

Fireworks sales fall before Lunar New Year

People are buying fewer and smaller fireworks than usual for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday in Beijing and Shanghai, where authorities have reduced the number of outlets allowed to sell fireworks.



A worker carries fireworks to put on display at a temporary sales outlet in Beijing's Chaoyang district on Monday. [Chen Xiaogen/for China Daily]

The capital approved just 511 stores for the holiday period, down from 719 last year, with none of them within the Third Ring Road. Sales licenses are valid from Jan 22 to Feb 1, according to the firework management office.

In Shanghai, which has a population of 24 million, just seven outlets have been given licenses – all of them in suburban districts – compared with 77 last year.

Traders have seen mixed fortunes in both cities in the first few days of sales.

"Sales are not going well, but we saw this coming so we decided not to stock too many," said a fireworks seller in Tiantongyuan, a populated residential area in Beijing, who gave his name only as Wang. "The price that distributors are charging has risen, so we have had to raise our prices, thus I don't expect trade to boom."

Panda Fireworks, the sole distributor to downtown Beijing this year, has predicted a 20 to 30 percent drop in sales, according to Beijing Daily. Yanlong Fireworks, another supplier, is only selling its leftover stock from last year in the capital's suburbs and has announced it is considering quitting the market.

By contrast, in Shanghai's suburbs, demand appears to remain high for some

vendors. The only trader in Qingpu district said he has almost sold all of his stock – 200 cases of fireworks.

However, in both cities, people are purchasing smaller, child-friendly fireworks as opposed to larger-scale, louder bangers traditionally associated with Spring Festival celebrations.

“Most customers are just buying sparklers,” said Tang Banghua, who runs a stall in the capital’s Chaoyang district, referring to handheld fireworks that emit a colorful flame as they burn. “They’re entertaining and cheap, priced at just 20 yuan (\$2.9) a pack.”

A woman in her 30s who visited the stall with her young son said: “I don’t want any myself, but my son insists. He likes the sparklers.

“It’s not convenient for us to set off big fireworks as we’re not allowed to do so until Lunar New Year’s Eve, and there are many restrictions on where you can use them. Also, the smoke they produce pollutes the air,” she added.

In addition to fewer licenses being made available, authorities have said that the sale of fireworks will be prohibited in the event of orange or red alerts for heavy air pollution.

“We’ll obey the policy, of course, but as traders, we just hope the weather stays clear,” Wang said.

Statistics from the Ministry of Environmental Protection showed the level of PM2.5 – fine particulate matter that is hazardous to health – rose from less than 100 micrograms per cubic meter to 700 on Lunar New Year’s Eve last year, when many people set off fireworks.

For centuries, Chinese have burned firecrackers and set off fireworks to drive away evil spirits, which eventually became a form of celebration.

Rocket designers set crosshairs on new air purifiers

Chinese carrier rocket designers are using their knowledge and expertise to tap into the public’s demand for fresh and clean air.

The China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology in Beijing, a major developer of the nation’s carrier rockets and ballistic missiles, will soon put on the market an air purifier that developers say incorporates a host of cutting-edge technologies used on rockets.

Beijing Ares Technology Co, a subsidiary of the academy responsible for the development and marketing of air purifiers, has sold 10,000 Alpha-blue air

purifiers, developed by rocket designers, to space industry workers and will launch 5,000 sets on the open market after the coming Chinese New Year.

Wang Libo, chairman of Beijing Ares Technology, said on Wednesday that he expects the product to be popular because it has better capabilities compared with other air purifiers of its kind on the Chinese market, while being reasonably priced.

"Compared with other purifiers of its size, the Alpha-blue has a much higher rate of delivering clear air and absorbing formaldehyde in a given period of time because we powder-coat its filter screens with nanoplatinum particles that are widely used in rocket production," he said.

"We also made use of our designers' knowledge of aerodynamics that they gained through the making of rocket bodies and engines to design the air purifier's intakes and outlets to ensure it has better air circulation compared with other products," Wang added.

In addition, composite materials and remote control technologies adopted by Chinese carrier rockets have also been used in Alpha-blue, according to Wang.

An Alpha-blue air purifier sells for 4,999 yuan (\$727), much less than other purifiers with its capacity, which usually have a price of at least 8,000 yuan, he said.

"The academy has been transferring its space technologies to medical air purification for many years and has served a lot of hospitals. Now we want to help the public get rid of PM2.5," he explained, referring to the most feared pollutant in Chinese cities – particulate matter with a diameter smaller than 2.5 microns that can penetrate the lungs and seriously harm health.

Several agents have signed contracts with Ares Technology, while the company is also developing a store on Taobao, the most popular online shopping website in China, Wang said.

Zhao Xiaozhuo, an electronic engineer at China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology who took part in the development of the nation's newest Long March 5 and Long March 7 carrier rockets, said he adopted monitor equipment used on rockets for the Alpha-blue that allows users to monitor and control the machine anywhere and anytime.

He added that the Alpha-blue's capabilities have been measured by China's top quality certification firm and the test results show it has better performance than most purifiers on the Chinese market.

Volunteers help Chinese go home for New Year

As millions of Chinese head home for Spring Festival, volunteers, charity groups and railway companies are helping them on their way.

Spring Festival, or the Chinese Lunar New Year, is the most important occasion in the Chinese calendar. This year it falls on Jan. 28.

About 3 billion trips are expected to be made during "chunyun," the Spring Festival travel rush that lasts this year from Jan. 13 to Feb. 21, the National Development and Reform Commission said.

The travel rush puts enormous strain on the transport system, leaving tickets in short supply, but many companies and local youth leagues are helping out by providing free bus rides for migrant workers.

Cheetah Mobile, a tech firm in Beijing, asked people to submit online requests for a free bus ticket back home. On Tuesday, the company arranged for buses to take more than 450 Beijing migrant workers back home.

"In the past five years, the 'orange bus' project has reached 18 cities in China during the Spring Festival, and helped 5,500 families to get together," said Xu Xiaohui, vice chief of the company.

Last week, Ping'an Group, an insurance company, commissioned 200 long-distance coaches to carry 10,000 migrant workers during the festival period.

Volunteers have also tried to make the tedious journeys easier for travelers.

At Hangzhou east railway station, volunteers handed out fortune paintings to travelers. Chinese people put such paintings, along with couplets, on doors and windows for the lunar New Year celebration.

A number of rail lines, particularly those that are less busy, have improved services. For example, some trains now have play areas for children.

"Railway staff are actively pushing reform. We aim to provide efficient and heart-warming services, making tortuous hours on the train a nice experience," said Wang Feng, head of the Lanzhou Railway Bureau.

New Year brings new hope for poor

Chinese

The cold winter wind rattled the window frames of Xu Haicheng's warm, cozy home. Inside sat an unlikely pair surrounded by receipts and papers.

Xu's house guest was President Xi Jinping, and Xi was helping the farmer with his household budget.

Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, for the past five years has made it an annual tradition to visit real Chinese before the Lunar New Year. On Monday and Tuesday, he was in Zhangbei County in the northern province of Hebei.

This is not the first year that Xi's New Year inspection tours have taken him to the front line of China's war against poverty.

He visited Gansu Province and Beijing in 2013, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 2014, Shaanxi Province in 2015 and Jiangxi Province in 2016.

Last year he also visited the provinces of Qinghai and Anhui, as well as Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, which are home to a high number of people living in poverty.

Just 200 kilometers north of Beijing, Zhangbei has been classed as a deprived county since 2013, but thanks to a major poverty-alleviation program it is receiving support, including measures to promote profitable agricultural products and emerging industries such as solar power.

Xu explained to the president that his family has 30 mu (2 ha) of land, upon which he grows potatoes, beets and oats.

The president picked up the man's budget.

"I can see that three mu of land produced 2,000 jin (1,000 kilograms) of potatoes, which you sold for two yuan (0.29 U.S. dollars) a jin. On 15 mu of land, however, you grow other crops that only sell for half a yuan a jin," said Xi, before adding, "That is a big price difference."

According to county officials, Zhangbei grows 20 percent of the nation's potatoes, and locals are keen to use more of their land to grow the lucrative tuber.

"You should develop industries and expand their scale according to market demand," Xi suggested.

Next Xi busied himself with some number crunching as he compared Xu's household income and expenses.

"You received a grain grant of over 2,500 yuan, another grant of 306 yuan for reforesting land, and another for grassland protection for 1,140 yuan," Xi said. "Added to the money you make from farming, this means you earned 43,000

yuan.”

“You spent 12,700 yuan on farming and another 29,000 yuan on various household expenses. This comes to 42,000 yuan, yes?” Xi asked.

Xu explained that he had to spend most of his income on his wife’s medical treatment and tuition fees for his second daughter, who is studying Traditional Chinese Medicine, and the tuition costs him 18,000 yuan a year.

Xu’s daughter told the president that she was also a recipient of a student bursary and was granted 1,500 yuan every semester.

Xi looked confused, “You earned 43,000 yuan but spent 42,000 yuan on farming, health care and education. How did you cover your day-to-day expenses?”

The farmers who also chatted with Xi at Xu’s house explained that families in the village had limited outgoings.

“We grow our own food and make linseed oil by ourselves,” one villager said. “I spent 600 yuan at most on coal for heating,” said another.

The conversations gave the president pause for thought.

He said medical insurance for serious diseases must work well in rural areas, as families can easily slip back into poverty due to the financial burden of ill health.

Moreover, he added, all rural children should be covered by the national education policy that guarantees them nine years of free, compulsory schooling, and access to additional financial assistance.

During his tour, Xi also listened to local Party cadres who briefed him on measures they had implemented under the poverty-alleviation program, such as solar power and infrastructure projects, and training schemes for farmers.

Xi reminded the officials that they must take the lead in the fight against poverty.

The key to building an all-round moderately prosperous society by 2020 will be implementation, Xi noted.

Following the commitment that China will eliminate poverty by 2020, huge strides in poverty reduction have been achieved.

Over the past four years, the country has lifted 60 million people out of poverty. Moreover, government spending on poverty hit a record high in 2016, exceeding 100 billion yuan for the first time.

The central budget allocated 66.7 billion yuan for poverty reduction this year, up 43.4 percent year on year, while provincial governments’ allocations rose more than 50 percent, topping 40 billion yuan.

In late 2016, China issued a poverty alleviation plan for 2016 to 2020,

promising to help over 56 million people who live in the country's poorest villages and counties.

"I care most about the poor," Xi said in his New Year speech on the last day of 2016. His words have resonated with millions of Chinese, who like Xu, will start the new year with renewed hope that their lives are on course to improve.

New Year brings new hope for poor Chinese

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