

## **Christmas and Capitalism in China**

By Joshua Zhong

Before I came to this country in the early 1980's, a new college graduate received about \$7 (56 RMB) a month. My father worked for a big company as a mechanical engineer. He made about \$10 a month. Lily's father was a historian and made about \$11. During that harsh and difficult time following the decade-long Cultural Revolution, which resulted the death of millions of innocent people, the loss of cultural artifacts, and the crumbling of the national economy, every family received the same small income, lived in the same size apartments, dressed in the same blue and gray Mao clothes, rode the same kind of bicycle, and listened to the same political rhetoric every day. We were not allowed to be different or to get ahead of others, until the day Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978. He opened China to the western world and ushered in a capitalistic marketing economy when he pronounced to 1.3 billion Chinese: "Who cares if it is a white cat (socialism) or a black cat (capitalism), as long as long it catches the rat (getting rich)!"

Today, China has the most cell phones and internet users in the world. Its GDP growth has led the world for more than twenty years and is still going strong. Its free government housing and education have been replaced by private ownership and expensive tuition. Private companies are taking over businesses formerly owned by the government and expanding into markets all over the world. China is on the verge of becoming the largest producer and consumer of automobiles. China has even started to "celebrate" Christmas!

I became a Christian in 1982 through an American tourist when I worked as a tour guide for the government. I went to a church afterward and for the first time I learned about Christmas. However, 25 years ago, most Chinese had never heard of or understood the true meaning of Christmas. Today, things are drastically different. Christmas is becoming the second-busiest holiday event in China - not in a spiritual way, but a commercial one.

According to Chinese tradition and the western capitalistic point of view, Chinese have never been "good consumers." Instead, the Chinese are incredible savers and always save half of what they earn, worrying about the uncertainty of the future. In fact, the habit of saving has been long regarded as a virtue in the traditional Chinese society. Therefore, in order to stimulate the economy, the capitalized communist government (sounds funny but true) has orchestrated an unprecedented "campaign of spending" by counteracting the tradition of "good saving" with a western slogan: "Life is good, spend and enjoy it now!"

One major step the Chinese government took about ten years ago was to extend major holidays, such as Labor Day and National Day, from two days to ten days. During the Spring Festival, vacation time is extended to almost two weeks. The goal was to get people out of their homes and into shopping malls, car dealers, tourist spots, and housing markets. Amazingly, the trick worked. The nation of 1.3 billion now spend billions of dollars buying new appliances, visiting far-away places, purchasing or remodeling their homes, or dining at restaurants. I don't remember any of our neighbors ever going to a restaurant to celebrate Spring Festival when I was in China twenty years ago. We all cooked at home. That time is now over and gone for more and more families.

Another step the government took was to allow businesses to introduce and commercialize major holidays from other parts of the world. This resulted in the celebration of Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Valentine's Day, as well as Christmas. In the month of December, shops, malls, hotels,

and airports spend millions to put on a Christmas face to attract increasingly westernized Chinese customers, as well as foreign tourists. You might go crazy listening to the same loud Christmas carol over and over. You might also notice that jolly Santa Claus has suddenly lost a lot of weight (maybe because of the Chinese food) and a whole bunch of skinny Santas are running around chanting a Chinese “ho ho ho.”

China has certainly changed a lot since I left her. I return to China a few times a year and every time I am surprised how dramatic the changes are, both economically and socially. Old and ugly buildings are tumbling down and are replaced by modern skyscrapers. Gigantic construction cranes are everywhere and have become the new “Chinese National Bird.” A few years ago, a former senator from Colorado summed up his first visit to China this way: “China is the most capitalized country in the world today. Compared with China, the United States is more like a socialist country.”

These changes are exciting and also concerning, because beneath the growing national and individual wealth, power, and prosperity is the ever-expanding gap between the rich and poor, increasing social discontent, a growing desire for political reform and freedom, a continuing search for spiritual guidance, and an alarming weakening of traditional Chinese values, such as respect for the elderly and care for the less fortunate.

I pray in this holiday season that China will continue to get stronger, more people will live happier, everyone will enjoy more freedom and peace, and most importantly, fewer girls and handicapped children will end up in abandonment, and all children in the orphanages will be well cared for and soon find their forever families, both domestically and internationally.

Merry Christmas to my countrymen!