

# WATCHING THE DETECTIVE: WINNIE CHUNG

11 April 2018 | Alumni Insights

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**Born in Hong Kong, Winnie Chung grew up on the classics - Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie, and all the other detective novels she could find that had been translated into English or were published in Chinese.**

Little did she know then that her childhood love of these stories would lead her to where she is today. We are delighted to share with you the story of Herbert Smith Freehills alumnus Winnie Chung, Head of Investigations at AIA Group based in Hong Kong.

A childhood love of detective stories led Winnie Chung to where she is today: Head of Investigations conducting internal investigations at the AIA Group based in Hong Kong.

Winnie grew up on the classics - Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie, and her favourite other Japanese detective novels that had been translated into English or were published in Chinese. But little did she know then that she'd later be doing her own detective work for a living.

Born in Hong Kong, Winnie moved with her family to Melbourne when she was 10, later gaining a double degree in commerce and law at the University of Melbourne. Economics and business had always been of interest, but her high score in the International Baccalaureate meant her family encouraged her to expand her horizons. They were quite traditional in their approach, she recalls, advising her to study either medicine or law. She's scared of blood, however, so law was the obvious choice.

Over the course of her career, Winnie has gained experience in a range of industries. She started out as a trainee solicitor with Herbert Smith Freehills in Hong Kong, where she says she benefited greatly from meeting Frances Pryor, who interviewed her for the role. "At the time law was still quite male dominated," says Winnie. So seeing a woman as a senior partner impressed her and provided her with an excellent early role model.

Economics and business remained primary interests, however, and she found herself naturally drawn to financial services work and a period at Goldman Sachs in order to “broaden my skill set,” she says. There was also another strategic move - to Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer. Her intent was to take advantage of the opportunity to be a counsel, but also so she could experience what it would be like to be part of a smaller and growing disputes team.

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The fork in the road came when she reached the point where she had to decide if her future lay in becoming a partner in private practice or move into a different field.

It was an easy choice to make, she says. “While there are many upsides to being a partner in private practice, I wanted more time, a more balanced life, so I could also spend time with my family. I don’t need to sacrifice my sleeping!”

A former Herbert Smith Freehills partner pointed her in the direction of the AIA Group and she approached the insurance company, believing she was going into a litigation counsel role. Instead she was interviewed for a role in the Internal Audit function and realised this was a chance to learn a completely new industry.

Insurance took a lot of adjustment, but Winnie relishes the challenge. “If I’m going to make a change, then why not for something that’s different?” she says.

Winnie believes her legal training has helped her to handle her current role, and that running an investigation in private practice isn’t that dissimilar to running one in-house. “The bulk of my role today is looking after employee misconduct... so it’s like internal police type of work,” she explains. “It’s a fine balance because, on the one hand, you need to build your relationships in order to be successful, but on the other you need to stay independent because of the role.”

She also notes other advantages of her Herbert Smith Freehills training. “It was quite different from other firms. It was very rounded and after it you are naturally a multi-tasker and can withstand a lot of stress. But you also become a confident person and believe in yourself.”

Her experience as a counsel managing a small team has turned out to be invaluable too, she says, as she now heads a group of six people covering all of AIA Group’s jurisdictions. People management and team engagement are two of her main focuses. “I spend a lot of time motivating the team,” she says. “I believe in leading by example and I’m a very headstrong person, so my aim is to get the team involved in every aspect [of the work].”

She’s also insistent on transparency, making sure that while her role may be one that uncovers misconduct by staff, she concurrently ensures that her team get constant feedback and updates on process.

The main challenge and difference between her current responsibilities and those she encountered while at Herbert Smith Freehills relate to their in-house nature. “There are many more angles you need to look into before you give any kind of advice or make any recommendations,” she notes, “because you are expected to know the organisation well and you should know what may or may not work.”

Has her job led her to change her views of human nature? She says she’s always been a fairly sceptical person and that her experience with white-collar crime cases taught her to stay objective and always look at the evidence. “I think maybe ‘rely’ is the best word,” she says. “You can’t really rely 100 percent on what the client has told you, because if you look at the document and it tells you something different, you have to ask the client...”

Sherlock Holmes would be proud.

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