



The Siblings Constellation

Hlai People – Hainan Island, China

In ancient times, in the mountains of Hainan Island in the South China Sea, there were seven sisters and brothers who, having been orphaned at an early age, cared for each other with great affection and diligence. Each undertook those tasks and activities that they could best carry out, and they did not resent each other for doing less than they could do, for they trusted the honesty and goodwill of their brothers and sisters.

When the sowing season came, the seven siblings chose a patch of jungle to clear, with the intention of planting *shanlan* rice (山兰稻). They spent the whole day pulling up bushes and felling trees, but they did not cut down more trees than were needed to grow enough rice to sustain themselves for the whole year. When they felled the Heavenly Taro tree, they felt they had cleared sufficient space, and returned home with the aim of going back the next day in order to prepare the land for sowing.

However, when they arrived in the field shortly after dawn the following day, they were astonished to discover that all the trees and bushes, which they had cut down the previous day, had grown back to their original size. Concerned and deeply intrigued by what had happened, they set to work again and, once more, spent the whole day clearing their chosen piece of land. When they had felled the Heavenly Taro tree again, they stopped work and returned home to rest.

The next day, the siblings could not believe their eyes when they arrived in the field and saw that, once again, the bushes and trees had grown back to their original height.

What was the cause of this mysterious phenomenon?

After a long time discussing what they could do in order to avoid having to clear the same ground for eternity they decided that, once they had cleared it all again and felled the Heavenly Taro tree as in the previous days, they would stay overnight in the area, so as to find out what could be causing the trees and bushes grow again.

So when night fell, though exhausted, the siblings spread out on the ground and hid behind bushes to watch the area from different spots.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, a light brightly illuminated the sky above them, and from it emerged a hideous Heavenly Pig, descending the length of the Heavenly Taro tree. When it reached the ground, it spat out a kind of white smoke and recited an incantation:

—*Sai ya sai, yun yay un, he dong ling dong ling.*

This meant ‘Trees, O trees; bushes, O bushes; return to your original state’. Whereupon, all the trees and shrubs that the sibling had felled and uprooted for the third consecutive day, grew back to their original height.

Finally, the Heavenly Pig made his way back to Heaven by climbing the Heavenly Taro.

When darkness returned to the area, the siblings emerged from their hiding spots and gathered to discuss what they had seen and share possible solutions. After a long time of proposals and discussion, they decided that they would build a giant crossbow and an arrow to put an end to the Heavenly Pig and its unwelcome nightly visits. They would then go up to Heaven by the Taro and tell the Heavenly Emperor what had happened so that he could judge the case.

The next day, for the fourth time, the brothers and sisters cleared the ground in the jungle and, when they had finished, they mounted the giant crossbow and armed the arrow just below the Heavenly Taro. And, when twilight came, they all hid under the big leaves of the tree with their weapon at the ready.

In the middle of the night, a glow overhead warned them that the Heavenly Pig was descending again. But, even before it could spit out its

white smoke, the siblings shot their crossbow and the arrow sank into the belly of the huge animal.

The Heavenly Pig, mortally wounded, leapt up and ran away up the Taro tree towards Heaven, and the seven siblings climbed up the huge tree following the animal's trail of blood.

When they reached Heaven, they were amazed to see a huge celestial city with palaces and towers rising up through the clouds. But they did not dwell on that. They followed the trail of the animal until they reached the pigpens of the Heavenly Emperor, where they found the gigantic pig which had bled to death on the ground.

Cheering with joy at having slain the hideous animal, they went together to the Emperor's palace. The Emperor had woken up with the commotion.

'What's all the shouting about?' Asked the Heavenly Emperor with a frown.

'Your Majesty,' the eldest of the sisters said, as she stepped forward, 'your pig came down to earth and ruined, three times, the work we had done clearing a piece of land in the jungle in order to plant our rice for the whole year. And, lest it should ruin our work a fourth time, we shot it with an arrow and killed it. We ask you to judge the case and be fair to us.'

The Heavenly Emperor raised an eyebrow in surprise.

'Truly, these peasants are bold,' he said to himself. 'I like them!'

But, tilting his head back, he continued to reason to himself:

'They can't go around killing animals, when they could've dealt with things in another way – for example, by coming up here to tell me what happened. I'd have taken care of everything.'

'Well,' the Heavenly Emperor finally said. 'While it's true that that pig violated the heavenly rules by coming down to Earth, it's also true that you had no need to kill him to solve the problem. You could've come here, as you've done now, to tell me about it and I'd have sorted things out.'

Hearing the ruler of Heaven say this, the siblings looked at each other in bewilderment and with concern.

‘Therefore,’ continued the Emperor of Heaven, ‘and so that you may learn that you can’t take a life if you have no real need of it, I condemn you to eat the Heavenly Pig whole, without leaving a trace of flesh, bone or broth.’

The siblings did not know whether to breathe a sigh of relief or to worry even more, for to eat the gigantic pig whole would be quite a feat. But, used as they were to solving their problems by themselves and as a united band, they set to work to carry out the emperor’s sentence.

So, they tore the Heavenly Pig to pieces, cooked it with various seasonings to create different dishes and ate it, bit by bit, until there was nothing left but a bowl of broth. All the siblings looked at each other, and finally the six older ones stared at the youngest sister, to whom they handed the bowl of broth with a smile. But, instead of drinking it, she could think of nothing else but to pour it into the heart of the Heavenly Taro.

Suddenly, and without giving anyone time to react, the tree shrank and shrank to the size it is today, and the siblings looked at each other, dumbfounded, thinking that they could no longer return to their home in the mountains. They would have to stay in Heaven!

When the Heavenly Emperor heard what had happened, he smirked and imposed a new sentence due to not finishing the last bowl and shrinking the Taro:

‘I condemn you to plough the clouds and cultivate them by day, and at night I condemn you to shine like the stars in the sky,’ he said. ‘However, you, the smallest sister, I condemn you to accompany the Moon as she travels through the firmament. This is because you threw the broth on the Heavenly Taro.’

And, raising his chin in a gesture of authority, he added:

‘This is my judgement.’

And so, as always, closely united, the siblings have since devoted themselves to ploughing and cultivating the clouds during the day, and

this is why we often see the clouds lined up in rows, as if in a furrow for seeds. And at night, after leaving the Plough, all the siblings, except the youngest, gather to tell each other stories in a corner of Heaven, while the youngest one accompanies the Moon and assists her with an incomparable brilliance.

When the elders of the Hlai People look up at the starry sky at night, they tell their children and grandchildren:

‘No matter where you are, you must be united as the Six Siblings’. This is said as they point to the constellation of the Pleiades. ‘Then you’ll be able to overcome any difficulty.’

And then, pointing to the Plough and the Big Dipper, they add:

‘Learn from the siblings who, with that plough, till the heavens every day, and then sit down together to tell stories and rest in that corner of Heaven.’ □

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

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Comments

According to scholars, the Hlai People appear to have originated on the Leizhou Peninsula, but began to move to nearby Hainan Island around 4,000 years ago. Eventually, by the 11th century, the entire population had settled on the island (Hlai People, 2022).

They have long been regarded as a tough fierce people, and, over time, they have been involved in multiple tensions and clashes with the Han ethnic majority, which began to move into the island from the mainland around 2,000 years ago. However, the Hlai never created any political or military movement for the purpose of seeing independence from China (Murray, 2017).

In more recent times, their confrontation with the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang, and their adherence to communism, brought not only brutal repression by the nationalist government in Beijing, but

also at the hands of Japanese forces during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). This happened almost as soon as the latter arrived in the country. Both factions, in the face of fierce Hlai resistance, engaged in the rape of the Hlai women and the extermination of entire villages. The Japanese soldiers killed more than 10,000 Hlai in four villages alone, while Chinese Kuomintang Nationalists massacred another 7,000 Hlai in one single town (Hlai People, 2022).

One significant, and possibly surprising, aspect of their history is the story of Wang Erniang, a woman who, in 1171 C.E. during the Song Dynasty, was given the title of 'Lady of Suitability' by the imperial court. She assumed the position of general commander of 36 ethnic groups in the southern part of the island (Bangwei, 2016). In fact, it is said that she 'had a husband, but no one knew his name ... and could keep the Li [Hlai] people under control' (idid., p. 218). Not only that, but her title and office would be inherited by her daughter and subsequently by her granddaughter, in 1181 and 1216 respectively.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

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

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.

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

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

Principle 12c: Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.

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

Principle 16a: Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.