

*This will be the last of these superbly insightful letters from Ferry and Aukje in Zhangye, Gansu Province, as they have now finished their time teaching English at Zhangye University and are on their way home via Hainan Island and time with their family in Japan. We look forward to welcoming them back to Nelson mid-year and hearing much more about their time in China. Thanks, Ferry and Aukje.*

## A BIG BANG!

- from Ferry van Mansum and Aukje Both

Chinese New Year is just round the corner and the best wishes for the coming year come with loud noise from lots of fire crackers and large fireworks that explode with a big bang. It is not so much the beautiful unfolding of many colours in the night-sky as the number of decibels generated that will rate the success of the pyrotechnics. We just read in a Chinese newspaper that if the air quality in Beijing does not improve - it already had more than 30 days of unacceptable high levels of particles in the air this year - fireworks will be forbidden there this Spring Festival. That must be a huge disappointment for many Chinese, because happiness is celebrated with noise.



In Zhangye, when the coal fires have done their job warming the chilly morning air, and before they are started up again around six o'clock in the evening, we are blessed with clear blue skies. We are also able to share the happiness of couples getting married, restaurants being re-furbished, shops opening, new high-rise buildings reaching their summit and successful businessmen receiving the keys of their brand new big SUVs, any day of the week and at all times of the day or night. In particular Saturdays are heralded by the sound of big firework cannons and long strings of firecrackers and the acrid smell of billowing clouds of blackish, brown smoke. We are just back from a stroll into town and today we walked from one celebration into the next. A deafening experience. Not only does the blast from the fireworks join the ever present sound of honking car horns and loudspeakers from shops repeatedly advertising their wares, the airwaves from the fireworks also set off the alarms of cars and electrical scooters parked nearby. Total chaos.



Here, in the west of China, people tend to be more superstitious than in the more developed east, so they feel the need to wake up the gods of luck and a trip to the fireworks shop is called for. Fireworks are such a part of everyday life that most people don't even stop to look where all the racket comes from. Even we are almost getting used to it; we no longer jump out of our skin every time when the street in front of us erupts into a war zone, but we still interrupt our conversation, plug our ears and look at this amazing phenomenon. Last week friends and employees of a newly opened restaurant in a pedestrian area filled with market stalls rolled out and lit hundreds of fire crackers, showering the restaurant with lots of good luck, but also blessing us and all the market stalls with floating pieces of burnt paper, smoke and ash.



While I am writing this I can hear the distant pops of yet another celebration, reminding me that we are here in Zhangye, where for good fortune and happiness we do not have to wait until New Year. We are getting our doses daily with every big bang.

Whether you will celebrate the Chinese New Year at the end of January or the western New Year on the first day of that month, whether you will explode into next year or slip into it quietly, we wish you a happy 2014 and we will catch up with most of you in the second half of it.

