

## Hakka Consciousness in Malaysia: The Perpetuance and the Decline

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### Abstract

Most Chinese in Malaysia are descendants of Chinese immigrants who fled China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in search of a better livelihood. When they arrived, they brought with them their identity that to a certain extent affected how they lived. Hakka is one of the sub-ethnic identities brought by them. In the beginning, the identity played important roles – as an identity marker that eventually enabled the Hakka to act as a collective group. However, the identity is on the decline. This paper attempts to elaborate the factors that enabled the identity to perpetuate and also the reasons that are causing it to decline. Past literatures related to the study of the Hakka community in Malaysia were reviewed. Based on the reviews, it is discovered that identity, just like any other cultural items will diminish if the community that adopts it see it as no longer relevant if it does serve the community needs while the community interacts with its social world.

Keyword: Hakka, Identity, Chinese Malaysian, Sub-ethnic consciousness, Social Change

### 1. Introduction

Chinese migration to the Malay states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely due to the push factors in China. Tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants were pushed to seek opportunities in the Malay states, driven by poverty and despair in China. Among them, there was a group of Chinese who was identified as the Hakka people. The term *Hakka* or “Ke-Jia” literally means the “Guest People; a term created to name the *Hakka* people after they migrated and dominated the northern Guangdong during the Southern Song period (1127 A.D. – 1279 A.D.). As the Southern Song dynasty was building up their influence in south-east China, the process of *sinicization* occurred. Groups of linguistically different Chinese converged in Guangdong. However, the convergence leads to social divergence when the older inhabitants of Guangdong began to identify themselves as the Punti people (native) and segregated themselves from the latecomers, the Hakkas (Cohen 1996). Hence, through such identification, the term Hakka became the identity for this group of Chinese.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a huge wave of Chinese migration to the Malay states. In general, poverty and despair were the main reasons that intensified the migration. For the Hakkas, the intensity was relatively higher. They as a community endured the ferocities of the wars that erupted in China throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it is not wrong to say that the wars were the immediate factor that caused the mass migration of the Hakkas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Roots 2016). The First Opium War that was ended by the signing of Nanjing Treaty had open the gateway for the Hakkas to migrate overseas *en masse*. According to the Nanjing Treaty signed in 1842, China would not forbid her citizen to leave China anymore. As a result, many Chinese started to head to South-east Asia and among them were the Hakkas. The subsequent war, the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) had plunged the Hakkas into troubled water as the heads of the rebellion were mostly Hakkas. After the rebellion was ended by the Qing government, numerous Hakkas were persecuted. Their hardship was also exacerbated by the Punti-Hakka Clan War (1855-1867). Being outnumbered, the Hakkas suffered losses and again, they were persecuted. The persecutions, poverty and hardships eventually drove many Hakkas to leave China.

As they were settling down in the Malay states, the Hakkas formed strong cohesive group. Hakka was used as an identity marker within the Chinese community and perpetuated among them. However, as time evolves, the way the Chinese recognizes themselves evolve too. There are many indications, dialect-based identity is no longer playing prominent role in how they identify each other. Though the Hakka identity had played a huge role in the Hakkas everyday life in the past, it is now playing lesser roles and what comes along this development is the decline of Hakka consciousness among Chinese Malaysians. This article attempts to elaborate this phenomenon among the Hakkas in Malaysia by reviewing past literatures concerning them. Two main categories of literatures will be discussed – the perpetuation of Hakka identity in Malaysia and the factors behind its decline.

## 2. The Perpetuance

The idea of an “ethnie” or an ethnic community refers to a named human population of alleged common ancestry, shared memories and elements of common culture with a link to a specific territory and a measure of solidarity (Smith 1996). By referring to such definition, “ethnie” for the Hakkas are undergoing changes. As mentioned earlier, the Hakka identity played an important role among the Hakkas migrants. They were both being identified and were self-identifying themselves as the Hakkas. According to Tan (2004), there were divisions among the Chinese migrants in the Malay states; by occupation and locality. The Hokkiens formed the largest group in town areas followed by the Cantonese while the Hakkas were fewer (Niew 1969: 310). Generally, the Hakkas were more spread out and were rural based. In terms of occupations, besides working in the mining industry, the Hakkas were also known as Chinese medicine practitioner. In such a situation, the dialects spoken by the Chinese became an identity marker that was used to identify and to be identified with. It was also the source of conflict among the Chinese immigrants.

Just like in China, the Hakkas arrived late. Other groups of Chinese such as the Hokkiens and the Cantonese had already established themselves in the Malay states. Being the latecomers, the Hakkas were arriving as minorities living among the numerically larger groups of other Chinese. This had inadvertently contributed to their sense of insecurity (Yen 2004). Their identity was then utilized to form cohesive groupings that were meant to give protection and to assist the newly arrived Hakkas. Among the various Chinese dialect groups, the Hakkas were the first to establish dialect-based organization. In 1801, the Hakkas established Chia-ying Hakka Association in Penang and subsequently many more Hakka associations were established throughout the Malay states.

### 2.1 The need for collectivism

Nevertheless, it should be noted that their cohesiveness was a reaction to the strong dialect-based consciousness that was present among the Chinese in the Malay states at that time. Almost all the Chinese immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were living within the domains of their dialect-based groups. The dialects spoken by them demarcated their identity as people who originate from different regions in China. For example, Hokkien was the language spoken by the people of southern Min (Fujian); Cantonese spoken by the people of central and southern Guangdong while Hakka was predominantly spoken by the people of the north-eastern Guangdong province and neighbouring areas. Their dialects became their identities and carried their conceptions of homelands. It became a source of bonding that drew the boundaries between the Chinese migrants. Their villages, counties and prefectures represented in the forms of dialects became their pillars to form solidarity. There was a clear sense of dialect-group consciousness and under such circumstances, Hakka consciousness in the Malay states precipitated.

They perceived themselves as different from the other Chinese groups; at the time when the intensity of intra-ethnic conflict within the Chinese community was high. Quite often, the disputes and conflicts that erupted among the early Chinese migrants in the Malay states were related to the animosities between the different Chinese dialect-based groups. The conflict between the secret societies that happened in Larut, Perak in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was one of such animosities. Hai San, a Chinese secret society dominated by the Hakkas were battling the Cantonese who dominated Ghee Hin (Leo 2015). The war between them was caused by the urge to control tin mines and their dialect-based identities played important roles in forming solidarities among them. Similar conflict happened in Sarawak. Due to the competition to control the lucrative trade of the Sarawak interior, the Hakkas of Bau attacked the Cantonese and Teochews of Kuching in 1857 (Andaya and Andaya 2017: 152). Their dialects created a form consciousness that caused them to see their dialect group members as “playing the same game” while the others as strangers. Such consciousness is what meant by Fredrick Barth (1969) when he coined the term “ethnic boundaries”.

### 2.2 To have a way of living

Apart from the dialect-based conflicts, the Hakkas consciousness in the Malay states as well as in Borneo prevailed through the adaptation of Hakka culture into the everyday life of the early Hakka immigrants. The Hakkas were basically applying the same way of life of the Hakkas in China when they migrated to Malaysia. Back in their homeland, the Hakkas lived in regions where economic development were relatively backward if compared to other parts of China. They lived in rural, mountainous areas and were mostly peasants. They were not industrious nor business minded but were very cohesive. Such features were seen among the early Hakka communities in Malaysia. The largest concentrations of Hakkas were mostly in the interiors (Carstens 1996). Most of them worked in tin mines and rubber plantations. In contrast, members of other dialect-based groups such as the Hokkiens were more inclined to be in the business sector. Such features had caused Carstens to conclude that the Hakkas were relatively more conservative than the other Chinese dialect-based groups in Malaysia. One of the examples that would vividly show

their conservatism was their insistence of continuing the Chinese patriarchy tradition. When the Hakkas married native women, they would ensure their wives and children were assimilated to be Hakkas. In this context, according to Carstens, the Hakkas were different if compared with the early Hokkien migrants who married the local native women. The early Hokkien migrants who married native women developed hybrid cultures that incorporated selected indigenous patterns of language usage, food style, clothing and kinship practices. However, the early Hakka migrants' conservatism and their limited access to businesses had made them to be relatively less successful in the business world. As a result of this, in all major towns in Malaysia (except towns in Sabah), Hakka dialect was not used as the *lingua franca* among the Chinese, even if the Hakkas formed a sizable population. Ipoh, the state capital of the Perak state was one of such towns. Although the Hakkas formed 50% of the Chinese population in Ipoh, Cantonese was used as the *lingua franca* among the Chinese there as the Cantonese were more dominant in business activities.

The above features set the Hakkas apart from the other Chinese dialect-based ethnic groups and strengthen their consciousness. They brought along their cultural values and used them to adapt to a new environment without much modifications and this had caused them to be distinctive. Even so, the most distinctive feature of the Hakkas that clearly made them different is their dialect. The Hakkas have a saying "I would rather sell the lands from ancestry than abandon the ancestral dialect" that implies their loyalty to their dialect (X. Wang 2017). It is common among Chinese Malaysians to identify a person who speaks as a Hakka, although he may not be a Hakka. Hence, the Hakka dialect plays an important role in displaying the Hakka identity. In fact it is the only obvious identity marker that can be used to differentiate a Hakka from the other Chinese instantaneously. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are variations within the Hakka community in Malaysia. Despite the fact that they are known collectively as the "Guest People", the Hakkas had subdivided themselves into subgroups. The naming of the subgroups are in accordance to their ancestral place of origin. As the Hakkas came from different parts of China, they started to identify themselves Hakkas of Jiayingzhou, Huizhou, Dabu, Hepo and so on (Cheng 1995).

The other distinguishable Hakka characteristics would be their food culture. Due to their migrating origin, the Hakkas food culture prioritizes ingredients that are available in their new found environment. The ingredients are also supposed to be energy rich and preservable. As such, the Hakka dishes are usually high in fat, salty and well-cooked (Hakka Affairs Council 2007). The Hakkas in Malaysia continued such food culture. Among the known Hakka dishes that are still popular till today are Hakka stuffed beancurd, braised pork with preserved vegetable, braised pork belly with black fungus and salted chicken. As the names of the dishes suggest, the Hakkas in Malaysia continued the tradition of eating oily, salty and preserved food. Currently, in Malaysia, the Hakka dishes are popular not only among the Hakkas. The Hakka dishes are also popular among non-Hakka Chinese Malaysians. Such popularity may have some impact on the Hakka consciousness. To the Hakkas, their food culture has caused them to realize that their food culture is distinctive and similarly to the non-Hakkas, they acknowledged the existence of the Hakkas in Malaysia.

There is another element found within the Hakkas in Malaysia that distinguish them from the other Chinese. Probably, this distinction is not found among the Hakkas in China but is found in countries that require the Chinese to write their names in romanized words. As the Malay states were both former British colonies, English was used as the official language. Thus, dealings with the government would require the Chinese to register their names in romanized words. Since the Chinese identified themselves according to their dialects, they would pronounce their surnames differently in English, although they could be sharing the same surname. The misfit had caused some of the commonest Chinese surname such as 王 to be pronounced as Wong in Cantonese, Wang in Mandarin and Heng in Teochew (Jones 1959: 39). Other common Chinese surname such as 陈 was pronounced as Chin in Hakka, Chan in Cantonese and Tan in Hokkien. After Malaysia achieved independence, the usage of the romanized surnames was continued. Today, if a Chinese Malaysian's surname is Chin, Chong or Poon, most probably he is a Hakka.

### 2.3 History and Origin

There are other aspects of the Hakkas' way of life that made them different. Their history is one of those differences. The Hakkas have a different narrative in explaining their origin. Their migratory past and their hardships were quite unusual if compared with other Chinese. However, even if there are distinctions between the Hakkas and the other Chinese, it does not mean that the Hakkas have lost their Chinese identity. In fact, according to Carstens (1996:142), the Hakkas are very insistence of being respected as a true Chinese. There are many aspects of the Hakkas' everyday life that are basically Chinese way of life. In fact, as proven by Carstens own research on the Pulau Hakkas, many of her Hakka interviewees were unable to tell the difference between a Hakka and other Chinese. The Hakkas perceive themselves as Chinese and this would mean that their way of life are the Chinese way of life too. There are many aspects of the Hakka culture that are difficult to be distinguish as purely Hakka way of life. For example, many Hakkas in Malaysia worship "Tai Pak Kung" but the deity is worshipped by the other Chinese too, such as the Hokkiens (Chai

2014). Although there are arguments that the Hakkas worship “Tai Pak Kung” earlier, such arguments will not hold water as the deity is a localized form of *Fude Zhengshen*, a deity worshipped by many in China.

### 3. The Decline

The Hakkas is the second largest Chinese dialect group in Malaysia. It has been estimated that there are approximately 1 787 000 Hakkas in Malaysia (Joshua 2020). Even so, the efforts to install a common Chinese identity have to some extent reduced the prominence of their Hakka identity and subsequently eroded Hakka consciousness. Coupled with the fact that many aspects of the Hakka traditions have already been forgotten, the traditional rituals such as those practiced during wedding ceremonies have been replaced with simplified rituals that are observed by all Chinese Malaysians. The wedding ceremonies are now generic among the Chinese Malaysians and reduced to merely a formal civil registration, ancestor worship at home and dinner at a restaurant (Tan 2004). The simplification of the what used to be distinctive traditional practices is an outcome of modernization. In short, the inter and intra ethnic dynamics in Malaysia have somehow contributed to the decline of Hakka consciousness and such decline appears to be unstoppable.

#### 3.1 Socio-political changes

After the Second World War ended, the Chinese in Malaya went through changes. One of the changes that deeply affected them was the Briggs Plan. The plan was carried out in 1950 under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs. He was appointed to direct British colonial government’s counter insurgency measures to suppress the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). MCP launched an armed rebellion to topple the British Colonial government and their support came largely from the Chinese community. In order to ensure the Communists had no access to the people of Malaya particularly the Chinese, Briggs directed a massive resettlement plan that forced approximately half a million Chinese to be relocated into the new villages (Comber 2008). Most of them were squatters who occupied land illegally at the fringes of towns, tin mines and estates. Due to such locations, the squatters became the target of the MCP to solicit support and assistance. In order to stop the chain of support and assistance given by the Chinese squatters to the Communists, the Briggs’ plan was carried out to relocate the Chinese squatters into confined settlements that were later known as new villages.

The new village resettlement plan did not consider Chinese dialect-based groupings as a factor when relocating the Chinese (Nyce 1973). However, some new villages were dominated by a particular dialect group due to the fact certain dialect-based groups were numerically bigger in certain regions. For example, the Hakkas formed a sizable population in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Perak and Negeri Sembilan (Niew 1969). As such, new villages dominated by the Hakkas emerged. These new villages contributed to the perseverance of Hakka identity in Malaysia. The presence of a sizable population of Hakka in a particular village enabled the Hakka language to be used as the *lingua franca* of the villages. Other aspects of the Hakka’s everyday life practices were also maintained. This was proven by the studies conducted by Carstens (1983) in Pulai, a Hakka village in Kelantan. Other known Hakka new villages are Kampung Titi in Negeri Sembilan, Kampung Bukit Koman in Pahang. Both Kampung Titi and Kampung Bukit Koman were known as Hakka new villages and were popular tourist spots in Malaysia. The villages’ Hakka identity became their selling point. As will be discussed later in this paper, there are other villages that can be known as Hakka new villages and the main criteria that qualify them is their sizable Hakka population.

Nevertheless, there are indications that even the so called “Hakka New Villages” were unable to continue their Hakka tradition anymore. In general, Chinese Malaysians have converged and identify themselves as *Huaren* (people of Chinese descent) (Tan 2004). *Huayi* (Mandarin) has taken over the role of dialects in Chinese-medium schools as well as Chinese Malaysians’ homes (Vollmann and Tek 2018). Parents refuse to communicate with their children in dialects. In schools, teachers will punish their students if they refuse to speak in Mandarin (Sim 2012:76). Various distinctions that used to segregate Chinese Malaysians according to their dialects such as occupations and locality are diminishing.

#### 3.2 Inter-ethnic relationships and collectivism

Such development is an outcome of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. After Malaysia achieved its independence, ethnic-based policies implemented by the Malaysian government had further intensified the formation of “Chinese consciousness” among the Hakkas. Observations done by researchers such as Clammer (1975), Hirschman (1988) and Matondang (2016) have shown that generally the Chinese in Malaysians are forming solidarity, in respond to Malay-centric government policies. According to Hsiao and Lim (2007), inter-ethnic conflict in Malaysia has overshadowed the Chinese Malaysians’ intra-ethnic relationships. Unlike in Taiwan and unlike their past, animosities among the various Chinese dialect-based groups are now not visible. On the other hand, the Chinese are perceiving their position

in Malaysia has been compromised due to the host community hostile treatment. Under such circumstances, the Chinese community in Malaysia are reconstructing their cultural identity to form solidarity.

Nonetheless, it should be noted too that within the Chinese community, there were efforts to forge Chinese cohesiveness way before the inter-ethnic relationships between the Chinese and the Malays were marred by conflicts. Before the Second World War erupted, the Chinese had formed the spirit of unison due to the events that were happening in China. Chinese nationalism in China had influenced the Chinese in Malaya and the result was dialect-based identities and other traditional identities that the Chinese were holding on to at that time had become less relevant (G. Wang 1970:15).

One of the measures taken to enhance the Chinese Malaysians solidarity is to reduce the role of dialect-based identity. Mandarin is now widely spoken among the Chinese, especially among the younger Chinese even in the state of Sabah. The Hakka community forms the biggest Chinese dialect group in Sabah and Hakka is spoken widely. However, in a recent study conducted by Liao (2018), the younger Chinese prefer to speak in Mandarin. There are other reasons that caused the Hakka language to be losing its role among the Hakkas in Malaysia. The Chinese Malaysians have a higher respect for Mandarin as it is seen as the Chinese language, a *lingua franca* among the Chinese. Mandarin is also seen as a language with economic value, especially with the rise of China of the second largest economy in the world. Other factors such as inter-marriages between Chinese of different dialect-based groups have also caused Hakka language to lose its role as a spoken language at Chinese Malaysians' homes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Summarily, Hakka consciousness among the Hakkas in Malaysia has eroded. Such pessimism is shared by scholars such as Carstens (1996) and Michael Hsiao and Lim (2007). According to Carstens, the cultural patterns that used to be distinct the Hakkas and the non-Hakkas are disappearing. Michael Hsiao and Lim concurred that Hakka identity will be a thing of the past as the Hakkas in Malaysia are no longer seeing it as an important identity. Due to the lack of the need to generate dialect-based identity to form solidarity, the Hakkas in Malaysia do not see their Hakka identity as functional anymore. The Hakkas brought with them their identity to Malaysia. It flourished at them when the Hakkas needed an identity that can integrate them and serve as a tool that enabled them to work collectively. However, the need to act collectively as a Hakka community diminished when they encountered new necessities and challenges in Malaysia. It is a matter of adaptation. Hakka used to be a primary identity but now it is hard to say whether it is even considered as a secondary identity. The decline of Hakka consciousness in Malaysia is a good reflect of the need of the impact of social change on culture. Social change in this context is not exclusively in the context of time. It encapsulates change in needs and interactions of a particular community with its social world.

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