

Chinese festivals

The Chinese year is marked by a variety of festivals. Festival dates are calculated using the lunar calendar, so do not fall on the same day each year in the Western calendar. Three of the main festivals are described below.

First month: Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), *chun jie* 春节

Celebrated on the first day of the first lunar month, the spring festival is the most important festival of the year. During the festival, people hold family reunions and honour their ancestors. Fire crackers, believed to ward off evil spirits, herald the New Year, and auspicious couplets written on red paper adorn the entrances of houses. The Dragon and Lion dance is also performed. It is customary to give children money wrapped in a red envelope. The Spring Festival comes to an end on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month with the Lantern Festival (*deng jie* 灯节). Chinese people believe that the lanterns help guide lost spirits toward judgment and reincarnation. Traditional rice balls (called *yuanxiao* 元宵 in the north and *tangyuan* 汤圆 in the south) are eaten during the Lantern Festival; symbolic of family reunion, harmony and happiness.

Fifth month: Dragon Boat Festival, *duanwu jie* 端午节

The Dragon Boat Festival, celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, commemorates the death of Qu Yuan (屈原, c.340 -278 BC), a great poet and minister of the state of Chu in south-central China during the Warring States period. Legend says that he drowned himself in the Miluo River in protest at his banishment for opposing court corruption. On hearing the news, local fishermen jumped in their boats and raced to rescue him; said to be the origin of the festival's 'dragon boat' races. Rice dumplings wrapped in leaves (*zongzi* 粽子), are eaten during the festival.

Eighth month: Mid-Autumn festival, *zhongqiu jie* 中秋节

Held on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, this festival is a time for family reunions and remembering distant relatives. It is also known as the Moon Festival. On the evening of the Mid-Autumn Festival, the full moon appears larger and brighter than at any other time of the year and gatherings of the full family symbolically reflecting the moon's fullness take place. It is traditional to eat moon cakes (*yuebing* 月饼) which are pastries, round or rectangular in shape, made from lotus seed paste and often filled yolks of salted duck eggs or other fillings.

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