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你们好! (Nimen hao! = Hello!)



Was it a lifetime ago that we wrote last? So much has happened! A month ago we were busy with all kinds of things in Chengxian, including with the Book Nook, which hit our 1000-book dream goal! I had a big birthday, and my little brother, David, even came to celebrate it with us. We also had an Amity Gansu regional conference in Lanzhou, and as there was a Chinese holiday and no classes, we used that opportunity to travel to the province of Inner Mongolia, and to Beijing. “Highlights” from the trip included staying in a traditional-style yurt in Inner Mongolia, and getting drenched in a freak thunderstorm while on a 10 km Great Wall hike (*photo, above, is taken directly after*). My third-year students finished up their classes and I gave final grades, and Tomas gave midterms to his 2nd-year students. But, although we are now safe, the terrible earthquake that has now devastated parts of China, especially Sichuan, disrupted our lives. Chengxian is in southern Gansu, almost on the Sichuan border, so we also experienced the earthquake. Since so many people have been asking questions, most of this letter will detail our experience. You can also find links to relevant newspaper articles on our web page.

It was on a beautiful day, on Monday, May 12th, without any warning at all, that it hit. Tomas and I were visiting with our friend and colleague, Michelle, in our 4th-floor apartment. I had just started to eat my lunch when I noticed something strange. “Why is my plate moving?” I asked. Tomas said, “No...” Then I felt something more. “I’m moving!” Then Michelle felt it too. What happened in the next few moments is a blur now, as time both seemed to stop—and yet to race—at the same time. The apartment started to rock back and forth. Tomas told me later that he went into the kitchen to support a shelf that had started shaking, but somehow I was already at the door, grabbing our keys, and yelling, “LET’S GET OUT OF HERE!” My only thought, having never heard of earthquakes in that area before, was that our building was collapsing on its own. The shaking got stronger as we ran down the corridor. On the



stairs the shaking became so violent that we could barely stay upright as the whole staircase swayed back and forth beneath us. I can only describe it as trying to run on a waterbed, or on a bowl of Jell-O. I remember the shock, and sadness, I felt in the back of my mind, that just a few moments before, we had been relaxing together on a beautiful day, and now I could hardly believe we were running for our lives as our building was about to collapse upon us. As we made it to the final two flights of stairs, the tremors became so violent that the cement above and around us cracked with horrible noises and pieces of cement and dust fell around us as we ran. On the last flight of stairs we yelled to encourage each other to hurry up, and I called out a fervent prayer.

Finally outside, we sank onto the grass in front of our building, which was already full of dazed students, who began hugging us and asking if we were okay. The ground continued to shake as we crouched down, holding onto each other. Then we knew it was an earthquake.



The following hours passed slowly. Once we had gotten over the initial shock, we tried to help students. It was very hot outside, as we were all herded out onto the school's soccer field, with no shade, and told to keep away from any buildings. Anytime anyone heard a noise, the students would scream and look up at the buildings around us, expecting them to come crashing down. But they didn't, so eventually the students sat down. A few students had

been injured getting out of the buildings (some had jumped from windows), and others had fainted. Fear and worry abounded, since we did not yet know where the epicenter was, and students were very worried about their families and friends. Most telephones were not working, nor was the electricity. We were not allowed to go into any buildings. After a few hours, our thoughts turned to the immediate needs of the 3900 students, the teachers, and the many elderly grandparents and small children on campus. Everyone needed water, and the shops and restaurants in town had all quickly shut down. We were later informed that the school canteen would provide food outside. Later yet, some tarps were hung vertically to create a toilet area for boys and another for girls. However, after just a few hours, this area became a disgusting place—no thoughts were given to hygiene or sanitation. No trenches were dug.

In the early evening, we were told to quickly go up to our apartments to gather some warm clothes, as we would spend the night on the soccer field. Tomas, braver than me, went into our building and got some blankets and sweaters. That was when he noticed the giant cracks in our building—through one, he could see the sky outside! But many students were too nervous to go inside, so they spent the night seated, huddled together for warmth. Before we went to sleep, Tomas and I went around to our students, as some were crying and most felt it was unsafe to go to sleep.

In the morning when we awoke (to see many students taking pictures of us with their phones) Michelle and I saw that a kind student had covered us with her own quilt. But most students hadn't slept at all as the temperatures had dropped to about 8 C, and especially not after a big aftershock woke us all around 4 AM. The next day most students were exhausted, and still scared. We were fed twice that day also (plain rice or noodles), but after just one day, with so many people, the sanitation situation was growing dire. A clinic moved onto campus. By then we had heard how bad the quake was less than 200 miles away in Sichuan. The sun beat down on us all day long as we waited. Later that afternoon a big truck arrived, carrying what we assumed were tents. Nope! We were shocked to see that the "supplies truck" was loaded with... basketball hoops! Although they had probably been ordered earlier, we felt a little angry watching the school's workers set up the hoops, while we strongly felt they should have been digging trenches for latrines and arranging sanitation measures to prevent spread of disease.



That evening, thankfully one building was unlocked to allow students to use the bathroom on the first floor. Later yet, leaders from Gansu's foreign affairs office in Lanzhou came by car to check on the 5 foreigners at the college. When they saw us, and our "beds" on the dirty soccer field, they were appalled. They quickly overruled our own Waiban (contact person) and decided to send us to Tianshui to stay at a college there, where they felt we would be safer. We were then given 15 minutes to pack. It was strange to go back into our apartments, which looked like they had been robbed, with things strewn about everywhere, and water coolers tipped and the floors flooded. But it is amazing how clear everything seemed. (Normally I am terrible at packing and making decisions!) What did we really *need* to get out of the building, should it later collapse? Surprisingly little. We brought our computer, camera, passports, wallets, and a few changes of clothing. In that moment of clarity, we saw that all of those things that we had amassed in two years didn't really matter at all. And then we left Chengxian, exhausted, but safe.

After one night and day of waiting and frustration in Tianshui, I got a call later the next night—my 98-year-old grandmother in Minnesota was seriously ill, and I needed to come home right away. I could hardly believe the timing, but I had no choice but to leave, the

very next evening. It felt terrible to leave Tomas behind in the uncertainty, and although I said a quick goodbye to Thad, Michelle, and Jackie, our colleagues, at that point we didn't expect that I was leaving for good. We still hoped to come back for our final month of teaching. Although I knew I needed to be with my family, I felt like I was betraying our students and colleagues, because I hadn't been given a chance to say goodbye to anyone. With only a small backpack for luggage, I also felt like a refugee.



Finally Tomas received word about our future: after a long wait and many discussions amongst our school, the provincial leaders, and Amity, it was decided that we would never return to Chengxian to teach again. It was not deemed safe. So, back in Tianshui a few days (and several aftershocks) later, Tomas was given one day to return to Chengxian to pack everything. This was a terrible day for him, as he saw the near-apathetic looks of many students still out wandering outside, waiting, and for him it was a day of rushing, packing, hasty goodbyes, fast decisions, and some arguments as well. Towards the end of the day students started dropping by our apartment. Many of them looked devastated. Some asked, "Is it okay if we just sit here and watch you?" so while he packed, students sat on the floor, some crying because we were leaving, and also because of their sad situation, sleeping outside, and afraid of more earthquakes.

Now Tomas has just arrived in MN. We will be in the US and Sweden this summer, before we return to China to start our third year, in Guangxi Province. Although physically we are okay, frequently I catch myself thinking, with pangs of regret, of all of the things that we had planned to do during the rest of the year. What will happen to the Book Nook? And although we had to go, we also feel bad that we left our students and colleagues behind, without even saying goodbye. But, I hope they will keep in touch, and in the end, we know how lucky we were. If we would have been closer to the epicenter, I don't think our buildings would have held. And our "not getting to say goodbye"-concerns are really quite small compared to the terrible tragedy all of the people are still enduring in Sichuan.



When we look back on our two years in China, what strikes us are the many differences we have experienced. We have always tried to be treated the same as the Chinese teachers, not just as foreigners, but also as real teachers and friends. Yet here we sit in the US, because Chengxian is considered to be too dangerous for us, while our Chinese colleagues are still there, sleeping outside under tarps and teaching during the day. No matter what we do, we will always be different; maybe that is not such a bad thing? Perhaps we should just accept that we are different and not try to just like everyone else. We will never forget our time in Chengxian, nor will we forget *how* we left. But

hopefully we will bring these thoughts and ideas with us to our next place in Guangxi Province, and even in our future as well.

Special thanks to all of you who have been keeping in touch and praying for us. After the earthquake we felt very far away, so we really appreciate every message, note, and phone call we received! Now our thoughts and prayers go out to all of the tens of thousands of people whose lives were lost, or forever changed, by this terrible earthquake.

Psalm 68: 19-20: Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death.

再见! (Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

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Note: this is a new address!