

A Reflection on Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival



On the Chinese calendar, one of the two most significant holidays is the Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Moon Festival (the other one is the Chinese New Year). This year, the Mid-Autumn Festival came on the 14th of September. Chinese believe this to be the day that the moon is the brightest and fullest in a year. To celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival, traditionally Chinese families gather around the dinner table to feast, to admire the full moon, and eat moon cake .

Dating back over 3000 years, Chinese have celebrated the Moon Festival for millennia. There are many legends and folklores about this particular holiday, the most famous one is about Chang Er, an immortal beauty living a lonely life on the moon with a hare as her only companion. There are many different versions of Chang Er. My personal favorite version is about Chang Er and her husband Houyi, a great archer, who were immortal beings serving the Jade Emperor in heaven. The Jade Emperor had ten rowdy sons, each of them transformed into a Sun to scorch the earth. To cease the outcry of heat torments, the Jade Emperor ordered Houyi to help. With his mighty bow and arrows, Houyi shot down nine of the Suns (sons). The earth was saved, however this achievement enraged the Jade Emperor; he casted both Houyi and Chang Er down to the earth. As mere mortal being, they would die of old age. Unable to face Chang Er's misery over the loss of immortality, Houyi sought out a quest for the elixir of life to bring back the immortality. He attained the immortal portion enough for two from the Queen Mother of the West under the condition that he had to meditate for a year to prepare to take the portion. Like Pandora in Greek mythology, curious Chang Er discovered and accidentally drank the whole portion. Overdosed, she floated up and eventually landed on the Moon. To this day, Chang Er still works fervently day and night to forge the elixir in order to return to the earth to save her husband.

As a little girl living in China, many times I was certain that the shadows on the moon definitely belonged to Chang Er and her bunny. Occasionally, it bothered me that ancient Chinese put up a Chang Er story at such a cheerful holiday. How ironic to celebrate family reunion along with such as a desperate separation! Along the history, so many famous poets poured out tears in their poems to express their sadness while facing the bright full moon. Although kids at school had to memorize and be able to recite the poems in the class, those classic literatures were beyond the comprehension of us young children. At our dinner table, my mother often mentioned her long-separated brother living at Portland, OR, the uncle whom I had never met. I knew she dared not write to him because of the control of the communist government then. Being a very considerate child, I often tried to soothe my mother with pretended sympathy. However, how long could you fake a sad face when you sat in front of a rare feast and delicious moon cakes!



My first Mid-Autumn Festival at this foreign land was not very delicious. The Festival arrived a few weeks after I enrolled at University of Maryland at Baltimore. Away from family, I was completely on my own for the first time while my parents were struggling new immigrants trying to fit in. As a matter of fact, I did not know the exact-day of the Festival without a Chinese calendar at hand, I recalled I had a hamburger for dinner. At the beginning of the semester, I sat at the classroom with a new companion, a tape recorder,

every day. To make sense of a lecture, I typically listened to the tape twice after class, somehow the English I learned at China was not the same as the one people were speaking there at Baltimore. Walking back to my apartment after a long day of study, I remember looking up to the bright moon staring down at me, casting a cold dark shadow besides me. All of sudden, I understood the old poem of Tang Dynasty that I mindlessly recited as a child: “Lifting my head I watch the bright moon, lowering my head I dream that I’m home...” Oh, how utterly homesick I was...

After a few sleepless months, I started to see light at the end of the tunnel. The lecture in English was not foreign anymore. Life became easier with my newly equipped language skill, and I discovered an American holiday called Thanksgiving! A post-doctoral fellow from the laboratory I rotated invited me to spend Thanksgiving holiday with her family at Syracuse, NY. What a beautiful family! How I enjoyed the family gathering with the feast of a big bird! Though there was no moon cake, I had something bigger and better, a pumpkin pie! To this day, it is still amazing to me how similar these two holidays are. No matter how far away your jobs lead you to, at these holidays children go back home to relax and catch up with the family. Even though we speak different tongues, inherit different cultures, celebrate the holidays at different day, month, even season. Underneath different colors of skin, we are the same, we all human beings need love and the pick-me-up recharge from our family.

Twenty years have passed; this once foreign land has become a place I call home. But I still remember my first Moon Festival and Thanksgiving in US. I often tell my own children the stories of the holidays and my deep gratitude toward those people who helped me along my journey at the new world. So at this Mid-Autumn Festival, I make sure to store plenty moon cakes at my pantry to share with families and friends, my extended family.