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► **To cite this version:**

Myriem Alnet, Camille Salgues. (Re)Establishing Bonds with Island Environments: The Case of Peng Chau, Hong Kong. 2025. <hal-05350605>

HAL Id: hal-05350605

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-05350605v1>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2025

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PREPRINT

Cet article est la version anglaise de « Fragilité et résilience des liens entre le milieu insulaire et ses populations. Le cas de Peng Chau à Hong-Kong », Espace populations sociétés, 2024/2-3. <https://doi.org/10.4000/13e14>

(Re)Establishing Bonds with Island Environments: The Case of Peng Chau, Hong Kong

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Abstract

Based on the case of Peng Chau, a small island of 1 km² and 6,300 inhabitants belonging to the Hong Kong archipelago, the article examines the way in which people and the island space are engaged in a contingent and fragile relationship. The first, historical, part of the article highlights the general trend towards standardisation of the population and space. The making of present-day relationships between residents and their environment is shown in the second part. Three 'items' were the subject of our study (through participant observation, interviews and mapping): chairs placed in the street, papaya trees and local T-shirts. The article considers the types of goods involved and the way in which they contribute to the production of the common and the local. It shows the relevance of looking at the island level - between the individual actor and the wider political community - and of taking into account the specific qualities of the local population, in terms of age, social background and ethnicity, in order to analyse the practical and cultural relationships that are forged with the marine environment. The article, written by two authors, reflects the exchanges between the academic world and local community stakeholders. It borrows from a variety of disciplines, including geography, anthropology, urban planning and economics.

Keywords: Peng Chau, Hong Kong, relationships with the marine environment, island population, commons, counter-mapping.

Introduction

In the Hong Kong archipelago, the Spanish flu pandemic, which spread between 1918 and 1920, was particularly deadly. On Peng Chau, a small island, the oldest inhabitants still recount how a group of residents of Hoi Luk Fung origin proposed organising a religious ceremony to ward off ill fortune, and were supported by residents of other ethnicities. It was decided to invite the sea deity Tin Hau to preside over the parade on the second day of the celebrations. Shortly afterwards, the epidemic subsided and, as a sign of gratitude, a commemorative ceremony has been held every year since. Thus, since the 1920s and to this day, the inhabitants of Peng Chau gather every year on the twenty-first day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar for a three-hour parade around the island in honour of Tin Hau (Lam, 2020).

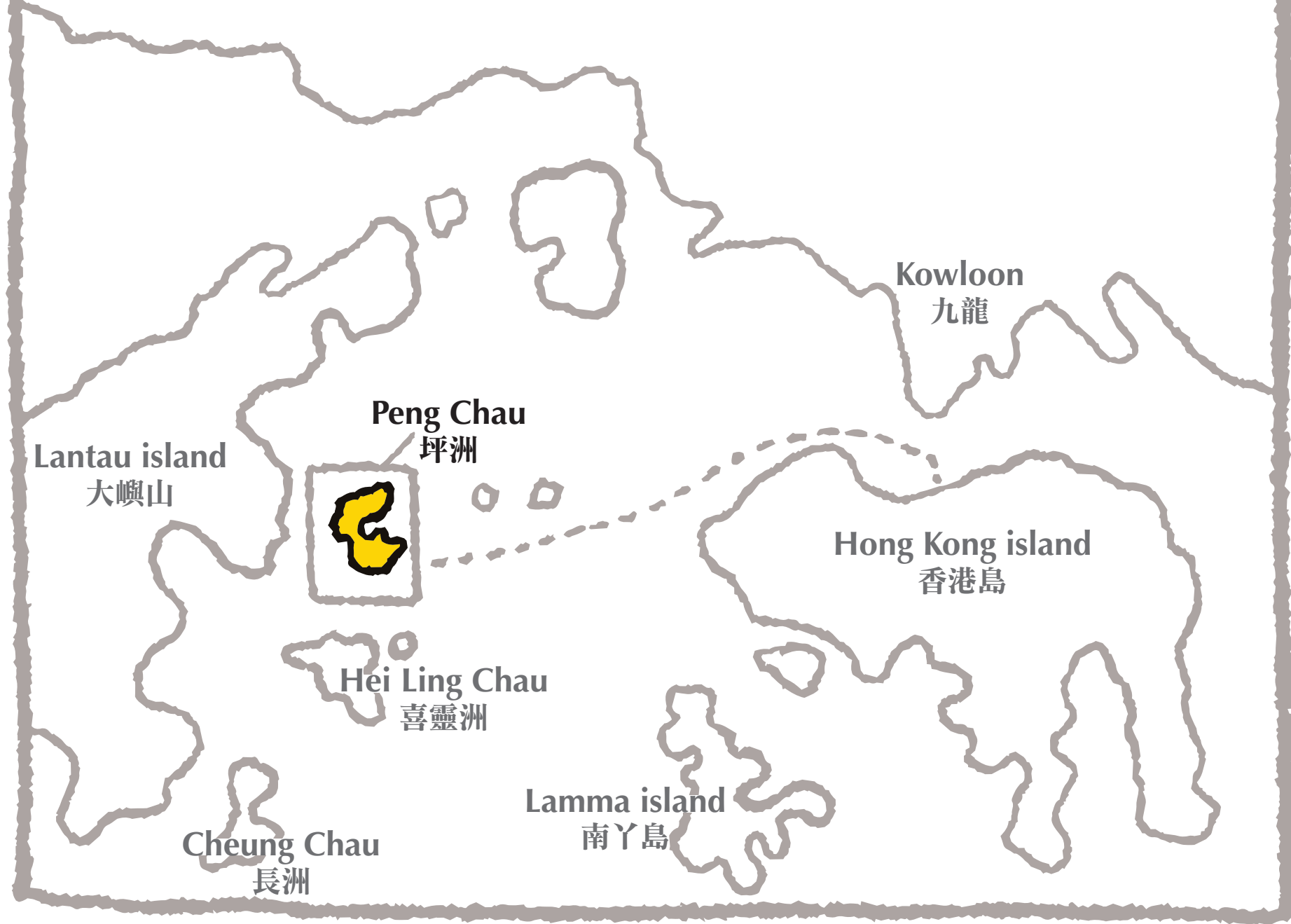
This story, which assigns symbolic centrality to the sea, shows how the inhabitants created a form of community, and how they perpetuate that community today in the form of cultural heritage. It also sets the scene for the present research, which seeks to show both the contingency and the resilience of the bonds between populations and the island and marine environment, through a case study of Peng Chau.

Although Hong Kong has been extensively studied, particularly since the handover (1997), from an urban, cultural, and economic perspective, less attention has been paid to the geography of this archipelagic territory as such. Despite its 263 islands, most accounts and studies have focused on the main island of Hong Kong and its development from a “barren island” to becoming an Asian financial capital. This myth served the purposes of the British authorities for many years in justifying their colonial project and the spectacular transformations of the territory (Decaudin, 2019), particularly the successive land reclamation schemes that pushed the sea further and further away. As for the “outlying islands” (a revealing expression in itself) that make up the rest of the archipelago, they appear as rural territories, less developed, less well connected, and dependent on ferry routes linking them to the centre. Among these islands, Peng Chau (Map 1), with an area of only 1km² and a population of 5,700, offers a detailed case study of what an “island population” is, and is not.

Map 1. Location of Peng Chau within Hong Kong

(Source: *Islanders*, with permission.)

New Territories
新界



Kowloon
九龍

Peng Chau
坪洲

Lantau island
大嶼山

Hong Kong island
香港島

Hei Ling Chau
喜靈洲

Lamma island
南丫島

Cheung Chau
長洲

We start from the premise that the people and the island space in which they live are engaged in a historically contingent and fragile mutual relationship, and that bonds can be forged between them, but that these bonds can also be broken or destroyed. The contingency and fragility of these bonds thus situate this essay in demography and qualitative geography within a broader ecological reflection, which is becoming increasingly important – particularly recent work in the social sciences that aims to take better account of the environment, both living and non-living, in its materiality (see, for example, Tsing, 2015), and to restore the bonds that different entities, with very diverse modes of presence, forge between themselves (Morizot, 2022). In some respects, this emphasis on ecology may bring to mind the classic model of geographers such as Vidal de la Blache, who posited that a population's way of life is itself the outcome of adaptation to a constraining environment (Vidal de la Blache, 1911). However, this model is currently undergoing a twofold crisis. Firstly, a political one: because of people's growing desire to participate in their own governance, particularly with regard to the living environment, the top-down approach (that of the census and the satellite map, which still reflects the composition of old geographical atlases) seems increasingly ill-suited to contemporary challenges. Secondly, a crisis of a strictly geographical nature: owing to the development of transport and telecommunications, the superimposition of geographical units (islands) on demographic groups (populations) is no longer self-evident – if indeed it ever fully made sense – as Françoise Péron (1988) pointed out for the case of Ouessant. In order to understand the weave of bonds between local populations and the island environment, we therefore propose to substitute:

- for the idea of a population characterised by its way of life, taken as an already established group, that of an uncertain, variable-geometry common, thus foregrounding the role of actors;
- and for the idea of a given environment that would immediately present itself as the relevant unit for geographical study, that of the local, considered as one significant scale among others, and which here corresponds to the bounds of the small island of Peng Chau.

On this basis, we can reformulate our research question more precisely in these terms: starting from the dynamics of the common, how do these unfold at the local level, with each of the two terms influencing the other, yet without being superimposed?

Our reflection on the common is based here on a few simple elements of economic theory. However, this theory is rarely associated with ecological thinking, but rather with the development of activities that have contributed to the erosion of the natural environment, in Peng Chau as elsewhere. This is because of its emphasis on private (market-traded) goods, to which neoclassical theory is best suited, to the detriment of other types of goods, which it nevertheless identifies with great precision. Economists have long made a fundamental distinction based on the use of goods: does my consumption of a good deprive others, as is the case with commodities, or not, as is the case with air or roads? This initial distinction enabled Samuelson (1954) to highlight the existence of public goods, which require very different forms of management from private, market goods. A decade later, Buchanan (1965) attempted to define a class of intermediate goods, situated between those that are entirely private and

those that are entirely public. He proposed a second distinction, that of excludability, related to control of access to the good in question, based on a principle of inclusion/exclusion (Table 1).

Table 1. Four kinds of goods in neoclassical economic theory.

The good is...	Rival (consumption of the good deprives others of its use)	Non-rival
Excludable (access can be restricted)	Private goods	Club (or toll) goods (video streaming services, etc.)
Non-excludable	Common resources (goods whose potential scarcity is managed collectively: communal grazing land, well water, etc.)	Pure public goods (air, roads, etc.)

Source: Based on Samuelson (1954) and Buchanan (1965).

Thus, the current proliferation of ecological thinking on the “commons” stems from the idea of a particular type of goods in economic theory, and has been fuelled by economists themselves, such as the Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (2010). We should, however, be wary of the terms used, which could be misleading. When reflecting on “the common”, in the broad sense, the use of economic terminology runs the risk of reducing the discussion to a single category and a single type of goods, those termed “common resources” by Buchanan and more recently “common-pool resources”, and which are situated at the local level. In reality, the question of “the common” (rather than “the commons”) is much more diverse, including in terms of scale. From this point of view, all categories and all ways of managing goods, depending on their different characteristics, can give rise to the common. This is even the case for private goods, which are the mediators par excellence of communal life, if we follow the liberal philosophical tradition going back to Adam Smith. Our article is therefore not a one-sided plea for “the commons”, and in referring to economic theory our aim is not to force the diversity of “goods” related to the island environment into this box of the table (nor into any other box). On the contrary, we aim to circulate between those categories, examining what separates them or brings them together, and probing boundaries, redefinitions, and the movement of things as they are made and unmade – the fragility and resilience of the bonds between common modes of management and the particular goods found on the island.

Methodologically, the article is based in part on work carried out in connection with the *Islanders* map-zines (a contraction of “map” and “fanzine”), published between 2020 and 2024 and devoted to Peng Chau: each of the four issues takes up a very ordinary object of study to reveal the ways in which space is created “from the bottom up” on the island.¹ This perspective follows in the wake of work by architects and urban planners interested in the vernacular, and provides a way of reflecting on how public space is produced. In total, this work required three

¹ The *Islanders* map-zine publication project was funded by the Hong Kong Design Trust. <https://islanders.space/zine/>

years of participant observation, around half a dozen formal interviews, and around fifteen informal interviews with island residents for each issue of the map-zine. We reworked and supplemented this research during workshops conducted as part of the Marine Research Laboratory and during the biennial Inter-Island Festival, and by analysing censuses, statistical and geographical data, and archival documents.² Using this material, we sought to examine, through a historical approach, how the bonds between the population and the island environment have evolved over time, and, through a particular case study, how they are constructed in the present. The perspective proposed here does not claim to be exhaustive or to offer a comprehensive “snapshot” of the territory and its population, as traditional cartography and census methods do. The contingent weave of these bonds cannot be grasped in its entirety, but only partially, by pulling and unravelling one particular thread or another, through ethnographic and counter-mapping work (Mogel and Barat, 2007; Aït-Touati et al., 2019).³

The first part of the article focuses on ethnicity, which was once an essential element in describing the island’s population, particularly the “water people”, the Tankas, and their position in relation to other Chinese ethnic groups who arrived later from the mainland and were less closely connected to the sea. This issue, in its traditional framing, is gradually being replaced as new racial divides appear, with the arrival of new Chinese populations, but it remains present in the background in sports-club life, and resurfaces in public space at least once a year during the Tin Hau parade. An ethnographic observation of the uses and circulation of T-shirts distributed on this occasion shows the role of certain cultural goods connected to the sea in attributing a form of “islandness” to individuals. The second part examines changes in the population by economic sector, and therefore also by social class. The improvement of transport connections to other islands and the mainland, and the broader evolution of the global economic geography – in which Hong Kong no longer appears as the “world’s factory”, as it once did – have brought about a significant shift in the profile of the inhabitants towards the service sector. At the same time, the management of local foodstuffs – from papayas, which are the subject of a detailed case study here, to seafood – shows the resilience of inherited ways of doing things and relationships with the island environment. Finally, the third part addresses the question of the island’s peripheral position and the place it offers to populations for whom the more central areas of the archipelago, particularly Hong Kong Island, are less welcoming. The emphasis is on demographic change, and the place occupied on the island by the elderly and, to a lesser extent, children. Aside from the question of age, this question concerns all those

² The Marine Research Laboratory is a transdisciplinary research group whose objective is to observe relationships with the marine environment in the Pearl River Delta. <https://drp.hypotheses.org/>. The Inter-Island Festival took place in 2021 and 2023 on the islands of Peng Chau, Cheung Chau, and Lantau. It promotes local culture and the links between Hong Kong’s outlying islands, and aims to develop community work between the islands (Alnet and Heim, 2024). This article was co-authored by an actor in the island’s local and “community” life (in the English sense, as used in Hong Kong), who also has a foot in the academic world, and a sociologist from China and geographer of childhood. This arrangement reflects how contemporary social science issues are integrated in a whole network of activism, where research accompanies community work and is nourished by it in return. The writing of the map-zines, and the organisation of the workshops and the festival were carried out under the responsibility of Myriem Alnet.

³ “Counter-mapping” is one of the terms, along with radical cartography, used to describe collective efforts to reappropriate cartography, often with a participatory aim and with the objective of “making visible” issues that have been overlooked. It is typically undertaken by different actors and in different formats from traditional cartography carried out by the authorities.

wishing to escape the frenetic pace of the centre, and even certain animal populations. While everyone, including tourists, can enjoy the specific virtues of such a peripheral space, our case study, based on the island's characteristic use of outdoor chairs, highlights the way the inhabitants themselves provide a form of attention or care to these different categories of the population. The conclusion briefly reconsiders the specificities of the local, in relation to other scales, in understanding these common ways of relating to the environment.

I. Islandness, otherness, inclusion

1.1. A space long structured by ethnic lines

It is estimated that the first inhabitants of Peng Chau arrived during the fifteenth century (Lam, 2020; Nieukey, 1963). At that time, Peng Chau was part of a larger archipelago of islands belonging to the San-on district of Guangdong province, where the islands of Cheung Chau and Lantau stood out for the importance of their maritime trade activities⁴ (Island Studies Network (HK), 2023). Owing to its location and geography, Peng Chau offered a favourable and peaceful stopover for Chinese merchants, particularly those known as “Tankas” – an ethnic category grouping together populations dwelling on the water and subsisting on maritime resources. From the eleventh century until the late twentieth century, these floating populations were marginalised from civilised Chinese society and culture, and viewed as “barbarians” or pirates because of their nomadic lifestyle, their different traditions, and their belonging to the maritime world (David, 2008).

These Tankas are considered to be the first occupants of the island. However, even though the ethnic question in Hong Kong is highly complex, and linked to the actions of the British colonists, who used it to govern, we can note from Hayes (1963) that different categories (Hakkas, Hokkiens, Hoi Luk Feng, and other inhabitants of Guangdong) soon settled there. While the Tankas lived mainly from fishing, the newcomers were involved in both sea and land activities, developing agriculture on the island and commercial activities based on selling supplies and equipment to fishermen, or reselling their catch (Hayes, 1963). The populations organised themselves into small villages along ethnic lines: the Tankas lived mainly on their boats at sea or on land in the north of the island, while others settled in stilt houses or lived above their shops in stone or wooden houses.

The densification of the urban fabric during the twentieth century blurred the boundaries between these villages, which became invisible from the 1980s onwards, particularly with the relocation of boat-dwelling populations (the Tankas) to land, and as land reclamation along the shoreline led to the disappearance of stilt houses. Thirty years later, a new supply of modern, secure housing (Breviglieri, 2013), developed on the model of gated communities and Western standards by property developers from Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, is drawing new dividing lines between the “local” population (Chinese and long-established) and a population of “new islanders” (Redon, 2019), with a more diverse profile (so-called middle-class Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese, Westerners, and also Southeast Asians). Nonetheless, the older

⁴ The British colony was established in 1842 on Hong Kong Island. Peng Chau was incorporated into the British colony in 1898 and is part of the “New Territories” that were leased for 99 years.

ethnic lines continue to structure social life on the island, particularly through sports clubs. These clubs serve as support networks for newcomers, but are also places for practising and passing on artisanal, musical, sporting (kung fu), and cultural skills specific to the ethnic group they represent. However, these clubs have had complex links with the triads (particularly up until the 2000s), and internal divisions can lead to the creation of several clubs of the same ethnic origin, thereby complicating these dividing lines. In addition to the clubs, there is the Kaifong Association (neighbourhood association), an entity overseen by the local Rural Committee, which organises the Tin Hau parade. Many residents prefer the neutrality of this diverse group to the belligerent image of the sports clubs. This association, which is more accessible and inclusive, also allows new islanders to participate in the Tin Hau parade, a key moment in the island's communal life.

1.2. A case study: Kaifong T-shirts⁵

The term “kaifong T-shirts” refers to T-shirts that come from local sports clubs and the island's two main festivals: the Hungry Ghost Festival, celebrated throughout East and Southeast Asia, and the Tin Hau parade, specific to Peng Chau. Their respective organisers explain that, in the 1990s, it became difficult to identify their teams of volunteers among all the participants. The solution was to distribute a coloured T-shirt to volunteers each year. There are three types of T-shirts: Hungry Ghost Festival T-shirts, which feature a map of Peng Chau on the back and change colour each year; polo shirts worn during the Tin Hau parade and distributed by the organiser (the Kaifong Association of the Rural Committee) to its volunteers – these shirts change colour each year and bear the logo of the Rural Committee on the chest; and T-shirts from sports clubs based on ethnic groups, which are worn during the Tin Hau parade, as well as during each club's major events, and do not change colour [Photograph 1].

⁵ The word kaifong (街坊), generally translated as “neighbourhood”, also implies a form of mutual recognition and trust.

Photograph 1: T-shirts and palanquin



Note: During the Tin Hau parade, the Kaifong Association, recognisable by their purple T-shirts, carry the goddess in a palanquin.

Photograph: Myriem Alnet.

The club T-shirt initially functions as a banner or standard, almost in the martial sense of the term, in the competitive atmosphere that permeates the Tin Hau parade: grouped by their clubs, men (and a few women) parade behind a mythological animal of good omen (dragon, unicorn-qilin, lion, etc.), advancing in time to music in a mix of dance and martial arts. Eight to nine groups follow one another in this way, clearly identifiable by the colour they wear. The garment itself is not important, beyond its use as a flag: its entire meaning can be summed up by its colour and, consequently, the affiliation it signifies. From an economic point of view, the T-shirt is characterised by the fact that it has no market value: it is distributed free of charge to volunteers and cannot be purchased. It is not really a limited resource – it costs almost nothing to produce and, on the day of the Tin Hau parade alone, the Kaifong Association distributes more than 500 of them. While it has a certain value in the eyes of those who own it, this value is based entirely on a mechanism of inclusion (being part of the club) and exclusion. In this sense, if we refer to Table 1, it precisely fits the definition of a “club good”.

However, observation and discussions with local residents suggest that this initial observation needs to be significantly revised. Firstly, the T-shirt has become part of everyday life: “Young people like to wear their dragon-boat team T-shirts,” explains a shopkeeper. Testifying to its success and integration into everyday life, the garment has diversified: polo shirts from the Tin Hau parade, T-shirts from the Hungry Ghost Festival, and dragon-boat club

vests. One sees locals wearing their kaifong T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops when going shopping or even to work: some shopkeepers wear them every day as work uniforms. So, while the kaifong T-shirt has no market value, it is not limited to a symbolic value, based on the meaning associated with its colour. It has also acquired a use-value, like other items of clothing. The result is that it has become part of the public space (especially as it is highly visible, with a single, always very bright colour) without signifying a form of ethnic affiliation.

Secondly, there has been a weakening of the original ethnic logic of exclusion. The following notes were taken by one of the two authors of this article, who is viewed as “White” or “Western” in the local categorisation, speaking English rather than Cantonese, and having lived in Peng Chau for only a few years; which makes her, at first glance, still a foreigner in the eyes of locals, despite the growing proportion of Westerners in Peng Chau’s population.

(Field notes, 10 August 2022) – Hungry Ghost Festival week. P. and I are discussing the Tin Hau parade that will take place next week. After a two-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Festival is finally back. A colleague of P.’s walks past us, stops, and speaks to her in Cantonese. P. turns to me and asks in English, “Do you want to join the parade?” Her friend adds (in Cantonese), “We’ve got extra T-shirts.”

(Field notes, 18 August 2022, 11:00 a.m.) – I arrive at the meeting point, where people are coming and going laden with musical instruments and ceremonial flags. They’re all wearing the same white T-shirt with an aggressive-looking tiger on the front and their logo on the back. A lady stops me at the door. I try to explain, but she doesn’t understand me. It’s a slightly awkward situation, but I’m saved by a man who recognises me: “She’s my neighbour.” He goes back inside, returns with two T-shirts, and goes back to what he was doing.

(1:30 p.m.) – The sound of cymbals, trumpets, and drums fills the square in front of the Tin Hau temple [Photograph 2]. The echo of the melodies spreads across the island, like a call to gather. The music grows louder and louder, and waves of people pour out of the narrow streets onto the square. I recognise the gas cylinder delivery man giving instructions to a group of people in red T-shirts; the uncle who runs a snack shop chatting with workers, all wearing purple polo shirts; a cluster of elders surrounding musicians, the latter all wearing green T-shirts. With their parade uniforms on, all these familiar faces suddenly reveal their affiliations: which club they belong to, where they come from, and their relationship to Peng Chau.

Photograph 2. The cymbals



Note: The sound of cymbals accompanies the procession. Note the white T-shirts with the club logo on the back. Photograph: Myriem Alnet.

These observations show that, while clubs remain largely a male domain based on ethnic affiliation, in some cases T-shirts may be given to women and outsiders as a gesture of inclusion. These dynamics of inclusion/exclusion are expressed here through mundane actions. Nevertheless, they can have profound significance concerning the relation to the island and its population. For example, Steve, a British man who has lived in Peng Chau for three decades, was welcomed by his local friends into their sports club in recognition of “his contributions to island life”. Significantly for our purposes here, he says that the T-shirt is the sign that he has been “localised” (interview, 21 September 2022).

Steve’s words bring out, clearly and precisely, the issues at stake at the scale of the island when it comes to forging a common identity – what we might call “islandness”. As Françoise Péron mentions in relation to the Breton islands, “it is not a competition between two rival groups (natives and newcomers)” (Péron, 2005), but rather a renegotiation of a common identity. The ethnic and racial grids that were initially instrumental in forging this identity have become blurred, and the lines of inclusion/exclusion have shifted. On the one hand, the island identity conferred by sports clubs remains symbolically attached to the divisions between Tankas, Hakkas, Hokkiens, Hoi Luk Fong, and Chiu Chow, while also becoming more complex; on the other hand, the dynamics of otherness and inclusion now incorporate new populations, not just “local” Hong Kongers, but also new arrivals who may be Westerners, Southeast Asians, or from elsewhere.

II. The use and sharing of resources

II.1. Legacies of the industrial past

For a time, Peng Chau was Hong Kong's "industrial island", particularly during the period of economic development from the 1950s to the 1980s – a designation that has never been given to any of its neighbouring islands. Its relatively peripheral position made it a prime location for industrialists looking for cheap land and readily available labour: at its peak, the island had 13,000 inhabitants, despite its small size. Furthermore, its remote location relative to Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula, which were at the top of the territorial hierarchy within the archipelago, "spared [the central territories] from the nuisance of smoke" (Wai, 1959). Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a large part of the population was thus engaged in activities related to lime production. For example, in 1901, more than 700 men worked on 20 junks and 60 boats collecting coral and shells (for lime production) in the sea separating Peng Chau from its southern neighbour, Hei Ling Chau (Hayes, 1963). In addition to the seafaring workers, there were also workers employed in the dozen or so factories that lined the western side of the island, where marine resources were processed into lime for use in Hong Kong's burgeoning construction industry. The scale of this activity was so great that it contributed to changing the island's geology: the shell debris thrown onto the beach compacted and cemented over time, forming layers that "resemble bioherms" (Nieukey, 1963, p. 13).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Hong Kong experienced considerable economic expansion, and the number of factories on Peng Chau increased rapidly. These factories varied in size: there was the Great China Match Factory, which produced matches to be exported all over the world, and employed more than 1,000 people at its peak (Lo, 2023); warehouses where steel pipes were manufactured to supply Hong Kong with drinking water from mainland China, or teak furniture for the international market; small open-air workshops for the production of shrimp paste; and home workshops on the ground floors of houses, making light bulbs or rattan objects and assembling products from pre-made parts.

This industrial development had a major impact on the island's demographics: people came from other islands, Kowloon, the New Territories, and mainland China. Thus, in 1959, out of a total population of 4,500, it is estimated that half of the working population was employed in these factories, while 20% lived off agriculture, and fishermen accounted for only 2% of the population. The rest were made up of shopkeepers, engaged in retail at various scales, who supplied the island with everyday consumer goods, and seafarers, such as those who worked on ocean liners and returned to the island a few times a year (Wai, 1959).

At the same time, the island's industrial development attracted the interest of the government, which attempted to plan its urban growth, in the expectation that its population would increase by a third. Between 1981 and 2003, the island underwent numerous transformations of its coastline as a result of several land reclamation projects, covering a total area of nine hectares. Those who lived on the water or the shore were forced to move onto the land. Small buildings were constructed to serve as social housing and accommodate the poorest populations, in line with Hong Kong's policy since 1954 to eliminate housing that it considered

illegal and unsanitary (Wai, 2020). While the populations living on the sea had become a minority, the fishing industry was also declining owing to overfishing and water pollution. Natural disasters (notably Typhoon Wanda in 1962) and the introduction of marine species protection policies by the Hong Kong and Chinese governments contributed to driving younger generations away from the sea and towards land-based industries (Shao, 2016). Finally, dykes and reclamations surrounded the island with protective walls and closed off access to the sea, except for the ferry pier. Today, most of the working-age population works outside Peng Chau – in Discovery Bay, Hong Kong, Kowloon, or the New Territories (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 2022). Those who work on the island are mainly shopkeepers or restaurateurs, working either independently or for family businesses. The post-industrial period is therefore characterised by a standardisation of space and a shift towards a service-based economy.

II.2. A case study: Papaya trees and edible resources

The exploitation of its resources by the primary and secondary sectors is no longer the island's *raison d'être*, nor the driving force behind its economy. The population has changed accordingly. However, in our study of the geographical distribution of papaya trees and the relationships that link humans to these fruit trees, we have focused on the bonds that islanders still forge with the land today, and the way in which resources are redistributed. Papaya trees, like banana trees and jackfruit trees (Map 2), are tropical trees typical of the climate of southern China. During this research, 707 papaya trees were recorded on the island. While a small part of the total harvest is sold at the market, most is exchanged or shared with family and friends.

Map 2. Nourishing land

Source: Map adapted from Islanders map-zine issue 2, "Nourishing land", 2020. Used with permission.



Sense of Place
島民地圖

NOURISHING LAND
豐饒之地



Some farmlands seem to be abandoned. Yet a few papaya or banana trees indicate that someone is still tending the place - just doing the minimum gleanng work.

為數不少看似半荒廢的農地，因戶主已遷出，無暇打理農田，故多種植香蕉、木瓜等自然生長的作物，不定期回來將之採集到市場上出售。



In the middle of the dense Wai Zai area, a sudden concentration of papaya trees signals the presence of ad hoc allotments. Here, a land progressively divided into small plots and rented to part-time farmers acts as a neighbourhood centre.

圍仔村中心這片田地裡種有50多棵木瓜樹，住宅中心圍著一片農地，由一島民租予圍內各人打理，每戶分別耕有一小片農地作消閒農莊，將收成予親人朋友，是個自然而成的城市農耕地景。



Up on the rooftops, papaya trees punctuate the landscape and indicate how far farming activities can reach. Even when people have no land, they find a way to engage in producing their own food.

由觀察木瓜可以看到，天台種植、陽台種植在這裡十分普遍，幾乎每家每戶都會種些食材，即使沒有種植地的島民也會盡方法種植自家作物。

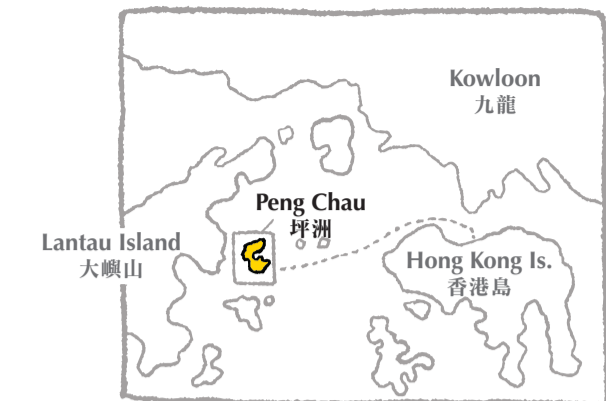


Seeded by the wind and the birds, some papaya trees grow in unexpected places. People still take care of them and sometimes redistribute the public fruits to the neighbours.

處於城市邊緣的土地，多半會自然長出果樹，人們便拿取不定期結出的果實分予鄰居，大量的木瓜樹因雀鳥播種而自然地散落在意想不到的地方。

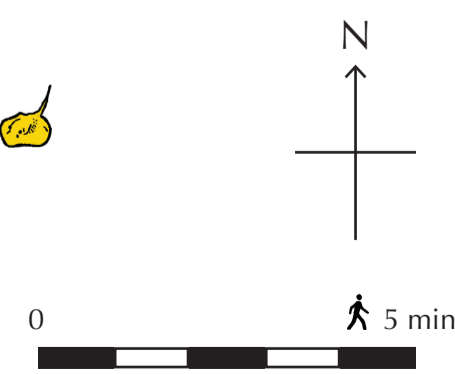


From fruits to fishes and shellfishes, a variety of foods show how islanders use the landscape and seascape as resource spaces. 除了木瓜，還有龍眼、荔枝、黃皮、大樹菠蘿、桑樹、番石榴、蓮霧、香蕉，大量果樹為島民於不同季節供應不同選擇，而附近水域漁獲亦同樣豐富，包括夏季出產的蜆、青口、飛魚和墨魚等等。



- Legend
圖例
- 1 Wet market 漁市場
 - 2 OIWA farm 離島婦聯(廚餘回收場)
 - 3 Fa Jei farm 花姐農場
 - 4 Natural farm 天然有機農莊
 - 5 Joy Health farm 歡登農場
 - 6 Canoe farm
- Farmer selling point 農民流動售賣點

- Farmland 農地
- Built area 已建地
- Open space 綠化地
- ⊙ Woodland 林地



Today, less than 2% of the working population still works the land (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 2022), but the era when the primary sector of the economy included just over a fifth of the inhabitants has left its mark on the geography and sociology of the island. In terms of geography, papaya trees are found mainly on the slopes of the two hills and in the eastern valleys, indicating the extent of the agricultural areas that were developed around streams (now dry), which helped to supply them with fresh water. In many cases, the plots seem long abandoned, as if offering a direct connection to their former agricultural use, yet a few papaya, banana, and/or jackfruit trees testify to a continuing human presence, engaged in a minimal harvesting activity. These papaya trees are also found outside agricultural areas: whether planted by people themselves, the wind, or birds, they spill over these boundaries and encroach on the urban landscape.

(Field notes, 8 February 2020) – In the middle of the dense Wai Tsai neighbourhood, a sudden concentration of papaya trees signals the presence of improvised shared gardens [Photograph 3]. Here, a piece of land gradually divided into small plots and leased to amateur farmers has become a central place for neighbourhood life. Growing on rooftops and terraces, papaya trees punctuate the landscape and show just how high they can climb. Even without land, residents find a way to produce their own food.

Photograph 3. Papaya trees in Wai Tsai



Photograph: Kit Chan. Used with permission.

The relationship of the population with the island's natural resources, including papaya trees, can also be seen in the island's sociology. The last farmers of large arable plots are mainly women, well past retirement age, who no longer work with a view to large-scale production but continue to maintain their land out of necessity, habit, and pleasure. Because of the potential for property disputes, land is rarely leased to individuals outside the family circle. This makes it relatively difficult for newcomers to the island to rent a plot and cultivate their own vegetable garden. However, this does not prevent residents from organising themselves individually to engage in small-scale micro-agricultural activities on their balconies or doorsteps, for their own consumption, and taking up no more than a few hours a week. It is this secondary activity that is signalled by the papaya trees growing in plastic boxes in the island's urban centre.

Conversely, all papaya trees, even those outside the boundaries of private property, are cared for by someone – mostly women.

(Field notes, 23 August 2020) – A neighbour explains: a papaya tree that does not produce enough papayas is not a viable tree. If one is spotted, it is cut down, and the stump is wrapped in a piece of cloth. This gives the other trunks a second chance to bear more fruit. No matter where it grows, no tree escapes this rule. [Photograph 4]

Photograph 4. A cut papaya tree



Note: Papaya trees that have been cut down.

Photograph: Kit Chan. Used with permission.

There is a whole practical economy at work here, which encroaches on public space by blurring the line between private and public. “At the wet market, a farmer loads a bucket of fish intestines onto her tricycle. She comments: ‘Compost for the papaya trees. It makes them sweeter.’”⁶ This utilitarian relationship with the environment, typical of the working classes and the native Chinese population, mainly made up of manual workers and peasants, can also be seen in the practice of gathering shellfish and fishing for self-consumption. This relationship with the island environment contrasts with the much more distant relationship of the new

⁶ Field notes, 24 January 2020.

islanders, which can sometimes lead to conflicts (for example, over the cleanliness of public spaces or the maintenance of unobstructed sea views).⁷

Ultimately, this issue is also related to the island's economy. In the terms of Table 1, papayas are certainly rival goods (my consumption deprives others of their use), a limited resource, synonymous in economics with relative scarcity. But are these fruits private, marketable goods or common-pool resources? Is their relative scarcity managed by the market or by collective logics marked by a certain restraint on everyone's part (similar to the management of communal pastures in the past, which serves as a model for thinking about common-pool resources in economics)? While a number of papaya trees spill over from agricultural land that is still cultivated, where they are clearly intended for the market, the phenomenon of the reprivatisation of papaya trees in public spaces, when they are cared for and exploited by a specific person, does not automatically make them a private, marketable good (characterised by their sale price), nor a common-pool resource, nor a valueless good.

In fact, alongside the practice of private consumption, papayas also belong to a circuit of gift-giving. Outside actual agricultural production, it is only once a certain number of papayas have been distributed around them that women will, possibly, sell the few fruit that remain. The gift of papayas is thus a gesture of inclusion, however fleeting, in a community where the goods produced by the land are redistributed. For the one receiving the fruit, knowing where it comes from is a guarantee of trust – a value that is sorely lacking in the food market in Hong Kong and, beyond that, in China (Fukuyama, 1995). There is no quality label on the island; in fact, suspicions sometimes arise in our interviews about the possibility of soil (and sea) contamination, from the island's former heavy industry. But the value of the local, as well as that of gift-giving and the mutual understanding it presupposes or helps to create, often outweigh these concerns.

There is therefore a phenomenon that amounts to a blurring of the lines between public and private – a crossing of boundaries, which are no barrier to the spread of seeds, in an organic movement that is not solely a matter of individuals managing their own kitchen gardens and which, at the same time, can never be fully regulated from above. This therefore creates an in-between space, typical of “common-pool resources”: a space whose management requires collective involvement and shared rules, which are often tacit in this case. Admittedly, falling short of a pure logic of the commons, there is also a logic of privatization, of appropriation of resources at the level of individuals, but this is less orientated towards commodification than towards redistribution, with the associated issues of inclusion and exclusion – here we find ourselves coming back to the collective. Beyond the commons, there is also a broader issue implicated in the management of papayas and food resources, which is that of food quality. Yet standards for food, as for air and water, are most effectively managed at the level of central political power, at the public level, following the top-down logic of laws and regulations (Combes, Combes-Motel, and Schwartz, 2016). Not everything happens in this in-between space, in this “common” space between the private and the public; but it is at this level that the

⁷ Some of the conflicts revolve around boats – fishing boats and small outboard craft – belonging to “locals” and left on dry land in places that have not been set aside for this purpose. More recent residents, belonging to the middle classes, have sometimes complained to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department about the presence of these boats, on the grounds that “they spoil the view”.

local working-class population forges relationships, sometimes inclusive and sometimes contradictory, with the island and with newcomers.

III. Periphery, fragilities, and dynamics of care

III.1. Between ageing and new islander dynamics

The ageing of Peng Chau's population began with the closure of the match factory in the 1970s and the relocation of many industries to mainland China or Southeast Asia. The economy slowed down and, although the island remained densely populated owing to low rents, the workforce left for other parts of Hong Kong. In the decades that followed, the population gradually aged and islandness took on a negative connotation: it became synonymous with isolation, closure, and underdevelopment. Between 1981 and 2021, the proportion of the population aged 60 or over rose from 13.7% to 28.3% (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 1981, 2022).

However, from the 2010s onwards, a “new islander” phenomenon began to take shape, led by younger, more international, and better educated cohorts seeking a less intense pace of life, and attracted by moderate rents and travel times compared to the Hong Kong average (ferries depart on average every 45 minutes and the journey from Peng Chau to Hong Kong Island takes 30 to 35 minutes), as well as a more natural living environment. These new residents have been moving to the island by choice and no longer out of necessity. The island is sought after, idealised, and imbued with symbolic value, in a way that is strongly influenced by Western perceptions (Péron, 2005). The Covid-19 period amplified this trend, with the arrival of residents from more central areas of Hong Kong in search of peace, greenery, and space, when it was not possible to leave the archipelago. The press has conjured up a glamorous image of the islands: a green escape from oppressive urban daily life, or a return to an “authentic” Hong Kong. The shore and the sea have also been made into places of recreation with the development of water sports (kayaking, jet skiing, etc.) (Leung and APO, 2022) and the local landscape has suddenly taken on aesthetic value. Most of the shops are run by long-time residents, and the fishermen and farmers are now made up of just a handful of gleaners past retirement age.

The island's unique space, with a pace of life incomparably slower than that of Hong Kong Island, is not only attractive to tourists. It is also welcoming to animal populations – such as birds (which attract birdwatchers), stray dogs, and cats – children, who can run about in the streets on their own, learn to ride bicycles, and play freely under the watchful eyes and comments of their elders, and, of course, the elderly themselves. In reality, the specific characteristics of this collective space are both the condition and the product of the presence of these particular populations. The latter benefit from the specific characteristics of this island environment, which is car-free and partially isolated by the sea, but they also require special attention, which, once again, involves a bottom-up effort.

III.2. A case study: Outdoor chairs

The presence of chairs in public spaces is a phenomenon that can be easily observed throughout Hong Kong: in alleyways, at bus stops, etc. However, they are generally few in number, to avoid obstructing pedestrian traffic on the pavements. Yet in Peng Chau chairs are everywhere, present in large numbers in its wide public spaces and scattered on every street corner, making them one of the island's characteristic features. These chairs are of all sorts, often plastic, mostly heavily worn and cast off by residents who no longer need them. Some are salvaged from restaurants or schools on the neighbouring island of Lantau, and all find a place on Peng Chau, offering a simple, mobile, and appropriable alternative to public benches. In this case, we can truly speak of flexible street furniture (one of the co-authors counted 293 at the time of her observation, but this number changes constantly). Map 3 shows the distribution of the chairs, helping us to understand the logic behind their organisation.

Map 3. Spontaneous public spaces

Source: Map adapted from Islanders map-zine issue 1, "Organic space", 2019. Used with permission.



Sense of Place
島民地圖

ORGANIC SPACE
有機空間



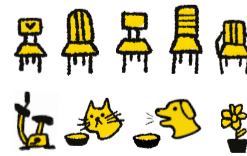
80+ chairs donated by anonymous neighbours are located on the main square (Lo Peng Street) where people gather. The rest are spread out throughout the island, in regular sitting spots arranged for the convenience of users.
80多張由不同人士捐贈的椅子位於人們聚集的主要大街(露坪街)。隨著島民的使用喜好，其餘的椅子散落在整個島上，多在樹下和人多出入的地方。



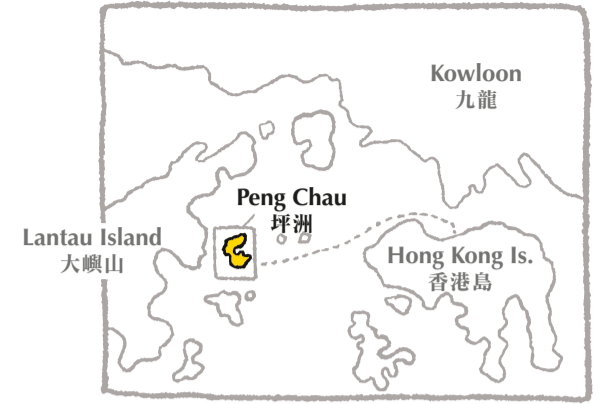
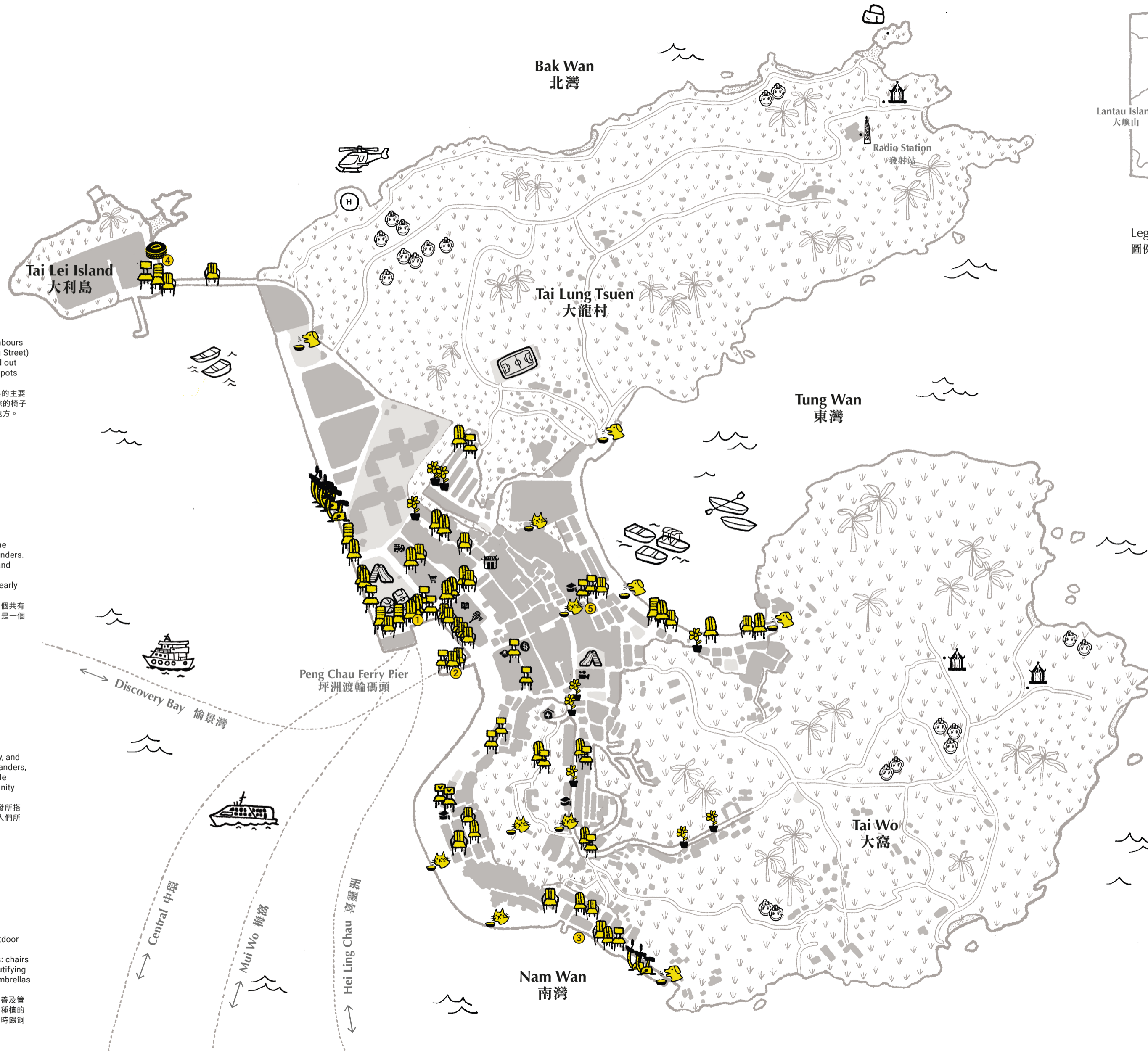
The open-air communal "gym room" is the next on-going experiment shaped by islanders. Made with second-hand exercise bikes and stepping machines, it becomes another impromptu gathering spot, especially in early morning and late afternoon.
在戶外的共有「健身房」是正在冒起的另一個共有設施。由二手健身單車和踏步機組成，它也是一個即興聚會的熱點，清晨黃昏尤其繁忙。



Spaces are sometimes made collectively, and sometimes shaped by self-motivated islanders, who want to make space more accessible for others: elders, kids, and even community animals.
與前述兩個相反，有些設施是由島民個人自發所搭建，令一些缺乏政府管理的空間變得更貼近人們所需。大利島上的兒童遊樂場就是一例。



More generally, many of Peng Chau's outdoor public spaces are shaped by subtle and anonymous additions made by residents: chairs for more resting area, potted plants beautifying the streets, feeding spots for animals, umbrellas sharing station...
坪洲許多開放的戶外空間提供了人們參與改善及管理這裡的機會。自己栽種的盆栽環繞著政府種植的樹木，沙灘由小石堆疊成的心形圖案，或定時餵飼流浪貓狗的地方。



Legend
圖例

- 1 Lo Peng Street
露坪街
 - 2 Public Pier
坪洲街渡碼頭
 - 3 Nam Wan Beach
南灣沙灘
 - 4 Tai Lei island
大利島
 - 5 Chi Yan School
志仁學校
- Space for the commons
開放的共有空間
 - LCSD-managed public space
公共空間
 - Private space & buildings
私人空間



Two main types of location can be identified, corresponding to two different uses of the chairs, which we will refer to here as mobile or fixed. Mobile chairs are available in large numbers in the centre of the island, on the main square that connects the pier to the Tin Hau temple. They are easy to spot, often made of plastic, white, and decorated with a brightly-coloured cross painted with spray paint. During the day they are dispersed and in the evening, they are stacked up again, sorted into their different models, against the wall of the library (part of the municipal services building).

(Field notes, 6 May 2020) – Some people take care of the chairs, such as Mr Kwok. Since retiring in the 2010s, he spends most of his time sitting outside, next to the sports centre, cross-legged, cigarette in hand, chatting with his neighbours. After breakfast or dinner, he takes a walk to bring back any chairs that have been left too far away. From his seat, he always shouts at tourists to “bring the chairs back to the library wall!” When some chairs are broken, he throws them away, and when necessary he sometimes collects funds from his neighbours to buy new chairs.

These chairs allow residents to get together and fully inhabit the island’s central public space [Photograph 5]. As they are marked with a large cross, they are easily identifiable as belonging to this collective infrastructure – they cannot be moved too far away, nor privatised by individuals.

Photograph 5. Chairs in public space



Photograph: Myriem Alnet.

On the contrary, fixed chairs, which can be identified by their relative isolation on the map, have been placed in specific locations by certain island residents and are not intended to be moved [Photograph 6]. They are mainly found in the streets, in front of houses or shops: a few chairs placed in front of the laundrette allow elderly ladies to take a break from their daily walk and chat with the manager, sometimes for several hours. These solitary chairs are scattered discreetly throughout the island: from the small uninhabited island of Tai Lei in the north-east to the southern tip, and particularly on the main streets. They have been placed there deliberately to meet the needs of a particular population: elderly people, whose daily presence in the island's public spaces stands out, given the relative absence of young or active populations. Their activities set the rhythm of the island's public life: shopping, walking, playing Chinese chess, stopping for conversations, exercising, etc., all interspersed with regular breaks necessitated by their physical condition (and, for much of the year, by the heat). The chairs thus provide places to rest, which naturally facilitate and encourage seniors to remain physically and socially active.

Photograph 6. A fixed chair



Photograph: Myriem Alnet.

Besides their uses, the question of how chairs (and other resources shared in public spaces) are managed also helps us to understand the making of the common. The chairs, both mobile and fixed, are provided by anonymous individuals, who share a certain form of attention, or care, for others – the elderly and children, but also stray cats and dogs (as evidenced by the food stations placed here and there). The common here does not arise from coordinated action, but from a sum of individual initiatives.

A small number of exercise machines, such as gym bicycles and others, are also present in certain locations along the seafront, as can be seen on Map 3. Here too, there was no movement coordinated from above, but rather a spontaneous form of organisation: a few fitness machines, placed in a street by an anonymous person who wanted to get rid of them, happened to be well used (in China there is a long tradition of exercising outdoors, including among older people). Later, the machines were grouped together, forming a kind of open-air gym facing the sea. Little by little, users assembled tarpaulins and wooden planks to protect themselves from the sun, and brought chairs to sit on and chat. The number of machines changes regularly according to the needs of the users. This “bottom-up” initiative is not without its problems: the Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department regularly puts up posters announcing that they will soon be coming to remove the machines; the residents temporarily remove them, then put them back in the same place once the inspections are over. The same problem arose initially with the chairs, which were threatened with removal. According to residents, people protested vigorously and the Islands District Councillor, responsible for representing the island, negotiated in their favour. Since then, the chairs have met with little interference, and are positively viewed on the island, among both old and new residents, who consider care to be a characteristic value of the island’s identity, which they are proud to display – and which, in moral terms, stands in opposition to the atomised urban society of Hong Kong.

What, then, is actually created by the inhabitants through this game of musical chairs? By definition, public space on the island, even if it is made less accessible by the sea, is a public good (Table 1), shared by locals and visitors alike, who appreciate its simplicity. The variable-geometry urban furniture constituted by its outdoor chairs, on the other hand, is a “common-pool resource”: the management of this limited resource is neither private, nor public, if by the latter that we are referring to standards decided and implemented centrally by the Hong Kong government. In some respects, as we have seen, the common has even been constituted here by opposition to that central regulation. Finally, although it unfolds at the local level, the common here is not synonymous with homogenisation across the island. By providing a certain amount of support to the population, the chairs contribute to the particular rhythm that permeates the entire island, but their very uneven distribution in space (Map 3) highlights and contributes to the dynamics of differentiation, “peripheralisation”, and centralisation. The common has nothing to do with sameness from a demographic point of view either. On the contrary, it is the plurality of the island’s inhabitants – human and animal populations, different ages with their particular needs – that gives rise to a feeling of necessity, for some, to invest in caring for others and in the bottom-up management of public space.

Conclusion

In 2020, a century after the great Tin Hau parade against the Spanish flu, the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the world. Hong Kong then implemented a strict “zero-tolerance” policy that prohibited all contact with the outside world (including with the “mainland”, that is, the rest of China). The experience of several earlier health crises, particularly SARS in 2003, had already ingrained in individuals certain preventative habits, such as the systematic wearing of masks, the use of disinfectants, and the practice of physical distancing (Keck, 2021). Paradoxically, the Tin Hau parade, which was specifically intended to commemorate a collective fight against a pandemic, was cancelled for the first time in 2020 owing to restrictions prohibiting any demonstration or gathering of more than four people.

In the case of these two crises, the modes of response therefore unfolded at very different scales. The 1920 crisis is considered in Peng Chau as the founding moment of a local common identity at the level of the island; the 2020 crisis, on the other hand, combined a public policy response formulated above the local level – at the central government level – with daily practices and acts at the individual level, which were moreover expected and requested by the authorities. The first crisis strengthened inhabitants’ bonds with the island and with the goddess of the sea; the second helped to highlight the island’s place in a larger archipelago, where it appears as a peripheral space, separated from the centre by the sea, which acts both as a divider and as the only connector to more central areas. In some respects, this crisis accelerated the redistribution of populations within the archipelago, with the arrival in Peng Chau of newcomers with a different ethos from that of the locals, coming in search of island life and driven by a “desire for the island” (Péron, 2005), whereas for previous waves of populations it had been more of a choice by default.

This final comparison between the 1920 parade and the response to the 2020 crisis, as well as our reflection throughout this article on the goods at stake in the collective, based on neoclassical economic theory, aimed to capture what is specific to the local in thinking about the population and its bonds with the island environment, while situating it between two other levels of analysis. Below the local level is the level of the individual, an omnipresent actor in both economic and sociological theory, whose choices and actions have a real impact through the mediation of institutions such as the market – the individual never acts in a vacuum, but in many contexts remains the relevant level of analysis. Above the local level, there are broader scales, which are necessary in particular for thinking about political power, the centre of which is decidedly not located on the island, and which, in the case of Hong Kong, now attracts much of the attention of observers. These two levels are inescapable, including for apprehending the ecological issue. In both cases, however, the “island population” is neither the right actor nor the right scale; instead, it comes into play as an in-between.

Our attempt to apprehend this in-between required a work of demography and qualitative geography. Using classic demographic variables (ethnicity and geographical origin, sector of activity, age) we sought to capture the qualities of the island and its population: its specific “cultural landscape” (Suwa, 2007), the ways of being and doing things, and the particular rhythm of life; and in each case, to grasp them between the legacy of the past and their reinvention in the present. The particular scale of the island appears relevant here for a

reflection on the forms of inclusion and exclusion characteristic of club goods, and on the forms of collective management from below characteristic of common-pool resources. It is also at this scale that some of the ecological and political issues of tomorrow are already playing out: the collective's capacity to welcome otherness, the relationships that humans forge with local or marine resources, or again the collective's capacity to care for populations that are diverse, fragile, but resilient – as are, more generally, the bonds between the population and the island world.

Disclaimer:

The writing of this article benefited from the support of the project “Dealing with a Resurgent China” (DWARC). DWARC has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101061700.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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