

Welcome.

I'm Becky Floyd, director of Death Education Central, and I'd like to invite you to walk with me through an exhibition unlike any other.

Every 7th Lunar Month, across parts of China and throughout Chinese communities around the world, families prepare offerings, temples fill with incense, stages come alive with music, and lanterns illuminate the night. To an outside observer, it may seem like a festival of ghosts. But as we'll discover together, the story is far richer—and far more human.

This exhibition is called **Ghost Month: A Guided Exploration of the Hungry Ghost Festival**.

It isn't a haunted house tour, and it isn't an attempt to tell you what to believe. Instead, it is an invitation to encounter one of the world's great ritual traditions through the eyes of history, anthropology, religion, and the people who continue to practice it today.

As your guide, I also want to make one promise.

Throughout this journey, we'll distinguish carefully between ancient scriptures, medieval stories, contemporary family traditions, public celebrations, and the interpretations of scholars. Traditions grow and change over time, and one of the greatest lessons anthropology teaches us is that there is rarely a single "official" version of a living tradition. Rather than searching for one definitive Ghost Month, we'll encounter a family of related practices that have evolved across centuries while continuing to express enduring human concerns.

As we move through these galleries, I invite you to notice not only what is unfamiliar, but also what feels surprisingly familiar. Every culture develops ways of remembering the dead, caring for ancestors, confronting loss, and strengthening the bonds that connect generations. The forms may differ, but the questions are deeply human.

So if you're ready...

The gates are open.

Let's begin.

GALLERY I

Sacred Time

Before we can understand Ghost Month, we need to understand something more fundamental:

Sacred time.

Every culture marks certain moments of the year as different from ordinary time.

The winter solstice.

The spring equinox.

Harvest festivals.

Days of remembrance.

These are not simply dates on a calendar. They are moments when communities step out of everyday life and enter ritual time—a different rhythm that connects them to ancestors, to nature, to one another, and to the stories that give meaning to human life.

Ghost Month belongs to this universal human pattern.

Across many Chinese communities, the seventh lunar month is understood as a season when the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead becomes unusually permeable. During this time, families make offerings, communities gather, and acts of remembrance and generosity take on special significance. But exactly what this means—and how it is expressed—varies widely depending on history, region, and religious tradition.

As we'll see throughout this exhibition, there is no single Ghost Month.

Instead, there is a rich constellation of related traditions shaped by Buddhism, Daoism, Chinese folk religion, local customs, migration, and centuries of cultural change. Our task is not to reduce that diversity to one story, but to appreciate how these different expressions illuminate shared human concerns.

Today, many people move through life according to work schedules, school calendars, and digital reminders. Yet seasonal rituals remind us that another kind of time still exists—a time measured not by productivity, but by memory, relationship, and return.

Ghost Month invites participants to pause the ordinary routines of life and remember that the living are part of a much larger moral community, one that includes ancestors, family, neighbors, and even those who have been forgotten.

That is where our journey begins.

Card I

Seasonal Opening

Let's pause for a moment at our first lantern.

One of the most striking features of Ghost Month is the widespread belief that the seventh lunar month is a special season—a time when the ordinary boundaries between worlds become more permeable.

Exactly how this is understood varies from one community to another. Some traditions speak of the gates of the underworld opening. Others emphasize opportunities for ritual care, acts of generosity, or remembering both ancestors and wandering spirits. These ideas should not be treated as a single uniform belief, but together they help explain why this particular month carries such ritual significance.

Anthropologists call this **sacred time**—periods set apart from ordinary life in which different relationships, responsibilities, and possibilities come into focus.

Card II

Worlds in Relation

One of the biggest surprises for many first-time visitors is that Ghost Month is not primarily about frightening ghosts.

Instead, it is about relationships.

Relationships between parents and children.

Between the living and the dead.

Between families and communities.

Between remembrance and responsibility.

As we move through later galleries, we'll discover that many rituals are less concerned with fear than with care—providing food, offerings, prayers, performances, or acts of generosity that acknowledge continuing obligations extending beyond death.

These practices ask an enduring human question:

What responsibilities, if any, survive the death of those we love?

Different traditions answer that question differently, but the question itself is nearly universal.

Card III

Many Ghost Months

Before we continue, there's one final point I'd like to emphasize.

There is no single, unchanging Hungry Ghost Festival.

The brief *Ullambana Sutra*, later stories about Mulian, medieval temple festivals, household rituals, Singaporean getai performances, paper offerings in Hong Kong, and family observances in Yunnan all represent different moments in a long and evolving history.

Throughout this exhibition, we'll take care to distinguish these voices rather than blending them together. Sometimes they agree. Sometimes they emphasize different aspects of the tradition. Together, they reveal not confusion, but the remarkable adaptability of a living cultural heritage.

Our goal is not to discover the "one true Ghost Month."

Our goal is to understand how communities across time and place have continually reimagined what it means to remember, care for, and remain connected with the dead.

"We have begun with time—with the season that makes these relationships visible. But to understand why the seventh month became so closely associated with care for the dead, we need to turn to one of the texts that helped shape its history. In our next gallery, we'll encounter the brief Buddhist scripture known as the *Ullambana Sutra*."