

Orchid new to science discovered in Hong Kong – *Gastrochilus kadooriei*



Gastrochilus kadooriei (Photo credit: Pankaj Kumar)

There was once a time when explorers of Hong Kong's peaks and ravines could readily encounter plant species unknown to science. In the first scientific account of Hong Kong's flora, published in 1861, British botanist George Bentham (CMG FRS) provided descriptions for over 75 new species discovered in the colony. These days it's not so easy. Most paths are well trodden, and most plants are well documented.

It was therefore no small surprise for KFBG botanist Dr. Pankaj Kumar to stumble upon an unusual orchid that did not match any of Hong Kong's 127 known species during a routine survey in autumn 2012. A small population of the orchid was found growing on mossy rocks near a stream at high elevation in the New Territories. Its slender stem and small leaves must have disguised it for decades, if not longer, as one of Hong Kong's more common scrambling woodland plants.

Almost one year passed before Dr. Kumar and his colleague Dr. Stephan Gale were first able to observe the plants in flower. Careful analysis led them to confirm that they belong to the genus *Gastrochilus*, which contains around 50 species distributed in tropical and subtropical parts of Asia. Moreover, they found that other botanists had previously collected the same

species elsewhere – in southwest China (Yunnan Province), Laos and Vietnam – but that those botanists had mistaken it for another, previously described member of the genus.

However, in their recent [paper](#), the KFBG botanists and their international collaborators present strong evidence to prove that the newly found orchid is quite distinct from all other known members of the genus, and that it represents a species new to science. They name the new species *Gastrochilus kadooriei*, in honour of Sir Horace Kadoorie, one of the founding brothers of Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden, an early supporter of nature conservation in Hong Kong, and an orchid lover.

Despite having made botanical history, the one small population of this species in Hong Kong is highly vulnerable to poachers who might be tempted to grow the plants in their private collection. Like all orchids, the new species is protected by law, and any illegal collectors face prosecution. KFBG promotes respect for all living things in their place in nature, and urges anyone interested in observing orchids in the wild to leave them intact and unharmed so they may complete their life cycle and continue to play their part in the wider ecology. Dr. Kumar says, “Hopefully our orchid team will bring about new insights which will help with conservation issues pertaining to these wonderful plants.”