



The Fire Bird

Gaoshan Peoples – Taiwan Island, China

In ancient times, the Gaoshan people dwelt on a vast plain located on an island the middle of the sea. At its centre rose a mountain overlooking the whole island. The evergreen landscape was full of palm trees and other tropical plants, in whose green shadows animals and humans lived peacefully side by side.

At the time, the east coast was swarming with huge clawed crabs, while the west coast was filled with sinuous, sharp-toothed conger eels. Both were responsible for protecting the island from flooding, as the summer monsoon rains and abundant typhoons threatened to swamp the land and endanger the lives of all the creatures that shared the island.

But, knowing that they were necessary for everyone's survival, meant that they were left alone and no other species dared to hunt or fish them. This meant that the number of individuals of both species increased over time, to the point of overpopulating their respective territories. With this came conflict.

One day, rushing out of a hole in the rocks to catch a minnow, the king of the conger eels shoved the king of the crabs, sending him tumbling a couple of fathoms down into the reef. The crab king, who was left belly-up after hitting his shell on the rocks, turned around in anger and challenged the conger king to a single combat on the sandy beach.

A crowd of crabs and congeners circled to make room for their kings and to watch the duel, while the spirit of the island held its breath, anxiously anticipating the possible consequences of the fight.

‘Do you see these teeth?’ the king of the congers asked the king of the crabs defiantly, opening his bloodshot mouth. ‘They are so sharp that your shell will not be able to protect you from them. And, besides, I can inject you with their poison. One bite and you’re dead. So take your people and get out of here. From now on, this territory is just for us.’

But the king of the crabs was not daunted by the conger’s bravado. Raising his powerful claws, and adopting an intimidating stance, he responded:

‘We’re not leaving here. And if you’re so confident in your sharp teeth, attack if you dare.’

The conger lunged at the crab with a dizzying, whip-like cracking motion, but the crab raised his thickest claw just in time to stop the attack and CRAC ... the conger broke his teeth as he bit into the tough skin!

Almost without giving him time to understand what had happened, the king of the crabs grabbed the king of the congers with his claws and CRAHS ripped him in half.

The king of the crabs had won, and that is why there are now only crabs on the beaches of Taiwan.

But this resulted in a serious problem because, in the absence of the congers, there were not enough crabs to cover and patrol the entire west coast. When the first typhoon of the summer came, the crabs could not hold back the waters and the island flooded, sweeping away most of the trees, animals and humans. Very few managed to survive on the highest part of the central mountain, and the humans now had no fire, so they could not cook their food. What could they do?

Near the top of the mountain was a huge rock, that the humans called the Boulder King, which summoned the surviving humans to tell them:

‘If you want a fire, someone will have to go to the other side of the sea, which is far, far away. Once there, they’ll have to look for a place where there is a flickering red glow. There they’ll find the fire.’

Humans and animals headed for the rocky ridge that faced the direction indicated by the Boulder King and, indeed, across the sea, they caught a glimpse of a flickering, reddish glow. This gave them hope.

Then a thin, but sinewy-looking, man raised his arm.

‘I can swim,’ he said. ‘I can go in search of fire.’

With the consent of the rest of the humans, he descended the mountain, jumped into the water, and swam for a long time until he finally reached the other side. He went to the place of the glow, took the fire and, put it in a lantern, hung it on a long reed and tied it to his back. He then set out on his way back. But as soon as he reached the mountain again, a wave snatched him and carried him down into the depths, together with the reed, the lantern and the fire.

The human survivors were filled with grief, but then a frog leapt out in front of them.

‘I can also swim, and I can also walk on land,’ she said. ‘I can go and get the fire for you.’

Amidst the rejoicing of the humans, the frog hopped down to the sea and swam for a long, long time, until she reached the other shore. She went in search of the fire and, putting it in the depths of a small empty seashell, which she tied to her back, she jumped back into the sea to make her way back. But halfway back the frog became exhausted. She was too small for such a long journey, and had no choice but to dive into the water to take a rest, at which point the water entered her shell and the fire was extinguished.

The people thought they would end up starving to death, but then a black bird approached them and said:

‘I think I can go for the fire. After all, I can fly, so the waves won’t reach me.’

The smiles and hopeful looks on the humans’ faces told him they would be eternally grateful, so he immediately set off on his adventure.

The black bird soared up into the sky and, following the sea breezes, glided for a long time until he reached the other shore. He landed on the place of the flickering reddish glow and, picking up an ember in

his beak, flew back. But the ember began to burn his beak, so the black bird began to pass it from one talon to the other and, from time to time, to his beak again. And so he managed to carry the burning ember, while the sea tried to catch up with him by raising the waves higher and higher. However, all its efforts were in vain. The black bird landed happily on the top of the mountain where the humans greeted him with jubilation.

In time, the ocean retreated from the plains and humans, animals, trees and plants returned to cover them. But the Gaoshans never forgot what the black bird had done for them.

From that day on, they called the black bird the Fire Bird, and his descendants still live today in the area inhabited by the Bunun People, one of the Gaoshan ethnic groups. These birds have beaks and feet as red as fire itself, and the Gaoshans say it is because of the sacrifice their forefather made to save the lives of their ancestors. That is why, even now, their descendants honour and protect the fire birds. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2022).

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Comments

The Gaoshan People are actually a collection of aboriginal peoples from Taiwan, the island which lies between the East and South China Seas and the Philippine Sea. These peoples are estimated to have inhabited Taiwan for approximately 6,500 years, and they seem to be the origin of all Austronesian peoples, who eventually spread to the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, the whole of Oceania - Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia - and even the island of Madagascar in Africa. However, on the island where they were born, they are a minority compared to the Han Chinese majority. With just over half a million inhabitants, they make up only 2.38% of Taiwan's population.

Taiwan's geographical location has led the Gaoshan Peoples to be discriminated against, and oppressed, over the past centuries by various world powers. This started with the Dutch colonisation (1623-1662) and continued with the invasions and colonisations of the Qing Dynasty

(1683-1895) and Japan (1895-1945). There were also Spanish troops in the north of the island for a short period of time, 16 years (1626-1642), although the intention was not to colonise the island, but rather to control the deployment of the Netherlands in the area, as this would harm Spanish commercial interests with China. In fact, as Gold (1986) notes, the Spanish 'had little effect on Taiwan's subsequent history' (p. 24).

All these historical difficulties have led the Gaoshan Peoples to largely lose their cultural identity and, with it, to a significant decline in their languages. In Taiwan alone, around 26 different languages have been identified among the Gaoshan – languages which correspond to the different peoples that make up this ethnic group. However, at least ten of these languages are already extinct, five are on the verge of extinction, and the rest are endangered (Zeitoun and Yu, 2005). This is a tragedy for our species, as linguistic and cultural diversity are essential for our survival (UNESCO, 2002). Each language implies a different model and way of thinking. Furthermore, in the event of a serious threat to the survival of the human species, no one knows whether the model of thinking of a minority may hold the key to solving the problem.

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Earth, Our Home: The global environment with its finite
resources is a common concern of all peoples.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global
society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights,
economic justice, and a culture of peace.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every
form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 5: Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological
systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural
processes that sustain life.

Principle 5b: Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere
reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's
life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural
heritage.

Principle 16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.