



All Souls' Day

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Conversations · Tomb Sweeping Day · the Cold Food Festival

WHEN The 104th day after the winter solstice — usually the first week of April.

Once a year the tombs are swept, food is laid out, and paper money is burned. The money is the part worth asking about — it is not a gift. It is a bribe, and it is burned because nobody is sure.

01 What you will see

The first step of the method is to notice, and to say that you noticed. Not to ask yet.

- The grave has been cleaned — weeded, washed, the lettering repainted.
- Food is set out at the tomb: real food, and enough of it.
- Joss incense is lit and left standing.
- Paper money is burned, and often paper models too — a house, a car, a phone, a watch.
- It happens on one day of the year, not whenever someone feels like going.

The words your friend will use

The words your friend will use. Knowing them is most of what it takes to ask a real question instead of a vague one.

Hun 魂

The spirit. It leaves the body at death and goes on into the Yin World. Many hold there are three, which is how one part can be suffering while another receives food at the grave and a third inhabits the tablet at home.

Po 魄

The bodily soul, which stays with the remains. Incense is offered toward the Po — but it is the Hun that is held to actually receive food.

Yin World 陰間

Where the Hun goes at death. It faces the first of ten courts, and misdeeds are atoned for across eighteen levels.

Shen 神

What an ancestor becomes on reaching the Western Paradise. A Shen can be prayed to, and can bless descendants.

Kui 鬼

What a spirit becomes if it is sent further down instead.

Western Paradise 西方極樂

The destination. A spirit may reach it by completing its stipulated suffering — or by paying its way out.

Veneration is not worship, and your friend may be doing either

The book is careful here and so should you be. Ancestral veneration remembers the dead with thanks. Ancestral worship prays to them. Three things tell them apart: whether the ancestors are prayed to as deities; whether money and paper goods are burned for them; and whether incense and food are offered. If none of those is happening, you are watching someone honour their grandmother, and treating it as worship will end the conversation before it starts.

Where the two meet

What is striking about this festival is how much of it a Christian already believes. The agreements are not a diplomatic opening — they are real, and there are more of them than differences.

Does a person's spirit outlive the body?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes. At death the Hun leaves and goes on into the Yin World.

BOTH HOLD THIS

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

Yes. The body returns to the dust it was formed from; the spirit does not end with it.

Is there a judgment?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes. The spirit faces the first court of the Yin World, where its misdeeds are weighed.

BOTH HOLD THIS

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

Yes. Every person comes before the judgment seat — a day of reckoning is exactly what the good news is about.

Are misdeeds actually punished?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes, atoned for across the eighteen levels.

BOTH HOLD THIS

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

Yes. Hell is described as burning sulphur, torment day and night without reprieve.

Can the sentence be shortened?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes — by completing the suffering, or by paying the guards and judges. This is what the burnt money is for.

HERE THEY PART

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

No. It is not temporary and it is not negotiable. Nobody sent there comes out.

Can the living do anything for the dead?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes. Offerings reach them, and burnt goods make the Yin World bearable.

HERE THEY PART

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

No. Prayer to the dead is forbidden outright. Where they have gone cannot be changed by us.

Do a person's deeds count for anything?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes — good deeds earn entry to the Western Paradise.

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

Where you go rests on Christ, not on your record. But what you receive there is related to what you did.

HERE THEY PART

04

The hinge

The burnt money is a bribe.

That is not a slur, it is the stated purpose: it is offered to the guards of the Yin World to shorten a sentence. Which means the Christian answer is not that bribing a judge is foolish. It is that this Judge came down and served the sentence himself, so there is nothing left to pay. A bribe buys a lighter sentence from a judge who can still be moved. What is on offer here is a finished one from a Judge who cannot be — because he already paid it.

05

Things you could actually say

Every one of these is a question except the last, and the last only comes if the question before it has been answered.

Who taught you to do this — your mother, or your grandmother?

When you burn the money, is it for one particular person, or for all of them?

Do you know whether he has moved on yet, or is he still in the Yin World?

Can I ask something I have wondered about? If the suffering is for a set time, does the money shorten it, or does it just make it easier while it lasts?

Christians think there is a reckoning too, and that misdeeds are really punished. The part we could never get past is that we could never pay it ourselves. Would you want to hear what we think happened about that?

Leave it open

You will not finish this at the graveside, and you should not try. The fifth step of the method is to leave it open — the point is that your friend keeps thinking after you have gone home.

Condensed from Spiritual Conversations with Practitioners of Chinese Folk Religion (Malcolm Goh, 2025), chapter: All Souls' Day.