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Chinese New Year and Spring Festival—過年與春節



After my journey to Japan concluded and second semester kicked off, Chinese New Year was just around the corner. Seeing as I'm staying with a host family, the timing couldn't be more perfect. About a week or two before the holiday, my host Mom informed me we'd be going to their house in the suburbs of Tianjin for the festival, to celebrate with relatives. A few days before we took off, my host Mom's older sister and husband came, and soon enough Grandma, my host Mom, and my host Aunt and Uncle all took off to the suburbs as Beijing quickly became a ghost town, with most of its residents heading back to their hometowns to be with family. The drive was short and was mostly fine aside from Grandma getting a tad car sick. At one point, we even had to stop by a nearby elementary school to let her use the restroom, the poor dear.

However sick she may have felt, she kept a calm demeanor to her, insisting we need not help her, modest as she is.



Host Mom Rolling Dumplings, New Year's Eve, Jizhou, Tianjin, China

The house was very nice and the neighborhood seemed very new as well, although people were scarce, likely because the homes all seemed to be used as getaway spots for people working big-time jobs in either Beijing or Tianjin. There was enough space for me to have my own room, so I settled in nicely. During the first few days, I was able to spend a lot of quality time with both my host Grandma and host Mom, as well as my host Aunt (who'd come all the way from Jiangxi Province in the South to spend the holiday with us all). My host Mom is a lawyer, so she's incredibly busy, working most weekends and going away for work almost weekly for days at a time. It was the first time we really got to do stuff together. She had a nice coffee machine there, so I took the liberty to make everyone coffee, which turned into a daily ritual as I put a twist on it, adding a small chunk of chocolate to each cup I gave out. We also baked some bread together, and on New Year's Eve—as is tradition—we rolled dumplings and ate them as the clock hit midnight as the New Year's Extravaganza rolled on the TV, the nation's biggest TV event of the year.



Family at the New Year's Eve Dinner Table, Jizhou, Tianjin, China

Each day during the afternoon, my host Mom, Aunt, Uncle and I would all go to the nearby gym and play badminton together, something I hadn't done in a while but still really enjoyed. We also would go to the nearby markets to buy food and snacks, often blabbing back and forth about what to buy and how much. Each night, Grandma only wanted to do one thing—play Majiang. Being the first time to play Majiang, I was very intimidated. While I could read the bricks with Chinese characters, many of them have separate symbols, which are different suits, much like cards. It took me a few days of watching and reading online before I had the courage to sit down and play, but it was really fun when I did. The game is fast-paced and always moving; you really have to be on your feet the whole time.

Despite her age, Grandma schooled us all most of the time. The whole experience was awfully immersive, and it was just so fascinating to see how the holiday works; the traditions, customs, food, games, etc. all play a big role in the liveliest time of the Chinese year.

Paul