

INTER-PACIFIC BAR ASSOCIATION

Chicago 2025 Annual Meeting and Conference

“Transformation Everywhere All At Once: Business and Law in a Changing World”

Report of IPBA Scholar

by Mei Gong

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Without the IPBA Scholarship, this perspective-shifting experience would not have been possible.

With that in mind, I would like to begin this report by thanking the people that made this life changing journey possible. I expressly thank the IPBA Scholarship Committee, including former Chair, Mahesh Rai, the IPBA Secretariat, in particular, Yukiko Okazaki, Randa Morioka, Varya Simpson, the former IPBA President, Miyuki Ishiguro, the current IPBA President, Michael Chu, and most of all, IPBA Vice President, James Jung (whose encouragement was vital in leading me to apply for the scholarship). Additional thanks to Lauren Salas Mationg, Ashley Justice, Keval Amin and Connor Larson from McDermott Will & Emery for their generosity and hospitality towards all the IPBA scholars.

Chicago (and the US) holds a special place in my heart and in my life. On a professional level, one of the most significant, billion-dollar M&A deal I advised on as a first year lawyer during the COVID-19 pandemic involved an Illinois based manufacturer and an Australian acquirer. On a personal level, ‘Mei’ in my name is part drawn from the Chinese translation for ‘America’, reflecting my uncle’s belief that America will play an important part in shaping the global geopolitical landscape and economy (which has proven true). I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to visit this place that holds both personal and professional significance in my life, a 20 hour+ flight away from my sunny hometown in Sydney, Australia.

The deepest bond I formed during this eventful trip was with my fellow IPBA Scholars, who I met as scholars, but farewelled as lifelong friends. That bonding began even before the official start of the Scholar program when a few of us decided to spontaneously meet up to visit the famous ‘Chicago Bean’ at Millenium Park and enjoyed a cosy dinner at a Korean poke bowl place across the road from the park. That bond continued to deepen and blossom as I got to spend time with all the scholars on the first day, and then gathering with fellow scholars from time to time as part of the conference program, whether that was a chance encounter at a common conference session or a considered reunion at the amazing Wrigley Fields baseball game or the gala and farewell dinners. Memorable was also all the snippets of the city we tried to squeeze in as part of short adventures in early mornings or late night after the conference program, including time spent soaking up the peaceful ambience on a cloudless morning at Lake Michigan.

The Scholars Day program exceeded my wildest expectations. From visiting the historic Northwestern University School of Law with a regal lecture hall that was reminiscent of a magical scene straight from Harry Potter, to catching an exclusive, behind the scene glimpse of two esteemed US judges’ work days, US District Judge Sunil R. Harjani and the Honourable William Yu. Associate Judge and visiting McDermott Will & Emery’s headquarters, all of which were perspective broadening experiences. The generosity with which both judges shared their insights regarding the US justice system and provided general career advice is deeply appreciated and gratefully received. Of course, I cannot neglect to mention the wonderful breakfast the McDermott Will & Emery team helped to organise, sourced from a Chicago local favourite hotspot, Gotham Bagels.

Attending the IPBA scholar / new members reception was a valuable opportunity to make new friends, whether that is with new IPBA members, or former IPBA scholars who have gone on to achieve amazing heights in their career (and within the IPBA). The warmth and closeness of the IPBA community was immediately apparent. It was a fitting way to top off a fabulous first full day in Chicago with a baseball game between the Chicago Cubs and Los Angeles Dodgers (including catching baseball prodigy Shohei Hotani in action) on the iconic Wrigley Fields. The atmosphere was vibrant, collegiate and a surprise bonus when the IPBA delegates got a shout out on the large baseball field screens.

The opening ceremony and plenary session on the impact of tariffs on trade was a timely and important topic. It was a grand experience to be part of a 900 lawyer+ contingent in the same room, hailing from over 60+ jurisdictions. An upbeat lion dancing ceremony invigorated the room, but it was the speeches that made a lasting impression. John C. Sciacotta, President of the Chicago Bar Association remarked friendship as a core value and that “*we see our brothers and sisters as friends*”. Friendship proved one of the most precious treasures I have gained from the IPBA conference, echoing the Spirit of Katsura that is the essence of the IPBA. William R “Bill” Bay, President of the American Bar Association made a passionate plea for the importance of the rule of law which remains a cornerstone principle to uphold notwithstanding (or perhaps made even more important) in the volatile global geopolitical landscape. Bill remarked that “*2025 has not been the year US has envisioned, but it is the one we have*” and ended his speech with a compelling call to action to educate our family and friends about the importance of the rule of law and that “*together, we are stronger together*”.

Aside from finding inspiration through rousing speeches, digital economy and artificial intelligence developments proved to be another global conversation point. I heard cutting edge insights on how corporate counsels are navigating generative intelligence, sat on niche sessions that resonated with my competition practice, including exploring the overlap of competition law with data and digital ecosystems and another session pondering on national security issues and abuse of dominance in the digital space. I also got to ponder on broader cross-border legal issues that affected my clients, including IP issues in international investment and post-merger integration challenges. While these sessions all provided intellectual enrichment, it was the personal stories that ultimately left the deepest emotional impression. Across two sessions hosted by the women lawyers committee, I heard trailblazing women from around the world share their stories and tips on how to prepare for a Board seat and how to excel in a Board role, with authenticity, adversity and adaptability being key themes.

While the food offered during the conference was plentiful (and diverse), whether it was the formal three course dinner at a conference ballroom, the farewell gala dinner at the beautiful Epiphany Centre for the Arts, or even the farewell lunch, I surprisingly found myself eating far less than usual. Not from lack of enjoyment (as the food were delicious and incredibly varied), but rather from a deep immersion in the conversations that I found myself to be a part of with other IPBA delegates. Again, this speaks to the truly unique and close community, and the incredible quality of conversations I got to have in my short time.

Reflecting where I started (and where I have ended), I decided to refresh my memory of what I had hoped to gain out of the conference when I had first applied for the scholarship back in July 2024 (extracted below)

I believe there is no substitute to meeting and establishing relationships in person, particularly given the unparalleled network of engaged and respected Asia-Pacific legal professionals that is within the IPBA. Not only will attending the conference be a literal expansion of my limited world horizon (having only travelled overseas to Japan to date), it will be a potentially limitless expansion of my legal knowledge and network, aligned with my desire to increase exposure to international M&A deals, potential sustainability related collaborations and supporting international FMCG/e-commerce businesses that wish to expand into Australia (and vice versa). I also believe that attending the conference will provide me with new insights into how I can best contribute to promoting and advancing the mission of IPBA in Australia.

I can graciously say that all of the above have rung true (and more). I have indeed left with a wider view of the world, a deeper appreciation of how vast (and at the same time how close) the legal community can be, united as we are by our shared interests and lived experiences in the Asia-Pacific region, and filled with fruitful insights that I look forward to applying to promote and advance the mission of IPBA in Australia. These insights are more valuable than ever given the rapid and dynamic pace of global developments, as embodied by the conference theme “*Transformation Everywhere All At Once: Business and Law in a Changing World*”.

Most of all, I am grateful for the lifelong friendships I have made and excited by the opportunity to create more lifelong memories and friendships at future IPBA events.