



Joy in Chaos: Legal Life in Asia's Most Important Startup

Interviews and Profiles





Gladys Chun

GENERAL COUNSEL & CHIEF COMPLIANCE OFFICER,

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In Asia, there is a strong cultural desire to follow in the footsteps or choose the same career as your mother or father. Gladys Chun, who serves as general counsel for the online retailer Lazada in South East Asia, vividly remembers when her father inspired her to become a lawyer. She saw him litigate in court as a teenager and immediately fell in love with the practice. And as general counsel for a company that was recently purchased for a controlling stake by the Chinese internet giant Alibaba for US\$1 billion, her father is probably very proud of her.

Lazada is often being viewed as the Amazon.com of Southeast Asia. The Singapore-headquartered company operates in six countries: Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. In addition, they have a regional sourcing hub in Hong Kong and a technology hub in Russia. Launched in 2012, its business model emulates its American contemporary. The company had several rounds of funding as it expanded aggressively in the region, including a US\$250 million round led by Tesco PLC, Access industries, and other investors, a US\$250 million round led by Temasek Holdings in Singapore, and recently, an additional US\$1 billion round from Alibaba.

The company's growth appealed to Chun. "I wanted to be part of a startup to learn and grow with the brand over time. I saw the potential in Lazada and I believed that we would succeed," she says. Lazada gave her the opportunity to learn a wide variety of business acumen, work with executives to fundraise, and work with investors. "Lazada basically ticked most of the boxes for me," she concluded.

Growing into a giant

The legal department has grown along with the company. When Chun first joined, in early 2014, the legal department had only three people, one in Singapore, one in Thailand, and one in Vietnam. Today, it has more than 30 lawyers working across the region. Each country has a legal sector that is supported by a regional team based in Singapore. The legal department is structured this way because each country is so different in terms of their legal landscape. Although there are regional agreements like the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), each country's laws are very distinctive and present a unique set of challenges.

In addition to being general counsel, Chun is also Lazada's chief compliance officer. When asked what her biggest challenge is operating in the region, Chun shared that it isn't necessarily the complexity of the laws, but rather their lack of clarity and transparency in enforcement. It is hard to anticipate with certainty how authorities will interpret certain regulations. As the company grows into being part of Alibaba, it is her responsibility and mission to heighten the awareness of company rules and compliance processes. She sets high goals, saying: "We want to achieve the best international standards for compliance measures."

Chun hires outside counsel when specialized skill sets are required, when she needs to protect

privilege, when complex government interactions are involved, and when there is uncertainty in regional laws. For example, she hires external counsel when trying to understand how corporations within a certain regulated industry are structured in Indonesia.

One of Lazada's primary priorities is customer privacy. The company places a heightened emphasis on the protection of personal data, hiring a dedicated data protection officer to ensure its security. Further, Lazada developed standard operating procedures and controls to track data flows and address privacy concerns.

As the company and its legal department grows, Chun says it's imperative that the legal department automates its processes and innovates to work smarter and more efficiently. On-the-go approval systems and smart contracts will allow the business to work faster. She plans to establish specialized functions, which focus on privacy, platform governance, and cybersecurity issues, as she continues to expand her team.

Her goal is to build a world-class legal department as quickly as possible. At a startup, "you find peace in chaos because nothing is set up; there is no (or minimal) policy, there is no (or minimal) procedure. You're required to unleash your creativity to develop the processes that suit a dynamic business model," she says, before adding, "and it's really, really fun and rewarding."



From Malaysia to Australia

Chun was born and raised in Malaysia. Her lawyer father was a major influence in her career choice and her mother is a tai tai, an Asian term for a lady of leisure. She left for Australia when she was 16. She took a heavy course-load at the University of Western Australia, earning a double degree in law and commerce. Her commerce degree had a double major in accounting and corporate finance. "That left me with very, very little time to slack or chill," she recalls, laughing.

After being inspired by her father to become a lawyer she started watching legal dramas that only

added to her desire. Of course, she quickly realized that what was portrayed on television was far from the reality, she jokes. But more importantly, she realized it takes a lot of hard work, dedication, resilience, and perseverance to build a career. She believes in celebrating failures as a step towards eventual success. To Chun, failure pushes us to keep trying and continue to put in the effort to achieve the eventual results.

She still values her lessons from law school. The ability to analyze and rationalize issues was important but, to her, the most central message was that “common sense is really uncommon.” She went on to say that “lawyers are wired to think differently. We are weird and unique in our own way.”

Building experience

Chun’s first full time legal position was with Wong & Partners and Wong & Leow, a member firm of Baker & McKenzie in Malaysia and Singapore, respectively. She applied to an international clerkship program and was the first Malaysian to be accepted into the program. She divided her time between the firm’s offices in Malaysia and Singapore. According to Chun, the five years with Baker equipped and prepared her for broader work in Southeast Asia, as the countries are increasingly dissimilar. Chun is currently based in Singapore and according to her, the city-state is generally proactive with its laws. It anticipates issues and is at the forefront of the legislative landscape, while neighboring countries tend to adopt a wait-and-see approach.

Chun views in-house and law firm work as a “heaven and earth comparison.” Law firm lawyers are viewed as a profit center and generally take good care of its fee earners. In an in-house environment, however, you’re a cost center and the dynamic changes drastically in terms of decision-making process, she says. Despite the perceived change of prestige, Chun prefers working for the business. “I knew that a law firm would give me the required training to ensure that my fundamentals are strong, but I also knew that I had a business knack and I’ve always wanted to be closer to the business. I enjoy being an entrepreneur building businesses.”

She transitioned into a business environment in 2011 when she joined Yum! as their regional counsel, where she provided strategic guidance and legal support to the company’s KFC, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell brands. Yum!’s Asia franchise business unit supports 14 countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Myanmar, the US state of Hawaii, Saipan, Guam, American Samoa, and Fiji. She oversaw negotiation and drafting of commercial contracts while also conducting due diligence reviews, skills that she later used at Lazada. Chun also reviewed, supervised, and tracked legal compliance by franchisees. Her experience with Yum!, a US multinational company with established policies and procedures, was drastically different from her current situation with Lazada, a technology startup.

But, for now, she is enjoying the thrills of chaos of building out Lazada’s legal and compliance department. There’s nothing like peace in chaos.

Getting to know... Gladys Chun

What do you do for fun?

Unfortunately I don’t have a lot of free time in my current role, but when I can I’ll go to the gym or travel. I love to travel and see the world. I also enjoy catching up with family and friends.

What is your dream travel destination?

I just came back from Bhutan, which is an amazing country, the only country in the world that measures the collective happiness in a nation (Gross National Happiness index), and the only carbon negative country in the world. It's really peaceful and you feel very contented when you're there. There is breathtaking nature and extremely kind and warm people. I think my next stop would be Iceland to chase the Northern Lights but let's see. I'm still planning it.

Are you reading any books right now?

I'm currently reading a book on the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. The book's title is *One Man's View of the World*. The book provides insightful analysis of the amazing leader. He brought Singapore to where we are today through his leadership: His keen analysis and strategic vision made Singapore the unique force in the world today. It's an inspiring book to read.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

At this point I would like to continue to grow in my role and with Alibaba. We are doing a lot of very exciting things in the domestic and international space. There are just so many opportunities to grow within the group.

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