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LIVING ON THE EDGE

Bob McKercher
Candace Fu
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China

Abstract: This study examines the role that tourism plays for residents of Tap Mun, an island off the northeast coast of Hong Kong which is in its last stages of decline. Once it was a vibrant fishing and farming community, but today its economy is reliant on tourism. The majority of enterprises provide only a marginal income and most workers are seasonal. Yet, this business provides the residents with the economic rationale to remain on the island, and in doing so, enables them to retain their existing social networks, sense of place, and connection to their ancestral homes. Thus, the net social benefits of pursuing subsistence-level tourism outweigh the limited economic gains. Keywords: periphery, domestic, social impacts, subsistence.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a spatially selective activity that is clustered in relatively compact areas focused around shopping and business precincts or anchored by primary attractions (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). The degree of spatial selectivity is especially noticeable in a place like Hong Kong, where the Special Administrative Region’s (SAR) mountainous topography dictates that all development is concentrated tightly along the coastal fringes of Victoria Harbor, on reclaimed land, or in bedroom suburbs located in lowland areas of the New Territories (HKY 2001). It is this compactness that gives the city its distinctive skyline. While many people consider Hong Kong to be one of the world’s most densely populated cities, in reality about three quarters of its 1,092 sq km landmass is undeveloped and almost 40% of it is gazetted as
country park (AFCD 2004). Most of the undeveloped land can be found in the New Territories or on outlying islands.

These rural areas have largely missed out on the economic miracle that is Hong Kong, in general, and on the tourism miracle, in particular. Many of the villages in the New Territories have suffered depopulation and economic stagnation. Within one generation, formerly vibrant fishing and farming communities settled by ethnic minority Hakka and Tanka people for more than 300 years have entered steep decline. Ghost towns, decaying villages occupied by remnant populations, and abandoned farmland and aquaculture operations are now the norm in many areas. These areas have also undergone economic transformation to become part of the pleasure periphery, providing nature-based, camping, and small-scaled domestic tourism opportunities for city dwellers wishing to escape crowded urban conditions.

This paper presents a study of those individuals who have chosen to remain on one such peripheral island, Tap Mun, and who now own and operate small businesses serving tourists. Tap Mun is a small island (1.7 sq km) located off the northeast coast of Hong Kong (Figure 1). Its name was first given by fishermen for the island’s resemblance to a Buddhist pagoda. It once had 5,000 residents and served as the supply station for other coastal communities. However, it began to decline in the 60s as water pollution, a decline in farming, and few opportunities for young people saw its population drift into the city or emigrate.
overseas. Today, perhaps as few as 100 mostly elderly people live there permanently. The island is a popular hiking and camping destination for Hong Kong residents. It is also a popular spot for charter tours that deposit upwards of 2,000 people on any given Sunday during the summer season for sightseeing and a seafood dinner.

TOURISM AND THE PERIPHERY

Much of the published material on tourism and the periphery has focused on fringe destinations, such as Pacific islands, arctic regions, or rural communities (Brown and Hall 2000; Getz and Nilsson 2003; Hall 1994; Pearce 2002; Prideaux 2002; Wanhill 1995; Weaver 1998). Only a few studies have examined the periphery of existing destinations. These have explored such themes as attributes-based approaches towards peripherality (Pearce 2002), residents’ perceptions of the rural urban fringe (Weaver and Lawton 2001), and the periphery as a possible urban ecotourism venue (Dwyer and Edwards 2000).

Peripheral areas tend to be economically, socially, politically, psychologically, and developmentally isolated from and marginalized by the core (Botterill, Owen, Emmanuel, Foster, Gale, Nelson and Selby 2002). They generally share a number of common features that accentuate their geographical disadvantages. They tend to have poorer infrastructure and services than the core; they are inaccessible, making communications difficult; their economic base is geared around primary production, which is now in decline; and what economic activity that does occur often has high leakages, as materials must be sourced from the core (Botterill et al 2002). The peripheries’ disadvantages are exacerbated by limited knowledge by the core (Wanhill 1995) and a power base vested in the hands of the core.

Socially, communities are characterized by small, close-knit populations with a strong sense of place (Wanhill 1995). Populations have declined as young people have been forced to leave due to either a lack of job options or better opportunities elsewhere (Botterill et al 2002). The remnant population is aging and often unskilled. Some residents may stay by choice, while others feel trapped due to a lack of employable skills. Minority ethnic groups, or indigenous peoples that do not speak the language or dialect of the core culture are also common (Keller 1987), further accentuating their sense of marginalization.

Businesses tend to be small, family-owned operations that are undercapitalized and often marginally viable (Keller 1987), which in turn results in weak multiplier effects for the community (Hohl and Tisdell 1995). There are few economic revitalization options, leading central governments to identify tourism as a potential savior (Keller 1987, Mercer 1991), more due to a lack of opportunities than because of innate market appeal. Larger enterprises are owned by nonlocal firms (Keller 1987) with the industry ultimately controlled, managed, and exploited to benefit them. It is for this reason that Britton (1989) likens much of the tourism in the periphery to a form of neocolonialism that perpetuates historic anomalies and ultimately serves to retain the
periphery in a submissive position. Boniface and Fowler are more succinct, stating “tourism feeds on the colonial impulse” (1993:19).

Nonetheless, peripheries do possess a number of attributes that make them potentially appealing to tourists (Foster 1985). They have strong natural environments (Wanhill 1995) with high scenic values. Their small populations and relatively undeveloped character create a refreshing alternative to cities. Those areas abutting urban regions often serve as their pleasure periphery (Boniface and Cooper 1987), providing easily accessible, relatively unspoiled day and overnight outdoor recreation opportunities and short break escapes.

These places have also become popular locations for holiday homes. A growing body of emerging literature documents the positive and negative impacts of second home development on host communities (Casado-Diaz 1999; Dredge 2001; Tress 2002; Visser 2004). Interestingly, there is no tradition of second or holiday home development in Hong Kong. A limited land supply means that any land released for development in remote communities is earmarked for residential development. Existing village houses in communities such as those found in Tap Mun, are not suitable for redevelopment as second homes. Legislation enacted in 1905 dictated that their maximum size had to be 436 sq ft or less and that they had to be single story structures with a pitched roof and a cock loft. A side room was added for cooking, ablutions, and storage. There was no indoor plumbing. Windows were not glassed in; instead they were small openings protected by iron bars. The policy was modified in the 60s to permit the construction of two-story homes with flat roofs and again in the 80s to expand the floor space (Hopkinson and Lao 2003). Older houses were abandoned when newer ones were built and have now fallen into such disrepair that they are structurally unsound. Additionally, Hong Kong residents tend to be superstitious and believe these places to be haunted. Consequently, few people are interested in redeveloping them.

A number of issues affect business viability in the periphery. Seasonality is particularly problematic as these destinations typically trade on their natural assets. Therefore, peak and trough seasons are dictated by climate (Butler 2001). Cyclicity is also a consideration in destinations that abut urban centers. This pattern refers to the uneven distribution of tourists throughout a week, with weekend peaks and mid-week troughs. According to Butler (2001), businesses in seasonal and/or cyclical destinations encounter difficulty in accessing capital, obtaining and retaining full-time staff, and earning a satisfactory return on investments.

Peripheries are as much psychological constructs as they are a reflection of spatial isolation. Some are clearly located at great distances from the core, as is the case in the Canadian north and Scandinavia (Sahlberg 2001). But, communities that are proximate to core areas may also be regarded as peripheral if they exhibit the conditions of relative remoteness, social marginalization, political isolation, economic decline, and depopulation. Such is the case in the study area which, though geographically proximate to downtown Hong Kong, exists on the social and psychological margin of the SAR. Tap Mun is less than
25 km to the east of new bedroom suburbs in the New Territories and is less than 30 km to the northeast of downtown Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Yet, a one-way journey from downtown Hong Kong or Kowloon by public transit takes more than two hours and involves two subways or trains, two buses, and a ferry. Land and water-taxis offer a quicker alternative at a much higher cost of $50 per person for a one-way journey. Even then, the journey is in excess of one hour.

**Study Method**

A qualitative method was adopted, as it seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings and, in addition, seeks insights, understanding, and depth of knowledge (Hoepfl 1997; Walle 1997). In order to capture the lived experience of participants, naturalistic inquiry using a series of semi-structured interviews was chosen, supplemented by site visits and field inspections. Interviews lasted from five minutes to more than one hour and were conducted in Cantonese. Notes were transcribed into English.

Developing a relationship with study participants is essential in this type of study in order to break down barriers and gain deeper insights into lived experiences (Hannabuss 1996). To this end, a total of six rounds of interviews were made by the second author between December, 2003 and August, 2004. Sixteen individuals participated in the study. All were residents of the island and all were involved in tourism to some extent. The sample included the owners/managers of two restaurants, five grocery stalls, souvenir stall holders, and Tanka residents who operated water-taxis. The sample represents virtually all permanent residents who are involved in tourism and/or related retail and transport activities on the island. The respondents’ pecuniary involvement means that the opinions expressed are likely biased in favor of this activity. Since the goal of the study was to examine residents involved in tourism, the authors purposefully did not interview any residents without an interest in visitation. Notably, the names of respondents have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Because qualitative research by nature involves an emergent structure, the research design and questions evolved as the study progressed (Hoepfl 1997). Preliminary interviews sought to introduce the researchers to the residents, start to build a relationship, and gain broad background knowledge. The first round, for example, focused on gathering oral histories of the island, and understanding tourism activity and the individual’s own involvement in this sector. Subsequent interviews sought clarification and additional details about why residents remained on the islands, their reasons for becoming involved, and other relevant information.

This style of inquiry relies on the subjective evaluation of spoken words and not on the quantitative evaluation of numbers. As such, bias or errors can enter in three possible areas: the respondent misinterpreting the question and providing a different answer to the question asked; the researcher recording the answer inaccurately; and the
analyst misinterpreting the recorded response. In addition, there is a risk of cultural bias, especially when one of the authors comes from a different ethnic and cultural background than the study participants. Each of the authors analyzed the data set independently and then they compared notes to ensure consistency and accuracy of interpretation. Subsequent interviews also gave residents the opportunity to clarify certain points and to augment their statements. The third point in the triangulation process was provided by secondary data sources. Importantly, as well, the stories told by participants were largely consistent, enabling cross-verification of ideas. The inclusion of a local Hong Kong Chinese author helped minimize cultural bias.

*Tap Mun*

Tap Mun, located in the northeast of the New Territories, is a remote island accessible only by ferry or water-taxi (Figure 1). People living here are either of Tanka or Hakka descent. Hakka, Tanka, and Cantonese (Punti) are the three original inhabitants of the New Territories (Watson 1983). The Tanka and Hakka have historically been marginalized by the more dominant Cantonese. The Tanka are thought to be descended from the original inhabitants of Hong Kong (Rodwell 1992; Lee and DeStefano 2002). They were traditionally nomadic fisher folk who spent their lives on their boats and rarely if ever went ashore. The influx of Punti people (the ancestors of the modern Cantonese) in the 1100s supplanted the Tanka and pushed them to the coastal margins. Stokes commented that the Tanka “continued to make their living around the coasts. Now outnumbered and often scorned, they faded into Hong Kong’s sea-hazed background (1995:30)”.

The situation remained unchanged until the invocation of two Coastal Evacuation Orders in 1661 and 1664, forced all inhabitants to be evacuated 50 km inland. The coast became a desolate wasteland as it was turned into a military zone (Lee and DeStefano 2002). The order was rescinded in 1669, but because most of the evacuees had perished during their period of forced eviction, repopulation was slow and sporadic. In response the Manchu rulers invited people from outside the region to migrate and the Hakka, people who had moved from northern China some generations earlier, responded. The term Hakka is somewhat derogatory and literally means “guest family,” in reference to their outcast status in their adopted homeland of Southern China. According to Lee and DeStefano the Hakka were a “people proud of their language and traditions [and] they did not assimilate themselves with the mainstream culture of Southern China. As such they were never quite welcomed by the majority Cantonese”. As a result “partly to preserve their own culture, but mainly to protect themselves from violent acts of xenophobia, the Hakka tended to live away from mainstream populations on poorer lands” (2002:53). The only land available to them was found on hillsides and other marginal areas leased from the Cantonese (Hung 1998), placing them in a socially inferior position economically indebted to the dominant cultural community.
Thus, the Hakka and Tanka inhabitants found themselves relegated to the geographical, social, and political margins, where they coexisted with some enmity with the dominant Cantonese population (Welsh 1997), continuing to speak their own dialects and practicing their own traditions. Many elderly Hakka and Tanka still speak their own dialects.

Until the early 60s, Tap Mun was a vibrant fishing village with a population of 5,000 people. According to Mrs. Law, “it performed the role of being a supply station for all fishing ships. It sold tools for fishing, food, and other stuffs that were needed by those fishing ships.” It also earned the nickname “mini Macau” as the village’s main street “was very busy with various kinds of gambling activities.” But the winds of social and economic change were blowing as Hong Kong modernized quickly in the 60s. Tap Mun, along with many other isolated islands, was on the cusp of rapid transformation leading to decline as traditional agriculture and fishing activities were abandoned while the region underwent its own industrial revolution. A marine biologist in the 60s commented, “you have a sense of making a journey through a doomed landscape. Superficially, rural life seemed traditional . . . but the country was threatened as never before by the city’s natural expansion” (Stokes 1995:114).

Decline accelerated in the 70s as a combination of water pollution, emigration to the United Kingdom, and few opportunities for young people saw a massive outflow of residents. The initial impetus to leave was the passage of the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962, which aimed at restricting admission to Great Britain. Ironically, this Act prompted the first great wave of Chinese immigration to the United Kingdom. Development of new bedroom suburbs in the New Territories led to more outmigration as young people left to pursue their education and stayed to take up jobs in factories, while many of elderly people chose the more comfortable retirement setting of a modern urban city.

Participants indicated that by the 70s the Hakka had stopped farming. Most Tanka also stopped fishing due to the combination of a series of Red Tides and the introduction of deep sea commercial net fishing operations that depleted onshore fish stocks. Social change continued as the Tanka abandoned their traditional lifestyle of living in their boats and moved into permanent housing on shore. The New Fishermen’s Village was established in 1964 by a group of villagers who migrated to New Zealand and remitted money. The construction of this village represented the last new construction on the island. Between then and now, buildings have been abandoned, and many have collapsed or are in a structurally unsound condition.

Today, Tap Mun is a quiet island with perhaps as few as 100 permanent residents. No one knows how many people live here exactly, as census data do not discriminate to such a small region. Most people live in the New Fishermen’s Village or along Tap Mun Hoi Pong Street in the original village. Much of the rest of the structures are abandoned and decaying (Figure 2), which add to its appeal as a contrast to ultramodern, high-rise Hong Kong. Few services are provided to this
remnant population. The primary school closed two to three years ago, there is no home postal delivery service, a floating medical clinic visits two mornings a week, the police post is manned only on weekends, and supplies must be boated in as there are no retail or large grocery stores.

*Why Residents Remain*

Sense of kinship and the strong attachment to place are seen as traditional virtues among Chinese people. This characteristic can be found in the remaining villagers, explaining to a large extent why they have chosen to stay. One elderly Hakka women stated that her family has been living on the island for five generations, while the wife of a food stall owner traced her family tree back six generations. Mrs. Li, a Tanka women of about 70 said that her family has lived on the island for 13 generations. Yet, this generation is the last one that has retained such a strong sense of place, for in each case, the children have either
emigrated overseas or moved to suburbs in Kowloon or the New Territories. In spite of the strong Chinese tradition of children looking after their parents, few residents interviewed were interested in moving in with their families. The Lai couple is typical. Although their sons and daughters are living in the New Territories, they choose to stay on the island. They visit for short periods of time, but become restless and complain of the lack of fresh air. Another woman continues to stay on the island while her husband and daughters live in the New Territories. Her family refuses to visit even during weekends. Another says that in spite of the inconveniences, she stays on the island because she does not get along with her daughter-in-law. As she commented, “I could hardly live peacefully with my daughter-in-law, maybe we are too old to understand why sometimes they would do something...we just end up quarrelling.”

Comfort, familiarity, and strong social network also emerged as important reasons to stay, even though residents realized island life is becoming increasingly isolated. The husband of a water-taxi operator stated that they have chosen not to live with their children in a public housing estate because they are accustomed to the simple life of the island. She rises at 6:00 and normally goes to bed about 5:00 in the afternoon. Another woman added, “it is just free and secure to live here, I can just wander around and leave my house open without any locks. I tried to live with my children for a few days, but I was just nervous and dared not to leave the house. I have heard of too many cases about elderly people being cheated.” Another interviewee, who was sitting in the backyard talking to three other Hakka women, said, “villagers here are just nice and friendly. I can chat with them at any time and occasionally play card games with them. We can entertain ourselves here while when I was living outside with my children, I got a feeling of being caught in a cage. I could talk to nobody but myself.” While the more aged residents may stay because of choice, those residents in their late 40s and early 50s indicated that they lacked the necessary skills to find suitable work off-island. Typically, they felt they were too old and too unskilled to find work elsewhere. Were they to leave, they would be relegated to the economic margins of Hong Kong. By staying, they can enjoy a relatively simple and stress-free lifestyle.

Tourism on Tap Mun

The tranquility of Tap Mun is disrupted when public ferries and charter tour boats disgorge thousands of tourists on a busy weekend for hiking, camping, sightseeing, and a seafood meal. No record of arrivals is kept, but on Sundays during the peak season, it is estimated that more 2,000 people visit. Up to 10 charter boats, each carrying 200 or more passengers may stop by the island. In addition, the regular ferry service frequency is doubled and the number of available water-taxis usually triples.

Tourism began in the late 70s, when newspapers started to publish articles about the outdoor recreational opportunities available here.
Interest grew slowly and the island’s economy evolved organically from one based on primary production to one reliant on tourism and recreation. As the number of individual hikers grew, domestic tour operators saw a business opportunity and started to organize day tours. These tours are now marketed to residents of public housing estates, through district councilors or among some private organizations like aged-care centers.

The Hong Kong Tourism Board includes Tap Mun in its promotional literature targeted at the international marketplace, but places much more emphasis on other more accessible islands with better infrastructure that offer the tourist more activities. In fact, its website promoting outlying islands (HKTB 2005a) makes no mention of Tap Mun and instead encourages people to visit islands located a short ferry ride from central Hong Kong. A feature article on outer islands (HKTB nd) mentions it in passing but again encourages people to visit other islands, while the “City Gardens and Parks” section (HKTB 2005b) indicates that a twice-daily $3\frac{1}{2}$ hour circular ferry route takes people to the island.

Some inbound tour operators have tried to offer day-hiking, kayaking, bird-watching, seafood tours, and even helicopter/bus tours but with limited success. One nature-based operator indicated he ran a ‘‘hand full’’ of helicopter trips before abandoning the idea. His kayak and coral trips were more popular, but catered to small numbers. His capacity was a maximum of seven people per trip. They ran during weekends in the summer and also there was enough demand to run one or two additional trips during the week. He also offered hiking trips, but soon realized they were not viable, as Hong Kong’s destination image was inimical with the type of product he was offering. Another operator indicated that lack of demand led them to abandon their tours to Tap Mun. Its remoteness, lack of infrastructure, and preponderance of other islands offering a better quality experience result in limited interest in the provision of commercial tours targeted at inbound tourists.

However, thousands of local residents may visit on a Sunday, and hundreds of others will go camping. Virtually all of the day-trippers purchase tours offered by local operators. Tour package prices range from US$10 to $15 (HK$80 to $120) per person. The fee includes transport to and from the housing estate, water transport, tour guide, and a seafood luncheon. Most of the tour fee is retained by the tour operator or ferry company, with local restaurants receiving US$4 or less per capita for a meal that consists of fresh fish, prawns, calamari, shellfish, a vegetable dish, rice, and tea. Prices are kept low due to the combination of intense competition between tour operators, competition between islands seeking to attract groups, and a primary market comprised mostly of low income, public housing dwellers. While the tours offer value for money, island businesses see few benefits. Narrow margins and low profitability dictate these businesses must survive on volume.

The offering of sightseeing tours targeted at local residents is a uniquely Hong Kong phenomenon. These tours have been available for
many years but grew in popularity during the 2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis when inbound tour operators began to target local residents as a means of generating cash flow during a time when international arrivals collapsed. Local tours are popular for two reasons. First, they provide access that is otherwise not available to remote areas. Car ownership rates are low (less than six cars per 100 residents, compared with more than 60 cars per 100 US residents). In jurisdictions where car ownership rates are higher, people will self-drive to these attractions, but in Hong Kong, tour operators fill the niche. Second, the HKSAR consists of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories which are connected to the China Mainland and some 235 offshore islands. Many of these islands have remnant villages and restaurants or offer a variety of nature based recreational opportunities which are appealing to local residents wishing to escape high density, high rise urban landscapes.

Package and independent tourists behave differently and exert different impacts on the community. Package tours include Tap Mun as one of two or three stops. The length of stay is short and focused around lunch. Group tourists usually stay for less than 2 hours. The disembarking of chartered ferries results in crowding on the pier and along the narrow street running through the village, sometimes taking more than five minutes for a group to snake its way through the narrow streets. Kirby (2003) describes the scene he encountered during his visit:

It was Sunday, and at Tap Mun (Grass Island), the loudhailers and pink flags were out in full force, flocks of quickie-style tourist groups arriving on quarter-hourly ferries. We stopped for noodles, and then followed the friendly masses along concrete paths that wound through abandoned villages, past a refurbished temple and through groves of traditional jinta graves . . .

Independent tourists time their arrivals to avoid the tour groups. Hikers and campers disperse quickly throughout the island along the hiking trails. Most are self-contained and may only purchase water or instant noodles, but will otherwise spend little.

The residents interviewed generally expressed positive attitudes, although admittedly, each has a pecuniary interest in this activity. Apart from the commercial benefits, though, they also enjoy the atmosphere created by tourists and the contrast it makes to their otherwise tranquil island life during the rest of the week. Contact between tourists and residents is limited, more by good fortune than by design. Most of the permanent residents now live in the New Fishermen’s Village which is situated 500 m to the east of the main ferry pier. It has its own pier that tour boats and ferries are restricted from using. Further, it is accessible from the public pier by a relatively obscure path that starts behind a public toilet block. Most tourists follow the main path that leads to the main street of the original village, past the temples and on to the hiking trails, and do not deviate to the path to the village. Only a small number of elderly women and shopkeepers continue to live in the original village, which is now largely abandoned and in a poor state of repair.
Much of the research on the relationship between tourism and local residents or other stakeholders is framed within a conflict context. But as McKercher, Ho and du Cros (2005) illustrate, conflict is most likely to occur during periods of rapid expansion, resulting in a shift of power balances between stakeholders. Negative attitudes are most likely to occur when otherwise stable systems are pushed to the edge of chaos. But conflict is a transitional stage and, over time, relationships between stakeholders tend to stabilize. This situation was observed in Tap Mun, where both the pattern and volume of visitation have been relatively stable for many years.

Tourism infrastructure, like other on the islands, is limited. An extensive hiking trail network has been built and a viewing pagoda constructed on a lookout. Other services and facilities are limited and restricted to the main village. Tap Mun has three seafood restaurants and four to six small grocery stalls that sell drinks, instant noodles, and snacks. Some souvenir stalls have also been established along the access road to the ferry. These stalls sell nick-knacks or dried fish and seaweed manufactured locally by the stallholders. A new restaurant was opened in 2003 in response to an increase in demand for local day trips caused by outbreaks of the SARS disease. It is operated by a nonresident who commutes on weekends. Officially, no licensed accommodation is available. Unofficially, however, it is possible to lease a village house by negotiating with one of the residents. The rate is less than $125 (HK$1,000) a month. Two or three other houses have been renovated as weekend holiday homes.

Why Residents Entered Tourism

None of the respondents made a conscious decision to enter into tourism. Instead, their involvement represented either a natural evolutionary step for existing businesses or a response to their need to find some type of employment due to a perceived lack of skills for suitable work off-island. All restaurant owners and most grocery stallholders inherited family businesses, with many feeling an obligation to keep them running. The owner of one of the seafood restaurants took over the business when her mother-in-law retired. A grocery stall owner told a similar story. She said “this grocery stall was opened by my husband’s great-grandfather. I have to continue this family business while my husband has to secure his employment and my daughters study off island.” Water-taxi operators are invariably of Tanka descent. Driving the taxi enables them to retain some cultural connection to the sea, while also generating additional income to supplement shallow-water fishing income.

Some of the elderly women have opened souvenir stalls selling dried fish and seaweed. These women dried seafood for their own consumption and began selling to tourists about 20 years ago. The motivations to enter business appear to be as much to do with social interaction as income generation, for the women commented that it keeps them busy, while earning a small income to enable them to support their modest lifestyles.
Businesses are small, one- or two-person operations that provide a subsistence income. Water-taxi drivers stated they often earned as little as $15 (HK$ 100) per week in the low season and perhaps triple that in the high season, prompting one person to confess he buys his fuel illegally from Mainland China to save money. An owner of a grocery stall mentioned that her shop “gains little benefit from tourism activities even during the peak season and that the income generated is only enough to support my life on the island, with nothing to spare.” During the old days when Tap Mun thrived, she said she could earn over $1,000 a day, but now she claims she rarely makes this amount per year. The owner/manager of the largest restaurant does better. Her business earns enough to pay her daily expenses and those of her two full-time staff, but it is definitely not a business where she can make a large sum of money.

The combined effects of seasonality and cyclical affect the viability of most businesses, limiting their optimum season to as few as 20 days a year. Tap Mun is busiest during the four-month peak summer period, with few tourists arriving during other times of the year. In addition, it is a cyclical destination with tourist numbers peaking on Sundays and public holidays and virtually no other arrivals at any other time during the week. Unlike most cities in the developed world, Hong Kongers work a 5½ day week, including Saturday mornings. Long one-way travel times mean few people visit on Saturday afternoon. A restaurant owner commented, “there are no customers during weekdays and only a few pre-booked tables on Saturday. Most of our business is done during Sundays or public holidays.” The owner of a grocery stall echoed similar sentiments when she said “tourists in organized tours will usually come on weekends. The peak seasons for me is only three to four months, from May to August.” Weather plays a critical role, especially when the peak days are so limited. As one stated, “The business on this island depends a lot on weather . . . we will definitely close down at times of bad weather like rainy and cold days.” A typhoon or heavy rain on a Sunday during the summer means more than the loss of one day’s wages; it can mean the loss of five percent of one’s annual income.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong is the world’s most popular urban destination (WTTC 2004), and its popularity is expected to grow significantly in the next few years, as arrivals exceed 22 million people by the end of 2005. A total of 24 new hotels will open, raising the accommodation stock to over 51,100 rooms (HKTB 2004). The city is also developing a series of major attractions, highlighted by Hong Kong Disney. However, development is focused in down town cores and increasingly on Lantau Island, the site of Disney. Tap Mun and other outlying communities in the New Territories will see few if any benefits from this growth. Instead, they can be characterized as being in the end stages of a long period of decline. As is typical of other peripheral destinations, tourism
activity is controlled by outside interests that dictate both the volume of tourists that will arrive and the prices that can be charged. As a result, overcrowding can occur during peak periods and businesses are driven by profitless volume.

On the surface, this study could be another in the long line of research that decries the social and cultural impacts of tourism on local communities and portrays local residents as victims of dominant, core businesses. But that is not the story conveyed by residents. In fact, quite the opposite picture emerges. Tourism is seen in a generally positive light that provides a range of social and economic benefits. The remnant population has chosen to remain on the island for a variety of reasons. Their modest needs and life goals are focused around retaining their connection to place and their attachment to ancestral homes and traditional lifestyles. Yet, they must still earn a livelihood and tourism provides the economic means to achieve their social ends. Therefore, the social benefits outweigh the limited economic returns. Retaining some commercial involvement provides residents with the rationale to remain where they wish. Small scale craft businesses keep residents active and engaged during the week and provide them with social contacts on weekends. Likewise, the operation of tourist transport services enables the Tanka residents to retain their cultural connection with the sea. Moreover, few people would like to see the status quo change.

Indeed, the island’s remoteness, extreme seasonality and cyclicality, basic infrastructure and more appealing alternatives elsewhere, actually work in the best interests of local inhabitants who want to remain there. They can retain their traditional lifestyles for most of the week without interference or interruption by tourists. Cyclical peaks are predictable and residents can choose to engage or avoid tourists. The layout of the island’s built communities is such that residential areas are physically removed from tourist precincts, limiting adverse social impacts. The lack of infrastructure precludes substantial new resort or recreational facility development. The consensus among study participants is that the current situation provides an acceptable balance between meeting modest economic needs and optimal lifestyle opportunities. This balance could be threatened should Tap Mun undergo major resort or attraction development, but this scenario is unlikely to occur.

Peripherality can be viewed from the perspective of either the core or the peripheral area. From the core’s perspective, one could argue that Tap Mun’s residents are disadvantaged, especially if looking narrowly at economic benefits. But a substantially different picture emerges from the perspective of the residents themselves. For them, involvement in subsistence level tourism provides them with some control over when they will leave the island. Tap Mun will die, just as many other remote villages scattered throughout the New Territories have died. Tourism provides an opportunity for those who wish to remain to stay as long as they are healthy enough to do so.
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