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March 13, 2009

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Dear friends, 你们好!

Greetings! Spring has now arrived to southern China, bringing fresh local bananas and a wave of hot weather (35-36 C) and high humidity, and now emerging into milder temperatures, occasional storms, and even higher humidity. Everything in our apartment is constantly damp. Precious chocolate, if left out, becomes soggy, papers are crinkled, spice shakers don't work, clothes and towels are never dry, and yesterday we thought we had a leak somewhere in the bathroom, until we realized that the floor is just soaked due to the humidity.



Last week we enjoyed a visit from my brother, David, who became the first person to visit us in China twice. He attended many of our classes, and nearly 2 meters tall, he was quite a hit amongst our students. Unfortunately, most of the time it rained, so we stayed in a lot playing games. We also went to Hanoi for the weekend, where we sampled the Vietnamese cuisine, shopped, and survived the traffic.

The last time we wrote, we described our Tibet trip in January. After Tibet, with the school still closed due to the Chinese New Year, we went to the Philippines for a Church of Sweden conference. We loved our trip, especially the friendly, easy-going Filipino people. The Philippines is comprised of more than 7,000 islands, has a land area slightly larger than Arizona, and over 90 million people. During our stay we made it to nine islands. Our first impression of the Philippines is that it is similar to other places in Southeast Asia, but at the same time, its history and culture are unique. The historical presence of the Spanish can be seen in the architecture and in the plethora of old stone churches that dot the landscape, and the American presence in the first half of the 1900s can still be felt in many ways, not the least through language. English is one of two official languages, making it the first time we have traveled in Asia without a language barrier.

We spent a few days in Manila before our conference. Manila is a city of contrasts, with expensive shopping malls full of well-dressed Filipinos, while outside the shiny façade, mothers begging with small, dirty children await someone's pity. Manila is a dusty city that smells of exhaust fumes that spill out of the popular Jeepneys. Unfortunately, there is a very visible prostitution problem. In the evenings, Tomas went out to buy groceries, and each time he was propositioned by both women and men. He felt very uncomfortable, especially since this must mean that this is a lucrative business for them.



The Church of Sweden conference was great. Unfortunately, three of our colleagues were unable to attend, so we were only eight people. We spent the week on an isolated part of Guimaras, near Iloilo. In many ways, Guimaras is a tropical paradise, but we were less than excited by our living quarters. We stayed in nipa huts (nipa refers to the traditional grass roofing) without electricity (except a

few hours each evening) and unfortunately, we shared our hut with several critters. Although I like small geckos, I was shocked once while indisposed in the bathroom to see a huge (foot-long) gecko staring at me, plastered to the back of the bathroom door! Despite Tomas's best efforts, the gecko was unwilling to move out (after all, he was there first...) so from then on, I just accepted his beady eyes staring at me from the doorframe every time I had to visit the powder room!



We had a good conference with meaningful discussions, relaxing devotions and intimate worship services. We also learned valuable information about the Philippines, especially its churches. The Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia with a predominately Christian, mostly Catholic, population. We visited one of the Church of Sweden's partner churches, IFI, where two of our colleagues work. In Iloilo we also watched a fiesta parade. Fiestas are

extremely popular in the Philippines, and involve locals dressing up and painting themselves to look like native tribes. While it was fascinating to watch, I could not help but wonder if native people appreciate being portrayed in this way.

After the conference, Tomas and I spent a few weeks' vacation traveling around. First we visited Boracay, a perfect island paradise with one of the best beaches in Asia. Then we traveled south to Bohol and Panglao Island. In Bohol and Panglao we were able to see more local culture and experience unique nature, including the Chocolate Hills and the world's smallest primate, the endangered and tiny, cute Tarsiers. Tarsiers can only be found in this part of the Philippines, and we saw them in a natural environment when we visited a Tarsier Sanctuary in Bohol. In Bohol we also had a chance to talk with several local people. We learned that locals eat fish and rice, every day. One man



told us that he eats fish and rice daily, but another man said his family eats fish and rice *three* times a day!



We took a dolphin watching outing early one morning, and we were ecstatic to see hundreds of dolphins jumping all around us! Then we stopped at an island with a protected coral reef for snorkeling. From the beach a local guide brought up his boat to bring us out to the reef. I took one look at his tiny, wooden canoe and told him that I thought the boat was too small for three people.

“No problem, ma’am!” he cheerfully replied. Doubtfully, we got into the boat and he rowed us out to sea. After about 20-30 meters, a huge wave splashed over our miniscule vessel, drenching us all, and then one more wave hit. “We’re swimming!” I shouted and dove out of the boat. Unfortunately, we capsized right on top of the coral reef, and the huge waves tossed us repeatedly onto the sharp coral, cutting our hands and feet, but it could have been much worse. Another local man soon came with another, slightly larger canoe to rescue us, and then



we were able to snorkel. The snorkeling was unlike anything we have ever seen before. At one point Tomas said that I must have had a thousand small, beautifully colorful and curious fish surrounding me in a vivid cloud. It was truly amazing. Later our local snorkeling guide told us about his personal financial woes. “You know, there is an economic crisis in America. There are fewer tourists now.” To watch this local man in his tiny wooden canoe at work on a miniscule island in the Philippines, and hear how he is affected by the global economic crisis shows just how far-reaching the problems have become, and how

small the world has become.

After Bohol we traveled to another small, beautiful island, Bantayan. Bantayan is like the Bermuda Triangle of the Philippines: when people visit, they often never leave! We met several now-locals of foreign descent that came to Bantayan and became so enamored of the place, they ended up marrying a local woman and going native. Unfortunately, during our three days in Bantayan we had a typhoon, but luckily it passed after a few days. When we bought our boat tickets to leave, I asked for the same type of ticket we had gotten before, namely a first-class seat, which only means an air-conditioned area of the boat for a few cents more. The man hesitated before replying, “It’s a cargo boat, ma’am.” We were a little nervous when we left but the trip went fine, but we had to squeeze between huge diesel trucks to find our wooden benches.

We ended our fascinating time in the Philippines in the dirty city of Cebu City. There we stocked up on dried mango and other local delicacies. While shopping in the huge grocery store, suddenly we noticed that everyone had stopped in their tracks and the store had grown completely quiet. Then we heard a woman's voice over the store's loudspeaker, "Hail Mary, full of grace..." Everyone stopped and waited patiently while the woman prayed for several minutes over the loudspeaker. Then she was finished, and everyone mumbled "Amen" before continuing their evening shopping. What a bizarre but touching ending to our Philippines trip.

The spring semester is now underway. Tomas has been home several days with a fever, and I have heard on more than one occasion that I have not done a good job providing what the Chinese people think a person should eat when they are sick. I told my students I brought him noodles, and they looked upset, "Oh no! He should have porridge!" Luckily, despite my failure as a wife, he is almost recovered!

Often we visit the school's English Center, and we are continuing to help the student librarians improve the room by arranging an magazine area (students *love* magazines) and encouraging them to enforce the room's "English Only" rule in order to improve their English skills. It feels so great to watch shy students grow in their role. We have also heard from our former students in Gansu that the Book Nook is thriving, with lots of students visiting the popular reading room. It feels so great for us to hear this! Any support (books or magazines) of these reading rooms is greatly appreciated; please find our current address label on <http://china.e455.se> and if you would like to send to the Book Nook, please contact us by e-mail for an address label.

A few weeks ago in class we brought in various topics for the students to practice their English. We asked, "What is your most treasured possession?" We were surprised to hear: "My glasses," one student said, "because without them I cannot see at all." "My English dictionary, because I had to work for so long to be able to buy it." "My teacup, because it was a gift from my sister and she has one just like it." Standing in the classroom, touched by my students, I realized, *This is why I am in China*. We chose these questions for fun, but I never expected anyone to say "my glasses" or "my dictionary." How often would we, in the west, be grateful for such simple yet vital items? Through understanding other cultures we gain important insight into our own culture and ourselves.

We wish you a blessed Lenten season!

再见! (Zaijian! = Goodbye!)

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