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The Journey That Follows You

Interviews and Profiles



If you play basketball, you could find yourself in China someday. Maybe. In any case, basketball played a role for Brent Irvin, vice president, and general counsel at Tencent Holdings Limited, giving him an opportunity to get his first glimpse of China. Irvin played basketball competitively at Carleton

College in his home state of Minnesota, where he began his higher education before attending Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, and Stanford Law in California. Following his love of history during undergrad, he studied the rich past of East Asia at Carleton, and the idea of pursuing a study abroad opportunity appealed to him.

A lot of his classmates chose programs in Europe and South America. But Irvin wanted to explore something different, so he selected a spring semester in Beijing that allowed him the study abroad experience, while not missing out on basketball season back in the United States.

“I did it pretty much on a whim,” Irvin says. “I just decided to combine my passion for history with my interest in China. It was very different there then than it is today — I feel like there were more horses than cars on the street. It was just at the start of economic growth and reform.”

Technology, law, and lessons learned

His first job as a lawyer was as a corporate associate at the Menlo Park, California office of Shearman and Sterling. Irvin says that the importance of thinking globally was definitely a lesson he learned at Shearman, an international law firm. He learned the ins and outs of the internet during his time at Wilson, Sonsini, Goodrich & Rosati, where he began doing M&A work for Tencent, among other clients ranging from start-ups to Google. These two learning aspects gave him a foundation to make the in-house move, after Tencent extended the invitation.

He says the legal and technological aspects of his role intertwine to create interesting challenges, and often help keep him ahead of the game because technology is an area that grows so rapidly.

“Technology tends to outpace the law, and I’m often facing new legal issues relating to antitrust, IP enforcement, and privacy, to name a few,” Irvin says. “Our antitrust case with Qihoo 360, for example, ended up going to the Supreme People’s Court of the People’s Republic of China. The case addressed the important questions relating to what constitutes a ‘dominant market position’ in a two-sided market such as inter- net platform. We won, by the way.”

His basketball knowledge comes in handy too, as Irvin deals frequently with the National Basketball Association (NBA) in his current role.

“As in-house counsel, you need to work closely with and understand the business, and fortunately for me Tencent’s core products — social media, games, video, music, etc. — are all interesting and fun to use,” he says. “And as a basketball fan and former college player, having a chance to work with the NBA has been a particularly fun experience.”

No two days, or even two afternoons, are alike for Irvin. But time management, communication, and concentrating on Tencent’s structure is usually mixed into his daily professional routine. With a company of Tencent’s size, Irvin adds, it’s impossible to be hands on with too many individual cases, so his team is especially key.

“Tencent Legal is, in my opinion, a world-class team currently consisting of approximately 200 lawyers divided into teams such as IP, litigation, M&A, and content/ content protection,” he says. “In some ways, legal is involved in everything that Tencent does, especially with content in starting with its creation, or in-license, and continuing through to IP enforcement. I think Tencent will continue to be one of the world’s leaders in providing content, from games to music, to movies, to live sports.”

Working in Shenzhen

Irvin lives in a culturally diverse city near Hong Kong called Shenzhen — where Tencent's headquarters are based — and he speaks fluent Mandarin, which he began learning during college. Being bilingual is an essential component, Irvin says, when working within a China-based internet company.

“Almost everyone in a China-based company speaks Chinese during the business day,” he says. “But tech is tech, although differences may exist in this field from country to country, the overall tech language largely stays the same. I think being bilingual and understanding technology allowed me to immerse myself in Tencent, and understand the issues a technology company faces.”

It may seem like Irvin's earlier years playing basketball, learning Mandarin, and studying Chinese history somehow led him to where he is now — in fact, he still plays basketball occasionally with a college team-mate who coincidentally relocated to Beijing. But he says there wasn't necessarily a correlation or an intended path that led him to move to China. He simply followed what he had the most interest in.

“You have to find a part of the law about which you are passionate. Otherwise, the work is too hard and demanding to not really care about what you are doing,” he says.

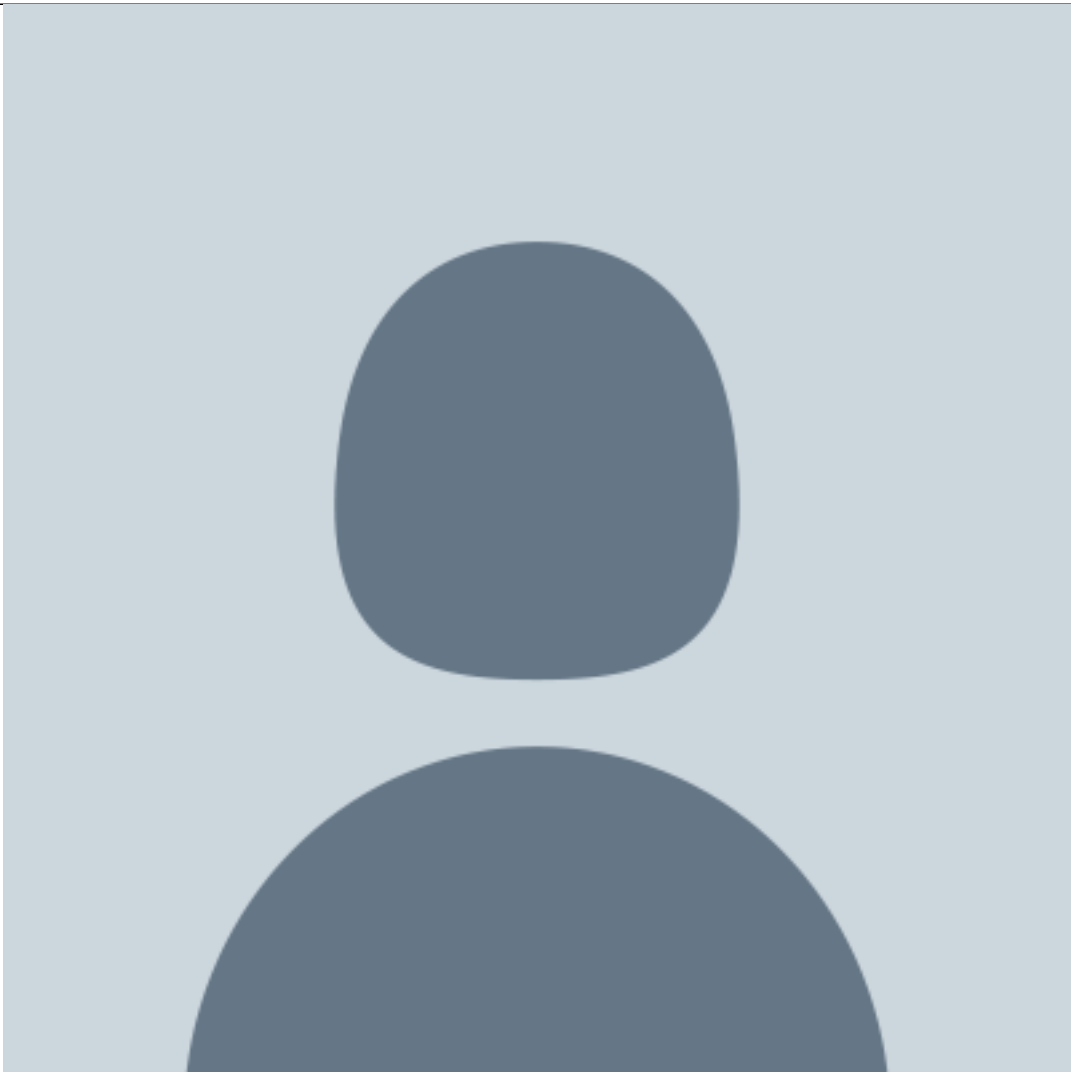
And he doesn't quite see a move back to the United States anytime soon.

“I have no current plans to leave where I am now. I love what I do and I'm happy,” he says. “Maybe I'll retire in the United States, someday. But there's still a little bit of time for that.”

INTERESTING FACTS

- Basketball is ranked the no. 2 pastime in China, and the NBA has a huge following in the Asian market.
- Shenzhen is one of the wealthiest cities in China, with clean air (for China) and a large immigrant population due to people relocating from other parts of the country to set up businesses. This conglomeration is noted in the local cuisine, where all the regions of China are represented.
- Having an open mind, not being afraid of change, and getting curious about what's different — these are key to adapting to life in Shenzhen, Irvin says.

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