

101 Ways to Integrate Yourself into Your Community (in China)

Many volunteers have said that even after two years in China, having studied and grasped the language, there is still a barrier between them and the local host country nationals at their site. Some ways to decrease, if not completely demolish this barrier follow. Every site is different, and the idea of a tight "community" in a multi-million-person metropolis may be a stretch, but at almost every site, you'll certainly know your community better by...

- ❖ **Using your tutoring fund (creatively and diversely):** Language lessons can also be lessons in calligraphy, cooking, *tai ji*, kung fu, a Chinese or other instrument (provided that all instruction is in Chinese). All you have to do is find a good tutor, which is unfortunately difficult.
- ❖ **Hosting movie nights in your school or apartment:** Some schools provide equipment and screening rooms, others don't! Be aware that advertising (i.e. putting up posters) is a very delicate issue. Most campuses have very strict rules and few places to post flyers.
- ❖ **Inviting students to your apartment to watch TV:** Students love doing *anything* in our apartments, and they can translate the Korean soap operas for you. They probably don't have TV's themselves, so every big sporting event on TV (CCTV5) can be a big, U.S.-style party.
- ❖ **Taking walks/jogs in the countryside, Climbing local mountains with students:** Get out with China's *real* population!
- ❖ **Sports:** Basketball, Ping Pong, Badminton, Soccer, and Volleyball are popular and available on most every site. Some have tennis. Past volunteers have had success introducing American football (after persistent, patient, and difficult efforts) to students. Many schools have departmental or other tournaments, but clubs and pick-up games are the norm! Buying and putting up basketball nets is a nice gesture.
- ❖ **Singing...Anytime, Anywhere:** Singing = Instant superstardom. Even if you are a terrible singer, Chinese audiences will applaud you sincerely. Sing in class, sing at parties, sing at school performances and functions. But remember, once you've sung, the singing will not stop. Before going to site, making a list of songs you can/are willing to sing at the drop of a hat is highly recommended.
- ❖ **Starting an English karaoke club (in your apartment or in professional business establishments, if you can afford them):** Most VCD and DVD players have microphone jacks, so you too can keep your neighbors up for hours on end!
- ❖ **If you can play an instrument and sing, start a band, play at a local bar or in the town square:** Talent is optional. Music stores will let you use their practice rooms (pianos, etc.) for a very small hourly fee. They usually appreciate Westerners giving demonstrations with the display instruments, provided you don't break anything. There's nothing in the handbook against playing *erhu* in the streets.
- ❖ **Poetry clubs:** In English and/or Chinese. This has been done successfully with other English teaching staff but could work for more advanced and interested students, too. Note that it can be both a reading and *writing* club if you're so inclined/inspired.
- ❖ **Scrabble (or other Western board games you've brought) clubs and tournaments:** Single tournaments with "fabulous" prizes (such as U.S. pennies) tend to be more successful and require less effort than clubs for such games. The entire concept of a board game may be new.
- ❖ **Learning to play Chinese chess, Majiang, and the official card games of long train rides/banquet prequels:** Guaranteed to make you friends with the entire country! Playing these games often leads to deeper conversation. Just remember that gambling is bad, bad, bad.
- ❖ **Treating students to meals/inviting students to your apt. to cook for you or teach you how to cook:** Average prep time and cost for an extravagant, home-cooked meal for 10 (cooked by 3-5 students) in China: 2-3 hours, 20-50 yuan. Just make sure you've got enough bowls and chopsticks! These make great "RTS's" (required touching stories) for your project reports.
- ❖ **Visiting students' homes/hometowns on weekends:** This has special status for leave days / weekend leave...be sure to notify the leave log! These really put things into perspective and can help you gear your lessons to your students' interests and experiences.
- ❖ **Hiring students as personal assistants:** Five *yuan* an hour will get all your dirty work done every week, with a smile! Also a great way to give students work experience and an introduction to the tasks of teaching (if they're studying to be teachers). Make sure it's not illegal, though.
- ❖ **Team-teaching with counterparts (or advanced students who will be teachers):** The benefits are mutual!
- ❖ **Judging speech competitions (or better yet, introducing other English competitions which are more interesting for foreigners to watch, more beneficial to improving communicative skills):** Do I hear the Titanic song? Again?
- ❖ **Volunteering at a daycare center:** Remember, that's *volunteering*, not padding a secret slush fund. Be sure to have lots of songs and nursery rhymes prepared, and don't be alarmed if they're afraid of you at first. Some *laowai* peek-a-boo is a good place to start.
- ❖ **Giving all-campus lectures, extra classes for English clubs (for interested students not in your regular classes):** This may actually be required of you, especially for HIV/AIDS. Any topic can create a successful general-interest discussion, and it's your chance to give new, content-based sessions on things you care about (as opposed to oral English classes whose goals are to increase fluency of what they already know).
- ❖ **Toga (or other theme) parties in your apartment:** No special occasion is necessary—good themes make great parties, with or without alcohol. May need to invite other PCV's to reinforce the theme, but the HCN's get into them too, eventually.
- ❖ **Developing and signing your photos and giving them to students:** Again, remember the PC won't allow us to sell our autographs, so don't try any profiteering! After you've signed 500 photos, you'll know exactly how it feels to be famous. Students will never ever forget you.
- ❖ **Picnics in parks:** Even the smallest villages have parks, and sandwiches are an important, culinary cultural window. Also bring a song to sing.
- ❖ **Zoo trips:** Tourist guidebooks say all Chinese zoos are depressing, but students love 'em. The cultural concept of not throwing things at the animals can be introduced. As a general rule, the smaller the city, the smaller the zoo, the smaller the animals will be (or at least their cages).
- ❖ **Visiting all the townships in your municipality:** Locals may not understand why you'd go somewhere that doesn't have a major tourist draw, but we're not exactly tourists, are we? Students can relate to you better if you at least know where their hometowns are.
- ❖ **Shopping and browsing at weekend vegetable, and flea markets:** These events are as Chinese as they get.
- ❖ **Shopping for antiques:** Just be sure to establish yourself as a local, or they'll charge you several times the usual price. But watch out when they start to call you *peng you*. That's how they getcha.
- ❖ **Bike tours (with helmets):** Students and the more accommodating *waiban* reps will guide you. This is a great way to see the countryside.
- ❖ **Visiting local tourist sites:** Did you know that China has a long, proud history?
- ❖ **Giving students 1 on 1 oral exams, homework essays on introductions and stories from their lives (which are almost always more interesting and also very difficult to plagiarize!):** The better you know your students, the better you can teach them.
- ❖ **Getting regular haircuts, massages, toenail paintings, etc.:** Note that for a couple more *kuai*, haircuts and head massages are often combined. Could gossiping in these places be universal? Only one way to find out...just stay out of the back rooms, gentlemen!
- ❖ **Sampling Traditional Chinese Medicine:** Just make sure you have the approval of the PCMO!
- ❖ **Selecting "mystery snacks" at the supermarket:** Requires bravery but will certainly lead to a better understanding of exotic Chinese tastes. You could try a new snack every week for two years and never run out. We recommend: dragon beards, big beans, haw roll-ups, tofu *gan*
- ❖ **Asking the many supermarket staff women to give you recommendations:** Liven up their boring jobs, and they'll greet you with a smile every time you go grocery shopping. A conversation about which shampoo to buy should last about half a day.

- ❖ **Getting *guanxi* at local travel agencies:** Most of them sit around the office all day. They'd love to give you travel tips (and pitches). Honest ones may even give you the scoop on the best way to get train tickets and the real story on why they're so hard to buy for yourself.
- ❖ **Visiting and volunteering at campus and local radio and TV stations:** They all have English programs and would probably love a foreign guest. Almost all schools broadcast something over campus loudspeakers, and wouldn't you like to have a say in what it is?
- ❖ **Tutoring government officials and their children:** This may be the most powerful *guanxi* of all.
- ❖ **Joining a gym (or hotel recreation center in smaller cities):** Just think of how fit you could get in two years. Some PCV's even have personal trainers. A year's membership should cost \$30-\$100. Make sure it's not too far away in the winter, when you'll need/use it most.
- ❖ **Having traditional Chinese clothes made:** always a great cultural experience, and surprisingly not too expensive.
- ❖ **Learning the drinking games:** These can go on for hours on end, and they really appreciate if you can play along. There are dozens of them.
- ❖ **Giving your students your address and phone number:** They will call, and they will knock. Give them the hours when not to do so.
- ❖ **Doing a local summer project:** Freedom of choice should be more incentive to make it through to your second year at site.
- ❖ **Learning (having someone teach you how) to open sunflower seeds and nuts with your teeth:** This is a useful and respected skill to acquire, and it may allow you to interact with someone you wouldn't otherwise.
- ❖ **Showing up to class early, leaving late to chat with students:** If students don't ask you questions, ask them!
- ❖ **Starting a photo club:** more and more students have digital cameras; with your photos and theirs, you can make great online photo albums.
- ❖ **Making bulletin boards in/around your office and the English department office:** Blank walls are dull and institutionally depressing. Spice them up a bit, and all will benefit. These may also increase awareness that you and the U.S. Peace Corps exist (and are special).
- ❖ **Non-English campus-wide competitions for fabulous foreign prizes:** Paper airplane flying, milk drinking, *jiao zi* eating, spitting, etc. all will make a grand spectacle and liven up any campus. Just make sure you've got the school's approval.
- ❖ **Starting an art club:** works can be displayed in your office, home, or classroom
- ❖ ***Shao kao* and street food night walks:** This is the nightlife in most towns and cities.
- ❖ **Dance clubs and bars:** in moderation, of course! Smaller ones will often play your music, and everyone will always imitate your foreign dance expertise. Lessons on dance (obviously in pretty open classrooms or outdoors) always go well. Hokey Pokeying has a long and storied PC tradition.
- ❖ **Going to church:** even smaller cities often have both Catholic and Protestant congregations who would be happy to worship (with) you. Visiting local mosques guarantees a cultural experience to remember. Temples large and small are everywhere! Devoutness is optional.
- ❖ **Going to Tea houses, learning about tea:** A great way to socialize with local senior citizens and get their life stories!
- ❖ **NBA/CBA:** NBA superstars have replaced ping pong teams as the foremost cultural diplomats between China and the USA. They may be the only Americans your students have heard of. How much do we know about the Chinese Basketball Association?
- ❖ **Participating in traditional holidays and festivals:** Note that "participating" often means singing, eating fruit, sunflower seeds and traditional holiday specialties. It may be hard to plan for them, though, since they're on different days every year.
- ❖ **Doing morning exercises and dances:** Gotta get up pretty early, but it's said to be an invigorating start and a sure-fire way to live a long life. There are different groups and exercises for every age and skill level, usually in the city center squares. This is one of the best ways to meet people.
- ❖ **Visiting art and provincial museums:** After a trip to a museum, you may know more about the local history than most of the locals do.
- ❖ **Opera and theater:** Even small cities will likely have a theater for traveling shows and performances. Sure to be more interesting the more you can understand. Again, a good way to meet the elderly generations and become addicted to tea.
- ❖ **Chatting with taxi drivers:** It's only your life in their hands; why not distract them from A to B? They need to practice *putonghua* too!
- ❖ **Asking your neighbors what they had for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, if they can cook:** This is both polite and friendly and will likely lead to your gradually knowing them better and better...and to be invited to their apartments for a meal.
- ❖ **Hosting office hours:** If they're productive and enjoyable, don't limit yourself to 2 a week. Doesn't have to be in your dingy office either (bakeries and ice cream shops don't often mind foreigners "loitering" at the tables). Sometimes you may have to require students to come.
- ❖ **Participating in (or starting) an "English Corner" at your school or in your community:** For truly infinite possibilities and variations on whether or not you like China, its food and people, and where you are from. Think of at least 10 answers for each.
- ❖ **Volunteering at an orphanage:** Can be hard to arrange but has been done, with rewarding and uplifting results.
- ❖ **Learning about Chinese film and music:** Chinese A/V stores are a great (and loud) window into contemporary culture. If you go together, your students can share what they're interested in, and you can introduce them to Western titles. There is a Chinese version of every style you enjoy, and finding it can be a difficult but fulfilling quest. Unfortunately, the banned films tend to be the most interesting to us.
- ❖ **Learning a minority language or a regional dialect:** Is Chinese *putonghua* just too easy for you? Then have one of your minority students teach you their language in Chinese. Or have your local students clue you into the *fang yan*.
- ❖ **Flying a kite in the city square:** As if you needed another reason to be noticed. Just *being* in your city square at night to *zhuan yi zhuan* (especially on weekends) gives a very integrated feeling. The longer your kite is, the more integrated you are.
- ❖ **Taking a picture of yourself at your favorite local restaurants and giving the restaurant a framed copy with your autograph and official endorsement:** Most little restaurants here don't have a wall of fame or much of anything besides old paintings (covered in grime) or little posters with fruits on them. A framed photo of yourself (with the message "Foreigner-Approved!" 外国人也满意!) would add a touch of class! Just giving your favorite restaurant your photo to thank them for two years of meals also says a lot for friendship and gratitude.
- ❖ **Starting a recycling program:** This is more *saving* your community (and the earth) than integrating, and it'll need a lot of work to make it sustainable. Greenish types are strongly encouraged to raise local awareness of environmental issues...but unfortunately getting groups involved is very difficult, and everyone will think you're crazy. A great PR issue to start with is the use of reusable chopsticks instead of throwaways. And if you're really ambitious, try guilt-tripping people about litter. Oh, and go hug a local tree while you're at it. No one else will hug it for you.
- ❖ **Subscribing to your local newspaper (or if you must, the China Daily):** Knowing the local and national events helps integration infinitely because you'll have something to talk about, no matter whom you meet. It's also great reading practice/tutoring material.
- ❖ **Starting an English newspaper for your school:** Sustainability is again key here (i.e. make students do the work!), but it has been done successfully. It'll also help you know what's happening on campus if you can't read the notices posted all over the bulletin boards.
- ❖ **Learning all the names of people in your department and those in the school who have relations with/power over you:** Find out who the "yes men" and naysayers are, who's on your side, who cares about the students, and who's corrupt/drinks *baijiu* all day. Knowing whom to ask for permission and assistance is a major factor in the success of everything from formal secondary projects to having your classroom copying covered. Put up a chart in your office if you have a hard time keeping Chinese names straight, and future volunteers would also benefit!

PAST VOLUNTEERS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DONE ALMOST ALL OF THESE THINGS AT SITE. IF YOU'D LIKE MORE DETAILED TIPS AND ANECDOTES, DON'T HESITATE TO ASK THEM. SOME WILL BE DISCUSSED FURTHER AT SESSIONS FOR "SECONDARY PROJECTS".