

## *Foreign Teachers Celebrate Christmas in China*

---

*Taken from **From China**, by Michael Donnelly*

Many foreign Christian teachers who have spent Christmases in China like to tell their friends about it. Michael Donnelly is one of those. Michael spent five years teaching in the Mainland. In his book, *From China*, a collection of letters, Donnelly records the impressions of his first Christmas in China in 1993, and his last in 1997.

In 1993 he wrote,

“Christmas here officially didn’t happen. The tradition at this university has been that the English department, where the foreign teachers work, puts on a Christmas party for its teachers and 200 students. There’s singing and dancing and snacks: a harmless enough break in the routine, you’d think. But in early December the government issued a directive banning the celebration of foreign festivals such as Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and April Fool’s Day (those were the examples listed in the directive)...The students studied the directive, postponed the party a week and called it a New Year party....”

The writer continues,

“‘Midnight’ Mass began at 6 on Christmas Eve, with about a thousand in a church that seats 400. The place was like a rush-hour bus. The front third of the church held paid-up Catholics; the middle section those who at least knew the chorus of the hymns and how to bless themselves, and at the back were people who had come in off the street to see what all the lights and noise were about. The seminarians rose to the occasion and wriggled round among the casual visitors, explaining what was going on. It was a good boisterous liturgy, with lots to look at and listen to, and send you home with a smile and a definite feeling of belonging to something bigger than yourself.

“On Christmas Day I taught my scheduled classes. Xiao Li and two companions took the four foreign teachers out to a restaurant

on Christmas night. The following evening the foreigners got together for dinner in one of our apartments....

“The students and teachers had made Christmas cards for us too or bought New Year ones and changed the message. I’ve never had so many. They really did want us to feel remembered.”

Five years later in 1997, one gets the impression that much has changed in China--and for the better. Donnelly writes about his ‘Karaoke Christmas.’

“There are 15 of us foreign Catholics of nine nationalities in Changchun, 10 teaching at different colleges and five studying Chinese. Where and how to celebrate Christmas? The arrangement we finally agreed on was to hire one of the private karaoke rooms in a downtown restaurant from 7 till 11 on Christmas Eve. We started off with a good meal. A big crowd sitting round one table makes for the best kind of Chinese meal; there are always several dishes on the table with new ones arriving at regular intervals, and you just keep filling up your personal saucer-sized plate with a bit from here and a bit from there.

“The meal over and the table cleared, the staff shut the door and left us to ourselves. We had an hour of reflection and carols, followed by Mass around the table. All this to a steady background roar from the neighbouring karaoke rooms, and no doubt our singing added to their entertainment. Then a glass of wine (there are several joint-ventures companies in north China now making reasonable table wines at three or four dollars a bottle, the foreign interest is usually French) and some snacks while we exchanged gifts, and home before midnight. It was all very pleasant and convivial, far and away the best Christmas Eve I’ve had so far in China.

“After morning classes on Christmas Day, the dozen foreign teachers at this college went off to the buffet lunch at a local hotel, and that was enjoyable too. We’d drawn names from a hat for Christmas gifts, each person to buy something for one other person, and got together in the evening for the giving and receiving.

“On the night of Boxing Day the college administration took all the staff, Chinese and foreign, to a restaurant for a meal with dancing and party games. So that was Christmas 1997 in Changchun. Was it white? No, not on Christmas Day itself but there was a heavy fall the next day.■