

Ghost Month and the Hungry Ghost Festival

In the seventh month of the traditional lunar calendar (usually around July or August), China and other Southeast Asian countries observe what is known as Ghost Month. During this month, it is believed that the gates of the underworld open, and the spirits of those who have died come to roam the world of the living. Spirits who may be angry or displeased are honored alongside family ancestors. On the fifteenth day of the month, the Hungry Ghost Festival occurs, which entails making offerings to the hungry ghosts and ancestors, street fairs and puppet shows, music and dancing, extravagant feasts, and religious rituals and prayers. The entire month is a time for the living to connect with those that have passed and to continue practicing community death care for ancestors. This prominent Chinese festival is a unique blend of Buddhist, Taoist, and secular culture and incorporates traditional beliefs about death and the afterlife with modern ones. The theological origins of the Hungry Ghost Festival are fascinating and shed light on the nature of the modern day tradition.

The history behind the Hungry Ghost Festival is complex, and the tradition likely evolved from various systems of belief and religious practice. In the Buddhist tradition, it is believed that the festival began with a Buddhist monk named Mulian, who had the ability to communicate with the dead. He discovered that his mother was being tortured by angry and vengeful ghosts, and found a way to rescue her from her suffering by asking the Buddha for help. To honor Buddha for aiding the rescue, Mulian continued to make offerings every year to the hungry ghosts. Taoism offers up the idea of the three realms of existence, which become connected during the time of Hungry Ghost Month. The way that the festival is celebrated varies across geographic location and cultural history. However, in every iteration of the festival, communities come together to practice honoring, remembering, and caring for the dead.

In Buddhism and Taoism, it is important to uphold proper funeral and burial rites as well as continuing to pay respect to deceased ancestors. If a person dies without receiving proper burial rights or is neglected by their living descendants, they can become angry. When a person dies, it is believed that their soul undergoes a many week's long journey to the underworld. After a series of trials and tests, they make it to the afterlife. However, the souls still require things such as food, drink, and money in the underworld. Those still living are responsible for providing the spirits these offerings which will keep them satisfied in death. If a soul is neglected or does

not have any family to make the offerings, they may become hungry, thirsty, and angry. This can lead to some of the spirits wishing to cause trouble for humans.

On the first day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the doors of the underworld open and free all of the ghosts. Most of the ghosts released are believed to be the ones who are neglected and displeased. When they are released from the underworld, they wander hungry looking for food and sometimes want to harm or intimidate humans. Ghost Month is a time where people tend to exercise extra caution. Some people may avoid swimming and staying out after dark for fear of a ghost attacking them. People also tend to avoid major life events during this month such as surgery, buying/selling a house, or getting married. In addition to being cautious, people who celebrate the Hungry Ghost Festival provide offerings for both the angry ghosts who may visit them and their own ancestors.

On the fifteenth day of the month, the “Hungry Ghost Festival” or the “Festival of the Worship of Good Brothers” happens. On this day, impressive meals and foods are prepared as offerings for the ghost visitors. People create altars outside their homes and place the prepared food alongside drinks, candles, incense, flowers, cigarettes, fruit, and paper effigies. Paper bank notes are burned as an offering to the ghosts which are thought to be valuable in the underworld and allow them to get any resources they may need. Temples are filled with lanterns, candles, and incense to help guide the ghosts and appease them. Some priests may perform certain rituals, prayers, or blessings to honor the souls of the deceased.

In addition to the altar creations and offerings that are made, there is a very lively celebration in the towns. Puppet shows are typically held which depict folk tales of the festival. There is often dancing and music as well as street fair vendors selling treats and food. Paper lanterns are floated on the rivers to help guide the spirits and please those who were victims of drowning.

After the day's festivities, a huge feast is held at home. Families often leave empty seats at the table in honor of their ancestors as they indulge in lavish displays of food, drink, and dessert. They might place photos of their deceased family members and bow to them before eating. Family members may also tell stories of their ancestors and spend the meal reflecting on the life they lived.

On the final day of the month, the ghosts are guided back to the underworld with lanterns and lotus flowers made from paper. They are lit with a candle and are meant to be beacons that

show the ghosts where to return home. When the light on the flowers and lamps go out, it means that the ghosts are gone, and have made a successful return to the underworld. This moment concludes Ghost Month, and allows people to resume their normal daily lifestyles and routines.

The Hungry Ghost Festival and Ghost Month are times when the divide between the realm of the living and the dead is permeated. It demonstrates the importance of deathcare and respect for the dead in Southeast Asian culture while offering an opportunity to reflect on mortality. Reminding people that even in death, they will be cared for each year by a community of both family and strangers may help to ease fear and anxiety around dying. It shows that those who have passed are still an important and vital part of the social fabric and that they are loved by those who continue to live on. Ghost Month is a time for deep community bonding and reciprocal care, and reminds each person of the thin line between life and death.

Citations

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