

HOSTING A CHINESE STUDENT



Hosting a Chinese student can be a rewarding experience – an opportunity to extend your family into a second culture. Chinese students provide us the opportunity to look at familiar patterns through the eyes of those who grew up in a different country, speak a different language and have different habits and expectations. Some of these differences may be hardly noticeable, while others may be surprising.

Recognizing cultural differences, respecting them and being able to accommodate them for the duration of the stay will broaden everyone's intercultural perspectives. The following information is to help start conversations in your home while raising sensitivity and expanding awareness about how your student will participate in your family's daily life. It will also help anticipate awkward moments and perhaps prevent difficult situations.

CHINESE STUDENTS HAVE EXPECTATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

Chinese students have expectations of life in the United States formed during their English-language learning experience in the Chinese classroom or from media. Most Chinese students have seen popular American movies and television series, and most likely their expectations have been shaped by these Hollywood images. As you well know, few families will match the image portrayed in school texts or movies. To get an idea of how this works, describe your image of China and see how your guest reacts. Visitors will be eager to experience the United States. They will expect to encounter the stereotypes they may have formed, but they should also be open to dismantling them. Many have very specific images of what the US is and how it operates. They know that school buses are yellow, they've seen freeways, Los Angeles traffic jams and New York City. Expectations may be idealistic, even unrealistic, and their requirements of their host families may be based on these expectations. Chinese students may have unrealistic ideas about the distances in the United States. When asked about what they would like to see or do, they may suggest something so far away that you are not at all prepared to accommodate that wish or at least surprised by such an excessive request. Help them transition to your daily American life.

MEETING YOUR STUDENT AT THE AIRPORT

Meeting the Chinese students at the airport is a moment filled with anticipation and feelings ranging from "Why are we doing this?" to "This is going to be so much fun. I can't wait!" Conversation tends to focus on the trip, the airline connections and the guests' travel fatigue. This is also an apprehensive moment for the students, who suddenly find themselves all alone with total strangers with whom they will live for the next 10 months. You can make a sign or a welcome banner to help your student identify you.

ARRIVING AT HOME

When the Chinese students arrive, they have spent many hours on the plane and have a time change to overcome. They will be excited about this trip! The sights, sounds and new language provide a barrage of impressions in the beginning. Much of the information you give during the first hours will be lost in the initial confusion. When you first arrive at home, introduce your student to family members and

pets. Determine immediately how you would like your student to address you. Do you want it to be by first name? Mom and Dad? Mr. and Mrs.? Show your guest where he/she will sleep and where to put his/her things, then tour the house, pointing out where important things are located, especially which bathroom to use and how to operate the tub or shower. Although it is important for your guest to know how appliances operate, this might be reserved for another time, when some of the excitement has settled and he/she will be more receptive to details such as how the microwave operates and which TV channels are more interesting than others. Remember to remind your host student of house rules/names again as some information may not be absorbed the first time.

MEALS

Even if it is not common for your family to eat three meals a day, provide this opportunity to your student. Treat your student as you would your own children. Are you planning to have family dinners at certain times on certain days? If you want your student to be there, make it clear when you expect him/her. Certain foods considered to be typically American and liked by most students may take some time to "grow" on your student. What are your thoughts about snacking? What is off limits? What is available? Is the refrigerator available for between-meal snacks? Are there limitations? Please make this clear to your student. Also, give your family the opportunity to try food from your host student's culture. Ask if he/she would like to cook, or find a local restaurant.

DAILY ROUTINES

Don't change your family's patterns to present the "typical" American family picture. If you do not normally eat breakfast together, don't start now. If there are times when everyone just goes to the refrigerator and helps him/herself, continue to do that and invite your student to participate. If you do laundry on certain days, tell your student when and where to put clothes to be washed. If you go to church on Sundays, invite your student to come along. If you do not normally go, don't go for your student's sake, but do make it possible for him/her to go to church if desired. Discuss the daily routines. What time is "rise and shine"? Is the bathroom to be shared? Do they know where to get on and off the school bus, and how to walk home from there? Are you expecting your student to participate in certain chores? Make his/her bed? Be ready to leave at a certain time? Is TV accessible at all times? Who sits where in front of the TV? What time do you expect everyone to be quiet for the night? It is a common Chinese habit to keep doors closed. When your student retreats into his/her room and closes the door, it does not mean that he/she is closing him/herself off from you, it just means that this is what is typically done at home in China. Also be sensitive to the student's need for privacy and quiet time. When in doubt about how your student is feeling, ask!

TELEPHONE AND EMAIL USE

What are your expectations regarding telephone use? It would be nice to let your students make a short call home to let their families know that they have arrived safely. Telephone calls home can often lead to homesickness. Discourage your student from excessively calling their family and friends in China. After that, what are your rules about long-distance calls? Time on the phone? Calls after certain hours? Telephone calls are also not as important anymore now that most families have email and Skype. Students should be given a chance to email their friends and families. Discourage hour-long sessions on the computer, as that prevents the students from being with their host families and fellow students.

LAUNDRY

What are your household procedures regarding laundry? Does everyone do his/her own? Should dirty clothing be in a certain place on a certain day? Who does the ironing? How will you know whether the clothes brought by your student are appropriate for the washing machine? Chinese typically wear the same article of clothing more often between washings than their American counterparts.

NECESSARY INFORMATION FOR YOUR STUDENT

Provide your guest with the home, work and cell numbers of family members or neighbors. Make certain that these numbers are written down and carried along with your address and directions from school to your house. It will be difficult for the student to orient themselves in the beginning, since the distinguishing features with which we identify our neighborhoods will be unfamiliar and difficult to remember for them. Make sure your student has access into the house at all times. If you have a security alarm, make sure the student understands how it works. Also, have your home address written down for the student.

ACTIVITIES WITH CHINESE STUDENTS

Everything will be interesting to the Chinese student, even if they do not show the appropriate enthusiasm. For many students, showing excitement about an experience is difficult. Some students may bubble with excitement, while others seem to shrug things off which you expect to be appreciated. Regard seeming indifference as a cultural variation. It is often interesting to observe how Chinese students react to a situation without apparent interest and then listen to them talk about it with great excitement to the other Chinese students at school the following day. It may well be that some of the experiences your student has while with you may not be understood until he/she returns home. Everyday life is also interesting - grocery shopping, running errands, visiting neighbors, doing family projects, attending little league ball games, spending a day at work with someone from your family, taking a trip to the hardware store, etc., will be valuable experiences for your student and will afford a detailed look into American life. Regard your student as a typical student. Your invitation to accompany you may not be met with excitement. He/she may prefer to relax in front of the TV. While some relaxing may be appropriate, those opportunities ought to be balanced with worthwhile activities.

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT?

Ask your student about his/her family, habits, food, work, etc. This discussion will give you significant information and will let you know where the cultural differences lie and what may be of interest to your student. Expect your Chinese student to be more politically informed than many Americans. A Chinese student typically has a global view and may not agree with the American way of doing things in the world. Do not try to convert him/her. Try to explain the reasons for your thinking and discover the reasons for your student's thinking.

YOU CAN DO IT!

Have fun with the visit! This is an opportunity for you and your family to learn firsthand about another culture. In fact, you may find that you have begun a long-lasting international friendship. Hope that your son/daughter will have the opportunity to return the visit and gain as much from the visit as your

student gained from being with you. There will probably be some awkward moments, but those will pass. When in doubt, ask and keep the dialogue going. You'll be surprised how quickly the time passes.