

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China
December 17, 2006

tomas.stenback@home.se

rachel.stenback@home.se

Phone in China: +86 939 3200667

MN phone number: 218-206-2468

Visit our web page: www.e455.se/kina



你们好!

(*Nimen hao!* = Hello!)

Advent Greetings!

Today is the 3rd Sunday in Advent and we attended our freezing cold church once again. The church was decorated with some tinsel and some Santa banners. Because the church is an unheated cement building, we could see our breath throughout the service. The sermon was a cool 100 minutes in itself, during which time we tried our best to follow along in the readings and understand a few words here and there! After church we walked across town to our favorite restaurant for lunch, but by that time, despite my thick wool socks, several of my toes were in pain from the cold!



But we are touched by the churchgoers' kindness. Last week two of our students, who also attend our church, found us because we did not attend church the previous two Sundays. We had decided not to go until Tomas' cough cleared up completely, because after the long services in the freezing cement building, we noticed that we did not feel healthier! But the church had heard that we were home because Tomas was sick, so they sent a huge bag of oranges and some Chinese snacks to us. We felt extremely

humbled; our church is probably housed in the poorest building we have ever seen, and when we are there and try to give our offering as discreetly as possible, we know they need it.

We are grateful for our warm apartment, especially when we notice the difference when we go anywhere else. Restaurants and other buildings are not heated at all, so they are getting very cold. We cannot understand why they don't close the doors and windows to the places, which would at least help a little! At the restaurant we went to today, there IS no door in the very back of the restaurant, and the front door is always open a crack



(many other restaurants just have some plastic hanging as a kind of door). I mentioned this to a student who said, "But if they had a door, then each person would need to open it!" Still, the waitresses all huddle around a tiny coal-burning stove that they have pulled into the middle of the restaurant, to warm themselves. When we are there we actually go and close the door, but we can't understand why they do not understand that before they bring in a tiny stove to heat a huge room, they should at least put doors on the building...! Especially for a country like China that is trying to figure out energy usage and yet since they do this with coal, which blackens many city's air, we hope that they will begin to realize that simple measures would help as well. Our classrooms are also becoming very cold

now. Today we went into town and bought some gloves without the fingertips so that I can use them for class. The windows in our classrooms are now frosty, which is a sign telling us that the rooms are too cold! For us it is not so bad, for we feel bad for the students who sit in their classrooms, in their jackets and gloves, all day long.

This past month we have been busy with classes, our movie nights (our 12th and final movie night for this semester this week), a Christmas get-together for our colleagues at our apartment, Chinese tutoring, and getting to know our students better.

We have learned a lot more about our students' lives now. For example, we now understand that many of our students are very, very poor in English. We do see that they are improving, however, and that feels great, and they are also very kind and interested as well. However, I was shocked when I assigned homework for the students, (the homework was to find an article on the Internet and summarize it). Unfortunately, some students found this assignment to be quite difficult. Two students turned in their summaries...in perfect GERMAN. When I questioned them about it, (I said, "Sie sprechen Deutsch?") they had not even known it wasn't English!

The students here have a very controlled life. Each morning they wake up to music which is played on loudspeakers throughout the campus. Then the students need to go outside and run before breakfast. Later they have classes, and after lunch almost everyone goes home during the 2.5 hour "nap time" break. After their classes they eat supper and then they need to go back to their classrooms to sit, each weekday evening, between 8-10 PM.



We feel very privileged to have visited some of our students' dorms last week. This was quite a shock for us. First of all, we were dismayed by how cold the students' rooms are!

6 students share a room, with no electricity except a few hours a day. The room itself is unpainted, cold, grey cement, and although the students have a bathroom in each room, they do not have any hot water in the sinks. They also do not have access to washing machines at all—they all wash their clothes by hand in their rooms and hang the clothes to dry. If they want to use hot water to wash, they need to walk across campus and buy hot water to fill a huge thermos, and carry it back to their rooms. We also heard this month that students need to pay money to shower. Showers are located across campus in a separate area. Because of the cost of the showers (more than the cost of a lunch, which for many of our students is expensive!) we were told by students how often they shower: once every other week during the winter. (!) Despite this, the students always look well-groomed and fresh, so they must do their best with what they have! But then one of my students asked me, “How often do you shower?” What does a person say to that question? “Oh, not every day...” I answered in order to be truthful. But the more we see here in China, the more we realize how many regular things we all take for granted in our lives back home!

Yesterday we had a Christmas get-together for all of the English teachers. 11 Chinese colleagues came, as did Thad and Michelle (Peace Corps) and Sarah, from England. Tomas and I had baked and prepared American and Swedish treats, such as Swedish saffron rolls, muffins, cookies, and some other things. The Chinese colleagues loved it all! It was great fun to watch them. First we called them all into the kitchen to explain a bit about the buffet table. I had arranged plates and napkins on one end of the table, and the food around the rest. Nobody understood at first what to do, despite our attempts to guide them. For a good 7 minutes, they all stood perfectly happily around the buffet table, just eating directly from the dishes there! Finally, Thad took a plate, filled it, and then showed them that they should go into the living room where we had set up chairs. But it was a great evening. We got to talk with colleagues that we otherwise have not had a chance to speak with, and it turned out to be quite a fun and relaxed time. After



people had all eaten, Tomas went to the kitchen for a napkin. (I had brought some Swedish Christmas napkins and these I had arranged on the table). Tomas took a napkin and while he was walking into the living room we heard, “Ooooh! THAT’S what that is!” Nobody had understood what the napkins were! In China, at least where we are, they do not have napkins. At most places people will have a roll of toilet paper on the table, or perhaps at a nicer restaurant, we receive tissues. So when they saw our colorful Santa and angel napkins, nobody had understood that they should actually take one! Then when they watched Tomas wipe his face with his napkin, they all went to get one.

But when they returned and after much oohing and aahing, several of the girls asked shyly, “Could I bring mine home instead of using it?” They wanted to show their friends!

Last week we both used the Christmas story from Luke, and the “Night Before Christmas” in class, because the students did not know the original Christmas story, or else they thought they knew it...One student suddenly stood up in my class, and said that he knew the Christmas story. He stood up and said something like, “A man named Jesus Christmas came and dropped money down a chimney, because the family inside was too poor and they needed money so the eldest daughter could get married.” So needless to say, we were quite happy to be able to bring in the original Christmas story, so that the students have seen it.

Many people have told us that they like reading our letters because they enjoy learning about China, since China feels so unknown and far away for them. But in some ways, it does not need to be so far away! No matter where you live, you can make a difference. Recently we learned that Amity Foundation, our organization in China, supports children who cannot afford even extremely small amounts of money in order to attend school. For about the cost of *one lunch* in a restaurant back home, you could send a poor Chinese elementary student to school for *a year* (approx. \$20). If you are interested in learning more, visit Amity’s web page at www.amityfoundation.org There you can also find contact information.

We will be celebrating Christmas on Hainan Island, in southern China, together with our Swedish friends and Amity colleagues, Gunnel and Per-Martin Hjort. We look forward to a relatively warm and hopefully relaxing weekend. We will tell you about it in our next letter!

Until then, we wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

再见! (*Zaijian!* = Goodbye!)

Rachel and Tomas

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

