

Food

Food played a large part in celebration of family events and annual festivals. This partly accounts for the excellent reputation and variety of Chinese food, which was much praised by poets and writers. The peasant tradition contributed as well. The constant threat of famine resulted in everything that was edible – vegetable, insect or offal – being used. The ox was essential to the peasant so beef was not eaten, and without dairy farming there was no milk or cheese. Just about everything else was consumed. Even human flesh was served in some restaurants in Hangzhou, and referred to as 'two-legged' mutton! The flesh of old men, women and children was served in separate dishes because the flavour varied.

There were regional differences just as there are today in China. In the south people ate mainly rice, fish and pork, with mild flavours, though garlic, peppers, oyster sauce and black beans gave more robust tastes. Shark's fin and even snakes were added. In the north the food was stir-fried, with noodles, pancakes and steamed rolls also being offered.

Read this description of a Hangzhou restaurant by J. Gernet writing in 1962, but based on primary evidence. Eating seems both a serious affair and a pleasure.

Source F

The big restaurants had doors in the form of archways decorated with flowers. From them was suspended half a pig or a side of mutton. The decoration was brightly coloured. 'As soon as the customers have chosen where they will sit, they are asked what they want to have. The people of Hangzhou are very difficult to please. Hundreds of orders are given on all sides: this person wants something hot, another something cold, a third something tepid, a fourth something chilled; one wants cooked food, another raw, another chooses roast, another grill. The orders, given in a loud voice, are all different, sometimes three different ones at the same table. The waiter never mixes them up, and if by any unlikely chance he should make a mistake, the proprietor will launch into a volley of oaths addressed to the offending waiter, will straightway make him stop serving, and may even dismiss him altogether.'

There were restaurants where all the dishes, including fish and soups were served iced. Others specialised in certain kinds of food or in regional cooking of some kind. Others again, of the cheaper variety, only served noodles stuffed with vegetables or pork and beans with boiled leeks. It is scarcely astonishing that the people of Hangzhou were often accused of being greedy.

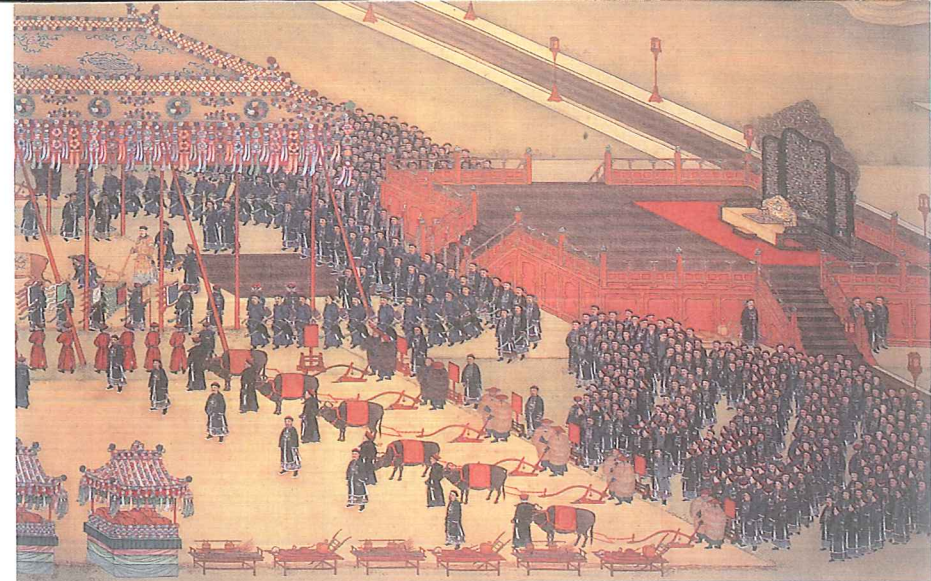
Festivals

The Chinese have always had a passionate delight in festivals. They offered entertainment to everyone, of all ages and classes, and also got rid of worn-out 'breaths', diseases, and demons, and started a new and lucky period. There were a great many festivals throughout the year, for example, a festival of flowers, of the moon, of the dead, of the harvest, of the autumn, of weaving, of the birth of Dao, of the birth of Buddha, of chrysanthemums.

Festival of New Year

Rich and poor alike prepared dishes of vegetables and soya beans for the god of the hearth, who visited heaven at New Year to give a report on family members. Shops sold paper streamers and painted images of the door gods. Hawkers sold sweets and firecrackers (bamboo filled with gunpowder). Charms were nailed to the doors with red streamers placed above to 'welcome the spring'. At night-time everyone stayed inside to make sacrifices to their family ancestors and to all the guardian spirits of the house – gods of the door, of the stove, of the bed, of the courtyard. On New Year's Day there was calm in the streets and the shops were closed.

This was followed soon afterwards by the Feast of Lanterns which was the happy side of celebrating New Year. It lasted for three days and three nights, and it fell at full moon. The doorways of every house were now draped with embroideries and lamps, everywhere was lit up – squares, lanes and shops. There was much competition to decorate the best lantern. The finest ones were 100 to 130 centimetres in diameter, made of glass in five colours and painted with landscapes, people, flowers, bamboo, birds and furry



This is the Festival of Agriculture, which was held in the spring.

animals. Games were played, and troupes of dancers, acrobats and musicians gave shows in rich people's houses. Everyone carried lanterns, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Entertainments and leisure

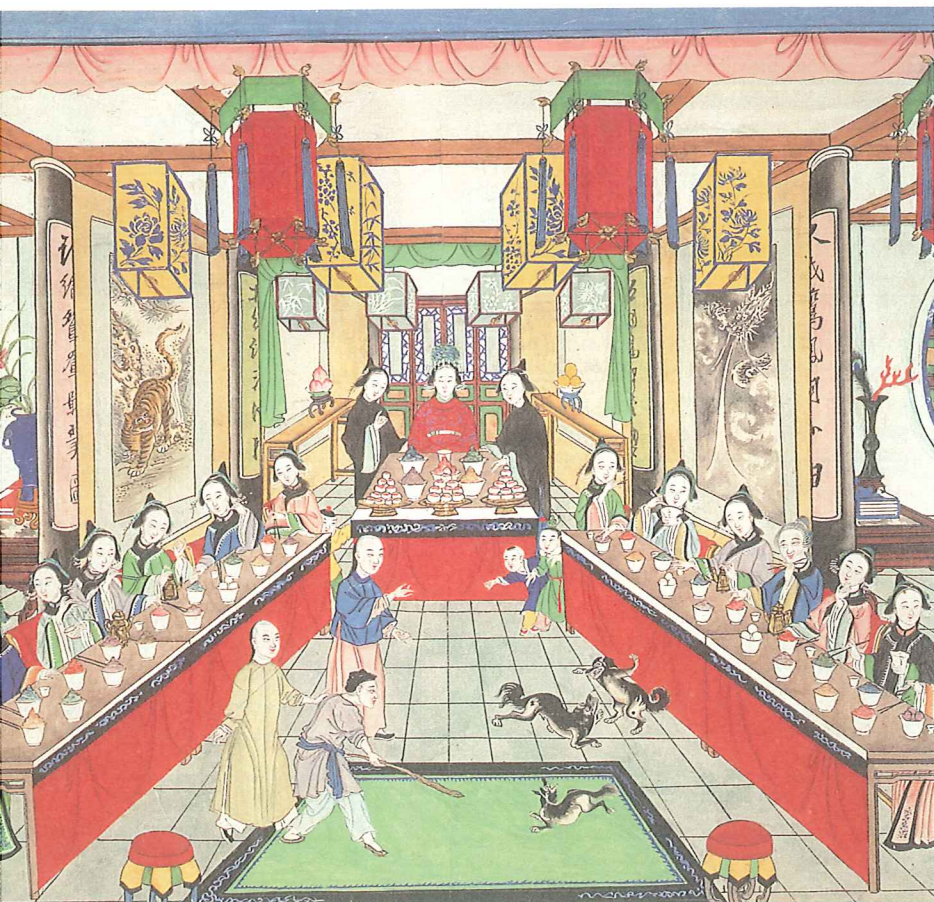
Chess, calligraphy and literary composition were popular amongst the upper classes. Physical activities were reserved for the lower classes, or for the military, who played polo, football and practised archery and fencing. Entertainments like puppet-shows, acrobats and storytellers were a regular feature of street life.

Here we can see women musicians, together with acrobats and an early fairground ride!



The wealthy ate food with spoons and chopsticks which was served on a low table in small porcelain dishes, and brought in on lacquer trays. Variety and the number of dishes was more important than quantity. Rice-wine was served tepid with each dish. The only other drink was tea, made popular in Tang times having been introduced to China in the Han dynasty. There were very many varieties: Hangzhou produced three – Jewel, Forest of Fragrance, and White Clouds. Most were imported from elsewhere. Tea-drinking was regarded as an experience, producing a state of well-being. On the practical side, it was far better to drink tea in Hangzhou than the water which came from the Lake and was not always pure.

This is a nineteenth-century Chinese painting of a marriage feast. Look at the decoration used.





Kites

For centuries kites have been made by the Chinese using bamboo for the frames and silk for the covering. Legend has it that a scholar and adviser to a Han Emperor first devised a kite to frighten off enemy forces attacking the palace walls. By putting sounding devices inside a light bamboo structure, he produced an eerie floating object that the wind caught, sending moaning, wailing voices into the night. The enemy, thinking the gods were warning them, left. Another use was in 549 AD 549 when messages were sent from within a besieged city to friends outside by means of kites.

The Chinese went on to make their kites for pleasure in the shapes of dragons, birds, insects and other creatures. Kite-fights were popular, the aim being to cut the string of one kite with the other's string.

FOOD, FUN AND FESTIVALS

- 1 Using the evidence on pages 38 and 39 describe a visit to a restaurant at festival time.
- 2 Design your own lantern or kite using decorations which the Chinese would have liked.
- 3 What does this amount of pleasure and entertainment tell you about;
 - a the people?
 - b the society?

DID THE PEOPLE OF CHINA LEAD CIVILISED LIVES?

- 1 Which aspects of everyday life in this chapter do not support the view that China was a civilisation? Why?
- 2 Which features do support the view? Why?
- 3 Summarise your thoughts. The people of China did/did not lead civilised lives because ... This can also go with your wall display.

Summary: How did the people live?

In this chapter on everyday life you have learned about different, but nonetheless important, features of China. These were the hardships but essential work of the peasants, the

role of women, the value of education, plus the available pleasures of ordinary life. Such things give you a fuller picture of Chinese society.