



# Tongku Saveq: Tiang, Child of the Mountain

A Full English translation is available.

東谷沙飛：山的孩子笛昂

**Author:** Neqou Soqluman **Illustrator:** Meng Yun Chiang **Publisher:** Sacca Publishing

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Across the world, indigenous peoples possess their own distinctive history, worldview, and ecology. In this award-winning book, readers follow Taiwan's Bunun people as they journey into Taiwan's highest mountain, Mount Jade, which they have called "Tongku Saveq" since ancient times.

In this gorgeously illustrated book, three generations of Bunun people—grandfather, father, and their child Tiang—embark on a thrilling journey. They live in harmony with the humble mountains, listen to the trees sing, and watch the cypress, pine, hemlock, fir, and Jade Mountain juniper race one another. Tiang begins to grasp how intimately his father, an alpine porter who hauls logs up and down the mountains, understands their surroundings. Together, this multigenerational family contemplates the relationship between humanity and all living things.

As Bunun author Neqou Soqluman explains, he seeks to "address humanity at large," weaving themes that resonate universally.



## Author **Neqou Soqluman**

Neqou Soqluman is a Bunun writer, one of the indigenous peoples in Taiwan. Originally from Kalibuan village, he is known for works of magical realism. His prizes include the Taiwan Indigenous Literature Prize and the Golden Tripod Award. Notable titles include *My Hunter Yeye*, *Grandma Ibu's Magical Beans*, and *the Legends of Tongku Saveq* series. He currently teaches at Gukeng Waldorf Experimental High School.



## Illustrator **Meng Yun Chiang**

Meng Yun Chiang is an illustrator who specializes in picture books. She enjoys experimenting with different media in her artwork and has a particular fondness for drawing cat bellies and dog noses. Through her creative endeavors, she strives to produce warm, thoughtful pieces that resonate with readers.

# A Journey to the Sacred Mountain: An Interview with the Author

by Wan-Shu Li  
(originally published on [OPENBOOK.ORG.TW](http://OPENBOOK.ORG.TW))

Neqou Soqluman is a writer from the Bunun tribe, one of the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, first heard the name *Tongku Saveq* during a climb up Jade Mountain. When his group reached the main peak, thick clouds rolled like waves, winds howled, and they felt as if stranded on a lone island. At that moment, an elder spoke in their language: “No wonder we call this mountain *Tongku Saveq*. This looks just like the ancient flood story.”

*Tongku* refers to the summit of the mountains; *Saveq*, though its meaning is uncertain, is believed to describe a place of refuge. Jade Mountain, the highest peak among the ranges, is the last sanctuary in the mythic flood that nearly destroyed the world.

The experience struck Neqou deeply. “It felt as if my ancestors had given me a task—to speak the name Tongku Saveq.” As a teenager, he loved

recording stories from tribal elders, yet even he had never heard this one. He knew others must not know it, either. He wanted to tell this story to his own people, to the mountain that had forgotten its name, and to anyone from other cultures willing to listen.

This became the anchor of Neqou’s literary approach: to return to his language and its worldview. He aimed to resist narrow ethnographic categorization and avoid frameworks that pit Indigenous peoples and Han Taiwanese against each other. His goal is simple: to “*spe*ak as a person, draw from the cultural experience of the Bunun, and address humanity at large.” He wanted themes to remain open and porous, grounded in universal human concerns: family, kinship, and the relationship between people and the land. These themes serve as bridges across cultures.

In recent years, Neqou has participated in several picture book projects, many built around intergenerational bonds. In the Bunun people’s daily life, grandparents often raise the children while parents work away from home; they pass down care, affection, and cultural knowledge. For Neqou, this theme also comes from personal longing: “I envied people who had grandparents.” His own father lost both parents at age five. Without grandparents himself, Neqou carried a recorder around the village in high school, interviewing elders without realizing he was doing fieldwork. He felt that elders were closer to the ancestors and the spiritual realm; their stories, especially myths, felt vividly alive, as if they had witnessed them firsthand. These memories and emotions are woven throughout *Tongku Saveq—Tiang: Child of the Mountain*.

The grandfather figure in the book is inspired by Neqou’s great-uncle. Eighty years ago, as a youth, he and his friend looked toward Jade Mountain and casually decided to climb it. One night, unable to sleep, he stared at the star-laden sky and at distant lights flashing rhythmically to the south. This image remained etched in memory.

The *manvai*, a chant sung by Bunun carriers to steady their breath and lift their spirits, also appears in the book. As a mountain guide, Neqou used it to encourage his team. When he

demonstrated it to a group of people, his voice filled the small room with a deep, resonant echo; one can only imagine how powerfully this voice resonates in the open mountains, enough to stir even the ridges and trees.

The story also weaves in forest knowledge: trees that sing, trees that race. As a child, Neqou found such tales amusing. But after studying ecology and climbing often, he saw truth in them: “Once, descending Jade Mountain, I looked back—and the story appeared before me.” Indigenous ecological knowledge, passed down orally, often mirrors scientific observation, embedding real environmental insights within imaginative narrative.

Through this story, Neqou hopes to convey that climbing is not only labor or burden-carrying; the mountains also carry cultural meaning. The mountains hold the community’s lived experiences, memories of labor, ecological wisdom, and the Bunun worldview, including its myths. “Unless you walk the journey yourself,” he says, “you will never truly know.”

*This essay has been edited for the purposes of this booklet.*

*Wan-Shu Li studied sociology and has extensive experience in writing, project planning, and public relations. In recent years, she has begun painting, storytelling, and speaking her mother tongue.*

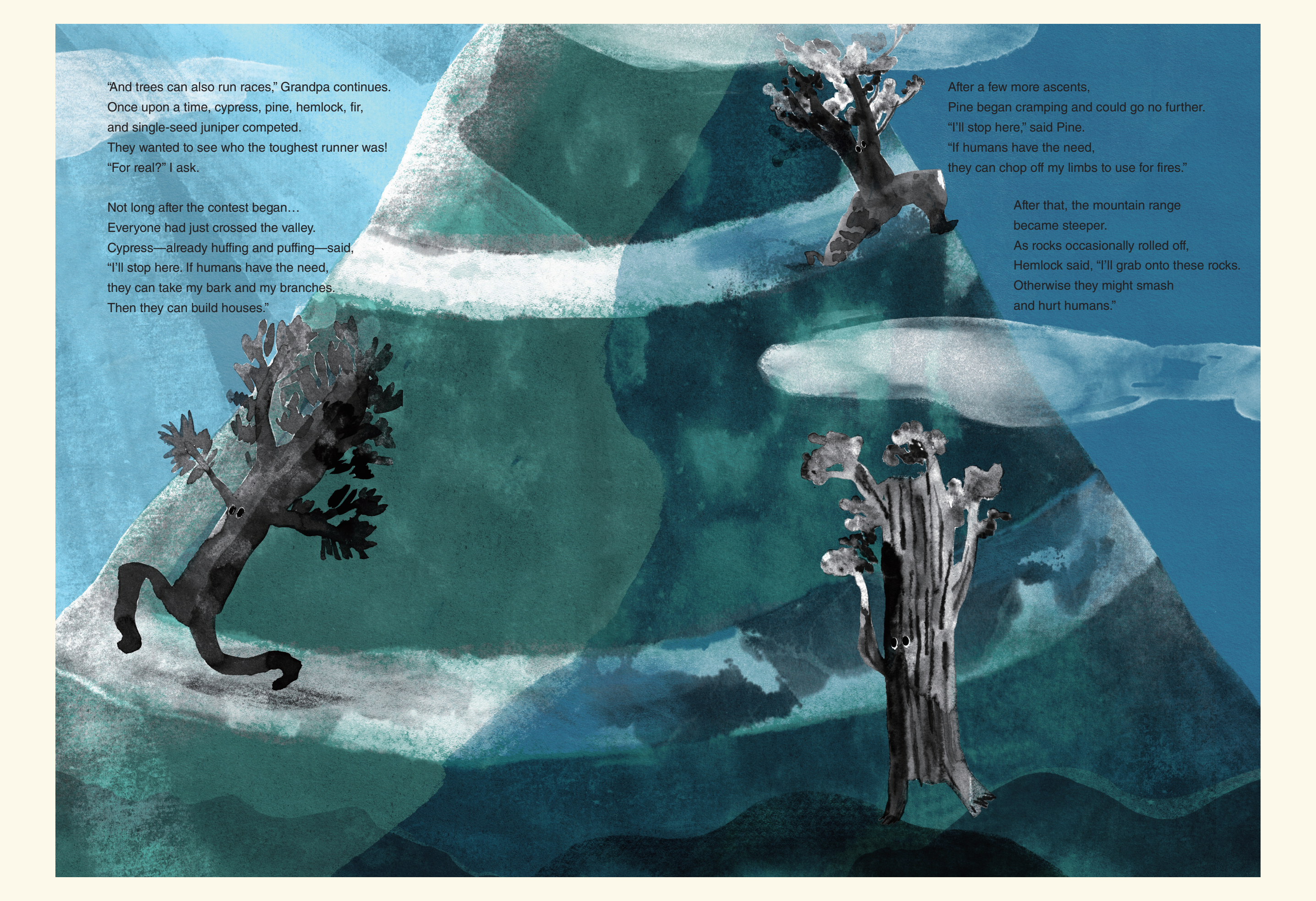


“Trees not only can sing, they can also walk!”  
Grandpa says, smiling.  
In ancient times, pine trees would walk on their own.  
They provided their own fuel for fires and cooking.

One time, a pine accidentally messed up an old woman’s loom.  
Even though the pine apologized, the old woman was still angry.  
“That’s enough,” she said. “You lot shouldn’t come here anymore.”

The pine grew upset, too.  
“Fine!” the pine replied. “We’re going to move high up into the mountains.  
From now on, humans will need to trek long distances just to find us.  
As people carry pine wood home,  
we’ll also chase you and pound your calves.  
Then you’ll appreciate the hard toil.”

Father also pipes up:  
“No wonder each time I carry pine wood home,  
My calves are aching and sore,  
As though they’ve been battered!”




“And trees can also run races,” Grandpa continues. Once upon a time, cypress, pine, hemlock, fir, and single-seed juniper competed. They wanted to see who the toughest runner was! “For real?” I ask.

Not long after the contest began... Everyone had just crossed the valley. Cypress—already huffing and puffing—said, “I’ll stop here. If humans have the need, they can take my bark and my branches. Then they can build houses.”

After a few more ascents, Pine began cramping and could go no further. “I’ll stop here,” said Pine. “If humans have the need, they can chop off my limbs to use for fires.”

After that, the mountain range became steeper. As rocks occasionally rolled off, Hemlock said, “I’ll grab onto these rocks. Otherwise they might smash and hurt humans.”



The mountaintop was now in sight.  
But there was gravel underfoot, and a strong wind blew.  
Fir could not stand steady.  
“I need to plant myself deep into the soil,” Fir said.  
“Otherwise I will fall to the bottom of the valley!”

Single-seed Juniper was short and stout.  
Despite keeping a slow pace,  
he reached the highest peak.  
Juniper was the victor.

“I’ve shed much sweat,” Juniper said cheerfully.  
“Sweat has salt, and salt feeds the animals.  
When humans arrive, they shall not lack for prey.”

Grandpa’s stories are amazing and vivid.  
In an instant, the whole forest comes alive.  
All the trees seemed to bustle with life.