

Chapter 1 - China market overview and support for your business

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Speaker 1

Hello and welcome to this spotlight on doing business in China. I'm Richard Seymore, Regional Director at Invest Northern Ireland, and I'm delighted you are joining us to learn more about our work in China and the opportunities within the China market. In this session we will explore why China is an important market for Northern Ireland businesses seeking commercial opportunities overseas.

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I will also introduce Invest Northern Ireland - China, share who we are, where we are and outline our key sectors. In subsequent presentations, our team of experienced business professionals leading the advanced manufacturing, engineering and food and drink sectors will explore how we can support the success of your businesses in China. We will then hear from the Northern Ireland companies doing business in China,

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explore intellectual property protection in the region, learn about sister city relationships with the Northern Ireland Bureau and conclude with next steps for your business. So why is China an important market for Northern Ireland businesses? China is the world's second largest economy, with a GDP of around 20 trillion USD. This year. China is targeting growth rates of 4.5 to 5%

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And if it succeeds, that will be almost equivalent of adding the GDP of Switzerland to the world economy. China is the world's second largest importer and after the USA and Germany. China, including Hong Kong, is the UK's third largest trading partner for goods and services, with total trade amounting to £134.9 billion in 2025. China remains a strong export market, with UK exports to China reaching nearly £50 billion in 2025.

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China is also home to 30 provincial level divisions, with many of its provinces having the economy the size of a small country. For example, East China remains a powerhouse of the Chinese economy, generating 25% of national GDP. Considered as a standalone economy, East China would rank as the world's fourth largest economy, behind the United States, China and Germany, and ahead of Japan.

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Jiangsu and Zhejiang each match the scale of mid-size G20 economies such as Spain or Australia in GDP terms, offering a range of opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses to explore across the many regions of China. China has a population of 1.4 billion people, which accounts for around 17% of the world's population. It is the world's largest population of middle class, which, coupled with rapid urbanisation and growth, has produced demand for healthcare, food and drink, financial services, advanced manufacturing and consumer goods.

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This brings significant export opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses as Chinese buyers increasingly demand premium, high quality and trusted international brands. Exports from the North to China were valued at £125 million in 2024, and the potential to increase this value further has been highlighted by the Northern Ireland Minister of Economy, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, during a five day visit to China in December 2025.

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In addition to a focus on education and tourism, the visit aimed to deepen economic ties between Northern Ireland and China, unlocking new opportunities for trade and investment, and supporting local companies to expand their presence in the region. The importance of ongoing engagement and the relationship between the North and China was also evident at the China and Northern Ireland Economic Trade and Investment Forum in Belfast, led by the China Chamber of Commerce in the UK.

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The forum, which took place in November last year, was attended by over 300 senior government officials, business leaders, investors, industrial associations and media outlets. Notably, 2026 also began with a visit to China by UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, which highlighted government support to give businesses clarity and backing to pursue export opportunities across China. While China is a large market,

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it is also an extremely complex market with regional, cultural and sectoral differences. It is therefore important that businesses take a considered and targeted approach to the region. To support this, Invest Northern Ireland employs trained professionals based in embassies and consulates in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Our team works closely with Northern Ireland businesses with a sectoral focus upon life and health sciences, agri-tech, financial services, food and drink and advanced manufacturing and engineering.

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We have a proven record of helping our client companies succeed in generating return from Northern Ireland through commercial engagement with China. We are here in market to advise and assisting Northern Ireland companies in capitalising on opportunities in the market. The Invest Northern Ireland China team work closely in partnership with Northern Ireland client managers and international trade advisors in Northern Ireland,

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keeping Northern Ireland client companies at the centre of all of our activities, we deliver assistance from within the market that meets the need of your individual businesses. In doing this, we take time to understand your organisation, educating Northern Ireland companies through seminars, webinars and by delivering sectoral and

regional research that helps companies evaluate the market and examine the commercial opportunities within.

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We support the development of regional strategies and help Northern Ireland companies plan their approach to market. We then assist our companies by directly undertaking business development activity, engaging key stakeholders and implementing promotional sales activities. This journey continues as we scale stakeholder engagement across regions and industry-specific promotional channels. We deliver a wide range of commercially focussed support to Northern Ireland client companies from business development matchmaking and buyer searches to generating sales leads, delivering events and promotions at industry exhibitions and leveraging marcomms channels and utilising our partnership network to generate export opportunities for the North.

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We also offer in-market policy insights and distributor searches to mitigate risk and empower Northern Ireland businesses to make informed decisions around their China engagement. Invest Northern Ireland maintains a world class partnership network, collaborating with a range of organisations from industry associations, influencers and key stakeholders. We also work with the Northern Ireland Bureau to leverage regional and provincial actors within the Chinese government.

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We're also here to advise if the market is not right for you, but importantly, we are here to guide you through an export journey that is right for you and we are here to support your success. In the year ahead we'll be working closely with Northern Ireland companies across our key sectors. If you are interested in engaging with the market, here are just a few of the events taking place in China in our key sectors.

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Throughout the year, Invest NI will be undertaking business development activities, promoting Northern Ireland interests, our products and services. We will be pleased to work with you or to represent your organisation should you or a member of your team be unable to visit the market in person. Please note that full details of upcoming activities, within food and drink and advanced manufacturing can be found in focused presentations available from our INI China team, in which they will also highlight the China specific opportunities of each sector.

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I hope you've enjoyed this spotlight on doing business in China. introductory session. Should you wish to learn more, participate in any of our upcoming activities or have a discussion regarding China, then please do not hesitate to contact us. We'll be pleased to hear from you and support your export success. Thank you for watching.

Chapter 2 - Advanced manufacturing and engineering opportunities in China

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Hi everyone and thank you for joining today's presentation. My name is Derek Deng and I'm regional manager for the Advanced Manufacturing and engineering sector at Invest Northern Ireland in China.

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Today's session has three main objectives. Firstly, I will briefly introduce our Chinese and position and why China continues to matter strategically for and NI companies. Second, I will outline the Chinese market opportunities and highlighting national policy drivers and practical opportunities emerging for advanced manufacturing and engineering. I will share details of INI China's in market activity and how and NI companies can engage with us over the year ahead.

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We are also pleased, to share with you a company presentation by Sensoteq, during which, Paul Daly, APAC Regional Sales Manager, will share more about Sensoteq's work and experience doing business in China. So my hope is that this will give you clarity, practical insights and confidence in exploring the Chinese market and how it can, fit into your international growth strategy.

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So why does China continue to matter for AME? For advanced manufacturing, China is no longer viewed simply as a low-cost production base, but as a high value innovation and application market. China remains the world's largest manufacturing and end-user market, representing around 30% of the global manufacturing output. This scale alone creates unique opportunities. For example, in sectors such as smartphones, smart home devices and wearables,

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China's massive consumer base allows companies to validate new features, designs and price points across multiple cities and segments simultaneously. So this scale rapidly reveals what works and what does not, allowing businesses to dramatically shorten, product development cycles. In addition to a large size of the market, China combines massive, domestic demand with speed. New technologies are adopted rapidly, enabling faster commercial validation and integration.

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So this is particularly evident in the development of advanced equipment, automation and enabling technologies which are in high demand. China is undergoing a strategic shift away from value driven growth towards innovation led, high value manufacturing. Increasingly, we can see that, China is not just where products are built. It is where they are tested, validated, scaled and globally referenced.

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This means this scale of the Chinese market can further accelerate the development of NI products once they are in the market. Notably in today's increasing complex geopolitical environment. China has proven itself to be a relatively stable market thanks to its broad industrial base, strong domestic market, and continual policy support. China has shown resilience in navigating external challenges amid a challenging global landscape, and has already surpassed growth rate for Q1 2026.

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So opportunities in China are strongly driven by national policy direction. I would like to draw your attention to the following national policies that are integral to creating opportunities in the market for NI AME businesses. The 15th five-year-plan covers China's national spending from 2026 to 2030, and places a continued emphasis on industrial upgrading, innovation capacity and system resilience.

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The key message is that, China is still aiming for high economic growth in this area, offering, burgeoning market for NI businesses. This current economic momentum has been built on the 'Made in China 2025' policy. Made in China in 2025 is China's national plan to upgrade its manufacturing industry, moving from large scale, low cost production to higher value, more advanced manufacturing, presenting China's clearer focus on quality, efficiency and technological depth rather than simple capacity expansion.

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A key concept increasingly encouraged to by the Chinese government is 'new quality productive forces.' It refers to advanced manufacturing, digitalization, green technologies and productivity enhancing innovations. As China moves from, capacity led growth to higher quality productivity, NI companies that can directly address and upgrade existing technologies in these areas are well positioned for market success. In addition to the national policies, China has also published its regional policies in key subsectors of interest for many NI companies, creating a more transparent operating environment.

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For example, the Action Plan for comprehensive Management of solid waste in 2026, released in early this year, standardises regulations and operations for the construction and demolition waste recycling in the market, an area of strength for Northern Ireland. Turning policy directions into practical opportunities, we see several priority areas for NI companies. China's construction and infrastructure sectors are vast, with China currently producing around 41% of the world's aggregates.

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However, each year there remains up to 2 billion tons production and consumption gap between the waste produced and the treatment of the waste being managed by China. In addition, the clay cake and or the mud cake, which is the C&D waste output after filter press, which accounts for 60% of the total C&D waste amount is largely not treated or consumed

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properly at present. Therefore, there is a structural imbalance between waste generation and the effective recycling or reuse capacity in China that NI technology can help support. Another key area of opportunities in China is the recycling of the retired wind blades, which is expected to grow significantly over the next five years, creating a new category of compact composite waste that existing systems are not yet equipped to handle at scale.

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Together, these dynamics are driving strong, policy support and market demands for advanced processing in China's recycling businesses. Northern Ireland products with proven capabilities in this area have an opportunity to capitalise on this market growing need. In terms of China's future technologies in advanced manufacturing and automation, demand is driven by labour constraints, cost pressure, and productivity targets across Chinese industry.

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This has created demand for solutions in AI, robots and automation, which NI businesses can fulfil. In particular, world-class photonics, lasers and optical technologies continue to be in strong demand as technologies evolve - particularly in precision manufacturing, electronics and new materials. China has targeted the achievement of Carbon Peaking in 2030 and the Carbon Neutrality in 2060.

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in clean technology and sustainability, China's scale creates unique challenges, from construction waste to resource recycling to renewable energy. We also see opportunities in high value niche technologies where NI companies can differentiate on performance, reliability or system integration rather than price.

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To assess these opportunities, INI has a strong pipeline of research outputs, visits and sector specific engagements to drive exports from Northern Ireland to China. We will provide focused reports and information on China's solid waste management action plan and the 15th Five-Year-Plan, translating policies into business-relevant insights for you. On the ground,

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we are targeting visits to cities and clusters such as Qingdao, as well as providing support in participating in major industrial events across optoelectronics, constructions, machinery, recycling and aggregates. We'll be also presenting at conferences and alliance platforms where policymakers, SOEs, system integrators and end-users come together. We'll be pleased to support you and promote your business at these in-market events, guiding you through your first step in China to understand local operations, identify potential opportunities, and explore where your solutions could add real value to your business.

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And that concludes my presentation on Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering in China. Should you have any questions or interest in the Chinese market, please do not hesitate to get in touch for discussion to see how we can support your business success. Hope we can hear from you soon and I look forward to seeing you in the market.

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Next you will hear from Paul Daly, APAC Regional Sales Manager at Sensotek, who will share the experience of Sensotek's time doing business in China.

Chapter 3 - Sensoteq's China export journey

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Hi there everyone. Thanks for the opportunity for speaking today. My name's Paul Daly. I'm the Sensoteq APAC regional sales manager. And I'm going to talk a little bit about our China market experience from a Sensoteq point of view. So as I said, I represent Sensoteq. They are a Northern Ireland based technology company. We deliver end to end condition monitoring solutions that enable smarter maintenance decisions, powering safer, more efficient, and more sustainable industrial operations for our clients.

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So we combine ultra-low power wireless sensors with a cloud based machine health intelligence platform, and that provides continuous asset monitoring, early fault detection and intelligent diagnostics. So basically that empowers maintenance, reliability and operation teams within the clients, giving them actionable performance insights for their equipment. So today our solutions are deployed in over 50 countries across the various industries.

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Energy, mining, aggregates, pharmaceuticals, automotive, food and beverage, and many more different sectors. So we support these organisations as they move from reactive maintenance to predictive, data driven asset management. So with that, we've actually worked with Invest Northern Ireland now for over a decade. And they've been quite instrumental in supporting our international growth. From that early stage development through to global expansion, we've leveraged their expertise, their network and in-market presence.

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And quite simply, they've been the key enabler to establishing, a footprint across those 50 countries.

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So then when we look at China - why China? There's probably two factors when we look at the China market. One, firstly is the scale. It's simply unmatched. And particularly in the manufacturing and heavy industry sectors, which is really our key focus. And secondly, there's a strong digital push for predictive maintenance, which aligns directly with our offering and our client base.

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So it makes sense for us. So when we look at the China market and our approach, it's actually been quite focused. We specifically didn't go in broad. We started with pilot projects, specific sectors, often with multinational customers who we'd already built trust with elsewhere in the world. From there, we then build those local partnerships for distribution and support.

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And importantly, we then adapt our solutions to meet the local regulatory requirements and data requirements of the clients. You know, so and China, of course, has been quite progressive. It's not overnight. It has been with continued support from Invest Northern Ireland team and I guess China, for us, it's not just a sales market, it's an innovation market.

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You know, customers are quite often willing to try out new technologies and try one quickly, which has helped us redefine and strengthen our products globally as well. Now, it doesn't come without challenges and business factors that influence working in China. You know, if I think about a few things, you know, one of the factors is speed.

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You know, when we're dealing with the clients in China, once trust is established, projects can actually move very fast. Decisions that may take months elsewhere can actually be taken and moved quite quickly in weeks. It's also secondly, it's a very relationship driven market. It's very important to build that trust. Obviously we look at contracts and contacts, but it's the relationships that really enable the business to happen.

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So yeah, there's also with it being China, there's a there's an expectation about localisation. And that can mean different things to different companies and different products. For us, the customer expects local language support, local cloud hosting, solutions tailored to their specific needs. And the other factor which makes China quite unique - the other factor that makes China quite unique is the digital ecosystem.

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It's very different. And you know, we're used to emails, we're used to phone calls. We're used to WhatsApp as well. China's a little bit different. They use WeChat socially. They also use it for business communication. They use it even for commercial discussions. So we have to adapt with that because that's how their market goes.

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Also, even the likes of some of the apps that we use in China, like Alipay, it's essential. You can't just grab an Uber in China. So Alipay lets you pay for your transport, lets you pay for food and other communications and other services within China. So it's quite unique, the way that we have to work with the Chinese clients. I guess with that in mind as well, you know, obviously there are various barriers that we've got we've had to overcome, like most companies.

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One of the biggest ones for us would probably be data hosting and cyber security. It can be quite daunting. And the conversations, the complexities of those conversations. You know, we need to understand quite clearly what the client requirements are with regards to data management and the cloud architecture. And there's a bit of an old cliché.

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“What happens in China stays in China.” Literally, so the data can't leave. So our solution there basically is just working with those local partners to ensure that we understand the security compliance issues and the process thoroughly. We discuss them in the early stages so that we don't have any surprises later on in the project. And then really the solution there is that we use in-country hosting

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if necessary. One of the other areas of challenge is just the access to the market. China is huge. It's very, very difficult to reach end customer directly. My first trip to China, we were on bullet trains travelling around, the countryside and the cities just go on forever. It's really, really huge. It kind of blew me away.

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So the way to get around that, obviously, is just to partner with local distributors. Local integrators that have already got proven relationships. You know, so far, we've looked at, global partnerships that we already have in place and then look for a local entity that maybe was working in China that we could review and maybe have opportunities with.

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We also have had incoming direct enquiries directly to us for projects, or for companies that want to represent us. So we look at both of them in the same way, and we do whatever background checks we can do to check the track record. We have Teams intro calls, and we basically don't jump in blind. Ideally, we want to meet the client as soon as possible.

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In my opinion, this presents a much clearer picture. You know, when you meet the client, face to face, you can meet the body language. You can see the facility, and you can get a better understanding for the opportunity. Another aspect would be cultural differences. Obviously, misalignment in expectations, maybe communication. The way we cope with that is really just investing time.

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Regular Teams calls, in-person visits and relationship building again. You know, currently I have monthly teams calls with the key clients, a visit to China at least once a year. During that week or two weeks, it's honestly nonstop. We visit a number of clients. It's bullet trains here, there and everywhere, planes as well. We just sleep whenever we can.

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It works for us. We obviously try to get as much out of the opportunity in the time that we're there. As the projects and the clients progress, we pick up the in-person meeting frequency, and culturally, it's very important that we build trust through that contact. Last but not least, would be the IP protection. Always a concern when you've got a technology or a product going to a new market.

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Again, quite simple, to protect your IP, we looked at structured agreements, we look at NDA's to retain control over the core IP that's being shared. So we work it quite logically to make sure that we keep ourselves protected.

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And then when we're looking at China, one of the early examples of projects in China, we actually used a solution for a client that we had elsewhere in the world. We knew they had an identity in China. We made contact with the China site and they gave us the opportunity to do a pilot, and that pilot gave us a bit of a foothold in the market, allowed us to work through the local requirements

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and ultimately led to broader opportunities, not just with that customer, but also with local partners, who saw the value in the solution that we had in action. But it was good to just leverage that global customer contact, and then get itself into China, even though it's a different identity. So the kind of "start small, prove value, then scale."

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It's worked quite well for us in the China market. If we think about China marketing, we haven't really used China marketing channels for promotion yet, but it's primarily due to the niche clients that we target. It's probably early stages, and we're not really using that communication method. As I mentioned earlier, when we do get any leads, we thoroughly do as much research as possible and have teams calls.

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And as soon as possible, meet the client face to face. So and our advice from our exposure in to China, for Northern Ireland companies would be quite simple. Just start with a clear vision. Don't try and sell everything to everyone. It's a huge

country. There's multiple sectors. So you've got to be quite strategic. Invest in those local partnerships early.

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They are totally critical for your market access and your credibility. And they're going to help an awful lot. You've also got to be prepared to localise, not just with your product, but also your approach to business. How we work in China is a little bit different. Communication tools, apps, whatever. It's just a little bit different. If you do have other customers throughout the world, somewhere else in a different region that have a presence in China, they could be one of the most effective entry points.

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You've already got something tangible. So use that. And I guess finally be patient. Although I said China, it can be quite quick. It's also a long term investment. It takes time to build relationships. Time to build trust. But the opportunities that will come will be significant when you get it right. And lastly, but not least, engaging with Invest NI, which leads into my next sort of overview.

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You know, finally, you know, the role of Invest NI for our journey has been quite significant. And they have supported us through market introductions, in-market expertise. Through their China offices and people, opportunities to participate in trade missions and events. They've got valuable guidance on the regulatory side of things, cultural considerations. A lot of which I said can be daunting when you're trying to navigate that independently.

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So you've got the resource there, they've got the experience and people. Ultimately the Invest Northern Ireland support has helped us reduce our time to market and risk,

enabling us to get the right connections early on. We've been to Invest NI supported events at China or we've had support with Invest NI contacts, doing translation, doing meeting preparation, setting up meetings for clients, follow up emails after the events discussions, even helping us with visa applications to make sure we can travel to China quite simply.

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We've also used Invest NI to look at potential Chinese clients or distributors, do a little bit of background checking because they've also got more resources. And we've also, use them for discussions on IP protection, copywriting, etc. as well so very, very valuable resource. Definitely use them to support you. So overall China for us, it definitely has been challenging but it's a very rewarding market.

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It's a huge market. You know we still believe that, you know, with the right approach, strong partnerships, support from companies like Invest NI, it can represent a significant growth opportunity for Northern Ireland companies. Now, we do expect to get more new clients and considerable sales over the next few years. It's all through this whole process of building partnerships, building strengths and building that reputation

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in the China market. So that's basically Sensoteq in China from our point of view today in this webinar. I appreciate your time and opportunity to share our experience.

Chapter 4 - Food and drink opportunities in China

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Hello everyone. Thank you for joining this presentation on food and drink in China. I am Summer Song, the regional manager for food and drink at Invest Northern Ireland. I am based in China's capital city, Beijing. I work closely with Northern Ireland companies who are exporting or considering exporting to China. Help them connecting with Chinese buyers, distributors, key stakeholders, industry associations and delivering in market initiatives that encourage commercial success.

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My role focuses on food and drink, covering everything from dairy and seafood to spirits. Essentially, I am the market specialist for Northern Ireland client companies, helping them to identify customers, partners and capitalise on opportunities across China. Today, I will provide a brief overview of the China opportunity for Northern Ireland food and drink companies. I'll talk about how we help Northern Ireland businesses in the market, share some of our past and upcoming initiatives, and highlight key industry events.

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For those of you who may be interested in exporting to China market over the year ahead. China is a sizeable and strategic market for food and drink exporters and sellers. According to the China Chamber of Commerce of Import and Export of Foodstuffs, Native Produce and Animal By-Products, which is known as CFNA, China became the world's largest food importer in 2024.

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China offers Northern Ireland businesses the world's largest pork market and dairy product market. It is the world's largest seafood consumer by volume and the world's

largest spirits market as well. China's top imported food categories align closely with sectoral strengths of Northern Ireland food and drink companies. This includes meat, aquatic products and seafood, dairy produce and animal feed, seafood and dairy.

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Both recorded strong annual growth of around 11% and 13%, respectively in 2024, highlighting a sustained demand for UK products in this segment. This trend is also reflected in UK-China trade performance. UK seafood exports to China more than doubled in 2024, rising by 128.9% to £75.3 million. This expansion is widely seen as being supported by China's rapidly developing cold-chain logistic infrastructure, which is improving access for high quality imported products.

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At the same time, food safety and regulatory compliance are taken extremely seriously in China. While this raises the bar for market entry, it also favours trusted and reliable suppliers such as those from lots of Ireland. According to the China National Food Industry Association, the industry's shift towards premium and value-added food products is accelerating, with organic and functional foods growing at annual rates of approximately 12% to 20%.

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This represents a demand from China that Northern Ireland producers with strong quality, traceability and regulatory credentials are well placed to meet. The two notable policy developments may also bring new opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses. In February this year, following a high-level visit to China by the UK Prime Minister, China reduced the import tariffs on UK whiskey from 10% to 5%.

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This has therefore increased the competitiveness of UK spirits brands imported into China market. There are also positive market indicators regarding possible market access to China for UK pet food. Pet food manufacturers can now review the export health certificate requirements online to decide whether their products are eligible for exporting. Eligible manufacturers should then prepare their registration with General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) and get licenses for feed from the China Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, which is also known as MARA.

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We will also continue to monitor policy developments in these areas and keep Northern Ireland clients informed. Invest NI supports Northern Ireland food and drink companies through a wide range of commercially focussed in market activities throughout China. We create sale and partnership opportunities by bringing Chinese buyers to Northern Ireland through inward visits, where buyers can engage with our clients in person and taste the pure, natural and quality Northern Ireland products firsthand.

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You will have provided effective opportunities for producing commercial outcomes and generating exports from Northern Ireland to China. In market, here in China, we also support and represent Northern Ireland companies at major trade shows, as well as smaller, more targeted activities such as tasting sessions and media buyer events. In major industry exhibitions and trade platforms such as the Hainan Expo and China Fisheries Expo,

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Speaker 1

we have curated matchmaking events that bring Chinese buyers and distributors together with Northern Ireland businesses. We also showcase Northern Ireland food and drink companies at high profile and influential platforms such as CIIE, the China International Import Expo. Alongside this, Invest NI leverages networking and profile, raising opportunities such as hosting gala dinners and showcasing lots of people at high end receptions for companies visiting China.

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Speaker 1

We arrange targeted meetings with local importers. We also provide market access, guidance for new products and give support at new product launching events and roadshows. Invest Northern Ireland also assists companies in exploring creative promotional channels which are more efficiently to reach Chinese consumers, such as live streaming sales initiatives. Looking ahead, Invest Northern Ireland will continue to create opportunities for Northern Ireland companies, sharing our passion for Northern Ireland food and drink with Chinese buyers and consumers.

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Speaker 1

Whether you are exploring China for the first time or already in market and looking to scale your commercial reach in the region, we would be pleased to support you with high impact initiatives to help grow through your business. Each year in China, there are a wide range of major food and drink trade shows that provide opportunities to showcase the very best of Northern Ireland food and drink and enhance your buyer network, such as China Whisky Development Conference in September, China Fisheries and Expo in October or FHC in November this year.

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Speaker 1

Invest NI will seek to deepen engagement with key Chinese partners and be present at conferences and events where buyers come together. Invest NI will be pleased to represent your organisation at industry events, supporting your China journey, guiding you through your first steps in China to understand the local operations, identifying potential opportunities and exploring where engaging with China could add real value to your business.

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Speaker 1

That concludes my presentation on food and drink in China. Should you have any questions or wish to learn more about food and drink in China, please do not hesitate to

get in touch for discussion to see how we can support your success. Hope we can hear from you soon and I look forward to assisting you in the market.

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Speaker 1

Next you will hear from Donal Harte, Head of Marketing at Lakeland Dairies, who will share learning and his experiences of doing business in China.

Chapter 5 - Lakeland Dairies: building a food brand in China

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Good morning all. My name is Donal Harte. I'm Head of Marketing for Lakeland Dairies. And today I'm going to share with you our experience of launching and building our Millac brand into China, what worked, what didn't work, and what we learned along the way.

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Firstly, Lakeland Dairies is 100% farmer-owned dairy co-operative and we actually launched into Asia in 1998. We learned many things on our journey, and one of them was actually launching in 1997 with a product called Sure Whip with a distributor. However, that distributor and ourselves as a business hadn't done our homework correctly. We hadn't looked at our competitor and we hadn't

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met our local market needs.

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We actually changed our distributor, and we did a lot of work with a company called Namchow. And once we had launched in 1997, it wasn't actually until 1998 or 1999 that we launched our hero products, the Millac Luxury SKU, and we met with Namchow in 2000 and over a series of meetings and business contacts on a series, we met with their leadership and it was very important that we decided to change our distributor to Namchow

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on the basis of meeting the leadership to align on the opportunity, culture, joint priorities, and that both teams made the decision to launch our hero SKUs into the product. At first, practically, Lakeland Dairies were exporting products internationally. We had an office logistics team of four. We had an Asia salesperson. We also had a UK senior salesperson who was based in the UK.

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And in order to get to scale over a period of time, we gradually built up that team. Primarily, we leaned in heavily into our distributor to help our distribution, to promote and to build our scale. And I'll take you through that little bit further in our slides. We also attended many trade shows, both on a national level and on a regional level, which is an important point for all to remember as that helps you gain word of mouth in the marketplace.

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That scale has allowed the Millac brand to now be the fourth largest importer of cream into China.

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And considering China and launching products into the marketplace, China really rewards products that are very clear in their proposition and brands that feel are very consistent and trustworthy. And there's two points on this slide around our Millac brand. Firstly, China wants quality and one cannot match the quality and taste of products that we can get from Northern Ireland.

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In our case, we've really built up our proposition around taste and performance, particularly in professional kitchens, bakeries and beverage outlets. Companies are now copying our products in China, but never truly matched. We really have the

confidence to position our product accordingly. We positioned as premium from day one, and a company from Northern Ireland needs to have that confidence in their product quality.

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Why? Because Northern Ireland has the best possible food standards. We have the geographical location. We have naturally grass fed from our green pastures. We have rainfall and our factory standards are second to none. The second key point that China looks to when launching products into the marketplace is all around its packaging learnings and what we can say about that.

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Firstly, we promoted Millac as a premium offering, starting with English. Localisation in the marketplace has to be done in an appropriate way. When you have permission and positioning in the marketplace. But showing up on pack matters and over time, we did move to include Chinese characters on packs. English helped us to stand out, but legislation drove that change, and we spent time to understand the meaning of Chinese characters, to allow us to think culturally in a way that stood out and retained our brand status.

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Unknown

Finally, the colour on packaging is very important and needs important consideration. Blue represents purity for a Millac brand, and red represents happiness. So product quality and packaging are key considerations when you're launching into China.

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Our approach has been very simple. We, as I said in the first slide, we engaged through a distributor. You need to be clear on your objectives with your distributor. Know what you're trying to achieve from the outset. Identify those clear requirements before

engaging with your distributor, set out your goals, but also do some homework around understanding, thinking about your supply model.

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Is your range best fit and suited for chilled, frozen, or ambient?

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What's the distributor already sell in to channels that you're targeting? Are they experienced in those particular channels such as retail, foodservice, or any bakery that you're targeting? Can you get some support from the distributor, and are they experienced in importing and promoting overseas goods? And very practically speaking, can they communicate effectively and easily? Do they have a support team in place to help you achieve your goals?

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Does the management team achieve those? Speak English?

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So some advice for companies considering China. As I said in the first slide, our success came with the second distributor and scale came with a lot learned in terms of the Millac brand. First and foremost, to use all the Invest Northern Ireland services available to you to help identify the potential distributors. Build a shortlist with support. Think do you want to launch your product regionally or nationally?

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Unknown

Meet with your distributors to understand those capabilities. It's very important that you think about that intent from your launch objectives. Secondly, a very important point that we certainly spent a lot of time on is protect yourself and your brand early. There are many legal requirements to consider. You need to have the right agreements in place. Be it through distributor agreements, joint business plan agreements, but also from a brand perspective.

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Unknown

It's very important that you trademark your brands. This is very important because again, based on the quality of our Northern Ireland products, local products in China will copy. And then finally, the labeling and regulatory rules in China are constantly changing and evolving. So you need to be aware of those. There are resources available to support your packaging claims and to navigate in order to give you confidence to achieve that.

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So how did Millac grow its brand?

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We used, in addition to attending national trade shows and the bakery show, it was very important that we used a very basic technique in marketing, which is product trial and tastings. This was done in order to generate trial, because we were so confident in the quality of the product that we had, but it can't be said and can't be done alone.

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Unknown

And over time, with a distributor, we worked to ensure that we raised a digital platform. Extensive PR and key customer events. In most recent times we've launched our own Millac digital platform, WeChat, Red and Weibo are the three that we've selected. Working with a local agency. And we're now getting up to about 13,500 reach and

growing on a weekly basis through a constant content schedule, PR, we're spending and investing money, to get the awareness and build up traction with the brand.

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Customer events are highly effective where you're inviting local companies and chefs, in our case, and baristas in our case to ensure that they try our product and we try to convert them as part of the lead generation process.

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How have we worked with and been supported by Invest NI? I think it's really important to call out that we have gained key introductions to Chinese dairy buyers nationally. Invest NI have helped us promote Lakeland dairy product ranges at industry showcases, assisting in Millac product launches across both first tier and second tier cities to drive sales.

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They've also assisted in social media promotion on Chinese language platforms, which was very important as we first set out to grow the brand and then more importantly and finally, in my opinion, the dairy market research to identify the consumer demands was really important and value add because that allowed us to meet the local needs as well. Also, they facilitated very high meetings, high profile meetings with the Northern Ireland Economy Minister in December '25, showcasing Lakeland at the UK Prime Minister visit to China in January 2026, and then also supporting at international expo as well in China.

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Unknown

Thank you for your time.

Chapter 6 - Protecting your intellectual property in China

00:00:00:12 - 00:00:31:11

Speaker 1

Hi everyone. My name is Max Jiang. I'm the senior IP officer based at the Shanghai Consulate. I'm delighted to present on IP Protection in China, a critical topic for businesses exploring opportunities or already in the market. As part of the attaché network of the UK Intellectual Property Office, the UK IPO, we are deployed here to better understand China's IP systems through constructive and direct engagements with Chinese IP authorities, and to support UK businesses as they navigate the Chinese system.

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Speaker 1

Drawing on the knowledge and insights we build from those engagements, it's important to note that none of our team members are IP lawyers, which means we cannot provide you legal advice. Businesses will still need to refer to legal experts to develop specific IP strategies or actions for specific cases or issues, but our support helps company to frame those discussions with professionals more effectively.

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Speaker 1

We work closely with partners like Invest Northern Ireland to guide companies doing business in China. Our objective is to help exporter make commercial decisions about China market based on a reasonable understanding of the Chinese IP environment and IP system. We have developed a five step model, which can form the foundation for companies seeking to build a sound IP strategy for China.

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Speaker 1

No system makes you completely immune from IP risks; but early planning, taking legal advice and discussing IP issues openly with your partners early can significantly mitigate any IP risks.

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Speaker 1

It's important for companies to understand the big picture and manage expectations. Interestingly, in comparison to the UK IP system, the Chinese IP system is both different and not different at the same time. There are obvious differences a different legal tradition, a three-tier enforcement system which is quite unique, and the sheer scale of the system, all of these create real challenges to companies.

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Speaker 1

However, there are also many similarities. Registered rights such as trademarks, patent and designs, as well as unregistered rights like copyright and trade secrets are examined, protected and enforced in ways that UK companies would broadly recognise. While some systematic issues remains at framework level, the system has become increasingly coherent, which means risks can be mitigated to a manageable level if the right steps are taken. At an operational level, I would like to highlight two differences that have direct practical impact.

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Speaker 1

First, the territorial nature and the first-to-register principle. The IP rights such as trademarks and patents are territorial, so UK registration do not automatically protect you in China. China also places strong emphasis on first-to-register, which is why bad-faith trademark, also known as trademark squatting remains one of the most widespread issues we see, particularly when products gain market traction before trademark registration.

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Speaker 1

Second, evidence. When enforcing IP right, especially enforcing unregistered rights, evidence of ownership must be presented to the Chinese IP authorities. In practice, you might have to rely heavily on evidence generated outside China where the right was originally created. You should bear in mind that extraterritorial evidence may not always

be directly eligible. You will have to process them for the use in China, which means extra time and costs are required.

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Speaker 1

Once expectations are set, the next step is to secure your rights. For registrable rights, registration is essential; for unregistered rights, ownership evidence needs to be prepared and suitable for use in China as I just explained. Registration itself is usually straightforward and it won't cost too much, but deciding what and when to register can be quite challenging, particularly for SMEs.

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Speaker 1

Registration forms your legal foundation in the market, but where the budget or register ability is limited, early and informed analysis is essential.

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Speaker 1

The fourth step is about how you engage with partners. Many of the popular business models require a strong partnership with local companies, but at the same time, IP infringement and IP dispute risks can arise when you can't manage those relationships well. Contract enforceability is a point that sometimes overlooked by a lot of people. Business arrangements involving IP are contractual by nature.

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Speaker 1

Under the Chinese framework, you are actually given big flexibility to negotiate and agree terms like foreground IP ownership or liability split, which could be codified in your contract with your partner. Your strongest leverage is the dispute resolution mechanisms agreed in the contract. Enforcing UK commercial judgement in China remains quite difficult nowadays. Enforceability should always be considered very carefully, especially when you work with partners whose assets are primarily in China.

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Speaker 1

And finally, the last step in this model in terms of the enforcement, IP rights in China are largely treated as private rights. While there may be occasional ex-officio actions, infringements rarely disappear unless right holders take proactive steps. China has multiple enforcement rules with different features and deterrence effects for you to leverage. There are, of course, challenges like the budget, which is faced by everyone in the market.

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Speaker 1

So the key thing here, from what we have experienced, is to plan and budget for IP enforcement, just that you would for any other aspect of your business when entering a new market. And that concludes this presentation. If you are serious about doing business in China, you need to factor IP protection into your commercial planning. Understanding the Chinese IP system and assess what your risk exposure looks like.

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Speaker 1

Once the reasonable precautions are taken, I hope you have enjoyed this presentation, and please feel free to reach out if you would like to have a more in-depth 1 to 1 discussion. Thank you.

Chapter 7 - How the Northern Ireland Bureau supports business in China

00:00:00:04 - 00:00:27:05

Speaker 1

So hello and thank you for joining this Spotlight on China session. Today I want to talk about how Northern Ireland engages with China beyond pure commercial activity. Why that matters directly to Northern Ireland businesses operating or considering operating in the Chinese market. So firstly, the Northern Ireland Bureau China is the official representative of the Northern Ireland Executive in China.

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Speaker 1

Our role is to act as a trusted bridge between Northern Ireland and China, connecting our government, councils, education institutions and agencies with Chinese provincial and municipal governments, and with business, education and innovation institutions across the country. What this means in practical terms is that we create the trust, the stability and credibility that Northern Ireland businesses can benefit from.

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Speaker 1

We link directly with foreign affairs offices across China. We oversee local commercial bureau who have responsibility for international business activity in their districts. These relationships provide political and civic context, support and oversight, but commercial engagement alone often cannot and that context really matters in China. So what do we mean about sister city and province to province links? Well, these are formal, structured relationships between Northern Ireland councils or the Northern Ireland Executive and Chinese cities or provinces.

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Speaker 1

They are built over time through regular civic engagement, continuity and mutual cooperation across a range of areas. In China these types of relationships carry real weight, China places a very high value on subnational government engagement,

particularly when it is sustained, senior and consistent. A recognised city or provincial relationship provides legitimacy. It acts as an official endorsement and, crucially, it enables access to local decision makers and for businesses

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Speaker 1

this matters because these relationships often determine how you are received, who you are introduced to, and how seriously those introductions are taken. So Northern Ireland already has a strong footprint across several key Chinese regions. Our established relationships include Belfast with Shenyang, Derry/Londonderry with Dalian, and Newry, Mourne and Down with Changchun. These are all in the northern China, in Liaoning and Jilin provinces, and we also have Fermanagh and Omagh and their growing relationship with Huangshi in southwestern Hubei.

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Speaker 1

In addition to these sister city links, at an executive level, Northern Ireland has province links with both Hubei and Liaoning provinces. And these relationships at a province level are particularly valuable as they cover the breadth of opportunities for each of those provinces, and they align well with Northern Ireland's strengths in advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences, agrifood, cyber and fintech, education and research.

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Speaker 1

They give Northern Ireland a depth of presence across multiple regions, creating more opportunities with relevant local partners. So a key focus for us at the Northern Ireland Bureau in China this year is ensuring that these relationships move beyond symbolism and deliver practical, commercially relevant outcomes. So in 2026, we are deliberately shifting from these relationships being largely ceremonial, to becoming structured platforms for engagement.

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Speaker 1

This includes developing clearer programmes around existing partnerships and exploring new relationships and strategically important cities such as Wuhan and Zhengzhou and the Bureau's role is to make sure that these links work in practice. We support senior civic and political engagement, convene thematic and sector focussed workshops, and maintain continuous engagement with Chinese provincial and municipal foreign affairs offices, as well as at a ministry here at a national level in Beijing.

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Speaker 1

And the outcome of all of this ongoing work for Northern Ireland is that there are now more structured entry points for businesses, platforms that support introductions and legitimate engagement. But what does that mean in practical terms for for the listeners to this call and our Northern Ireland companies. So sister city and provincial platforms will make it easier to access local government officials, state owned enterprises and major private sector players.

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Speaker 1

They provide stronger signalling of official support at a city and province level, and that matters in how companies are perceived, received and supported. They also improve the quality of opportunities for delegations, for site visits and business matchmaking, so companies often benefit from faster access to senior decision makers and a warmer reception overall. And importantly, these relationships provide political assurance in a complex environment, particularly during periods of regulatory change or market uncertainty.

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Speaker 1

So, in short, our sister city and province platforms amplify credibility. They reduce friction in market entry and increase the quality and effectiveness of engagement. There are wider benefits to in education, research, collaboration, talent mobility and tourism. And you can rest assured that the Northern Ireland Bureau is also working actively in developing these opportunities. So let me close on sister cities and province links with a final thought.

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Speaker 1

So in China, relationships open doors. They're very important. But trusted relationships keep them open. So for anyone on the call who are wishing to find out more in relation to their local Northern Ireland China links and engage locally to explore how sister city relationships can be used to support international growth, please reach out, either directly to your local council to find out more about their direct links, or engage directly with the Northern Ireland Bureau in China.

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Speaker 1

We are happy to have a conversation with you about existing Northern Ireland-China links and how they can be used to support you. So thank you and I hope this has been a useful insight into how Northern Ireland's existing relationships can support your business success in this market.

Chapter 8 - Next Steps for exporting to China

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Speaker 1

And that concludes our spotlight on doing business in China presentations. We hope you have gained a deeper understanding of the real opportunities currently available in China for Northern Ireland companies, and how Invest Northern Ireland can support your business on that journey. Thank you to all those who've contributed their time, especially to our companies, Sensoteq and Lakeland Dairies for sharing expertise about doing business in China.

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Speaker 1

Thank you to colleagues from the UK Intellectual Property Office and the Northern Ireland Bureau who covered how to protect your business in navigating intellectual property challenges and the valuable role of sister cities and the Northern Ireland Bureau in China. Together with the Invest Northern Ireland presentations, we've demonstrated there is a passionate, robust and active ecosystem of support available to Northern Ireland companies who are wanting to explore the China market.

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Speaker 1

Be it attendance or representation at trade shows and events, gathering market insights or taking your first steps into the China market. Invest NI is here to support you every step of the way. Once again, thank you for joining the Spotlight on Doing Business in China from Invest Northern Ireland. If you would like more information or to have a conversation about China, please contact us at exportenquiries@investni.com or visit investni.com/export.

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Speaker 1

We'll be pleased to help you explore the market and find the right opportunities for your organisation. Thank you.