

Hakka Dreams

By Steven B. Quinn

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Some years ago at a popular restaurant in Hsinshu*, I joined a gathering of twelve business owners, all local Rotarians, for a feast featuring the local Hakka fare. Shortly after the first bottle of whiskey was opened, the backslapping and the joshing began. "Steven, this is Mr. Gao. We call him "Hotel." He's the richest man in our Rotary Club."

Mr. Gao replied: "Nonsense! Chemical, you are the richest man in Rotary, and you know it!"

Over the course of the meal, the sequence repeated itself several times. By the end of the evening, it became clear that Car, Bank, Manpower, DM, Medicine, and Well—each man nicknamed according to his industry or, in the case of Well, legendary drinking ability—were all wealthy yet unwilling to admit it too openly.

What I also remember about that evening, and dozens of similar evenings over the years, are the frequent observations made by these Hakka businessmen about their cultural identity. Things like: "We all came from farms up in the mountains. Our parents had to go to the river and catch a fish if we wanted to eat meat" or "Hakka people are careful with their money," or "We Hakkas tend to be more conservative than your average Taiwanese." One the most memorable of these remarks came from a Hakka businessman who often trades with the Japanese. He told me: "A Taiwanese Hakka businessman can best three typical Taiwanese businessmen, and a typical Taiwanese businessman can best three Japanese businessmen. These poor Japanese don't stand a chance!"

Ask a non-Hakka Taiwanese to describe Hakkas, and he'll often cluck his tongue and say something like "Hakkas can be really generous, but only when they need something from you," or "Hakka people tend to be very clannish," or "Hakkas are really tight with a dollar."

Some 15% of Taiwan's population is Hakka. The Mandarin word for Hakka is 客人, or "guest person," though this appellation is fairly recent. It describes the traditionally migratory nature of the Hakka people, who originated in northern China around 2,700 years ago. After a series of resettlements aimed at escaping war and social unrest, most Hakkas settled in southern China, with large concentrations in Guangdong and southwestern Fujian Province. It was from these southern outposts that Taiwanese Hakkas departed in their last migration southward, across the Taiwan Strait.

Today, there are four major concentrations of Hakka people in Taiwan. Most people in Taiwan recognize the corridor stretching from Taoyuan to Miaoli County as the location of most of the Hakka population in Taiwan. About 50% of Chungli City, and 80% of the residents of Taoyuan, Hsinchu, and Miaoli Counties are ethnically Hakka.

The settlement pattern of these areas has much to do with the earlier arrival in Taiwan of Hoklo immigrants from Fujian Province, starting from the period of Dutch occupation in the mid-17th century. By the time most Hakkas arrived in Taiwan, the most fertile of Taiwan's farmland, particularly in the south, was already occupied by larger populations of well-established Hoklo people. The only option left for most Hakkas was the hills and mountains of northern and central Taiwan.

A number of my Hakka friends have narrated oral histories of long-ago battles between Hoklo and Hakka peoples, explaining that the Hakka preference for mountain and hill living was really the result of having been pushed, by force, out of the lowlands. Ironically, as the Hakkas moved further inland, they in turn displaced, and sometimes assimilated, the aboriginal peoples living the mountain areas they settled in.

There are also significant populations of Hakka peoples in Taidong and Hualien Counties. Most of the Hakka immigrants who settled there arrived too late to settle in the hills of north-central Taiwan, traveling to the East coast looking for other lands to settle.

In Pingdong County's Liugui and Meinung, there are also high concentrations of Hakka people. These were among the first Hakkas in Taiwan, having arrived as soldiers with Zheng Cheng Gong in 1661.

Finally, there are large groups of ethnically Hakka Taiwanese in the Dongshi area in Taichung County, as well as in surrounding towns and villages.

Taipeites hear MRT station announcements given in Hakka, after Mandarin and Taiwanese but before English announcements, symbolic of the place Hakka holds in the linguistic hierarchy in Taiwan. Providing Hakka translations of station announcements is more a nod to cultural preservation than a practical necessity. In fact, many ethnically Hakka Taiwanese have lost the ability to communicate in Hakka.

There are a hundred or more spoken Hakka dialects worldwide. In Taiwan, most Hakka linguists identify four Hakka language groups. The two most commonly spoken groups are the Hai (ocean) Lu (land) Hsien group, which is spoken in Taidong and Hualien, and the Four Hsien group, which is spoken in Miaoli, Taoyuan, and parts in between. There is also a dialect spoken in the Pingdong

area, known by Hakkas as Meinungyu. Dongshi is a fourth dialect, spoken in the mountainous areas of Taichung County.

Politically, Hakkas are known for their support of the nationalist (KMT) party in Taiwan. Most Hakkas will proudly tell you that Sun Yat Sen and Li Deng Hui are part of a long list of prominent Hakka politicians, and many of today's politicians, from both sides of the political fence, claim Hakka ethnicity.

In researching this article, I kept coming back to a fundamental question about Hakkas. That is, do they define themselves as Taiwanese or as Hakka? Certainly, there are distinctive cultural characteristics—preferred foods, religious practices, architectural styles, language dialects, social customs, etc.—that are identified with Hakka peoples. When I asked my Hakka friends this question, they invariably told me that they considered themselves both Taiwanese and Hakka. Perhaps one of them explained it best when he said: “I think of myself as Taiwanese, but I’m Hakka first. I grew up speaking Hakka, follow Hakka customs, and tend to think more like a Hakka than a typical Hoklo Taiwanese.”