

Episode Three: Global Thinking with Peiwen Chen and Justin Chang (sponsored by White & Case).

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Isabella is an Events and Engagement co-opt for the GLSA.

Peiwen Chen is Counsel in White and Case's Hong Kong office and Justin Chang is an Associate in White and Case's Melbourne office.

Isabella: The GLSA acknowledges that the Melbourne Law School is situated on stolen Wurundjeri land of the Kulin Nation, of which sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Hi there welcome to the third episode of the Think Global: Careers in International Law podcast series brought to you by the Global Law Students Association and White & Case. This episode we explore the availability of international experience that White & Case offers, from the earlier stages of a career within the firm through toward being Counsel for White & Case looks like.

White & Case is a long-established global law firm founded in 1901 with headquarters in New York. White & Case provides services in 27 practise areas in leading markets across the world.

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Today I'm speaking to law experts from White & Case, an International law firm and GLSA sponsor. I'm happy to be here with Peiwen Chen and Justin Chang. Peiwen who is based in Hong Kong is Counsel in the Mergers and Acquisitions and Private Equity practise and Justin is an Associate in the firm's Melbourne office and a member of the Project Development and Finance Group.

Hello Peiwen and Justin and thank you for joining us today.

Peiwen: Hello thanks for having us

Justin: Hi

Isabella: Before we jump into a discussion on your legal careers would you mind briefly introducing yourselves and maybe include telling us where you grew up.

Peiwein: Perhaps ill start then. My name is Peiwen Chen. I am Counsel based in Hong Kong in the M&A Private Equity practise. I actually grew up in Melbourne, spent my whole life in Melbourne and went to Melbourne University as well, back when they still had an undergraduate law degree. After working a couple years at Allens I then moved out to Hong Kong and have been here for the last nine years. Initially I had the intention of only coming out for two to three years, like every other Aussie back then, but I am still here.

Isabella: Thanks Peiwen, what about you Justin?

Justin: Hey guys thanks for the introduction Bella. Not sure about the expert part I think that's more Peiwen and not me because I'm only a second year Associate at White & Case in the Melbourne office in the Project Finance team.

I was born and raised in Korea until about age 11 when I moved to Australia, Melbourne with my family back in 2004 and I've been in Melbourne ever since. I did an undergrad in Accounting & Finance at Melbourne Uni and then went on to do Melbourne JD.

I started my career as a graduate at White & Case and did a couple of rotations in dispute in Sydney and then went to Tokyo to do corporate M&A and now I'm back in Melbourne to do Project Finance.

Isabella: Everyone's an expert to us law students Justin. Thanks for acknowledging that, through your experience.

Before we really dive into careers in law and your work at White & Case, something we are asking all our guest is, what catalysed your decision to pursue law and start a legal career? Can we start with you Justin?

Justin: Sure, for me I think it came naturally even though we didn't have any lawyers in the family at all. When I was growing up and I was a primary school student in Korea as a kid I just generally enjoyed reading and was sort of good at Korean, the language, but I was pretty bad at Science and Math. So then pretty much all you can become is a lawyer, well that's what I thought.

Isabella: Wonderful thank you. What about you Peiwen?

Peiwen: I actually never dreamed of being a lawyer. I wanted to be an artist growing up. I think at primary school when you were asked to dress up as your idol I apparently dressed up as Leonardo DaVinci as my mom likes to show me from my primary school days. I have obviously a very traditional Asian family and they're like an Artist? That's not how we imagine your life would be.

Actually, why I picked Law back then came from, in hindsight, a really sort of funny idea, from my mom. She was just showing me this magazine about this lady based in Hong Kong who, in mom's opinion combined her love of arts as well as a law career. I think she was working at some fashion house and her background was, Commerce/Law and she worked in Hong Kong as a private practise lawyer, and then sort of moved her way up the corporate ladder and ended up becoming the CEO of Gucci group. My mom's like wow why don't you do this? I was like that's not such a bad idea you know. I always thought law was slightly boring and I'm like maybe this could be the future me. Then I enrolled in undergraduate Commerce/Law and here I am. Not quite at Gucci group but White & Case, just as good.

Isabella: Thank you so much that was really great. I guess now I would like to really dived in to discuss the steps have both taken in your career since leaving the university of Melbourne. I appreciate as much detail as possible because I think a lot of us are still trying to find out how we move forward in the world after our degree.

Peiwei, maybe if we start with you first? You've been in the field for the past ten years and now Counsel at White & Case, which is a testament to your exceptional ability in your particular practise area. You mentioned briefly your pathway from your time at University of Melbourne to your current role. Could you perhaps discuss with us what you consider to have been influential or important steps or achievements in your career that led to your current position

Peiwen: I didn't think I would still be in private practise for so long and I think the reason why I am still here, ten years later, is because I had some really inspiring people that I met along the way and really great mentors. As, I mentioned, I didn't really set out to be a lawyer growing up and I think even when I first joined private practise, I would always feel that was a little bit different and didn't quite fit the peg as a lawyer. But I just had really great mentors along the way who really encouraged me to just be different and just be the lawyer I want to be, whether that's a little bit eccentric or what not and not to necessarily follow other people's paths.

And I think I didn't appreciate how important soft skills were as a lawyer which I think was something that I naturally excel at. I think that's been really helpful in my career. The people skills and those sort of experiences I gained when I was at university for six years and I worked in retail I didn't appreciate how helpful that experience was especially now when you know there's a lot of business development and maintaining relationships with clients. I find all those experiences I didn't think much of when I was at uni actually very helpful in my career.

Isabella: That's good to know that various jobs to pick up along the way make a difference to where you're at now. I think a lot of us have jobs that we think, this is such a side track but it sounds like it's added things to your career anyway.

Peiwen: Yes, I think so. I think when I was at uni a lot my friends were paralegals, and I think that's obviously really helpful towards sort of building your legal skills sets when you're at university, but so is any other jobs or part time jobs you have along the way and the skills you build and develop in every job. I think soft skills anyway, are really helpful to have in law because on a day to day basis we do, as you so progress in law, you are facing people and handling unhappy clients. That does take a certain skill set that you don't learn necessarily in your Law degree. So I think those are sort of helpful things to bear in mind as you go about whether it's a job at McDonalds or retail or really any job handling customers is something that you could definitely apply in your legal career.

Isabella: you said two things earlier as well that I was wanted to ask you more about, the importance of mentors and dimensions you know being yourself and be the lawyer you want to be even if that's a bit eccentric or not. I would love to hear more about that as well personally because sometimes you have to be a certain type of person to be in this world. But could you elaborate on that further for me that the eccentric point.

Peiwen: Yeah sure. Maybe I'll go back to when I was interviewing as a clerk for Allens. At the time I was in Melbourne, and as I think like every other last year and I was really nervous anxious so competitive to get into a law firm. I remember I was so nervous for my interview I had to take a shot of vodka or something before my interview. In my interview I think they asked me a simple question like tell me about yourself, and I think I just ramble on from the age of three when my parents left China to the age of 20 when I interviewed. And then after 30 minutes of monologue I was like, Oh my gosh does that answer your question? and the two Partners looked at me and said Yep! And I'm like oh you know this is the end, everyone tells me don't do a monologue and I actually didn't say anything about why I wanted to work at that particular firm, I just told them my life story. Anyway I obviously did get the job and afterwards I went to these partners and I'm like why did you hire me? because I was just like, everything that could go wrong went wrong in my head. Their answer was 'you were just really weird and different' and I think that's set the tone for the rest of my career. If I had a particular view on something I would really sort of push for that. And you know I would speak up if I had an opinion which is very not so mainstream. I think it's sometimes really scary to step outside of what is considered to be the normal you know to behave a particular way. But like I

mentioned, my mentors told me that you don't have to be a particular type, there's no particular type to fit to be a lawyer. I think certainly at White & Case we do have quite a diverse range of people from all walks of life and I think we should embrace that.

Isabella: that's great thank you. So to go to your mentors again a second time. It appears that's a really important part of a flourishing career. Could you talk more about maybe that experience? Who those mentors have been or where you picked them up? And how that relationship occurred? and what you've gotten from it?

Peiwen: Some mentors develop quite naturally and I think my supervising Partner as a grad was one of them. He doesn't work at White & Case but he continues to be a really influential mentor. He was the one I think at some point my career where I said, actually I don't think you know I'm going to be Partner material at a private practise or Counsel material, I'm just a bit different. He was the one who actually encouraged me to really embrace being different and just sort of carry on be myself because that's having a diverse range of lawyers is something a firm should have.

And at White & Case I also have really great female mentors who, since I've been married, have been able to help me to manage and guide me through juggling work and life. And sort of making that work even in the very fast pace transactional environment that I work in. I think that's been really helpful because as you pursue progress you have different personal milestones and you start thinking about all these various thing. Having strong mentors do help you find a way through things even if sometimes you're like oh it's just not going to work.

Isabella: So when you say personal milestones do you mean kind of like normal life occurring outside work that you're trying to find a place for everything?

Peiwen: Correct. Whether it's being in relationship, having children those sort of things you know any other personal milestones that are significant to you outside work. I think sometimes a lot of people think private practise or working at law firm is so demanding, and that certainly was my view when I first started out and thought after a couple of years I wouldn't be able to do those hours or work in that high pressure environment and I'll go in house or I'll do something else. But for me it was these mentors in my life that showed me a way through to make it work and still have my life outside work and be able to also maintain my career.

Isabella: that's great thank you so much. So I definitely understand personal life milestones. Could you talk us through maybe some professional milestones that you've reached?

Peiwen: obviously making Counsel was a bit of a milestone. I didn't think I would get there but I have. I think for me sort of getting involved in the past couple of years in White & Case i've been involved in some very interesting deals. It is sometimes hard to imagine working on projects with 11 different officers in the White & Case network and sort of over 50 lawyers, coordinating and managing 50 lawyers. Two years ago we were involved in the Noble Group restructuring. Which was a very personal milestone deal just because of the size of it, the complexity of this restructuring and obviously restructurings are typically very emotionally draining because it's difficult to have happy people happy parties stakeholders involved when you have a restructuring. But you know that one that particular deal was a bit of a sort of career milestone in just the sheer size of the transaction, and the fact that it went on for almost two years and obviously it was completed successfully. But I think that at that point I was like wow actually you know I can do this, and I can work on a big scale deal with so many lawyers. Just on the White & Case there were at the completion call, I think over 150 people that dialled in to the completion. And just managing that process is something which I think in hindsight I'm like well I can't believe I did that!

Isabell: Right, getting to the other side and being like oh I just did this, yeah no worries what's next? Thank you so much that's interesting.

But we will move along to Justin now and ask about your career Justin if that's OK? We have we have some more specific questions about your role now as an Associate with White & Case. We'd like to know more about what that role consists of, about what work looks like on the day to day or even what a regular week looks like?

Justin: yeah right I think a lot of people say this every day every day is different and every week is different. I started as a graduate in 2019 and as I said before now second year Associate in Project Finance. As a junior lawyer in that space I'm involved in a variety of tasks for example in the recent weeks I've been assisting our partners in Singapore on a PowerPoint project in Afghanistan and that involves drafting various documents that's governed by England & Wales Law which I'm not a Lawyer in England but you know, you do it. Then you just attend calls with parties spread all over the world so when Peiwen was mentioning that the completion call, I would be one of those 150 lawyers joining the call in sitting in and taking notes and tracking the progress, managing the status of all the documents to make sure that you know where everything is and what stage they are at so nothing gets missed. Then there's another deal helping working with FRV, which is one of our long standing clients. That involves a lot of communication and coordination within internal FRV commercial team members and also the General Counsel, so I work closely with the General Counsel. And again you do a lot of variety of stuff including, like I said before; drafting documents, to sending emails to clients to attending calls. And every now and then you get some discrete tasks on other deals when another team member get busy and they need an extra hand. They'll come for your help and you just sort of drop-in you know do the task, and get back out and concentrate on your deals again

Isabella: sounds like a really busy day and a lot of different things on your plate possibly on the day or during the week so lot of balancing. I heard you reference FRV is that Fotowatio Renewable Ventures ? I probably butchered that. Could you tell me what that was?

Justin: yeah I'll butcher it as well so I won't try but it is. It's a Spanish headquartered global developer of renewable assets. In Australia they develop and so they build and operate a lot of Solar Farms across different States in Australia. Yeah so our role as White & Case representing FRV would be to help them project finance these Solar Farm.

Isabella: OK, and because I think I saw that you did a secondment with FRV, is that right? And how long was that for if that was?

Justin: Yeah so this was last year when we were in full lockdown. I was actually in my final rotation and was still you know technically part of the graduate programme in the Project Finance Team and one day Brandon Quinn the Partner that I work for called me up, I think it was on it like a Saturday, and is just, hey Justin do you want to go on secondment to a client, I said yes I started Wednesday I started on Wednesday. That went on to five months I think we were working on a Solar Farm in New South Wales it was called Sebastopol Solar Farm. I was basically working for FRV with White & Case to achieve the financial close of the Sebastopol Solar Farm.

Isabella: I mean that just sounds like a really interesting organisation that's doing good work. Is that kind of something that drove your interest in it as well?

Justin: Yeah, so I was definitely interested in the renewable energy space . It's a big industry in Australia and also globally there's a lot of financing of renewable energy projects and White & Case

in our Australian offices do a lot of renewable energy project financing. So I was sort of familiar with it and it was a real really valuable opportunity for me so early on in my career as a graduate technically to be able to you know go to a client be seconded to them and work full time with them only. It's great because you know when you're a junior lawyer working in private practise that's the only side you get to see, but when you're seconded to a client you really get to see the deal from the clients perspective and you can learn so much from, that even as a junior ,and yes I'm just very grateful for the opportunity. I am actually back with FRV now so I'm on a shorter secondment with FRV working with them on another deal so that it's good to see that relationship continue as a junior lawyer as well.

Isabella: absolutely I bet it is. you're speaking about great opportunities or interesting things you worked in Tokyo or about six months with your time at White & Case?

Justin: Yep so graduates in White & Case get the opportunity to do an international rotation as part of their graduate programme. So one six month rotation you get to do overseas and I chose to go to Tokyo which was probably one of the best decisions I've made in my life, after joining White & Case. So yeah really grateful again for White & Case for giving me a the opportunity and how they made everything so easy and seamless as well. You literally just need to pack your bags and everything else is arranged for by the firm from the visa to the service residents in one of the best areas in Tokyo. All for this one clueless grad, me who obviously doesn't give the equivalent amount of value to the firm to what the firm is doing for you, and it's all so the firm is invested in you train so that you can become the best lawyer you can become. You really get the sense that this firm is committed to doing something like that. And apart from apart from work aspect, I just had the best time of. my like in Tokyo.

Isabella: Sounds great that's a very compelling case for pursuing law firm careers. Just that kind of opportunity that comes up for you like you said that's what invest in you that's really appealing

Justin: yeah

Isabella: OK great well thank you so much. We now have some questions that we would love to hear from both of you on kind of general questions just to kind of finish this off as well. So you kind of both touched on this a little bit but maybe what is the most surprising things you've learned since beginning your legal career?

Peiwen: Surprising things. I think I did touch upon this before probably the soft skills maybe it's something that I I don't know I think sometimes when you think of a law firm or life as a lawyer you just think that you're stuck in the books and the documents that you don't talk to anyone but you actually do talk to a lot of different people. I think at least for me 80% of my job is still dealing with people, handling people and sort of difficult situations So having sort of good people soft skills is really important and common sense and I guess that you know like common sense and you know being commercial as well, you'll hear this word a lot I suppose when you apply for law firms and whatnot, being commercial is something that is actually really important. Like Justin mentioned yes clients do expect legal service, but they are a business and they want your legal advice to be something that's very practical and very commercial that they can apply to their business. So I would say those are those are very important things and yeah those would be the on the top of my list.

Isabella: yeah the words commercial awareness haunts me. I hear them in my dreams. But what I'm hearing is from you is about having a common sense approach to applying law, to the world, to business and economy is that kind of what I can understand from that?

Pewien: that's right. Obviously, a lot of the work we do in the advice we give are driven by understanding of the law but on the day-to-day basis I think if you have a good common sense that that would take you a really long way.

Isabella: Right, common sense prevails

Peiwen: correct

Isabella: what about you Justin anything that's really surprising that stands out for you?

Justin: yeah in my long legal career spending three years and a half years, I guess I was really surprised by how international this career can be if you want it that way. I always wanted an international career whether that be working overseas physically or working on international matters while being based in Australia. And that's the key reason why I chose White & Case. But even then I guess I didn't really know that it was going to be so easy. To give an example within the first year of my career as a graduate I worked in Melbourne, Sydney, Tokyo and Seoul physically and with so many international clients or multi jurisdictional cross border deals. There's just so many deals, like most of their deals like that that I can't even pick out one example, and that has been really surprising. It has been a pleasant surprise because that's what I was really looking for in my career.

Isabella: right thank you. both of you maybe what's one thing that you wishing you as a law student before entering the legal field?

Justin: yeah probably the fact that I know nothing at all and I'm going to be completely clueless about literally everything as a graduate. I mean that was the case me and others, well I hope that was the case for others too. Knowing that you will run around like headless chicken during your grad rotations, but with time you will eventually start picking things up. That gives that can give you a lot of Peace of Mind and you know can have a more relaxed mindset or open my set, absorbing things much faster and not be too anxious and stressed about it.

Isabella: that's a really good tip actually I'm sure so many of us will go in there and then be like, I'm freaking out because I don't know anything I've probably wasted the last three years of my life getting a degree that I can't use I'm stupid! So you're saying no, no everyone feels that way is that right?

Justin: literally my thoughts when I started.

Isabella: oh that's great thank you. what about you Peiwen?

Peiwen: I fully agree with that. Sometimes I still feel like that. But I think I remember when I was a law student everyone one was quite anxious in getting clerkships and grad positions and you know people applied to many law firms that they do many clerkships but I do think that sometimes people forget that you know getting the job is actually not the end game it's just actually the beginning of a career. And that you know during whether you are applying or during the clerkship periods ,people forget that it should be a two way interview that you know you're not just trying to please the law firm and you get the job you should really you need to make sure that that law firm is a good fit for you from a cultural perspective, the type of work they do. Otherwise when you do begin as a grad and you find that actually not only you know nothing because everything is so new, but you are also not enjoying your time or your career. I think then it becomes a really long road so I do encourage

everyone to really, you know rather than like Oh yeah I need to get the job I need to get the job also assessing whether this is the job for you and this is the law firm for you.

Isabella: Thank you that's really helpful to remember. OK bit of a off topic question but I see that you're both multilingual. Having a second language I imagine is just hugely beneficial when working in international law. Could you give us some examples of when that's been an asset and do you have any tips for those who are looking to improve their language skills

Peiwen: In Hong Kong on a day to day basis I speak Cantonese, Mandarin and also English, although alot deals addare in English there also deals are purely some Cantonese or Mandarin. So I would say that yeah most of my deals there is a sort of a Chinese element to it. Although not all the deals it is very very useful, especially if someone's thinking of working in Asia to have a second language. At university I studied Japanese as well so having different languages even if you're not fully fluent in them is very helpful. I remember we were working on a transaction which had no Japanese element but one of the counterparties is Japanese and they needed a bit of assistance not just from a language perspective but also from a cultural perspective and I think it's like OK Peiwan knows a little bit you know can you please help? I think you know those little small things can really help the transaction or just help with building relationship. Whether it's just purely from you know knowing OK from a Japanese cultural perspective is this acceptable is that not acceptable as well as also from a language perspective. So it is very very helpful so I do encourage people to keep it up if you already have a second language

Isabella: thank you, what about you Justin?

Justin: yes I speak Korean and also Japanese like Peiwen. My Korean I think is as good as my English almost in both speaking and writing. This has been good when I worked with a big Korean client last year to help develop an asset in Indonesia. Because it was a cross border deal, all negotiations and contract drafting were done in English and while the Korean clients they had no problems with comprehending and communicating in English sometimes there were some fine legal points that were raised in the meetings which needed further explanation to them and they had a bit of difficulty understanding. In those instances I would write them memos in Korean explaining these legal issues in Korean and how it impacts the contract. This made things run smoother for both the client and for the deal over all. Another instance is when I was rotating in Tokyo, my Japanese isn't as good as my Korean and English, but it was good enough for me to be able to network with Japanese clients over a few drinks, hold a conversation, talk about life and from time to time also help out do legal Japanese to English legal translations for foreign clients looking to do a deal in Japan. Because sometimes you know a lot of the Japanese legislations there's no English versions available then the lawyers would need to do short translations from time to time.

I can't really say much about improving the language skills I've frankly I've just been lucky in the sense that I grew up in Korea and then in Australia and picked up Japanese as a second language subject in year seven just because I thought it be easier than like learning other European languages'. When I first came to Australia in year 5 I could not speak English and they were teaching French in English as a second language so they gave me a bit of PTSD for European languages. That's why do clear Japanese. But speaking for my colleagues at White &. Case a few of them spend a couple of hours a week participating in firm sponsored language classes. I think that's a great way to keep improving and get a few extra business level phrases under your belt, ready to fire when you are with those clients.

Isabella: yeah definitely sounds like for both of you it's just been so helpful in terms of building relationships and trust as well as like working on legal documents and stuff so thank you so much for sharing that.

Our last question is just kind of a broad question maybe bit reflective question just about you know what do you think makes a good lawyer? What kind of common characteristics or skills or actions do you see from people who are really successful or working towards great success in their field?

Maybe Peiwen first.

Peiwen: that's a hard question. I don't think there is sort of one type of really good lawyer out there and you know you see so many a really diverse range of lawyers and partners especially at White & Case you know it's difficult even pinpoint whether White & Case lawyer is as it's so diverse. But for me I go back to you know like having good communication skills, I guess that's all sort of wrapped up around the soft skills, but you know having good communication skills having good common sense does go really well. Being able to help a client dissect a legal problem and making it something that's digestible instead of commercial and good communication also helps with handling very difficult situations, explaining complex legal concepts too clients or other commercial deal teams of the clients. I also see that you know having maintaining your network of contacts like, friends you meet along the way at university or high school at the end of the day a firm is a business so you having a wide range of contacts and maintaining those relationships even if they seem very primitive you know when you start up your standing on the same field people go to different places in their career. I think those could be really helpful in building your client base as you progress. I think maintaining all those different relationships is something that when you're busy you tend to forget but it is very helpful once you as you progress in your career more.

Isabella: Thank you. what about you Justin?

Justin: yeah I think Peiwen ticked all the boxes. I think one thing that comes to my mind the most right now is your ability to manage pressure and stress. I suspect this applies to most professions and I feel it is a key skill that you need to develop throughout your legal career as well. As a junior lawyer the quality of my work improves as I learn to feel calm under pressure and also speaking from my experience, I feel really lucky now to be working with the Senior Associates and Partners in my team because all of them are just so good at handling stress. It almost as if they seem like they don't get stressed at all and they're not just working there but like families and kids. Watching these guys operate has just been invaluable experience to me in multiple ways. One, your life as a junior becomes so much easier and two, after watching them you just tell yourself that you want to be just like them. I think that when you think that you're setting yourself on the right path to becoming a better lawyer for yourself as well

Isabella: thank you both I know it is a bit of an open-ended question but tricky to answer but we've just received really insightful answers and I think our listeners could possibly just even see a little bit of themselves in one of those answers and it's just really something that we can cultivate. thank you.

And I think that really wraps up our conversation today it's been really great talk with you and it's just been yet invaluable to receive insight on your work at white and case and for those of us interested in working in international law so thank you again so much for your time Justin & Peiwen.

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Isabella: thank you so much thank you for listening to this episode of the think global series. To learn more about the opportunities that Justin and Peiwen discussed today as well as more about the firm please see our Facebook page for further links to these resources.