

Pearl River presents...

# The Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival

A celebration of nature, harvest and family

## What is the Moon Festival?

The Mid-Autumn Festival (Traditional Chinese: 中秋節, Simplified Chinese: 中秋节; pinyin: Zhōngqiūjié; Korean: Ch'usŏk 추석/秋夕; Vietnamese Tết Trung Thu; also known as the Moon Festival, Mooncake Festival, or the August Moon Festival. In Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, it may be referred to as the Lantern Festival, similar in name to a different festival which falls on the fifteenth day of the Chinese New Year) is a popular Chinese celebration of abundance and togetherness, dating back over 3,000 years to China's Zhou Dynasty.

The Festival falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the Chinese luni-solar calendar (usually around mid- or late-September in the Gregorian calendar), a date that parallels the Autumn Equinox of the solar calendar. At this time, the moon is at its fullest and brightest, marking an ideal time to celebrate the abundance of the summer's harvest. The traditional food of this festival is the moon cake, of which there are many different varieties.

Farmers celebrate the end of the summer harvesting season on this date. Traditionally, on this day, Chinese family members and friends will gather to admire the bright mid-autumn harvest moon, and eat moon cakes and pummelos together. It is also common to have barbecues outside under the moon, and to put pumelo rinds on one's head. Brightly lit lanterns are often carried around by children. Together with the celebration, there appear some special customs in different parts of the country, such as burning incense, planting sweet-olive trees, lighting lanterns on towers, and fire dragon dances. Shops selling mooncakes often display pictures of Chang'e, the mythical moon goddess, floating to the moon.

The custom of worshipping the moon (called Xi yue in Chinese) for both the Han and minority nationalities, can be traced as far back as the ancient Xia, and Shang Dynasties (2000 BCE-1066 BCE). In the Zhou Dynasty (1066 BCE-221 BCE), the people celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival to worship the moon.

The practice became very prevalent in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) that people enjoyed and worshipped the full moon. In the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), however, people started making round moon cakes, as gifts to their relatives in expression of their best wishes of family reunion. At night, they came out to watch the full moon to celebrate the festival.

(Adopted from [Wikipedia](#))



## Legends of the Moon Festival

Although it is primarily a celebration of the harvest, much like the Thanksgiving of the West, [many interesting stories](#) surround the Mid-Autumn Festival.

One tale, of which there are many incarnations, involves the beautiful Chang'e and her husband Hou Yi, an extraordinary archer, and a magical elixir of immortality that is awarded to Hou Yi by the emperor. In some versions of the story, Chang'e is forbidden from swallowing the pill of immortality but does anyway (as Eve did the Apple) and leaves her

husband behind and flies to the moon. In another version, Hou Yi is corrupt and desires immortality for self-serving purposes, so Chang'e, after a fumbled attempt to discard the pills, accidentally takes them and ascends to the heavens. A common thread through most versions is that she is able to ascend only because her husband's archery skills are dulled by either indolence (from corruption) or love for her.

Another tale involves **Wu Kang**, an arrogant and lazy man who wants a fast-track to becoming an immortal. A wise immortal tries to serve as his mentor, but is so dismayed by his lack of diligence and ego that he tricks him by granting what appears to be Wu Kang's greatest wish--to visit the moon. After Wu Kang decides that he prefers living on earth, the wise man tells him that he must chop down a giant cassia tree on the moon's surface. But every time Wu Kang gets close to chopping the tree down, he grows lazy, takes a rest, and the tree magically heals itself, forcing him into a never-ending cycle. To this day, the tree is visible on the moon from the earth, and the faint sound of wood-chopping can be heard on quiet nights.

A third tale is one of morality. A rabbit, a fox and a monkey are the companions of a wise old man, and when famine strikes, the animals know that they are his only hope for survival. They search high and low for something to feed the man to keep him from starving. The monkey picks a few dried-up fruits, and the fox finds no food but manages to cobble together some wood for a fire. The rabbit has even less luck, and returns empty handed. Overwhelmed with guilt as he watches the pitiful old man dying, he declares that he will sacrifice himself to feed his companions, and plunges himself into the flame.

So touched by his sacrifice are the gods that they reach down into the flame and elevate him to the moon to commemorate him. The rabbit now makes the moon his eternal home as a mythical Jade Rabbit, serving the gods by preparing medicines for them. From his luminous perch, he remains an emblem of altruism for all people on earth to admire.

## The Moon Cake

No Mid-Autumn festival is complete without a box or two of dense, rich sweet treats known as "moon cakes." Filled with sugary pastes, nuts and egg yolks, the Fig Newton-like concoctions are the Chinese answer to the western fruit cake (with the same dubious reputation of being an overabundant and often less-than-welcome gift during the holiday seasons). The more practical story behind moon cakes is that they became popular during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) as celebratory pastries circulated among friends and family. The more mythical history is that the cakes served as a key instrument of warfare during the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1368) in the early 14th century. Han Chinese people wanted to rebel against Mongol rule, but had no way to plot the overthrow under the surveillance of the Mongol leaders. So they stuffed notes inside the little cakes that indicated the Mid-Autumn festival as the date of the uprising, and distributed them widely. The result was a major local insurgency that helped set off a nationwide revolt that brought down the Mongols. Today, moon cakes are not just a sign of an auspicious harvest, but a replica of possibly the world's only edible weapon of mass destruction.



If you'd like to learn more about the moon festival this year, ask our staff or email [pearlriver@pearlriver.com](mailto:pearlriver@pearlriver.com).

### Resources on the Mid-Autumn Festival:

- *Wikipedia*: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-Autumn\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-Autumn_Festival)
- *Chinatown.com.au*, "Stories of the Moon Festival": [www.chinatown.com.au/eng/](http://www.chinatown.com.au/eng/)
- *Legends of the East*: [legendsoftheeast.wordpress.com](http://legendsoftheeast.wordpress.com)