

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.

Press release: Final phase of £192

million A556 dual carriageway work unveiled

Drivers will shortly be able to use the new £192 million A556 Knutsford to Bowdon dual carriageway in Cheshire, with the final phase of work starting next month.

Highways England, which is building the new link road between junction 19 of the M6 at Knutsford and junction 7 of the M56 at Bowdon, today detailed the final phase of road works for the project – paving the way for the new road to open in March , providing a faster and more reliable link between the 2 motorways.

View looking north from new A50 bridge – with finishing landscaping and carriageway works underway

Full weekend closures – of the existing A556, junction 19 of the M6 and junctions 7 and 8 of the M56 – are needed and are scheduled to start in mid-February. The closures will allow the old road to be sealed off from through traffic and the motorway junctions to be tied into the new dual carriageway.

Highways England project manager Paul Hampson said:

We are on course to open the new dual carriageway by the end of March, if not sooner. As well as starting work next month to connect the new dual carriageway to the M6 and M56 link roads, we'll be using the weekend closures to do some preparation along the existing A556 which will become a B road with much-improved facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.

We're working hard with partners and stakeholders like the emergency services and Manchester Airport to plan for these weekend closures and to make sure they'll be well-publicised once the full details are confirmed.

View from new A50 bridge looking south

Drivers are being advised the schedule for the final phase of work is dependent on the weather. The schedule currently involves:

- a full weekend closure of the existing A556 and associated M6 and M56 junctions between 9pm on Friday 17 February and 5am on Monday 20 February
- a full weekend closure of the existing A556 and associated M6 and M56 junctions from 9pm on Friday 3 March to 5am on Monday 6 March – with the new road opening to drivers that morning for the first time
- a final full weekend closure of the old A556 and new A556 between 9pm on Friday 10 March and 5am on Monday 13 March to finalise work to seal off

the old road

Highways England is working with partners and stakeholders such as Manchester Airport, major football clubs and the police to plan for and publicise the road works so drivers can plan journeys affected by the weekend closures. More information and advice will be released nearer the time of the closures.

Alternative view looking north up the new A556

Construction of the new A556 link road, between the M56 and the M6, started in November 2014 and is part of a £15 billion government investment in motorways and major A roads by 2021 which is being delivered by Highways England as part of the Northern Powerhouse initiative.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[Press release: Consultation starts on Tyne and Wear junction](#)

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Public are encouraged to take part in a consultation for the A19 Testos junction improvement scheme.

Local residents, businesses and road users are encouraged to take part in a 5 week statutory consultation into the A19 Testos junction improvement scheme in Tyne and Wear.

A preferred option was already selected for the junction back in 2014 but Highways England wishes to carry out a consultation update to make sure that nothing has changed and to allow people who have recently moved to the area to have their say. This is in accordance with the Planning Act 2008.

The scheme will improve journeys for drivers along the A19 who will no longer need to negotiate the current Testos roundabout. Work involves raising the A19 on a flyover and building new slip roads to connect it to the A184 via the Testos roundabout.

[A computer generated video showing the new junction has also been released and is available at](#)

Highways England project manager Paul Ahdal said:

This consultation is another opportunity for the people of Tyne and Wear to give us their thoughts on the proposed scheme and tell us about any changes locally.

This is an exciting scheme which will be delivered with the A19 Downhill Lane scheme which we consulted on late last year to keep disruption to a minimum.

The consultation begins on Monday 30 January and will run until Monday 6 March. Flyers have been sent to addresses in the area but brochures and questionnaires are available at local venues including Bunny Hill customer service centre and local libraries.

The information is also [available on the scheme website.](#)

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CBI business optimism

Surveys of opinion can be unreliable. In July 2016 the CBI survey showed a dreadful minus 47, compared to a minus 4 in January 2016. At the time I thought it an odd reading predicting a downturn we would not experience, as time proved to be the case. Today's survey shows a surge to plus 15 for this January, implying good growth to come. It's a great turn round in sentiment from ultra pessimism last summer.

More reliable order book figures show plus 15 this January, compared to plus 5 last January. This is a better indicator of more growth to come. Why are

some forecasters still expecting a big slowdown?

[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.