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Spirit seeker

What is it about Halloween that makes us seek things that go bump in the night?

Stories by JOLEEN LUNJEW
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People dressed up in the weirdest outfits imaginable, pumpkin heads grinning eerily in the night and children going house to house trick-or-treating for candy. Sound familiar?

Yes, it's Halloween once again but, of course, this celebration mostly takes place in Western countries. Malaysians have not quite bought into the idea yet. So what is Halloween all about, anyway? And why is it always associated with horror and spooks?

Halloween's origins date back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced: sow-in) or the Celtic New Year where Celts believed that on the night before, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead become blurred, allowing spirits, both harmless and harmful, to pass through. Their belief is much like

our very own Hungry Ghost month that is observed by the Chinese.

To disguise themselves from the harmful spirits, people wear ghoulish costumes and masks to, *umm*, blend in. These days, costumes have evolved and scary costumes take their place beside cute, sexy and ridiculous ones.

Malaysians have taken to Halloween more for the commercial aspects than anything else and it is mainly a celebration of fun, albeit with some elements of spook. Entertainment and F&B outlets take the opportunity to cash in on this event, organising themed costume parties for revellers while TV stations play horror movies.

What is it about the supernatural that intrigues us so?

We say we are afraid, but why do we keep seeking them and inviting them

into our lives?

Sabahan Augustine Towonsing, 37, is one such person who actively seeks answers to what lies beyond the realm of the living. He established the Malaysian Ghost Research (www.malaysian-ghost-research.org) in 2004 to conduct scientific research on paranormal activities and to share information about the existence of life after death. There are currently over 1,200 members within the group's forum board and 126 members in their Facebook group.

Towonsing, a school teacher by day, is also a member of the International Ghost Hunters Society.

"I've been interested in the paranormal ever since I was young as I have the 'gift' of seeing ghosts. My research is conducted during my spare time and I normally go solo. My aim is to change people's perception about life after death.

"The places I investigate are mostly ceme-

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Augustine Towonsing on one of his nightly outings; (right) he is founder of the Malaysian Ghost Research.

They see dead people

The supernatural world is more closely linked to our everyday life than you think — or at least some people think so. These are people who can sense or see spirits. A few share their ghostly tales.

Najah Hadisah, 36, teacher

Najah has been seeing ghosts ever since she was in secondary school. Her first encounter was with a huge creature with red eyes which caused her to scream like a mad person.

Her father recited some prayers over her and after that incident, she could see and hear ghosts.

Growing up in the government quarters near the Tang Lin Hospital in Kuala Lumpur didn't help. The hospital was used during the Japanese Occupation and said to be haunted. Najah used to see nuns walking around and hear the sounds of people screaming in the night.

"I am used to seeing ghosts around me, there are many types. Some look like normal people, some are tall and black while some are like corpses wrapped in white shrouds. I always ignore them and pretend not to see them, sometimes praying under my breath for them not to disturb me.

"I believe that we are just sharing the same space and if you

don't disturb them, they won't disturb you," says Najah.

She remembers one incident in a university art studio in Shah Alam very vividly.

"My first encounter there was of a huge black figure roughly 3m tall looking at us as we went down the stairs. The rest of my friends didn't see it so I just kept quiet and ignored it.

"We went into the art studio which is known to be haunted. One of my friends decided to challenge the ghost to appear. The ghost is called Puteri Hijau, so my friend called out, "*Keluar Puteri, kalau berani* (Come out princess if you dare)."

Five minutes later, we all saw a lady in a green gown walking towards us. All of us screamed and ran back to the hostel.

"While I was washing my legs at the hostel toilet, I saw a girl two feet away who looked exactly like me with the same hair and clothes. She rolled her eyes and pointed her finger at me. I was so scared that I screamed and immediately ran out of the toilet.

"I couldn't finish saying my prayers because I was still shivering in shock. That were three incidents in one night. I fell ill the next morning and my father came to take me home. My father helped to cure me by reading passages from the Quran," she recalls.

Najah has been seeking traditional help using Muslim methods such as reading from the Quran to reduce the encounters. She says it has helped and the incidences have lessened.

"My father has been helping me. Now after the birth of my first child, I no longer see these beings, but I can still feel their presence as my hair would stand up and I'd get very uneasy. This third eye is not something you would want in your life."

Choong Wai Leong, 46 painter

Floating heads, dead people walking around, weird spirit creatures — these were the apparitions that haunted Choong since he was a little boy.

"I believe I could see ghosts since very young. I say 'I believe' because I might have thought the ghosts were real people then. You never question these things when you are a child. I remember seeing my grandfather sitting beside his coffin during his funeral but I didn't say anything because I thought it was normal. I was five years old then," recalls Choong.

Choong has been lucky so far as he has never had any problems with these ghosts.

"I can sense them and sometimes see them but they never bother me because I don't bother

them. I believe they are lost souls or trapped spirits who can't cross to the other side and that is why they are wandering around in our world.

"But it can get unnerving sometimes, especially when the ghosts look sinister or died because they met with an accident. I remember once that I was stuck in a traffic jam and was wondering what had happened. Not long after, I saw a pregnant lady covered in blood with her head smashed in walking past my car.

"I knew then that that was the victim. Sure enough, I passed the accident scene and saw the body of a lady covered with a cloth lying on the road. I said a little prayer for her spirit to cross to the other side."

Choong's parents used to take him to several *sinseh* and temple priests but nothing seemed to help.

"I can still see them. I've given up trying to get rid of my third eye. It gets worse during the Hungry Ghost month when the Gates of Hell are open for the spirits to cross into our world. I'd see all sorts of things then. I'm so used to having them around now that I take it as part of everyday life. I live by the philosophy of 'I don't disturb you, you don't disturb me'," says Choong matter-of-factly.