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Christmas in Beijing

by Edmund Chia by Gemma Cruz



A 50-foot Christmas tree outside the Catholic Church of North Beijing

BEIJING -- We knew that Christmas was in the air as we walked into the Beijing Capital International Airport, not only because it was December but also because of the huge and elegant nativity scene and Christmas decorations that adorned the airport's arrival hall.

Why is the Chinese government celebrating Christmas? Is this not the same people who persecuted, tortured and expelled Christians? Is this not the same regime which crushed all forms of religious expressions during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution? Is this not the country whose synonyms are communist and atheist?

A tour of the city, however, eliminates any doubt that Christmas was indeed being celebrated. And a celebration it was, as Christmas carols were played and sung in public complexes and Christmas wishes greeted us everywhere, complete with Santa and sleigh bells, including red-nosed reindeers. This is apparently a new phenomenon in the People's Republic of China, with its inception traced back to the 1980s Open Door policy of Deng Xiao Ping. Since then, the sight of the chubby old man with the red hat and thick white beard has become as common as Colonel Sanders, the other bearded man, who as the face

of KFC has mushroomed all over China. In fact, public and private companies alike throw Christmas parties and restaurants and bars have Christmas Eve specials, featuring exotic wines and mystery gifts.

This, however, has little to do with the birth of the Son of God whom Christians believe is incarnate in Jesus Christ, the savior of the world. For the Chinese, it is Christmas in so far as the theme song, "Silent Night," elicits a sense of holiness and peace and the myth of the magi promotes gift-giving. It is this Christmas that is celebrated, mainly among the young, especially the yuppies of modern-day China. They see the season as an occasion for developing friendship or to engage in courtship. It is yet another Valentine's Day where lovers spend the evenings in cafes and pubs and exchange gifts with family and friends, all in the spirit of Christmas but without any association with Christianity.

To be sure, these Christmas revelers do not consider themselves Christians either. They don't identify with anything religious, especially one, in the words of a yuppie, "which has strange beliefs and insists that people go to church every Sunday." For these young Chinese, Christmas is simply another expression of the foreign and Western enterprise they so desire to identify with. Some have called these Chinese yuppies Cultural Christians, people who are sold on the cultural aspects of Christianity without having to believe or belong. In a way, their celebration is no different from the Christmas celebrations of most Cultural Christians in the West, especially those for whom pilgrimages to Kohl's and Macy's must precede the visit to the manger of the baby Jesus. The young people of China are also sold on Church weddings, again, not because they want to become Christians but, according to our yuppie friend, "because Western weddings look cool."

Even if indirectly, these Cultural Christians are the ones promoting Christmas and Christianity in China. They join yet another class of Cultural Christians, the scholars and intellectuals, in making Christianity better known in this nation where two-thirds of the population professes no religion. This latter class has also been at the forefront of forging a Sino-Christian theology, a rigorous enterprise but one distinctly absent of the faith component. They are the teachers and professors in China's prestigious universities, enlightening future generations and schooling them in the ideals, values, and philosophies of Christianity. They do this with all sincerity, attempting to discern why China has remained backward and has kept its feudal structures much longer than the West. They see Christianity as an essential constituent of the Western world's foundation and are working to make it a visible social and cultural force for the future development of China. Though unbaptized, they are probably the most fervent evangelizers of Christianity to the Chinese, especially the elites of the younger generations.

These Cultural Christians from the academy, however, either do not or cannot identify themselves as Christians, not only because many are Party members of the Communist regime but also because they truly believe that only atheists can research on or teach about religion without bias. More important is perhaps the fact that most baptized Christians are from the grass roots, comprised generally of women and the elderly, and are basically uneducated and practice what is seen as bordering on superstition. The intellectual elites would be embarrassed to be identified with such a group.

That was somewhat confirmed when we visited the Catholic Church of North Beijing. At an early morning weekday Mass we counted some 200 worshippers, the majority of them grey-haired. Apparently, another 200 had attended the earlier 6:00 a.m. Mass and together they represent two-fifths of the 1,000 parishioners who attend Sunday liturgies. These figures might be misleading since many attend more than one Mass per day, some even as many as five on Sundays. They do so believing, according to the parish pastor, that "more Masses means more graces."

Even during Mass many could be seen in personal meditation or reading from their own little prayer books, probably devotionals and formulaic prayers. As soon as the priest signals the end of the Mass a prayer leader automatically stands up to lead in the recitation of the Rosary. Oh yes, Latin hymns are sung

as well and in the South Beijing Church the entire Mass is also available in Latin.

When we joined the line for Holy Communion one of the senior women shuffled towards us to ask if we were Catholic. We wondered how these women would respond if the cultural Christians should one day decide that attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion would also be cool?

[Edmund Chia (Malaysian) and Gemma Cruz (Filipina) are Asian theologians teaching in Chicago. This is their first visit back to their home continent during the Christmas season.]

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