

Chengxian, Gansu Province, China  
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The Christmas season is upon us, at least in our apartment, in the Book Nook, and in our hearts. In the rest of China, however, at least in the rural areas, there are no signs of Christmas. Some commercial aspects of Christmas are trickling into Chinese shops; for instance, last year we were able to find a few Santa heads to hang on the wall. The Chinese people that we know recognize the word Christmas, and Santa Claus (who, in Chinese, is called “Christmas Old Man”: *Shengdan laoren* 圣诞老人). Beyond that, Christmas can only be found in churches. Like last year, we have focused on Christmas in our reading classes, by bringing in informative texts that include both the original Christmas story from Luke, and the history of some parts of Christmas, such as trees, stockings, etc. It feels important to discuss this important season with our students, because the problem with bringing over some aspects of a holiday into a new culture is that important information (such as the reason for the season, the Nativity story) for most people is totally unknown.

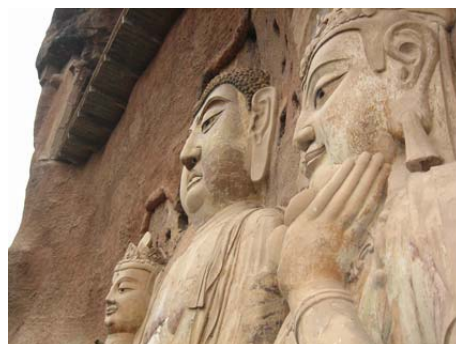
Since we last wrote, we have been busy with our normal teaching schedules, Chinese lessons, and our other activities, such as Saturday Night English movies that we help arrange, and visits to the Book Nook. Tomas participated in a soccer tournament last month, as the only teacher, for the English Department soccer team.



a famous old temple outside of Tianshui, called Majishan. This old temple is a mesmerizing labyrinth of staircases, built outside of a mountain. It is a truly amazing place to visit, with all of its paths, Buddha statues, and paintings.

In November, all of the Amity teachers in Gansu province had a regional conference meeting in Tianshui. As always, it was good to get together with our teacher colleagues to share stories and experiences (not to mention to enjoy some western treats from the bigger cities, such as banana bread for me and bacon for Tomas!) On

Saturday afternoon we visited



We have known for months that we would “soon” move to campus. We have not looked forward to it, since we had a very comfortable and nice apartment before, but we began to prepare. For weeks this fall the college kept telling us “soon you will move...” but they would never tell us when the move would take place. Since the college did not have a good apartment for us,

they promised that they would give us two different apartments and open up a little door between them. Then two weeks ago we were told that we *probably* would move that weekend sometime. Early on a Sunday morning we awoke to a knock on the door. It was a secretary from the school. “Yes?” Tomas said. “You are moving,” she said. (I was hiding in the bedroom, still in my pajamas, listening to their conversation). “When?” I heard Tomas ask. “Now!” she said. And thirty minutes later, 10 people entered our home and promptly began to haul everything away! Since the school had not told us when we would actually move, we hadn’t dared pack all of our teaching clothes or books or other personal items, so within an hour all of these last things were thrown haphazardly into big plastic bags and moved as well! The day before we had visited the new apartment for the first time, after getting a call from the school. “It is not possible to open up between the two apartments,” our contact person said. Needless to say, we felt quite frustrated when they waited until the day before our move to actually begin to knock out the wall, only to say that it was not possible! So, last Sunday we finally moved, but not into one apartment--into two!

In one apartment we have our bedroom, an office, and a bathroom, and in the other we have a small kitchen, dining area, living room, and another small bathroom. Always remembering our keys to go between rooms is taking some getting used to! Look for a new video tour of our new apartments on our web page very soon.

Although it is mostly frustrating to have the two apartments, through all of the problems we have seen and faced we have learned a lot about China (learned the hard way?) Everything that could be a problem in an apartment HAS been; everything from the plumbing, to the electricity, to the water and the Internet, and everything in-between, has needed fixing. Some things are still not fixed. Through this experience we realize two things: 1) we shouldn’t take for granted when everything in our lives and our homes are going well and going smoothly, and 2) Chinese people deal with problems differently from us. For example, the other night our dining area completely flooded due to a drainage problem in the bathroom. A worker came promptly. First he said, “Do you have any tools?” (Workers almost never bring any tools with them at all in China). Then, after he had returned again after getting tools, we heard lots of loud pounding. His way of solving the drainage problem? Smash a hole in the center of the drain! Also, a few days ago we were experiencing new problems, so we called a man who often helps us. While we felt very frustrated that he was so slow in dealing with our issues, suddenly I heard someone in the other room saying, “Cheeerrrr-yyy blossss-ummm... Bath and Booody...” I came out to see him examining my Bath and Body Works Body Spray. I then watched as he proceeded to spray his hair four or five times! How angry can a person remain with a Chinese man who sprays Cherry Blossom Body Spray all over his hair?!

There are some perks to having two apartments, if we try to keep a sense of humor about it. Last weekend I slept in, and when I woke up I opened my window and knocked on the bigger apartment’s window. A few minutes later Tomas knocked again, and through the windows served me my breakfast! Since I don’t like going between the apartments in my pajamas because of all of the students milling about, this feels like a good solution to the breakfast problem (at least for me!)

Since our students are very interested in our lives, we held two open houses last week. In two nights, for four hours total, between 150-200 students visited! It was intense and tiring, but really fun to see our students in our new home, even for a short time.



As our friends and family feel especially far away during this season, we are trying to celebrate Christmas a little extra. We decorated the Book Nook with lights and a small potted Christmas tree. The students absolutely LOVE it! We have now hit 678 books, and seeing now what a success the room is for many students, we continue to hope for more (don't be afraid just to send a few! Everything adds up!) Next week, together with Michelle and Thad (Peace Corps), we will host a Christmas party for the student librarians. Also, visit our web page to view a new video introducing the Book Nook with interviews and pictures.

This weekend we hosted a Christmas party for our Chinese and foreign English teacher colleagues. It was great! This year I explained the idea of a buffet table very carefully, so it went better this year. (Last year they just stood around the buffet table and ate until all the food was gone!) We had a great conversation that lasted hours, where we laughed and talked about everything from Christmas, to "how many children can a person have in America?" and everything in-between.

One surprising aspect of Chinese culture is that it is common for Chinese people to live far away from spouses and even young children. We have a Chinese colleague friend, Belinda, who lives here, and her husband lives hours away in a different city, and their baby (under a year old) lives in another city, and is being raised by her husband's family. She misses her daughter and husband and speaks of them often. Several other English teachers have told us that their young children are many hours away, being raised by their in-laws. They have also told us that they will only be able to have one child (unless each of them is a single child themselves, in which case, according to the law, they told us, they could actually have two children). Although it is lucky for the child to be raised by family members, which is the Chinese way, as opposed to daycare, we have a hard time understanding why the parents wouldn't just move home to be in the closer to their one and only child. Obviously there are still many aspects to Chinese culture that we don't fully grasp.

At the Christmas party I wanted to have both a gift exchange (which went very well and the Chinese colleagues loved it! They screamed with excitement when they opened their gifts!) and door prizes. It never occurred to me that I would need to explain the concept of door prizes, so I asked everyone to write their names in a bag and then I proceeded, throughout the night, to give away three small prizes. After the third



prize, they got really excited and seemed to realize that all they had to do was pull out their name, and they would get a gift! Before I knew what was happening, they had removed all the names again, and sat there looking at me, waiting for their gifts! Thinking quickly, to avoid an embarrassing situation, I found some small Yankee candles that I had brought over last summer, which they loved. Several teachers asked if they could bring home their beautiful “paper” (Christmas napkin) instead of using it, so when the party ended, they left, happily carrying their little gift-exchange gifts, and holding up their precious paper napkins.

China does not observe Christmas, but since we work for a Christian organization, we have two days’ vacation. Therefore, we will go to Lanzhou to spend time with our Church of Sweden colleagues and friends, Gunnel and Per-Martin Hjort. We look forward to a stay in a hotel (hopefully with a bathtub!) and some R & R.

Please keep in touch; contact from friends and family is such a comfort and source of joy for us! We wish you all a very nice, blessed Christmas and a great new year.

*Please note: our phone numbers and mailing address are unchanged.*

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Best Wishes  
for a  
Merry Christmas

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