

events for many Christians in rural areas, and always linked with the sharing of the Good News. In recent years however, due to the influence of secularization, these same villages are more likely to have an all-day mah-jong tournament, while Christian villagers worship in song and pray; so New Year celebrations in rural areas are more mixed and less Christian.

The secularization of rural life has brought a challenge to Christians.

The Bible tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.” (2 Cor 5:17). At Chinese New Year, let us examine ourselves, and not just emphasize "removing the old and welcoming the new" in an external way. Let us remember that in Christ we ourselves have become new, and are witnesses for Him in every season.



Prayer Letter

February 2020



Celebrating the New Year and Sharing the Good News

I do not know when it started, but Chinese New Year (also called Spring Festival) has become the most important festival for the Chinese. Every Spring Festival, millions of men, women, and children travel by various means of transport to gather with family. This phenomenon has become the largest population migration on our planet every year. Christian churches all over the world are happy to open their doors and welcome Chinese students, scholars, workers and their families who live nearby to celebrate by making and eating a

meal together. This is because for Chinese, the most important thing about the New Year is going home.

Today, returning home during Chinese New Year is not only a cultural practice in the mainland. It has become a very important feature of Chinese cultural identity.

Compared with other festivals, the Chinese spend a long time celebrating the New Year, and New Year's Eve is the most important day. The Chinese New Year holiday actually starts with Kitchen Cleaning day on December 23/24 of

the lunar calendar; and it usually ends on Lantern Festival which is held on the 15th day of the first month. So the Chinese New Year celebrations last for almost a month.

Traditionally, Chinese New Year is the most important festival of all. The strongest desire is for blessings, welcoming the new and getting rid of the old. People want to welcome new year blessings, worship their ancestors, and pray for a good year.

From ancient times Chinese have considered that everything good is based on blessings from heaven. From the time of the Zhou Dynasty people have reflected on the origins of blessings. Gradually, Chinese thinking grew to value such virtues as being cautious and pursuing good; and over the years the Chinese New Year season has become a time of religious and human aspirations.

This annual event has brought about the biggest migration on earth. It clearly illustrates a Chinese saying "Leaving home is the way to advance, New Year means returning home." For many people, returning home for the New Year is stressful. Migrant workers, the

largest number of people on the move during Spring Festival, may not want to return home. If they have not made enough money, or if their bosses have not paid them, they have been unable to return home because they feel ashamed. Some of them have even hidden under bridges in the city where they live to celebrate the New Year. So, although going home to celebrate the New Year is very important, certain conditions are expected to be fulfilled – most importantly, having enough money. If they have no money, people think "I can't go home. I can't face my family". If people consider themselves unsuccessful, they will not go home to celebrate the New Year.

By contrast, some people link going home to celebrate the New Year with honoring their ancestors. On one New Year's eve, this writer saw an interesting sight: on a desolate dirt road in a rural area, he saw something akin to the parking lot of a fancy shopping mall, full of luxury cars and men, women and children clad in brightly colored clothes. This created a stark contrast with the surrounding crumbling old houses. Local preachers there said that villagers returning home to celebrate the

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New Year was originally a beautiful thing, showing respect and affection for their elders. But now it is dominated by a competitive form of consumerism, and elderly folks who have been waiting for a year to see their family have become spectators of this absurd celebration of materialism.

The absurdity of current New Year customs has reached a new level with the trend of renting a girlfriend or boyfriend. For many young people these days, it is not difficult to return home with plenty of money. The difficulty they face is the pressure to get married. Many young people are afraid of this. So single young people who have been away in the city have adopted this way of fooling their relatives and friends into thinking that they really do have a girlfriend or boyfriend.

According to news reports, this absurd practice has been around for many years. Marriage agencies "renting" girlfriends to go home to celebrate Chinese New Year is very popular. Some men sign a contract, while others verbally agree to a price: "1,000 yuan (RMB) a day during the Spring Festival."

This practice of deceiving relatives and friends – just for appearances – serves to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the culture. Chinese New Year customs originated in ancient religious and practical considerations. They developed in line with cultural values. But under the influence of current materialistic and secular trends of thought, the good custom "going home for Chinese New Year" has become corrupted.

During the 1980s, when society was more collectivized and everyone was still very poor, Christians used to put a strong emphasis on evangelism during Chinese New Year. They would take from their meager supplies, such as a few eggs, and go to visit neglected elderly people. They also brought firewood to help these elderly people stay warm and cook porridge. They sang and prayed together. According to an elderly preacher, the revival of Christianity in the 1980s was inseparable from this practice of Christian outreach during Chinese New Year.

It is interesting to learn that the revival of rural churches had such a close relationship to the old practices of Chinese New Year. Chinese New Year parties were big

22 Pray for a rural church in Heilongjiang. They have needed to operate under the “Three-Self” banner, due to external pressure and lack of personnel. But the church is still trying hard to remain faithful to the Truth. Pray for other churches in similar situations.

23 Pray for one elder of an urban church in South China, which has had to break up into small groups. This elder is very tired from supporting the pastor as he tries to keep various ministries running. These leaders need help urgently. Pray for God’s blessing on the small groups.

24 Pray for an elderly sister in a rural area who often invites believers from nearby churches to conduct training courses in her house. Pray for God’s protection.

25 Please pray for a church in south China which has been targeted for crackdown. Pray for the leaders and believers in this church – that they can maintain their vision despite these difficulties.

26 Pray for a Christian school in the south which is no longer able to continue as normal. Teachers are continuing to teach small groups in a number of students’ homes. This has greatly increased their work load, so do pray for these teachers. Remember the students and their parents also.

27 Please pray for teachers who have been let go by closed-down Christian schools. They are still willing to serve in a Christian school, but right now they need to look for alternative employment. Pray for God’s provision.

28 Pray for pastors who have had to stop their ministries after the church broke into small groups. Many of these pastors have had to do other work in order to make a living. Pray for the Lord’s provision.

29 Please pray for churches in China to be sustained by God’s grace every day, and to experience His blessing on all their labors for His sake.

Prayer Points

February 2020

1 Today is the eighth day after the Chinese New Year. Please continue to pray that believers will grow in faith to meet the challenges of this New Year season.

2 Many rural churches have the tradition of organizing inter-church events during the week before Lantern Festival. The authorities have tightened their control over religious activities and encouraged those who report such activities with cash rewards. It is very difficult to continue these Christian meetings. Pray for the revival of China’s rural church.

3 In rural China, during Chinese New Year, it used to be said that in enjoying , “Jesus believers sing hymns, and Buddha worshippers play mahjong.” In the past two years, this has changed to, “hymns are now forbidden, but we feel free to play mahjong.” Pray that God will guard the hearts of young rural believers who are returning home for the New Year. Pray that they will enjoy quality times with their family.

4 Reunion with family members is the most important thing during the New Year holiday. Pray for children who have been abandoned by their parents – that God will take care of them and move Christian families to offer them hospitality.

5 Pray for children in government-run orphanages. Outsiders are no longer allowed to conduct religious activities there. Believers are therefore unable to visit the orphans. Pray for creative ways to reach these children.

6 Pray for private orphanages which are operated by Christians or Catholics. They do not receive funding from the government and struggle to make ends meet. Orphanages in rural areas have even more difficulties. Pray that God will provide.

7 Pray for Chinese orphans adopted by overseas foster parents. Pray that they will have opportunities to attend church, grow spiritually and live lives that glorify God.

8 Pray for children adopted by foreigners who are now adults and planning to travel to China to look for their birth parents. Pray that they will have wisdom and discernment. Whether or not they can find their birth parents, may God bless them and lead them to know their heavenly Father.

9 The New Year holiday has now come to an end. Many migrant workers and students will be returning to their homes in the city. Pray for safe travels and God's protection.

10 Pray for Christian migrant workers who spend long periods of time separated from their parents and family. Pray that God will help them adjust to work and life in their new locations.

11 Pray for university students who are returning to their campuses. Pray they may experience more of God's presence this new semester.

12 There are a lot of boarding schools in China, both junior

and senior high schools. Religious activities are strictly prohibited in these schools, so this seriously affects Christian students. Please pray for the spiritual growth of these students.

13 Many house church leaders have been arrested or detained during the past three years. Some have gone to trial. Please pray for these faithful believers who are being persecuted.

14 Religious affairs officials have been organizing meetings and implementing tighter regulations over house churches. They want to put house churches under three-self church management. Pray for house churches which are determined to uphold the truth and resist secular influence.

15 Last November, an International Conference on "The Bible and the Belt and Road Initiative" was jointly convened by Shanghai CCC/TSPM and a number of religious research institutions. The purpose of this conference was to persuade believers to participate in current

political movements. May believers discern "what is Caesar's, what is God's", and have courage to act according to God's word.

16 It is reported that some religious affairs authorities have asked churches to "speak less about doctrines, and more about the current Great Time and Great Era." They also demand that churches supervise each other with the implementation of these new rules. Pray that the church can uphold Biblical truth and resist unreasonable demands.

17 One seminary has asked its students to "gain a deeper understanding of the New Era theory, before learning biblical knowledge". Pray for God's mercy on these future ministers.

18 Pray for those who were forced to join a ministers training course, during which participants have to study current affairs and government policies. They cannot continue their ministries before passing this course. Pray that God will help them keep their faith firm in spite of these challenges.

19 The national conference for religious affairs is usually held in January or February. Pray for God's sovereignty over this event and the ways its outcomes might impact the national situation.

20 Pray for a Christian businessman whose business includes running a hotel. He has invited a local church to occupy an entire floor of this hotel. The authorities have asked him to stop allowing the church to use the venue, or they will shut down other aspects of his business. Pray that he will have much wisdom as he faces this challenge, and other Christian business people facing these same kinds of challenges.

21 Pray for fishermen on a small island in the East China Sea. The labor of early missionaries has resulted in all residents on this island being Christians. However, they have been seriously influenced by secularism. And now that the government has tightened control over religion, believers are drifting away from the church. Please pray for spiritual revival on this island.