

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China  
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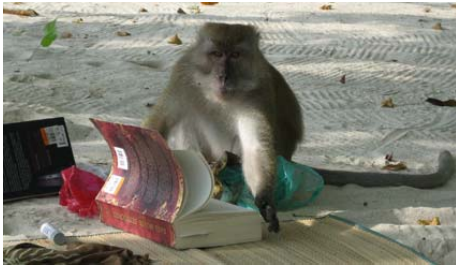
你们好!

(Nimen hao! = Hello!)

Happy (Chinese) New Year! First of all, we want to let you know that we have decided to extend our time in China by another year. We both feel very happy to be here and we feel that we have many things yet to learn and experience. Both Amity and Svenska kyrkan were happy about our decision. For various reasons, we are unable to stay here in Chengxian, Gansu Province, in the north, so we will need to move. As far as we now know, next year we will be in Guangxi Province, in southern China, bordering Vietnam. We don't know much about this move yet, and of course we are anxious to hear where we will live, so we will let you know as soon as we hear more! Through Amity colleagues we have already heard about the tropical heat, tropical plants, fruits, and unfortunately, giant tropical insects! But we have also heard that it is a beautiful, but very poor, province. (The great movie, *The Painted Veil*, was filmed in Guangxi Province).

After fall semester ended in January and we finished giving finals and grading, we traveled to Guizhou Province for Amity's Winter Conference. For nearly a week we participated in teaching workshops and meetings that were very interesting, but most importantly, we were able to spend time with other Amity colleagues and friends. Due to the extreme winter weather China had this year (the coldest winter in 50 years), we were unable to visit Amity's projects, so the conference was shortened to allow people to travel onward. The winter weather caused enormous amounts of problems in China, since the country is unprepared for such winter travel conditions. We were lucky to get out of Chengxian at all when we needed to leave in January, because the mountain roads were so slippery, most taxi drivers refused to drive us! Although this area of China does see some snow, it is generally not much, and as far as we can tell, drivers are very nervous about snow and ice, probably because their tires seem to be in terrible shape. There were many accidents this winter, including a tragic bus accident at a college that our Amity teachers told us about. Their school never told anyone about the accident (it was hushed up) but they heard about it through students. 14 students were killed in that tragic crash. I am sure that you heard about other weather-related problems in China; we heard, amongst other things, that 800,000 migrant workers were stranded in Guangzhou for a time, that large areas of the country were without basic supplies or heat, and the country experienced a multitude of other dangers and problems. Several of our students have told us this week how they suffered during their winter vacation, some even getting frostbite on their hands and feet while they stayed inside their homes. Coming from MN

and Sweden, where we frequently experience cold winters, this is a little hard for us to understand, but we know that it is because they are so ill-prepared to handle cold and snow. For example, apparently Chinese cities and the countryside here are not equipped with snow removal equipment such as plows. We were surprised when we drove to the Xi'an airport. The snow was really coming down, but on the highway there were some local women doing their best to keep the road clear—using only homemade brooms! China never ceases to surprise us.



After Amity's conference, we were happy *not* to be snowed in (as many people were) as we continued on our way. Due to the Chinese New Year and the college completely closing, (even turning off its heat, much to the disappointment of the other foreigners who spent a few weeks in any icy-cold apartment!) we took a trip south. First we spent two relaxing weeks in Malaysia, where we enjoyed the

beautiful nature around us (including several unexpected meetings with some very cute, but rambunctious wild monkeys). In Malaysia we traveled to the capital, Kuala Lumpur, which is a very clean, modern, green city, and to two different islands and Cameron Highlands. Although Malaysia is also an Asian country, in many ways it felt very western, very different from China.

We then journeyed onward to one of the most interesting places we have ever visited, Cambodia. Although our time there was short, we got a little feel for the country. Cambodia definitely felt Asian again. Although we have lived in China for 1.5 years and survived its chaotic traffic, we have still never seen anything like the traffic in Cambodia. The highways were constantly packed with all types of vehicles and sometimes even cows. Mopeds almost never carry only one person; as in China, whole families often ride together. Once we were surprised to see a father driving five children at the same time! Everywhere on the highway were trucks or semis carrying loads of goods, and perched on top of the goods were often several people as well, as the truck drove full-speed down the highway!



Never before have we visited a country whose past is so tangible in its present. This is true for many of its awesome sights, such as the temples around Angkor Wat (where we spent two days). But Cambodia's more recent, war-torn past is still tangible today as well. Evidence of NGO's or charity organizations



is everywhere. We even saw several Christian churches and, by chance, met some Cambodian Christians. They told us that in Phnom Penh today there are “many churches.” The Christians that we met were a group of 8 young women who together run the Jars of Clay café in Phnom Penh (recommended by Lonely Planet). The women explained that the café and shop is “their ministry.” It was a short but memorable meeting with those hard-working, friendly young women, who also

give 10 % of the café’s income to people in need in their community.

It is a common occurrence in Cambodia to see people living with disabilities caused by war or landmines. Around Siem Reap and the temples of Angkor Wat, we saw many groups of men sitting on the ground, playing local music. In front of the people they had signs that said things like “We have been injured by mines but we want to work, not beg” so instead of begging, they played music and hoped for the generosity of visitors, or the sales of CD’s. It was very inspirational to see these young men, all of whom were either blind or had lost at least one limb.



Tourism is rapidly increasing in the country; we read somewhere that 2 million people visited Cambodia last year. Beyond the touristy area of Siem Reap, however, begging was much more prevalent, and especially young children seemed confused by how to best handle the presence of so many foreigners. As a tourist or, I imagine, as an NGO, it is very difficult to meet young children begging for food or money. Some children ran around Phnom Penh, dirty and naked, while others looked decently dressed (some even with simple jewelry), and yet many of these children would approach foreigners to beg. For some, it almost seemed like a habit. We could see groups of clothed children, running and playing together, but when we came, a few would break away from their friends to beg from us. Other times some of these children even crawled up to our tables if we sat at an outdoor café. Needless to say, it is a very disturbing sight, one that I cannot help but wonder how it can best be handled, but more importantly, if we aren’t inadvertently partially the cause of. Finally, while reading a “Responsible Travel” brochure, we read that there are several NGO’s working in Cambodia specifically to help get those children off the streets, back to school, and the article strongly advised against giving children money or food, since that simply dissuades those children from seeking a different life. (They encourage supporting such NGO’s directly instead). But that is sometimes easier said than done. When even young mothers sometimes spread their naked, dirty, crying children right out on the sidewalk where tourists walk, hoping for some cash, something is definitely not right with the society. Tourism is giving the



country a giant boost, but I can't help but wonder: if the tourists (and NGO's?) weren't there, would many of these people rise up on their own to find a better life?



Although traveling in countries like this is thought-provoking and can even be disturbing in some ways, most of it was very uplifting. One day we took a “little” boat trip (9 hours on a crowded wooden bench on an ancient wooden boat! That was Tomas’ idea...) from Siem Reap to Battambang. The boat traveled the river, allowing us to glimpse local Cambodians’ daily life. We passed whole villages that floated on docks, and many houses built on stilts, right in the river. As we

passed their houses, young children and sometimes even the parents would call and wave at us, or run alongside the boat as long as possible, laughing and waving. (We are making a short video from this boat trip that we will put up on our web page soon).

We have now returned again to Chengxian and it is nice to be back. It is hard to believe we only have four full months left here. This semester we plan on adding to the Book Nook student reading room as much as we can, and on training our student librarians so that hopefully, the room can continue even without our help. We continue to receive donations of books from various sources (current total: 707 books and more on the way!) These books mean so much to the students. Students have commented, “I wish we would have had this room when I first arrived at this college,” but at least now it will be in place for both current and future students.

Please keep in touch; it really means a lot to us! Although we do our best to stay busy, sometimes we do get bored or feel uninspired, so we are always grateful for the prayers and support of friends and family. Calls and simple notes in the mail mean more to us now than we ever knew they would before we came! ☺

再见! (Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

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