

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

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Veteran China Practice Partner
Alex Zhang offers advice to
his younger self.

I grew up in Beijing China during one of the most difficult and turbulent times in Chinese modern history, the so called 'cultural revolution'.

Because my father and his father were both medical doctors, they were labelled intellectuals that needed to be 're-educated'.

I was seven years old when the red guards came to our house and dug up the floors looking for evidence that we were enemies of Chairman Mao's regime. They took anything that was of value and confiscated our house before my entire family was ordered to leave Beijing to complete physical labor in the countryside.

Because of my age, I was the only one allowed to stay in Beijing with my grandmother.

Life was tough. I had to constantly fight kids on the street because of my family's reputation, but there were also so many good people who offered help, including my teachers at school.

Their kindness was the motivation I needed to pledge that someday I would pay them back. I also remember my parents telling me that their hope was that I'd be a good student and make something of my life. I certainly hope I have lived up to their expectations.

Fortunately, the 'cultural revolution' in China ended in 1976 and China began to start its college enrolment program under the leadership of Deng Xiao-ping. All young people, regardless of the education history and background, were allowed to take a three-day nationwide college entrance exam.

It was perfect timing and I was one of around three per cent of high school graduates to be accepted for college education.

When I was a junior in college, my English Language teacher, Professor Liu, inspired me to consider a career in law.



In high school, 1977

“Mr. Mondale taught me a lot, particularly that being a good legal adviser was as much about earning trust and building relationships as it was about providing quality legal advice.”

He had a PhD degree in international law and, though he wasn't allowed to teach law initially, he later received approval to start a new course called International Law and Dispute Resolutions.

Professor Liu shared stories of when he was a law student in Switzerland and I was so impressed that I became the best student in his class.

I'd never have dreamed I'd go on to become an international lawyer, but my legal education continued with a three-year program at the Graduate School of China University of Law and Politics in Beijing.

What happened next changed my life. I was one of very few students to receive a scholarship from the Ford Foundation for further legal education in the United States and, even better, Professor Bob Hudec of the University of Minnesota (who was a visiting professor in my law school in China) kindly promised to be my supervising professor. So, I left China and travelled to the United States for my second round of legal education.

During my studies, I was recruited by former vice president Walter Mondale for his private practice.

Mr. Mondale had played a big role in improving China-US relationships during the 70s and he was now planning to establish a US-China practice.

The opportunity couldn't have come at a better time. During my 14 years working with him I was made partner and appointed co-chair of the Asia practice.

I came back to Asia in 1995 and helped him establish offices in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Tokyo.

Mr. Mondale taught me a lot, particularly that being a good legal adviser was as much about earning trust and building relationships as it was about providing quality legal advice.

I joined the Firm eleven years ago having been very impressed by the recruitment process. The regional section head at the time, Barrye Wall, and Head of M&A John Reiss were very persistent in convincing me that joining the Firm was the right career move for me.



Starting my legal career in 1989

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I was even more impressed by White & Case's global platform, which I saw as increasingly important as China's international relationships were growing so quickly.

Since joining in 2011, I've served as the head of China corporate and M&A practice and was the office executive partner for the Shanghai office for 10 years. I even served as OEP for both Shanghai and Beijing and headed up the China practice at the request of then head of Asia Eric Berg.

During my time at White & Case, the Firm has built a great platform and reputation in the China market and the quality of our people has never been better. I've been privileged to have been part of an exciting success story, working with fantastic clients and colleagues including John Reiss, who continues to be a great role model for young lawyers in how to treat people, be accessible and manage client work and teams.

China has become a challenging market because of the continual changes in political relationships between China, Europe and the United States. However, we have built a first-class team ready to face new challenges.

Importantly, clients trust us to protect their rights and investment in China. We will continue to grow our China practice and excel for all our clients' China-related work in the years to come.

If I was to offer career advice to my younger self it would be to invest as much time as you can in developing your network of contacts. Asia continues to value old-fashioned relationships, so having good relationships with clients or potential clients makes a difference.

I would also encourage our younger lawyers to have a plan to maintain and develop contacts with their acquaintances, including classmates and people they meet at social events, as some may be your future clients.

Secondly, I'd say always have a clear career plan and objective. The Firm is very entrepreneurial and provides a solid foundation for you to achieve your goals, but you must stick to your plan and execute your plan.



With Walter Mondale in 1995

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With my wife, Stephanie (right), elder daughter Emily (left) and younger daughter Sophia

My younger self would never have believed he'd go on to hold a senior position in a globally renowned law firm.

But I moved to the United States because I was determined to reach my goal. It was hard work but having a purpose and goal drove me forward, step by step and minute by minute, even though there were challenges along the way.

Looking back, I'm proud of what I've achieved and wouldn't do anything differently. I count myself lucky to have been part of a generation that saw China grow and change so much. I'm privileged to have been part of that journey with White & Case.

Pursuing a legal career comes with a lot of challenges and hard work and this is particularly true in China as you feel stress and pressure coming from all directions.

If I had one day where I could do whatever I wanted, I'd get away from it all, get up early, enjoy a round of golf followed by a single malt scotch and some reading in the afternoon. I live a very busy life, so to unwind and have a day of total freedom is what I love.

And, if I could have one last conversation with someone who is no longer with us it would be my father who passed away suddenly when I was traveling in the United States.

He was always there to support me in whatever I wanted to achieve in my life, but his advice to me was always subtle and implicit.

I just wish we could have a long conversation to have clarity on so many matters we dealt with together, but I'm confident that he'd say I had lived up to his expectations as his son with a good professional and family life.

I am currently living in Shanghai with my wife and two daughters and one of my daughters could be following in my footsteps as she will be a liberal art student in college in the United States this next year and she has kindly promised me to consider a legal career in future.