

Mid-Autumn Festival

What is Mid-Autumn Festival?

Mid-Autumn Festival (also known as Moon Festival) is one of the most important festivals for many East Asian families in China, Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and more. It is considered a time of reunion, and people return home to spend time with family. During this time, the moon is round and full, symbolizing togetherness. The festival dates back over 3000 years and takes place on the 15th day of the 8th month in the lunar calendar, around the autumn equinox. In many countries the festival celebrates and gives thanks for a bountiful harvest.

Origin Myths

Chang'e and Hou Yi

In ancient times, the earth was scorching hot and night did not exist because there were ten suns. A heroic archer named Hou Yi was tasked to shoot down nine of the ten suns to cool down the earth. As a reward, the gods gave him an elixir of immortality. However, Hou Yi's wife, Chang'e drank the elixir herself. She then became immortal and floated to the moon. After learning what had happened to Chang'e, Hou Yi prepared a feast with her favorite desserts and fruits on this day every year for the rest of his life, in the hopes of reuniting with his wife.

Since then, people have prayed to Chang'e, the moon goddess, for luck and safety, and continued the tradition of Hou Yi's offerings. This custom has been handed down for thousands of years since that time and demonstrates the importance of immortality and longevity in Asian culture.

Lanterns



During the festival, lanterns of all sizes and shapes are carried and displayed as symbolic beacons that light people's path to prosperity and good fortune. One can see elaborate displays set up all over major shopping malls and promenades as the festival approaches. The lanterns are traditionally often circular, symbolizing wholeness - just like the moon itself! Nowadays, lanterns of all shapes and designs can be found, including popular cartoon or movie characters.



The Moon Rabbit

Another story that is often told about the Mid-Autumn Festival is the myth of the Moon Rabbit. One day, the Jade Emperor decided that he wanted someone to help prepare the elixir of life for the immortals. Thus, he came down to Earth disguised as a beggar and cried out for help and food. Eventually three animals approached the man: the monkey, the fox, and the rabbit. However, despite searching throughout the forest, the rabbit could not find any food for the old man. When he returned and found the beggar, the rabbit felt sad that he had been unable to find him any food. In an act of selflessness, he sacrificed himself by jumping into the fire. Luckily, the Emperor saved the rabbit and rewarded his courage by bringing him to the moon to help brew the immortality elixir.

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Celebration Across Different Countries

In **China**, people celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节 zhōng qiū jié) by going to family gatherings, having mooncakes, and making *tangyuan*. The significance of mooncakes and *tangyuan* lie in their round shape, which symbolizes reunion, family and being whole. Family members often give mooncakes to one another as gifts and share pieces from the same mooncake. It is also common for businesses to gift elaborate mooncake sets to their clients and associates. Elaborate lantern displays decorate major shopping malls and promenades, and families make special excursions to visit and enjoy them.

Chuseok (추석), also known as *Hangawi* (한가위), is **South Korea**'s Mid-Autumn Festival. In Korea the festival began as a celebration of the harvest, and *chuseok* literally translates to "autumn eve". *Charye* is a traditional rite performed at *chuseok* by preparing an elaborate feast to honor the ancestors for a bountiful harvest. Koreans wear *hanbok* (traditional Korean dress) and come together as a family to make and eat *songpyeon* (half-moon-shaped rice cakes, as well as other traditional delicacies like *toran guk* (taro soup).

The **Vietnamese** celebrate *Tet Trung Thu* by spending time with loved ones. Families place trays of fruit and cakes on their ancestral altars and eat mooncakes (most soft, mochi-like *banh deos* and oven-baked *banh nuong* cakes). This festival has evolved into a children's festival (*Tết Thiếu Nhi*). Children are often gifted toys such as star lamps and masks. Similarly to other East Asian cultures, people organize a feast to watch the moon.

Food

Mooncakes are the iconic Mid-Autumn Festival treat. Typically round in shape and intricately decorated, they can be sweet or savory; sweet fillings include custard, sweet bean paste, lotus seed paste or red date paste with mini salted and cured duck egg yolks. Some popular savory fillings are ham, Chinese sausage, roast pork and radish. Some contemporary mooncakes even have ice cream and chocolate in them! They are often given as gifts to family members, friends and business associates.

Songpyeon is one of the most important foods of *Chuseok*. They are half-moon shaped rice cakes (and also the food made by the Moon Rabbit mentioned above)! While giving thanks for the harvest, Koreans traditionally make *songpyeon* with the new rice from that year's crop. *Songpyeon* is a little sweet, chewy, and nutty, with a subtle pine tree flavor that comes from steaming the rice cakes in fresh pine needles.



Can you see the duck egg yolk? It represents the full moon on Mid-Autumn. Some special mooncakes even have up to four yolks in them.

During *Tsukimi* (which translates into "looking at the moon"), the **Japanese** decorate the streets with pampas grass - representing a bountiful harvest - to protect against evil spirits. They also eat rabbit-shaped sweet dumplings (*tsukimi-dango*) and seasonal foods like pumpkins and chestnuts.

Mid Autumn Festival is also celebrated by many **Filipinos** of Chinese descent. A popular festival activity is *Pua Tiong Chiu* (a dice game in the Hokkien dialect), where Chinese Filipinos play for mooncake prizes.

