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# Temples as centres of communal networks: a case study of South Lantau

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## Abstract

In the countryside, where intensive rural development and rising property values have been observed since the late 1970s, the preservation and meaning of traditional dwellings have emerged as crucial considerations in shaping Hong Kong's countryside conservation policy. The focus of this paper is on the conservation of temples, as we are drawn to these structures not only for their architectural merit but also for their role as public buildings within the countryside. Consequently, their cultural significance is heavily influenced by the stakeholders they are associated with, distinguishing them from other types of dwellings.

This paper examines the coastal landscape of South Lantau, which includes several villages with distinct traditions that have undergone significant transformations since the 1960s. Located at the southwest edge of Hong Kong, Lantau Island had a rural lifestyle that was relatively undisturbed before WWII because of the difficulty in accessing the island. However, in response to the large people influx from China's mainland after 1949, the Hong Kong government introduced the Lantau Development Plan in 1953, mainly to open up new sources of freshwater resources for Hong Kong Island. The construction of South Lantau Road in 1955 and Shek Pik Reservoir in 1957 gradually led to the decline of agricultural activities in South Lantau and the population exodus of local villagers, resulting in a rupture to regional traditions.

In multilineage communities such as the villages on South Lantau, worship of a common deity provides a vital source of social bonding, particularly for an area long beset by typhoons, piracy and banditry. Local people pray for safety and prosperity through collective rituals and celebratory activities. Therefore, temples are not only religious establishments but also embody the sense of social solidarity among villagers on South Lantau. Through the case study of three rural villages on South Lantau, this paper examines how temples play an important role in the continuity of the communal network amid repercussions from the postwar disruption of traditional rural life. Significantly, this pilot study also draws attention to the functions of temples in their historical context. It emphasises the importance of recognising and re-evaluating these buildings for cultural enhancement as part of community engagement. This study provides valuable insights for future conservation efforts for religious buildings in the countryside.

**Keywords** communal network, religious heritage, countryside conservation, rupture, community engagement

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## 1 Introduction

Countryside conservation has received a relatively large amount of attention not because people want to retain the rural landscape for traditional farming but because urbanites enjoy the cultural diversity of the countryside in contrast to the pressured lifestyle of the modern city. Countryside conservation takes place in a physical location that is neither rural nor urban, and it is the zone in which urban visitors are most welcomed while rural inhabitants' values and experiences are fully respected (Cody 2019). The areas are not as developed as urban areas but offer a certain degree of accessibility that is greater than rural areas. They often prioritise the preservation of natural landscapes, allowing for the demonstration of the interaction between humans and nature. Such a definition of the countryside is particularly relevant to Hong Kong, where urban areas, countryside zones, and rural landscapes coexist within a compact land area. The boundaries between these areas are not always clearly defined and often require individual consideration on a case-by-case basis. To enhance the rural–urban symbiosis in the countryside, built heritage probably plays a significant role for both local hosts and urban guests to engage with each other.

Among the various village clusters in a region, there are lineage-oriented networks centred on the lineage hall through which ancestral worship has been organised to enhance the sense of belonging, while religious places of worship serve the same purpose for multilineage groups as well as multivillage community clusters. Regarding socio-cultural significance of folk belief, Bosco and Ho (1999) suggested that Tin Hau temple serves both as a religious centre for individual worship and a symbol and focus for community identity; recognised as the 'district temple', it plays the role of the common venue to unite groups with different backgrounds and the regional centre allying various units of either family or regional community associations. Such temples would likely have more elaborate affairs, including festivals in which smaller village temples and shrines send their gods to the 'district temple'. The Tin Hau Festival in Shap Pat Heung (the alliance of the 'Eighteen Villages') is one of the best examples of a network embedded in the regional context. For example, the focal temple of the festival is the Tai Shu Ha Tin Hau Temple, which is a 'district temple' receiving the participation from more than forty temples and associations during festivals. Villages of the alliance would bring out their village gods and process with them together with a dragon dance or martial arts troupe along the route to the Tai Shu Ha Tin Hau Temple. The initial intent of such a parade might be to show the power of the alliance, but a shared identity as a member of the alliance was also developed through collective practices year after year (Bosco and Ho 1999).

Brim (1974) introduced the term 'village alliance temple' to describe a concept similar to the 'district temple'. His research in the New Territories during the 1960s focused on popular deities such as Tin Hau, Hou Wong, Hung Shing, and Kwun Yum. These deities were often represented by smaller statues known as 'travelling images' in the village alliance temple, and during times of crisis, such as epidemics, these statues would be brought to smaller villages to invoke the positive influence and blessings of the deity (Brim 1974). Theoretically speaking, this concept illustrates a dynamic two-way relationship between the temple and the community. Temples and their principal deities not only passively embody the communal networks – the informal webs of social connections, shared identities, experiences and norms amongst community members, regardless of whether they share a common lineage – among various villages by providing spaces for collective activities, but they also actively reinforce the sense of belonging and attachment to specific villages. Brim (1974) also argues that the existence of village alliance temples and their respective rituals provides continuous benefits to their subsidiary villages, thus contributing to a sustainable connection to these villages, which do not have a shared dominant lineage.

Based on the interpretation of Bosco and Ho (1999) and Brim (1974), we may speculate that the multilineage communities represented by villages lying along the coastal regions of South Lantau are similar to those in the past, even though we have not witnessed any existing festivities in other village alliances in Hong Kong. From the evidence of some regular local events within villages, there is no doubt that temples and places of worship are not merely religious establishments on even their first day of operations; they also embody the sense of social solidarity among villagers. From a nonreligious standpoint, it is crucial to acknowledge that the worship of a common deity provides vital communal bonding, particularly for an area long beset by typhoons, piracy and banditry. Local people pray for safety and prosperity through collective rituals and celebratory activities, which are mostly correlated to their traditional living patterns, thus providing participants with a shared identity. However, our research on South Lantau reveals that the processes of village development, transformation, and modernisation have affected or even led to the demolition of collective rituals and practices and even the temples that represent them. As villagers still require a place or means to embody their communal attachment and reconstruct their shared identity, this paper aims to demonstrate how built heritage, particularly temples and places of religious worship, has influenced the development of local communities or undergone modifications in that process.

Regarding the conservation of religious and communal buildings in Hong Kong, Cheung (1999, 2000) suggested that remembrance is a component not only of rites and ceremonies but also of built heritage, particularly in relation to specific historical events reinterpreted within a socio-political context. Furthermore, Cheung (2003) argued that traditions can be invented or reinvented for various socio-political reasons, and the establishment of heritage is a socially constructed and contested process. In line with Cheung's arguments, we have observed that following the disruption of the traditional living patterns on South Lantau, temples have been constructed, rebuilt, or modified in various villages to serve as custodial places for rituals and ceremonies, remembering the community 'past'. However, there exists a disconnection between the temples as physical structures and their current function as centres for the practice of folk beliefs within the local network. Therefore, one of our objectives is to examine how temples have been adapted to meet the needs and objectives of the community.

In this paper, we would like to portray the 'traditional' village landscape with our survey of temples along the coastal communities on South Lantau, even though some of them were removed, re-established, abandoned or excluded from 'normal' practices. We employ qualitative methods to examine the cultural significance of existing facilities and to document the cultural practices of locals. Governmental documents, such as census reports, gazetteers, and reports from different officials, supplemented by field notes and the writings of local scholars, are used to investigate the socio-economic context of the South Lantau area. Furthermore, international guidelines and charters are consulted to enhance our understanding of how communal attachment plays a role in the cultural significance of built heritage. Additionally, we interviewed locals of both genders and various age groups, ranging from their 50s to 90s, for their views and practices of folk beliefs to understand how the new communal network is based on the changing roles of temples in the area. Special collective festivities, rituals and activities such as the Tin Hau Festival at Pui O, the 'mei nga' ceremony (16th day of the 12th lunar month) at Shek Pik San Tsuen and Shui Hau, and the 'hoi lin' ceremony (2nd day of the 1st lunar month) at Shui Hau were observed to provide supporting evidence for this paper.

## 2 Historical development of South Lantau

### 2.1 Background and cultural significance of South Lantau

Lantau Island is located in the southwest of Hong Kong, which is located in the lower basin of the Pearl River estuary. It was originally home to the native *She* (畚) and *Yao* (僑) people. The earliest trace of human activities on Lantau Island can be dated to the mid-Neolithic

Period, more than 5000 years ago. Other archaeological findings, including lime kilns and tombs with unearthed artefacts, such as stoneware, pottery and bronzewares, can be found along the coast of Lantau Island, dating to the Bronze Age (c. 1500–221 BCE), the Han and Six Dynasties (206 BCE–CE 589), the Tang and Five Dynasties (618–960), and the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911).

The first written record of villages on South Lantau was made in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) (Siu 1989). According to *Yue Daji*, written by Guo Fei in 1595, there were 9 settlements on the island: Kai Kung Tau, Mui Wo, Lo Pui O, Tong Fuk, Tung Sai Chung, Tai Ho Shan, Shek Pik, Sha Lo Wan and Tai O. More villages, such as Yuen Ka Wai, Mui Wo, Shek Pik, Tong Fuk, Shui Hau, Shek Mun Kap, Shek Lau Hang, Ngau Au, Sha Lo Wan, Shek Tau Po, Yi O, and Ngau Ku Long, were recorded during the Qing-era reign of the Jiaqing Emperor (1796–1820).

Apart from the above land-based communities, an imperial edict, proclaimed in 1728, allowed the *Tanka* (蜑家) people to settle permanently on shore and take up farming after the Coastal Evacuation Order was rescinded. Gradually, these sea-based boatpeople moved ashore and assimilated into land-based lifestyles. Currently, most of their descendants live on land.

With the *Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory* signed between the United Kingdom and the Qing government in 1898, Lantau Island was put under the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. The then-Colonial Secretary J. H. Stewart Lockhart found 35 villages on Lantau with 30 people living in Shek Pik, 80 people at Shui Hau, and 300 people at Pui O (The Hong Kong Government Gazette 1899). Statistics from 1911 indicated that there were approximately 1600 residents on Lantau Island (Hong Kong Sessional Papers 1911).

Although the majority of the South Lantau villages listed above are composed of land-based communities, they are highly susceptible to typhoons, as their villages are mostly located along the shore. In addition, after frequent contact with the sea-based *Hoklo* (鶴佬) and *Tanka* people over time, the land-based and sea-based customs merged among these coastal communities through marriage and trading, and traces of this hybridised culture still survive today in many traditions of South Lantau. For example, the co-existence of worships in Tin Hau, Hau Wong, Hung Shing, Kwan Tai, earth god, reflects the strong connection between the land-based folk belief system and the cult of sea gods in these coastal communities.

In view of the fact that many temples on South Lantau have undergone a natural development process from small to large or from prosperity to decline, an understanding of these local temples and places of worship

helps us know more about the social lives and historical development of all of South Lantau.

## 2.2 Rupture to the traditional lifestyle on South Lantau

In the mid-20th century, the government of China underwent a change of power, leading to a significant influx of people into Hong Kong. The influx of a large number of new arrivals from China's mainland prompted the colonial government to introduce the Lantau Island Development Plan in 1953, advocating the promotion of Lantau's agricultural industries, facilitating the development of the rural economy, and simultaneously procuring new sources of freshwater resources for Hong Kong Island. The two key proposed projects in the scheme were the construction of Southeast Lantau Road (hereafter 'South Lantau Road') and the Shek Pik Reservoir, which indirectly caused a rupture in the traditional rural lifestyles of South Lantau.

Transportation between the villages of South Lantau was by sampan or through footpaths about four feet wide, worn by the feet of the villagers in the old days (Strickland 2010). South Lantau Road, which was built in two phases, was the first paved road on Lantau Island. The first phase of road building was carried out from 1955 to 1957, with the route passing east to west from Mui Wo through Pui O before arriving at Cheung Sha. The second stage of roadwork was to extend the original road to Tong Fuk, Shui Hau, and Shek Pik between 1958 and 1959. The road has officially penetrated the entire South Lantau area since the 1960s.

The location of Shek Pik Reservoir was surveyed and formally selected in 1955, and its service officially commenced in 1963. Rivers and streams that originally served to irrigate farms on South Lantau would be diverted to the reservoir from different water catchment areas and then transported to the Silver Mine Bay Water Treatment Plant through underground tunnels on the island. The water would then be supplied to the Mount Davis Service Reservoir on Hong Kong Island through the submarine water pipe located in Steel Wire Bay.

Lantau people have long been seafarers and farmers. Prior to the end of WWII, most farmers were engaged in cultivating freshwater paddy fields, which occupied over 80% of arable land (Hong Kong Regional Council 1990). In addition to cultivating rice, the villagers grew sweet potatoes, vegetables, spring onions, chili peppers, and taro. There was a strong sense of community, as families supported each other in farming tasks, particularly when someone was sick or pregnant (Hayes 2006). Livestock, such as pigs, chickens, and ducks, were also raised, and firewood was regularly collected. Fishing played a significant role, with each family owning sampans operated by males, while females managed the farming activities.

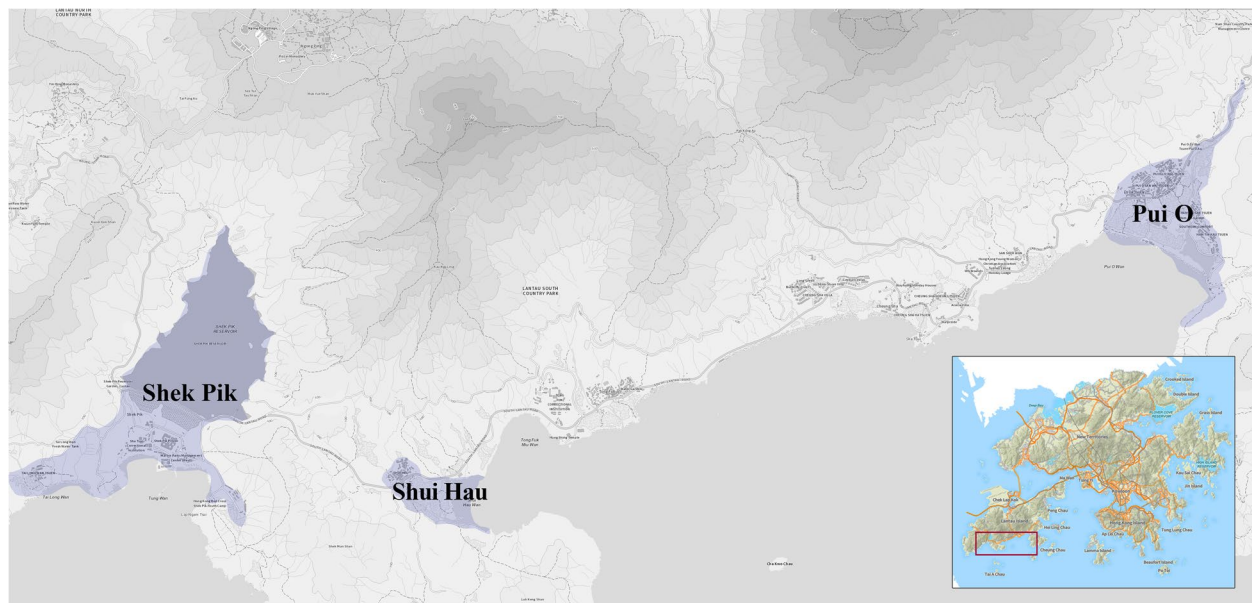
Villagers employed various fishing techniques, including net traps, bright-light fishing at night for cuttlefish and pomfret, and shoreline-based foraging for shellfish. For transportation, villagers traveled to Cheung Chau to sell fishing and farming products and purchase essential groceries such as oil, salt, sugar, and fruits (Hayes 2012a). Some villagers also sold pigs to Tai O.

Following a gradual decline in rice cultivation in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the massive influx of more inexpensive rice imported from Southeast Asia, some farmers switched to more cost-effective crops, such as lotus root and Chinese water chestnut, in the 1960s. However, the roadwork and reservoir construction had a serious, lasting impact on agriculture in South Lantau. South Lantau Road cut across paddy fields in the villages, and the water catchment facilities brought most water needed for irrigation to the Shek Pik Reservoir instead (Hayes 2006). Meanwhile, the underground tunnels of the reservoir affected the water table in South Lantau, making farming more difficult in some places. Moreover, the noise and pollutants from construction also affected local fisheries. In general, the traditional industries of South Lantau started to decline in the 1960s.

Apart from the rupture in traditional lifestyles, the completion of South Lantau Road strengthened the connection between the South Lantau area and other parts of Hong Kong, which gradually resulted in the exodus of local inhabitants. In the inauguration ceremony for the first phase of South Lantau Road in 1957, Mr. Allan Inglis, the Director of Public Works, pointed out that 'it is expected that people living in the city...will come in (to South Lantau). In this way, the villagers here will be closely in touch with the residents of Hong Kong and Kowloon.' With new job opportunities introduced by the rapid growth of the manufacturing industry in Hong Kong since the late 1950s, many South Lantau inhabitants found new jobs and moved to the urban areas by means of the better transports. At the same time, the new roads and bus services led to many scenic spots in the area being widely reported. The massive influx of new visitors prompted the opening of new restaurants, holiday accommodations and shops in South Lantau, which dramatically transformed the rural life of the area.

The exodus of local villagers and changes in their lifestyle have unavoidably weakened communal networks in South Lantau villages, impacting the inheritance of folk beliefs and the sustainability of temples in the area. In the next section, we will examine three rural villages to illustrate how individual subjects manage and utilise temples to maintain their communal network after the postwar disruption to traditional rural life on South Lantau. The villages include (1) Pui O, a *Hakka* (客家, literally 'guest





**Fig. 1** Location map of Pui O, Shek Pik and Shui Hau (Source: GeolInfo Map. <https://www.map.gov.hk/>. Accessed 16 November 2021)

people') village that restored one of its abandoned temples in the 1970s, leading to the revival of the subsidiary communal network; (2) Shek Pik, a submerged *Punti* (本地, literally 'native Cantonese') village that demonstrates how the temple remains the centre of community memorial activities even if, after village resettlement, rituals and celebratory activities related to the deities were no longer practised; and (3) Shui Hau, a *Punti* village that maintains its communal network to some extent despite the absence of a formal temple (Fig. 1).

### 3 The three villages

#### 3.1 Pui O

##### 3.1.1 Background

Pui O is located in a river valley in the eastern part of South Lantau, surrounded by mountains in both the east and west. Pui O Lo Wai Tsuen is the oldest village at Pui O. It was founded by the Cheungs, a *Hakka* clan originating from Fujian, who settled at Pui O around the late Ming or early Qing Dynasty (middle of the 17th century). The Cheungs left the inland areas during the period of the Great Clearance and returned to Pui O during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (1662–1722). Afterwards, they grew and set up branch villages such as Ham Tin, Sap Long, Tai Long, and Lung Mei in adjacent areas. Although villagers obtained a living from the sea, these villages were located at some distance from the shore. The genealogy of the Cheungs documented that in 1788, a pirate named Tam Ah-che 'robbed and killed, burned down houses, and took away men and women as slaves'. In 1803, villagers constructed walls to

enclose Pui O, which is the current limit of Pui O Lo Wai Tsuen, to protect themselves against the pirates.

From the 18th to the 20th centuries, there were other clans, including both *Hakka* and *Punti* people, moving to Pui O in the preexisting villages or setting up new villages such as Pui O San Wai Tsuen and Lo Uk Tsuen. There were 300 people at Pui O according to Lockhart's report in 1899 (The Hong Kong Government Gazette 1899). The population gradually increased to 434 people by 1911 (Hong Kong Sessional Papers 1911) but dropped to 349 people in the 1950s (Hong Kong Government 1960).

Neither *heung*, *yeuk* (village alliance) nor any village office was set up at Pui O to handle village affairs until 1986 (Hayes 2012b). Before that, most village affairs were settled at Pui O Lo Wai Tsuen (the central village of the Cheungs), and meetings were hosted in the Cheung ancestral hall, *Yu Tak Tong*, when needed. There was also a multiclan organisation named *Hap Hing Tong* that coordinated festive activities such as the *qilin* dance (Chinese unicorn dance, typically performed by two dancers accompanied by rhythmic music. This dance is commonly performed during festivals, deity birthdays, ceremonies, and wedding rituals) and the launch of *hung ming* lanterns (Chinese sky lanterns, which are meant to grant wishes) at the Mid-Autumn Festival.

##### 3.1.2 Rupture to traditional lifestyles

In the late 1950s, the government opened up a quarry site at Pui O Au to extract stone for different roads and water systems. Aqueducts, pipe tunnels, cisterns, and a pumping station (for supplying water from Shek Pik to Silver

Mine Bay) were built at or near Pui O. Some farmlands and their irrigation system were affected. For example, an underground pipe tunnel leading to Mui Wo from Pui O was dug in 1961, resulting in poor harvests on villager farms of the aquatic plant arrowhead (*Sagittaria sagittifolia*). In 1962, villagers complained that the irrigation source was affected by the construction of the Shap Long Pumping Station, and the lack of water resulted in the loss of the lotus and arrowhead harvests again. In 1963, most farmlands at Pui O suffered from monsoon failure, which caused acute crises and suffering in many areas. However, at the same time, plenty of fresh water collected from the water catchment areas flowed out from the *Loong Hau* (spouts of the underground tunnels) next to Lo Uk Tsuen to the sea directly, as the pipe was not yet connected to Mui Wo, leading to a waste of freshwater resources.

Agriculture declined in Pui O due to the above unfavourable factors, while the completion of South Lantau Road increased villager mobility and encouraged them to find jobs outside the village. In 1962, the South Lantau Rural Committee received inquiries from over 200 young farmers seeking employment in urban areas. By the end of 1964, an article highlighted that, along with the impact of typhoons and other factors, the introduction of low-priced foreign agricultural and livestock products placed competitive pressure on local products, forcing many villagers on the outlying islands to abandon large-scale farming activities. As a result of the disruption to traditional rural life, both the Hung Shing Temple and the Tin Hau Temple, the two main temples in Pui O, experienced a decline in prosperity.

### 3.1.3 Hung Shing Temple and Tin Hau Temple

Although its construction date is unknown, the Hung Shing Temple was renovated during the reigns of the Jiaqing Emperor (1796–1820) and the Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908). It was mainly used for worship by boatpeople, but land-based villagers of Pui O also donated funds and co-managed the temple, although they provided less support later on. As farming at Pui O was well developed decades prior, villagers routinely extracted a certain amount of the harvest to invest in the salary for temple manager and other daily operation costs. However, with the rupture of traditional living patterns, such practices no longer existed, and eventually, no one managed the temple. It is speculated that the Hung Shing Temple was still active in 1955, as villagers of Pui O requested permission to build a jetty (in vain) in front of the temple to facilitate better traffic, but following damage by typhoons in the second half of the 20th century, the temple fell into disrepair. Villagers of Pui O suggested restoring the Hung Shing Temple in both 1963 and 1968, but these

suggestions were all put on hold due to a lack of funding. At that time, the temple was described in a news article in the following terms: ‘the front hall has collapsed, the ruins are crumbling, the ground is full of rubble, and the dangerous place is barely supported by old wood. It is heart-wrenching to enter. Inside the temple, the whole offering table is engraved with figures, flowers and birds, but it is deteriorating.’ Today, the Hung Shing Temple is completely abandoned.

Similar to the management of the Hung Shing Temple, the Tin Hau Temple was co-owned by all villages in the past, and together, they paid the temple manager with husked and unhusked rice as a reward (Hayes 2012b). The temple was repaired in 1916, and the donation list included villagers of different surnames. With the decline of agriculture during the 1960s, the temple started to deteriorate, as reported in an article: [the temple is] ‘very majestic in appearance, but unfortunately the temple has been abandoned and dilapidated.’ In 1968, it was said that ‘the two side halls of the temple have collapsed and only four walls are left in the nave. Roof tiles of the temple have long since disappeared, and only a small part of it is left covered.’

However, different from the outcome of the Hung Shing Temple, villagers of Pui O joined forces with other villages of South Lantau to form a temple rebuilding committee for the Tin Hau Temple to promote it as one of the tourist attractions of the area. The committee received HK \$80,000 (approximately US \$10,000) from the Chinese Temples Committee to carry out the restoration in 1974. Following the completion of the renovation, the Tin Hau Festival was celebrated again at Pui O, and it is currently one of the very few elaborate ritual celebrations on South Lantau.

The traditional *Hakka* unicorn dance was reintroduced to Pui O during approximately the same period when the Tin Hau Temple was restored, as we were told by some elder Pui O villagers that they had been members of the unicorn team for approximately 50 years. The current unicorn troupe is the second generation of performers since the reintroduction of the practices, and there are separate teams at Pui O Lo Wai Tsuen and Pui O San Wai Tsuen. Since *Hakka* people consider the Chinese unicorn an auspicious creature that removes evil and brings good luck, the unicorn dance is often performed during large-scale festive occasions. We believe that the restoration of Tin Hau Temple and the recelebration of the Tin Hau Festival provided the necessary support for the reintroduction of the *Hakka* unicorn dance.

Currently, Pui O villagers believe that *Hakka* unicorn dance is one of the important parts of their communal network. Some of the local villagers consider the *Hakka* unicorn dance the indispensable ‘soul’ and identity of Pui

O. They feel nostalgic once the music of unicorn dance is heard, and they hope that the practice of the unicorn dance could be passed on to the next generations. In response, Pui O villagers keep reviewing ways to teach the practice of *Hakka* unicorn dance, and improvements are made to keep up with the times. For example, women are now allowed to perform the dance when previously this was forbidden (Fig. 2).

### 3.2 Shek Pik

#### 3.2.1 Background

Shek Pik Valley is situated on the southwestern coast of Lantau Island, directly under Lantau Peak, the highest point on the island. The first Chinese farmer probably entered the valley not later than the mid-Ming Dynasty. Material evidence shows that the name of Shek Pik was found in documents published in the Ming Dynasty, such as *Yue Daji* written by Guo Fei. In terms of family histories, some lineages claim to have lived in the valley since the 15th century. Another scholar learned that the Fung clan was said to have arrived from Kowloon Peninsula in approximately 1660 (Hayes 1962).

The whole valley area used to have two main villages, namely, the Shek Pik Wai and Fan Pui, which were connected to two subsidiary hamlets, Kong Pui and Hang Tsai. Almost all of the Shek Pik inhabitants were *Punti* people, given their long family history in Hong Kong. In addition to the *Punti* community, it was recorded that there were six families of boat people in the Shek Pik area in 1957 (Hayes 1996).

Shek Pik appeared to be a populous place until the mid-19th century, at which time the valley claimed to have a peak population of nearly 1000. However, the number of villagers had then fallen significantly due to recurrent epidemics; for example, an outbreak of *haemorrhagic septicaemia* on Lantau Island was recorded by government officials in 1905 (Hayes 2001). According to

the Hong Kong Census Returns of 1911, 422 people were living in the Shek Pik Valley. Among them, 363 resided in Shek Pik Wai, which by the New Territories standards of the time was still a rather large settlement (Hong Kong Sessional Papers 1911).

According to Austin Coates, the South District Officer of the colonial government in the early 1950s, Shek Pik and Fan Pui had splendid water resources and thus were among the very few villages in the Southern District that could grow enough rice for subsistence. The community also owned 'one of the finest herds of cows in the New Territories' (Strickland 2010).

#### 3.2.2 Rupture to traditional lifestyles

Two serious stages of rupture took place at Shek Pik during the 1930s and the late 1950s. For the former, Austin Coates recorded a sharp decrease in population in the area due to two major plagues, killing 70 villagers in 1928 and another 100 people in 1936. As a result, there were just 179 residents left in Shek Pik and Fan Pui together, and there were only 2 families living in Kong Pui and 3 families in Hang Tsai by 1955 (Strickland 2010). Moving all the surviving inhabitants to another location was the last resort for the desperate villagers. They abandoned their centuries-old homes in Shek Pik Wai, moved southwards and settled on crop-drying ground, a site that was thought to be less dangerous lower down the valley. They either occupied the existing huts used to store tools and grain or built simple structures with materials salvaged from their old homes (Hayes 2010). The resettled village was then renamed the Shek Pik Tai Tsuen.

To solve the problem of chronic water shortages due to the increasing population, the Shek Pik Valley was chosen by the government as the site for a new reservoir in 1955. After a series of confrontations and fierce negotiations, the administration finally reached a consensus on resettlement options with the Shek Pik villagers in the



**Fig. 2** Unicorn Dance at Pui O during the Tin Hau Festival in 2021 (Source: the authors)



late 1950s. The relocation project involved resettling 202 people, mainly to the new villages constructed by the government in Tai Long Wan and Tsuen Wan. Schools, temples and ancestral halls were also relocated to the two places at the same time. The original villages located in the valley were then inundated by the Shek Pik Reservoir in 1963.

On October 4, 1959, the 13 households residing in Fan Pui relocated to Tai Long Wan Tsuen, a neighbouring settlement situated to the west of Fan Pui. The new village opted to continue as a farming community. Each household received compensation equivalent to the value of three crops a year (two paddy crops and one vegetable) according to the original area of their farmland in the old village (Hayes 1996). Later, the majority of the villagers left Shek Pik Tai Tsuen on November 22, 1960. These 59 households moved into Shek Pik San Tsuen on newly reclaimed land on Yeung Uk Road in Tsuen Wan, the first new town in Hong Kong with an industrial district in the 1960s. The new village consisted of 6 five-story buildings with 8 shops on the ground floor of each building (Hayes 2006). These shops were allocated to the land-owning families as compensation because the villagers had to give up farming to live in the urban area.

### 3.2.3 *Hau Wong Temple, Hung Shing Temple and new Hung Hau Temple*

There were two temples in the Shek Pik Valley, namely, the Hau Wong Temple and the Hung Shing Temple. The Hau Wong Temple, which was reputed to be more than 300 years old, was located inside Shek Pik Wai. Villagers seemed to pay great respect and attention to this temple, as it was the only building left standing and maintained when they moved down the valley during the epidemic, while other old settlements in Shek Pik Wai were allowed to fall into disrepair. It was recorded that the temple was repaired at the village's sole expense as late as in 1950 (Strickland 2010) before it was submerged after the completion of the reservoir. Although no written record could be found to justify the importance of the temple to the village, it is generally believed that the deities Hau Wong and Che Kung have a special bond with Lantau Island. Hau Wong refers to the Marquis Yang Liangjie, and Che Kung was his subordinate. The two fled with the last emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty, when they took refuge on Lantau in the final days of the dynasty. Meanwhile, their veneration in South Lantau is probably related to the recurrent epidemics that took place in the area, as the two generals are said to ward off evil and forestall calamities for their devotees. Although another temple, the Hung Shing Temple, was near the shore and avoided inundation, it

was eventually abandoned after the resettlement project for want of support from the villagers.

During the resettlement project in the 1960s, a combined Hung Hau Temple was built in both Tsuen Wan and Tai Long Wan to host the deities of the two old temples. In both locations, the two main deities, namely, Hung Shing and Hau Wong, are enshrined on the temple altar in parallel, which is very uncommon in Hong Kong. According to artefacts in the temple and other old photo records, the original statue of Hau Wong, a bronze bell, a drum, and the incense table were relocated to the new temple in Tsuen Wan, which is located on the top floor of one of the five-story buildings of Shek Pik San Tsuen, while its counterpart in Tai Long Wan is a one-story traditional pitched-roof building.

We found that the religious function of the combined temples seems to be weakened in the context of the new lifestyles of the relocated villages. Large-scale religious activities and rituals related to the two deities (such as the Hung Shing Festival and Hau Wong Festival) are no longer practised, and statues of some subordinate deities are misrecognised. For example, the statue of Che Kung, with its most significant feature of holding an axe, was traditionally worshipped as subordinate to Hau Wong, but research revealed that statues of Che Kung were placed in either the earth god shrine or in the shrines related to business and wealth at the two temples. It is believed that the statues of the same god were mistaken for the god of wealth and an earth god. Religious knowledge is believed to have faded among the younger generations after the relocation of the two villages.

Although no longer serving as a centre for large-scale religious activities, the Hung Hau Temple still serves residents of Shek Pik San Tsuen for celebrating the anniversary of their resettlement on the 4th day of the 10th lunar month and to give thanks to their deities at '*mei nga*' on the 16th day of the 12th lunar month every year. These practices are irrelevant to the original natures and functions of Hau Wong and Hung Shing, which were commonly believed to be responsible for warding off evil, forestalling calamities and providing protection from storms (Fig. 3).

## 3.3 Shui Hau

### 3.3.1 *Background*

Shui Hau is located on the southwestern coast of Lantau Island, with Shek Pik in the west and Tong Fuk in the east. It is situated at the foot of the mountain, with woodlands surrounding its north. Its name, literally 'water mouth', was said to originate from its location near the river mouth. The plain contained farmlands all along the river. An earth god shrine is located on the way to





**Fig. 3** Resettled villagers celebrated the Anniversary of the Resettlement at the Hung Hau Temple in 2021 (Source: the authors)

the farmland from the village. The river mouth was also where the boat people berthed.

There are three clans, surnamed Chi, Chan and Fung (all *Punti* people), living at Shui Hau. The Chi, who originated from the Shek Pik Valley, arrived at Shui Hau no earlier than 1625. These clans often intermarried with neighbouring villages at Shek Pik, Tong Fuk and Pui O. Some of the Chi identified themselves as *Hakka* people, which may be a result of cultural integration due to intermarriage with nearby *Hakka* people (Strickland 2010). There were 80 residents at Shui Hau according to Lockhart's Report in 1899 (The Hong Kong Government Gazette 1899). The population gradually increased to 214 people by 1911 (Hong Kong Sessional Papers 1911) but dropped to 126 and 147 people in 1955 and 1957, respectively. Currently, there are approximately 200 villagers at Shui Hau, among whom 143 are local villagers.

There were boat people living around the bay of Shui Hau before the 1960s. They went out to fish and berthed their boats near the bay, which acted as a shelter with calm water. They sometimes cleared the sludge near the river mouth.

### 3.3.2 Rupture to traditional lifestyles

Similar to the rupture of the rural living pattern at Pui O, farming and fishing have been in decline since the 1960s at Shui Hau. With the intention to increase the water supply to the Shek Pik Reservoir, aqueducts that cut off the streams and rivers used to supply irrigation to farmland at Shui Hau were built in the water catchment areas. As a result, Shui Hau villagers had to share the same water source with the nearby village Tong Fuk. In 1962, conflict was aroused between the two villages over water issues. Although the government tried to seek a new water source for Shui Hau in the same year (1962) and built water gates and dams to secure the water supply to Shui Hau in the following year (1963), the situation did not improve due to serious drought in 1964.

In addition to the tough conditions for agriculture, the tourism industry has developed rapidly at Shui Hau since the 1960s and accelerated changes in rural living patterns. Shui Hau was a transit spot for tourists traveling from Mui Wo to Ngong Ping by bus according to a tourist map of South Lantau in the 1960s. Many shops and grocery stores, which provided tourists with beverages, food and recreational equipment, began their businesses at Shui Hau in this period. Moreover, with more convenient transport, competitive urban salaries and the availability of public housing, urban areas began to attract an increasing number of villagers and boat people. In the 1980s, numerous young villagers moved to Hong Kong and Kowloon to make a living, leaving less than a hundred elderly people and children behind in the village.

Interestingly, there is no formal temple at Shui Hau except for a small-scale Tin Hau Temple (which is very difficult to access on foot). However, community activities and rituals persist within various places of worship, such as the earth god shrines and the Tai Wong Yeh (literally 'Great Lord') Shrine, serving to uphold the communal network of the village, as shown in the next section.

### 3.3.3 Earth god shrines and the Tai Wong Yeh shrine

The most general village protective deities of the New Territories are commonly referred to as Tai Wong Yeh, Pak Kung (the earth god of *Hakka* people), or the earth god. They are the presiding deities for the intimate affairs of the locals who provide good health to humans and animals and act as the arbiter of disputes. Earth god shrines can commonly be found at all key locations in the village, such as wells, bridges, trees, and especially every village entrance. There may be several earth god shrines in the same village, but usually only one Tai Wong Yeh Shrine can be found to oversee all the earth gods.

Both Tai Wong Yeh and the earth gods are usually worshipped in an open-air shrine. Meanwhile, unlike other

deities represented in human likenesses and known to their devotees by names, Tai Wong Yeh and the earth god are usually represented as rocks on South Lantau. For example, Shui Hau villagers believed that the two stones in the Tai Wong Yeh Shrine were collected from the sea during shoreline fishing in the past. The stones were then taken back to the village and deified as local protectors. With such a simple shrine structure and representation of deities, the shrines can be managed at a far lower cost and thus, they are unlikely to be abandoned as long as the village still survives. We believe that this may be one of the reasons for the sustainability of the rituals performed at Shui Hau even after the rupture to rural lifestyles in the 1960s and the efflux of villagers in the 1980s.

On every 16th day of the 12th lunar month (commonly known as ‘*mei nga*’) and 2nd day of the 1st lunar month, villagers perform rituals such as burning incense, setting off firecrackers, beating drums and gongs, and sharing pork at Shui Hau. The Tai Wong Yeh Shrine and earth god shrines are located at strategic locations along the route of worship. Pork sharing is the most symbolic practice in ritual worship, and it is usually performed in the open area in front of the Tai Wong Yeh Shrine. In the old days, pigs raised in the village were butchered in front of the shrine. The fresh meat was then shared among all families (instead of the number of males) of Shui Hau, and they would take the meat back home for further cooking. In James Watson’s interpretation of the symbolic meaning of pork-sharing rituals, the pig symbolises ancestral property and the ancestors’ ongoing care for the physical needs of their living descendants. The balance in the relationship favours the living, as they have the ability to sell ancestral property and divide the proceeds under certain circumstances. To symbolise this idea, the butchered meat was meticulously divided and weighed to ensure an equal distribution of shares (Watson 2014). The great

emphasis on families and fairness during the process of pork sharing undoubtedly consolidated the social bonding of every individual member in the village, and their identity as ‘Shui Hauers’ is strengthened through the practice (Fig. 4).

#### 4 Discussion and conclusions

The case studies of the three villages demonstrate how temples or places of worship as objective structures are managed and utilised by individual subjects at different levels. The intention of individual subjects to support the abandoned Tin Hau Temple at Pui O led to the restoration of the temple, and the reintroduction of the traditional *Hakka* unicorn dance strengthened the communal network of the local residents. For the Shek Pik Case, the religious function of the objective Hung Hau Temple gave way to maintaining the communal network of the resettled villages through different kinds of community memorial activities organised by the individual subjects. With the low cost of maintenance and management for the objective Tai Wong Yeh Shrine and earth god shrines, Shui Hau villagers could sustain their community at a lower cost even after the rupture of rural lifestyles in the 1960s and the efflux of villagers in the 1980s.

There is further meaning to be found in the conservation of religious structures in the countryside from the findings of the three cases. Introduced in 1979, the Burra Charter proposes that the cultural significance of a place lies in its aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, or spiritual value for past, present, or future generations (Australia ICOMOS 2013). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that multiple values can coexist within a single historic building, and prioritising one value over others by first impression often leads to the neglect of the remaining values. Religious buildings usually have obvious spiritual value, but they are not merely places of worship from the perspective of individual subjects, especially for stakeholders whose daily life is closely attached to the religious structures. Meanwhile, the changing socio-economic context can contribute to the addition of new value to built heritage, aligning it with the evolving needs and objectives of the community. The three cases of temples in South Lantau clearly demonstrate how the communal network of villagers is embodied in the religious building itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, and records after the rupture to their traditional lifestyles; these temple-organised networks inherit the collective memory and common identity of the community.

Therefore, the research findings presented in this paper emphasise the need for community-based research to further explore the contextual aspects of a place before preparing a management plan for religious structures



**Fig. 4** Ritual in front of the Tai Wong Yeh Shrine on the 2nd day of the 1st lunar month in 2021 (Source: the authors)

in the countryside. Sometimes we may be misled by the rupture to the traditional lifestyles of locals that separated the original religious function from the religious structure, which can lead to an underestimation of the cultural significance of the structure on first impression. As in the cases shown at Pui O and Shek Pik, the worship of Tin Hau has only been ongoing since the 1970s in Pui O, while religious know-how has faded among the younger generations in the resettled villages of Shek Pik. However, the temples in both cases have transformed into a key element in embodying the communal network and the sustainability of the community. Although the conservation of religious structures does not yet have a mainstream practice of involving the community, there is rising awareness of the need to incorporate the values of local communities when restoring abandoned religious buildings. Regarding the situation in South Lantau (and perhaps other coastal communities in Hong Kong), we draw attention to the historical functions of temples and how the buildings should be recognised and reconsidered for cultural enhancement and community engagement in the coming years.

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