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The foot of snow that fell on Beijing on Sunday and Monday was enough to shut down schools and highways on the first working day of the new year. It did the same for other parts of north China and the Korean peninsula as well. In Seoul, the state weather agency says the snowfall was the worst since South Korea began conducting meteorological surveys in 1937.

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MADELEINE BRAND, host:

Here in Washington, we've been complaining about how cold it is, but really, it's nothing compared to the weather in China. China and most of northeast Asia are digging out from the worst snowstorm to hit the region in decades. It's broken all sorts of records. NPR's Anthony Kuhn reports from Beijing.

ANTHONY KUHN: The foot of snow that fell on Beijing on Sunday and Monday was enough to shut down schools and highways on the first working day of the year. It did the same for other parts of north China and the Korean peninsula, as well.

(Soundbite of car engine)

KUHN: Mau Win Jun(ph), a Beijing sanitation supervisor, is leading a work crew, shoveling the now hard and sooty snow on a main city thoroughfare. The city does have snow plows and salt spreaders, but, Mau explains, its traditional response to big snows is to mobilize the masses.

Mr. MAU WIN JUN (Beijing City Sanitation Supervisor): (Through translator) Our reaction to the extreme weather was pretty timely. When the snow started to fall, we activated our emergency plan, which was to call on all employers and residents to come out and clean up the snow.

KUHN: In Inner Mongolia, firemen rescued 1,400 passengers whose train cars were trapped by massive snowdrifts. Seoul, the South Korean capital nearly ground to a halt under the heaviest snowfall since it began meteorological surveys in 1937. The weather is a frigid reminder of what Beijing used to be like only a couple of decades ago. Since then, Beijing winters have been relatively mild. Mau Win Jun remembers.

Mr. JUN: (Through translator) I'm 50 now. I remember when I was seven or eight, gosh. The snowfalls were really big, and it was really cold. Back then, we would go out bundled up in thick, padded, cotton coats and pants, and we'd still be freezing.

KUHN: Changing weather patterns have also mean more frequent drought for north China. So at least farmers here can take comfort at the prospect of more melting snows.

Anthony Kuhn, NPR News, Beijing.