

# Home Away from Home: International Students' Chinese New Year in Ningbo

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As the Chinese New Year unfolds its festive charm across Ningbo, the city's warm atmosphere of celebration and reunion has extended to international students from all corners of the globe. Amid the red glow of Spring Festival decorations and the joy of traditional customs, these young students far from home are not just experiencing the magic of a Chinese New Year in Ningbo, but also finding a heartfelt sense of belonging and the familiar warmth of "home" in this foreign land.

On the afternoon of February 11, the international student dormitory hall at Ningbo University of Technology's Fenghua Campus was bathed in festive "Chinese red", decorated with "Fu" characters, Spring Festival couplets, Chinese knots and piles of New Year gift boxes. A lucky draw for staying students filled the air with cheers; nearly 70% of the university's 200-plus international students chose to stay in Ningbo for the Year of the Horse, from freshmen experiencing their first Chinese New Year to postgraduates who have celebrated it five or six times here.

Ade from Yemen, grinning with his third-prize gift box, is having his second Chinese New Year in China. "Chinese New Year is so much fun!" he said in fluent Chinese. He still fondly remembers dragon dancing in Fenghua and pounding glutinous rice cakes in Xiangshan last year, and plans to explore Ningbo and nearby cities this year to savor different New Year flavors. Baobao, a Bangladeshi student also spending his second Spring Festival in Ningbo, has fallen in love with Chinese calligraphy. He was amazed when his handwritten "Fu" character, inscribed with his name by a teacher, looked "just like a painting", and even jokingly refers to the God of Wealth as the "money god". This festival, he's off to Shanghai with Chinese friends to celebrate. Both agree that festivals in their home countries focus more on quiet family gatherings, lacking the grand, joyful energy of



Group photo of international students after the Spring Festival lottery event.

Chinese New Year.

Far from their homelands, the students never feel lonely. Dormitory aunts check on Ade daily and bring him small snacks, making him feel like he "has a Chinese mom here". Baobao has forged sincere cross-border friendships, joining Chinese friends to visit festive spots and experience an authentic Spring Festival. Ningbo University of Technology has gone all out to ensure their safety and happiness, with a winter vacation on-duty system, daily teacher patrols of the dorms and 24/7 dormitory staff. "In Ningbo, in China, I never worry about safety or being left uncared for," Ade said, giving a thumbs-up. Facing the camera, he sent his wishes with perfect Chinese: "May you have the spirit of a dragon and horse, and may success come at once!" Baobao then blurted out "Wish you get rich immediately!", drawing warm laughter from everyone around. Many students, including Ade who now calls Ningbo his second hometown, say they will miss the city's Spring Festival charm deeply after graduation, and hope to bring their families here to visit one day.

International students from other schools in Ningbo also had unforgettable Spring Festival experiences. Rebecca, an American postgraduate at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, has lived in northern China for seven years and is celebrating her first "Jiangnan" Spring Festival this year. She traded

northern dumplings for Ningbo's sweet glutinous rice balls, and at the university's festival event, she marveled at traditional Chinese opera, tried her hand at writing the "Fu" character and enjoyed a festive dinner. Amazed by the custom of pasting "Fu" upside down to mean "blessings arriving", she took her handwritten character back to her dorm, eager to "hold Ningbo's New Year blessings tight". Marta, a 16-year-old Italian exchange student at Ningbo Zhenhai High School, spent her first Chinese New Year with her local host family. She learned about Spring Festival customs from her Zhejiang-born Chinese teacher before coming to China, and in her six months here, has built a deep bond with her host family—they've visited Xitang wearing Hanfu and baked both Chinese and Italian food together. On Chinese New Year's Eve, they shared a special Sino-Italian dinner: the family cooked authentic Chinese dishes, and Marta made her signature pizza, pasta, and tiramisu. After dinner, they watched the Spring Festival Gala, set off fireworks, and during the holiday, traveled to Wenzhou to explore local customs. Though she sometimes misses home, Marta says this longing makes her cherish the warm reunion with her new family even more. Gerle, a Mongolian girl at NingboTech University, had a truly special cross-border reunion this Spring Festival. Mongolia also celebrates the festival with cleaning, feasts and New Year greetings, and Gerle missed the family celebration at home

last year due to school. This year, she planned to stay in Ningbo to focus on learning Chinese, but was overjoyed when her parents and friends flew all the way from Mongolia to be with her. Since her family doesn't speak Chinese or English, Gerle and a young friend formed a bilingual team to translate and plan trips to Shanghai, Hangzhou and Ningbo. Her father loved Shanghai's dynamic urban vibe, while her mother was drawn to Ningbo's gentle, laid-back atmosphere, and both families were enchanted by the poetic beauty of West Lake.

The New Year flavor of Ningbo also lingers in its fairs, cinemas and markets. Iranian student Kavan from Ningbo University worked as a volunteer at a cinema during the Spring Festival film season, serving as a ticket checker and shop assistant. He recommended *Panda Plan: Adventure of the Tribe* and said he could feel people's great confidence in the future of Chinese cinema. Russian student Yana and Ukrainian student Oleh visited a New Year fair in Xiangshan's Sizhoutou Town, experiencing local age-old customs, grabbing red envelopes and tasting delicious street food. "It feels just like home here," Yana said happily. Moroccan student Nada and Iraqi student Leo, from Ningbo University of Technology, picked out Spring Festival decorations at a local market—couplets, Chinese knots, red envelopes and more. "The joy of Chinese New Year brings people from all over the world together," Leo said, holding a Chinese knot, and Nada added with a smile, "That's exactly why we love this festival so much."

In every warm interaction, every fun traditional experience, every heartfelt reunion, these international students have truly understood the meaning of Chinese New Year. In Ningbo's rich, festive air, they have all found a special, cross-border home—one filled with warmth, friendship and unforgettable memories.

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