

# Traditional Chinese Folk Customs



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By

Huawen Fang

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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

China, a country of appealing mysteries.

The Chinese nation, a nation intermittently strong and weak, honorable and infamous, awake and asleep, with a history of five millennia at the shortest, though probably longer, has experienced the highest stages of ancient civilization in the most prosperous dynasties of the world, and made indelible contributions to the advance of human societies. As the world's biggest nation, the Chinese people account for approximately a quarter of the whole population on Earth.

As a standing member of the UN Security Council, China exerts enormous influence on international affairs. Economically speaking, it is the world's largest consumer market and human resource reservoir, as well as the largest base of processing industries.

Over the recent three decades, China's opening up to the world has brought about an unprecedented level of contact with people from all other countries, resulting in great advancements in Chinese society and a drastic growth of its economy, which have drawn even greater attention from the world.

As was the case in the past when China was in its prime, again, the world finds it impossible to overlook China and its people.

However, for its many sufferings in pre-modern and modern history – social unrest and setbacks, natural disasters and social misfortunes – for a long time, China has remained relatively backward, listed as a “developing country” of the world. For the same reasons, the Chinese people and their civilization have been neglected in the developed countries, and to many people in the West, what is now known of China remains what it was 30 or 50 years ago.

In view of the above conditions, we hereby present to our readers these brand new Chinese Way books with the aim of helping those who are interested in all things Chinese to learn about the people and their social life, and ultimately to discover “the last hidden world” and the nation that is once more on the rise in the Orient, so as to more effectively communicate with Chinese people in all walks of life.

Within this series, there are five books, respectively on the language,

folk culture, rites and rituals, traditional food, and traditional physical exercises of the Chinese people. Drawing upon vast resources from libraries and internet materials, these books are all written from the special perspectives of the writers themselves, and infused with their individual insights. What's more, the style of the language may also be interesting to Western English readers because the writers are all native Chinese themselves who teach English in higher institutions of education in China. This means that their English language may smack of some "Chinese flavor," somewhat different to that of the native English writers, but pleasantly readable nevertheless after minor revisions by native English speakers.

*The Chinese Language Demystified* by the undersigned chief-editor of this series begins with a general introduction of various "Chinese languages," languages of different Chinese ethnic groups as well as the majority Han people. The relation between Mandarin Chinese and Chinese dialects is also explained with fair clarity. Through reading the introduction, you will learn why Mandarin Chinese has become "the Common Language" (Putonghua) of the nation, how Chinese written characters evolved into the present form, and what differences exist between the classic and modern language, and between the formal written style and informal speech. In addition, the systems of Mandarin Chinese Pinyin and Tones are introduced in detail to serve as a threshold for exploring the contents of the book.

After the introduction are six chapters elaborating on the distinctive features of Mandarin Chinese, respectively in terms of its phonology, tones, morphology and syntax. In each chapter, typical and practically usable examples are provided, along with annotations of the tones and translations in order to help readers learn with ease. Finally, the book is rounded up with a seventh chapter summarizing the most prominent features to reinforce what the readers have read.

*Chinese Rites and Rituals* is co-authored by Ge Feng (冯鸽) and Zhengming Du (杜争鸣), professors of Chinese at the Northwest University and English at Soochow University respectively. The English translation has been done by Jieting Huang (黄洁婷) and Yinji Jiang (蒋茵佶), who are both English lecturers at Suzhou Vocational University. The book comprises an overall introduction of the Chinese ritual systems and the related social norms and customs. The first part begins with an elaboration of the central Chinese concept Li (礼), which carries a wide range of connotations including not only rites and rituals, but also what are generally concerned as good manners, appropriate behavior and acceptable

ceremonies for various social occasions.

The contents are divided into two parts, with the first part on traditional rites and rituals and the second on the modern practice. Actually, all possible aspects, which are appropriate for consideration under the general title of Li, are touched upon, from individual social conduct to state rules. With the understanding that Li is a matter of great importance in Chinese culture, we believe this book is of special value for those who wish to learn about the Chinese society and the Chinese way of thinking and life.

In *Chinese Food for Life Care*, authored by Hua Yang (杨嫫) and Wen Guo (郭雯), lecturers of English at the Soochow University of Science and Technology, readers are expected to learn about the traditional Chinese way of eating, and find their opinions as regards the choices of food in various situations. They will also familiarize themselves with a great variety of traditionally consumed Chinese food items, and learn to understand why some items are more popular than others in China, as well as why the Chinese people generally believe “food and medicine are of the same origin.” It is our hope that the detailed accounts of the properties of different food items will serve as useful references for making decisions on what one should choose to eat according to his or her own physical conditions.

*Traditional Chinese Exercises* is written by Jianmei Qu (曲建梅) and her daughter Xinqing Wang (王新清), respectively an associate professor of English at Yantai University and an MA student of English at Shandong University.

The book begins with a brief account of the basic knowledge of Chinese physical exercises and health care, a short history of the development of various methods of traditional physical exercises, such as Taijiquan and Qigong, the basic theories concerning their efficacy and mechanisms, and the methods generally adopted in practice. Then, in the following chapters, the concrete procedures of exercises are presented, all well illustrated with clear pictures to aid the practitioner. In addition, traditionally practiced supporting “minor exercises” including various methods of self-massage are also introduced at length. It is our belief that the explanations and illustrations not only make interesting reading, but also help in practice.

*Traditional Chinese Folk Customs* is written by Huawen Fang (方华文), my colleague at Soochow University. Its first draft translation was completed by Weihua Zhang (张伟华), associate professor of English at Wuxi Institute of Arts and Technology. At the request of the writer and

the publisher, I gladly sign my name as a co-translator after reading and revising the manuscript. This book projects to the readers a changing and kaleidoscopic view of Chinese social phenomena seen in different areas and ethnic communities, in both ancient times and the present. Although it is understandably difficult for the writers to account for how much or to what extent the old customs have lasted to date, we can well assume that quite a lot have, though possibly in somewhat changed forms. At any rate, they should have some ineluctable impact on the contemporary Chinese way of life. In addition, with the growing consciousness of the importance of protecting traditional culture, some wholesome folkways that had once fallen to the verge of extinction are now being recovered, while others are still often found in Chinese literary works even if they have fallen out of date. Thus, reading about them should be rewarding, and as I hope, it could also be enjoyable.

On the whole, the five titles in these Chinese Way books form a kind of knowledge pool for readers interested in Chinese society, the people, and their way of thinking and social behavior. I believe they will be of very practical use for those who are presently working in China, or considering a visit or some time staying there. For readers of Chinese literature, the contents should also be worth reading because they provide knowledge of the social and cultural background to aid understanding.

I feel obliged to acknowledge the help of many who have given me very good suggestions as regards the contents of the books. First, I am grateful to Professor Xiaoming Tian (田晓明), Vice President of Soochow University and an open-minded scholar in arts and education who has seen the meaningfulness of these books and urged me to carry on. Then, for making the plan more concrete and practical, I feel indebted to Mr. Jinhui Deng (邓锦辉) and Mr. Lei Zheng (郑磊), editors of China Intercontinental Press, for providing many insightful suggestions. Last but not the least, my gratitude goes to Mr. Mingming Chen (陈明明), vice-chairman of the Translators Association of China and an ex-ambassador of China to New Zealand and Sweden, for he has been a constant source of encouragement in any of my endeavors of translation and writing.

July 5th, 2015  
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# PART I

## FESTIVAL CUSTOMS

### *The Spring Festival (Chunjie)*

*Chunjie*, beginning on the first day of the first month in the lunar year (which usually starts on a day between January 21 and February 19), marks the most important traditional festival for the Han and other ethnic groups in China. This nationwide tradition began as early as the Reign of Han Wudi (141–87 BC). Since then, this day would always see children taking to the street to set off firecrackers and adults listening to the blasts as they bid farewell to the old year and greet the new. With regards to this practice, there is a poem left to us by a poet named Wang Anshi of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), which goes as follows:

Amid the firework crackles, a year is past.  
The spring warmth enters Tusu wine in a blast.  
As the sun shines upon every house's door,  
New couplets appear, and the old seen no more.

This is a beautifully vivid depiction of the joyful atmosphere of the festival celebration.

Before *Chunjie*, people will busily prepare for the event. In every household family members work diligently, regardless of their age, with some whitewashing the home and others doing the laundry, so as to “greet the new year with a new look”. In many families, steamed baozi, dough wrap-ups of red beans and vegetables, will be prepared, not only for their own consumption but also for treating their relatives and friends. They also have to do the “new-year shopping” in advance, because during the festival the shops will all close, with the owners and their assistants going home to celebrate the festival with their families.

Posting the New Year Pictures is also a must of the festival activities. The contents of pictures are rich and may carry various messages, some for good wishes and fortune (such as a child carrying gold ingots or riding on the back of a big carp), and others against evils and for blessings (such

as a heroic figure posted on the door). The latter custom comes from the Southern Dynasty (420–589) when people would post the pictures of Shentu and Yulei brothers on their doors because they were believed to have the power of subjugating evil spirits and bringing good luck. Then in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the pictures of the two most worshipped generals Qin Shubao and Yuchi Jingde were posted instead. Even today, in many districts these two figures are still regarded as sages and their pictures are posted to contribute to the propitious atmosphere during the festival. In many parts of the country, particularly in the rural areas, the pictures of Zhong Kui are posted, for he had upright characters and, as a born enemy of the evil spirits, is believed to have been granted, after death, the title of “Evil-Killer General” by the Heavenly Emperor. He enjoyed a high reputation among the people, for the legend goes that he led three thousand heavenly warriors in wars, catching and killing the evil beings.

The last day of the ending year is called *Danian Sanshi* (literally “the big year’s 30<sup>th</sup>”), or *Chuxi*, which literally means “the ridding-off (the old) eve”. On the evening of this day, family members will all sit together for a conversation on liberal topics. Those who work away from home will then return for gathering with their own folks. They’ll then sit talking over tea and such “odd food” as cracked seeds and fried dough chips. Currently, watching the special entertainment TV program is also a major part of the family activities, which will last from 8 p.m. to midnight through the family talk, adding to the joyful air. Many families will not forget to wrap up jiaozi as they chat off, and they’ll not only make enough for immediate consumption but also for the next day—the first day of the New Year. To be sure, jiaozi is not all that is served at the Spring Festival’s table. There is much more: sweet rice cakes, rice dumplings, date-dotted steamed bread, etc. So the children, seeing such gorgeous display of food, find it hard to stop eating, and many will have stomach aches as a result of overeating.

*Yasuiqian*, a sum of money as a token for gaining a new year in age, is given to children by their parents. But whether it is given on the *Chuxi* eve or on the first day of the new year is the family’s choice. This also explains why the children so eagerly look forward to the festival, for the sum of money may not be a small one. Almost all of them may get “a small fortune”.

Even before dawn of the New Year’s first day, firecrackers begin to crackle in the distance like popping corn in a hot pot. Parents serve their children jiaozi, which they have prepared for them to eat to their hearts’ content. The little ones, as soon as they have finished eating, will dash out into the street, where they gather to fire off all kinds of fireworks with names like “Piercing the Sky”, “Rolling Landmines”, “Spread Flowers”,

“Cavaliers in Red”, etc. There are just too many to list. In the meantime, the adults go around to *bainian*—to pay New Year visits. Leaders of organizations will take the opportunity to show their cordiality to their employees by paying visits to them, expressing good wishes to them with greetings such as “Happy New Year”, “Good Fortune”, etc.

The custom of *bainian* is an ancient one. As the legend goes, there lived a monster named “*Nian*” many, many years ago, which would dash down the hill on the last day of the passing year to eat people with its bloody wide-open mouth. So the frightened people would place various kinds of meat on the doorway for it to eat, while hiding themselves behind their closed doors. Then on the next morning, as they opened their doors, they would congratulate each other on their good luck of surviving the danger. Later, people would not only just say good-wishes but would also present each other with seasonal greeting cards on which are printed beautiful designs, maxims, or clever sayings.

As people celebrate the Spring Festival, they also remember the deceased. They pour out a cup of wine for the dead or light incense and pray that the gods bless them, who are believed to live on in another world. Some families will visit the tombs of the deceased and offer them date-dotted steamed bread and fried rice dough cakes. Presently, since cremation is required, people will go to the ash remains depository for the memorial ceremony and bring along with them the joyous air to their dead ancestors and loved ones who are forever at rest.

Both in the north and south of China there is the customary lion dance to celebrate the festival, with only minor variation in the form and content. Lion dance competitions are often held between villages in the rural areas as well as between communities in the cities. A “lion” is usually played by two people, with one playing the head and the other, the body. The former is regarded as a crucial player, for he must demonstrate extreme agility in action and quickness in perception, which is usually developed in a person from early childhood. In a competition, two “lions”, each representing its own party, will fight for a huge tassel-fringed ball (called *xiuqiu*) as they dance to the music of gongs, drums and cymbals. The players dressed in stage costumes will jump up and down in high spirit. What a display! It is the full presentation of the Chinese people’s fighting spirit against the evils. The head player of the lion dance will often perform a series of dangerous stunts, such as jumping onto the top of chairs piled one upon another on a table, so as to win the spectators’ applause.

In some parts of the country there is the custom of the dragon dance. Like the lion dance, it is also a major activity of the festival celebration. This dance calls for several participants, with one playing the head and the

rest, the body. So, the huge “dragon” will now stride forward with straightened head, now open its mouth and show its claws, now sway its head and tail back and forth, all for people’s acclaims. The spectators’ hearts may also go up and down with the action of the “dragon”, and they’ll naturally admire the players’ extraordinary skills shown throughout the performance. The dragon dance looks best during the night, when the huge eyes of the dragon, each with an electric torch inside, give off sky-piercing light, which may lead people to imagine a legendary fight it might have had against some monster. It excites the spectators greatly, making them feel as if they were also involved in the intense war against the evil force.

The Lantern Festival of the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the new year’s first month is called *xiaonian*, literally “the small new year”. Though not as solemnly celebrated as the first or second day, it is just as well full of activities. Now many shops and itinerant peddlers will hang out various lanterns for sale. The lanterns bear different designs, mostly from classical novels, such as “Nezha on the Sea”, “The Monkey King”, “The Pig”, and “The Friar”. Some may have the image of a pig, a cat, a dog, a rabbit or other pet animals. Inside the lantern there is usually a lighted candle that keeps flickering during the dark night. The figures designed on the outside of the lanterns show sharp and clear images set off by the light, looking very attractive to onlookers. At night, with the streets lit by candle light, there are various forms of outdoor entertainment, such as the dances of the lion and dragon players, land boat rowers and the participants of the stilt parade. All the activities greatly contribute to the superlative scene of delight and beauty. Regardless of night or day, the public gardens are very much crowded. The sightseers can enjoy various food specialties sold on the roadside peddle stands as they play games such as shooting and throwing loops for prizes. In the meantime, children run through the crowd in excitement, calling out for their playmates and buying their favorite small gadgets with their *yasuiqian*.

“Lantern play” on the Lantern Festival is a custom passed down from the Tang Dynasty. On this day, people will take to the streets as soon as it is dark, with all lanterns coming together to make a Milky Way on land. In ancient times, the government or its officials would finance the renovation of the street front to give it a new look. Also, “the fire trees of silvery flowers” (displays of lanterns and fireworks) were seen everywhere. As recorded during the reign of Emperor Ruizong (662–716), a rack about 70 meters high was constructed outside the royal palace for displaying the lanterns, decorated with colorful ribbons and other things to go with the thousands of colorful bright lanterns. The citizens would go in each other’s



company to appreciate the lantern display, the fireworks, and the wonderful circus performances. In the Song Dynasty (960–1279), there appeared the game of word puzzle, in which the person who proposes would write the puzzle on a slip of paper stuck on the lower part of the lantern. Anyone who could hit the answer would get a gift as the prize. The Lantern Festival became even more exhilarating in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), when opera performers would give performances in the streets to please the people.

The major food item for the Lantern Festival is *yuanxiao*, or *tangyuan*. It is made of sticky rice, in the form of balls containing fillings. *Yuanxiao* has few variations in the north and south, usually containing such fillings as black sesame, sugar, haw, etc. But in the south people are also fond of meat fillings. Nowadays the contents of *yuanxiao* are getting richer, with a greater variety of fillings to cater for different tastes.

The Lantern Festival also marks another round of visiting activities. It is only when this day is past and the enthusiasm for the Spring Festival begins to wane that people will become cool-minded and begin to concentrate on their daily work.

### ***Pure Brightness Festival (Qingming): The Tomb-Sweeping Day***

*Qingming* Festival, a traditional Chinese festival, usually occurs around April 5<sup>th</sup> of the Gregorian calendar. It is a time of bright sunshine and flourishing vegetation, with a scene of prosperity, just a good season for going out on a spring excursion. Therefore, gaily dressed young couples will go sightseeing together to enjoy the fresh air and the beautiful scenery of the springtime. Such a scene was once depicted in a simple sketch by Chen Yi (a late government leader) in a poem entitled *Travel on the West Hill of Kunming*: “Tide of traffic, sea of people; tourists of the Pure Brightness fight for their way as in a race”.

*Qingming* is also the high time for commemorating martyrs as well as one’s ancestors. On this day, both the southern and northern people have the custom of “sweeping the tombs” at their ancestors’ graveyards. All family members will get up early and get all dressed up to go to the cemetery with food as an offering. They can also take the time to enjoy the spring scenery for relax on their way. After worshipping, people will sit around and share a square meal. For the Young Pioneers and the Youth League members, the time is also taken as a good opportunity for moral education. Under the guide of their teachers or the secretaries of their organizations, the youth will go to sweep the martyrs’ graves, recalling

their great contributions as an inspiration.

The Cold Food Festival (*Hanshi*) is celebrated for three consecutive days starting on the day before *Qingming*. During this festival there is a tradition of forbidding fire—therefore all food is to be consumed cold. According to the record of *Jingchu Chronicle*, “On the 105<sup>th</sup> day after the winter solstice, storms would often occur, hence the name of *Hanshi* and the three-day forbidding of building a fire”. From this we can see this custom was already observed in ancient times.

The origin of *Hanshi* comes from a popular legend that Jie Zitui would rather get burnt than take an official position. It is said that during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC) Duke Xian of the state of Jin wanted to pass on his throne to Xiqi, the son of his favorite concubine, so he killed the prince Shensheng, whose brother, Chong’er, was forced into exile and endured many hardships. Once, in order to help Chong’er out of the torment of hunger, Jie Zitui, his faithful follower, cut off a piece of flesh from his thigh and offered it to him for sustenance. Knowing the fact, Chong’er was deeply moved, and vowed to share the great wealth and high honor with Jie in the future. However, when he became Duke of the state, he conferred titles on all those who had shared distress with him except Jie. When reminded by others, he was overcome with regret and hurried to invite him. However, Jie declined his invitation, preferring to lead a hermit’s life with his mother in the mountain. In the hope that he could force Jie out by burning the mountain, Chong’er ordered his men to set the forest on fire. However, the fire burnt for three days and nights without revealing the shadow of Jie. When searching the mountain afterwards, they found Jie and his mother’s remains under a big tree. To commemorate Jie, Duke Wen (Chong’er) renamed the mountain as Mountain *Jie*, and ordered that all fires in every household be put out on the day before *Qingming* and all food be consumed cold. Thereafter, other dependent states also accepted this practice and it spread across the country in the name of *Hanshi*. Since it occurs at the same time as *Qingming*, folks began celebrating these two Festivals under a general term called the Tomb-Sweeping Day. Although the tradition of eating cold food has long been abandoned, Jie Zitui is still held as an exemplary model, a man who was modest and despised material and snobbish pursuits.

### ***The Dragon-Boat Festival (Duanwu)***

The Dragon-Boat Festival falls on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month in the lunar calendar. A children’s song tells how people celebrate the day:

*“On May 5<sup>th</sup>, the Duanwu Festival, there’s mugwort on the door and the aroma in the air. We eat zongzi with white sugar, and see the dragon-boat on the water”.*

The *Duanwu* Festival is also called Double Fifth Festival, and quite a lot of folk customs are related to the figure “five”(wu). For example, red, white, black, yellow and blue silk threads are woven into five-color bands and tied to children’s necks or wrists, in hope that they can lead a safe and sound life. In some decent families, five plants—mugwort, cattail, pomegranate blossoms, garlic and morningstar lilies are kept in the room. And in a few areas, people have five drinks and food items with “yellow” in their Chinese names on this day, i.e. cucumbers, yellow croakers, eels, yellow wine and yolks of salted duck eggs.

It is believed that this day is celebrated in honor of Qu Yuan (about 340 BC—about 278 BC), a patriotic poet of the ancient Chu State, present-day Hunan and Hubei provinces. Qu drowned himself in the Miluo River for being helpless in saving his state from corrupt officials. On hearing the news, the local people tried their best to find his body, but failed. The fleeting boats on the water in the search were believed to have started what later came to be known as the custom of dragon-boat races. Great importance was attached to this custom in the ancient states of Wu, Yue and Chu. A typical dragon-boat is dozens of feet long, whose vivid dragon-shaped head has a long beard and a mouth that can open up and close. Before the race, competitors in splendid array would first visit Qu’s temple and hold a memorial ceremony there. On an open expanse of water, rows of dragon-boats with devoted rowers would get ready to start. Then there would be a sudden burst of gongs and drums, and all the boats would set off at once, presenting a spectacular scene. This has become a custom that has lasted till today. Now such races are held not only on the *Duanwu* Festival but also on other important occasions.

*Zongzi*, the representative food on this day, originated from the south. It is a kind of dumpling made of glutinous rice and sweetened bean paste or red date wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves and then boiled or steamed. Eventually, this food has become popular throughout the country—including the northern provinces. It is said the custom of eating *zongzi* is also related to Qu Yuan: after his death, the local people were afraid that his body would be eaten by fish and crabs, or other water animals, so they threw the tasty *zongzi* into the river for the fish in hope that they would no longer hurt the respected poet. The aroma from the bamboo leaves rouses people’s appetites. There are more and more kinds of *zongzi* these days, and they are spreading so wide as to countries like Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

The custom of hanging mugwort leaves on the door dates back from the Tang Dynasty, when Huang Chao (835–884) raised a revolution against the government during the Reign of Emperor Xizong (873–888). As the impoverished farmers led by Huang were approaching the Dengzhou City in Henan Province, the local officials told a lie to the people that the farmers would massacre the inhabitants after entering the city. The scared people all fled out of the town. On his way, Huang saw a woman and asked why she was in a hurry. The woman repeated what she had heard. “I am Huang Chao. We only kill the corrupt officials and never hurt the poor”. With these words, he pulled up a few mugwort leaves and gave them to the woman, saying, “Please tell the poor to put these leaves on their doors, and then they will be protected”. The next day was the *Duanwu* Festival. The forces of farmers marched into the city, and only killed the corrupt officials. Under the protection of the mugwort leaves, all the poor people were safe. In order to commemorate the event, people have kept it as a custom to put the leaves on their doors on this Festival. Actually, mugwort is a herb with special odor repulsive to mosquitoes and flies. Many kinds of destructive insects reproduce themselves around the Festival when the days get warm. The leaves on the door can act as a repellent. This is also one reason why the practice has become a custom.

### ***Mid-Autumn Festival (Zhongqiu)***

The Mid-Autumn Festival is held on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the eighth month in the Chinese calendar. In ancient times, there was a custom of moon worship in China, which may be read in some classic books. Then in the Tang Dynasty, it became a national custom to enjoy and worship the moon on this date. At night, when the full moon was bright in the sky, all the family members would get together, eating moon cakes and appreciating the moon and the moonlit scene. Like a round plate, the moon symbolizes the reunion of families and gives poets boundless inspirations. Quite many Tang poems were written with this theme. People away from their hometown would feel keenly alone, and what they couldn't help doing is miss their friends and relatives under the fullest moon, as was depicted by Wang Jian, a Tang poet,

“In the courtyard tree stays a crow.  
Chill dew silently wets the osmanthus.  
Tonight, to its fullness the moon will grow.  
Where is the homesickness to go?”

Here the poet expressed how he missed his close relatives on this Mid-autumn night.

As is the custom, family members will get together to enjoy the full moon, or invite close friends to have dinner at a restaurant. In some areas, there'll be such activities as calligraphy show and entertainment performance to attract more visitors. Children are in high spirits, enjoying the time and running up and down through the crowds in the streets. Meng Yuanlao, a literate of the Southern Song (1127–1279), thus wrote:

“On the Mid-Autumn night ... people fight for a good place in the inn to view the moon... The kids are at play all through the night, and the market flourishes till the morning”.

There's a difference between worshipping and viewing the moon, and most people just take the latter, for the former involves a rather complicated rite. Firstly, an altar is set up in the moonlight, on which offerings are placed, including moon cakes, melons and fruits, and sometimes a Jade Rabbit with a pestle in its hand. To be sure, there is also a censer and candleholders. In the light of candles and the aroma of sandalwood, family members will take turns to kowtow to the moon in their age sequence. Then, they'll share the food offerings among themselves.

The most special food for the festival is the moon cake, which may be sweet, salty and spicy in taste. A lot of materials can be made into the filling, such as crystal sugar, bean paste, seafood, fruits, vegetables, milk products and medicinal foodstuff. The pictures displayed on the cakes are representative of the Wide-Cold Palace (*Guanghan* Palace), the osmanthus tree and Chang'e (a fairy who lives on the moon according to several legends) flying up to the moon. The cakes are largely divided into five categories according to their originating places—Beijing, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Suzhou and Chaozhou, although there are numerous other kinds. And the most famous brands include the Virtue-Diligence-Politeness (*De-Mao-Gong*) crystal cakes of Xi'an, the grape-filling and the crystal bean paste cakes of Ji'nan, the black sesame cakes of Yangzhou, the Daoxiangcun cakes of Beijing, the Qinglan cakes of Xiamen, the *Dian*-style cakes of Yunnan, the *Hu*-style cakes of Shanghai and the five-kernel cakes of Fuzhou. Nowadays, there are even more varieties in the market. You can choose the economic types for yourself or the gift types for your friends. In other words, on this festival, all kinds of moon cakes will satiate both your eyes and palate. Some cakes, however, are extremely expensive, priced over 1,000 *yuan* per case.

The custom of eating moon cakes on this festival was seen as early as in the Tang Dynasty. It is also explained by a legend telling how the cakes

became necessary in each home:

At the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), Zhang Shicheng (1321–1367), a rebel leader who attempted to gather forces to overthrow the ruling Mongolians, had moon cakes sent to the common people, with each cake containing a slip of paper on which was written: “Let’s kill the Mongols on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month”. Then, on that day, all the people rose in revolt and successfully overthrew the Mongolian rulers. And it is since then that this custom has been passed down.

### ***Double Ninth Festival (Chongyang)***

The ninth day of the ninth lunar month which occurs in October in the Gregorian calendar is the Double Ninth Festival, one of the traditional Chinese festivals. In the golden autumn, strong fragrance from the osmanthus blooms and the golden scenery dyed by the chrysanthemum flowers are especially intoxicating. People would go out to appreciate the picturesque landscape, carefree and joyful. The activities on this day mainly include climbing heights, appreciating chrysanthemum flowers, drinking chrysanthemum wine, wearing cornel twigs, and eating flower cakes.

In the eighth month, the summer sun radiates fire-like heat, and therefore people have to stay indoors. Then around the Double Ninth Festival, with the autumn breeze blowing pleasantly and the sky clear and cloudless, people would at once find an excursion appealing. They would climb up a mountain top for a distant view and have a picnic with a few companions on a chosen spot. It was recorded in a writing of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) that

“On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month, Beijing people would leave the city and go ascending a height with drinking vessels. They would compose poems, drink wine, and eat roasted meat and cakes, which are really pleasant activities”.

The climbers would wear the cornel twigs on their clothes or heads, or in their sachets. According to *Compendium of Materia Medica*, a masterpiece on Chinese herbal medicine, the cornel has a spicy and fragrant scent and mildly warm nature, and therefore has the function of ridding off coldness and toxins. It is slightly poisonous and can expel insects. So people think it can be used to exorcise them of devils. The custom of wearing cornel twigs to escape disasters was already observed in the Tang Dynasty.

In fact, there is a folk tale telling how the cornel upheld the good and suppressed the evil. In ancient times, there was a plague devil in Heli, Runan County. It brought a plague that caused many deaths among the residents, including the parents of a young man named Hengjing, who then went around visiting immortals in determination to get rid of the devil. Moved by his piety, an immortal named Fei Changfang gave him a bag of cornel leaves and told him that the scent from them would discharge the devil of its power. Eventually, the young man found the devil and killed it with a sword stab, for it became completely powerless at the moment it smelt the scent.

On this day, friends would invite each other to go hiking and climbing. Those who cannot return home feel awfully regretful and sad. Such a situation was described by the great Tang poet Wang Wei (701–761) in a poem entitled “On the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month: Missing my Shandong Brothers”, as the following:

All alone in a foreign land,  
I'm twice as homesick on this day.  
My brothers are climbing far, far away,  
With the cornel but no me, I understand.

As the festival approaches, it is customary for people to go appreciating the chrysanthemum blooms while drinking the chrysanthemum tea. This flower is also called “longevity flower” for it has the ability to clear away internal heat and toxins, and is also regarded as an exorcising substance. The ancients made wine out of it because of both its fragrance and its function of extending one’s life span. In some ancient books, two methods of making such a wine are recorded. One is “to pick the stems and leaves when the plant is in bloom, mix them with millets and keep them with yeast until the Double Ninth Day of the following year and then just enjoy the nice chrysanthemum wine”. The other is “to fill an urn with plain wine, hang a silk bag filled with the dried flowers several centimeters above it; then seal the mouth of the urn, and enjoy the wine with chrysanthemum fragrance the next day”.

Appreciating chrysanthemum flowers was already a prevailing custom in the ancient times. Wang Wei even called the Double Ninth Festival the Chrysanthemum Day, and thus wrote: “On the Chrysanthemum Day, I often compose poems in reply to the emperor’s request”. So far, it has become a necessary event on this day. In some areas, chrysanthemum exhibitions are held, with the beauty of the flowers greatly enriching the colorful and festive atmosphere.

The flower cakes people eat on this day are made from rice flour or millet, with various designs on the surface such as rabbits, dogs and tigers. And the designs vary in different periods of history. For example, animals were popular in the Tang, small green flags were prevailing in the Northern Song, and two little sheep were favored in the Southern Song because they have the same pronunciation with Double Ninth in Chinese. Before the Festival, civilian food workshops had to run through the night, as was recorded in a book of the Qing Dynasty entitled *Records of the Qing Merits*:

“The rice cakes in five colors that the local Wu residents eat are called the Double Ninth Cakes. Hundreds of workers work overtime into the night. This is referred to as ‘busy nights’. The cakes are not only shared in the family, but also used to offer to the ancestors as sacrifice or serve to guests, especially in the southern part of China”.

### ***Water-Splashing Festival of the Dai People***

The Water-Splashing Festival, New Year’s Day by the Dai calendar, falls on the seventh day after the *Qingming* Festival, in April in the Gregorian calendar, lasting for 3–4 days. During this festival, people roam the streets with various containers, and throw water onto one another as they meet, so as to wash away the devils and give the blessing. The Dai districts are then full of joyful atmosphere. The water expresses respect when thrown at the elderly, shows admiration when splashed onto youth, and implies welcome when it goes onto the visitors. All people indulge themselves in the spree and enjoy the time to their hearts’ content. Like rain curtains and waterfalls, the clean water flies between the green trees and drips from human bodies. The young Dai people in bright colors play the elephant-foot-drums and the Mang-drums, and the singing and dancing pushes the festival to full intensity. During this festival, visitors from all over the country rush here, joining in the joyful celebration—splashing water and singing songs together with the hosts. Premier Zhou Enlai once took part in the Festival in 1961, dressed like a Dai member: wearing an open-front white coat, a pair of coffee trousers and a red head-kerchief. By the Lancang River, he watched the dragon-boat races among Dai people, and in the Jinghong Street, he joined in the water-splashing. Since then, the festival became increasingly well-known, and has grown into an unprecedented scale. Besides water-splashing, there are many other activities: “piling sand” to pray for harvest, “throwing pouches” to show love, “rowing the dragon-boats” to create an auspicious atmosphere, and “bathing the Buddha” to get blessings. Among them, the last one is the



grandest, for many of the Dai people are Buddhists. On the first day of the festival, they dress up and get together to listen to the scripture, and then, carry two barrels of fresh water to splash onto the Buddha statue so they might get His blessing.

As regards the origin of this festival, there is a legendary story. Long, long ago, there lived a devil that committed all kinds of evil deeds and killed a lot of people. Moreover, it took seven beauties as its mistresses, among whom the youngest and most beautiful was Yidanhan. Once, being drunk, the devil said that there was nothing except its own hair that could hurt itself. After it fell asleep, Yidanhan pulled a long hair off its head and twisted the hair around its neck. In a rush of struggle, the monster broke off its own head, which fell onto the ground. But unexpectedly, the head began to emit filthy fire that burnt the earth and killed people and animals. On seeing this, Yidanhan bravely got back the head and hugged it in her arms. The other six beauties carried water from the river to throw at the head and wash the blood and filth off her body. Finally, the fire was put out. To commemorate Yidanhan as well as the other girls, all of the Dai people began to splash water, and hence the beginning of this festival, also known as the Dai New Year's Day.

### ***Torch Festival***

On the 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> day of the sixth month in the lunar calendar, some ethnic groups, including the Yi, the Bai, the Va, the Blang, the Naxi and the Lahu, celebrate their common festival—the Torch Festival. Meanwhile, some Han people also take part, which is called “shared happiness between the Han and the ethnic minorities” in some old classics. On this day, bonfires are lit up in each village and everyone holds a torch. The bright flame reddens the night sky.

The Yi people bear particular affection to fire: they are given names by a fire pit at birth, and cremated after death, and have thus developed an indissoluble bond with fire all through their life. They use fire to burn the grass on the waste land for farming, to make celebrations and to keep warm in winter. During this festival, the Yi men wear embroidered open-front jerkins and wide trousers, with a strand of long hair kept out of their dark blue kerchief called “Heavenly Bodhisattva”. They wear a red stud in their right ear, and have some hair tied up on their foreheads called “the hero's knot”. So they look more handsome and spirited. In colorful embroidered shirts and graceful pleated skirts, the women also look very charming and slender.

During the Festival, torches are erected in front of every house of the ethnic groups such as the Yi, the Bai and the Naxi. And a super torch is banded and set up in the center of each village's square, about ten meters high and so thick that it would take two or three people to embrace it with their arms. It is usually made up of pine and cypress, dried sticks and twigs, layer after layer, in the shape of a pagoda. Some little animals made of rice flour are decorated at the top. The tops of some great torches are made into the shape of a container, symbolizing a good harvest of the crops. When night falls, holding small torches in hand and surrounding their super one, people dance on the beat of the gongs and drums. Their cheering hurrah vibrates in the atmosphere, showing the ethnic groups' spirit of union and strength in life.

There's also a custom of "fire-splashing" in the Yi districts on this day, when the people go outdoors, holding a torch high, with incense ash mixed with colophony powder in their pockets or handbags. On meeting a beloved person, they would splash a bit of ash onto the torch and therefore create a bright flame before him or her. This is a way to show affection, and is very likely to please the other. Young men tend to court their true love in this way.

As for the origin of the Festival, there's an ancient tale. Long, long ago, under the Heaven King's order, a demon of wickedness came into the human world and levied exorbitant taxes on the local people, bringing upon them great sufferings. They then managed to kill the demon under the leadership of Atilaba, a Yi hero. Knowing this, the King went so angry that he scattered countless insects in hope that they would eat up the crops and make the people starve. Facing this, the Yi people got together and lit countless torches to burn the insects. Three days later, most were killed, while a few had escaped and would come back to harass the people. Therefore, the people kept burning them for three days each year, which gradually developed into the Torch Festival. Several ethnic groups including the Naxi have adopted this Festival and regard it as a very solemn one.

### *Tibetan New Year*

The Tibetan calendar, calculated on the running of both the sun and moon, has a history of over 1,300 years. In order to celebrate their New Year in a grand way, the Tibetans begin to do the New Year shopping in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> month. They get various delicacies such as ghee and wine from the stores. In each household, there appears a busy and lively atmosphere—they get young crop shoots by steeping the seeds of the

highland barley in basins, make fried dough chips in ghee, mould mini-sculptures of “sheep head” with colored ghee, and fill up all kitchen containers with *tsamba*, which is made of glutinous rice and mixed in ghee, fried wheat grains and ginseng fruits. The array of all these foods implies that the past year is of good harvest, and that people wish for favorable weather, abundant crops and auspiciousness in the new one. The last two days of the old year are spent cleaning the house. Before supper on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, Tibetans sprinkle a little dry flour onto the front wall of the kitchen to draw lucky marks. At this supper, each person is supposed to refill food nine times in his or her bowl, each time with some leftover in it. Afterwards, all the leftover is to be collected in a basin, and family members, holding the basin as well as torches, enter each room to drive away the devils. On the New Year Eve, people clean up their courtyards, splash some water, and light up pine twigs at the top of their houses as auspicious symbols. And in many a household, pictures of Songtsän Gampo and Princess Wencheng are put up, for they are supposed to give blessings.

On the early morning of the New Year’s Day, the mistress of the house will get up hastily and carry the first barrel of “lucky water” from the river. When all the family members have awoken, the older generation will take out a container filled with different kinds of food and everyone will exchange greetings, such as “Wish you good health” and “All the best”. Then, they’ll begin to share the delicious food and propose a toast of barley wine. According to Tibetan customs, people won’t leave their homes on this day. They stay indoors or in their courtyards, and children enjoy themselves in games and firecrackers.

Then during the four or five following days, people will pay New Year’s visits to their friends and relatives. It is a common practice to present a “khatag”, also named “*hada*” which is a long ceremonial scarf mostly made of white silk in different lengths, when visiting a respected or elderly. The more respected the recipient is, the longer it will be. Some may be over two meters long and one meter wide. With the khatag between his thumbs and index fingers, the presenter will first lift it over his head in all sincerity, then lower it to the original height, and at last deliver it with some words of respect. The hosts will treat guests with *tsamba* and highland barley wine.

During the New Year’s Day, Tibetan operas are performed in urban and rural areas. In some places, there are contests like tug of war, horse racing, archery, wrestling and throwing. The herdsmen of the grasslands light an open fire and sing and dance around it all through the nights.

### ***Double Third Festival of the Li People***

The third day of the third lunar month is an important traditional festival to the Li people when all the villagers go for a gathering in celebration, bringing along with them cakes and *zongzi*. Young girls wear bracelets on the wrist, ankle and neck, and boys are also dressed in bright clothes and hats. Lovers present gifts to each other, expressing their enduring affection. They also sing songs to show their heart-felt emotions—boys and girls sit at the opposite sides, each pair taking turns to sing and reply. The lyrics are genuine and sincere, mostly composed by themselves. At night, around bonfires on the slope, they sing, swing or wrestle. The winners are likely to gain admiration from the opposite sex. Before parting, girls will tie a self-knit color band to her beloved's waist, and boys will insert a pin made of deer bone into his beloved's hair, and thus they have made a promise to meet each other this day next year.

On this Festival day, the contests of bamboo pole dancing, double knife dancing and ball throwing are held in some Li areas. Among them, the first is the largest in scale and also the most fun: Eight young men hold eight bamboo poles on an open ground with four on each side, and open and close them to the beat of the gongs and drums. The dancers hop between the poles, and will be eliminated from the contest if an ankle is caught. The person who passes through will become the winner and earn respect from all other youths. This activity is regarded as a chance for the young people to choose their “hero” or “heroine”.

With regards to the origin of this Festival, there are a variety of tales, the most popular of which is “the tale of the flood”. It is said that a flood struck the Li residential area in ancient times, inundating all the villages. All the people and animals were drowned except a boy named A-gui and a girl named A-bei. They got married in a cave on the third day of the third lunar month, and then opened up wasteland for farming, and dug up pools for fishery. Their offspring went on to become the Li ethnic community. Later, in order to commemorate the couple, the Li people began to observe the celebration on this day of each year.

### ***Eid ul-Fitr: Fast-Breaking Festival***

The first day of the tenth month in the Islamic calendar is Eid ul-Fitr, also called Eid Festival, or Roza Festival in some parts of Xinjiang. It has been one of the three grand festivals of Islam, and later became the New Year of the Chinese Hui people. Besides the Hui, many other ethnic groups in China including the Uyghur, the Kazak, the Tajik, the Uzbek,

the Salar and the Dongxiang also take it as one of their important folk festivals.

According to the Islamic doctrine, the period from the first day of the ninth month to the first day of the tenth month is Ramadan, during which all adherents are supposed to have meals only before the sunrise and after the sunset, and not to eat or drink in the daytime. The smoking addicts have to restrain themselves too, for it is also forbidden in the daytime. As Islamites, they must purify their mind and diminish any desire, including sexual intercourse, so as to show their piety to Allah. Old people, children and menstruating women, however, can take exception, so long as they do not eat in public. Every night, only after the bell for breaking the fast rings can families begin to make fire and cook.

The Muslims believe that the fast can help strengthen their willpower, regulate their conduct, and develop their perseverance and observance at work. In addition, it is good for their health, for it helps prevent certain kinds of disease such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes and chronic enteritis.

When the Fast-Breaking Festival arrives, all Muslims take a bath and put on their festive clothes and then go to the Mosque. After that, they visit their friends and relatives, exchange gifts and chat over tea. A few ethnic groups, including the Kazak, the Tajik and the Kyrgyz, also have a horse race, a wrestling match, or a sheep-grabbing contest, which contributes to the joyous celebratory atmosphere.

### *Nadam Fair*

The word Nadam means “entertainment” or “games” in Mongolian. Such “games” including horse-racing, wrestling and archery are held by the Mongolian people every year between July and August when grass on the meadows is ripe and domestic animals quickly fatten. .

Quite often, the Fair is held together with the *aobao* worship ceremony. The so-called *aobao* is a cone-shaped stack of rocks piled up on the top of a mountain or hill, surrounded by various flags, and with twigs, feathers, bows and arrows, or knives and guns inserted in between the rocks. Before a battle, the Mongolian warriors would offer cheese, horse milk and meat in front of the *aobao*, and pray for their ancestors’ and immortals’ blessings. Currently, this rite is also held on other great occasions.

Besides the above-mentioned ceremony, the Nadam Fair was also an activity in ancient times to pray for a good harvest. On such an occasion, three contests—wrestling, horse riding and archery—were customarily held, for they were regarded as the most important skills to the valiant

nomadic Mongolian people. Later during the Reign of Genghis Khan (1206–1227), this activity became more frequent, and gradually evolved into a grand traditional festival of the Mongolians. Nowadays, the fair is even more spectacular and people of the Han and other ethnic groups may join it too. To witness the grand scene on spot, some people have to travel great distances. On the grasslands, colorful flags ruffle in the wind, Mongolian yurts and various other tents are scattered here and there, and the peddlers of different kinds of souvenirs and food are either shuttling among the crowd or huckstering by their stalls. Outside of the competition field, the atmosphere is auspicious and happy; and inside, the figures of players move up and down, and the clip-clopping and the sounds of bowstring are heard at all times. The triathlon champion enjoys the most respect and is treated like a prince.

### *Duan Festival*

The *Duan* Festival of the Sui ethnic group is equivalent to the Spring Festival of the Han in importance. It is a time when the Sui people in Sandu Sui Autonomous County, Dushan County and Libo County of Guizhou Province are immersed in a festive ambience. Each household will do an entire cleanup and then bring out various delicacies, such as fruit, candy, dried fish, cakes made of glutinous rice, and some snacks like sunflower seeds. Children are quite excited, following their parents and nagging for candy, while adults get together and talk about domestic trivia, farming, weddings and marriages. All this contributes to an atmosphere of happiness and harmony. The drummers and gong players of each village are called together to bid farewell to the past year and welcome the new one with their music.

The festival also gives girls a good opportunity to show off their beauty. Indeed they do look graceful and charming in lace-decorated blue coats and colorful aprons, with their long hair slanted up, wearing silver earrings, neck rings and bracelets. Men also want to show their various strengths, not only dressing themselves especially handsome, but also performing their musical talents by blowing the *suona* horn or the *lusheng* flute, playing the urheen, or beating the drum. Accompanied by melodious and exciting music, young men and women enjoy themselves in singing and dancing, praying for a better life and wonderful love.

Besides singing and dancing, the Sui people also hold other entertainment activities: horse racing, bullfighting, tug-of-war, and lantern operas.