

# China's doors wide open for Mass. high schoolers

## Students hope to gain an edge in careers

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | August 26, 2007

Intent on giving their graduates an edge in the workforce, public high schools across the state are sending students to China, where they live with host families in high-rise apartments and study alongside Chinese peers in crowded classrooms, experiencing the country in a way tourists rarely do.

For six weeks to five months, the students learn to bargain with street vendors, navigate their way to school through jumbles of bicycles and cars, and sample Chinese delicacies such as congealed pig's blood, deep-fried scorpions, and roasted larvae.

Most student travel to China in the past decade has been through private exchange programs. Now, about 20 Massachusetts high schools, primarily in affluent suburbs, have or intend to design their own programs for groups of students and teachers. By staying with Chinese families and studying in Chinese schools, the students get a deeper understanding of a country poised to be the world's next superpower, their teachers say. And the teens are forced to test their comfort levels as they adjust to living in a foreign culture.

"These kids are very sheltered," said Yafei Hu, a Chinese teacher at Sharon High, which will send eight students to China for the first time in March. "If they don't have this genuine experience of another culture, then they will grow up with one perspective of looking at the world."

High schools starting China programs are modeling their initiatives after Newton's, whose high schools in 1986 became the first in the United States to send students to stay with host families in China. Newton teachers are helping schools across the country design similar programs. China also has been aggressively reaching out to American schools and cities in recent years, hoping to spur exchanges.

Brookline and Dover/Sherborn started their China exchanges in the ancient cities of Xian and Hangzhou more than five years ago. Needham plans to start an exchange in Shanghai in spring 2009, and Whitman Hanson, which began teaching Mandarin this fall, hopes to send students to China for a semester in two years.

Students must pay for their plane tickets, about \$1,500 round trip, but they stay for free with Chinese families who cook meals for them and take them on weekend excursions. They also attend the Chinese schools tuition-free, auditing Chinese classes in various

subjects in the morning.

In the afternoons, American students typically attend their own classes for credit in Chinese history, literature, and culture, mostly taught in English by teachers from their own schools. They also take a Mandarin class with a Chinese teacher. Many of the students have already studied Mandarin for years in their home schools. In exchange the following year, the Chinese students study in America and live with host families.

Teachers say they hope the early exposure to China will spark students to continue their studies of the country and language in college and pursue related careers.

Ben Liebman was among the first group of students Newton sent to Beijing in 1986. It was a daunting trip at a time when China was less familiar to American students, said Liebman, now a professor and director of the Center for Chinese Legal Studies at Columbia Law School. Liebman recalled how foreigners were so rare in China that strangers would frequently stop him and invite him home for dinner.

When Liebman's group visited, the long-insular China was just beginning to open up to the world after the death of Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong in 1976. Deng Xiao Ping, China's next leader, allowed foreign investors and tourists into the country and sent his granddaughter on a Newton exchange in the late 1980s, said Charlotte Mason, a former Newton teacher who helps other schools copy the district's efforts.

Liebman was so enthralled by his experience in high school that China immediately became an integral part of his life when he returned from Beijing. He spent a summer as a delivery boy for a Chinese restaurant in Brookline to keep up his newfound language skills. He majored in Chinese at Yale University, studied Chinese law at Harvard Law School, and practiced corporate law in China. Liebman still visits his Chinese host family and other Chinese classmates when he travels to Beijing on business.

"It's the most important thing I've ever done in my life," said Liebman, 38. "None of this would have happened without this exchange."

Claire Jensen, a Brookline High senior who lived in Xian for four months in 2006, said she thought she had made a huge mistake when she first arrived in China. She was nervous because she had only taken one semester of Mandarin and could not communicate with her Chinese family. But she soon felt at home, helping the family's father shop for a car online, and trying whatever her new family served her including pig intestines and cow tongue.

Eager to use her Mandarin and keep her ties with China, Jensen spent the summer along with her mother in Beijing, where they volunteered at an orphanage. She and two classmates have started a club at Brookline High that will pair young Chinese adoptees in the community with older ones. And she is applying only to colleges with Asian studies and Chinese programs.

The exchanges have forged hundreds of friendships between American and Chinese students, something unthinkable when their teachers and administrators were young.

"When I grew up, China was the enemy. Red China," Robert Weintraub, principal of Brookline High. "Here was an opportunity for us to build a bridge. This is our way of creating a more harmonious, more understanding world."

Most high schools prepare their students for culture shock the summer before they leave for China. Students take hours of Mandarin a day to improve their listening and speaking skills, and their teachers, who are from China or who have visited the country during previous exchanges, share stories about their travels and daily life in China. At Sharon High, students have peppered their teachers with questions for the last month. In the beginning, some students were put off by the teacher's warning that beggars might follow them and strangers might touch their hair or snap their pictures.

And the teenagers say they are nervous about living among new people and eating new food. Most have never traveled so far or been away from their families for six weeks. But all summer they have practiced introducing themselves in Mandarin. They shopped at a Chinese supermarket in Quincy, picking up the cabbage, tofu, eggplant, and scallions on their teacher's grocery list, and learned to cook dumplings, wontons, and rice.

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