



Students learn the steps of *da lian xiang* from a teacher along the shore of Taihu Lake in Suzhou.

Myths and delicacies of Dragon Boat Fest

Justin Kor

When Paul Nathan James Green peeled open the bluish-hued shell of a century egg, he was in for a rude shock.

"Why is it black? I've never seen this in my life," commented the 22-year-old Briton, who is a Chinese studies undergraduate on exchange from the University of Exeter in England.

Green was not the only one to be taken aback by what they saw. He was among 32 international students from Fudan University who were on a day trip to the Wujiang Taihu Lake New City in neighboring Suzhou, Jiangsu Province.

The trip was organized by Shanghai Daily to help foreign students experience the traditional festivities associated with the Dragon Boat Festival which fell this Thursday.

There were students from about 20 countries on the trip from as far as Kazakhstan to Sweden.

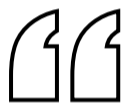
The students were shown the ropes of making century eggs, a local delicacy of Wujiang. It is made by coating a duck egg with a mixture of wood ash, mud and salt. It is then preserved for about 21 days, during which the yolk takes on a dark greenish hue and develops a creamy texture, while the egg white turns jelly-like.

For Wujiang's century eggs, the mud is taken from the nearby Taihu Lake due to its higher purity so the eggs would not be easily contaminated. The eggs are sometimes infused with chili oil as well for an added taste.

Another highlight of the trip involved students trying their hands at making *zongzi*, or rice dumplings, a tradition closely associated with the Dragon Boat Festival.

The rice dumpling has its origins dating back to about 2,000 years ago. The food commemorates Qu Yuan (340-278 BC), a poet and also a minister of his home state of Chu.

Legend has it that he was banished by the emperor who opposed his suggestions to reform the state.



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Julia Chen, 22

A postgraduate from England

A despondent Qu tied himself to a rock and drowned himself in the Miluo River after receiving news that his homeland had been invaded.

The people rushed to throw rice dumplings in the river in the hope that the fish would not feed on his body but the dumplings instead.

Since then, it has been an annual custom to make rice dumplings in honor of Qu. Rice dumplings are traditionally made with glutinous rice, with either sweet or savory fillings. They are then wrapped in bamboo leaves and steamed.

The students also sampled the regional cuisine for their meals, one of which was the gorgon fruit, more commonly known in China as the "hen's head rice" (*jitou mi* 鸡头米). Similar in texture and shape to barley, the gorgon fruit is considered as one of the eight local delicacies in Suzhou.

Culinary experiences aside, the foreign students also explored the area around Taihu Lake on four-man bicycles. Spanning 2,250 square kilometers, Taihu Lake is the third-largest freshwater lake in China. The students visited one of its landmarks — the Yuehu Platform (阅湖台).

Built in 2013 at a cost of 820 million yuan (US\$125.15 million), the platform extends out 211 meters into the lake. The intricately woven metal structure is designed to resemble a fisherman's net being cast into the water.

Along the shores of Taihu Lake, the students engaged in a traditional Wujiang activity — *da lian xiang* (打莲香), a folk dance where performers clad in neon pink-and-green costumes dance using a wooden staff. The sticks are attached with bells to help the dancers keep to the rhythm of the music. They also watched a *guzheng* (Chinese zither) performance as well.

For some of the students, it was an eye-opener to the diverse world of Chinese culture.

Christoffer Hagglin, a Swedish student, said, "As I'm a big fan of music, I really enjoyed the segment where they played the *guzheng*. The food was great as well. I managed to try many local delicacies."

The 28-year-old has been studying Chinese for eight years in Sweden and plans to get a job in China.

For Julia Chen, a 22-year-old English postgraduate who came to Shanghai on a one-year program to study Chinese, her favorite moment was when she learnt how to make rice dumplings.

"I particularly enjoyed it, even though my rice dumpling was really ugly," she laughs. "I had fun on this tour. It's been great to learn more about traditional Chinese culture."



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1. Built in 2013, the Yuehu Platform is designed to resemble a fisherman's net being cast into the water.

2. Students learn how to make rice dumplings.

3. A Fudan University exchange student tries her hand at preparing century egg.

4. Students enjoy a *guzheng* performance in Wujiang.

— All photos by Justin Kor