

A Quiet Festival Celebrating the 'Double Nine'

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch



Given the importance of the number nine (*jiǔ* 九) in China, how could the ninth day of the ninth lunar month not be significant? And indeed it once was. But although the 'double nine' date was probably one of classical China's most symbolic holidays, it is almost unknown and unrecognised today, long surpassed by Chinese New Year, the Lantern Festival and even the fifth day of the fifth month (traditionally 'Dragon Boat Day'). The reason why? It was once the prerogative of China's imperial family.

Numbers were included among the things understood to be made of different composites of *yáng* and *yīn* essences: even digits (2, 4, 6...) reflected *yīn* qualities, and odd numbers (1, 3, 5, 7, 9...) *yáng*, hence the festival's name, 'double yang' (Zhòngyáng 重阳). *Yáng* characteristics were those that exhibited masculinity, strength, power, light, dryness and warmth.

Nine is also the result of three threes, with three understood to be the primary combination of heaven, earth and mankind. But because 'nine' also sounded like the word for 'unending, eternal' (*jiǔ* 久), the ruling houses of China claimed it as their special number, its use almost a royal entitlement. Thus the 'double nine' date was reserved for the imperial family's enjoyment within the palace walls.

Sadly, we have no records of how they might have spent the day; we have only a few references to the day itself such as that found in Qu Yuan's (343-277 BCE) poem, "Travelling Far Away" (*Yuǎnyóu* 遠遊) from the anthology *Chǔ Cí* (*Songs of the South, or Songs of Chu*).

Scholars tell us that it wasn't until the unification of China during the Han era (206 BCE-220 CE), that the general population began to practise special activities related to the festival. Sometimes referred to as the 'Height-Ascending Festival' or 'Dogwood-Wearing Festival', the celebration became associated with chrysanthemums, climbing mountains, collecting dogwood, flying kites and eating cakes.

The eating of cakes (*gāo* 糕) or special treats on any Chinese festival day is a given, and on 'double nine' would have had the boon of the word 'cake' sounding

like 'high' (*gāo* 高), which could be a clever reference to climbing mountains (another metaphor for achieving high status).

We can imagine ancient imperial families celebrating their day by eating cakes, but given the mystery of how they otherwise celebrated the day, the holiday was doomed to fall into the hands of modern politicians. In 1966, the Ministry of Interior in Taiwan designated 'double nine' as a Senior Citizen's Day, a time of expressing gratitude to the elderly, reinforcing the Chinese tradition of venerating the old. The holiday is mainly ignored in the People's Republic of China although marketing-savvy department stores sometimes use it to sell decorated cakes and chrysanthemum tea.

This year 'double nine' falls on October 26. I will celebrate it as I do every year, and as generations of

Chinese sages and academics have in the past, by admiring my pots of chrysanthemums and sipping a glass of chrysanthemum wine or a cup of chrysanthemum tea. Chrysanthemums have been cultivated in China for more than 3000 years and no flower, with its



large, bright golden petals, exemplifies the properties of *yáng* more than they do. As the poet Tao Yuanming (365-427 CE) noted: "The memory of drinking wine while admiring chrysanthemums lasts for a thousand years [forever]."

Patricia Bjaaland Welch moved to Singapore in 1995 for a two-year assignment – and is still here. Although she was a senior docent of Bangkok's National Museum in the late 1980s, full-time employment kept her from being an ACM docent until a few years ago when she began guiding special groups and on weekends. In February 2009 she 'jumped the corporate ship' to return full-time to writing and sharing her passion for Asian history and art.

Photos courtesy of the author

An Abundance of Autumn Chinese Festivals



Mid-Autumn Festival



Making offerings to the Hungry Ghosts



Beijing Opera Monkey God mask

In addition to the Double Nine Festival, there are several other Autumn festivals that are important to Singapore's Chinese community.

The Hungry Ghost Festival, which took place in August, acknowledges the month when the 'Hell Gates' are opened for the spirits of deceased ancestors to wander about. If not appeased with food, drink and other offerings, the ghosts may torment you the rest of the year. If you stroll through Chinatown and other residential areas you will see and smell smoke wafting from barrels in which burn paper likenesses of money, cars, clothes, houses and food – all the items someone needs to live comfortably in the afterlife. Also during this month, Getai performances take place at various outdoor venues. A form of folk opera with comic overtones that is in contrast to the otherwise sombre tone of ghost month, Getai is usually performed in Hokkien dialect and is known for loud singing, glittery costumes and crude jokes. Originally intended as entertainment for the ghosts, Getai appealed primarily to an older generation and was rapidly becoming a lost art. A 12-hour Getai marathon in 2006 revived the art form, creating new interest among the younger generation.

The Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Harvest Festival or Moon Festival, commemorates the rice harvest and also the victory of the Han Chinese over their Mongolian rulers in 1341 AD. A time of thanksgiving and family reunions, this festival is celebrated during the eighth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, with the main festival day (3 October) falling when the moon is at its roundest and brightest, symbolising completeness and abundance. This year the festival runs from 19 September to 18 October. It is a romantic night when lovers hold hands as they moon-gaze and children parade colourful lanterns through the streets, with magnificent lanterns also displayed at the Chinese Garden and on the Singapore River. Traditional festival foods are red for good luck – lobster, salmon, apples and pomegranates are favourites. Another tradition offers five dishes of round fruits representing both the moon and family

togetherness. Because the word for pomelo or grapefruit, *yu*, is homophonous with the word for protection, pomelos represent hope for the moon god's protection. Moon cakes eaten during this festival symbolise family unity but also commemorate the rebellion in which paper messages inserted into the traditional round pastries directed the Chinese to rise up against their Mongolian rulers. The standard moon cake with its centre of preserved duck egg is not always appreciated by the Western palate, but innovative flavours of cappuccino, chocolate and durian are now available in addition to traditional red bean, lotus paste and duck egg.

The popular **Monkey God**, who celebrates his birthday twice a year, has his autumn birthday on the 16th day of the eighth lunar month, falling on 4 October this year. The best-known celebration may be at the Monkey God's temple in Tiong Bahru. A priest or medium, seated in a dragon chair, channels the spirit of the Monkey God, helped along by the loud beating of drums and gongs. He falls into a trance and soon is quivering and gesticulating like a monkey. Helpers insert skewers into his chest, arms, tongue or cheek, or slash his arms and legs to demonstrate the Monkey God's bravery. The medium brings a dragon to life by dabbing it with red paint. Then commences a parade led by an empty sedan chair hoisted aloft by devotees. The chair jerks and bounces as if by magic, a reminder of the Monkey God's crafty ways. Drumming, clashing of cymbals and fireworks accompany the procession, which winds through the neighbourhood, ultimately returning to the temple, where the priest miraculously recovers from his trance and proceeds with his normal daily routine. Chinese opera and puppet plays are often performed in association with this festival.

Editor's Note: Information for this article was compiled by Susan Hunter, Features Editor of *PASSAGE*. For more information on other ethnic and religious festivals taking place in Singapore this autumn go to www.fom.sg
