

## **Report for the Staff, Students, Parents, Governors of Rugby High School on the Headteacher's Visit to Shenzhen, the People's Republic of China 13<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

The primary purpose of the visit was to form links with a school in Shenzhen. This has been successfully achieved and a link has been formed with Yantian Foreign Languages School.

### **Shenzhen**

Shenzhen is a new city. Building began about twenty years ago when Deng Xiao Ping declare the area a new economic zone and promoted the development of industry in this area which was close to the British Colony of Hong Kong. The net result is that today, many of the goods that are stamped 'Made in China' are made in Shenzhen or elsewhere in the province of Guangdong of which it is a part. Shenzhen had an original population of 50,000 but this has grown to more than 10 million today making it a much larger city than London. ICT related products are a specialism: the annual international High Tech Fair was taking place during our visit and was clearly geared towards showcasing innovation and developing the already thriving export market for Shenzhen goods. Shenzhen is also being promoted by the government as a tourist destination. It is famous in China for its theme parks and golf courses are being developed in several parts of the city in anticipation of a growth in leisure time for some people.

### **Yantian District**

Our partner school, Yantian Foreign Languages School, is situated in Yantian, the most easterly of the districts of Shenzhen, more than an hour's drive from the city centre. As in the rest of Shenzhen, the sights and sounds of new construction are everywhere. Yantian is a costal district. It is home to one of the biggest container shipping ports in the world. The Chinese government is seeking to develop Yantian as a tourist destination for both the domestic and the international traveller. An enormous theme park, OCT East, is being developed in the mountains above the town. At the moment the seafront is similar to that you might find in a sleepy Mediterranean resort. The beaches are amongst the top ten in China. Because Yantian is on the coast, the air quality is better than in the middle of Shenzhen where the smog blots out the sun most of the time.

### **Chinese Education**

Education has been strategically important to the Chinese for several decades. A series of huge drives means that 99.1% of people now receive some form of basic education. In rural areas this may be limited to basic primary education. In cities the norm is nine years (from 6-14). Education is seen as a way of escaping from poverty and gaining a better life. Students who do well are rewarded with scholarships and opportunities to study abroad. The school year is organised into two semesters and holidays grouped around important festivals e.g. the New Year.

Performance and progress checks are very important to the Chinese. Students sit examinations and tests at the end of every semester. Chinese league tables are very thorough affairs: schools are ranked by students' overall performance and by performance in different subjects. The results are displayed on a large notice board. How well a student does dictates his/her future schooling path and determines whether or not he/she wins a place at university and at which university. Although Shenzhen has a thriving university, the ultimate goal for many is Hong Kong. Hong Kong tertiary education is six times more expensive than its mainland equivalent.

The curriculum is much more prescriptive than in England (personalised choices are only accommodated in the last year of schooling). All students must study English, Mandarin, Mathematics, History and Science until they leave school. Curriculum content is centrally dictated but there appeared to be a choice of textbook in some areas e.g. Yantian (which teaches Science and ICT in English) had textbooks that were written in English by Hong Kong residents and published by international publishers.

All students in China wear the same uniform (a form of tracksuit) although they also have a second uniform for formal occasions. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their school environment: they all contribute to keeping it clean and tidy. No cleaners are employed.

There has been a heavy investment in technology. At Yantian all staff had their own work station and desktop pc and most classrooms were fitted with interactive whiteboards in addition to traditional blackboards. Textbooks were relatively new.



*The Staffroom at Yantian School.*



*A Science lesson at Yantian School.*

There are very few displays of students' work or of material related to the curriculum in Chinese schools although I was given a lovely booklet celebrating students' artwork. Experiential learning appears also to be very limited. There are few resources beyond textbooks. Handouts were noticeable by their absence.

It is quite usual for students to board at school in China because many live over an hour's drive from the school. Two thirds of the students at Yantian Foreign Languages School are boarders. Most boarders go home at the weekends. Those who remain at school are expected to spend their weekend studying. Boarding accommodation is basic: each student has a bunk bed in a room shared with seven other students. A communal washbasin is located on the balcony of the room and each bedroom shares a toilet and a shower. Each student is expected to do his/her own washing. Washing is hung on the balcony to dry. A sophisticated video surveillance system means that staff can see all the corridors and ensure that students are in their correct rooms without having to leave their monitoring station. There was little evidence of students having personal possessions at school.

### **Our Partner School**

Yantian Foreign Languages School is three years old (most of the schools in Shenzhen are of a similar age reflecting the city's rapid growth). It is housed in new purpose built buildings. Its location and its commitment to language learning have made a place at Yantian Modern Foreign Languages School very desirable from the school's inception. The school is one of the best in Shenzhen.

The school currently educates over nine hundred 11-14 year old students. When it has finished growing, there will be well over 1000 students (boys and girls) aged 11-16. All parents have to pay fees (the only people who receive free education in China are the rural poor whose children are educated free for the first two/three years). Fees are much lower than for independent schools in Britain (although the cost of living is much lower too).



*Officials from Warwickshire County Council, Yantian District Education Bureau, the British Council, and the two schools pose for a photograph outside the school before the start of the official visit.*

## **Classes**

There are seven lessons a day each lasting forty minutes. Instead of a bell there is a jolly song (in English) to mark the end of each lesson. There are breaks during the day for exercises and a two hour break for lunch (it is expected that everyone will have a nap of at least an hour after lunch). School starts early (before eight o'clock) and ends late (at 5.00pm). There is supervised prep for boarders which lasts a minimum of a hour and a half each evening.

Classes are large: 45 students per class is not uncommon. I saw some smaller classes but I am not sure whether these represented the norm or a special arrangement. Students sit in pairs in long lines facing the front. Students are sometimes asked to discuss work with a partner and then to feed answers into a class discussion. In class discussions, which are heavily directed by the teacher, it is common for the rows of paired students to compete against each other (a mark being given each time a valid point is made). Care is taken to ensure an equal result between teams. In the unusual event of one team winning students are told that learning is its own reward: there are no prizes. However, certificates are awarded for more major events.

All the lessons that I saw were fast paced and demanding. At Yantian Science and IT are taught in English. Students were asked to answer profound questions e.g. to identify the limitations of science; to consider the industrial and scientific applications of IT and to speculate about the future of IT applications. It is quite normal for the whole class to be asked to give the answer to a closed question. Sometimes teachers have a rigid expectation of what the answer should be and reject viable alternatives. It appeared from the lessons that I observed that the most able students thrived and were challenged by the teaching. There were some students who appeared to be confused and although they were invariably provided with the right answer (and sometimes an explanation as to why it was right) there were no further checks to ensure that they did understand either the answer or the explanation.

On the surface, behaviour is excellent. Students speak respectfully to teachers and to visitors and are polite and friendly. Students are not given opportunities to question teachers about their learning in the way that they are in England. There were no overt signs of disaffection or disengagement amongst students. Students give the appearance of being focused and there is complete silence when the teacher is talking. However, learning is often quite a passive experience and when students are not being asked to respond to a particular question there is plenty of time to day dream and to doodle. Calling out answers to questions is the accepted tradition although some teachers who had spent time in England used hands up on occasions. Some teachers were very good at asking targeted questions which covered all the class in the course of the lesson, in others it was possible for the less able to avoid answering any questions as individuals and simply to guess the answer to questions which were asked to the class as a whole.

Students are expected to do a lot of preparation in advance for each class (including rote learning). Very little time is given for writing down homework and there are no specific instructions to do this or to write down useful website addresses for further research. Students are expected either to memorise these or to note them without prompting.

Learning is primarily visual and auditory. There was no provision in the lessons that I observed for kinaesthetic learners. This may be partly dictated by the availability of resources. Investment in resources is very carefully targeted and provision in relation to schools in this country, sparse (with the exception of ICT).

### **Our Agreement**

Our partnership is founded on our common desire to help students and staff to understand and appreciate each others' culture and language, to be good global citizens and to enhance the quality of learning in our two outstanding schools.

Our educational aims are to promote understanding of each others' cultures by:

- creating opportunities for students to develop their communication skills and cultural understanding by becoming pen friends
- creating opportunities for students to work together on common themes and topics e.g. the benefits and drawbacks of scientific advances
- creating opportunities for students to learn each others' language and to appreciate each others' cultures through summer schools and exchanges (the possibility of a group of students and staff from Yiantian visiting England in July 2008 will be explored).
- creating opportunities for staff share pedagogy and learn from each other.

We will be working hard over the coming weeks and months to make this agreement a working reality.

### **Thanks To**

My thanks go to Warwickshire Children, Young People and Families Directorate, the British Council, HSBC, Shenzhen and Yan Tian Education Bureaus without whose support and assistance this visit would not have been possible.

Charlotte Marten  
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