



A girl touches a lantern attached to a tree to celebrate the Lunar New Year, marking the Year of the Dog, at the Ditan park in Beijing. — AFP photos



Dancers with traditional Peking Opera costume waits to perform at a fair to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

ALL QUIET AS BEIJING MUZZLES YEAR OF THE DOG CELEBRATIONS

Beijing began the Year of the Dog Friday with eerily silent streets, as the usual thunderous bursts of firecrackers and fireworks were silenced by a strict ban that sacrifices tradition in the name of an anti-pollution campaign. Overnight, police patrolled deserted neighborhoods in the Chinese capital—normally abuzz with excitement as the country welcomes the arrival of the Lunar New Year. “I never imagined it would be this quiet! It’s usually packed,” said a Beijing resident surnamed Wang who had been out in the city centre following a traditional New Year’s Eve family dinner.

A migrant worker from neighboring Hebei province surnamed Zhu said that without the firecrackers, “the magic of the New Year is gone”. The low-key celebrations were in stark contrast to previous years, when the streets were crammed with Beijingers setting off firecrackers and the sky was lit by near-constant firework displays, unleashing a deafening thunder until dawn. But the tradition, conceived as a way to ward off evil spirits, has this year been targeted by authorities anxious to lower winter pollution levels.

Some 440 Chinese cities have banned the use of firecrackers and fireworks—which are also set off during weddings or when moving house—since last year. Beijing introduced a ban in December. “Like all Beijingers, I have been lighting firecrackers since I was a child. But times have changed (...) air quality is what matters most to people now,” said a man who gave his surname as Zhang.

The government has launched a huge campaign to reduce pollution during the winter, ordering polluting factories to leave Beijing and its surroundings, and designating “no-coal zones” where more than three million homes have abruptly switched to gas or electric heating. In 2017, the level of PM2.5 particles—which penetrate deep into the lungs—in Beijing over the New Year was 26 times higher than the level recommended by the World Health Organization. But on Friday the sky was a brilliant blue. “It (the ban) is a good thing, given the disastrous state of the environment,” said Xi, a young student, before adding: “Even if it deprives us of a little pleasure.”

Peace and quiet

Safety is another reason behind the ban. Every year there are numerous accidents caused by pyrotechnics, many of which are of poor quality in China. Dong Weiwei, a resident who had volunteered to patrol his street, stood ready to alert police should he see anyone flouting the new regulations. “In the past I have seen people wounded, an eight-year-old child whose finger was blown off by a firecracker explosion,” he said.

In southwestern Yunnan province, a fireworks explosion killed four people and injured five others Thursday night, state media said. The ban has made some happy, including Zhu Ye, an elderly Beijinger who took advantage of the peace and quiet to take her dog Xiao Mi for a nighttime walk. “I no longer liked it at my age... with the fireworks and firecrackers everywhere, we didn’t dare to go out,” she said. “But this year, there are not many people in the streets and I am finally able to walk my dog.”

Ahead of New Year celebrations, hundreds of millions of Chinese travel back to their home towns, often on

crowded trains, making it in the world’s largest annual human migration. Meanwhile in Hong Kong a spectacular fireworks display scheduled to mark Lunar New Year was cancelled as the city mourns victims of a deadly bus crash. A speeding double-decker overturned in northern Hong Kong on Saturday evening, killing 19 and leaving more than 60 injured, some critically.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam said residents were grieving and wanted “to express their somber mood”. In Shanghai thousands flocked to temples to pray for good fortune. While in Nepal, exiled Tibetans living in Kathmandu carried images of their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, as the community—estimated to number in their thousands—gathered to celebrate Lhosar, the Tibetan Lunar New Year, with traditional music and food.—AFP



A dragon dance is performed during a cultural festival to mark the first day of the Lunar New Year in Chinatown neighborhood in Manhattan in New York City.



Dancers perform during a cultural festival to mark the first day of the Lunar New Year in Chinatown neighborhood in Manhattan in New York City.

Russian Buddhists mark Lunar New Year with prayers and dumplings

Russian Buddhists in the Siberian region of Buryatia near the Mongolian border on Friday kicked off celebrations for the Lunar New Year that will last almost a month. At the Atsagatsky datsan, or temple, 50 kilometers outside the regional capital of Ulan-Ude, believers came to pray and hear astrological predictions for the next year. “The poor will get poorer, the rich will get richer, the summer and autumn will be rainy, but in general it will be a good year,” the temple’s lama Tarba Dorzhiyev, 61, told them.

Believers also celebrated with festive food including traditional buuzi, a type of large steamed dumpling filled with meat. “The gods offer us another year of life and they wish for us to be happy,” said 57-year-old Svetlana Tsybikzhapova, one of those busily preparing the dish. Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday released a message of congratulations to Buddhists, saying that “it’s important that Russia’s Buddhist community carefully preserves the priceless moral and spiritual heritage of its ancestors, their original principles and customs.”

Russia, where the majority of the population describe themselves as Orthodox Christian, has around 900,000 Buddhists living in Siberia, near the border with Mongolia and around Lake Baikal, as well as further west in the region of Kalmykia on the Caspian Sea. Buddhists, like other religious groups, suffered persecution from the Soviet authorities, but the post-Soviet years have seen a revival, with teachers of Tibetan Buddhism from other countries playing a major role.—AFP



Performers take part in a street parade to mark the first day of the Lunar New Year celebrations for the Year of the Dog in Hong Kong.

