

GRANDFATHER EARTH

Nicknamed 'Black Ying' for holding his ground, Hong Kong Countryside Foundation founder and Hong Kong Observatory ex-director Lam Chiu-ying is leading a generational struggle for nature and heritage – one endangered village at a time.

STORY CAMERON DUECK
PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH GAY

Lam Chiu-ying takes a break in the woods around Lai Chi Wo, where his group and villagers are working together to promote repopulation through an agriculture-led revitalisation project.

Lam Chiu-ying has spent much of his career with his eyes towards the sky, watching the weather. These days, his focus is closer to the ground, where he says a battle is being waged between Hong Kong's development-focused old guard and a new generation that values nature and heritage.

The city's country parks and traditional villages are at the heart of that battle. With Hong Kong stuck between the sea and the mainland border, its appetite for growth and development is putting a precious commodity at risk. "Hong Kong is in an unfortunate position of being bounded by a rigid boundary, so we have to recognise this physical constraint," says Lam, the former director of the Hong Kong Observatory. "Hong Kong can't expand, so we need to have a hinterland within Hong Kong itself. It is an asset that belongs to all of Hong Kong – to breathe, see the sky and the land, the sea and open space – because in Hong Kong, space is a commodity."

Lam, who is also an adjunct professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's department of geography and resources, says the demographics of last year's Occupy Central protest overlapped with the city's conservation movement, and this struggle of ideas is due to a generational shift. "The younger generation has a different set of values from the older people, who now have the power and authority," he adds. "The government is still working on the basis of a set of values established in the 1980s, which is growth, globalisation and the [monetisation] of the world. They're still on that track, but young people are on a different track."

With a shrill laugh, Lam describes himself as a "grandfather" to the movement to protect Hong

Kong's natural assets. He points out that government officials have mooted the idea of developing country parks to make room for more housing, a radical departure from Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's election pledge that country parks "should be protected from development as far as possible".

However, much of the recent debate has been focused on what to do with Hong Kong's country park enclaves, those traditional villages left within the city's protected areas. There were once 77 of them, but 23 have already been covered by the Outline Zoning Plan for town planning, resulting in heavy development in some previously protected areas. The other option is subsuming the remaining 54 enclaves into the country parks for protection, ending their independence and threatening the villagers' way of life.

In 2011, Lam helped found the Hong Kong Countryside Foundation (HKCF) with political heavyweights such as former chief secretary David Akers-Jones and Leung, who was the executive council convenor at the time. The foundation aims to help resolve conflicts between villagers and the public interest in protecting areas with high ecological or heritage value. They do this by buying or renting land, as well as assisting in advocacy and negotiations.

THREE VILLAGES

The foundation is currently working on three villages: Lai Chi Wo, a Hakka village surrounded by Plover Cove Country Park in the northeast New Territories; Tai Long Sai Wan, a popular stopover for hikers on the MacLehose Trail in Sai Kung East Country Park; and Sha Lo Tung, a village near Tai Po that is a sensitive habitat for dragonflies and damselflies.



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TOP Long Valley, in Sheung Shui, has been set aside as a nature park and agricultural zone, allowing villagers to preserve their farm-based way of life.

NEAR AND FAR LEFT Lam Chiu-ying inspects rice grown at his group's farm in Lai Chi Wo, which has also yielded a bounty of vegetables and other crops.

Lai Chi Wo, often described as a "walled village", is under an Outline Zoning Plan and is being held up as the foundation's success story so far. "When we started, it was practically an abandoned village, with no full-time residents. But they had maintained their houses, so it's still a very nice village, although the fields are overgrown," Lam says.

It took the foundation about three years to gain the trust of the villagers and be able to secure an 11-year lease for the site, with a conservation programme launched in 2013. HKCF is working with various faculties of the University of Hong Kong, the Produce Green Foundation, the Conservancy Association and Lai Chi Wo villagers in an agriculture-led revitalisation project to promote repopulation. After being fallow for some four decades, Lai Chi Wo's fields have once again been made productive, with two crops of rice harvested so far.

"When the rice seedlings were planted, the villagers posted photos of it on Facebook, and their brothers in the UK were saying, 'Oh, it looks really nice. I nearly cried when I saw it.' It's a very emotional thing for many of them," Lam says.

When villagers returned to Lai Chi Wo for the Chung Yeung Festival in October, they were served locally grown rice at lunch. The village now has two permanent residents, and Lam is confident more will soon follow. More importantly, he adds, conservationists have established a good working relationship with the villagers. "Our type of conservation is not always just about keeping everything green or about ecology, but is also about preserving the traditional Hakka self-sustaining culture. If we do it properly, in a few years, it could be a model for real sustainable development in harmony with nature."



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A LIVING PLACE

Tai Long Sai Wan was the first enclave to be subsumed into a country park in 2013 despite protests from the villagers, and it remains a battleground as locals contend that including them in the park threatens their ability to earn a living from their restaurants or develop their land for profit. The village’s restaurants are now struggling to get licences and meet other government requirements to stay in operation, an issue that needs urgent resolution, Lam acknowledges. “Incorporating it into the park was the right thing to do, but we have not done very well in helping the local villagers live a decent life. This I feel a bit sorry about,” he explains.

Lam says he is looking for help in navigating the bureaucracy to get the villagers licences for their restaurants. “Putting it in the park

should not stop the village from operating viable businesses. I am not a conservation fundamentalist. People, villages and their businesses are all part of the bigger cultural context,” he says. “We want it to be a living place, not a dead village.”

The differences between Sai Wan, as part of the country park, and Lai Chi Wo, an Outline Zoning Plan area undergoing responsible development, should offer the government ideas. “It creates an opportunity for us to observe how incorporation of a village into a country park would work. We now have two different approaches in Lai Chi Wo and Sai Wan – a two-pronged plan,” Lam says.

Sha Lo Tung is HKCF’s third area of focus. It is home to some 65 per cent of dragonfly species in Hong Kong, and some 35 per cent of butterfly species, as well as more than 100 kinds of birds,

and many freshwater fish. “It’s a magical place,” Lam says. “You go up a tiny country road and then you pass through a hole in the trees and enter this open countryside area. It’s like going into a fairyland.”

All of this came under threat in 2012 when the Sha Lo Tung Development Company proposed building a massive columbarium in the village, which would have required a bigger road. Conservation groups, including HKCF, called for Sha Lo Tung to be incorporated into Pat Sin Leng Country Park to protect its natural and cultural value. The village rejected the foundation’s offers of help, and it remains at a stalemate with the government.

CENTRE OF THE STORM

All three villages have caused their fair share of controversy, something that Lam seems to attract. His

TOP
Lam Chiu-ying gives an impromptu lecture to a tour group during an unscheduled meeting in Lai Chi Wo.

RIGHT
A local farmer tends to his cabbage patch in Long Valley.



term as head of the Hong Kong Observatory earned him the nickname “Black Ying” (黑英), referring both to his refusal to raise the typhoon signal as well as what he says was his penchant for “bumping into things” when it came to public debate.

When he founded HKCF with establishment figures, he was written off as pro-government by many conservationists, but he is quick to dismiss the issue of alliances. He has been a vocal opponent of the government’s plan to build a third runway at Chek Lap Kok, saying the existing two runways are not being used to maximum operational efficiency and that more tourists will erode the quality of life for Hong Kongers. “I’ll work with anyone. I want to help the government find solutions,” he says.

Lam says many of Hong Kong’s current battles are between the

haves and have-nots, the old guard and the new generation. Wealthy Hong Kongers have lost touch with their own city because their wealth isolates them from the pollution and issues over lack of space, he says. “They are detached from the land where they live, they are no longer homo sapiens, they have become homo urbanus.”

He points to the growing trend of urban agriculture and the increased use of parkland by the younger generation in Hong Kong as signs that today’s youth are less concerned with generating wealth and growth but more focused on a sustainable lifestyle. “A lot of people are rethinking their connection with the earth and they treasure opportunity to walk among the hills,” Lam says. “With time, these people will populate the positions that carry power and influence. It’s an evolution, not a revolution.”