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# THE CLEAR RIVER SOJOURN - STUDENT LEARNING FROM A SHORT VISIT TO CHINA

JANE ORTON  
MARA PAVLIDIS  
XIA CUI

CHINESE TEACHER TRAINING CENTRE  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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## 1. AIM

This study was undertaken to investigate the outcomes of a short-term sojourn in China for 20 secondary students of Chinese from 11 Victorian government schools. The aim was to gauge gains in

- language proficiency
- cultural knowledge of China
- intercultural competence.

## 2. PROGRAM

Eight students in the group were of Chinese background and there was a very wide range of Chinese language experience in the group, from students who had learned Chinese from Prep-Year 9, to some who had learned Chinese from Years 7-10, to some who had done less than one full year.

The eight-day program took place at the international campus of a Chinese Middle School located in the north-west of Beijing. It comprised three hours of dedicated classes in Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) every morning, and in the afternoon excursion providing opportunities to make use of the morning's lessons, plus on two occasions, sessions on traditional Chinese culture. In the evening there was a 2-hour library session in for doing homework or private study. On the weekend there were excursions to cultural sights around Beijing, and in the last couple of days, introduction to an assigned Chinese 'buddy' of their own age.

Upon arrival in Beijing the 20 students were allocated to classes at one of two levels, Intermediate (11 students) and Advanced (nine students), based on an initial oral assessment and the practical desirability of even class sizes. Lessons were taught by two teachers at each level, who were all qualified Chinese language teachers, with between three and eight years' teaching experience. Their overall aim for the language programme was to improve students' listening and speaking skills in relation to topics relevant to their sojourn in China, for example, shopping interactions, ordering dishes in a restaurant. Teaching was largely in Chinese only, with active student participation in pair-work and whole class learning activities. There was no formal end-of-course language assessment, but students were issued with a Certificate of Participation.

## 3. PROCEDURE

Data were collected as

- semi-structured individual interviews conducted pre-sojourn and post-sojourn by two bilingual researchers; one, a Chinese first language user, tested students' language using only Chinese, the other, a first language user of English, discussed and assessed cultural knowledge and intercultural development using English
- observation of classes and excursions in China, as well as interviews there with students and with the Chinese teachers.
- a simple self-assessment questionnaire about their learning in China was completed at the end of the post-sojourn interview.

In addition to profiling students and establishing some baseline for the learning, the interviews were intended to assist learning by having students think about and articulate their expectations and hopes prior to departure, and post visit to reflect on their experience and sense of achievement.

## 4. SUMMARY OF PROGRAM OUTCOMES

### 4.1 LEARNING

In the post-sojourn interviews there is clear evidence of some benefit for all participants in the program with respect to the areas investigated. The following is a summary of the most important gains from the time in China.

#### 4.1.1 Language

- All improved in language proficiency to some degree, with the weaker ones at the start making the greatest progress
- Most demonstrated slightly improved comprehension and question response rates
- Two-thirds used more complex sentences
- Half made as many or fewer pronunciation errors
- A quarter provided information additional to answering a question
- Another quarter used communication strategies in Chinese to overcome a difficulty in expression
- Five made less use of English, seven did not change in this respect, and a further seven used more English than earlier
- In interactions with local shop people, on-sojourn observations showed students prepared to use expressions that they had just learnt in class.

#### 4.1.2 Cultural Knowledge

- The most frequently commented on aspect of Chinese culture was the urban environment. Students had not expected China to be as developed and westernised as they had found it to be in for example, its architecture
- An unanticipated social reality was the socio-economic divisions in Chinese society and the associated contrast between rich and poor
- Anticipated differences in educational expectations and standards were confirmed, notably the diligence of Chinese students, their respect for teachers, and the stricter approach to teaching and learning in the schools
- Unanticipated differences in school life centred on the length of the school day, the heavy workload, the large school population, and the presence of international students.

#### 4.1.3 Intercultural Competence

- Students who already had a deeper awareness of culture evident in their pre-sojourn interviews tended to have engaged at a deeper level with their experiences in China and to have more profound observations to make
- Students who demonstrated limited cultural awareness pre-sojourn tended to have observed less while in China and to have noticed as many matters similar to their own lives as differences
- The most common terms students used to describe the Chinese they encountered were positive. Of highest frequency was *friendly*, a first, or self-referencing, level of engagement, which describes 'how they are' in terms of the speaker; another term was *hard-working*, a static attribute of 'how they are' at the second, or observer, level of engagement.

- The most common attributes of Chinese people noted were *resilience*, *determination* and *diligence*, while *respect for the elderly* was also mentioned
- A small number of students experienced a strong sense of connection with Beijing and, in particular, with the school they attended, a feeling which surprised them, coming as it did from such a short period of time there.
- Many students embraced the Chinese values evident in educational expectations and standards for students in China.
- Those who already recognised the relative nature of cultural practices, attitudes and perspectives, could explicitly accept that practices they would not approve of for themselves might be reasonable in a different society
- Even students making negative comments about cultural difference felt the need to minimise the criticism by qualifying their comment.

In summary, the study provides strong evidence for the value of the program for providing:

- first-hand experience of Chinese culture
- an authentic purpose for language learning
- motivation for continuing to learn Chinese.

## 4.2 SOJOURN DESIGN

### 4.2.1 *Language classes dedicated to the specific students were beneficial in*

- improving Chinese language skills and confidence in speaking Chinese
- assisting students to carry out day-to-day activities in the world outside the classroom.

Students also found having a home base in the school to be a very comforting factor.

### 4.2.2 *Chinese program teachers commented positively on the students'*

- enthusiasm for their language classes
- high participation in learning activities
- cooperative attitude towards program activities.

### 4.2.3 *Weaknesses in the program stemmed from*

- division of the very disparately proficient students into classes at only two levels
- pace of lessons and lack of individual attention limiting improvement possible
- sessions on culture presented in language above students' competence
- content of culture sessions being unrelated to language work
- visits to cultural sights being too brief and very rushed
- an undue amount of extracurricular time devoted to shopping
- limited opportunities to connect with Chinese people
- failure to provide each student on arrival with a local 'buddy'
- accompanying *Hanban* appointee to Victoria often not available to support teachers.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 PLANNING AND DESIGN

- The China sojourn programme supported through the *Hanban* should be continued, but with DEECD providing greater input into the design and implementation of the program, including alerting Chinese partners to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Australian students
- A buddy system which includes a brief home stay should be incorporated
- 10-12 days is too short to reap maximum benefit from the expense in organisational effort and money required to run the program. 18 or more days would be likely to reap much greater rewards, and a minimum of 14 days should be stipulated
- Clear shared goals need to be established for the desired outcomes of the sojourn programme, in terms of language training, cultural learning and intercultural experience and the weighting to be given to these
- Learning from the program should be formally assessed and information used to reform program design
- Pre-sojourn training in how to learn from a sojourn – not simply briefings on travel practicalities and law – could maximise the gains from even a short visit.

### 5.2 MAXIMISING LEARNING

- The Chinese side should provide more tailored work in language development – for example, targeting a couple of weaknesses evident in a pre-sojourn diagnostic test, and linking work on these with the vocabulary needed for program participation, such as visiting the Zoo
- Students should be paired up with a buddy in the first week of the program, or even beforehand via Skype. This would maximise the chance of developing a relationship that might last
- Direction needs to be given for use of the time allocated in evenings for private study
- Formal reflection activities are shown to enhance learning and these should be introduced in the form of personal blogs or journals and some group reflection on the experiences of each day and plans for the following one.

### References

- Orton, J. (1999). What Can Be Learned in a Month? Intercultural Learning in a Short-Term Program. Paper presented at the *Third Chinese Symposium on Intercultural Communication*, Shenzhen University and Hong Kong Baptist University, Shenzhen, China, 21-24 November, 1999.
- Orton, J. & Mansell, D. (2011) *Learning from Short-term Sojourns in China*. Melbourne Graduate School of Education, the University of Melbourne. Available at <http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/cttc/Publications.html>



## 6. DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

### 6.1 CHINESE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

#### 6.1.1 Method

Assessing Chinese language proficiency involved a 2-3 minute discussion with the student. The interviewer started with two to three questions about the student's name, year level at school, age and how many people in their family. Following this, in the pre-sojourn interview a photograph depicting a Chinese cultural activity at a Victorian secondary school (Picture A below) was used to elicit language, and in the post-sojourn interview both Picture A and Picture B (below) were presented in turn. Looking at the photograph students were asked to:

- describe the setting (location and time)
- identify/describe the people depicted
- describe the nature of the activity/ies

The interviewer adjusted the difficulty of questions as required and, where necessary, asked additional questions to elicit a more detailed response.



Picture A



Picture B

Responses were assessed according to the following criteria:

1. Evidence of comprehension
2. Task completion
3. Use of complete sentences
4. Pronunciation errors
5. Recourse to English
6. Volunteering additional information
7. Use of strategies to handle the response.

*Comprehension* of interviewer speech was evidenced by an appropriate answer or translation into English. *Task completion* comprised a response as requested. While students were not necessarily required to respond in complete sentences, using *complete sentences* demonstrated a wider language repertoire, for example, in describing activities depicted in the photograph. *Pronunciation errors* were counted when students (a) produced a word that is incomprehensible to the interviewer, (b) did not pronounce a consonant correctly/clearly, and (c) used an incorrect tone. *Recourse to English* refers to a student's use of English (a) for all or part of an answer or, (b) to check their comprehension of the question. *Volunteering additional information* was demonstration of a capacity to go beyond the

interviewer's questions to provide further information without prompts. *Use of strategies* involved students' using Chinese to deal with a question they could not answer by saying, for example, '我不明白 (I don't understand)', or simply repeating the question with rising intonation, instead of going back to their first language.

## **6.2 LANGUAGE RESULTS**

### **6.2.1 Pre-sojourn language assessment**

1. Comprehension and response rates for questions asked in Chinese ranged widely, from 100% to below 50%, with two understanding even less than 10%.
2. A number of students could not understand questions regarding such basic information as their name, age and year level.
3. In most cases, the greater number of complete sentences used in answers correlated with higher comprehension and response rates.
4. The number of times students referred to English during the interviews ranged from 0-11 times. English was used (a) for all or part of an answer to an interview questions, and (b) to check comprehension of questions.
5. On one or more occasions, approximately 50% of students used communication strategies such as asking for confirmation of understanding, paraphrasing, or clarifying the interviewer's questions.

### **6.2.2 Post-sojourn language assessment**

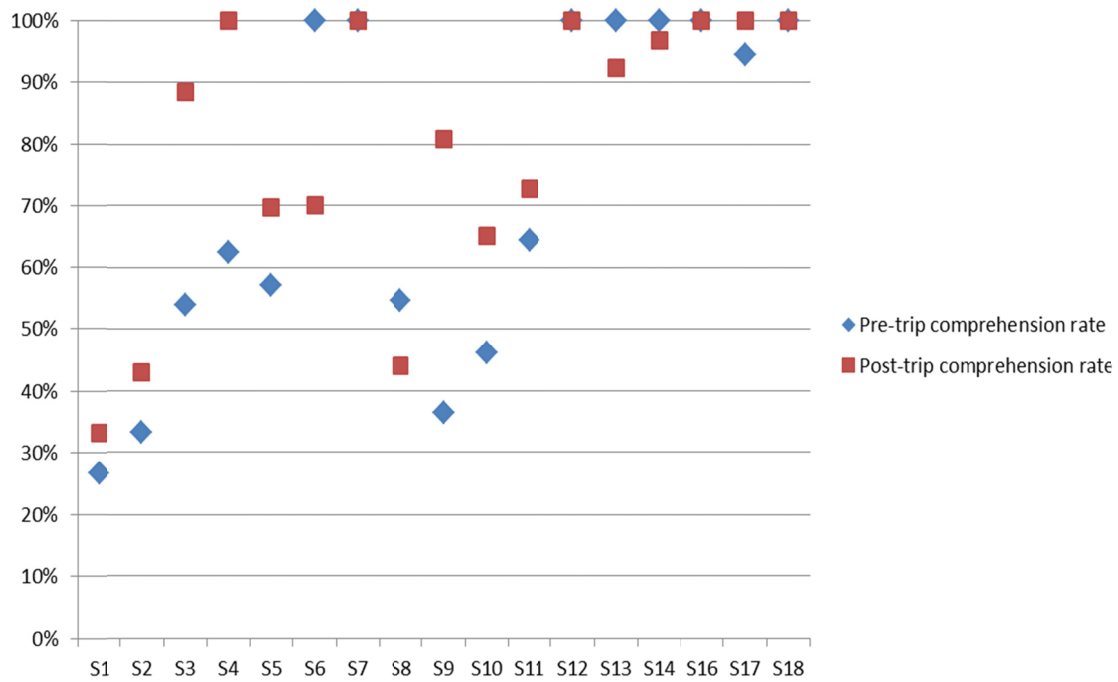
1. Overall increase in comprehension and response rate.
2. Most contributed to the total of 139 more complete sentences (as compared to 89 in pre-sojourn interviews).
3. Students generally used a wider range of vocabulary in their responses, particularly when talking about their experiences in Beijing.
4. Some students used some colloquial expressions.
5. Five students volunteered additional information without prompts from the interviewer, most appeared to be more willing to speak, though some used English and Chinese to do so.
6. The use of communication strategies to clarify or avoid a question remained the same as pre-sojourn.

### 6.2.3 Details of language test results

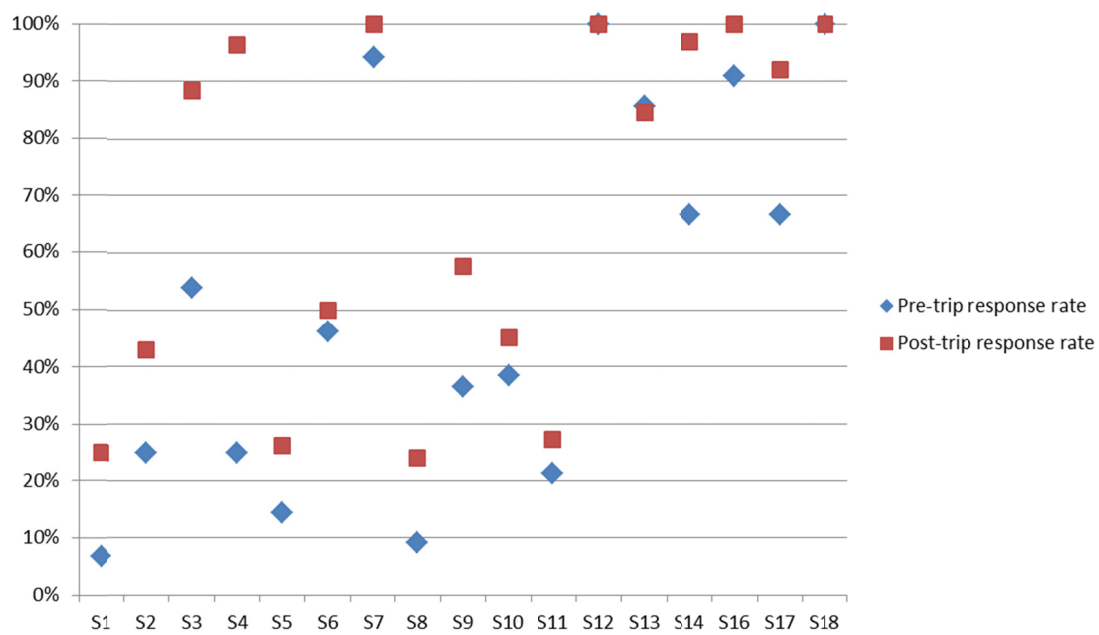
**TABLE 1:** Tally of student responses – Black = pre-sojourn (N=20) Blue = post-sojourn (N=17)

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S16	S17	S18	S10
No. of questions asked	15	12	13	16	14	13	17	11	11	13	14	16	14	15	22	18	13	13
	24	21	26	27	23	20	23	25	26	20	22	22	26	31	23	25	22	20
Percentage of questions comprehended	26.7	33.3	53.9	62.5	57.1	100	100	54.6	36.4	46.2	64.3	100	100	100	100	94.4	100	46.2
	33.3	42.9	88.5	100	69.6	70	100	44	80.8	1 65	72.7	100	92.3	96.8	100	100	100	1 65
Percentage of questions responded to appropriately	6.7	25	53.9	25	14.3	46.2	94.1	9.1	36.4	38.5	21.4	100	85.7	66.7	90.9	66.7	100	38.5
	25	42.9	88.5	96.3	26.1	50	100	24	57.7	45	27.3	100	84.6	96.8	100	92	100	45
No. of complete sentences used	3	3	2	1	1	5	8	0	3	3	3	15	9	7	10	5	11	3
	5	3	3	12	2	9	17	1	6	7	2	14	5	19	13	12	9	7
No. of pronunciation errors	5	1	4	1	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	0	1	0	5	2
	5	6	3	2	3	0	5	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	7	0
No. of times referring to English	3	7	0	9	8	8	3	10	6	0	11	0	1	3	3	3	0	0
	2	9	0	4	14	7	2	11	6	3	5	0	3	4	0	3	2	3
No. of times providing additional information	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	5	0	3	0
No. of times using strategies to respond	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	3	2	3	0	1
	4	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	2	0

**Graph 1: Students' comprehension rate pre-and post- comparison**



**Graph 2: Students' response rate pre- and post- comparison**



5.2

#### **6.2.4 Pre-sojourn interviews**

1. Students anticipated their greatest gains in cultural knowledge would be with respect to Chinese history and tradition, achieved through visits to cultural sights.
2. Their actual knowledge of China's history, geography and contemporary culture varied but was generally quite limited.
3. They were looking forward to establishing friendships within the group (most unknown to them), as well as with peers at the Chinese school.
4. With respect to positive cultural differences they expected to encounter, students cited respect for the elderly, the diligence of Chinese students, a more disciplined structure and stricter culture in Chinese schools, and greater respect for teachers.
5. They also anticipated differences in lifestyle and the urban environment, but could not specify what these might be.
6. Students were generally curious about the Chinese image of Australia and looking forward to the chance to present a positive image of themselves and their country.
7. Nearly one third were aware that they could encounter difficulties in communicating successfully due to limited language and cultural differences or to negative experiences such as homesickness.

In summary, the students showed an openness to the notion of cultural difference; curiosity about the lives, attitudes and values of Chinese people; and an understanding that there likely to be similarities and differences between Chinese and Australian cultures.

#### **6.2.5 On-sojourn interviews and observations**

Time did not permit all 20 students to be interviewed in Beijing, so a group of 7 providing a balance of gender (3F, 4M) allocated class group (Intermediate 4, Advanced 4), home schools, and family background was selected.

1. Interviewed two-thirds of the way through their visit, students said their greatest gains were in
  - language development, especially in listening and speaking
  - strategies for coping with language volume and unknown structures
  - confidence and motivation to use Chinese, even with strangers
  - self-awareness as a language learner
  - establishing friendships with new people also involved in Chinese study
  - coping with the world around them by learning, for example, to bargain
2. Emerging intercultural competence was evident in
  - the preparedness of many of them to take risks, especially in interactions with Chinese people
  - a growing feeling of connection to China experienced by some of them.

However a few had encountered culture shock, due to matters involving lack of hygiene, perceived rudeness, and disrespect for religious practices.

3. Weaknesses in program design were apparent due to the

- wide range of language levels in each of the two class groups
- rapid pace of the lessons
- lack of connection between the morning language program and the afternoon culture component
- lack of intercultural awareness in the teachers, with one urging a Muslim student wearing a hijab to try the pork dish she had brought to class, causing some distress to the Australian student.

#### **6.2.6 Post-sojourn Interviews**

1. Students claimed their greatest gains were in

- the ease of communication with Chinese people
- improvements to their Chinese language skills
- increased confidence in speaking Chinese
- motivation to learn
- flow-on effect on their learning once back at school
- friendships established within the group
- ease with which they related to their buddy
- appreciation of how modern life in urban China is
- interest in returning to China.

About one third of the students found:

- too many Chinese spoke English
- it was hard to understand local speech
- high oral-aural focus of lessons was very positive
- lessons more interactive than in their own school
- teachers more interpersonally engaged than in their own school
- 3-hour lessons starting at 8.00 a.m. made the morning too long.

2. The positive cultural differences anticipated pre-sojourn had been confirmed:

- Chinese people are resilient and determined
- people generally were hard-working.

With respect to school education they were impressed by the:

- respect for teachers
- length of the school day
- diligence of Chinese students
- heaviness of student workload
- stricter approach to teaching and learning,

Some found aspects of the school negative with respect to:

- size of classes
- size of school population
- lack of extracurricular activities.

Several also cited negative aspects of modern life, including:

- air pollution
- traffic density
- spitting in the street
- Western orientation in advertising and products
- stark differences in socio-economic status among Chinese.

3. Emerging intercultural development was apparent in the:

- empathy expressed towards Chinese people
- capacity of most students to notice cultural difference
- preparedness of many to take risks in interactions with Chinese people
- feeling of connection to place at the school experienced by a few
- readiness to accept the legitimacy of Chinese values.

### 6.2.7 Details of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence interviews

**TABLE 2:** Pre-sojourn responses in interview about cultural knowledge and intercultural competence\*

Focus	Number of affirmative responses (N=20)
<b>1. Overall Expectation &amp; Goals</b>	
Deepening knowledge of Chinese culture/history	17
Improving Chinese language skills	11
Meeting people/making friends	5
Opportunity to travel overseas	1
<b>2. Knowledge of China</b>	
Naming specific cultural sights/events	10
General cultural knowledge	3
Experience of traditional Chinese culture	2
Knowledge through school projects	2
<b>3. Expected Cultural Difference</b>	
Attitudes and behaviour	10
General cultural difference	6
Lifestyle	5
Urban environment	4
<b>4. Differences in School Experience</b>	
Educational expectations and standards	16
School routine	8
Conduct of classes	7
Environment	4
<b>5. Interactions with Chinese</b>	
<i>Positive aspects</i>	
Sharing cultural information	16
Establishing friendships/interaction	11
Projection positive image (self/Australia)	8
Improving Chinese language skills	3
<i>Negative aspects</i>	
Limited Chinese language skills	6
Cultural differences	1
Home sickness	1



**TABLE 3:** *Post-sojourn responses in interview about cultural knowledge and intercultural learning\**

Focus	Responses (N=17)		
<b>1. Overall Impression and Highlight</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Greater cultural insights/understanding	18		1
Improving Chinese language skills, classes	5		
Establishing friendships/meeting people	1		
<b>2. Observed Cultural Differences</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Urban environment	5	9	4
Attitudes and behaviour	7	5	2
Society	2	5	4
Lifestyle		6	2
<b>3. Differences in School Experience</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
School and Chinese language classes	16		3
Educational expectations	13	5	1
School routine		9	1
Environment	1	7	
<b>4. Interactions with Chinese People</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Communication	16	10	6
Interacting with Chinese students	5	4	2
<b>5. Chinese Buddy</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Having a buddy assigned	7		
Timing was appropriate			4
Subsequent contact with buddy	8		

\*Note: In many cases students provided more than one response to a question, in other cases, there was no response.

### 6.3 POST-SOJOURN STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Ratings of the quality of the sojourn, showing the number of students who made each response are listed below. (Note N = 20)

#### Part A

1. The trip to China increased my motivation to learn Chinese.
  - a lot (12)
  - quite a bit (5)
  - a bit (0)
  - not at all (0)
2. The trip to China increased my confidence in speaking Chinese.
  - a lot (6)
  - quite a bit (9)
  - a bit (2)
  - not at all (0)
3. The trip to China improved my Chinese language skills.
  - a lot (5)
  - quite a bit (9)
  - a bit (3)
  - not at all (0)
4. Apart from language, I feel my knowledge of China increased.
  - a lot (8)
  - quite a bit (9)
  - a bit (0)
  - not at all (0)

#### Part B

5. I used my Chinese to:
  - communicate with locals (teachers, locals, Chinese students) (16)
  - survival, carry out day-to-day activities (shopping, bargaining, ordering in a restaurant) (10)
6. The things that helped me communicate better were:
  - friends, buddies, teachers (9)
  - language classes (8)
  - communication strategies (hand gestures) (2)
  - listening to Chinese and picking things up (1)
  - English language skills of locals (1)
7. If I went to China again, I would:
  - go sightseeing/see other parts of China (10)
  - take more opportunities to communicate in Chinese (friends, locals) (4)
  - go shopping (3)
  - revisit the school (2)
  - continue study of Chinese (2)
  - learn about, experience the culture (1)



**Chinese Teacher Training Centre**

Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Level 8, 100 Leicester Street

The University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010

Australia

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