

first person

Hong Kong needs a law to protect "heritage" trees, argues Roseanne Thong, author of a children's book called *The Wishing Tree*. Thong's book is based on the Wishing Tree in Lam Tsuen and was published just before an overburdened branch fell off it.

“ I am really sad about what happened to the Wishing Tree in Lam Tsuen. It was a lovely tradition and one I would love to have seen sustained in the future, but it seems to have been a case of tourism gone wild.

I first went to the Wishing Tree about seven years ago. At that time, it was a lovely small-town tradition and even though the tree was covered with wishes it wasn't being visited by bus loads of tourists. It was really lovely and the colours were so vibrant and I thought, here was something that needed to be written about.

I have a young daughter and she has been wishing for a dog for quite some time and we have been out to the tree on a number of occasions. We can't have a dog because I am allergic to animals. But I began thinking what makes children wish for things they know they can't have, and what does a child think about when they make a wish?

That led to the character called Ming in my story. He wishes when his grandmother is on her death bed that she will get better, and that can't happen. The story has a universal theme. It is about children making wishes and the anticipation of waiting for them to come true – then realising what type of wishes are realistic and which are unrealistic.

I last visited the tree in December. That was the first time I noticed that things were getting out of control. It really bothered me. I had never seen bus loads of tourists besieging the tree before. I knew it was on the tourist circuit and lots of people were going to see it – but there were so many of them.

This tradition wasn't meant for



“The Wishing Tree tradition wasn't meant for large-scale tourism, no matter how well-intentioned the visitors”

large-scale tourism, no matter how well-intentioned the visitors, and I don't think anybody imagined this lovely tree attracting so many people. A tree is a living entity. It doesn't need to be pummeled by thousands of oranges.

Even so, it never occurred to me that the branch would fall down. It just looked overburdened. Sometimes I suppose you learn lessons the hard way. I don't think anyone realised the full implications – but you can see the same story all over Hong Kong.

I live across the road from Tai Tam Country Park. On some days, five double-decker buses will pull up and disgorge hundreds of people. That is way too many people in such a small ecosystem that is not made for that level of intrusion.

People who go into country parks aren't doing anything illegal or bad. They are well-intentioned and they're not the kind of people who dump litter. I just think it is way too many people in a fairly small-scale environment, and this kind of thing is going to happen more and more.

I do a lot of hiking in the United States and a lot of national parks

limit the number of hikers. Often they say it's 100 people per day, first come, first served. It may not be the solution for Hong Kong but something needs to be done.

This is a wake-up call for people to protect the remaining trees that are in Hong Kong. We all have to consider how important trees are and what Hong Kong would be like without them.

On the one hand, we have this wonderful tradition. On the other hand, by keeping the tradition we might lose the tree altogether. I think the villagers will come to the conclusion that it is worth saving the tree.

We need a heritage tree ordinance to protect these kind of trees. In the last chapter of my book, Ming realises he has come to visit the wishing tree for all these years and he has never shown his appreciation. On that last visit, he says thank you to the tree. Maybe that is what we as Hongkongers need to do. Instead of wishing for things all the time we need to stop and say thank you for the environment around us. ”

As told to Simon Parry
The Wishing Tree, by Roseanne Thong, is published by Shan's Books