

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China
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你们好!

(Nimen hao! = Hello!)



Happy Easter!



Spring semester is now in full swing. Since our last letter, we have had a busy but productive month, and we have also (finally!) had some really nice weather. Spring is now here, and with it we are enjoying sunshine, views of the surrounding mountains, and all of the lovely flowering trees. Everywhere we look, trees are bursting into pale or bright pink, white, purple, or yellow blossoms. People are out and about now more than before also, enjoying the weather and planting their fields, so there is always noise and activity.

Although we have now been here long enough for some tasks to now be routine, sometimes we suddenly realize how even regular things are actually quite interesting, as we noticed recently during our 8-minute walk to school. As we walk to school we first leave our building, then we pass the man who fixes bikes, and another group of older men who together play a lively game of checkers on the sidewalk next to the bicycle man.

Then we cross the street. Although we live in a remote area, there is usually a LOT of honking by the few vehicles speeding down our road. Along the road is a row of gorgeous flowering trees, which are bursting with pink blossoms. After we cross the street, we pass a group of women doing their morning exercises to blaring Chinese traditional music on a portable stereo. They are all dressed in brightly-colored jogging suits. As we continue to walk we enjoy bird song, which comes from the 5-10 traditional Chinese birdcages hanging from trees around the morning exercise women, that they bring with them in the mornings. A woman stands with a bicycle cart, selling a section of fresh pineapple on a stick. A man is usually out next to her, but on his cart he pops popcorn and sells by the bag. Everywhere we look, older men and women are out for a morning stroll. Younger men



and women bike by me on their way to work or school. Often fathers or mothers (or both, the whole family at the same time, 2-4 people) will drive their young children to school on the back of their moped. After we pass the morning exercise women we are almost at the school. The road leading up to the college is lined with tiny shops, some of which only sell a few cassette tapes or notebooks. These shops are tiny, with grey cement floors and walls, and no real door, maybe with just strips of plastic hanging in the entryway. These shops are open from early morning to late night. There are also many noodle restaurants, and these places are so small that the customers eat their bowl of noodles outside the restaurant, at a small plastic table outside.

Also thanks to the pleasant weather, we have been taking more walks, hikes, and bike rides to explore Chengxian and the area around it. Last week we took a long bike ride along the river. After biking for an hour along a narrow dirt path, which is what the local people use to walk home or to their fields, we ended up in a tiny village. Undoubtedly, the people in this village had never seen foreigners before, or so it seemed from their shocked expressions when we entered the village. They didn't even yell



“hello” at us. Despite the poor houses and the garbage strewn about—as it always is here in the poor countryside in China—the village felt like such a genuine, traditional place. We loved it there. As the village had almost no real roads, just walking paths, the only



sounds we heard were the sounds of roosters, hens, cows, and children playing. As usual, the houses never have grass around them, just dirt. We have come to understand now that grass is seen as a luxury item here in China. Whenever we see grass, there is almost always a paved path around it on which to walk, and often there are signs telling us not to “disturb” the grass. (Such as at our college, or in a park. Once Tomas cut across the grass, and he literally heard some students gasp when they saw him do it!) At local people's homes, if have any room around their house, they plant vegetables. Even a few square meters free will be planted with some type of vegetables. We have seen many houses where the vegetables begin almost right outside the door. No

space is wasted. When we have shown our students pictures of our childhood homes, they are shocked by all of the grass in the pictures!

As we explore we also learn through observation how regular things are maintained or handled here, such as garbage removal. Pollution is a problem in general in China; although where we live we are happy to enjoy relatively fresh air, due to the lack of industry. However, we certainly have a garbage problem. There is literally garbage strewn all about, and whenever there is a river, its banks will often be totally covered in garbage. Our guess is that rural areas in China have no system to take care of the garbage

problem, and with China's rising affluence, some people are consuming and throwing away more and more, while still others remain quite poor, and they seem to have even less of a system to handle the garbage. In order to raise this issue with our students, we brought a text to our reading classes about the garbage problem in Gansu. One student said during the class discussion that in her hometown in Gansu, sometimes people cannot drive or even bike down a certain gravel road, because it is so covered in garbage! Outside of our apartment building garbage is first thrown, in the open air, (which attracts rats) behind a low wall, and once in a while it is collected. Recycling almost doesn't exist, except for a few materials, but the problem is that people collect these materials AFTER the garbage is first thrown into a heap. In other words, after our apartment's garbage has been lying out in the open for a few weeks, then some people come and try to sort it out somewhat (we know they collect cardboard and plastic bottles) and later the rest is taken away by a garbage truck (see picture).



Recently we also observed "moving donkeys" with carts, probably hired to help a family or business move. We thought it was hilarious to see 4 donkeys with their loads, "parked" outside our apartment building. The local people seemed amused when I petted a donkey, and Tomas took pictures!

This month the semester has gotten off to a busy, but good, start. We are both teaching Extensive Reading again, and I am also teaching one class called "English Song and Performance." Last week I taught the class of 45 Chinese students to do the Hokey-Pokey! Although I have been busier because of the singing class, it has been a fun class, and very different from teaching reading. Along with teaching, we are hosting movie nights for Tomas' students this semester. He has 6 different classes of about 45 freshmen, so we have been having two movie nights per week, and the students really seem to enjoy it. Our students always ask lots of questions. One of Tomas' students asked us one evening, "How many children can people have in America?" She was referring to China's "One Child Policy." Also, at these movie nights, we offer the students some small hard candies as a snack during the movie. One girl wanted to thank Tomas for the candy, so she said, "Mr. Stenback, I really like your sugar!"



Together with our American colleagues, Thad and Michelle from the Peace Corps, we have also been busy helping the students re-organize an effective English Corner, which

now takes place on Mondays from 5-6 PM, and a Movie Night. Every Saturday evening the students can now watch English movies. Organizing these two seemingly simple events has not been easy; we have been trying to book a room for the movie nights since we first arrived! So now we are very happy that it is finally happening, and on a regular basis. The students are grateful for these simple, yet beneficial, activities. Since they cannot hear English anywhere else in China, for the most part, they really need to create opportunities to practice their English, and this is something that we have been focusing on helping the students do.



We continue to study Chinese with our tutors, this semester 3 times a week. Although we are happy to be making progress, Chinese really is a difficult language. Since each syllable can be pronounced in four different tones, each changing the meaning of the words, misunderstandings can happen. We recently learned that when we have been asking for no MSG in our food, we have actually been saying “And we do not want to eat scarves.” The word for MSG is dangerously close to the word for

scarf! Thankfully, in this situation the waitresses have understood through context! *(Picture: Michelle, from Peace Corps, and I, together with our Chinese tutors at a local Hot Pot restaurant).*

This semester we are also working towards helping the school create a well-stocked, cozy student reading room, “The Book Nook.” Our students have almost no access to English reading materials, except for their textbooks. The school is very excited about our plan, and thanks to some generous donations, we have been able to order an initial shipment of books. We hope that this plan will become a reality sometime later this semester. The idea is that once we have helped the school with the initial work, the room will be completely student-run and it will continue long after we are no longer here! We will need a lot of reading materials in order to make this room become a success; especially donations of new or used books and magazines would be greatly appreciated. Donations can be sent to our address; just mark them as “Book Nook.” Please contact us if you want to learn more!

We were happy to receive two sets of visitors this past month: Per-Martin and Gunnel Hjort, our friends and colleagues from Sweden, who teach in Lanzhou, Gansu, and Tomas’ cousin, Maria, and her husband, Olov. It is always fun to visit with friends, and it is especially fun to show people around where we live. We



walked all over town, into the hills and into the old part of town. Maria and Olov even visited some of our classes, and when they entered the room they received a huge round of applause from the students!



This past weekend we spent our first Easter in China. Except for in the church, China does not have Easter at all, but we brought in texts to our reading classes telling about the Easter story, and some Easter symbols as well. We received many questions from the students about the Easter story (some quite difficult to answer!) Our church was packed on Easter Sunday. The Easter sermon lasted 1 hour and 50 minutes (!) but the guest speaker was unusually charismatic

so it was fun to watch. We managed to follow along in our Bibles anyway, and catch words and phrases, and after that we imagined the rest! After the service we ate lunch at the church; they served noodles with vegetables, rice bread, and rice. It was a simple meal but we enjoyed it immensely, since it was really the first time we have had the opportunity to converse with some of the people in the church. Some of our students attend, so we were able to talk with them also. Although we felt far away from our families on Easter, we were once again grateful for modern technology, as we called our families on Skype, and we were even able to talk with my 97-year-old grandmother again, both looking into web cameras! Thanks to this technology, we do not feel as far away from our friends and family and we otherwise might feel. Next month we look forward to a conference with Svenska Kyrkan, our sending organization from Sweden, and in May my mother and her husband are coming to visit us.

Until next time, take care and please keep in touch! We love hearing from you!

再见! (Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

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