

Ties that Bind: Meaningful Sister City Relationships Between Australia and China



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Australia's sister cities live in our parks and streets



Adelaide - Qingdao



Adelaide - Himeji

Japanese garden



Perth - Kagoshima

Kagoshima Park Gardens



**Cockburn -
Mobile**
The Friendship
Way

Each one is a public promise that two communities have chosen to know each other.

A rose for Qingdao, a garden for Himeji



Adelaide - Qingdao Garden, 2018

“Song of the Wind”, gifted by Qingdao, twins a statue in Qingdao. A red rose named for Qingdao was bred in South Australia.



Adelaide Himeji Garden, 1985

A Himeji gardener gave months of voluntary help to rebuild it, and taught council staff techniques still used today.

Trees for Kagoshima, flags for Mobile



Kagoshima Park Gardens, 1974

“for international peace and goodwill”.
Visiting Kagoshima mayors plant trees in
Burswood Park: 1985, 1995, 2009, 2014, 2020.



Cockburn - Mobile, Alabama

Signal flags spell Mobile's greeting, “Let the
good times roll”.
The link: Captain James Stirling served at both.

A long and busy family tree

560

sister city relations
held by Australian
communities

100+

of them with
Chinese cities

#2

China's rank
among Australia's
partner countries

1980

Melbourne and
Tianjin form the
first Australia-
China pair



1939

Parkes – Coventry
Australia's oldest



1980

Melbourne – Tianjin
First with China



2026

Melbourne – Chengdu
The newest

Born from war, built for peace



1920 Keighley and Poix-du-Nord

A Yorkshire town raised money to rebuild a French village destroyed in the First World War. Often cited as the first twinning in Europe.



1950s Coventry and Dresden

Two cities flattened by bombing, each losing its cathedral, chose friendship over blame after the Second World War.

From high diplomacy to every kind of agenda



A citizen's movement

Started in the US in 1956, it reached Australia with a national sister cities body in 1979



Beyond city halls

Schools, hospitals, unions and universities now form relations too



Solidarity

In the early 1990s, Scottish towns linked with South African regions to support black communities in the transition away from apartheid



Help in a crisis

Tianjin and Kobe sent each other supplies during COVID-19

Other reasons cities have chosen each other



A shared love of dogs

Edinburgh and San Diego



The same name

Portsmouth and Portsmouth,
Christchurch and
Christchurch



A shared love of music

Glasgow and Havana



A theme park

Swindon, England, and Walt Disney World



A city that does not exist

Wincanton, England, and Ankh-Morpork, from
Terry Pratchett's fantasy novels (2002)

Communities are asking what they get

“

“A junket, however you polish it up”

Councillor, Greater Dandenong, Victoria, 2020

“

“You have to ask how the relationships are benefiting the humble ratepayer”

Sunday Herald Sun editorial, 2014

“

“Only about a dozen people ever benefited”

Mayor of Doncaster, England, scrapping all five links, 2009

Too often, the main output is **the photograph**: a signing ceremony, a gift exchange, a handshake. A sister city should be judged by **what it delivers**

Happy with the friendship, less sure about the business



Generally satisfied

with the educational and social benefits of Chinese sister cities

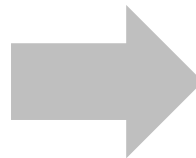


Less convinced

that they had built Chinese markets for Australian business, or attracted investment and tourists

85%

of councils went in hoping for business and trade benefits



in practice

Fewer than half

believe the relationship has delivered them

Under-resourced on the Australian side

Australian councils

Survey of 26 councils, 2020

14% had one or two full-time staff for the relationship

21% had a budget over \$20,000 a year; some had no budget at all

5 councils had a sister city manager with Chinese language skills

Chinese partner cities

How the work is organised



A dedicated office

Most city governments have a dedicated Foreign Affairs Office, with friendship cities part of its remit



A plan for each partner

Shenyang sets a “one city, one plan” approach and a team for each of its 102 friendship cities



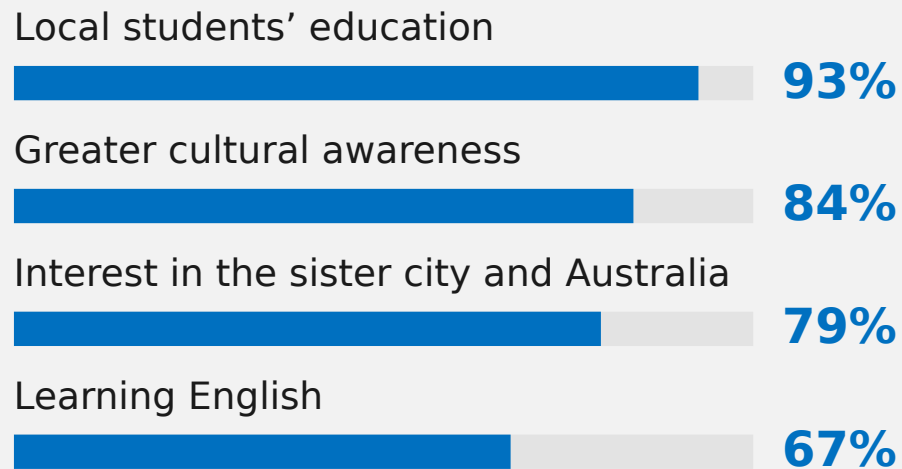
National backing

CPAFFC coordinates and support over 3,000+ pairs

Japan's sister cities tell the same story

Share of Japanese councils who say their Australian sister city delivered each benefit

Where the links deliver



Where they rarely do



42% of these links have gone dormant or paused at some point

What a sister city can deliver



People to people

Trust and friendship
between communities



Education

Exchanges,
languages and
university links



Culture

Festivals, arts
exchanges and
shared heritage work



Trade and investment

Export links,
especially for small
businesses



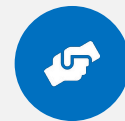
Tourism

Visitors, profile and,
sometimes, new
flights



Shared know- how

City planning,
environment, public
administration



Help in hard times

Support after
disasters and during
pandemics



A channel that stays open

Communities keep
talking, whatever the
politics

Four ways to make it work – Lessons from Adelaide



Build on what already exists

South Australian barley already went to Qingdao to brew Tsingtao beer. The sister city tie came after the trade, and strengthened it.



Choose on evidence

Adelaide weighed several Chinese cities on history, culture and development goals before choosing Qingdao.



Learn from each other

Adelaide and George Town, Malaysia, have worked together on heritage preservation.



Show up in a crisis

After the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, Adelaide donated funds and housed displaced university students.

Relationships that deliver



SINCE 1980

Melbourne - Tianjin

Over 400 Tianjin officials trained in Melbourne through an RMIT University leadership program. A Melbourne office in Tianjin since 1998.



SINCE 2014

Adelaide - Qingdao

Barley trade, a joint institute between the University of Adelaide and Ocean University of China, and festival exchanges.



SINCE 2000

Canberra - Beijing

Expertise for Beijing's 2008 Olympic bid, environmental training, and a leg of the Olympic torch relay in Canberra.

Not just the big cities



SINCE 1998

Perth - Nanjing

A youth exchange that has hosted over 40 Nanjing students in Perth, and school bands performing together for the 20th anniversary.



SINCE 2012

Warrnambool - Changchun

A regional city that set up a China Bureau to help local firms enter the Chinese market, alongside agriculture, education and tourism links.



TELLING THE STORY

Greater Geraldton

A bilingual “China Connect” website promoting business and investment opportunities to both communities.

Melbourne – Chengdu: hot-pot diplomacy



Built on existing ties

A Victoria–Sichuan sister state relationship since 2016, and direct flights



Business first

A 2025 Melbourne trade mission led to a Chengdu hot-pot chain opening in Melbourne



A fixed term

A four-year partnership, endorsed by council in September 2026

\$24m

expected turnover in three years

50+

Melbourne jobs expected from one restaurant franchise

Principles for the next forty years

- | | | |
|----------|---|---|
| 1 | Choose partners on substance | Shared industries, real needs, existing links |
| 2 | Deeper invested relationships | Resource each one properly, or don't sign |
| 3 | Set shared goals and review them | Agree what success means, check every few years |
| 4 | Let communities own it | Schools, universities, business and friendship groups |
| 5 | Tell the story | Show both communities what the relationship achieves |

Let's make sure there is
something real behind
every agreement.

Thank you · 谢谢