

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China
July 14, 2007

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!)



The sounds and rocking motion of the train inspired me to write one more greeting for this school year. As I write this, we are en route from Tianshui to Shanghai by train (about 20 hours), to fly home to Sweden for a few weeks, and then on to MN for a few weeks for a vacation before we return to China. The train ride sounds long, but really it is quite comfortable. We have beds in the section of the train called “soft sleeper,” which means that we are in a small private cabin with four beds. The beds have pillows and comforters, and there is a small table near the window. Hot water and a thermos are provided on the train, since the Chinese must have their tea and Ramen noodles! This train is also air-conditioned. We have been traveling for about 15 hours now and the nature here is totally different from the Chengxian area. It is totally flat here, and there are fields of water everywhere. Since we live in the north of China, we are always surprised when we travel and actually see rice paddies! There are rectangular rice paddies, interspersed with fields of water lilies. My guess is that this is for harvesting lily bulbs, which are popular to eat (and delicious!)

A train ride is a good place to reflect upon this past year, our first in China. In some ways it feels like it has flown by, but at the same time, it also feels like it was long. It has definitely been a wonderful experience for us and although we look forward to this summer vacation to see friends and family, we also look forward to returning to China again.



Probably the best part of this year has been getting to know our students. They are so sweet, and even though their English skills are low, they are enthusiastic and they make teaching here feel important and worthwhile. (This picture shows 3 of my students who came to our apartment to teach us to cook a few Chinese dishes. It was delicious, and so much fun to watch them in action!) We have also learned so much about China—although there is still so much more to learn of course—but we are

beginning to understand how some things work and why things are the way they are here. Our Chinese is also improving, slowly but surely. Also, although services are *looong* and in a dialect of Chinese, we feel blessed that we were able to attend our small church in Chengxian and at least feel fellowship with fellow Christians.

After a year in China we have also seen first-hand some of the problems that China is facing today. To read in the papers about the gap between the rich and the poor is one thing, but to live amongst the local people and see and feel—indeed, to even be a part of—that gap is completely different. I cannot understand why there is such a difference here between rich and poor. The Chinese people who have jobs and live in a city often live in relatively nice apartments, and they wear very fashionable, always clean, clothes. Five minutes away there are people living in the countryside. They still live in packed-dirt houses, wash their clothes by hand in the polluted stream, throw their household garbage right outside their house, and plow their fields by hand with an ox and a wooden plow. Millions of people in China live well below the dollar a day level of poverty. The people around us look happy when we walk into the countryside, and they do not seem hungry, since they have small fields with vegetables for sustenance living (and they often have a satellite dish on their dirt house that they have somehow been able to afford!) but still, the difference between how they live, and how local people live in the city, is staggering. The same enormous difference exists between Beijing and the poorer areas of China. We have seen this first-hand as well. Beijing is like another country compared to where we live! Our students always say in class that they dream of visiting Beijing, which is, in their minds, some kind of paradise.

Sometimes I wonder if when we live in China, we are contributing to the problem, or helping to eradicate it? I must believe that we are here to help the local people learn English better, which will, in turn, enable them to go back to their home villages in the future and hopefully become better teachers. Education is so important! It is a way to smooth over the dividing lines amongst a people.

The other day Michelle, my Peace Corps colleague, and I decided to meet to go into town and get our nails manicured. (In Sweden I could never afford this luxury, that in Chengxian only costs a little over a dollar, 10 RMB). As I waited outside, four tiny old men passed in front of me, each of them struggling to pull a wooden cart loaded with a heavy burden. The clothes these men were wearing were dirty, and as I watched them straining at their work I was struck by an indescribable feeling. This is these men's reality. Each day they sit at a street corner, waiting for someone to come and hire them to pull their goods for them to a different location. This work is backbreaking, and it is inhuman, if you will (it would not need to be people pulling these carts—it could just as well be a small tractor or a donkey). As I stood outside there in the hot sun, wearing my clean skirt and blouse, which I easily wash in our washing machine whenever I want, on my way to get my nails manicured—I was struck. These men do this every day, in order to bring home money for their families. In one day I am not sure they will earn a dollar—after all that hard work—the same amount of money that Michelle and I were about to spend on our manicure. It just seems so unfair that some people should be born into poverty and others, like us, were born in a totally different, more comfortable, situation.

During this past month, we have been very busy. Finishing up the semester and the school year means more work than normal, including in giving and correcting final exams and notebooks for all of our many hundreds of students. But we also enjoyed more visitors; Tomas' younger brother, Jonny, and their cousin, Markus, came to visit us. We met them in Xi'an, and then they came back to Chengxian with us, where they spent over a week. Although we worked, we also made time to visit



local sights, try local foods at all of our favorite restaurants, go bowling and play ping pong, and to visit the school and our students, and our church. Markus is over 6 feet tall (2 meters), which, compared to some of our students, looked like he was about twice their size! Everywhere we went, people stared and laughed, and they tried to stand next to him to see how tall they were (if they reached his shoulders or not). Jonny also visited some of Tomas' classes and one of mine, and of course our students loved meeting Mr. Stenback's brother! We had a great week together.

In our spare time we have also been busy working on things for the Book Nook student reading room. More books have arrived from people back home, although we still hope for many more. A few people have sent 2 or 3 books in a small package, and this is a great way to contribute. Sending just a few books keeps the shipping costs down, but still, every little bit helps! As I once read: "If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito". We hope that many things will arrive this summer, to help build up the room for our grand opening this September. Our students are so excited! (If you want to send anything, simply cut out our address, below, and mark the envelope as "Book Nook.")



We wish you a great summer!

再见! (Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

Rachel and Tomas

Rachel and Tomas Stenback
Longnan Teachers College
Chengxian, Gansu Province, 742500
China
Zip code: 742500

中国甘肃省成县 陇南师专科研外事处