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My 2017 Summer at Yoon & Yang LLC

As the first UCI Law student to venture out to Korea for a summer associate (SA) program, I was very excited. However, at the same time, I did not know what to really expect. What is the role of foreign attorneys in Korea? What is the work environment like? What are the differences between working in a Korean law firm and a U.S. law firm in Korea? These were some of the questions I had when I arrived in Korea. Although I did some prior research and asked people who had experience in Korea, my ideas of working in Korea were still vague. The only way to find out was to experience it myself.

I worked at a Korean law firm called Yoon & Yang LLC (also known as Hwawoo), which was located near the Samseong station in the Gangnam district of Seoul. There were about fifteen SAs from the U.S. and Canada, and a pair of SAs shared an office room. The first surprise (more to come later) was that many of them were coming from another Korean law firm or had plans to head to another one after this program. In other words, many of the SAs came to Korea to work in two different law firms, one after the other. Law firms did not seem to mind and gave SAs the flexibility to do so.

My next surprise came from the work assignments. As a foreign SA, you start by assisting in translation of various Korean legal documents. Through this I learned that one of the main responsibilities of a foreign attorney working in a Korean law firm is to facilitate communications between foreign clients (many of which do business in Korea) and the Korean lawyers at the firm who advise those clients. Sometimes the legal issue concerned U.S. law, but most of the times, it related to Korean law. Therefore, most work was “inbound,” meaning the issues pertained to domestic law. However, I learned that if you work in a U.S. law firm’s Korea office, a lot of the work is “outbound,” meaning you serve Korean clients who have legal issues in the U.S.

However, my work experience this summer was not limited to Korean domestic law. To my surprise, Yoon & Yang had a variety of projects related not only to U.S. law but also to international law. Among many things, I had the opportunity to research international law and write a memorandum related to a major international arbitration case that the firm was handling. I also researched U.S. law on issues related to bankruptcy, contracts, and trade. One project even required me to research the tax law in Turkey. I was very fortunate to experience a wide range of legal issues and work with many different attorneys in the firm.

My impression of Yoon & Yang was that everyone was extremely hard-working and focused. To my surprise, there was almost no *hwesik* (회식) among the attorneys. *Hwesik* is a company-sponsored dinner gathering with your colleagues to encourage team building. When I asked why there was no *hwesik*, my mentor attorney told me that everyone was just too busy and could not afford the time. I came to observe that most of attorneys, at least the foreign attorneys, worked on average until 1:00AM or 2:00AM everyday. But no one seemed to complain. Thankfully, SAs were required to work only from 9:30AM to 6:00PM.

Overall, I had a great experience at the firm, and I would be happy to share more if anyone is interested in working in Korea. For those who are interested, don’t worry about not being able to have *hwesik* if you work in a Korean law firm. You can always go out and spend a crazy Gangnam-style *hwesik* night with your fellow summer associates.