

The tree-shaker and the alarm-clock bird (by Leow Yoon Li)

The trees before the HDB block were still shrouded in the semi-darkness of early morning. I walked along a cement path to an exercise area. Out of the corner of my eye, a movement caught my attention. It was a short, middle-aged Chinese man in black shorts and white, sleeveless T-shirt, and he was alternately kicking and pushing with both hands the trunk of a tree.

What is this? A new form of exercise? I quickened my pace to put distance between us, just in case he was another one gone berserk in this highly urbanised and stress-filled city-state.

Under the cool shade of an old fig tree, I began my Tai Chi routine, which involved turning the torso in various directions accompanied with arm and leg movements in specific forms. As my body warmed up, the rows of sculptured ixora bushes fringing the little garden beside the exercise area became a brighter green with the rising sun. Numerous early birds jogged along the park-connector's footpath, across a strip of grassy field with several tall Mahogany trees.

While executing the left style of the Tai Chi form called "Grasp the Bird's Tail", I became aware of the same man moving quickly from one tree to another, each time repeating his abuse on trees. Peering upwards, he appeared to be agitated by something in the crowns of trees. Then, a Koel bird flew out from the last abused tree to disappear around the corner of a HDB block, with the man in hot pursuit.

Ah... .. so it was not a demented man, but someone woken up by the loud and penetrating "woo-wu woo-wu" calls of the Koel bird, and did not appreciate the alarm-clock service provided by it. It was not so long ago that Singapore had villages and people used to wake up to the morning calls of cockerels. I have not heard of anyone annoyed enough by that to chase cockerels around the village, have you?