OCI Public Talk

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[Edited transcript]

Qian Kan
I'm Kan Qian. I'm the director of the Online Confucius Institute and Professor in Chinese language education in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. I'll be chairing the talk today. And our guest speaker is our old friend, Feixia. She has done quite a few sessions, wellbeing sessions, with us, and last year she delivered a talk as well.

Feixia Yu
Thank you very much, Professor Kan, for this opportunity to do this workshop, and good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, teachers and students and friends.

Today, we'll look at the Chinese way of marking the progression of time in a year. So, it's a workshop on the 24 solar terms, and then the discussion is between the moon and the sun, because today is the *Moon Festival*, but we are looking at the solar terms. The *24 solar terms* are a living heritage, and it's about seasonal practice, and that is the focus of today. We'll talk about how we measure the time, the different calendars, but more importantly, we want to look at how the Chinese devise different ways of exercising the body so that our energy flows within the body are in synchronisation with what is happening in nature.

So, today we will look at moon time versus sun time and *The 24 Solar Terms* as UNESCO's *Intangible Cultural Heritage*. And then we'll do some *Daoyin* demonstration and I would like to invite you to follow me and do the movements because that would be very embodied learning, you'll experience what we are talking about and it makes more sense. We'll also be looking at different examples of food, drinks, games, rituals in the summer and in autumn. 24 solar terms are a lot, so we can only pick a few to talk about.

First, as Professor Kan mentioned before, today is the *Moon Festival* and in Chinese, we call it 中秋节 (zhōng qiū jié) the *Mid-Autumn Festival*. If we are talking about mid-autumn, then the immediate question is, when does autumn start? Does it start on the 1st of August, 7th of August, 1st of September, 23rd of September, or the 25th of September? It very much depends on which calendar you are using. I've listed the five calendars here: it could be the astronomical calendar, *Celtic calendar*, *lunar calendar*, the *meteorological calendar*, and the *24 Solar Terms* calendar. With

the images here, you could have a quick think and see which date will match which calendar in terms of the beginning of the autumn. Now, if you follow the Celtic calendar, then autumn starts on the 1st of August, because that will be the time it's important that you get the harvest in as quickly as possible. And then on the 7th of August, that is 立秋 (lì qiū), the beginning of autumn, if you follow the 24 solar terms. But many people, when they organise their life, for example, the school days, etc., then autumn starts on the 1st of September. The BBC's weather forecast will be using this meteorological calendar, which says autumn starts on the 1st of September. Some people would also say, no, it starts on the 23rd of September, that is if you follow the astronomical calendar, then it starts on the 23rd, which is 2 days ago. And that is also in the 24 solar terms, that is 秋分 (qiū fēn), autumn equinox. And then the 25th of September - today - is the mid-autumn festival if you follow the lunar calendar. So, different calendars for different purposes.

That brings us to the question of traditional Chinese timekeeping. Which calendar do we use? Actually, in China, we have different calendars and we use a mixture, a combination, of them. Some people will simply say - for the Chinese New Year - most people will say, the Chinese *lunar* New Year because we follow the lunar calendar, and then the solar term follows the solar calendar, but actually, more accurately, we should say the Chinese follow the *lunisolar calendar* because it's a combination of the lunar calendar and the solar calendar. And the reason is, after a while, there is a mismatch and then you have to add an additional lunar month to bring the two calendars back into sync. And there is also another very complex system is the 天干地支 (tiān gān dì zhī), the *Heavenly Stems* and *Earthly Branches*. Many of you will know that if you talk about the 12 animal signs, we are using the Earthly Branches. So, there are 10 Heavenly Stems and 12 Earthly Branches. Imagine you've got two wheels, one with 10 units and the other with 12, and you move them simultaneously, one at a time. After 60 years, they match, they come back to the beginning. So that's the 甲子年 (jiǎ zǐ nián), the beginning of that cycle of 60. It combines the lunar months with the solar framework. The Moon helps to number the months and date, and it helps to date many of the festivals, for example, the Moon Festival, which is today. The Sun keeps the calendar in conversation with the seasons, the seasonal changes because the Sun's position in relation to the Earth affects our seasons, and so two days ago, the 23rd of September, was the autumn equinox.

The *24 Solar Terms* divides the year's apparent annual path into 24 segments of 15 degrees each. This diagram is taken from *Friends of UNESCO Hong Kong*, and *Hong Kong Observatory* publishes the exact date down to the minute and the second when the next solar term starts, because it is measuring the sun's position in relation to the Earth. The autumn equinox occurs when the sun appears to cross the celestial equator from north to south. It rises approximately due east and sets approximately due west. Day and night are close to equal in length. In traditional Chinese thought, this balance of light and darkness, day and night, can be understood as a moment of relative harmony between yin and yang. The concept of yin yang is crucial, it is one of the key cornerstones for Chinese culture, so that balance is very important - we're talking about yin yang balance - and the Chinese way of seeing the body, our physical health is very much about the energy flow, the yin and the yang. We don't want too much yin, we want too much yang, we want a balance. But it's important that we remember that balance is a dynamic balance; it's not fixed. If you have excessive yin, then you do a little bit of yang movements to bring your yin up. Or if you have too much heat, too much yang, then you eat food items that would help you to replenish the yin and draw and suppress the yang, et cetera, et cetera. That's what we do.

Here is the list of the 24 solar terms, and you can see four seasons, six solar terms in each season, 立春 (lì chūn), 雨水 (yǔ shuǐ), 惊蛰 (jīng zhé), 春分 (chūn fēn), 清明 (qīng míng), and 谷雨 (gǔ yǔ), and to remember them, even in primary school, we have little songs to remember, 春雨惊春清谷天 (chūn yǔ jīng chūn qīng gǔ tiān)，夏满芒夏暑相连 (xià mǎn máng xià shǔ xiāng lián)； et cetera, et cetera. Basically, four-line little poems, and then you remember, and you use one word from each of

the solar terms, plus an additional character, and that's very easy to remember. (If you're interested, you can look at the slides afterwards.)

Now, here's something very interesting. I think Britain is signed up to the *UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage*. There's a charter – from only a few years ago - but *The 24 Solar Terms* was enlisted in 2016 as an intangible cultural heritage because it acknowledges the knowledge of time and practices developed in China and is through the observation of the sun's annual motion. What was recognised in the inscription is that it's more than just a calendar system. More importantly, it's a way of life, it's a comprehensive form of intangible cultural heritage, it's the knowledge system, the associated practice, which is deeply embedded in Chinese culture that shapes the relationship between the people and the universe. In Chinese, we very often talk about 天人合一 (tiān rén hé yī), humans and nature should be at one, we should live in sync with natural changes. So, the scope of the heritage is to include traditional agriculture. Initially it was primarily fixed very much on agriculture. If you imagine when it first originated, over 1 000 years ago around the Yellow River Delta. It's very, very agriculture based and it affects our daily life and diet. Obviously, in different season you grow different plants, you eat different things. Animals would move, come back, come out of hibernation or start breeding, et cetera. Seasonal changes have a profound impact on that. And then, as human societies, we develop rituals and festivals, and because there could be a harvest, it could be a time with busy agricultural work, so there are rituals devised to encourage people to live in sync with nature.

Half of our talk today is about health practice, i.e. the *Daoyin* for the 24 Solar Terms. Some of you have been following the OU online weekly courses on 八段锦 (bā duàn jǐn) *Baduanjin qigong*. This type of qigong initially started as Daoyin, so you guide your breath, your energy flow, to make it more harmonious, and you stretch the body to make it more flexible. So ,you work on both the body and the energy in the body. So, the cultural significance is a unique world view, and the philosophy is through observing, respecting, and adapting to the natural world's cycles. It's a vital channel for understanding the harmony between humans and nature. And what is very important here is thatb it's passed down through generations; it could be through education; could be the proverbs in everyday language we us; by watching the weather: predicting whether it's going to be cold or hot and for how long are we going to have a very hot summer or very cold winter; there are a lot of songs, nursery rhymes; and community rituals. Certainly, in China right now - because they want to promote cultural tourism - there is a revival of a lot of the rituals, particularly local ones in ethnic minority regions in rural areas. One, on the one hand, this is commercially driven, on the other hand, people are genuinely becoming more interested in rituals, because it's very, very important to mark the time. I remember talking to a friend a few days ago, and he's really into rituals, and you were seeing a lot of people saying that during COVID, somehow during all those months, life just merged into a murky thing and you can't really remember what exactly happened, etc., because they were no longer able to mark significant events. And then with the 24 solar terms it is the community involvement from farmers, artisans, practitioners of traditional medicine, and entire communities will be celebrating seasonal festivals. For example, we have the beginning of spring, the spring equinox, the autumn equinox, and the solstices as well, the summer and the winter solstices, all those are key points. They don't just happen in China, they are also marked in many other communities across the world, but the Chinese have this specific system with 24 segments. They just divide the year, 365 days, into 24 segments of 15 or 16 days. It does vary slightly; sometimes it's one or two days different from the previous year. It is far more than just a historical calendar, it's a living cultural practice that continues to shape the identity, the wisdom and daily life in China, and it offers timeless insights into living in harmony with our environment.

My own research interest is looking at how these 24 solar terms are being received and practised in the UK. We would like to invite you to share your seasonal observations, reflections, creations in the bigger community in the form of written or spoken forms, still images or little visual recordings, music and art forms, it could be a recipe, could be a costume, could be something you have knitted.

It could be anything. Here is the 24 solar terms website address. If you are interested, go and have a look and you're most welcome to contact me and send your contribution and share it with the bigger community. Obviously, you retain your copyright, it's just for people to look at. So, that's the website.

Now, more importantly, let's look at what the Daoyin is for the 24 solar terms. It is a traditional Chinese health preservation system. The core idea is to synchronise the human body with the natural world by practising specific movements and breathing practises tailored to each of those 24 solar terms. The purpose is to unblock the body's meridians. Because of our poor posture, because of the way we move the body, etc. we are likely to have stagnations in the body, depending on who you are and what you do, maybe in different parts of the body, which is totally normal. But if we can use some exercise to unblock those blockages, that would be great. We want to guide the *Qi* and the blood flow throughout the body, help the body to adapt to the specific climatic and energetic changes outside, thus preventing illness, and maintaining this yin-yang balance throughout the year. We are talking about synchrony with nature, so this system, this belief system is rooted in *Daoism* and traditional Chinese medicine. (Incidentally, I think the next OU talk is about American Daoism, how it could help us to live a happier life. So, you will see if the thinking is very, very similar.)

Human health is deeply interconnected with the rhythms of nature, which bring a unique environmental quality. For example, we talk about heat, cold, rising dampness, the drying wind, etc. We need to develop a way for the human body to adapt; we wear more clothes when it's cold, we wear a raincoat when it rains, etc. But in addition to these external things, we can also do exercise, and by doing exercise, by stretching the body, focusing on our breathing, we build up resistance in ourselves against these external factors that may adversely affect our health. There are specific exercises for specific times, for example, a corresponding Daoyin movement or short sequence for each of the solar terms. The goal is to create a balance and a harmony, ultimately to proactively adjust the body's internal environment, the yin-yang balance, the Qi flow, to match the external ones, preventing the seasonal pathogens, wind, cold, dampness, etc. from causing disharmony and dis-ease. The key is 顺时养生，天人合一 (shùn shí yǎng shēng, tiān rén hé yī), we want to nourish our life, we want to live our life according to the seasonal changes to hopefully achieve harmony with nature. And then 春生夏长，秋收冬藏 (chūn shēng xià zhǎng, qiū shōu dōng cáng). Eight characters, four phrases, four words describing what is happening in nature. 春生 (chūn shēng), in the spring, life sprouts, sort of energy rises. 夏长 (xià zhǎng), in the summer, things grow, there's a lot more growth in the summer. 秋收 (qiū shōu), autumn is the time for harvest, to conserve, to converge; you want energy to come back into the body.

In a minute, we'll look at the movements and look at that, we'll have a go. I've chosen four Daoyin movements, as an example. Here, just before we get into the movement, I want to very quickly illustrate using these movements. So, the summer, the energy is rising. It's about growth. So, you see this in the illustration, our Master 张明亮 (zhāng míng liàng) is sitting there, and then one hand comes up, rises up from a sitting position, hands on the knees, and then one hand comes up, symbolising that you are trying to guide the energy to rise. Then you turn the palms out, you expand the body, one palm pushes up, one palm presses down. So, in your mind, you are expanding the chest, you're expanding the whole body. But this is in 小满 (xiǎo mǎn), in 'small fullness'. So, the heat, the energy begins to rise, the grain begins to fill. But the next one, the next two illustration is taken from the next movement is 芒种 (máng zhòng), 'grain in ear'. You imagine, you see the grain filling up a bit more. Although most of the movements in the 24 solar terms are seated practice, with this one you stand up because just to mirror what is happening in nature. The energy is rising more, there's more heat, so you expand your body more, you're standing up, you're pushing your palms up as if you're holding up the sky. Also, you look up. By looking up in this position, you will be able to open your chest a bit more and push your palms further up, and you'll be on your toes as well. Then

you slowly coming back and gather the Qi back in, etc. So hopefully the bottom two images show that more energy rises than in the top two images in the summer.

Now, let's move to look at the autumn movements. Autumn, in terms of nature, is the time for harvest. You gather, you gather. How shall I put it, even the trees in the autumn, they begin to shed their leaves because they want to cut out any wastage of energy. They want to preserve the energy to the core, to the trunk.

秋分掩耳侧倾式 (qiū fēn yǎn ěr cè qīng shì), In the autumn equinox. you cover your ears and you bend up sideways. Now, why do we do that? in terms of the TCM [traditional Chinese medicine] theory regarding the energy flow in the body, we humans get easily distracted and our eyes are busy looking at things and ears and listening etc, etc. But how do you then draw your energy back into the body? Slowly, gently lowering your eyelid is one way. Covering your ears is another way. ,are by physically covering your ears, it draws your attention back into the body. Also, your ears are related to the kidneys. Your vital energy is stored in the kidneys, in the 丹田 (dān tián), etc. So, you cover the ears and that helps you to reflect. We use the word of 内景 (nèi jǐng), internal landscape. It helps you to reflect, to look back into the body. Then you turn the body, you bend sideways. Now, why is bending sideways useful? Because the liver and gallbladder meridians travel by the side of the body. By bending sideways, you stretch those meridians and you help the energy to come back into the body. So, that is the autumn equinox.

And then the bottom 3 characters is 寒露 (hán lù), is for the next solar term, 托掌观天式 (tuō zhǎng guān tiān shì). You push your palms up and then you look at the cosmos, you look at the sky. Now, why is this? We use the words, 外导内引 (wài dǎo nèi yǐn). Externally, you use the movements to guide the body, to stretch the body. 内引 (nèi yǐn), internally, we want to draw, you guide the energy flow within the body. So, for example, in here, Master Zhang Mingliang is holding the palms together as if it's a lotus flower. Taking a deep breath in and you push the hands up and you're also looking up. These upward push, you expanse, you bring the internal with the 真气(zhēn qì). You cause the 真气(zhēn qì) to rise up to heaven, i.e. in this case, your head. And then, you bring the prayer hands together. In your mind, you are drawing this energy down. We imagine it's like an elixir 雨露 (yǔ lù), like a juice coming down, and you use that to nourish you as if the Qi falls down, as if it's a plant. So, you are drawing the Qi. coming down from the head all the way down to the body. These types of movements, they are quite small movements compared with going to the gym, pumping iron, et cetera, or running a marathon. In comparison, all these movements are very small, but the key is to bring your attention back, listen to the body.

In terms of culture, what are the cultural elements, what is reflected? In the Chinese tradition, the most beautiful state is not this perfect fullness, rather it is the *small fullness*. So, the small fullness is the name of a solar term in the summer. The first illustration you saw, that's the small fullness, because we just have enough sunlight, enough food, enough bread, enough love, everything, just about enough. And then more importantly, there's still space to grow. So, there is some autumn food there. Remember the 小满 (xiǎo mǎn), most people would think that Xiaoman, even as a human life, that is the perfect state, because if you've got everything, full to the brain, then you begin to suffer losses or something is going to go downhill, so it's always good to be on the going-up trajectory. And looking at the folk tradition in 立夏 (lì xià) at the beginning of summer, you can see it's important on the left column, on the left, you see two pictures. The people are carrying a very big scale with a basket, and you sit there to weigh yourself. Why bother to weigh yourself? That is because- particularly for older people - they want to make a record of what you weighed at the beginning of the summer, and then hopefully remind you not to lose too much weight. In the summer, it's hot across the whole of China. We talk about 苦夏 (kǔ xià), the 'bitter summer'. So,

weighing yourself first, it tells you what your weight is, and hopefully you don't lose too much - particularly children, they will continue to grow. The rest of the pictures are children and adults, playing with eggs. What are they doing? In the beginning of summer, eggs obviously are nutritious food. They also believe that the young energy rises. At this time, you'll be able to keep the egg, a raw egg, to stand it up on a surface, like you see in these bottom two pictures. They are standing up some raw eggs on the table. It's not easy, but you can do it. What it requires is concentration and also belief in yourself. We were just about to do it. I think the teacher behind looks like he can very easily stand the eggs up because he's as a Qigong Master, he could do that before us. But for us as newbies, we really had to attempt it several times.

But anyway, as for cultural practices, you know that there are different things we do to mark that. So this is the 芒种 (máng zhòng). Let's look at what happens in the summer. It's not just in 芒种 (máng zhòng). I've put a few things together. Now, summer food. When we say 24 solar terms affects how people live their life, one of the best indicators is our diet, what we eat, what we drink. In the theory of the five organs, the heart corresponds to the summer. We've got the five elements: fire corresponds to the summer as well. The five colours correspond to the five organs, and so red would correspond to the summer. In terms of flavour, the flavour of sourness corresponds to the summer. So all these things will actually manifest themselves in a meal, So, foods red in colour, sour in flavour, are good for the heart in summer. I've got a contribution from Hannah in London. She sent this image. She said, 'I've just cooked this seasonal meal, all red food for heart health.' You can see the grass, they had this meal in a park, a picnic, with friends together, with different colour food. The middle two images are from another event, another art event, linking art creation with food. And you can see again that the colour red is quite prominent there. This is what is happening in London; I talk about the ideas and then local people would then think about it, 'Oh, in my in my culture,' or 'look at the ingredients, this is what I could do'. For example, in here in the summer, we like 酸梅汤 (suān méi tāng). 酸梅汤 is plum, sour plum soup. The soup is very sour, even though we put honey in, but you still want to preserve that sourness because sour is good for the summer taste, but it's not widely available in the West. The next two photos were contributed by a student from Hungary, and she sent it in. She says she made an elderflower cordial, and somebody else said rhubarb and gooseberries could also be used. So, what she's done is pick elderflowers in her garden, and then put them together with lemon and honey, and she made it into this cordial drink. So, maybe you could also look at this in your own life, what do you do in the summer? Do you make anything different?

And then talking about rituals, do you do anything differently? Do you collect anything to make an altar? So, this is the summer solstice. I've received some collections of images as well, including by people in the UK of the rituals that they practise. Did you do anything special to mark this day? So, because in nature, the yang energy reaches its peak, and then the yin energy begins to grow.

Now, let's come to the autumn. In the autumn, 秋分掩耳侧倾式 (qiū fēn yǎn ěr cè qīng shì), we talk about covering the ears. The purpose of covering the ears is to stop ourselves being too much distracted by the external world. We want to turn the attention back onto our body, focusing on the internal landscape, 内景 (nèi jǐng). You cover your ears, you bend sideways, and you come back, you turn the other way. Everything is practised three times

Now, we want to also talk about autumn. In the autumn, the beginning of autumn, 立秋 (lì qiū). In the summer in Suzhou, people would weigh themselves. It's like a hopeful blessing. It is believed that doing so protects against lethargy and the poor appetite typical of the sweltering months ahead in China. And then in the autumn, if you look at the bottom right picture of autumn weighing-in in Suzhou as well. Now, that is not superstitious, but very, very practical in the sense that the differences reveal how much weight was lost during the bitter summer. I hope it doesn't happen to little children because they should continue to grow. But for adults, older people, they may lose quite a lot of weight. But if you lose the weight, then the heat suppresses the hunger - you've got no

appetite so you're eating less - and then when the autumn comes, we have this expression 贴秋膘 (tiē qiū biāo), so you will eat more, you will have this autumn layer of fat around you to help you through the bitter winter. So, autumn fattening is what we do, it is this deliberate eating of nourishing meat and hearty food to restore weight and lost energy. So, they show how ordinary people would use seasonal markers, not just to observe nature, but to tune their everyday life to their bodies, to the rhythm. This living example of Chinese wisdom still makes sense today. And for me, any good excuse for delicious meals is great.

Another thing I want to talk about is tea. When most people talk about Chinese tea, they immediately think about green tea. And we think about green tea, we would highly prize the spring tea 春茶 (chūn chá), particularly 明前茶 (míng qián chá) before the 清明 (qīng míng), which is another solar term. Spring tea is prized for its delicate flavour, its delicate taste, but autumn tea is also highly prized for different reasons. It's not so much the delicate flavour, but the richness. Because the leaves, the plants will be older, the leaves will be bigger, and particularly the stems, and especially if you're making Oolong tea, the stem would have a lot more nutrients there. So, autumn tea usually has this lingering aroma, which is rich and mellow in flavour. More importantly, it can withstand multiple infusions like 大红袍 (dà hóng páo) and 铁观音 (tiě guān yīn). You can typically infuse them seven, eight times, and it's still very good. It still smells very nice. It is a nice scent, and it also has the flavour there. Tieguanyin as well. Autumn tea is valued for its aroma. And then at the top you have the 普洱 (pǔ ěr) you can also enjoy all year round.

寒露托掌观天式 (hán lù tuō zhǎng guān tiān shì). OK, very quickly. So, this is the autumn movement which we went through before. In terms of folk traditions, you will eat the dragon-eyed food and you make a rice wine, and in 白露 (bái lù). So, these are the autumn foods. Eating sweet potatoes will be particularly good. because they are supposed to nourish the qi of the spleen and the stomach, the body's energy factory, and it helps to prepare for the winter. Lotus fruit is also very good. Mild nourishing tonification for the lungs. Lungs are related to the autumn.

Other cultural practices typically are the mid-autumn festivals, you fly kites, you stand up eggs, etc.

I know that Professor Kan has got some announcements to make so I'll stop sharing.

KAN Qian
Thank you very much, Feixia, for very interesting and very practical tips. Thank you.

I just want to use this period of time to share Open University courses and the forthcoming two talks with you all.

Very briefly, we have a range of different courses, some with credits, some are certificates, some are online short courses without credits. I'm just going to quickly go through the list.

We have a Beginner's Chinese 30 credits. You can do it as an option with other qualifications, with some qualifications, not all, but within the Open programme.

Then Intermediate Chinese, which only starts this very academic year from October. And on both of these modules, the registration starts every March for the October start. So, if you and any friends or relatives or people you know who may be interested, let them know.

This year we have only just started another very useful certificate and not just in Chinese, but in French, German, Spanish as well. It's called OU certificate. If you just Google OU certificate in Chinese, in French, then you will find the link. And it's 60 credits, which includes both the beginners and intermediate modules.

And then we have certificate of higher education in Chinese with Business and with Law, and that's together 120 credits.

In addition to credit learning, we have a range of short courses in not only Chinese, but also other languages. The link is here.

So that's our modules.

For the forthcoming public talks, Fei Xia has already mentioned the next talk on the 23rd of October. And the topic is *How ancient Daoist wisdom can help us live our best life*. It's going to be delivered by Professor Elijah Siegler, who is an expert in Buddhism, especially to do with North America, from the College of Charleston, USA.

And on Friday, 27th of November, there will be a very fascinating talk. The topic is: The Last Emperor of China: Twilight of the Forbidden City by Paul French, a well-established author. He's published a few books.

Both of those talks are already on our Eventbrite page. If you want to or have any issues, you could e-mail us at online-ci@open.ac.uk

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