

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China  
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你们好!

(*Nimen hao!* = Hello!)



Greetings once again! Sorry for the long silence, but we have been traveling all over for a great—but busy—summer vacation. Since we wrote last, we have literally been around the world: first we traveled to Shanghai where we spent only one day; then we went on to Sweden, then the US, and then back to China.

It was wonderful to see family and friends again, both in Sweden and in MN, and just sitting on the lawn or grilling in the evening felt great. We realized that we had missed that during our year in China. In Sweden it felt particularly good to be back in our own house and see that things were pretty much as we had left them! However, the first few days back in Sweden, we did feel out of place. For instance, it was very strange indeed to walk into a grocery store for the first time, where, compared to China, everything was perfectly organized, clean, quiet, cold, and empty (in China practically each aisle in the grocery store has a girl working in it). After Sweden we also spent nearly three weeks in MN, and then it was time to come back to China. We were a bit worried about how it would feel to come back to China again, after spending 6 very comfortable weeks in Sweden and the US, with all of the comforts of home and western food as well, but after just a day back in China, we felt that it was perfectly normal for us to be here also. No shock—and that was a relief! It seems we are getting used to quickly changing cultures.



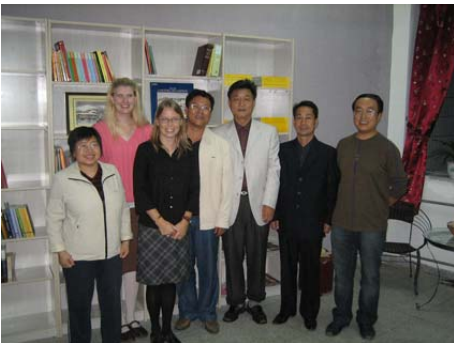
Back in China, first we attended a summer Amity conference in Nanjing, where we had the opportunity to meet new and returning Amity colleagues for meetings, conversation, church services, and more. After that we traveled to Chengxian by train.

Getting back to school was a bit rushed at first, since we arrived on an afternoon and had to get our schedules and start the next morning, but now we have gotten caught up and all

is well. We both teach the same students that we taught last year, which has made for an easier transition into the second year. We do, however, still teach over 500 students together, which is a lot to keep track of! Tomas teaches all Extensive Reading this semester, and I have Extensive Reading, plus two different classes of “English Song and Performance.” The idea is that this class will be valuable for our students, since the focus is on teaching them songs that they can use in the future when they teach their future students. This week we are doing “Twinkle, Twinkle”, “If You’re Happy and You Know It” and “Old MacDonald!”



The beginning of the school year means obligatory military training for new freshmen. This training differs from college to college, but it usually lasts a few weeks. Military training for college students began, we have heard, after the events in 1989 in the nation’s capital. For the military training, the students march around in camouflaged attire, singing songs, marching in unison, etc. This year the students sometimes even held weapons (fake, or unloaded, we hope) and shields. It actually felt uncomfortable to walk by hundreds of camouflaged students holding up shields, because it looked threatening, even if we know it was just training. The students, however, did not seem to be too bothered by it--despite the daily rain we have had so far this fall, and which they were out in every day! Whenever we would walk by, the students would giggle, wave, or sometimes even begin yelling “HELLO!” It was a strange feeling indeed to have hundreds of military-clad young students yelling greetings as we walked by!



The Book Nook student reading room is now open! After months of preparation, the room is finally up and running. Last week we had a Grand Opening, to which we invited English teachers and school leaders. Leaders are held in very high regard here in China, and hierarchy is important, so it felt great that two of the school leaders came. We had gotten a huge cake, (which, as usual, was more colorful than delicious, but it still felt festive) and three student librarians helped serve cake and tea to our guests. It turned out to be a great night! First I thanked everyone for coming, in as much Chinese as I could muster up, and then the leaders thanked us. During the evening they praised us for our creativity and they told us that the spirit of this room will live on long after we are all gone from here, and beyond the material goods in the room. That felt wonderful to hear, since getting the room started last year was like pulling teeth!

Now the room is open every day, and student librarians work in the room. The idea is that now



that the room is created, it will be self-sufficient, with student workers managing it every day. Through the process of creating this room, we have discovered many new things about the way things work in China, and about some cultural differences that we have never before even considered. For example, in the school library here, students never actually see the books. They just fill out little cards, give them to a librarian, who then goes to get the book for the students. So for the students to come to the Book Nook and be able to peruse the shelves for an interesting book is quite a new experience for them! Also, they have no idea how books are organized, so Michelle and I are explaining to all the students that foreign libraries are organized alphabetically. This is not easy for our students to understand, however; first they need to know which is the author's last name, because in China the last name is always listed first. Then they need to figure out how the book should be alphabetized, and this is not easy for them either, especially since in Chinese, there are no letters at all!

It is truly wonderful to see the students' reactions to the room. When we have visited to check on things, there have been 10-15 students in the room on average, and those that use the room seem in awe when they sit there. The rule for the room is "English Only", so the students speak in quiet voices with each other as they page through books or magazines. It is truly wonderful to see! Right now we have 386 books, which is great, and we are expecting more. We also still hope that people will continue to send us books and magazines throughout this coming year. If you would like to do this, please use the address label at the end of this letter.



Living in China over a year now has changed our perspective on many simple aspects of life. For example, I see now how we take our access to literature for granted back home. Chengxian does not have a library, and sometimes we see local people gathered on the street, around a person selling used, worn books or magazines. At home these would end up in the recycling bin, but here people are very interested in them because that is all they have access to. Also, access to electricity and water, despite our clean and modern apartment, is sporadic. Yesterday we had no electricity for many hours, and today the water was turned off—again—and when it came back on, for hours it was coffee-colored.

But most of the time, things do work, and for that and how well we do live, we are grateful.



Last weekend we went with our friend, Ren, for a long hike in the surrounding mountains. We love the nature around here, and it feels wonderful to get out of the noisy city to breathe the fresh air. We hiked for almost 5 hours, stopping just for a short lunch. The paths we walked upon are the paths that the local farmers use. When we had reached about our halfway point, and had at least



2 hours left to go to get back to Chengxian, we met two young men. They told us they were on their way into Chengxian to shop for supplies, and that they walk into Chengxian once or twice a week. In other words, for the local farmers to walk into the city for supplies takes them at least 5 hours roundtrip, on narrow, dirt paths. This is also how they bring their goods into town to sell. The local farmers always look at us curiously and are friendly when we talk with them, but it was a strange feeling to realize that the hike we took for pleasure is for them a necessity.

Walking along the path on our hike, all of a sudden things started falling around us. We quickly realized that it was walnuts! We looked up to see a farmer up in a tall tree, knocking down walnuts with a long pole. Ren asked the farmer if he could buy a bag from him, so for the past few days we have enjoyed totally fresh, delicious walnuts. In China, at least out in the boonies such as where we live, people eat a lot more seasonally than we do at home (and I think we can all learn from this). For example, in the months before we left for summer vacation we could not find apples or carrots, because those were not in season. Although it is sometimes a bit frustrating to eat this way, it really is natural, and it feels wonderful to buy totally fresh produce from a farmer who has just picked the vegetable and carried it into town.



Sometimes when the weather is nice we walk into town in the evenings (about a 15-minute walk) and eat supper at the Muslim Market in the middle of town. It has a great atmosphere. This is the season for corn on the cob, and several people grill it on the street so we buy it and eat it warm. There, sitting on low Chinese benches in the busy market in the evening, for a little while feel like we are actually a *part* of the local society, not just two foreigners. It is a great feeling.

再见! (*Zaijian!* = Goodbye!)

Rachel and Tomas

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