

**Document 18.8: Excerpt from “Holiday Season” by Zhang Zhiping in *Beijing Review*, January 26, 2006**

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***Spring Festival is China’s biggest celebration, but foreign holidays such as Christmas and Valentine’s Day are making inroads***

Although the upcoming Spring Festival is generally regarded as the most important celebration of the year, the fall and winter have a number of non-native holidays that are gaining popularity among the Chinese.

These include Halloween, Christmas and Valentine’s Day. In the past, these foreign holidays were observed only by those who worked for foreign companies or those who had studied or lived abroad. But today, many Chinese are devoted to the holidays and celebrate them in some manner, such as sending short messages to friends or having a large dinner in a restaurant. Valentine’s Day is mainly for young couples, while Halloween is most celebrated by children.

Christmas is becoming increasingly popular among the Chinese, although originally it was heavily promoted by businesses. For the holiday last month, in the bustling Xidan commercial district in downtown Beijing, a large shopping mall put up Christmas trees, welcoming visitors to write down their Christmas wishes and hang the notes on the trees. In just one or two days, the trees were filled with all kinds of Christmas messages, such as, “I wish those who love me and whom I love happiness in the next year,” “May God bless my parents’ health and happiness,” or “I hope my girlfriend will be accepted at renowned universities.”

Sociologists say the rising popularity of Christmas is due to the cheerful and bright colors associated with the holiday. Red is the most favored holiday color in China, representing

harmony and indicating a happy event. On Christmas Day, people may find that Santa Claus and traditional red Chinese lanterns go well together.

The popularity of Christmas also caters to the emerging consumerism. On Christmas Day, shopping malls and restaurants are decorated with Santa Clauses and Christmas trees. The service staff is dressed up, promoting their products in the name of the foreign holiday.

The holiday also makes manufacturers smile, as several months before Christmas many gift enterprises in China receive orders from all over the world, even the White House. About 70 percent of Christmas products are made in China, and for those enterprises Christmas is a golden time to make money.

For people like Zhu Fang, who works for a public service institution in Beijing, Christmas provides a good excuse to hang out with friends and have fun. On Christmas Eve last year, Zhu and a group of friends had dinner at the Great Wall Sheraton Hotel, where a Christmas buffet and dance were held. At about 10 p.m., Zhu left her friends, who were still waiting for the lucky draw, and went to the Xishiku Cathedral.

That was part of her plans for the night, as she had missed the choir performance in 2004 and was determined not to miss it in 2005. Zhu, who graduated from the Beijing International Studies University in 2001 and once briefly studied in Britain, said she was deeply attracted by the evensong in the church.

Like many Chinese, Zhu does not believe in Catholicism, but she said she likes the pure and harmonious atmosphere of the church. But Christmas Eve disappointed her once again, as admission to the cathedral was by ticket only, and she did not have one.

Xishiku Cathedral, with a history of more than 130 years, is one of the four well-known Catholic churches in Beijing. It is also known as the Beitang (northern) Church. The Christmas Eve Mass was held at midnight, but from 7 p.m. on, Catholics and non-

Catholics alike visited the church in an endless stream. Admission tickets, however, were sold out a week before the holiday.

China has a considerable number of Christians. According to official statistics, currently there are 4 million Catholics and 10 million other Christians in China, and the number continues to grow. This shows that the popularity of Christmas has a huge supporting population.

### *Spring Festival tradition*

Despite the growing popularity of foreign holidays, the Spring Festival, which this year falls at the end of January, is still the most significant festival in the country. At that time, family members gather together and have reunion dinners, as well as setting off fireworks and visiting friends. Yet, particularly among younger people, the holiday is not without its stresses.

As more people leave their hometowns and work in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, the Spring Festival is a time when they can go back home and meet with their parents after a long separation. The national broadcaster reported that commuters made 1.9 billion trips during the 2005 Spring Festival period, and it is estimated that the number will increase to 2 billion this year.

Although the transportation capacity has improved each year, it still does not meet the demand, and as a result, the transportation situation remains tight. Many people choose to travel by train, which is less expensive than flying, and that causes big headaches since it is extremely difficult to buy a train ticket at this time of year.

Ma Liqiang, Deputy Secretary General of the National Development and Reform Commission, contended, "The shortage of transportation capability will not be fully made up for even in five to 10 years, and the tight situation during the Spring Festival

frenzy may last longer than in the past,” as more people travel and extend the holiday period.

Referring to the Spring Festival, Lin Xi, who works for the Ministry of Construction, said, “I believe many people have mixed feelings toward it.” It is exciting for people to get together with their parents, but the process of buying a train ticket takes up too much energy and is a headache, he added.

For many young people, the Spring Festival can be a difficult experience. Lin said for those who have a good career, the holiday could be a platform for showing off their accomplishments. But those who have just started out in their careers might feel an intangible pressure: Their “worth” could be materialized in the value of the presents they send to others. Therefore, those people may feel embarrassed by both the excitement of coming home and their inability to give more expensive gifts.

Like Lin, many young people in cities are growing tired of the rituals of eating, drinking and sending gifts at the Spring Festival. As a result, some experts are concerned that the holiday may lose some of its significance.

Source: Zhang Zhiping, “Holiday Season,” *Beijing Review*, January 26, 2006.