

TRADITIONAL CHINESE FESTIVALS

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THE HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL (中元節)

The Hungry Ghost Festival (中元節), Gui Jie (鬼節) is a traditional Buddhist and Taoist festival held in certain East Asian countries. According to the Chinese calendar, the Ghost Festival falls on the 15th night of the seventh month and is generally regarded as the Ghost Month (鬼月). Distinct from both the Qingming Festival (or Tomb Sweeping Day, in spring) and Double Ninth Festival (in autumn) in which living descendants pay homage to their deceased ancestors, during Ghost Festival, the deceased are believed to visit the living.

Intrinsic to the Ghost Month is veneration of the dead, where traditionally the filial piety of descendants extends to their ancestors even after their deaths. On the fifteenth day the realms of Heaven and Hell and the realm of the living are open, in preparation of the visit, various rituals are performed; ritualistic food offerings, burning incense, joss paper and even papier-mâché form of material items such as clothes, gold and other fine goods.

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

RESEARCH FOCUS:

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HISTORICAL ORIGIN

The timing and origin story of the modern Ghost Festival, ultimately derives from the major Mahayana Buddhist scripture known as the Yulanpen Sutra.

The sutra records the time when Maudgalyayana (one of Buddha's closest disciples) achieves abhijñā (higher knowledge) and uses his new found powers to search for his deceased parents. Maudgalyayana discovers that his deceased mother was reborn into the preta or hungry ghost realm. She was in a wasted condition and Maudgalyayana tried to help her by giving her a bowl of rice. Unfortunately as a preta, she was unable to eat the rice as it was transformed into burning coal. Maudgalyayana then asks the Buddha to help him; whereupon Buddha explains how one is able to assist one's current parents and deceased parents in this life and in one's past seven lives by willingly offering food to the monastic community during Pravarana (the end of the monsoon season), which usually occurs on the 15th day of the seventh month; whereby the monastic community transfers the merits to the deceased.

OTHER RELIGIOUS AFFINITIES

Taoism, Daoism (Japanese Taoism), Chinese Folk Religion (a polyphyletic term used to describe the diversity of practices) and Hinduism in India.

OBSERVANCES

During this month, ghosts are free to roam the earth where they seek food and entertainment. These ghosts are believed to be ancestors of those who forgot to pay tribute to them after they died, or those who were never given a proper ritual send-off. Family members offer prayers to their deceased relatives, offer food and drink and burn hell bank notes and other forms of joss paper. Elaborate meals (often vegetarian meals) would be served with empty seats for each of the deceased in the family treating the deceased as if they are still living; samples of food are also placed on an offering table to please the ghosts and ward off bad luck. Ancestor worship is what distinguishes Qingming Festival from Ghost Festival because the latter includes paying respects to all deceased, including the same and younger generations, while the former only includes older generations.

LOCALE ORIENTED CELEBRATIONS

In some East Asian countries today, live performances are held and everyone is invited to attend. The first row of seats are always empty as this is where the ghosts sit. The shows are always put on at night and at high volumes as the sound is believed to attract and please the ghosts. Some shows include Chinese opera, dramas, and in some areas, even burlesque shows. Traditionally Chinese opera was the main source of entertainment but the newer shows, concerts, dramas, wars and so forth are referred to as Merry-making. These acts are better known as “Getai”.

JOSS PAPER

Ghosts roam the earth freely where they seek food and entertainment. Existing family members typically offer prayers and offerings to their deceased relatives; offerings include food, drinks and burning hell notes and other forms of joss paper (paper houses, cars and even the latest fashion wears and first-world technological wonders).



JOSS PAPER ART

The prominent Chinese character you can see above is the word “shòu”(壽) – translates to “longevity” in English. Similar one-word symbols such as “wealth”, “success”, “fortune” and “happiness” are also used occasionally. As you can tell, typography is not the only design element present, visual images and emblems decorate the surface too. However, with that being said, visuals very much represent the same ideas denoted by their typographic counterparts. Take for example the deer symbolism in the background; the deer symbolises success, as the pronunciation for deer in Mandarin is “lù”(鹿), the same as wealth.

Joss paper art as a source of aesthetic inspiration will be invaluable; notably its use of typographic and symbolic representation.

FOLKLORE

Though much of the Hungry Ghost Festival's origin myth is lost to time, many attribute the holiday's focus on the destitute and less fortunate to the influence of Buddhism. Specifically, there's a story about Mu Lian, a monk who rescued his mother from hell. Horrified to find his mother committed to the fiery depths of the underworld, Mu Lian appeals to Buddha for help. He's told in response that only the power of joy harnessed through the collective effort of mass prayer could save her. When the ritual is performed by the Buddha and his disciples on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, Mu Lian's mother is released. Many point to this story as the reason why the Hungry Ghost Festival focuses so much on easing the suffering of the wandering ghosts, as well as exonerating their spirits.

CLOSING RITUALS

Fourteen days after the festival, to make sure all the hungry ghosts find their way back to hell, people float water lanterns and set them outside their houses. These lanterns are made by setting a lotus flower-shaped lantern on a paper boat. The lanterns are used to direct the ghosts back to the underworld, and when they go out, it symbolizes that they have found their way back.

BUDDHISM

With the rise in popularity of Buddhism, the idea became popular that souls would live in space until reincarnation. Buddhism has the idea that hungry ghosts can emerge from neglect or desertion of ancestors, therefore, Buddhists would hold ceremonies to relieve ghosts from suffering, many of them holding ceremonies in the afternoon or at night (as it is believed that the ghosts are released from hell when the sun sets). Altars are built for the deceased and priests and monks alike perform rituals for the benefit of ghosts. Monks and priests often throw rice or other small foods into the air in all directions to distribute them to the ghosts.

BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

Buddhist cosmology is the description of the shape and evolution of the Universe according to the Buddhist scriptures and commentaries. It consists of temporal and spatial cosmology: the temporal cosmology being the division of the existence of a 'world' into four discrete moments (the creation, duration, dissolution, and state of being dissolved.) The spatial cosmology consists of various realms be it earth, heaven or hell. The Hungry Ghosts are mostly dwellers on the earthly realm, though due to their mental state they perceive it very differently from humans and typically live for the most part in deserts and wastelands.

WHEEL OF LIFE

Wheel of life (Bhāvacakra) is a symbolic representation of cyclic existence. Across the Buddhist world, death is regarded as an essential transition to another point on the Wheel of Life and does not hold the sense of finality as it does in Western eschatology. A ghost in Buddhism is in a transitional state towards other incarnations on the Wheel of Life. When loved ones die, the living have a duty to take part in rituals which will assist the transition of the deceased spirit from tormented, yearning ghost to happy ancestor.

A HUNGRY GHOST

Should the above transition not be accomplished, a spirit that has been unable to rid itself of earthly desires is therefore condemned to roam in a perpetual state of unsatisfied yearning. Driven by intense emotional needs in an animalistic way, “*ēguī*” (餓鬼), “hungry ghost”, are not to be confused with the generic term for “ghost” or damnation, “*guī*” (鬼) (i.e. the residual spirit of a deceased ancestor). The understanding is that all people become such a regular ghost when they die, and would then slowly weaken and eventually die a second time. Hungry ghosts, by contrast, are a much more exceptional case, and would only occur in very unfortunate circumstances.



*Realm of Hungry Ghosts; Buddhist Cosmology
(from The Six Realms of Rebirth)*

TYPES OF SPIRITS

It is believed that the soul contains elements of both yin and yang. The yin is the “kui”, or demon part, and the yang is the “shen”, or spirit part. When death occurs, the kui should return to earth, and the shen to the grave or family shrine. If a ghost is neglected, it will become a kui. The shen, or ancestral spirit watches over its descendants, and can bring good fortune if properly worshipped. **There are three main groups of hungry ghosts:**

- Ghosts of no wealth (無財鬼)
- Ghosts of little wealth (少財鬼)
- Ghosts of much wealth (多財鬼)

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

Filial piety seems to be a recurring theme in this traditional festival. If we set aside the typical superstitions that people are afraid of (bad luck, bad omen or misfortune), the Hungry Ghost Festival is very much about appeasing and pleasing the visiting ancestors. In fact, the whole reason why this festival is even celebrated in the first place has links to filial piety. Conversely it is ‘unfilial piety’ that results in succeeding generations having to make up for what their forefathers failed to do; lost souls and even the “hungry ghost” whom are described to have long needle-thin necks are all direct implications of disobedient progeny who did not provide proper ritualistic send offs and offerings upon their progenitor's death.