



SinoInsights™

Interview: Patrick Dransfield†

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(Credit: Patrick Dransfield)

Roasted sweet potatoes, Xinjiekou Free Market, 1986

Interviewee's note: Xinjiekou was one of China's first free markets allowed in the 1980s, when the country was transitioning away from its planned economy. Behind the sweet potato sellers was a sign that reminds sellers not to cheat their fellow comrades. Roasted sweet potatoes remain one of Beijing's most popular and enduring street foods.

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Patrick Dransfield Principal of Clearway Communications Co-Founder of the Managing Partners' Club

Named by Asia Law Portal one of the "30 People to Watch in the Business of Law in Asia" in 2019, Patrick Dransfield, a British citizen and a permanent resident of Hong Kong, is currently Principal of Clearway Communications and Co-Founder of the Managing Partners' Club. Clearway Communications is a unique resource for connecting people and ideas in the business of law. The Managing Partners' Club focuses on providing a forum for its members to share their experiences and learn about effective management in the legal profession.



Credit: Kevin Hong

In his current leadership roles, Mr. Dransfield draws from his wealth of experience at Pacific Business Press, White & Case, Shearman & Sterling, Euromoney Institutional Investor, and Haymarket Publishing. His experience extends across public organizational experience, press relations, major speech writing, revenue generation, business development, thought leadership, people management, as well as coaching and strategic planning related to corporate and financial institutions and law firms.

Apart from his experience as a senior business executive, Mr. Dransfield is also an author and accomplished photographer. Featuring photographs taken in 1986 in Beijing and Datong (a prefecture-level city in Shanxi Province), his solo exhibition titled *Track of Time: Moments of Transition* held at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Hong Kong in October 2020 prompted a four-page feature in the *How To Spend It* magazine of the Financial Times (October 17, 2020). The following book titled *Track of Time* provides a valuable resource that plays witness to China evolving from a liminal state to become the second largest economy in the world (for more information about the book, see <https://www.clearwaycomms.com/book-launch>).

Mr. Dransfield received a B.A. (Joint Hons.) in English and History of Art from Leeds University, United Kingdom, in 1985 and an M.A. in Far East Asian Studies (Chinese Politics, Anthropology, and History) from University of London's School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), United Kingdom, in 1990.

Mr. Dransfield, you decided to undertake an M.A. in Far East Asian Studies. What triggered your interest in Asia, and in particular, China?

As a young boy, I was familiar with some aspects of Asian culture. This is perhaps surprising because I grew up in Runcorn, a small, industrial northern English town. My parents were both gregarious and curious about the world. With a career as a senior research chemist for the then-global behemoth Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), my father Dr. Philip Dransfield forged close relationships with peer chemists in Japan, India, and the United States. Having Japanese scientists in our home sampling my father's homemade beer and wine was quite a regular thing.

An important factor that influenced my interest in China was Leeds University. The university's Chinese Language department was and remains one of the biggest in the

United Kingdom. When I studied there in the 1980s, I met many other students who had just spent time in China, a country that began opening up to the world in the late 1970s. I was determined to see China with my own eyes and so, with a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certificate and some cash earned as a *shoddy-shredder* (i.e., one who helps to manufacture cheap cloth) in a Huddersfield textile mill, I arrived in a freezing cold Beijing on December 22, 1985. My life changed, for the better, from that moment.

You have an interesting and remarkable career that allows you to play different important roles ranging from being an advertising executive to managing director, marketing director, business development director, consultant, and principal. How have your skillsets evolved? What skills or personal attributes do you think have been pivotal to your career successes?

Patrick Dransfield

Yes, it has been quite a ride so far! Four of the five core character traits that I have brought to my career—Curiosity, Insight, Sales, and *Yorkshire Grit*—align with those identified by global headhunter Egon Zehnder as crucial for determining a leader’s future ability (<https://www.egonzehnder.com/what-we-do/diversity-equity-inclusion/insights/egon-zehnders-cynthia-soledad-at-sxsw>).

Curiosity, first and foremost. From having an open, engaged, and questioning mind, one gains **Insight** towards a goal. From that, I have learned the skills and harnessed the empathetic connection needed to **Sell** that vision (i.e., “engagement”, a term used by Egon Zehnder). After all, leadership requires an ability to persuade people. *Yorkshire Grit* (which captures the quality of **Determination and Resilience**) has also proved an essential character trait in situations, such as Covid-19, when things have not always gone as planned.

I would like to add a fifth character trait because I think it is crucial: **A Moral Compass**. In his book co-authored with James Allworth and Karen Dillon (*How Will You Measure Your Life?* (Harper Business, 2012)), the late Clayton Christensen drew on important lessons from the

“At the foundation of all is trust! Asia has proved to be quite a small place and thus, being true to one’s word is essential.”

world’s major businesses to articulate three questions that one should ask to find meaning and happiness in life. The questions focus on finding career satisfaction while building strong personal relationships and maintaining integrity. In my career, I have come across numerous people (almost all men) who have let their ambition, greed, insecurities, and hubris get the better of them. Sadly, some of them have, in their pursuit of business goals, even broken the law. Whether called to account or not, this undermines their own integrity and should have been avoided at all costs.

Mr. Dransfield, you have forged strong relationships with private practitioners and in-house counsels at various corporations across Asia, the Middle East, and the United Kingdom. What are your secrets of success?

At the foundation of all is trust! Asia has proved to be quite a small place and thus, being true to one’s word is essential. With this foundation, I have been lucky enough

to have a broad and varied circle of trusted friends. These friends are all great people and I always look for connections among them to create long-lasting authentic relationships. In other words, both trust and an ability to connect great people are probably my “secrets of success”.

Specifically, regarding forging strong relationships with senior lawyers, this is related to my long-term experience in providing training programs to them. I was first assigned to play this role by Whit Pidot, former Asia Managing Partner of Shearman & Sterling, and his mentor, the late knowledge management guru Chris Argyris. The mission was essentially: teach smart people how to learn. The mission was quite challenging because one of the essential secrets to learning is to be humble enough to admit that you simply don’t know something. This can be quite hard for senior lawyers whose daily jobs require them to be on hand to give counsel.

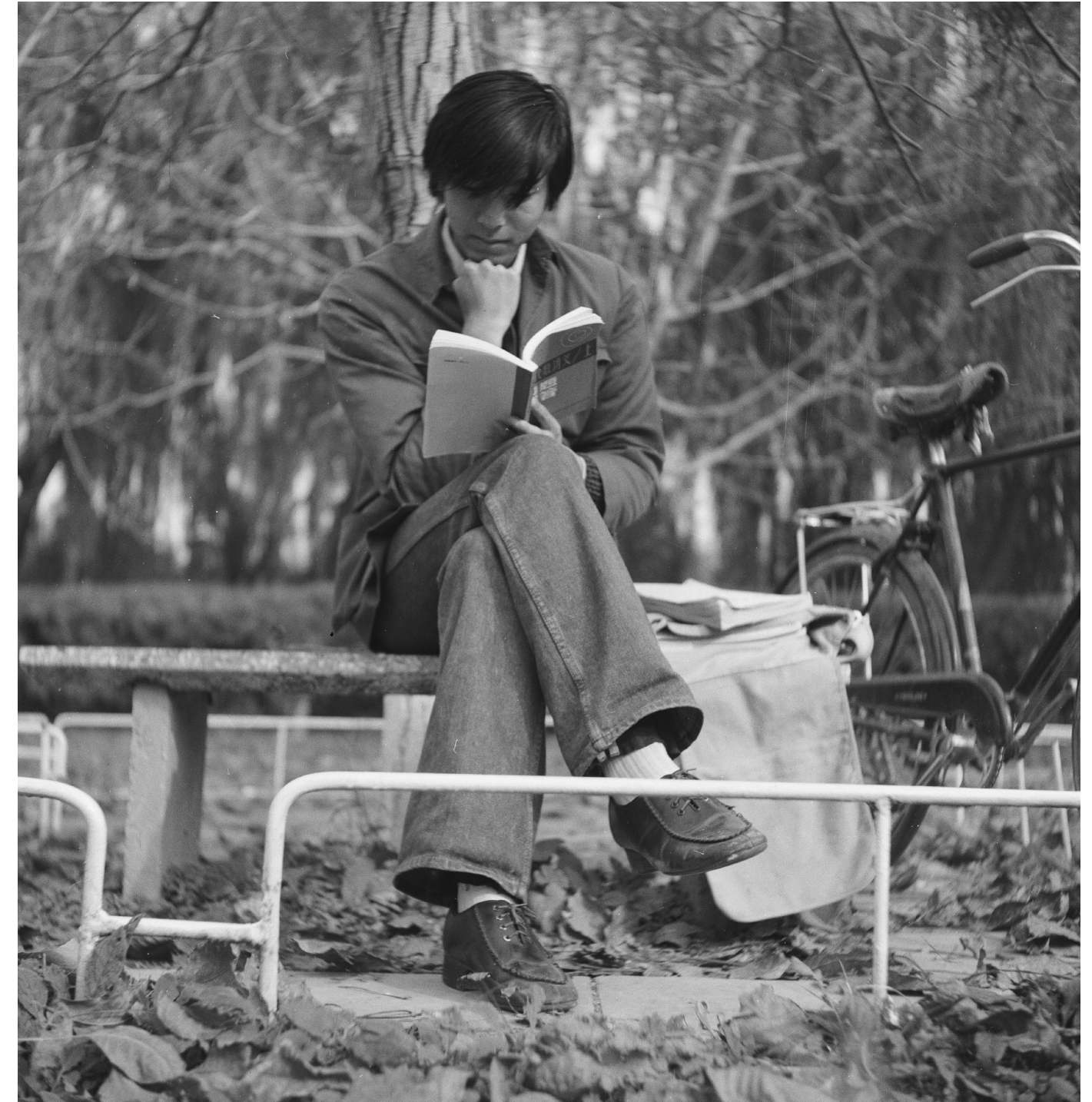
To accomplish our mission, we provided the oxygen in the room by creating a structured, secure, and trusted environment for senior lawyers to listen and share their experiences. As a result, senior lawyers could take a break from the expectation that they had to know everything,

breathe a little with their peers, and walk away with new insights. Through the organization of these highly valued training programs, I have been able to forge strong relationships with these lawyers.

Today, this training approach lies at the very heart of the Managing Partners’ Club (“MPC”) that I founded in January 2021. My fellow founders, such as Paul Smith of Calls9 and Lakhbir Gill and Sherry Kerr of Equibloom Asia, have combined best knowledge management practices with top production values to ensure that members of the MPC continue to have such a trusted learning environment. Two events are illustrative. First, on January 12, 2022, the MPC year kicked off with a dialogue featuring global General Counsel veteran Trevor Faure, who provided exclusive insight into how approximately 40 global law firms measured up to the expectations of a company that had put its legal services (worth USD 300 million per year) out to tender. On March 9, 2022, the MPC will welcome authors Matthew Fuller and Tim Nightingale on the launch of the second

edition of their award-winning book *Strategic Tendering for Professional Services*. This training approach may be the reason why, within such a short time, the MPC

has already received support from managing partners of 30 distinguished law firms operating in Asia and the Middle East.



(Credit: Patrick Dransfield)

Dashing Scholar, Bei Shi Da Campus, 1986

Interviewee’s note: This young man is reading a book on algebra. The thirst for knowledge to catch up on education interrupted before China re-opened its country in the late 1970s was very much a 1980s trope. In 1986, the choice to be a lawyer was not an obvious one largely because there were no private law firms to practice in. Most ambitious young men and women wanted to improve their English and go into engineering.



(Credit: Patrick Dransfield)

Children under the statue of Mao Zedong

Interviewee's note: Taken in July 1986, the very month when the Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory Education took effect, this picture depicts how a group of young kindergarten kids "lined up" for school at the feet of the marble statue of Mao Zedong.

You have a keen interest in visual arts and have been invited to exhibit photographs at numerous exhibitions in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong International Arbitration Centre also displays a permanent installation of your work. Please tell us how an artistic mind can blend so well with a business-oriented brain. Do you see interesting similarities in these two seemingly different areas: art and business?

I learned from my father that creativity and innovation exist in all fields of human endeavor. After all, his "Eureka!" moment in the field of commercial organic chemical research was while staring at a round ash tray (later, I learned that it was something to do with Benzene rings). Similarly, the top lawyers I am familiar with take a creative approach to formulating legal solutions, either for their clients or as architects of international regulatory policy. So, I don't really see a difference in the creative process between art, the law, or even business.

My career until very recently was an application of my various talents to the job at hand. It was perhaps

a combination of a lack of self-confidence, lack of opportunity, or application, that I did not begin focusing more seriously on my photography and fiction writing until the outbreak of the current pandemic. I dabble a bit in painting, but to be a true master, one needs the singular dedication of a Picasso, a Morandi, or a Rego, to create something truly outstanding in this field. With photography, I have been applying myself to the discipline for over forty years, so some mastery has been achieved, I guess.

Having worked in Pacific Business Press and having helped build a network of over 20,000 legal and compliance professionals in the emerging markets of Asia, the Middle East, and South Africa, where do you see the legal industry heading, particularly in these and other emerging markets?

Let me share some thoughts about Asia and then, specifically, China.

In Asia, the alternative worlds of in-house counsel and private practice partners are, sadly, still as far apart as ever. According to *Asia Business Law Journal's* recent survey (<https://law.asia/in-house-counsel-regional-survey>), in-house counsel in Asia remain "shockingly dissatisfied with law firms". Despite all the advice and feedback to the contrary, a good many private practice law firms are still *not* stepping up to the plate. Once we move away from these liminal times, I firmly believe that the law firms that provide mutually beneficial alternative fee arrangements, embrace technology, engage in the emerging areas of law, and work hard to provide value-added services, will prosper. For those firms that bask in the increased profitability of minimal travel and the shedding of head count while continuing to increase their billable hour rates without considering the need to value-add, there will be a reckoning.

Regarding China, the legal industry there never stops surprising me and many others. When I first arrived in China in 1985, the practice of law as a profession simply did not exist. Fast forward 34 years, there are nearly half a million private practice lawyers and more than 34,000 law firms in China (see, e.g., *China Justice Observer*). To put the growth of Chinese law firms into perspective, let me share our experience of compiling the world's first legal directory of Chinese law firms in 1996. I was Publisher of *Asia Law & Practice* and Chris Hunter, who unfortunately just passed away (<https://www.fcchk.org/christopher-hunter-a-man-of-conviction-and-faith>),

was managing editor of *China Law & Practice*. These two pioneering publications were owned by Euromoney Institutional Investor. To prepare the directory, our combined teams started our research with a list of only ten leading domestic practitioners who were recognized as practicing at an internationally accepted level of service. Today, the law as a profession is a viable and respected one in China and in certain aspects of international law, China is leading the way. Moving forward, I see that the legal industry in China has much to contribute to its counterparts in other emerging markets.

"[...] I firmly believe that the law firms that provide mutually beneficial alternative fee arrangements, embrace technology, engage in the emerging areas of law, and work hard to provide value-added services, will prosper."

Finally, congratulations on being named one of Asia Law Portal's 30 people to watch in the business of law in Asia in 2019—you have clearly made a tremendous impact in the industry. We are curious to hear about your personal and professional goals for the near future.

Personally, although my geographic reach has been savagely curtailed to the environs of the Hong Kong SAR due to the pandemic, I have been invited to take photographs of local heroes (inspired by the full-length portraits by Diego Velazquez, 1599-1660) in Yau Tsim Mong District, Hong Kong, for an exhibition in 2022. I will also be seeking a publisher for my first historical novel, *The Inner Circle*, which starts in Liverpool's Chinatown of 1916. Life is short, so I do try and waste as little time as possible on more trivial things.

Professionally, expanding the Managing Partners' Club remains a priority and, as the Club exists for its members, I have asked Nishith Desai, Managing Partner

of Nishith Desai & Associates, to say a few words, which are as follows:

I am delighted to count myself a member of the Managing Partners' Club ("MPC")! The MPC is a trusted and secure environment for senior partners to both share their experiences and listen to their peers. People at the top are lonely, they too need guidance, direction, and a place where they are comfortable to open up, especially, to their peers. The MPC utilizes

the latest techniques in knowledge-sharing for senior private practice lawyers in Asia and the Middle East. I was delighted to join the MPC when it was first launched in Q1 2021 and have had the pleasure of participating in all the scheduled calls in 2021. Close-knit friendships have blossomed as a result and we can now pick up the phone and call each other without hesitation. I sincerely look forward to our discussions in 2022!

Overall, these unique opportunities for me to pursue my personal and professional goals have continued inspiring me to stay in Hong Kong. In addition, Hong Kong is my home. Just as in 1986, there was not a single morning that I woke up in Beijing and wished I was back in Runcorn, so there has not been a single day when I am in Hong Kong that I wish I was in London. Hong Kong is also the birthplace of my wife, home for her parents, and the nurturing environment for our three children. Our collective connection to Hong Kong is deep indeed. ●