

Be-leaf it or not: worshippers pray to tree gods for protection 樹大有神 有拜有保佑

In Taiwanese folk belief, some people pray to trees in the firm belief that there is a deity in every big tree. This practice has developed into a unique "big tree deity" culture in what is a unique aspect of Taiwanese folk belief.

Su Jui-chan, a teacher at A-lien elementary school in Kaohsiung County has spent two years visiting 700 sites of big trees and temples and collected his notes in a study.

Su says Taiwanese traditionally refer to grass and tree spirits as the Big Tree Deity, the Tree King or the Ancient Holy Lord, and that the worshipped trees are taller than 10m and older than 100 years. They also differentiate between different kinds of trees, such as banyan, fir, mango and so on.

Su's study shows that big tree deity worship in Kaohsiung County is mainly found on the western bank of the Kaoping River, and that there are more such deities in Taliao and Chishan than in other townships. Su guesses that the Kaoping river bank is hilly and that mid and upstream parts of the river are close to the mountains and therefore less developed than other areas such as Fengshan and Kangshan. The result is that there are more old trees left there.

Su says tree worshippers include men and women, old and young, and that according to folk tradition, weak and sickly children often are made to worship tree deities as if the deities were their step- or godparents in the hope that the children will grow to be as strong and healthy as the tree deity.

The Banyan King in the Shennong Temple in Neitong Village of Neimen Township is an old mango and banyan tree growing intertwined with each other. A protrusion on the southern side of the mango tree looks like male genitalia, while a cavity on the northern side of the banyan tree looks like female genitalia. As a result, many childless couples visit the Banyan King to pray for children.

In addition, many women of a certain occupation firmly believe they will remain healthy and avoid disease if they touch the cavity on the banyan tree.

There are also innumerable local legends about big tree deities. The best known legend about a big tree deity saving a person is the one about the Parasol Tree King in Tali City, Taichung County. According to legend, during the reign of the Qing dynasty Kangxi emperor, the Parasol Tree King transformed into a warrior dressed in red and then fought off a band of bandits and freed Prince Jiaqing who was visiting Taiwan.

Su also says big tree deities do not rank very high in the spirit world, placing them roughly at the same level as the earth god. Big tree deity worship, however, shows no signs of disappearing, and the ongoing worship and activities remain an important clue when studying Taiwanese folklore.

(LIBERTY TIMES, TRANSLATED BY PERRY SVENSSON)



在台灣民間信仰中，有一個拜樹族群，深信「樹大有神」，而發展出獨特的大樹公信仰文化，堪稱是台灣社會底層的信仰特色。

高縣阿蓮國小蘇瑞展老師花費兩年時間上山下海，走訪全台約七百棵大樹及廟宇，記錄第一手研究資料。

蘇瑞展指出，台灣一般習稱草木神為「大樹公」，或稱「樹王公」、「樹仔公」、「萬古聖公」，凡生長數十公尺以上、樹齡逾百一律祭祀，按樹木種類區分，則有榕樹、松樹、芒果等。

調查發現，高縣大樹公分佈以高屏溪沿岸沿線為主，大寮、旗山的大樹公數量明顯多於其他鄉鎮，推測可能高屏溪沿岸多丘陵，中上游已近山區，開發程度不如鳳山、岡山區，老樹得以較多保留。

蘇瑞展表示，拜樹信眾不分男女老幼，台灣民間常有歹育飼的囝仔拜神明或大樹公當契子的習俗，希望體弱多病的猴囝仔，也能長得像大樹公般枝繁葉茂、生生不息。

內門鄉內東村神農宮的榕王公，為芒果與榕樹合株的老樹，芒果樹上南側瘤狀突起，狀似男性器官，無獨有偶，榕樹北側一處枯朽樹洞，也狀似女性器官，榕王公因而大受不孕夫婦青睞，經常結伴前往膜拜祈求生男得女。

許多從事特種行業的女性，則深信觸摸形如女陰的樹枝分叉或小型樹洞，即能百病不侵、永保健康。

而有關大樹公的鄉野傳奇，更是不勝枚舉。最著名的大樹公救人傳說，當屬台中縣大里市的涼傘樹王公，相傳涼傘樹王公在清康熙年間曾化身紅衣武士擊退土匪，解救遊台灣的嘉慶君。

蘇瑞展表示，在神明的世界，大樹公位階並不高，約等同於土地公，但大樹公信仰自古至今不墜，相關祭祀活動持續不斷，是研究台灣庶民生活文化的重要線索。

(自由時報記者蘇福男)

Top: The Parasol Tree King in Tali City, Taichung County, is said to have transformed into a warrior during the Qing dynasty and freed the Jiaqing prince by fighting off a band of bandits.

Below left: Worshippers hoping to win on the lottery have burned sacrificial paper money at a big tree deity. Below right: A protrusion on the mango tree part of the Banyan King at Shennong Temple is said to look like male genitalia.

PHOTOS: SU FU-NAN, LIBERTY TIMES

上圖：台中縣大里市涼傘樹王公，相傳曾化身紅衣武士擊退土匪，解救遊台灣的嘉慶君。

下左圖：大樹公拜大家樂之賜大量興起，也遭到下毒、燒砍下場。

下右圖：內門鄉神農宮榕王公，芒果樹上有瘤狀突起，神似男性器官。

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