Chinese culture is one of the oldest in the world today. Over 6,000 years ago this culture began to develop in the Yellow River Valley and many of those ancient practices are still observed in the present.

**Farming, food and drink**

The principal crop of China was rice, which grew best in the southern part of the country's flooded fields. Rice was so important that people used it to pay their taxes. It was eaten at every meal in some form and was even brewed to make wine. Wheat and other grains were also grown, but were never as important as rice.

The Chinese diet was, and still is today, mostly vegetarian. The Chinese temples and monasteries taught people that a healthy diet led to a long life and also emphasized vegetarianism as a humane and healthy way of eating. Fish was the most popular dish served with rice and vegetables.
The most important drink was tea, which was first brewed from powdered leaves. Different leaves were blended for different tastes or to produce different effects. Tea was considered a powerful medicine, but was also just a popular drink people enjoyed drinking.

People would eat tea leaves with their meals, and tea was considered an acceptable religious offering at temples. Tea gardens became popular among the wealthy, and the Tea Ceremony was developed. This is an elaborate ritual of respect in which people take tea together.

**Home life, games and sports**

The Tea Ceremony was performed in one’s home or garden where one would welcome guests. The home, just like today, was the center of the family's life. Women took care of the home while men worked outside of the house. Women, men and children of the peasant classes all worked in the fields.

Peasants lived in huts while merchants and other middle-class people lived in houses made of wood.

There were sleeping quarters inside the home, a kitchen and a hall that had a dining room and entertainment area. Families would eat in the hall and talk and listen to music or read.

Cats were the most popular pet in ancient China, and almost every home had one. Dogs were kept more for security and as a source of food.

The Chinese would play games like mahjongg, a type of chess or checkers. They also enjoyed playing kickball, soccer, wrestling and archery.

In every home, there was a shrine to the ancestors of the family, to the Tudi Gong god, who was the local protector, and to other gods. In the kitchen, there was always the paper image of the kitchen god known as Zao Shen.

Zao Shen was probably the most important god of the home because his job was to keep watch over the family. It was said that he would leave the house once a month to tell the local gods how the people were doing.

Once a year, on New Year's Eve, Zao Shen left to make his full report to Shangti and the other gods in heaven. His image would be offered food and drink, and then his mouth would be smeared with honey. This way, only a good report would come out when he met the gods.

**A variety of festivals**

There were national festivals, regional festivals and local festivals. A local festival might be a celebration of the birthday of some famous citizen who had done good works for the town, or a poet or artist.

Regional and local festivals could also be held to honor the Tudi Gong god. Many festivals were observed to rid a village of evil spirits or to honor ancestors and invite their blessings.
The most important national festival was New Year’s Day. Fireworks were set off to welcome the new year, to speed Zao Shen on his journey to the heavens, and to drive away evil spirits. The focus of the festival was to give thanks for the past year and make wishes for the new one.

Animal skins were hung up outside of homes as offerings, incense was burned and a special ale was brewed. Drinking this ale was thought to protect people from illness caused by evil spirits or restless ghosts.

The New Year’s celebration concluded with a Lantern Festival, which was a festival of light to honor the full moon. People would float lighted lanterns on ponds, lakes or streams, watch the full moon, play games, dance and hold feasts. According to their wealth, some people would erect huge displays for the celebration.

People sought to outdo each other in providing the grandest lamps. For example, an emperor during the 700s A.D. had a lantern wheel 200 feet tall with 50,000 lights.

Other festivals took place throughout the year. Each festival had its own purpose, such as driving away evil spirits or honoring ancestors.

Festivals kept the people in touch with their past and grounded them in their cultural values. In the present day, many of these same celebrations are observed every year. The rituals go back hundreds or even thousands of years and continue to be performed in very similar, or exactly the same, ways.