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**VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

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## **Cultural Fluidity in the Context of the Hakka Community in Southeast Asia**

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### **Abstract**

The documentation of Hakka traditions, particularly the majority of Hopo Hakka, within the Chinese ethnic community in Miri, a city in Eastern Malaysia, reveals a delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to the rapid changes of the contemporary world. As these communities navigate modern advancements, their traditional practices and values risk being overshadowed and diminished by the undertow of cultural homogeneity. This visual ethnographic research examines how the Hopo Hakka community in Miri strives to maintain its unique cultural identity through the establishment of the Hakka Association in the area. By analyzing the role of the Miri Hakka Association and their community's initiatives, the research highlights the strategies and values that foster a sense of belonging and equality among the Miri Hakka, positioning them as integral members of society rather than marginalized outsiders.

### **Keywords**

Hakka, Visual Ethnography, Photography, Southeast Asia, Migration

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## **Introduction**

The Hakka people, known for their perseverance and strong sense of community, have a rich history marked by continuous migration (Cohen 1996). According to Xianglin (2018), a profound contributor to the Hakka research spectrum that described Hakka's history for over six great migrations, the Hakka people started moving towards the southward Yangtze River basin; followed by the second migration in the Tang Dynasty where the migration took place as a large number of northern Hans retreat into the Gan and Fujian area to escape the "Anshi Rebellion". The third migration took place in the Wei dynasties, with the Hans again avoiding the invasion of northern ethnic groups, and together settled in the rugged terrains of Guangdong and Fujian provinces where they formed a larger Hakka tribe (Xianglin 2018).

From these migration patterns, we can deduce the reoccurring traits that are seen in the contemporary Hakka community. The continuous need to move without settling permanently created a scattered topology of the Hakka ethnic group. The diversity present in historical Hakka clans is through the intermingling of local ethnic groups during their migrations. This experience of being outsiders, reflected in the term "Hakka" itself which translates to "guest people," fostered a unique cultural identity built on resilience, adaptability, and a tight-knit community spirit (Chin and Chang 2022). The history lineages, also sometimes called clans, are defined by genealogies sharing common ancestors and they play an important socio-cultural role in Chinese society (Svensson 2022)

Miri, one of the largest cities of Sarawak in Eastern Malaysia, became home to a significant Hakka population during the 19th century, specifically the Riam District (Chong 2009) (Figure 1). This coincided with the intensive wave of Chinese Migration to the Malay states due to poverty and losses from the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion (Chin and Chang 2022). As such, many Hakkas fled to Southeast Asia to escape persecution, poverty, and the ongoing hardship in China.



**Figure 1.** View of Lianlue, also known as Riam Road in the southern part of Miri city, where 80% of the local Hakka communities are from the Hopo region (Chong 2009). Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.

Traditionally the Hakka were drawn by opportunities in gold mining and agriculture in Malaysia (Leo 2015), however, other testimonies of migration and settlement of the Hakka Hopo community in Miri are through recruitment by leading engineering contractor Yang Shu Kou, who had secured multiple government and local oil field projects upon entering Sarawak (Chong 2009). Originally from Puning, Yang Kou recruited workers from nearby Hopo in Jieyang County (now Jiexi County) for his Miri Road and bridge projects. Despite both locations being in Chaozhou prefecture, many Hakka settlers in Riam have their origins in the Hopo province of China (Chong 2009).

Besides the evident presence in the aforementioned district, the Hakka and Chinese migration in East Malaysia, particularly in Miri, is noticed by the existence and the establishment of non-governmental associations commonly affiliated with different Chinese ethnic groups. Founded in 1955, the Miri Hakka Association is a key place of aggregation for the local Hakka community. Throughout the years their activities epitomize aspects of cultural fluidity, transculturality and intersectionality in the Association's effort to adapt Hakka's unique culture to the present-day context.

To sustain the Hakka identity in Miri, the association holds social activities aimed more towards socioeconomic sustainability rather than a cultural preservation perspective. Most events from 2017 to 2019 are general participation in blood donations, association gatherings, organized trips, and charity works. Some interesting social activities that happen annually are singing competitions organized by the Miri Hakka Association's own culture and recreation section with the theme around Hakka folk music. These singing competitions emphasising Hakka songs can be linked to spatial belonging. A sense of belonging is associated with the idea of home which refers to spaces of

familiarity, comfort, and emotional attachment, and feelings of security generate a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar or insecure environment (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). With the support of key governmental figures, the association could perpetuate their culture by creating an event for Miri Hakkas to share traditional folk songs and pop music amidst the collectivist society of Chinese Malaysians.

Aspects of intersectionality can be seen in the hosting of gatherings and international cultural exchanges with Taiwan and China. Lim and Wang (2008) stated that the Hakka have a custom of gathering with friends and family in autumn. In Singapore and Malaysia, they reflect on the struggles, industry, and thrift of the early Hakka settlers and remind the younger generation to always remember the Hakka spirit. Newspaper clippings from local news such as Li's written article (2019) on the Hakka conference and See Hua Daily News's reporting (2019) highlight the Hakka Miri Association's continuous outreach to the cultural discipline, planning visits and exchanges with Hakka from Taiwan and China to not only boost social outreach but to continue this drive of intersectionality between the Hakka consciousness and the local Malaysian Chinese solidarity.

Consequently, the study has focused on how the Hakka community, historically marked by permanent migration and entailed by the sense of 'guest people', reorganizes to express the Hakka identity in East Malaysia. By probing the aspects of cultural fluidity within the Hakka community, and particularly through the observation of the Miri Hakka Association as a case study, it evinces that belonging is never a coherent or autonomous experience, but a complex, multiple, and partial, fragmented, or segmented relationship (Fridlund 2014). As well as that cultural interactionism rejects the idea that social structure is stable, asserting instead that identities are fluid, with individuals constructing their identities differently in various contexts (Zhang 2017).

## **Methodology**

Focusing on the complexities of Hakka migration and its cultural milieu in Miri, the researchers planned to visit the Miri Hakka Association currently located on the 1st and 2nd floors of a building in Miri's downtown area (Figure 2) attempting to identify aspects of cultural fluidity, hybridity, transculturality, and intersectionality within the Miri Hakka community.



**Figure 2.** View of the Miri Hakka Association located on the first and second floor of the downtown area of Miri, East Malaysia. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.

An initial contact with the association's office was established via email allowing the researchers to set an appointment to meet the actual association's chairman Kelvin Kong and other relevant members. During the first visit the researchers were introduced to the Association's consultant, Mr Lee, whose regales tales of the six migrations that brought forth the surge of Hakka in Guandong and Fujian alongside the establishment of Miri Hakka's Association in 1955.

The qualitative methodology was chosen because it best fits the objective of this research in order to describe cultural contexts as they manifest in people's lives (Busetto et al. 2020). During this fieldwork study, the researchers conducted a series of in-depth interviews with a set of questions previously partaken with the association members. Due to the cultural complexities of the studied context, the in-depth interview modality as a popular method for collecting qualitative research data (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019; Eppich et al. 2019), was found to be the appropriate approach.

Mandarin and English were the predominant languages used during the interviews and verbal exchanges between researchers and members of the association and respective stakeholders. The interview data recorded in Mandarin was later translated to English for common understanding and analyses.



The Miri Hakka Association self-published book titled, **美里客家公会成立50周年纪念特刊** [50 Years Establishment of Miri Hakka Association: Special Edition] (Chong 2009) is used as part of the vital literature for the study. The book highlights relevant elements of Hakka culture. This includes the history of migration into the region, the Miri Hakka Association's background and list of members and Sarawak Hakka's economical livelihood which are crucial details to the historical documentation of the association's presence in the local community.

Considering the use of photographic documentation as a tool of visual ethnography the researchers have documented several locations including the city districts resided by the Hakka community, the precinct of the Miri Hakka Association and social events and community's initiatives organized by the same. The idea of using photographic documentation and audio recordings aligns with the precepts of focused ethnography which attempts to offset the short-term field visits by an intensive use of audio-visual technologies for data collection and analyses (BenGhida and Schellini 2024; Rafee et al. 2016; Knoblauch 2005).

Finally, to contextualize the photographs taken during the documentation process, a participant validation interview (Lindheim 2022; Birt et al. 2016) was conducted, in which association members validated their relevance and commented on their content. This process has utterly assisted the researchers in visualizing aspects of cultural fluidity and better contextualizing the images' captions.

## Photos



**Figure 3.** View of the Miri Hakka Association's meeting room. The total area of the association is 150 m<sup>2</sup>, which comprises the areas consisting of the 1st-floor auditorium room of 10x15 m<sup>2</sup> and the 2nd-floor meeting room of 10x18 m<sup>2</sup>. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 4.** Inside the Miri Hakka Association, many of its walls are used as a display of the memory of its previous members. Besides the main entrance door, a wall exhibits a double sequence of twenty framed portraits covering decades of the association's existence and history. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 5.** Portrait of the current Miri Hakka Association's chairman Kelvin Kong whose tenure started in 2021. This photo was taken during the anniversary event organized by the Miri Hakka Association on the 30th of June 2024 at Thai Poo Kindergarten. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.





**Figure 6.** The Miri Hakka Association stores several objects that entail a dedicated space of memorabilia. As informed, the furniture clock was donated by the Brunei Hakka Association which demonstrates the Hakka associations are interconnected to a broad network that surpasses the Malaysia state limits towards neighbor countries of Southeast Asia. A reproduction of a hand-colored photographic portrait of Chong Goek Moi, the donor of the clock, is framed in the Miri Hakka Association meeting room. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 7.** The displayed portraits of member-donors-that contributed to the construction of Miri Hakka Association's first building. One of the portraits Chao Gao Chuan (left) is in a place of honor among trophies and mementos. Chao's portrait bears the medal of Ahli Bintang Sarawak (A.B.S) in his right pocket. The medal is awarded to leaders or Sarawakians for their committed service to the country, A.B.S medals fall under the Management and Professional Groups, including Assistant Superintendent of Police, Major (Army), Squadron Leader (Air Force), and Lieutenant Commander (Navy). Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.





**Figure 8.** Portrait of Chao Gao Chuan, a prominent community member had his tenure as Miri Hakka Association's chairman from 1996 to 1999. Chao is a senior Miri Hakka association member and was the *kapitan* and head of village to Riam Road. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 9.** The Miri Hakka Association was founded in 1955. The association hosts a few anniversary events every year to celebrate its establishment by inviting the Hakka Association from other branches to the celebratory event. The figure above marks the association's 324th event organized by the Miri Hakka Association on the 30th of June 2024 at Thai Poo Kindergarten. The official chairmen from the seven

designated Hakka association branches (Brunei, Tai Poo, Guanying, Huining, Lonzhuang, Hopo, Miri and Jiayin), Chao Gao Chuan and the Sarawak's Transport Minister Dato Sri Lee Kin Shi are present in the photo. Each member holds a fried glutinous sesame ball, a traditional Hakka dessert. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 10.** The image shows how different Hakka associations are distinguished by wearing colorful team polo shirts with their respective logos and names. The Miri Hakka Association members wear red polo shirts with white collars and golden Chinese Mandarin inscriptions, 'Miri Hakka Association'. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 11.** The calligraphic work written in Mandarin meaning "Hakka as one family" expresses the collectivist ideal of Hakka kinship. Despite the Hakka dialect and its linguistic aspects being an integral element that defines the Hakka community, this calligraphic work and other oral and written communicational contexts observed during this field research evinced the predominant use of the Mandarin language. One of the reasons for the assimilation of the Mandarin language has been the Chinese



inter-ethnic relationships and collectivism. As noted by Chin and Chang (2022), Chinese Malaysian communities aimed to enhance their solidarity against the Malay-centric policies by reducing the role of dialect-based identity. Their solidarity gives rise to the linguistic emphasis on Mandarin as a common tongue among Chinese Malaysians. The Mandarin language emerges as a unifying language, contributing to this linguistic shift. Yong and Kong (2022) highlight the Hakka people's ability to adapt to new environments while preserving their cultural values. The Hakka dialect served as a distinguishing marker, but over time, its significance waned, however, the core ideal of their own identity "family". Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



**Figure 12.** During the visit to the Miri Hakka Association, Benson—the leader of the Youth Hakka Association section—demonstrated the recently purchased “Green Lion King” head for the Hakka Lion’s dance. A Chinese tradition that has developed its own variance and characteristics in Malaysia. Contrary to the more common lion heads in modern dances, the structure that defines the Hakka lion remains as a square—symbolizing “the Hakka lion eats in all directions” (TVS Entertainment 2023). Benson mentioned the importance of preserving this tradition while the Miri Hakka Association is looking for a lion dance instructor to train its young generation. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



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