

'Monkey' tree draws crowds

Tree experts say 'monkey' figures are formed by callusing but devotees think otherwise

By Adeline Chia

OVER the past week, retiree Tan Khai Lim has been leaving his four-room flat in Jurong West at 8am to do volunteer work.

No, not to work with the sick or elderly, but to help control the crowds that have been gathering around a so-called lucky 'monkey' tree in Street 42 near blocks 430 and 431.

Since news of it broke on Thursday, hundreds of people from all corners of Singapore have flocked to the usually quiet HDB neighbourhood to pay homage to the tree.

On its trunk is a remarkably life-like outline of two monkeys - one larger than the other - with clearly delineated limbs, faces and bodies. They are formed on a surface that is smoother and of a slightly lighter colour than the rest of the trunk.

Devotees believe that the images are either a manifestation of the Monkey God, a deity from Chinese mythology, or Hanuman, the monkey deity in the Hindu pantheon, and that praying to them would bring them luck.

They have been leaving bunches of bananas, scattering handfuls of peanuts, burning joss sticks and asking for lucky 4-D numbers at the tree - which is where



NATURAL CHARMS: Devotees and curious passers-by flock to the 'monkey' tree in Jurong West, bringing garlands, peanuts and bananas. -- ST PHOTOS: LAU FOOK KONG

Mr Tan, 72, comes in.

Together with three other residents, he has taken it upon himself to distribute the bananas and peanuts to people who drop by. The volunteers have also put up signs telling people not to leave red packets filled with money beneath the tree.

'Thousands of people have come here already. Some people pray for good luck, some are just curious. But many come to get 4-D numbers,' says Mr Tan.

The crowd grew to over 200 at one point last Friday afternoon. Men and women - mostly Chinese and Indians of all ages - were jostling for a peek of the monkey images. Many took pictures of the tree with their mobile phones.

In fact, the monkey tree's celebrity was contagious: Two nearby trees also started garnering offerings last Friday - one for a supposed outline of Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, on its trunk, and another whose bark resembles the Hindu elephant god Ganesha.

The crowds got so bad that residents started complaining of the noise, littering and traffic jams caused by vehicles parked illegally along the narrow road. The police have started patrolling the area.

A little economy also sprang up around the trees with images of the monkey tree being sold at \$3 or \$10 a photo. An ice-cream man was seen doing brisk business 15m from the tree.

It's natural

THE monkey business started last Wednesday when an unknown person put up a sign in Chinese on the tree saying that a monkey had come to the tree three years ago to look for his father, the Monkey God.

The sign added that a recent car accident had split the old bark of the tree open, releasing the Monkey God.



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The appearance of the sign and the monkey outlines were reported in the English- and Chinese-language press. Reports also quoted residents claiming how three car accidents had earlier happened at the spot, but none had been fatal, purportedly due to the tree's 'magical' properties.

Tree experts dismiss this.

The National Parks Board (NParks) says the tree is a species of the African Mahogany and is planted to provide shade, particularly in parks and along major roads and expressways. It is a hardy tree that grows well under most soil conditions.

A spokesman for NParks, which maintains the tree, like all other trees in parks and along roads, explains how the 'monkey' images could have formed.

'The tree was involved in several minor accidents over the years. The uneven bark surface at the base of the tree trunk is the result of callusing, a natural reaction in which the tree grows new bark over injured areas,' she says.

Associate Professor Hugh Tan from the department of biological sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) says that patterns formed by callusing are random and depend on the damage caused by the accidents.

He says: 'This is a coincidence. With some imagination, I guess you can see the face of a monkey.'

He adds that the 'monkey' on the smoother bark may disappear with time as the new tissue layers form under it and push this layer out. Then the smooth surface will get darker and rougher, like the rest of the tree bark.

But this scientific explanation is unlikely to convince those who have flocked to Jurong West.

Cleaner Tan Keng Huat, 55, who travelled by bus all the way from Sengkang on Friday, says: 'We must come down and pay our respects. But it's too bright in the afternoon. It's better in the evening when you



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-- ST PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK

can see the figures of the gods.'

Contractor Soh Ah Seng, 62, who lives in the area, has been down to check on the tree every day since Wednesday. He says: 'There are so many people praying now, the tree will have even more lingqi (Chinese for spiritual prowess).'

Tailor shop owner Billy Singh, 45, who drove from his Orchard Plaza store to look at the tree last Wednesday and Thursday, proclaims the images a 'miracle'.

'I believe that this tree will bring good luck. Property prices around here should rise,' he says.

Mr Tan says that some residents won a quick buck by betting on the number 4309, which won second prize in Wednesday's 4-D draw. The number was obtained by combining the HDB block near the tree - 430 - and the order of the monkey in the Chinese zodiac - ninth.

Spectacle shop owner Quek Hong Chui, 49, who lives in the area, says: 'The trees are lucky since people have won money - they have proven themselves. We can expect to hear good news this weekend at 4-D.'

Believing is seeing

DR KENNY Fong, founder of Singapore Paranormal Investigators, a group which seeks to solve paranormal-related mysteries, thinks that it could be a case of believing is seeing.

Dr Fong, a professor in the department of computer science in a Hong Kong university, says: 'Our brain is good at making up images of what we wish to see. I have seen the photos of the monkey god tree - why must they be monkeys? They look like koalas to me since I grew up in Australia.'

Others point out that the phenomenon of finding divine objects or 'lucky' or 'holy' images in odd places is a widespread one.

Visiting professor Michael Hill from the NUS sociology department says that 'those who believe in divine objects are mostly those who follow a simple faith which is founded in tangible evidences of the sacred'.

'These are long established in the most orthodox of religions, such as icons in the orthodox faith and relics in the Catholic faith,' he says.

He points to how in May last year, believers flocked to the mountains of Mexico's southern Chiapas state where a rock with an image that resembles Jesus Christ was discovered.

Dr Daniel Goh, an associate professor in sociology at NUS, says that these objects are called fetishes or 'objects that are imbued with deep symbolic significance to become sacred objects that embody gods and spirits'.

An object becomes significant because of events that took place there, for example, at sites of fatal accidents or because of its proximity to a grave of an important person.

In the monkey tree's case, it is because of a 'natural transformation of its material appearance that reminds people of an important legend', he says.

He adds: 'This form of worship is actually basic to human religious behaviour and appears abnormal or strange only from a modern perspective.'

Indeed, retiree Mr Tan doesn't expect his tree duty to end any time soon.

He says: 'People will come to see the trees for a long time. It's free and I do the work here voluntarily.'

His advice for interested devotees?

'Just bring incense and joss sticks, not money,' he says.

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Are people silly to flock to the 'monkey' tree? Send your comments to stlife@sph.com.sg

Other 'lucky' trees

BESIDES the 'monkey' tree in Jurong West, urban legends have sprouted around other trees in Singapore. The Singapore Paranormal Investigators (SPI), a paranormal interest group, says these include:

Tree shrine in front of Block 177, Toa Payoh Central

Urban legend has it that in the early 1960s, when the land here had to be cleared away for the development of Toa Payoh, an engineer who tried to remove the tree was crushed to death under his own vehicle.

After praying to the tree for several years, residents set up a shrine under it in 1969. It houses the four-faced Buddha and the Goddess of Mercy, and attracts many devotees during the first and 15th days of each lunar month.

4-D tree in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 4, near Block 641

Since last year, 4-D punters have been coming here to stare at the upper branches of this lucky tree. 'Numbers' supposedly appear to some.

Wind chime trees in Kampong Java Park

It is not known who placed wind chimes on these trees or when they started appearing, but the chimes are believed to ward off evil spirits and to look after the souls of the dead. SPI claims that a lake near the trees was formerly a cemetery.

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