



WHAT LIES BENEATH

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DAZE OF THEIR LIVES

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Visitors takes photos of a sacred tree at a Buddhist temple in Pathum Thani province, central Thailand, in the hope of finding lottery numbers on it. Photos: Tibor Krausz, James Wendlinger

The treasure trunks

Lottery-obsessed Thais believe a benevolent female spirit lives in the sacred ta-khian trees, and make offerings to her in the hope that she will reveal the winning numbers

Tibor Krausz
life@scmp.com

At first glance the scene may come across as a gathering of enthralled botanists. Thirty-two horizontally mounted tree trunks, each thickly lacquered and festooned with colourful ribbons, are laid out in the form of a rectangular labyrinth, behind sequined statues of mythical naga serpents.

Around the trunks are many mannequins of beautiful young women clothed in brocaded Thai-style dresses, appearing to keep them company or watch over them. Navigating the tight spaces between the trunks are scores of local men and women, young and old, milling about in silence.

But these visitors to the Buddhist temple of Wat Bo Ngern ("Money Well"), in a rural part of Pathum Thani province in central Thailand, are not arboreal enthusiasts scrutinising the intricacies of tree anatomy. They are fortune seekers poring over odd shadings and intricate patterns in the wood to divine the shapes of "lucky numbers". The people who flock here daily all have the same wish: to win the lottery.

Pausing here and there

intuitively, they stick gold leaves on the trunks or bow down to them with a respectful Thai-style *wai* – palms pressed together, heads bowed. They lean closer and peer at random sections of wood. Many of them snap pictures of gnarls and bits of flaky bark on their mobile phones, the better to inspect them up close.



My nephew won 1 million baht. He saw the numbers in the bark

WANDEE KHAWKHAM, LANDOWNER

The old boles come from sacred ta-khian trees (*Hopea odorata*) and have been dug up from nearby rice paddies. According to Thai folklore, every specimen of this tall and shady tropical tree is inhabited by a female spirit called Nang Ta-khian ("Lady of the Ta-khian Tree"), who can be induced by offerings to grant wishes.

"My nephew won 1 million baht [HK\$236,500]," says Wande Khawkham, a thickset, middle-aged woman with heavy make-up

and chunky gold jewellery. "He saw the numbers in the bark."

It was on land owned by Wande, a former subdistrict chief, that the trunks were discovered during a routine soil removal operation this year. "I was happy when we found the first tree," she says. "I knew there were more. I told the workers to keep digging."

In the end her paddies, on what was probably once wooded terrain, yielded 32 trunks of varying sizes. "I paid my respects to them and they showed me some numbers," she says. "I played the numbers on the lottery and won [a smaller sum]."

Most of the trunks are inhabited by the spirits of young women, but attractive young men, wise old hermits and androgynous children also occupy them, if the mannequins placed by their side are any guide.

"I can see some spirits right now," says Wande, who claims to be a medium. "They are standing there by the trees, dressed in nice old-style clothes." She is referring to invisible souls who, she says, hover around the sacred trunks.

Wande shows photos she has taken of the trunks on her iPhone. In some of them there are light

splodges or bright spots. They appear to be lens flares or diffused light cast by lamps. "Can you see their faces?" she asks expectantly.

The spirits also communicate with her. "They don't speak to me with words," she says. Rather, they make their wishes known to her telepathically. Their wishes include being plied with precatory offerings such as joss sticks and gold leaves that she happens to be selling to all comers.

With a microphone in hand, Wande, who stays on site all day long almost every day, urges visitors to buy the offerings so as to honour the spirits. "If we obey them and respect them, they will protect us and reward us," she says through the loudspeaker.

Tanaporn Udomlarp respects the spirits, but she is still waiting to be rewarded. The 42-year-old has come repeatedly with her teenage daughter to pay homage to the trunks, but she has not won anything on the lottery yet.

"I come here mostly for inner peace, but I hope Nang Ta-khian will help me win the lottery," Tanaporn says. She earns 330 baht a day working at a factory in Bangkok so she could use some extra cash. "I'm not asking for much from her. I would be happy with a little bit of money."

By the look of things, though, it is not visitors such as Tanaporn who have been lucky, but many of the local villagers. Their small farming community is in a sparsely populated area far from the cities, yet on the premises of its Buddhist temple a thriving street market has sprung up, and the atmosphere is festive.

Many locals are making a killing selling votive offerings, handmade souvenirs, deep-fried snacks and sugary confectionery to an unending stream of visitors from Bangkok, an hour's drive away.

A few months ago barely anyone visited the village temple, locals say. Now, thanks to the sacred tree trunks, there's constant bustle. "We are feeling blessed," says a villager who sells sugar cane juice in bamboo cups. "Nang Ta-khian has been helping us."

It helps that many Thais are obsessed with the lottery – the



A woman adds gold leaf to a mannequin for good luck.

only popular form of gambling that is legal in the country.

According to official figures, some 20 million people in a nation of 69 million play the national lottery. Lotto tickets, which are usually peddled by roving vendors from slim wooden cases, cost between 80 baht and 120 baht apiece, depending on the presumed propitiousness of the six pre-printed numbers on them. Collectively, Thais spend an estimated US\$2.5 billion on lottery tickets each year.



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TANAPORN UDOMLARP

Although winnings tend to be relatively small, with a maximum of 3 million baht per ticket stub, even guessing two digits correctly in a six-digit combination can pay 1,000 baht. More often than not, though, it's the thrill of trying one's luck that motivates lottery buffs. And so the hunt is forever on for winning numbers, which many Thais believe can be gleaned periodically from strange occurrences.

In July, a coconut tree in a farmer's field in the northeastern province of Nakhon Ratchasima spouted green shoots resembling cobras with their heads raised. Villagers took them to be manifestations of nagas and set about

deducing numbers from various features of the tree's anatomy.

In August, a banana plant growing in another farmer's field, in Ang Thong province, sprouted an unusual number of buds. That, too, became an object of intense curiosity for lottery enthusiasts.

Then, in September, a young woman driving along a Bangkok street on a rainy night was horrified to discover a large python slithering across her windscreen. The incident, recorded on her dashboard camera, made headlines, whereupon a scramble ensued among lottery-obsessed citizens to find out the numbers on her car's licence plate.

"People want to get lucky," says Phrakru Wipach Pathumkij, the abbot of Wat Chang, a Buddhist monastery on a bank of the Chao Phraya River on the northern outskirts of Bangkok. "But they should not waste their earnings by chasing their luck on the lottery."

His advice seems to have fallen on deaf ears. The abbot's own monastery has turned into a pilgrimage site – thanks less to its famed, centuries-old Buddha statue than to an old ta-khian bole discovered in the river opposite the temple. It was promptly retrieved and is now on permanent display at a pavilion specially made for it.

Believers arrive daily in droves, bringing dresses, cosmetics and toiletries to the Lady of the Ta-khian Tree believed to inhabit the trunk. In return for their offerings they hope to receive winning lottery numbers. These they seek to work out by rubbing baby powder on the smooth, bone-hued wood and looking for patterns resembling digits.

"If you are lucky, numbers will manifest themselves to you," says Chalern Tongmorn, a 58-year-old man who guards the sacred tree and administers to the needs of its female spirit, who speaks to him via a local medium acting as a go-between.

The caretaker has repeatedly detected the faint outlines of numbers in the coating of talcum on the tree, including the combinations "705" and "085." None of them have been winners so far.

