

THE **RECORDER**

Willkie Farr Taps Bay Area Gibson Dunn Partner to Help Lead White-Collar Practice

Michael Li-Ming Wong is departing Gibson Dunn after more than 12 years at the firm.

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Willkie Farr & Gallagher is doubling down on the West Coast with the addition of former Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher partner Michael Li-Ming Wong, who will co-lead the firm's white-collar practice.

Wong, who was based in Gibson Dunn's San Francisco and Palo Alto offices, noted that Willkie Farr has been a New York institution for more than a century, but it has only had a presence in California since 2018.

"To expand the white-collar practice group leadership to the West Coast is quite an investment, and I think it means they're truly committed to a national practice and to the idea that West Coast white collar can be a destination practice," he said.

Wong will join Michael Schachter in New York and Bill Stellmach in Washington, D.C., as co-chair of the practice after former white-collar co-chair Randall Jackson left for Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz in September.

Wong, who joined Willkie Monday, is departing from Gibson Dunn after more than 12 years at the firm, focusing on white-collar criminal matters and complex civil litigation, as well as data privacy and internal investigations. The former federal prosecutor was among the first Gibson Dunn attorneys to represent Uber in 2015, beginning with a case over a driver's alleged rape of a passenger. He also netted an Am Law Litigation Daily Litigator of the Week win in 2017 after earning the dismissal of a data breach class



Photo: Jason Doiy

Michael Li-Ming Wong of Willkie Farr & Gallagher.

action compromising the license plate numbers of about 50,000 drivers.

A spokesperson for Gibson Dunn said the firm wishes Wong well.

Wong said the move to Willkie Farr presented a great opportunity to serve in a national leadership position at a global firm and team up with Willkie

Farr's San Francisco managing partners, Simona Agnolucci and Ben Hur. "We're lucky to build up a relatively new office and new practice here on the West Coast," he said.

A big portion of Wong's cases are matters with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, which he said feels more active on both the West and East coasts in recent years. "They have their traditional usual mandate of enforcing laws regarding securities fraud and insider trading and other traditional market-related cases, but now they're pushing into newer areas, such as crypto and data privacy," he said.

Willkie Farr's diversity at every level, including the partner level, also drew Wong to the firm. "I think that means a lot, particularly for the young lawyers coming up the ranks to see what is possible," he said. The opportunity to help grow the new San Francisco office, which Agnolucci and Hur launched in 2019, means that Wong can help build diversity from the ground up, he said.

Wong also plans to continue his pro bono practice, fueled by a belief that it is a moral obligation for lawyers to use their education and training to make a broader impact to right wrongs. His pro bono work has included representing defendants in cases involving nonunanimous jury verdicts. Only two states have allowed the nonunanimous jury verdicts in recent decades, with both Oregon and Louisiana allowing the practice within the last five years. In one case, Wong represents Darrius Copelin, sentenced to life in prison in Louisiana after an armed robbery conviction. Wong was able to reduce Copelin's sentence. He's now going to get out in several years.

Former Chief Justice Bernette Johnson of the Louisiana Supreme Court worked with Wong on the nonunanimous jury verdict litigation, and said she wrote a letter to lawmakers recommending him for a federal judgeship. Johnson said she was impressed by his value set and ethics.

"He would be a great judge," she said. "I hope to see him be elevated to the federal judiciary at some point."

Wong, who is a first-generation Chinese American who grew up in Columbia, Missouri, said he thinks it's important to serve as a role model for the next generation.

"Someone who looks like me, a person who is different, can also serve as a law firm leader, not just sitting at counsel table, but lead trial lawyer, and in other roles that maybe years ago he couldn't," he said.

Despite a busy practice, Wong said he works just as hard to be a "very hands-on Dad," a mindset he adopted after his clerkship at the U.S. Supreme Court with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

"Justice Ginsburg taught me—taught all of us—that I can work very hard to win for my clients, but also still be extremely involved in my kids' lives," he said. "So I never miss a game. I never miss a play. I try not to miss anything. I also work darn hard to win my trials as well."

Paul Watford, a partner with Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati and former judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, has known Wong since the two clerked for Ginsburg in the mid-1990s.

"He's one of the smartest lawyers I have ever had the chance to work with," Watford said. "He's an incredibly talented lawyer. His career, both as a prosecutor and as a lawyer in private practice, attest to that."

Watford also said he's grown to trust Wong's judgment and advice over the years. Arthur Chong, the former general counsel for Yahoo Inc., now Altaba Inc., shared that sentiment.

Chong said he was a little surprised by the move because Wong is going from one powerhouse firm to another. But, he said, "whatever the new firm managed to do to entice him to go, they are incredibly lucky."

While a general counsel for three different Fortune 500 companies, Chong said he's known many great lawyers.

"Michael, in my judgment, is at the very top of all the lawyers I have the privilege of working with as GC of Fortune 500 companies," he said.