Dream Facilitator

What comes after Ph.D.? For Tim Xia, it's J.D.

When Tingkang "Tim" Xia came to the United States in 1985, he planned to pursue a career in physics.

"In my wildest of dreams, I never thought one day I could be a patent attorney, not to mention a kind of decision-making partner in an American 200 law firm," says Xia, a partner at Morris, Manning & Martin in Atlanta.

Xia grew up in Ankang City, a small town at the foot of the Qinling Mountains in China, and attended Peking University in Beijing before flying to the States to continue studying physics at Ohio State University.

His new educational system required some adjusting. While Chinese professors lectured on specific material they wanted students to learn, Xia says, American professors were more open to letting students "find" their knowledge.

Then there were the grocery stores. "I was surprised by the richness and abundance of American goods. At the time, in China, you still had to use coupons for fruits, for sugar and for cooking oil," says Xia. "Here you went to the supermarket—you can buy whatever you want! … I never thought the productivity and the efficiency of the market system could bring such abundance of goods to people."

After earning his Ph.D., Xia became a research scientist at Georgia Tech and published articles in highly regarded international physics journals, including *Science*. He specialized in areas unfamiliar to most people: supercomputing, large-scale computer simulation of complex fluids and super-thin films of polymers, and Josephson junction superconducting arrays. Then he wanted a change.

"One day I recognized that what I'm doing is kind of like a restaurant cook," says Xia. "It's making a recipe, then putting [it] into oven, letting the oven do the baking. Here the oven is the computer and the computer does the calculations. It is not that inspiring."

To move forward, Xia reflected on why he originally came to the United States. "I was always thinking about one day I want to do something to help my motherland, China," says Xia. "At the time … what China needed most is rule of law."

Xia planned on becoming an international human rights lawyer; but at Columbia Law School, his professor, Randy Edwards, asked him, "Who is going to pay you to do that?" Edwards advised patent law instead. At the time, in the early '90s, intellectual property rights was not yet a hot topic, but Edwards believed it would be in the future.

"I think I made the right choice," Xia says. "I recognized only if a country respects the intellectual property rights [will that country] respect human rights as well."

The thought processes for science and law, he feels, are similar: identify the issue; decide on the solution. "Of course," he continues, "in science, [with] every problem, you have one correct answer. But in law, for each issue, you have different plausible answers, so you have to take into consideration intertwining factors or interests."

Xia, whose practice focuses on patent prosecution and litigation, has represented a variety of clients in the tech arena. Last year, he was able to secure

a patent protection for a Chinese automotive company—taking only five months from filing to securing the patent application despite a legal environment that is reluctant to issue patents. "[This] showed that the United States encourages innovations, inventions and [is] treating people around the world fairly," Xia says.

On the litigation side, Xia helped represent a Chinese manufacturer in a patent litigation in U.S. federal courts, winning the case by summary judgment in 2007—the first time that a Chinese company won a patent of innovation in the United States. "A Chinese national TV [station] made it the top news piece," he says.

Xia came to the U.S. to pursue his dream; now he helps others realize theirs. "I've become a dream facilitator," he says, "and there's no better reward."

—*Nyssa Gesch*