

Relationships key to prosperity with Chinese clients

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Investing in relationships and developing cultural awareness is critical to fostering a fruitful and longstanding relationship with China, lawyer Robin Chambers has said.

My firm has made a big investment of time and expense by way of comparison to other competitive law firms who are doing considerable projects with the Chinese but who don't seem to have any of the cultural awareness," the senior partner of Chambers & Company told *Lawyers Weekly*.

"With China more than any other foreign country, it is important to understand the culture that you're dealing with."

Chambers & Company is a Melbourne-based commercial law firm that specialises in international transactions with a special focus on China.

Firms can best approach cultural fluency starting with simple transactional communications, Mr Chambers said. He also pointed to the importance of hospitality to Chinese culture.

"We communicate in Chinese and English – that's a good start."

"As a firm, we offer hospitality when required. We're visiting China very often or over in Perth where the Sinosteel head office is located. We spend a lot of time meeting people outside the parameters of providing actual advice and building relationships as you have to do," he said.

Enduring over two decades and forged over trade deals of several million tonnes of Australian iron ore, China has been a prominent feature of Mr Chamber's working life.

When China's 1983 Open Door Policy saw its first modern trade investment in Australia, he was there. More than 20 years later, the lawyer has worked for and alongside the Chinese government mostly on joint venture projects in the metallurgical and resources sector.

With a long-term project value over \$420 million, China's investment in the Channar Mining venture in Australia's Pilbara region has been a main feature of that partnership. Mr Chambers is also a director of Sinosteel companies in Australia, which are parties to the joint venture.

"Channar has been a very successful project for China and the profits have been very considerable. It has been one of the most successful and profitable Chinese investments in Australia," Mr Chambers said.

After time working for Wall Street, Mr Chambers spent his early career as the general counsel of CRA Limited -- what is today known as Rio Tinto in Australia. In 1981 he travelled to China as part of an Australian legal delegation when the state took first steps towards participation in global trade following a long hiatus.

"In 1981, as part of Australia's first legal delegation to China, I was invited by Chinese leaders to help draft the China's legal system but particularly its joint venture law," Mr Chambers said.

"After the Cultural Revolution the whole of China's legal regulation was five pages long. There were no lawyers, no law firms and no other commercial regulations," Mr Chambers added.

During his time visiting China as a legal delegate, Mr Chambers was privately invited to take tea with Chinese leader Zeng Humin. The encounter set him on a career which has spanned 30 years, deeply enmeshed in the resources sector and Australia-Chinese trade relations.

"Zeng Humin invited me to help draft China's legal system. They were looking to draft the joint venture law which has been quite central to the inbound investment into china over the ensuing period.

"In 1981 Rio Tinto probably had more joint venture experience than anyone else in the world. We were doing projects in 30 countries and also many of the biggest mining projects in Australia, which were all joint ventures," Mr Chambers said.

Over the next three years, and with the support of Rio Tinto, Mr Chambers spent significant time in China giving lectures and providing legal advice to its government. By 1984 he had established his own firm and was appointed as the Chinese government's first foreign lawyer to its Ministry of Metallurgical Industry. Mr Chambers says the professional relationship has prospered ever since.

"Today I'm a director of Sinosteel's holding companies here in Australia, which run [the Channar] project and I am also on the management committee. For many years I have also sat on the management committee representing the Chinese side," Mr Chambers said.

"I probably have the longest connection with Channar than anyone else I think as it goes back to 1984."