

## For residents of [Your Community]

COFFEE AND A COUNTRY · WEEK 1

# China

## The Second Cup

*Tea, a grandfather, and the traditions we pass along*

*If the story is new, is it still the same tradition?*



AI illustration made for The World Desk; not a photograph.

### OUR VISIT TODAY

1. A postcard from China: a map, a few surprises, and three words to say together.
2. A short story, read aloud, set in a teahouse in Chengdu.
3. The real story behind it, and then your own stories.

### TRY IT TODAY

When someone pours your coffee or tea today, tap two fingers on the table to say thank you. The story will tell you why.

### SET THE TABLE

Jasmine tea is a favorite across China. And the fortune cookies? Guess where they really come from on page 2.

Day

Time

Room

# For residents of [Your Community]

## POSTCARD FROM CHINA

## Where we are visiting



### PEOPLE

About 1.4 billion, roughly one of every six people on Earth.

### SIZE

About 3.7 million square miles, close to the size of the United States.

### ONE CLOCK

One time zone, Beijing Time, for a country wide enough for five. Beijing is 12 hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Time (13 in winter).

### HOW FAR

About 6,800 miles from New York and 7,800 miles from Miami, as the crow flies.

### TEA

Tea began in China. Its six main families: green, yellow, white, oolong, black and dark.

### A WORD YOU USE

Our word “tea” sailed to Europe from China’s southeast coast, where people say “te.” “Chai” comes from “cha,” the way most of China says it.

**Guess first: Where were fortune cookies invented?**

**Answer:** California! They were most likely created in the early 1900s, probably by Japanese-American bakers. You will rarely find them in China.

## SAY IT TOGETHER

HELLO

你好

nǐ hǎo

say “nee how”

THANK YOU

谢谢

xièxie

say “shyeh-shyeh”

GOODBYE

再见

zàijiàn

say “dzai-jyen”

## For residents of [Your Community]

A SHORT STORY · THE HOST WILL READ THIS ALOUD

# The Second Cup

*An invented story, inspired by real life. The people are imaginary; the customs, the storytelling art and the holiday are real.*



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Every afternoon at three o'clock, Old Wang walks to the teahouse in the park and sits in the same bamboo chair under the ginkgo tree. He has sat there for forty years. Before that, his grandfather sat there, cracking sunflower seeds and listening to the storyteller on the little stage by the door.

The storyteller is long gone. The stage holds a stack of folding chairs now. But the tea still comes the same way. A waiter lifts a copper kettle with a spout as long as his arm and, from a full step away, sends a thin stream of hot water into each cup without spilling a drop. The air smells of jasmine and wet leaves.

This week is Golden Week, the national holiday, when it seems all of China is on a train going home. Wang's grandson, Lei, has come back from Shanghai. He is twenty-seven, works with computers, and has not been to the teahouse since he was a boy.

Lei lifts the teapot and fills his grandfather's cup. Without thinking, Wang taps two fingers on the table.

"What's that?" Lei asks.

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## For residents of [Your Community]

### THE SECOND CUP · CONTINUED

“It means thank you,” Wang says. “Long ago, the story goes, an emperor traveled in disguise and poured tea for his servants. They could not bow without giving away his secret, so they bowed with two fingers instead.” He shrugs. “My grandfather brought it home from the south. Now I do it.”

Lei laughs and taps the table back. Then he takes out his phone. “Grandpa, you have to hear this.”

From the tiny speaker comes a voice Wang knows in his bones: the quick patter, the long pause, the crack of a wooden block on a table. A pingshu storyteller, the old kind. Wang leans in.

But the story is all wrong. The Monkey King is not leaping across the clouds. He is riding the subway in Shanghai, arguing with a ticket machine.

“He tells new stories the old way,” Lei says. “Thousands of people listen every night. I used to fall asleep to your radio, remember? Then I stopped listening. This brought me back.”

Wang listens for a long time. He closes his eyes, and for a moment he is nine years old again, lying on the floor beside the family radio while his mother shells peas. The storyteller does every voice. He stops at the most exciting moment, just as the old masters did, and promises more tomorrow. At the next table, two old men stop talking to listen.

“The story is foolish,” Wang says at last. “But he is good.”

“So is it still pingshu,” Lei asks, “if the story is new?”

Wang lifts the pot and pours the second cup, for Lei this time. Lei taps two fingers on the table.

“You tell me,” says Wang.

### TASTE IT

Jasmine tea, or dumplings (jiaozi, “jyow-dzuh”), a favorite at family gatherings in northern China.

## For residents of [Your Community]

THE REAL THING · A REPORTED STORY

# An old art finds new listeners



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Pingshu (“ping-shoo”) is a storytelling art about a thousand years old. One performer sits at a table and plays every part, with only a folding fan and a small wooden block called a xingmu (“shing-moo”). A knock opens the story, marks a big moment or ends it. Pingshu grew up in teahouses and markets. From the 1950s, radio carried it into millions of homes, and it was most popular in the 1980s.

In July 2026, the news site Sixth Tone reported on Qi Jingchuan (“chee jing-chwahn”), a pingshu performer who tells stories live online most evenings. When he began retelling famous fantasy novels from abroad in the old style, his nightly audience grew about fivefold, with listeners as far away as the United States. One 27-year-old fan said it brought him back to an art he once shared with his grandfather. The performer has also begun asking the original authors for permission.

Old Wang and Lei are invented. That report inspired their story.

*Wang calls the new story foolish but the storyteller good. When a tradition changes, what part has to stay the same?*

Sources for every page are on the back page.

## For residents of [Your Community]

### YOUR JOURNEY

## Your journey

*Pick any question that sparks a memory. Travel stories are very welcome. So is just listening.*

### AT YOUR TABLE

1. Who poured your first cup of coffee? Where were you sitting?
2. When guests came to your childhood home, what was served, and who did the pouring?

### ON YOUR TRAVELS

3. Has anyone been to China? What surprised you?
4. Have you been somewhere you didn't know the customs? Who helped you feel welcome?
5. Golden Week is about going home. Where did you travel home to for the holidays, and how did you get there?

### PASSING IT ON

6. What did your grandparent teach you that you still do?
7. Has a younger person ever brought you back to something you loved?

**yǐn shuǐ sī yuán**  
**饮水思源** “When you drink the water, remember the spring it came from.”

An old Chinese saying, in our own translation.

A tradition I'd like to hand to the next person is ...

**Next week:** Brazil, for music, memory, and belonging. Goodbye for now: **zàijiàn** (“dzai-jyen”).

**Sources (facts summarized in our own words).** **Country facts:** World Bank, China population data; Encyclopaedia Britannica, “China”; timeanddate.com, China's single time zone. **Tea:** UNESCO, traditional tea processing techniques and associated social practices in China (inscribed 2022); Wikipedia, “Etymology of tea.” **Finger tap and legend:** Wikipedia, “Yum cha.” **Pingshu:** China Daily, pingshu feature, September 18, 2018; Li Xin and Liu Haowen, Sixth Tone, report on pingshu performers and new online audiences, July 28, 2026. Sixth Tone is owned by Shanghai United Media Group, a state-backed media company. **Golden Week:** China's official 2026 public holiday schedule. **Fortune cookies:** Smithsonian Magazine and Wikipedia, “Fortune cookie,” on the cookie's California origins. **Saying:** Taiwan Ministry of Education, Dictionary of Chinese Idioms, entry for 饮水思源. **Journey to the West:** 16th-century Chinese novel, public domain. **Map:** Drawn by The World Desk from Natural Earth public-domain data (naturalearthdata.com).

All readings are original writing by The World Desk; facts are summarized in our own words. Pictures are AI illustrations made for The World Desk, not photographs. We use AI to help research and draft; a human editor, William Kohn, checks every edition.