

# Daily Journal

Jun. 29, 2022

## Qiaojing “Ella” Zheng

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**Sanford Heisler Sharp, LLP**



Qiaojing “Ella” Zheng

SAN FRANCISCO - Qiaojing “Ella” Zheng was born and raised in China, got her law degree at a Chinese university and planned on a legal career in Hong Kong.

Instead—following a personal crisis in 2010—at age 22, she moved to San Diego, studied law there and in about a decade rose to become co-managing partner of Sanford Heisler Sharp, LLP’s San Francisco office and chair of the firm’s Asian American finance and litigation practice.

“It was a bad breakup with my boyfriend at the time,” said Zheng, who is now married to a different Chinese man. “I wanted to get off that continent. It took a few months to convince my mom. Chinese parents are so protective. Now, my career is dedicated to bridging that gulf between the U.S. and Asia. And my mom is comfortable with having me raise my daughter here.”

Zheng said much of her work involves employment law cases growing out of the region’s multicultural work environment. “The Bay Area has such diversity, but few attorneys have the language and cultural skills to represent people with backgrounds like mine. Having my own brand is very beneficial.”

She was lead counsel for a co-founder of a San Jose and Shanghai-based data storage processing company who found himself in a contentious partnership fight; both partners are Chinese. “They treated each other as brothers, but when money was on the table, crazy things happened,” Zheng said. “This is an old tale in Silicon Valley. But under Chinese culture, you don’t put things in writing because it would have shown distrust.” *Chen v. InnoGrit Corp. et al.*, 18CV337042 (S. Clara Co. Super. Ct., filed Oct. 31, 2018).

An arbitrator in 2021 found the company and the other co-founder made and disregarded promises to Zheng's client to grant him 20% equity in InnoGrit, amounting to breach of contract and fraud. The arbitrator awarded Zheng's client \$3.5 million in compensatory damages, \$500,000 in emotional distress damages and \$650,000 in punitive damages. Zheng and her team won more than \$3.6 million in attorney fees and costs.

Zheng overcame the lack of a written contract by producing text messages and emails to investors, demonstrating the one-time partners' intention to share in the company. "We poked holes in the other side's story and showed our story was credible," Zheng said.

Currently, Zheng is on the plaintiff team alongside an IP attorney representing a former senior vice president of marketing and communications at a semiconductor company. Her client has filed a \$365 million suit against the company for whistleblower retaliation and misappropriation of trade secrets. *Joseph v. Xilinx Inc.*, 21CV385612 (S. Clara Co. Super. Ct., filed Aug. 9, 2021).

Zheng said she loves leaning into her heritage. "Some don't know whether to hide or highlight being Chinese in today's America. But I want to be a good ambassador for my culture. It's so important at this moment."

--John Roemer

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