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# Learning from Short Term Sojourns in China

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**June 2011**

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## Summary

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This report presents the outcomes of research into the nature and benefits of short in-country China sojourns for Australian school students and the challenges that such an event poses for planners and sojourn leaders in both countries. Recommendations for ways to proceed with an in-country sojourn are made with reference to the literature on short visits for learners and to the views of Australian educators experienced in the design and conduct of successful innovative of China programs.

In summary, the benefits that students can gain from a short in-country sojourn are:

- improved language competence and greater knowledge of Chinese historical culture and modern society
- intercultural development towards a more ethnorelative world-view
- personal and social development in preparation for a global future.

The challenges for planning and implementation are:

- establishing school commitment to sojourns as an integral part of the school's LOTE program
- creating meaningful, sustainable partnerships with in-country institutions and people that are beneficial for all involved
- developing programs that support and enrich students' language and culture learning to the maximum.

The framework underpinning the research and recommendations presented here are based on Pritchard's (2011) theory of experiential learning elaborated from Vygotsky, Piaget and Dewey. The framework identifies the essential design components of such learning to be: *challenging setting*, *constructed social interaction*, *tolerance of risk*, and *reflection*. In practice this means a program will provide:

- experiences that engage learners in observation, interaction and reflection
- opportunities for learners to interact with local people in varied contexts that emphasize purposeful communication
- opportunities for learners to develop friendships with peers based on shared tasks and balanced power
- specific language and culture learning based on analysis of learner needs
- the means for learners to understand their own *intercultural development* and support for its demands in the lived experience.

# 1. Introduction

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The Melbourne Declaration, signed by Ministers of Education from all Australian governments in 2008, nominates languages, and especially Asian languages, as one of the eight learning areas that are crucial for the promotion of world-class curriculum and assessment (MCEETYA 2008: 14). The subsequent *Languages Learning for the 21st Century: The Victorian Languages Strategy* (DEECD, 2010) aims to ensure that young Victorians are informed and active global citizens who are equipped for life, work and travel in the 21st century. One means for achieving this is 'real-world language use' (2010: 17).

An in-country sojourn creates excellent opportunities for real-world language use and for becoming informed about the world beyond our national boundaries. This applies to sojourns to China which are the focus of this paper. Many secondary schools teaching Chinese in Australia incorporate at least one trip to China in their programs. However, a typical school does not have the capacity to fully determine the effects of these visits despite the considerable costs incurred in time, energy and money. Given these costs, there was a need for an agency such as the Chinese Teacher Training Centre (CTTC) to set out the educational basis of these sojourns and to determine their impact, as a contribution to improving the quality of planning and delivery of similar programs in the future.

The research reported here was conducted through a review of the literature on short term sojourns for language learners and school age learners, perusal of documents published by organisations such as the Asia Society and the Peace Corps, interviews with leaders and participants on Endeavour Language Programs, and with experienced curriculum designers and leaders of China sojourn programs recently undertaken by schools in Victoria.

It is therefore hoped that this research will initiate and inform greater discussion about what makes an in-country sojourn valuable so that school communities may make better informed decisions about the type of in-country program they run, and how they might monitor and extend the benefits it offers their students and staff.

## 2. Sojourns

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### 2.1 Definition

A *tour* is a period of travel from place to place, whereas a *sojourn* is a temporary stay in a 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' (Byram 1997: 2). These are not automatic outcomes, however, so the experience needs to be managed in order to be successful.

### 2.2 Categories

The types of China sojourn program for school students that currently operate in Australia fall into three broad categories: an in-country campus program, a partnership, and a short stay.

#### 2.2.1 In-country campus program

An in-country campus program comprises a sojourn of some weeks with a focus on personal growth from the foreign experience. The best-known example of this type of program is the international program for Year 9 students run by Melbourne private school Caulfield Grammar at its Nanjing campus, which has been running since 1998. The students spend most of their visit staying in specially built accommodation that Caulfield Grammar rents on the host-school's grounds. Interaction with the host school involves a welcome and a weekend home-stay, but in many respects the program is run independently of the Chinese school. It includes some time in Beijing and Shanghai, as well as visits to other sites. To set up and keep running, this type of program involves many months of negotiation and a firm commitment from host and visitor institutions.

#### 2.2.2 Partnership program

A partnership program is similar to an in-country campus in that it involves commitment between institutions and a sojourn of some weeks, but does not entail ongoing connections beyond the one occasion, nor any investment in buildings. An example of this type of program is the Gariwerd Program that took place in 2008 in which 20 Years 9 and 10 students were selected from five state secondary schools in the Grampians Region of Victoria to spend six weeks in China. Their host school owned the facilities they used and included motel-style dormitory accommodation which had been built expressly for foreign visitors. During the program there was some engagement with staff and students in formal assemblies, language and culture classes for the Australians, student information exchange sessions and one-night home stay visits.

#### 2.2.3 Short stay program

A short stay sojourn is the most typical Australian school in-country China program. It usually comprises a group tour during Australian school holidays and a short visit to a Chinese school that the Australian school already has a relationship with. Although this type of program is shorter and involves less contact time with a local school than the partnership and campus type programs, with good preparation and clear learning goals in mind, the time in China can also take on the characteristics of a sojourn.

### 3. China Connections

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Sojourn programs in any category involve connecting with a Chinese institution, usually a school. There are a number of very different kind of arrangements used to make these connections, some long standing, others more recent.

#### 3.1 Sister schools

The teaching of Chinese as a Second Language in Australian schools was pioneered in a very few schools about 40 years ago. A first wave of more widespread proliferation occurred in the early 1990s. At that time, some 50 independent and a handful of government schools set up programs at primary and secondary level which have survived to the present. In the wake of recent greater public enthusiasm for the language, these are now redeveloping and their numbers gradually being added to. Most of the first wave schools quite quickly began conducting tours to China and sought out sister schools where they could visit while there. They also opened their school to visits from staff and students from China.

The Chinese teacher at the Australian school has been the usual intermediary in setting up the sister school relationship, often using personal networks back home. This has made for generally smooth sailing during visits, but means that a very large responsibility and a great deal of hard work has fallen on the one person, both in preparation for the trip and while it is being undertaken. Non-Chinese speaking staff members and some parents often accompany the group, but without language skills they are naturally limited in what they can provide by way of support. More formal occasions such as visits by school administrators or school principals have also needed the Chinese teacher's assistance in making arrangements and in interpreting.

The outcome of these earlier initiatives is varied. Some relationships have continued and matured over the years to become very solid links that are capable of withstanding changes in leadership and teacher positions on both sides. In many of these cases the links now extend beyond the Chinese learners to include sports teams, choirs and orchestras, as well as regional bureaucrats. In other schools the relationship has not developed beyond providing an in-country base for the visitors, and in some cases the connection has withered over time.

On the Australian side, the failure of a sister school relationship in China has generally been due to; the departure of the initiating teacher and his or her personal link, a lack of student numbers to undertake a trip more than occasionally, fears about health risks in some years, and difficulty finding sufficient money to run a trip often enough to keep contact and maintain a balance of benefits. On the Chinese side, most schools with the facilities to receive foreign guests do not lack for prospective partners from around the world. The incentive to partner schools in Australia lies largely in the opportunities it offers their students to improve in English. Hence Chinese schools tend to work at relationships which provide opportunities for reciprocal visits, particularly visits by numbers that seem to Australian schools uncomfortably large to accommodate easily in classes and home stays. When these requests cannot be met the Chinese school may maintain a low level link, but seek elsewhere in the English-speaking world for partnerships of greater benefit to them.

#### 3.2 Commercial tours

In combination with an arranged visit to their sister school, or as a complete alternative to organising their own trip, a number of schools make use of Western or Chinese commercial companies to run tours to China for their students. These provide guided visits to prime tourist sites in the major cities, which may be worked around time visiting or even staying at the Australian school's Chinese sister school. Within China, commercial tour companies contracted by the *Hanban* (China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) also provide visits and a brief stay somewhere for language instruction. Along with

trips aimed at principals or teachers of Chinese, these tours are usually arranged annually as part of *Hanban*-Department of Education links and are often heavily subsidized.

### **3.3 Confucius Classroom networks**

In the UK and the USA, partnerships with Chinese schools have recently been established through Confucius Classroom Networks (Sharma 2008, Livaccari and Wang 2009), which have the support of the *Hanban*. In the UK the Confucius Classrooms are essentially online communities, but schools that are network 'hubs' organize teacher exchanges for five to ten weeks (Sharma 2008). The US program is a more recent initiative but promises that '[each]Confucius Classroom will be linked with a partner school in China to enhance opportunities for language learning and to provide students, teachers, and administrators with opportunities to conduct exchanges and joint projects' (Livaccari and Wang 2009).

Confucius Classrooms have also been established in Australia in the past year, with Victoria already hosting two, and more are in the planning stages. They offer a variety of services to their host school and its local cluster schools and also provide an introduction to a *Hanban* supported partner school in China if desired. While schools with newly set up programs have been grateful for the assistance in finding a suitable match, even some schools with an established Chinese sister school have welcomed the chance to develop links to more than one place, or to start again somewhere new.

### **3.4 China BRIDGE Project**

Following the successful creation of its Indonesia BRIDGE project, in 2011 the Asia Education Foundation in Australia has initiated a China BRIDGE project, which will also assist schools to match themselves with a suitable partner in China and to develop exchange programs involving teachers and students, firstly on line and later in actual visits. By facilitating online collaboration through wikispaces, the project enables even school communities from far-flung regions of Australia and specialty regions involved in, for example, mining or agriculture, to be directly connected to similarly situated schools in China.

### **3.5 Online partnerships**

A related trend is the creation of partnerships between schools seeking to internationalise their curriculum in which contacts are expected to be mediated wholly or largely online. Such a model may, however, also include visits as part of the learning continuum. A number of these links are between Australian schools and international schools in China where English is the principal medium of instruction, although Chinese will also be taught there. These are institutions where Australian principals and administrative staff can connect in comfort using English, and staff such as maths teachers can have the experience of teaching abroad for a term or more. The Chinese teachers in the two schools often have their students form some links over language and culture, especially over learning Chinese.

## 4. Creating a Partnership

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### 4.1 Preliminaries

While a tour is a relatively de-personalised arrangement of transport schedules, hotel bookings and standardised activities, a sojourn, particularly one involving a school stay, offers the chance to tailor experience to those involved and thus reap deeper and more certain connection from it. Achieving this, however, creates greater demands on those involved, especially on the staff who will carry the program from year to year while the groups of students involved in any year move on. Building such an intercultural relationship is vulnerable to the same misunderstandings, tensions and maturation path as individual relationships. Studies show that the cost of such development has been most successfully borne when there is

- a 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 a partner school
- enough staff to participate in various roles as host as well as visitor, so as to provide a sturdy and stable base
- a number of people to share the workload.

### 4.2 Phases of relationship building

#### 4.2.1 Starting steps

On its extensive website, the guiding light of Chinese language development in the United States, the Asia Society, has published guidelines for developing a school partnership in China (Wang 2009). They identify five key steps in the process:

- warm-up
- establishment
- break-in
- project implementation
- expanding reach.

The guidelines note that the Break-in phase is the point at which many partnerships fail because poor communication in earlier two phases has masked differences of intention or capacity. These problems only become apparent when vague goals set in earlier phases are challenged in the process of developing concrete programs. It is proposed that if both sides are able to 'candidly explore each other's objectives and capacity for possible projects', and if the spirit of reciprocity is maintained, then programs can be implemented successfully.

Some of the issues experienced by schools moving from the enthusiastic early stages of establishing a relationship to the reality stages of Break-in and Project Implementation, have been reported by the Australian and Indonesian educators involved in the BRIDGE Project. In particular, staff on both sides of the partnership have acknowledged the many obstacles that commonly stand in the way of ready communication (Tomazin: 2010).

In considering such negotiations, it is pertinent to remember Hofstede's (1991) cultural continua, on which the acceptable degree of directness in speech is one very strong cultural differentiator from society to society. An ethnocentric Australian assumption about what constitutes 'an appropriate degree of candor' could be disastrous in a society where candour is not admired, while an attempt to be culturally sensitive could make candour very difficult to achieve even when it is essential that something be raised. Daniel Gregg, Director of the Shandong School Partnerships for the Connecticut State Department of Education, proposes that it is of great value to planners to have a trusted friend as mentor to the program who has



personal connections in China but also understands the culture of the sojourner (in Clydesdale, 2009).

For a partnership to be reciprocal, equal attention must be paid to the benefit gained by both the visiting and the host school. Given the profound differences between Western and Chinese education systems, the benefits being sought are likely to be different, so negotiations in this area need to be handled very carefully. Moreover, goals for both sides need to be monitored during the course of the program and adjusted in light of actual events. Some very important issues may simply not have been visible at the time of initial discussions and only emerge in the present. Even when foreseen as a possibility, this still can be very disconcerting for the other partner if it contradicts matters previously agreed to. Intercultural communication training can be useful in achieving successful negotiation of changes, or expressing worries that emerge, so that while painful, difficult incidents result not only in resolving the particular problem but also in deepening the bond between those involved (Orton 2000). Expanding the reach of a partnership requires momentum to build from establishment. The Asia Society recommends schools use technology to engage learners and provide opportunities 'that encourage unscripted activities' (Wang, 2010). Furthermore, for partnerships to be sustainable 'the entire school community should have a stake in the relationship' because 'too often, with the departure of one teacher or coordinator, a program can collapse' (Wang, 2009).

#### **4.2.2 Maintaining a partnership**

As students usually only have the opportunity to take part in a sojourn once in their secondary school years, the relationship between institutions made concrete by their participation in any one year needs to be renewed with each successive group that visits, and the link sustained during the intervening time (a year, sometimes even two years). As noted above, to be successful this cannot be made the burden of just one teacher or coordinator, or the relationship will always be at risk of collapse. Involving staff members from departments other than Chinese, and engaging the principal and parents, are necessary for maintenance of strong relationships. Music, drama and sports teachers are accustomed to managing large groups of students and their areas cross cultures well; but even teachers from departments other than languages can participate by providing content knowledge for activities that take language and culture learning outside the Chinese language classroom.

In Australian schools, international relationships are rarely unique. A school seeking a partnership in China is likely to already have relationships with schools in other countries. Similarly, the Chinese partner may well have established relationships with schools in other countries. Knowing where the partnership is intended to stand within whole-school planning enables the partners to operate within both schools' capacity. An important aspect to be considered is the timeframe in which the planners are working: are both thinking long term, are both seeking to cultivate a relationship which can develop over years?

## 5. Program Design

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### 5.1 Design framework

The key factor in creating experiential learning is *cognitive dissonance*: something in the current experience disrupts the automatic and causes the learner to stop and take note, think and re-plan action. Pritchard (2011) has identified the following as the essential components in a sojourn that engenders the desired cognitive dissonance: *challenging setting, constructed social interaction, tolerance of risk, and reflection*:

- the setting of the new experience is a key trigger of cognitive dissonance, and the specific properties of each setting interact with learners in ways that afford specific learning opportunities. While each may have its value, time on tour and time spent in one place occur in different settings and provide very different learning experiences
- individual student status and collective social structures can be profoundly altered through experiential settings and ruptured contact with the home community. A great deal of development offered by the sojourn experience will come from perceiving self and others from home anew in the changed environment, leading to a renegotiating of roles and status in light of individuals' responses to the new setting and daily tasks
- risk emerges as an indispensable property of novel experiences, and acknowledging and accepting risk is a valuable learning experience in its own right
- reflection, both facilitated and unfacilitated, is the necessary means by which experiential learning is stored in episodic memory and informs the process of knowledge creation. Without reflection, experience is not likely to become learning which transforms the participant.

### 5.2 Design Principles

Design principles that derive from the above framework of experiential learning are that the program should provide

- experiences that engage learners in *observation interaction and reflection* with the setting
- opportunities for learners to *interact* with local people in varied contexts that emphasize purposeful communication
- opportunities for *intercultural relationships*, for learners to develop friendships with peers based on shared tasks and balanced power
- specific *language and culture learning* based on analysis of learner needs
- the means for learners to understand their own *intercultural development* and support for its demands in the lived experience.

#### 5.2.1 Observation, interaction and reflection with setting

A useful role for a successful language learner sojourner is that of ethnographer: *someone who goes to another place to discover how other people live and think* (Byram quoted in Thomas 2001). Ethnographic activities that have been found useful for school students include composing case studies involving observation of the local scene, conducting surveys in the new setting, and journal writing (Snow and Byram, 1997). Grounded in directly observable data from their own observations, the immediate identification of experiences they found 'interesting, puzzling, irritating or otherwise significant', combined with initial analysis and later reflection, has been shown to be a very productive process for developing learning from both negative and positive experiences of difference (e.g. Berwick and Whalley, 2000).

### 5.2.2 Interaction with people

Setting off on what is often their 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, are all ingredients for students to have a memorable and usually invigoratingly interesting couple of weeks away. Whatever the form of the program, there is a wide variety of opportunity for networking with locals and the set of shopkeepers and other people in public roles contribute to the nature of the experience and to the impression students form of the society. The greatest potential benefit of any lasting nature for students, however, comes when touring is matched by an encounter of greater depth with Chinese people including peers during a sojourn in one place, normally at, or in connection to, a local school.

Significant networking during a sojourn also occurs within the same-culture home group as well as in interaction with local people. Same-culture groups may help or hinder sojourner development, encouraging or discouraging in both individual and the group as a whole 'the willingness to accept change in oneself and one's relationship with home' (Pearson-Evans, 2006: 44). Internal relations of all kinds among the home group need to receive careful attention prior to and during a trip, and some warning of possible changes and techniques for dealing with them need to be part of participant preparation and staff competence, if they are not to risk becoming too time consuming or even destructive.

### 5.2.3 Intercultural relationships

To achieve the benefits a sojourn can offer in a very short period is not easy. Pearson-Evans, for example, found that Irish students visiting Japan 'developed increasingly negative attitudes towards Japanese when contacts were superficial, feeling used as "token *gaijin*" or "free English practice," as was often the case with the contacts organized for them by the host university (2006: 46). In contrast, friendships developed well where the relationship was based on goals other than language learning, such as a shared hobby.

Pearson-Evans result is a finding which matches research undertaken more than 30 years ago into the experience of US Peace Corps and study abroad programs, in which the interculturalists Weekes, Pedersen and Brislin (1977) reported that groups foreign to one another were not likely to be effective in developing good intercultural relationships just by having contact. What was needed additionally were 'especially favorable conditions'. The key areas which constitute these conditions are:

- equal-status contact
- superordinate goals
- intimate contact
- the candid treatment of difficulties (Brislin, 1993).

When considering *status* it is useful to keep in mind Galtung's (1975) concept of *being power* not just the wealth of *having power*. Being first language speakers of the second language the other is trying to learn bestows a certain amount of being power on each group of school students in a two-country partnership. Coming from overseas is also a mark of status, while having local knowledge can provide a counterbalance for this. Beyond these matters, there is the more subtle shaping of status given off by teachers, school leaders and parents in dealing with and referring to those in the other group.

*Superordinate goals* are objectives for students' joint work which provide benefits for more than just themselves. Thus their work might form part of a bigger whole group project, or be intended to share with an audience. These goals work best if they are specific rather than general. Thus having students undertake a common project with a clear structure is better than just urging them to 'make the best of their language opportunities'. 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 project which engages local students in having to reconsider a regional phenomenon from an international perspective, develops even further the equality that comes from *interdependence*.

*Intimate contact* is most easily arranged through a 'buddy' system, in which the visiting students are each paired with a local student for a day or longer. In current programs the time spent together is usually free time (a Saturday, for example) with activities organized by the buddy's family. These typically involve a home visit, a major meal and sightseeing. A home stay for a night may also be included. While valuable for the intimacy they offer, buddy arrangements are limited to close contact with only one or two people, and for the most part are so brief that they rarely provide the chance for friendship to develop. They are also very much a matter of hit and miss: some work out well, others only get by, a few are not a success at all. Most programs also arrange for the two groups of students involved to spend some time together at school, both in formal assembly meetings in which the group of visitors is introduced and made welcome, and in accompanying buddies to classes, and/or some hours of language and culture instruction are provided for the visitors.

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, such as being offered new food items, or finding differences in levels of privacy when using bathrooms. To be productive, *the candid treatment of difficulties* by individual students as well as program organisers needs to be made discussable among staff of both sides in the preparation phase, and planned for with students of both sides. Briefing and training in intercultural communication for all involved is also an essential if the handling of incidents is not to lead to bad feelings, whether displayed or kept hidden.

#### **5.2.4 Culture and language learning**

Although almost all China programs offer some time in a sojourn devoted to traditional crafts such as paper cuts and martial arts, these experiences are less remarked on by returning students, while visits to important historical sites, their buddy's study load, the sheer size and vigour of modern Chinese cities, and novel food experiences are memorable for virtually all.

At the post-secondary level, as a result of extensive data collected over many years using pre- and post- tests of participants' speaking, listening and reading skills in European languages, Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg (1995) assert that 'a combination of academic programs, individual study and intensive interaction with native speakers of the language' is generally accepted as the typical model for success in language development in-country (1995: 38). Almost nothing is known about the impact of an in-country visit on school students' language learning, but intuitively the above suggestion seems likely to hold for mid to upper secondary as well, especially for students who are already motivated towards acquiring the language. It is a particular weakness in design that opportunities for Australian learners to interact with locals using Chinese are rarely structured into their program and they are generally relieved of any opportunity to understand or speak the language by Chinese students and their family members whose English is superior to the Australians' Chinese. Shopkeepers will often use English even in the face of student efforts to use Chinese.

Learning how to use modern technology is an area of language content that is particularly valued by students. Having local students teach the sojourners how to send Chinese text messages using numbers has proven highly engaging, as has the simple language for shooting baskets together around a hoop. Staying in one place for any period of time means that familiarity with the physical environment gives sojourners the confidence to go on unaccompanied excursions into local shops and restaurants where they are exposed to and have to use repeated patterns of language which they can incorporate into their own repertoire.

Programs vary in the amount of formal language learning they include, but even when the sojourn is located in a language teaching institution, to date, diagnostic assessment amounts to no more than testing to split the group into 'higher' and 'lower' levels, with nothing specific targeted for improvement, nor any post-test undertaken to evaluate effectiveness of the teaching. Language institute classes are highly valued, but often school-provided language classes amount largely to just 'more time in a room with a man and a book', something that would be easily provided at home. In one school sojourn studied students had the opportunity on a daily basis for one-to-one practice in spoken language and this they found particularly beneficial and satisfying.

Most students find their teachers attractive people who make class enjoyable, but it is the sheer quantity and frequency of the lessons (often one or two hours a day, amounting to a significant increase in the quantity and intensity of learner time on task) that students most commonly cite as having had a beneficial effect on their language development. It is much easier to remember vocabulary and characters if they are reinforced daily rather than only re-met after a gap of days.

Language classes run on a 'needs-based' approach, in which the focus is on learning the language needed to function on that day's excursion, has proven a form of very effective sojourn language curriculum. Having teachers in charge who are familiar with the terrain to be explored (or who at least scout it out in advance) and so already know what it offers in the way of culture and language opportunities, and know practical things such as where restaurants and public toilets are and how to access destinations by public transport, allows linguistic and cultural scaffolding to be provided to students planning an excursion. With such a preparation, teachers accompanying them on the outing can then leave the problem solving and decision making to the students, except in cases of danger. Such a flexible approach to language development is not usually something Chinese schools are willing to provide, however, so it usually needs to be conducted by visitor staff themselves.

In 2010 the CTTC at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education began to create instruments to assess student development in language, cultural knowledge and intercultural competence from short visits to China. Still in the trial and development phase, results are already showing that within a group of even 10 students, changes following a visit to China can include small but clear language development in aspects such as articulatory and grammatical accuracy, expansion in the use of set phrases, greater vocabulary, fluency and volume, and growth in confidence and readiness to speak, and in capacity to listen and understand. These advances could even be increased if daily use of the language in lessons focused on remediating identified weaknesses, and practice in these same areas was provided through well-structured opportunities to use the language with cooperative Chinese interlocutors.

### 5.2.5 Intercultural development

In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding ...A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures (Bakhtin, 1979; trans. 1986: 7).

Whatever their competence in the local language and the degree of local engagement they may be seeking, the changed setting for running their daily life confronts young Australian sojourners in China with unavoidable challenges. These challenges contain the fundamental potential for valuable development, personally, in understanding of the local society, and at the deepest level for acquiring a more Chinese meaning base for the Chinese language they are learning. Those who will successfully and usefully learn from the change in their circumstances must begin to recognize through encountering difference the existence and location of their own cultural boundaries, and seek to step outside them in order to *participate in*, rather than simply *observe*, the 'otherness' of the language and culture they are dealing

with (Kramsch 1993). To do this in any depth, they will need the help of those inside the society.

Without significant encounters with otherness, human beings remain grounded in ethnocentrism, which assumes that 'the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality' (Bennett 1993: 30). Bennett posits three stages of ethnocentrism: *denial*, *defense* and *minimisation*. These days few could deny the existence of 'others' in the world, but many remain at the stage of *defense*, acknowledging the existence of different beliefs, values and ways of living, but denying the value of any but their own. The defender's position is that when differences occur, one side must be right, and, as it always seems to the ethnocentric, that right side is clearly *our side*! In the stage of *minimisation*, the existence of difference is acknowledged, but its significance is played down. "Deep down, we are all really the same", the minimisers say. In the development of intercultural competence beyond ethnocentrism lie the three stages of ethnorelativism: *acceptance*, *adaptation* and *integration*, in which 'cultures can only be understood relative to one another and ... particular behaviour can only be understood within a cultural context' (Bennett 1993: 46).

Progression through the stages is not guaranteed and is, anyway, a slow movement which may include retreat as well as sudden insight and positive shift. A sojourn allows for greater exposure to difference and greater opportunity to engage with the dynamics of intercultural development than does a tour. As a result it also runs greater risk than a tour of reinforcing or even exacerbating stereotypes and ethnocentrism. While the tourist may come back saying "They're lovely" about people they observed largely from behind the windows of their coach, the sojourner may come back saying "They're awful" about people they have been quite closely engaged with, unless there has been guidance for the learner in anticipating, recognizing and working through sudden confrontations to their values and habits. This is particularly so for teenagers, who are often only beginning to perceive what their values and habits are as a consequence of these being challenged. Supervising teachers need to monitor the students and recognize when they are reaching the edge of their cultural competence. By taking the responsibility for assigning and rotating students to different roles for daily activities (tour guide, language guide, map reader, safety officer, for example) students can be challenged within their competence.

Discovery of their own cultural inclinations is one of the most valuable and predictable outcomes of a student sojourn, and a necessary component of becoming interculturally competent and more genuinely bilingual. It is often a noisy and somewhat shocking, even painful, process. School principals and teachers are well aware that we live in a risk-averse society and consequently the appeal and proliferation of the 'tourist' approach to overseas trips is understandable. Even Bennett acknowledges that the riskier option 'must be approached with the greatest possible care' (1993: 21), but already in the early 1990s he could point out that the 'world of unimagined interdependence' (ibid.) offered no choice but to engage.

More than a decade later, the imperative to engage has grown exponentially, both in the process of education and in the intercultural situations the students are likely to have to work in. Well designed, an in-country sojourn provides an excellent means for a school to realise its commitment to preparing students for their future in a global society.

To achieve the benefits a sojourn can offer from a very short stay is not easy. It requires planning and performance informed by an understanding of the nature of experiential learning, the nature of the experience being offered, and insight and knowledge into intercultural development.

## 6. Planning a sojourn

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A fully articulated sojourn can be thought of an educational intervention that is integrated into the relevant language program, and may also contribute to the broader educational goals of a school. These goals are more likely to be met if the visit is carefully planned.

Comprehensive sojourn planning should be concerned with three stages: before, during, and after the visit.

Whatever the format, the following needs to be part of the strategy following the decision of a school to commit to a sojourn:

- start planning early
- involve school leaders and wider staff
- run a briefing program about learning from the visit, not just for practical matters
- select projects
- research project topics, destinations and points of interest
- have students, teachers and principals in the two schools make contact before leaving.

A key aspect in the planning of a sojourn is the selection of staff.

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 may be frustrating for all concerned.

Preparation before the trip and time to reflect during the sojourn can mitigate much of this. Realistic expectations when planning the itinerary can reduce the stress on staff involved.

Sufficient staff with appropriate skills need to be provided so that sojourn leaders can have rotating time off. This is particularly critical where the timing of the sojourn means that teaching staff will have no break between school terms.

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.

### 6.1 Itinerary

The itinerary for a first visit to China of only 18-20 days is fairly inflexible in that at least half of it will be taken up sightseeing in Beijing, making a visit to Xi'an to see the underground warriors, and visiting a third and even fourth city – usually Shanghai and/or Nanjing, and/or Hangzhou. Travelling will use up an additional 4-5 days, which leaves about five days remaining time to be spent staying at a school. Both the touring and the school visit can form part of a broader sojourn if planning is integrated and the whole visit and its activities are framed for students as a single coherent experience.

#### 6.1.1 The tour

The key to learning from a tour is to ensure that students get to own their experience. Lack of engagement is a typical response to being assigned a passive role, where all the decisions are made for them. Simple means to promote ownership include:

- putting the students 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
- allowing error such as taking a wrong bus, so long as there will be no massive inconveniencing of others or safety issues
- prompting rather than taking over if intervention by a teacher is necessary
- make strict rules about teachers not being there to help with language except in urgent matters.

### **6.1.2 The school visit**

It is important 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 among those who will be involved in making the relationship happen and structuring to allow monitoring and adjustment during the visit, and mutual feedback and program revision 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
- offer or 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
- 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 third person as intermediary between the two sides 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.

## **6.2 Curriculum**

The principle of gradual scaffolding is the primary learning rule for planning sojourn activities. Thus whether on tour or visiting a school, 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 independently organized student excursion to somewhere new. A project can be scaffolded so that students gradually increase their interactions with local people during excursions, working from simple greetings to more complex interactions. When accompanying students, the presence of teachers especially teachers who speak Chinese - can inhibit students from attempting to use their language unless very strict rules are made [and kept] about the unavailability of the teachers to help except in cases of true emergency.

### **6.2.1 Projects**

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. Each pair of students, for



example, may be required to conduct 10-12 interviews and later students combine and discuss their data. 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. As well, the information gathered about modern Chinese society contributes to their cultural knowledge and understanding.

### **6.2.2 Language Acquisition**

*Instruction mode* If language instruction is to be included among activities, 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, and such a program should include pre- and post- visit language assessment, if necessary undertaken at school in Australia, with results shared with the host institution teachers. 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. The offer to work in tandem with local teachers on such classes can be a productive way to open up a collegial partnership.

*Micro skills* Being able to listen without being required to respond reduces anxiety for 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.

Exposure to limited material with repetition reinforces learning. Informal settings that support this include activity-based language, such as that used to play games, or interaction with children, who tend to repeat their utterances rather than reformulate them when their conversation partner doesn't understand.

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 cooking workshop. These lessons should always be conducted in Chinese.

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

### **6.2.3 Contact**

Apart from formal appearances at assemblies and being paired off with a buddy for a Saturday, opportunities for contact with local students at a school can be provided by arranging that students eat lunch in the school cafeteria, participate in morning exercises, and are available to join in physical activities such as shooting baskets. These contexts support language learning by creating authentic reasons for interacting, natural repetition of language, and plenty of visual and kinesthetic cues. These are opportunities for interaction which students can increasingly make on their own.

Scheduling time for students to be able to venture out on their own is important for creating the need and opportunity to use their language with strangers and gain confidence.

### **6.2.4 Reflection and Assessment Tasks**

Half an hour 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 can consolidate learning from

the day. As the sojourn develops the time required may increase as the volume of writing and the enthusiasm of students for recording their experience develops or when they are asked to prepare a final presentation to other students. The rate of introduction to yet more new experiences needs to be set with consideration to students' capacity to absorb them, as evidenced in their reflections.

Having access to a computer laboratory for an hour a day so students can post reflections, photos and videos so as to store and share their experience as it happens is very useful

### **6.3 *Monitoring the Effects of a Sojourn***

Schools should set up a system to assess the impact of the sojourn on the involved students.

In order to monitor development it is essential to establish a baseline profile of each student prior to departure. For example, a video of a short but realistic presentation of self in Chinese to an unknown Chinese person (Hello, my name is ... , I am 16 years old ... and one or two more lines, and then reading aloud of a line or two) could be made. The exercise can be repeated on return and performances compared.

It is also useful to work with the participants before they leave to establish some personal and individual projects and targets. For example:

- What kind of knowledge should they aim to acquire about Beijing/China – historical and contemporary?
- What targets should they set for themselves re language development and use?
- What social experiences they should set for themselves – going somewhere alone or taking the subway, buying something from a shop (not just a supermarket where no speaking is required)
- What contact with Chinese people will they try to establish?
- What souvenirs or resources (DVDs, menus, bus tickets, etc) might they bring home?
- What gifts or objects to show might they take?

The goals can be written and taken with them and time allowed for them to be considered every three or four days and some notes made about progress as it is occurring.

To initiate contact and begin developing their relationships, Australian and Chinese students and teachers can be asked to present introductions to themselves which provide information on their local life and interests, and questions they would like answered by their buddy/colleague in the other country. In this it is important to emphasise the context as well as the particular and the ordinary rather than the extraordinary – my house, a residential street, the local shops, our school playground - a This work can form part of the students' assessed language learning.

Using a Wiki, email and Skype, this information can be exchanged, pondered and responded to over a period of months prior to the visit. Follow up activities could include watching samples of TV shows mentioned, listening to music or singers nominated as popular or favourites, and comparing daily life, recreation activities, language lesson content and teaching and learning practices.

## 7. Learning Outcomes

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The key learning outcomes that might be expected from a sojourn include personal growth in terms of sense of identity, responsibility, and relationship to others and the world; increased cultural knowledge and understanding; improved language proficiency; and development in intercultural competence.

While it is not suggested that the sojourn be turned into a grind of meeting learning targets, it is suggested that some formal assessment be undertaken in the above areas to assist in consolidating the student's learning and also to allow teachers to better understand the learning potential of an experience many have never had themselves as learners.

### **7.1 Personal growth**

Personal growth is an individual matter which may manifest with respect to taking responsibility for self (health, money, clothes, etc), coping with being outside the familiar and supportive home environment (emotional maturity, daring to eat new things, persevering in the face of difficulty), and/or getting on with other students whom they don't usually associate with (social maturity).

Assessment of personal growth is often informally recorded, emerging through student declarations, teacher, parent and peer observation, and behavioural and attitudinal changes that continue beyond the sojourn period. Much of what might be sought as evidence of personal growth may be available in reflections during the sojourn and in contributions to a wiki or blog on the experience. With the aid of Form teachers or the school counselor, a simple formal reflective tool could be designed for students to use themselves, with an invitation but no obligation to reveal the contents. Teachers could also note statements or critical incidents.

### **7.2 Cultural knowledge**

Cultural knowledge may be assessed with respect to specified periods, places, persons and events using projects, presentations and formal testing, although, as with personal growth, it is often only observed informally by the student, family and school community. It is important to remember that cultural knowledge may be about modern society, not only tradition and history, and that understanding may be reflected in the perception of links and differences, not simply factual information: knowing how the Chinese often do such things as run a school, furnish a home, organise a bus system, etc.

### **7.3 Language learning**

Unless language learning errors and gaps have been specifically targetted for work during the visit, and overall proficiency tested during the year, including before and after the visit, it is difficult to estimate what language learning has taken place that can be directly attributable to the sojourn. However, an effort to monitor readiness to speak, volume, fluency, accuracy, the acquisition of set phrases, and improved rhythm and tones, can show results, which in turn can inform program design, and act as motivation for the student to continue.

## **7.4 Intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence is not developed in a straight line and is a complex matter, not easy to perceive. Some indications of movement in a desirable direction which could be noted by students and teachers include awareness and the start of some competence in managing difference, both technically (allowing for it, remembering it) and emotionally (not getting upset by it); and increasing awareness of their own social values and norms of behaviour (becoming more aware of what 'we' do). Based on suggestions by Gochenour & Janeway (1993: 2-4), even in a short time, sojourn participants in China may show embryonic intercultural growth by beginning to

- develop factual knowledge of contemporary urban China across a range of topic areas and acquire the necessary practical skills to live and work in the new society, even for just a few days
- establish contact and essential communication, and are accepted locally
- increasingly look outside of themselves and beyond their immediate concerns
- observe what is going on and begin to sort out meanings, so that being in China becomes a process of understanding another people and their society in gradually more complex ways
- recognise and acknowledge *difference*
- develop self knowledge, both personal and cultural, as they begin to see anew parts of their own society and themselves and start a critical appraisal of their own cultural shaping; and, after Brislin (1993: 208)
- show a lessening of stereotyping, a preparedness to take risks in interactions, and persistence in developing skill in dialogue over differences.

## 8. Conclusion

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The new setting in China and the changed social relationships among the home group once in the new setting, can be expected to provide the experience of dissonance with prior experience that is needed for learning to occur and, indeed, the present research into existing programs and the experience of those involved shows that there are very positive learning outcomes for almost all students who go on a visit to China.

At the same time, examining current practice in taking Australian secondary students of Chinese on short in-country visits suggests that, given the considerable investment in money, energy and time entailed, even more might usefully be done to foster and monitor in a formal way the learning that accrues from the visit.

Studies of sojourns over some decades show that planning for a high yield learning outcome means designing, implementing and assessing a program which in sum offers

- experiences that engage learners in observation, interaction and reflection
- opportunities for learners to interact with local people in varied contexts that emphasize purposeful communication of graduated complexity
- opportunities for learners to develop friendships with peers based on shared tasks and balanced power
- specific language and culture learning based on analysis of learner needs
- the means for learners to understand their own intercultural development and support for its demands in the lived experience.

To achieve these goals for Australian school sojourns to China would entail greater preparation of students for learning from the visit in addition to the relatively brief preparation largely directed at practical matters that is now provided. Teachers would need to be educated to assist students to embrace the opportunities for growth the visit presents and maximize their realization, while also tolerating the inevitable risks involved. Successful experiential learning shows that time and leadership in reflecting need to be incorporated into the daily schedule if experience is to be consolidated into long-term learning gains. An expansion of support across the school for the Chinese teacher who is asked to manage the itinerary and interaction with a school in China could create a broad, resilient connection that becomes increasingly rich as the program runs from year to year.

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