

Rising Star: Latham & Watkins' Kuan Huang

By Max Jaeger

Law360 (June 3, 2021, 2:02 PM EDT) -- Kuan Huang helped win more than \$1 billion for client UBS, one of the largest contract damages awards ever awarded by a New York court, while putting to rest a decade-old behemoth of a securities dispute, earning him a spot among the trial lawyers under age 40 honored by Law360 Rising Stars.

THE BIGGEST CASE OF HIS CAREER:

When UBS AG sued Highland Capital Management LP over tanked securities in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Huang was still in law school and "worrying about my decision to become a lawyer at all" given the imploding economy.

Ten years later, Huang would serve as second chair on the trial team that finally ended the sprawling contract dispute and scored UBS \$1.03 billion — after he got up to speed, that is. Latham took the case in December 2017, and Huang was added to the team about two months before the July 2018 trial kicked off. To make matters trickier, all the attorneys who had initially filed the case were long gone, he said.

"So we had to do some archeology on the way to figure out what had happened before," Huang recalled. "There were like eight or nine discrete defenses that the other side raised — one more Byzantine than the next, and I got one of the more Byzantine ones out of the list. I had to deconstruct it at a molecular level."

Persistence and a willingness to ask seemingly trivial questions paid off when Huang found a key defect in the defense he was tasked with dismantling, he said. He cross-examined Highland's lead expert witness, and the next day, a judge handed him a win on the issue, which had \$400 million on the line — 40% of the overall damages.

"I remember thinking at the time that was a lot of pressure for me — and a really big moment for my career," he recalled.



Kuan Huang
Latham & Watkins

Age: 36
 Home base: New York City
 Position: Partner
 Law school: Columbia Law School
 First job after law school: Summer associate at Kirkland & Ellis LLP

WHY HE'S A TRIAL ATTORNEY:

Huang didn't arrive at the legal profession by the typical path. First he was going to be a writer, then a fighter — but in the law, he found a balance that drew on both personal strengths.

A published author with a creative writing degree, Huang first planned to live by the pen. Then, the Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt operated a martial arts school with a friend in college and considered becoming a professional MMA fighter.

But seeing his first jury trial "knocked some sense" into him, and Huang saw how courtroom battles could exhibit the high-flying drama of the ring, especially when you have a way with words.

"I go, 'Oh, this is it. This is MMA. This is putting a choke hold on the other side and making them tap out,'" he said. "And as a trial lawyer, at the end of the day, we're just telling stories, and you're trying to be compelling. I've been able to transition those writing skills — not without a lot of effort and pain and blood — into legal writing."

WHAT MOTIVATES HIM:

For Huang, it's all about winning and honing his craft. And the more he hones his practice, the more he sees the parallels between law and martial arts.

"As I've been doing this more and more, I start to relate it back to jiu-jitsu and martial arts," he said. "I want to get as good as I can at this, what I think is a very noble and worthwhile craft: litigation and being a trial attorney."

To gauge his growth, Huang looks to mentors and fellow Latham attorneys Joe Serino and Eric Leon. During a recent securities arbitration, Huang finished a cross-examination, and Serino called him aside to tell him something along the lines of "I don't know if that was the best expert cross I've ever seen you do, because that might be the best expert cross I've ever seen anyone do," according to Huang.

"To this day, if I have a down moment, I think of that," Huang said.

HOW TRIALS WILL CHANGE IN THE NEXT DECADE:

If the last year has proved anything, it's that remote litigation is here to stay, Huang said. Gathering for proceedings becomes physically less onerous, and the ability to share and mark up documents in real time makes presenting them in court easier and more compelling, he added.

"It's a bit of a game-changer in very document-heavy cases, which all of our cases tend to be," he said. "I think in the next 10 years or so that is going to be a large part of the practice. And being facile with technology — knowing what you're doing in this remote, technological world — is going to be super important for trial lawyers."

— As told to Max Jaeger

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2021 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,400 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of April 30, 2021, to be eligible for this year's award. This interview has been edited and condensed.