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MIND YOUR AGE: WHY DO HAKKA WOMEN MARRY YOUNG?

Elena Gregoria Chai

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an important step forward in a woman's life in the Chinese society. A Chinese woman cannot remain with her parents or natal family forever. She has to marry and only then, will she have a permanent dwelling in her later life and also afterlife. Her natal family's house will be taken over by her male siblings. If she remains single and stayson in her natal home, she is subordinated to her brothers and sisters-in-law after her parents pass on. Her status in the family is downgraded to the like of a housemaid, helping with house chores and havingno control in all decision-makings. In many instances, these single old women were jeeredat by the sisters-in-law and are topics of gossip by others. One who is not married is sometimes ridiculed as weird, mentally unsound, anti-social and so forth.

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With the progress and development of education, where both male and female have equal opportunity for education, there are disparities in terms of employment options and gender roles within the Chinese community. The potential resources of married Chinese woman, including educational training if she ever received one, are not fully utilized, simply because of the restrictions of the traditional role expectations at home (Yao, 1983). For a Chinese woman, her feminine behaviour [婦德], speech [婦言] and moods [婦容] must be decent to her father, husband and son throughout her life, in order to be useful to the society and to uphold the Chinese traditions of respecting the male gender. In her work [婦工], she must be able to perform most chores in the domestic sphere such as being able to weave, work in the farm, wash and cook, all the chores that a male

is not willing to do. Briefly, the ideal perceptions of a traditional Chinese family is that the husband and children have esteem status, but not the wife or mother. A Chinese woman's unquestionable priority upon marriage is to bear children, take care of them and never to challenge her husband's wishes or demand so that she can live up to be a virtuous wife and a good mother.

Tapah Village

Tapah is a small village situated at KM36 off the Kuching-Serian road in Kuching Division, Sarawak, Malaysia. The village falls under the jurisdiction of Siburan District Office. The population of Tapah is around 2500 people with 485 households to date. The village consists of mostly Chinese of Hakka origin, which accounts for 97% of the population there. They are primarily involved in agricultural activities, notably vegetable farming and animal husbandry. The vast expanse of land in Tapah is used for growing vegetables and fruit trees, where they are sold mostly in the larger city such as Kuching. Tapah is familiarly linked with the vegetable icon of a 10 feet concrete structure of a Chinese spinach 'pak choi' which stands majestically at the junction to Tapah village, greeting every visitors to the village or passers-by travelling along the Kuching-Serian highway. Poultry and chicken egg farming are also practised on a large scale here.

Other major business activities in Tapah include birds' nests processing and shop keeping. Altogether there are 30 licensed birds' nests processors, ranging from very small to very big ones with fully equipped factories which cater to international markets. The larger producers have about 40 daily paid workers who are, mainly women who work seven days a week. The majority of these workers are Bidayus staying in villages in the vicinity of Tapah. The small business operators, usually consisting of women and housewives living nearby, receive unprocessed materials from suppliers and larger producers, to work in their own homes.

The Tapah Bazaar has around 51 shops, consisting of four rows of old shoplots and three new ones. Shop keeping is one of the major occupations here, with 18 shops operating as grocery shops. There

are also 13 coffee shops, five hair saloons, two of them also providing bridal grooming service, four electrical appliances and repair shops, three garments shops, two hardware shops, two motorcycle workshops, two pesticide shops and one popular snookerium centre.

In terms of education, Tapah has one government kindergarden and one Chinese medium primary school. The Tapah Chung Hua Primary School consists of 18 classrooms and has a student population of about 500. Upon completion of primary education, students have the choice of either continuing their secondary education in a Malay medium school at the Sekolah Menengah Tun Razak, which is located about 5.6 km away. Otherwise, they will have to travel to Serian town to attend Chinese education at the Min Lik Chung Hua School. Tapah village is well connected with other nearby towns by the newly completed Kuching-Serian road and is served by public transport. Telecommunication systems including internet services are well developed here.

The Hakka Community in Tapah

Although Tapah village is teeming with agricultural and business activities, most recently stimulated by the completion of the Kuching-Serian road, it has a bleak history of origin. The Hakkas in Tapah had a humble and difficult beginning during the Brooke's era. Unlike other Chinese dialect groups, they had no permanent home and were constantly moving from one place to another. Generally, they are also called 'Khek' which means 'guest people'. They occupied rural areas that were less fertile and worked as farmers.

During the Brooke administration, they were invited to Sarawak to work on agricultural land to supply food to the local population. Thus, the influx of Hakkas to Sarawak began in the late 1890's and their arrival was considered late as compared to other Chinese dialect groups. Thus, most of the urban areas were already taken up and the Hakkas had to stay and work in the outskirts of towns. They were regarded as 'the rural people' and were given the derogatory term 'Shan-tang' or 'shua teng' people, and largely resided in the outskirts of Kuching and Samarahan.

The Hakka community living in Tapah was forcibly resettled there under the Hammer Operation during the communist upsurge in the 1960's. In fact, most of the Chinese around Tapah and nearby villages were resettled into a close community in Tapah without exception, whereas the other ethnic groups were allowed to stay in their own homes (Lee, 1970). Although there were a few teachers, traders, shopkeepers and other occupational groups amongst the Chinese, the majority were farmers. These farmers were smallholders engaged in cultivating pepper and rubber, growing vegetables and fruit, and rearing chickens and pigs for the market and for their own consumption.

However, these 'guest people' had a proud history of overcoming hardship and rejection Porritt (1965), such as being labelled as outcast because they were strangers. Nevertheless, Tapah village has developed rapidly since the end of the communist uprising era in the late 1960's. Outward migration of the young to bigger cities where there are more job opportunities is happening in most small towns in Sarawak and the same can be observed in Tapah. As many as 30 young men are now working in Singapore due to the higher pay there. However, very few young women have left Tapah. Social constraint is presumed to be the reason why young Hakka girls are most likely to stay behind in Tapah.

Research approach and methods

This research focuses on the Hakka women of Tapah who still live in close proximity and have common lifestyle of traditional village settings. I intend to analyse and compare the differences pertaining to marriage, social upbringing and perceptions of the different generations of these women. Comparisons are made between the different generations of Hakka women residing in Tapah.

Over the period of six months from October 2005 to March 2006, interviews were conducted with 121 Hakka women from Tapah village. This figure represents about 25% of total married women here. The interviews were conducted by using open-ended questionnaires consisting of 65 questions, covering mainly topics on