

Some Reflections on the 10th Annual Mid-Autumn Festival

I was born in the United States, grew up here, and never set foot outside of the US until July 1979, when, after completing college, I decided to go to Hong Kong for two years to live and teach.

On October 6, 1979, I experienced an event that would profoundly change my life. It was the annual mid-Autumn festival in Hong Kong. In Philadelphia, I never knew what Mid-Autumn festival was. As a child, I knew that once a year, if my parents had time to make the trip to Chinatown, there would be one night when they would take out a pink cardboard box that weighed several pounds. Inside the box would be four heavy cakes, made of a mixture of bean paste and lotus seeds. My parents would take out the cakes lovingly and cut them up and offer them to us. We children would screw up our faces at the strange food, noses wrinkled. We'd take tentative tastes of the precious cakes, then run off to watch television or to play in the streets in our neighborhood. I never really thought about what my parents talked about after we all cleared out of the kitchen. I never thought about why they valued those four cakes so much.

Before going to Hong Kong, Mid-Autumn Festival was that much memory to me. Another strange custom my parents tried to infuse into a household where their four children fought desperately to "be American." Another time for my parents to get nostalgic while we squirmed with anxiety to run off and play. There was no special significance to this day. We went to school. Parents continued the same work routine. No festivity. It was just another day.

On October 6, 1979, I was at my adopted family's house in Wanchai, Hong Kong. "Baat-mouh" spent the day cleaning, cooking and preparing a feast. Ming was my adopted brother. He spent hours patiently explaining Chinese culture to me. He would look at me, incredulous at my seemingly boundless lack of knowledge of traditions and cultural markers fundamental to his understanding of what it meant to be Chinese. He told me, "Tonight, you will see something really beautiful. This festival is the most fun. New Year of course is special, but the Moon Festival is really something." I nodded stupidly.

That evening, the Chau family gathered to watch Baat-mouh take care of the seemingly endless rituals necessary to conduct the ancestor worship for Mid-Autumn Festival. Then we all crowded around the tiny fold-out table in the 10x10 foot bedroom/dining room/ living room of the house. Baat-mouh had cooked many dishes. Chicken, fish, pork, beef – all kinds of meats. Soup with dried dates. Vegetables and large quantities of fresh fruits. And of course, mooncakes. In addition to Ming's parents and his two brothers and two sisters, his uncle joined us during these festival times. The nine of us tucked in, eating and laughing. After the meal we cleaned up as fast we could, and all piled out of the house and into the alleys to find our own favorite Mid-Autumn hang out spots around Hong Kong. Ming and I hopped on a tram headed for Victoria Park.

The streets were packed, and as we got off the trolley, I saw the sight that would cause me to fall in love. There before me, hundreds of families sat in the park waiting for the moon to rise high in the sky. Children ran everywhere with lanterns lit. Each family had staked out an area for itself with rows of candles. Music played softly in the background. Hawkers sold lanterns and snacks. It was peaceful, joyous, and the spirit of family was so sweet. We wandered through the park for several hours, watching the children play and holding our own lanterns up to the sky. Ming said, "But now we have to go to the Peak." We boarded a crowded bus that wound up the mountains in central Hong Kong and all along the side of the mountain path, lights sparkled as people made their way up and around the mountain with their lanterns. The moon now shone in the sky, large and round. When we got off the bus, and began to walk around the mountain with the rest of the revelers, I realized all that I had lost. I finally understood the tenderness my parents showed in our small kitchen when they cut open the cakes to share. When Ming reached out to hold my hand for the first time, I fell in love again...

In the summer of 1995, three members of the Chinatown Committee of Asian Americans United (AAU) had taken a group of immigrant Chinatown youth (Gang Chen, Andy Zeng, Cha Chen, Eddie Chen, Bowei Wu, and Tammy Ng) for a picnic. While the group sat in the shade of a large tree along the banks of the Schuylkill, the youth talked about homesickness and in particular about the elderly in Chinatown. The youth, who ranged in age from 12 to 16, realized that though the homesickness was bad for them, it must be much worse for the elderly. The times they felt the most homesick were during the traditional holidays of Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival. From this quiet conversation, the idea to

mount a Mid-Autumn festival in Philadelphia Chinatown began to blossom and grow.

AAU has always seen arts and cultural work as a fundamental means for creating social change in our communities. Folk arts in particular can be a catalyst for social change with a power that unites the political fight for social justice with a profound cultural thread which speaks to the heart and the spirit. We knew that working with these youth to establish a Mid-Autumn Festival in Chinatown would not only fill a cultural need, but also could serve to raise the consciousness of the Chinatown community to the fundamental human right to culture.

Chinatown is often viewed by city policy-makers as a dining and tourist zone, rather than as a residential neighborhood. Larger commercial interests have shaped Chinatown's development and impeded the community's own ability to maintain a vital vernacular culture: there had been limited places for the community to gather for itself, or to practice and enjoy traditional arts. With this in mind, we began together to recreate festival – to recreate home in the heart of the community.

The youth decided they would like to do a play based on a folk tale about the Moon Festival. But many of the youth were unclear about the story. They had vague memories of a story about the Moon Maiden, and many of them wove a mish mash of various folk tales together in their minds trying to remember the tale. I am "*jook sing*" - a Cantonese term which is used for American-born Chinese. It literally means "hollow bamboo" and implies that while we have the "outsides" – the physical appearance of being Chinese – we lacked the "insides" – the heart and soul, the spirit and culture of being Chinese. As a *jook sing*, I was little help in trying to figure out the folk tale. After a bit of library research we came up with two versions of the tale and the youth worked to create the play "so other kids out there don't forget the stories the way we did." The youth themselves chose the theme for the first festival: "Honoring the Elderly." They worked for two months organizing logistics, making paper lanterns, preparing scenery for the play, and lining up additional acts, one of which was the Senior Citizens' Tai Chi Group from Chinatown. They thought perhaps one hundred people might come to see their festival, but were really not sure who might attend.

On that cool fall evening ten years ago, over 450 people from the community showed up for the first Mid-Autumn Festival. By last year, the attendance had risen to over 5000. Now, as we prepare for the tenth festival, the youth involved with the first play have moved on. They now

have jobs and greater family responsibilities. They have families of their own now – several now have children. Yet, each year, we still rely on the heart and spirit of well over one hundred youth to make this festival possible. Last year, as I met with youth for the orientation to work at the festival, I asked, “Who remembers when there wasn’t a Mid-Autumn Festival in Chinatown?” I was shocked when not a single young person raised their hand. In just ten short years, the children of our community have grown up expecting this festival, believing it has been here forever, knowing that Mid-Autumn festival is a special time for our families and our community.

The planning committee searches for ways to now offer young people access to folk dance and singing traditions in a consistent way. The festival has become a reason to celebrate and as such, has become a reason to develop craft and technique. It has also become a vehicle for understanding the dynamic nature of tradition.

On September 17, AAU will sponsor the tenth Mid-Autumn Festival celebration in Chinatown. My children, and the others who come, will once again hear the story of Hou Yi and Chang E. They will see mooncakes not as the weird heavy cakes in the cardboard box, but as “the special treat we get to eat once a year.” They will light their lanterns and run with their friends through the streets of Chinatown. They will build memories of a sacred, spiritual link to thousands of years of Chinese culture. This year, under the full moon, I will look with sad and hopeful eyes at the moon. For this year, the first time in 27 years, my husband and I will be apart for this festival. Ming has returned to Hong Kong to be with his family and to let our 3-year-old daughter spend time with her grandmother. On the 27th anniversary of our “first date,” I will look at the moon and think of my love who helped to make this wonderful tradition not only important to me, but to entire generations of Chinese here in Philadelphia who might have grown up never knowing what this day means in our tradition. I will look at the round moon, think of my family on the other side of the world, and I will fall in love all over again...

--Debbie Wei