



Assisting the Transition

*A guide for teachers to
assist Chinese students
moving into mainstream
secondary school
education*

Teacher Brochure

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Authorised by T. Burke, General Secretary, QIEU
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QIEU is committed to pursuing professional, industrial and social issues on behalf of members.

Members have consistently raised the need to assist in the transition of international students from intensive English language courses to mainstream Australian secondary schools.

This brochure is designed to provide some information about international students from China and their educational background to assist teachers in the transition of these students.

The comments in this brochure are necessarily general in nature, as students will have had a range of experiences and there will always be individual students with different attitudes and values.

*QIEU General Secretary
Mr Terry Burke and
Ms Liu Rui from the
Shanghai Municipal
Trade Union Council
meet with students from
Nudgee College*



Contents

Asian world view	3
What is the Chinese education experience?	4
Character of academic senior high schools in China	4
Chinese language characteristics	7
How do international Chinese students respond to Australian teachers?	9
How do international Chinese students react to the Australian teaching style?	11
Transition issues	15
Discipline issues	16
Assessment issues	17
What is the role of homestay?	17
How can Australian teachers and schools assist in the transition process?	19

Asian world view

While Australian beliefs are based on European values, which are heavily influenced by religious traditions, China has a more philosophical view of the world where traditions and rules, which have been handed down, directly affect the lives of people.

Generally loyalty to the family is important in China and to bring shame on oneself and one's family is something to be avoided.

Different cultures display different thought patterns and while Western thinking tends to be 'writer-oriented' with the onus on the writer to convey meaning, China tends to be 'reader-oriented' and it is the task of the reader to understand and interpret written information.

Thus, the writer will not be expected to make their evaluations explicit. As a result, Chinese students will tend to read for factual content before reading for meaning and when writing will wish to demonstrate their knowledge, expecting the reader to interpret the meaning. Therefore, they approach their work in a very factual manner. In traditional Chinese schools there is limited opportunity to express opinions or feelings.

Therefore when teachers ask questions of the class, Chinese students may be hesitant to respond without encouragement and may even experience feelings of disappointment in the perceived knowledge, skills and abilities of the teacher.

What is the Chinese education experience?

Structure of Chinese education system: School education in China begins at age six and spans twelve years. Students are required to complete a compulsory six years in primary school and three years in junior high school.

At the completion of junior high school students sit centralised exams to receive a certificate of graduation which enables them to move into senior secondary schooling.

Senior secondary schools are divided into two main streams: academic; and technical and vocational. Entry into key academic senior high schools is very competitive as a high percentage of these students then achieve admission into the limited places available in preferred universities and colleges.

Character of academic senior high schools in China

Subjects: Curriculum, teaching plans and textbooks for academic senior high schools are centrally prescribed. Students preparing for entrance to tertiary education will sit the National College Entrance Examination (with the exception of Shanghai).

Subjects offered in Chinese high schools include Chinese, Mathematics, a foreign language (usually English), Physics, Chemistry, History, Geography, Biology, Politics, Physical Education, Music and Art.

During senior high school students specialise in either humanities or science disciplines, while subjects such as Chinese, Mathematics and a foreign language remain compulsory for all students. The curriculum also allows students to undertake some elective subjects such as Computing. Extra-curricular programs are also offered.

English experience: At the completion of their secondary education students are required to understand three to four thousand English words. However, this is considered too small a vocabulary for serious English reading and writing. Considerable emphasis is placed on the study of English grammar.

Classroom: There are approximately forty students in a class in China; however, there can be more than fifty students at key schools. School starts at 7:30 am and finishes in the late afternoon. Some students may finish as late as 5.00pm.

Each lesson is roughly forty-five minutes in length with a ten minute break between lessons. Students have approximately forty lessons per week and these lessons are held in the same classroom with the teacher moving rather than the students.

Homework: Homework occupies most of the students' spare time and regularly takes three to four hours every day to complete. Homework is collected the following morning for the teachers to correct. Chinese students will receive written corrections as opposed to being corrected verbally in front of the class.

Style of teaching: Education at senior high school level is examination-driven and narrowly focussed on achieving good results

in the exit examination. Traditionally, in the classroom, the teaching methods were very formal; however, teaching styles are becoming more flexible and as a result, group work is beginning to be used. The students are required to show discipline and control during classes and although relationships between teachers and students outside the classroom may be quite friendly, in class the students are expected to give formal respect to the teacher.



While a Chinese teacher usually stands at the front of the class to teach, this is changing. Chinese teachers would not move around the class to the same extent as Australian teachers. There are limited discussions during class.

Teachers are encouraged to promote students asking questions in class, but a reluctance to ask a 'silly question' and a fear of making a mistake in front of others means students prefer to ask questions after the class.

Teachers in China are more authoritarian and the education structure does not encourage students to develop original ideas. Chinese teachers see their role as transmitting knowledge to students as opposed to Australian teachers who see their role as facilitating the students to explore and learn for themselves.

As a result students are not encouraged to develop higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, independent problem solving or research.

Cultural background: Chinese people have a strong identification with their history, culture and value system. Their educational system reflects society's belief in group goals and purposes rather than individualism which is more evident in Western cultures. The curriculum does not focus on students developing original ideas to the same extent as the Australian curriculum. This results in few tasks requiring the student's initiative or creativity.

Due to the fierce competition in the labour market, there is a great focus on higher education to secure favourable employment. It is emphasised to students that to be successful, their only option is to achieve good academic results. Parents are often very demanding of their children and may place a great deal of pressure on their children to achieve academically.

As the Chinese educational experience is primarily focused on the rote learning method, the student's learning ability relies on very clear directions by teachers. During the transition phase students would initially benefit from clear direction and guidance. Students should also be encouraged and assisted to adopt an independent learning style.

Chinese language characteristics

The Chinese language has a number of cultural norms which influence the nature of social engagement. The Chinese language does not use words that indicate a change of topic. Although Chinese people have such words as 'excuse me', 'please' and 'thank you', students may not necessarily use them to initiate a discussion with a teacher.

Chinese students are used to engaging directly with a teacher on a topic, and having used the teacher's name, may immediately ask a question or make a statement. The spoken Chinese language has a non-gender specific pronoun as opposed to the multitude of English gender-specific pronouns such as 'him' and 'her'. As a result Chinese students may have difficulty with the correct use of these pronouns during conversations.

The Chinese language, like any language, has sounds that are associated with 'thinking' moments where thoughts are considered. While English speakers use pause words like 'uhm' and 'arh', Chinese speakers will use a much harsher sound like 'ergh'. This may sound rude and impolite but it only represents a pause to consider one's thoughts. Students need to be instructed about the polite way to converse and the appropriate use of courtesy words (excuse me, please, thank you).

There is also some difficulty associated with the written and spoken 'yes' and 'no'. Often questions asked by the teacher result in unexpected answers by Chinese students. For example if the Australian teacher asks the question 'There aren't any errors in this essay?' The Australian teacher would anticipate a 'no' answer signifying agreement with the intent of the question. Chinese students however, may answer 'yes' signifying agreement to the statement.

It is best to minimise the use of such questions to Chinese students and if such questions are used it is important to ensure that the student's understanding of the question is consistent with the implied meaning of the question.

How do international Chinese students respond to Australian teachers?

Students overwhelmingly report very positive attitudes towards their Australian teachers. However, initially Chinese students see Australian teachers as being 'easy' in comparison to their Chinese counterparts. This perception is largely derived from an immediate impression that Australian teachers demand less of students than Chinese teachers because of the absence of day-to-day prescribed homework.

It is essential during this period of transition that teachers affirm their authority as they encourage students to shift to a more independent learning style and to take responsibility for their learning outcomes. These demands are very different from the demands in the Chinese educational system. Teachers may need to assist students to develop a personal study plan during this period to cope with the different expectations regarding homework and assignments.



“Australian teachers want you to do your best but there is not as much pressure here as in China.”

Ping Yu, student from Clayfield College

“You don't get as much academic pressure here as in China. There is more freedom ... they encourage you to be more creative.”

Frank Li, student from Nudgee College



“It is much more relaxed and there is more free time.”

Bowen Huang, student from Nudgee College

Students also noted that Australian teachers create a friendly and caring classroom environment and are approachable and willing to help students who learn at a different pace. Teachers are also seen to have a good sense of humour.

“Students in the classrooms here are very free. Students ask any questions they want even questions about me and my family.”

Yao Wei, a Chinese teacher on exchange at St Edmund’s College



“The teachers are more approachable.”

Bowen Huang, student from Nudgee College

While Australian teachers also have high expectations of their students, they are not seen as authoritarian as Chinese teachers and initially, Chinese students may give limited regard to the teacher’s directions.

How do international Chinese students react to the Australian teaching style?

While many of the international students adapt very well, there are some transition issues that can be easily addressed with some consideration and good communication.

Asking questions: The most significant issue identified by both students and teachers is the reluctance of the students to ask or respond to questions during class. This hesitation is largely from a fear of making a mistake or getting the wrong answer and thus, being ‘shamed’ in front of others. Reluctance also occurs as students are not familiar with the process of asking questions during class time, nor have they had the experience of interactive questioning and generating questions within the classroom environment.

Therefore, Chinese students need to be strongly encouraged in class before they will offer an answer or opinion. Students may initially want to wait until after class to ask questions, until they have developed a trust in the teacher and the teaching style.

“Some mainstream teachers feel bombarded at the end of a lesson by students waiting to ask questions and to have concepts and ideas explained from that lesson. Teachers should use more open questions such as ‘can you explain to me what you need to do this task’ so that they may gain a better understanding of the students understanding during the lesson. By doing this they can deal with the matter during lesson time as opposed to dealing with the matter after the lesson.”

Narelle Ward, teacher from Clayfield College

Teaching methods: Students express pleasure in the variety of teaching methods utilised by Australian teachers. Many enjoy group work but find larger groups difficult to interact in as they have trouble keeping up with the fast-paced conversation in the groups.

Therefore, they are slower to respond and might be thought to contribute less than the Australian students.

“I think most of the problem in groups is the language difficulties between the Chinese and Australian students.”

Yang Xinhao, student at St Edmund’s College.

The use of oral presentations is a very challenging teaching method for Chinese students. Oral presentations are uncommon in Chinese classrooms where individual opinions are not considered as valid as the authoritative opinions found in text books and sanctioned in the curriculum.

Due to the size and nature of the Chinese classroom environment oral presentations would be impracticable.

Assignments: Assignments cause some concern for both students and teachers as Chinese students would not commonly experience assignment/research work in the Chinese education system.

They are more familiar with regular, nightly homework that is thoroughly checked and marked by the teacher. They may not understand that assignments are similar to homework and need to be scheduled over the whole time available.

Due to the different styles and nature of assignments, students may need assistance in determining the correct style and form of response before approaching the specific assignment.

Students also have difficulty understanding the need for and appropriate way to reference in assignments. It is essential that referencing be clearly explained and emphasised to students to avoid issues of plagiarism.

The Chinese education system is very regimented and prescriptive where students are given a high level of direction and guidance. Providing assignment criteria sheets is essential and these should be detailed and explicit in their requirements to meet the various levels of achievement.

Topics of study: The topics and literature chosen for study in an Australian school can have a definite cultural context which is difficult for an international student to understand. Wherever possible, teachers should try to adapt literature and set topics at an appropriate level of understanding.

Teachers should also note that some topics are also potentially culturally sensitive and may be quite confronting to Chinese students. These topics may include sensitive issues (eg. abortion) that would not be considered publicly.

Other issues beyond the classroom such as international conflicts between China and other countries may be raised during school work in a manner that is not productive.

Religious education is especially challenging and thought should be given to the level of assumed knowledge in the tasks set. International students are often reluctant to study religion, believing that it is too time-consuming or irrelevant. Some Chinese students may be unaware of the importance placed on studying religion when they attend a religious school in Australia.

Use of Academic English: Students typically complete a preparatory English language course before entering the secondary school curriculum. Students who have not completed an academic English language preparation program will have difficulty understanding subject-specific terms, for example mathematical and scientific terms.

The school should establish whether an academic English language preparation course has been completed and if not, provide the student with a summary of commonly-used terms they will encounter in a work unit.

Students need to understand that all subjects require a communication component, making English an essential skill in every subject.

They also need to understand that if they do not achieve high marks in this communication component it will affect their overall grade. This emphasises the need for academic specific English assistance for overseas students.

“English is a big challenge. I think the novels I read are so hard. Without Australian English, English would become easier for us.”

Chen Ji, student at St Edmund’s College

Transition issues

Language barrier: Students often have difficulty making Australian friends because of the language barrier, as they have difficulty keeping up with the banter of the conversation. They may have something to say but the conversation will have moved on. Australian students should be encouraged to allow time for responses by all group members.

Anglicised names: Chinese students often feel pressured to have an English name to make it easier for Australians to communicate with them. Many Chinese students are reluctant to adopt an Australian name and schools should encourage students to use their name of choice. Chinese names have the family name first, followed by the given name.



“There is pressure to have an English name. I would prefer to use my Chinese name, but teachers always ask if I have an English name.”

Ting-I Chen, student from Clayfield College

University entry: Many Chinese students are singularly focussed on achieving their academic goals, often to the exclusion of other activities. While extra-curricula activities might be very important to the school, many Chinese students will limit these pursuits especially when they involve long hours. School staff may find it difficult to encourage these students to participate in these activities.

Cultural norms: There are also some different cultural norms to consider. For example, Chinese people believe it is rude to blow their nose in public; however, a student sniffing throughout a class is just as rude to Australian teachers.

Speaking quietly to the student, giving them some tissues and allowing them to go out of the classroom to blow their nose is an effective way of dealing with this matter.

Loud speaking level: Often when talking with their peers Chinese students speak in a higher pitch which results in a louder voice and they may not be aware how distracting this is for the teacher and other students especially during group work. Teachers need to recognise this and encourage them to talk to their peers quietly especially during classroom activities.

Discipline issues

When Chinese students are reprimanded in public it can result in feelings of shame and embarrassment. Chinese culture, although changing, is still strongly influenced by the fear of being shamed. Disciplinary actions should be avoided in public and should be done in a one on one situation.

When reprimanded, the student may smile out of embarrassment and this may seem somewhat insolent to an Australian teacher. However, this reaction stems from a sense of shame and humiliation. Eye contact can be interpreted as being disrespectful in China and Chinese students may avoid eye contact, especially in a situation when being admonished.

Assessment issues

The common assessment form in China is centralised examinations for university entrance and any school-based assessment is preparation for this external examination. Therefore, Chinese students may not initially understand the importance of subject assessment in Australia.

It is important to explain that Australia has regular and ongoing assessment in subject areas and this combines with a centralised examination in Year 12 called the Core Skills Test. These two types of assessment, school-based and Core Skills are then combined to give an Overall Position (OP) and this OP is used for tertiary entrance.

As there is a great deal of emphasis placed on attending university in China, students may not be aware of other tertiary options available to them. It is advised that career counsellors and teachers discuss other study options with international students and devise an action plan (with options) for the students to achieve their future goals.

What is the role of homestay?

Homestay issues clearly affect a student's schooling experience.

It is important to maintain good communication with the homestay family and using an interactive homework book that the homestay parents sign each night is a useful way of promoting communication. It includes space for comments from the teacher to the parents and vice versa.

International students have stated they do not want to be artificially included in all of the family's activities. There needs to be a balance between a supervised and supportive environment and an appropriate level of independence.

“Every weekend they go out with their son for sport and I have to go. I spend too much time and am not interested in being taken to (my homestay brother’s) sporting activities.”

Long Xiao, student at St Edmund's College



There may be other issues such as the level of noise when eating, a fear of swimming (few Chinese are proficient swimmers) and the late hours they keep that the homestay family will need to deal with.

The amount of time spent on laptops playing games and watching DVDs is often of concern to homestay families. This may occur due to lack of social interaction or as a means of avoiding homework/ assignments. Students should be encouraged to spend less time on their laptops especially late into the night and on school days.

Homestay families should encourage their students to embrace Australian culture while maintaining an understanding and acceptance of Chinese culture. Chinese students often comment on how different the Australian style of food is to Chinese food. Homestay families should be encouraged to provide both Australian and Chinese food for their homestay student and perhaps encourage the student to cook Chinese food for the family.



“Sometimes they give me Chinese food, which is always welcome.”

Cao Yang, student at St Edmund's College

It is advised that a school contact person be arranged with whom the Chinese students can discuss their homestay concerns or issues. This person should also be able to assist in negotiating positive outcomes for the students should any issues with the homestay family arise.

Understanding, patience and communication will result in a happier, more productive homestay experience.

How can Australian teachers and schools assist in the transition process?

Australian schools and teachers can assist the transition of international students by following some of the advice below:

- Buddy them up with an Australian student in class to encourage them to speak English. This can be achieved easily by matching the subject choices of the international student with an Australian student who has similar subject choices. This can be particularly useful if the Australian student is also a student of Chinese.

- Buddy them up with an international student who has undergone this period of integration from ESL to mainstream senior secondary schooling. Once again matching the timetables can be a way of determining the buddy mix. These experienced students can act as mentors and share their experiences with the new students to assist them during this period of transition.
- Allow them a lesser academic load, for example, five authority subjects rather than six.
- Provide templates for common assessment types. These templates can be used as reference points and assist students with their understanding of what each assessment type requires.
- Explain the context of subjects when they are choosing their subjects – many of the students will not have experienced these subjects in China.
- Provide clear and structured learning outcomes for students. This will have been their educational experience in China and will assist them when making the transition.
- Provide the student with a summary of commonly-used terms they will encounter in a subject prior to the study of a topic as they may be unfamiliar with the English language requirements that are subject-specific.
- Provide one-on-one tutorial sessions to assist them with specific language issues and general support.
- Ensure that students understand all the options of tertiary study available to them at the end of their secondary studies as students tend not to be aware of the multiple pathways to university and often give superiority to one university over another. This could be best achieved through regular meetings with the career counsellor to discuss various further study options.
- Regular meetings of the staff members involved with Chinese students are to be encouraged to allow teachers to identify, discuss and resolve any issues relating to the transition and education of these students. These meetings should encourage professional development around these issues.
- In-service days could be used as a way of educating all staff about the needs and requirements of international students. Staff from an international college could become guest speakers and share their experiences and knowledge on such days, so could previous students who have undertaken the transition from the international college to mainstream secondary education.
- Prior to the commencement of the school term, new international students should attend a seminar given by both teachers of the International College and mainstream school to talk about differences that they are likely to experience and expectations of the secondary school. This forum also gives students the opportunity to ask questions and clarify their concerns.
- Give the international student time and space to blend into the school environment.

- Identify a person in the school that the students can speak to about any concerns including homestay. A person with a similar cultural background would be of immeasurable assistance as this person can act as a 'cultural bridge' to clarify and explain cultural sensitivities.
- Arrange meetings involving the school administration, the teachers of Chinese students and the homestay parents to assist in highlighting any issues or concerns and to allow teachers and homestay parents to discuss the student's progress.
- Allow for the different dietary needs of Chinese students by providing either Chinese style food for sale through the tuckshop or by providing facilities for preparation of such foods. A microwave facility at the school which is accessible to students is a thoughtful consideration.
- Avoid unnecessarily grouping the international students together as they would rather blend into the school with all the other students.
- Be aware that international students will be homesick at some point and symptoms can include persistent colds, listlessness, general unease and depression.
- Contacting the student's family regularly is vital. Reports should be translated and sent home. It is also important during this contact to make the student's teachers known to the parents. If it is not possible to translate the reports at the school, it should be suggested that the student's parents arrange for this to be done.
- International students should be added to the registrar of special needs (if the school has one) so that all teachers become aware of the extra assistance they require.
- Depending on the year level, an appropriate amount of extra time for exams and assessment items should be given.
- The school should establish a multicultural feeling in the school by promoting and engaging in international celebrations or by establishing a celebration to promote this feeling of multiculturalism.



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