

Trees in Taiwanese Folklore

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Abstract In Taiwanese folklore, the worship of immortal trees has taken various forms. Often such practices are closely related to the worship of the earth god. In other cases, what is called *Dashugong*, literally ‘great tree god’, acts as a child’s guardian figure: the health and reproduction of a living tree in an otherworldly setting parallel the health and posterity of a human being. Religious rituals associated with ancient tree worship continue today. Trees symbolise fertility in folk beliefs and in folk art, and the impact of ancient beliefs may be traced in horticultural practices, and in the retail sale of trees. The idea that gods reside in large trees persists, as does the belief that a tree spirit appears only when it – or the living tree – is confronted, wounded, or killed. Reacting to such violence, a tree spirit becomes vengeful and dangerous. Government agencies and environmentalists have alluded to this concept to promote conservation. When an old tree dies, people nowadays plant a sapling to replace it. The tree of life continues to be celebrated, no longer for its gigantic profile but as a symbol of renewal.

Keywords Tree worship. Tree of life. Moon Festival. Lantern Festival. Children’s guardian deity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Tree Gods as Parents. – 3 A Tree of Life in a Cosmic Garden. – 4 A Few Money Trees. – 5 Tree Spirits. – 6 Tree Folklore and Environmental Protection.



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1 Introduction

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade describes a cosmic tree.

The mystery of the inexhaustible appearance of life is bound up with the rhythmical renewal of the cosmos. This is why the cosmos was imagined in the form of a gigantic tree; the mode of being of the cosmos, and first of all its capacity for endless regeneration, are symbolically expressed by the life of the tree. (Eliade 1963, 148)

Just like other symbols of immortality, trees imply a seemingly never-ending regeneration cycle. The notion manifests in the tree's shedding all leaves in the fall and regaining new leaves and vigour come spring. Particularly with large trees, a dense leafy crown attests to prolificacy, sturdy trunks to strength, and the various creatures residing underneath the sheltering foliage to their constant protection. Large trees live long, often longer than human beings, so they suggest longevity. For these reasons, trees became symbols of life, informing many customs meant to prolong life.

In this article, I shall detail various facets of arboreal folklore that are still alive in contemporary Taiwan. Related myths and legends provide a conceptual framework. I shall go on to describe several cases of arboreal folklore affecting human behaviour. Finally, I shall try to explain how this folklore can help promote environmental conservation.

2 Tree Gods as Parents

One of Taiwan's most important traditions is the Mid-Autumn Festival or Moon Festival, which falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. It is celebrated within every household and in the public sphere. The family reunions that take place are called, in Mandarin, *tuanyuan*, literally 'group round', a phrase used to describe the lunar sphere. Moon gazing follows a big family dinner. In southern Taiwan the Mid-Autumn Festival is considered the earth god's birthday. During the day, worshippers bring offerings of food to temples or shrines devoted to the god. A stage is usually erected before the temple, and *budai* puppet shows are performed. Ritual activities also occur at small shrines set underneath large trees, affectionately called *Dashugong* or 'God of the Great Tree'. In these rare cases, it is the *Dashugong's* birthday that is celebrated.

The worship of *Dashugong* evolved from an ancient form of earth worship, first seen in a text dated to the fourth century BC. In order to mark the mound of earth that they worshipped, people planted a

tree atop it. Today's worship of *Dashugong* is a reminiscence of that custom (Yang 2000, 129-41).¹ The term *gong* means 'grandfather' and is also an honorific term for a male deity, making *Dashugong* 'Grandpa Big Tree' or 'God of the Great Tree'. Some of these deified trees are banyans, others bishop trees or Chinese hackberries, all common species on Taiwan's coastal plain. Needless to say, tree gods are often visibly impressive, noticeable even from afar. They either boast a massive trunk, sport expansive foliage, exhibit grotesque gnarls, or resemble in silhouette a well-known image or person (You 2004, 101-27). *Dashugong* trees invariably live a long life, remaining obvious landmarks for generations of villagers.

Exactly when and how the Moon Festival united worship of large tree gods and the earth god defies precise dating. However, the underlying reasons for their combination are not too obscure. Large trees are grand and sturdy. The largest plants on earth, they live for a long time, spanning many human generations. Prominent, with a development comparable to that of humans, they lent themselves readily to life's symbolism the world over (Lechler 1937, 369-41). And a Chinese myth links trees and the moon. According to the tale, a number of characters reside on the lunar surface. When beautiful Chang-E stole and swallowed her husband's elixir of eternal life, she was swept up to the moon. Legend has it that she is accompanied by a rabbit pounding herbal remedies with a pestle, supposedly making an elixir of eternal life. Another resident is a man named Wu Gang, who spends his days fruitlessly chopping at a tree trunk that instantly heals (He 1999, 53-60). Myths like these spell out the moon's association with vitality. Just as a tree goes through an annual cycle, the moon waxes and wanes - both imply everlasting life (Eliade 1958, 154-71). Therefore, the mythical triad of moon-tree-vitality explains folkloric practice.

Various legends recount the marvels of individual tree gods, which bestow blessings, heal illnesses, and rescue believers from calamities (Luo, Cheng, Yang 2009, 15-29). Such acts parallel those of other deities, as does the protection of children. This is best illustrated by the annual rituals performed during Mid-Autumn Festival. Many people in Taiwan believe that weak or disaster-prone children need a deity's protection to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood. The parents of such children visit temples devoted to the deities they are familiar with, using divination blocks to ascertain whether the deity will 'adopt' the child, who is expected to preserve the relation by paying respect to the 'godfather' or 'godmother' (literally) on the deity's birthday.

Since many tree gods celebrate their 'birthday' during the Mid-Autumn Festival, convention has made that the day for the 'adopted

¹ Those who worship earth focus on a mound of earth, a large tree, or a stone.

children' to visit their guardians. Parents and child bring offerings and worship the tree god just as they would any other god. Before the child departs, he or she is given a leaf from the tree god, which is worn on a red string tied around the neck, along with a talisman from the shrine or temple. Every year, the child repeats this ritual, and the leaf is replaced, until he or she turns 16, the legal age of adulthood of late imperial China. Thanks to a symbolic kinship, the child is connected with the tree god through a fictive vein that conveys vital force. The annual visit recharges the child's vitality: the weak become strong, bad fortune is ameliorated, and the child grows up.

3 A Tree of Life in a Cosmic Garden

In contrast to the physicality of a massive tree, Taiwanese people also believe in an otherworldly garden that mirrors the human sphere. An old couple, Flower Grandpa and Flower Grandma, tend to the plants in that far-off world, where every human life is represented by a tree or flowering bush; the health of one affects the other. Whenever a person falls ill or succumbs to bad luck, it is said that his or her plant-twin is suffering, whether fallen down, withered, or attacked by vermin. To remedy this, a Daoist master is asked to conduct a ritual called 'fortifying the flower bush' (in Taiwanese pronunciation, *king hue tsâng*), enlisting help from Flower Grandpa and Flower Grandma to nurse the afflicted plant so as to restore the health of the unfortunate human.

A woman's tree or bush requires special attention to promote or improve her health in general and to guarantee her fertility. If a woman fails to conceive a few years after she is married, some may think it prudent to check on her flower bush in the garden of fate. Reading that plant reveals not only the details of her health, but her reproductive future too. For example, a plant with two red flowers and one white flower is taken to mean that its human-twin will bear two daughters and one son in her lifetime. In the case of a failure to conceive, the ritual master begins by determining the reason for her infertility. If poor health is the diagnosis, then 'fortifying the flower bush' must be performed. Once the plant has been invigorated, the woman regains her health, and conception should follow. If the investigation reveals no flower buds on the plant, the woman is destined to be barren. Then the ritual master performs another kind of ritual, called *tsai hue tsâng* in Taiwanese (planting the flower bush). That is, the original plant is replaced with a new and healthy plant expected to blossom. With this ritual, it is believed that the woman's fate can be reversed, ensuring that she will eventually give birth to children.

During the millennia of agriculture's dominance over industry, male offspring were preferred to females due to the reliance of farm-

ing on heavy labor; in addition, the succession of patriarchal lineages requires male scions. Such issues understandably affected an expectant woman's thinking about her unborn child's sex (especially if she had already given birth to several girls). This is when the 'changing flowers' ritual (*uānn hue* in Taiwanese) might have come in handy. The purpose of 'changing flowers' is to alter the sex allotted to her child, so that she will get the son or daughter that she prefers. In a detailed record of the ritual, Kang Shiyu describes how real flowers and paper flowers are used in a temple devoted to Madame Linshui, the guardian goddess of maternity and newborns. The ritual master guides the expectant woman to pluck paper flowers of her desired color off a paper structure labelled 'flower bush palace'. It is worth mentioning that the character for 'palace' used there is the same as the one used for 'uterus'. The woman has to hide at her home whatever she has plucked, adorning her hair with the flowers for three days.

When those days have elapsed, the next steps are taken. A potted plant that rested on the offering table during the 'changing flowers' ritual is covered with a piece of red cloth. The ritual master instructs the couple to tend the plant, keeping it first in their bedroom, shifting it outside after 12 days. If they succeed, the couple can also apply to Madame Linshui to adopt their child (Kang 2006, 133-200). Out of this framework arises yet another ritual – much simpler, less magical – called 'beseeching the flower'.

The most opportune time for "beseeching the flower" is Yuanxiao, known as the Lantern Festival. It falls on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. This is the day when all New Year activities reach a final climax, just before everyone resumes his or her normal routine. This is the time when countless rituals related to fertility are conducted, for the sake of crops, livestock, and human beings. 'Beseeching the flower' allegedly started in Peitian Temple in Potzu, Jiayi County, Taiwan. (I am skeptical because about ten years ago, on a trip to southern Fujian, I witnessed a very similar fertility ritual.) During the days before Yuanxiao, two plastic trees are erected in the courtyard of this temple devoted to the goddess Mazu. One is adorned with red flowers, the other with white ones. Unlike the flower bush ritual mentioned above, 'beseeching the flower' does not require the mediation of a ritual master; it can be coordinated by temple staff from the temple or conducted on one's own. Peitian Temple has even printed an instructional leaflet for couples hoping for a child. It outlines how to throw the divination blocks that convey Mazu's response to their appeal.

Having summarised the relevant rituals, I shall offer some observations. With *Dashugong*, an adoption ritual constructs an artificial kinship between tree and child. The talisman and leaf received from the tree god embody this (otherwise) invisible bond. Just like a pregnant mother conveying nourishment to a fetus, sympathetic

magic's law of contagion ensures that the tree god's vitality passes to the child via the leaf. The *dashugong* functions like a parent. Although related through fictive kinship, the tree god and the child are separate beings. With the flower bush, however, the rituals grow from the metaphor 'Human life is a (flowering) tree'. The analogy blends features from the human and arboreal realms, fashioning a new space where the living experiences of the two realms are perceived in the same way. In this new mental space, trees are human, flowers their offspring. One can infer that trees bestow on humans their offspring – trees give life.

4 A Few Money Trees

Trees not only assist with human lives, they also bear valuable fruits. While money trees cast in iron or fashioned from potters' clay have been found in archaeological sites that dated from the Three Kingdom period (220-280 AD), that tradition seems to have died out (Zhang 2001, 25-9).² However, the notion of a tree that produces an inexhaustible supply of coins is fascinating, and the image remains a popular auspicious symbol to this day. In Taiwanese folk art, the money tree often appears, whether painted or carved from wood or stone. A favourite location is temples. During New Year holidays, money trees materialise on the market to enhance the festive mood. Vendors adorn little kumquat trees with plastic coins and ingots, or simply red-and-gold ribbons. Another tree that came to be associated with money is the cat-tail willow (*Salix gracilistyla*), whose shiny bark and red buds are pleasing to the eye. A common name in Taiwanese, *gîn liú* (silver willow), sounds much like the term *gîn niú* (silver ingot). Both are very popular domestic decorations during the New Year.

But perhaps because many people hope to get rich, and their thoughts on the subject are not limited to the New Year season, yet another type of money tree emerged. In 1986, a Taiwanese truck driver came up with the idea of planting five Malabar chestnut (*Pachira aquatica*) seeds in a single pot and braiding their stalks as they grew. The concept soon took off, and the trees became an important export (Zheng 2006). To lend the product a feeling of auspiciousness, the trade settled on calling the plants 'five lucks' or *wufu*, a vague concept traditionally used to encompass all good fortune. This meshed well with the idea that the rapid growth of the species symbolised speedy advancement (Kong 2022). Soon the plants gained the nick-

² Zhang Maohua argues, however, that instead of calling such treelike structures 'money trees', we should call these uprights connecting heaven and earth *axes mundi* or 'world pillars'.

name ‘money tree’. For decades, such money trees have been ubiquitous in shops and offices, and no opening celebration, whether of a small business or a local event, is complete without one. In recent years, consumers have welcomed a new type of money tree, now made of crystals and semiprecious stones. Such glittering objects are luxurious, showy household ornaments.

5 Tree Spirits

While money trees can be very mundane, the indigenous peoples of Taiwan consider large trees something to be revered and even feared since each of them harbours a tree spirit. The Tsou people, who have long resided in the mountainous area of Alishan, trace their origins to a tree. Once a goddess shook the seeds from a maple tree, which fell to the ground. The seeds germinated and became the ancestral Tsou, and their sacred native place is named after the tree. In practice, the Tsou also venerate the large-leaf banyan (*Ficus subpisocarpa*), particularly the large ones planted near their assembly hall. Each year, during their annual Mayasvi (Triumph Festival), tribal elders invite their ancestors’ spirits to join the festival by climbing down from heaven by way of these banyan trees. Large trees planted at the gate of a settlement or house serve as guardian spirits, shielding residents from disease and supernatural invasion (Pu 2019, 11).

Inside the Alishan resort, a traditional Tsou territory, stands a memorial dedicated to the tree spirits. Erected in 1935 by the Japanese colonial government, the memorial claims to have appeased the tree spirits whose ire was aroused by a large lumber operation. Although Zhang Jialun challenges this account, citing evidence from contemporaneous newspapers to prove that the memorial was really meant to uphold a forest conservation policy, part of a broader colonial effort to consolidate Taiwan’s status as part of imperial Japan.³ Regardless, it did not stop “ghost stories” of ferocious tree spirits from circulating in the area. For decades, lumberjacks were said to be scared out of their minds or frightened to death. While the idea that trees had spirits was not new, there was something novel to the suggestion that tree spirits were capable of expressing emotions, that trees have minds very similar to those of human beings. When trees suffer a violent, untimely death, they become wrathful and are likely to exact vengeance.

Vengeful trees occur not just in Tsou folklore, but in that of ethnic Han people as well. Every once in a while, accounts circulate about

³ Zhang Jialun, however, has argued that the memorial emerged from Japan’s ‘green movement’, and that it glorified the nature-loving Japanese empire. See <https://storystudio.tw/article/gushi/alishanforest/>.

some tree spirits offended by human beings who causes misfortune. Enough cases have turned up over a long period to fuel both reverence and fear. During the Ghost Festival of 2012, a certain farmer named Chen executed a purgatorial ritual, or *pudu*, before chopping down several betel palms on his property. His qualms had driven him to appease the tree spirits (Huang 2012). Of course, not everyone is as conscientious as the farmer in question. So when trees are injured or improperly transplanted, those responsible learn of the tree's outrage one way or another (Wu 2017, 234-5).⁴ Such occasions demand repenting or rectifying the wrongdoing, somehow making amends to the tree.

Consider an extreme case from 2007. Houzhen, in Yizhu Township, Jiayi County, is a remote rural village with no more than two hundred households. For residents, 2006 and 2007 were tough. Approximately twenty residents died of old age, disease, and other causes. The unusually high mortality rate stirred up panic. Seeking an explanation, they prayed to the village deity, Lord Chi of Zhen'an Temple. Through a spirit medium, Lord Chi informed the villagers that a tree murdered seven years earlier was seeking revenge by inflicting misfortune on the village. Villagers alleged that a landowner poured herbicide to the soil around the tree because he had other plans for the land. In response to that disclosure, Lord Chi gave detailed ritual instructions for ending the misfortunes and ensuring a peaceful future (Cai 2007). The villagers complied: they prepared scapegoats made of hay, all according to the deity's instructions. Attached to each scapegoat – which stood for a family in the village – was a paper figure for each member of the household. Under the guidance of the spirit medium and the temple staff, the villagers performed a series of rituals that shifted their inauspicious fate onto the scapegoats. The scapegoats were subsequently set ablaze some distance from the village, signifying the elimination of their tainted history. Afterwards, Lord Chi led an inspection through all the villagers' lands. His divine entourage made a stop at the site where the slain tree had stood. Villagers had already planted another tree (supposedly the offspring of the original) on the very site. To highlight the new tree's special status, villagers draped a strip of red cloth over the trunk. This folkloric convention is closely associated with *Dashugong*. Further rituals were conducted there, paper money burned, and firecrackers set off to conclude the ceremony of reconciliation. Thanks to his divine power, Lord Chi managed to appease the tree spirit and bring peace and security to the entire village.

⁴ Public construction often require clearing land or expanding roads. This can endanger old trees, which are sometimes transplanted. Without careful planning, transplanting can be fatal for old trees.

Let us look more closely at the event. Even though the tree had been dead for seven years, villagers still believed that its lingering resentment needed to be pacified. Murdering a large tree constitutes an act of desecration that deserves punishment. In addition, tree spirits occupy a relatively low place in the hierarchy of deities, enabling Lord Chi (or another higher-ranking deity, presumably) to settle the conflict between the tree and the village.

One should note that there is a slight distinction between a tree god and a tree spirit. The former, like many other officially recognised deities, is benevolent, omnipotent, reasonable, and caring. However, a tree spirit is typically unrecognised or receives little attention. People are rarely aware of its existence until something unusual happens. While a tree god should in theory live forever, a tree spirit can and does perish. It only manifests when it suffers a wound or premature death. This threatening side of the tree serves to evoke people's awe of nature (Qing 2016, 78-81). In response to harm, a tree spirit may inflict a punishment on the culprit. Given the history of tree god and tree spirit vengeance, it will be useful to consider it along with the environmental spirit that arose in Taiwan late in the twentieth century.⁵ In fact, many environmental protection groups or events choose to use the image of the tree as their icon. One of them has even become *Dashugong's* unlikely ally in the public sector.

6 Tree Folklore and Environmental Protection

In 1989, Taiwan's Department of Agriculture and Forestry launched a Precious Old Tree and Sidewalk Tree Protection Plan. For its purposes, a 'precious old tree' must meet at least one of the following three criteria: (1) over one hundred years old, (2) diameter at breast height more than 1.5 meters, (3) special species or locally representative species (Ministry of Forestry 2002). This may be the earliest legal act regulating and promoting the protection of old trees. That means that even if an old tree is not recognised as housing a tree god or tree spirit, so long as it has lived beyond one hundred years it is a cultural as well as an ecological treasure. As the protection of old trees entered the mainstream, the death of such a local legend no longer meant simple oblivion – it became something of concern, to be regretted. Possibly one of the earliest public memorial to an old tree occurred in 1994, when a large banyan inside a primary school died of old age. The county magistrate personally attended and presided over the memorial, along with nearly one thousand students,

⁵ The grassroots Taiwan Environmental Protection Union and official Ministry of Environmental Protection were both founded in 1987.

members of environment protection groups, teachers, and government officials. Over the course of the memorial, the messages conveyed were gratitude, remorse, and a resolution to work towards a harmonious coexistence with all creatures on earth (Bao 1994). In 2017, a pine tree in Hualian died after being poisoned by the landowner. This caused an uproar. In ways befitting the passing of a local dignitary, residents came to the site, placing candles and flowers to commemorate an august figure that had witnessed more than one hundred years of local change (Wang 2017).

Increasingly, people find solace after the loss of an old tree by planting its offspring in the same site (one thinks of Houzhen). This applies to both historical trees and tree gods (Liu 2016). Ostensibly a perpetuation of the tree's life, the practice offers an opportunity to promote ecological awareness. While the deification of an old tree is certainly one way to protect it, there are drawbacks. When people build shrines near trees, branches are unnaturally constrained, roots are buried underneath cement, and the plant may get insufficient water (Randrup, McPherson, Costello 2003, 210-15). Suppose sticks of incense are sold and heavily used: fire, high temperatures, and choking smoke can pose serious threats to the tree's health (Zhang 1993). As with human beings, when a tree grows too old, its health deteriorates, and its trunk is no longer able to support great masses of foliage. Diseases and pests may plague the weakening tree. That is why Zhan Fengchun, an arborist, maintains that planting new trees to replace old ones might be desirable (Lin 2021, 50-3).

Whether we choose to preserve old trees or plant young ones, ideas and beliefs surrounding *Dashugong* must have instilled in believers an inclination to respect and cherish aged banyans, maples, and other sorts of trees. That constitutes a common ground with nonbelievers who venerate old trees for their cultural and ecological value. In Taiwan, unfortunately, such a common ground is rarely seen. Followers of folk religions and environmentalists are often in opposing camps. As one side calls the other 'arrogant' and 'ignorant', the other speaks of environmental degradation. Lack of understanding on the part of the public sector leads to more misunderstanding and conflict. That is what happened with the ill-fated "Reduce Incense-Burning" 2017 campaign. The founders of that campaign hoped to improve air quality by stemming the burning of spirit money and incense in temples. However, overzealous officials triggered a terrific backlash. Believers in folk religions complained that their right to religious freedom was being infringed on. A coalition of temples staged a grand demonstration unprecedented in scale (Liu 2017). The conflict caused deep rifts between government and society. Other disagreements on analogous topics abound.

If civil servants took a crash course in local folklore, it would facilitate both policy-making and subsequent implementation. An en-

couraging example recently came to light of bureaucrats recognizing the legitimacy of popular religion. On the Facebook page of the Water Resource Planning Institute, a story about the Zengwen River was posted on November 8, 2022. One hundred years ago, as the bed of the river widened, it edged closer and closer to Shi'er dian Village. Those who lived there felt their livelihood was in danger, and they turned to their guardian god. The god instructed them to plant banyan trees on the riverbank to quell the threat of flooding. Those banyan trees have grown into a small forest, attracting a constant flow of tourists. Research carried out by the Water Resource Planning Institute indicates that there is scientific evidence supporting the wisdom of the local deity. Since banyans grow very swiftly, and their root systems latch firmly onto the soil, they protect riverbanks from erosion. A wall of trees could divert the water course away from the village. Such practices belong to folk knowledge of those in riverfront villages; they also conform to the "Nature-Based Solutions" advocated by UNESCO (Water Resource Planning Institute, 2022).

It is to be hoped that the further investigation and analysis of folk customs will enhance the mutual understanding of all parties, helping to bridge some of the gaps lying between them.

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