

The Hong Kong Hakka Dialect: from lingua franca to highly endangered

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Hong Kong Hakka Language and culture: Past and Present

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Hong Kong Hakka

How to say: in Hakka

1. Counting from 1-10
2. Radish, Tomato, Peanut, Maize
- 3 I (ngai2), you (ngi2), he/she (gi2)

Hong Kong Hakka phonology

Hong Kong Hakka phonology

1 Hakka has 16 onsets, quite similar to Cantonese, but it has no gw, kw (e.g. gwa > ga, kwong, > kong). The w in Cantonese is a v.

The most difficult pronunciation is the combination of ngi-, e.g. ngi4 (twp),, ngion1 (soft), ngiun2 (silver).

Hong Kong Hakka phonology

2. The rime consists of medial, main vowel and coda.

The only medial is -i-, such as sia³ (write), giam³ (pick up), siau⁴ (laugh)

There are only five vowels: a, i, u, e, o as in Japanese or Indonesian.

Hong Kong Hakka phonology

The codas are m, n, ng, p, t, k as in Cantonese.

e.g. one to ten are

“yit⁵, ngi⁴, sam¹, si⁴, ng³, luk⁵, vit⁵, bak⁵, giu³, sip⁶”

pin²go³ (apple), cut⁵ngip⁴ (out-in),
nam²kit⁶ (South pole).

Hong Kong Hakka phonology

3. Hakka has six tones, but tone 5 and 6 are entering tones having the tone values of 3 and 4.

sa1 社, sa2 蛇, sa3 灑, sa4 射,
sak5 析, sak6 石

Hong Kong Hakka Grammar

The grammar of HKHK is very similar to Cantonese, but it has possessive and plural forms for personal pronouns like English. This is not found in other Chinese dialects.

ngai2 (I) - nga1 (my) - nga1 deu1 (we)

ngi2 (you) - ngia1 (your) - ngia1 deu1 (you pl)

gi2 (s/he) - gia1 (his/her) - gia1 deu1 (they)

Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

The history of Hong Kong Hakka dates back from the Evacuation Act more than 350 years ago.

In 1644, the Manchurians took over China and established the Qing Dynasty. However, Zheng Chenggong used Taiwan as a base to rebel against them.

Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

The Manchurians had no navy and was always losing sea battles. The costal population also supported Zheng.

In 1662, the Qing Dynasty ordered the inhabitants along the SE coast to move inland for 50 Li (about 30km), to avoid the disturbance of Zheng CG.

遷界事件

1662年，清政府為阻止漢人接濟鄭成功反清勢力，勒令閩粵兩省沿海村莊居民內撤50華里，香港頓時變成無人之境，歷時8年



Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

Also, people were forbidden to go out to the sea. The whole coastal areas were deserted.

Although Zheng died and the Act was partially lifted in 1669, the coastal areas continued to be abandoned and there were practically no economic activities.

Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

Although some inhabitants came back after 1669, the population was far less than before.

Total lifting of the Act was necessary to encourage people to come back. Later, two officials named Zhou (周) and Wang (王) successfully persuaded the Qing Emperor to lift the act.

Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

There are two temples to commemorate these two officials, one in Shui Mei Village of Kam Tin, and another in Sheung Shui Wai.



周王二公書院

錦田歌樂土傑爭天而故弄眉久鎮著

粵海種鴻猷萃一姓以報功度恭圖

周王二公書院

周王二公書院

周王二公書院

Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

However, less than one half of the inhabitants came back even after a few decades. The Qing government hoped that economic activities could be revived. Later, people from NE Guangdong were encouraged to immigrate to cultivate the coastal areas around the PRD.

18世紀初，大量粵東人口移民
到珠江口東岸的新安、惠陽等地
方，成為客家人



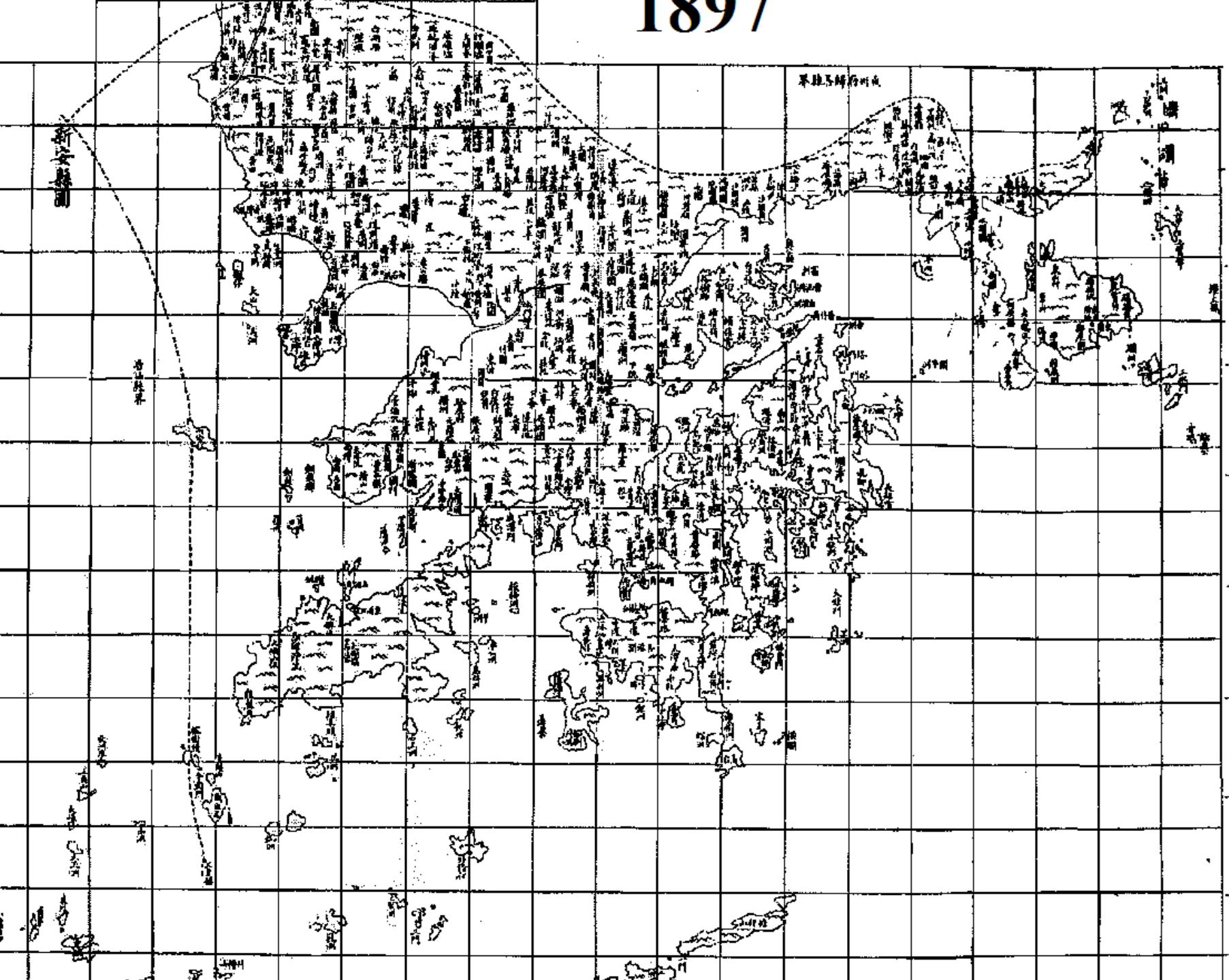
Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

These new immigrants could get subsidies after they registered themselves as “Ke (客 guest)” in their household records.

The locals began to call them “Kejia” (Hakka 客家, guest families), which also referred to their dialect. This meant they did not have the right to join the local examinations.

Origin of Hong Kong Hakka

These guest people set up hundreds of villages in the Xin'an county (新安縣 which included Shenzhen and Hong Kong). In the whole territory of Hong Kong, there are around 400 villages. One can look at the map of Xin'an around 1897. Most of these names are still in use.



Hong Kong under British rule

After the Hakka settled down in Hong Kong for around a century, the conflict between Britain and China started.

After Lin Zexu 林則徐 burnt the opium in Humen 虎門, the British government was furious. It sent troops to China and defeated the Qing army.

鴉片戰爭



Hong Kong under British rule

Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain in 1842, and Kowloon in 1860 in two treaties. In 1898, the peninsula lying south of the Shenzhen River and 256 outlying islands (later named New Territories, NT) was also leased to Britain for 99 years. Finally, in 1898, around 950 sq km was under British rule.

寶安縣

新界

1898

九龍

1860

香港島

1842



The Six-day War

As Britain tried to take over the New Territories, they faced strong resistance from the people of the New Territories.

In April, 1899, the inhabitants of NT, both Waitau and Hakka united together and started a war against the Englishmen for six days, which ended up in a total defeat

The Six-day War

There were almost no documents about the Six-day War, but it is estimated that around 500 inhabitants were killed, although some old people told us of 10 times the figure.

It was a very bad memory for the villagers even up to the 1960s.

The Six-day War

The gate of Kat Hing Wai in Kam Tin was destroyed and shipped to London. It was returned to the village in 1926 as a gesture of reconciliation ◦

After the war, Britain did not interfere the villagers' farming life. Everything went as usual.

Kat Hing Wai around 1930



The Six-day War

After the war, villages built before 1898 were defined as indigenous villages.

After 1972, each male inhabitant in these villages was entitled to build his 3-storey village house (Ding uk 丁屋).

Life in NT before 1950s

The life in the NT was simple and modest. Most of the inhabitants, no matter Waitau or Hakka, led a self-subsistent farming life. They grew rice, vegetables and raised domestic animals. However, some Hakka villages in Kowloon such as Lei Yue Mun lived on quarrying.



Life in NT before 1950s

Even around 1970, there was no electricity or water supply in the NT. The villagers got water from wells or streams. They collected grass and wood from nearby hills as fuel and cooked in large stoves, and used oil or kerosine for lamps.

They usually ate twice in the day: a brunch and an early dinner. They slept before 10 in the evening.











Life in NT before 1950s

In the market, the people shouted to sell their products in Waitau or Hakka. However, there were practically no intermarriages between the two dialect groups, as the matchmakers could only speak one dialect.

Their languages and cultures were preserved perfectly as the children read books in their own tongues.

Changes in NT after 1950s

However, everything changed after 1950.

The government decided to develop the NT. First, modern schools were built in most villages and children were educated in Cantonese.

As these children grow up, they cannot read books in their own dialects. The indigenous tongues are endangered.

Changes in NT after 1950s

Around 1980, they grew up and got married. More than 90% of these new families converse only in Cantonese.

As Cantonese became more and more popular, the grannies also learnt Cantonese to communicate with their grandchildren.

NT Hakka emigrated to UK

Around 1950, many refugees from China came to Hong Kong as the communist took over the Mainland. The population rocketed.

As the city industrialized, large amount of water was needed. The government built a lot of water works to lead water to reservoirs to meet the demand.

NT Hakka emigrated to UK

The farmers did not get enough water to grow their crops. They had to abandon their farming.

Some went to work in the city area, but most people could not do so, as most villages did not have roads. If they wanted to find a job in the city, they had to move out, which was costly.

NT Hakka emigrated to UK

Around the end of the 1950s, the HK government allowed NT villagers to work in the UK. This attracted many villagers to go there. Thousands moved to the UK in the following two decades

Many villages in the NE and eastern part of Hong Kong were deserted. Most of them were Hakka villages.

NT Hakka emigrated to UK

The emigration wave left many villages empty, and only in the last two decades did the villagers want to revive them, such as Kuk Po 谷埔, Lai Chi Wo 荔枝窩, Mui Tsz Lam 梅子林, etc.

What is Hakka culture

Hakka culture = Hakka lifestyle

(1) Language spoken and songs sung in Hakka

(2) Religions, rituals, marriage and funeral ceremonies, festival celebrations

(3) Martial arts, Qilin 麒麟 dance, Fire dragon dance

What is Hakka culture

(4) Architecture, furniture and utensils, village design (Fungshui)

(5) clothings, hats, ornaments.

(6) food and drinks: cuisines. cakes, snacks, tea or drinks

(Which of the above do you think is the most difficult to preserve?)

Hakka villages

A typical Hakka village has a semi-circular pond in front of the village. However, due to geographical restrictions, not every village can afford the space, and today many of them are reclaimed for car-parks.



Hakka villages

There are two protection gods
(Bakgung 伯公, Taivong 大王) in
front of the village.



公恩似海
王恩耿耿與人

佑庇

旺雨財丁
光息

民安境保

大德洋洋如水樣
伯德如山

王爺之神位

本村伯公神位

Hakka villages

There are usually one to several ancestral halls depending on the number of clans in a village.



Hakka villages

There are two main forms of Hakka villages: walled and unwalled.

Houses in the past were made of bricks and tiles, usually two-storey high.

Village houses since 1972 are now three-storey high and old houses are usually demolished.





Hakka food and drinks

Hakka people prepare different kinds of cakes (ban 粿) in different festivals. e.g around CNY, they make Ngioiban out of a kind of grass (ngioi 艾), and at Qingming they make Gaisiteng-ban. For CNY, they make the NY cake, Yeast cake, rice-biscuit, Mi-cang, etc.

艾草













Hakka food and drinks

During ceremonies/celebrations, they make Hakka-style braised pork, stewed pork with yam (keu-ngiuk), salt-baked chicken, stuffed doufu, poached duck, etc.

However, Puncoi is not Hakka, but of Waitau origin.







Hakka culture

Both Hakka and Waitau women had Liongmau (cool hat) in the past. However, there are subtle differences between them. They were not happy if they wore the wrong hat.

Hakka women had another head ornament, Dongteuzai, which is not worn by Waitau villagers.

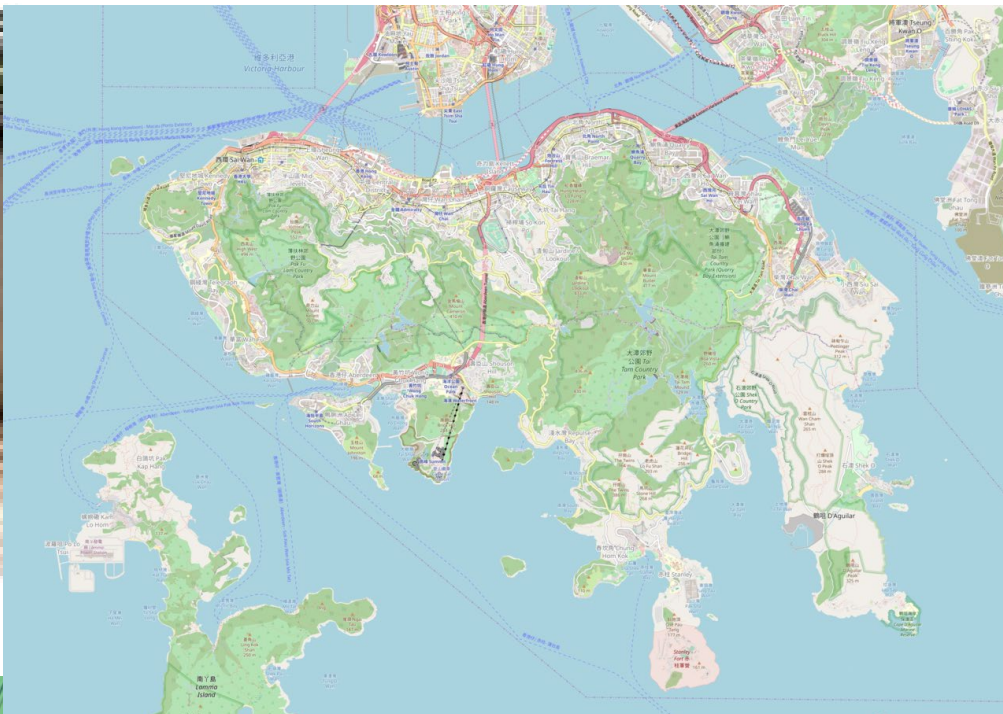
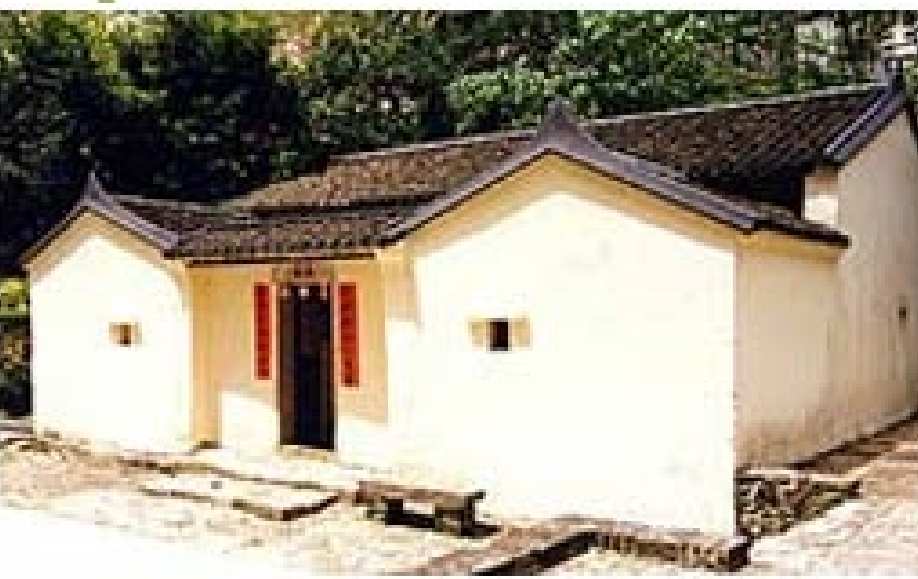
Hakka woman head dressings



Distribution fo Hakka villages

Because of urban development, it is now difficult to find a Hakka village in Kowloon or on HK Island.

The only Hakka village found on the Island is Tai Hang. The Lo Uk Museum in Chai Wan was part of a Hakka village.



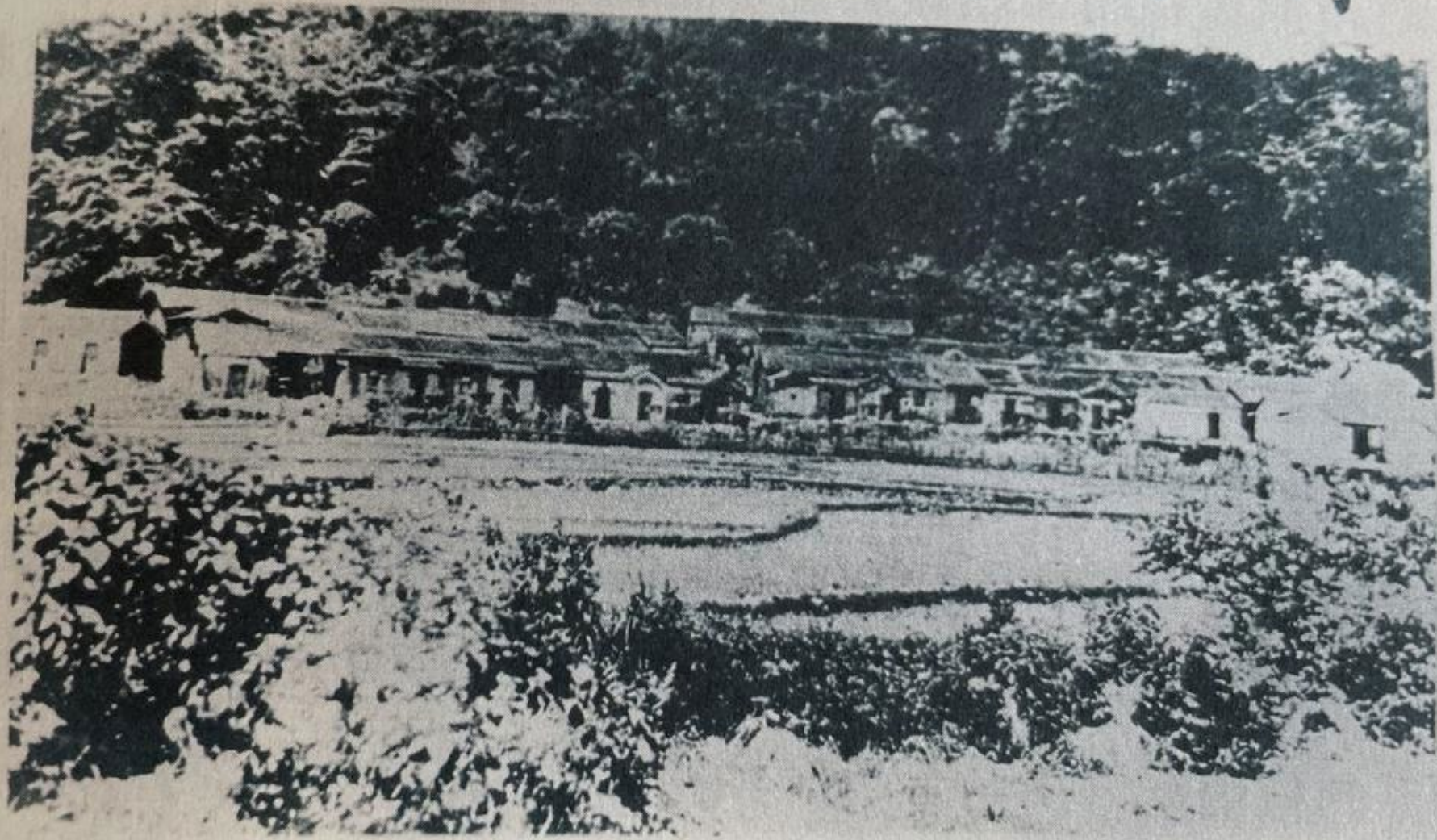
Distribution fo Hakka villages

There were 13 townships in Kowloon, of which 7-8 them were made up of Hakka villages. Apart from Chuk Yuen, Ngau Chi Wan, Cha Kwo Ling and Lei Yue Mun, most of them have been demolished and high-rise buildings erected. Many of their names are changed or forgotten.

Distribution fo Hakka villages

In NT, Hakka villages are ubiquitous. Tsuen Wan and Kwai Chung were townships made up of pure Hakka villages. Although Yuen Long and Sheung Shui are Waitau dominated, there are still many Hakka villages. The villages in other districts are mostly Hakka.

村圍大門口城灣荃



Non-indigenous Hakka villages

Some villages are founded after Britain took over NT in 1898. They are called non-indigenous villages. The oldest villages are Shung Him Tong of Fanling and Kwu Tung of Sheung Shui. Also, there are a few more such as Tai Kei Ling, Ng Ka Tsuen and Shung Ching Sun Tsuen in Yuen Long..

Hkka people in the city

Around 1949, many refugees fled from Guangdong to Hong Kong.

Among them many are Hakka.

However, when they finally settled down in the city, they gradually assimilated.

Their children do not speak Hakka.

They do not feel that they are Hakka.

Changes in Hakka villages in the past century

The government did not interfere with the life of people in the NT before 1950.

The lifestyle of Hakka remained unchanged as 300 years ago.

Changes in Hakka villages in the past century

However, after the second world war and the civil war, there were a lot of changes. Thousands of refugees came to HK, and the Hong Kong government changed its policies. As a result, Hakka dialect and culture are highly endangered after decades of development.

Changes in Hakka villages in the past century

The government set up a series of policies in the NT in 1972. The male indigenous inhabitants can build their village houses in their village area.

However, not every village has village houses. e.g. in the NE part of NT, all inhabitants have moved out and no one applies for a village house.

Reasons for the decline of Hakka in Hong Kong

1. The former stable farming life changed abruptly into city life in the past century. The basis for Hakka dialect and culture is no longer available.

Reasons for the decline of Hakka in Hong Kong

2. Children go to Cantonese schools after the 1950s. They are no more literate in Hakka.

Reasons for the decline of Hakka in Hong Kong

3. After the 1970s, the young people find their spouse by themselves. The traditional Hakka-Hakka marriage system was broken and the new families are mostly Cantonese speaking (as Hakka consists only of 10% of the total population).

Reasons for the decline of Hakka in Hong Kong

4. Even when the grannies lived with their grandchildren, they tried to speak to grandchildren in their broken Cantonese. It seems that most grannies were ashamed of speaking Hakka as it was a symbol of villagers and illiterate elderly.

Reasons for the decline of Hakka in Hong Kong

5. As many new village houses have been built and transportation improved, city dwellers are attracted to move into the villages. They gradually diluted the Hakka population.

The villagers have to speak Cantonese in the villages.

Reasons for the decline of Hakka in Hong Kong

6. In the past century, the Chinese radio and TV channels broadcast only in Cantonese.

Hakka children could not hear Hakka at school, in the media, on the streets and even in their families.

They had no way to listen to and learn their ancestral tongue.

Conclusion

- ❖ The original look of Hakka villages in Hong Kong has been completely lost. No one works as a farmer anymore; the original farmland is either abandoned or used to build houses. Villagers under the age of 50 cannot understand Hakka and do not identify themselves as Hakka. Hakka culture is also on the verge of extinction.

Conclusion

- ❖ In light of this, I created the YouTube channel "Hakka Studies" in 2017 which reports Hakka language use, culture, cuisine, and village visits in Hakka. More than 300 videos have been produced. I also organized Hakka classes in person or on zoom which attracted more than 1000 students. More than half of them can now speak.

Conclusion

- ❖ My videos received attention by Hakka people both at home and abroad, as well as non-Hakka viewers who are interested in learning about Hong Kong's local culture and history.

Distribution of Hakka in the World



Conclusion

In 2021, I also published my book “A Study of Hakka in Hong Kong”, which details the authentic Hong Kong Hakka. It records some Hakka proverbs and idioms that are rarely heard now. It includes audio recordings. For info:

<https://www.chunghwabook.com.hk/book/detail/id/1378029545429737700>

Conclusion

Meanwhile, I am also the vice president of the Association for Conservation of Hong Kong Indigenous Languages. In 2023-24 I helped to develop the "Text-to-Speech" App for Hong Kong indigenous languages. By simply inputting Chinese characters, the App reads sentences or words aloud in Waitau or Hakka dialect.

<https://hkilang.github.io/TTS/>

Conclusion

If you are interested in learning more about Hong Kong's local Hakka culture and history, please visit and subscribe to my channel, and share it with your relatives and friends. Thank you.

hakkastudies.org



Thank you!
do cia