

Australia-China Council

The Australia-China Council was established in 1978 by an Executive Council Order to nurture the relationship between the two countries.

Today the Council consists of a Chair plus eight appointed members and a representative of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who meet formally three times each year to determine Council business. As the members have a range of expertise and interests, sub-committees have been formed to handle different aspects of the Council's work. This work is conducted through prolific email contact and numerous informal meetings.

Despite Commonwealth funding for this financial year of a mere \$740,000 the ACC embarked on an ambitious programme of activities with an emphasis on Council initiated projects. The sub-committees take responsibility for programmes that cover Youth Exchange, Australian Studies in China, Residencies and Awards, Culture Sport and Heritage, Publishing and Media, Commerce, and Science, Technology and the Environment. There is also a Special Projects category and an Audit Committee.

By far the largest proportion of the budget, and of the efforts of the Council, is directed at activities involving young people as it is felt that the future relationship with China depends on educating the youth of today to understand each others' cultural mores.

There are three tiers to the Youth Exchange Programme. The China Experience Programme allows school children studying Chinese language to participate directly in daily life in China for one month during their summer vacation. The most recent group travelled to Guilin where they attended school and participated in home stays. The trip also included two days of sightseeing in Beijing.

The Year in China Programme, designed for recent school leavers who have studied Chinese as a major subject, gives the successful applicants a full year of study at a Chinese University. This year there are a total of ten students – five of whom are on full scholarships – studying at Liaoning University in Shenyang province.

The third tier in the Youth Programme is the Young Business Scholars programme, which provides young professionals, who are reasonably fluent in Mandarin, with six-month study including a semester of business studies at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. The expectation is that this period of study will be followed by an internship with a Chinese or foreign company based in greater China. This scholarship is also available in Taipei.

Other programmes targeting young people include the National Chinese Speaking Competition, being held for the first time this year and the Residencies Programme. Although the Residencies Programme is not directed exclusively at youth the Council is keen to support projects created by, or involving, young participants. The Council offers the use of an apartment in Beijing, university accommodation in Hong Kong, a period of

residency at an artists' village in Taipei or a subsidy for accommodation in a nominated Chinese city for up to three months. A travel subsidy is also provided for a select number of the applicants. This year's successful applicants included an Australian author who is writing a novel based in Shanghai, a cultural studies scholar examining independent films made in greater China and a young painter keen to make contact with contemporary Chinese artists based in Beijing. The relationship with the Taipei Artists' Village takes the form of an exchange and Taiwan is sending two artists-in-residence to Australia this year.

Whereas the Youth Programmes foster young Australians' understanding of Chinese culture the Australian Studies Programme encourages Chinese students to develop an interest in Australia. Within Chinese universities there are now 25 Australian Studies Centres that the Australia-China Council has helped to establish – with more than 1700 university students doing courses in Australian studies. These days the ACC finances special projects which are competitively assessed and also gives achievement awards. Every two years an Australian Studies Conference is hosted by a different University – last year by Xuzhou University. At each conference, which is sponsored by the ACC, an Australia-China Council Book Prize is presented. The Australian Studies Centres all have their own small libraries, with some funds for acquisitions given by the ACC, and the Council also continues to support the development of the Australian section in the Shanghai Library, which was officially opened during Australia Week 2002.

The previously mentioned projects are all ACC initiatives that are managed on their behalf by the secretariat or by a service provider. But the ACC also receives numerous applications for financial support for a great variety of China related activities – in particular for cultural and sporting events. In some cases seed funding is approved as the official endorsement of the ACC will often stimulate corporate sponsorship, enabling an ambitious project to come to fruition. For example, in its latest funding round, the ACC granted \$10,000 to the West Australian Ballet to enable a production of 'La Boheme' to tour to three Chinese cities. The total cost of this venture is estimated at more than \$200,000 and it is intended that this small injection of funds from the ACC will encourage further financial support. Sometimes a few thousand dollars will make all the difference to the quality of a project. The Art Gallery of New South Wales is presenting an exhibition of Chinese Calligraphy later this year. It will be accompanied by a scholarly catalogue. The ACC has agreed to provide \$5000 to allow the text to be printed in both English and Chinese. Another current project of particular interest is an exhibition of collaborative works by an Australian ceramicist, an Indigenous artist and a Chinese artist. The ACC very much liked the cross-cultural nature of this project and agreed to assist with travel expenses.

Sporting collaborations are also encouraged. The ACC supported the RMIT Redbacks soccer team with its China Tour in 2003 – a tour that has generated further invitations to compete in China. Heritage is another area that the ACC looks upon very favourably, especially as it is an opportunity to showcase Australian expertise. Grants have been awarded to allow Australians to assist with the documentation of Chinese heritage sites.

All of the ACC's programmes contribute to cultural understanding. Distanced, as they are, from whatever the current political agenda may be, they enable relationships to be established and maintained. The relationship between Australia and China is progressing rapidly in the area of business and trade. But what is needed to ensure that there are no misunderstandings is a thorough knowledge of each other's values. It is only by direct experience – by meeting people, making friends and learning to trust 'the other' that we can be confident that Australia and China can move forward in their business dealings.

There are many new opportunities at this time for furthering people-to-people contact. Very senior Chinese government figures now make regular visits to Australia. But it is often the less senior ones, perhaps the younger members of a delegation – those who will be the leaders of tomorrow – whose memories, and contacts will be vital in the future.

The need to encourage exchange between middle level public servants and post-graduate students from all disciplines has been identified by the Australia-China Council as a key area for expansion and the ACC is currently investigating options for an Executive Development Programme that will focus on cultural and language training.

The ACC believes that its programme, with its emphasis on encouraging and educating the youth of today, is making a key contribution to the Australia-China relationship. However, without a significant increase in the annual budget, it is hard to see how these efforts can be extended.

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