

Culture



The glory of China is the sheer diversity of its culture – from a rich **history** and regional **cuisines** to colourful **festivals**, China has it all. Here we present you with a cultural snapshot of the country and give you the tools to travel in an exciting and respectful way.

history timeline

Take a wander through the rich history of China . . .

c 4000 BC	Early settlements established in modern-day Shaanxi and Hénán.
c 3000 BC	Emperor Fúxī ushers in the period of the legendary 'Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns'.
c 2200–1700 BC	Dynastic rule commences with the Xia.
1700–1100 BC	The Shang dynasty comes to power. Bronzeware production is perfected, and the consistent use of Chinese characters is documented.
1100–221 BC	The Western and Eastern Zhou dynasties rule.
600 BC	Laotzu, the founder of Taoism, is reputedly born.
551 BC	Confucius is born.
300 BC	Petroglyphs indicate the spread of Buddhism in Tibet at this time.
221 BC	The short-lived Qin dynasty is established.
221–206 BC	The Qin kingdom conquers the surrounding states to create the first unified China.
214 BC	Emperor Qin indentures thousands of labourers to link existing city walls into one Great Wall.
206 BC	The Han dynasty takes over.
c 100 BC	Chinese traders and explorers follow the Silk Road all the way to Rome.
c 50 BC	One of the first documented accounts of tea-drinking in China.
AD 220–581	An 'age of disunion', seeing a succession of rival kingdoms and a strong division between north and south China.
581–618	The Sui dynasty rules.
c 600	The Grand Canal, the world's longest artificial canal, is constructed.
608	The first mission is sent from the Tibetan court to the Chinese emperor.

618–907

The Tang dynasty holds sway.

635

The first Christian missionaries are believed to have arrived.

c 640

Pilgrim Xuan Zhuang sets out for India, returning 16 years later with countless Buddhist holy texts.

625–705

Wu Zetian is the first and only woman to become emperor.

960–1279

The Song dynasty is in power.

c 1000

The major inventions of the premodern world – paper, printing, gunpowder and the compass – are all commonly used in China.

1215

Genghis Khan conquers Běijīng.

1279–1368

Kublai Khan's vast Mongol empire includes all of China.

1286

The Grand Canal is extended to Běijīng, assuming its current form.

1368–1644

Chinese ethnic rule is restored with the Ming dynasty.

1385–1464

The life of Tangtong Gyelpo, Tibet's 'Renaissance man' – leader, medic, inventor of Tibetan opera and builder of 108 bridges in Tibet.

1406

Ming Emperor Yongle begins the construction of the Forbidden City.

1557

The Portuguese establish a permanent trade base in Macau.

1590s

The classic tale *Journey To The West* is published – made known to many by its incarnation as 1970s TV series *Monkey Magic*.

c 1640

The *qipáo* (cheongsam) becomes a fashionable frock for women.

1644–1911

Conquerors from Manchuria establish the Qing dynasty.

1720s

Emperor Kangxi declares Tibet a protectorate of China. Two Chinese representatives, known as Ambans, are installed at Lhasa, along with a garrison of Chinese troops.

1839

British traders at Guǎngzhōu hand over 20,000 chests of opium to Chinese officials, the pretext for the First Opium War.

1842

Hong Kong is ceded to the British in perpetuity.

1856–64

The Taiping uprising establishes army rule in parts of eastern China with Nánjīng as its capital, ultimately failing following civil war.

- 1894–95 First Sino-Japanese war.
- 1908 Two-year-old Puyi ascends the throne as China's last emperor.
- 1911–12 Revolution brings dynastic rule to an end with Sun Yatsen's republican government and abdication of the emperor.
- 1921–22 Lu Xun's *The Story of Ah Q*, the first work to be written entirely in Mandarin 'vernacular', is published in serial form.
- 1923–27 The remains of the Peking Man, between 500,000 and 230,000 years old, are unearthed at Zhōukǒudiàn, near Běijīng.
- 1927 Chiang Kaishek's Kuomintang rounds up and kills thousands of communists in Shànghǎi and Guǎngzhōu.
- 1934 The infamous Long March of communists from Jiāngxī province begins, travelling 6400km northwest.
- 1935 Mao Zedong is recognised as head of the Chinese Communist Party in a meeting at Zūnyì.
- 1937–45 Japanese invasion and occupation of China.
- 1946 Communists and the Kuomintang fail to form a coalition government, and plunge China back into civil war.
- 1949 The People's Republic of China (PRC) is established.
- 1950 China supports North Korea in the Korean War.
- 1957 A brief period of liberalisation under the 'Hundred Flowers Movement', but criticisms of the regime lead Mao to imprison or exile thousands.
- 1958 The Taiwan Straits crisis.
- 1958–62 The Great Leap Forward ultimately causes mass starvation.
- 1959 Widespread revolt in Tibet is suppressed. Amid mounting violence the 14th Dalai Lama flees to exile in India.
- 1965 The establishment of the Tibetan Autonomous Region.
- 1966 The birth of the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution. Mao's 'Little Red Book' of quotations is published.

1971

The US national table tennis team becomes the first American delegation to set foot in China in 49 years; Nixon soon follows.

1973

Deng Xiaoping returns to power as Deputy Premier.

1976

Mao Zedong dies aged 83.

1979

Diplomatic relations are established with the US.

1980

The one-child policy is enforced. Mao's 'Gang of Four' is put on trial.

1987

The Last Emperor collects an Oscar for best picture.

1989

Hundreds of civilian demonstrators are killed by Chinese troops in the streets around Tiananmen Square. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, wins the Nobel Peace Prize.

1997

Deng Xiaoping dies. Britain returns Hong Kong to the PRC.

1999

Falun Gong protest silently in Běijīng, prompting a crackdown. Macau is handed over from Portugal to the PRC.

2001

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is formed between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. China also joins the World Trade Organization.

2003

Hu Jintao becomes president. SARS hits Hong Kong and mainland China. China sends its first astronaut into space. The Golden Shield Project is put in place to control internet usage.

2007

Prime Minister Wen Jiabao addresses Japan's parliament. Hong Kong author Jiang Rong wins the first Man Asia Literary Prize for his novel *Wolf Totem*.

2008

Tens of thousands are killed in the Sichuān province earthquake. Běijīng hosts the 2008 Summer Olympic Games – topping the medal tally with 51 gold – amid pro-Tibet demonstrations.

2009

The global financial crisis sees a 10-year low in China's economic growth rate. A university study finds China has 32 million more boys than girls.

food

the chinese & food

The Chinese live to eat – not just to eat, but to eat well, to eat indulgently and to eat flavoursome, interesting, well-cooked food at every meal.

Chinese cuisine can be divided into four main schools, summed up in the Mandarin saying *dōng suān, xī là, nán tián, běi xián* (meaning 'the east is sour, the west is spicy, the south is sweet and the north is salty'). Cantonese (southern) cuisine (*Yuècài*) is the nation's most varied and elaborate; we can also thank it for *yincha* (yum cha). Shànghǎi's *Zhècài* (eastern) cuisine is generally richer, sweeter and oilier, relying on preserved vegetables, pickles and salted meats. *Lǔcài* (northern) food from Shāndōng uses wheat pancakes, spring onions and fermented bean paste, while *Chuāncài* (western or Sīchuān) style is renowned for red chillies and peppercorns firing up pork, poultry, legumes and soybeans. Finally, *Huáiyáng cài* (east coast cuisine) is relatively vegetarian-friendly and is home to meat simmered in dark soy sauce, sugar and spices. And there are many other influences, like Macau's Portuguese touches, Hong Kong's gift at importing the best and Tibet's *momos* (steamed dumplings) and *chang* (fermented barley beer).

eat by number

A Chinese saying talks of seven basic daily necessities: fuel, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar and tea. Another 'seven' is the seven tastes incorporated in dishes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, hot, *guō qì* (wok essence) and *xiān wèi* (a kind of savoury, more-ish element sometimes created with MSG). Then there are five elements that must be attended to in cooking: colour, aroma, flavour, shape and texture. In addition, food is considered medicine for the *qì* (life energy). Accordingly, a meal must balance *yīn* (cool and moist) and *yáng* (warm and solid), the five elements (wood, earth, fire, water, metal) and the four states (moist, warm, cool, dry).

staples

If it walks, crawls, slithers, swims or flies, someone in China will probably eat it. In Guǎngdōng you can sample possum, elsewhere pangolin (anteater), steamed scorplings, cicadas, land and water beetles, snakes (the bile and blood is meant to help impotence) and turtle. The term for meat is *ròu*, which will generally mean 'pork' unless otherwise stated, and lard is laced in breads and sweets alike. From the water, sample *sānwén yú* (salmon) from Hēilóngjiāng, *niān yú* (catfish) in Sīchuān, and live

xiāzi (prawns) at Xiàmén. The best ocean fare comes from Qīngdǎo, where every self-respecting restaurant has live shellfish and fish on the front step. Eat all *hǎixiān* (seafood) hot from cooking, even the medicinally 'cold' *pángxiè* (crab), best steamed with ginger and spring onions and eaten with yellow rice wine.

Vegetables and fruit are diverse and readily available, but vegetarians will face *niúròu tāng* (beef stock) and *háoyóu* (oyster sauce) in nearly everything – don't be suckered by the term *shūcai* (vegetable dish), which is not usually vegetarian but rather features a particular vegetable. Meantime, try out the chillies of Húnán, the soft flavour of cabbage and the yummy taste of taro. In addition to *qīngcài* (green leafy vegetables), the Chinese make use of delicate, crisp turnips in salads, and fennel tops in dumplings across the north. Don't miss out on Yúnnán's coal-cooked sweet potato. Other delicacies are Běijīng's *biǎn táo* (flat peaches), the *záo* (jujube, also called Chinese date) and *lóngyǎn* ('dragon eyes', also called longan).

Although grains other than *fàn* (rice) play their part in Chinese cuisine – wheat, millet, sorghum, corn – rice is so important that *fàn* is a symbol for all meals. It is prepared as flour, noodles, porridge and more, and even the aroma from rice cooking is revered. Black rice is glutinous and used in sweets, jasmine rice dominates towards the southeast border, and red rice is used for alcohol and vinegar. In the northwest, noodles are more likely to be made from wheat, while in Inner Mongolia and Tibet millet is probably used. *Jiǎozi* (dumplings) are a must-eat, from Běijīng's pork-filled, fried or steamed wheat dough, to Guǎngdōng's yum cha. In the north, eat the big, soft dumpling called *mántou*. Breads include the famous *dà mianbāo* ('big' bread) of Hǎ'ěrbīn, as well as Shànghǎi's *yóutiáo* (deep-fried bread). And finally there's the versatile *huángdòu* (soy bean), which the Chinese have been fermenting, smoking, maturing and eating for over 3000 years – best known in *dòufu* (tofu) and *doujiāng* (soy milk drink).

fishy business

An ingredient, its form and the manner of eating it may hold symbolic meaning in China. For example, serving a whole fish means prosperity, as it has a logical beginning and end. Yet you'd never turn it over once you've eaten the top side, as this is reminiscent of a boat capsizing at sea and therefore means death.

mystery ingredients

So what are China's secret herbs and spices? *Dàsuàn* (garlic) in Shāndōng and *chùng* (spring onion) in Guǎngdōng are easy to identify, while *bājiǎo* (star anise) is used continent-wide in marinades and braised dishes. Look out for *huājiāo* (Sìchuān pepper, a prickly ash bud that sends your tongue numb), as well as the ubiquitous *sui* (coriander), *zhīma* (sesame seeds) and *wǔxiāngfěn* (five spices mix, using cassia bark, star anise, fennel seeds, black pepper and cloves).

Soy sauce, *jiàngyóu*, comes in dark and thick or light varieties, and is used for dips as well as in cooking. Toasty-flavoured *zhī ma yóu* (sesame oil) is a finishing touch, while in Sichuān *zhīmá jiàng* (sesame paste) and *lajiāo jiàng* (chilli sauce) are ever-present. Fújiàn's Pacific oysters provide *háoyóu* (oyster sauce), and other flourishes come from *hóngcù* (red rice vinegar) and syrupy black Chinkiang vinegar.

A wealth of dried ingredients is available, with over 30 kinds of mushrooms, not to mention *gōu qǐ zǐ* (wolfberries), *chóng cǎo* (caterpillar consumed from the inside by a rabid fungus) and dried *hǎishēn* (sea cucumber). *Xiāng gū* (*shiitake* mushroom) is the most common fungus, but also try *mù ěr* (wood-ear fungus) and *hóu tóu gū* (monkey-head mushrooms). Nuts and legumes abound, the more unusual ones being *xìng rén* (bitter apricot kernels) and *bái guǒ* (ginkgo nuts). Meat is also dried and the *ròu sōng* (dried beef) of Hángzhōu has a texture like fairy floss.

And then there's the outright exotic, such as bamboo worms, deer penis and wild cat. Other local treats are *sōng huā dàn* (preserved or 'thousand-year' eggs) and *yàn wō* (bird's nest – made from the saliva of swiftlets).

drinks

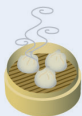
No true Chinese will miss out on their tea. There are at least 320 strains of the tea plant *Camellia sinensis*, processed according to six broad categories. In Xī'ān they prefer the heady, gutsy nature of *wūlongcha* (oolong) or *hóngchá* (black) teas, while the people around Hángzhōu on the eastern seaboard prefer *lǜchà* (green) tea. In Yúnnán they prefer Pu'erh tea (*pǔ-ěr chá*), a fermented black tea. While most teas in China are drunk without milk or sugar, in Inner Mongolia they prefer to add cream or butter to their 'milk tea' (*sōo tē chē*), while Tibetans fancy it with rancid yak butter and salt (*bō chá*). Also check out *tuóchá* (brick teas – made from tea that has been compressed into a brick shape) and *huāchá* (scented teas).

For other nonalcoholic options, try *lizhī zhi* (lychee juice), *suānméi tāng* (sour plum drink) or *xìng rén niú nǎi* (almond milk) in the south. In the north, you'll find *suānnǎi* (yoghurt) as a breakfast item. You could also sample the near-nonalcoholic lemon beer and pineapple beer, or *kāfēi* (coffee), popular with the up-and-coming younger generation.

Alcohol definitions in China are a little slippery: *bái pútáo jiǔ* (white wine) actually means near-toxic firewater, containing 40% to 60% alcohol – try Yúnnán's Long Chuan rice liqueur and Chinese flowering quince wine. Other renowned wines include red rose liqueur, and *Shàoxīng jiǔ* (yellow rice wine), with a 2400-year history in the city of Shàoxīng. Beer (*pījiǔ*), is China's universal alternative to tea. Always ask for your beer *lěng* (cold). In Macau test the evocatively named Lágrima de Cristo (Tears of Christ), a Portuguese white port.

table manners

The word *rènào* (bustling) encapsulates the atmosphere of restaurants across China, where people value enthusiastic participation in conversation as well as the meal. Meals come not in individual servings but in *dàpán* (communal plates) – do get your hepatitis A shots but don't miss out on the fun. At the table, wait until your host picks up their chopsticks before you begin eating. When choosing your food, go for the dish closest to you or ask people to pass your choice – never reach over the table. Don't tap the side of your bowl with your chopsticks (the sign of beggars), nor stick the chopsticks upright in your rice as that resembles funerary incense. Finally, it's polite to offer to pay the bill, even if you're clearly the guest. Bluffing or not, say: *Shì ní qīngde kè, wǒ buguò shì mǎidān de* (You were tonight's host, but I'll pay the bill). And should you need a night off the dreaded white spirits, a good escape is to turn your glass upside down and explain that your doctor won't let you drink.



street food

Be prepared: any Chinese with a gas bottle and a wok can become a *jiētóu xiǎochī* (street vendor). Eat only freshly made *xiǎochī* (snacks) and only where appreciative crowds are gathered, and you needn't miss out on local delicacies such as *zòngzi* (sticky rice in bamboo leaves), *húntun* (wonton soup) or *jiānbǐng* (egg and spring onion pancake). Ubiquitous *shuǐjiǎo* (meat- or vegetable-stuffed dumplings) are a treat – locals mix *làjiāo* (chilli), *cù* (vinegar) and *jiàngyóu* (soy sauce) according to taste in a little bowl, then dip. Postparty in Hong Kong, grab some *dím sàm* (dim sum) to soak up the beer – try *hà gáau* (steamed shrimp dumplings) or *chéung fán* (steamed rice-flour rolls with shrimp, beef or pork). Some Chinese street-fare shows a Persian influence, like *shashlick* and kebab. While in Běijīng try *chòu dòufu* (astonishingly stinky tofu fermented in cabbage juice), in Shànghǎi go for the half-moon *xiǎolóng* dumplings, and in Macau don't miss the distinctive pastries on Rua da Felicidade. Hong Kong tempts with *ngàu zaap* (cow's organs), *yèw dān* (fish balls), *cháau fūng léut* (roasted chestnuts) and *jèw chéung fán* (rice noodles). Tibetan markets offer the challenge of *chura kampo* (dried yak cheese), white balls eaten like a boiled sweet.

festivals

A-Ma Festival (A-Ma Temple, Inner Harbour, Macau)

The birth of the Taoist goddess of fisherfolk A-Ma is celebrated on the 23rd day of the third lunar month (March/April). One legend has it that a junk sailing across the South China Sea was embroiled in a storm, the passengers facing certain death. Behold, a beautiful young woman on the boat stood and ordered the sea be calm, saving all on board. A temple was built in her honour in 1488 – at the location of their safe return to land – and A-Ma is worshipped along the coast under the names Mazu, Tin Hau and Niangniang. On the festival day, seafarers and their families throng the Ming dynasty temple, leaving offerings, burning incense and praying for safe journeys. Enjoy the Chinese opera performances and take in the gorgeous poetry inscribed on the surrounding cliff walls.

Cheung Chau Bun Festival (Cheung Chau, Hong Kong)

On the island of Cheung Chau the Buddha's birthday public holiday is marked by the construction of rocket-shaped towers, standing up to 20m high, covered with sacred bread rolls. At midnight on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month (April/May), competitors scramble up the towers, grabbing a bun for good luck – the higher the bun, the better the fortune. For 26 years the festivities were kept to ground level after a tower collapsed in 1978, but the bamboo structures have been replaced by metal and climbers now use safety ropes. Swirling around the towers is the greater festival, with processions featuring floats, stilt walkers and people dressed as characters from legend and opera. Most interesting are the 'floating children', carried through the streets atop long poles. Make the most of the vegetarian feast and check out the colourful fishing boats in the harbour.

Chinese New Year (Shànghǎi)

There's something special about being in one of China's major cities for Lunar New Year (January/February), the 'real thing' after seeing it in your local Chinatown. Also known as Chūn Jié (Spring Festival), it's the high point of the Chinese year, and for the most part this is a family festival. Throughout the country, the weeks building up to the festival are an explosion of colour, with *chūnlián* (spring couplets) pasted on door posts, door gods brightening up alleys and streets, and shops glistening with red and gold decorations. Work colleagues and relatives present each other with *hóng bāo* (red envelopes) of money and the streets ring with cries of *Gōngxǐ fācái!* (Congratulations! May you make money!). Shànghǎi-side, check out the explosion of fireworks at midnight both to welcome in the New Year and ward off bad spirits, plus the special services held at Longhua and Jing'an Temples. Stay hungry for the eight- or nine-course banquet coming your way!

Dragon Boat Festival (Mi Lo River, Húnán)

During the Dragon Boat Festival (fifth day of the fifth lunar month, May/June), the Mi Lo fills with colourful crafts decked out to imitate dragons, from fearsome snout to scaly tail. The China-wide festival commemorates Qu Yuan, a revered poet-statesman who drowned himself in 278 BC to protest the Qin state's invasion. Onlookers tried to keep fish and evil spirits from Qu Yuan's body by splashing their oars and beating drums. Today festival spectators snack on *zòngzi* (sticky rice in bamboo leaves) in memory of the rice scattered as an offering to the poet's ghost. Arrive waterside early to see the dragon-head prows blessed with incense and gongs. The race is won when a rower straddles his craft's dragon head and grabs the flag. The festival is also a tribute to the god of water, and homes fill with invocations of physical and spiritual well-being. The herbs calamus and moxa are hung from front doors and pictures of Chung Kuei, the demon slayer, are pinned up. Adults also enjoy *hsiung huang* (a type of rice wine) and the party continues after dark with firecrackers and dragon dances.

International Ice & Snow Festival (Zhaolin Park & Sun Island Park, Hā'ěrbīn)

China's northern Hēilóngjiāng province may be cursed with one of the coldest climates in Asia, but its capital Hā'ěrbīn has made the best of a bad thing with its International Ice and Snow Festival. Held in the depths of winter (5 January to 5 February), the festival revolves around over 1300 fanciful and elaborate ice sculptures built by teams from about 20 countries, including recreations of famous buildings and structures (such as a scaled-down Forbidden City, or a Great Wall of China that doubles as an ice slide). The bulk of the sculptures can be found in central Zhaolin Park and Sun Island Park, while the hardiest of festival-goers can join Hā'ěrbīn's winter swimmers for a dip in the frozen Songhua River. Attractions include ice lanterns, skiing, ice skating, outdoor swimming, hunting, dog-sled rides and art performances – not to mention whooshing down ice slides and the ice-axe free-for-all that marks the festival's end.

Mid-Autumn Festival (West Lake, Hángzhōu)

Also known as the Moon Festival or the Moon Cake Festival, this festival on the full moon of the eighth lunar month (September/October) is a holiday for lovers, families and the homesick. Loved ones meet under the lunar symbol of unity to barbecue, eat pomelos (draping the rinds on their heads), do fire-dragon dances, and hang lanterns from towers. Incense is burnt for the lunar goddess Chang'e, who lives on the moon with a jade rabbit. The *yuè bing* (moon cakes) themselves are made of a thin dough shell containing fillings such as jelly, dates and nuts or red bean paste – during an uprising against the Mongols in the 14th century, revolutionary plans were secretly passed around in the cakes. A popular spot to moonbathe is Hángzhōu's West Lake, with its three candlelit towers.

Náníng International Folk Song Art Festival (Náníng, Guǎngxī)

The Náníng International Folk Song Art Festival has become a spectacular affair, held each November since 1999. Entertainment comes in the form of local and foreign folk-singers showing off their modern and classical numbers, dancing galas and dramatic lighting displays. It's come a long way from its roots as a *ge'wei* (song gathering) for the Zhuang minority, whose omnipresent musical culture led to the province of Guǎngxī earning the name 'Ocean of Folk Songs'. The Zhuang sing their way through daily life, while working the fields, collecting firewood, attending funerals and, of course, courting. At a *ge'wei*, young people sing an impromptu antiphonal song cycle (a one-to-one song competition) telling of their love; women hand the successful swain *xiuqiu*, a ball made of 12 silk stripes like flower petals.

Qīng Míng Jié (across China)

A celebration held around 5 April (or 4 April in leap years), Tomb-Sweeping Day, also called Clear and Bright Festival, sees families returning to their ancestors' graves. The dead are honoured by cleaning weeds from gravestones, touching up inscriptions, offering chrysanthemums and favourite foods, and burning paper goods and *zhiqian* ('Bank of Hell' money) so the ancestor will be wealthy in the afterlife. The particularly devout hang a willow branch in the doorway to their homes, preventing the dead from entering if they roam free of the cemetery. For most it's a spring celebration rather than a day of mourning, with families feasting on the offerings and flying kites. Traditionally, trees are planted to welcome the warmer weather, and tea leaves picked before this date are prized for their subtle aromas (and priced accordingly).

Qurban Festival (Xinjiāng Uighur AR)

Also known as Eid al-Adha, this major Islamic festival sees the faithful remember the story of Ibrahim, who offered his son as a sacrifice in order to show his obedience to Allah. Allah saved the boy and a lamb was sacrificed in his place, and today an important part of Qurban is the sacrifice of a goat or cow to commemorate this occasion. During the three-day festival, Muslims across China dress in their finest and head to the mosque for prayer and thanksgiving. It's not all prayer and sacrifice, though – this is also a time for entertaining family and friends, gift-giving and partaking in traditional festival foods, including *sanzi*, a deep-fried noodle-shaped dough. The festival begins on the tenth day of the final month of the Islamic calendar (falling in November until 2011, then October). This is a particularly interesting time for visitors to be in the Xinjiāng Uighur region.

Saga Dawa Festival (Lhasa & Mt Kailash, Tibet)

Buddha Sakyamuni's conception, enlightenment and entry into nirvana is marked on the 15th day of Tibet's fourth lunar month (May/June). It falls during the year's holiest month, when the karmic effect of all wholesome or unwholesome actions is multiplied by 100,000 – another good reason for most of Lhasa's population to walk the Lingkhor circuit. Prayer wheels are turned on the streets, Tibetan operas recount history and legend, and boats are paddled in the Dragon King Pool at the foot of the Potala Palace. Alternatively, you can trek to holy Mt Kailash to see the 25m Tarboche prayer-pole being raised in accordance with a Lama's instructions. *Lung ta* (prayer flags; literally 'wind horses') are hung to the tune of sacred horn-and-cymbal music, the faithful circle the pole, and if it's positioned correctly all bodes well for Tibet.

Sister's Meal Festival (Shīdòng, Guìzhōu)

Love is in the air during this courtship ritual in eastern Guìzhōu when young Miao (or Hmong) people find partners through the medium of sticky rice. To a soundtrack of music from the *lúshēng* (a reed instrument), and amid dancing, paper-dragon fights and buffalo fighting, young women dress in exquisite embroidery and kilograms of silver jewellery shaped into neck rings, loin chains, and multiple headdresses. The suitors arrive, serenading the women and presenting a parcel of dyed rice to the ladies who have taken their fancy. In return, the damsels hand back rice parcels containing unspoken messages – two chopsticks indicate acceptance, one means 'no thank you', a leaf is a request for some satin before giving a decision, while a chilli is the most definite of rebukes. The celebration, held on the 15th day of the third lunar month (March/April), marks the time when married women return home and see their parents.

Wéifáng International Kite Festival (Wéifáng, Shāndōng)

Tradition has it that the world's first kite – an eagle made out of wood – was held aloft from Mount Lu (in Wéifáng) more than 2000 years ago by philosopher Mozi. Thanks to his discovery, Wéifáng is now home to both the International Kite Festival (launched, pun intended, in 1984) and the Wéifáng World Kite Museum. Come April, international teams and thousands of enthusiasts arrive to display and compete over three days. Visitors will be awestruck by enormous structures being hauled aloft by jeeps, or dragon kites over 800m long. The creativity and presentation of the kites, which are often based on traditional folk designs, is the focus of the festival. Performances include an opening parade of participants, an impressive fireworks display to close and regional songs and dances. Be sure to take in the kite museum, whose peacock-blue roof is designed to resemble a dragon-head centipede kite.

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