Opening Up China

A good grounding in general knowledge is now an important aspect of the national curriculum, and this is where cross-curricular projects really come into their own. Here, we provide an excavation of the best online materials and resources to get you started on a cross-curricular project about China.

Nowhere in the world is changing faster than China – it is a great economic powerhouse, a major political power and has a long history of cultural development. China’s impact on the rest of the world is unavoidable. Whether you bring China into the classroom or take the classroom to China, it is a compelling catalyst for a robust cross-curricular project, and at your fingertips on the web is a wealth of resources and information to get you started.

The way in which students learn has changed; evolved for the new millennia. It is no longer considered best practice to hand students information on a plate. Instead, ‘independent learning’ is favoured, whereby pupils actively discover knowledge for themselves. The use of websites with a cross-curricular project extends independent learning by encouraging students’ critical analysis skills - so that rather than becoming swamped under the abundance of online data, pupils learn to filter relevant information from their research.

How to Plan a Cross-Curricular Project – China

Des Bowden and Pam Copeland, creators of the ‘Revealing China’ Cross-Curricular Pack, believe that the starting point of any cross-curricular project is to choose a topic, theme or set of subjects that will excite and emotionally engage pupils. In their opinion, for learning to be optimally successful, the teacher should provoke and stimulate children into wanting to learn. China, a country steeped in history, culture and a great deal of influence on the future of the world, offers a wealth of topics and starting points to motivate and inspire a captivating learning experience for every pupil.

Bowden and Copeland believe that to create the ‘wow’ factor in the classroom when initiating a cross-curricular project, five key points will need to be considered. Their importance and order should be tailored, depending on the teacher.
1. Define learning objectives and outcomes for whole scheme and individual lessons
The teacher needs to consider why the children should study China and define what the children will gain from learning about it. He/she then needs to be able to articulate reasons for learning about China, and can use resources as a stimulus. Information in these resources will need to be customised to fit the demands a personalised China project.

2. Involve the children in the planning and their learning
The ‘Irresistible Curriculum’ (Sage 2010) suggests starting topics or ‘learning journeys’ with a quality text. On a template, the teacher documents all cross-curricular skills, outlining learning objectives, skills, activities and outcomes. The children should also have a draft book suggesting the ways in which they would like to further their journey, which the teacher will incorporate into future learning episodes.

The teacher can introduce topics with children interrogating a composite sketch so that they begin to gain an understanding of and record what they want to learn - children will not really be able to contribute to the planning until they have started to have some idea of what the topic encompasses.

3. Develop your subject knowledge
Lack of subject knowledge of China need not be a hindrance as there is so much information available on the Internet. Websites really do come in handy here, and the websites listed later on in this article contain an abundance of starting points on China and Chinese culture, whilst also pointing you in the right direction for further reading and relevant books.

4. Consider timetabling
The timetable must not be the main driver for the learning, however the teacher does need to decide on the organisation of the project. The teacher will need to decide whether it will be for a whole term, half a term, or a focus week, and whether it will involve days with time away from school (to visit a Chinese Takeaway or cultural centre or museum with Chinese exhibits, for example).

5. Devise a set of key questions
Teachers need to have at the forefront of their planning a series of questions which the topic will explore. Basic questions include:

- Why do we need to know about China?
- How are we linked to China?
- What do we know or think we know about China?
- Where have our ideas come from?
- Why is China developing so rapidly?
- What would we like to know about China?

These questions could then form the basis of a formative assessment to test whether learning has progressed.

Websites to get you started
The Internet is undeniably the largest information gateway in the world, so no matter what resources or materials a teacher searches for; the Internet will almost always offer an ample supply. One should also remember that the new generation of school pupils are ‘digital natives’ – and exploring a website comes as naturally to them as an “Are we nearly there yet?” does during a long car journey. Getting students to use the Internet as a research tool encourages them to be responsible for their own learning. Rather than being spoon-fed and handed the information, they seek it out for themselves. Here, we explore websites aimed at both teachers and pupils.
China Resources Pack - www.thinkingonlinecatalogue.co.uk

Pull out a real box of tricks with this resource, and transport pupils to a contrasting culture. Exciting artefacts that students can touch, examine and explore makes learning about a distant place more real. The use of artefacts assists in the development of the skills of enquiry and investigation, enabling pupils to gather and process information in order to gain knowledge and understanding about the world and its inhabitants. With this pack pupils can transform into traditional Chinese farmers or even Jainzi sports champions! The variety of exciting artefacts will really get the creative juices flowing, as it is possible to plan a lesson based on any subject’s around each artefact, or use them all at once for a complete China experience or role playing activity.

Included in the ‘China Resources Pack’ are authentic objects used by real Chinese citizens during their daily routines, such as: an abacus, The China Enquirer newspaper (an English language newspaper written for KS2 children), Chinese child’s traditional outfit, traditional woven farm workers hat, paper fan, jade horoscope (a piece of jade jewellery related to one of the years on the Chinese horoscope), paper kites, replica Chinese money, Jainzi - large shuttlecock (used for playing keepy uppy game with feet), and a model Terracotta Warrior to name a few. Alongside the box of authentic artefacts, Bowden and Copeland have authored a cross-curricular scheme of work, an information booklet for teachers and a printed and/or CD photo pack.

Liling Looks Around

Teachers of Key Stage 1 will also find the Liling Looks Around series a captivating set of resources, using Keiran Egan’s ‘teaching as storytelling learning’ method. KS1 Students enter into a narrative about Liling; a little girl who lives in a village near Xian in the province of Shaanxi in central China. The story tells of her adventures as she travels from her home, to Beijing and Shanghai to meet her grandmother and her friend Chi. The story can be followed on printed books and CD format, and to supplement the tale and get young, inquisitive imaginations racing, ‘Liling’s School Bag’ can also be purchased, containing a set of stimulating artefacts similar to the ‘China Resources’ package.

Yong’s Confucianism China Quest Adventure Game - http://www.mylearning.org/yongs-china-quest-adventure-game-level-1/interactive/1452/

A scroll rolls out across the screen and reads simply: “Welcome Young Disciple to your challenge. The period is 500BCE”; setting the scene for this clandestinely educational game. Through the use of a fun, interactive game pupils learn about ‘Confucianism’, and the man who dedicated his life to carrying forward the old tradition in a chaotic time. “His students compared him to the sun and moon, whilst his rivals compared him to a man who does not use his arms and legs, or know how to tell the difference between different types of grain. However, his name would be forever linked to Chinese culture,” the scroll continues, authentically setting the scene.

The game centres around users directing Yong around an Ancient Chinese landscape. During the adventure, players ‘examine’ their surroundings, encounter and converse with characters such as ‘the floating man’, collect interesting objects to put into their rucksack, and keep a diary of what they have learnt. Yong’s China Quest has been developed as part of Renaissance Yorkshire’s China in Yorkshire Programme. The game includes objects that can be linked to various collections in museums across the UK, and has three levels to challenge pupils.
Geography Geek - http://www.geographygeek.co.uk

Geography Geek is maintained by Helen Young, and has the aura of a website that has been up and running for a very long time. Its vast array of content and resources feel like they have been perfected and honed over several years of teaching. Of particular note here, is the ‘Year 8 China Scheme of Work.’ Users of Geography Geek can download the complete scheme of work straight to their Word Documents Folder and be teaching its contents within minutes – it makes it all look easy! The downloadable scheme of work contains 12 lesson plans, each with their own Learning Objectives, activities, clickable links to resources including pre-made PowerPoint presentations and Word documents, and guidance for differentiation, ECM, citizenship and assessments. Lessons cover population, rural China, urbanisation, pollution, ‘superpowers’ and more. Some lessons stand on their own, some are designed to be used alongside the GA ‘Teachers Toolkit’ book. Either way, with this Geography Geek scheme of work, you really have no excuse not to create a cross-curricular Key Stage 3 project.

Further inspiration
Outside of China, Geography Geek provides masses of Geography lesson ideas and resources. Helen Young has developed and created a set of AEGIS resources (a program that creates interactive worksheets for pupils to use) for use with pupils from Key Stage 2 right through to Key Stage 5, to give teachers an idea of what can be achieved with AEGIS software before they become confident in creating their own interactive worksheets. Similar to the China scheme of work, Geography Geeks can access schemes of work on other topics including: transport, the EU and rivers. And, to really test the skills of digital natives, the Geography Geek website lists five ready to use WebQuests looking at a variety of topics from Antarctica to fair trade issues.


To get a better idea of what a School Link project can bring into a school, the Haybridge High School website gives you a good glimpse into what can be achieved. Enter ‘China’ into Haybridge High School’s search box, and a reflective essay, written by Head of Languages Mike Burton will give you a good example of how a School Link project starts life. As part of their exchange programme, Mike was invited to visit Chengdu in China, back in 2007. During his visit he took note of the scale and rate of development of Chengdu, taking plenty of pictures along the way to bring back to school for lesson ideas. He visited Shiangliu Experimental Middle School to observe the differences and similarities between the Chinese school and his own school, the Panda Research Centre, a Chinese Opera, and a couple of world heritage sites including the Nine Village-Valley. Nine Village-Valley is a landscape of mountains and lakes, and the site also harbours a laboratory dedicated to sustainability in the environment – great inspiration for a joint curriculum project.

A Life Long Link
Haybridge have maintained their links and the project continues to flourish; in 2009, following on his 2007 visit, Mike and eleven year 10 students crossed the oceans and explored China for themselves. After the inspiration taken from his preliminary visit, Mike took his students to the Shiangliu Experimental Middle School, the Panda Research Centre, and an ancient dam and irrigation system. This year, Haybridge celebrated the Chinese New Year with an Art Exhibition, additionally hosting artwork from their partner school in Chengdu. With lifetime partnerships like this, Haybridge are at a teaching and learning advantage, opening up the curriculum and opening up to the world and other cultures as a result.
Geographical Association – http://www.geography.org.uk

Type ‘China’ to the GA’s Resource Finder, and you will get 28 results. An interesting resource to explore, given that the London 2012 Olympics are just around the corner, is the ‘Beijing: a contrasting locality in China’ unit of work, by Arthur Kelly. The unit aims to develop 5 to 7 year old pupils’ understanding of Beijing as a place that contrasts with where they live, in particular to develop their knowledge and understanding and sense of place in relation to the city. Whilst waiting for the GA’s London 2012 Olympic resources to be released, why not provide a context for pupils, with a look back at the last Olympic games event.

Olympic minds

The Beijing Games Scheme of Work can be downloaded as a PDF, and all worksheets are ready to be printed of and/or photocopied. It is great to use as a precursor to the London 2012 Olympics as it covers the history of the Summer and Winter Olympic games so far, right back to the first ever official Olympic games held in Athens, 1896. Opportunities to extend the work touched upon in this scheme of work soon crop up – as an example, pupils could look at the historical aspects of the Olympic games – to look at Ancient Greece - the very first Olympians, or even the cancellation of the Olympic games due to the two World Wars. The scheme of work details both teacher-led and student-led learning activities, with a list of useful websites to help with their completion. Pupils can engage with a look back at how they think Beijing 2008 affected China, and try to predict what effect London 2012 may have on the UK (for 14 – 16 year olds, see also ‘Going for Gold’ by Dr Grant Kleeman, and for 16 – 19 years olds, ‘Measuring the environmental and social footprint of the Beijing Games’, by Bob Digby.)

Elsewhere on the GA website, if you’re looking for an introduction to your cross-curricular China project, the ‘A – Z of China: An Alphabet Journey through China in words and pictures’ PowerPoint presentation (by Kate Russell) is perfect. This PowerPoint presentation provides a brief introduction to China, and is illustrated throughout with relevant photographs and maps. For ‘A Different View’ of China, see ‘The Real Toy Story’, to introduce a topic on manufacturing, industry and production.


For ideas on how to heighten the History and Art subject areas of a China project, with an exciting class trip to boot, the British Museum’s Teaching resources are the place to visit. They are largely designed to accompany a museum visit to the ‘China: Journey to the East’ exhibition due to be held at the Manchester Museum until 26 June 2011, and then Weston Park Museum in Sheffield from 17th December 2011 - 12 April 2012. The exhibition itself covers 3,000 years of Chinese history and culture, exploring themes of play and performance, technology, belief and festivals, food and drink, and language and writing. This unique exhibition features over 100 objects from the British Museum, the largest loan of Chinese material. The British Museum has provided a number of classroom activities to get pupils to do before and after the museum visit, so that pupils enter the museum with a sound knowledge of the topics the exhibition explores, as well as being able to make sense of what they learnt during their trip.

The Art of Shadow Puppetry

If a visit to Manchester or Sheffield is out of the question, the resources provided on the British Museum’s website stand-alone and form a solid resource base, with detailed information including poems and short fables for pupil to read themselves. One activity pupils are sure to love is the opportunity to build their own shadow puppets. A good shadow puppet performance is like a cartoon, but with the atmosphere of a live performance. The British Museum provides a short video clip of professional Chinese shadow puppeteers for pupils to watch, as well as the templates of the same shadow puppet characters seen in the video. Children simply have to colour in and construct their shadow puppets and hey presto! – they are ready to write and perform their own show, and in planning their own performance, pupils will be given a real sense of pride and achievement by presenting their own work.
Ancient China - http://www.ancientchina.co.uk/menu.html

The British Museum has also created the ‘Ancient China’ website, predominantly aimed at Key Stage 2 students. Split into two parts, this website has one part for pupils (the main part) and another part for teachers (known as the ‘Staff Room.’) In the virtual staff room, teachers discover that the scheme of work has five chapters – Crafts and Artisans, Geography, Time, Tombs and Ancestors and Writing. Each of these chapters is then divided into three sections: Story, Explore, and Challenge.

Story, Explore and Challenge

The ‘Story’ is a presentation of information in a narrative form. The ‘Explore’ is a non-linear presentation of information. The pupil controls the order in which they access the information. It is then the responsibility of the pupil (and/or the teacher) to make larger connections among ideas and information and place the information in a context or framework. The ‘Challenge’ is an activity that allows pupils to practise certain skills (historical, analytical, mathematical, observational) within the context of a theme or topic relevant to ancient China. Slickly designed and easy to use, pupils navigate their way through various Story, Explore, and Challenge areas. As pupils do this, the staff room website provides detailed guidance notes and learning objectives for teachers, a wide selection of discussion points to bring into the classroom, and photocopyable worksheets for teachers to use alongside the pupils’ web-learning. By its nature, the use of this website is very similar to a WebQuest and is inquiry-based learning, therefore pupils are taught to use information rather than just look for it.

Connecting Classrooms - http://www.britishcouncil.org/scotland-learning-language-school-partnerships.htm

The British Council operates various School Linking Partnership programs, and a visit to the website provides the information, support, advice and expertise needed to find a suitable partner school, through the UK offices and the four offices in China. The British Council has a lot of experience in school linking across the world and provides excellent resources, case studies and templates for curriculum projects or visits via its website. Once a link is established, teachers and headteachers can apply for funding for a school-linking visit to develop the link. It also provides other Chinese experiences, such as the Chinese language immersion courses, gap year scholarships for students through HSBC, and Chinese language competitions.

Linking with another school will enable students to:

- understand different beliefs and cultures
- work in partnership and communicate in different ways and settings
- develop and communicate their own beliefs and view of the world
- develop an openness to new thinking and ideas.

The British Council offers various ways in which to link with another school, anywhere in the world. A Chinese Link School can be used during cross-curricular projects to give real life examples of life in China, and students and teachers can create a dialogue with the Link School to exchange ideas and resources. It is all about learning from each other and sharing information.
Cross-curricular projects break down the walls of subject teaching – science does not just have to be taught in a ‘science class’, and English does not have to be taught in an ‘English class’ – cross-curricular projects allow children to enjoy any subject in any classroom. The ‘wow’ factor, the engagement a cross-curricular project creates, creates magical memories and means that children will really remember what they have learnt.

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