

## GETTING THE MOST YOU CAN FROM YOUR SCHOOL'S CHINA TRIP

### Sojourn/ 短居 duǎn jū v. & n.

•n. a temporary stay •v. *intr.* stay temporarily  
□□ **sojourner** n. [Middle English from Old French *sojorn* etc.]



Sojourns to China are the focus of this document. Most secondary schools teaching Chinese in Australia incorporate trips to China in their programs. Many of these include a period of days spent as guests of a Chinese school. These visits are designed to have an educational impact, especially in relation to language and culture learning.

This summary of the Chinese Teacher Training Centre's study of such visits is intended to help you to plan, deliver and improve similar programs in the future.

*A tour is a period of travel from place to place, whereas a sojourn is a temporary stay in a single place. A sojourner is a visitor or guest, there for whatever reason, whereas a tourist is a holidaymaker who travels for pleasure.*

*Where the tourist remains essentially unchanged, the sojourner has the opportunity to learn and be educated, acquiring the capacity to critique and improve their own and others' conditions<sup>1</sup>.*

*An in-country sojourn creates excellent opportunities for real-world language use and for becoming informed about the world beyond our national boundaries. These are not automatic outcomes, however. The experience needs to be managed in order to be successful.*

## SOJOURNS: WHAT SHOULD BE EXPECTED?

A well-designed in-country sojourn provides an excellent means for a school to realise its commitment to preparing students for their future in a global society. It should be considered as a direct contribution to the general educational goals of the school.

The key learning outcomes that might be expected include the following.

### **Personal growth**

This includes knowing more about oneself as an individual, as a member of a society and as a cultural participant. Being part of a group in challenging situations should encourage a keener and more active sense of personal and social responsibility, as well as the experience of living closely with other young people with whom one might not usually associate.

### **Language proficiency**

This is unlikely to improve dramatically during a short sojourn unless much of it is spent on language learning, but immersion in the language should contribute to improved confidence and readiness to speak, the acquisition of set phrases, the quality of rhythm and tones, and fluency and accuracy.

### **Cultural knowledge and understanding**

These attributes should be expected to expand significantly. They will be concerned with contemporary society and its issues as well as tradition and history. Increased understanding will be reflected not just in the acquisition of factual information, but also in sharpened perception of links and differences between societies.

### **Intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence begins with perception and gradual acknowledge of difference. It is reflected in greater tolerance of uncertainty and difference, a preparedness to take more risks in interactions, and becoming increasingly aware of the role of culture in the shaping of identity.

## MANAGING SUCCESSFUL SOJOURNS

Setting off on what is often a first trip overseas, spending days on end with close friends, going to a country as vibrant and different as China, seeing places studied and heard about for years, and finding their way on foreign streets — these are all ingredients for a memorable and invigoratingly interesting sojourn.

But to achieve the potential benefits a sojourn can offer from a short stay is not easy. It requires planning and performance informed, among other things, by an understanding of the nature of experiential learning, whereby something in the current experience disrupts automated responses and causes the learner to stop, take note, think and act according to requirements of the new circumstances.

To achieve this, the sojourn should provide:

- challenging or otherwise personally significant experiences and consistent opportunities to reflect on them
- opportunities for learners to interact with local people in varied contexts that emphasize purposeful communication and to develop friendships with peers based on shared tasks and balanced power
- specific language and culture learning based on analysis of learner needs, and
- support to help learners to understand their own intercultural development and to meet its demands during the lived experience of the sojourn.

## SOJOURN PREPARATION

Planning of the sojourn should be comprehensive and concerned with its three stages: before, during, and after the visit.

Following the decision of a school to commit to a sojourn, the implementation strategy should be to:

- clarify the reasons for the sojourn and use those reasons to focus and direct planning
- start planning early: make close contact with personnel at your destination, research the destination thoroughly, locating points of interest
- involve school leaders and the staff more widely
- in any briefings always emphasise the learning goals for the sojourn
- select and design suitable projects for participants, and
- have students, teachers and principals in the two schools make contact before departure.

Staff as well as students should have a preparation program that includes training in mentoring and monitoring individual students and the group as a community, and in intercultural communication skills. Basic Chinese pronunciation and an introduction to the Chinese school system are important for accompanying staff to feel they can cope and can contribute to building a relationship. Staff should be encouraged to develop a professional learning project for themselves to undertake as part of the sojourn.

## DURING THE SOJOURN

### 1

The effort and patience required of the sojourn leaders to foster a supportive environment for personal development cannot be underestimated. The most effective experience will not necessarily be the most efficient experience; and allowing for active student engagement will take longer than simply making arrangements for them, and at times this may be frustrating for all concerned. Sufficient staff with appropriate skills need to be provided so that sojourn leaders can have rotating time off.

### 2

The principle of gradual scaffolding is the primary learning rule for planning sojourn activities. Learning will be enhanced if students have the chance to repeat an experience and gradually increase their independence within the one environment. For example, accompanied taxi rides to local shops can lead to unaccompanied taxi rides, and then to bus rides and independently organized student excursions to somewhere new.

### 3

Formal project tasks might comprise pairs of students going to a large public space such as a shopping mall to collect data about work by interviewing shoppers. Because such a task requires repetition of a limited range of scripted questions, with a generally limited range of possible answers, it reinforces language learned and builds confidence.

### 4

With respect to learning new language, a choice needs to be made between targeting diagnosed problems in general proficiency and providing short sessions with content directly related to the day's activities. The former is particularly suitable for visits to language institutes where there are specialist teachers available. The latter is more suitable for visits to a school where teachers will not be specialists in Chinese as a Second Language. A significant benefit of an in-country sojourn is that it takes language learning out of the classroom. However, Chinese hosts may view classroom-based learning from books as the appropriate environment and means for language study, and so lessons created to deal with a particular day's events may need to be conducted by the visitors' own teachers.

## ON RETURN

### 5

Being able to listen without being required to respond reduces anxiety for language learners and allows them to listen without being distracted by the need to formulate a response. Aimless listening, however, particularly to complex language, is an open invitation to tune out. Observing a kindergarten classroom or watching a quiz show is more likely to be productive than observing a senior History class or watching the news. In formal settings the opportunity to practice listening and speaking will be most beneficial when it involves using short texts, recycling, and dialogue that is supported by physical movement, such as a paper-cutting, texting, or a cooking workshop. These lessons should always be conducted in Chinese.

### 6

Learners need opportunities to practice using Chinese unobserved, away from more competent peers and teachers. Unaccompanied excursions to practice language unobserved should be programmed into the schedule.

### 7

A period of quiet time each evening during which students are expected to work on an assessment task for the next day or write in a private journal consolidates learning from the day. Enabling students to post reflections, photos and videos on a website to store and share their experience as it happens is very useful.

## ACTIVE LEARNING

Get students on the front foot, active and engaged by, for example:

- putting them in charge of the itinerary, the budget and the maps
- allowing time for planning for the day (or the next day) with respect to destination, route and means
- letting students find their own way to tourist sites rather than have them travelling as a group on a tour bus
- prompting rather than taking over if intervention by a teacher is necessary
- making strict rules about teachers not being there to help with language except in urgent matters.

A procedure to assess the impact of the sojourn on the participating students should be in place and used. This system should directly reflect the stated purposes for the sojourn. The basic framework you could use might be:

We went to China in order to [X, Y, Z, etc]  
To what extent did this happen?  
What unexpected things happened?  
What factors influenced these outcomes? How, and why?  
What should we do differently next time?

The four broad areas of learning outcomes suggested at the beginning might all be investigated in this way.

### Personal growth

An example: *We went to China in order to learn more about ourselves and become more self reliant.* Personal blogs or wikis could be used as one focus for reflection on this. Additional comments could be sought from peers or staff members.

### Language proficiency

An example: *We went to China in order to improve our language capabilities according to agreed individual targets.* To be able to assess this would entail conducting pre- and post-tests based on the teacher's knowledge of the student's language capabilities. As noted above, dramatic improvements in accuracy should not be expected from a short sojourn, but there are areas such as confidence which could improve markedly.

### Cultural knowledge and understanding

An example: *We went to China in order to acquire more knowledge about contemporary Chinese society especially related to the system of education of young children and to see famous historical sites.* This is a perfect opportunity to use the project agreed before departure as the medium for evaluation of what has been experienced and learnt. Blogs, personal diaries and other reflective matter will provide evidence for a judgment about more general acquisition of cultural knowledge and understanding.

### Intercultural competence

An example: *We went to China in order to perceive ourselves from a new angle and to begin to see diversity among Chinese people.* Development might be evidenced through accounts of difference and the demonstration of some capacity to link these to broader society beliefs, values and practical realities (e.g. in the value of education, in the pressure to succeed in a country with a huge population), and some critical awareness about self and home society beliefs and values; and, at the same time, a lessening of the tendency to speak of 'the Chinese' as one entity.

# SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

The most effective sojourn programs are founded on successful relationships which have evolved into stable intercultural partnership between institutions and people. This is the way in which their benefits can be maximised and subsequently increased.

As intercultural relationships, these partnerships are vulnerable to the same misunderstandings and tensions as individual relationships. Studies note the need for:

- a strong sense of mission
- a genuine desire on the part of the entire school leadership on both sides to establish and develop a successful and sustained relationship with the partner school on a scale/of a nature that both can manage
- enough staff, possibly drawn from a range of faculties, to participate in various roles as host as well as visitor, so as to provide a sturdy and stable base, and
- a number of people to share the workload.

Staffing issues have been emphasised here because the Chinese teacher in the Australian school has usually been the active agent in setting up a sister school relationship, often through personal networks. This has generally made for smooth sailing, but means that a very large responsibility and a great deal of hard work has fallen on one person, during the sojourn and otherwise. **Sustaining partnerships cannot be made the burden of just one staff member**, or the relationship will always be at risk of collapse. A healthy partnership involves the school leadership team, staff members from departments other than Chinese, and parents.

Another common reason for partnerships failing is irregular or tenuous contact. However, longstanding research into intercultural contact suggests groups foreign to each other are not likely to be effective in developing good intercultural relationships just by having regular interaction. 'Especially favourable conditions' are needed<sup>2</sup>.

**Equal status contact** is one of these conditions.

Being first language speakers of the second language the other is trying to learn bestows a certain amount of 'being power' or natural status, on each group of school students in a two-country partnership. Coming from overseas is also a mark of status, even though having local knowledge can provide a counterbalance for this. Taking such matters into active consideration when planning interaction is critical.

**Shared superordinate goals**, objectives for students' joint work which provide benefits for more than just themselves, is another condition. The sojourn's 'work' might, for example, form part of a whole group project of value to both partners. A study project involving some current or historical specialty of the local region allows students another form of equal status in their separate but complementary roles of inquirer and information provider.

A third condition is **intimate rather than superficial or formal contact**. This is most easily arranged through a 'buddy' system, pairing visiting students with a local student and providing opportunities for them to interact.

The last is the **candid treatment of difficulties by both parties**. Intercultural relationships, like any other, are particularly subject to stress from unanticipated differences. The most painful are usually deep value clashes, but there are also some surface social practices that may be extremely confronting. Briefing and training in intercultural communication for all involved is essential if the handling of such incidents is not to lead to bad feeling.



## THE BASICS OF ESTABLISHING A PARTNERSHIP

It is important for those responsible to enter into early negotiations about visiting a school with the intention to create a relationship of the kind both schools want and can sustain. This will require some pre-contact discussion — an actual visit is invaluable — among those who will be involved in making the relationship happen and structuring to allow monitoring and adjustment during the visit, with mutual feedback and ideas for improvement afterwards.

At the time of negotiation, it is essential to:

- make the sojourners' needs clear and to be firm about what is wanted while remaining flexible as to how these needs can be met
- ask what the hosts are seeking for their part
- monitor one's own assumptions and check the assumptions being made on the other side – a crucial matter in an intercultural conversation, especially one mediated by third parties and translation

- raise worries politely but clearly, and make difficulties discussable
- allow sufficient time and number of contact occasions for second thoughts and unexpected concerns to emerge
- schedule post-sojourn reflection and renegotiation, and
- seek ways of involving staff from music or sport to spread school commitment to the program and encourage students to see language learning as part of their whole selves, rather than a discrete specialization.

The use of a suitably-qualified intermediary can be useful, provided sufficient time and care is taken to brief and debrief the person, and that they can be seen by all involved as benign and relatively independent.

The CTTC is available to consult on sojourn planning and implementation.

**Telephone:** +61 3 8344 8534

**Email:** [education-cttc-info@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:education-cttc-info@unimelb.edu.au)

## References

1. Byram, M. 1997. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters
2. Weekes, W., Pedersen, P., and Brislin, R. (eds). 1977. *A Manual of Structured Experiences for Cross-Cultural Learning*. Yarmouth, Me: Intercultural Press. Inc.

This document presents a summary of the report 'Learning from Short Term Sojourns in China', by Jane Orton and Deryn Mansell. The full document can be downloaded from the CTTC website <http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/cttc/Publications.html>

