal but a hybridised court, fusing Royal Justice – embodied in the Crown-appointed Recorder – with Company Justice, embodied in the EIC's Governor and Councillors sitting *ex officio* as lay judges. The Charter further provides that the Governor or any of the Councillors could hold court and any of the Councillors could hold court and exercise judicial power, even without the presence of the Recorder.[15] Even within the Court, the Recorder ranked below the Governor but above the Councillors,[16] even though in a hearing where the Recorder is present, the Recorder gets to vote or render his opinion first.[17] In any case, the Charter mandated that if the Recorder was resident in the Factory, 'no Court shall be holden, and … no Act shall be done by the said Court' without his presence 'unless the Governor or President of the said Factory … shall authorise the Court to sit and act in the Absence of the Recorder'.[18]

The Second Charter sticks closely to this semantic formula. It established 'within the Settlement of the Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca … a Court of Record, which shall be called *The Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore, and Malacca.*'[19] And, as in the First Charter, the composition of the Court was a hybrid mix of Royal and Company Justice. The Court would 'consist of, and be holden before the Governor or President and the Resident Counsellor … of the Station where the Court shall be held, as two of the Judges of the said Court, and before one other Judge, who shall be called 'the Recorder of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca', and which Recorder shall be a Barrister in England or Ireland of no less than Five Years' Standing'.[20]

Because the Straits Settlements was territorially divided, the arrangements for court hearings and precedence were necessarily more complex. As in the First Charter, the Governor and Resident Councillors (one each in Penang, Malacca and Singapore) were recognised as judges in their own right even though the Recorder (if present) would continue to rank higher than the Councillors but on par with the Governor.[21] The Court of Judicature could thus be convene and hear cases so long as any of the judges – whether Governor, Resident Councillor or Recorder or any combination of them – were present and sitting.[22]

The requirement that the Recorder be present in Court if he was residing in that particular Factory was repeated in the Second Charter.[23] In the case of the First Charter, this practically meant that the Recorder – being resident in Penang – would necessarily have to attend every session of the court except in the exceptional instance as authorized by the Governor. However, the retention of this clause could not guarantee the presence of the Recorder either in Singapore or Malacca since the compulsion applied only at the Recorder's place of residence which remained solely in Penang until 1855. This was when the Third Charter split the Court of Judicature into two divisions – one in Penang, and the other in Singapore (covering Malacca) with two professional judges – the Recorder of Singapore and the Recorder of the Prince of Wales' Island.[24]

The Court's Jurisdiction

Under the different Charters, the Court's jurisdiction is typically defined only with reference to existing courts in England, which evolved piecemeal from the King's household and revenue machinery over several centuries. The Court of King's Bench grew out of the peripatetic *curia regis* and later took on supervisory, criminal and much general business; Common Pleas crystallised as a stationary court for civil suits between private persons; Exchequer developed as the King's revenue court; and Chancery emerged as a separate equity jurisdiction responding to the rigidity of the common law. On the criminal side, commissions of Oyer and Terminer and of general Gaol Delivery gave judges distinct, named powers to 'hear and determine' serious offences and to clear the prisons. And of course, the High Court of the Admiralty had emerged as a distinct forum to deal with foreign merchants and sailors.

Because these jurisdictions had grown organically and separately and were well understood by the eighteenth century, it was far more logical – when drafting a colonial charter – to define a new court's reach by reference to them than to attempt a fresh, exhaustive catalogue of powers from first principles. The Bengal Charter of 1774, which is organised by subject, sets out the Court's jurisdiction by reference to the various English courts, with clauses scattered throughout the document. It would have general jurisdiction as that of the Court of the King's Bench;[25] to exercise Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction,[26] to be a Court of Equity,[27] to be a Court of Oyer and Terminer and Gaol Delivery,[28] and to be a Court of Admiralty.[29]

The First Charter 1807 correspondingly grants the Court of Judicature similarly wide jurisdictional powers but using a different formula. Instead of separately listing the Court's jurisdiction under different subject heads, the First Charter collapses the grant of jurisdictional powers in a single clause:

> And it is Our further Will and Pleasure, That the said Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales' Island … to have such Jurisdiction and Authority as Our Court of King's Bench, and Our Justices thereof, and also as Our High Court of Chancery, and Our Courts of Common Pleas and Exchequer, respectively, and the several Judges, Justices, and Barons thereof, respectively, have and may lawfully exercise, within that Part of Our United Kingdom called England, in all civil and criminal Actions and Suits, and in Matters concerning the Revenue, and in the Control of all inferior Courts and Jurisdictions, as far as Circumstances will admit.[30]

It will be noted that this jurisdictional clause includes the jurisdiction of the Court of Exchequer, which was absent in the Bengal Charter of 1774. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction,[31] Oyer and Terminer and Gaol Delivery[32] were granted through separate clauses[33] in the Charter. The Second Charter of 1826 follows a similar formulation: King's Bench, Chancery, Common Pleas, Exchequer and Ecclesiastical jurisdictions in one clause, and Oyer and Terminer and Gaol Delivery in another.[34]

A significant omission in jurisdictions when compared with the Bengal Charter is that of the Admiralty Courts. This extremely important and highly lucrative jurisdiction was most probably deliberately omitted from the Straits by both the First and Second Charters to protect existing vice-admiralty revenues and institutional interests in India. This deliberate, as opposed to negligent omission may be surmised from the fact that the legislation that empowered the Crown to constitute the Court of Judicature,[35] and the EIC's petition for the grant of the Charter dated 29 May 1826[36] both specifically sought the grant of Admiralty jurisdiction in the Straits. This omission was only rectified in 1837[37] when the practical problems caused by the lack of Admiralty jurisdiction reached a critical point.

The Applicable Law

Beyond setting up a Court, the various Charters also stipulate the law that the Court may apply when resolving cases and disputes. The Bengal Charter required the Court to apply English common law in general civil and criminal cases.[38] A more qualified approach to the application of English law was made in Equity ('as nearly as may, according to the Rules and Proceedings of Our High Court of Chancery')[39] and in the exercise of Admiralty jurisdiction ('according to the Course of Our Admiralty … in England, without the strict Formalities of Law, considering only the Truth of the Fact, and the Equity of the Case')[40] and Ecclesiastical Law (the same as that 'exercised in the Diocese of London … so far as the Circumstances and Occasions of the Provinces and People shall admit or require.')[41]

By the time of the First Charter, the application of law clauses was somewhat more qualified, with greater attention paid to the subsisting customs and usages of the local inhabitants. In the case of general civil and criminal law, the court was enjoined to apply English law 'as far as Circumstances will admit'.[42] Insofar as its Ecclesiastical jurisdiction was concerned, the Court of Judicature in Penang was to apply the law 'so far as the several Religions, Manner and Customs of the Inhabitants of the said Factory and Places will admit.'[43] Insofar as punishments for crime were concerned, the Court was empowered 'such Punishment … [which] shall not extend to Life or Limb, or perpetual Imprisonment or Banishment, or Transportation from the said Factory or Places aforesaid, and so as such Punishment shall not be repugnant to the Religions, Customs, or Manners of the Persons on whom it is to be inflected.'[44]

The formulaic phrases for applicable law in the First Charter were largely repeated in the Second Charter save for two differences. First, in addition to the general application of English law in civil and criminal matters 'as far as Circumstances will admit', the Court was also enjoined to 'give and pass Judgment and Sentence according to Justice and Right'[45] and to administer criminal justice with 'due Attention being had to the several Religions, Manners and Usages of the native inhabitants.'[46]

Regulating Lawyers

The final key pillar of the various Charters of Justices deals with the admission and control of persons qualified or approved to appear before the courts. The Bengal Charter authorises and empowers the Court:

> … to approve, admit, and enrol such and so many Advocates, and Attornies at Law, as to the said Supreme Court of Judicature… shall seem meet [sic], who shall be Attornies of Record, and shall be, and are hereby authorized to appear and plead, and act for the Suitors of the said Supreme Court of Judicature…; and the said Advocates and Attornies, on reasonable Cause, to remove; and no other Person or Persons whatsoever, but such Advocates or Attornies, so admitted and enrolled, shall be allowed to appear and plead, or act in the said Supreme Court… for or on the behalf of such Suitors, or any of them.[47]

The First Charter adopted a slightly different approach. It provided that 'no Person or Persons shall be permitted to appear or act as the Advocate, Solicitor, Attorney, Proctor, or Agent, or to plead, verbally or in Writing, for any Suitor or Suitors in the said Court … unless such Person or Persons shall have been previously permitted or licensed by the said Court to act as an Agent or Agents for the Suitors of the said Court generally, or specially for the particular Occasion or Occasions.'[48] The Court was further authorised and empowered 'at its pleasure, either assigning a Reason, or without assigning any Reason whatever, to withdraw or vacate any Permission or Licence which shall, at any Time, be granted to any Person or Persons to act, generally or specially, as the Agent or Agents of any Suitors, or particular Suitor, of the said Court.'[49] The same regulatory clause appears, almost verbatim, in the Second Charter.[50]

The End of the Charter

The Second Charter of Justice, augmented by the Third Charter of Justice in 1855 remained the constitutive instrument for the judicial establishment in the Straits Settlements right up till 1868. On 1 April 1867, the Straits Settlements became a Crown Colony in its own right and ceased being a part of the Bengal Presidency. With this constitutional change, the Straits Settlements acquired legislative powers of its own through a Governor-appointed Legislative Council. This major constitutional change led to the ultimate demise of the Second Charter of Justice. There was, however, no imperial legislation that abolished or repealed either the Second or Third Charters of Justice specifically. The Charters were simply rendered redundant and inapplicable over time as new laws were passed on the same subject matters governed by the Charters.

In 1868, the Legislative Council passed the Supreme Court Ordinance[51] to constitute the Supreme Court of Judicature. Significantly, section 1 of this Ordinance provided:

> 1 The Court of Judicature of the Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca, established under Royal Letters Patent is hereby abolished, and the said Royal Letters Patent shall cease to have any operation in the Colony from and after the coming into operation of this Ordinance.

A plain reading of this section seems to make it clear that not only was the old Court of Judicature abolished, the Second Charter of Justice that established it also ceased to operate in the Straits Settlements. The new Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements was established as a Court of Record[52] and consisted of three Divisions – one each in Singapore, Penang and Malacca.[53] This Ordinance did not, however, deal with the subject of applicable law.

Under the Third Charter of 1855, the old Court of Judicature comprised two judges – the Chief Justice stationed in Singapore and also covering Malacca, and the Judge of Penang[54] – as well as the Governor and Resident Councillors of the three Settlements. However, with the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office in 1867, the post of Resident Councillor had been abolished. In the same year, the new Straits Settlements Legislative Council passed the Judicial Duties Ordinance to remove the Governor as judge of the Court of Judicature,[55] ending any executive role in the judiciary. The structure and composition of the Court were further refined in 1873, when a Court of Appeal was constituted as an intermediate appellate court[56] and more judges – a Senior Puisne Judge and a Junior Puisne Judge – were added.[57]

Following roughly the template of the Second Charter, the new Supreme Court was conferred 'such jurisdiction and authority as the Court of Queen's Bench … and also the Court of Chancery and the Courts of Common Pleas and Exchequer.' However, the new Court is to 'have and exercise the jurisdiction vested, under the Letters Patent of the 10th of August 1855, in the Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca in Matrimonial cases so far as the several religions, manners and customs of the Inhabitants of the Colony will admit.'[58] For criminal cases, the Court was constituted as a Court of Oyer and Terminer and Gaol Delivery, Assize and Nisi Prius and to exercise the same jurisdiction and authority of the same courts in England.[59]

Finally section 40 of the 1868 Ordinance empowered the Court to 'admit and enrol such and so many persons as have been admitted Barristers-at-Law or Advocates in Great Britain or Ireland, or have been admitted Attornies, Solicitors or Writers, in one of the Superior Courts as Westminster, Dublin, or Edinburgh, or have been admitted as Proctors in any Ecclesiastical Court in England'. The Court could also, 'upon examination' and 'approved of as competent to act as Advocates or Attornies', 'any persons of good repute not previously admitted'. The Court could remove any person so admitted 'upon reasonable cause'.

The Courts Ordinance of 1868 repealed the Second of Charter Justice and supplanted the Charter in three of its four pillars – (a) structure and composition of the court; (b) jurisdiction of the court; and (c) control over the admission of persons entitled to plead before the court. The fourth pillar – on the applicable law – was not explicitly dealt with in the 1868 Courts Ordinance nor by its replacement, the 1873 Courts Ordinance.[60] It was not till the passage of the Civil Law Ordinance in 1878,[61] that explicit provision stipulating that the Supreme Court shall administer 'Law and Equity' in 'every civil cause or matter, commenced' in the Court in accordance with the rules set out in the Ordinance.[62]

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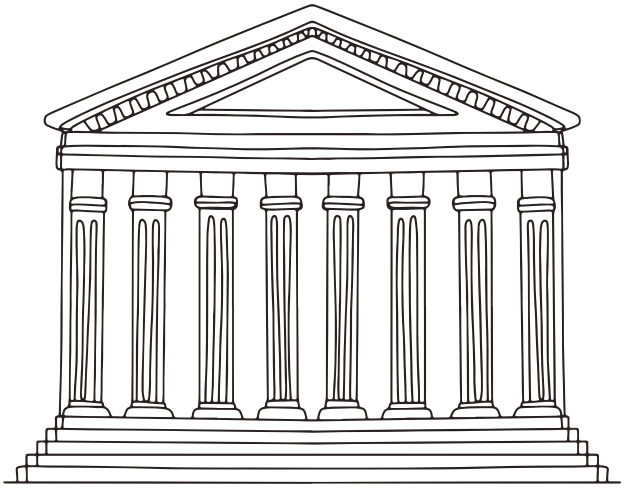

[1] The page count is based on Letters Patent, Establishing the Court of Judicature at the Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore, and Malacca in the East-Indies (Malacca: Mission Press, 1827).
[2] 13 Geo III, c 63.
[3] Readers will note that the word 'Charter' appears nowhere in the actual instrument itself, so the Second Charter of Justice is properly entitled Letters Patent Establishing the Court of Judicature of the Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca.
[4] Letters Patent Establishing a Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort-William in Bengal (London, 1774).
[5] See generally, JW Norton Kyshe, 'A Judicial History of the Straits Settlements: 1786–1890' (1969) 11(1) Malaya Law Review 38–179, at 38–76.
[6] *Ibid*, at 45.
[7] *Ibid*, at 53.
[8] *Ibid*, at 70.
[9] See Kevin YL Tan, 'Establishing Order … and Law in Singapore: Part I' Law Gazette Jan 2023, available at https://lawgazette.com.sg/feature/establishing-order-and-law-in-singapore/ (accessed 1 Feb 2026); and, 'Establishing Order … and Law in Singapore: Part 2' Law Gazette, February 2023, available at https://lawgazette.com.sg/feature/establishing-order-and-law-in-singapore-2/ (accessed 1 Feb 2026).
[10] Letters Patent Establishing a Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort-William in Bengal (London, s.n. 1774) [hereinafter 'Bengal Charter 1774'].
[11] *Ibid*, at 3.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] Letters Patent Establishing the Court of Judicature for the Prince of Wales' Island in the East Indies (London: E Cox & Son, Apr 1807) at 4 [hereinafter 'First Charter'].
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] *Ibid*, at 6.
[16] *Ibid*.
[17] *Ibid*, at 7.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] Letters Patent Establishing the Court of Judicature for the Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca in the East Indies (Malacca: Mission Press, 1827) at 9 [hereinafter 'Second Charter'].
[20] *Ibid*, at 10.
[21] *Ibid*, at 11–12.
[22] *Ibid*, at 12.

[22] *Ibid*, at 12.
[23] *Ibid*, at 13.
[24] Letters Patent Reconstituting the Court of Judicature of Princes of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca in the East Indies in John Augustus Harwood (ed), The Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements from the 1st April 1867 to the 1st June 1886 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1886) 1–34, at 3–4.
[25] Bengal Charter 1774 (n 10) at 4. The Charter does not explicitly refer to the jurisdiction of the Court of the King's Bench but instead gives the Supreme Court of Judicature 'Power and Jurisdiction … to hear, examine and determine … All Actions and Suits, which shall or may arise, happen, be brought or promoted …'.
[26] *Ibid*, at 25.
[27] *Ibid*, at 21.
[28] *Ibid*, at 22.
[29] *Ibid*, at 29.
[30] First Charter (n 13) at 15–16.
[31] *Ibid*, at 17.
[32] *Ibid*, at 37.
[33] Second Charter (n 19) at 21.
[34] *Ibid*, at 42.
[35] 6 Geo IV c 85, s 19.
[36] On file with the author.
[37] See 6 & & Will IV c 53 and Letters Patent conferring Admiralty Jurisdiction on the Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca, 2 Oct 1837.
[38] Bengal Charter 1774 (n 10) at 4.
[39] *Ibid*, at 21.
[40] *Ibid*, at 30.
[41] *Ibid*, at 25.
[42] First Charter (n 13) at 16.
[43] *Ibid*.
[44] *Ibid*, at 42.
[45] Second Charter (n 19) at 31.
[46] *Ibid*, at 43.
[47] Bengal Charter 1774 (n 10) at 8.
[48] First Charter (n 13) at 27.
[49] *Ibid*.
[50] Second Charter (n 19) at 32.
[51] Ordinance V of 1868. For the text of this Ordinance, see Straits Settlements Government Gazette, 26 Jun 1868 at 352.
[52] Section 2, Ordinance V of 1868.
[53] Section 10, *ibid*.
[54] Section 5, *ibid*.
[55] Section 1, Judicial Duties Act, Act III of 1867 (Straits Settlements).
[56] Part IV, Courts Ordinance, Act V of 1873 (Straits Settlements).
[57] Sections 13 & 14, *ibid*.
[58] Section 23, Ordinance V of 1868.
[59] Section 24, *ibid*.
[60] Ordinance No V of 1873 (Straits Settlements).
[61] Ordinance No IV of 1878 (Straits Settlements). This statute came into force on 1 January 1879.
[62] Section 1, *ibid*.

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5

Legal Education in Singapore: Past, Present, and Future

Introduction

As the profession changes, so too must legal education. The purpose of legal education is, after all, to equip lawyers with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their work. As the 200th Anniversary of the Second Charter of Justice approaches, it is opportune to reflect on the state of legal education in Singapore today, and on what tomorrow holds for it.

The Past

The Singapore legal system is 200 years old; legal education here is less than half that age. A Law Department was established only in July 1956[1] as part of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Malaya in Singapore. The first batch of students graduated in 1961.[2]

Prof. Woon graduated 20 years later, in 1981. Teaching in the Law Faculty was done in the time-honoured way. Students were inundated with masses of cases,[3] in reading lists that grew longer with the years. Singapore law was considered a minor offshoot of the great banyan tree of the common law.[4] There were practically no textbooks dealing with Singapore law. Practically the only texts that were available were casebooks – collections of cases, with scant commentary.

Over time, the law school at the National University of Singapore ("NUS") was joined by two others: at Singapore Management University ("SMU") and later at Singapore University of Social Sciences ("SUSS"). The SMU Yong Pung How School of Law was established in 2007 and, like NUS, takes in both undergraduate and graduate students.[5] The SUSS School of Law was established in 2017, and has a different focus, admitting mostly mid-career, mature students. Its objective is to ensure a supply of practitioners in community law, principally in the family and criminal bars.[6]

The Present

Things changed fundamentally in the last years of the previous millennium with the advent of computers and the internet. Instead of the mind-numbing drudge of plowing through masses of dusty law reports in the hope of finding one or two relevant cases, computers allowed searches to be done at the speed of light. The unfortunate side effect was that the dearth of material was replaced by a tsunami of cases,[7] mostly irrelevant.

The internet also liberated law teaching from the constraints of space and geography. Zoom and other similar tools enable teachers and students to interact despite the lack of proximity. This was graphically proven during the Covid Pandemic, when in-person classes ceased. Even after the Pandemic, such classes remain part of some courses.

Unfortunately, post-Pandemic, the study of law in Singapore has reverted largely to the traditional model. Most classes have gone back to requiring physical attendance. Students still read textbooks and cases, and attend lectures and tutorials. Though there are some clinical courses and workshops, for example, the Legal Clerkship Programme at SUSS in which students are attached to law firms to obtain practical experience, the study of law remains largely a traditional academic endeavour.

This is also reflected in the profile of law students. By and large, law students tend to come from high-performing junior colleges and to be academically accomplished. However, in recent years, students from Temasek Polytechnic's Law and Management programme[8] have been making an appearance in law schools and acquitting themselves well. The establishment of Juris Doctor programmes at NUS and SMU, and SUSS's focus on mature students, have also resulted in more mid-career entrants to the legal profession.

The importance of digital technology has also led to the hybridization of legal education. SMU now offers a Bachelor of Science (Computing & Law),[9] and Ngee Ann Polytechnic has recently started offering a Diploma in Computing with Law.[10] Graduates of such programmes, however, do not qualify for the bar, unless they subsequently complete an LLB or JD.

The Future

The developments of recent decades necessitate a fundamental change in the approach to teaching law in the 21st century.

Decentralise legal education

Firstly, classes no longer need to be confined to a particular place. Zoom and other similar technologies allow lecturers and students to be physically separated. Indeed in 2024, Prof. Woon was stranded in Taipei when his flight was cancelled due to a typhoon. His students switched seamlessly to a Zoom class. The fact that Prof. Woon was over a thousand miles away made no difference.

It is a canard that students prefer in-person classes to remote ones. It all depends on whether the instructor knows how to use the online tools effectively. Since the Pandemic in 2020, Prof. Woon has been polling his students about Zoom versus in-person classes.[11] In order to avoid over-burdening this short article, we have condensed the responses into positive and negative.[12]

1. Is it important to learn how to use Zoom and similar online tools? Positive: 96.69%; negative: 3.31%.
2. Are Zoom classes more convenient than in-person classes? Positive: 92.06%; negative 7.94%
3. Is it easier on Zoom to see materials displayed on the screen? Positive: 83.33%; negative 16.67%
4. Is it easier to hear what your classmates are saying on Zoom than in-person? Positive: 62.87%; negative: 37.13%
5. Are you more inhibited about participating via Zoom than in-person? Positive: 61.94% (meaning less inhibited); negative: 38.05%
6. Is it easier to hear the instructor on Zoom than in-person? Positive: 61.06%; negative: 38.93%
7. Is it easier to ask questions on Zoom? Positive: 59.55%; negative: 40.45%

Legal practice is increasingly moving online. Cases are heard via Zoom. Client instructions are taken remotely. Any student who cannot handle online tools is at a disadvantage in the market, a fact clearly appreciated by students as shown by the first question.

It should be noted that even the most negative response was still only around 40%. To ameliorate the problems highlighted by questions 5-7, Prof. Woon gave his students his Telegram handle and invited questions. A fair number took the opportunity; on one occasion he fielded questions the night before the exam.

Remote learning also opens up legal education to more diverse classes of learners. At SUSS, many mature students have jobs and families, which makes it difficult to attend classes in person. Virtual classes enable such students to attend from home or from the office. Failure to offer an online alternative often simply results in students not attending classes at all.

Remote learning allows Law Faculties to be organised differently. It is possible now to have Indonesian and Chinese lecturers teach Indonesian and Chinese law from their respective countries. Staff may emigrate to other places and still continue to teach. The possibilities are endless.

This is not to say that law schools should be exclusively virtual. There is value in face to face interaction, to build connections which will be important when students enter the profession. This can be accomplished by certain events, group projects, or meetings. The point is simply that there ought not to be a slavish adherence to physical proximity in all things.

Assess the right things

The second mindset change needed is the way law is assessed. No one in his right mind locks himself away for three hours and tries to expound the law from memory; this a recipe for a negligence suit. Closed-book exams are therefore of limited utility. Examiners who rely on essay questions will find that the internet is awash with materials, which now are more easily accessed with AI. Multiple-choice questions lack nuance and often penalise those who can think beyond the obvious; AI will be able to provide the answers.

Artificial intelligence cannot make up for human stupidity. It is necessary to set questions that test human intelligence and moral intuition, which AI currently cannot replicate. For instance, the first scenario Prof. Woon poses to students involves a mother killing her autistic child and then attempting suicide because she cannot cope. AI may recognise that murder has been committed. What AI cannot adequately do is recommend whether the mother should be charged with murder, and if so, whether the death penalty should be sought. There are an unlimited number of scenarios which can be constructed to test students; one does not have to be a novelist to create such problems.

Advancements in AI have also had a profound impact on assessments. An additional advantage of setting hypotheticals, as described above, is that they are harder for AI to address even at a legal level. AI is currently capable of producing quite passable essays, regurgitating material from the internet, but often struggles to properly analyse and apply the law to facts, especially to novel fact patterns. The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to stop students from using AI, except in controlled conditions. Therefore, we should assume that students will use AI on any assignment that does not take place in a controlled environment. This in itself is not a bad thing: law schools should be equipping students to deal with AI tools in an ethical and effective manner. The courts do not require lawyers to refrain from using AI in their legal work, merely that it should be used responsibly, and law schools should hold students to the same standard.[13]

What is required is that examiners be clear about what they are assessing. To ensure that students are not entirely reliant on AI, every grade should also include a component based on assessment within a controlled environment, such as an in-class exam, presentation, or *viva voce*, in which students will be required to stand on their own without the assistance of AI. This will likely be more labour-intensive for the faculty, but this is a resourcing issue that can be worked out.

Teach the right skills

The third change is in what needs to be taught. Content is not as important as skills. Content changes with the current rate of change, it is likely that whatever cases and statutes students learn will have become updated or outdated by the time they enter practice. Further, the ability to ingest and regurgitate information has diminished greatly in value with the advent of more powerful legal research tools, particularly those powered by AI. Information recall will likely be a function of technology, and lawyers must add value elsewhere in the process.

The principal value of a legal education lies in acquiring the ability to reason. Substantive legal technology, including legal AI, is still in its infancy and subject to severe errors in reasoning and accuracy. The role of the lawyer, for the foreseeable future, will be to curate content retrieved by technology and shape it into accurate, comprehensible, and compelling legal arguments.

Further, reasoning must be from first principles. Mere adherence to precedent lacks value in a world where a precedent saying whatever one wants can be found if one looks hard enough – a task that has now been made possible by modern legal databases. The Common Law evolved in circumstances of information scarcity, but the modern world suffers from information overload.

In Singapore today, in addition to cases reported in the Singapore Law Reports, there are unreported Supreme Court cases uploaded to the Judiciary.gov.sg website, and even State Courts decisions on LawNet. This is in addition to domain-specific data repositories, such as the Sentencing Information Repository on LawNet. The existence of this vast corpus of cases imposes an obligation on lawyers to search all of it, just in case something of relevance crops up. Given that the vast majority of such cases are not legally significant, this exercise is often both time-consuming and fruitless. Further, cases are easy to hallucinate by AI, and the courts are already seeing cases where such hallucinations have been cited.[14] More information is not always better, especially when such information simply increases the noise-signal ratio.

Given the increasing pace and complexity of legal work, lawyers cannot afford to be bogged down by irrelevant things. Reasoning from first principles, aided judiciously by a few, relevant precedents, is not only more intellectually rigorous but also more efficient.

Therefore, undergraduate legal education should focus on reinforcing the core skills of legal reasoning above all else. Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon has expressed concerns about AI degrading the skills of lawyers:[15] a distinction must be made between core skills of legal reasoning and other ancillary skills. No one should mourn the loss of the ability to use Boolean operators in legal research, for example, whereas we ought to be rightfully concerned if lawyers are unable to reason from first principles without the assistance of AI.

This means that law schools should focus more on core legal subjects and not less. It is not really necessary, for example, to teach law students computer programming or legal technology. In practice, lawyers will not be coding, they will depend on other professionals to do that. What is more important is that lawyers understand their own business well, and are able to articulate their requirements and work seamlessly with professionals from other disciplines. If anything, rather than coding, lawyers should be taught process mapping, design thinking or systems thinking. But even then, this is something that can and should be done at a Continuing Professional Development level. LLB and JD courses are packed enough as it is, and adding more subjects necessarily means removing some other subjects. Ancillary skills should not be taught at the expense of core legal skills.

Incentivise effective legal educators

Finally, there has to be a change in the way lecturers are assessed. Citations of published works is not a good gauge of how effective a lecturer is. Foreign journals are uninterested in Singapore law. What matters is whether lawyers and judges actually read what is published.

There are better ways to assess this. Citations in decided cases is one. Some lecturers are cited hundreds of times; others hardly, if at all. Another way is to eschew publication in journals and put articles on the internet. The number of hits will show how much of a reach a particular writer has. The writer will live and die according to the persuasiveness and clarity of his arguments.

Singapore legal education cannot move forward in the 21st century if it remains mired in 20th century methods. Some dinosaurs will be stuck and go extinct. Others will evolve and take flight. Encourage the teachers of law to soar.

Professor Walter Woon SC
Emeritus Professor
National University of Singapore

Professor Walter Woon's research interests are in Criminal Law, Company Law and International Law. A graduate of NUS Law's class of '81, he was Sub-Dean and Vice-Dean of the Faculty from 1988-1991. He later became a Nominated Member of Parliament from 1992-1996, and was Legal Adviser to the President and Council of Presidential Advisers 1995-1997. Professor Woon was also Ambassador of Singapore between 1998 and 2006 in Germany, Greece, the European Union, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the Vatican.

Alexander Woon
Consultant, Advocate and Solicitor, Singapore
Provost's Chair and Lecturer, Singapore University of Social Sciences

Alexander is a Singapore-qualified lawyer whose practice focuses on criminal law and law and technology. He is Provost's Chair and Lecturer at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, School of Law. He is the course leader for the criminal law course, and also for the law and emerging technologies course. Alexander was previously also Programme Director of the Singapore Management University Academy's Graduate Certificate in Law and Technology.

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[1] Change and Continuity: 40 Years of the Law Faculty (Times Editions Singapore; Kevin Tan, editor), p11. The Department only became a Faculty in 1959: *ibid*, p17.
[2] *Ibid*, pp19-20.
[3] Selfish students would often tear pages out of law reports. Photostating was expensive; far easier for the dishonest to simply steal the case. No doubt the culprits went on to become pillars of the Bar.
[4] See e.g. "The Applicability of English Law in Singapore" Chapter 4 in The Singapore Legal System (Longman Singapore 1989; Walter Woon, editor), p136 where there is a table setting out the frequency of English and local authorities cited in the Malayan Law Journal between 1974-1985. The article was written by Prof. Woon who combed through ten years of law reports in the Law Library.
[5] https://law.smu.edu.sg/about/about-smu-yphsl.
[6] https://www.suss.edu.sg/about-suss/our-milestones.
[7] Aprés l'ordinateur le déluge, so to speak.

[8] https://www.tp.edu.sg/schools-and-courses/students/schools/bus/law-management.html
[9] https://computing.smu.edu.sg/bsc-computing-law
[10] https://www.np.edu.sg/schools-courses/academic-schools/school-of-infocomm-technology/diploma-in-computing-with-law
[11] The students were from both NUS and SMU. The sample size varied from semester to semester, so responses to the questions were based on different sample sizes, from 121 to 348.
[12] There were actually four responses, two positive and two negative. It was a deliberate strategy not to allow fence-sitters.
[13] See Registrar's Circular 1 of 2024: "Guide on Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools by Court Users".
[14] See *Tan Hai Peng Micheal and another (as the executors of the estate of Tan Thuan Teck, deceased) v Tan Cheong Joo and another and other matters* [2025] SGHC 217; and *Tajudin bin Gulam Rasul and another v Suriaya bte Haja Mohideen* [2025] 5 SLR 518.
[15] Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Opening of the Legal Year 2026: https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/news-and-resources/news/news-details/chief-justice-sundaresh-menon--response-delivered-at-the-opening-of-the-legal-year-2026

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Pro Bono & The Rule of Law

Congratulations on getting called to the Bar!

Your path ahead will take many forms. Some will spend much of your careers in court; others will build practices advising businesses. There may be many twists and turns along the way, and likely a lot of time grappling with the impact of AI on practice. Wherever you land, I invite you to consider making pro bono service a part of your professional lives.

You enter the profession in the Bicentennial year of the Second Charter of Justice, as we commemorate 200 years of the rule of law. For many lawyers, the rule of law is often discussed in constitutional or institutional terms.

However, in my last 6 years working in Pro Bono SG (The Law Society's charity arm and wholly-owned subsidiary), I have witnessed how Pro Bono SG's mission is critical to upholding the rule of law. Simply put:

- The rule of law rests on the idea that legal rights and obligations are not merely theoretical, but capable of being understood, invoked and relied upon in practice.
- Access to justice gives life to that idea by ensuring that individuals and organisations are able to obtain legal advice, guidance and representation when needed.
- Pro bono work is one way in which the legal profession helps bridge the gap between principle and practice for those who are under-resourced or who have other vulnerabilities.

To the vulnerable communities and social impact organisations that we work with, the rule of law is not a lofty ideal. In such community settings, the rule of law lives in the practical day-to-day choices that lawyers help others to make.

Pro Bono SG at the "Plan Your Legacy" roadshow on 19 and 20 July 2025, a two-day event aimed at empowering individuals and families to take charge of their future, organised by Agency for Integrated Care, Central Provident Fund Board, My Legacy @ LifeSG and The Office of Public Guardian.

Pro Bono: The Rule of Law Beyond the Courtroom

When we consider how pro bono service contributes to the rule of law, many of us may think of courtrooms. After all, litigation is where legal principles are tested most visibly — where rights are asserted, disputes resolved and precedents established.

Indeed, Pro Bono SG relies heavily on volunteers to take up representation cases, including those involving criminal defence, family justice, and salary and personal injury claims for migrant workers.

However, I have also witnessed how our diverse pool of volunteers goes beyond court work to focus on:

- Legal education through focused outreach programmes for members of the public and the social service sector;
- Consultations through our network of legal clinics;
- Integrated legal care by working with other social service professionals to provide holistic solutions at our Community Law Centres and other specialist centres; and
- Legal and governance support to social impact organisations.

Beyond legal outcomes, Pro Bono SG's mission prioritises outcomes such as empowerment and well-being of our service users and sustained social impact. Much of this work prevents disputes from even reaching the courts.

Every year, Pro Bono SG runs Law Awareness Weeks @ CDC, the nation's largest legal literacy campaign organized in collaboration with the five Community Development Councils, National University of Singapore Faculty of Law, Singapore University of Social Sciences School of Law, Singapore Management University School of Law, and the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association Pro Bono Chapter, supported by the People's Association.

In 2025, the talks ranged from family law, end of life planning, online harassment, community disputes to employment and more. Out of 15 webinars attended by 1,864 attendees, 90% of the survey respondents reported an improvement in terms of their understanding and awareness of the relevant laws, and their ability to seek help and make informed decisions.

One of the participants of the webinar "Invisible Disabilities & The Law – Know Your Protections" shared in relation to her clients who are caregivers of persons with invisible disabilities, "I work with some older clients and struggle to tell them what they should prepare to safeguard the interests of their children. With this, I have a better understanding of how to talk to them."

Another participant of the webinar "Neighbours in Dispute – What Are My Legal Options?" shared, "I am more knowledgeable now to be able to advise fellow neighbours, in the estate, should they encounter situations and require help."

Beyond the quantitative data from our users, their qualitative feedback tells us that our services have a rippling and multiplier effect within social service and community settings.

Launch of Law Awareness Weeks @ CDC 2025 on 20 September 2025.

Pro Bono: The Rule of Law in Non-Profit Boardrooms

Pro Bono SG now has touchpoints at The Foundry and Temasek Shophouse for our Non-Profit Legal Services programme targeting ground up initiatives, charities and social enterprises. With proximity comes relationship building which in turn destigmatizes help-seeking for legal and governance needs. With volunteer support, we run legal risk assessments (called "Legal Health Checks"), clinic consultations and training programmes.

A common query is this. "*My organisation has grown quickly. What began as a small volunteer initiative had developed into a registered charity serving vulnerable beneficiaries. The board is expanding, partnerships are forming, and fundraising activities are increasing. I want to know.* ***Are we doing this properly?***"

In such cases, the non-profits are not facing a dispute. No regulator had raised concerns. The non-profits were simply trying to ensure that governance structures, policies and legal foundations were sound as the non-profits continued to grow.

To a charity working on the ground, the rule of law means that the rules governing their work are clear, predictable and applied fairly. A charity can structure its activities knowing what the law requires; donors can trust that funds are used responsibly; beneficiaries can rely on systems that hold institutions accountable.

In essence, the rule of law provides a foundation of trust that allows social impact organisations to pursue their purposeful missions with confidence.

"Legal Health Check for Charities" on 6 November 2025 co-organised by Pro Bono SG and the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association, with the support of White & Case and The Foundry. Each legal health check is usually attended by around 20 non-profits, and each non-profit is matched to a trio of volunteers – a private practitioner, an in-house counsel and a student.

A legal health check in action. A legal health check is a legal risk assessment exercise targeting specific domains such as employment, fundraising, intellectual property, contracts and more. At the end, the charity receives a report flagging risks and setting out next steps to rectify the issues flagged by the volunteers.

Pro Bono Tips for Newly Qualified Lawyers, Bicentennial Edition

6 years ago, I wrote "Pro Bono Tips for Newly Qualified Lawyers" to share how junior lawyers could consider getting involved in pro bono work. Here is an updated and summarized version as you consider getting started.

- Remember you are not too junior — new lawyers can contribute meaningfully too.
- Start small with bite-sized assignments or clinic work.
- Seek mentorship or supervision from more experienced lawyers when taking on pro bono matters.
- Keep trying even if you feel nervous or inexperienced — skills improve with practice.
- Use pro bono to build advocacy and client management skills.
- Find opportunities aligned with practice area to build confidence.
- Pick a cause or organisation you care about to stay motivated.

- If pro bono is important to you, find an environment that is the right fit.
- Do not pre-judge your clients or their cases. Treat every client seriously regardless of how their case initially appears.
- Set boundaries with clients and manage expectations to not burnout.
- Stay open to learning about social issues affecting clients and the ever-evolving social service landscape.
- Let pro bono broaden your perspective and develop you as a lawyer.
- Contact Pro Bono SG's friendly volunteer engagement team at volunteer@probono.sg to find your fit, whether it is in litigation, charities governance, outreach or other opportunities.

Once again, my heartiest congratulations to all of you. Welcome to the Bar and I hope you will join our community of volunteers!

Volunteer Appreciation Event on 19 September 2025.

Cai Chengying
Deputy CEO
Pro Bono SG

As Deputy CEO, Chengying oversees efforts in fundraising, grants administration, supporter engagement, communications and legal support for the non-profit sector. She also focuses on enhancing organisational efficiency, charities governance, impact evaluation, and resource mobilisation. Working directly with the CEO, they guide our strategic direction and operational initiatives to drive organisational growth and success. She speaks frequently at various legal industry and social sector events and participated in NCSS's 40-Under-40 programme, a distinguished leadership initiative for social service sector leaders in 2023. In 2025, she was conferred the Merit Award at the Social Service Professional Awards Ceremony in recognition of her invaluable contributions to the sector. Prior to joining Pro Bono SG in February 2020, Chengying was a litigator in private practice. She volunteered with Pro Bono SG's various legal aid programmes after getting called to the Bar and was seconded to the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme to do full-time pro bono criminal defence work as a pioneer CLAS Fellow in 2015.

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Law in the Digital Age through lived practice
The more things change, the more things stay the same

When the Law Society of Singapore first reached out to me to contribute a reflection on "Law in the Digital Age" to the Bicentennial Law Gazette issue, the first thing which came to mind was how, when I first started practice in 2006, the profession was still very much used to doing things with pen and paper. My seniors and mentors would often give me hand-written markups in bright red ink on my drafts which I printed for their review. Technology was seen by the older generation as a tool that should be left to the younger generation for their benefit, but which would not necessarily make the practice of law easier or make one a better lawyer.

I knew that how technology has shaped the practice of law would be a central theme for my reflection. However, at the same time, I thought about how a younger lawyer, one who would have a different starting point and who would have viewed technological change with a very different lens than I have viewed it growing into practice, would have experienced technology's impact on the practice of law. So, I invited Timothy Oen from my team at Drew & Napier LLC who started practice in 2019, 13 years after me, to do this reflection together.

As we reflected on this topic and our experience together, we found our views converging to the same conclusion. Despite our different starting points, we agreed that technology has made and continues to make the practice of law both easier and harder at the same time. Nevertheless, despite warnings of massive disruption to the legal industry, and putting aside the question of which of these warnings are important calls to action and which of them are overblown hype, the basic legal principles one must grapple with have not changed, and the aptitude which makes a good lawyer also has not changed. This led us to the conclusion that regardless of where you start and the changes that occur, when broken down to the basics, the more things change, the more things stay the same.

The practice of advocacy

When I first started training, litigation was very much an exercise in going through reams and reams of documents, analysing evidence for submissions and cross-examination, and researching for cases where the facts fit. When preparing for one of my first trials with my pupil master, my task as a young associate was to help my pupil master find specific documents from the hardcopy volumes of the bundle of documents to help her prepare for cross-examination. It was a daunting task since I was new to the file. Her natural expectation was that I would pick up a file and start reading the documents, flipping pages, making notes and digesting the facts of the case while searching for what she needed.

She stared at me quizzically while I sat before her, eagerly awaiting to be given a search term so that I could run the search on the PDFs. When I explained to her why I was focused on my laptop instead of the reams of documents, she expressed some doubt about whether I would be of any help at all with her cross-examination preparation unless I knew the facts of the case. I was asked to find documents from about a particular date to address a disputed fact. Within seconds and to her surprise, not only was I able to find the exact document of that particular date that clearly settled the disputed fact, I was also able to find other documents of that same date which showed that the other side was clearly wrong on the issue. I was thus helpful in her cross-examination preparation even without knowing the facts.

But did that use of technology make me a better lawyer? I was able to easily find highly relevant and helpful documents for my pupil master, but I was none the wiser about what those documents said or why they were helpful without understanding the facts. It still came down to my pupil master's oral advocacy and cross-examination to advance the client's best case and make the best submissions based on the materials that were before her. Technology made searching for documents an almost brain-dead easy part. Reading the documents, understanding the facts and asking effective questions was the actual lawyering.

From the time Tim started practice, the one big way in which technology changed how advocacy was practiced was when Covid hit in early 2020. Overnight, we went from having only hearings in person to having only virtual hearings. Instead of being able to see the body language and demeanor of opposing counsel and the Court in person, all that was left were small images of people's heads on the screen, boxed within an 8 x 6 cm screen depending on the Zoom setting which you were using.

Suddenly, the majority of things I taught, and which Tim learnt, in advocacy class about looking at the Court when you spoke, being able to see when a Judge was with you and when they were not, had little to no relevance. We needed to change and adapt to accommodate remote advocacy.

As time wore on and the novelty of virtual hearings wore thin, we realised that the purported magnitude of this change was perhaps somewhat overblown. At the end of the day, while the format and means by which we presented and argued our client's case did change, the content did not. While we all had to pick up new skills in virtual advocacy, the core skills of speaking slowly and clearly, having good presentation, and most of all, having solid legal arguments did not change. In other words, good lawyering stayed the same.

The practice of practice

One of the other key areas where I have seen technology truly impact the practice of law is in document management. When I first started practice, everything was more or less on paper, and so I would have had to flip through stacks of files in order to look up the history of a certain case. I complained a great deal about it to my seniors and my pupil master. I could not understand why the files were not digitized so that I could run searches on the electronic files to find what I was looking for.

Eventually (and I suppose thanks to my complaining), I was tasked by the firm to migrate all of its physical cases onto an online document management system (DMS). As the old saying goes - Be careful what you wish for?

The entire process was without a doubt painful, but (I would like to think) worth it. It was essentially a key step in the digital transformation of the firm's practice. At the end, instead of having to trawl through physical files, I was able to log on to the system, key in various search terms, and find what I was looking for. The system when it first started was by no means perfect, but it certainly assisted us in the practice of law.

The DMS greatly increased knowledge sharing within the firm. Nonetheless, while the DMS provided us lawyers with an additional platform which we could leverage to practice the law, the core skills required of knowing the facts of the case, being apprised of all developments in the case, and advising the client on the best way forward did not change.

Tim's experience in this regard was the increased use of cloud-based storage systems (like OneDrive) which really flattened the manner in which we practiced. When he first started, each lawyer/individual contributor would still have their own drafts and research saved on their own devices, which would then be sent by email to someone else in the firm if requested. The DMS had to an extent helped with this but the focus of DMS was mainly to ensure that the key records of a case were properly captured and recorded, and would only contain what was uploaded.

With the cloud, instead of each individual working on their own drafts, there was now one draft which everyone worked on. The workplace became much flatter than ever before – everyone has access to everything, and one is expected to know all that is going on even more. To be honest, this took all of us some getting used to. However, this did not mean that the core skills required of being a lawyer changed, but that this was (again) an additional platform that one needed to leverage to provide the best possible advice for our clients.

The pace of practice

The pace of the practice of law has also generally quickened and will continue to quicken with developments in technology.

This has not been limited to litigation (which is exemplified by the OCR anecdote above). When I first started practice, the standard way of sending a letter would be by fax. This would involve having to physically print out the letter, bring it to the fax machine, key in the fax number of the law firm you wished to send it to, fax the document, and thereafter wait while the fax machine did its job. At the time, I remember when my mentor would tell me of how, in the past, sending a letter took one to two days instead of ten minutes since letters had to be physically posted.

Now, however, everything is sent over email. Gone are the days of waiting by the fax machine to do its job. Now, at the click of 3 buttons, a letter can be sent: one to print the letter into a PDF, two to attach it to an email, and three to send. What perhaps used to take ten minutes now takes two. Lawyers are now expected to get things done faster than ever, and that will never stop being the case.

Of course, despite the way in which the pace of the practice of law has quickened, the standards expected have not changed. Having more time in between correspondence gave one more time to think, but the issues that needed to be considered did not change. We still need to carefully consider everything we say in correspondence, even if the time we have to prepare such correspondence has now dramatically decreased.

Even since 2019 when Tim started practice, technology has caused the pace of practice to increase, through the increase in use of instant messaging apps to work. Fax was still in use in 2019. However, Covid soon came along, which moved everything to email. Things were still very much done over email, which (in a sense) gave us some separation and buffer - one would have the space and time to craft a response and send it via email. Instant messaging apps had already been growing in popularity, but it had mostly been limited to personal and not business use.

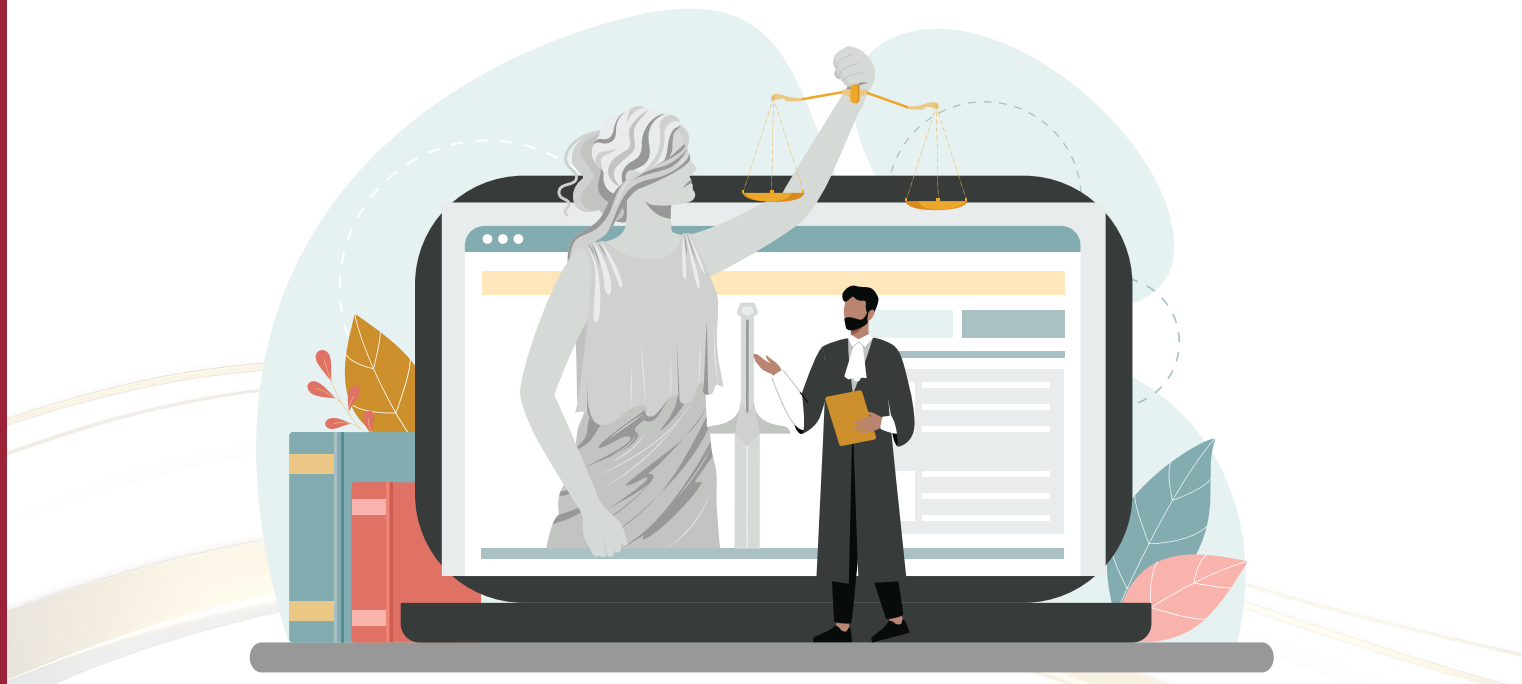
Nowadays, we find that clients are increasingly expecting you to be online and available at all times of the day on WhatsApp and/or other instant messaging apps, thereby further increasing the pace at which lawyers are expected to practice. What used to be a query sent by email will now come as a WhatsApp text message, with an answer expected in minutes. The pace of practice has picked up tremendously even in the past 7 years. But legal advice is legal advice, and whether it is given by WhatsApp, email, or hard copy letter, it's important to get it right. Managing the pace to allow space for double and triple-checking has now become critical.

Looking forward

Much of the above has been spent looking backwards. For me, looking back on my own experiences while at the same time hearing Tim's experience has shown me that despite the differences in changes we have experienced, the core of what it means to be a lawyer has not changed. The tools that we may leverage on may now be very different, but the basic skill sets of having good attention to detail, a logical mind, being able to leverage every resource you have, having a good foundation in order to provide efficient and speedy service, has not. The practice of law may be more demanding than what it was twenty years ago as the pace of practice has quickened, but we have to move with the times and cannot long for a time gone by.

This is especially so with the advent of GenAI. Now, both Tim and I are being approached by clients who already have an answer to their question provided by GenAI. GenAI has lowered the barrier of the legal profession to the general public. With the right prompts, a layperson would be able to have a credible-sounding answer to a legal question and will come to you expecting you to immediately agree with them, and will challenge you when you do not.

All this to say that technology is changing the practice of law once again, but at the same time, it isn't necessarily changing the making of a good lawyer. Responding to clients who come with AI-generated answers may be more time consuming, but the basics needed to respond will still be the same. We will still be required to treat them professionally, answer their queries efficiently, cut through the noise and get to the root of their issues and concerns. That has been the heart of the profession since we began practice and will continue to be the heart of the profession, no matter how much practice changes, for the years to come.



Rakesh Kirpalani
Director, Dispute Resolution & Information Technology
Chief Technology Officer

Rakesh leads the Dispute Resolution & Information Technology practice at Drew & Napier. He is also the Chief Technology Officer of Drew & Napier. He has an active practice in complex commercial dispute resolution, including litigation and arbitration. He is engaged in appellate and trial advocacy at all levels of the Singapore Courts and also advises on risk management and disputes concerning technology, electronic evidence, employment, compliance with technology-related regulatory issues and cybersecurity. He has extensive skills and knowledge in the information technology field and manages the interface between legal and technological issues for clients, regulators, judges and arbitrators. The clients he has advised include various multi-national corporations, multi-jurisdictional private equity funds and listed companies both in Singapore and other jurisdictions. As a student, Rakesh was a speaker on the winning team that represented NUS in the Manfred Lachs Space Law Moot Court Competition Asia-Pacific Regional Rounds in Sydney, Australia, in April 2005 and went on to represent NUS at the World Finals in Fukuoka, Japan in October 2005 where he appeared before members of the International Court of Justice. He was also the winner of the Law Society Prize for the Best Student in Advocacy in the Postgraduate Practical Law Course in 2006. Rakesh also teaches advocacy and coaches moot teams at the NUS Law Faculty on a voluntary basis.

Timothy Oen
Associate Director
Dispute Resolution and Information Technology

Timothy is an Associate Director with the Dispute Resolution & Information Technology team of Drew & Napier (DrewTech). His practice is mainly in commercial litigation and arbitration, information technology and employment law. He regularly assists clients in disputes and disputes avoidance concerning commercial contracts (including provision of software services and sale and purchase of commodities), data protection, and employment issues. The clients he advises and has advised include both multi-national corporations and SMEs, financial institutions, and private clients both in Singapore and other jurisdictions. As part of his work with the DrewTech team, Timothy has assisted with advising clients on issues where risk and technology interface, including on cloud computing contracts, terms and conditions to accompany the implementation of mobile applications, breaches of end-user/employee/counterparty confidentiality obligations, implementation of e-signatures at an enterprise level and malware incidents. Timothy is dual qualified in Singapore and the United Kingdom. He has experience working in London as a solicitor with Locke Lord LLP (now known as Troutman Pepper Locke LLP) in their insolvency and dispute resolution team.

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Singapore Legal Bicentennial: The Development of Singapore's Corporate and Securities Law Over the Last Two Centuries

From its origin as a colonial administration to its present status as a first world sovereign metropolis, the development of Singapore's corporate and capital markets legal regime in the past two centuries reflects the country's broader social, economic and cultural transformation.

The key milestones of Singapore's transformation from a trading outpost to a leading global financial centre can be summarised as follows:

❶ Foundational Period (1819 - 1980s): Establishing Sovereignty and Basic Frameworks

From Singapore's founding by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819 to its independence in 1965, Singapore's legal development has been closely tied to its British colonial heritage. The Second Charter of Justice established a court with English-equivalent civil and criminal jurisdiction in Singapore and was traditionally perceived to have introduced English common law, equity and pre-1826 English legislation into Singapore. This charter provided legal certainty and commercial familiarity in a nascent trading settlement.

After gaining independence in 1965, Singapore's legal system evolved into an autochthonous framework curated to the nation's specific needs and unique circumstances. Previously reliant on entrepot trade with a modest manufacturing sector, Singapore made rapid economic transformation. Through eclectic adoption and adaptation of the common law, coupled with robust enforcement, Singapore shaped its legal system in tandem with its development as a financial metropolis in Asia. The government established international trust and confidence essential to attracting foreign investments.

Prior to 1967, the Companies Ordinance 1940, which was modelled after the English Companies Act 1929, remained the principal corporate statute.

Thereafter, the Companies Act 1967, Singapore's first major independent corporate statute, was enacted. Whilst it was largely based on the Malaysian Companies Act (1965 edition), it represented an important step towards localisation of the country's corporate law. The Companies Act 1967 laid the groundwork for a corporate regime focused on basic incorporation, administration, and creditor protection that was needed for the developmental stage of Singapore's economy.

Institutional accountability was strengthened with the enactment of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) Act in 1970, and the birth of the eponymous financial services regulator in 1971.

In 1973, the Securities Industry Act 1973 was established. This provided a statutory framework for regulating the securities markets in Singapore. The same year, the Stock Exchange of Singapore was formed and established its listing rules. These legal and regulatory developments reflected Singapore's emphasis to institutionalise an orderly Singapore securities market.

The key focus during this formative period was building foundational legal structures, ensuring basic corporate governance, market regulation and building investor confidence in a young and evolving economy. The foundations of Singapore's statutes and regulations, derived from the common law, shaped the contours and practices of Singapore's legal profession. Over time, new laws and targeted legislative amendments morphed the framework and substance of the principles governing Singapore's financial and capital markets.

❷ Modernisation and Liberalisation (1980s - Late 1990s): Embracing Market Economics and Global Standards

The economic recession of 1985 prompted a reassessment of market practices and regulatory structures. The Companies (Amendment) Act 1987 introduced tighter regulatory standards, which signalled a growing appreciation of the importance of corporate governance as an indispensable component to hard-wire economic resilience. For corporate managers and their legal advisers, these legislative changes marked a shift from a merit-based system to a disclosure-based regime, under-pinned by corporate governance best practices that place strong emphasis on management integrity and accountability to stakeholders of corporations.

The Securities Industry Act 1973 was replaced with the Securities Industry Act 1986 and, later, the Securities and Futures Act 2001. This marked a move towards a more comprehensive and modern capital markets regulatory framework. These reforms also reflected Singapore's increasing engagement with international standards, including those promulgated by the International Organisation of Securities Commissions.

The Singapore Code on Take-overs and Mergers, first introduced in 1974, was refined over the years, with the latest edition in 2019.

In 1977, MAS played a predominant role in regulating the securities and futures industries, including the insurance and banking fields.

Towards the late 1990s, Singapore began a transition towards a disclosure-based regime, granting companies greater latitude to access capital markets while placing increased emphasis on transparency and informed investor decision-making.

Singapore's corporate legal reforms in the 1980s to 1990s expanded regulatory oversight in tandem with its economic development, reflecting the nation's aim to establish itself as an international financial centre underpinned by a robust regulatory and enforcement system of Singapore's corporate and capital markets. Legal evolution requires lawyers to remain vigilant and responsive to legislative and regulatory developments. Lawyers were required to learn and gain a thorough understanding of the evolving legal and regulatory landscape to develop the requisite know-how and expertise to guide corporate clients through complex market products, and to navigate the attendant multifaceted regulatory frameworks and thickets of rules.

❸ Strategic Review and Enhancement (Late 1990s - 2010): Post-Asian Financial Crisis and Competitiveness Drive

The Asian Financial Crisis underscored the need for robust corporate governance and regulatory coherence. December 1999 marked the appointment of the Company Legislation and Regulatory Framework Committee (CLRFC), which was pivotal to conducting a coherent and comprehensive review of Singapore's corporate law framework, informed by domestic experience and international best practices.

The recommendations of the CLRFC were progressively implemented through a series of amendments to the Companies Act from 1999 to 2005. In 1999, the Companies Act criminalised any person who acted as a director or manager of a company while being an undischarged bankrupt.

Major amendments were made to the Companies Act in 2002, notably, the introduction of the limited partnership and limited liability partnership business structures, the simplification of incorporation and maintenance procedures for private companies, and the threshold for compulsory share acquisition. For lawyers, these reforms meant a greater diversity of business structures and consequently, more complex legal advisory roles. As companies navigated these changes, lawyers had to stay ahead of evolving regulations and tailor their advice to the new landscape.

More significant changes were made with the Companies (Amendment) Act 2004, and subsequently the Companies (Amendment) Act 2005.

Singapore's corporate governance was further enhanced with the enactment of the statutory derivative action in 1993, which was a significant milestone for the protection of minority shareholders. Singapore progressed from a merit-based regime for public companies to a disclosure-based model in 1997.

The Companies Act began codifying the general management powers of directors, duties of disclosure of conflicts of interest, and duties not to misappropriate company assets and breach of directors' fiduciary duties.

Following the Companies (Amendment) Act 2005, the Companies Act 2006 strengthened creditors' protection by imposing restrictions on a company's provision of financial assistance for the acquisition of its own shares. It also empowered creditors to declare that a person engaged in fraudulent trading is personally liable for the debt of the company.

In 2004, the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA) was formed by merging the Registry of Companies and Businesses and the Public Accountants Board, and a one-stop regulator was created for company registration and accounting standards. Greater administrative efficiency came with ACRA's launch of the BizFile+ portal, which streamlined filing requirements and processes for businesses.

The first Code of Corporate Governance that was formalised in 2001 and applicable to all listed companies came into effect in 2003. The code was significantly revised in 2005 to strengthen the disclosure framework for directors.

The development of Singapore's corporate laws and regulations during this period emphasised enhancing transparency, accountability, and investors' protection to boost international confidence and Singapore's attractiveness as a financial and business hub.

Collectively, these reforms reflected a period of introspection and consolidation—an effort to reinforce trust, accountability and resilience in the corporate sector in the wake of regional instability.

❹ Comprehensive Reform and Global Leadership (2010 - Present): Agility, Innovation, and Sustainability

After extensive review and public consultation, the Companies Act 1967 was repealed and replaced with the Companies Act (Chapter 50) in 2006, which came into full effect with the Companies (Amendment) Act 2014 and Companies (Amendment) Regulations 2016.

The Companies Act amendment was a significant milestone in Singapore's corporate law reform. The new framework sought to balance flexibility with accountability. Key changes included simpler criteria to be registered as a "small company" exempt from audit requirements and mandatory annual general meetings.

New solvency tests were introduced for capital reductions and financial assistance to apply uniformly to all transactions, allowing more flexible options for mergers and amalgamations. Corporate governance was strengthened through more stringent disclosure requirements for nominee directors, refined director duties and shareholder remedies.

In the last decade, several initiatives aimed to enhance the competitiveness of Singapore's capital markets. Key measures included the introduction in 2018 by the Singapore Exchange (SGX) Regulation (SGX RegCo) of a listing framework for companies with dual class share structure, the launch by MAS in 2019 of the S$75 million Grant for Equity Market Singapore Scheme (GEMS), and the Variable Capital Companies Act 2018 (VCC Act) which took effect in 2020.

The VCC Act, which introduced Variable Capital Companies (VCC), created a novel and flexible corporate structure specifically tailored for investment funds. Designed to strengthen Singapore's position as an asset management hub, the VCC offered an alternative investment vehicle influx that blended features of the traditional corporate form with elements of hybrid structures popular in other leading financial markets at the time of the enactment of the VCC Act. This development expanded the range of structuring options on which lawyers could advise their fund management clients and to cater to the growing market for family offices.

In 2022, the S$1.5 billion Anchor Fund @ 65, was established jointly by the government and Temasek, to support promising high-growth enterprises to raise capital through listings in Singapore.

The SGX RegCo also launched the Special Purpose Acquisition Companies framework in 2022 to provide an alternative capital-raising avenue for high-growth companies, which allow such enterprises a faster time to market.

Collectively, these measures aim to attract innovative and high-growth companies to list on the Singapore bourse.

Apart from improving market competitiveness and innovation, measures to develop the corporate law scene holistically were also introduced. Sweeping revisions were made to the Code of Corporate Governance in 2012 and 2018, emphasising board independence, diversity (including gender diversity), business sustainability, internal risk governance and remuneration-linked risk management, as well as stakeholder engagement beyond pure shareholder primacy.

Singapore also made significant inroads to incentivise corporates to promote good practices in the environmental, social and governance areas. In 2021, SGX RegCo mandated sustainability reporting for listed companies in line with the recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures. This enhanced the transparency of climate-related disclosures by listed companies in Singapore.

In 2022, MAS and SGX RegCo jointly launched ESGenome, a disclosure portal for listed companies to voluntarily make climate-related financial disclosures. The expansion of sustainability reporting requirements underscored a growing recognition that corporate accountability extends beyond financial metrics.

In 2024, MAS' investigative and enforcement powers against corporate miscreants were expanded. ACRA's scope of such powers were also widened with the Corporate Service Providers Act 2024 and its regulations.

Greater enforcement powers accorded to SGX RegCo were introduced in August 2021, including its ability to issue public reprimand and compel listed companies to comply with its directives.

The BizFile+ portal was further revamped in 2024 to ensure seamless online corporate filings and transactions, streamlining digitalisation.

The Corporate Restructuring and Insolvency Regime implemented pre-packaged schemes of arrangements and adopted the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law's Model Law on Cross-Border Insolvency.

Collectively, such regulatory reforms were implemented to maintain Singapore's competitiveness, foster innovation (particularly in areas such as fintech and asset management), promote sustainable and responsible business practices, enhance ease of conducting businesses - especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) - and strengthen Singapore's reputation as a trusted international dispute resolution centre.

The regulatory reforms underpinned various significant developments. The laws governing Singapore's corporate regulatory regime were shaped to support national economic goals of attracting foreign direct investments, developing financial services, and facilitating the growth of SMEs. Global best practices serve as reference points for Singapore when the government considers adopting international regulatory standards.

The regulatory authorities have demonstrated continual stakeholder engagement by seeking extensive public and industry consultations prior to introducing and formalising reforms to the corporate regulatory regime in Singapore.

In 2024, the government formed a review committee headed by a Cabinet minister to boost Singapore's attractiveness as a venue for initial public offerings and secondary listings. The review committee's recommendations are broadly categorised to target three key areas – supply, demand and connectivity/trading.

Supply

In 1H 2025, the review committee announced its first set of measures, which included listing corporate income tax rebate, and enhanced concessionary tax rate for new fund manager listings, to attract entities and fund managers to list in Singapore.

The regulatory regime for issuers has also shifted to a full disclosure-based system. This system has been adopted after the review committee's recommendation to streamline SGX RegCo's qualitative admission criteria. The new regulatory regime will focus on comprehensive disclosure of material information by issuers in their offer documents in place of the hitherto hybrid prescriptive regime that has been the policy of the SGX RegCo.

SGX RegCo has refined the quantitative and qualitative admission criteria for the SGX-ST Mainboard, which include lowering the profit test threshold for new listings from S$30 million to S$10 million, and requiring disclosure of material issues such as conflicts of interest and weaknesses in internal controls.

Demand

The GEMS scheme is expected to be enhanced with additional funding of S$50 million and expanded to include research coverage on pre-initial public offering companies and mid- and small- cap entities, in the hope of raising awareness of such enterprises to support investor demand and valuations.

The review committee also recommended an adjustment to the existing Global Investor Programme (GIP), administered by the EDB to attract high-net-worth individuals, business owners and entrepreneurs keen on substantial investments in Singapore.

Following the review committee's proposal, an option in the GIP will require Single Family Office applicants to deploy at least S$50 million into Singapore equities, to bolster capital injections into Singapore's trading market.

MAS and the Financial Sector Development Fund (FSDF) also launched a S$5 billion Equity Market Development Programme (EQDP). Under the programme, MAS will invest in commercially viable strategies actively managed by asset managers in Singapore with a strong focus on Singapore listed equities.

The EQDP's goal is to incentivise fund managers to attract more retail and institutional investor interest which will enhance trading liquidity, improve price discovery, facilitate fair valuations post-listing, and widen investor participation beyond large-cap stocks. As of November 2025, there are 9 appointed asset managers with a total capital deployed of S$3.95 billion.

MAS and SGX will also launch a "Value Unlock" programme to assist listed companies in investor engagement and shareholder value creation, including allocating S$30 million from the FSDF to fund two grants to build capabilities in articulating compelling value propositions and building effective investor relationships.

Connectivity/Trading

In January 2026, MAS and SGX jointly announced the proposed establishment of a new listing bridge to enable qualifying companies to dual list on the SGX and Nasdaq.

The proposed Global Listing Board (GLB) aims to attract quality high-growth companies in Asia with market capitalisation of S$2 billion and above to raise capital from investors in the United States and in Singapore.

Various initiatives that have been introduced such as the Anchor Fund @ 65 and EQDP, will also support fundraising and trading liquidity for promising high-growth companies on the GLB, which is envisaged to go live around mid-2026. Both Anchor Fund @ 65 and EQDP will each be further enhanced by S$1.5 billion as recently announced in Budget 2026, reflecting the government's long-term commitment to strengthening the equities market amid global market uncertainties.

SGX has also recently announced the proposed reduction of the board lot size for Singapore-listed securities trading above S$10. The rule change is to lower the minimum investment size for higher-priced securities, catalyse active trading by investors in the Singapore market, and enhance market liquidity for the Singapore bourse.

The SGX has also proposed to discontinue aligning the minimum bid size of Renminbi, Japanese Yen and Hong Kong Dollar securities and futures contracts traded on SGX-ST with those in their respective home markets; such alignment may only be necessary on a case-by-case basis to support liquidity on SGX-ST.

Overall, the holistic proposals put forth by the review committee has resulted in an increase of new listings from both foreign and local companies on the Singapore bourse.

MAS has indicated that an Equity Market Implementation Committee will be created to oversee implementation and adaptation of the review committee's proposals over the next 1 to 2 years.

Market developments also prompted MAS to publish a consultation paper in May 2025 on updates to the Takeover Code, to ensure greater certainty and fairness, including regulating assets sale by the offeree that can potentially frustrate a general offer for voting rights.

The Singapore government announced on 13 February 2026 the formation of a new workgroup aimed at enhancing the country's growth capital ecosystem to bridge the gap between private funding and public listings, creating a smoother pipeline from venture capital stage to initial public offerings.

As Singapore celebrates its legal Bicentennial, the evolution of its corporate and securities laws traces the nation's journey from a colonial outpost to a global metropolis. What began as an imported legal system, shaped by common law traditions, has become a distinctly Singaporean framework, tailored to local needs but responsive to global market developments.

Singapore's corporate law has evolved from a compliance-based regime into a sophisticated, principles-based system, supported by internationally recognised dispute resolution mechanisms.

Singapore's latest legal and regulatory developments seek to balance investor protection and governance with business-friendly flexibility; and traditional legal doctrines with new rules necessary to sync with technological progress and rapid economic transformations fueled by artificial intelligence.

This transformation reflects the adaptability of Singapore's legal institutions and underscores corporate law's role in nation-building – both as a stabilising force and a sustainable catalyst for economic progress.

As Singapore's legal industry progresses into its third century, the continually evolving corporate legal landscape has morphed in tandem with Singapore's economic and financial developments. Lawyers will continue to play a key role in guiding clients through the profound legal changes in an era of rapid geo-political developments and technological transformations.

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Robson is a Director of Legal Solutions LLC (Kennedys Singapore joint law venture partner) in the Corporate & Commercial practice. Robson has more than 30 years of experience in advising clients on a range of licensing, securities, banking, insurance, trustee duties and financial market regulatory compliance, SGX listing compliance, corporate governance, and regulatory investigations. Robson also represents Singapore public companies on cross-border M&A and foreign joint venture investments, and advises local and foreign companies in their funds raising and market flotation. Robson is the Assistant Secretary of the Securities Investors Association (Singapore) (SIAS) and the Head of Legal Affairs of SIAS. He also currently serves as a member of the MAS' Appeal Advisory Panels (AAPs) constituted under the Business Trusts Act, Financial Advisers Act, Insurance Act, Securities and Futures Act, and Trust Companies Act. He has been a member of the AAPs since 2015 and was reappointed for the fourth term to the AAPs in October 2021. Robson received his Bachelor of Laws (Hons, 2nd Class Upper) from the National University of Singapore in 1993. He is an Advocate and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Singapore and a Solicitor in England and Wales.

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Dispute Resolution in Singapore

The inaugural Mass Call this year marks a significant milestone in the lives of the newly admitted lawyers, even as we commemorate 200 years of the legal profession in Singapore.

In recent decades, Singapore has experienced a meteoric rise in its international legal profile. This is reflected in both the diversity of Singapore's legal profession and the rise in cross-border legal work. As of January 2026, there are 1,418 foreign lawyers[1] registered with the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, making up 18.15% of the registered lawyers in Singapore.[2] The number of Foreign Law Practices (**FLPs**) has grown from 74 in 2020[3] to 141 as of January 2026.[4] Of these FLPs, 10 have obtained a Qualifying Foreign Law Practice licence, 9 are part of a Joint Law Venture and 10 are part of a Formal Law Alliance (collectively, "**foreign law structures**").[5] The introduction of foreign law structures has expanded the scope of legal practices available to Singapore practitioners, allowing them to pursue further accreditation within Singapore's legal structures. For example, at the time of publication, no less than four Foreign Law Alliances offer dual qualification training programmes, under which trainees will qualify in both Singapore and the UK.[6]

The number of newly admitted lawyers has fallen over the past few years. There was a sharp drop between 2020 and 2021, from 714 to 613. This was followed by a record low of 569 admissions in 2023 for the first time in half a decade.[7] There was a slight increase in the number of newly called lawyers in 2024, with 593 admissions.[8]

The liberalisation of the legal sector in 2000 and 2008, which introduced the foreign law structures that exist today, was driven by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and Singapore's development as a global financial hub.[9] As Singapore's economy and financial sector matured, the demand for a neutral forum for international dispute resolution became increasingly evident. Today, Singapore is acknowledged as a significant global player in dispute resolution. It has consistently been ranked as a top global arbitration seat in the annual Queen Mary University of London and White & Case International Arbitration Survey since 2010. In the 2021 survey, Singapore rose to share the top globally ranked seat with London in 2021[10] and maintained its position in 2025.[11] The increased global confidence in Singapore as an arbitration hub is also reflected in the consistent growth in caseload and value of disputes heard by the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (**SIAC**). The total number of cases heard has grown from 343 in 2016 to 625 in 2024, with a notable peak of 1,063 cases in 2020.[12] The composition of cases heard by the SIAC has consistently been more international in nature, making up 90.56% of the SIAC's caseload in 2024.

Complementing Singapore's robust international arbitration scene is the Singapore International Commercial Court (**SICC**), which was established in 2015 as a division of the High Court. Cases of an international and commercial nature can be commenced in the SICC or transferred from the General Division at the General Division's own motion or on the application of a party.[13] The popularity of the SICC has grown steadily since its inception. Not only has there been a rise in caseload from 2 cases in 2015 to 28 cases in 2024,[14] but the number of cases commenced in the SICC surpassed those transferred for the first time in 2024, with 18 originating cases and 10 transferred cases. Singapore has endeavoured to enhance cross-border dispute resolution in the MENA region through the 2025 Bahrain International Commercial Court (**BICC**) and SICC Partnership. This partnership introduces a unique appeals mechanism which allows cases heard by the BICC to be appealed to the International Committee of the SICC, marking the first arrangement of its kind between commercial courts.[15] This development underscores the importance of not merely cultivating industry-specific expertise in cross-border commercial law but also staying attuned to emerging international partnerships. Building familiarity with the SICC framework and its regional extensions will position lawyers to seize opportunities in an increasingly interconnected global legal landscape.

While the landscape of cross-border dispute resolution in Singapore continues to expand, domestic practice remains a critical pillar of the profession. The number of cases filed in the Family Justice Courts has risen from 27,842 cases in 2016 to 28,541 in 2024, with slight fluctuations in the interim.[16] This reflects a steady demand for family law practitioners. The State Courts have accounted for the largest share of the Singapore Court's annual caseload since 2016, representing 78.96% of all cases filed in 2024.[17] However, filings in the State Courts have declined by 50.78% between 2016 (319,740 cases) and 2024 (157,375 cases), primarily due to the decrease of 148,781 criminal case filings. Nonetheless, criminal cases remain the leading contributor to the State Courts' workload, comprising 75.71% of State Court cases in 2024 and far exceeding civil, community justice and tribunal case filings. The reverse is true of the Supreme Court, where civil cases outweigh criminal cases. Excluding fresh filings in the SICC, there was only a modest decrease in total cases filed in the Supreme Court from 14,538 in 2016 to 13,365 in 2024. Domestic practice therefore remains a vibrant arena for young practitioners.

As you embark on your legal journey, developing specific competencies in dispute resolution strategies and emerging areas of legal practice will be vital to providing effective legal services and tapping into new legal markets. In this journey, the Continuing Professional Development (**CPD**) scheme is a vital tool to keep abreast with legal and technological developments. Resist the temptation of treating the CPD scheme as an annual "tick-box" exercise. Leveraging the training programmes offered by the likes of the Singapore Academy of Law, Singapore Mediation Centre and Singapore Law Society will not only bridge gaps in industry knowledge but also accelerate your learning of soft and hard skills.

Beyond your work as counsel, contributing to the legal and business communities is a necessary element in forging a successful career. Contribution is the gateway for market players to know your heart, mind and ability. Make your presence felt in bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (**CIArb**), Singapore Institute of Arbitrators (**SIArb**), Association of Small & Medium Enterprises, Singapore Institute of Directors and committees of both the Singapore Academy of Law and the Law Society. Civic organisations, such as the many Voluntary Welfare Organisations present in Singapore, and bodies with an international reach, such as Rotary International, are useful avenues of contribution. Many law practices and legal bodies host conferences and events ranging from panel discussions to fireside chats, all of which provide ample opportunities for young practitioners to participate and grow. Demonstrating your thought leadership through written publications will signal your interest in shaping industry conversations.

Contributing to pro bono clinics for the Legal Aid Bureau, Pro Bono SG clinics, and Community Legal Clinics at Community Development Councils is also a meaningful way to give back to the community. Pro bono work is an opportunity for young practitioners to gain practical court and trial experience and manage a file independently early on in their careers. Young lawyers can also enhance their mediation skills by contributing to the SMU Pro Bono Mediation Clinic. Other avenues to sharpen your advocacy skills include participating in advocacy training courses, including those organised by the Law Society, the Singapore Academy of Law and the NUS Faculty of Law. In advancing your proficiency in dispute resolution, gaining accreditation through institutions such as CIArb, SIArb and the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution will enhance your professional credibility as a mediation or arbitration lawyer. As you grow in tenure and experience, it is also recommended that you invest in these communities by being involved in their activities, such as by assisting in training initiatives.

The international arbitration community is receptive to young lawyers looking to establish themselves in the industry. Capitalise on opportunities in the region as well. The SIAC and the Hong Kong International Arbitration Centre (**HKIAC**) offer free membership to their young professionals' group – Young SIAC and HK45 – for individuals under 45. Members gain access to regular seminars, networking events and development opportunities. Notable events include the annual SIAC Symposium, which is a key platform for lawyers to network with global leaders in arbitration, and the HK45 Essay Competition, with winning essays being considered for publication in the Asian Dispute Review and Kluwer Arbitration Blog.[18] Further, SIArb has a Young Practitioners Network (**YPN**) for members under 40, or with less than 10 years of experience in arbitration. It promotes a strong mentorship culture through the YPN Mentoring Programme and events such as the Annual Careers Roundtable.

Free membership to young professionals' groups such as the London Court of International Arbitration's Young International Arbitration Group (**YIAG**), International Chamber of Commerce Young Arbitration and ADR Forum (**ICC YAAF**), and Young International Council for Commercial Arbitration (**ICCA**) is available to individuals under 40. These groups offer networking platforms including the YIAG Tylney Hall Symposium, writing opportunities like the YIAG Gillis Wetter Memorial Prize and Young ICCA Essay Competitions, and global events such as those hosted by ICC YAAF. Further, Young Arbitral Women is a network available to female practitioners seeking early exposure, mentorship and meaningful opportunities within the international arbitration community. Other international institutions with robust young practitioners' networks include the International Centre for Dispute Resolution, International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes and the Inter-Pacific Bar Association (**IPBA**).

Being an active member of such groups will allow you to foster relationships with like-minded peers across the globe. International bodies such as the International Bar Association and IPBA are potent platforms of contribution and connection. The writer is somewhat partial towards the IPBA, which has a greater focus on Asia and attendees to its annual flagship conference with a track record of consistent repeat attendances.

It is also useful to be accredited as a trained tribunal secretary as it will expand your understanding of arbitration beyond the perspective of counsel. Working closely with seasoned arbitrators will not only accelerate your learning but also expand your network vertically. Institutions such as the HKIAC, the Asian International Arbitration Centre and Shenzhen Court of International Arbitration offer accredited tribunal secretary training programmes. Locally, SIAC hosts virtual and in-person courses on the role of tribunal secretaries.

Finally, be acutely conscious of the power and impact of vibrant relationships. Actively cultivate this. From court clerks to judges, from the tea lady to your boss, from colleagues to opposing counsel. Treat everyone as you wish to be treated – respect, courtesy and integrity are key. Every individual in the legal, business and general community is ultimately your travelling companion, support and ally. When you can count them as meaningful friends and partners, life itself acquires a magical quality. What Singapore will turn out to be in a decade or more from now will be determined in large part by the spirit, moral values and guiding beliefs of the younger practitioners, and they will ultimately shape the destiny of the legal profession.

The writer is indebted to Joey Chee for her invaluable assistance on this article.

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Called to the Bar in 1989, Francis Xavier, SC is currently Regional Head, Dispute Resolution at Rajah & Tann Singapore LLP and practices international arbitration (both commercial and investor-state) and cross-border commercial litigation. He was appointed Senior Counsel in 2009. He is also a Chartered Arbitrator of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (CIArb). Described as "truly one of a kind", Francis is recognised for his expertise in complex corporate, banking, property, aviation, and investment-related disputes. He has a track record of being involved in novel and unprecedented cases and has appeared in significant matters before the Singapore International Commercial Court (SICC), including its very first case.

[1] Registered under Sections 36B, 36C, 36D and 176(1) of the Legal Profession Act 1966.
[2] Legal Services Regulatory Authority, E-Services Portal (last accessed 20 January 2026).
[3] Data retrieved from The Law Society of Singapore.
[4] Legal Services Regulatory Authority, E-Services Portal (last accessed 20 January 2026).
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] Clifford Chance with Cavenagh Law, Ashurst with ADTLaw, Herbert Smith Freehills with Prolegis LLC, and Simmons & Simmons with JWS Asia Law Corporation.
[7] Final Report of the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee (8 January 2025), para 44(b); Adrian Tan, President of the Law Society, Address at the Opening of the Legal Year 2023 (9 January 2023), paras 15-18.
[8] Law Society of Singapore, 'Sustainability in Practice: 2024 Annual Report - Admissions' p.97.
[9] Jeffrey Chan Wah Teck SC, "Liberalisation of the Singapore Legal Sector", ASEAN Law Association 10th General Assembly.

[10] Queen Mary University of London, White & Case, '2021 International Arbitration Survey: Adapting Arbitration to a Changing World'.
[11] Queen Mary University of London, White & Case, '2025 International Arbitration Survey: The Path Forward: Realities and Opportunities in Arbitration'.
[12] Singapore International Arbitration Centre Annual Reports, 2016-2024.
[13] See Order 2, Rule 4 Singapore International Commercial Court Rules 2021.
[14] Chapter 9, "*The Singapore International Commercial Court and Arbitration"* in *Charting New Waters: The Singapore International Commercial Court After Ten Years* (2024).
[15] BRICS + 'Bahrain Launches International Commercial Court Modelled on Singapore System' (11 Nov 2025) <https://neweconomy.expert/news/261161/> (last accessed 20 January 2026).
[16] Singapore Courts Caseload Statistics 2016-2023; Singapore Courts Annual Report 2024.
[17] Singapore Courts Annual Report 2024.
[18] HK45 Website 'HK45 Essay Competition' <https://hkiac.org/hk45/hk45-essay-competition/> (last accessed 21 January 2026).

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Entering a 200-Year Profession and Shaping What Comes Next

To the 2026 cohort:

Congratulations on your call to the Bar!

As Co-Chairpersons of the Young Lawyers Committee (YLC) of the Law Society of Singapore, we welcome you to the profession.

Your path from university, through training, to finally becoming lawyers has been longer and tougher than those who have come before you. As the first batch of the year-long training period, you have gone through so much uncertainty. We know it has been difficult in many ways, and you deserve to fully celebrate this milestone.

Entering a 200-year-old profession shaped by generations of lawyers before you can feel daunting. We wanted to leave you with three short reminders that will hopefully lighten that weight.

First, you are so much more than your job.

Your worth as a lawyer and even more importantly, as a person, is not defined by the number of hours you bill or the number of likes you get on your LinkedIn post. You are not defined by one bad draft, an overlooked typo, or the feedback a partner gives on a bad day.

Instead of measuring yourself and others by wins and losses, we hope you find more meaning in how you showed up as a friend, colleague, and mentor. You will meet so many along the way who will show you generosity, patience, and kindness in big and small ways. Accept their kindness with an open heart, and one day when you are able to, we hope you will pass on the kindness to another.

Second, you can define success in your own way.

You will receive advice from so many people on what you should or should not do, who you should or should not be. They may be well-meaning, sincere, and even come from people you trust. But their advice is based on their version of success, their lived experiences, and their own privileges and challenges. It may be true for them but that does not make it true for you.

We hope that you will find a version of success that is true to yourself and your own values. That can mean continuing to nurture hobbies outside of work, dedicating time to pro bono causes that you are passionate about, and making sure you have enough energy to be fully present for family and friends.

Finally, it is safe to reach out.

Both of us have each told ourselves so many times “no one else would have made such a mistake”, “how could anyone do such a thing”, “maybe I’m just not cut out for this”. There have been so many moments where the fear and anxiety have felt crippling and never-ending. Lawyering is an old profession, and that means whatever mistake you’ve made, someone else has done the same.

It can be easy to lose perspective in the moment. We hope you find your tribe both within and outside the profession to keep you grounded and remind you of what is important.

Community is much more than belonging to something — It is about doing something that makes that belonging matter. You do not just belong to the legal profession; You are the legal profession and what you do makes the legal profession. We look forward to building the legal profession with you.

Once again, congratulations on your call to the Bar and we hope to celebrate with you at the YLC’s mass call party!

Darryl Chew Zijie
Co-Chairperson, Young Lawyers Committee
The Law Society of Singapore

Darryl Chew is a Singapore-based litigation lawyer, with a primary focus on family, criminal and commercial disputes. He graduated from the University of Southampton (2016) with First Class Honours and was admitted to the Singapore Bar in 2018. He was named as one of the Family Law Rising Stars (Singapore) in the 2024 Doyle’s Guide for Family & Divorce Lawyers. Beyond practice, Darryl is an active contributor to the legal profession. He has been serving on the Council of the Law Society of Singapore since 2022, and he co-chairs the Young Lawyers Committee and the Middle Category Committee, as well as serves on various other committees of the Law Society of Singapore.

Charmaine Yap Yun Ning
Co-Chairperson, Young Lawyers Committee
The Law Society of Singapore

Charmaine Yap is a white-collar defence and investigations lawyer and Co-Chair of the Young Lawyers Committee. A graduate of the NUS Faculty of Law and admitted to the Singapore Bar in 2019, she is currently a Fulbright Scholar pursuing her LL.M. at Columbia Law School, with a focus on transnational justice and corporate accountability. Beyond her legal practice, Charmaine is a passionate advocate for migrant worker rights, climate justice, animal rights, and social protections for vulnerable communities. She drafted the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act and the first parliamentary motion declaring a climate emergency, and successfully advocated for the inclusion of illegal wildlife trafficking under the Organised Crime Act. She also serves as a pro bono lawyer with Justice Without Borders and Project X.

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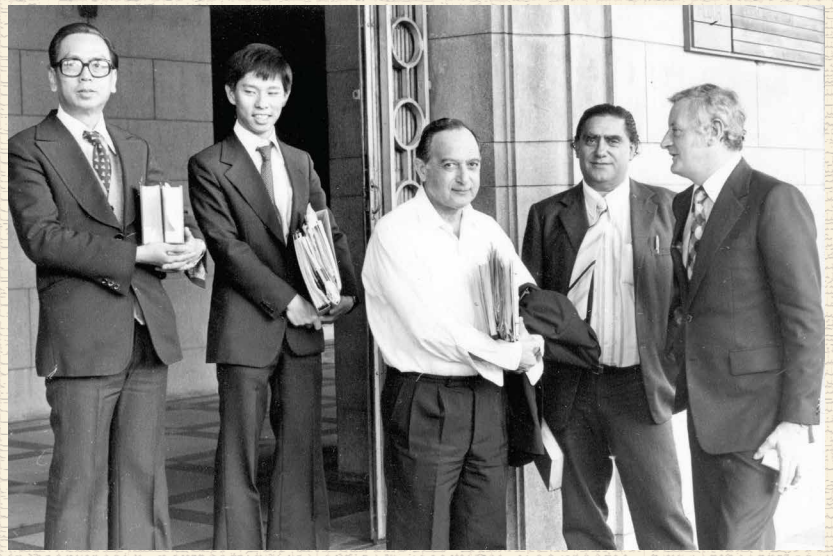
Looking Back

When a long career comes to a close, one may wonder quietly as to what legacy one has left behind. A legacy is an endowment of the riches that one accumulates from learning and experience, and it is offered, without conditions, to the generations that come after us, to benefit them the way we had benefitted from those who come before us. The hope is that the initial capital of knowledge and wisdom may generate a self-sustaining interest, growing far more fruitful than the original seed. A legacy can only sprout after one dies, for, until then, it remains a work in progress.

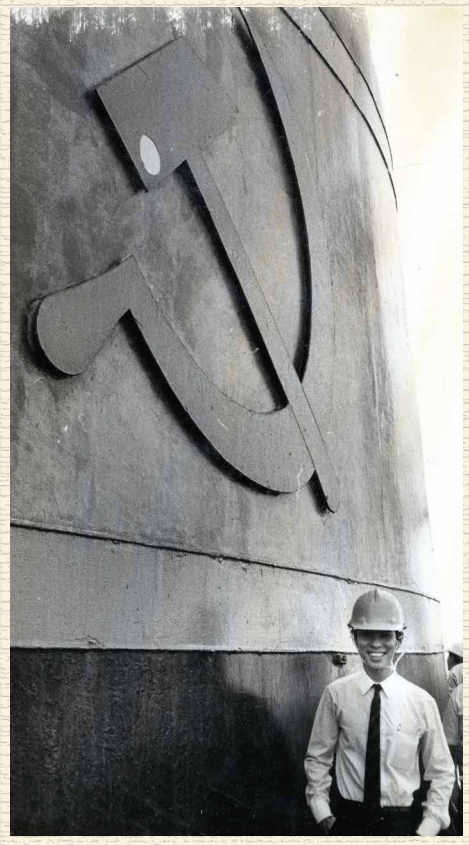
Science can be a major disruptor of life and culture. Scientific progress is inexorable and therefore, some of the more valuable lessons we can leave behind concern how one deals with the changes that have taken place over the years. When I left student life and entered the profession as a pupil (now known as a 'practice trainee') on 1 April 1979, I was introduced to a practice world filled with nostalgia of Englishness – judgements of English judges and their habits (their wearing apparel, robes and wigs and all). Pupils in conveyancing practices are shown reams of old conveyancing documents, all neatly and beautifully written in cursive, often by the firm's clerks. Those documents of title are invariably adorned with colourful stamps representing paid 'stamp duties'.



1979 – Defence Team in the Slater Walker Case
From left: Dr Albert Myint Soe, Justice Choo Han Teck, Mr Howard Cashin, Mr Awther Singh (expert accountant), and Mr Richard Tarling (extreme right), director of Slater Walker, whom the team represented.

In the tradition of the barrister, advocates here practise their court craft in like vein, weaving their client's story in the examination-in-chief like a master storyteller, and then relishing the cross-examination of opposing witnesses as they end their performance in court. Finally, ending his case with an eloquent closing speech. Indeed, the final submissions as we know it today were often referred to as 'the closing speech'. Where the opening speech that precedes the calling of one's first witness is the oratory of promise – the promise of what evidence counsel will be adducing, the closing speech is a reminder to the court of promises made and fulfilled, draped with the call for justice for the client.

Looking back, in 1979, we had just graduated from a law school structured in the traditional British university's style of purely academic courses. There were no courses on how to appear in court or what to say when we get there. There were also no courses on how to draft documents required in the practice of law. We had basic lessons on how to do research, and even that was mainly teaching us how to read library catalogues and find citations of cases.



1983 – Public Inquiry into the Sentosa Cable Car Accident
Justice Choo Han Teck (then in practice) with Mr Howard Cashin representing Keppel Shipyard at the public inquiry into the Sentosa cable car accident involving the rig Eniwetok. The inquiry was presided over by Justice Lai Kew Chai.

We taught ourselves how to write case summaries because the photocopying charge for a page of a law report cost twenty cents – the same price as a bowl of fish ball noodles at that time. I did not see a facsimile machine and a faxed document until the early 1980s. We were careful with our drafting, inexperienced as we were, because mistakes were time consuming – we had to redraft copy by copy, either by hand or the old typewriter. Even the ones that allow instant correction came around the time of the fax machine. There was no spellcheck and proof-reading required two persons – one to read aloud and the other to follow and spot the mistakes.

1986 – National Institute of Trial Advocacy Programme, Harvard University
Justice Choo Han Teck with three third-year Harvard Law School students assigned to him as tutor during the National Institute of Trial Advocacy teacher training programme.

What we did have then were seasoned lawyers trained in the old school, lawyers who were skilled in analysing the cases – that is, the cases they were representing their clients, and not just the cases they needed to cite to the court. They were also skilled, in very individual ways, in the manner in which they presented their cases. They were the epitome of trial advocates. There were at least two or three of such counsel in the big and medium sized firms. Furthermore, Queen's counsel were also engaged, especially by firms that do not have a strong local counsel. Young lawyers have much to learn, and many to learn from. And because of that, young lawyers get their baptism of fire in court very early in their career. My own solo trial came in the second month after I was admitted to the Bar.

Decades later, as we entered the new millennium, not only had practice been changed but so has the curriculum in the study of the law. We now have courses on legal drafting and basic courses in trial advocacy. Evidence-in-chief is exchanged by way of affidavits, eroding, in some ways, the skill of eliciting a litigant's story. It also affects the cross-examination because counsel has more time to plan what he hopes to achieve in cross-examination. The result is that courtroom drama becomes less dramatic, and more technical. Artificial intelligence has taken over research and drafting. It is also playing a big role in the analysis of legal issues.

1989 – Allen & Gledhill Justice Choo Han Teck with his associates Ms Pauline Gan and Mr Lek Siang Pheng during his years in practice at Allen & Gledhill.

1995 – Helen Yeo & Partners
Justice Choo Han Teck with partners from
Helen Yeo & Partners shortly before his appointment to the Bench.

1 April 1995 – Swearing-in as Judicial Commissioner
Justice Choo Han Teck taking his oath as Judicial Commissioner before
President Ong Teng Cheong, with Chief Justice Yong Pung How and Justice Judith Prakash present.

The advent of the email and other electronic means of communication had produced a far greater volume of documents for discovery and, accordingly, greater scrutiny and inquiry through the discovery and the interrogatory process. We began practice by drafting our letters and other documents by hand, and sometimes by dictating to the secretaries. The ubiquitous presence of the personal computer saw the end of dictating letters.

Although the explosive expansion of documents is being handled by artificial intelligence, the modern lawyer will have to discover how he stays relevant when there is hardly any area in the teaching and the practice of law that is not dominated by the brain in the laptop. I believe, however, that the human brain itself is an indomitable organ. It will find a way through the new paths opening up every year.

Choo Han Teck

Justice Choo

Justice Choo Han Teck was first appointed Judicial Commissioner of the Supreme Court of Singapore in 1995 and subsequently elevated to Judge of the High Court in 2003, serving until his retirement in 2019. He has since been re-appointed multiple times until his retirement from the bench on 20 February 2026. Over his distinguished judicial career, Justice Choo has presided over matters spanning employment law, revenue law, tort, criminal law, and family law. As one of the more senior judges on the High Court bench, he has played a pivotal role in shaping family law jurisprudence in Singapore. He has served as President of the Military Court of Appeal since 2004 and is a member of the Singapore Academy of Law's Publications Committee.

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