



"Offering Rice Dragon" is a traditional custom in the farming villages of central Taiwan.

## Seeking hidden buried treasures

# Discovering 'Offering Rice Dragon' Traditions in Dafeng Community

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The "Offering Rice Dragon" tradition is used by local agricultural communities to express their gratitude to nature, which is exactly what Tanzi district's Dafeng Community is doing as a means of encouraging future generationse to respect nature, cherish what we have and love the soil we live on.



The stars, clouds, sun and moon are essential elements for a rice dragon.

It was 9 o'clock in the morning and the normally quiet and peaceful Earth God Temple in Tanzi district's Juxing village was inundated with loud temple music mainly consisting of drums and cymbals. The whole area was filled with a festive atmosphere.

This unusual day was specially organized for residents of three communities--Dafeng, Dafu and Xiangren Vision communities--and the Caring for Communities Association by Dafeng Community with assistance from the other two communities. The goal of this social event was to create a platform for local residents to exchange their ideas and discuss the current situations within their communities. This event also attracted the Community Building Group from Houli, making it truly a significant day for community sharing.

## Industrial transformation reshapes community structure

In earlier times, the majority of Dafeng community families were farmers who led hard-working but simple lives. However, the progression of time and technology has changed everything, resulting in a breakdown of the traditional farming sector. Currently, only 30 to 40 percent of land is used for agricultural purposes, with the rest is divided between export processing, electronics industry and more traditional industries.

These industrial changes have directly affected the structure of communities. Taking the population as an example, as farmers age and retire, not many young people are present to take over their work due to growing labor demands at factories. The population has also increased from 2,000 in 2001 to 6,000 in 2011. This change--triggered by the growth of new industries--is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, more job opportunities are being created, motivating young people to return to their hometowns. However, the existing infrastructure has been unprepared for these rapid developments within local communities, leading to negative effects such as chaotic traffic, environmental pollution and other alarming social issues.

Dafeng Community Development Association was established in 1997 to tend to the needs of the community. Many programs and activities were specifically designed, such as the Caring for Seniors and Caring for the Children and Mothers' Classroom programs. In 2001, the association introduced environmental preservation programs to the community. Association chair Lin Cailing volunteered and handled administration work for the programs at the very beginning. She says that this is how she expresses her thankfulness to the land, which has provided a safe haven for her family. In addition, her children are all grown-up now and can take care of themselves, which frees up more of her time.

The first step of the environmental program was creating a greener environment and recycling food leftovers as fertilizer. The program received a big jump start from Lu Tinggui, the father-in-law of the chairman of Changshou (longevity) Association, who provided his 400-ping parcel of land for the leftovers and fertilizer free of charge. Residents are also encouraged to grow their own vegetables and fruit there. Inspired by Mr. Lu, Mr. Lin also offered his guava orchard, which had been untended for a while, for farming. The result was the Dafeng Community Organic and Environmentally Friendly Farm, about one hectare in size. A total of 100 residents have managed the farm together and Mr. Lin also allows people to adopt the guava trees in the orchard. Tanzi Elementary School adopted 45 guava trees while Taichung City Cultural Affairs Bureau has also engaged in this activity. Even better, the fertilizer used for the vegetables and fruit at the farm is recycled from leftovers collected in the community.

Lin Cailing says that an organic and environmentally-friendly farm acts as a catalyst for closer interaction. The residents interact more and get to know each other better while tending to their farming. The relationship between parents and children also improves. At the same time, the farm brings about environmental and financial benefits and the natural environment there is preserved as families reduce expenses by growing their own food and using recycled fertilizer.

To share the success of organic farming in Dafeng Community, the community is opening the farm to the public. Organizations and groups interested in participating in the community's DIY fruit-picking should contact the Taichung City Government Cultural Affairs Bureau or Tanzi District Office.

## Dafeng's crouching tiger, hidden dragon

"Offering Rice Dragon" is another precious cultural practice in the community. Lin said that she has Taichung City Government's Cultural Affairs Bureau to thank for



1. At formal religious ceremonies, coins are applied to represent dragon scales.
2. The life-like dragon claws are what Chen Mingchang is best at.



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1. The organic farm in Dafeng Community is about one hectare in size.
2. Dafeng Community frequently holds activities to exchange experiences with other communities.
3. The largest rice dragon can use up 2,000-3,000 jins (1,200-1,800 kilos) of white rice.

discovering this precious tradition. In 2008, Dafeng Community applied for grants to establish a cultural tour program. The bureau evaluated community developments and proposed that tour program volunteers dig into their local roots to uncover distinctive local traditions of their own. The volunteers then interviewed neighborhood families and obtained rewarding information from the retired village chief, who revealed that he knew of a senior Beiguan musician who might be the answer. This individual could become an instructor for a group performing Beiguan music, usually a part of temple events.

Dafeng Community had been planning to form a Beiguan group and discovering that an experienced Beiguan musician actually resided there was a godsend. The association immediately visited the musician, Chen Mingchang, and found that Mr. Chen, now in his sixties, was not only skilled at playing Beiguan instruments but also in making art. His "Offering Rice Dragon" performance was swift and sophisticated, in what turned out to be a long-lost traditional folk art. Since then, he has been invited to give his wonderfully-skilled performances during community activities and for major Taichung cultural events.

What exactly is "Offering Rice Dragon"? Lin explains that in agricultural societies, the farmers depend on the weather to survive. This gives them respectful attitudes toward the believed-in supernatural powers of the sky, earth, ghosts and gods. They also believe that during the construction of a house or a temple, certain destruction is bound to take place. To pay respect to the "Earth Dragon" residing beneath the construction, and to express gratitude, the "Comfort Dragon and Thank the Earth" ceremony is specially held. "Offering Rice Dragon" is a ceremony to beg the dragons to return to their residences, and to pray for a peaceful and harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

### Traditional folk art shines again

The "Offering Rice Dragon" ceremony originates from Taoist practices and demonstrates a gratitude and respect for life. It used to be quite common in central Taiwan when farming thrived. However, as the farming culture slowly faded, the skills required to perform the ceremony began to disappear. For musician Mr. Chen, mention of this tradition never fails to light up his face. Even though he's already 66 years old, his passion for these skills never ceases to bring joy to his life.

Chen began cultivating a big, lifelong fondness for the arts when he was very young. He once was an apprentice for a movie ad maker and painter. Because of his painting job, he visited many temples where, by chance, he saw the "Offering Rice Dragon" ceremony performed. He was fascinated and learned related skills by observation. Unfortunately, he didn't have a chance to perform at that time and it wasn't until he learned to play Beiguan and temple music that he got the opportunity to begin a religious career as an "Offering Rice Dragon" master.

He notes that "art" sounds deep and profound and while he doesn't think about it much, he simply likes "doing what I like and doing it well". To be able achieve excellence, he pays attention to every detail, such as weaving the horns of the dragons with straw and their whiskers with various plant stems instead of wire. He even makes the nostrils with straw--a feature that most people actually neglect. His meticulous attention to detail makes him the most renowned "Offering Rice Dragon" master, not only Tanzi but also across central Taiwan.

The discovery of this long-lost tradition has drawn much attention to Dafeng Community. Lin Cailing shares her view that there are so many hidden treasures in the community, such as local mandarin oranges, bamboo shoots, potatoes and rice, that didn't get much attention until becoming famous internationally. "In the future, I'm hoping that Dafeng Community can develop new and original rice products and share the beauty of Dafeng Community with everybody in Taiwan," she says. 