

020226 One Last China Email

I thought that the China emails would be over with the last one about Beijing. However, I just received a letter from my friend Li Mei from Yantai. In it, she describes some of the customs regarding the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) that I wanted to share with you. Keep in mind that the date of the New Year is determined by the lunar calendar, not the solar one and so all of the dates that she mentions are also lunar. Her letter begins:

On the 20th day of the 12th lunar month, people usually make twenty or thirty steamed buns. Each one weighs one kilogram. It's too big, isn't it? They also buy many Chinese dates. Each is cut into six pieces. There are thirteen pieces on a steamed bun. Do you know why we make so many steamed buns? This is one of the Chinese customs. From the 1st day of the 1st lunar month, to the 15th day, people can't make steamed buns, or it will bring bad luck. These steamed buns are preserved in a jar about one month.

On Lunar Dec 25th day or 26th, people begin to clean the dust of their house and wash clothes. On the 27th or the 28th, they get many vegetables, fruits, fish and meat at the food markets. On the 29th, they clean their windows, doors and floors. In the morning of the 30th, they cook many deep-fried fish, smoked fish, stewed chicken and pig's hoofs, etc. In the afternoon, they cut a lot of fillings to make Chinese dumplings (jaozi) because people must eat them on New Years Eve, the Spring Festival and the next day. From eight o'clock to twelve o'clock of the New Year Eve, people like to watch the Spring Festival evening party on CCTV. It is wonderful. When it is almost midnight, a big bell is shown on TV. When the bell knocks the last time, firecrackers resound throughout Yantai. It means that people have entered the new year. At the same time, Buddhists also burn joss sticks and worship on bended knees for Buddha at their home.

In the morning of the Spring Festival, people usually get up very early (about four or five o'clock). After they set off firecrackers and eat Chinese dumplings they wear their new clothes, socks and shoes to pay New Years call on their friends and relatives. Money is given to children by adults. The money is wrapped in a piece of red paper. It means safe and sound and auspiciousness. How do you feel about the Chinese custom? Isn't it complicated? But, it is very interesting. I especially like the firecrackers.

Li Mei's English is excellent and I wrote the letter as she did. Whether the customs that she speaks of are particular to Yantai or the Shandong province or are practiced all over China, I do not know. But, now if you ever find yourself in Yantai during the Spring Festival, you will not be surprised to hear firecrackers at 5AM on New Years Day!

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