

beyond travel and lifestyle

# EDGE

ISSN. E07  
Tianjin Special

## Welcome to **BINJIANGDAO**

Finding the best budget buys

### **TIANJIN TAILS**

The life of urban pets in China

### **A BAKING AFFAIR**

Bread creation at its finest

### **DRUM TOWER STREET**

Noodles, and dumplings and printmakers

April 2007

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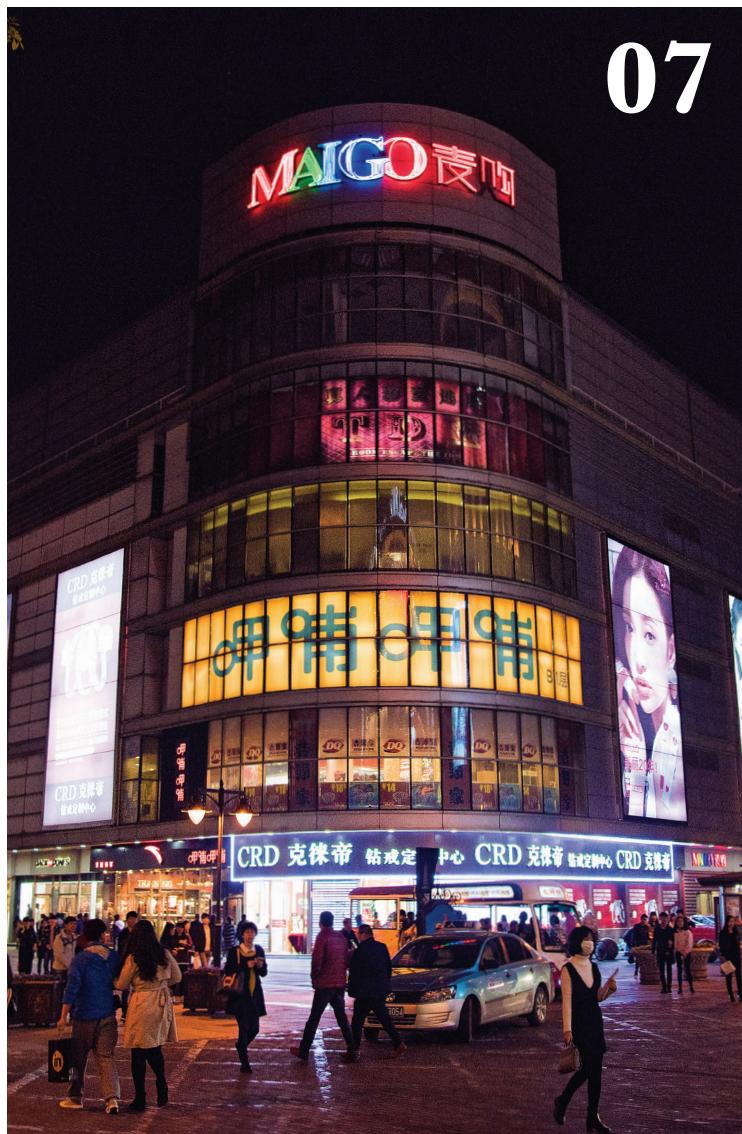
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# Editor's Note

A trip to Tianjin is like a romantic escapade to a hideaway far from the baggage of mundanities. Settling down into the little-known city, it was just me and a new place, trying to get along with each other.

As a tribute to my host city, EDGE brings you Tianjin Tales, a collection of stories from the streets of Tianjin. We present the essence of the beautiful city's unique and interesting features through the eyes of a Singaporean.

The cool of early Spring and the blooming of beautiful cherry blossoms charmed me almost immediately, but I was determined to discover the city and its depths. Talks about Beijing, its monolithic neighbour, are always met with praises and cheers, but Tianjin?

Cue the crickets, because this commerce hub isn't a common pin-in-the-map tourist destination that every youth would want to explore.

Tianjin constantly provides both novelty and familiarity at the same time. This gorgeous city perfectly weaves the terms 'modern' and 'culture' together, just like our motherland does. Digital payment prevails through the form of QR codes on the surfaces of shops and bicycles, yet Chinese culture is present in every nook and cranny of Tianjin. It is home to many historical sites that evoke the fascination of foreigners and locals alike.

Embark on a journey to Drum Tower Street, a place so authentic it's almost impossible to distinguish the past from the present.

We've sought out the Bugis Street in Tianjin's Orchard Road, and we tried our hand at tea mastery in Jinmen Tea Centre.

As the path less travelled by, Tianjin still holds much more to be discovered. Here's to finding yourself and something you love in this marvelous city.



**Koh Jie Min**  
Head Editor

EDGE TEAM

Deputy Editor

**Haymun Win**

Sub-editor

**Nikki Andrea**

Photographer

**Chee Jean Wen**

Designer

**Inge Shi**

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Advisor

**Sng Poh Yoke**

Printing

**Ultra Supplies Pte Ltd.**

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**Ngee Ann Polytechnic**  
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**Technology**

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You can explore the streets of Five Boulevards on a horse-drawn carriage, for about 80 yuan per trip.

# Five Boulevards – an old world for the young

*From fairy-tale cameos to hipster cafes, INGE SHI uncovers the wonder behind Wudadao, one of Tianjin's most iconic landmarks*

“And this is Singapore,” the cab driver says as he points at a road that looks absolutely nothing like our garden city.

“Now it’s called Dali Street, but the British used to call it Singapore Street.”

The amazement at Tianjin’s foremost historical site doesn’t just end there. Hop onto horse-drawn carts, fashioned after Cinderella’s pumpkin carriage, for the best sightseeing experience at Five Boulevards, also known as Wudadao.

Leaning lampposts peek out from the corners of the grid-arranged houses, transporting you to a different age. The boulevards’ rustic streets are surprisingly popular amongst college students.

Boasting more than 230 buildings of various European styles, from Spanish garden villas to elaborate French mansions, the boulevards’ impressive assortment of architectural styles is a fascinating window into 19th-century Tianjin. These concession-era buildings were built to house Western dignitaries when the city was first opened to foreign trade in 1860.

“These are not just any ordinary buildings,” says Ms Hao Yuanyuan, a 23-year-old graphic designer who had brought a friend along. “These are French and German architecture. And we are here to see it.”

Under the preserved European allure and past the fences of colourful courtyards lie shops of every nature imaginable.

Novelty boutiques such as antique cafés line Chongqing Street, where most of the best dining spots are located. For heartier meals, a large variety of foreign cuisine can be found, such as authentic Japanese hotpot and American burgers.

The abundance of clubs and bars around the area also attracts hordes of people to Minyuan Plaza. Located right at the entrance to the plaza is VICS, one of the more reputable establishments. The nightspot is opened by Na Ying, a popular Chinese singer.

To Mrs Dong Huanyeng, 72, who has lived here for 40 years, Five Boulevards is most beautiful during spring, when the flowers are in bloom.

The trees flower in late April and reach full blossom by May. Mrs Dong and her neighbours often take afternoon walks together to appreciate the beauty of their neighbourhood.

A peaceful enclave inside the bustling cityscape of Tianjin, Five Boulevards is home to a maze of streets that were once named after British colonies. Who knows, homesick travellers might find a piece of home along Singapore Road. ■

## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS



### Simple Café

This café is a literally hole in the wall find with an open area to sip the best coffee in Tianjin and enjoy some great scenery.

📍 65 Guilin Lu, Heping Qu  
Wudadao



### all cats

With 12 feline staff and a fish tank, this café with quirky furniture provides a cozy atmosphere.

📍 56 Chongqing Dao, Heping Qu  
Wudadao

RIGHT: End off your trip with a hearty bowl of flavourful beef noodles.  
BELOW: Every Thursday antique sellers flock together on these grounds and sell their goods.



# Drum Tower Street

CHEE JEAN WEN and KOH JIE MIN explore a cornerstone of Tianjin culture

A first-time visitor to Drum Tower Street, or Guloujie as they call it in Mandarin, will be pleasantly surprised at the plethora of things to do on this seemingly ordinary street.

On the south of Drum Tower Street lies the Princess Estate, a mini remnant of old Tianjin. It is also known as Gegefu, the former home of Princess Heshuo.

An entrance fee of 10 yuan (\$2) is required, but the compelling architecture will draw your hands to your wallets.

The wealthy Ms Cang Xiuyun was in her late 50s when she discovered and developed an interest in the estate.

“I had to buy it. It was just the place for me, and I want to preserve its beauty,” the millionaire told China People.

The wooden frames of the structure show no sign of fatigue, even after a century. Excellent preservation of the residence made time stand still, taking visitors back to a different era.

The four-sided courtyard frames the sky in a succinct square. In those days, only the wealthy could afford such a structure.

“Not many structures in Tianjin retain this Qing Dynasty design,” the estate’s staff Mr Zhang Lianyong, 65, frowns, “Not in such good condition.”

Being of French and Manchurian descent, the princess had amassed an impressive collection of Western and Chinese artefacts. These pieces seem too queer to belong on the traditional structure; the cultural contrast in the rooms resembles old Peranakan shophouses in modern Singapore.

Similar to Ancient Cultural Street, an astonishing variety of delicacies can be found at Drum Tower Street, without the queues. Pay a visit to the noodle stall right outside Princess Estate.

Topped with a generous amount of fresh coriander, their signature dish is a bowl of springy handmade noodles in thick broth. The slices of succulent beef just make your mouth water in anticipation.

Besides sight-seeing and eating, antique shopping is another must-do here. On Thursdays, antique sellers gather to sell their goods in a local flea market.

At Ancient Cultural Street, the goods feel like replicas lining the streets. However, the flea market here holds an irresistible mystique to the foreign eye.

Like every city, Tianjin has its tourist traps. Drum Tower Street is one of the few underrated local gems that offers a completely authentic cultural experience. ■



TOP: The very landmark that gave the destination its name, Drum Tower stands mighty in the heart of the street.

RIGHT: The majestic appearance of the residence is a sight to behold.



# The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread

**HAYMUN WIN** explores bakeries and find out the latest trend in Tianjin's baking scene

If you think that the Spicy Pork Floss Bun from Breadtalk is the best thing since sliced bread, prepare to be humbled by the baking creation scene in Tianjin.

Long gone are the days of the traditional golden-brown bun. Assorted breads of quirky shapes and colours are now perched upon displays in bakeries; not to mention the curious flavours they hold.

A tasty example would be the Orange Peel Charcoal Doughnut sold at 25 yuan (\$5.10). This creation can be found at ANYHOW, located in Five Boulevards.

The word 'doughnut' is used loosely here. Served up to customers is an enormous chocolate doughnut, four times the size of a regular one.

Tastefully frosted with lemon icing, the zesty aroma of the doughnut tempts you to sink right in. The sweet custard filling bursts in your mouth unexpectedly, and melts within seconds of touching your tongue. Contrasting with the smooth filling are bits of crunchy orange peel, offering up a tart tang. Every bite ends with a pleasant and refreshing aftertaste.

Nowadays, youths prefer Western flavours to traditional ones, and most people in Tianjin attribute this trend to the transition of taste.

"Bread is now less of a staple food, and has transformed into something more sophisticated," says Ms Yang Lijia, a 25-year-old policewoman thoughtfully as she makes her way out of ANYHOW cafe with her breakfast for tomorrow. "More expensive and refined ingredients are used in bread creation now." This shift in the perception has opened up new doors for both bakers and consumers alike.

Ms Yang's recommended the Squid Ink Baguette (20 yuan) from missme café. As an avid lover of savoury bread, it is her current favourite. ►



Breads are increasingly becoming not just appealing to the tastebuds, but also to the eyes.



Western types of bread are stealing the hearts of the Tianjin people.



The original Nutty Red Wine bread is widely loved by its loyal consumers, but has since been modified to suit the taste of a wider audience.



The unique shape of missme café's Horseshoe edition of their best-selling Nutty Red Wine Bread allows more alcohol to be soaked into the bread, making the taste of the wine more distinct.

A twist on the traditional baguette, the loaf is entirely black, courtesy of the squid ink in the dough. Seafood lovers will appreciate the slightly salty and fishy taste. While the bread is good enough on its own, it's the filling that makes this a bestseller. Generously stuffed with a juicy mix of smoked chicken, cheese and barbecue sauce, this creation is indeed a meat-lover's dream.

Behind every successful invention lies hundreds of discarded prototypes. Mr Zhu Ming, 28, manager of missme café, reveals that every product goes through a never-ending trial and error process.

"As one of the first companies to bring European bread to Tianjin, we uphold strict standards," he says with a glint of pride in his eyes.

The bakery's best-selling Nutty Red Wine Bread (22 yuan) has been modified multiple times. Adjustments were made to alcohol content, the type of nuts used, and the shape of the bread to suit the local palette.

While pecans go well with Pinot Noir, the wine used in the bread, it was later changed to walnuts, which the people of Tianjin prefer. The café has even come up with a horseshoe-shaped version of this creation. The thinner shape allows the red wine to be soaked up by the bread more thoroughly. Instead of nuts, cranberries are used for those with a sweeter tooth.

This next making will also tickle the fancy of sugar junkies. The shop Sweet Gathering specialises in doughnuts catering to children.

Mrs Yu Xinyue, 25 years old, does the designing, while her husband brings her creations to life. The shop carries a series of doughnuts adorned with fondant cartoon figurines.

*"Bread is now less of a staple food, and has transformed into something more sophisticated."*

"My designs are often inspired by Disney animations, as well as the whims of the children visiting my shop," she says. She adds that when she notices kids carrying bags with cartoon characters on it, she keeps them in mind for the drawing board.

Their bestseller is an original creation that will whisk you back to your childhood. The Balls of Sweetness (15 yuan) is inspired by the Glazed Haw Candy sold at street sides. The string of five bite-sized balls of dough are mini versions of popular flavours in the shop.

The first ball is coated with vanilla frosting and strawberry sprinkles, carrying a fruity aftertaste. The second is topped with chocolate frosting and rice krispies, which add a crunchy texture to the otherwise doughy ball. The third is a coconut strawberry combination, a strange pairing that works better than you think.

The most impressive ball was the fourth. Covered in matcha chocolate goodness and topped with childhood rainbow sprinkles. The bittersweet notes dance around in your mouth, and the sprinkles are a colourful bonus.

The last ball is milk chocolate and peanuts – a timeless classic.

If you're looking for a strong bout of nostalgia, this is the perfect treat for you.

For years, Singaporeans have made snarky remarks about China's lack of originality, but we can certainly learn a lesson from the bread creation scene in this innovative city.

If you are in Tianjin and craving a sweet treat or two, pay a visit to these bakeries and cafés around town. You might be surprised at what new bread inventions they can come up with! ■



Each doughnut in the Balls of Sweetness has a story of its own and is lovingly created by Mrs Yu.





Maigo houses many of the cheapest deals on this shopping street.



Missed something from last season's collection? You can get it here without breaking the bank.

Happy Friday is the one-stop shop for those who like to mix-and-match.

## BINJIANGDAO ON A BUDGET

*First-time visitor HAYMUN WIN sniffs out the best steals in Tianjin's Orchard Road*

Known for being a wealthy city, budget shopping in Tianjin almost sounds like an oxymoron. Underneath the surface of luxury and extravagance, Binjiang Street, better known as Binjiangdao to locals, offers a fresh look into the vibrant but underrated shopping scene in Tianjin.

Akin to Singapore's Orchard Road, the shopping haven snakes through downtown Tianjin and continues on Heping Street for another kilometre. If you think the walk is too long, trams are also available for quick transportation from one end to the other.

The huge departmental malls and roadside stalls lining the street will get your inner shopaholic squealing. At first glance, familiar international brands like H&M and Sephora will beckon to you. Forget them. Head over to the local stores for the best deals.

Located in the heart of the bustling street, it is impossible to miss the neon green and orange signage plastered all over Maigo, a mall popular amongst local teenagers.

Skip the lower-end brands on the first two floors. Sprawling with small stores selling a variety of affordable fashion, the party starts on the third floor. From street-label knockoffs to cutesy *otaku* fashion, there is something for everyone. Think of it as Singapore's Far East Plaza, with Bugis Street prices.

While sportswear outlet stores can be found in almost every mall, the bulk of them are clustered along Binjiang Street. From common white Nike Huaraches to the elusive holographic Adidas Superstars, these outlets have them all.

For those who aren't fussy sneakerheads, the first factory reject store opposite Millenio Mall offers authentic Yeezy's at 399 yuan (\$78), albeit with minor stitching errors. In Singapore, the same pair of shoes are balloted \$349.

Ms Sun Ying, an 18-year-old undergraduate, visits the store religiously. She gushes that the store carries the season's latest kicks with guaranteed authenticity, making it one of the most frequented along the street.

Away from the huddle of sportswear stores, Happy Friday features an uncanny collection of fashion brands, nestled in the second floor of Ouxiang Mall.

Run by Mdm Hou Baolan, Happy Friday is a gold mine for bargain hunters. Scissors in hand, she fixes a couple of loose stitches on a jacket.

"Our clothes are factory rejects, so we try to fix the flaws," the 52-year-old says. When asked about business, her face lights up. "Despite the obscure location, customers come back due to the unique designs we bring in."

The store carries a range of mainstream brands such as Astradavarius, Northface and Old Navy. GAP and Levi's denim jackets retail for as low as \$4, compared to the \$70-100 price tag in Singapore, making it practically daylight robbery.

The incredible bargains you'll unearth at Binjiang Street will show you that there is more to budget shopping in China than just Taobao and Alibaba. Plus, you can save on shipping. ■

*Guided by his unwavering love  
for sugar craft, CHEE JEAN  
WEN takes you through the life  
and struggles of the Sugar Man*

# SUGAR — OR — SPICE



TOP: The designs of the 12 Zodiac, such as the rooster, are the most popular among customers.  
TOP RIGHT: For years, Mr Zhou has been using the same equipment for his craft.



*"It was arduous, but I did it anyway so he would let me experiment with his equipment."*

Using his ancient-looking metal ladle, he scoops a generous amount of melted sugar. Angling his hand at 45 degrees, he carefully shapes the outline of a tiger on a cool, white marble surface. With swift, light strokes, he fills the tiger. He attaches it on a wooden stick upon completion and hands it over to his customer with a wide smile across his wrinkled face.

Mr Zhou Fusheng, 61, has been practicing sugar craft at the Nanshi Food Street in Tianjin for 40 years.

"If he is comfortable with you, he'll chat more. If not, he'll talk less," says Mr Liu Hong Sheng, the 60-year-old best friend of Mr Zhou, who works as a security guard at the food street.

Exposed to sugar craft at the early age of 13, he recounts his early years with little enthusiasm.

"I didn't like to play soccer. I was not an active child," he mumbles. He was reserved and different from the others in the village, making him an outcast.

"I did chores for my shifu, the local sugar man. Fetching sugar was the most arduous one, but I did it anyway. In exchange, he let me use his equipment to experiment," Mr Zhou recalls.

Every day after school, the 13-year-old boy would run to the boats at the riverside importing large sacks of sugar.

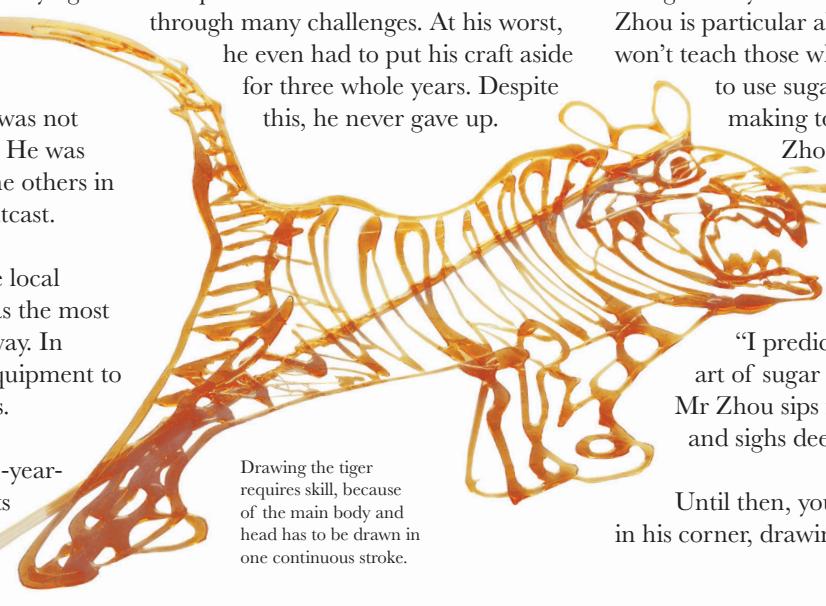
With bare hands and untrained muscles, he washed and squeezed empty sacks to collect sugar water, which he boiled over fire to obtain sugar crystals.

For seven years, Mr Zhou carried out this routine without a word of complaint.

His dedication flourished with age, although the craft was never his main source of income. In his 20s, he worked as a technician in a hardware factory. On his only off day, he would set up a small stall in an obscure corner of Nanshi Food Street.

"I don't earn much. I do it because I love it," Mr Zhou explains.

His passion is not untested. It has been through many challenges. At his worst, he even had to put his craft aside for three whole years. Despite this, he never gave up.



Drawing the tiger requires skill, because of the main body and head has to be drawn in one continuous stroke.

When asked about the cheapest candy ever sold, he scoffed, as though it was the stupidest question he had ever heard. "I don't care about the amount of candy used or how cheap or expensive I sell it. What matters important is that my drawings satisfy my customer."

Mr Zhou once drew the Monkey King, which would normally cost a hefty sum, and gave it to a blind child for free. His generosity and love for the art transcends all monetary incentives.

His strong principles do not go unnoticed. "He is the role model of our district. He doesn't like it when people say it, but it's true," affirms Mr Liu, much to the chagrin of Mr Zhou.

Being heavily invested in the craft, Mr Zhou is particular about his students. "I won't teach those whose sole motives are to use sugar craft as a money-making tool," declared Mr Zhou. "I am willing to pass down my skills for free, but one has to have the right values."

"I predict that in 30 years the art of sugar craft will be extinct," Mr Zhou sips from his metal flask and sighs deeply.

Until then, you will find him sitting in his corner, drawing away meticulously. ■

five-minute tutorials for the lazy soul

# PAPER CUTTING

Paper cutting is a Chinese folk art that is enjoyed by all ages for its beauty and simplicity. You'll be done with a perfect Double Joy paper cut before you can convince yourself to procrastinate and read EDGE instead of doing work (but you're already reading, aren't you?). Try it out yourself with the instructions below!



Materials you will need:

- A piece of red paper cut to 10cm by 10cm
- Scissors
- Determination

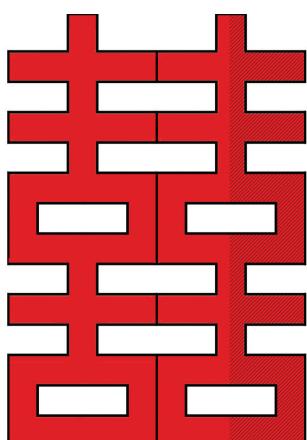


- 1 Fold the paper length-wise twice. For a Triple or Quadruple Joy, feel free to fold more times (at your own risk).



- 2 Make sure the folded side is facing you. Then, draw the outline of the Double Joy and shade the parts as indicated on the template given.

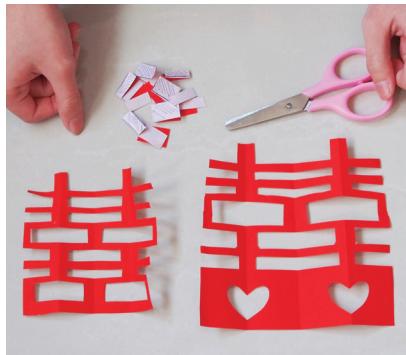
TEMPLATE



Only draw the shaded side of the template on your red paper. You can find more templates and tutorials on [www.edgemag.sg/tutorials](http://www.edgemag.sg/tutorials).



- 3 Snip, snip! Cut away the shaded portions as carefully as possible.



- 4 And there you have it! Show your masterpiece to everyone because even a novice can make a perfect Double Joy paper cut. Looks like we are all *cut out* for greatness.

## ALREADY AN EXPERT AT PAPER CUTTING?

Snap a picture of your masterpiece and in 100 words or less, tell us about your paper cutting experience!

The most creative submission will win a pair of plane tickets to Tianjin, China!

Submit it to us at [hello@edgemag.sg](mailto:hello@edgemag.sg)  
Contest ends on 31 May 2017, 2359

\*terms and conditions apply, for more information please visit [edgemag.sg](http://edgemag.sg)

# China's Pampered

INGE SHI reveals the real soft spot of China's stoic urbanites – pets.



Many elderly keep dogs as a companion into their retirement years. Treating him like her own flesh and blood, she takes pride in showing off how good-looking her 'son' is.

As celebrations for Lunar New Year come to a close, Mdm Chen Qi can finally take a breather after the busiest time of the year for her store.

Mdm Chen, 56 and owner of four dogs, runs a small pet boutique in Tianjin. Canine mannequins line the top shelves, clothed in the latest doggy fashion. It's not surprising that this store also serves as a beauty salon, spa parlour and boarding house – for our furry friends, of course.

In China, the pet care business is booming. Euromonitor International predicts that the pet industry is to grow by more than 50 per cent from the current value of 97.8 billion yuan (\$20.5

billion), outpacing the world's biggest pet care market, the United States.

Pet shops such as Mdm Chen's boutique are the backbone of the industry's rapid growth. In China, there are more than 30,000 pet stores in operation, three times that of the US.

Most of these pet shops will experience an influx of customers during the Lunar New Year period.

"People will come to dye their dogs' fur red, like this," Mdm Chen says as she points to her mixed breed's orange puff of a tail.

Belying their popularity is the price of such salon visits. Shops charge anywhere from 100-200 yuan (\$21-42) for a simple shower. Meanwhile, hair colouring and cuts can cost upwards of 500 yuan.

Even without the manicure and grooming sessions, just keeping a dog at home can bite a sizable chunk off one's savings, much less one's salary.

"It's not uncommon to spend 1000 yuan a month on pet food," says Mr Yang Zhiyuan, a 28-year-old convenience store owner. "I know many people who buy fresh vegetables, eggs and meat to cook daily for their dogs," Mrs Huang Min, ▶

manager of Miya Animal Hospital, the biggest local veterinarian centre, says.

Despite the exorbitant upkeep, dogs are still very popular among Chinese citizens. In 2014, China reached a total of 27.4 million pet dogs, ranking third in the world, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China.

As the popular saying goes, a dog is a man's best friend. But in China, dogs are more than just that – owners see their furred charges as their own flesh and blood.

"We raise them as our own children," Mr Yang explains fondly, as his poodle crossbreed quirkily named Ergazi follows obediently at his heel whenever he goes out. "That's why we want only the best for them."

"We were so worried," Mdm Chen recounts, face scrunched up in an anxious frown. "One of our huskies fell sick when he was a cub. Momo had to be hospitalised for weeks. He's fine now, but the medical bill cost us more than 7000 yuan."

Many owners are willing to shell out big dollars for their canines. Animal hospitals can receive up to 15 patients a day, mostly for regular check-ups and common maladies. Odder inflictions do come by occasionally, such as a toy stuck some poor dog's stomach.

Even when all is well, owners still take care of their own with great care. Mr Yang brings his pooch to work every day,



At first glance, this shop looks like any other convenience store, until you see the cat nip and leashes.

and Ergazi has a small cushion specially set beside his human's seat. Mr Yang is not the only one to have a companion at work; it's a common sight for shops to house a few furry friends.

Nevertheless, those who don't bring their pets as an everyday companion still walk their dogs frequently. Parks in Tianjin are nearly bursting with dogs jumping around greeting other dogs, or simply investigating new lampposts to pee on.

*"We raise them as our own children. That's why we only want the best for them."*

Keeping pets are seen as a sign of wealth and success. While this pleases and benefits many pet owners, it does not always bode well for the animals themselves.

*Xingqiquan*, which means week-long dogs, are aptly named for how they only survive for one week, and they are advertised as such – hassle-free and no strings attached. They are usually peddled from the boot of cars crowding around a hotspot, and they go as swiftly as they come.

There is also a problem borne from the prestige of keeping pets, that happens almost everywhere. Pet abandonment is rife as a result of people buying carelessly to bolster their reputation and not having the commitment or financial capability of maintaining one.

Even with the government cracking down on illegal markets, China's unscrupulous treatment of pets still starkly contrast their all-encompassing love.

In our own metropolis, we are no exception to this atrocity. The main difference, however, is the existence of animal cruelty prevention measures by the government as well as organisations. Many such organisations and policies in China are still in its infancy, and it's a much anticipated change.

On the other side of the world, the sun sets in the distance and Mdm Chen gears up to go out for dinner. All the dogs in the shop quiet in expectation, as she goes to her four beloved and kisses them each goodbye. All the while she whispers to them 'haohaizi', meaning good child in Mandarin. ■



A pet beautician at a small neighbourhood petshop says goodbye to one of her charges.

# Turning Pages

NIKKI ANDREA investigates the trend of reading local literature in China and Singapore

Walking into a bookstore in Tianjin is like boarding the MRT during peak hour. The local literature section bustles with a crowd made up of talkative students, grandmothers, and everyone in between. The only place in the store where you can catch a breath is the foreign literature section. This wouldn't be a surprise – unless you're Singaporean.

In a 2015 National Arts Council survey, only one in four Singaporeans have read a book written by a local writer in the past year. This pales in comparison to the 78.6 per cent in China who pick up local works, according to the Chinese Academy of Press and Publications.

Reading statistics aside, the distinction between the two reading cultures can be attributed to a few reasons.

"When I read imported books, I have little interest in them. I can never finish them," tells Ms Yu Lilin, 22, a student. "The land is too different and so are we."

She finds it harder to relate to characters in foreign literature because these characters embody different beliefs.

The idea of relatability is seemingly obvious when it comes to the choice between reading local and foreign books. However, another reason for this trend dates back to ancient times. As an educator, Confucius emphasised on reading as a means to improve one's life. Many others share this millennia-old philosophy of turning to books for enrichment.

"It's an old teaching, but the Chinese still follow it," affirms Ms Chen Weiwei, a 47-year-old baker. "They may not be conscious of it, but their actions are affected by this philosophy."



Bookstores are popular date spots for many youths, which is unusual in Singapore.

She frequents the self-help section and likes to pick up books on family and time management. "My husband and I are still going strong, even after more than 10 years of marriage. When we fight, I follow the book's advice," she says sheepishly.

*"My husband and I are still going strong, even after more than 10 years of marriage. When we fight, I follow the book's advice."*

The history of on the importance reading and enriching oneself through books explains the Chinese's inclination towards local books. In Singapore, however, books do not have such a lasting impact. Instead of turning the pages of books, Singaporeans turn to their friends, or even Google for advice. To us, reading is not a resource to learn and grow. Instead, we see it as a mere leisure activity.

Mr Xu Yang, manager of Tushudasha, Tianjin's biggest bookstore thinks that authors have a part to play in this trend as well.

The bans on foreign works such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *Green Eggs and Ham* by Doctor Seuss could have formed the Chinese habit of consuming local material instead.

"Authors here are now influenced by Western culture as well, thus locals do not turn to foreign literature as they can still get trending genres in a Chinese context," Mr Xu says.

In contrast, Singaporeans turn to foreign books more often than not, even though local literature holds its fair share of Western influence. Perhaps our blurred cultural identity reduces our interest in all things local. We have significantly low interest in books written by local authors that are set in a Singaporean context.

This is not exhaustive of books alone. The local food and arts scene are becoming increasingly unpopular, quickly being replaced by fast food joints and American movies. Even Singlish, the language of our childhood is now being shunned by parents wanting their children to speak proper English.

Nevertheless, as Ms Chen eloquently puts it, "It's the things closest to home that matter most."

If life is a book, then these episodes of reading trends are merely pages. The value of reading differs from people to people; society to society, but at the root of it, that difference is what makes these pages worth turning. ■

# Their Cup of Tea

KOH JIE MIN enters the world of tea mastery and gets to know its residents

When Ms Xiao Ying was little, she used to think that being able to differentiate the types of tea by smell alone was like having a super power.

Today, as a professional tea master at Jinmen Tea Centre, she is working to accomplish that dream. At the age of 24, Ms Xiao is already able to tell most specimens of tea apart. Not only that, she can tell her customers exactly where each tea originated from and which season it was harvested in.

Aged between 19 and 28, these young tea masters are filled to the brim with constant curiosity and a relentless passion. The youngest, Mr Wang Pengbo, comes to work after his morning classes on weekdays. Yet, his skills do not pale in comparison to Ms Xiao's.

"Our job is to make the bad teas taste good, and the good teas taste better," he explains. In the past, brewing tea was as simple as pouring hot water on tea leaves. Today, tea masters have polished their practice to achieve a tea's best potential.

The principle of tea mastery is precision. Each vintage tea set in the centre has an electronic weighing scale used to measure exactly how many grammes of tea leaves are used. The temperature of water and the brewing duration are closely monitored.

"The devil is in the details. What makes the difference is always the extra attention paid to make sure that the tea is brewed right," Mr Wang says.

His 28-year-old colleague, Ms Zhang Hongyi, believes in conveying to their customers the health benefits of drinking tea.

"Most people think that the caffeine levels in tea keeps the body awake and in turn harms the body. In my opinion,



our duty as tea masters is to debunk that myth. The health benefits of tea are almost endless," Ms Zhang says,

Laughing, Ms Xiao adds, "I haven't caught a cold in three years because of the amount of tea I've been drinking at work."

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make the bad  
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Becoming a tea master takes more than filling up a job application. Just like learning a sport or a musical instrument, there are milestones to tea mastery. Tea masters are expected to attend classes and take examinations. After which, they are awarded certificates and are qualified to become professional tea masters.

Nine-year-old Mr Wang was sent by his father to attend lessons at the tea centre,

where he developed an intense love for tea culture. Even now, as professional tea masters, Mr Wang and his colleagues are still attending regular lessons to deepen their understanding of tea culture.

What makes a good tea master, according to Ms Zhang, is not just a good memory that corresponds to one's sense of taste and smell or the capability of describing one's tea to his customers. "Above all, he must never be complacent with what knowledge he has," she emphasises.

The boss of Jinmen Tea Centre, Mdm Wang Yanming, reveals why she hires youths as tea masters. "Because of the depth of tea culture, my tea masters need to start young to grasp the details."

It's not hard to see that she has succeeded in doing just that. Each of the tea masters under her wing is skilled despite their brief work experiences.

Every day, the tea masters come in for work and lessons. These bubbly youths behave like regular young people do, laughing and joking when no customers are around. If one did not know what

Good tea and equipment are nothing without the tea masters.



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their professions were, it would be easy to dismiss them as simple youths based on their small talk. Yet, the instant professionalism is required, they pour their hearts and souls into their work.

If not for the smile on their faces and the warmth they emit as they share their knowledge with their customers, it would be easy to confuse them with a database.

Word by word, they are able to recite the details of each tea to a curious visitor. For most people, it would be tedious to memorise all that information. Not for these tea masters, though.

“A top student would not find studying a dread. In fact, he may even consult a teacher if he feels that he doesn’t know enough. For us tea masters, it’s like that too. We’re always seeking to learn purely out of interest,” Ms Xiao says.

The corners of Ms Zhang’s lips turn upwards when she talks about her job. “Tea mastery directly affects my happiness, sadness, anger and satisfaction. It’s no longer just my career, but also my emotional support.”

“Tea culture really improves a person’s character and temper,” Mr Wang admits. “I used to be a little too hot-headed, but tea culture has really helped calm me down. I don’t think I’ll be who I am today without it.”

Aside from doing what they love, being where they love is a perk too. The ambience of the tea centre is serene. All across its grounds, a zither tune plays

softly in the background and tea tables are designed according to the trends of each dynasty of the past.

“My tea masters are able to calm down and feel the essence of tea culture as they brew their tea. This is important because how a tea master feels directly affects the taste of the tea,” Mdm Wang notes.

Maybe your childhood ambition was not to tell tea apart like Ms Xiao’s, but to the tea masters, tea mastery is definitely their cup of tea. ■

## FIND THE TEA FOR YOUR WOES

### SLIMMING – PU’ER

Flip through a Chinese restaurant menu and you will see Pu’er tea in the drinks section without fail. This is because Pu’er removes oil from the body so you can enjoy the food without suffering the guilt worth its amount in calories.

### ENERGY BOOST – OOLONG

Burning the midnight oil again? Oolong tea is the equivalent of a shot of coffee for tea lovers. High in caffeine levels, Oolong tea is the solution for nodding off during last minute study sessions. Fighting!

### ANXIETY – JASMINE

Relax, everything will be fine! Calm your jitters by taking a whiff of this fragrant tea before tackling grueling classes and examinations. Who knows, you could even strike up a conversation with your crush!

### PERIOD CRAMPS – GINGER

Was that a sneeze we hear? Ginger tea packs a mighty punch against a cold. This tea is also the answer to hangover problems when you’ve had a little too much to drink from the party last night. For the ladies, This tea doubles as the remedy for period cramps. Goodbye Panadol.

### ACNE – SHOUMEI

Yet another breakout? Try a cup or two of Shoumei to help with reducing the inflammation. After a week or so, you’ll see the results!

### GASTRIC PROBLEMS – ZHENGSHAN XIAOZHONG

That burning sensation has got to go! Adding some Zhengshan Xiaozhong to warm water could be just the cure. Don’t forget to take some food afterwards, though.



The delicate work of the tea masters involve unrivaled precision and patience.

FOLLOW **NIKKI ANDREA** AS SHE TAKES YOU PLAZA DANCING AFTER SUNSET

# A Riptide between Spaces

Like many retirees her age, Ms Yuan Yulian, 66, is a simple homemaker. However, when night falls and the music plays, the wrinkles on her face seemingly disappear – she becomes someone else.

Ms Yuan is clothed in velvet pink and a pair of leather boots. She dances with grace, footwork as dainty as a ballerina.

“I saw other women dance and thought they looked beautiful. I wanted to be like them,” says Ms Yuan, one of the hundred dancers by the Yinghe River every night.

After dinner, groups of women weave into each other like the rushing of a tide, forming stringent lines. They are ‘plaza dancers’; people who dance together in an open space, each group with their own unique dance style.

Public spaces are filled with upbeat modern tunes. Their rhythm is reminiscent of a beating heart, with the dancers following the ebb and flow.

Once in a while, a nostalgic folk song plays, and passers-by stop and hum along to the melody. The dance and the song draws attention, calling for more dancers to join their joyous circle.

Beginning as an exercise a decade ago, closely-knit communities brought about a long-term dedication to this lifestyle.

“The friends I’ve made keep me coming back daily,” says Mrs Zhao Yenxia, plaza dancer for six years and leader of a group in the Hexi District.

For Ms Wang Li, 58, plaza dancing is more than a social activity.

“In the past, I hurt my arm. I couldn’t comb my hair, wash my face or even wear my own pants,” she recounts, performing impossible yoga poses with surprising ease.

As the music draws to an end, the ladies disappear, dissolving as quickly as they came. Like the aftermath of a riptide, the ladies’ promises of ‘see you tomorrow’ hang in the cold. ■



Standing in front are the leaders, while inexperienced dancers are towards the back of the line.



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