

CITATION FOR THE HONOURABLE SENIOR JUDGE JUSTICE CHAO HICK TIN
AT THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER OF THE SINGAPORE ACADEMY OF LAW
(23 OCTOBER 2018)

- 1 Today, the Singapore Academy of Law honours the Honourable Justice Chao Hick Tin who, in a distinguished career spanning five decades, has held high legal office in Singapore and whose life's work has been dedicated to public service for Singapore.

- 2 Justice Chao Hick Tin was born on 28 September 1942. As a schoolboy in Catholic High School, the young Chao Hick Tin's legal aspirations arose out of a desire to "champion for justice"¹. That aspiration saw him obtaining his Cambridge Advanced Level certificate through self-study² to gain entrance to University College London to read law. In 1965, Justice Chao graduated with an LLB and then proceeded to read for an LLM, which he received in 1966³.

- 3 On his return to Singapore in 1967, Justice Chao joined the Attorney-General's Chambers⁴. In the early 1970s, Justice Chao was approached to go into private practice. When the then AG heard about it, he persuaded him to stay and as they said, the rest is history. Having chosen to dedicate himself to public service in Singapore and to resolutely protect and advance Singapore's interests, he

¹ *A Judge for The Ages* (Andrew Phang JA and Yihan Goh, gen ed) (SAL Academy Publishing, 2017) at p 6.

² *Id.*, at p 4.

³ *Id.*, at p 3.

⁴ *Id.*, at p 8.

quickly proved to be pivotal as one of the pioneers of international law practice in Singapore.

- 4 In 2017, Justice Chao retired after 50 illustrious years of public service. In those 50 years, he was Head of the Attorney-General's Chambers in 1982, Singapore's second Judicial Commissioner in 1987, Judge of Appeal in 1999, our fourth Attorney-General in 2006 and the Vice-President of the Court of Appeal in 2008⁵ among several other roles, including President of the industrial Arbitration Court between 1993 and 1999, and Chairman of the Singapore Mediation Centre between 2003 and 2006⁶. And in those 50 years, he was awarded the Public Service Medal, Public Service Star, Public Service Star (Bar) as well as the Distinguished Service Order in 1976, 1984, 2006 and 2008 respectively ⁷.
- 5 Significantly, Justice Chao was the first legal officer to be elevated to the High Court Bench without having done a stint in the then-Subordinate Courts. Additionally, Justice Chao was re-appointed to the Court of Appeal for an unprecedented five times after reaching the retirement age of 65 and holds the distinction of being the only judge to have served under all four of our post-Independence Chief Justices.
- 6 To honour Justice Chao for his service to Singapore and for his contribution to jurisprudence in Singapore, Academy Publishing published a book of essays

⁵ *Id.*, at p 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Id.*, at p 13.

aptly titled “A Judge for the Ages” in the year of Justice Chao’s retirement. The authors of the first essay in the book, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon and Judge of Appeal Justice Andrew Phang, fittingly set out three key aspects of Justice Chao’s sterling qualities as a judge – first, his judicial scholarship; secondly, his judicial temperament; and thirdly, how the integration of scholarship and temperament together with humanity makes him a role model for all aspiring judges⁸.

- 7 Of his judicial scholarship, Justice Chao exhibited a “masterly grasp of the legal material concerned regardless of the subject matter”⁹ with his judgments covering a diverse number of areas of law. His passion for justice¹⁰ meant he did “not hesitate to depart from the majority in the Court of Appeal by issuing a dissenting judgement in the interest of justice and fairness”¹¹ while his dissents were always “marked by very thoughtful and considered reflections of what the law is and the law ought ... to be”¹². It may not be a well-known fact, but Justice Chao is the current record holder for the greatest number of dissenting judgments. His record is more than double that of the next-in-line contender for the record.
- 8 However, Justice Chao’s judicial scholarship, though second to none, pales in comparison when the conversation turns to his personality and character. His “kind and courteous manner ... the mark of a true gentleman”¹³ is inescapably

⁸ *Id.*, at p 1

⁹ *Id.*, at p 15.

¹⁰ *Id.*, at p 25.

¹¹ *Id.*, at p 27.

¹² *Id.*, at p 27.

¹³ *Id.*, at p 30.

evidenced in his “thoughtful and insightful nature and his deep caring for others”¹⁴. He never lost his cool¹⁵ and he never caused any counsel appearing before him to feel small in spirit¹⁶. Counsel invariably agree that Justice Chao kept an open mind when listening to their arguments even if he eventually disagreed with their arguments and, parties usually could not disagree that they had their day in court before Justice Chao¹⁷. It is this impeccable judicial temperament that has garnered him the distinction of being “among the most respected and most loved of Singapore’s judges”¹⁸.

- 9 Within the Judiciary, Justice Chao is held in the highest esteem by his peers and colleagues for his prodigious contributions toward the development of Singapore law and his incomparable role in helping to shape the legal system. However, the regard, respect and reverence that is accorded to Justice Chao by his peers and colleagues go beyond his judicial scholarship of Singapore law. For those who were fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to interact with Justice Chao on a more personal level, they will fondly remember his wit, candour, generosity, and funny stories from forgotten times. For many, their admiration for Justice Chao is rooted in Justice Chao’s outstanding character – his humility, thoughtfulness, composure, and wisdom, among many other admirable attributes – and the humanity that he brought to his role as a judge.

¹⁴ *Id.*, at p 31.

¹⁵ Based on phone interview with Justice Kan Ting Chiu dated 21 September 2018.

¹⁶ *Supra* n 1, at p 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Id.*, at p 28.

- 10 Still, Justice Chao is more. In his personal time, he was the Commander of the Volunteer Special Constabulary and is well respected by the Hainanese community. He is an affectionate grandfather who travels up to thrice a year to the United States to be with his granddaughter. He plays tennis religiously, likes listening to Teresa Teng's tunes like 我只在乎你 (English translation: "I only care about you") and enjoys going to unassuming places like hawker centres for his favourite "*char siew siew yok fan*" (in Cantonese) (English translation: "barbecued pork and roast pork rice"). He never saw his judicial office as preventing him from initiating and taking people out for lunch. In his *makan kaki's* words, Justice Chao is the "ultimate nice guy"¹⁹.
- 11 With almost three decades on the Bench and over 600 written judgments to his name, Justice Chao's wealth of experience and his towering moral character truly makes him a "gentle giant of the law"²⁰ who is an invaluable asset to our legal system and "An Immaculate Heart in a Vessel Pristine" [一片冰心在玉壺]²¹ that shines as an example to all in the Judiciary.
- 12 The Honorary Fellowship for Life and Membership for Life that is to be bestowed upon Justice Chao today is Singapore Academy of Law's acknowledgment of his accomplishments and contributions to the legal profession and our nation. In the 30 years of SAL's history, this is only the 7th time this honour has been conferred.

¹⁹ Based on phone interview with Justice Kan Ting Chiu dated 21 September 2018.

²⁰ *Id.*, at p 29.

²¹ *Id.*, at p 3 (一片冰心在玉壺 = 冰心：比喻心的纯洁。玉壺：冰在玉壺之中，进一步比喻人的清廉正直)。

- 13 The Senate and the members of the Academy present Justice Chao Hick Tin,
Honorary Member for Life and Fellow for Life of the Singapore Academy of Law.