

Honoring the Elderly: The Original Intention of the Double Ninth Festival

The Double Ninth Festival, observed on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, is one of China's major traditional celebrations. For centuries, the literati relished recounting its customary practices like ascending heights to ward off misfortune, wearing dogwood sprigs, admiring chrysanthemums, sipping chrysanthemum wine, and savoring Double Ninth cakes. Yet they seldom touched upon the ancients' original intention in establishing the festival: to respect and honor the elderly.

At the core of the festival lies the wish for longevity. Dogwoods and chrysanthemums, the emblem of the festival, are not only seasonal plants of autumn, but also potent symbols of longevity. During the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE), Cao Pi, Emperor Wen of Wei, had a bouquet of chrysanthemums sent to his friend Zhong Yao on a double-ninth day, accompanied by a letter:

As years and months roll by, once more the ninth day of the ninth lunar month is upon us. Nine is a *yang* number, and both the month and the day bear this number. People esteem the name “Double-Ninth”, deeming it propitious for long life, and thus hold grand banquets and festive gatherings on this day...Fragrant chrysanthemums alone bloom profusely while common trees and grasses cease to grow... No other herb is more precious in nourishing the body and prolonging life. I respectfully present this bouquet to aid you in the art of Peng Zu.

Cao Pi's letter is among the earliest extant texts to mention the symbolic meaning of the Double Ninth Festival. In traditional Chinese cosmology, *yang* numbers, also known as the numbers of heaven, refer to the five odd numbers ranging from one to nine. They symbolize enduring vitality and active cosmic force. In Chinese folklore, Peng Zu, well versed in the art of longevity, was said to have lived for over 800 years.

As two lines of an ancient poem put it, “A human life can hardly reach a hundred, yet one often harbors cares that span a thousand years.” Conscious of the transience of mortal existence, people everywhere aspire to long life. It is no surprise that the Chinese people have held festive activities since antiquity such as praying to heaven and ancestors for longevity and honoring the elderly. *The Book of Songs*, the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, gives

a vivid account of the autumn harvest celebration:

In the ninth month frost is keen;
In the tenth we sweep the threshing floor clean.
Two pitchers of wine we prepare for toasts,
And slaughter lambs to hold feasts.
Up to the lord's hall, rhino-horn cups we raise,
And wish him a long life of endless days.

This verse shows that offering blessings and toasting to long life were important purposes of autumn harvest rites.

The pursuit of longevity naturally entails showing respect for the elderly. The custom of honoring and providing for the aged during the autumn harvest season dates back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE). As recorded in the “Monthly Ordinances” of *The Book of Rites*, “In the eighth lunar month, it is the time to provide for the aged and infirm in accordance with ritual. The Son of Heaven bestows upon them body-leaning rests, staffs, and millet congee.” The congee, well boiled and tender, is easy for the elderly to digest. The practice of providing for the aged and infirm in the eighth lunar month is intended to wish them sound health and long life. This shares the same purpose as ancestral sacrifice offered during the autumn harvest.

During the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the imperial court held the “Monthly Ordinances” in high regard and instituted the regulations on ritual provision for elders in the eighth lunar month as state policy. “Treatise on Rites and Ceremonies” in *The Book of the Later Han* records, “In the eighth lunar month, local officials verify residents’ ages against household registers. Those aged seventy or above are granted imperial staffs and millet congee. Those in their eighties or nineties receive additional bestowals by ritual regulations.” The same historical text records that an imperial staff was nine *chi* (about 2.08 meters) in length, with its top adorned with a turtledove, a bird that was believed never to choke on food. Since the elderly often suffer from tooth loss and weakened digestion, they are prone to choking while eating. The carved image embodies a wish that the elderly might eat and drink without difficulty—a concern identical to that behind the provision of well-cooked congee to

the aged.

In 1959, a staff with a turtledove finial, together with ten wooden slips inscribed with the emperor's edicts, was unearthed from a Han Dynasty tomb at Mozuizi, Wuwei City, Gansu Province. This archaeological discovery provides material evidence for the Han tradition of honoring the elderly. These edicts stipulated that imperial staffs topped with a turtledove finial were to be bestowed upon those aged seventy or above. Holders of such staffs were to be entitled to the same privileges as officials bearing imperial tallies. Any official or commoner who insulted and/or assaulted these elders was to be punished for a grave crime, and even sentenced to public execution in aggravated cases.

During the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), festival observances were gradually fixed to specific dates of the lunar calendar. For example, the *Shangsi* Festival (the Double Third Festival) was set on the third day of the third lunar month, the *Duanwu* Festival (the Dragon Boat Festival) on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, and the *Qixi* Festival (the Double Seventh Festival) on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. By the same token, the festival for honoring the elderly was set on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, hence the name Double Ninth Festival.

Nine, or *jiu* (九), is the highest of the five *yang* numbers, which represents the culmination of the *yang* energy. *jiu jiu* (九九) is homophonous with *jiu jiu* (久久) in Chinese, the latter evoking the sense of “long-lasting”, which further extends to “long-enduring” (长久). Both terms carry auspicious connotations of longevity (长寿). It is therefore fitting that a festival intended to honor the aged is set on this very day. Hence it was named the Double-Yang Festival (*Chongyang*) or the Double Ninth Festival (*Chongjiu*).

The date and name of the festival were thus fixed, but over time its new names gradually overshadowed its original purpose. Later generations came to celebrate the festival primarily through activities such as climbing heights, appreciating chrysanthemums and drinking wine. In doing so, they gradually neglected its initial intention of honoring the elderly. After the Han and Wei dynasties, climbing heights and composing poetry on this date became a refined pursuit among scholars and poets. Among the numerous poems, lyrics and essays themed on the festival, many were masterpieces, but few made reference to the time-honored custom of honoring the elderly. From the Ming and Qing dynasties onward, local gazetteers, when recording customs for the festival, seldom noted more than the usual: climbing to high places,

enjoying chrysanthemums, drinking wine, and eating cakes.

It was not until 2012, when the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress adopted the revised Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, that the ninth day of the ninth lunar month was officially designated as Senior Citizens' Day. This institutional measure has revived the longstanding cultural memory embedded in the Double Ninth Festival. The Chinese nation has long cherished the fine virtue of respecting the elderly. Against the backdrop of an increasingly aging society, this ethical tradition integral to the festival grows ever more precious, and deserves to be rediscovered and carried forward.