

**Editor's Note:** Chinese lunar new year begins on Saturday, February 1. The following reports by China Daily staff reporter YU NAN unravel the controversial issue of the ban on firecrackers in Beijing and how rural people in Jiangsu Province will enjoy the festivities.



**Year of the Goat:**  
Papercut, 4 cm by 3 cm, by Zhang Yuzhu.

## Firecracker bans promise not to be a fizzer

Tan Quan is one of the few people not eagerly expecting the Spring Festival.

"I am always busier during the festival holidays than usual," the 31-year-old police officer said.

Tan has been working with the Dangerous Articles Administration Department with Beijing Public Security Bureau for more than nine years, almost since the Beijing People's Congress first passed the law banning firecrackers in urban areas.

According to the deputies who endorsed the law, the ban on firecrackers hopes to prevent fires, explosions, air pollution and injuries, especially during the biggest festival in China.

Chongqing Municipality as well as a number of provincial capital cities, including Guangzhou, Wuhan, Nanjing, Xi'an, Jinan and Lanzhou have also banned firecrackers and small fireworks in urban centres. Shanghai forbids firecrackers in most downtown areas where business offices and shops are concentrated.

A public poll in 1992 indicated that 80 per cent of urban Beijing residents were in favour of the ban. A good percentage of people began to miss the days when they could set off firecracker celebrations, according to the bureau.

Ten years have been quite a long time, enough for people to forget about the unceasingly sharp bangs and serious wounds caused by shoddy firecrackers, said Qian Jin, director of Tan's department.

Such lenient and forgiving attitudes might explain why many people have picked up the old habit again after a lapse of several years, he added.

But Qian and Tan have not missed the firecrackers. For nine years, Tan has spent the days of the festival in patrol cars and by hotline telephones.

He has also spent the festival hours counting the number of casualties and fires, all caused by festival firecrackers and even small fireworks. A year ago during the Spring Festival holidays, they, along with the fire brigade, received calls to attend some 158 fires caused by firecrackers. About 26 people were reportedly wounded.

"Actually more than four-fifths of Beijing, are allowed firecrackers," said Qian.

To adapt to the increasing desire for firecracker fun, the bureau has defined more than 600 special areas outside urban areas, where setting-off firecrackers is permitted, these areas are equipped with fire prevention facilities, spacious grounds and convenient emergency medical care personnel.

Tan wishes those who long for the "noisy" old days will only set off firecrackers in the appointed places so that he and his colleagues will meet less unwelcome eyes during their patrols along the streets in the banned areas.

"All of us want people to have a happy and safe Spring Festival. What we do is just to protect people's security," he said.

### Looking at the ban

Wei Lili, in her 70s, said she could enjoy the clear booms and colourful flashes from a distance on the balcony of her 20th-floor apartment near the Third Ring Road of Beijing during the festival holidays.

She felt excited about the firecrackers because they went off at least 2 kilometres away from her, she said.

"We aged people were tired of unstoppable sharp explosions which always happened at lunar new year's eve in the early 1990s," she said. "The sounds not only made for sleepless nights but also broke up our regular life schedules."

Tan from the police bureau said most of the complaint calls pouring into the hotline were from aged people who lived in the newly-built residential communities where setting off firecrackers were permitted.

The complaints concentrated on the excessive noise from the firecrackers, which also triggered many car alarms all night in the communities, Tan added.

But some younger people share a different view about the firecrackers.

Ling Dongsheng, a 27-year-old businessman, said he didn't feel annoyed or offended by the loud and sharp bangs.

"I will feel the festive mood is incomplete without firecrackers," he said. "But I agree with

the law because lighting firecrackers in urban areas will disturb those who don't like it."

On the lunar new year's eve over the past several years, Ling has usually driven out with his friends to the northern suburbs to enjoy the excitement of the firecrackers.

The main beneficiaries of the restrictions have arguably been holiday resorts built in the suburbs.

Ninety per cent of their guest rooms had been booked in the first week of this month and "firecrackers allowed" were designed as the drawcard in their advertisements, reported by an early news bulletin on Beijing Evening News.

Guo Changqing, staff from Qinglongxia Holiday Resort in Huairou District in northern Beijing, said his resort has specially defined a 50,000-square-metre yard for the guests to set off firecrackers.

"As more private car owners appear in Beijing, spending holidays in the resort has become popular. When the Spring Festival arrives, setting off firecrackers is no doubt one of the biggest attractions to those who live in downtown areas," Guo said.

Qian Jin said to ensure a safe and sound festival, Qian and his colleagues with the police department acted earlier than usual to crack down on the illegal firecracker producers and traders, which are believed to be the main sources of low-quality firecrackers that are to blame for injuries.

The capital's police seized 4 million firecrackers worth 60,000 yuan (US\$7,250) in Beijing last year from February to December.

Most of the firecrackers are illegally produced by private workshops in regions in and around Beijing. They often contain too much gun powder and banned chemicals, which makes them particularly dangerous, according to Qian.

Qian quoted a case in which they detained an illegal producer in Tongzhou District of eastern Beijing.

The producer rented several houses in a village and produced tons of firecrackers without any security or fire prevention facilities. "A situation where any minor spark could cause a big tragedy," Qian recalled.

In recent years, firecrackers, which used to be small explosive devices, are now being made more elaborate, and thus more dangerous, said Tan Quan.

He said that the biggest firecracker he once seized was one 30 centimetres in diameter and 100 centimetres in height. "The gun powder from an explosion was enough to destroy a big wall," said Tan, who majored in chemistry.

Even smaller or legally produced firecrackers have some potential dangers to children, said Tan.

During the last Spring Festival, the right ear of an 8-year-old girl in Beijing was heavily injured by a small firecracker she was holding.

The girl subconsciously covered her ear when she saw a big firecracker nearby was ready to go off, while totally ignoring the ignited one in her hand, recalled Tan.

Tan recommended that parents with young children should watch carefully when their kids play with firecrackers and should buy the legally produced works to ensure the safety of their youngsters.

"If the resources of illegal firecrackers are controlled, our heavy security presence will be largely eased," he said.

A tradition that has withstood the test of time in China must have something unique that appeals to the people but now it should be reserved in a more standard, reasonable and safe way, Qian said.



**Happy New Year:** Papercut, 10 cm by 10 cm, by Zhang Yuzhu.



**Lion dance:** As the Spring Festival approaches, members of the armed police force in Northeast China's Jilin Province stage a lion dance to entertain new recruits.

## Workers hit road home for reunion

The Spring Festival, the biggest Chinese holiday, is always precious and exciting.

Now as a supervisor in charge of equipment distribution at a construction site in Beijing, the 35-year-old is about to go home and hug his 7-year-old son when the lunar new year arrives.

"Before I could only hear my son's voice through phone calls. The Spring Festival is the only time for people like me, who are always on the move, to fulfill our duties to the family," Wu said.

He said that the construction process went so smoothly during winter that he could afford to buy an earlier train ticket to spend the *xiaonian* (a festival on the 23rd day of the 12th month of the lunar year when sacrifices are made to the kitchen god) at his hometown in Shaobei town, East China's Jiangsu Province.

It's the first time since leaving his hometown five years ago that Wu has been able to go home early and visit the town he claims to be a wonderful place with an amazing landscape and abundance.

The city of Jiangu, which Shaobei town is in, is famous and prosperous places for the construction industry in the entire country, owning more than 70 construction teams, according to Wu.

Chen Jinsong, 27, who works with Wu as a supervisor in charge of construction quality and also comes from Shaobei, added that more than 2,000 people in Shaobei are engaged in the construction industry across the country.

But no matter how busy the construction schedule has been, they always go home for the family reunion festival, he said.

Chen said they have their own unique way to spend the festival holiday in his hometown. "They are colourful and full of fun," he said.

It includes exciting dragon-boat games, wonderful lion-dance performances, a big festival lantern show and it is always a good time for children to enjoy setting off firecrackers.

Besides family reunion, delicious local food also allures the folks home from across the country, Wu said.

Although often away from home for extended periods, both Wu and Chen said they still disliked the hot and salty food of northern and western parts of China and always missed the light and slightly sweet Huaiyang dishes, one of the four most popular cuisine styles in China along with the other three — Sichuan, Cantonese and Shandong dishes.

Moreover, food prepared during the Spring Festival in Shaobei usually has its special meanings, said Wu.

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, a dish of stir-fried celery is specially prepared. The celery is called *qiaocai* by local people, which grows up in the water and the inside is hollow.

"The hollow channel symbolizes the next year's smooth promotions, transportations and

communications with people," Wu said.

Another preferred vegetable during the festival is pea shoots. Local people used to call it *anlecai*, meaning peace and happiness of the coming new year.

*Tangyuan*, stuffed dumplings made of glutinous rice flour in soup, served on the lunar New Year's Day as blessing for a lasting family reunion with salted front paws of pigs served the following day as a blessing for a big fortune.

Chen specially noted his favourite *shizitou*, a dish of large meatballs browned and braised with soy sauce, because those he has tried in Beijing have not been made in the genuine Huaiyang style, he said.

Chen said it is a pity that they have to rush back to Beijing before the Lantern Festival, the 15th of the first lunar month, for the construction demands.

"But to have about a 20-day family reunion is already the biggest bonus for the one year of hard work," he said.



**Moment of joy:** Residents of Dalian in Northeast China's Liaoning Province enjoy fireworks at the Fireworks Spring Fair held during last year's Spring Festival.



**Lantern Festival:** Farmers living nearby Jinan in East China's Shandong Province perform a dragon dance to celebrate the Lantern Festival which fell on February 26 last year.