



## The Legend of Ali and the Fairy Maidens

*Gaoshan People – Taiwan Island, China*

Long, long ago, on the island of Taiwan, there was a mountain called Tushan, which means Bald Mountain. It got this name because it rose up in the middle of the island like a bald head. It had no trees to raise their arms to the sky and no bushes to cover its bare earth and rocks with the gentle green of their leaves.

In a small valley on the northern slope of Tushan, there lived a young boy named Ali who had been orphaned not long after he had reached his teens. Many years before, his mother and father had died in a mountain accident. Due to this, the boy had learned enough to survive on his own and about what the forests, at the foot of the bare mountain, gave him. In fact, he had become an accomplished hunter with a skill hard to beat when shooting game with a bow.

It happened one day that, while hunting for some small prey to satisfy his hunger, he saw in the distance two young maidens picking flowers in a clearing in the forest. Never having seen such beautifully attired young women before, he made his way towards them with the intention of engaging them in conversation. But, suddenly, he saw a huge tiger stalking the women. It was crouching under the trees at the edge of the clearing.

With the sharp reflexes of a seasoned hunter, Ali hunched down so as not to be noticed by the animal and made a mad dash in its direction, with an arrow in his bow ready to be shot in a split second.

He was within arrow-shot distance of the feline when, oblivious to Ali's presence, the cat began to slowly advance in the direction of the maidens.

'A little bit more, a little bit more without it seeing me,' thought Ali when he felt he was at the right distance not to miss the shot. So he stood up, puffed up his chest while tightening his bow and shot his arrow without the tiger noticing him.

The arrow flew through the air straight towards its target, and WHAM! ... it got stuck in the stump of a fallen tree, right in front of the tiger's nose. The tiger, startled by the arrow, which had severed one of its whiskers, turned its head and, seeing Ali with his bow ready again, ran off in a panic to hide again in the forest.

The maidens, hearing the commotion, turned startled in Ali's direction. This was just in time to see the tiger leave the clearing and head off into the depths of the forest in search of shelter. Ali kept aiming his bow in the direction of the spot where the tiger had disappeared. Then they understood everything.

'You saved our lives!' exclaimed one of the girls.

She said it in a voice trembling with fear, the fear that assails you when the danger has passed, but when you realise how close you were to dying.

'It's nothing,' said Ali, playing it down as he pulled the arrow out of the tree stump with the intention of using it again.

'How did you frighten it?' asked the other maiden in surprise. 'It didn't seem to be hurt'.

'I grazed its whiskers with the arrow and it got scared. I didn't mean to hurt it,' Ali replied, lowering his eyes. 'I just wanted to scare it away. I never kill any animal except out of necessity in order to feed myself or to keep it from killing me'.

The two maidens approached him and, for a few moments, they chatted. They just asked him questions about his life and, at no time, did they reveal where they came from or what they were doing there.

Finally, looking around them with concern, they asked Ali which might be the safest way to leave the forest. He gave them precise directions and they said goodbye.

But, as he stood at the edge of the clearing watching the maidens walk away, he saw an old man with a long beard descending from the sky. He carried a long staff with a dragon on the upper end and he was walking towards the women.

Something inside told him that perhaps the maidens would need his help again, so he began to run in their direction without losing sight of the old man. His intuition was soon proven right, when he saw the old man catch up with the two maidens, grab them both by the waist and then soar back up into the sky clutching them like a bird of prey with two victims.

‘Hey, old man! Wait a moment!’ Ali shouted, trying to confuse and surprise him, and also to gain the tenths of a second he needed to catch up with them.

And he succeeded! In a last-ditch effort, Ali leapt into the air just in time to catch the old man’s feet and bring him down together with his precious cargo. The old man rose to his feet ready to fight Ali, but the young man didn’t give him time to defend himself. With two quick steps, Ali placed himself in front of the old man and struck him hard on the forehead with the heel of his hand.

The old man crumbled to the ground then slowly sat up, dazed, while Ali gave him time to see if he would give up fighting him.

And so it was. The old man, on regaining full awareness, cast a furious glare at Ali and, with a haughty gesture, raised his wide sleeves and soared into the air, only to disappear into the clouds like a whoosh of air.

‘Oh no,’ the maidens said, ‘You shouldn’t have done that!’

Ali didn’t understand what was happening – he had just saved their lives from a tiger, and now he had stopped an old wizard from kidnapping them! What could he have done wrong?

‘Sorry, it’s not your fault, it’s ours,’ one of the girls finally said.

‘We’re two fairy maidens from the Temple of Heaven,’ explained the other, ‘and having heard of the beauties of this island, we decided to sneak down this morning to look at the landscapes and pick wild flowers in the forest clearings. But unfortunately, absorbed in such beauty, we didn’t realise that time was passing faster than in Heaven, and someone else must have informed the Emperor of Jade of our transgression’.

‘The man you’ve beaten is the Old Man of the South Pole,’ continued the other maiden, ‘the Emperor of Jade must have sent him to take us back to the Temple of Heaven ... to receive our punishment’.

‘Well ... I didn't know ...’ Ali began to say, but just then there was a distant rumble of thunder.

‘The Old Man of the South Pole must have told the Jade Emperor what happened!’ exclaimed one of the girls, frightened.

‘And now the emperor is sending the God of Thunder to ravage the whole island and kill all the people who live here,’ added the other sadly, as if accepting her fate.

‘Can nothing be done to save all the creatures on the island?’ Ali asked, overwhelmed by the news as the rumble of thunder got closer and closer.

‘Only if someone climbs the southern peak of the Bald Mountain and draws the lightning of the God of Thunder to themselves,’ said the sad maiden, lowering her eyes, ‘may we prevent the fire caused by the lightning from destroying the whole island and the life on it’.

And, raising her head again, she looked Ali in the eyes and added in an urgent voice:

‘Quick! Run for the plains! We’ve caused this and we’re the ones who have to deal with it. We’ll go to the southern peak of the Tushan and draw the lightning towards us’.

‘No!’ Ali shouted, shaking his head. ‘It was I who struck the Old Man of the South Pole, and it’s I who have brought doom upon everyone on the island.’ Then he added with a look of resolve: ‘I’m the one who has to climb the Tushan to attract the lightning!’

Before they had time to react, Ali picked up the dragon-staff that the Old Man of the South Pole had left behind on the ground and set off, at full speed, in the direction of the southern peak of the Bald Mountain.

Meanwhile, the thunder was getting closer and closer.

By the time the storm's black had clouds rolled over the island, Ali had already reached the top of the Tushan.

'God of Thunder,' Ali cried at the top of his lungs, attracting the god's attention, 'it was I who struck the Old Man of the South Pole! Look, I've his staff here! It was I who set the two fairy maidens free... and it's I who now reproach you, the Old Man of the South Pole and the Emperor of Jade for your ignoble behaviour, and for imposing unfair laws on the inhabitants of Heaven and Earth alike. This has nothing to do with anyone else on this island, so cast your thunderbolt on me and let's end this farce!'

He had not finished uttering these words when a horrifying gigantic bolt of lightning descended from the sky and struck Ali's chest, shattering him into thousands of pieces, as well as scorching all the Bald Mountain, its earth and rocks, with blazing fire. However, it failed to reach the forests at the foot of the Tushan or the jungles of the plains where all the life of the island, including humans, lived.

Soon after, the storm faded away and the God of Thunder returned to the Temple of Heaven to give an account to the Emperor of Jade of Ali's words and of his brutal punishment. And it is said that the Emperor of Jade was crestfallen and thoughtful for many days after that, and that he did not even send again for the two fairy maidens who had transgressed the laws which he himself had imposed in Heaven.

It is not known how, or why, the thousands of pieces of Ali's body turned into trees and bushes which began to grow on the scorched earth and rocks. And it is said that the two fairy maidens, seeing what was happening on the mountain, were so moved that they also decided to give their lives in order to bring an abundance of life to the mountain.

'Ali died for us and for all life on the island,' they said to each other in tears, 'and with his death, he has covered the Bald Mountain with forests. Now we'll become flowers and grass, covering the clearings of these forests with beauty to give Ali company and also remind the

heavens that the longing for beauty can never again be treated as a crime’.

And the people, when they heard what had happened, began to say that the greenery that now covered Tushan, the Bald Mountain, were the hair and flesh of Ali, who had become immortal through his sacrifice. They also said that the grass and flowers of the forest glades were the feerical bodies of the maidens, who were now his friends.

To this day, the once Bald Mountain, Tushan, is covered with trees and bushes. But, if you go to Taiwan, don’t ask for the mountain of the legend by calling it Tushan, because that mountain has since been called Alishan, the Mount of Ali, in his immortal memory. □

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

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## Comments

Among the over 20 peoples or tribes that make up what we now call the Gaoshan People, the Tsou tribe is the one that traditionally populated Alishan, Mount Ali (Alishan, 2021), so perhaps this legend should be attributed to this ethnic group. However, given the form in which we have found this story today, elements belonging to Chinese mythology (Han mythology) appear, such as the Emperor of Jade, the Old Man of the South Pole, the God of Thunder and even the *xiannü* (仙女), the ‘immortal women’, textually a word that is usually translated as ‘fairies’ (Stone, 2019).

It is quite possible that elements of the mythology of the majority Han People of China were later added to the original Tsou story. Although settled on the plains of Taiwan since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Han People did not begin to colonise the mountains of the island until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, in the original Gaoshan story, it is quite possible that the *xiannü* of the Han Temple of Heaven were indeed ‘fairies’, in the sense of *nature spirits*, since the Gaoshan Peoples have animistic beliefs, according to which everything in nature has a spirit (Guo, 2015; LeBlanc, 2019).

During the Japanese occupation (1895-1945), the Alishan forests began to be logged for industrial purposes. This led, in 1906, to the discovery on this mountain of a red cypress (*Chamaecyparis formosensis*) which was over 3,000 years old. The Japanese let it live and called it the Sacred Tree, while popular culture transformed it into the staff of the Old Man of the South Pole which Ali had carried with him when he drew the lightning bolt of the God of Thunder. According to the new legend, when the pieces of Ali's body became trees and bushes, the staff of the Old Man of the South Pole was transformed into the ancient Sacred Tree of Alishan.

Unfortunately, this magnificent cypress, 58 yards high, with a trunk diameter of 5 yards and a crown circumference of 25 yards, was struck by lightning in 1956 and then the core of its trunk slowly burnt until it died. It was felled in 1998 to avoid accidents with tourists, although the trunk can still be seen stretched out on the ground along its entire length.

However, there are still a number of very long-lived large trees on the Alishan, such as the 49-yard-high, 2,300-year-old red cypress Xianglin. These are trees that continue to honour Ali's sacrifice in the realms of the collective unconscious that interpenetrate the physical landscape of the Alishan.

For more information about the Gaoshan People and their historical background, see the story 'The Fire Bird' in this Collection.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 1b: Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 4: Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

Principle 6a: Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 12d: Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

Principle 13c: Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.

Principle 15c: Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.