

大溪地的客家

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關鍵字：客家、大溪地、移民

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投稿日期：2013 年 7 月 16 日
接受刊登日期：2013 年 10 月 1 日

The Hakka in Tahiti

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Mr. Jimmy Ly is a second generation Hakka in Tahiti. In this article, the author evaluates the current state of the Hakka people, including their history and the issues the new generation faces in their lives in Tahiti. The accounts are mostly based on the author's own experience and observations. This article ponders how a second generation Hakka in Tahiti experiences the transmission of the Hakka 'culture' from the first generation, and laments the inevitable disappearance of these 'traditions' over the following generations.

(Editor's Note)

Keywords: Hakka, Tahiti, Immigrants

* Date of Submission: July 16, 2013

Accepted Date: October 1, 2013

I am a second generation Tahiti-born Hakka, educated in French speaking schools. My parents were born in Tahiti, but my grandparents came from Guangdong(廣東)province . My paternal grandparents come from the village of Xia Gong Tang (蝦公塘) and my maternal grandparents come from the district of Si Ka Pu (西瓜埔) in Longang (龍岡). As for me, I am a French citizen and French is also the language I communicate in within my own community and with the Polynesians in Tahiti. Nevertheless, although I hold a French passport and a French identity card, I know I am not French nor am I a Polynesian. I have never ceased to lay claim to my Hakka roots. In this article, I will introduce the status quo of the Hakka in Tahiti, mostly based on my own experience and observations. I will start by explaining the location and the population of Tahiti. The article will then focus on the background of the Hakka in Tahiti, including the history of immigration, and the issues the next generation will face. To conclude, I will discuss how I myself and many people of my generation see the future of the Hakka community in Tahiti.

Tahiti and the Society Islands

Location

Tahiti is an island in the Pacific Ocean in between Australasia and South America. It belongs to the archipelago of the Society Islands, which in turn belongs to greater French Polynesia. Polynesia comprises of 5 small archipelagos of 218 islands in the South Pacific Ocean. The Society Islands form the two most important archipelagos and are composed of the

Windward and the Leeward islands, where approximately three quarters of the 250,000 inhabitants of French Polynesia reside. Topographically, the Society Islands are high islands of volcanic origin surrounded by a coral reef, which forms a lagoon. Though far from the usual maritime routes, one can easily see on a world map why Papeete, the administrative capital of Tahiti, was a natural stopover for ships following the Hong Kong-Sydney-Lima-San Francisco route. Many Chinese travelled along this maritime route, and this is how they first came to Tahiti.

Today the economy of the islands is focused for the most part on activities related to the sea, including tourism, the pearl industry, and the fishing industry. As regards the tourist business, it is worth noting that quite a few of the international five stars hotels are privately owned by the Hakka. As for the black pearl industry, the market has been largely dominated by Robert Wan, a Tahiti born Hakka, who is known as the “Emperor of the pearl”. He personally controls more than half of the entire production of pearls in French Polynesia, with his business catering for and selling to international markets in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai. Alongside Robert Wan, various Chinese producers are also supplying quality production in the market. Furthermore, in the fishing industry, though their participation is minor compared to the Polynesians who receive financial support from the territory, Hakka Chinese have made forays into the market and invested in fishing boats. Therefore, we can see that the Hakka Polynesians play a crucial role in French Polynesia’s economic picture.

The Population

The population of French Polynesia is comprised of: (1) Whites who are called *popa'a* by the native Polynesians. Since the departure of the atomic testing centre called the Centre d'expérimentation du Pacifique (C.E.P), they are found mainly in administration, education and to a lesser extent in the army and the police force. (2) Demi-Tahitiens or half-Polynesians, who are mixed race, most commonly being Polynesian and French. Depending on the individual, they either identify themselves as Tahitians or French and tend to be fluent in both Tahitian and French. (3) Tahitians, who are native people with predominantly Polynesian blood; they speak the Tahitian language by choice and are often not very fluent in French. However, this situation is evolving very rapidly. (4) Chinese, including pure Chinese, who nowadays they are fewer and fewer in number, mixed Chinese-Tahitian and today Chinese of French ancestry.

The population according to the latest census of 2003 is about 250,000. However, since ethnicity cannot be taken into account, because it is forbidden by law to mention it in statistics, we can only speculate about the real size of the Hakka population. A believable figure would be about 12,000. If we add to this figure those of mixed race, both half Polynesian and half Occidental, we have a grand total of perhaps 20,000 to 25,000 people with Chinese blood. However, it is worth noting that although some Polynesians with Chinese blood consider themselves to be Chinese, in most cases they do not.

One seldom sees half-Polynesian half-Chinese people speaking Chinese. Nevertheless, those who can speak the language, do it remarkably well.

Today, there is an increasing number of mixed marriages between the Hakka and other ethnic groups, including the Occidental and Polynesians; their offspring often face a hard time deciding whether they identify themselves as being Chinese or not.

Identity is seldom an issue for the Polynesians; people can claim their identity as whatever they wish it to be. Therefore, the children of half-Polynesian and half-Chinese do not suffer too much from this form of identity crisis. Even with their identity being blurred, they tend to adapt themselves to the situation admirably. Some of them, for example, simply define themselves as Polynesians in the geographical sense when in doubt.

We can see now that the cultural problems of the Hakka community in Tahiti stem from being in a minority in French Polynesia, as the following statistics illustrate:

Polynesians and half-Polynesians - 80%

Whites or Pōpō'a - 13%

Chinese and Half Chinese - 7%.

Since immigration effectively ceased in 1947, the Hakka community has thrived on the economic prosperity of the island. However, at the same time these people have existed there without exterior cultural reinforcement. This is one of the major reasons why Hakka culture is disappearing at an alarming rate.

Origins of the Hakka Immigration in Tahiti

Early Immigrants

Contrary to the widely-believed myth, the current Chinese population in Tahiti does not come from the fabled workers of the Stewart sugar cane plantation, established in 1865 in the fields of Atimaono in Tahiti. In fact, when the plantation went bankrupt, the majority of the Chinese coolies returned to China; only 320 workers chose to remain on the islands and married with local Polynesians, mainly because there was no Chinese brides available. Chinese women did not arrive in the Polynesian islands until around 1904.

Most of the Hakka people in Tahiti originated from successive waves of immigration between 1909 and 1928, with the most intense period of immigration occurring between 1909 and 1914. This intensity ceased for a while then resumed from 1921 to 1928, probably because of the 1911 revolution in China. However, in the beginning, it was intended to be only a temporary departure from the homeland in order to earn money and return home with at least some extra savings. This has to be taken into account, as does the number of Chinese who went back to their native country whether they had succeeded in becoming wealthier or not.

Political turmoil such as the 1911 revolution and natural disasters such as floods and famines were evidently important factors which lead the Hakka population of the Guangdong province to seek a better way of life far from home. In Tahiti, most of the immigrants came from the rural villages of the Guangdong province; they were hardy and enterprising, and arrived on the

South Seas islands via the Southern route via Sydney and Auckland.

The traditional pattern of Chinese immigration in Polynesia was to go back and forth from China. Many of the immigrants in French Polynesia had their mind set on returning someday to their homeland. The living conditions there were barely adequate and they were considered administratively as aliens in the country, which was under French rule. This made it difficult for most of them to settle there. There were also other reasons why the Chinese immigrants wanted to return to their homeland. Not all of them had achieved economic success and the majority of them had left their families back home. For this reason, following the end of World War II in 1947, about a thousand immigrants, mostly Cantonese and from the villages of Pao On (寶安), Hui Yang (惠陽) and Tung Kuan (東莞), returned to Hong Kong and settled back in their native villages. The reasons most often cited were the lack of institutional facilities like schools to maintain their own cultural heritage, but mostly it was a strong desire to give their children a formal Chinese education and to teach them the language.

After this episode, immigration to French Polynesia was forbidden for Chinese nationals. The local Chinese community which had become by force in majority Hakka lived in a political and administrative limbo due to the international conflict between China and Taiwan until 1964, when General De Gaulle, the president of France, recognized the People's Republic of China.

Today, many Chinese in Tahiti have made the journey back to China to see their native villages, but not all have found the situation to be as they had imagined. Take myself for example, I felt a deep sense of disappointment

when I returned to my home village in China since I no longer had relatives there to welcome me. Furthermore, the scenery was unrecognisable from what I had hoped for, no scenic rice fields or quaint villages but rather a modern environment and a great number of factories lined up one after another.

Citizenship

In 1973, following the intense lobbying efforts of the “tu sang” reunited in a caucus, called “Union Pour le Devenir de la Polynésie Française” (U.D.P.F.), the French Government issued the decree 73-42 of January 9th of the same year, under which all Chinese born in French Polynesia were regarded as the French citizens. They were then given the right to vote, although the right to acquire land was still somewhat restricted.

The first consequence of this important legal step was the official recognition of the Hakkas as full members of Polynesian society. This would lead toward a better integration and participation in the political, sociological and economic life of French Polynesia. As they now had the same rights as regular French citizens, they could also intervene in the conduct and the political fate of their country through casting their vote in elections, most notably for the territorial assembly.

Although progress was slow, the Hakka Chinese of French Polynesia had made some incursions into domains that were not open to them before. Because the young Chinese were now joining the French army, they were no longer considered to be second class citizens. As such, they started to apply for placements and jobs in the administrative body of French Polynesia.

However, this integration was fraught with difficulty and even frowned upon in the beginning. One might even say that at that time racism was rampant.

As a result of the stubborn efforts of those that came before them and sometimes the suffering of the pioneers, the candidacies of the young Hakkas in the local administration are today accepted on the same basis as the native applicants and they work efficiently alongside with their Polynesian counterparts. In addition, the naturalization and the granting of French nationality to the Hakka Chinese prompted them to create their own political parties. At that time, the majority of them felt that their interests and their voices would have more weight and would be taken into account to a greater extent if they had their own representatives at the local assembly.

At the beginning of these electoral battles, they turned out to be so successful that they got two representatives elected at the territorial assembly. However gradually, with the augmentation of the size of the polynesian population, division and dissension among the Chinese community sealed the fate of these two parties which depended too much on ethnic votes. Unfortunately in the nineties, they disappeared, but not before they had made their impact felt in the political realm of the Polynesian assembly.

However, more often than not, the two representatives had been praised for the high quality of their work and interventions in the parliament. These past few years with the emergence of a dominant Polynesian party, in order to get a political representation, the Hakka Chinese had a difficult choice to make: either join their forces with minority opposition local Polynesian parties, or try their luck with the dominant one at the risk of being dominated and completely diluted.

In spite of these risks, the latter line was chosen by the majority. With much difficulty, hard work and bit of luck, they also succeeded in placing two Chinese representatives of the highest quality, one of them was even elected to the vice presidency of the assembly. On the other hand, by successfully contracting alliance with the dominant party, many local Chinese have been elected as full members of the highly regarded city hall council of Papeete; there their influence has contributed to the bettering the capital, the mayor of which is himself half-Chinese. Moreover, the highly influential minister of Finances has been chosen among the elected Chinese members of the ruling party. He was entrusted with the very difficult job of managing the French Polynesia financial budget. Furthermore, he is assisted by the financial adviser in charge of the territorial budget, who is also Chinese.

However, the success of the Chinese in integrating into the public administration of Tahiti is not without its drawbacks. For example, in order to balance the budget, they frequently have to elaborate and propose unpopular fiscal measures in the territorial assembly. The business community at large and especially the Chinese often find these measures discriminatory and unfair. Furthermore, a successful candidate who has been chosen by the President of French Polynesia to a ministry has to prove he is up to the task and more satisfactory results are demanded from him than from his Polynesian counterparts, so much that adversely he has to prove himself to be tougher with his own kin than with the Polynesians. Many examples of this kind illustrate the plight of Chinese successfully integrating the French and local administration. The best example is at the customs department at the international airport of Papeete, where incoming passengers have to declare

goods at their arrival.

Hakka people are likely to be subject to more control than the other passengers from their own kins, as a proof to their superiors that the latter are not showing more indulgence. As for the near future, with a new statute for French Polynesia to be voted on by the French parliament, people are afraid of what the future may hold for the small and proprietary political parties. It remains a question of whether there will be still representatives of Chinese origin at the local assembly if tougher laws are passed, which states that a party has to obtain at least 5% of votes in order to join the territory parliament. If the laws are passed, it would be a very tough challenge for the Chinese party leaders. In fact, two ethnic Chinese parties have disappeared recently and there is no more Chinese representative in the local Territorial Assembly today.

The Chinese Surname

Every Chinese person knows the importance of the surname in asserting one's identity among the many different groups that compose the population of the country. In fact, traditionally the bond of kinship is so strong that it is considered incestuous for a couple sharing the same surname to marry. However, at the time the Chinese applied for French citizenship, they were usually asked by the French administration to make their surname sound more French. Very few succeeded in keeping intact their Chinese surname. The Ly family, however, is one of the few successful examples, managing to keep their name more or less accurate, with French phonetic translations ranging from Li to "Lee or Lis and Ly."

In my opinion, the main reason behind the difficulty in keeping original surnames was the avowed French policy to eradicate the Chineseness in the surname in order to facilitate the integration of the Chinese community into the Polynesian society. However, researchers also speculated that sometimes the Chinese themselves may have welcomed and agreed to this pattern of transformation, in order to show their desire to integrate and their willingness to be assimilated. As a result, many Hakka surnames have been changed. The ethnic surnames have been replaced by their French sounding phonetic versions, and sometimes replaced by French names outright, with no relation whatsoever to the original character.

This may have caused recognition problems of the parents (*tch'in tch'it*, 親戚), even leading to psychological trauma. Because concept of filiation or *tch'in tch'it*, had been forgotten and replaced by the vague erroneous occidental concept of cousinship, we had some cases of misalliances, which fortunately were stopped before the marriage.

Today, given the work of many associations, there is a renewal and a resurgence of the concept of the clan according to the *siang* (鄉), especially at the moment of the two *Ching Ming* (清明), called here *Ka San* (掛山). Also, due to computers now making it easier, many families have embarked on the creation of a new genealogy. Apparently some young members of extended families are feeling the urge to put down on paper the origins of their relationship with other kins, so they can have something tangible to transmit to their children whether they are of Hakka descent or not.

The Language

Tahiti, a former French colony, is now an Overseas Territory. Its official and administrative language is French, although most of the Polynesians speak their native dialects, which are slightly different depending on the archipelagos. All Chinese schools were closed in 1964, on the date of the formal recognition of the People's Republic of China by De Gaulle. As such, all the Chinese children had to follow a French curriculum through public or private schools while the Chinese schools were deserted by their own students. Nevertheless, because their parents pushed them to pay great attention to their studies, the children of Hakka origin have been for most part very successful. Some of them go abroad (for example, to France or the United States) to study and earn qualifications from the top universities there.

In my opinion, their scholarly success is closely related to the high value Hakka families still place on education. Contrary to the fourth or fifth generation Chinese, who were born in French Polynesia and do not speak and understand Hakka at all, the second generation can speak and understand a little. They tend to avoid and overcome the problem by saying they are Polynesians; however, they do not seem to know what meaning to attach to this word. It could be said that they keep the Hakka spirit alive not via the language, but by the strong hold of their family and community ties, and via partaking in some traditions or customs, for example Ka San.

Chinese is now studied as a foreign language in the French high schools in Tahiti. Very few young people can speak Hakka nowadays, with the exception of those majoring in foreign languages. Many of them can speak mandarin fluently after a few stays in the mainland or in Taiwan. The

closing of the Chinese schools has been a tremendous factor in the loss of the language. However, the main reason that less and less people can speak Hakka is that most of the elder Hakka citizens fail to speak Hakka regularly to their grandchildren. On the other hand, even those who have succeeded in speaking Hakka in their childhood have abandoned the language due to the intense social pressure in schools. So much so that the young students are almost ashamed to speak the few words of Hakka they have learned at home. The usual joke here is that the youngsters do not even know how to curse others in Hakka.

All the associations have had a hard time establishing Chinese speaking schools due to the lack of qualified teachers and a valid Chinese curriculum interesting enough to attract young people to speak Hakka or Mandarin. They are, though, trying very hard to maintain a viable curriculum. Moreover, they have to compete with other interests like learning music, local or classical dance, martial arts, all of which are often provided on Saturday morning. So, evidently, language is the area where the Chinese community is feeling the loss most.

The Future for the Hakka Community in Tahiti

Will there be any more Hakkas left ten years from now? That is the serious question that the Hakka community in Tahiti has to face if its members want to survive in an environment which is becoming less and less Hakka and more and more Polynesian.

Although the ethnic Chinese Hakka are still doing well in the economic

arena, they do not seem to be fully aware of their Hakka identity and the cultural problems surrounding this, preferring to concentrate on more mundane affairs, especially the economic crisis and its effect on the island. To preserve past identity without reaching out to the next generation means death; and yet to carry out necessary reforms also means a form of dilution, which could mean also death. We can sense a revitalization today in the resurgence of the clans of same *siang*, which have become more dynamic. However, they lack financial means and are too restricted in their recruiting efforts. Attracting young members of the same *siang* is another major difficulty these associations face. They come alive only during the two *Ka San* and remain dormant the rest of the year.

Given the fact that all the Chinese schools have been closed, the languages, both Hakka and Mandarin, are being increasingly abandoned, either through lack of choice or voluntarily. For most of the young generation, French and sometimes the local Tahitian dialect, are the natural language of communication at home and at school. Mandarin is now studied as a foreign language and not learned and spoken at home. It is taught only sparsely in a parochial and French school basis. In addition, Hakka is not being transmitted any more to the children, especially in the families of mixed French and Chinese.

Along with the language, a new type of education is being implemented. Children are now taught to be independent and self-reliant in the occidental fashion. Although individualism does not connote necessarily selfishness or an uncaring attitude toward the elderly, it does not stress a communitarian attitude or traditional values such as filial piety. Take myself and most of

the second or third generation Chinese for example, we still feel that we are Chinese, yet we feel that a diffuse sense of loss of identity has occurred, especially with those of fifth or six generation born in Tahiti.

Younger generations born in the 70s or 80s do not have a strong cultural affinity with Hakka and its culture, because they have no personal recollections or memories of where their ancestors came from. This is the reason why so many young Chinese relate their lineage solely to their grandparents buried in the Chinese cemetery in Tahiti and not to any kind of lineage from China or elsewhere. The same situation can also be found in the Hakka community in Tahiti.

Traditional festivals are still celebrated like Chinese New year, the celebration of which is the result of the sheer persistence of the Wen Hua (文化) (or Wen Fa, as it is written in French) association. They were very instrumental in its revival, its main end result being better exposure of Chinese culture and traditions to the French and Tahitian communities. For example, twice a year, the ceremonies of Ka San are still held with much fervour in the Chinese cemetery, even when they are performed by families of mixed descent.

On top of this, the even more urgent situation is the survival of Hakka culture among the Chinese community. Taking daily food consumption for example, many of my generation and I myself do feel that one day our Hakka style of cooking may be forced to change in order to cater to Polynesian tastes. Some people even say that the future will lay in more fusion cuisine, incorporating the Polynesian and the occidental tastes. The movement toward integration is progressive and inevitable. There are more and more

intermarriages. The Hakka language is no longer spoken by the young, and even our Hakka cuisine specialities have become mixed in taste. These changes may be predictable; however, people in the community should be aware of and keep a watchful eye on these changes, which should not come at the loss of our identity.

We are currently walking a very fine line. On one hand, we, as an ethnic minority in Tahiti, should avoid stressing our distinctiveness; this could lead to our eventual marginalisation. On the other hand, we should also keep in mind that if we do not fight against this irresistible tide, we will be diluted into eventual extinction by the sheer numbers surrounding our community. So, the only worthwhile questions that remain are: Are we Chinese anymore and Hakka for that matter? With the passing of time, will we eventually sink into oblivion or be reborn into a new and mixed identity?

Some speculate that the resurgence of China as a nation can be a factor in holding back the tide of change, but to be realistic, it would have only a temporary effect. One of the possible answers given by the older generation is derived from this indubitable fact; as long as there is a Chinese temple reminding everyone everyday that somewhere in this island, there is a Hakka spirit still alive, there is always some hope that the community will somehow survive in the Polynesian environment and will pursue its uncertain destiny. Personally, I just want my children to incorporate all the lessons which have proved themselves so invaluable over the long history and culture of the Hakka. If they can accomplish this task and succeed in harmonizing with their Polynesian and occidental influences, then they stand a chance of evolving into true citizens of the world. Having been educated in both the

East and the West, I could be really proud of them.

It is understandable that many Hakka in Tahiti cannot help but have rather ambivalent feelings towards their origins, which are such a mixed bag. All in all, for all the complication of the identities of the Hakka in Tahiti and their future, here is my perspective and conclusion: If one says that he or she is a Hakka, then nobody can take this away from them and this is ultimately the only aspect of identity that truly matters.

Jimmy Ly is a writer, who mostly writes in French. Based on his presentation in “World Hakka Culture Conference” in Taiwan in 2003, the author has added new information to this research note. The article has been edited by the Editorial Board.

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