

Mid-Autumn Festival: Cultural Blending and Value Inheritance of Traditional and Modern Times

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To cite this article: Nan Jiang (2025). Mid-Autumn Festival: Cultural Blending and Value Inheritance of Traditional and Modern Times. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 14(1): 43–51. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0003](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0003)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0003](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0003)

Abstract

As an important traditional festival in China, the Mid-Autumn Festival carries rich cultural connotations. Despite the new challenges in modern society, the cultural value of traditional festivals remains undiminished. This study explores the inheritance and innovations associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival in contemporary society, and examines diverse aspects such as its historical origins, cultural connotations, status in Chinese culture, and modes of celebration. The festival originated from ancient moon worship and legends such as Chang'e's escape to the moon. Through centuries of development and evolution, it has acquired rich customs and cultural connotations. Its core idea of reunion not only promotes family harmony but also social harmony and inspires patriotism. The respect for life and praying for blessings are reflected in different activities and customs. In effect the Mid-Autumn Festival is an embodiment of family and national feelings and a carrier of cultural inheritance. The characteristic celebration methods in different places are rich and colourful, including traditional folk activities and modern innovative festivities. Future efforts to strengthen cultural education and publicity, promote cultural innovation and integration, develop cultural industries, and increase international exchanges and cooperation will enhance the cultural and practical roles of the Mid-Autumn Festival in the new era.

Keywords: Mid-Autumn Festival, cultural connotations, inheritance and Innovation, characteristic celebrations

Introduction

China has a long history and many traditional festivals. These celebrations have long been studied due to their historical and cultural relevance (Xiao, 2018). The Mid-Autumn Festival is a major festival that is imbued with rich cultural connotations. Despite having been celebrated for centuries, it faces new challenges today. The pressure of urban living and the pursuit of career advancement have led to changes in the perceptions of traditional values (Chen & Smith, 2019; H. Zhang & Wang, 2019). The quickened tempo of modern life tends to diminish the need to prepare for and celebrate the festival. The form of celebration is often symbolic rather than substantive, such as consuming moon cakes and having family meals, without being immersed in the cultural practices that are integral to the occasion. The emphasis is veering towards commercialisation of the festival, with moon cakes and related items being presented and marketed in extravagant styles. The focus is centred more on products and commodities rather than on displaying the underlying cultural meaning of the occasion (Li & Wang, 2020; Zhao, 2016).

Despite these challenges, the rich cultural connotations and unique values of the Mid-Autumn Festival cannot be ignored. It is not only a symbol of family reunion but also an essential part of Chinese traditions. Indirectly, it is a means to foster the national spirit and strengthen national cohesion. The festival is now celebrated as a national event in ways that are commensurate with the growing prosperity of the nation and a factor in contributing to the revival and enrichment of Chinese traditional culture.

The festival incorporates several core elements of Chinese culture, such as the idea of family reunion, the reverence for life and blessings for family members, its common and local rituals, and associated auspicious connotations that are of great significance and relevance to contemporary society. This study will examine the Mid-Autumn Festival culture in contemporary society to better understand the known and hidden facets of its cultural connotations and issues of inheritance and innovations.

The Origins of the Mid-Autumn Festival

The origins of the Mid-Autumn Festival are linked to the worship of the moon and the legend of Chang'e's escape to the moon (Q. Zhang, 2021). This stems from the tradition of the worship of celestial bodies in ancient society. The moon is a source of light to brighten up the darkness, giving hope and a sense of security to the people. The phenomenon of the bright and dark phases of the moon inspires the imaginations of generations of people. Deeply entrenched in their imaginations was the existence of a lunar palace and Chang'e's existence. Hence, the moon is a living entity. Its ups and downs symbolise life, old age, sickness and death, but the idea of "rebirth" fascinated the people and aroused their curiosity about the moon, which gradually became an object of worship.

Praying to the moon became a form of seeking blessings and care. This kind of worship was initially manifested as occasional random kneeling and later evolved into an institutionalised sacrifice with specific time, place and procedure, which thus marked the formalisation of the moon worship ceremony. The tradition could be said to begin as early as the Zhou Dynasty (Liu, 2017).

The legend of Chang'e's flight to the moon is part of Chinese mythology. The story relates to the tale of Chang'e being forced by the god Wang Meng to seek refuge in the Moon Palace after consuming the immortal medicine given to her husband Hou Yi by the Western Queen Mother. This legend reflects the ancient worship of heavenly bodies and the people's yearning for a better life. The people began to pray to Chang'e with incense and thus initiated the custom of paying homage to the moon on the day of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Chang'e's departure was a loss to her husband, and they longed to be reunited. The Mid-Autumn Festival is thus symbolic of the desire for reunion between Chang'e and her husband and that of the people with their family members. Chang'e's act of eating the forbidden immortal medicine reflects a yearning for longevity and immortality. In putting herself in danger, she was sacrificing herself in a spirit of selfless dedication to protect everyone else.

The Mid-Autumn Festival became an officially recognised festival during the Tang Dynasty. On August 15 of the Chinese calendar, the custom of moon watching on a stage or on a boat, accompanied by drinking and singing, was practised. It was also an occasion when scholars recited poems in praise of the moon to express their feelings and aspirations. In the Song Dynasty, the festival became popular, on par with the Spring Festival. The bright moon was more than a sight to watch but also an object for making symbolic offers. Traditionally, children could dress like adults, and girls put on makeup to look like Chang'e. It was during this period that the mooncakes began to appear as a seasonal food. The great Song Dynasty poet Su Dongpo likened the act of eating the mooncake as chewing the moon, crispy and pleasant. During the Ming Dynasty, celebrations were grand and boisterous. People of all walks of life, including ordinary folks, children, musicians, entertainers, and scholars rejoiced amid songs and dancing. By the Qing Dynasty, the custom of viewing and praying to the moon persisted, so also the tradition of eating moon cakes, fruits and other items. After the founding of the Republic in 1911, the Mid-Autumn Festival gradually became a national festival. Apart from traditional customs of enjoying the moon and moon cakes, the festival acquired new cultural significance and meaning. Its role as an occasion for family reunion has increased. The need to work away from home has increased the urge to return to their ancestral village to celebrate with family members and relatives.

In the context of globalization and international travel, the Mid-Autumn Festival is gradually serving as an important window for the spread of Chinese culture. Foreign visitors to China can understand and appreciate the cultural charm of the festival. In effect, the festival is changing from being an ancient folk custom into a nationwide celebration imbued with an exuberant vitality and

adding to the list of Chinese cultural heritage.

Cultural Connotations of the Mid-Autumn Festival

The cultural significance of the Mid-Autumn Festival is reflected in three aspects. These are the reinforcement of family togetherness, the promotion of social harmony, and the respect for life and blessings.

Like the Spring Festival, family reunion is the core connotation of the Mid-Autumn Festival. One yearns for family reunion because of homesickness and longing for loved ones. As the famous Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei confesses, “A lone stranger in a strange place, doubly homesick on festive days” (Voon, 2022: 63). In modern society, although the pace of life is accelerating and work pressure is mounting, the significance of family reunion during the festival is more than symbolic. It not only makes it possible for family unity to flourish and strengthen bonds between family members, but it also serves as a reminder to the younger generation of the traditional values of filial piety. Arising from the growing trend of working or studying away from home, gone are the days of the idea of raising children to look after one during old age.

Family reunions are the gathering of parents and children that provide emotional communication and spiritual solace. In the fast-paced modern life where many are overwhelmed with work or studies, there is less and less time with the family. The Mid-Autumn Festival affords a welcome source of family warmth and solace. The festival offers a rare occasion for family members to share delightful moon cakes, to indulge in recalling the past and to dream of the future. This intimate interaction enhances mutual feelings and strengthens family cohesion.

According to statistics, hundreds of millions of people across the country travel home for reunion during the Mid-Autumn Festival each year. Behind this massive movement is the deep attachment to the family and a strong desire to bathe in the warmth of family togetherness. To be together is a treasured value of Chinese families, as it reaffirms affection and to soothes the tired spirit. In the process, it recharges the energy and drives the spirit to move forward. On this special day, the pressure of work is lifted as family members embrace the joy of peace and happiness.

Family reunion is the basis of social harmony. Families that exist in an atmosphere of harmony constitute the foundation of an inherently stable and peaceful society. The widespread celebrations in a festive mood is favourable to social connectivity through inter-personal communication and social cohesion. The festival and its tradition of exchanging gifts, blessings and love among friends and colleagues promote mutual care and interests. On a broader level, the reunion culture also stimulates feelings of patriotism. The Chinese attach importance to family and the love of the motherland and its culture. The feeling of patriotism unites people to strive to realise the great rejuvenation of the country.

In certain regions of China, and as recorded by Liang Shaoren (梁绍壬) of the Qing Dynasty, there was a custom of “touching autumn” or secretly picking melons by married women in the darkness of night. The belief was that success in picking a melon, known as “*nan kua*” --- *nan* has the same sound as “male” in Chinese would help to answer the wish of bearing a son (M. Li, 2020; X. Li & Wang, 2020). This custom is symbolic of the desire for the continuation of life and the expectation of a happy family. Traditionally, the importance of having male descendants to continue the family line is a core filial duty of every generation. The relevance of the custom of “touching autumn” is thus obvious. This custom not only reflects the strong wish for fertility but also the love for life and the inheritance of traditional culture (X. X. Chen, 2021).

Another traditional custom was the burning of a “brick tower” or Wata to worship the moon gods. Burning Wata began as a form of opposition against the tyrannical rule at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. Children collected pieces of bricks and tiles and built a “tower” or Wata at the gate of the village. As the moon appeared, the children took out moon cakes, set fire to the Wata and offered sacrifices to the moon gods. Onlookers cheered and danced around the Wata, eating moon cakes and nuts until dawn. Some localities list the Wata as a key promotion of cultural activities (Gao, 2020). Burning Wata symbolises the desire and blessing for a better life, while the rising flames indicate that life becomes more and more prosperous.

The traditions and celebrations offer a rich diversity of colour and patterns, each peculiar to provinces down to individual villages. Certain regions exhibit a popularity for the activities of answering lantern riddles, reciting poetry, and performing antiquated arts. These traditions have a long history and are still practiced today. There are regions where festival bazaars are organised to bring together hundreds of traditional delicacies and nonlegacy handicrafts from neighbouring counties and districts (Gao, 2020).

The Mid-Autumn Festival and the National Spirit

The Mid-Autumn Festival is a traditional celebration treated as a major national event complete with public holidays. Functionally, the festival represents the family and national spirit as well as a means of transmitting cultural inheritance.

The concept of the nation is encapsulated in the ideas of “country” and “family”. The family is the smallest “country”, and the “country” is the culmination of the large family. The Mid-Autumn Festival mirrors the inseparable relationship between the family and country. The family that is in harmony is the foundation of a stable and prosperous society. The family and the country are thus dependent on each other. A stable and peaceful country creates the necessary conditions for the people to work and to live at ease. On a global scale, as the foundation of the country is the family in harmony, so is the stable and peaceful country the foundation of the world (Zhao, 2016).

The Mid-Autumn Festival is like a bridge that connects the past and the present and is part of the historical memory and cultural genes of the Chinese nation. One aspect is the place of the Mid-Autumn Festival in ancient poetry. Poems are a living culture of the Chinese and are highly relevant in the daily lives of people of all walks of life. There are countless delightful poetic works tracing back to the Tang Dynasty down to the present. They are expressions of the beauty of the moon and its associated myths and legends, the sentimental feelings reminding of nostalgia, of loved ones, friends, the home or village. For more than a millennium, the poems have become an important expression as well as the transmission of culture. Exquisite depictions of the moon, love and reunion, and of life continue to convey the values and aesthetic taste of the Chinese nation and passing down to future generations the appreciation of the breadth and depth of their ancient culture.

At the broader scale, the Mid-Autumn Festival plays an essential role in the transmission of the national spirit and pride as well as the enhancement of national cohesion. As a nationwide festival celebrated in large parts of China, it is infused with eternal charm. The customs of different regions and localities reflect the cultural traditions and the rich tapestry of customs and practices that are common as well as unique to each place. In contemporary society, this cultural pride promotes love for the country and contributes to strengthening national unity and stability.

In the contemporary era, the traditions of the Mid-Autumn Festival are being handed down and celebrated in innovative manners. New and colourful celebration activities have been introduced. Festival parties, folk exhibitions, cultural talks and other activities are held. These celebrations raise the appreciation of the cultural meanings of the festival and provide a platform to increase its cultural allure.

In addition, the Mid-Autumn Festival constitutes a proud cultural inheritance of the people as well as a source of innovation in modern-day society. While serving as a form of traditional culture and values that is passed through the generations, it is also a medium by which modern science and technology are combined to generate creations to inject new vitality into itself in the form of a digital medium for online reunion, AI painting, and related innovations to enhance its lustre.

Modern science and technology and cultural creativity have also injected a new vitality into the innovation of the Mid-Autumn Festival culture. For instance, using digital technology for online reunions, AI painting, short videos and other new media forms, the Mid-Autumn Festival cultural elements enable more people to intuitively and vividly understand and feel the charm of culture. In cooperation with the tourism industry, new tour routes related to the Mid-Autumn Festival allow tourists to feel the unique charm of the festival culture while enjoying the beautiful scenery; combined with artistic creations such as paintings, sculptures, music and other works, all of which add to an enriching experience of the festival culture.

The schools and campuses have become new avenues for the celebration of the Mid-Autumn

Festival and a conduit to pass on the culture. The rich and vibrant activities are helping to enhance students' cultural awareness. One creative event is to devise innovative lantern riddles to challenge attempts by students in solving them both as a form of entertainment and learning. International students are encouraged to participate in the making of lanterns and moon cakes as well as be involved in other activities. Some schools have online activities with twinning schools thousands of miles apart, where the teachers and students recite or sing traditional poems via remote video. Other schools combine elements of traditional and local cultures in dances or music. The Mid-Autumn Festival activities in schools and campuses broaden the festive atmosphere, increase the personal involvement of students with celebration activities, and to enhance their cultural confidence and sense of national pride (H. Zhang, & Wang, 2019).

Conclusions and Prospects

Historically, the origins of the Mid-Autumn Festival could be traced to ancient legends associated with the worship of the moon and Chang'e's flight to the moon. Over time the festival has become a major cultural event of national importance. The celebration serves as a bridge between the nation and the family, embodying sentiments of both. Its function in preserving national and familial sentiments has grown in importance in the modern era, and it is now a crucial channel for the dissemination and advancement of traditional Chinese culture. The festival's rich history, deep cultural meanings, significant status, and variety of celebratory activities have made it a highly regarded cultural event.

The future of the Mid-Autumn Festival and its sustainability as an ancient cultural occasion face both opportunities and challenges. To infuse fresh life and resilience into the festival, efforts should be focused on the following strategies.

The first is the need to strengthen cultural education and publicity. Schools may include the study of cultural festivals in the curriculum to let students have a deeper understanding of all aspects of national festivals, including their historical origins, cultural connotations and traditional customs through classroom teaching, extracurricular activities or field visits, or in holding special events on reading or reciting relevant poems, lectures by "cultural promoters," exhibitions of traditional customs and similar events. Public awareness and knowledge of festivals can be spread by means of television, radio, Internet and other media platforms that produce and broadcast regional or national programmes and documentaries.

The second is to promote cultural innovations and integrate traditional and contemporary styles of festival celebration. An example is the use of virtual and augmented reality and other technologies to enhance the atmosphere and charm of the occasion and to enable participants to immerse themselves in the festive mood. An attempt to broaden the influence of the festival is

to integrate the festival's cultural elements through animation, games, music and other modes to launch new creative works, game products, music albums and others.

The third strategy is to encourage the growth of a festival-centred cultural industry. Embedded into the culture of the Mid-Autumn Festival are immense commercial potentials to take advantage of the demand for leisure and entertainment programmes in both urban and rural locations. There is much room to develop and expand cultural tourism products and the introduction of new tourism routes and sites related to the Mid-Autumn Festival to enable tourists to experience the cultural atmosphere of the occasion. Handicrafts, souvenirs, food, and beverages will be among the spinoff benefits. Temple and cultural fairs may be held to attract tourists, promote consumerism and generate growth.

The final strategy is to promote international exchanges and cooperation. Globalisation has facilitated international tourism and the diffusion of the Mid-Autumn Festival outside of China. International exchanges and cooperation may be promoted through interaction and visits. Academic seminars and other programmes involving foreign scholars, artists, tourists and other participants may be organised to explore the value and significance of Mid-Autumn Festival culture and ultimately to popularise the festival to the world to promote understanding and friendship (L. Chen & Smith, 2019).

Like other traditional festivals, the Mid-Autumn Festival is likely to decline in popularity at different times or in different localities. To ensure its significance as an ancient tradition is a long-term and arduous task. It is mandatory to take effective measures to strengthen cultural education and publicity, promote cultural innovation and integration, promote the development of the heritage, and strengthen international exchanges and cooperation. At a time of national development in the context of globalisation and modernisation, maintaining and continuing efforts to infuse innovative elements into the festival will ensure the meaning, popularity, and appeal of the Mid-Autumn Festival.

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