



**Briefings**

**HCMC**



# Mama Squirrel



## The squirrels of Tao Dan have someone watching their back.

Photos by **Mike Palumbo**

**A**nyone who has visited Tao Dan Park at six o'clock in the morning will know it's a flurry of activity with open space at a premium. People in their golden years commandeer the pavement to play a game of badminton, workers get in a few laps of the park before their jobs start, and everywhere you look there are people stretching every which way. What many may not know is that up in the trees are some furry critters patiently waiting for their morning meal from a special lady.

Ms Lieu, or Mama Squirrel as she is affectionately known, has been coming to the park for over 20 years to feed the squirrels — seven days a week, 365 days a year. So chances are if you come sometime after 6am she will be here, laying down the freshly prepared bananas which she cuts into small pieces and places at the trunk of a certain few trees.

"I was exercising in the park, that's how I started feeding them," she says. "I saw the squirrels and thought they must be hungry. At first I didn't know what kind of food squirrels like. I figured that they must like fruit, so I decided that bananas are the cheapest if I was going to feed them long-term."

Once she has placed the bananas, the bolder squirrels dart down the trees. With their striped, bushy tail as their trademark, it's a rare treat to see the timid creature so

tame. They only have eyes for the prize at the bottom of the tree, and soon a steady stream of them make their way down to get their morning meal. Joggers smile and exchange pleasantries with Ms Lieu; it is clear she is part of the social fabric of the park.

She says: "My friends and family understand that the squirrels need food, and that I feed them from a good heart. This park has been open for over 100 years and there have been wild squirrels for all that time."

### **Squirrelisation**

In the 20 years she has been feeding them, there has been an understandable increase in squirrel traffic. Hungry squirrels now arrive from other parks in the city, knowing that they can get a guaranteed meal for minimal effort. A brazen rat scurries out of a nearby bush and picks up a piece of banana, and even goes back for seconds.

"I think there are a couple of hundred squirrels here, but of course they don't all live in this park, they come from all over for the food," says Ms Lieu.

More squirrels means more food to bring, and for Ms Lieu this means a significant investment.

"In the beginning I fed them only 2kg, that went up to 4kg, then to 6kg. They were eating the bananas quicker than I could feed them. Now I feed them 10kg a day but that's my financial limit."

### **Animal Theft**

There is a darker side to park life here, as unscrupulous criminals try and profit from this place that many animals call home. Ms Lieu sees herself as not only a provider of food for the squirrels, but as a protector of all the wildlife and animals in the park.

"Everyone is friendly but there are criminals that come and trap the cats and birds," she says. "Squirrels are hard to catch but cats and birds are not so lucky. Many get sold for money or food. Some people put sleeping pills in their food so they pass out. I once saw a flock of birds drop out of the sky because of the poison. When I see anything like that I report it to the authorities straight away."

The menace of animal theft is not the only threat to the sanctity of the park. At least 33 large trees are due to be felled in the park to make way for a new metro station. The city is developing at such a rapid rate, and there are more and more places for people but fewer places for animals to live. "It's very upsetting," says Ms Lieu.

But it's now 7am and the several boxes of bananas that Ms Lieu brought with her are empty. Bits of discarded banana peel continue to rain from the trees, as Mama Squirrel heads off on her scooter, to return at the same time tomorrow.

— **Thomas Barrett** 

