

# Hungry Ghost Festival

Zhōngyuánjié 中元节

**Celebrants believe that during the annual Hungry Ghost Festival the gates of hell are thrown open, and ghosts are once again free to roam and may prey on the living. People hold feasts to fete both deities and ghosts.**

**T**he annual Hungry Ghost Festival (Feast of the Wandering Souls, Zhong Yuan) is perhaps second only to Chinese New Year as the most popular Chinese celebration. It is celebrated for thirty days starting on the first day of the seventh moon of the Chinese lunar calendar (usually around August). The festival has

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**Suplicants come to a temple in southern China to burn joss (incense) sticks to please their ancestors. They also bring food and drink to feed the hungry spirits.**

PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



roots in Chinese forms of social life, Daoist folk religion, and Buddhism. People believe that during the time of the festival the gates of hell (purgatory or the underworld) are thrown open, and ghosts—“good brothers”—are once again free to roam the realm of the living.

The Hungry Ghost Festival is an inauspicious time when hungry ghosts may prey on the living, driven by resentment and anger. Couples do not have weddings during this time, and people circulate ghost stories of mishaps and bad luck to keep the living alert. Particularly vulnerable are children, and parents are careful to prevent them from swimming in the open sea or camping in forests, for example.

To appease the ghosts, people make offerings outside of homes at nearby road junctions, country lanes, and open spaces. People also take care not to invite the ghosts into the homes. Clan and trade associations and neighborhood groups have more elaborate celebrations that last for a few days. They build temporary sheds in open spaces to house deities. The deities, made of papier-mâché, are burnt at the end of the festival. The chief deity—called “Phor Tor Kong” in the Hokkien language—is the keeper of purgatory who keeps watch over the wandering ghosts. People hold feasts to fete both deities and ghosts. An assortment of foods is laid out, including rice, noodles, meat dishes, sweet cakes, fruits, wine, and other drinks as well as joss sticks, paper money, and paper clothes. In addition, entertainment, such as traditional Chinese opera, singing bands, and open-air film showings, is provided. In addition to fulfilling ritual obligations,

the Hungry Ghost Festival sometimes is used to raise funds and awareness to support concerns about the well-being of diasporic (scattered) Chinese communities, particularly concerning Chinese ethnicity, education, and culture.

**YEOH Seng-Guan**

## Further Reading

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