

Headline	Century-old cave monastery fighting for survival as quarrying activities encroach		
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Century-old cave monastery fighting for survival as quarrying activities encroach

IPOH: One of the last 12 remaining limestone hills in the Kinta Valley National Geopark, Gunung Kanthan is surrounded by lush greenery that is home to some endangered species of flora and fauna like the bent-toed geckos, snow-white orchids and tiny snails.

However, what makes this hill which is estimated to be about five million years old unique is the Dhamma Sakyamuni Caves Monastery.

Built amid the karst formation inside the caves, the century-old monastery is home to about 15 monks and a place for prayer and meditation.

But the cave monastery's very existence is now under threat from a company attempting to expand their quarry activities near the cave.

Over the years, about 80 per cent of the Gunung Kanthan has already been cleared due to the quarry activities.

"What remains of the hill is a small part, which is zones C and D, where the monastery and the endangered species of flora and fauna are located respectively," monastery abbot Dr Chiong Sai Tin said.

The Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) said three critically endangered new species of flora namely the *Gymnostachyum kanthanense* (Acanthaceae), *Meioglyne*



Chiong (left) during an interview in Canning Garden, Ipoh July 20, 2021. — Malay Mail photo

kanthanensis (Annonaceae) and *Vatica kanthanensis* (Dipterocarpaceae) are found in Gunung Kanthan.

Chiong also said the monastery did not face any eviction issues from previous companies who had conducted quarry activities near the hill.

He said the monastery representatives had been reassured by previous companies that there will be no development in the area where the monastery is located.

"Unfortunately, when the current company took over in 2019 the eviction notice was issued in 2020.

"The government and the company must show some discretion as this is not just a matter of national heritage but also a great treasure of Buddhist heritage worldwide," he said.

Meanwhile, Malim Nawar assemblyman Leong Cheok Keng said that he will bring the matter up at the next State Assembly sitting scheduled this month.

"Basically, the gist of my question is to find out whether the state government supports this area to be preserved as a heritage site," he said.

Recently, it was reported that Menteri Besar Datuk Saarani Mohamad requested

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Some of the unique Buddha statues found inside the Malaysia Dhamma Sakyamuni Monastery (Caves Monastery) in Gunung Kanthan, Perak July 20, 2021. — Picture courtesy of Malaysia Dhamma Sakyamuni Monastery

for reports on the issue and will call for an official meeting with stakeholders to discuss a possible solution.

The monastery was founded by Great Master Lao Shi Fu who was one of the Thudong (Ascetic) monks from Thailand who visited northern Malaya's mountains and caves for meditation retreats in the last century.

Chiong said Great Master Lao had a vision about this monastery when he was in deep meditation.

"The accomplished Great Master Lao during his deep meditation saw a nimitta

(reflection of the mind in deep meditative state) of this monastery and came looking for it," he told Malay Mail.

"He came to Gunung Kanthan and established it as a place of rest and to practise meditation," he added.

Chiong said that the monastery has two main shrine halls namely the upper cave and lower cave.

"The upper cave served as the living quarters and a place of meditation for the monks while the lower cave is open to devotees for prayers and chanting," he said.

Chiong said that after Great Master Lao established the

monastery, many monks from various countries visited the place for meditation.

"This was when the people around the area started to learn more about the monks and spiritual benefits of meditation," he said.

Chiong added that some of the devotees even became monks.

The monastery is also home to a one-of-kind grand golden Buddha statue embedded in the upper cave.

"Initially, due to the small number of devotees, only a small golden Buddha image, approximately 30.48 centimetres tall, was built.

"As the number of devotees started to grow by the year 2000, Great Master Lao decided to guide the monks to construct a bigger and grander golden Buddha image," he said.

He said it took them six months to complete the three metre-tall and five tonnes golden Buddha image.

"The golden Buddha image is extremely unique due to its distinct sitting posture where both the palms are placed on top of the knees.

"To Buddhists, this is the perfect meditative stage of the enlightened and compassionate Buddha. This sitting posture does not feature in any other Buddha image in the world," he said. — Malay Mail