

Finding a Job in China

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Australian Chinese-language graduates face a challenge if they wish to work and develop their career in Mainland China in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. In the past, there were limited numbers of young people heading off to China from Western countries with the objective of working. They generally had a few years of work experience, if that, and Chinese language skills learnt either at university or later once they arrived on the ground. These people inevitably found their way into English teaching jobs, which were easy to find then and still are now. At that time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the only real alternative to teaching was within Embassies, often with the Immigration Department stamping visas.

Nowadays, however, there is an increased variety of potential jobs available in China for young people. Concurrently, the competition for these jobs has witnessed an increased intensity. While this is especially so in the major cities of Beijing and Shanghai, others locations including Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shenzhen, and Tianjin are also becoming something of a hot-spot for young job seekers.

There has been an influx into these cities of young professionals who have industry-specific professional training coupled with excellent Chinese

language skills, making the market more competitive. They are no longer satisfied teaching English or working in lame Embassy jobs, and are aggressively pursuing careers in such areas as banking, consulting, law, management, and research. The result is that it is now much more difficult to find a meaningful job in China that has the potential to develop into a career or even to provide useful experience that can be utilised once you have left China.

This competitive situation has led to the presence of numerous young Westerners in China who arrived speaking good Mandarin and were full of promise and are, perhaps years later, unwittingly teaching English on weekends for extra cash while moonlighting in a ‘temporary’ job until something better comes up.

It doesn’t have to be like this, though. The intention of the following text is to outline some essential job hunting steps that. This shows that if planned carefully and carried out with determination, it is possible to find a rewarding and promising job in China—one that can become a foundation of your career development.

What is necessary is a combination of personal qualities and Chinese language skills (naturally, or you probably wouldn’t want to move to China in the first place), and a solid system for managing the job-hunting process. It is no good to come to China and say “Okay, I’ll start looking for a job, but if I can’t find something in one month, I’ll leave”. Everyone who has said words to this effect ends up leaving. Yes, there are some exceptions, but these are *exceptions* and not the norm. Finding a job in China is an art in itself. It is a combination of giving

yourself maximum exposure by following up every lead that sounds remotely interesting, and maintaining a sense of professionalism and judgment to be able to make decisions when they need to be made.

Deciding to move to China to work is not an easy decision. Below is listed an initial suggested step-by-step approach that will give you excellent preparation, exposure, training, and hopefully success in finding a job in China.

1. Utilise university contacts.

At least 6 months before you go to China start letting people know what your intentions are. Start close to home with your university lecturers and tutors. Tell them what you want to do and see if they have any ideas, or even contacts that they can pass on. If your teachers are Chinese, then they will have friends and their own experience in China. If your teachers are not Chinese, chances are they have spent a significant time in China studying and working (and may also have similar experiences to what you are about to embark on) and will also be able to pass on contacts and other advice. Furthermore, your teachers know you—they have probably seen your interest in China grow in conjunction with your language ability, and will be encouraging, playing an important supporting role at this initial stage. Also, get some language partners and check out the Chinese Students Club and other related clubs at Monash.

2. Network at business functions in Melbourne.

Try attending business events such as those held by the Australia China Business Council (ACBC), which have offices throughout Australia,

including Melbourne. It is easy to get some business cards made. Grab a pack and get out there and network. It will be easy to learn to network in Australia amongst familiar surroundings and people than in, say, Beijing or Shanghai, where there will not only be more strangers but also more people like you which means more competition. As networking will be essential in your ability to find a job in China (I'm sure you are all familiar with *guanxi* by now) you should start practicing early. Chances are you will meet someone in an industry you are interested in. Have a chat, get their card, and email them within the next two days—don't waste any time. If they mention to “drop me a line”, do so. Do not mistake a potential colleague's apathetic manner for a non-opportunity. Most probably you will be more passionate and determined than this person—after all, they have a job and you don't. Follow up everything.

3. Become active in interest groups in your city.

There are a wide variety of interest groups that are worthwhile to become involved with. For example, Asialink, which is affiliated with the University of Melbourne, has an excellent range of programs and activities focusing on China. However, there are many more. If you do a little research, you will find out that AIESEC used to arrange executive exchanges between Melbourne and Beijing with Cadbury, the Australian Association of Victoria offers language awards to exemplary first year Asian language students, and that the Chinese Association of Victoria has a Youth Club that puts young Chinese professionals and those interested in China together.

Affiliation with organisations such as these will not only increase your exposure to similar people, but also increase your exposure to people who can help you with advice and introductions.

4. Obtain Chamber of Commerce in China Directories and contact members before you leave.

There will be many potential future employers who you will not have a chance to meet in Australia because they are based in China. Possibly the most efficient method for locating these people is to find their contact information in China-Australia Chamber of Commerce directories. Student membership is available at AustCham in Beijing; AustCham in Shanghai has a mailing list for non-members, while AustCham in Guangzhou has individual membership for only RMB 500 (which is about AUD 80 at the time of writing). Join and get into the mailing network.

The directories contain company and contact information for all members. One way to approach companies located in directories that has proved successful for many young Australians is to send an email from Australia introducing yourself and informing them that you want to work in China and you would like to ask them their advice on working in China. They are not dumb – they will know immediately that you are looking for a job. However, if you immediately say you are looking for work, they will answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. If they say no, you have effectively severed your lines of communication with them. It is much better to ask their advice and opinion. This way, you have established a more equal relationship and

have the opportunity to gain any knowledge or advise they can give you. More often than not, people will be more than happy to share with you. China is still a business world on the frontier for many people, and they are normally more than happy to share their experiences with interested and enthusiastic people. If they like you, then you can talk about jobs.

5. On arrival in China, immediately follow up on everyone you have already had contact with from Australia.

This cannot be overestimated. Do not wait for people to get back to you. If you said you would call someone on Monday after you arrive you must call him or her. The job market in China is not like Australia—most jobs are not advertised. In Australia, if you are unsuccessful for an interview you may still see those people around and be on friendly terms. In China, the people you are contacting, if they are Western, may have gone through the same sort of gruelling approach you are. If you don't call them they will forget you. More importantly, there will probably be another young professional looking for work too who will beat you to the post.

6. Do not limit yourself to the Australia community

It is a common mistake to only approach Australian potential employers. The fact remains that the Australia business community, while successful, active, and friendly, is only one of a number foreign communities in China. Actually, there are Australians in China who in 10 or so years have never worked for an Australian company! Other business communities that are worthwhile to get involved with are the American, British, Canadian, and

New Zealand communities via their Chambers of Commerce. Furthermore, the German, Italian, Swiss, Korean, etc are also very active and should be approached as well. The rule of thumb is never dismissing any potential opportunity to meet people in your area of interest that may be helpful to your job hunting process.

7. Do not limit yourself to your specific industry.

Unless you are certain that you would like to pursue a particular profession that doesn't allow much deviation—professions such as law come to mind—be open to new ideas and employment directions.

Management, in all its guises, is still very much in demand, particularly in foreign-started consultancies where Western attitudes and management techniques are often utilised in the sourcing, removalists, education and training (not teaching), and desk research positions.

One of the advantages of being something of a China-hand is that it is easy for someone to teach you their industry, but it is much harder for you to teach someone about China. As a specific example, one young Australian worked as the chief representative of a US company that manufactured pipe-fittings and was expanding sales in China. He explained that he got the job because he knew just how to sell to the Chinese and was comfortable in the banquet process and with all the formalities whereas his engineer US boss would have had no idea. It was much more efficient for the US engineer to teach his industry in order to

understand the products than for our Australian friend to explain all the intricacies in China to the American.

8. Even if the person you are in contact with makes it clear that they do not have a job, insist on a meeting.

This means that you have to be a bit pushy, but this is okay in China, as long as you are professional and reasonable. A good way to phrase this is to say something like “I understand that you do not have any positions open at this stage, but I’d still really like to come and talk with you for 20 or so minutes because this in itself will be very helpful for me as I continue with my task of finding a job in China”. This is a perfectly acceptable request. Some people will turn you down, but most will be happy to meet with you and share their ideas and experiences with you. A lot of business takes place in the evenings in China, especially in bars. Suggesting coming to their office is okay, as is taking them out for a drink one evening. While such aggressive behaviour is not the way to get a job in Australia (maybe) it is fine, indeed normal, in China.

9. Ensure that you integrate yourself within the community of other young ‘job-seekers’.

This is very important. Even though throughout this article the competition from other similar people has been emphasised, at the same time it is a good idea to integrate yourself with them. Don’t do this unnaturally though, as you won’t make any friends. Rather, no doubt you will find similar folk in the same boat. Become friends with them, as you will help each other out

enormously. Having extra eyes and ears, as well as friends, makes the job hunting process enjoyable and fun—there are bound to be numerous strange occurrences while you are looking and sharing these with kindred friends is what living in China is all about. As someone once said, “In China you can laugh or cry, and I’d rather be laughing”.

Furthermore, no-one likes a lone-ranger. For you, being in China may be enough in itself, but for others it can be very difficult and lonely, particularly if they don’t have the language skills you have, so it is good to get to know everyone and become known yourself.

10. When the time comes—negotiating your salary and other benefits

You will notice that there are nine points for preparation, and only one section on what to do once you are offered a job! This is the reality—preparation is the key. You will most likely progress for some time with lots of meetings, phone calls, emails, and running around town and then all of a sudden someone will offer you a job. This may be after one meeting or it maybe after five or twenty! Unless the job you are going to accept is in an Embassy or was advertised (though not for all) you will most likely need to negotiate yourself on your wages. This is a difficult task—most people have never had to do this before. While everyone differs and there is really no set rule, a few tips are as follows:

- If it is your first job in China, better to get experience first. Later you can ask for more money. Between USD 1,500 and USD 2,000 per month is a reasonable amount to ask for.

- Make sure you have a contract with your employer.
- Some companies, especially smaller ones, will not be in a position to offer such benefits like medical and relocation. The point to make here is to be realistic about what you ask for—imagine you have your own company in China and you were looking to take on some new staff. Never ask for something that you know you will not be able to get.

Lastly, be confident and aggressive in a professional sense. There are jobs in China for those that work hard and manage the process well. Good luck!

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