

Ghost Festival

China Uncensored Staff

The Ghost Festival (Yu Lan Festival in Chinese) also known as the Hungry Ghost Festival is a traditional Chinese festival and holiday celebrated by Chinese in many countries. In the Chinese calendar, the Ghost Festival is on the 15th night of the seventh lunar month (14th in southern China).

In Chinese tradition, the fifteenth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar is called Ghost Day and the seventh month in general is regarded as the Ghost Month, in which ghosts and spirits, including those of deceased ancestors, emerge from the lower realm. Distinct from both the Qingming Festival (in Spring) and Zhongyuan Festival (in Autumn) in which living descendants pay homage to their deceased ancestors, on Ghost Day, the deceased are believed to visit the living.

On the fifteenth day the realms of Heaven and Hell and the realm of the living are open and both Taoists and Buddhists would perform rituals to transmute and absolve the sufferings of the deceased. Intrinsic to Ghost Month is ancestor worship, where traditionally the filial piety of descendants extends to their ancestors even after their deaths.

Activities during the month include preparing ritualistic food offerings, burning incense, and burning joss paper, a papier-mache form of material items such as clothes, gold and other fine goods for the visiting spirits of the ancestors. Elaborate meals (often vegetarian) would be served with empty seats for each of the family deceased as if they are still living.

Ancestor worship is what distinguishes the Qingming Festival from the Ghost Festival because the latter includes paying respects to all deceased, including the same and younger generations, while the former only includes older generations. Other festivities may include, buying and releasing miniature paper boats and lanterns on water, which signifies giving directions to the lost ghosts and spirits of the ancestors and other deities.

Origin:

In the Ullambana Sutra, there is a descriptive account of a Buddhist monk named Maudgalyāyana, originally a Brahman youth who later ordained, and became one of the Buddha's chief disciples. Mahāmaudgalyāyana was also known for having clairvoyant powers, an uncommon trait amongst monks.

After he attained Arhatship, he began to think deeply of his parents, and wondered what

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happened to them. He used his clairvoyance to see where they were reborn and found his father in the heavenly realms i.e. the realm of the gods. However, his mother had been reborn in a lower realm, known as the Realm of Hungry Ghosts. His mother took on the form of a hungry ghost (preta) – so called because it could not eat due to its highly thin & fragile throat which no food could pass through, yet it was always hungry because it had a fat belly. His mother had been greedy with the money he left her. He had instructed her to kindly host any Buddhist monks that ever came her way, but instead she withheld her kindness and her money. It was for this reason she was reborn in the realm of hungry ghosts.

In the Ullambana Sutra, Maudgalyāyana obtains instruction from Buddhas, making food offerings to the sangha on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

During this month, the gates of hell are opened up and 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. They have long needle-thin necks because they have not been fed by their family, or as a punishment so that they are unable to swallow.

Family members offer prayers to their deceased relatives, offer food and drink and burn hell bank notes and other forms of joss paper. Joss paper items are believed to have value in the afterlife, considered to be very similar in some aspects to the material world.

Families also pay tribute to other unknown wandering ghosts so that these homeless souls do not intrude on their lives and bring misfortune.

A large feast is held for the ghosts on the fourteenth day of the seventh month, when people brings samples of food and places them on an offering table to please the ghosts and ward off bad luck.