

Hungry Ghosts & Screeching Macaques

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*Screeching, Shadowing, and Stumbling in the Smoky
Month of Hungry Ghosts*



Our apartment in Penang, Malaysia looks toward a botanic garden and the lush jungled hillsides behind it. There's almost always a cloud of smoke enveloping the Buddhist Temple near the garden's entrance because of all the burning incense at the nearby Chinese cemetery.

But this month, the smoke is heavier than usual. That's because it's the month of the hungry ghosts. Taoists and Buddhists here in Malaysia and other parts of Asia believe that the gates of hell are opened each year during the seventh moon of the lunar calendar. The guardians of hell take a little vacation at this time, and the ghosts are free to escape and roam among the living. So, it's very important to avoid being out after dark — especially if you're a child — since the hungry ghosts could easily scoop you up and try to switch places with you, leaving you to take their places in hell.



To avoid this fate, it's wise to stay inside at night and do what you can to appease the ghosts. Outside the door of your home, you should leave offerings of fruit and definitely burn a lot of incense. If ghosts happen to pass your door at night, they'll eat the fruit, rather than barging in to rampage through your kitchen.

And when I say “incense,” you probably think of those thin sticks about a foot long, like those behind the pineapple doorstep offering. But to make sure the ghosts are fully appeased, merchants here burn *huge* incense sticks, called “joss sticks.” They're several feet tall, and instead of being thinner than a pencil, they're several inches in diameter. That way, they'll burn for days and provide maximum protection. They're decorated with colorful dragon motifs for extra effectiveness in keeping ghosts at bay. To be sure that the not-yet-lit sticks don't get soggy should it rain, they cover the tops with plastic “condoms.”





But incense isn't all you should burn. According to the ancient tradition of the hungry ghosts, the whole thing started when a very greedy woman's son sought to free her from hell so she could join his father in heaven. But, during her lifetime, she had been very wicked, having scoffed at the poor and turned away begging monks. She was too far gone to be released from hell. So, her son began the tradition of seeking to appease and plead with those ghosts in hell by offering not only fruit, but also entertainment, performances, singing, and puppet shows. Following his example, people today also burn cardboard models of refrigerators, TV sets, and other expensive appliances the ghosts might want, as well as (and very importantly)... gifts of money.

People of Chinese descent here in Malaysia burn heaps of fake currency at this time, believing that the smoke from the burning banknotes will reach the ghosts and distract them from causing any mischief among the living.

People buy stacks and stacks of specially printed notes that resemble real money, as these are hopefully good enough to fool the ghosts. There may be some really rich individuals who burn actual money, which is a shame because the currency here in Malaysia is really quite beautiful. One of the best bargains around is the one-ringgit note. Although it's only worth about 33 US cents in purchasing power it's worth holding onto as a work of art.



People even buy fake ghost passports and fake highway tax permits and burn them, too. This makes it easier for the ghosts to move about, since they apparently travel internationally and utilize roads! (*I'm not making this up.*)

Since we don't want to take any chances with the hungry ghosts after dark, Barbie and I restrict ourselves to daytime activities. (Well, if you know us at all, you already realize that marauding ghosts aren't really a threat to us, as we don't do much after dark, anyway.)



While Barbie's at the gym in the early mornings, I sometimes go hiking up near the clouds of smoke by the Chinese cemetery. The first time I went there one early morning, well before the hungry ghost month, I was surprised to find the parking lot overflowing, even though it was not yet 7:00 AM and still dark. As I quickly learned, Penang-ites, and particularly those of Chinese origin, love to visit the botanic gardens pre-dawn to practice

tai chi. There are usually several groups of a dozen or so each practicing their slow, methodical movements with screeching Chinese music in the background.

Although discordant to my ears, that music is not the only source of screeching.

I joined a "Monday morning hikers" meetup group for a couple of hours on the jungled trails leading up into the forest behind the botanic garden.

Just a few hundred meters along the trail, I began hearing a different kind of screeching.

Shaking branches up in the trees beside the trail was the giveaway. A troop of monkeys was shadowing us. As we moved along, they did, too.

It's important to make a quick visual identification of the specific type of monkey you're dealing with when hiking here. Some, like the dusky leaf monkeys, are merely curious and rather timid. Seeing them with their white fur circled eyes is almost humorous. They keep their distance.



But the macaque monkeys are a different story. They are strong, smart, and nasty. You definitely want to keep them at bay because they've been trained by other visitors to expect food. It's absolutely forbidden to feed them, but some uneducated parents think it's entertaining for their children to throw out candy and treats. As a result, the macaques have been conditioned to expect that people will give them delicious morsels. And if passing hikers don't, they'll literally jump down from the trees, climb up on people, and fish around in their pockets. Don't mess with the macaques.



When I first spotted the group of macaques that was shadowing us, following along high in the trees and making quite a screeching racket, I stumbled.



On the ground, I realized that I had disrupted an army on the move. The ants here are huge, up to an inch long. I'd seen many jammed "highways" of ants crossing the trail up until this point, and it was easy to step over their thoroughfares. But this time, they were moving parallel to the trail, instead of across it, so I jumped up quickly before they swarmed over me.

My first encounter with the macaques was actually frightening. I expect to see such monkeys in a zoo setting, but when you're out on a hike, they're rather alarming. I got up from my stumble, picked up a stick, and walked along, glancing back frequently to be sure they weren't getting too close. After a couple of hundred meters, I suppose they realized we weren't going to feed them and dropped back, hoping to do better with the next group.

*“I ain’t afraid of no ghost,” ...
but a hungry macaque is another story.*