



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TOUR

Two teachers from St Mary's School in Donald, Mary Hogan and Andrea Molloy-Drum, travelled to China during the school holidays on a Professional Learning tour.

Below, they have shared some of their experiences from their trip.

The tour was organised by *My Education Group*, who provide the Chinese language program in our school. The language program is taught via an interactive video conference session with teachers in Beijing, with the students learning about Chinese language and culture.

On first hearing about the tour, we both felt it would be a great learning opportunity to experience Chinese culture first-hand and bring new understanding to our teaching of the language program. We were fortunate to receive funding to participate on the tour through a CECV Languages - Speak Up! study sponsorship grant through the Catholic Education Office in Ballarat and we are grateful to Bernadette Brouwers for providing this information to us.

On our first day in Beijing, we met our tour guide and other people in our tour group, before exploring the Hou Hai Lake District and local Hutong area in central Beijing. The hutongs are neighbourhoods around inner Beijing where traditional residences and courtyards are joined by many narrow lanes and alleyways. It was fascinating to wander through these areas and see all the activity going on, and get a sense of everyday life for residents here. The afternoon included an entertaining ride in a rickshaw through the local streets and alleyways, as our driver shared some laughs and banter with other drivers! That evening we waited for table space outside what is known by locals as a very popular restaurant in downtown Beijing. While the entry is discreetly tucked down a laneway and the building and décor appear very modest, it proved worth the wait, as we were treated to its specialty Peking duck, which was delicious.

The following day, we visited a school outside of Beijing. The trip out there gave us more of an idea about the size and scale of Beijing. With a population of around 22 million people, the outskirts of the city stretch in all directions to a radius of about 75 kilometres from the centre. Our group was taken by bus to the central train station where we caught a bullet train. The train took us over 300kms south-west of Beijing in less than an hour. We were warmly welcomed by the Principal, teachers and a group of students at the entrance gate to the school. The students were very enthusiastic about trying out their English language to converse with us. They have daily English lessons from a young age, so our efforts to communicate in Mandarin were soon replaced by their desire to practise English! We had a tour of the school before sitting in to observe different lessons taking place. It was interesting for us to observe some of the similarities and differences between schooling in China and Australia. In the afternoon, we had the opportunity



to team-teach a lesson we had prepared, to a class of 50 students in Year 4. Our lesson was based around a Dreamtime story and looking at some of Australia's native animals. Before the lesson concluded, the students were interested to hear some facts about where we come from: Donald and its population, farming and other industry. We had packed enough individually wrapped Kooka's Country Cookies to give to the students and teachers in the class. A soft toy kookaburra, which was also purchased from Kooka's factory, was given to the class and the students were delighted to hear it's laugh on pressing a button. We felt honoured to be so well received by all the staff and students at the school, who showed a genuine appreciation for our visit to their school.

Thursday began with a visit to the offices where some of the *My Education Group* team work from and deliver lessons to St Mary's students. After this, we had a Chinese language workshop, to brush up on some basic Mandarin and essential phrases needed for shopping! In the afternoon, we were taken to a Chinese Cooking School, where we made our own noodles, learned about some exotic spices, and used them to cook a stir-fry. We then sat down for a meal with our tour group and enjoyed our home cooking!



On the Friday, we took a bus to Huanghuacheng, a small village nestled in a valley along a quieter stretch of the Great Wall. This area is also known as the Lakeside Great Wall and some parts of the wall are even immersed by the reservoirs of water. While there are still some wild parts along this section of the wall, most parts have been restored, so this made the walking easier. We were lucky to have a very clear day with blue skies to view the countryside and see parts of the Great Wall snaking over the mountains. We spent the afternoon exploring the area and walking along the Wall, before finding a good spot to watch the sun set behind the beautiful landscape.

We had some time on Saturday morning to look around the village and surrounds, before heading back to Beijing. Our tour guide, Li Li advised that we should allow more time for travelling anywhere as the following day was National Day and the beginning of a week-long holiday across China, when people throughout the country travelled to be with family and friends. She estimated that it might take double the time to drive to our destination, which was the famous Pearl Market in Beijing. On the drive there, Li Li gave us some helpful tips to prepare us for shopping at the market and what to expect when bargaining. We were given a few hours to explore the five floors of shopping which was both a fun and exhausting experience. On the first two levels, most of the stall holders are very persistent and once you show the slightest interest in anything, it can be very hard to move on, especially when they start draping clothes, scarves or bags over you to demonstrate how wonderful the items look!

Sunday, our last day in Beijing was packed with various experiences, beginning with a Tai Chi lesson under the guidance of a Martial Arts master. We went by bus to meet with our teacher in the beautiful gardens which surround The Temple of Heaven. This is one of four major temples in Beijing and each of them are set amongst huge areas of parkland and gardens. These gardens are on 270 ha and while we saw only a small section with hundreds of people passing through, you could sense the peacefulness in the space it provides, away from the noise and bustle just outside the walls. So many people of all ages go to the gardens to exercise, in groups or on their own, amongst rows of different tree plantations.

We visited the Temple of Heaven which was built around AD 1420 in the Ming Dynasty. Emperors came to the temple to worship Heaven and pray for a good harvest. The Temple is renowned for its architectural

design which, as our guide explained, includes many complex elements that represent the workings of the universe. From here, we went to a traditional teahouse where we sat down to a tea tasting. We tasted some amazing teas made with fruits and flowers, and enjoyed watching the ceremony and art of pouring tea.

After lunch, we went to Forbidden City via Tiananmen Square. From the wide open spaces of Tiananmen Square, you can see different landmarks and monuments that remind us of China's distant past, including the entrance to Forbidden City across the road. With the National Holiday and huge crowds, we had to move patiently and go with the flow of pedestrian traffic. This added to the sense of how formidable this place really was, and still is. Built in the 15th century as the palace for emperors in the Ming dynasty, Forbidden City was the Chinese imperial palace to the end of the Qing Dynasty up until 1912. The sheer size, layout and architecture of Forbidden City is astounding.

To cap off this full day, our tour group had a night visit to a local food market. We weren't adventurous enough trying our taste-buds out on anything, especially after seeing a bunch of scorpions squirming on skewers before being deep-fried. However we were keen to try and get some photos of the huge variety of different foods....knowing that these would be of great interest to our students.

On day eight we left bustling Beijing for an early flight to the slightly smaller city of Chengdu – only a population of 14.5 million! Met at the airport by our guide, we were whisked away to a restaurant for lunch where we were lucky enough to witness a Chinese wedding reception in action. Chengdu is located in the Sichuan Province and is known for its spicier food, so we sampled a couple of hotter dishes at lunch. Chengdu is the home of the Giant Panda, one of the rarest animals in the world, so after lunch we headed to the research and breeding base of the Giant Panda. The crowds were intense, visitor numbers are limited to 40, 000 per day but it didn't feel as though this was honoured on that day! The reserve was set in lush, green hills with paths lined by arching bamboo plants. We witnessed pandas, including the Red Panda, of all ages lazing and playing in their enclosures. An authentic Sichuan hot pot dinner was experienced and appreciated by those with a palette for spice. Our accommodation was a quaint hostel above a busy restaurant on the busiest laneway, through which we hauled our luggage! The evening was spent exploring the bustling laneways of the area, lined with market stalls, food outlets, shops and entertainment.



In the morning we travelled to Leshan, about 180 kilometres from Chengdu, to visit the Leshan Giant Buddha. The Giant Buddha is a 71 metre tall stone statue built between 713-803 during the Tang Dynasty. The Buddha is carved in a cliff face and is the largest and tallest stone Buddha statue in the world. The Buddha is said to calm the waters of the rivers which flow beneath its feet. A short ride in an aging speed boat allowed us to view the statue front on from the river at the foot of the Buddha. The smallest toenail of the Buddha would accommodate an adult and over 100 people would fit in the instep of the statue.

The next morning we were treated to a morning to ourselves. We chose to wander the local streets and visited the People's Park which was built in 1911 and covers around 113 square metres. We saw people doing calligraphy, their morning tai chi and dancing, with Andie getting a short cha-cha lesson as well. There were also many advertisements along certain pathways, with parents advertising their children as prospective partners for marriage. The park is also home to Heming Teahouse, almost a century old and can accommodate up to 3000 customers. People gather to drink tea, play Mahjong, read and socialise. After lunch the Professional Learning Tour group headed to the airport for home. We were fortunate to extend

our time in China and left the tour group at the airport and headed for the city of Shanghai, one of the most populated cities in the world with a population of over 24 million and located on the east mid-coast of China.

Our first day in Shanghai was spent with a local tour guide who treated us to some aspects of local life coupled with some usual tourist attractions. A delicious breakfast pancake cooked in an obscure side street started our day. Next was an unexpected highlight of the day as we headed to Long Museum on West Bund. We were fortunate to view an exhibition by Antony Gormley who is a British sculptor. The main piece was 'Critical Mass 11' (1995) which was an instillation of sixty life sized cast iron body forms. The exhibition celebrated the body as a form for feeling and engaging our deepest hopes and fears, attraction to light and darkness. The different works were varied and thought provoking. For lunch there was pan fried dumplings and soup before experiencing a local traders market where people congregated to sell goods from all over China and abroad. The Yu Garden was next on the agenda. The garden is located in the northeast of the Old City of Shanghai. 'Yu' means pleasing and satisfying in Chinese. The garden was built by a government officer in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) for his parents as a space to enjoy a happy time in their old age. The garden was spacious, scattered with bridges, ponds and luscious greenery.

This was followed by a tour of the Temple of Confucius, which was particularly interesting to us as educators. In ancient times a Confucian Temple was typically a combination of school and temple. The artistic nature of the Chinese characters displayed on scrolls and the written teachings of Confucius were inspiring. We proceeded to the area once designated for the French and today vast (8 kilometres wide) and a popular area of residence for expats, alive with history and beauty. Our first stop showed hip restaurants, bars, cafes and high end fashion boutiques entwined between the quaint residences. A taxi ride to another area of the French Concession brought us to a more authentic strip of laneways lined with market stalls, art, jewellery, clothing and local food. After a busy day we enjoyed tea on The Bund and then cruised the Huangpu River on a ferry to view the amazing lights of Shanghai's nightline.

The next morning we headed to Suzhou where we toured a silk factory and witnessed the making of silk, very popular in China. We saw all stages in the life cycle of the silkworm from the hatching of silkworms, hatchlings feeding on mulberry leaves, the washing and untangling of the cocoons, the spinning of the silk and even a participation in the construction of a silk doona! Of course this was followed by the opportunity to purchase various silk items; bedding, clothing, scarves and beauty products. After lunch we continued to Zhouzhuang, an ancient water town famous for its canals. Called "The Venice of the East" the ancient residential houses are well preserved and surrounding lakes and rivers, dotted with stone bridges, very beautiful. A peaceful and scenic ride in a gondola style boat, with a traditional tune by the oarswoman topped off the day.

Our final day in Shanghai – and in China, was spent on Nanjing Road, the main shopping street in Shanghai and one of the busiest streets in the world, providing a perfect opportunity for final souvenirs and local cuisine. A warm day also allowed for a final sweep of local garden areas to people watch and take in the local culture.

Two very tired, but enlightened and enriched individuals headed for the Pudong Airport to begin the journey home. We look forward to sharing our experiences with the students of St Mary's enriching their Chinese curriculum with authentic experiences, photos, tales and answering the many, many questions the children have for us.