

Longzhou, Guangxi, China
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Dear friends, 你们好!



Only one month remains of our three-year China adventure, and it feels quite strange that we will soon be leaving. Our southern tropical weather often surprises us with changes from bright sun, to rain or thunderstorms, but always with high heat (over 30 C) and humidity. Teaching in the afternoons has become quite trying, and the students are also suffering in the stifling classrooms. But in this heat and humidity, our campus has become even greener; on campus we have mango and jackfruit trees (*see photo*), and flowering trees and bushes, including fragrant frangipani, jasmine, and others we cannot identify. Butterflies are everywhere, and unfortunately so are the spiders and cockroaches.

China is now very concerned about the Swine Flu. Some of our students have told us that they have starting running in the evenings to build up their health to help build up resistance. Others have warned us that we should not travel anywhere now that it is so dangerous. “Now the Swine Flu is very serious,” they have told us, frightened. When we recently traveled to Vietnam for the weekend, a Vietnamese doctor, who specifically wanted to know if we had been to North America



recently, questioned us, and our temperatures were registered. On the Chinese side, we had never seen such pandemonium as hoards of Chinese tourist groups (all in matching baseball caps) were all pulled aside to fill in a special health questionnaire. We were also questioned about our travels and our health. Two of our Amity colleagues in another Guangxi city were recently told they were not allowed to teach classes, because they had had an American visitor, and their school just assumed that they could have been infected. Every day they had to report their temperature to the school leaders. In the international news we have read that at least two hotels (Beijing and Hong Kong) have been completely under quarantine due to fears of one guest infecting the entire hotel. This exaggerated caution and fear is certainly due to China’s SARS experience, and; I believe, a general lack of basic knowledge about the spread of disease. (When a Hepatitis B outbreak hit our Gansu school, I asked a colleague about it and she said, “Yes, you know, the weather is so bad these days, it is easy to get sick.”) This, coupled with the sheer numbers of people in this populous country, is why China and Chinese people are

currently so worried about the flu. We hope that Swine Flu will soon be contained and will not lead to unnecessary despair amongst the Chinese people.

In April we celebrated Easter in our local church, in a nice but small service, where we were happy to be able to understand the main points as we followed along in our Chinese-English Bible. Easter was a nice time also because we were happy to celebrate it with two of our Swedish friends, Tomas and Martina Halvarsson, who came for a week-long visit.



A few weeks later, we celebrated my birthday. We had planned to invite a few colleagues out to dinner, but the students had learned about my birthday and they arranged a “surprise” party. (A while before, we met several teachers who said, “Tonight is your surprise party, right?”) So when the time of the party arrived, Tomas and I waited...and waited... finally, Tomas called a colleague to ask what was going on. “We are all waiting for you!” she said. In the excitement to plan the event, nobody had invited us to the party! So, about a half hour late for my own surprise party, Tomas and I made our way over. We were shocked by what we saw: probably two

hundred students all in a ring, with hundreds of balloons, our colleagues and some school leaders, a gigantic cake, flowers, and gifts. When we arrived I was handed a huge fruit basket and then the speeches commenced. It was such a surreal evening! First, two of my students gave a welcome speech, and then the school leaders welcomed us. After that

the student leaders said, “Now you may go up to Mrs. Stenback and give her your gifts.” Another time they instructed students to “approach Mrs. Stenback and give her your best wishes” (which meant, give me a cheesy speech into the microphone for everyone to hear). Later they played games, and Tomas and I were to pop a balloon between our backs. To the students’ great embarrassment, we



were unable to pop the balloon. Trying to make us feel better, they said, “It doesn’t matter! It is because you are both so thin” (when in actuality, we are giants compared to our students). After several boisterous rounds of “Happy Birthday,” the party ended when it started to rain. Although it was flattering and quite touching, it was more than a little exhausting to be the foreign puppet in such a crazy party!



Last month we were pleased to welcome Tomas’s sister, Elenor, who came for a short but fun visit. During her stay we spent time with our students in the classroom and the school’s English Center, and we also saw our own Chinese city. We also spent a weekend together in Hanoi, which has now become

one of our favorite Southeast Asian cities with its loud but vibrant street life, delicious Vietnamese food, shopping, and interesting local culture. Chinese people value family above all else, so whenever our family members have visited us, they have become so happy for our sake and they always want to learn everything they can about our guests.



Last weekend we were privileged to attend our Chinese friend and colleague, Terrence's, wedding. The wedding took place in Guizhou province, which is just north of Guangxi, in his wife's hometown. However, since we live in the very south of Guangxi, it was a *long* trip. In a nice gesture, Terrence and his wife, whom we call Xiao Yi ("Little Yi"), arranged cars for all of the Longzhou guests, but we were 12 people squeezed

into two cars, so four people in the back. The trip ended up taking us 15 uncomfortable hours, and we said several prayers as our driver began our trip driving 170 km on the highway. Later the road conditions worsened, and at one point we were literally stuck in the mud on the road! However, as the road conditions worsened along our journey, the scenery became lovelier. Guizhou and Guangxi are both provinces with high percentages of minority people, and their homes are traditional wooden houses, surrounded by green hills and rice paddies. Finally we arrived in Liping. We had a very nice weekend with Xiao Yi's family; we were included in all of the family activities such as outings, meals, and just spending time together in the family home. Not only was it a great chance to practice our Chinese, we were also able to observe, and participate in, a Chinese family's home life. This is something that we have often longed to do, but getting invited home like this takes time.



There are very few similarities between western and Chinese weddings. Although we have discussed weddings in our classes, and therefore learned many Chinese wedding traditions, in theory these may or may not happen in a Chinese wedding. This is the third wedding we have seen in China, and we now realize that there is no real ceremony, but sometimes there are interesting wedding traditions and customs that are followed. One surprising thing about Chinese weddings, that we still fail to completely understand, is

that Chinese couples will often go to a government office and "register their marriage" (so, legally get married). After this, the couple is technically married and will live together. The wedding party might take place later. Terrence and Xiao Yi have already been married a year now before their wedding party. Despite this, choosing the wedding date is an important custom for Chinese people; often parents choose the wedding date after consulting a local fortuneteller, to find a lucky date for the big day.



Terrence and Xiao Yi's wedding consisted of a lunch and dinner for over 300 people, with time in-between for relaxing with the family. For the dinner, Tomas wore dress clothes and a tie, and I was wearing a Chinese dress. We soon realized we were overdressed compared to the Chinese guests. Tomas was the only one wearing a tie, and I was only one of three women wearing a dress! When the wedding started, we watched the guests enter the hall, and most of the people did not even look at the couple that stood in the doorway to greet them and, in accordance with Chinese customs, offer a cigarette (*see photo*). Most people just walked directly in, sat at a table, and began to eat right away. One hour later, most of the people had finished eating, had boxed up their leftovers in to-go boxes, and had left! We stayed a few hours longer with the family, and had a fun time, but we were still surprised by the other guests' behavior. In many cases Chinese people invite many people for a celebratory wedding dinner, but there is no actual ceremony (although out in the countryside, there are more traditional customs). It seems to be more of a social obligation. Terrence and his wife apologized that the wedding was not more formal. One of Xiao Yi's sisters explained, "It would have been different if it would have been a son getting married..." implying that since this family has four daughters, the weddings are toned down in importance.

Remembering our exhausting ride up to Guizhou, Tomas and I opted to take a car and then train home by ourselves. We arrived home in time for Tomas to participate in the final game of the English students' soccer tournament. Although they came in 4th place in the tournament, they have played several exciting games and the students were very happy that Tomas joined them.

We wish you a pleasant May/June; we'll be in touch again before we leave China in about a month. This last month will be a busy time of preparations...and endings.

再见! (*Zaijian!* = Goodbye!)

Rachel & Tomas

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Dong minority building