From the Head Master

During the Easter break I travelled to China with a delegation of independent school leaders from NSW. There were a number of goals for the trip, including learning about Chinese education through visiting schools, engaging in dialogue with educational leaders, and expanding my horizons with reference to this part of the world, which will loom so large over the century ahead.

The imperative for coming to grips with China seems self-evident. China is Australia’s largest trading partner, more than double the size of the second largest. Geographically, we are closer to China than to Europe, and the cultural connections to China are strengthening. Chinese students comprise nearly 50% of the international student cohort in Australia. In the 2016 census, just over 10% of Sydney’s population indicated that they had Chinese ancestry. At
Trinity, nearly 15% of students speak Mandarin in the home or to extended family. China is a significant element in the world for which we are preparing our children.

The trip was focussed on the two cities of Shanghai and Hangzhou. While there were cultural and tourist-oriented activities during the week-long trip, most of our activities had to do with schools. I visited six schools and participated in two dialogue meetings; one was focussed on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) education, and the other covered more general topics including staff development, international connections, and student wellbeing.

I am still processing all that I learned, as I ruminate on my observations.

Shanghai was the top-performing educational jurisdiction in the world, according to the OECD’s PISA tests in 2009 and 2012. It is not simple to identify the causal factors in a high-performing system. However, I noted that Year 9, which is the year in which the PISA tests take place, is a very high-stakes year for Chinese school students; their results in Year 9 will determine the high school into which they are admitted. Consequently, Year 9 is a time of significant academic and educational pressure for systemic reasons. This is not the case in Australia, where Year 9 is often characterised as a time of disengagement in learning.

Chinese high school teachers teach about half as many lessons per week as Australian teachers. Much of the remainder of teacher time is spent on professional development and improvement. However, the extra time is made possible by teaching very large classes (by Australian standards); there are often close to 45 students in a class. A consequence of the large size of the classes is that most teaching appeared to be very didactic in style; the teachers stood at the front and delivered content, which was captured and memorised by the students.

The students that we saw were very focused, with a very high level of time on task. This was explained to us by our hosts as being a consequence of the high value placed on education by the families, along with an awareness of the intensely competitive nature of schooling, and our presence as observers. It appears that the Hawthorne effect works across all cultures! Nonetheless, there are reasons to think that the cultural context of the Chinese schools places a very high value on compliance and diligence by students, which then shapes the ways in which teaching and learning take place.

Aspects of Chinese and Australian schools appeared to be mutually unintelligible to the other. Single-sex education, Christian education, mandatory inter-school sport, and the breadth of co-curricular activities, were all highly intriguing to my new colleagues. Our schools have formed as part of the complex ecology of our culture; they shape our society and they are shaped by our society.

I was also struck by the priority that Chinese schools place on learning English. The normal pattern appeared to be an hour of English instruction every day, and many of the young people we met aspired to live and study for a time in an English-speaking context. Dependent as I was on someone translating for me, I was reminded again of the potential disadvantages that come from being monolingual.
As previously mentioned, I am still processing the experience. What opportunities might exist to broaden and deepen the educational experiences available to our students? How best can we prepare them for the future in which it seems China will be pre-eminent among the nations? Does our school’s vision for the education of the whole person – in mind, body and spirit – have anything to offer in a profoundly different cultural context?

Finally, welcome back! It has been lovely to see the School return to life with the noise, activity and laughter of the boys. We look forward to the term ahead.

Tim Bowden
Head Master