

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China  
October 16, 2006

[tomas.stenback@home.se](mailto:tomas.stenback@home.se)

[rachel.stenback@home.se](mailto:rachel.stenback@home.se)

Phone in China: +86 939 3200667

Visit our new web page! [www.e455.se/kina](http://www.e455.se/kina)



你们好!

(*Nimen hao!* = Hello!)

Greetings friends!

Time has flown by since we last wrote, and we are slowly becoming accustomed to life here. We have been healthy except for a stubborn cold/sinus infection that I had for about 3 weeks. Thankfully we have even been able to purchase a small electric oven! Unfortunately, we have not had many hot showers since we arrived, due to only having solar power and never having any good weather, but hopefully soon our new electric water heater will be installed. I never imagined that I would actually choose to take a kind of “bath” with a pail of boiled water... As for shopping and things we need, sometimes we can find yoghurt and for that we are grateful! Otherwise, in Chengxian we cannot purchase most things we are accustomed to eating or drinking, such as: margarine, fresh milk, cheese, bread as we know it, cereal, pepper or most any other spices, etc., etc. But we are becoming creative!

Our classes are going well, we think. It is a struggle to get the students to only speak English during class, but we try! We are mostly teaching Extensive Reading. Our students are, for the most part, interested and they are very nice as well. Today I had a class of freshmen for the first time, and after the first hour one girl approached me and gushed, “Mrs. Stenback, I love you very much. Can we be friends?” and she was so excited about it! I always try to calm the students, reassuring them that we are planning on being here for two years, so that soon they will find us boring! (When the novelty of a



having foreign teacher wears off!) We have begun having movie nights in our apartment, where we have invited half a class (about 20 people) over each night. It has been hilarious to observe the students when they have come over! First of all, since in China people do not remove their shoes upon entering, they are extremely uncomfortable with the idea of walking in their socks. We knew this, so we had prepared for the first movie night by purchasing some guest slippers.

We thought that since we had purchased several pairs, that would be good enough and that the students would understand that we could not possibly own enough pairs for so many guests. Well, the first night, we ran out of guest slippers and a few students did not find any. These students just stood there, totally lost! Some old socks sufficed for the

situation. Since that night, remembering the look of confusion on the students' faces, we have purchased more guest slippers, and now, almost everyone can borrow slippers!



Also on these student nights we have tried to offer the students some very simple refreshments, since as hard candies, sometimes popcorn, tea, or Coke. They have completely refused to accept anything! We could not understand this. So far only one class has actually taken any of the candies. What a change from American or Swedish students, who would jump at the chance for some snacks! Then when the movie is over, then one of the students usually holds a short

speech, thanking us, on behalf of the whole group. Then the group, almost in unison, rises and goes into our guest room to change back to their own shoes and outerwear to leave! They have, however, seemed very happy to be in our apartment. They have looked at pictures both on our refrigerator and the computer, and they notice everything we have (for example, they asked why we have a few candles in the living room: “are they for Christmas?”)

A regular week here so far consists of teaching Monday-Friday, usually between 8-12 AM (a full load here, for a college) and then we have lunch. On Mondays and Wednesdays we have one-hour tutoring sessions with two Chinese students. Otherwise we study Chinese or prepare lessons in the afternoons. On Monday evenings the students have English Corner, which we try to attend, and then sometimes in the evenings we have activities in our apartment for the students. Tomas has also played some soccer with students, and they have really liked that. In the evenings, we often walk or bike into town and stroll about the city streets. Wherever we go people are still shocked by our presence! On the weekends we are mostly free, unless something comes up and if we are able to attend, we will. In general, we can feel that we are getting busier and busier, so we have said that we will try to keep a few evenings a week free from outside activities, to have time to relax and to spend time together as well. Also, beginning this coming Sunday, we believe we will be attending the local church, which we are happy to report that we have found! Some of our students will be bringing us with them. We will meet the students at 7:30 AM to walk there, and they said the service usually “only lasts until 11”, so a 3-hour service in Chinese. We will report on this more in our next letter!



One change since we wrote last is that some other foreigners have arrived in town. About a week after we came, Thad and Michelle, two Peace Corps Volunteers from Idaho, arrived. We are happy that they are almost exactly our same age, and married as well. We look forward to getting to know them more, although we were surprised that we were not the only foreigners here (as we first been told we would be). There is also another woman, Sarah, from England, here as well. She also seems nice, and she has invited us over a few times already for supper or a movie.

We have been on two good hiking outings since we have arrived here, with a friend that Tomas has made. He is a very enthusiastic person (to say the least!) so each time we have seen him has been interesting. The first time we went hiking was our first time to really wander in the nature, and we loved it! On that trip we hiked to a temple, which was tucked away in a tiny, old house. When we entered the house, we discovered that the front of the house was only the entrance to the temple, which, itself, was actually located in a huge cave! There we sat and drank tea together, in the cave temple. It was wonderful to really see how lovely the nature is in our area of southern Gansu. We would sometimes meet a cow on the same paths where we walked, and other times we would meet a lone farmer walking into town, carrying a simple hand-made backpack, on his or her way to sell fruits or vegetables.



Tomas took a long bike ride yesterday to explore the area. As he biked, he quickly began to realize that his bike was actually a time machine. Only about 5 minutes after leaving town, with its modern buildings, he was out in the country and in that short time it felt like he had traveled back in time 100 years! He saw women working in the fields, picking weeds by hand, and other women were washing their cloths in the brown water of a small stream. Tomas met a man walking his ox down

the path, and on his shoulders he carried an old-fashioned plow, made entirely out of wood. Tomas found it shocking to think about what a difference there is, just within our own small city. Where he biked it did not even feel like he was still in 2006, but perhaps hundreds of years earlier!



In the beginning of October was the Chinese National Holiday, so we had a week off from school. Tomas and I decided to take this opportunity to try our first trip within China. It turned out to be a great week. First, we took the bumpy-yet-beautiful bus ride from here to Tianshui, which takes a little under 3 hours. (Unfortunately, we can hardly recommend traveling by bus in China, at least not when it can be avoided, because the drivers seem to think that “honk and then just pass” is a good rule, no matter how little they can actually see ahead). Then we took a train to Xi’an, for about 4.5 hours, in order to catch a plane there. The train ride was quite an experience! The train was so full that we technically did not have seats, just standing room, but the Chinese people in our section of the train were all so friendly, that soon we were invited to half-sit on somebody’s seat with them. And it was quite a show! It was pretty much the opposite of taking a train within Sweden. In Sweden, the people sit quietly, not speaking with each other, and certainly not moving about. The Chinese train, on the other hand, never quieted down! People were constantly moving about the train, switching seats, even standing up on their seats to stretch, eating nuts and other snacks, and even cooking! Some men had taken off their shirts because of the heat, some had rolled up their pants legs, and most people walked around in slippers as they went from section to section, sometimes with pots and pans in order to make noodles! It was quite the sight. Since we were the only foreigners on the train, of course we also attracted a lot of attention. People always become happy when we can speak any Chinese at all with them, so we did our best to try to explain a bit about ourselves.

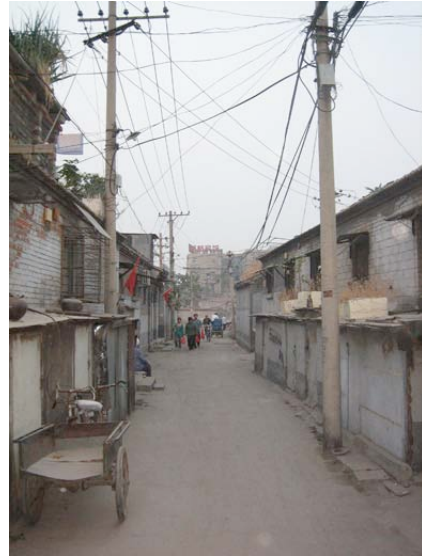


From Xi’an, the next day, we flew to Beijing. In Beijing a friend of Tomas’ family, Daniel Hedström, picked us up at the airport and brought us home with him. We spent the first two days and nights at his family’s home, eating good, Swedish food we have been missing (like cereal and toast!) and taking wonderfully hot showers! They also showed us around Beijing some and we attended their international church as well. After that we moved to a hotel closer to town, and from there we were based as we spent time in the city.

We saw many things that a tourist should see, such as the Great Wall. Despite the amount of people visiting the Wall, it was not a disappointment. The surrounding area really was truly breathtaking. We spent several days exploring both the rich and the poor areas of Beijing, going to international restaurants and eating delicious food, visiting parks, etc. We enjoyed our time in Beijing but we observed several things. First of all, walking along a road in Beijing seemed like a good way to see the city. Often, however, we were disappointed to discover that there were enormous



walls along many roads. Sometimes we think these walls were protecting something important, and sometimes, as we managed to see, we found that these walls were hiding a filthy, poor area of town. When we looked through cracks in the wall sometimes, what we could see was Chengxian... It felt as if Beijing wants the world to see what is on the “right side” of these walls, where the sidewalks are perfectly free from garbage (there are always people walking around and picking up garbage, as their job) but it is impossible to miss the people walking around the streets of Beijing, who obviously do not have easy lives. One evening we sat at a McDonald’s in an elegant shopping mall, to enjoy a chocolate milk shake. While we were sitting there, an elderly woman entered the café area, and then proceeded to the garbage can. There she dug around until she found a cup. She then moved and sat down at one of the café tables, and there she sat, leisurely sipping the remains of that cup. I really do not know if she was just thirsty, or if she also wanted to feel, for just a while, that she too could sit at that café, in that fancy shopping mall. Only her appearance betrayed that she did not “belong there.” During our week in Beijing we also saw people digging in garbage cans along the street,



trying to find something they could sell to make some money. The difference and economic gap between these extremely poor people, and the rich people who shop in the glamorous shops along these rich streets, is probably unfathomable. In Beijing, if you have the money, you can buy almost anything your heart desires. In our area of Gansu those things do not even exist. We do not even have fresh milk, while in Beijing, we were happy to visit more than one Starbucks! (see picture)

The air in Beijing is also something that we will not miss. Most days we could not even see the tall buildings in front of us, due to the smog. We wondered how healthy it will be to run marathons in that air, during the 2008 Olympics!

We traveled home from Beijing by night train, which was very comfortable, and this time it was only the two of us in one cabin (a more expensive, yet very nice, way to travel). We spent one day in Xi’an before returning home again. There we saw the famous Terracotta Warriors. We can recommend this famous attraction to visitors—to see once, that is.



It was quite a trip, and we learned a lot (and did all of our Christmas shopping!) but it was also good to return to Chengxian, to good air (although much cooler) and to our new life here. We knew we were soon in Chengxian when traffic was affected not by traffic jams, as in Beijing or Xi'an, but by cattle wandering onto the highway...

After the Beijing trip we were home one day before we received a call, saying that we had to go to the capital of Gansu, Lanzhou, in order to hopefully finish up the last requirements to receive our final work visa. We traveled by bus, a very long and uncomfortable trip where we make only one pit-stop in almost 7 hours, at a country "restroom" so bad that I will spare you any details, before arriving in Lanzhou. Despite the boring journey and the reason for the journey, we were very happy to have two evenings in Lanzhou to spend with our good friends, Per-Martin and Gunnel Hjort. They are also from Sweden, also sent to China through Svenska Kyrkan and Amity Foundation. We visited their apartment on the second night and had a very cozy evening. To talk, laugh, eat, and pray with friends felt wonderful.



That is all for now. Please write and keep in touch! Every day we (okay, I admit, I) rush to the mailroom to see if we have gotten anything. We love all forms of contact!

Next month we look forward to our first visitors! Maria (one of my best friends) and her husband, Magnus, are coming for a late honeymoon to visit us in China! We look forward to their visit in the middle of November.

Many thanks to our friend, David Larsson from Sweden, who has created a web page for us! Please visit it at [www.e455.se/kina](http://www.e455.se/kina) and please send us comments! On our web page you can read letters and see many more pictures.

再见!

(Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

Rachel and Tomas

***Our address:***

Rachel & Tomas Stenback  
Longnan Teachers College  
Chengxian, Gansu Province, 742500  
China

In Chinese:

Zip code: 742500

中国甘肃省成县陇南师专科研外事处



*View from our living room  
window*