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Honoring the Ancestors: The Yulanpen Festival and Chinese Spiritual Traditions

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Abstract:

The Yulanpen Festival (**盂**兰盆节), also known as the Ghost Festival or Ullambana, stands as one of China's most spiritually profound and culturally rich traditional observances. Rooted in the Buddhist Ullambana Sūtra and deeply influenced by Confucian ethics and Daoist cosmology, the festival centers on the value of filial piety and the enduring connection between the living and the dead. This paper examines the historical development, religious significance, and evolving practices of the Yulanpen Festival in both Chinese and diasporic contexts. Through its diverse rituals—including ancestral offerings, sutra chanting, and ritual operatic performances—the festival serves as a powerful expression of compassion, karmic redemption, and social cohesion. It also offers a compelling example of how ancient religious traditions adapt and persist amid the forces of modernity. Drawing on historical texts, canonical scriptures, and ethnographic case studies from Hong Kong, this study highlights the Yulanpen Festival as a vital conduit for cultural continuity and spiritual renewal.

Keywords:
Yulanpen Festival, Ghost Festival, Ullambana, Buddhist, Confucian, UNESCO, China

1. Introduction

The Yulanpen Festival, commonly known as the Ghost Festival, is a significant cultural and religious event in China, closely associated with ancestor worship. It is observed annually on the fifteenth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar.

The term *Yulanpen* originates from the Buddhist scripture *Ullambana Sūtra* (《盂兰盆经》), in which the word *ullambana* means "hanging upside down." This imagery symbolizes the suffering of souls trapped in the torments of hell. According to the text, rituals known as “Feeding the Hungry Ghosts of Flaming Mouth” are performed during the festival to alleviate the suffering of deceased souls. These rituals involve offering food, incense, and symbolic paper items representing wealth, with the intention of bringing comfort and relief to the spirits of the departed.

The festival is deeply rooted in the Confucian principle of filial piety, which forms the foundation of traditional Chinese ethics. Honoring and making offerings to deceased family members is considered a vital filial duty. As a result, the Yulanpen Festival, which seamlessly blends Buddhist teachings with Chinese ancestor veneration practices, gained widespread acceptance throughout the country after its introduction. It has since evolved into one of China’s most important folk festivals, celebrated across regions and generations.

Today, the festival continues to be celebrated annually in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and parts of Southeast Asia with significant Chinese communities. Although it was discontinued in mainland China during the Cultural Revolution, it has seen a gradual revival in recent years. The festival is observed not only in Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples, but also within

local neighborhoods, often with support from community donations and business sponsors.

In Hong Kong, the festival usually takes place in late August and spans several days. Traditional activities include making offerings to deities and wandering spirits, burning paper money for deceased ancestors, and distributing rice and food to the poor. A major highlight is the performance of a traditional Chinese opera depicting the story of Mulian, a devoted disciple of the Buddha, who journeys into the underworld to rescue his mother from the torments of hell.

2. The Origin of the Yulanpen Festival

The Yulanpen Festival, also known as the Ghost Festival or Ullambana, has deep roots in both Buddhist tradition and Chinese folk culture. Observed on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, it is a time when people honor and offer sacrifices to ancestors and wandering spirits, seeking to bring them peace and salvation.

The festival's origin traces back to the Buddhist sutra, the *Ullambana Sūtra*, which tells the story of Maudgalyayana (Mulian in Chinese), one of the Buddha's foremost disciples. According to the legend, after attaining supernatural powers, Maudgalyayana discovered that his deceased mother had been reborn into the realm of hungry ghosts—a place of great suffering. Despite his spiritual strength, he was unable to alleviate her torment on his own.

Distressed, Maudgalyayana turned to the Buddha for guidance. The Buddha instructed him to offer food and make generous donations to monks on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month—when the monastic community concluded their summer retreat and their spiritual merits were at their peak. By following the Buddha's advice, Maudgalyayana was able to rescue his mother and lead her to a better rebirth. This act of filial piety became the foundation for the Yulanpen Festival.

Over time, the festival evolved, incorporating elements of Taoist ritual and traditional Chinese ancestor worship. Today, it is observed across East and Southeast Asia, blending solemn ceremonies with cultural performances and offerings of food, incense, and paper goods. At its heart, the Yulanpen Festival remains a powerful expression of filial devotion, compassion, and the hope for spiritual liberation for all beings.

The Yulanpen Festival traces its origins to the *Ullambana Sūtra*, a Buddhist scripture translated into Chinese by the monk Dharmarakṣa in the third century. The sūtra recounts the story of Mulian (Chinese: 目連; Sanskrit: Maudgalyāyana), one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, who discovers that his mother has been reborn in the realm of hungry ghosts—a place of immense suffering—due to her past misdeeds.

In a desperate attempt to alleviate her torment, Mulian descends into the netherworld and offers her food. However, because of the severity of her karma, the food bursts into flames before she can consume it. Distressed, Mulian turns to the Buddha for guidance. The Buddha explains that his mother's negative karma is too great for one person to overcome alone.

Instead, the Buddha advises Mulian to make offerings to the monastic community on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, marking the end of the Rain Retreat (*Vassa*). On this auspicious day, the collective merit generated by offerings made to the Sangha can benefit not only one's immediate parents but also those of the past seven generations. If deceased, they may be liberated from suffering and ascend to the heavens; if still living, they will receive blessings for health and longevity.

Following the Buddha's instructions, Mulian performs the ritual, generating great merit through his devotion. As a result, his mother is freed from the realm of hungry ghosts. This act of filial piety and spiritual

intervention laid the foundation for the Yulanpen Festival, a tradition that continues to be observed in East Asian Buddhist cultures as a time to honor ancestors and extend compassion to all beings.

In 2014, over 118 festive celebrations were held in temporary structures across various public spaces in Hong Kong, organized by local communities of diverse ethnic backgrounds. These celebrations typically spanned from one to six days, depending on the availability of manpower and financial resources. The cost of organizing a single event could reach up to USD 140,000.

Ritual specialists were often invited to perform ceremonies aimed at pacifying spirits and purifying the community. In addition, traditional opera performances were sometimes staged as offerings to the gods. The festivities featured elaborate displays of giant paper offerings, along with the burning of incense, joss sticks, and various types of paper effigies. A wide array of food was also prepared as offerings to deities, ghosts, and ancestors. These vibrant celebrations not only underscore cultural uniqueness but also reflect a strong sense of communal identity and solidarity.

In 2009, the Hungry Ghosts Festival, as celebrated by the Chaozhou communities in Hong Kong, was officially recognized as part of the city's intangible cultural heritage (ICH). According to UNESCO, ICH encompasses "traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts." In 2011, this particular celebration of the Hungry Ghosts Festival by the Chaozhou community was further inscribed into China's national intangible cultural heritage list.

3. Ritual Practices and Spiritual Significance:

At the heart of the Yulanpen Festival lies a deeply layered system of ritual practices that reflect a fusion of Buddhist soteriology, Confucian filial ethics, Daoist cosmology, and Chinese folk beliefs. The central purpose of these rituals is twofold: first, to alleviate the suffering of the deceased, particularly those trapped in the realm of hungry ghosts（饿鬼, èguǐ）; and second, to accumulate merit for the living through acts of compassion, charity, and spiritual devotion. Rooted in the narrative of the Ullambana Sūtra（《盂兰盆经》）, these rites are understood as a moral obligation for the living to care for both their ancestors and all forgotten or orphaned spirits, ensuring that they do not become harmful forces in the world of the living.

One of the most visible and widespread ritual acts is the offering of food, often referred to as "Feeding the Hungry Ghosts"（施食）. Special tables or altars are prepared with fruit, rice, tea, sweets, and sometimes full meals, arranged either at temples, family shrines, or in public spaces. These offerings are made not only for known ancestors but also for 孤魂野鬼 (wandering and unclaimed spirits). According to Teiser (1996), the ritual feeding of ghosts is more than symbolic—it is perceived as a real act of compassion that sustains the spirits and ensures their peace, preventing them from becoming malevolent (Teiser, The Ghost Festival in Medieval China).

Equally important is the burning of joss paper and elaborate paper effigies representing money, clothing, houses, and even modern luxuries such as cars and smartphones. These ritual items, also known as "spirit money" or "hell bank notes," are burned as offerings that provide comfort and status to spirits in the afterlife. This practice is rooted in the belief that the afterlife mirrors the material world and that the dead continue to need resources. The Daoist cosmological framework contributes to this view, conceptualizing the spiritual realm as organized and bureaucratic, where wealth, debt, and hierarchy continue beyond death (Feuchtwang, 2001).

Another significant component is the recitation of Buddhist sutras, particularly the Ullambana Sūtra, by monks or ritual specialists during ceremonies known as "universal salvation rituals"（普度法会）. These sutras are believed to generate spiritual merit（功德）that can be transferred to the souls of the dead, helping them escape lower realms and be reborn into better existences. The collective merit created through the participation of the monastic Sangha is essential, as the Ullambana Sūtra emphasizes that an individual alone cannot relieve a soul burdened with heavy karmic debt. Instead, communal acts of merit—especially those performed on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month—are most effective in enabling liberation. This doctrinal foundation explains why the Yulanpen Festival is traditionally associated with large-scale monastic ceremonies, where offerings to the Sangha serve as intermediaries for spiritual salvation (Ullambana Sūtra, Dharmarakṣa Translation).

In addition to these religious rituals, the performing arts play a vital role in the Yulanpen Festival. Traditional Chinese opera performances—especially the drama "Mulian Rescues His Mother"—are staged in public spaces or near temples. These performances are not merely cultural entertainment but are offered as spiritual gifts to wandering souls and local deities. The operas often feature didactic stories that emphasize filial piety, karmic retribution, and moral behavior, thus reinforcing the ethical messages of the festival. In many Southeast Asian Chinese communities, front-row seats are intentionally left vacant during performances to allow the invisible spirits to attend. This act affirms a ritual hospitality that bridges the seen and unseen worlds, symbolizing the living community's respect for their non-corporeal guests (Lau, 2016; Chan, 2009).

The spiritual significance of these rituals lies in their embodiment of the principle that spiritual intervention is both necessary and effective in maintaining harmony between realms. According to C.K. Yang (1961), the festival's practices illustrate how Chinese society views death not as a rupture but as a transformation of social and spiritual relationships that require ongoing maintenance through ritual care. The dead remain integrated into the family and community through rites that affirm their place in a broader cosmic and moral order (Yang, Religion in Chinese Society).

The rituals of the Yulanpen Festival reaffirm core values such as filial piety（孝道）, compassion, community solidarity, and cosmic balance. They transform fear of the unknown into structured, meaningful action that benefits both the living and the dead. In doing so, they preserve a rich spiritual heritage that continues to adapt to modern contexts while retaining its moral and emotional resonance.

4. Regional Celebrations and Community Involvement

The Yulanpen Festival has found particularly vibrant expression in regions with large Chinese diasporic communities, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, where the traditions surrounding ancestor veneration and Buddhist ritual practice remain deeply embedded in local cultures. Among these, Hong Kong serves as a notable case study of how the Ghost Festival has been adapted into a highly organized, community-centered event that blends ritual performance, religious ceremony, and civic participation. According to the Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Office, a 2014 survey recorded over 118 separate Yulanpen celebrations held across various public venues, many of which were facilitated by local residents' associations, temple committees, and district-based charity groups (Hong Kong ICH Office, 2014).

These events are often hosted in temporary bamboo structures, which are custom-built for the occasion. These include altars, stages for traditional

Chinese opera, and spaces for ritual ceremonies. The opera performances are often dedicated to deities or spirits and serve both a spiritual and entertainment function, reflecting the belief that theatrical offerings can pacify hungry ghosts and gain merit for the community. One of the most frequently performed operas during the Ghost Festival season is the Mulian Rescues His Mother narrative, based on the Ullambana Sūtra, which dramatizes the journey of a filial son into the underworld to save his mother from the torments of hell. These performances are typically conducted in the evenings and are open to the public, reinforcing the communal and inclusive nature of the festival.

A central element of these celebrations is the creation and ritual burning of elaborate paper effigies, known as zhǐzhā (纸扎). These may include representations of luxury homes, cars, clothing, mobile phones, servants, and even passports, symbolizing material comfort for the spirits in the afterlife. The burning of such effigies, accompanied by incense and joss paper, is believed to transmit these goods to the spiritual realm, ensuring the well-being of both familial ancestors and lonely or neglected spirits. In addition to offerings for the dead, it is customary in many communities to distribute free rice, canned food, or daily necessities to the poor and elderly, which reflects an extension of the festival's ethical foundation of compassion and shared merit to the living—especially those marginalized by society. This act, known as "universal salvation" (pǔdù, 普度), embodies the Buddhist ideal of benefitting all sentient beings, not only one's immediate kin.

Religious specialists—either Buddhist monks or Daoist priests—are often invited to conduct rituals of spiritual purification and salvation, known as cháodù fǎhuì (超度法会), which are aimed at liberating wandering souls and improving their karmic conditions. These ceremonies may involve chanting sacred texts such as the Ullambana Sūtra, performing water liberation rites (fāngshēng, 放生), and establishing spirit tablets for souls without descendants (gǔhūn, 孤魂). By invoking both Buddhist and Daoist cosmologies, these rites underscore a syncretic religious framework that defines much of Chinese folk religiosity. According to Teiser (1996), such rituals "link the realms of the living and the dead in a complex moral economy" where the welfare of ancestors depends on the piety and generosity of their descendants (Teiser, 1996).

The communal nature of the Yulanpen Festival in these regions demonstrates how ritual practice continues to serve as a form of social cohesion and moral instruction. Community elders often act as stewards of tradition, passing down knowledge of customs and organizing donations and manpower. These festivals can last anywhere from one to six days, depending on the resources and scale of the organizing body, and in many cases, the cost of a single celebration can exceed USD 100,000, funded through public subscription or business patronage (Chan, 2009).

In recognition of the cultural significance of these events, the Hong Kong SAR Government included the Ghost Festival celebrated by the Chaozhou community in its Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory in 2009. This celebration was later added to the national intangible cultural heritage list of China in 2011, underscoring the festival's role not only as a religious observance but also as a living cultural tradition that strengthens ethnic identity and community solidarity (UNESCO ICH, 2011).

Through these intricate, multilayered celebrations, the Yulanpen Festival reveals itself as more than just a religious rite; it is a performative expression of ethics, identity, and collective memory. It allows Chinese communities—both within and outside mainland China—to reflect upon the cycles of life and death, honor ancestral legacies, and foster a shared sense of spiritual belonging. Despite pressures from modernization, secularism, and

changing demographics, the festival persists as a meaningful vessel for spiritual renewal and cultural continuity.

5. Modern Challenges and Revival

The Yulanpen Festival, though deeply rooted in the spiritual and ritual fabric of Chinese culture, did not remain immune to the sweeping social and political transformations of the 20th century. One of the most significant disruptions occurred during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a decade-long campaign led by the Chinese Communist Party that sought to eradicate elements of traditional culture, religion, and so-called "feudal superstition." During this period, public expressions of religious belief—including ancestor worship, temple festivals, and rituals like those performed during Yulanpen—were banned or harshly criticized. Temples were destroyed or repurposed, monks and Daoist priests were persecuted, and religious festivals disappeared from public life. The Yulanpen Festival, with its elaborate ceremonies involving offerings to spirits and recitations of Buddhist scriptures, was among the many casualties of this campaign to secularize society and promote state atheism (Yang, 1961; Overmyer, 2003).

However, beginning in the 1980s, following the death of Mao Zedong and the gradual liberalization of Chinese society under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, there was a noticeable resurgence of interest in traditional religious and cultural practices. This revival was not merely a grassroots phenomenon but was also facilitated by shifting government attitudes toward religion and cultural heritage. A major turning point in this process was the growing global recognition of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as a vital element of human civilization. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines ICH as including "oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe," and emphasizes its importance in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization (UNESCO, 2003).

In line with this global trend, both local and national governments in China and Chinese-majority regions began to reframe traditional festivals not as superstitious remnants of the past, but as valuable cultural resources. For example, in 2009, the Hungry Ghost Festival as practiced by the Chaozhou community in Hong Kong was officially recognized as part of the city's intangible cultural heritage. In 2011, the festival was further added to China's national list of ICH, thereby gaining official support for its preservation and continued practice (Chan, 2009). This designation provided not only institutional legitimacy but also financial and infrastructural support for community groups to organize public celebrations, construct altars and stages, and invite Buddhist or Daoist clergy to lead ceremonies. Moreover, recognition by UNESCO and local authorities helped reposition the festival as a key site of cultural pride and identity, especially among Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia.

Another key factor in the festival's revival has been the growing spiritual curiosity and cultural nostalgia among younger generations, both in China and abroad. Amid increasing urbanization, environmental stress, and mental health concerns, many young people have begun seeking alternative frameworks for meaning and identity—often turning to traditional philosophies such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. For these individuals, participation in Yulanpen rituals offers more than just cultural connection; it provides a sense of emotional healing, ethical reflection, and spiritual rootedness in an era of rapid change. In particular, the symbolism of repaying karmic debts, honoring ancestors, and expressing compassion for unseen beings resonates with contemporary values surrounding mindfulness, sustainability, and community responsibility (Palmer, 2011; Chau, 2006).

The rise of cultural tourism has significantly contributed to the reinvention and increased visibility of the Yulanpen Festival. In regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, the festival has evolved into a major cultural event that attracts both domestic and international visitors. Tourists are drawn not only to the theatrical performances—most notably the opera Mulian Rescues His Mother—but also to the vibrant visual spectacles, including towering paper effigies, communal banquets, and elaborate public rituals. These events are frequently promoted by municipal cultural bureaus as part of broader strategies to boost heritage tourism, revitalize local economies, and strengthen regional identity (Lau, 2016). While commercialization introduces certain challenges—such as the potential dilution of ritual meaning or the prioritization of entertainment over spiritual significance—it has nonetheless played a crucial role in preserving and dynamically transmitting the traditions of the Ghost Festival.

In summary, the Yulanpen Festival has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of political repression, cultural skepticism, and economic modernization. It continues to serve as a vibrant medium for negotiating spiritual belief, filial ethics, and community identity in contemporary Chinese society. By integrating elements of ritual performance, religious doctrine, public memory, and cultural heritage policy, the festival illustrates the enduring relevance of ancestral traditions in shaping not only how people remember the dead but also how they reaffirm the values of the living.

6. Conclusion

The Yulanpen Festival is far more than a folk ritual or religious observance—it is a living, multidimensional tradition that intricately weaves together Buddhist soteriology, Confucian filial piety, Daoist cosmology, and Chinese folk religiosity. At its spiritual core lies a deeply rooted belief in the interconnectedness of the living and the dead, bound by karma, compassion, and familial obligation. The festival's central themes—alleviating suffering, honoring ancestors, and accumulating merit—embody a rich cultural worldview that transcends individual religious boundaries and speaks to a universal human concern with mortality, remembrance, and continuity. Its enduring presence through dynastic upheavals, political suppression, and modern secularization attests to its remarkable adaptability, preserving its ethical and spiritual essence across centuries of transformation.

Moreover, the Yulanpen Festival represents an important site of social cohesion and inter-generational transmission, where community members come together to engage in shared rituals, storytelling, and acts of generosity. Whether in urban centers like Hong Kong, where large-scale performances and community offerings are staged, or in rural villages, where families gather to burn incense and offer food at ancestral graves, the festival continues to shape a collective identity rooted in memory, reverence, and mutual care. In an age marked by rapid urbanization, individualism, and cultural homogenization, the Yulanpen Festival offers a counter-narrative: one that reaffirms the importance of ancestral ties, moral reflection, and spiritual responsibility.

Furthermore, its inclusion in both national and UNESCO intangible cultural heritage lists signals not only official recognition but also a renewed appreciation of its enduring cultural value. The Yulanpen Festival, with its vivid blend of liturgical rites, operatic performances, and community generosity, serves as a vibrant testament to the resilience of Chinese spiritual culture. It functions not only as a ritual of remembrance but also as a cultural and ethical compass, helping both individuals and communities navigate questions of life, death, and belonging. As such, it remains a dynamic and meaningful tradition in the evolving spiritual landscape of East Asia.

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