

As the principle investigator of the project titled "Conserving Chinese Buddhist Monastic System: An Oral History of Sangha in Luk Wu, Lantau, Hong Kong" funded by Lord Wilson Heritage Trust in March 2011, I am delighted to learn that the government initiated the plan with the intention to protect this unique pure land. The reasons for me to apply for the fund to conduct this project are as follows:

### **Special religious characteristics**

According to the preliminary research data, Luk Wu and Keung Shan on Lantau Island have nearly 130 years of history for Buddhist practice. The Government has ranked four temples (respectively Lu Hu Jing She (鹿湖精舍), Wu Che (悟徹), Fo Quan Si (佛泉寺) and Zhu Yuan (竹園)) as grade 3 historic buildings that are worth preserving. Apart from preserving historic buildings, in the past, there were many great masters such as Venerable Master Hsu Yun (虛雲老和尚), Master Kwun Ching (觀清法師), Master Fat Ho (筏可大和尚), Master Sum Ming (心明老和尚), Master Sheng Yi (聖一老和尚), who had preached Dharma here. At present, there are still many monks and nuns practicing in the temples in Luk Wu. They regularly hold Buddhist rituals and retreats, which are precious intangible Buddhist cultural heritage of Hong Kong. If these temples turn for commercial use (for example as columbarium), it would be an immense loss to Hong Kong society. Why?

Owing to its pristine natural environment, five prestigious temple groups of Zen sect have been nurtured on Lantau Island, Luk Wu, Keung Shan, Tung Chung, Man Cheung Po and Ngong Ping. Luk Wu is the most 'hidden' one. Luk Wu's unique religious characteristics and tranquil environment have provided a place for Buddhist monks and nuns and the public to put down their vexation and

ignorance through Buddhist practice. Such practice purifying society by helping people purify their minds. Buddhism is not a cult for the deceased (with columbarium and commercial Sutra-reciting). These temples and ongoing practices provide a place for the public to get in touch with the nature, to take a break and to find their true self.

Luk Wu and Keung Shan is far from ordinary life and is a quiet and solemn place. Since over one hundred years ago, it has become a place for Buddhist practice and meditation, and was the original source for Buddhist culture on Lantau Island. It is the second largest of the Five Buddhist temple groups on Lantau Island, following Ngong Ping. According to the data provided by Master Wing Ming (永明法師) in the *Buddhism and Monasteries in Hong Kong*, up to the fall of Hong Kong in 1941, on Lantau Island alone, there were 94 buildings used for practicing Buddhism.

Currently although the area has not faded away from the past glory, it still has a number of monks and nuns who have set their minds on practicing Buddhism. It is the spiritual oasis for Hong Kong people under stress.

According to an assessment in 2009 by the Antiquities and Monuments Office, among 1444 historical buildings in Hong Kong, 11 buildings were in the area of Luk Wu and Keung Shan. In addition, there is a historical road aged almost one hundred years, which was constructed by hand carrying stones one after another to the site. It became a pilgrimage route running through Tai O, Keung Shan, Luk Wu and Ngong Ping. If only preserve individual buildings, it might lose a holistic perspective on preserving Buddhist culture. As such the route should be included into the preservation. The concept should be expanded from "point" (that is individual buildings) to "line" (that is the routes) and "area" in order to keep the integrity of such a place-specific religious environment, including tranquil environment and Chinese Zen lifestyle practiced by monks and nuns in the area.

Back to 1970s when the Government excluded the Luk Wu area from the designation of the North and South Lantau Country Park, the action was done with the good intention to protect and maintain the special characteristics of the religious culture and not to impose the regulations and restrictions of the ecological protection areas on the long standing lifestyle of practicing Chinese Buddhism in the area. The lifestyle has been harmonized with the environment for over 100 years. It is hoped that this good intention could be continuously appreciated but not be improperly abused by commercial enterprises. Under a great pressure of commercial development of Hong Kong, Luk Wu is a spiritual oasis for Hong Kong people to take refuge for their mind and body. It is hoped that the contributions of religion to the modern society as well as the protection of the environment can be put into consideration when making a judgement on how to preserve this pure land.

### **Current ecological conditions of the area**

1. A number of natural streams and water bodies, including Keung Shan Catchwater, can be found in the Area. Floral species of the area are mostly common and widespread with scattered protected species ((such as *Aquilaria sinensis* (土沉香) and *Pavetta hongkongensis* (香港大沙葉))
2. There are some uncommon species that are Lantau flora specific. (such as *Gmelina chinensis* (華可梓) and *Fraxinus griffithii* (光臘樹)). Before the village was formed, the vegetation was lush with the land concave like a lake, and many barking deers were around, hence named Luk Wu (Deer Lake). To the present day, one on occasion can still see signs of the barking deer.
3. The area supports a high diversity of amphibian species, such as the Romer's Tree Frog (盧氏小樹蛙). In vicinity of the diversion channel, there are appearances of bats.
4. To the east of the diversion channel between Upper and Lower Keung Shan is a water catchment area. Any development needs to be strictly regulated in order to prevent pollution or erosion of the water catchment area.

### **The effects of commercial development**

Recently, there has been some commercial development in Luk Wu area with illegal development of columbarium. Building construction has centered around "destroy first and construction later" and it has resulted in severe damage to the ecological environment and sources of water. Coupled with an increase in pedestrian traffic, it not only generates environmental pollution, but also destroys the original tranquility of the environment. Increasing footfall also affects public security. In recent days, there have been many cases of break-ins in the area. Police has distributed notices in the area to remind residents to be vigilant. Under this cloud of uneasiness, it is difficult to put minds at rest and the atmosphere of a spiritual oasis is lost.

If the area is zoned for commercial use, it will attract business for columbarium, and result in large-scale development, with widening of roads for the convenience of visitors. This will not only affect the ecological environment in the area (including the local ecology of the plants and animals), destroy the natural landscape, disturb the work and the lifestyle of Luk Wu residents, but also put an end to the last pure land for Buddhist practice in Hong Kong.

In the past, it has been observed that development activities have included chopping down large numbers of trees, filling in streams, and even building septic tanks and foul water drainage adjacent to streams. This will cause serious damage and pollution to the ecological environment and water sources and will be disturbing and harmful to the lifestyle of residents. At the same time, in acquiring village houses and agricultural land adjacent to the temple for [future] expansion in stages, as well as large-scale building of roads and bridges, this will involve occupying government

land. With the selling of columbarium niches, this will bound to attract more crowds and bring more traffic and more pollution. It will seriously affect Luk Wu as the original cultural-specific feature of Buddhist practice and meditation.

### **Conclusion**

The research team supports the comprehensive planning intention of the Town Planning Board's Draft of Luk Wu and Keung Shan Development Permission Area plan, the purpose of which is to protect the natural landscape, unique religious characteristics and tranquil environment of the area, so as to avoid the circumstances arising from the intrusion of unauthorized developments and unsuitable change of land use. After viewing the proposed plan, we have the following suggestions:

1. Apart from the 0.41 hectares of land to be zoned for "Village Type Development" in the proposal, the remaining land should be zoned "Conservation Area" in order to protect the natural landscape, unique religious characteristics and tranquil environment of the area.
2. There should be clear guidelines and restrictions for all types of development and land use in the area.
3. Development of columbarium in the area is objected to.
4. There should be immediate enforcement and prosecution of all unauthorized development.
5. During the process of drafting of the Outline Zoning Plan, there must be continued public consultation.

Note. The project is in collaboration with a number of local temples and non-government organizations.

1. Su Bong Zen Monastery and subsidiary bodies (Gak Su Temple (覺修寺), Lotus Shelter (蓮花蓬), Wai Sau Yuen (慧修院), and Jim Bak Lam (蒼菊林)),
2. Lok Sang Lin Shea (樂生蓮社),
3. Ni Tor Ching Yuen (彌陀淨苑),
4. Pee Lee Ching Yuen (毘梨淨院),
5. Dai Kwok Chi (大覺寺),
6. Association of Tai O Environment and Development (大澳環境及發展關注協會),
7. The Conservation Association (長春社),
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9. Lingnan University Student Internship Programme (嶺南大學學生實習計畫)