

Prayer letter No. 6: Autumn/Winter 2011

First of all, apologies to you all for the long gap between the last letter and this – many of you wrote to me asking if you had dropped off my list! I was waiting until I had something to say, but waited rather too long!

Water

Water is essential to life, but here in northern China we have had periods when it was very hard to come by – particularly last summer, when we had several weeks of disruption due to the major road works involved in laying new water heating pipes. The latest disruption was caused when, as punishment for a few residents not paying their water bills, the entire water supply to our block of flats was cut off until the recalcitrant residents paid up. We were without water for 30 hours, which unhappily coincided with a period of gastric upset on my part. Necessity being the mother of invention, we found ways of reusing used water.

Flats

My teaching partner, Angela, and myself are fortunate to have moved to new flats this term. They are more modern and are conveniently situated just 15 minutes' walk from college. The only downside is that we are both situated on the top (6th) floor (but not in the same block), which is not a problem in itself – except that the central heating has insufficient pressure to reach the top floor. We both cope with the situation by supplementing the meagre heating by plug-in radiators, and meanwhile count our blessings that the electricity, internet, and usually water, are regularly supplied.



图表 1 Our new flats

Reflections on the future

My contract with Amity was for 2 years (August 2010 to July 2012) and I decided not to renew for a further year, the main reason being because most of the existing Amity teachers are leaving (due to retirement or end of contract) and the supply of new teachers has greatly reduced, meaning that I would have very few Amity colleagues and no teaching partner. I have appreciated very much being part of the Amity community, so felt that it would not be right to stay on. This means, of course, that I have to re-establish my life in the UK.

When I decided to accept BIATG/Amity's offer to work for them, I also decided to resign permanently from my job (I worked as a secretary at the University of Bristol), so I don't have a job to go back to. I am hoping to find some temporary employment on return to Bristol, but am realistic about possibilities – I may have to experience unemployment, and it may take a very long time until I find a permanent position, due to the nature of the economy in the UK at present. But I don't regret my decisions to date. Living in China in a poorer community has made me aware of the differences between our two countries – political, social, cultural and economic – and I have enjoyed the simplicity of living with less money and within a cash-based, rather than credit-card based, economy. I hope that any employment I take on will give me the flexibility to carry on with my voluntary work with the homeless, and also the flexibility to be able to visit my elderly father more frequently (we live 4 hours apart) and also my 'French parents' – **Pierre and Elisabeth**, teachers whom I met when I was a language assistant in France in 1985-6 and whom I try to visit, at their home in Alsace-Lorraine, every year.

Summer 2011



图表 3 Diane and I on the rooftop restaurant of the Roosevelt, overlooking the Huangpu river and the financial centre of Shanghai

enjoyed a meal! (The photo to the right was taken from their website: <http://www.rooseveltchina.com/>) Shanghai has some lovely sights, particularly the river at night, so I was glad to have the opportunity to go there.

News from this Autumn

This year I am again teaching first-year college students, and Angela is teaching second-years. I have felt that this year's students has perhaps a slightly lower standard of English than last year's, because it has taken longer to reach the same standard compared to my students last year. Aware that I am still a novice teacher – remember that I only qualified as a TEFL teacher in June 2010 – I took the opportunity to go and visit my Amity colleagues, a Swedish couple, **Per-Martin and Gunnel Hjort**, to discuss with them various teaching issues. It was good to learn from them. I was able to teach a few of their classes, introducing myself and my grandmother's story to the students. Visiting the Hjorts was the longest unaccompanied train journey I have yet done – 17 hours – as they are based in Chifeng, in the east of Inner Mongolia.



图表 4 The interior ceiling of the yurt

I had the opportunity to ride a horse on the grasslands. Christine was happily willing to come into our classes to teach, so our students benefited from her presence –

Summer 2011 was packed – it is a shorter vacation than the Spring one, so I was quite busy – spending time with my father and brother in Cheshire and with my French parents in France, as well as catching up with friends, financial and health appointments in the UK. After returning to China I was able to spend time with our American colleagues, **Diane and Daniel Johnson**, in Shanghai. This was very symbolic for me, as I hoped to find the house in which my maternal grandmother was born in 1904. We did indeed find the place where the house had been, but the house had

been demolished and rebuilt as a hotel/restaurant, the Roosevelt – where we



图表 2 The Roosevelt hotel, 27 The Bund, Shanghai. My grandmother was born here, in the previous building on this site, in 1904

This Autumn we were also fortunate to have visits from three friends – **Kate** (former Amity teacher) and her friend **Carol**, who is also teaching English, and **Christine**, also a former Amity teacher. With Kate and Carol, Angela and I braved a night in a yurt on the grasslands – the coldest night in my yet life (colder even than the sleep-outs for the homeless that some of us have done yearly in Bristol in February!). Despite this, it was a worthwhile experience, and



图表 5 Mr Pan and I, my 'twin'. Note the grasslands picture in the background

visitors, especially from overseas, are always a great treat! Angela and I also had two perfectly-co-ordinated 'housewarming' parties for our colleagues. As we live in adjacent flats which have to be accessed by separate staircases, we organized the party into 2 groups, which changed over after an hour. Our colleagues were puzzled and curious by the notion of a 'housewarming', as it isn't really done in Chinese culture. But they enjoyed themselves. I found to my delight that I have a twin – in the form of Mr Pan, my colleague! We discovered that we were born on the very same day in the very same year, and will both (of course) be turning 47 next summer! Taking into account the time difference between China and the UK, I have worked out that he is older than me by a few hours.

Christmas in Jining

Last year, Angela and I, together with Amity teachers the Hjorts, the Johnsons and Ian Groves all met in Baotou (in the West of Inner Mongolia) for a magnificent Christmas. This year, Angela and I stayed in Jining, where we were happy to attend our local church service on Christmas Eve. The children, of course, stole the show with their expertly choreographed and well-rehearsed performance. Angela and I amused the crowd by singing 'We wish you a Merry Christmas' in English and Chinese. On Christmas Day we went out with our Chinese colleague Sarah for a meal followed by a foot massage.



图表 6 The children's performance at church on Christmas Eve



图表 7 With staff (dressed in red) of our local restaurant, and our friend Sarah, on Christmas Day. Left to right (in grey): Angela, Sarah, Alison

Christmas in China is a more subdued affair, mainly because there is no public holiday – work carries on – you can even go to the bank on Christmas Day, even if it is a Sunday, as the working week is 7-days, rather than 5-days – though we were entitled to 2 working days off as foreign teachers. Shops and hotels do put up decorations, such as Christmas trees, but the emphasis is on Santa Claus rather than any religious festival. I have told the Christmas story to my students by using an Advent calendar in class.

Spring vacation

The Spring vacation, despite being in the middle of the academic year, is in fact the longer than the Summer vacation. Angela and I will be leaving Jining on 5 January, as Amity has a meeting in Lanzhou, North-West China, from 7-10 January. After that, I'm going to Chengdu, Sichuan province, for one reason only – pandas! Then I'll fly on to Shenzhen, which is near Hong Kong. I'm staying in Hong Kong itself, but it's cheaper to fly to Shenzhen and then take public transport to Hong Kong rather than to fly directly to Hong Kong. After a few days in Hong Kong (where I'll try and find the war grave of my great uncle) I'm flying to Taiwan – to stay with my friend **Min-Hua Jen**, whom I met while working at the University of Bristol. After a few days with her family, we'll both fly back to Hong Kong, and from there back to Heathrow.

How I've changed

I am hoping that being in China has meant that I have changed for the better. Some ways in which I feel I have changed are:

- **Stepping up to the challenge of teaching**

Those of you who have known me for many years know that I am naturally timid, but my students don't believe me when I tell them. Teaching has enabled me to become more extrovert and creative, and I have discovered that I naturally build into my lessons elements of drama and humour – the latter is particularly remarkable as I was so lacking in humour as a child that my family celebrated whenever I managed to tell a joke. As part of my work I also (with Angela) deliver lectures to the staff. I've given lectures on the tax system, criminal justice, religion, multiculturalism, transport and aspects of phonology, to name just a few. I'm able to do this partly because of the expectation that I can, and the opportunity to do this; what we often talk about regarding pupils and students (give them new opportunities; have high expectations) works for newbie teachers, too.

- **Becoming more practical**

I startled my UK computer guru by buying wire cutters and thin wire in order to make a permanent pull-handle to open the broken DVD drive on my laptop; used an adjustable spanner when assembling the feet of an electric radiator; and dismantled the spin-dryer to rescue trapped socks!

- **Accepting frustrations**

At times, life in China can be frustrating. For example, at Hohhot railway station it is very difficult to get a taxi because, although many taxis are there, there is no system, and even if you can hail one, the taxi driver may refuse to take you to your destination. Accepting that



图表 9 Alison on a camel in Jining

getting a taxi there will be difficult is the only thing you can do – patience being the order of the day.

- **Accepting that things are different**

In Jining, cars park on the pavement – not just 2 wheels, but the whole car, meaning that pedestrians cannot walk round it and have to walk on the road. Drainage of – even newly-constructed – roads is poor, resulting in literally mounds of ice where water has collected and then frozen. Public toilets, even at our church, are stalls with a hole in the ground leading to a



图表 8 A lady from my church, who also runs a local shop

waste channel below, with no basins or any water for hand washing. Toilet paper is so rarely provided that to find it is remarkable, and hotels are loath to leave too much of it in the bathrooms – I guess we might actually use it. 'Loo of the year' award goes to the western restaurant in Jining, which has everything one could expect, and more – even a toilet attendant! On the other hand, road sweepers are out in all weathers, working very hard to keep the roads and pavements clean – they dress warmly and use 'witch's brooms' made of bamboo. Banking is in some – though not all – ways better than in the UK, with keypads on ATMs protected from prying eyes by a 'hood' over the keys. Public transport is cheap, buses being the equivalent of 10p for any local journey; taxis cost the equivalent of 50p for a short journey. Eating out is also cheap, a good meal costing only the equivalent of £2 a head.

On the social/cultural side, invitations are often given with an expectation of immediacy – you are invited out with immediate effect rather than given any warning. This is sometimes inconvenient, but also meant that when we invited our colleagues out and gave them only 3 days' notice, everyone was able to come! Deliveries from shops can also be made with immediate effect (dream on, UK!) by independent contractors with flat-bed trailers. People are also willing to help you with any problem straightaway rather than arranging a later, mutually convenient time.

Spiritual life

Being away from my home church, [Christchurch, Clifton](#) in Bristol, is hard. Access to church services here is limited, as we may not have any English translation. I view it in the same way as when I attended church as a small child – I didn't understand what was going on, but went all the same – able, through my parents' direction, to show obedience to God in a small way, appreciating only later that God loves everyone and that complete understanding is not necessary. In saying 'Amen' to the prayers of the pastor, I don't know what I'm endorsing, but I view it more as 'praying in the Spirit' – those who pray in tongues, for example, pray without knowing for what they pray, only knowing that it is a heavenly prayer. The hardest thing for me is keeping my prayer life going. I fall far short of who and what I would like to be. But we have the glorious assurance that God is faithful *in spite of us*. I know that God is, and always will be, with me; it is not Him that has turned away.

Prayer requests

To give thanks for

Geraldine – a teacher who made a miraculous and complete recovery from her serious car accident

Bella, a student – who has settled down and is fitting in much better this year

New accommodation, which is much better

Our lovely Chinese colleague, Sarah, who is a good and kind friend

The support, care and prayers of the people in my church, especially my co-ordinator, Sue

To pray for

Hunter – a young teacher suffering from a very serious illness

Increased love for God and dedication to a renewed prayer life

Safety during traveling in the Spring vacation – to Lanzhou, Chengdu, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the UK

The skill to make students of all abilities feel included in every lesson

The ability to cherish the time I have left in Jining, and the patience to wait for God's direction on my future path in His good time



图表 9 With students from Class 2. Note the words for 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' on the blackboard

Basic info:

- I'm a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teacher in a Teacher Training College in northern China (the province is called Inner Mongolia, which borders the country of Mongolia)
- I'm working on behalf of the Amity Foundation, a Chinese Christian NGO, and was sent from the UK by BIATG (British and Irish Amity Teachers group), which comes under the umbrella organization CTBI (Christians Together in Britain and Ireland)
- I'm supported by my local church, Christchurch, Clifton, (in Bristol, UK) and funded through a combination of BIATG, Amity, the college in which I work, and my church
- I have been here since August 2010 and will return to the UK in the summer of 2012

- If you would like to receive future (or past) newsletters, please email me on alisoncapey@gmail.com. These newsletters should also be available in hard copy at the back of church (Christchurch, Clifton).
- I can also email you the report I wrote on the Great Wall of China Walk in 2009, which I did with a Christian organization.