Many cultures regard trees as part of their heritage. How is inherited knowledge passed from generation to generation through trees? How can we use trees to tell stories and connect with our ancestors? In this article, we’ll explore how cultures have shaped our “human-tree” relationship in different parts of the world I have traveled.

Tu Di Gong, Gods and Trees
During the summer of 2010, I packed my prized climbing setup and a couple changes of clothing and headed to Hong Kong, China. There, I joined my colleague, Will Koomjian, to complete contract work for the Hong Kong Government. Upon arrival at the airport, I unfolded the directions I had jotted down on scratch paper. The notes depicted a bus transfer and an hour and a half trip through the Northern Territory of Hong Kong. My destination, Sui Hang San Tsuen, bordered Shenzhen, China. I was greeted by Don the local arborist and promptly put to work at a nearby site. Jetlagged, on the first day, I was shown how to use GPR and tomography to examine the underground roots of old roadside Melaleuca trees before an improvement project. I was impressed.

Over the next year, Will and I found ourselves climbing and writing reports for hundreds of spectacular specimen trees managed by the Hong Kong Government. Many of these trees were deemed Old Valuable Trees (OVTs), which gave them special recognition and protections. This program could easily be compared to a heritage tree program run by a city, county, or state here in North America. The OVT program criteria considers current size, rarity, age, historical value, and form. What really presented itself as significant is that these trees had already been protected for centuries, long before the inception of the OVT program in 2004.

Although Hong Kong’s population is nearly 7.5 million, most of the population is densely fit into large cities. Most notable is the Mong Kok area, which holds a population density of 340,000 people per square mile. However dense, these super urban environments are separated by miles of road and rail through hundreds of tiny rural villages and wilderness regions.

Tu Di Gong (土地公) is the Chinese god of earth, wealth, and merit. For me, he’s most easily identifiable by his long beard and typical placement at a village altar under a significant tree. Historically, this god was worshiped mostly for concerns relating to agriculture and seasonal weather. Something deeply significant to the success of the village as a whole. Each village has a delegated village elder who is traditionally responsible for choosing the tree for the Tu Di Gong altar. Once the tree is chosen, it is cared for above all other trees in the village. Some altar trees are centuries old, dating back to the Zhang and Zhou Dynasties. These tree altars are considered sacred. Today, they are commonly used for prayer and to connect with and pay homage to ancestors.

Tree of Life
Traveling can conjure a myriad of emotions, overwhelm us with local “must-see” destinations, and stimulate all kinds...
debates. But among arborists, you can bet on one commonality. Wherever we travel, the question will rise, “I wonder what trees are here to visit?”

The year following a 1 kilometer, 5-day traversing journey across the tops of an Oak (Quercus garryana) grove in Oregon, Will and I decided to gather data that we collected and present it. We displayed our poster at the 2012 International Canopy Research Conference in Oaxaca, MX. The poster outlined our movements and compared efficiencies of traversing methods we used.

Our 5-day climbing feat was also captured and transformed into a film called “Treeverse” that won awards at the Banff film festival serving to introduce the concept of “expedition-style tree climbing” to a broader audience. Still fresh, we shared the film with other climbing enthusiasts at the conference. Naturally, we explored Oaxaca’s famous mole restaurants, drank mescal served from gas cans, and walked countless streets and corridors around the downtown square during the Día De Los Muertos festival.

Beyond the many attractions the Oaxaca area offers, none rivals the Arbol del Tule, the giant Montezuma cypress (Taxodium mucronatum). The Tule tree holds the record for the largest diameter of any living tree at 46.1 ft. Other large diameter trees like General Sherman at 25.1 ft or the Limpopo Baobab at 34.9 ft boast to be the largest, but the Tule tree takes the cake for diameter. So, Will and I put some coin together, rented two mostly functioning bikes, and headed out across town for the bumpy 6-mile dirt road adventure, avoiding the highway.

The Giant Montezuma cypress tree is located in the downtown sector of Tule beside a stunted mission chapel in the shadow of the tree’s crown. Some 2 years later on a return visit I found a total of 18 giants throughout the town. But on this trip, we found ourselves mixed into a small crowd aimlessly walking around the Tule giant, stunned and gawking with upward gaze.

Unlike its size and suspected age, what may not be so obvious about this tree is its history. During the Spanish invasion, civilizations were destroyed, cities brought to ruin, and new cities rebuilt on top of old to erase Mesoamerican culture. Yet as Hernan Cortes and the Spanish colonization were cruel to this region, the mighty Montezuma cypress was nevertheless admired. The town of Tule (meaning bulrush) was literally built around the tree reclaiming an ancient swamp. Like many millennia-aged trees, anthropogenic influences threaten its vitality and remind us once again that a healthy human–tree relationship is reciprocal.

Locally, the Tule tree has also been dubbed the “Tree of Life”. Due to its gnarled architecture, it has given birth to shapes that resemble fruit and animals. When visiting, it is common to find school children offering tours pointing out pineapples and creatures like jaguars and elephants that reside on the tree trunk’s surface.
Millions of tourists are destined for notable trees around the world each year to see and be awed by. Each and every tree has its own story, but the oldest and largest trees gather the masses and contribute to cultural tourism. Find more on big trees in Oregon and Washington at championtreeregistry.com.

**Dendroglyphs**

In February 2018, I visited the vast mid-level, old-growth conifer forests of Taiwan. Accompanied by my wife Rachel, also a tree climber, we assisted researcher Rebecca Hsu during an expedition setting up weather stations and collecting information on tall *Cunninghmania lanceolata*, *Tsuga chinensis*, *Taiwania cryptomeroides*, *Chamaecypris formosensis* and *Chamaecyparis obtusa*. Most of Rebecca’s work focuses on tall trees, vascular epiphytes, and bryophytes throughout Taiwan. These include organisms like a carnivorous moss of/or related to the Pleurozia genus.

Taiwan is an extremely mountainous country, with more than 250 peaks above 9,000 ft., and claims to have the highest density of tall peaks on the planet. This terrain proved difficult. While traversing and shouting across forest ridges, we explored these tall trees, discovered interesting plants, and “geeked” out over each other’s climbing gear. In the midst of all this, our guides prepared wild deer on an open fire.

As many adventures start, ours began at the end of an old logging road—where evidence of past felled trees faded to distinct indicators of old-growth, like monolithic towering trees thousands of years old. However mistaken, we couldn’t help feeling like ours were the first footsteps in this primitive forest. But no matter
how far we thought we had lost ourselves, our aboriginal guides, dressed in modern outdoor apparel, seemed to have internal compasses with flawless directions. On the second or third day, as I recall, we were introduced to another form of communication. Markings offering information about good hunting areas, the terrain, and ancient animal trails had been carved into trees. These markings (dendroglyphs) were another way past hunters and ancestors could communicate to decedents that rely on these diverse forests. What seemed evident was the generational use of these scarred trees, still treated as a kind of forest utility and recognized by their community today.

Driving back to Taipei, I was taken by a sense of conflict. As the trees shrank in size, the roads changed from gravel to pavement and billboards appeared, I knew we were well on our way to showers and a warm meal. The transition seemed as if I was trading a human essence for convenience. Or that I had left something there but didn’t know what. I imagine this is a common reaction many encounter after a week’s camping trip or outdoor adventure. If so, does this confirm a connection we have with trees?

We can reveal history and communicate through a “lens of time” in living trees. Why wouldn’t we use trees to communicate? Many conifers can outlive our average life expectancy by 40 times. Trees are living archives of information, like fires from hundreds of years ago, floods, and droughts—but also, the history of our communities and where we came from.

Consistent in past and present civilizations appears a primal and reverential connection with trees. In art, religion, and government, trees are celebrated, but none more celebrated than through the works of our arborist community.

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