



The Hungry Ghost Festival

中元節 *Zhong Yuan Jie*

Conversations · the seventh month

WHEN The whole seventh lunar month — the gates are held to open on the first day and close before the eighth month begins.

For one month the gates of Hell are held to stand open and the uncared-for dead come out. Notice the phrase: uncared for. Not wicked. Nobody has been feeding them.

01 What you will see

This one is public and you cannot miss it — which makes it the easiest of the four to ask about without intruding.

- Paper money burned at the roadside, often in a red-painted bin.
- Food set out on the pavement, and joss incense left burning at kerbs and void decks.
- Getai 歌臺 — loud open-air concerts staged through the month.
- The front row of seats at a getai left conspicuously empty.
- It runs for a month, not a day, and it is not aimed at anyone's own ancestors.

The words your friend will use

Two words carry the whole festival.

Uncared for

The book's own translation of the situation, and the key to it: these are spirits who have received no offerings of food or money from friends or relatives all year. Their problem is neglect, not wickedness.

Getai 歌臺

The concerts. They are staged to entertain the spirits so that they will leave the living alone — which tells you the mood underneath is not welcome but appeasement.

Kui 鬼

A spirit still in the Yin World, not yet released to the Western Paradise.

Nobody says the ghosts are their own

The book makes a quiet observation worth carrying into the conversation. These are the gates of Hell being opened, and no one wants to believe their own ancestors are in Hell — so the spirits released are held to be the uncared-for, someone else's dead. It is a tender piece of self-protection, and pointing it out triumphantly would be cruel. Notice it, and let it inform how gently you ask.

Where the two meet

Almost everything here is shared with Qing Ming. Two things are specific to this month, and one of them is the strongest point of contact in the whole book.

Is there life after death?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes, and the spirit can be in need after it.	Yes. This is common ground and it is not small.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Are the living world and the spirit world genuinely separate?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes — which is why a gate has to be opened for one to enter the other.	Yes. And the Bible treats the boundary as real, not imaginary.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Can the dead be contacted?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes, and during this month they come to you.	It is possible — the medium at Endor did call up Samuel. That is precisely why it is forbidden: the prohibition assumes it can be done.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Should the dead be prayed to?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes, and fed, and appeased.	No. It is named an abomination. Not ineffective — forbidden.
HERE THEY PART	
Do the gates of Hell open?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Once a year, for a month.	No. They do not open at any time.
HERE THEY PART	

Is Hell a place of torment?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes.

BOTH HOLD THIS

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

Yes — agreed, and without qualification.

04

The hinge

The Bible forbids calling up the dead because it can be done, not because it cannot.

This is the single most useful thing you can know for this month. A friend who burns money at the kerb is not being told by Scripture that the spirit world is make-believe — the medium at Endor called up Samuel and Samuel came. The boundary is real, the traffic across it is real, and God's response is to forbid it. That is a far more serious answer than dismissal, and it is one your friend can actually recognise. Where the road ends is here: those who have gone before us cannot be moved by anything we burn. The living still can.

05

Things you could actually say

Easier than the others, because the festival is in the street and asking about it is not intrusive.

Why is the front row always left empty?

Is the food for anyone in particular, or for whoever comes?

If somebody has been fed properly all year, do they still come out this month?

Can I ask — do you think of them as dangerous, or as sad?

I always thought Christians said all this was imaginary. We don't, actually. There is a story in our Bible where a medium calls up a dead prophet and he really comes. What God says about it surprised me. Want to hear it?

Leave it open

Leave it there. You have said something that contradicts what your friend expects a Christian to say, which is worth more than finishing the argument.

Condensed from Spiritual Conversations with Practitioners of Chinese Folk Religion (Malcolm Goh, 2025), chapter: Hungry Ghost Festival.