Premier’s Kingold Chinese Language Teacher Scholarship

Chinese language and culture - a path for the future

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Rationale

In this 21st Century, Australia has been rapidly changing as a result of the increasing influence and impact from Asian countries. Education and, in particular, language teaching and learning have undergone much scrutiny and change. As a recipient of the 2010 Asian Language Training Scholarship Program (Chinese, Mandarin) I was fortunate to have the opportunity to study first-hand Chinese language and culture. As a life-long language learner, with more than 30 years of Italian and more recently French, I have found the study of an Asian language, Chinese, to be a challenge and a great achievement.

The focus of the study tour in May 2013 was to establish links with China for language students from Years 7 - 12 at my school to build opportunities for students studying Chinese as part of their secondary education, in particular, in the areas of Performing Arts and Hospitality and Tourism.

Firstly, it was proposed to research the language and culture of traditional and contemporary Chinese Performing Arts. Secondly, the plan was to research the Hospitality, Retail and Tourism sectors in China and examine possible placements and/or exchanges, to enhance vocational study. The aim was to gather authentic teaching and learning material to inspire students and encourage a deep interest in China and Asia. The aim was also to establish a sister school relationship with a school in China which has performing arts as its focus.

Planning

Hunter School of the Performing Arts is a public school enrolling years 2-12 through audition for the performing arts of Dance, Drama and Music.

In 2011 HSPA introduced Chinese in the Year 7 100 hours mandatory course. Three classes of approximately 90 students, study the language and culture. Students have gained an insight into their place in the Asian region in an Asia-literate Australia of the 21st century. In 2012 preparations began for the first China Cultural Study Tour (September/October 2013).

In 2012, having been awarded the Premier's Kingold Chinese Language Teacher's Scholarship, I sought a sister school relationship with a school in Shanghai. It quickly became apparent that there are clear differences between “friendship schools” and “sister schools”. A “friendship school” is an informal relationship between schools that can be established to enable students to send emails and share language lessons and cultural information. A “sister school” is a much more formal relationship which requires the endorsement of principals and governments.

The Sydney travel agent arranging my study tour has a particular interest in student groups and exchanges and this proved beneficial both for my Kingold study tour and for the HSPA student China excursion.

Study Tour - 28 April to 1 June

**Beijing - Tianjin**

During the first 10 days in Beijing, I attended language classes with up to four other students from various parts of the world (Brazil, Canada, UK and Australia), which was an extremely positive experience. This language school tailors courses for the individual needs of the student, making it perfect for an exchange for a senior high school student, such as Year 10 studying Food Technology and wanting an in-country experience involving morning classes in a language school and afternoons in a cooking school.

During the five-week study tour of China I met with many teachers and students and learnt much about the education system in China. My students at HSPA were keen ask questions, such as, do the Chinese students study Chinese like Australian students study English? Chinese teachers and students alike were very keen to exchange email addresses with usso that students can share information about their cultures using the target language. We discussed the possibility of using technology to link classrooms and share lesson plans and cultural classes. They all expressed their wish to visit Australia.

At the same time, students in my classes at HSPA were using the internet to follow my itinerary daily and email questions and comments about the various videos and photos. Chinese Performing Arts are special because the Folk Arts, Opera, Dance, Acrobatics and Puppetry are unique to China and the performers are absolute professionals who have trained daily from early childhood.

All students and teachers that I met showed interest in the differences between schools in China and in Australia. They asked questions about the subjects taught and the timetable, whether uniforms are compulsory, what they eat at lunchtime, how much homework they get and general teaching methods. One interesting difference is that generally the Chinese classroom is teacher focused, with the teacher at the front of the room, giving instructions, talking about the subject content while the students quietly sit and listen and only raise their hand with a question when asked to do so, in marked contrast to Australian schools.

Across China, there are variations in the spoken language. While Mandarin is the official language taught at school, the ethnic minority groups have their own dialects and China's second main language of Cantonese is spoken in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau. Written language is the same across China with simplified characters being used predominantly, but in some older parts of towns and cities traditional characters can be found on signs, shop windows and restaurants. Traditional characters are still used in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Simplified characters contain the same radical as the traditional but, as the term suggests, they have fewer strokes and are easier and quicker to learn and write. In the 1950s the government introduced simplified characters in order to boost literacy across this huge nation by reducing the number of strokes required to write the character.

An example of this is China. 中國 (traditional) 中国.

Indeed, having studied Chinese for four years, I have compared traditional and simplified characters and I am grateful that the simplified form is what is studied today.

As my study tour progressed my language skills were steadily improving along with my knowledge of China's history and culture. The many experiences motivated and inspired me to plan and create new activities and lesson plans for my students. For example, a wander through a food market in the morning showed local people of all ages carefully choosing from the fresh products available. Chinese people love food and they love to eat, so the quality and freshness of the produce is very important for their daily lives. I was inspired to create lesson plans on the differences in Australian and Chinese cuisine and plan a cooking lesson for my students. For example, Beijing Duck or Hot Pot.

I was particularly interested in the differences between the big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Xian and the regions. The population of Beijing is approximately 20 million, Shanghai 23 million and Xian 8.5 million. These figures are astounding. Moving around in these hugely-populated cities is surprisingly easy and subway systems are very modern and generally function well. At peak times though it is extremely difficult to get a taxi and the subways are packed. My students were amused to see photos of me going from the hotel to the English school by pedicab. Initially they sympathised with the driver who was peddling my weight, but they understood that I wasn't exploiting him when I told them the bike was electrically powered.

I travelled from Beijing to Tianjin on the bullet train. The population of Tianjin is approximately 12.5 million and the half hour bullet train journey links the cities with ease. I was told that these two cities could easily merge in the not so distant future. Tianjin is a port city on the Bohai Sea and its proximity to Beijing might lead one to believe it is a similar city, modern and moving into the 21st century, but this is not the case. Although Tianjin's architecture reflects the influences by European settlements after the mid 1800's and these influences are a tourist attraction, Tianjin is a metropolis and a major seaport and the largest coast city in northern China.

**Nanjing**

In Nanjing I conducted interviews with local students and teachers and I discovered the wonderful history of this beautiful city. Nanjing had been the southern capital of China and is located on the lower Yangtse River. The bridge over the river was the first to be constructed entirely by Chinese. In Nanjing I observed how the local community comes together in parklands. In a park in the centre of the city both elderly and young people join together to dance, sing and play music. Another park by the lake had many families and young people sharing the beauty of the environment and enjoying nature.

I had informal discussion with some secondary students about the subjects they study at school. As well as the traditional academic subjects, such as Mathematics and Science, students are now encouraged to study Confucianism. This is a quite recent trend in Chinese schools. In the Maoist period after 1949 and in the period of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, the study of old customs, habits, culture and ideas were outlawed. The young people explained that they are now encouraged to study Confucius and his philosophy through the classical writings to learn about this great philosopher and his works which date back more than 2000 years.

**Xian**

In Beijing I was able to set up a meeting with a school in Xian, called the Brilliant English School, and it offers after-school classes. Students attend their mainstream school during the day followed by further English lessons at the Brilliant English School. I met with the Principaland staff and gave a presentation on HSPA, the Newcastle-Hunter Region and New South Wales.

The teachers showed a keen interest in our methods of language teaching and learning and I was able to present a mock lesson to demonstrate. I was told that in Xian there are around 54 universities. These facilities are of various paths - languages, technology, sciences etc. Considering Xian's population is less that half of that of Beijing and Shanghai, this demonstrates the sheer and astounding magnitude of the student body who are in the secondary school system in China.

The students at HSPA were very excited when I emailed from Xian after a visit to the Terracotta Warriors. Earlier in the year the had completed a unit of work on the Warriors and the students had created cut-outs of soldiers and horses. I also attended the Tang Dynasty music and dance show and was able to meet with the performers and talk about their training and arduous, continuous practice.

**Lijiang**

Lijiang is a small city of approximately 1.2 million people located in the Yunnan Province in the south-west of China on the route of the ancient Silk Road and Tea Road. The local Naxi ethnic minority group follow the Dongba culture, which is over 1000 years old. This rich culture and religion follows the belief that man and nature are as one and the Dongba shamans, or "wise men" in Naxi dialect, are the teachers of the culture. Many books have been written about the religion, arts and classic scripture in the Dongba script, which is pictographic and is still taught today.

Lijiang has two parts, the Old Town and the newer section of the city. In 1996 Lijiang was rocked by a huge earthquake in 1996, which destroyed most of the high-rise buildings in the new city and damaged much of the Old Town. The World Bank, along with the Chinese government, worked together to repair the Old Town, which was then given World Heritage status by UNESCO. The new city was rebuilt, with wide, modern roads and new buildings and accommodation for the many displaced people.

My guide explained that prior to the 1996 earthquake, Lijiang and the Naxi people followed the Dongba culture without any influence from other, more modern parts of China. She talked about the young girls who still learned the art of embroidery and had to make their dowry of clothing, household linen and garments for their husband-to-be. They used the traditional designs and colours that had been passed down in their culture. After the earthquake and the rebuilding of Lijiang, the rest of China discovered this beautiful city and people and Lijiang became a popular tourist destination. The traditions and practices quickly became less important to the young people as they discovered a more modern lifestyle. Most of the artefacts made today are sold in markets to the tourists.

The local Naxi people have now established an embroidery school to encourage the young girls in the region to learn the local craft. A visit to this school proved extremely valuable, seeing the students combine the ancient art of silk embroidery and their Naxi culture with studying English. Their English studies complement their skills in selling the crafts to tourists. The teacher of English at the school was keen to stay in contact and establish email-pal friendships for the students with our students at HSPA. This sharing of language and culture would be extremely beneficial to all the students.

**Chengdu**

In the Sichuan province I visited Chengdu where I met with local students and teachers. The Chinese people are very proud of the exquisite Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Research Foundation. These beautiful grounds house the iconic panda, yet the local people are curious as to why the panda is so exciting to us westerners. This is an interesting observation and one which was extremely thought-provoking for my students at HSPA.

Also in the Sichuan province is Mount Qingcheng which was the birthplace of Taoism. Mount Qingcheng and the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, which is 2000 years old and still in use today, were placed on the World Heritage List in 2000. Taoism is a 2000 year old religion which is second in China to Buddhism. It follows the principles of the themes of opposites creating harmony, or Yin and Yang, such as dark and light, hot and cold, and the five elements of water, fire, wood, metal and earth. Taoism stresses man's relationship with nature.

This beautiful, natural area is indeed, in stark contrast to the concrete, high-rise forest of the big cities in China. Interviews with local students revealed their pride in this area. The area is approximately one hour from the busy city of Chengdu. The people of Chengdu visit the area to appreciate nature. I was introduced to teachers and we are continuing our professional dialogue, discussing teaching and learning materials and methods. I have encouraged them to use their local attractions and environment to create classroom activities and tasks.

I also attended a performance of Sichuan Opera. This style of opera dates back to the 1700s and is one of the most famous in China. The opera itself is a narration, usually based on a myth or folk tale from the past, sung in a high-pitch and accompanied by a gong and an "erhu", a two-string violin. The opera also includes other performances, such as face changing and sword hiding. The performers spend two to three hours applying make-up and costumes for each performance. The Sichuan Opera Theatre was established more than 40 years ago and the performers are from various professional opera schools. I met with some performers after and discussed their art and the possibility of our students visiting and participating in a performance. Such an opportunity would be of tremendous value to our performing arts students in Australia, broadening their view of Chinese culture. The performers were encouraging and positive and contacts are being established.

**Guilin**

In Guilin I met with teachers and students and we shared information about our cities, regions and culture. We discussed collaborating on a bank of activities about our regions. Guilin boasts the beautiful Li River where there are rock formations, caves and lush green countryside. Guilin city is quite compact in comparison to other cities. The city is proud of its beauty and it is quite a tourist destination.

Ideas for classroom activities and exchanges would include language and image matching; discussion and study of the relevance of earth, sky and water in the Chinese language; the osmanthus trees and osmanthus tea; a working river. The Hunter Region would exchange activities such as a working harbour; dolphin and whale movements; earth sky and water; floods and fire; the eucalyptus tree; Australian animals.

**Shanghai**

In Shanghai I met with the negotiator to whom I had been introduced by the DEC Curriculum Support Unit. This colleague introduced me to the Principal of a prestigious performing arts primary school in Shanghai. I was warmly welcomed and we discussed the possibility of their students visiting HSPA later in the year. I also met with students and teachers from other schools with a view to sharing resources and activities and creating friendships between our students. Indeed, the teachers were also very interested in the contacts I had created in other parts of China, because it is not always possible for students or teachers to travel and visit other areas. To be able to share classroom activities about each city that I visited would be a wonderful outcome of this study tour.

**After....**

I had experienced the thrill of seeing performances by acrobats, the Beijing Opera, Sichuan Opera, musicians playing traditional instruments and dance performances. The passion and emotion expressed by the performers conveys a sense of heritage and tradition that is intrinsic in the Chinese people and their culture. I had met wonderful, dedicated teachers and excited and interested students.

My approach to teaching Chinese language and culture had been enriched. Although we are teaching Mandarin as the standard Chinese language, there are many other dialects which are extremely important to the minority groups in China. These dialects, in spoken and written form, should be included in our teaching, to show our students examples of living languages outside the main cities. There are also cultures within China which should be taught to our students. For example, the rich and fascinating Dongba culture, which belongs to the Naxi people, could be presented for its pictogram frescoes, history and its respect for and love of nature and humanity.

At HSPA teachers were in the process of gathering passports and visas and finalising the itinerary for the school's first China Cultural Tour involving 11 students from Years 7, 9 and 10, aged from 13 to 16 and two teachers. The students were more and more excited to receive my emails and pictures, preparing them for the exciting excursion to come.

In July 2013, I attended the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Association biennial conference in Canberra. I presented at the conference, speaking about my experiences from 2010 when I began studying Chinese to 2013 when I was in China as the recipient of the Kingold Chinese Language Teacher Scholarship.

As a result of my visit to the Luwan No. 1 Public School in Shanghai, 14 students and 5 teachers came to Sydney and Newcastle in August 2013. These performing arts students performed at the Sydney Opera House on 19 August in the Broadening Horizons concert, a DEC initiative. The next morning they came to HSPA where they were welcomed and hosted by our primary students. We introduced them to Australian food by reading "Possum Magic" (written by Mem Fox) and they held and cuddled a koala at the local Blackbutt Reserve.

In September/October 2013, HSPA had its first overseas excursion to China. The 11 students and three teachers who travelled enjoyed an eventful and extremely exciting 15-day journey. As a result of my Kingold Chinese Language Teacher study tour and ongoing liaison with agents and colleagues, we visited six schools. HSPA has now built up friendship schools with many students in various regions and we have taken another step towards establishing a sister school relationship with the Luwan No. 1 school in Shanghai.

The 11 students were from the performing arts of Drama, Music and Dance. Although these students had not previously worked together in established ensembles or groups, they successfully put together a repertoire of items to perform at the schools we visited. The students were wonderful ambassadors for their school, HSPA, region, state and country.

The schools we visited were primary, middle, a conservatory high school and a college for tourism and business. The visits were very successful and through further liaison with local governments and the DEC, it is hoped that student exchanges and in-country experiences will take place in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I express my sincere thanks to the Kingold Group for the opportunity to travel in China and further my study of the Chinese language and culture. HSPA has fully embraced the study of Chinese in the school and we hope to have elective classes in Stages 5 and 6 in the future. HSPA students have become language learners, as many have studied Italian in the primary school and the study of Chinese has complemented this knowledge of our multicultural society.

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