

JOURNEY INTO CHINA



Gong Wen

Lifestyle *in* China

*translation by Li Ziliang,
Zhao Feifei & Li Zhaoguo*



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
PRESS

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Counsellor: Cai Wu
General Director: Li Bing
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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

生活之旅: 英文/龚纹著, 李子亮, 赵菲菲, 李照国译.
—北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2007.8
(中国之旅)
ISBN 978-7-5085-1102-3

- I. 生…
II. ①龚… ②李… ③赵… ④李…
III. 社会生活—概况—中国—英文
IV. D669

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2007) 第064529号

LIFESTYLE IN CHINA

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Photo Credit: Imagine China, China Foto Press,
Hong Kong *China Tourism*, FOTOE, Quan Jing Photo
Publisher: China Intercontinental Press (6 Beixiaomachang, Lianhuachi
Donglu, Haidian District, Beijing 100038, China)
Printer: Beijing Picture in Picture Printing Co., Ltd.
Tel: 86-10-58891281
Website: www.cicc.org.cn
Edition: Aug. 2007, 1st edition, 1st print run
Format: 787×1092mm 1/16
Signatures: 11
Words: 53,000
Print Run: 1–7,000
Price: RMB 98.00 (yuan)



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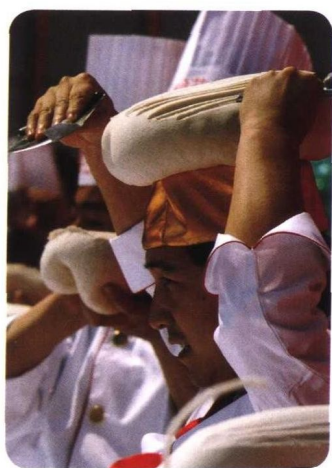
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THE REAL LIVES OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE

Twenty years ago, foreign tourists from other countries learned about China through such wonders as "The Great Wall," "The Forbidden City" and "pandas." Since then, the keywords about China have reached such a high number that they can no longer be measured in digits. The present tourism environment, which is open to the outside world, and the Internet has continually helped to present a more real China than it used to be reported in the mass media. Though characterized by the magnitude of time, China, like an old friend, will surely evoke a warm response. Learning about China does not mean simply looking up to the big and great country as she is presented; what's more important is feeling the charms she infuses in the real lives of the Chinese people. Only through close contact in their actual lives can a realistic understanding of China and her people be gained.

As China is a big, traditional, agricultural country, grain has always been sacrosanct. The Chinese people not only value food greatly from the bottom of their hearts, they are familiar with the how's and why's of food as well as its appeal. Various wonderful methods of cooking and the commonly used seasonings together lead to the five tastes of sour, sweet, bitter, pungent and salty and result in the singular sight of Oriental food, which comprises color, fragrance, taste, meaning, form and nutrition. Delicious food embraces not only a revelry of tastes, but is also the most extensive and profound folk culture that is rooted in the lives of average people, just as the magical appeal of roast duck lies not only in the dish, but also in the process of



its being precisely sliced, just as the deliciousness of the chafing-dish lies not only on the tips of our tongues, but also in all the tempting aromas wafting from a chafing-dish. Celebrations on festive occasions are also underscored with food. From Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) to the Laba Festival (the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month), all festival-related food, ranging from *jiaozi*, New Year Cakes to sticky rice dumplings and *zongzi*, makes the traditional Chinese festivals more lively and interesting. Chinese food culture is extensive and profound. From light breakfasts along the streets to the hundreds of local dishes, including an array of dishes of the Manchu and Han nationalities, regardless of the complexity or simplicity of the processes through which they are made, they all contribute to the enrichment of the lives of the Chinese.

The Chinese discovered and manufactured tea, and tea instills the tranquil and refined temperament into the Chinese nation. Tea plucking, tea manufacturing and tea drinking form the essence of traditional Chinese culture. Tea set, tea etiquette and tea ceremony brilliantly reflect the Chinese aesthetics of life. Sitting in a courtyard and drinking a bowl of jasmine tea in spring will offer the heart a pleasurable trip around the ancient capital of Beijing. If you happen to be in a teahouse in south



China in summer, whether it's noisy or quiet, a cup of mild, pure Kung Fu Oolong Tea will refresh and comfort you as it slides down your throat. In autumn, how pleasant to taste strong, mellow, traditional *pu'er* tea while travelling along ancient roads! In winter, when a group of good friends gather around a stove in a Mongolian yurt, drinking mare's milk and brick tea, they will be transported, body and soul, with its salty aroma and warmth. The spirit of tea drinking, which bolsters nature and is free and unconstrained, has continued throughout the ages and still has a great effect on the Chinese people.

If the consensus is that "people regard food as their primary requirement," wine can be thought of as the timely rains bestowed by the heavens. Deeply immersed in the fragrance of wine, the Chinese nation has followed the wine-brewing concept that "wine is the crystallization of grains" for over 1,000 years. Wine culture traces its history back to ancient times. In ancient China, wine was closely associated with religion, politics and military affairs. In addition, wine played an even more significant role in the cultural lives of people. Learned men of all ages forged an unbreakable connection with wine. Shaoxing wine, which tastes mild and mellow, has till now been exclusive to China. *Moutai* wine, the national wine of China and also one

of the three major distilled wines in the world, has long been regarded as China's heavily fragrant calling card. For the Chinese people, drinking wine is a crucial way of life. More important, it is also a way of entertaining and socializing. Vintage wine and the protocol, good habits and customs in wine drinking comprise the Chinese wine culture, which conveys warm, genuine feelings while simultaneously revealing the Chinese mindset that a feast is incomplete without wine, is not proper without wine and is not considered a celebration without wine.

Leisure-time entertainment of the Chinese people is also multifold. Today, you may go to Liulichang of Beijing to search for ancient classics, works of calligraphy, paintings and seals. You may also choose a random street corner and join any one of the groups of elderly chess players. Various traditional Chinese operas are staged in opera houses, while folk artists tell stories or sing ballads about the lives of average people on the fairs on street corners. The relaxed ambiance deserves being savored and considered. The Chinese firmly uphold the belief of the perfect unity of heaven, people and *qi*, and this in turn results in the principles of maintaining good health—that people should behave in accordance with the laws of nature. To achieve good health and sound mind by following the will of heaven is the Chinese people's philosophy of life, as is taking care of one's self in order to enjoy the course of one's natural life.

Now, Chinese food is ready to challenge your bold appetite. Top-quality tea and mellow wine will take you to the Orient of which you have been dreaming. The games of intelligence, which have been the gratification of several thousand years, will arouse you from your deep sleep. And the Chinese way of keeping fit will unfold its philosophy so that you may take good care of your health. Here, we've included all these aspects of the lives of the Chinese people and hope you can enjoy them to the fullest.

Yang Ping

PARADISE FOR FOOD LOVERS



Enjoying Foods in Chinese Festivals

Nowadays, if you casually leaf through any Chinese calendar, you'll notice that many days among the 365 days of one year are gaily noted with festive occasions and commemorations. Undoubtedly, the festival-related food with unique Chinese characteristics plays a significant part in the celebration of the traditional Chinese festivals and holidays.

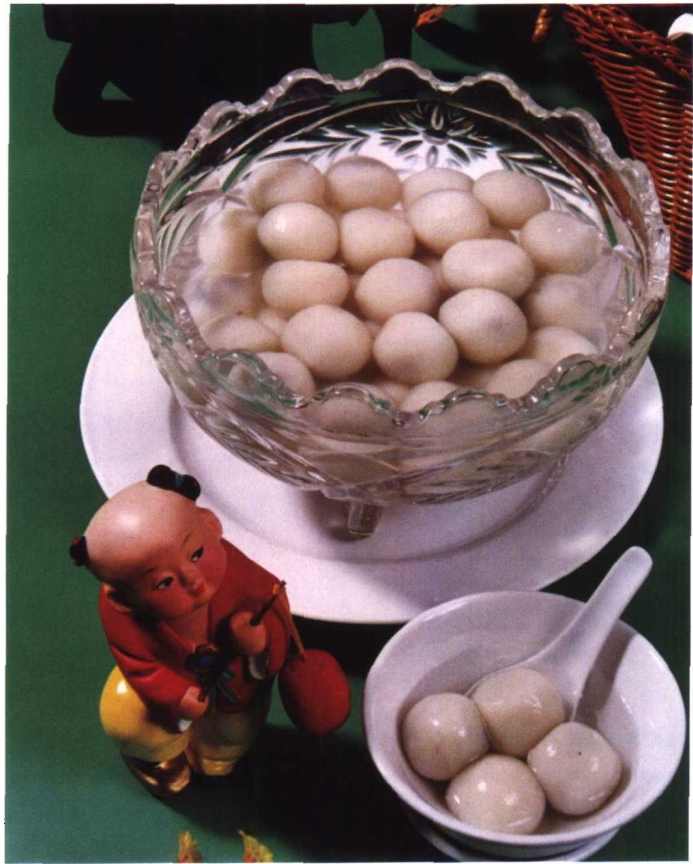
Spring Festival marks the beginning of the Chinese New Year, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. Also, it is the most important festival for the Chinese people.

A saying among northern Chinese people goes, "No-one wouldn't love to have a bowl of *jiaozi* for the New Year." But southern Chinese people do not subscribe to this belief. Actually, the "New Year food" shared by all the Chinese people from both the north and south is "New Year cake" (*nian gao*), which literally can be interpreted as "The quality of life is improving year by year." The

Food is indispensable to every Chinese festive celebration.



Yuanxiao. The gist of traditional Chinese culture has been handed down to us through the rich and colorful festival-related Chinese food.



New Year cakes from the north, which are mostly sweet, is either steamed or deep-fried. The New Year cakes with hundreds of fruits are a traditional specialty snack popular in Beijing. The northeastern people make New Year cakes with sticky, husked *kaoliang* flour. People from Shanxi Province love to eat New Year cakes made of sticky millet flour, while people from Hebei Province love to add dates and mung-bean flour in their New Year cake recipe. Aside from steaming and deep-frying, New Year cakes popular in south China can also be fried and cooked with both salty and sweet flavors. New Year cakes in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, which are light, are made of round-grained, non-sticky rice flour and are good to fry and cook. Preserved ham, dried shrimp and mushrooms picked in winter are added to the radish



cakes and taro cakes popular in Guangdong Province; these cakes have a typical flavor, and are deliciously refreshing. New Year cakes were usually hand-made in the past. In the south this is called “husking rice with mortar and pestle to make New Year cakes,” which is regarded as a grand occasion among peasant families there.

It is a time-honored tradition to eat *zongzi* at the Dragon Boat Festival.

First of all, husked rice, which has been soaked in water for a couple of days, is milled into thick liquid on the millstone, drip-dried and then steamed in an iron cooker. After it is steamed, the whole family, old and young, all pitch in and pour it into a stone mortar. The very young, while singing, pound the rice flour with big, wooden pestles, and the old and older children add water and turn over the rice flour, thus ushering in the New Year in the lively activity of husking rice with mortar and pestle to make New Year cakes.

As the saying goes, “Spring Festival won’t be over until the 15th day of the first lunar month” and the celebration lasts as long, and the last day of this



For the Chinese people, moon cakes are a must to go with the Mid-Autumn Festival.

celebration falls on another major traditional folk festival, the Lantern Festival (*Yuanxiao Jie*). Naturally, the Chinese eat rice dumplings (*yuanxiao*) at this festival. People from the north call rice dumplings *yuanxiao*, while people from the south call them *tangyuan*. Both *yuanxiao* and *tangyuan* are made of sticky rice flour and filling and are round, signifying "union and togetherness." When making *yuanxiao*, the northerners first mix sesame, peanuts, sweet bean paste and other ingredients, forming small pieces, then placing them into large bamboo or wicker baskets that contain rice flour. They rock the baskets and sprinkle water continuously on the rice flour in

order to make the filling and rice flour form full, round balls. Southerners make *tangyuan* by wrapping the filling with the sticky rice flour wrapping and then crumpling them into balls. *Tangyuan* is usually larger than *yuanxiao* and its filling can be sweet or salty. Southerners also use green vegetables as filling to make large, delectable and lovely *tangyuan*. Just a couple of *tangyuan* are enough for a meal.

During the Dragon Boat Festival, which arrives in early summer and lands on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, all families fully participate in picking bamboo or reed leaves, washing sticky rice and wrapping *zongzi*. Two or three bamboo or reed leaves are placed on top of each other, creating a pyramid; sticky rice and filling are poured into it and cotton thread is wrapped around this. Boiled *zongzi* is exquisite and satisfying. If you have *zongzi* with white sugar or honey, you'll be struck by its pleasantly sweet flavor. The filling of the *zongzi* as prepared by the northerners is sweet, chiefly consisting of small dates and sweetened bean paste. The *zongzi* made

by southerners also contains salty fillings, such as meat, ham and yolk, which contrasts nicely with the sweet, aromatic sticky rice.

In autumn, the Mid-Autumn Festival, the second most important traditional festival for the Chinese people, arrives with the full moon. The mid-autumn moon cakes echo the shape of the full moon, symbolizing "union and togetherness." On the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, all families gather to appreciate the bright, full moon and eat moon cakes. How happy and close each family is when they gather to enjoy the bright, full moon! Various flavors can be savored, including Beijing-Flavored, Guangdong-Flavored, Suzhou-Flavored, Yunnan-Flavored, Chaozhou-Flavored, Hong-Kong-Flavored, etc. Among these, Guangdong-Flavored is the most popular among the Chinese. Shiny and smooth, these cakes have a thin skin and rich stuffing. Apart from traditional stuffing such as the five nuts, sweet bean paste, lotus seed mash and yolk, almost anything that is edible can be made into stuffing of Guangdong-Flavored moon cakes. Do not be surprised if you come across moon cakes with a champagne or cheese flavor on Mid-Autumn Festival.

As an essential part of life, food is present every day from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, when winter arrives quickly. Laba Festival, which falls on the eighth day of the 12th lunar month, is the prelude to Spring Festival. On this day, families throughout China put all kinds of food grains into their cookers and make Laba porridge. The food grains boiled in today's Laba porridge number more than eight and the porridge, made with cereals, beans, potatoes, nuts, dried and candied fruits and vegetables, is both delicious and healthful. Also on this day, people from the north put new garlic in matured vinegar and preserve it till New Year's Eve, when, along with Laba garlic and Laba vinegar to accompany *jiaozi*, they enjoy their first dinner of the coming New Year with great gusto.

All the Tempting Aromas from One Chafing Dish

The history of the Chinese people's eating hotpot dishes can be traced back 10,000 years. The *ding* (an ancient pot with two round handles and three or four legs), which today can be seen in museums, is actually the beginning of ancient hotpots. However, hotpots specifically used for cooking food were reportedly invented by the descendants of Genghis Khan. The Mongolians loved to eat mutton but when troops were on a march or during war, cooking large pieces of mutton was too time-consuming, so the soldiers cut frozen mutton into thin slices, dipped and cooked them in boiling water, then retrieved them

Food suitable for chafing dish is so rich and varied that it may well meet the requirement that meat and vegetables should complement each other to make a balanced diet.



instantly and spread on refined salt before devouring them. Prepared this way, mutton tasted fresh and tender and could be cooked very quickly. This can be regarded as the beginning of the hotpot mutton dish.

Nowadays, the hotpot mutton dish still occupies a crucial role in the family of hotpot dishes. *Donglaishun*, a long-established restaurant noted for its hotpot grassland mutton in Beijing, has a history of 100 years in using traditional charcoal fire and a copper pot. As thin as cicada wings, each mutton slice is no wider than 1 mm and is cooked instantly once dipped in the hotpot. However, the mutton can never be overdone even if boiled for a long time. Moreover, the fat is not greasy and the meat is not dry. Light soup is usually the most popular for traditional dipped mutton, but there are as many as a dozen seasonings to complement the mutton, including sesame paste, soy sauce, rice vinegar, Shaoxing wine, thick chili oil, shrimp oil, fermented bean curd, chive flowers, sweetened garlic, coriander and chopped green onion.

Echoing this mutton dish in the far north is the hot and spicy chafing dish in and around south Chongqing. "Hot" is exclusive to the Chongqing chafing dish; with many red hot peppers, the Chongqing chafing dish is hot, spicy and delicious. After this dish was introduced to other parts of China, the customers who were not used to hot dishes were also tempted to try it. As a result, the mandarin-duck chafing dish, which resembles the *Taiji* symbol, came into being, with light soup and hot soup being separated from each other, so customers could choose whichever they preferred.

Apart from the two places of origin of the chafing dish, one from the north and the other from the south, the chafing dish has become extremely popular throughout China. The soup for the chafing dish can be light, hot and spicy, of various delicacies, sour and hot, and even act as a tonic. The food contained in the chafing dish includes almost anything edible, from birds and beasts to fish as well as seasonal vegetables. The seasonings can be