

The existence of the tradition of Moon Festival  
in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province  
การดำรงอยู่ของประเพณีไหว้พระจันทร์ในอำเภอหาดใหญ่  
จังหวัดสงขลา

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บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการดำรงอยู่ของประเพณีไหว้พระจันทร์ในอำเภอหาดใหญ่ จังหวัดสงขลา เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพโดยเก็บข้อมูลจากเอกสารและงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้อง ข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์แบบเจาะลึกจากชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีนในอำเภอหาดใหญ่ จังหวัดสงขลา ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ประเพณีไหว้พระจันทร์สามารถดำรงอยู่ได้แต่มีการปรับเปลี่ยนรูปแบบของพิธีกรรม เป็น 2 รูปแบบ คือ รูปแบบที่หนึ่งในช่วงเช้าของวันไหว้พระจันทร์ชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีนจะนำของเซ่นไหว้ไปไหว้เจ้าแม่พระจันทร์ที่ศาลเจ้าแล้วกลับมาไหว้พระในบ้าน รูปแบบที่สอง จัดโต๊ะไหว้พระจันทร์ในเวลากลางคืน มีการย่อพิธีกรรมการไหว้ให้สั้นลง ปรับเปลี่ยนเวลาไหว้ให้เร็วขึ้นเพราะกลุ่มวัยทำงานต้องตื่นเช้าไปทำงานนอกบ้าน เปลี่ยนแปลงสิ่งของที่นำมาไหว้ตามยุคสมัยโดยจะซื้อของเซ่นไหว้ในปริมาณลดลงเพราะสภาพเศรษฐกิจฝืดเคือง อาจกล่าวได้ว่าประเพณีไหว้พระจันทร์ในอำเภอหาดใหญ่สามารถดำรงอยู่ได้ตามกลางกระแสสังคม

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เพราะวิถีพลั้งของชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีนในอำเภอหาดใหญ่ที่ผนึกกำลังกันปรับเปลี่ยน พิธีกรรมให้สอดคล้องกับการดำเนินชีวิตในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์

**คำสำคัญ:** ประเพณีไหว้พระจันทร์ ชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีน อำเภอหาดใหญ่ จังหวัดสงขลา การดำรงอยู่

## Abstract

This article aims to investigate the existence of the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province. The data of this qualitative study were gathered from related documents, research reports, and in-depth interviews with Thai Chinese in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province. The study found that the tradition of Moon Festival could be maintained with two types of adaptation. One is a ritual performed in the morning in which Thai Chinese take offerings to pay respect to the Goddess of the Moon at a shrine. The other is a ritual performed at night at home with a shorter ritual of paying respect at an earlier time because the working-age group of people has to wake up early in the morning to go to work. Offering items have been changed to suit the modern time, and bought in smaller quantities due to the sluggish economy. It can be said that the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai can be maintained amidst social changes because Thai Chinese in Hat Yai unite to adapt the ritual and make it suitable for life in the age of globalization.

**Keywords:** Moon Festival, Thai Chinese, Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, Existence

## Introduction

The Malay Peninsula was the land where Chinese and foreign merchants came to trade along its east coast. The migration rate of Chinese to the Southern part of Thailand such as Songkhla either directly or through Singapore and Penang continued to be high until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ampaiwan et al., 1986, p. 51). These Chinese settled down in Songkhla and their descendants have inherited the business until nowadays. However, not only the business is inherited but also is Confucius philosophy of tradition and belief, especially gratefulness for one's ancestors.

In Sung Dynasty, the Tartars, ancestors of Mongolians, invaded and ruled China. They forced Chinese to take care of the Tartars, and only one knife, tied in the middle of the village, was allowed for ten families for use because the Tartars were afraid that the Chinese would rebel against them. The Chinese could not tolerate this rule because most of them were farmers and very poor; they needed to use more knives for farming as well as other purposes in everyday life. They were poor and had to pay taxes to the government. So they could not afford taking care of the Tartars at the same time. As a result, all the Chinese in the village agreed to protest against the Tartars. A small group of elderly Chinese in this village had an idea of how to get rid of the

Tartars. What they did was that they wrote a note explaining their protest against the Tartars and put this note inside small round cakes and sent these cakes to every family and ordered everyone to eat these cakes because the cakes could protect them from a disaster which would happen on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. So each family cut and shared the cake to all their family members. Inside the cakes, they found a note that said

“To night, at 03.00 a.m. we shall kill the Tartars”.

So, every family of the Chinese prepared weapons and, when they heard the sound of knocking bamboo, together, they killed most of the Tartars in a wink. After they were successful in chasing the Tartars away (Kaemkhunthod, 2001, p. 42) and finished the harvest, they took a rest and organized a ritual for asking good luck from the moon and they held a celebration for this victory. According to the legend, there was a beautiful lady who lived in the moon called Princess Shang Aue. She was Hooli’s wife. One day she stole the ambrosia which her husband brought from the god and drank it so she could fly to stay on the moon. When the winter began she sprayed the ambrosia on the earth. On this occasion, to celebrate a good year of rice harvest, Chinese used rice to cook a kind of dessert called “Khanom Ko” for worshipping the moon (Chongrakwong, 1999, p. 22). Eventually, worshipping the moon has become

one of the traditional Chinese festivals that has been in existence for more than 2,000 years.

Thai Chinese in Songkhla Province have continued to organize traditional festivals, for example, Chinese New Year, Qingming Tradition, Spirit Festival, Vegetarian Festival, Moon Festival, etc. However, this article focuses only on Moon Festival of Thai Chinese in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province which is organized yearly to commemorate the liberation of their ancestors that took place in China a long time ago. Moon Festival in Hat Yai falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month of every year. In the past, Thai Chinese organized a grand moon worshipping ceremony to which everyone paid attention because they believed that the moon was the sacred goddess which was important for human beings, and that it could protect them and brought them good luck. They also asked the moon to bless them and make them successful and prosperous in their occupations. In the downtown area, shops owned by Chinese were decorated with many flags, lanterns, and flowers. The rituals of worship were performed at home in front of the house or on the deck of the house where they could see the moon clearly at night. There were competitions on decorations of tables set with offering items to the goddess. On the Moon Festival's day, in the afternoon, boys and girls, holding small lanterns and walking along the road while teenagers wearing beautiful outfits, strolled around the downtown area that was adorned with colorful lights and beautiful decorations, and tables with offerings on them were set along the

streets. In the evening, they set on the table the offerings used for moon worshipping rituals consisting of fruits, cosmetics, clothes, tea, flowers, joss sticks, candles, lanterns, silver and gold joss paper, desserts, and a special dessert called moon cake. Many people came to visit Hat Yai during Moon Festival. (Siripaisarn et al., 2005, p. 65)

However, Moon Festival in Hat Yai has gradually been less bustling due to social influence from outside that has come to affect Songkhla society which is open to globalization. Moreover, because it is a center of communication and tourism for the Southern part of Thailand, there are many visitors from other countries as well as from all over Thailand to Songkhla. It is very interesting to find out whether or not amidst modernization, the new generations of Thai Chinese in Songkhla still give importance to this tradition and continue to preserve it, and because many ethnic groups have traveled to and from Songkhla continually, various cultures have been passed down across the border. Another interesting issue is that if they still practice it, how they sustain this important tradition. The researcher, therefore, aimed to explore to find the answers to offer the experience to other cultures that are being pressed for expulsion and become weak and prone to cultural assimilation. The other question is how the beliefs have been handed down to the younger generation.

## Objective of the study

This study aims to investigate the existence of the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province.

## Methodology

### 1. Informants

The informants were divided into two groups. The first one was a group of five elderly Thai Chinese aged 50 years and older who live in Hat Yai and have had at least 20 years' experience in holding the moon worship festival, have seen the change of the moon festival in Hat Yai and still worship the moon until the present time. The second one was a group of five people aged 25-49 years who have participated in organizing the moon worship tradition and participating in moon worshipping activities at home.

### 2. Research instrument

The research instruments used in field data collection from the two groups of informants were in-depth interview question sheets. Structured, open-ended questions were used in the Informal interviews. The researcher participated in the moon worship ritual to observe the informants' behavior so that more interviews could be conducted in case more information was needed.

### 3. Data analysis

The data collected from related documents, research reports, in-depth interviews and observations were analyzed using historical method consisting of classification, selection and approval of the data. Then

phenomenological analysis and interpretation were carried out before a conclusion was drawn, and descriptive analysis was presented.

## Results

### 1. The tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

In the past, when Moon Festival came, every family set a table to pay respect to the moon. Offerings included moon cake, Khanom Ko (a kind of dried cake made of glutinous rice flour), bean cake, and other kinds of sweet, three to five kinds of fruit, sugarcane, tea, cosmetics, silver and gold joss paper, lanterns, etc. The ritual of paying respect to the moon begins when the moon is seen rising in the east, and the ritual has to be finished before the moon rises making a right angle with (the land) one's head. Women are to be the first to perform the ritual followed by everyone else in the family. The number of joss sticks to be lit for each family member to pay respect to the moon depends on the number of kinds of fruit offered. For example, if three kinds of fruit are offered, then three joss sticks are lit; if five kinds of fruit are offered, then five joss sticks are lit. One can pray to be blessed by the moon, to ask for favors related to love, fulfillment, prosperity, etc. Using joss sticks is a means to send offerings to the Goddess of the Moon the same way as virtual actions done on the Internet. The joss sticks are the medium that takes the offerings to heaven. Thus, they are left to burn away while people are waiting as if to give enough time for the Goddess of the Moon and their ancestral spirits to finish the meal. Then silver and gold

joss paper is burnt and that is the end of the ritual, and it is time for family members to drink tea and have snack together (Namnueng, interview, December 19, 2015).

## 2. Adaptations related to Moon Festival in Hat Yai District

When Moon Festival comes, in Hat Yai City, some tables set for paying respect to the moon can still be seen, mostly in families with elderly people whose children or grandchildren, especially those in the working age group, help doing it. This group of people has become the main persons in their families to arrange the ritual of paying respect to the moon. They plan in advance what to buy, particularly silver and gold joss paper that needs to be folded in certain patterns, and different kinds of sweet from the shops they usually buy. They plan a few days in advance because most of them go out to work and do not have much free time. The younger generation of Thai Chinese has adapted their way of life to be more Thai due to economic reason. Some move out to have and live with their own family while others move to work in other provinces. Consequently, there are fewer Thai Chinese who continue Chinese customs and traditions. As a result, there are adaptations related to paying respect to the moon as follows.

### 2.1 The Rituals

The first one is the morning ritual. In the morning, Thai Chinese in their beautiful costumes go to the shrine near their homes which is crowded with people coming to make merit. Most of them bring offerings which are moon cake, Khanom Ko, fruits, silver and gold

joss paper, flowers, and joss sticks, all of which are required for the ritual. People working at the shrine prepare tables in front of the shrine for worshipper to place offerings on. While waiting for the joss sticks to burn away, they greet and talk to each other in a friendly way. After the joss sticks have burnt away, silver and gold joss paper is burnt, and then the offerings are packed. They say goodbye to gods and the Goddess of the Moon, and that is the end of the ritual. They go home to arrange another set of offerings on a table to pay respect to the Buddha image at home (Nuikun, interview, November 8, 2015).

The second one is the night ritual. At night, the ritual is from around 8.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. because nowadays many Thai Chinese go out to work and have to get up early in the morning. Thus, they want to finish the ritual of paying respect to the moon early in the night and go to bed. They usually pray to the Goddess of the Moon for help in love, fulfilling their hopes, prosperity in making their living, fertility and happiness of their families, etc. (Worawannukun, interview, November 20, 2015). Moreover, Thai Chinese believe that using joss sticks in paying respect is to send offerings to the Goddess of the Moon because joss sticks are the carriers taking offerings to heaven. Thus, they let joss sticks burn away and they wait a little longer after that as if to give time to the Goddess and their ancestral spirits to finish with their meals. Then they burn silver and gold paper to end the ritual. After that family members drink tea and eat sweet together for auspiciousness and to tighten their relationships (Ratanavisut, interview, October 17, 2015).

## 2.2 The Offerings

Usually only a small amount of important offering items are bought because they are now much more expensive than before. In addition to traditional items such as five kinds of fruit, silver and gold joss paper, joss sticks, and candles, cosmetics and beautiful designs and colorful cloths get bought because it is believed that the Goddess of the Moon is a beautiful lady who can use these beauty products. After the ritual is finished, the cosmetics can be used by women who have paid respect to the moon or their children because it is believed that the cosmetics that have been offered to the Goddess of the Moon are auspicious for users. Furthermore, an offering item such as sugarcane used to be considered important in the past because its sweetness dwarfed to smooth business and fulfillments. However, sugarcane is rarely seen nowadays and houses are decorated without it but only with lanterns (Wongpipatkul, interview, November 20, 2015). People who pay respect to the moon remain to be the elderly and some in the working age group while a few teenagers help to prepare the offerings even though most of them participate in the ritual. However, it all depends on the degree of importance their families give to this tradition.

Nowadays, even though fewer Thai Chinese set tables for paying respect to the moon, there is a new phenomenon among them. That is they take the opportunity during the Moon Festival to take moon cake to the elderly or their relatives to make good wishes to them. Therefore, the pattern of paying respect to the moon has also changed. During the

festival, many shops sell moon cake so people who do not perform the ritual also buy moon cake for consumption which helps stimulate the economy. (Pittakun, interview, October 26, 2015)

### 2.3 Adaptation in the time of paying respect to the moon

In the past, the ritual of paying respect to the moon began when the moon is seen rising in the eastern horizon at around 6.00 p.m. and gradually rises higher until the entire full moon is brightly seen. The time for the ritual of paying respect to the moon used to be longer and all family members gave importance to paying respect to the moon the whole time until midnight when the moon begins to go down towards the western horizon. Nowadays the length of time for paying respect to the moon has been adapted to suit the way of life of the new generation who have to go out to work. The length of moon worship time has been shortened, and thus, the ritual begins at 8.00 p.m. and lasts to around 10.00 p.m.

As can be seen, the moon worship ritual has been adapted for conveniences, and adaptations have been made in terms of the ritual itself, the time, and the offerings due to economic reasons. In addition, the new generation has gradually replaced the older generation that has gradually passed away decreasing interest in doing activities related to Moon Festival.

### 3. The existence of the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

The data collected from in-depth interviews with the informants can be summarized as follows. The first group of informants thinks that

the tradition of Moon Festival will be continued in order to commemorate the bravery of their ancestors, and for family reunion which results in the bond and unity among family members. However, presently the tradition is rather dull with only the elderly who still hold the belief in and worship to the moon (Informant interview, November 8, 2014). The ritual has been shortened, offerings have been reduced and some offering items have been changed or modified to suit the present time (Chaimongkol, interview, November 20, 2015). The second group of informants thinks that the tradition will probably fade away from Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province because facts about the moon have scientifically been proved, and because Neil Alden Armstrong, an American astronaut who walked on the moon in 1969, has made the belief about the Goddess of the Moon less important (Krachangsai, interview, December 19, 2015). Another reason is that the new generation of Thai Chinese is in their working age and they pay less attention to worshipping the moon. Thus, whether the tradition of Moon Festival will continue to exist or not depends on how much importance the new generation of Thai Chinese gives to it (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** A simple arrangement of offerings to the moon in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

(photo taken by Jureerat Buakaew on September 15, 2016)



**Figure 2** A couple of Thai Chinese paying respect to the moon with a simple arrangement of offerings in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

(photo taken by Jureerat Buakaew on September 15, 2016)

## Conclusion and discussion

The practice of the Moon Festival tradition in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province has gradually declined because of modernity and consumerism. This reflects the fact that older generations will one day be all gone while fewer Thai Chinese of the new generation have such belief and value towards the tradition which may eventually result in its complete disappearance from Songkhla society. Thai Chinese in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province have held the tradition of Moon Festival for a long time. However, the festival has gradually been less bustling because of various factors. The viewpoints of the informants on the existence of Moon Festival can be classified into two groups. One group thinks that the tradition will still continue because this festival came from the Chinese history of which their ancestors were very proud and practiced it in their way of life. The attitude and the practice of the moon festival have been handed down through interactions among kin; this corresponds with the concept of the lecturers of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology (2006, p. 32) that humans transfer culture from one generation to the next, and may receive some cultures from nearby societies; however, such cultures must not be in conflict with the existing ones. This is in agreement with Addsakul (2014, as cited in Yeetin, 2016, p. 87), who states that social changes such as changes in traditions and family systems can either go forward or backward permanently or temporarily. When the world becomes borderless, information technology rapidly disseminates information and news across the world

resulting in rapid receipt of information and easy acceptance of cultures from outside. Therefore, Hat Yai locals have access to information, news, and other cultures through technology momentarily.

The other group thinks that the tradition of Moon Festival will be lost due to the environment, and modern technology without borders that flows in and influences Hat Yai where people respond and accept culture from outside all the time. This is in agreement with the Modernization Theory of Eisenstadt (1966, p. 122) that underdeveloped society transforms to modern society. In addition, such modernization is a process of change that socially, economically and politically affects people in Songkhla Province, and Thai Chinese in this province have to adapt to the present society. This is why the tradition of Moon Festival in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province has to change accordingly. Younger generations in Hat Yai absorb and learn to integrate Thai culture and Chinese culture in their families. Current society and cultural assimilation in Hat Yai coexist while elderly people are making efforts to revive the Moon Festival for Chinese identity. This corresponds with Addsakul (2014), (cited in Yeetin, 2016, p. 88), who said that culture can change through time with influences from inside and outside societies that change community culture.

However, Hat Yai Municipality should take a more serious role in promoting other organizations such as Chinese clan associations to take part in organizing the Moon Festival because they have the potential and budget to support this tradition. This is because Chinese clan associations

in Hat Yai regularly manage other public activities in the area. Furthermore, Hat Yai community should concentrate on this tradition which can promote tourism in Hat Yai so that people can earn more income. Moreover, the festival will make the younger generation look back and consider the value of cultural heritage that can promote the economy while preserving the Moon Festival and maintaining its existence at the same time.

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