

Briefly describe the history and the vision of the Nelson branch of the NZ China Friendship Society.

The New Zealand China Friendship Society (NZCFS) is a New Zealand wide charitable organisation formed over 60 years ago.

The aims of NZCFS are

To promote friendship, understanding and goodwill between the peoples of China and New Zealand by encouraging visits and exchanges of ideas, information, culture and trade between the two countries

To foster interest in and promote the study of China, its history, culture, political and social structures – past and present

To support specific aid projects in China

To promote the study of the Chinese language by New Zealanders and advanced English studies in this country by Chinese

To foster on-going development of all sister-city links between New Zealand and China

To assist both visiting students and new migrants from China requiring help to fit in to New Zealand society

The Nelson branch operates under the auspices of NZCFS but operates independently to meet the organisation aims within the Nelson and Tasman regions. The Nelson branch of NZCFS is one of the most active branches of NZCFS. Although reasonably small, our members are highly committed to improving community awareness of and tolerance for people of Chinese ethnicity and their culture mostly arising from positive personal experiences with China and Chinese people

What inspired you to initiate a student exchange with Yangjiang?

The Nelson branch of the New Zealand China Friendship Society strongly believes that creating awareness, understanding and friendship between the young people of both countries is an excellent way to further these aims. To this end they facilitated an arts and cultural exchange with Nelson's sister city, Yangjiang in Guangdong province. Six secondary school students from Nelson accompanied by two adults were hosted by Liangyang Senior High School in Yangjiang in April this year. This exchange exceeded the expectations of all parties and strong bonds were formed.

Liangyang Senior High School was identified as a suitable exchange partner through Bill Findlater of Nelson Regional Development Association through his contacts representing Nelson as part of the sister city arrangement.

What challenges did you need to overcome and how did you do this?

The major challenge was funding the exchange. An application was successfully made to the NZCFS Deng Fund who made a contribution of \$9000 towards airfares. Nelson Sister City Committee granted a further \$2000. Successful applicants were then required to make a contribution of about \$1000 each.

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The visa application process was coordinated by Jane Lister, Executive member and also exchange chaperone. Although requiring significant detail, visas were successfully obtained.

This was the first foreign exchange ever hosted by Liangyang Senior High School. Arranging a suitable programme and on campus accommodation was made much easier by having regular WeChat conversations and email exchanges between Yu He Gao, Deputy Party Secretary of LHS and Jane and Ian Lister.

Most of selected students had little understanding of China (2 had not travelled outside NZ previously) and were provided with a thorough orientation over the preceding 2 months. This included preparing acts for the performance concert to be held as part of the cultural exchange activities.

How did you choose your candidates?

The exchange was promoted to the 5 local secondary schools in Nelson/Richmond and students invited to apply. Applicants were interviewed by a panel of 4 NZCFS Nelson branch members. Six senior high school students were selected from applications with priority given to those with particular interests in the arts such as music, drama, dance or fine arts, with Mandarin language a consideration. Adaptability, curiosity and strength of character were also into account, as well prior knowledge of or interest in Chinese culture.

Briefly describe the students' experience during their time in China.

The group travelled to Yangjiang, Guangdong province, China for 10 days in the April 2018 New Zealand school holidays. They were hosted by Liangyang Senior High School. This is a week-day boarding school and the group was accommodated in dormitories at the school on week days. For the weekend the group stayed in a hotel on nearby Hailing Island to facilitate visits to the Silk Road Maritime Museum, markets, fishing village and other attractions.

A fantastic, highly active and sharing programme was followed. This included visits to 5 English classes each with a focus topic for sharing – differences between China and NZ education, interactive games, Yangjiang specialty foods, traditional festivals, ethnic cultures. Club activities enjoyed were Tai Chi, calligraphy, seal making, traditional dance, Lion Dancing and street dancing and making kites. Other activities included visits to an ancient fishing village, lacquerware museum (a Yangjiang specialty), shopping mall and dinner at a teacher's house. These gave a wide and varied insight to Yangjiang life and education.

A particular highlight of the exchange was the Cultural Performance by the Nelson and Liangyang students to an audience of 500 students, staff, and Foreign Affairs Bureau representatives. The concert included a significant component of Maori culture including a mihi, waiata and hongi that were extremely well received. The Nelson group also learned and sang a song in Mandarin.

What have they learned?

Extracts from student feedback are below.

"... it was well planned and organised so as to give us students enough independence to explore the culture, yet still enough structure to keep us engaged in activities. I enjoyed that the trip allowed plenty of opportunities to interact with our Chinese peers.

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The positive attention we were paid by the people of Yangjiang surprised me most. As a foreigner, I expected most students to be apathetic towards us, or even avoid us, because of how I have seen foreigners treated in New Zealand. Much to the contrary, we were treated like celebrities, with the utmost respect. I was very humbled by the enthusiasm we were greeted by, and hope that New Zealanders can learn from their example.

I enjoyed any activities where we were speaking, socialising, or otherwise interacting with the Yangjiang students. These interactions gave me an insight into culture and life in China, in a way that textbooks or museums never could.

We were well prepared enough for this trip, that our biggest point of contention was which t-shirts we should wear. I think that the trust and respect given to us by Jane and Ian allowed preparation to proceed quickly and painlessly. The fact that the exchange went off without a hitch speaks for the preparation and planning that went on behind the scenes.

Thanks for the unforgettable experience”

”.....it was a lot of fun and I really enjoyed myself there. I was really surprised about the school days the students there have, starting early in the morning and going to school until 10pm. My favourite parts of the trip were the time we spent on Hailing Island and wandering around Zhapo and also hanging out with the students at the school”

”.....I was incredibly impressed by the level of organisation from Jane and Ian as well as the school itself. I always felt informed of what was happening so I never felt unsure or uneasy about being in Yangjiang. The trip exceeded my expectations because of the high quality of hospitality we received as well as the experiences we had that I never would’ve had as an ordinary tourist, for example being at the school or going to the teachers house. The way the school welcomed us was surreal because I’d never been surrounded by so many people who wanted to get to know me. Overall the exchange was a once in a lifetime experience that I wish more people could experience, I feel very fortunate to have been selected.

Before arriving at the school I expected a few teachers from the school to greet us and I thought some students might stare at us because we look different but I never expected them to surround us and talk to us as much as they did. We have lots of exchange students in Nelson so we don’t think twice about them being in our schools but being over there made me realise how diverse our schools are and how uncommon it was for them to have international students.

As well as being at the school and getting to know the students, my favourite part of the trip was the weekend on Hailing Island where we got to explore some of the older, less fancy parts of China. Although there was a lot of dried fish, I loved walking around the streets and going over to the fishing bay to see where the locals spend their time because I feel like this was the real China that we got to see. Another highlight was KTV because I feel like that is something that you would only truly experience in an Asian country so I’m glad we got to go. Other highlights include seeing Yangjiang at night, taking part in the clubs at the school and seeing the old Chinese village.

I feel like we had just the right amount of meetings before the trip so we were prepared enough without it taking up too much of our time (because we’re all busy people) There was good communication and we got to know each other a bit before going on the trip which meant we could really bond while we were away.

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The exchange was an incredible opportunity for us, as students, to experience a taste of what life is like for the students is like in China. The trip exceeded every expectation I had so I don't think there was much you could improve on. I really hope there will be future exchanges so more students will be able to experience what we did because it was truly a once in a lifetime experience."

Aside from the above feedback, one student has been studying Mandarin at Level 1 and 2 NCEA. There were endless opportunities for her to practise her listening and speaking skills and she was called upon daily to translate, both in formal and informal situations. She was able to do this competently and confidently and enjoyed the full immersion experience which enabled her to communicate on a deeper level and reinforced her ability to do so.

What will they learn from hosting their Chinese exchange students?

Based on the success of the initial exchange to Yangjiang, it is now proposed that a group of 10 students and teachers from Liangyang visit Nelson in March 2019 to further enhance the mutual awareness, understanding and respect for each other's culture. The aims of this return visit are to-

- Introduce a group of young Chinese to their counterparts in New Zealand and develop an understanding and raise awareness of its culture, heritage and education.

- Establish friendship links and mutual understanding by sharing culture through personal interactions, performances and art.

- Raise awareness of Chinese culture among New Zealand students, their families, their school colleagues and host families as well as the wider community.

- Further build a bridge of friendship for developing mutual awareness and understanding between Nelson and Yangjiang people.

How does NZ society benefit from exchanges like this?

The exchange visit to Yangjiang was eye opening and indeed, life changing for both the Nelson students and the Liangyang Senior High School students who had previously only had very limited opportunities to mix with foreigners. The sharing of personal and cultural experiences has created mutually positive impressions and lasting friendships and contacts between these young adults. These have been shared by the New Zealand students with their peers, families, schools and the wider public through presentations, local media and most importantly, enthusiastically re-telling stories of the trip.

After the presentation by the exchange students on returning from China, a number of members of NZCFS have remarked on the value of seeing China through young and fresh eyes. We have no doubt that young New Zealanders relating to young Chinese adds dimensions to new cultural understanding that cannot always be appreciated by older generations.

It is believed that this return exchange will further enhance this cultural awareness by directly reaching a significantly larger number of young New Zealanders through the school and other shared activities, as well as positively influencing their families and wider communities.

It is believed that this will in turn provide the basis and enthusiasm for on going two-way exchanges that will lead to a strong sister city relationship with Yangjiang, break down cultural and language barriers, create a more welcoming and accepting environment towards Chinese migrants, visitors and business people in Nelson and facilitate increased integration of Chinese people into the Nelson community.

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NZCFS members understand that New Zealanders often have incorrect perceptions of China based on historical views. New Zealand now has significant trade, tourism relationships with China and increasing migration from China. These factors are undeniable and we see this project as valuable in providing a bridgehead for a younger generation with first hand experience and information about the realities of modern China. Although starting small, this project has massive upside to shape future relationships between New Zealanders and Chinese people.

What are future projects of the NZ China Friendship Society in Nelson?

Promoting Mandarin Language week

Participating in China week to promote awareness of Chinese culture in the Nelson region

Providing assistance and friendship to the Mandarin Language Assistants provided by Confucius Institute to teach at NMIT and Nelson schools

