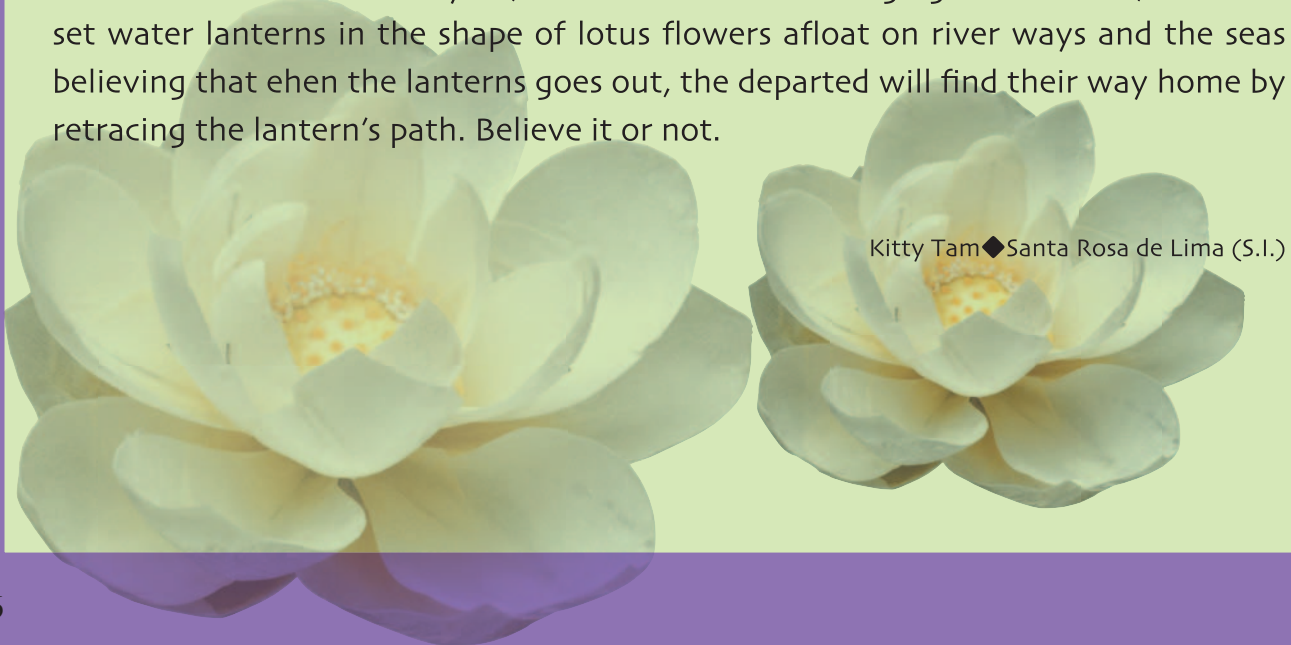


Hungry ghost festivals in Hong Kong

Believed by Buddhist and Taoists to be a holiday for ghosts, the month of the Hungry Ghost Festival is a cautionary tale for all. Released from the boundaries of the etherworld, it is thought that hungry ghosts wander the earth in search of food and victims during the 7th month of the Chinese lunar year. Taboos for the month include going swimming. Staying out after dark and auspicious celebrations. No one wants to get married on the 15th, the day of the Hungry Ghost Festival, it is a day for reunion with deceased loved ones. During the month, believers burn joss sticks, candles and ghost money by road sides and street corners, especially at sites where accidental deaths have occurred, to appease restless spirits lest they wreak havoc upon the living. Nothing is spared in the effort to avoid ghostly harassment, including the burning of elaborate paper effigies of cars, houses and home appliances, ritual offerings of food and even providing Chinese opera performances as entertainment.

Also known as the Yu LAM Pen Festival, Shangyang Festival and the Zhongyang Festival, the custom of the Hungry Ghost Festival dates to the Liang Dynasty (502-557 AD), evolving out of a legend about of a pair of childhood sweethearts whom, unable to marry, committed suicide by jumping off the Yu LAN Bridge. Days after the sad event a single stalk of lotus bearing 2 flowers were found under the bridge. Another associated folklore has it that the mother of a monk called MuNian had fallen victim to a hungry ghost and was condemned to eternal suffering. Praying to the Buddah for help, Munian was told to use the Buddhist cannon of Yue Lan Pen to save his mother's soul on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month. The 15th day of the 7th lunar month is thereafter associated with piety and commemorating one's deceased ancestors.

The Shangyang Festival also coincides with the Lantern Festival which celebrates the first new moon of the year, however instead of hanging out lanterns, believers set water lanterns in the shape of lotus flowers afloat on river ways and the seas believing that ehen the lanterns goes out, the departed will find their way home by retracing the lantern's path. Believe it or not.



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