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Dear friends, 你们好!



We hope you have had a nice Christmas! Since we only have two days vacation for Christmas, and since our school surprised us with a big, colorful Christmas tree, we decided to stay home in our Longzhou apartment. Therefore, on Christmas Eve we stayed at home, made tacos (all the imported fixings bought in Nanning), and spent a relaxing day talking with our families back home. Several groups of students also stopped by with Christmas cards or gifts. Although it was cozy, of course the distance between our families and us feels greater during Christmas than at other times.

On Christmas Day we attended our local church's Christmas program. About 25 people usually attend church services, but on Christmas Day, the church was packed with over one hundred people, all crowded together in the room. (Watch a short new video from this service on our web page). Chinese Christmas programs are like an extremely chaotic, Bizarro-world version of ours back home. First of all, most of the older ladies and children wore bright red Santa hats, and several people came in full Asian theater-style makeup (even the older men had painted their faces white and penciled in thick, dark eyebrows! Later we saw that these men were somehow involved in the program). While people performed, the congregation was anything but silent. Children continued running around, and people of all ages continued talking—loudly—and even answering in their telephones. For the first time in China, I sang a solo, and I am quite sure that no one listened to it at all! But, the Chinese church seems to be quite aware of the importance of Christmas. As we mentioned last year, Christmas is coming to China through the stores, and people are becoming very curious as to what it is all about. Many people know that it has something to do with the church, and so, all around China, people are finding their way to the churches on Christmas. It is quite exciting to witness this development first-hand. The young pastor in our church did a good job of speaking for just a few moments between



performances, in language simple enough that even we could often grasp the meaning of what she shared!

Before we gave our final exams, we studied Christmas both in and out of our classrooms. This has been a very meaningful experience for us, as we discussed everything from the Nativity story, to modern-day traditions and customs. We also showed the movie, “The Nativity Story” for most of our students. Students are often surprised and moved when they realize that Jesus was born in poor conditions to which many of them can relate.

These past few months, we have visited the local church as often as possible. Although it is a small, poor church, it has a warm and friendly atmosphere. However, several weeks ago we were quite surprised during a service when, in the middle of the sermon, the young pastor suddenly fainted dead away on the cement floor! Together with some others, I rushed to the pulpit to see if I could help. The pastor’s mother and an elderly man accepted the water bottle I offered them, but then they motioned for all of us bystanders to go and sit back down. Within a few moments, Tomas and I were shocked to see the congregation turning on the midi-file “organ” music again, and taking up a hymn! The congregation then heartily sang the hymn, while the pastor’s feet were still sticking out from behind the pulpit right in front of us! I told Tomas then, “I hope I never faint in the classroom; the students will probably just continue the class without me!” (Later we talked with the pastor, who had apparently come to the church despite having a fever).

This fall we have been honored to have several guests. First, in late October, two visitors came from our sending organization, the Church of Sweden, and in early December, two colleagues from Amity visited as well. Both visits were good, but short. Then in November, my father, and Tomas’s parents, met in Beijing and then flew down to Guangxi together to visit us, on their first trip to China. We spent two weeks together. (See a new video from their visit on our web page). During their visit, we visited the famous rice terraces in northern Guangxi again.



Tomas and I taught classes while they were here, and my dad visited all of my classes, which the students loved. For the second time this fall, we also went to Hanoi, Vietnam.



Except for Nanning (three hours away by bus) our closest city is Hanoi. Therefore, one weekend Tomas and I visited Hanoi, and we returned for a second visit with our parents. Although Hanoi is only about six hours from Longzhou, it is actually very different from China. For one thing, Chinese

traffic pales in comparison with Vietnamese traffic. We have never seen a more chaotic city than Hanoi, in any of our travels! The streets are packed with mopeds and bicycles, and occasional vans or cars, all mixing together on old, narrow streets, and each person honking incessantly. (I often wear earplugs while shopping!) After our first visit to Hanoi, we both felt it was nice to come back to organized, tidy, relaxed China again!



On the other hand, Hanoi is a city that is absolutely brimming with movement and life everywhere one looks. It is fun to see such a cultural difference only a few hours away. The food in Hanoi is quite different from Chinese food (except that rice and vegetables are staples in both places), and the language is different. But despite the shocking chaos, visiting Hanoi is a lot of fun, especially trying new Vietnamese restaurants, walking the Old Quarters and admiring the different

French/Vietnamese architecture, the vibrant street life, and shopping for local crafts. There are also several interesting historical and cultural monuments in Hanoi; for example, the War Museum (focusing on the “American War” as it is called in Vietnam) is quite an interesting and educational, but disturbing, place to visit. Watching a young, fashionable Vietnamese mother encouraging her young children to pose on a captured American tank for pictures is eye-opening indeed. Vietnam is certainly a green, lush, interesting country we hope we can visit more in the near future.



These past few months we have become more involved in helping the students with their pre-existing English Center. Before Amity’s visit in early December, we asked the school if it would be possible to fix up the room a little, since the walls were filthy, curtains broken, and everything generally very run-down. We were impressed when they agreed to help, within just a week. Now one wall is painted a soft purple color, and the new purple curtains have really given the room a facelift.

The student librarians tell us that more students are now visiting the room, which is fun to see, especially when there is now an “English Only” rule there so it is a great place to practice their oral English. We still hope to be able to help more, so should you feel inspired, please feel free to send any (used or new) young adult books. (Address labels on our web page; e-mail if you have any questions or would like book suggestions).



Some of you have sent us stamps, and we want to pass on thanks from our appreciative students. Whenever we have amassed enough stamps, we invite groups of students over for an evening visit to our home. Last time they asked us, “How can you have so many stamps for us?” and when we said that our friends and family have sent them for our students, some looked like they would cry! Stamp nights—and other such evenings we have had this semester, such as students cooking with us on

several occasions—are an enjoyable way for us to get to know our students better, in an informal setting. It is also a simple way to make a cross-cultural connection.

We are grateful not only for our kind students, but also our colleagues. Our contact teachers, Millie and Terrence, and Terrence’s wife, along with Jessica, Margaret, and Megan, are all Chinese colleagues that we are happy to get to know. We have invited them all over a few times also, sometimes for Tomas’s soon-to-be-famous homemade pizza. Megan recently announced that she is expecting a baby. She and her husband are very excited, and although she is only about a month along, Megan’s parents-in-law have already moved across several provinces to move in with them to help take care of the baby. Although it is common in China for in-laws to live with their grown children, we were surprised that they came after just a month of pregnancy! Several people have disclosed some information about this kind of living arrangement, saying that the baby’s young mother, and the woman’s mother-in-law, often end up having serious problems getting along. In a culture where respecting one’s elders is so crucial, for the mother-in-law to raise the grandchild in front of the mother often exposes generational differences that are perhaps becoming more apparent in this rapidly developing society.

The semester is now ending, so the school will soon close down for the Chinese New Year break. Tomas and I are very excited, because this weekend we will travel to Tibet for a 10-day trip. Then we have two conferences, first with all of the Amity teachers in Lanzhou, Gansu, (we hope to meet some old students there) and then we will return home for a few days to repack, before we travel to the Philippines for another conference, this time with our Church of Sweden colleagues in Asia. After that busy time we will spend a little extra time traveling around the Philippines.

Until next time, please keep in touch. We wish you a Happy New Year of peace and blessings.

再见! (Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

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