

Ni Hao, 'Mum and Dad'?

Bill Minnis



Aaron Dalziel, Chemistry and Maths teacher, with Catherine Ding, left and Julia Ren

Quiet Stawell (pop. 5,500) in western Victoria and gateway to the Grampians National Park, might seem an unlikely place for overseas secondary students to complete their Year 11 and 12 studies. But Peter Hilbig, principal of Stawell Secondary College says that the town's size and three-hour drive from Melbourne are attractive to Chinese parents wanting to send their offspring to Australia, but unsure about their welfare in a big city.

According to Hilbig, the school's successful international student program started "almost by accident" when a plan to establish an elite sports college in Stawell for Chinese athletes fell through. Cheng Youzhi a Chinese teacher from Jiangsu Province had been hired and had already arrived in Stawell when the project was cancelled. So Stawell Secondary had a Chinese teacher but no Chinese students to teach.

Ms Cheng suggested that the school could

fill the gap by enrolling Chinese students... and each year since, up to 30 boys and girls have been enrolled. Most come from Wuxi, Suzhou or Yancheng cities in Jiangsu where Stawell Secondary has sister schools.

The new students arrive in Stawell in July each year for an intensive six-month English program that equips them to start Year 11 in the following year. As well, they take electives in a range of subjects that encourage them to interact with the Australian students.

Home stay accommodation with English-speaking families is essential to the program's success, Hilbig says. Stawell is very much an Anglo-Celtic community with few non-English speaking residents so the Chinese students are immersed in English for all of their waking hours. The school tries to avoid placing two Chinese students with the same family, so there's no temptation to drop into Chinese.

Of the \$11,000 fees per year charged by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for foreign student tuition at state schools, Stawell Secondary receives close to \$8000 and the \$200,000 to \$240,000 that the student fees add up to is a useful addition to the school's annual budget.

Home stay cost works out at around \$200 per week, or \$10,000 for 50 weeks accommodation during the year. This is a welcome extra in the family's budget too, though Hilbig emphasises that the host families provide a very high standard of care and there's probably not a great deal left over.

"Most of the money would go into the supermarket till," he says.

As a boost for the town's economy, Hilbig calculates that the school fees, accommodation and students' incidental living expenses and pocket money are worth \$500,000-\$600,000 each year. He emphasises that Stawell's residents



From left: Phoebe Xu, Kerrie Peters, international student coordinator, Peter Hilbig, school principal, Ling Zhao Chinese language teacher and Sonny Tang; Stawell high street

also benefit from the opportunity to interact with the Chinese students. Many long-lasting relationships have developed over the years, with university students often returning from Melbourne to see 'Mum and Dad'.

The Department of Education provides "lots of guidance" and the school is required to follow the department's International Student Program guidelines closely.

Approval of host families is also tightly controlled. Each home is visited and inspected twice each year and all adult family members are required to obtain a *Working with Children* police check. As part of the process, the students are also interviewed and any concerns that may emerge are sorted out.

Hilbig says that the ideal home stay is one where the student spends the two and a half years with the same family, but this isn't always possible and 12 months with the same family is quite usual. Some families host a student on an ongoing basis, while others prefer to take a break between student stays and come back into the program later. At any one time, between 20 and 30 Stawell families will be hosting a student.

The Chinese students perform very well academically and are most are highly motivated. "They come to Stawell with the intention of completing their VCE and gaining a place in one of the most competitive university courses... Maths, Accounting and the Physical Sciences (physics and chemistry) are popular choices. Typically, their VCE score is in the 90s," Hilbig says. "Cathy Zhu, one of our Chinese students, was dux of the school last year."

And, in a rub-off for local students, the Chinese students' interest in accounting has enabled the school to offer accounting as a subject, which would not otherwise be possible when perhaps only four or five local students would be interested.



Ian and Joan Brilliant with students Yourx Zhu, left, and Shane Liu; below: Stawell and the Grampians

