

The Local as Processes: Making Cheung Chau Island

by Wong Yam Ling (Lynn)

After his college graduation, my friend Zed Chan moved to Cheung Chau, a small “outer” island off the coast of Hong Kong. He did tell me that living on this island was one of his dreams of life. When I visited him there for the first time, it was difficult for me to understand his longing to live in such a “touristic” place. But soon after I spent more time on the island, I met a variety of people who chose to move here from Hong Kong just recently or several decades ago. They are from different parts of the world, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, Denmark, the UK, Malaysia, and Vietnam. I did not expect to encounter the “global” on this little island, and it made me wonder even more about this place—what made the island attractive to them? Why did they choose to settle down here?

The most intriguing answer I got so far was from an expatriate artist who had been residing here for over 40 years—“The very essence of Cheung Chau is, it is a very local place.” His sentence keeps hovering in my mind: maybe he is right, Cheung Chau’s localness becomes unique and appealing in our time of global placelessness, and especially within the orbit of Hong Kong as megacity, or as a key Asian financial center.

However, *the local* is not something out there on the island, but something that people have different understandings of. What do they mean when they say Cheung Chau is a local place? How do they feel localness in Cheung Chau? How do they perceive and imagine Cheung Chau? How do they constitute and remake Cheung Chau through their own practices?

I think the people *here* are part of *the local*, and what they do in their everyday life, as well as in all kinds of community events, is *the process* that makes *their* Cheung Chau as the place they want. In this project, I see the local as placemaking processes at different scales, and I seek to understand how different people see and make the same place differently. Also, in their practices which are materializing the “places” they see in Cheung Chau, do they contradict each other, build on each other, or pass each other without friction?

Fieldwork and Methods

In January 2018, I moved to Cheung Chau to live with Zed Chan and his friends. Before that I had visited Cheung Chau every weekend for about five months in 2017 to make connections with the islanders, and it helped me to build rapport with several key interlocutors. Also, living on the island gave me an embodied experience of daily life here, and as time went by, I also found my roots on the island, that this place was no longer a field site, but more of a “home” to me.

The people I got to talk with were mostly by convenience sampling, and there were few cases of snowball sampling or judgmental sampling. In my fieldwork, I followed 5 events of different scales, in which I sometimes played a more active role, and I regarded it as a way of engaging with communities in Cheung Chau and a form of reciprocity as a fieldworker. For instance, I made a hand-drawn poster for one event. Also, I followed people—walking with them on the island; and visiting their houses—to see how they made sense of the place, or how they did what they did on the island. Here, my fieldwork was full of participant-observation, not only in community events, but also in more mundane everyday activities such as an afternoon tea.

Moreover, I did in-depth interviews with more than 15 interlocutors. Most of the interviews were informal and semi-structured, depending on the interviewee—when I interviewed the president of the Rural Committee, it had to be a formal and structured interview. Each of the interviews took about 1 to 1.5 hours, and I typed out transcripts with reference to field notes or sound recordings. I also had many small chats with the islanders, and it sometimes gave me important inspiration. Moreover, I tried to let people tell me stories with their own pictures or draw a map of their daily life on the island, and I also tried to document what I saw in Cheung Chau with photos and videos. I want to *show* the island to my readers, with “materialization” of Cheung Chau by photos and my interlocutors’s voices, instead of me telling it, and I know, in writing about Cheung Chau, I am also *making* the place.

Significance

By focusing on placemaking, I see the local as processes and lived experience, from which I know not only power dynamics but also agentic decisions. Also, through people’s definitions of Cheung Chau, we know how they understand this island, in the context of Hong Kong as well as of the globe, that it reveals how localness or rootedness is perceived in Hong Kong, and by our contemporaries in the time of globalizing placelessness. Most important, it may shed light on what kind of place do people want for their life—that is, the kind of life that they desire, and the world they are seeking for.