

The Moon, the Cake, and Everything in Between: Changing Connections as Seen in the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hong Kong

Amy Lee

School of Arts and Social Sciences
Hong Kong Metropolitan University

Keywords

Mid-Autumn Festival

Mooncake

Chang 'e/moon goddess

Jade Rabbit

Payment by instalments

Human relationships

Abstract

A The Mid-Autumn Festival remains one of the most important celebrations in 21st-century Hong Kong, a highly urban city that is well-connected with the global world thanks to its advanced information technology. The city 'where the east meets the west' has been widely recognised and accepted as one of the core cultural identities of Hong Kong; despite its colonial past and in many ways westernised outlook, the cultural heart of Hong Kong is a unique blend of many different factors emerging from the progression of its local life. The annual festivities and how they are celebrated by the local people offer an interesting demonstration of this unique heart of Hong Kong culture. In this article, we will examine the celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hong Kong from the 1950s to the present day, using it as a case study to illustrate the changing values of the society, and how its people have responded to these changes through their behaviour. The Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Moon Festival or Mooncake Festival, originated as a celebration of the autumn harvest in Chinese culture. As it takes place on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, the full moon has inspired many stories that accompany the celebration, including the famous legend of the moon goddess. In Chinese communities that are no longer primarily agricultural in nature, the celebration becomes a time when family members (including dispersed family no longer living together) converge, share a good meal, partake of the mooncake, and light lanterns under the moonlight. In this context, Hong Kong has seen an interesting development since the 1950s in how this human connection is maintained. During the 1950s, when the general population was relatively poor and handmade food such as mooncakes was expensive, the first 'payment by instalment' scheme appeared in Hong Kong, for mooncakes, illustrating the value of gifting during this important festival of human connection. By

the 1980s, when general living standards had improved and mass production was in full swing, mooncakes developed into a highly commercialised commodity appearing once a year. The 1990s saw the emergence of ever new favours and varieties of mooncakes designed to appeal to a younger market, as the celebration was considered traditional and irrelevant to the young. After the millennium, the mooncake assumed yet another identity as wealthy members of society tended towards overconsumption and a new narrative needed to be constructed to contextualise this traditional festival. By tracing the changing cultural practices in relation to the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hong Kong since the 1950s, this article sets out to discuss the developments in how human beings are connected through the post-WWII era to the present day.

Stories about the Mid-Autumn Festival: nature and the supernatural

The Mid-Autumn Festival remains one of the most important celebrations in Hong Kong society. Its status can be seen from the fact that the day after the festival is a public holiday, and that offices usually allow staff members to stop work a few hours earlier on that day.¹ Even when Hong Kong was a British colony, the Moon Festival (another name for the same festival) was well-established as an iconic day, being one of the few festivities originating from Chinese culture that was widely observed among the community. With more than 3000 years of history, 'the holiday is still observed as a time to reunite with family and engage in exciting festivities like dragon dances, eat mooncake, and light lanterns. These activities are all tied together through their shared moon symbolism' (The HK HUB). Dozens of local websites about popular events in town offer similar descriptions of the origin of the festival, related legends, and local practices, illustrating both of its popularity and its down-to-earth ordinariness.

True to its namesake, the Mid-Autumn Festival is the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, a day of full moon. In ancient Chinese society, this was a time to celebrate the autumn harvest, to show gratitude to the celestial moon, and, probably, to pray for good fortune in the following year. Historical records show that moon worship dates as far back as the Zhou Dynasty (1045–256 BC), and during the Tang Dynasty (618–907AD) moon appreciation and celebration was popularly adopted among the upper class, only later spreading to the lower classes. The festival became an official holiday in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127AD). The full moon with the bountiful symbol of the harvest set the scene to be an occasion when the family could enjoy good food under the auspicious and gentle light of the moon—moon gazing or moon appreciation became the 'main event' of the festival. This takes place across three nights: the fourteenth day is dedicated to 'moon welcoming'; the fifteenth to 'moon gazing'; and the sixteenth to 'moon pursuing'.²

A cultural event of this historical depth will not be without its myths and legends. Over the years, many stories have been told in relation to this celebration, with the moon as the core symbol. The most famous myth is the story of Hou Yi and his wife Chang 'e. According to one version, there were originally ten suns in the sky, and they scorched the earth so much

¹ Other Chinese festivals marked by public holidays include the Lunar New Year (four days), Ching Ming festival, Dragon Boat festival, and Double Nine festival (for family tomb sweeping). The Mid-Autumn Festival public holiday is special because it is the day after the festival, meaning that people can rest after the main celebration, which takes place during the night of the full moon.

² The Chinese terms for the three nights of action are: 迎月 (welcoming the moon), 赏月 (appreciating the moon), 追月 (going after the moon).

that they risked destroying everything. Hou Yi was a skilled archer and managed to shoot down nine of the suns, leaving one to provide the necessary warmth to support life. As a reward for this heroic deed, he was given the elixir of immortality. One night, someone broke into his house in an attempt to steal it; to prevent the burglar from getting it, Chang 'e drank the elixir herself. She became weightless and floated all the way to the moon. From then on, she resided on the moon and became the moon goddess, together with the Jade Rabbit, who was already there. Therefore, Hou Yi would gaze at the moon every fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, when it was supposed to be at its fullest, to try to see the shadow of his wife (Time Out 2023).

Another story, with partial historical references, is that of the Tang emperor Li Longji (685–762 AD).³ According to the story, Li Longji received a visit from a Daoist monk in the first year of his reign. The Daoist monk invited him to travel to the moon and visit the palace there. When they arrived, they were welcomed by heavenly dancers who were dressed elaborately and were dancing to heavenly music. The emperor was captivated, and asked what costume they were wearing. The monk replied that they were 'Rainbow Dress and White Feather Garments' (霓裳羽衣). When the emperor returned to his earthly palace, he wrote a song from his memory to commemorate the visit, which became the famous Tang song entitled 'Melody of Rainbow Dress and White Feather Garment' (霓裳羽衣曲). It is a song that is still performed with a dance today (Shen Yun Performing Arts 2013; The HK HUB 2023).

Another story with historical associations is related to the mooncake, which is the main festival food item. In the 13th century, the Mongols invaded China and succeeded in taking over the reign, establishing the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Needless to say, there were numerous attempts by the Han people to overthrow the Mongols and to resume the Han reign. It was said that in one of these attempts, Liu Bowen, a confidant to the rebel leader, suggested a rebellion to coincide with the Mid-Autumn Festival. The plan was to take advantage of the festival and seek permission from the Mongols to distribute mooncakes to the residents, claiming to celebrate the festival and pray for longevity to the Mongol leader. Inside each cake, however, was a piece of paper with the words 'kill the Mongols on the fifteenth day of the eighth month' to mobilise the residents. This plan was successful, and the Mongols were soon overthrown (Mandarin Matrix).

Although these three representative stories about the Mid-Autumn Festival differ greatly in their content, they all feature a strong yearning for (re)connection: the beloved wife; beautiful art; and one's home country. The moon, the moon goddess, the Jade Rabbit, the heavenly music, and even the mooncakes are all objects that manifest this yearning for a (re)connection with something that the heart holds dear. Some 3000 years on, in places where the festival is celebrated, the actual practices vary, but the core meaning of the festival remains very much the same. In the following section, the celebration of this yearning to connect will be discussed with reference to the city of Hong Kong, an international city with a majority Chinese population.

³ Li Longji (李隆基) was Emperor Xuanzong (玄宗) of Tang Dynasty from 712 to 756 AD. He inherited the Chinese empire in its golden age through two palace coups, and reigned for forty-four years, becoming the emperor who sat longest on the throne during the Tang dynasty. It was a period remembered for its internal stability, good government, and prosperity; overall, an era of confidence during which real progress was made in every field. However, the sudden end of his reign, caused by the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763 AD), changed the political situation of China greatly. Information taken from <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xuanzong>> [accessed 29 July 2024].

Image: This is what a traditional mooncake looks like. Picture taken from Kee Wah Bakery Limited: <<https://keewah.com/en/mooncake.html>> [accessed 29 July 2024].



Mid-autumn gifting: the moon and cakes as commodities of connection

The most notable food enjoyed during the celebration is the mooncake. Different Chinese communities have their own variations of the mooncake, but traditionally it is a baked cake prepared with sweet fillings and whole salty egg yolks. The sweet fillings were originally lotus seed purée and bean paste, but as living standards have improved, the mooncake has become a highly commercialised item and almost every year there are some new creations in its taste and appearance. What is interesting about the story of the mooncake in Hong Kong is not only that there are more flavours and more varieties now, but that the story of the mooncake is also a story of how people maintain connections over the decades. From the way in which this festival food item has been marketed and purchased since the post-WWII era, we can gain an insight into how human relationships have been created and maintained at various points in Hong Kong history.

Below is an excerpt from a local newspaper article dated 5 October 1998. When interviewed about market changes in relation to mooncakes, the Executive Director of Kee Wah Bakery Limited⁴ said that:

More than 40 years ago in Hong Kong, although life was difficult, during the Mid-Autumn Festival citizens would buy mooncakes as gifts for their superiors, relatives and friends. In order not to rush for it during the festival, people like to take out a 'mooncake programme', to ensure that they won't miss out in the coming year. At the time, the majority of our customers were workers, housewives, and people living in the neighbourhood.⁵ (Yip 1998)

The 'mooncake programme' he refers to was a new way of paying for the important gift of mooncakes in the 1950s in Hong Kong, which no longer exists (Yip 1998; Wong 2020). In the 1950s, mooncakes were an expensive but indispensable gift item. A regular box of mooncakes contained four pieces, while a more luxurious one contained eight pieces, called 'seven stars around the moon' [七星伴月] (seven small pieces around one big piece). For many people, it was not easy to have the money during the autumn months to buy enough mooncakes to give to friends and relatives, and most importantly to superiors at work. Therefore, Chinese bakeries offered a programme of payment by monthly instalments for buyers. Each buyer could subscribe to a full programme, which was usually ten boxes of mooncakes, or a half programme, which contained five boxes. As long as the subscriber made all the monthly payments, they would get the mooncakes during the festival period.

The mooncake programme says a lot about life in Hong Kong during that time. Firstly, general living standards were not high, such that average people would not have an extra lump sum of money at their disposal to buy expensive gifts for friends and relatives. This speaks to the significance of the festival, however, as even when mooncakes were not easily affordable, people still tried to find a way to present them as gifts, especially to their superiors at work. It is evident that human connection, symbolically



Image: Two examples of mooncake advertisements in the 1960s and 1970s (Wen Wei Po 6 September 2008) <<http://image.wenweipo.com/2008/09/06/ot0906i4.jpg>> [accessed 19 June 2024].

⁴ Kee Wah Bakery Limited [奇華餅家有限公司] is a local Hong Kong bakery specialising in Chinese-style cakes and pastry. It was established in 1938, and has expanded over the years; it now has more than 100 branches globally. The products are made in its own food industry, located in Hong Kong. It is one of the major local bakeries of its kind. Information from Kee Wah Bakery Limited's official website: <<https://keewah.com/en/brand-story>> [accessed 29 July 2024].

⁵ The original words are: 四十多年前的香港，生活雖然清苦，但每逢中秋節，市民都會買月餅送給上司、親友。為免到時張羅，大家都喜歡供月餅會，以確保來年餅源不缺。當時顧客以打工仔、阿嬤、街坊最多。

represented by the moon and the stories woven around it, makes the festival one of the most important on the lunar calendar. The fact that mooncakes were given to people's superiors at work also demonstrates a strong hierarchical structure in professional relationships. The gift may have sweetened work relationships and created a better impression whenever promotion opportunities were available.

Richness, Hong Kong style: the flowering of payment by instalments

While the 'mooncake programme' came into existence in the 1950s in Hong Kong, it really flourished during the 1970s, which for many people was the time when Hong Kong genuinely began its transformation into the international city it is today. In the same newspaper article quoted above, the Executive Director of Kee Wah Bakery Limited remarked that:

The height of the mooncake programme was the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, the profits from the mooncake programme, which had more than 10,000 subscriptions, were equal to the profits from retail. It had happened in the past that the mooncake programme was already oversubscribed on the second day we opened; the queues for mooncake programme subscriptions were almost as bad as those for buying properties.⁶ (Yip 1998)

The last remark about the queues for subscribing to the mooncake programme being as long as those for buying properties is particularly notable. Hong Kong's hilliness and population density are well-known globally, and the desire to own a private property is the long-held dream of most people. There is no better comparison than to the queue for properties to show the intensity of the urge and excitement over buying mooncakes.

During the 1970s, in general Hong Kong society was richer, and on average people had more readily available money, and were thus much more eager to spend money on gifts that were meaningful as well as practical. To cater to people's increasing demands, bakeries also invented new flavours and varieties to attract customers. The picture below shows a number of advertising leaflets from the 1970s.

There are a range of different mooncake flavours, including some rather unusual ones: mushroom and roast pork [北菇叉燒月]; five nuts and sweet meat [五仁甜肉月]; deluxe roast chicken [精品燒雞月]. Some advertisements also feature very poetic names designed for mooncakes, such as Chang 'e Love Moon [嫦娥愛月] and Xishi Drunken Moon [西施醉月]. This was before the invention in Hong Kong of the 'snowy' mooncake in 1989, but even within the confines of traditional baked cake, the range of flavours and the advertising already clearly illustrate the immense popularity of this festive commodity.

The examples contain three different mooncake programmes from the 1960s and 1970s. The top two examples are from the same Chinese restaurant, You Nan Grand Restaurant [有男大茶樓] (literally meaning 'have a boy/son'), which was a traditional Cantonese-style tea house established

⁶ The original words are: 最多人參加供月餅會的高峰期在七、八十年代，當時月餅會的收入與門市月餅銷售平分春色，佔50%，超一份。曾在收月餅的翌日，出「超」的餅家規定徵收一萬份，但有多一半以至一倍的顧客爭相做會，真是排遣海內。

Image: Three examples of advertising leaflets promoting mooncake programmes in 1960's and 1970's Hong Kong (Wen Wei Po 6 September 2008) <<http://image.wenweipo.com/2008/09/06/ot0906c4.jpg>> [accessed 19 June 2024].



in the 1930s. It was not unusual for tea houses or restaurants to offer mooncakes and other festival-related food items, and this practice is still alive today. The top example is from 1978: on the right-hand side is a table of all the different flavours of mooncakes available for the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1978. At the bottom of the table, there is a line that specifies that all the mooncakes come with a colourful tin box [全部奉送七彩鐵盒]—an important item since mooncakes are gifts to be presented elegantly. On the left-hand side of the leaflet is a call for the 1979 mooncake programme, which comes in two categories: the upper part shows the more expensive category (16 HKD per month for twelve boxes of mooncakes) and the lower part shows half the share. The line specifying that the mooncakes come in a colourful tin box is there again, reminding readers that the commodity is mainly perceived as a gift.

The second example (in the middle) from the same Cantonese tea house is dated 1960. The leaflet provides the same kind of information: the list that takes up three quarters of the space on the right-hand side includes the thirty-two flavours available in 1960,⁷ while the short list that takes up a quarter of the space on the left-hand side announces the call for the 1961 mooncake programme. Here, only one type of programme is displayed: for 3 HKD per month, the subscriber will receive eleven boxes of mooncakes (in tin boxes) after completing the payments for twelve months. Comparing the two leaflets from the same tea house, one can see that there are some common flavours – the more traditional ones, which persist even today, such as the lotus seed purée and the bean paste filling, and some rather unique flavours that are no longer seen today. The last three items of the 1960 offerings have the name 'ice-skin', which bears the same Chinese name as a new invention by a bakery called Taipan established in 1989, although the 'ice-skin' mooncakes from the 1960s did not become popular and could no longer be seen in the leaflets from the 1970s.

The third example on the leaflet is dated 1977, and comes from a Chinese restaurant called Pak Sin Grand Restaurant [八仙大酒樓] (literally meaning 'the eight celestial beings'), which opened in 1966. It closed not long after the building of the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) as the construction caused the business to decline. As the MTR was officially opened on 30 September 1979, this leaflet must be among the last ones it offered. The overall design of the leaflet is very similar to the other two examples, with the right-hand side showing the current year's offerings of mooncakes, and the left-hand side calling for subscriptions to the following year's mooncake programme. The prices here are slightly higher than those in the first example, but the flavours available are more or less the same, and again, there is no sign of the 'ice-skin' mooncakes. According to an interesting anecdote about this leaflet, although the original restaurant closed, the brand lives on as Pak Sin Bakery [八仙餅家].⁹ When the restaurant was set to close, one of the dessert chefs took over and turned the restaurant into a bakery. Today, the second generation run this traditional bakery.

These mooncake leaflets from the 1960s and 1970s indirectly confirm that the 1970s was indeed an exciting time for the city on its path of transformation from a small Chinese city into an international metropolis. The

⁷ The thirty-two titles of the mooncake are (top right to left): 'seven stars around the moon', 'phoenix roast chicken', 'three-yolk lotus seed purée', 'happy You-Nan (signature)', 'Osmanthus seed perfume', 'double-yolk lotus seed purée', 'roast duck-leg', 'moon appreciation at the moon-palace', 'double-yolk chicken oil', 'Dragon-king night banquet', 'mushroom and roast pork', 'golden ham', 'gold and jade coiled dragon', 'milky way night', 'Xishi Drunken Moon', 'Chang 'e Love Moon'; (bottom right to left) 'four joys come to the door', 'Guangzhou preserved sausages', 'precious duck and lotus seed purée', 'single-yolk chicken oil', 'Indian almond and lotus seed purée', 'formal lotus seed purée', 'pure vegetarian lotus seed purée', 'five nuts and sweet meat', 'mixed salted meat', 'fruits, coconut and lotus seed purée', 'supreme fruits vegetarian', 'Indian almond, red bean paste and meat', 'Indian almond, bean paste and meat', 'ice-skin lotus seed purée and meat', 'ice-skin red bean paste and meat', and 'ice-skin bean paste and meat'.

⁸ The 'ice-skin' mooncake in the 1960's advertisements was a new creation during the 1950s. Based on the traditional mooncake, some bakeries used glutinous rice flour to make the coating, giving it a whitish colour, which was different from the baked mooncake. This 'ice-skin' mooncake could be kept at room temperature, unlike the snowy mooncake invented by Tai Pan Bread and Cakes in 1989, which has to be kept refrigerated. This whitish 'ice-skin' mooncake was not popular due to its inauspicious colour and was no longer found in advertisements in the 1970s. Information from 'Heated Discussion from Netizens: The Mandela Effect? Ice-skin Mooncakes Existed 66 Years Ago' [網民熱話：曼德拉效應？66年前驚現冰皮月餅], ON.cc [東網], 4 October 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20240811044628/https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/news/20171004/bkn-20171004174840126-1004_00822_001.html> [accessed 14 September 2024].

⁹ Taken from the Facebook page of the Pak Sin Bakery. 「八仙餅家源於1966年開業的八仙大茶樓，當年的酒樓位於長沙灣。後來因為附近興建地鐵而導致生... - Your HK Journey 啟程 | Facebook.

festival, firmly rooted in Chinese culture, is well-anchored in the Hong Kong community's hearts and minds, and has grown with the city through different manifestations of the celebration—different mooncakes, different purchasing methods, and different presentations of the product. In the next two sections, we will examine further changes in the ways in which the community interacts with the festival and its celebration, which again shows the changes in how people connect to each other and to their culture.

Something for everyone: health awareness and mooncake update

Two major events occurred in the next phase of the mooncake story in Hong Kong. The first was the appearance of a brand-new type of mooncake called the 'snowy' mooncake in 1989, which is non-baked. The second was the decline of the mooncake programme. Both of these events established the 1990s as a new phase in the celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as indicating a change in the way in which people connected with each other and how they identify themselves in relation to their environment and culture.

In a magazine article about the development of mooncakes in Hong Kong, Kwok Hung Kwan [郭鴻鈞], the founder of Taipan Bread and Cakes [大班麵包西餅]¹⁰—a notable local bakery established in the 1980s—was interviewed. He talked about the rationale behind the ground-breaking invention of what is known as the 'snowy' [冰皮] mooncake. He said,

Because the traditional mooncake already has more than a thousand years' history, it is sweet and greasy, and the fillings are always lotus seed purée and egg yolk, nothing surprising. Therefore traditionally, mooncakes are the standard gifts: people buy them just as gifts for other people; not many people buy them to enjoy the mooncakes. We saw this problem, and tried to create a new market for the mooncakes—people who would buy them to enjoy (the good taste). We targeted the shortcomings of the mooncake, such as adjusting the flavour and the fillings, hoping to open another market. The result was the invention of the snowy mooncake.¹¹ (Chow 2007)

What he said in 2007 confirms an observation we made above, that is, that the mooncake's persistent importance in the city is cultural in nature. The huge demand for mooncakes, even during the 1950s when general living standards in Hong Kong were not high, and the burst of demand that supported the mooncake programme in the 1970s, were due to the idea that mooncakes were indispensable as gifts.

According to Kwok, the invention of non-baked mooncakes—which were less greasy and lighter in taste because of a range of fruity and custard fillings—changed not only the marketing of mooncakes, but also their consumption. The snowy mooncake (also known as the ice-skin or crystal mooncake) changed people's perception of the food item from a gift to something else and from an item used to symbolically commemorate the festival to a 'real' food item that one can enjoy eating. The fresh, trendy

¹⁰ *Taipan Bread and Cakes [大班麵包西餅] is a Hong Kong chain store selling bread and cakes. It was established in 1984, and has dozens of branches around the city. Its appearance revolutionised the way in which bakeries were run in Hong Kong then. It is also well-known to be the inventor of snowy mooncakes, a non-baked dessert-like cake, which is different from the traditional baked mooncake and has to be kept refrigerated. Information from Taipan Bread and Cakes official website: <<https://shop.taipan.com.hk/zh-HK/pages/5?cc=ecom>> [accessed 29 July 2024].*

¹¹ *His original words are: 因為傳統月餅已有千多年歷史，味道又甜又多油，餡料永遠都是蓮蓉、蛋黃，沒有新意。所以傳統上，月餅只是中秋節指定送禮佳品，人們的心態僅是『為送而買』，真正喜歡吃月餅的人卻不多，那時我看到這個問題，便想要開拓一個嶄新『為食而買』的月餅市場，改變傳統月餅的弊端，例如調整味道、餡料，希望打開另一個新興市場，結果我們便研發出冰皮月餅來。*

Images: Snowy mooncakes from Taipan Bread and Cake. Picture from official website: <https://www.taipan.com.hk/snow-ymooncake_twinspace.html> [accessed 29 July 2024].



image of the snowy mooncake also appealed to the younger generation. From the 1990s onwards, while the snowy mooncakes were taking the market by storm, other mooncake innovations also appeared, creating a fashionable image for mooncakes and establishing the Mid-Autumn Festival as much as a young people's festival as a celebration of traditional family union. In 1984, Häagen-Dazs ice-cream entered Hong Kong, and one of its successes in adapting to local tastes came from the creation of its own brand of mooncake in 1997 (General Mills 2017).

The other event that marked the 1990s as a turning point in the history of the mooncake in Hong Kong was the decline in subscriptions to the mooncake programme. Ironically, this decline was actually a sign of further expansion rather than a shrinking of the mooncake market. If we look back at the emergence of the mooncake programme, it was due to the lack of readily available money among buyers to purchase a large number of gifts. As such, the monthly instalment payment method allowed average customers to pay for what they wanted over the course of a year, while at the same time offering providers a convenient way to estimate sales numbers and prepare accordingly. At the height of the mooncake programme, it accounted for half of the sales every year—meaning that half of the customers still made their purchases at retail outlets.

Concerning the change in customers' behaviour, the Executive Director of Kee Wah Bakery Limited observed that, 'into the 1990s, there was a decline in demand for the mooncake programmes, at the rate of 10% to 15% yearly. In 1990, the subscription was 10000 shares, but in 1998 it dropped to only 3000 shares' (Yip 1998).¹² With customers' changing attitude towards mooncakes, as well as new ways of purchasing this commodity, subscriptions to the mooncake programme only accounted for 10% of the total yearly sales during the late 1990s. In 1989, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council began to host the yearly Food Expo at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. This is a major sales event for vendors to showcase their wares and for the public to review and purchase food items at greatly discounted prices. Because it is held every year from mid-to-late August, the Food Expo has become the defining point in mooncake sales for all major bakeries.

Post-millennium era: mooncakes and the many faces of Mid-Autumn Festival

The above sections described the story of the Mid-Autumn Festival as it has evolved over the centuries, and discussed its celebration in Hong Kong from the 1950s onwards, focusing on the central commodity of celebration, i.e., the mooncake. The change in payment method, from payment by instalments to the consumerism exhibited in the annual Food Expo, demonstrates a change in the average Hong Kong people's relationship with the core commodity of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Although sales reached a new height after the 1970s, mooncakes were still very much a gift to other people intended to maintain good relationships. It was not until the 1990s—with the appearance of a new mooncake, the snowy

¹² *The original words are:* 踏入九十年代，市場對月餅會的需求出現逐年下降10%至15%的情況，從九零年約一萬份，減至九八年約只有三千份。

mooncake, designed to cater to the taste of the general public—that it became a real food item for customers to enjoy themselves.

The practice of gifting to maintain good relationships also changed. In post-war Hong Kong, it was workers who bought mooncakes for their superiors, hence the emergence of the mooncake programme operating on a payment by instalment method. Nowadays, those who purchase mooncakes as gifts tend to be businesses sending their clients a token of their gratitude and good will, and therefore the mooncake programme, which was introduced for people who could not afford to pay a lump sum, was no longer needed. In fact, as Hong Kong transformed itself into an international metropolis, and average incomes improved, the opposite condition came about: It is now not unusual for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to persuade people not to overbuy mooncakes, or to collect unconsumed but edible mooncakes to be sent to old people's homes or to the underprivileged.

Despite the change in purchasing behaviour, the mooncake remains an item that symbolises connection, whether it is sent by workers to their superiors or by businesses to clients, or even collected and distributed by NGOs to those who still cannot afford it today.



Image: Courtesy of <https://www.hk-cityguide.com/expat-guide/the-ultimate-guide-to-different-mooncakes>.

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