

**CHINESE**  
CULTURE

# FESTIVALS

WANG XUEWEN



China Intercontinental Press

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# Preface

The festival is a universal cultural phenomenon – one that gives people all over the world enjoyment and spiritual fulfillment. Festivals are special days that come round periodically and have a relatively stable – and recognizable – content and form. Colourful festivals run through the calendars of all societies – agricultural societies, industrial societies and the modern information society. There are all kinds of festivals, including traditional festivals, that have a history stretching back to ancient times, and modern festivals that were established with the support of the nation and state. There are political festivals, religious festivals and mundane festivals; festivals for certain professions and festivals particular to certain sex and age groups; festivals on the theme of sacrifice, festivals on the theme of love, festivals on the theme of gathering and festivals on the theme of entertainment and competition. The list is almost endless.

We can find the origins of festivals, and the reasons why they have persisted over time, in the geography, history, culture, political systems and economies of the people who celebrate them. Festivals revive, explain and pass on the past; shape, interpret and maintain the present; and, at the same time, herald, inspire and help mold the future. Try to imagine how insipid people's lives would be without festivals. They act like a cultural string of beads connected by time and are a framework of events that help support daily life. Without festivals, people's lives would lack a great deal of spirit and interest. As scholar Liu Dong says, "Life lacking celebration of festivals is not civilized life, and a civilization having lost celebration of festivals is certainly a lost civilization."

China is a country of many festivals. During its long history and across its vast territories and diverse landscapes, the various Chinese ethnic groups have created, passed on and developed a diverse culture of festivals. How many festivals does China have? It is impossible to give an exact number. The saying “important festivals come every three days and common celebrations come every day” vividly reflects just how many Chinese festivals there are. These festivals are stages in the calendar that epitomize Chinese culture and its most important components. Various elements of Chinese culture such as myths, legends, religions, rites, traditional Chinese opera, music, dancing, foods and drinks, and arts and crafts are inseparable from festivals. Festivals carry the Chinese nation’s historical memories, cultural creations, social mechanisms and its joy of life. In festivals, people satisfy their sensual needs, meet, marry and have children, strengthen their social groups and search for mental peace and spiritual solace.

In modern times, the development of Chinese festivals has been rapid and dramatic – just like the development of Chinese society itself. Today, festivals show unprecedented complexity and diversity. On the one hand, many complain that “there are no festivals any more” and that “festivals are boring”. On the other hand, there has been an upsurge of events that are celebrated as festivals.

Traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, and some of the festivals of minority ethnic groups, have been carried forward alongside China’s overall development, but their spirit and content has been transformed. Some traditional festivals such as the Shangsi Festival and Land God Festival are gradually shrinking for various reasons. Some festivals only remain as records in old books or as memories and no longer take place. However festivals such as the May 4<sup>th</sup> Youth Day, June 1<sup>st</sup> Children’s Day and National Day have emerged during the modern development of the nation and state, and have become deeply embedded in the Chinese people’s psyche. People are now accustomed to looking forward to and celebrating these “new festivals.” Western festivals such as Christmas and Valentine’s Day are also much favored by Chinese youth. Today, the country enjoys a lineage of festivals, that mixes the traditional and the new, the global and the regional, the religious and the mundane.

These festivals provide special moments in the lives of Chinese people and give shape and rhythm to their lives.

*Chinese Culture: Festivals* is an overview of current Chinese festivals. By highlighting a number of key festivals and festival themes and topics it presents the current situation in China, while also giving a fascinating insight into the history of the country's festivals and cultural heritage.



New Year drawn by Zhang Xingyu from a painting album of the Wanli Period of the Ming Dynasty.

# FESTIVE CHINA

Chinese festivals are special cultural occasions that are closely linked to the history and traditions of the country's diverse mix of cultural, ethnic and religious groups. To properly understand Chinese festivals, they must be put into context as part of the country's rich tapestry of historical and cultural development.

# Origins of Festivals

The traditional Chinese character for “festival” contains the character component for bamboo. Beginning from tender sprouts, bamboos grow higher joint by joint in a regular pattern. The ancient Chinese described this growth as pushing out the old and bringing in the new – which gives an indication for how the Chinese character for festival came into being. The choice of character shows that festivals are important milestones in the Chinese calendar.

The regular rhythm of bamboo growth and the link to festivals is also extended to instrumental music, rites, morals and philosophy. For example, according to *Near Correctness: Explanations of Music*, “Harmonious music is called festival,” and in *The Book of Changes*, there is a special section on “Festival Diagram.”

The timing of ancient Chinese festivals was not set randomly. First of all, it was based on China’s system of seasons. Ancient Chinese people divided the year according to the rhythms of nature to create a calendar system for guiding agricultural production and the tempo of life. In the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), China created a complete system of four seasons, eight periods and 24 solar terms. In this system one year includes four seasons and eight periods, and each period is divided into three solar terms. The four seasons are spring, summer, autumn and winter, and the points marking the eight periods are the summer solstice (when daytime is the longest), the winter solstice (when daytime is the shortest), the spring equinox and autumnal equinox (when daytime and nighttime are the same), the beginning of spring (when the weather gets warm), the beginning of summer (when the weather gets hot), the beginning of winter (when the weather gets cold) and the beginning of autumn (when the weather gets cool).<sup>1</sup> The twenty-four solar terms are remembered by people in the forms of ballads and proverbs.



Rice agriculture in the southwest of China (photograph by Wang Xuewen).

### *Song of 24 Solar Terms*

*Beginning of Spring, Rain Water, Waking of Insects, Spring Equinox, Pure Brightness and Grain Rain.*

*Beginning of Summer, Grain Full, Grain in Ear, Summer Solstice, Slight Heat and Great Heat.*

*Beginning of Autumn, Limit of Heat, White Dew, Autumn Equinox, Cold Dew and Frost's Descent.*

*Winter Solstice, Slight Snow, Greater Snow, Winter Solstice, Slight Cold and Great Cold.*

*Solar terms begin on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> days in the first half of the year and on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> day in the second half.*

*Two solar terms in each month begin one or two days earlier or later than these dates at most.*

In ancient times, China relied on this system of seasons to coordinate the relationships between people and nature and between people and society. This system not only marked the passage of time, but also helped organize religious and political life and rituals and other ceremonies.



Rulers controlled and guided people's life throughout the year through a series of "instructions on the calendar". In this way seasonal festivals gradually took shape – for example, on the day of the beginning of spring, the emperor would personally lead various officials to the suburbs of the capital for the arrival of the "spring gods" (God of Grain and Spring Ox). This custom was implemented as an official rite throughout China from the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911). Today, there are still folk customs of "welcoming spring" and "whipping the spring ox" in China. According to historical documents, there were sacrificial ceremonies for all the solar terms in the past, however not all the solar terms developed into what



Wind and rain bridge in Liping Dong Stockade Village, Guizhou (photograph by Wang Xuewen).