Guidelines for student cultural exchanges with China

Cultural exchanges, both for students travelling to China and for those hosting students from China, can provide a rich, cultural experience. Participating students not only gain an increased knowledge, understanding and appreciation of another culture and lifestyle, they also gain an understanding of and appreciation for diversity. The most effective cultural exchanges are those in which students build personal relationships, often making life-long friends. Cultural exchanges also add a global perspective to the classroom curriculum.

Cultural exchanges can sometimes create cultural dilemmas for participating students, who may find themselves in new and confusing situations. This document has been developed to support participants and their families in developing an understanding of lifestyles and customs in China. Whether you are travelling to China or hosting a student from China, this information may help you gain the maximum benefit from the experience. The information provided is not exhaustive, and is intended as a guide only.

Greetings

In China people usually shake hands when they meet. Sometimes they just nod their heads or bow slightly to greet each other if they do not know the person well. Embracing each other in public is not common, even between family members or very close friends. Younger people or teenagers, if they are good friends, may slap each other lightly on the shoulder to show affection. Kissing in public is culturally unacceptable to Chinese people.

When adults meet in a formal situation, they may exchange business cards. The card will be presented face-up, with both hands, holding the bottom two corners. When receiving a card, hold it at the top two corners using both hands and take a moment to read the card. Chinese people believe that how you treat the card is representative of how you will treat the presenter, so place it carefully in your business card holder. Placing the card in your back pocket or writing on it would be considered insulting.

Names

The Chinese surname comes before a person’s given name. Most Chinese people have one Chinese character for their surname e.g. 李 (Li) or 王 (Wang). Some people in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Singapore may have both Chinese and English given names. Their Chinese given name is spelt according to the way it is pronounced, using Hanyu Pinyin (Chinese phonetic spelling). Nowadays for the convenience of learning and culture exchanges, some Chinese students adopt an English name.
Chinese people address their elders (parents’ friends, etc.) as Ayi (‘aunty’) and Shushu (‘uncle’). There are different titles to use with actual relatives.

In China, people are addressed by their surname followed by their title, e.g. 李经理 Li Jingli (‘Director Li’) or 王校长 Wang Xiaozhang (‘Principal Wang’). If a teacher’s surname is Wang, students will call the teacher 王老师 Wang Laoshi (‘Teacher Wang’).

Colleagues or acquaintances are usually addressed by their surnames only. If they are young, they may be called 小李 (Xiao Li = ‘little’ Li) or 小王 (Xiao Wang = ‘little’ Wang). If they are older, they may be called 老李 (Lao Li = ‘old’ Li) or 老王 (Lao Wang = ‘old’ Wang). Only good friends use their given names with each other, and only when invited to do so.

**Interactions (including non-verbal language)**

Chinese people make eye contact when talking to each other. This is done as a courtesy and it is regarded as impolite if you are talking to one person but looking at someone else.

Chinese people tend to avoid responses which may cause offence. For example, if asked to attend an event they don’t want to attend, they may say it is ‘inconvenient’. This means they actually do not want to go, and the reasons should not be probed further. Similarly, they may use the word ‘maybe’ when they actually mean ‘no’. The speed of their response can also give clues as to whether or not they are keen to do something, e.g. a quick reply indicates they are happy to do it, a slower response indicates unwillingness.

On formal public occasions, Chinese people seldom use body gestures. Adults on exchange to China may be expected to give a short speech at formal occasions, such as school visits.

**Pointing when speaking is considered rude.**

**Housing**

Traditionally, Chinese homes are smaller than Australian homes, however apartments and houses are increasing in size. Some families have three generations under one roof.

Homes and apartments in affluent urban or suburban areas are often furnished like homes and apartments in Australia. Most Chinese homes do not have a separate laundry – the washing machine is in the bathroom.

Western-style toilets are becoming more common, although many public toilets are the Asian-style squat toilets. It’s a good idea to carry tissues with you, as not all public toilets provide toilet paper.

**Eating and drinking**

Chinese people usually put all the serving dishes on the table and then share the food. The host, the most senior person present or the parent will say a few words and will then start the meal. To show their hospitality, Chinese people like to ensure...
everyone always has food on their plates. It is polite to accept extra food, even if you are no longer hungry.

In China people commonly use chopsticks to eat. Sometimes you may find two pairs of chopsticks provided for you to use. You use one set to bring food from the serving dishes to your own plate, and then change to the other set to eat. If you find spare chopsticks next to the dishes on the table, you can use them to place the food on your plate. It is customary to leave your chopsticks next to your bowl or plate when you finish. You should not point or play with your chopsticks, and should never place them straight up in your bowl, as that is how Chinese people place joss sticks at graves, to honour the dead.

Some Chinese people may slurp their food when they eat, especially noodles, however this practice is becoming less acceptable in public. Chinese people also prefer their meat well cooked, not ‘rare’.

Chinese people love to start the meal together and leave the table together. When everybody has finished, the host may say a few words like ‘I hope everybody enjoyed the meal’, signifying that people may then leave. If you wish to leave the table before everyone has finished, you should say something by way of explanation. It is considered impolite if you finish the meal and leave the table without comment.

**Clothing**

In China’s larger cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, most people wear Western-style clothing.

School students wear a uniform. Many companies also have their own formal uniform, which the staff must wear during working hours.

The most popular colour for celebratory clothing in China is red or other bright colours, e.g. at important festivals or special occasions like weddings, people prefer to wear clothes in red, pink, yellow, orange, etc.

Chinese traditional clothing style is 旗袍 (qipao – a type of dress) with dragons, fish, flowers or bird patterns on it. At formal occasions many Chinese women wear 旗袍 to show their happiness.

As a foreigner visiting China, it is important to wear appropriate clothing. For a female, it is best not to wear anything too revealing, such as low-cut blouses or singlets. Thongs are also not recommended footwear.

**Families**

Chinese society follows the philosophy of Confucianism. One of the core values of Confucianism is filial piety and respect for elders. Family welfare is much more important than the needs of the individual. Familial responsibilities include looking after elderly parents and grandparents.

Traditionally, extended families live together, and the grandfather or father is the head of the family. Nowadays, smaller nuclear families are common but the same values of filial duty remain.
Chinese families are often smaller than those in Western countries, due to the One Child Policy. The policy, controversial both within and outside China, was first applied in 1979, with the goal of reducing China’s massive population growth. Exceptions do apply, and the policy is being slowly relaxed in some areas, especially in the country. For those who are the only child in their family, ‘sharing’ may be a new concept.

Chinese children generally have a lot of homework after school and so tend to work quietly by themselves. However, they are willing to give any help their parents require them to do. As such, a lack of initiative doesn’t signify unwillingness – it usually means they are waiting for a task to be given to them, or prefer to get on with school work.

**Schooling**

Traditionally, Chinese people place a very high value on education and great importance on academic achievement. Education is viewed as crucial for success and competition is consequently very fierce. Success at school opens the door to higher education, a better career and an improved standard of living. With such high expectations of academic results, it is not uncommon for a teacher to visit a student at home, if required.

In order to gain good results, most Chinese students go to after-school classes, as well as doing lots of homework in the evenings, on the weekends and in the holidays. Chinese students may not have the same amount of free-time as Australian students. Since most Chinese people place great importance on their children’s learning, parents are often prepared to do a lot of things for their children to support their study.

Students are encouraged to respect seniors and to be polite in all circumstances. When students meet the principal, teachers or visitors in the school grounds, they stand aside to give way. In some schools, when a teacher enters the classroom, all students are required to stand up, bow and greet them.

Schools in China generally have longer hours than Australian schools, with some senior students returning to school in the evening for extra lessons or tuition. These lessons usually end around 7.30pm.

Students usually have lunch at school, with most schools having a dining room. Every student has a card for buying food at school.

Flexible learning styles are not as common in China and, as such, students are used to following instructions. English is learnt with a focus on speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, large class sizes mean students’ reading and writing skills are often much better than their speaking and listening skills. Speaking slowly or writing things down can help Chinese students understand what you are saying.

In China, teachers are highly respected, both inside and outside the classroom. Students must raise their hand if they have any questions. Chinese students often do this by resting their elbow on the table and raising their hand to head-height.
Students wait until the teacher calls their name, then stand up and speak. Interrupting the class is unacceptable.

To encourage responsibility, students are organised into groups to clean their classrooms and the school grounds, with students on duty wearing a red arm badge or red ribbon.

Parents do not usually go into the school grounds, even at primary school level. They drop their child off and pick them up at the school gate.

**Gift-giving**

When visiting a host family or school, it is expected that you take a gift, something that could be shared among the school or family and that is not too expensive. First time visits could include Australian books or pictures or other souvenirs. Presents should be wrapped, preferably in red or gold. The gift is presented when you greet the person. If you are attending an official welcome ceremony then you can present the gift at that time. The gift will be received and you will be thanked. It is not customary to unwrap the gift in front of the giver, as this is regarded as being impolite. However, because of the influence of Western culture, people now sometimes open the gift in front of the giver, so they can show their happiness.

You should avoid giving a clock as a present, as the sound of this word in Chinese implies death. Nowadays, bringing a bunch of flowers when you visit people is very popular in China.

**Religion**

China is a country of many religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity.

Most Han Chinese people have been strongly influenced by Confucianism. However, this is regarded as a set of principles, rather than a religion.

**Manner and demeanour**

In China, resisting a show of emotions is a sign of maturity and dignity. As such, Chinese people may appear more reserved than their Western counterparts. They are not accustomed to showing their feelings or expressing opinions directly, especially if they disagree with someone else.

In Chinese culture, blowing your nose in public is considered impolite.

**Time**

Punctuality is very important to Chinese people. Arriving on time, or slightly early, is expected.
Transport

Major cities in China have extensive public transport systems, including different types of buses and subways. Timetables are written in 24-hour time and the locations are written in Chinese characters. Public transport is very convenient in most cities, with buses scheduled every ten minutes. Bus tickets are normally purchased on the bus, although some require pre-paid tickets. Subway tickets are pre-paid at each station. Most buses and subways offer monthly tickets that are much cheaper than every day tickets.

Public transport in cities is typically very crowded. During peak periods queueing is not considered essential, with people tending to push through doorways and entry or exit gates. At the bus stop, you will usually find a person, wearing a special uniform, whose job it is to keep people in order. People stand very close to each other when they are on the bus and subway. It is important to be aware of all your belongings at these times and to be assertive when you want to get on and get off.

The population in China is huge, so traffic conditions can be challenging. Roads are often crowded, both during peak times and off-peak times. Cars do not always stop for pedestrians, and pedestrians sometimes cross the road against the red light.

Shopping and bargaining

Bargaining is often used when shopping in markets and some shops in China. However, in department stores people do not haggle, but pay the listed price instead. Bargaining starts when you demonstrate an interest in an item. The stall owner will often invite you to offer a price and then they will counter the offer and the process continues until you agree. Many stall owners will use a calculator to show prices. Some shoppers will pretend to walk away in order to obtain a cheaper price. The stall owner will work hard for the first sale of the day, as this is said to bring luck for the rest of the day. The process can be time consuming and requires skill. It can also be a lot of fun and very rewarding. It is important to be serious about the process and note that once you have agreed upon a price you will be expected to buy the item.

In some department stores there are central purchasing points. Once you have selected your item, a sales assistant will provide you with a purchasing slip. They will hold on to the item while you go to the cashier to pay. When you return, the assistant will give you your item, once they have sighted your receipt.

Concept of ‘saving face’

The concept of ‘face’ is very important to Chinese people. To avoid embarrassment, you should not criticise people in public. If a problem arises, you should discuss it in private, keeping the conversation friendly and asking the person for their views on a possible solution.
Writing system

All script is written in simplified Chinese characters in China. Some signs are written in Chinese characters with *Hanyu Pinyin* (sounds). Full form Chinese characters are used in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Traditional books and texts are written from top to bottom, right to left. However, nowadays many texts are written in the same format as Western texts, i.e. left to right, top to bottom.