Beyond ‘Sister Schools’ to a Strategic Alliance

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In 2002, the Hamilton and Alexandra College—a co-educational school in the Western District of Victoria—and Gaoyou Middle School in Gaoyou—an industrial city in Jiangsu Province of China—formed a strategic alliance such that each school is prominently acknowledged at the campus of the other. This alliance goes well beyond the normal concept of ‘sister schools’. It recognizes the opportunity to nurture a sense of belonging to a world of differences, amongst the students of both schools.

The connection between Gaoyou and Hamilton was established at a local government level in the late 1990s. This led to the signing of an initial Memorandum of Understanding by Mr John Turnbull, then Principal of Hamilton and Alexander College, and Mr Li Zhongming, Vice-Principal, Gaoyou Middle School. This initiated educational exchange visits between the two schools, and the current alliance was formalised in 2002 when the principals of both schools—Mr Bruce Simons (Hamilton and Alexandra College) and Mr Dong Yu Hai (Gaoyou Middle School)—signed a new Memorandum of Understanding which made each school a ‘twin campus’ of the other. The principal of each school became honorary principal of the other.

The mission statement underpinning the twin campus program focuses on building friendship and intercultural understanding, the improvement of language skills in English and Mandarin Chinese across the two schools, and the development of exchange visits. It also promises a unique ‘international experience’ for the students of both schools; since the Memorandum of Understanding was signed, every Year 9 student at Hamilton has participated in an annual trip to Gaoyou and three groups of Gaoyou students have visited Hamilton. There has also been an exchange arrangement for staff, with Chinese staff from the English faculty at Gaoyou spending nearly two months at the Hamilton and Alexandra College, living in the Boarding House and visiting classes during the day to observe Australian teaching practice and methodology. Two students who had
completed Year 12 in Hamilton have also spent some months in Gaoyou, working in the school as assistants to develop their knowledge of the Chinese language and culture. In 2007, a Hamilton teacher will spend some months working with Chinese students in the Gaoyou Middle School.

**Report of a Visit in 2006**

I was lucky enough to participate in the 2006 visit to Gaoyou by the Year 9 students at the Hamilton and Alexandra College. In all, there were fifty-five students, four staff members and four parents (including a doctor and a nurse), and we spent twenty-six days in China. Teaching staff take it in turns to participate in such visits, and our participation is fully subsidised by the school. Already, twenty-two staff members have been able to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in what our school calls the ‘China Experience’.

While in Gaoyou, the Hamilton students board at the school and attend classes most days for about two weeks. The lessons are conducted by Gaoyou teachers and include Chinese Language, Geography, Music, Calligraphy, History and Gong Fu (Kung Fu). The Australian students also help out in the English language classes by interacting with the students and teachers. Outside the lessons, students also participate in ‘friendly’ matches in soccer, basketball and athletics, and, of course, there are both semi-formal and informal opportunities for the students to socialise and interact with their Chinese counterparts. Meals are provided in part of the dining complex. Since their chefs cater for about 1500 boarders from a school of about 4000 in the equivalent of our Years 10, 11 and 12, feeding our group was easily accommodated.

Undoubtedly, a highlight of each visit to Gaoyou is the ‘homestay’ day, when the Chinese students take our students to meet their family and spend time eating, playing, chatting and visiting those parts of the city which teenagers find interesting. Of course, not all the Australian students are fluent in Chinese, yet somehow the language barriers seem to break down quickly as the young people relax with each other. Many of the students forge enduring friendships during this time.

From Gaoyou, it is easy to make trips to nearby cities such as Changzhou, Nanjing and Yangzhou to visit historical sites and take in all the pleasures of shopping in China. We visited the bustling city of Shanghai on our way to Gaoyou and were able to go to the former northern Chinese capital city of Xian to see the extraordinary Terracotta Warriors that were unearthed in 1976. While in Xian, we were able to experience Tang Dynasty music and dance. Our trip also included a visit to Beijing and, of course, a walk on the Great Wall of China—along with a teeming mass of other international and Chinese tourists.
A Deeper Understanding of the ‘New’ China

You can’t visit Beijing without being struck by the amount of work being done to prepare for the 2008 Olympic Games. At the time of our visit, many of the old buildings in the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace were clad in scaffolding as part of that preparation work. It is also noticeable that the English language is being used more in public spaces and that the young are becoming more proficient in the language than their parents’ generation. In cities like Gaoyou, you often see young people translating signs in English for their parents.

All of us—students and staff—came back with a stronger admiration for the work ethic of the Chinese. At the Gaoyou school, the students commonly work for six and a half days each week with the aim of getting a place at a university. Clearly the relationship between China and Australia is becoming more important in the contemporary world, and we were interested to see many news reports on that relationship while we were in China. We gained a much greater appreciation for Chinese history and traditions and became much more proficient in the Mandarin Chinese language (even for those of us with no prior experience of the language).

With international travel becoming more and more accessible to young people, it has become more important to understand cultural differences and to learn how to build mutual respect for such differences. The alliance between the Hamilton and Alexandra College and the Gaoyou Middle School is certainly giving the students of both schools a rare opportunity to experience another culture in a meaningful way, and the staff and students on the 2006 China Experience certainly had a shared experience that gave us a better understanding of what globalization can mean in practice.

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