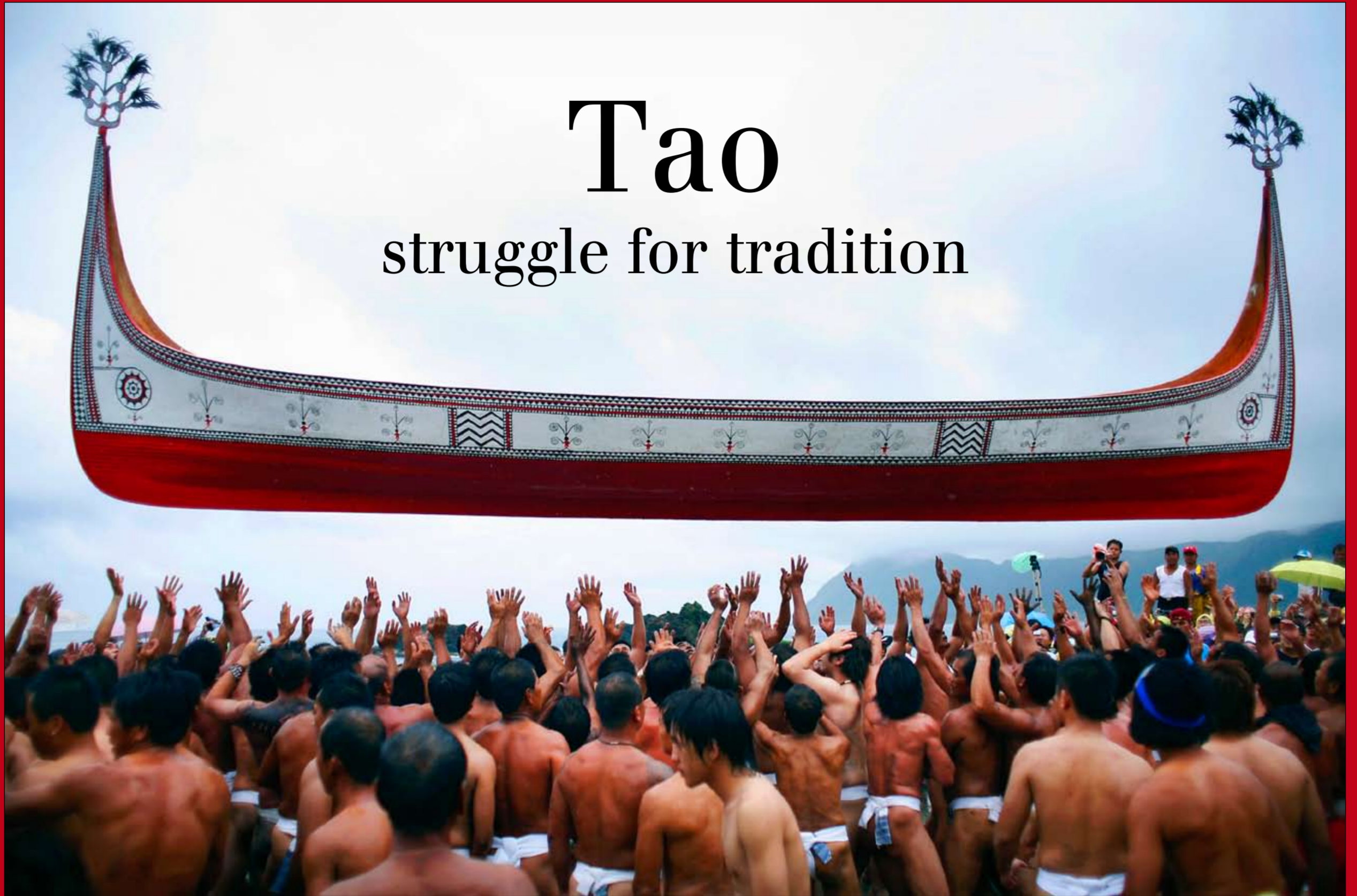


# SUNDAY FEATURES

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## Tao struggle for tradition



Top: Tao villagers hoist a new fishing boat into the air during a traditional launching ceremony on Orchid Island. PHOTO: WALLY SANTANA, AP  
Clockwise from bottom left: Villagers slaughter pigs as part of the boat-launching ceremony; elder villagers pass on offerings of taro during the ceremony; Tao elders arrive at the ceremony wearing traditional warrior helmets and jewelry; village chief Syman Koten, left, puts the final details the boat; villagers move the boat to the shore of Orchid Island.  
Right: The Tao fishing boat on its maiden voyage. PHOTO: WALLY SANTANA, AP



*For decades the Tao of Orchid Island have used colorful canoe-like boats to net flying fish in the warm waters of the Pacific. But now more and more Tao men are migrating to the Taiwanese mainland, leaving fewer villagers to maintain the old traditions*

BY WALLY SANTANA  
AP, ORCHID ISLAND



The four dozen men in loincloths stopped repeatedly to toss the new boat into the air as they carried it through their village to shore.

Then they launched it ceremoniously into the Pacific Ocean. It was the first launch of a Tao fishing boat in seven years.

For decades the Tao Aborigines of Orchid Island have used colorful canoe-like boats to net flying fish in the warm waters of the Pacific. But now more and more Tao men are migrating to Taiwan's cities to look for work, leaving fewer to learn how to build the 7m boats. The tribe is also under siege from Taiwan's majority Han culture.

About 4,000 Tao live on Orchid Island, 62km east of Taiwan's southern tip. They are among the country's 460,000 Aborigines — 2 percent of the population — whose ancestors migrated from south Pacific islets starting 6,000 years ago.

Last month, villagers filled the new boat with taro roots. They slaughtered about 40 pigs near the shore for a mass barbecue. Then the men waved their fists angrily at an imaginary enemy to summon strength for the sacred task of launching the boat.

The launch was the culmination of a process begun three years earlier when fisherman Syman Koten went to Orchid Island to search for the bread tree, dragon eye and other types of wood. The boat is made of 27 wooden planks from five kinds of trees, held in place without any nails or fastening devices.

"I remember my father told me before he died ... I must take up the responsibility to lead our family fishing team," said Koten, 69. "And that is why I built this boat for my family. A big boat that can take 10 of my family members." The boat is decorated with elaborate red, black and white designs, including an eye in the shape of a wheel to guide it on safe journeys.

"The tradition of catching the flying fish has bred an endless culture that should be passed from one generation to another," said Tao cultural researcher Syman Fengaien, 45. (Syman refers to Tao married men.) "So catching flying fish is not only the center of the Tao people's life, it's also the core of the Tao culture." Amid the rejoicing, the launch of Koten's boat served as a reminder of the fragility of the Tao way of life. Koten's 37-year-old son said his interest in life on the Taiwanese mainland has prevented him from truly practicing Tao culture.

"While I have taken part in the boat building project, I didn't learn the skills needed to build a boat," said Syman Manidong.