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# Crisis as opportunity: legal career paths at two historical turning points in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

This article investigates the career trajectories of Hong Kong solicitors during two historical turning points, specifically 1994–1997 and 2018–2021, when hundreds of lawyers left private practice to pursue alternative career options such as business and finance, government and politics, or relocation to other countries. Data are sourced from the career mobility records of law firm partners reported in 336 monthly issues of the *Hong Kong Lawyer* journal between 1994 and 2021, as well as other relevant archival sources. The research examines the underlying forces that led these law firm partners to abandon their high-status positions and pursue alternative career paths during these pivotal moments in Hong Kong's history. The findings suggest that the career trajectories of these elite professionals are not solely based on individual choices but are also shaped by their social origins and the physical and social spaces that influence their careers over time. This study contributes original insights into the complex interplay between individual, spatial and temporal factors that drive career mobility among legal professionals.

**Keywords:** career; Hong Kong; lawyer; profession; turning point

The making of lawyers' careers is often understood as a process involving capital conversion or elite reproduction (Dezalay and Garth 2021; Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Nelson et al. 2023; Vauchez and France 2020). Nevertheless, the extent to which major political or economic events and other exogenous shocks impact the careers of legal professionals remains largely uncharted territory. These pivotal moments often compel individuals to make significant career decisions, which can ultimately determine their professional and personal trajectories. While politicians may seize power during a revolution or fade into obscurity, and capitalists may either thrive or suffer during an economic crisis, the influence of such historical turning points on lawyers' careers presents a fascinating inquiry. Amidst these crises, numerous lawyers may opt to preserve their conventional practices and career paths, finding comfort in the

status quo. Conversely, some lawyers challenge convention and choose to embark on new careers, relinquishing the status and capital they have accumulated within their profession.

How do lawyers change their career trajectories at historical turning points? This study uses the case of Hong Kong solicitors to investigate this theoretical question. We focus on two turning points with comparable historical significance to Hong Kong, a postcolonial city that has experienced major political transformations while maintaining its status as an international financial center. The first period (1994–1997) consists of the years leading up to the city's sovereignty “Handover” from Britain to China in 1997. It signifies Hong Kong's transition into a postcolonial era under authoritarian rule. The second period (2018–2021) covers the turbulent years of the US–China economic decoupling, the anti-extradition law amendment bill (anti-ELAB) protests, the coronavirus pandemic and the passage of the National Security Law. The 2019 anti-ELAB protests reflect “a major tectonic shift in local society and the global political economy” (Hung 2022: 8). The pandemic and the enforcement of the National Security Law have further changed the social, political and economic landscapes of Hong Kong.

A doomsday narrative pervaded both historical turning points. During these periods, hundreds of lawyers departed from private practice in Hong Kong, seeking alternative career options such as business and finance, government and politics, or relocation to other countries. Remarkably, this exodus included many solicitors who had attained partnership in some of the world's most prestigious law firms, achieving a distinguished level of income and status within the legal profession. It raises the empirical puzzle at the heart of our study: what underlying forces led some law firm partners to abandon their high-status positions and pursue alternative career paths amid the two major historical turning points in Hong Kong?

Our analysis draws on a unique data source, namely, the career mobility records of law firm partners reported in 336 monthly issues of *Hong Kong Lawyer*, the official journal of the Law Society of Hong Kong (HKLS), from 1994 to 2021. Using HKLS's official records, LinkedIn profiles and other publicly available sources, we constructed a database of the career trajectories of 347 partners who left the Hong Kong legal profession during the two historical turning points (1994–1997 and 2018–2021) and analyzed them both qualitatively and quantitatively. We find that the career paths of these elite lawyers are not only the results of individual choices but also shaped by their social origins and the physical, social and legal spaces in which their careers unfold over time.

While the existing scholarship on legal careers typically emphasizes various forms of capital held by individual lawyers (Dezalay and Garth 2002; 2010; Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Nelson *et al.* 2023), our theoretical approach is spatial and processual. To demonstrate this new approach using an analogy, the professional labor market can be envisioned as an expansive body of water consisting of various rivers and streams representing career trajectories, spanning across multiple physical and social spaces over time. However, not all legal professionals possess equal opportunities. Some enjoy advantages in pursuing specific career paths due to factors such as race, gender, family and educational backgrounds, or other forms of capital (Nelson *et al.* 2023). Moreover, the flow of professionals in the labor market is influenced by the spatial landscape in which their careers are embedded. A historical turning point can be compared to

an earthquake that dramatically alters the landscape of resources, opportunities and challenges. As the tremors cause water to surge, individuals react by leaping onto diverse streams. Some lawyers relocated from Hong Kong to alternative locations, changing the physical space of their work while remaining in the social space of law. Others stayed in Hong Kong but shifted their careers from law to business, government or other social spaces. These two spatial processes, *relocation* and *rerouting*, establish the foundation of our analytical framework and direct our empirical analysis.

### The spaces and temporality of professional career mobility

An examination of lawyers' career decisions during pivotal historical moments necessitates addressing a broader theoretical question concerning human actions in scenarios referred to by American pragmatists as "fork in the road" situations (Dewey 1929; 1958; Joas 1996; Sendroui 2022). A "fork in the road" situation represents not an abstract philosophical concept but tangible events that unfold within specific spatial and temporal contexts. Sociological studies of the life course emphasize that individuals' life courses are embedded in historical times and spaces (Elder 2003; Elder et al. 2003; George 1993), considering how major historical events such as the Great Depression and World War II (Elder 2019[1974]; Hareven and Masaoka 1988) can serve as turning points in people's life trajectories. Although life course theory acknowledges the cohort effects of historical forces and social institutions, its primary focus on age and generations implies that it does not directly scrutinize the sociohistorical impact on the career mobility of particular professions.

Turning points, as Abbott (2001: 258–59) argues, "have duration and extension" and "are best envisioned as short, consequential shifts that redirect a process." Individual choices at turning points are "made in a context of many others' choosings" and social structures are produced by these "networks of actions" (Abbott 2001: 253, 255). Following this processual perspective and incorporating insights from life course theory, our theoretical approach to professional career mobility at historical turning points emphasizes the spatial and temporal processes that limit human agency, channel individual actions and generate different career trajectories.

High-status professions like doctors or lawyers often achieve a high degree of social closure by controlling the production of professionals and how professionals provide services (Abel 1989; Larson 1977). Yet, occupational structures in the labor market are shaped by the flows of workers within and across "mobility boundaries," which "partition occupations into groups within which mobility is frequent and across which mobility is rare" (Cheng and Park 2020: 578). The mobility boundaries of professional careers do not end at the boundary of a profession's social closure. The legal profession is closely connected to business and politics, with many revolving doors in between (Dezalay and Garth 2021; Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Vauchez and France 2020). Leaving the profession is not simply a result of losing the promotion tournament in law firms (Galanter and Palay 1991; Kay 1997), certainly not for those lawyers in our study who had already made partners. To understand how and why lawyers move from law firms to other jobs demands a processual approach that examines their job sequence and spatial mobility both before and after a turning point.

Legal careers unfold in a variety of physical and social spaces over many years. Career mobility is often examined as vacancy chains of jobs (Chase 1991; White

1970), interfirm mobility within a profession (Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Galanter and Henderson 2008) or geographic mobility between locations of practice (Dinovitzer and Hagan 2006; Harrington and Seabrooke 2020). Conceptualizing career mobility as the flow of lawyers across spaces and time acknowledges that career trajectories are influenced by both historical events and the physical and social spaces in which lawyers operate. During a crisis, many lawyers adhere to conventional career paths, but some choose to pivot their trajectories and explore new territories. These decisions are made within and across spatial boundaries and are also shaped by the sequence of jobs and the accumulation of capital leading up to the turning point (Dinovitzer and Garth 2007; 2020). The historical timing (Elder 1994), sequence of events (Abbott 1995; 2001) and their progression in physical and social spaces play a crucial role in understanding career trajectories.

In comparison to other professionals, there is an additional aspect of space relevant to lawyers' career mobility. Jurisdiction not only serves as a sociological concept denoting the boundary of professional work (Abbott 1988) but also as a legal concept indicating the boundary of law practice and judicial authority. Every lawyer operates in a legal jurisdiction, which typically corresponds to the physical location of their practice, although not always. This is particularly true for transnational lawyers licensed in New York or England and Wales who practice common law globally (Flood 2007; Harrington and Seabrooke 2020; Silver 2011). As a result, when a lawyer transitions from one job to another, it can involve alterations in the physical, social or legal spaces of their practice.

We classify the spatial changes to lawyers' professional careers into two main types: *relocation* and *rerouting*. First, a lawyer may stay in the profession but *relocate* to a different geographical location or legal jurisdiction. This is most common among expatriates who work in different offices of global law firms (Quack 2012; Silver *et al.* 2009), but it is also observed for lawyers who emigrate from one country or province to another. At historical turning points, people migrate to escape ongoing or potential crises, such as the Jewish lawyers who moved from Quebec to Ontario in the 1970–1980s amid the exodus of English speakers from Montreal (Dinovitzer 2006). Second, a lawyer may stay in the same location but *reroute* from a law firm to a different industry or sector, such as government, business or non-profit. This rerouting from the legal profession to another social space can be risky and unpredictable as the lawyer would lose much social capital accumulated through years of practice, but there are also well-established exit routes from law firms such as in-house counsel and government legal staff (Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Liu 2012; Nelson and Beth Nielsen 2000; Wilkins 2012).

Not all lawyers follow conventional routes, however. Some lawyers transition to politics during periods of democratization, postcolonial struggles or civil rights movements (Halliday *et al.* 2007; 2012; Marshall and Hale 2014). Others become entrepreneurs to capitalize on business opportunities in national and global markets (Hoang 2022; Vauchez and France 2020). Additionally, some pursue unique career options in fields far removed from law, such as writing, music, culinary arts or art collecting. To comprehend these atypical career trajectories, it is important to examine not only the lawyers' demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status but also their life experiences and work histories, as well as their navigation through diverse social and physical spaces in preparation for their departure from the legal profession. Professional and personal networks function as social structures that facilitate

professional flows across spaces and alter their directions during key turning points. However, professional flows are more complex than a mere aggregation of network ties. To fully understand the social process in which a professional career progresses, it is essential to consider its temporality, that is, how various life experiences, social networks and demographic characteristics intertwine to form a sequence of events, ultimately culminating in a significant career shift at a historical turning point.

In sum, relocation and rerouting represent two overarching spatial changes in professional careers. In both scenarios, a lawyer's career shifts across multiple physical or social spaces. At historical turning points, opportunities in certain spaces become available to specific individuals, not solely due to adherence to traditional paths or taking bold, innovative steps but also because their career flows across spaces create openings or closures. Consequently, the "fork in the road" metaphor may not be the most fitting for contemplating career changes at such junctures. A more suitable analogy might be a "splash in the water," wherein each individual discovers a unique path within their spatial and temporal constraints. Similar to the flow of water, individual career trajectories inherently exhibit an element of randomness. Consequently, focusing on the spatial and temporal patterns of professional flows is a more fruitful approach for understanding career mobility, especially in times of uncertainty.

### Local elites and transnational professionals

In professional career mobility, why are certain opportunities accessible to specific lawyers but not others? Addressing this question requires an understanding of the social differentiation of lawyers within a professional service market. Most existing theories classify lawyers according to their client types (Heinz and Laumann 1982), practice areas and settings (Levin 2004; Nelson and Nelson 1988), social and educational backgrounds (Dinovitzer and Garth 2007) or political connections (Michelson 2007; Vauchez and France 2020). Gender, race, age and immigration status are all significant factors that shape lawyers' career paths (Nelson et al. 2023). For example, women generally are less inclined to relocate to another country compared to men as they often shoulder more family responsibilities and encounter greater obstacles working abroad (Kay and Gorman 2008). Older lawyers tend to seek more flexible positions as a transition toward retirement, compared to their younger counterparts. Numerous such career shifts are well-established paths within the legal profession or between the legal profession and adjacent social spaces in business and government (Dinovitzer and Garth 2020).

In global cities such as New York, London or Hong Kong, the presence of "transnational professionals" (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020) and global law firms (Silver et al. 2009) adds another layer to the internal stratification of the legal profession. Local and expatriate professionals occupy different niches of the legal services market, often facing distinct career opportunities and risks. White expatriates generally exhibit greater mobility than local lawyers, as they are less entrenched in local networks and benefit from the symbolic capital associated with their race (Nelson et al. 2023; Wilkins and Mitu Gulati 1996). In Hong Kong, for example, the enduring legacy of British colonialism continues to favor Anglo-American expatriates in the job market even after the 1997 Handover (Holdsworth 2002; Leonard 2010).

Compared to local practitioners, transnational lawyers generally enjoy better access to physical migration opportunities by relocating to different offices of global law firms. They can easily traverse national boundaries and continue their practice in another branch of their firm in their home country (e.g., UK, US or Australia) or another global city abundant with work opportunities (e.g., Singapore or Dubai). Although both local and transnational elites possess comparable educational and licensing credentials, the majority of relocations are comprised of white expatriates, as subsequent analyses will demonstrate. In addition to crossing national borders, these transnational elites also have access to a wider range of professions for rerouting their careers after a turning point, such as becoming writers or chefs. It is uncommon for local lawyers to embark on such adventurous career paths.

Local elites do hold certain advantages over expatriates. They are more deeply embedded in local business and power networks, which facilitates client relations and broadens the scope of their practice. Many local elite lawyers possess a combination of global and local education and work experiences, often holding advanced law degrees from UK or US schools in addition to their first degrees in local universities. As a result, they can integrate Western “know-how” with local “know-who,” an advantage that Dezalay and Garth (2002; 2010) find in their studies of Latin American and Asian legal elites. Furthermore, decolonization strengthens the power and status of local elites over Western expatriates, as observed in Hong Kong during the two decades following the 1997 Handover.

Local lawyers tend to reroute their careers along well-trodden paths within the legal profession without leaving the locality, such as joining legal departments in adjacent social spaces like government, business or non-profits. Relocating abroad is both economically and socially costly for these local elites, as they are deeply embedded in local networks and highly reliant on local clients. Even for those local elites who did leave their practice and relocate elsewhere, they often maintain institutional or work ties to their home city or country, such as serving as consultants to their old firms or assisting their clients with expanding business overseas.

Compared to transnational lawyers, local elite lawyers have access to a wider range of jobs in adjacent social spaces to law, such as government offices and statutory bodies or in-house counsel in local or national firms. In contrast, when expatriates reroute their careers, their options are often limited to in-house positions in multinational companies or financial institutions. There are also a small number of lawyers who can be considered hybrids of local elites and transnational professionals, as they possess both strong local networks and extensive overseas educational and work experiences, often starting from elite boarding schools or International Baccalaureate schools as teenagers. These hybrid professionals enjoy the broadest career options among all lawyers.

The distinction between local elites and transnational professionals adds a new layer to the existing classification systems of the legal profession, which primarily focus on aspects such as client type, gender, race, or social and cultural capital (Heinz and Laumann 1982; Kay and Gorman 2008; Nelson *et al.* 2023; Wilkins and Gulati 1996). Furthermore, this distinction connects lawyers’ capital and other personal attributes (Dezalay and Garth 2021; Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Nelson *et al.* 2023) to the physical, social and legal spaces of their practice. Local and transnational lawyers occupy distinct positions within these spaces, resulting in their careers following divergent paths

over time. Examining the interplay between various forms of capital and different types of spaces provides a fresh perspective for understanding legal careers.

### Data and methods

*Hong Kong Lawyer*, the HKLS's official journal, was our primary data source for constructing a database of lawyers' career mobility. From 1994 to 2021, the HKLS published 336 monthly issues of the journal. Every issue had a section on "Partnerships and Firms," which provided comprehensive and accurate records of law firm partner mobility. Based on the official records, we created a database of 11,368 partner moves in and out of law firms in Hong Kong during the 28 years. Note that our database focuses on partners only and does not include law firm associates or barristers, because Hong Kong barristers are separately regulated from solicitors and the *Hong Kong Lawyer* journal did not report on the mobility of associates.

The selection of this archival source arose from necessity, as the COVID-19 pandemic rendered fieldwork in Hong Kong infeasible, and many Hong Kong lawyers became reluctant to accept interviews after the enforcement of the National Security Law in 2020. Virtual interviews via Zoom also proved to be challenging and ethically problematic, as the National Security Law made it a criminal offense if a person unlawfully provides state secrets or intelligence concerning national security for a foreign country or an institution, organization or individual outside China (Article 29). This law placed potential informants at serious risk when communicating with international researchers. As ethically responsible researchers, we must not expose our subjects to such risks. Consequently, we could not explore the personal and emotional aspects of lawyers' decisions to leave private practice in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the monthly partner mobility records in *Hong Kong Lawyer* provide not only a comprehensive roadmap of legal careers in Hong Kong but also an excellent entry point for examining individual professional trajectories over time.

To investigate how lawyers changed their career trajectories from law firms to other jobs, we created a sub-dataset that focuses on the attrition of partners. Attrition is defined as partners and sole practitioners ceasing private practice in Hong Kong for at least 12 months. Under this definition, 1,708 attritions of partners were recorded in 28 years. *Hong Kong Lawyer* provided three types of basic information regarding attrition: lawyers' names, the law firms they left and the dates of their exit. To collect additional information of these lawyers' career trajectories, we developed a coding scheme to trace and code their biographies. We drew primarily on publicly available information, including the lawyers' resumes, their HKLS profiles, law firm websites, LinkedIn, as well as news reports, personal websites and other relevant publications.

Three main types of biographical data were coded: (1) demographic data, including age, gender and observed race; (2) professional qualifications, including educational backgrounds and admitted jurisdictions; and (3) next job and current (or last) job after a lawyer left private practice, including sectors and locations. Due to limited information on lawyers' race, we coded observed race based on their names and appearances in profile photos. This coding method is imperfect, as it does not account for multiracial or other racially ambiguous individuals. However, as Roth (2016) suggests, despite the inconsistencies among different measures of race, each may contribute to our

understanding of different aspects of inequality. In this study, we observe a significant discrepancy in the allocation of relocation opportunities between white and non-white lawyers. As a result, we decided to include the observed race in our analysis, despite its limitations.

A qualitative approach was employed to closely examine the career paths of lawyers who left Hong Kong law firms during the two historical turning points (1994–1997 and 2018–2021). Although we selected four years for each period, the two turning points differ in nature. The 1997 Handover was an anticipated event since the 1980s, making the four years leading up to it most relevant, as lawyers could plan their career moves beforehand. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic was unforeseen, and the 2019 anti-ELAB protests and the US–China economic decoupling were sudden disruptions for many Hong Kong lawyers. Therefore, we opted for 2018–2021 rather than earlier years to examine the recent turning point. In total, there were 101 attritions during 1994–1997 and 246 attritions during 2018–2021. We managed to trace the career trajectories of 56 (55.4%) and 140 (56.9%) lawyers at their respective turning points who moved to other social or physical spaces after leaving a Hong Kong law firm. It can be argued that lawyers from larger and more prestigious firms were overrepresented in the traced attritions, as they were more likely to have visible public profiles. This is a significant reason why we employed qualitative analysis as the primary research method, supplemented by descriptive statistics, since any statistical inference would be problematic due to the elite bias in the relatively small sample of traced attritions.

It is important to note that, contrary to popular belief, the total number of attritions during the two historical turning points is not significantly higher than that in other four-year periods from 1998 to 2017. The period from 2002 to 2005 had the highest total attritions at 307, while the periods from 1998 to 2001 and 2014 to 2017 also recorded higher attritions at 283 and 292, respectively, compared to the 2018–2021 period. Interestingly, the four years preceding the 1997 Handover witnessed the lowest attrition rate in the 28-year data span. In other words, fewer partners left Hong Kong law firms during the two historical turning points than during less turbulent times. Although this may seem counterintuitive initially, it implies that seasoned legal professionals are more likely to change their careers during prosperous times rather than during crises. However, as our empirical analysis will show, some lawyers who altered their careers during the two turning points did so due to context-specific reasons associated with the historical events.

The gender ratio of partners who left private practice was strikingly similar at both turning points, with approximately 27% women and 71% men (1–2% were unidentifiable). This ratio aligns with the gender distribution of all partners in Hong Kong. According to the HKLS, in November 2016, 27% of partners were women, a ratio that had remained stable since the mid-2000s (Chu 2016). From 2016 to 2021, there had been a slight increase in the percentage of women partners, reaching 30% (Law Society of Hong Kong 2021). In terms of age, however, the 2018–2021 cohort was noticeably older than the 1994–1997 cohort for both men and women. Although we lack official age data for all law firm partners in Hong Kong, it is plausible that the Hong Kong legal profession as a whole aged over the two decades following the 1997 Handover.

Our data analysis reveals that relocation and rerouting are not mutually exclusive. During 1994–1997 and 2018–2021, 41% and 33% of traced attritions rerouted to other career paths, while 30% and 40% relocated to other cities or jurisdictions without



leaving legal practice. Additionally, 20% and 21% simultaneously moved across social and physical spaces. It is also worth noting that five lawyers remained in Hong Kong but shifted their practice to a different legal jurisdiction during 2018–2021. They officially became nonpracticing solicitors in Hong Kong and worked in offshore firms from jurisdictions such as the Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands and Marshall Islands to advise on cross-border transactions, thereby contributing to what Hoang (2022) terms the “spiderweb” of global capitalism.

### Relocation: the paths elsewhere

Relocation is a common response when facing a major historical turning point such as the 1997 Handover or the COVID-19 pandemic. At both turning points, relocation accounts for at least half of the traced attrition of partners from the Hong Kong legal profession: 28 (50%) between 1994 and 1997 and 85 (61%) between 2018 and 2021. Nonetheless, not every lawyer in Hong Kong possesses the same geographic mobility. Anglo-American expatriates, primarily white men, continue to be the most advantaged transnational professionals in navigating the regional and global spaces of the legal profession (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020). Global mobility is a gendered and racialized privilege, even among elite professionals.

During both turning points, approximately 60% of the relocated partners continued their private practice outside Hong Kong. Among the various paths to relocation, it was common for partners to transfer to another office within the same law firm. During 1994–1997, 13 out of 17 partners (76%) who relocated their practice continued to work in the same law firm. Meanwhile, 28 out of 50 partners (56%) made an internal transfer during 2018–2021. Overwhelmingly, the opportunities of internal transfer were open to white men who received UK or US legal training. Only one woman in 1994–1997 and six women in 2018–2021 were internally transferred to other jurisdictions. The educational histories of these lawyers also provide insight into their national and cultural backgrounds. In the 1994–1997 cohort, none of the 13 partners who made internal transfers was educated in Hong Kong. Similarly, among the 28 internally transferred partners in 2018–2021, only two received at least part of their legal education in Hong Kong.

Elite Anglo-American law firms offered more internal transfer opportunities than other firms. In 1994–1997, all but one of the internal transfers were made within UK law firms such as Allen & Overy, Herbert Smith and Simmons & Simmons. UK law firms continued to offer the most internal transfers in 2018–2021, accounting for 20 out of 29 (71%) internal transfers during this period. While only one internal transfer occurred within a US law firm (Baker & McKenzie) in 1994–1997, six such internal transfers were made in 2018–2021. It corresponds to the increasing presence of US law firms in Hong Kong in the 2000s and 2010s (Liu et al. 2022). By contrast, no Hong Kong law firm offered any internal transfer to its partners in both periods, as few of them had an overseas presence.

Although internal transfers are routine practice in global law firms, during historical turning points they also reflect the firms’ strategies to navigate changing global environments. The career trajectory of Greg Burch is a good example. Burch was among the first group of American students to travel and study in China in 1979 after the two countries re-established diplomatic relations. After completing

his J.D. at the University of Texas, Burch's practice has focused on advising China-related international businesses. He was admitted to practice in Hong Kong in 2014 and became the Managing Partner of Texas-based law firm Locke Lord's Hong Kong office in 2019 when multiple partners left the office. Locke Lord closed its Hong Kong office in 2020. Subsequently, Burch returned to Texas and remained a Locke Lord partner.

Burch's career path was shaped by the changing US–China relations over the past four decades. China's economic reform since the late 1970s opened a myriad of business opportunities for China-specialized professionals like Burch. The 1997 Handover did not deter multinational corporations or professional service firms from Hong Kong (Hung 2022). On the contrary, following China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, US law firms had extended their presence to Hong Kong and other Chinese cities (Liu 2008; Liu *et al.* 2022; Stern and Li 2016). Yet, these opportunities appeared to vanish with the rapid deterioration of US–China relations in the late 2010s. The 2019 anti-ELAB protests and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the retreat of US lawyers and firms from Hong Kong.

Edward Epstein and Eric Szweda, two partners in the Hong Kong offices of Troutman Sanders, were also affected by the stream of US firms' exit from the China market in 2018–2021. Troutman Sanders opened offices in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing in 1997, 2007 and 2013, respectively. However, all three offices were closed in May 2018. Unlike Burch, Epstein and Szweda left Troutman Sanders and stayed in Hong Kong. Epstein, an Australian lawyer who had spent more than 30 years in the Greater China region and fluent in Chinese, became a Hong Kong barrister in 2019. Szweda took the General Counsel positions at Polygroup, a large consumer goods company, and KD Capital, a venture capital firm.

The experiences of these three lawyers exemplify how geopolitical shifts generate crises and opportunities in professional careers. As the tide in US–China relations shifted dramatically in the late 2010s, lawyers like Burch, Epstein and Szweda found themselves compelled to make abrupt career transitions. Swimming in the river of the globalizing legal profession, they were drawn to Hong Kong when the city served as a gateway for inbound foreign investments into China (Hung 2022). However, when US investments began to veer away from China, resulting in a crisis for American law firms in Hong Kong, their career trajectories diverged. One of them returned to the US, while the other two remained in Hong Kong, leaving their firm to explore new professional opportunities.

Whereas only 13% of partners who exited Hong Kong in 1994–1997 relocated to an Asian destination, 38% chose an Asian destination in 2018–2021. Erica Chong Yee Mee was another partner affected by the closure of a US firm's Hong Kong office. Chong joined Orrick as a trainee solicitor after completing her law degrees from the University of Hong Kong in 2007. After working in the firm for more than a decade and passing the California bar in 2017, she finally made partner in 2019. Yet, Chong was only in the position for 20 months when Orrick closed its Hong Kong office in August 2020. Instead of transferring to another Orrick office or joining another law firm, Chong moved to Singapore in September 2020 and became the Director and Senior Counsel of Zimmer Biomet, a global medical technology company, thus changing both the physical and social spaces of her legal career.

Indeed, Singapore became a popular destination for the partners who exited Hong Kong in the recent historical turning point. In 1994–1997, only three partners in our data relocated to Singapore, while 12 partners did so in 2018–2021. In April 2021, Christopher Betts, an Australian lawyer who practiced in Hong Kong for two decades, became the General Counsel of Grab, a Singapore-based ridesharing company. Betts was visiting his family in Australia when he got the job (Seah 2021). He moved to Singapore directly and bypassed Hong Kong because of its COVID-19 restrictions, leaving most of his possessions behind (Seah 2021). In addition to Singapore, other Asian destinations also gained popularity in 2018–2021. While no partner relocated to mainland China in 1994–1997, seven moved to mainland China and 18 transitioned to other Asian cities in 2018–2021. For example, Annabella Fu van Bijnen, who had practiced at the UK firm Linklaters for 18 years, left Hong Kong in June 2020 to join a boutique Chinese law firm in Shanghai.

Aside from geopolitical and professional considerations, relocation decisions are also personal. The case of Elizabeth Gomersall illustrates how some professionals may prioritize family needs over career advancement. Gomersall is the wife of Stephen Bradley, a former British Consul-General to Hong Kong in 2003–2008. Born in Hong Kong, Gomersall married Bradley in 1982 and they have two children (National Archives 2003). Bradley worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London until 1987–1988 when he took a special unpaid leave to join Guinness Peat Aviation in Hong Kong to be with his wife, who was working as a lawyer there (Yiu 2008). From 1988 to 1993, Bradley extended his stay in Hong Kong by serving as Deputy Political Adviser to the Hong Kong government, followed by another year of unpaid leave from the FCO (Yiu 2008). In 1995, FCO called Bradley back to London. At that time, Gomersall was a partner of Johnson Stokes & Master (JSM), one of Hong Kong's largest law firms. She quit her job, left Hong Kong with her husband (Yiu 2008), and never returned to the legal profession. For the next 15 years, Gormersall embraced her role as “the wife of a diplomat” (Kong 2017), and the couple returned to Hong Kong in 2003. It was not until 2010, when Bradley opted for an early retirement from the British Diplomatic Service and decided to stay in Hong Kong, that Gomersall opened a hat-wear boutique in the city (Kong 2017).

Gomersall's story underscores the family and gendered aspect of global professional mobility. It exemplifies the coordination between a couple in relocation and career advancement, as their professional careers unfolded simultaneously. Gomersall's husband first made career compromises for her to extend her legal career in Hong Kong. In turn, Gomersall ended her legal career and devoted herself to being a diplomat's wife. Subsequent analysis will reveal that Gomersall was not the only woman who ended her legal career in the 1990s to become the full-time spouse of a politician. However, it is challenging to track most female partners who made similar decisions in our dataset, as they typically do not maintain a public profile after departing from the legal profession.

### Rerouting in-house: the well-trodden paths

Unlike relocation, which changes the physical space and legal jurisdiction of a lawyer's practice, rerouting shifts a lawyer's career from law firms to another social space in the same locality. These alternative spaces for lawyers' careers are usually adjacent to

law. In our data, most partners moved into law-related jobs in business corporations or government offices. We observe a notable “in-house counsel movement” (Wilkins 2012) in recent years, with many more partners going to corporate jobs in the 2010s than in the 1990s or 2000s. In this section, we examine the partners who went in-house in either private or public sectors within Hong Kong.

The global trend of in-house counsel growth has been evident since the late 20th century (Edelman and Suchman 1999; Liu 2012; Wald 2019; Wilkins *et al.* 2020). The increasing need for legal support within companies and government agencies, alongside the growing demand for cost-effective legal services, has led to the creation of numerous in-house positions for lawyers worldwide, including Hong Kong. Between 1994 and 1997, 13 law firm partners transitioned into in-house roles; the majority (eight) joined the government, while five entered the business sector. In contrast, between 2018 and 2021, 35 partners assumed in-house counsel positions, with the majority (30) joining the business sector and only five joining the government. This shift highlights the recent surge in corporate in-house positions and the declining appeal of government roles, which may be attributed to a decrease in interest in politics and public service among Hong Kong lawyers following the recurring political unrest of the 2010s. The next section will delve further into this topic.

The decision to take an in-house job can result in significantly different career trajectories for lawyers. Generally, entering the public sector offers greater stability but less financial reward compared to working in law firms. In comparison, transitioning to the business sector can be a pivotal step for lawyers seeking to advance their careers within the corporate world. This distinction may account for the gendered patterns observed among lawyers who chose these paths in the 1990s. Between 1994 and 1997, our data show that seven women and only one man joined the government, including the Housing Department and the Department of Justice. Some of these lawyers eventually attained prominent positions within the public sector, as exemplified by the cases of Raymond Tang Yee Bong and Alexa Lam Cheung Cheuk Wah.

In 1996, then 54-year-old Raymond Tang, a partner of M K Lam & Co, was appointed first as the Chief Counsel and then as Special Counsel to the Chairman of the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC), Hong Kong’s watchdog for its securities and futures markets. Tang worked in the SFC until 1999, but his public service continued afterward. He served as the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data in 2001–2005 and then became the Chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission from 2005 to 2010. Alexa Lam also joined the SFC after leaving private practice and eventually became its Deputy CEO. During her tenure at the SFC, Lam actively promoted the integration between the mainland Chinese and Hong Kong markets. After departing from the SFC in 2015, Lam took up a position teaching law at the University of Hong Kong. She continued in this role until 2018, when she became the CEO of Asia Pacific for ICI Global, a global association of regulated funds.

Both a local elite and a transnational professional qualified in Hong Kong, New York, and England and Wales, Lam represents an exceptional case of an individual traversing both public and private sectors. However, it is far more common for lawyers to transition into in-house roles exclusively within either the public or private sector. Betty Choi Man Yee, for example, left the US firm Baker McKenzie in 1997 to join Walt Disney Company Hong Kong, taking on the position of its Parks and Resorts Chief Counsel. Later, Choi became a senior executive of Hong Kong International Theme Parks. Other

lawyers who took in-house positions in business around the 1997 Handover also rose to senior management positions eventually. For instance, in 1996, Sandy Yung Sheung Tat left local firm Haslings & Co. and joined the real estate giant Sun Hung Kai Properties when he was 37 years old. He made a meteoric rise to become its executive director in 2009 and played an important role in managing the group's business strategy, risk management and compliance.

The landscape for in-house counsel changed significantly in 2018–2021. In addition to the previously discussed reversal in the number of lawyers joining public and private sectors, the gender ratios also shifted. While women were more likely to enter the public sector and men the private sector during 1994–1997, conforming to the traditional stereotype of government lawyer positions as feminized (Kay and Gorman 2008), the gender ratios for both sectors in 2018–2021 became more balanced. During this period, two women and three men joined the public sector, while fourteen women and sixteen men transitioned to the private sector.

Another notable difference between the two periods lies in the industries that lawyers opted to explore. Apart from traditional corporations like airlines and property developers, 16 (53%) of the lawyers in the 2018–2021 cohort joined investment, information technology and financial technology (fintech) firms. Jeanette Chan Kim Yum serves as a prominent example of those who ventured into the fintech industry. After completing her legal education in Canada and the US, Chan worked for more than three decades in Paul Weiss, a prestigious Wall Street law firm, starting in the New York office in 1986 and becoming a partner in the Hong Kong office in 1998. She was the first female Asian partner of the firm. In 2016, Chan became the firm's first Managing Partner of the China Practice and ran its Beijing and Hong Kong offices. In particular, she was a long-time legal counsel to Tencent, a Chinese information technology giant (Beattie 2019). In August 2019, Chan left Paul Weiss to join Airwallex, a fintech startup backed by Tencent, as its General Counsel and Chief Compliance Officer.

The fact that a fintech startup could hire a senior partner from an elite Wall Street firm highlights the allure of this emerging industry in recent years. However, Chan was close to retirement age when she left Paul Weiss, which potentially made the decision to join a fintech firm less risky for her than for younger lawyers. For example, Max Hua Yichun, at the age of 38, left the elite US firm Shearman & Sterling in March 2021 to join Bitmain Technologies, one of the world's largest manufacturers of Bitcoin mining chips, as its Financial Vice President and Chief Financial Officer. After the cryptocurrency market experienced a notable downturn in 2022, the future of Hua's career move appears uncertain. This suggests that, while the fintech industry offers exciting opportunities and potential for career growth, the rapidly changing landscape and market volatility can also present risks for legal professionals transitioning from established law firms into this emerging sector.

In conclusion, transitioning to an in-house role remains a prevalent and secure career option for lawyers leaving private practice, both during ordinary times and periods of uncertainty. This well-trodden path generally requires minimal creative action (Joas 1996), as even those lawyers who ultimately attained high-ranking positions in government or business experienced largely stable and predictable career trajectories. These professionals all benefitted from the expertise and client relationships

they accumulated in law firms over the years, which served as valuable assets when making the critical decision to reroute their careers.

### Rerouting to politics: the paths of thorns and roses

When lawyers reroute their careers during historical turning points, they envision the future amid uncertainties. While uncertainties can be perceived as threats by some, they can also be viewed as opportunities by others. In contrast to the well-trodden in-house paths, a small number of lawyers ventured into politics in the years leading up to the 1997 Handover. By reimagining the new world post-Handover, these lawyers made career decisions that placed them in uncertain spaces and times. Politics represented such a space, with its institutional forms facing the possibility of dissolution and reconstruction due to the Handover. Two decades later, this space underwent further transformation with the 2019 anti-ELAB protests and the imposition of the 2020 National Security Law in Hong Kong.

Lawyers who ventured into politics during these periods had to navigate the shifting institutional structures and balance their roles as legal professionals and political actors. As a result, their career trajectories were often less predictable and more exposed to external factors than those of their peers who chose more traditional paths. Nonetheless, these turning points also offered unique opportunities for lawyers with the foresight and adaptability to leverage their skills and expertise in the evolving political environment. In this section, we explore how the two historical turning points presented varying opportunities and challenges for lawyers pursuing political careers.

The 1997 Handover and the decade leading up to it marked an era of intense destabilization of the colonial political order (Flowerdew 1998; Tsang 2004), which prompted the emergence of lawyer-turned-politicians vying for control over Hong Kong's future. As the British retreated, the widespread uncertainty surrounding Hong Kong's political future was perceived as an opportunity by both pro-Beijing and pro-democracy camps to replace the departing power. Amid the political frenzy concerning Hong Kong's future, both camps required professionals who possessed the imagination and audacity to harness their expertise for political influence. Lawyers' political participation took the forms of accepting public appointments and establishing political parties – signals of political allegiance that delineated which lawyers would champion the new government and which would stand in opposition. Through the contrasting cases of Elsie Leung Oi-sie and Man Sai-cheong, we illustrate how Hong Kong lawyers navigated the uncertainties presented by the 1997 Handover.

Born in 1939 in Hong Kong, Elsie Leung grew up in a patriotic family with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Her maternal grandfather Wong Lan-Koon was a member of the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance (同盟會) founded by Sun Yat-sen (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology 2011). After moving to Hong Kong, Wong Lan-Koon founded Chung Wah Middle School in 1926 and Leung's maternal uncle Wong Cho-Fun became its principal in 1938. This school was known for its pro-CCP stance and some of its alumni became Hong Kong's leaders following the 1997 Handover, including Tung Chee-Hwa, the first Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) (Loh 2019). Wong Cho-Fun also served as a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in mainland China in the 1960s–1980s.

Leung was the 16th women lawyers admitted in Hong Kong after serving five years of articling at a local law firm and passing her Law Society Qualifying Examinations in 1967 (HKU Honorary Graduates 2016). She was also admitted in England and Wales in 1975 and obtained an LL.M. from the University of Hong Kong in 1988. Much of Leung's legal career was dedicated to practicing matrimonial law at a local law firm. In the 1970s, she played a key role in the establishment of the Hong Kong chapter of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA). She later became FIDA's International President during 1994–1996. Leung was also involved in advocating the inheritance rights of Indigenous women in the New Territories and extending the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to Hong Kong.

Leung's engagement in women interest groups intersected with her political involvement with China. She has been affiliated with the Hong Kong Chinese Women's Club and the Hong Kong Federation of Women, two women interest groups that were co-opted into the Chinese government's "United Front" umbrella to promote patriotic and nationalist interests in women's mobilization (Lim 2015; Lo et al. 2019). Following her uncle's footsteps, Leung was appointed as a delegate to the People's Congress of Guangdong Province during 1988–1993 and further appointed as a delegate to the National People's Congress during 1993–1997. Concurrently, she was appointed by the Chinese government as a Hong Kong Affairs Adviser after Chris Patten, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, put forward an electoral reform (Flowerdew 1998). After a landslide defeat of the pro-Beijing candidates in the first direct election of the Hong Kong Legislative Council in 1991, Leung and 55 other political elites founded the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) in July 1992 (Lo 1996). Stemming from Beijing loyalism, DAB vocalized support for the CCP and vied for seats in the Legislative Council during the years preceding the Handover. It remains a prominent political party in post-Handover Hong Kong.

The 1997 Handover marked a crucial leap in Elsie Leung's career, as she transitioned from private practice to a prominent political role in Hong Kong. In 1997, she was appointed the first Secretary for Justice of the HKSAR and a member of its Executive Council. During her tenure, Leung exerted significant influence over Hong Kong politics, but it was not without controversies. One notable controversy involved a vote of no confidence against her in the Legislative Council. However, this motion was voted down by the pro-Beijing camp, allowing her to continue in her position. Despite these challenges, Leung remained an influential figure in Hong Kong's legal and political landscape. Upon her retirement in 2005, Leung was appointed Deputy Director of the HKSAR Basic Law Committee and returned to her law practice as a consultant.

As a historical turning point, the Handover presented Elsie Leung with a rare opportunity to transition from private law practice to a high position in Hong Kong politics. However, this shift did not happen overnight; it took two decades of political engagement to pave her way into the HKSAR government. An important factor that contributed to her political ascent was the social network she cultivated as a matrimonial lawyer. Leung's clientele as a family lawyer included key elites in the pro-Beijing camp (Loh 2019), which helped her build connections and establish a reputation within influential circles. As Audrey Eu, a Hong Kong barrister and the founding leader of the pro-democracy Civic Party, once remarked, though many lawyers might be capable of being the Secretary for Justice, "not all of them are trusted by the Beijing Government

and Mr. Tung [Chee-Hwa]" (Hon 2002). Leung's pro-CCP family background and her political appointments in the years leading up to the Handover played a significant role for her political ascendance. Her ability to simultaneously navigate the two social spaces of law and politics over two decades prepared her for the key career move in 1997.

By contrast, the Handover appeared to be a threat for Man Sai-cheong, who left the city in 1996 after an active career in Hong Kong politics. Born in 1944, Man obtained his B.A. and M.Phil. degrees in literature from the University of Hong Kong and took a job in the public library after graduation. In 1971, Man was sponsored by the Hong Kong government to receive training in library studies in the UK, during which he became involved in the *Baodiao* movement asserting Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (Muran 2006). He returned to Hong Kong the next year and continued his work in libraries until 1976, when he opted for a breakthrough in his career and studied law in the UK. He was admitted as a solicitor in Hong Kong in 1980, specializing in real estate and commercial law (Muran 2006).

Like Leung, Man developed his political career alongside his legal career in the 1980s. In 1983, he became a founding member of Meeting Point, a political group that "supported Hong Kong's return to China under local autonomy and democracy" (Hung 2022:124). The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 incentivized Man to set up the political party Hong Kong Affairs Society in collaboration with Albert Ho, another pro-democracy solicitor who later became an influential figure in Hong Kong politics. Both Meeting Point and Hong Kong Affairs Society were embryonic political parties with limited resources and small memberships. Yet, they were significant in representing "a movement of political participation from below in a period of liberalization, decolonization and democratization, the harbingers of the party movement in the 1990s" (Ma 2007:137).

In 1985, Man was appointed to the Hong Kong Basic Law Consultative Committee, an official body consisted of 180 Hong Kong residents to canvass public views on the drafts of the Hong Kong Basic Law. He was then elected to the Provisional Urban Council responsible for managing municipal services on the Hong Kong Island in 1986 and the Eastern District Council in 1988. The Chinese government's crackdown on the Tiananmen student movement in 1989 further galvanized Hong Kong democrats to form a united party to prepare for the first ever direct election of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong in 1991 (Ma 2007: 138). Man paired up with pro-democracy barrister Martin Lee to lead the United Democrats of Hong Kong, a short-lived party, and both won the election. Man's early organizing work played a significant role in bolstering the democracy movement in Hong Kong, as Meeting Point later merged with the United Democrats of Hong Kong in 1994 to form the Democratic Party.

In 1996, a year before the Handover, Man abruptly ended his legal and political careers at the age of 52. He emigrated to Canada and opened a bookstore near the University of Toronto, where he sold books related to Chinese affairs. In a later interview, Man said his decision to emigrate was partly because of the threat of the Handover. However, the decision was also made from his consideration for his family and personal pursuit. He said, "I love literature, traveling, reading, music. I have a lot of hobbies and interests that I share with my family. Yet, in those years, I had to give them up because of work. Not just me, my family also gave those up because of me" (Muran 2006).



Back in 1966, Man was offered a job at the Commercial Radio Hong Kong, which he turned down because his family would like him to get a civil servant job with a higher and more stable income (Muran 2006). After three decades, in 1997, he was invited by Fairchild TV, a Canadian Cantonese broadcaster, to narrate the Hong Kong Handover ceremony (Muran 2006). It led him into a new career in the media and he became a talk-show host at CHKT, a Chinese-language radio station in Toronto. In 2005, Man was appointed as the CEO and Director of News of CHKT. He passed away in Toronto in 2015 after two decades of peaceful life in Canada. Meanwhile, several of his pro-democracy lawyer peers, such as Albert Ho and Martin Lee, continued their legal and political careers and gained prominence in post-Handover Hong Kong. In 2021, both Lee and Ho were convicted for their roles in the pro-democracy movements (Ho 2023).

The divergent fates of Elsie Leung, Man Sai-cheong and Man's pro-democracy colleagues offer telling cases of how a major historical turning point like the Handover can open or close spaces for lawyers' political careers. Leung's pro-Beijing stance secured her a remarkable career in high offices after 1997, while for pro-democracy activists like Man Sai-cheong or Albert Ho, the decision to stay in Hong Kong politics was risky and uncertain. Looking retrospectively, Man's choice to abruptly end his career and relocate to Canada before the Handover might have saved him from potential political persecution two decades later. His decision highlights the difficult choices that lawyers and other professionals had to make during this tumultuous period in Hong Kong's history.

The Handover also opened a gendered pathway for women lawyers to engage in politics. In contrast to Elsie Leung, who remained unmarried for her entire life, two women ceased their legal practice in 1994–1997 to become the spouses of politicians. In the pro-Beijing camp was Regina Leung Tong Ching Yee, the wife of Leung Chun-ying who served as the third Chief Executive of the HKSAR during 2012–2017. Born in 1957, then Regina Tong met Leung Chun-ying at an alumni event of Bristol Polytechnic in 1978 and the couple married in 1981 (Next Magazine 2012). While Leung Chun-ying became politically involved with the pro-Beijing camp, Regina Leung was qualified to practice in Hong Kong in 1983 and joined the law firm of Gallant YT Ho, a notable pro-Beijing lawyer with strong mainland China ties (Next Magazine 2014). She left the firm in 1994 and only briefly practiced as a partner of Raymond Ho & Co between 1998 and 1999. When her husband ran in the 2012 Chief Executive election, Regina Leung told the press that she left private practice and became a full-time homemaker in the 1990s as her son started primary schooling (Next Magazine 2014). In the 2000s, she mostly resided in Britain to take care of her children. As the spouse of Chief Executive during 2012–2017, Regina Leung took up positions of patrons of various not-for-profit organizations.

In the pro-democracy camp was Carol Chen Suk Yi, the wife of Alan Leong, a prominent lawyer-politician who served as the Chairman of the Hong Kong Bar Association, a Legislative Council member and the second leader of the Civic Party. The couple met when they studied law at the University of Hong Kong (Law and Ko 2007). They were married in 1987 and have three children. Chen was admitted in Hong Kong in 1985 and joined the corporate law firm JSM, where she later became a partner. In 1995, a year after she gave birth to twins, Chen left JSM and became a homemaker (Law and Ko 2007). After that, she did not engage in any long-term, full-time employment. However, Chen worked as the campaign manager for Margaret Ng in the 1995 Hong

Kong legislative election and then for Audrey Eu in the 2000 bi-election (Law and Ko 2007). Although Chen has never taken up any official political position, she remained active in the election campaigns of the Civic Party.

Whereas the turning point in 1997 generated a flurry of political activities among lawyers, there was a glaring absence of law firm partners turning to Hong Kong politics in 2018–2021. In our data, the only person who paused private practice to engage in politics in this period was Michael DeSombre, an American lawyer who took on a diplomatic appointment. A graduate of Stanford University and Harvard Law School, DeSombre moved to Hong Kong in 1997, the year of the Handover. Having resided in Asia for more than two decades, DeSombre is not only a partner of the Wall Street firm Sullivan & Cromwell but also active in promoting the interests of overseas Americans in his capacity as the Worldwide President of Republicans Overseas. In July 2019, President Donald J. Trump nominated DeSombre as the US Ambassador to Thailand. DeSombre assumed his post in Bangkok from March 2020 until January 2021 when Trump left office. Afterward, DeSombre resumed his legal career as a partner at Sullivan & Cromwell.

The 1997 Handover brought along both threats and opportunities that prompted lawyers to engage in a variety of creative actions in their political involvement. However, Hong Kong's political turmoil in the 2010s has made the political path a dead end for many, especially the pro-democracy lawyers. In our full 28-year database, the last law firm partner who quit his job to pursue Hong Kong politics left his law firm in 2011 while serving as a district councilor. Meanwhile, it is common for Hong Kong lawyer-politicians, such as pro-Beijing legislators Junius Ho and Holden Chow, to maintain their license to practice law even when they are in office. This is because the practicing qualification can bolster their credibility as lawmakers and provide a professional fallback option in case their political careers face challenges. Facing the current political uncertainties, Hong Kong lawyers, including the pro-Beijing ones, have few incentives to quit private practice to fully engage in politics.

### Retouring to the unknown: the adventurous paths

Going into politics is indeed a risky career shift, but as the data suggest, it is not the most adventurous choice some lawyers have made. A few lawyers have ventured into vastly different social spaces from law, exploring unconventional career paths and industries. Despite the idiosyncrasy of these career paths, they are similarly conditioned by the opportunity structures of the specific contexts of Hong Kong in both historical turning points.

The career path of John Burdett reflects a hippie lifestyle that was mostly available to white men from the West in the late 20th century. Born in England in 1951, Burdett described himself as “a natural hippie” who grew up in “the hippest part of London” where “kids were smoking dope and dropping acid” (Algie 2018). His venture into the legal profession was not straightforward. Before pursuing his first degree in literature, he traveled across Europe and Morocco (Algie 2018). Then, instead of entering law school, he relied on 2 years of cramming to pass the qualifying exams in England and Wales (Algie 2018). Burdett practiced in London for 2 years before becoming a corporate lawyer in Hong Kong for 12 years. In 1994, he quitted JSM, the Hong Kong law firm in which he made partner, and kicked off his alternative career as a crime

novelist. The next year Burdett published his first novel, *A Personal History of Thirst*. His knowledge in both law and Hong Kong informed his creative writing. His second novel, *The Last Six Million Seconds*, was a thriller set in the weeks before the 1997 Handover. In addition to the novelist's career, Burdett also adopted a sojourner lifestyle as he split his time between Thailand and Southwestern France (Algie 2018). His geographic mobility and lifestyle reflect the unique opportunities opened to British nationals in global postcolonial relations (Botterill 2017).

David Yeo Hui Kiong's career trajectory illustrates how lawyers can make significant shifts into distant social spaces from law. Yeo, a Singapore-born lawyer, practiced as a solicitor in the Magic Circle firm Freshfields in England from 1986 to 1995 and later became a partner at Herbert Smith's Hong Kong office before the 1997 Handover. After leaving Hong Kong in 1997 and continuing as a partner in other jurisdictions, Yeo made a major career shift in 2000 by opening his first restaurant, Aqua, in Hong Kong. Yeo's high-end restaurant gradually expanded into an international chain with locations in London, New York, Miami, Beijing and Dubai. While his culinary career was not directly built upon his legal expertise, it did benefit from the lifestyle of a law firm partner who frequently traveled for business. As Yeo mentioned in a later interview (Erickson 2022), his frequent travels as a corporate lawyer allowed him to experience different cuisines, expand his cooking repertoire and shape his culinary philosophy. His passion for cooking, combined with the traveling opportunities afforded by his legal career, ultimately led him to pursue a successful venture in the restaurant industry.

Such exotic careers were rarely observed in 2018–2021. A notable case was Antony Dapiran, an Australian corporate lawyer who turned himself into an activist writer amid the political upheaval. Dapiran was a visiting student at Peking University while doing his undergraduate studies at the University of Melbourne. After graduation, he joined Freshfields and worked in its Beijing and Hong Kong offices from 1999 to 2010, when he moved to the elite US firm Davis Polk to launch its Hong Kong office. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 triggered Dapiran's exceptional political turn from an elite corporate lawyer. As he explained in June 2017, when he was hit by the police's teargas during the movement, "it was only when I was personally there, witnessing the entire event, that I realized my identity as a Hongkonger" (Stand News 2020). Dapiran began to write on the history of protests in Hong Kong and published his first book *City of Protests* in 2017. Meanwhile, he left Davis Polk to become Of Counsel at Skadden, another elite US firm. In the next three years, especially during the 2019 anti-ELAB protests, Dapiran became a prolific commentator on Hong Kong in Western media. He actively covered the 2019 protests on his Twitter account and frequently appeared on television and radio. In October 2019, Dapiran ended his legal practice at Skadden to write his second book, *City on Fire: The Fight for Hong Kong*, in which he chronicles the anti-ELAB protests with his frontline observation. He has been an independent consultant and writer since then.

The cases of Dapiran, Burdett and Yeo highlight the possibility of creative career moves for elite corporate lawyers in Hong Kong, particularly expatriates, amid political turmoil. These transnational professionals, facing the ending of British colonial rule or the diminishing autonomy of Hong Kong, found opportunities to explore more creative and exciting paths as the prospects of their legal careers in Hong Kong became uncertain. It is worth noting that no local lawyers in our data made a similar career move. The closest case, as mentioned, is Man Sai Cheong, who gave up his political

and legal careers in Hong Kong in 1996 and started a new life in media in Canada. For these adventurous lawyers, a historical turning point poses not only a threat but also an opportunity to steer their careers into new paths. Although their stories are vastly different, it is evident that their career trajectories and life courses are profoundly influenced and molded by the historical contexts and ecological settings surrounding them (Elder *et al.* 2003).

## Conclusion

In Chinese, the word “crisis” comprises two characters: the first signifies “danger” (危) and the second represents “opportunity” (機). Changing professional career paths at historical turning points encompasses both risk and opportunity. In the case of Hong Kong lawyers, some law firm partners pursued conventional routes, such as relocating to other jurisdictions or rerouting to in-house roles in business or government. Others ventured into riskier paths in politics, fintech or more creative careers as writers or chefs. Prior to the 1997 Handover, the UK was the primary relocation destination for expatriates, while the door to politics was wide open for Hong Kong lawyers. In contrast, during the recent 2018–2021 turning point, relocation destinations became notably more diverse, and most law firm partners who left the profession but remained in Hong Kong moved to the private sector rather than the public sector. During both periods, white male expatriates experienced the most significant geographic mobility, primarily benefiting from the globalization of law. Conversely, only a small number of local elite lawyers departed from Hong Kong at these two turning points. Furthermore, even when pursuing political or adventurous paths, white expatriates encountered fewer risks compared to local elites.

However, this article is not merely another sociolegal study highlighting the persistence of global inequality in the legal profession. While elite reproduction and capital conversion are compelling theories for explaining the patterns of legal careers (Dezalay and Garth 2021; Dinovitzer and Garth 2020; Nelson *et al.* 2023; Vauchez and France 2020), they fall short in tracing the dynamics of career shifts and accounting for unpredictability. By examining a wide variety of career paths at two major turning points in Hong Kong’s history, we have underscored the significance of space and temporality in understanding legal careers. Individual lawyers make diverse decisions when a crisis emerges, yet all these decisions are shaped by the physical, social and legal spaces they inhabit, as well as their social origins and the experiences accumulated over years, or even decades, before a turning point materializes. A more pragmatic approach to legal careers involves mapping out how career trajectories evolve spatially and temporally, rather than attempting to explain individual motivations or the structural limitations that lawyers face when making career decisions.

Contrary to the “fork in the road” metaphor, which implies that human action occurs in static spatial circumstances at a specific moment in time, we emphasize the dynamic and processual nature of career decision-making, taking place in continually evolving temporal and spatial contexts. Historical turning points generate seismic forces that can result in more dramatic shifts in social and physical spaces, prompting individuals to react in response to changing environments. Professional career mobility, therefore, not only involves the movement of individuals based on their capital and personal characteristics but also how individuals navigate and adapt to changes

in physical and social spaces over time. Driven by emotions, social interactions and other idiosyncratic factors, human actions are too complex and unpredictable for any simplified models devised by social scientists, particularly during turbulent times (Sendroui 2022). As researchers with limited data access and substantial ethical obligations, we must embrace this complexity and document it with humility. Nonetheless, by shifting our focus from individual action to space and temporality, this article has provided a novel perspective for investigating legal career paths and, more broadly, how people cope with uncertainty and adapt their lives accordingly.

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