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[Voice of Experience: Vivian Tsoi, Partner, White & Case](#)

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By Melissa J. Anderson (New York City)

Vivian Tsoi, Partner at global law firm [White & Case](#), sees opportunity just about everywhere, a trait which, no doubt, plays into her success working in mergers and acquisitions at the firm.

Working out of White & Case's Beijing office, Tsoi says she is amazed at the attitude of possibility that she sees in her clients in China. She said, "You can really see the growth and see how much they have learned. The level of sophistication they have achieved in just a few years is astounding. It keeps you on your toes."

"A career in Beijing was, frankly, not something I ever anticipated," she continued. "But I love being here right now."

An International Path

Born in Hong Kong, Tsoi moved with her family to Jakarta, Indonesia when she was five and began learning English. "Five years later, she said, "we moved to Tokyo and I attended an international school." Tsoi remembered her time in Tokyo fondly. "There was such a vibe of opportunity in Tokyo in the '80s. It seemed like anything was possible."

When she was sixteen, Tsoi's parents sent her to the US for school. Eventually she attended [Georgetown](#), studying at the School of Foreign Service, and graduating with a specialty in International Relations.

“All along, my family, being Chinese, considered it a good thing to become a professional, so I decided to go to law school,” she said. After attending law school at [UC Hastings](#), Tsoi moved to Honolulu and began to work at a private firm.

After about three years, she said, “I joined White & Case Palo Alto in 2000 and spent five years in the Palo Alto office. White & Case was just starting to join the Silicon Valley market [so it was an exciting time].”

“Then,” she continued, “White & Case asked me if I wanted to move to China.” Unsure about the move, she called her parents, who had since moved to Shanghai, for advice. She recalled, “Dad knew I loved growing up in Japan in the ’80s – the world was changing there, with the feeling that anything was possible. My dad said, ‘If you loved Japan in the ’80s, then you will love China right now.’ So I moved to Beijing sight unseen in October of 2005, and I’ve been here ever since.”

She continued, “I love it. Every month there’s something new going on – being able to attend the Olympics was wonderful. In five years I’ve seen tremendous change, not just in the city, but in the way our Chinese clients approach things. You feel change and advancement every day.”

For example, she explained, “Working in mergers and acquisitions, I do what is called “China Outbound,” dealing with investments overseas. I serve as a trusted advisor to companies making their first foray out of the country. It’s a very fulfilling time to be in China and it has been extremely exciting.”

Looking five to ten years ahead, Tsoi said she sees herself “in another part of the world – the next destination. I do enjoy getting to know different clients and doing M&A is a great way to meet clients in different industries.”

Advice for Women on the Practice of Law

The best piece of advice Tsoi said she ever received came from a partner she worked for. She explained, “The partner told me that if somebody on the other side is saying something, and you don’t understand, it’s not because you are stupid; they are not being clear. Just keep asking. Otherwise, you are the stupid one – for not asking them to be clear.”

She continued, “When I was starting I wish I had known that I’m not supposed to know everything. It’s okay to ask for guidance, to ask questions of your partners, to let people know that you’re learning. This is a trade – it’s called a practice for a reason: you’re learning a craft.”

Women in the industry face additional challenges, she said. “I think that women just by our nature – because we are those who become mothers biologically – we have challenges. For those of us who do want to have children, we have to plan things more carefully.”

She takes an optimistic view of work/life balance, though, explaining that it’s part of a skillset one can build over time. She explained, “It’s a skill that you hone, and never perfect, but a skill that you keep on learning.”

In fact, she said, working in M&A may provide an advantage in this area. “We may be more fortunate,” she said. “A wise senior associate told me, ‘If a deal closes, put your pen down and go home. Take advantage of the M&A cycle. There will be nights – long nights – in the office. If there’s a lull, go home. I don’t want to see you in the office. Take the precious time and do what you need to do.’”

She continued, “It’s not perfect, hopefully during the downtime you can relax, and hopefully your family can be more understanding [during the harder times].”

Tsoi believes strongly that the practice of law involves many different kinds of skills. She advised, “Work hard, observe, and learn from it. Hone your craft in the first couple of years – not just your lawyering skills but your negotiating skills. And your work/life balance skills. It’s something you have to learn how to do. Being a good lawyer involves all of that – your professional skills, and being a complete person.”

She also emphasized the importance of confidence. She said, “Take charge – a lot of female lawyers have to learn how to be able to assert themselves well in the professional environment.”

As women advance in their careers, she said, it’s important that they work hard to develop their professional style. She explained, “Everybody has a different way of advocating. During those years – the mid level years – try on different styles. It’s all a process of trying on different hats – figure out which one, or which blends, allow you to be the most effective advocate.” She joked, “It’s a skill I’m still trying to figure out!”

Tsoi also discussed the value of belonging to the firm’s women’s initiative. She said, “It’s a forum, a community, a sense of belonging, an opportunity to meet other senior associates. I’m so glad to have another place to turn to – the practice of law is not an easy one, and neither are the challenges of being a woman in law. I’m very proud to be part of the women’s initiative.”

Drawing Inspiration from the Next Generation

She also mentioned a second program she’s proud to be part of – a grant program that enables some of the firm’s Chinese associates to go overseas. She explained, “It’s so exciting for young associates to see the rest of the world and be part of the global conversation. And they all want to come back – they want to be part of the growth in China.”

In fact, Tsoi said she draws a lot of inspiration from new lawyers coming up through the ranks at White & Case. She said, “Working with my team, and a couple of different teams now, it’s great to just watch the junior associates grow and learn to enjoy the trade as much as I do. It’s great to see them grow to understand and grow to make decisions, to represent clients on their own.”

She continued, “I am inspired every year by the first year associates who tell me how excited they are to work in a global firm and do something international. In your daily life, through the years, it’s so easy to forget why you are doing this, to be amazed by all of the opportunities this firm provides. I’m refreshed by the newcomers who want to do what I wanted to do. I get inspired by that.”

