

Short Communication

A reflection on “Christmas fever” in China in the globalizing world

Liping Li* and Gaoyuan Zhang

Foreign Language School, Nanjing University of Finance and Economics, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province 210046, China.

Accepted 04 November, 2013

Globalization is a natural historical process of communication and interaction on a worldwide basis, which makes a strong impact on and poses a challenge to Chinese national culture. What attitude should the Chinese adopt facing cultural fusion such as the landing of exotic festivals? As a reflection on “Christmas fever” in China in the globalizing world, this paper analyzes some typical viewpoints and points out the – as we think – ‘right’ attitude towards such a phenomenon. Due to the inevitable globalization trend, it is for China to expect that oriental and occidental civilizations will supplement and learn from each other, which is hopefully the only way for China to revitalize its traditional culture and mature the cultural mentality of its people.

Key words: Reflection, Christmas fever, globalization, China.

INTRODUCTION

On December 21, 2006, ten PhD students from China's top universities jointly publicized a petition on the Internet, calling on citizens, especially the youngsters, to be less excited about exotic holidays such as Christmas. That is the latest instance of public resistance to western cultures and lifestyles in China. In the online petition titled, "Walk out of Cultural Collective Unconsciousness and Strengthen Chinese Cultural Dominance" and dated with traditional Chinese Era Calendar, the ten PhD students from China's most authoritative universities including Beida, Tsinghua and Renmin University hope to "awaken the Chinese people to resist western cultural invasion". The petition stresses that occidental culture had been like storms sweeping through the country rather than mild showers, and it cites the prevalence of Christmas celebrations as a typical example. The petition claims that China, the ancient oriental nation, is on the way to becoming a western society. The authors claim that celebrating Christmas is a personal decision, but most Chinese join in the celebration without knowledge of the origin of the festival. There has been much controversy over the phenomenon that western festivals are becoming more and more

popular in China. Many people, mostly the cultural elite, tend to worry about the disadvantages and potential harm brought about by the celebration of foreign festivals.

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THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS AND ITS DISSEMINATION IN CHINA

Christmas is the time when Christians, and indeed non-Christians such as migrants or atheists, around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus; they hold the 'Mass', or church service, for Christ every year in December. That is why this time of year is called “Christmas”, a word from the Old English name Cristes Maesse (Christ's mass). The first recorded observance occurred in Rome in AD 360, but it was not until AD 440 that the Christian Church fixed the date, 25 December, for celebration, with a Christmas dinner for the whole family.

Christian missionaries arrived in China in 625 AD, and set up base in In Xian (an ancient capital). That their base existed is apparent from several specimens of contemporary art found in excavations, art that depicts

*Corresponding author. E-mail: lily6617@hotmail.com.

Christianity related phenomena such as Nativity scenes. One example is a nativity scene which is carved in wood and plaster and had been dated to circa AD 780. This was found on a shadowy wall of a crumbling 1,200-year-old pagoda on the windswept hillside of a Tao monastery in 1999. The scene is a fascinating mixture of eastern and western spirituality.

Though originally developed as a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, Christmas today is a global event that tends to transcend religious beliefs. Over the years in China, particularly with the rapid influx of foreigners to this country, the concept of Christmas has been developing quickly, to the point that if one is to walk into a store in the capital today, you are just as likely to hear a Christmas carol as you might hear a mando-pop song.

Christmas advertising is quite evident in Dalian, probably because it is one of China's "special economic zones" and therefore it attracts a lot of foreign business. Dalian has a lot of Japanese, Koreans and Russians in addition to English teachers from the west, and no doubt this has increased the presence of Christmas promotions. So Christmas is all about Christmas trees, lights, and Santa Claus, and it seems to be celebrated primarily by department stores, hotels, and some restaurants like Pizza Hut and McDonalds.

WHAT KINDS OF PEOPLE ARE ATTRACTED BY CHRISTMAS IN CHINA?

Christians

Christmas, originally a religious holiday in the West is prevailing in China where about 1% of the population is Christians. The vast majority of the Chinese people view Christmas in a purely materialistic light, as probably most western people do. Millions of Christians in mainland China celebrate Christmas either in churches or in their own homes. For the people of faith, Christmas carries far more significance than the Chinese Spring Festival. They go to special services, such as midnight mass, at Christmas Eve.

Non-Christian youngsters

Younger generations are exposed to western cultures and lifestyles through the national trend of learning English. Many other individuals celebrate Christmas-like festivities even though they do not consider themselves Christians. Many customs, including sending cards, exchanging gifts, and hanging stockings are very similar to Western celebrations. Young people see Christmas as a time to hang out with their friends. The three things they enjoy are: Christmas party, shopping and Christmas dinner. Many people go to carol singing, although they do not quite understand the songs or the Christmas stories.

Children also love Christmas. They are fascinated by the lights, the music, the laughter and smiling faces and, above all, by the presents.

Department stores and restaurants

Christmas decorations, signs, carols and other symbolic items have become increasingly prevalent during the month of December in large urban centers of mainland China, with Chinese "Father Christmas/Santa Claus" helping to make the scene complete. All this reflects a cultural interest in this western festival, and retail marketing campaigns as well. Businessmen view western festivals as good opportunities to make money and desperately try to boost the atmosphere of foreign festivals, expecting the willing customers to take the bite. The holiday consumption boom has become a regular spur for the country's economic growth. For ordinary people, festivals, whether western or Chinese, are a good time to have fun. Life is getting better for urban Chinese, and they want to enjoy it.

REFLECTION: BOYCOTTING OR APPRECIATING, WHICH ATTITUDE SHOULD CHINESE TAKE?

Media in Hong Kong criticized the boycott represented by the petition by the ten Ph.D. students. An editorial in Hong Kong's Oriental Daily said that Christmas has evolved beyond a religious holiday into a celebration that transcends ethnic and national lines. The editorial further asked, "Can boycotting Santa Claus really strengthen our country? Even if everyone worshipped Confucius on Christmas eve, would China gain more respect?"

It is "absurd" to suggest that China's 5,000-year-old culture is suffering under Western attack. "As a matter of fact, Chinese culture had developed a lot while embracing other cultures" and "it is not necessary to boycott Western culture. You just can not", said He Liangliang, a well-known commentator on the Hong Kong-based Phoenix television station (http://www.eduzhai.net/yingyu/598/624/yingyu_205665.html). That is a tolerant and enlightened view.

Christmas celebrations benefiting economy

Cards, presents and meals cost money, so Christmas can be expensive. But spending money is good for China's economy, it creates jobs. In the West, the "consumer economy" is largely responsible for its prosperity. Christmas is a harmless international holiday that should be encouraged in China. From a strictly economic point of view, the Chinese economy is export-driven. This economic model cannot be sustained. China must stimulate domestic consumption because the domestic

demand is far from developed. If the Christmas custom of decorating and gift giving were encouraged, it would have a very positive effect on China's economy. China makes the majority of Christmas decorations and the majority of the toys in the world; these industries would expand due to the increased demand (Wang and Zhimin, 2003).

Mr. Wang (the chief author of the petition) and his Ph.D. colleagues are not economists, businessmen, or social scientists; they are even not aware of the fact that Chinese culture is strong enough to absorb all of the world's customs and give them "Chinese characteristics." Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea have all accepted the custom of Christmas and it has not hurt their culture. Christmas is indeed a good way to stimulate domestic consumption. It is not harmful for China to encourage this custom (Wu, 2006).

Expressing love

Celebrating Christmas gives us a chance to tell our family and friends how much we love them and appreciate them. We do this by sending cards or giving presents, or by having a big meal together. Our family and friends know we love them but every once in a while we are somehow afraid to tell them and Christmas allows us to do that.

Filling the gap

Christmas also comes at a good time of the year for the Chinese. There is a long gap between Mid-Autumn Festival and Spring Festival. Christmas gives people an excuse to have a celebration, to have fun and enjoy themselves. They love to get together to eat, laugh and sing.

Some people think that adopting a western festival like Christmas is harmful to Chinese culture. They think traditional Chinese festivals may become ignored and lost. But we should be clear that, although Christmas was originally a Christian festival, it is now a cultural festival celebrated all over the world regardless of the celebrators' beliefs. It reminds people that life is to be enjoyed and that family, friends, and indeed, all mankind, are to be appreciated. It is a time to wish for "Peace on Earth and Goodwill towards Men".

A result of cultural exchanges

Chinese people celebrating Christmas are a result of cultural exchanges, which presumably will not affect the traditional Chinese culture. During the season, people can meet friends and have fun together, watch movies and go to the church. They can also learn English and Western religious culture (Zuo, 2005).

Finding an excuse to enjoy oneself

For young Chinese, they have their own reasons of celebrating Christmas. They are not worshipping foreign traditions. In their daily life, they are under great working pressure and just want to find an excuse to enjoy themselves. This is the typical mentality of the white collars. People are generally willing to adopt any holiday that comes along as a pleasant excuse to escape the monotony of daily life without much consideration about the origins of the holiday.

THE REVELATION OF SPRING FESTIVAL SPENT OVERSEAS

The 2008 Chinese Lunar New Year once again reflected the emergence of a new trend: Chinese New Year is being celebrated around the world. It has become a festival celebrated by ordinary people in many countries and one that is enjoyed by both Chinese and non-Chinese. Since the 1990s, Spring Festival has become increasingly fashionable in countries and regions where Chinese have emigrated to. Many festivities are held. Heads of state and government leaders convey their greetings to the local Chinese community. Some cities and regions have listed Spring Festival as a public holiday. On the eve of Spring Festival this year, more than 1,000 red and gold lights were lit on the top of the Empire State Building. Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, joined by footballers Frank Lampard from Chelsea and Wang Dalei from Shanghai, turned on huge Chinese lanterns at Oxford Circus to launch celebrations arranged to coincide with the Lunar New Year.

For Chinese people, the Spring Festival is a folk show; for people in other countries, it has a broader and deeper implication: It is a festival of cultural exchange and an opportunity for different people to communicate and appreciate different cultures. With more and more people around the world aware of the cultural value of the Chinese Lunar New Year, the Spring Festival is becoming more internationalized. Different to Western religious holidays and festivals, Spring Festival celebrations reflect people's desire for well-being in their current life. People pray for happiness, look forward to the future, guard their family, and seek smooth and harmonious interpersonal relations during these holidays. All these philosophies are well demonstrated in a series of festive activities. Jubilant drums and firecrackers, lion dances, and the ubiquitous Chinese red color, reflect an optimistic outlook on life. To Chinese people, the Spring Festival is a folk show. To people in other countries, it has a broader and deeper implication: it is a festival of cultural exchange and an opportunity for people across the world to appreciate different cultures and to communicate.

Owing to the efforts of tens of millions of overseas Chinese in more than 150 countries, the beautiful festival

is receiving more and more international recognition. It is these people's love of Chinese culture and their high degree of cultural consciousness that has encouraged the spread of Chinese Lunar New Year traditions and customs to other countries and peoples.

CONCLUSION

Two reasons are pushing Christmas popularity in China: First, more and more foreigners are rushing to China; second, Christmas economy plays an important role.

With the rapid development of communication and telecommunication, the overlap of eastern and western cultures is becoming increasingly larger. More and more Chinese are celebrating western festivals, and Christmas in particular. Meanwhile, westerners are showing interest in Chinese traditional festivals. By way of cultural interaction, Chinese and westerners will come to know more and more about each other.

While Christmas is becoming increasingly popular in China, it has been stripped of its religious significance and is generally celebrated as a materialistic holiday at least in the public eye. With each passing year, the Chinese public is becoming more conscious of the significance of Christmas, and more and more people are beginning to participate and immerse themselves in the spirit of Christmas celebrations.

The fact that Christmas, part of western culture, is celebrated at the homes of the Chinese public and emerges with new features demonstrates the inclusive and absorbent nature of the Chinese culture, the characteristics of which require us to treat different cultures with an open mind, changing, merging and absorbing them gradually with a view to shaping a new Chinese civilization. Since ancient times, China has been at the centre of a regional culture, with Chinese culture exercising persistent influence over Korea, Japan, Vietnam and other surrounding countries of South-east Asia. The essence of the Chinese culture lies in fusion rather than replacement. Just on account of its fusing and absorbing capacity, China has been maintaining its central position as a cultural power. Looking back upon its history ever since 1848, the history of humiliation China experienced for a whole century, the Chinese

culture, instead of being destroyed by advanced artillery and strong warships of foreign powers, had managed to absorb the progressive elements of western culture in addition to the preservation of its own essence.

Just as the French proverb goes, a caterpillar will never become a butterfly if it is so attached to its identity that it refuses to morph. The long lasting origin of the Chinese civilization and the preservation of its traditions do not mean that we have to reject foreign cultures. We should definitely not conclude that Chinese culture has been finalized and that it is able to improve everything by means of its own traditions. The culture of a nation should always be in a dynamic and growing state; rather than fixed and perfect, it is in the process of ever growing, which is a breath-taking and fascinating process.

A staunch and receptive nation should never lose its own traditional culture, which is the root, but it should neither reject foreign civilizations, which, like humid breezes from all directions, moisturize and nourish the roots, the branches, the leaves and indeed the whole tree of its civilization. In the globalizing process, it is equally provincial to stick to orientalism, to the exclusion of occidentalism, or vice versa, either mentality of which will result in hopelessness. What we need is for the eastern and western civilizations to interact with each other, learning from, supplementing and nourishing each other, which will enable us to develop better, faster, and to grow stronger. We should have a broad and receptive mind, as well as a strong and elastic cultural mentality. Peaceful coexistence, mutual appreciation, mutual inclusion, and never depreciating others while carrying forward our own merits and strengths, that is what is required of the Chinese people in the present era of opening up.

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