

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China
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你们好!

(*Nimen hao!* = Hello!) Greetings friends!

Now the end of November is already upon us and with it, cloudier days and colder weather, although we have yet to see any frost. Since we wrote last we have been busy with our classes, occasional student movie nights in our apartment (the last time with 24 students!), and with other activities.



We are lucky to be healthy, except for stubborn colds that keep reappearing. This week Tomas had a cough and was hoarse. Of course, we know that he will certainly soon be better since it is a regular cold. But several of his students, and even a colleague, have both called and e-mailed him to express their concern. One teacher colleague, our friend, Ren Laoshi, tried to convince him to visit a doctor. He said, "But I know a very, very, very..." and here Tomas expected him to say "GOOD doctor", but instead he said, "...OLD doctor of Chinese medicine..." We thought it was so funny that for him, the most important characteristic for the doctor was that he was "very, very, very old!" We figure that these colds are due to the change in environment, and hopefully soon we will be over them.

On Oct. 31 we attended our first Chinese Halloween party. It was organized through the Oral English Association, and it was held at the college. It was certainly a unique experience! I felt like a cross between a college teacher and a 7th grader. There were hundreds of students there, and of course we were seated, together with Thad, Michelle, and Sarah, the other foreign teachers, in the very front row. We had been told that everyone MUST dress up in a costume. Well, since we have only been here for a short while, we didn't have much in the costume department, so I dressed up in Tomas' clothing, with pants, shirt, and a tie, and Tomas wore a sheet provided by Sarah, to look like a ghost. The students were very creative. Most of them had made a little mask out of paper or other materials, and this they held up in front of their faces, as if it were an old-fashioned masquerade ball! The party began with Thad introducing the origins of Halloween, and then with a movie, and then with games, and even some dancing. (If you

want to see something hilarious...visit www.e455.se/kina and watch Tomas and Sarah, the volunteer from England, in a tough tug-of-war match, in their Halloween outfits!) Apparently, however, Tomas and Thad's Halloween outfits were never understood by the students, because I am still getting questions like, "Why was Mr. Stenback wearing white on Halloween?"



Tomas had the honor of playing on the English Department's soccer team in a tournament this month. Thanks to him, (or at least, that is what the team said!) they won the tournament! Tomas had a lot of fun playing. But as usual, before the tournament could begin, they called him to come and "give a short speech." In the last game Tomas got a yellow card (which could have been red, had he not been a foreigner), and the spectators and players alike all seemed to think that was hilarious!

With some students' help, we have now found and we have now attended our local church three times. What a feeling it is to attend this church! Unfortunately, we do not understand much, but we have Chinese-English hymnals and we try our best to follow along. Whenever we look a little lost (which is probably most of the time!) a nearby person will come and take the book from us and find the correct number! The church is obviously extremely poor. The walls and floor are only painted cement, so the first time we attended we both shivered through the entire service. Now we know what to expect so the second time, even though it was warm outside, we both dressed very warmly and it was much better. (We have seen that they do not have heat in the church, so it should get quite cold there soon). When we enter the church, people turn and smile or wave and seem so happy to see us. Then a few moments after sitting down, the last few times, a very old man has tried to give us his handmade, extremely thin sit cushion that he is using himself. Last time, the man looked like he was 90 years old, and he looked all skin and bones! Of course we thanked him but we managed to get away with not accepting it.



The last time we attended, they had communion for the first time. What an experience that was! Most surprising, and yet touching, was after the bread had been passed around and eaten, when we looked up to see the pastor in the front, praying for and blessing...yes, an old silver teapot! Then we realized that instead of wine or juice, which are expensive and which they do not have here, they use tea for the communion. Then the communion assistants passed out tiny teacups to each person in the congregation, and then together we drank the communion tea!

We have received many questions about the church in China. Some people have asked what type of church we attend, for example, if it is a Christian church or not, and yes, it is. We are very happy to have found the local church and we plan to continue to attend whenever we can, despite language difficulties! (Made especially difficult because apparently the local dialect is spoken there). The local people who attend the church seem perfectly happy to be there, and to sit for three hours total in a freezing cement building. I wonder if we would be willing to do the same? We have posted a video from inside the church, of the congregation singing a hymn, on our web page, which you can watch if you are interested in taking a look inside the church.



We were happy to be able to go on one more great hiking trip before the weather got too cold. For this past trip, our friend, Ren Laoshi, and Thad and Michelle, (and some students who seemed to have planned to tag along!) hiked up the highest mountain around Chengxian. Chengxian is at 700 meters, and the mountain we hiked was 2000 meters high, so for us anyway, it was quite a day! The weather that day was perfect, not too hot but with a nice, warm sun. The highest peak of the mountain is an extremely narrow peak with vertical mountain cliffs all around, except for one small trail. When you stand on top of it, next to the Buddhist temple, and look straight down about 500 meters it almost felt like standing on top of the world.



changes until it is almost desert around Lanzhou. It felt wonderful to see our colleagues again. We spent time together talking, sharing experiences, and just having a good time. Tomas and I also managed to get in some grocery shopping for several things that we cannot find in our remote area (like olive oil). All in all it was a long and tiring weekend, but it was well worth it to see so many friends and colleagues again.

A few weeks ago we journeyed to the capital of Gansu, Lanzhou, to meet all of the Gansu Amity English teachers for a conference. It was a long trip both on Friday and Sunday, but it is fascinating to watch the landscape change as we travel. Where we live, in the southwestern corner of Gansu, we are surrounded by green mountains. As we travel to Lanzhou, the landscape slowly



Then the week after the Lanzhou conference, Tomas and I traveled to Xi'an on Friday, to meet our first visitors! My friend, Maria, and her husband, Magnus, chose to have their late honeymoon in China, and in their trip they included a visit to our place! We met in Xi'an for the weekend, and there we stayed in a nice hotel and enjoyed the spacious rooms (with wonderfully soft beds, unlike our extremely hard, Chinese beds) and we swam in the pool as well. We also toured some sites in Xi'an and ate great food, and did a little shopping. We really like the atmosphere in Xi'an, especially along some shopping streets! Tomas has become a great bargainer, so he helps me shop and he helped Maria and Magnus make a few purchases as well. I think it is a perfect combination: I get to shop for Chinese knick-knacks, and in the process, he practices his Chinese...!

Then on Sunday we traveled by train and car back to Chengxian. We showed them around the city, and some of the countryside, which, one could say, is the "real China," not just a big city. We had several short meetings with local people during their visit, since of course 4 foreigners is even more surprising than 2... We saw this man walking with an enormous burden on his back. The man was very short, much shorter than Maria and I even, and when we met him, he stopped to rest. We then asked if we could take his picture, which we could, and then we were able to talk with him for a few minutes. These short meetings make it feel like it is definitely worthwhile to study our Chinese! It was a wonderful visit, although we felt sad to see them leave.



arrived. Also, when we bike or walk outside town, we can see that the farmers are still hard at work on their fields. Their fields are literally tiny compared to anything we have seen before; they almost look like a regular-sized garden in Northern Minnesota! But the difference here is that these farmers live on that little "garden." Sometimes we see people working the land by hand, with tools, and sometimes we see farmers with an ox and a plow made entirely of wood. For us this is almost a little exciting to see this, because it feels like we *are* traveling in time. But for them, this is their reality. They do not have

In our last letter we wrote about how Tomas biked a few minutes into the countryside and felt like he was traveling back in time. Well, this month we have had some moments like that again. Now that it is late fall, when we go outside we can both smell and see smoke. This dirty smoke is coming from coal that they are burning to heat all of the homes around us. Of course we are grateful to no longer be shivering in our apartment, but we can already notice that the air here is not as fresh as it was when we first

anything better than hand tools or perhaps an ox and a wooden plow. For them, this reality is certainly not as “cute” as it seems to us. This is their reality and they need to farm to survive.



We hope that this letter finds you well. We are happy for all of the ways that we are able to keep in touch with friends and family while we are here. What would we do without the Internet?! We use the Internet for everything, including calling our families. This month I was even able to talk with my 97-year-old grandma twice on Skype! (see pic)

再见!

(Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

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