

**The Invisible Ones/*Yinxing Ren*: The Production and Flow of Cultural Meaning
Among the Hakka of Taipei**

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Paper prepared for the *Remapping Taiwan Conference, UCLA, October 12-15, 2000*

INTRODUCTION:

During the summer of 2000, I began to attend bi-weekly meetings of a certain group of Taipei college students at the Taipei Hakka Arts and Culture Center (*Taipei Kejia Yiwen Huodong Zhongxin*), nestled within a small community near the corner of Hsin-yi and Hsin-sheng South Roads. The students had just begun a project in which they were to do an ethnographic investigation into Hakka-owned Taipei businesses, primarily restaurants. At the first of their discussion meetings, the question of culture inevitably came to the fore. In particular, the students were having a problem with the ways in which respondents were answering their survey questions. As one student put it,

“No one agrees on anything. And this is very frustrating because we can’t figure out what constitutes Hakka culture. How are we supposed to make sense of it all if they themselves can’t even agree on what it means to be Hakka in Taipei?”

The project-leader, an experienced 27 year-old “culture worker” (*wenhua gongzuozhe*) from Mei-nung, responded that there may not be a distinctive list of traits that identifies a person as ‘Hakka’ in contrast to other Taipei residents. Thus, they’re task in producing this latest Taipei Civil Affairs Bureau (*Taipei shi Minzheng Ju*) publication was not to define or present Hakka culture, but to highlight the diversity of the more than 400,000

Hakka residents of Taipei. In addition, later in private, he told me that even though the Civil Affairs Bureau had funded another local ethnography of Hakka businesses, *his own* intent was to recruit another generation of Hakka intellectuals into the movement by piquing their interest in cultural politics. Although the finished product has yet to be published (I've since been informed that they were able to survey dozens of restaurants in metropolitan Taipei), I found this exchange interesting in that it situates culture production within 'the city' as site of articulation between complex, extra-local flows of people, commodities and ideas. As will be discussed below with two brief examples, this instance of situated cultural production illustrates how Hakka culture workers in Taipei are managing to mount viable, though sometimes tenuous, counter-hegemonic critiques of the nation-state form.

The title of the paper, "The Invisible Ones", refers to how many informants view the Hakka living in Taipei. Basically, because until recently no one ever spoke Hakkanese in public, the only obvious marker of Hakka identity was absent. But as anyone who has observed a post-democratic Taiwanese election knows, the Hakka of Taipei are anything *but* invisible during an election year. In addition, the title also refers to the fact that the majority of culture workers with whom I worked had originally migrated to Taipei individually to attend various universities, and thus, are not counted in the official census as "Taipei residents". So, the task of carving out a politicized space in Taipei's social environment has been left, in part, to culture workers that live neither in Taipei, nor elsewhere, but constantly move back and forth between the predominantly Hakka areas of Meinung, Miaoli or Hsinchu. In effect, they appear to reside neither in the countryside nor Taipei. In the anecdote related above, the group leader (who was

also the director of the Arts and Culture Center) had learned various strategies from his own previous experience in the Mei-nung Anti-Dam Movement (*fanshui ku yundong*) and were applying them in Taipei. So even though they themselves are state employees, I will argue that it is in the travel of these ‘invisible ones’ around in (and outside of) Taiwan that puts them in a vantage point to mount viable critiques of the nation-state through the medium of state-sponsored cultural production.

‘CULTURE’ AND TAIWANESE NATIONALISM

As Allen Chun (1996) has illustrated, ‘culture’ has been one of the central tools through which the Taiwanese state has enforced its various nationalistic aims deep within civil society. Through the co-opting of both traditional Chinese culture in the postwar era, and more recently, various ‘other’ cultures (such as Taiwanese, Hakka, and the various aboriginal groups), the state has been able to achieve a modest amount of consensus while enforcing its own view of the new multi-ethnic nation-state (Chun 1996; Tu 199x; Chang 1996). In particular, the state’s practice of building cultural centers (*wenhua zhongxin* in many townships throughout Taiwan) functioned to defuse dissenting voices in the debate about Taiwan’s political future; or, the form of the multi-ethnic political community called the nation-state (Chun 1996). Chun’s analysis may indeed be an accurate assessment of the overall situation, all things being equal. When viewed from a top-down perspective, not taking various “feedback” effects into account, the Taiwanese state’s attempt at what Brackette Williams called the “incorporation of difference” (Williams 1989) appears to have indeed been relatively successful. However, as the anecdote related above illustrates, I would suggest that once the micro-processes involved here are examined ethnographically, one could find opportunity within

ideological state apparatuses such as these for a ‘real’ culture of politics capable of meaningful social change (as evidenced by the very recent strides made in language policy). Culture, though a powerful tool for state hegemony, is also fertile ground for political action because of its ambiguous, contested nature. As I argue below, it is the process of situated cultural production (which can only be viewed from an individualist perspective), that allows for such political action.

THE PRODUCTION OF POLITICIZED SPACE

Lest we forget about the negotiated, unstable nature of hegemony (even where hegemony means ‘multi-ethnic democracy’), I believe there are spaces (in Lefebvre’s (1991) sense of “both medium *and* outcome of social action” (35?)) within which the shape of the nation is vulnerable to challenges from the social actions of culture workers. Adopting an approach that incorporates the view of ‘social space’ advocated by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991), as well as Ulf Hannerz’s (1992) method of cultural analysis, I view the Taipei cultural “apparatus” as a house. To further develop Lefebvre’s metaphor, once the walls of the house are stripped away, the “house” is revealed to actually be a node through which water, electricity, food, garbage, cable, etc are constantly entering and exiting. Further, it is the inhabitants of the house that regulate the flow of these articles into, around in, and out of the structure of the building (Lefebvre 1991: ?). Methodologically, I have chosen to focus on the people involved as they themselves move about, as well as manipulate the materials that flow through the structure. Thus, if these cultural artifacts can be viewed as fetishized commodities (or, as ‘products which conceal the social relations behind their production’ in Marxist terms), my ethnographic task should be to reveal the social relations behind the

production, distribution and consumption of meaning-laced cultural objects. So, rather than study the design of the house (ethnic policy) or its history (the history of the movement), or its relationship to other houses (other social movements), I have chosen to concentrate on how the people that live in the house (Hakka activists in Taipei) produce, consume and distribute the water, garbage, and electricity (cultural products and activities) in their daily lives (as intelligentsia involved in a social movement). To quote Hannerz then:

What defines the cultural apparatus, I would suggest, is that it connects one person or a relative few (creators, personified symbols, performers, players) with a greater many who are more passive (clients, spectators, audiences), in relationships the core of which is a provision of meaning. These relationships are thus asymmetrical in terms of scale, and also with regard to input quantity, as some parties are more active than others (Hannerz 1992: 82).

The data I have collected, then, mostly concern the ways in which the travels of the very situated culture workers with whom I worked produce and distribute cultural artifacts within networks of goods, funding and ideas that flow through the primary urban node of Taipei. In addition, the ways in which these goods are consumed will also be addressed.

SITES OF SITUATED CULTURAL PRODUCTION:

During the current phase of Taiwanese nationalism, the view of culture enforced through apparatuses such as schools, the media, military and cultural centers tends to lean toward an essentializing narration of each ethnic group's (mainlander, Holo,¹ Hakka and aboriginal) participation in the formation of the nation-state (Chang 1996; Hughes and Stone 1999). With Taiwan's well-documented history of ethnic conflict, the state definitely has an interest in encouraging ethnic harmony. However, in-line with what

was mentioned above in regard to situated cultural production, I would suggest that ‘culture’ itself has become a site of conflict between the state and various interest groups. Since my own research involved the Hakka movement, what follows will be a precursory discussion of how these processes occur within this particular field of cultural production.

One day in the summer of 1998, having just completed a year of Mandarin study at National Taiwan University, I was leaving my apartment on Tong-hua Street, Ta-an District, when I noticed that some sort of festival, with hundreds of participants, had started practically on my doorstep. Among the dozens of music, food and craft stalls, as well as various ‘ethnic’ dance performances, I managed to talk to a few of the organizers. They informed me that I had unknowingly wandered into the second annual “Taipei Hakka Street Festival” (*Taipei shi Kejia wenhua jie*). When I asked why it was held on this street, they responded that this was the largest Hakka neighborhood (*Kejia diqu*) in Taipei. Since I had not decided on a dissertation topic at that point, I was thought that it might be interesting to do a community study on the relatively small area within which the festival was held. “After all”, I thought, “the ways in which urban spaces are appropriated as ethnic spaces seems like something worth doing.” Following the suggestion of those at the festival, I soon visited the Hakka Arts and Culture Center. There, I was introduced to the projects these culture workers were engaged in. I was especially interested in the ethnography of Tong-hua Street, *Taipei Hakka Street History: Tong-hua Edition* (*Taipei Kejia Jielu Shi: Tonghua Bian* (1998)), which people would give me at every cultural center, radio station, and university Hakka club I would visit. This had been their first publication since the Bureau of Civil Affairs started funding the

¹ As a side note, I noticed a distinct difference in people’s tendency to refer to the majority ethnic group as “Taiwanese” from just two years ago. I even heard people correct each other toward using “Holo” or

Arts and Culture Center in 1997 (during Chen Sui-bian's stint as Mayor of Taipei). What interested me was not only the content of the book (your typical ethnographic fare of Hakka strength during adversity, hard work and determination while carving out a space in Taipei from the 1960's to the present), but the ways in which the book, not for sale, had been and continues to be distributed as a means of attracting attention to the cause of saving the rapidly disappearing Hakka culture and language. I was offered so many free copies on so many different occasions that I started to wonder what was more important, the book's content or the book's travels? More than one participant in the book's publication informed me that they themselves felt like it was more "the government's" project than their own, and that the street was chosen (for the festival and the ethnography) because of its location rather than because it was a 'Hakka neighborhood'. Statements such as these only hint at the tension between the culture workers As I write my dissertation, data will be analyzed as to 1.) how the content engages nationalist and ethnic dialogues on Hakka identity, 2.) the ways in which the book has been distributed and received, and 3.) how the book was produced. For now, I can only say that while the book's content is relatively conservative, its production and distribution were anything but. Though it was more "the government's project" than the culture workers' own, they still managed to put it to political use through the strategic choice of location (I was told that Tong-hua Street was chosen because its location would attract more attention), as well as in the ways in which the research and publication of the book functioned in the reproduction of culture workers through recruitment from various Taipei universities.

If the above example illustrates the importance of *distribution*, the following shows how *content* and *representation* are also play important roles in these cultural

"Min-nan", rather than the more politically provocative "Taiwanese".

contestations. Taipei filmmaker Lin Hsiao-fang's documentary, *The Faded Blue Blouse*, offers a critique of traditional representations of Hakka women in literature, arts and film. Funded by The Broadcasting Development Fund (*caituan faren guangbo dianshi wenhua jijin hui*), the precursor to Taipei Public Television, the film focuses on her own aunts and their own life histories in the predominantly Hakka town of Meinung in southern Taiwan. The faded traditional Hakka blue blouse of the title is a metaphor for the struggles of these Hakka women as they succeeded in financially supporting the education of two generations of Hakka men (their brothers and sons) by selling *ban tiao*. In one sequence, the focus of conversation turns to her aunt's hands as other family members comment on their coarse, worn appearance. The gaze of the camera seems intent on questioning so-called traditional gender roles within the Hakka community from a "western feminist perspective" (Lin, personal communication). Normally praised for their strength and courage in such sayings as "Hakka women have the spirit of cows (*niu de jingshen*)", as I heard from cab drivers on more than one occasion; or "they have a capacity for physical hardship and hard work (*chiku, nai lao*)", Lin's film, in part, critiques an unproblematic view of the Taiwan Hakkas' participation in the Taiwan Miracle by asking, "Why have Hakka women had to *chi* so much *ku* in the first place?"

Within our network perspective, the film points to a feminist undercurrent within the sphere of cultural work. In fact, among the culture workers I met in Taipei, the clear majority were women.² Some of the women involved, in fact, pointed to gender roles within the community as the main problem facing the Hakka community in Taiwan (in contrast to the more popular answer of the 'language crisis' (*yuyan xiaoshi wenti*). Here,

we see how the positioning of culture producers feeds into the production and distribution of culture within the apparatus in Taipei. A 'key symbol' (*a la* Sherry Ortner) of Hakka identity is being challenged and reconfigured within the realm of state-sponsored culture production; in turn, these representations themselves are distributed in strategic ways, which contributes to the reproduction of the social relations behind its own production.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As I've attempted to illustrate in the 2 brief examples above, *social space* in this instance consists of what Hannerz calls the three most important aspects of the social organization of cultural difference: thoughts and ideas, representations and distribution/consumption. As I try to make sense of the picture, my hope is that I can account for how people negotiate the spaces that they themselves help to produce. If the idiom "*shang you zhengce, xia you duice*" is true, then maybe I'm guilty of stating the obvious. However, I believe that highlighting how people, ideas and funding (which I haven't discussed here) flow *between* Taipei and other areas such as Meinung, Miaoli and Hsin-zhu will help in understanding how processes such as these can provide opportunities for empowering socio-cultural critique outside of power framework of the state's project of hegemony.

² There may be several reasons for this, but the main ones told to me were that 1. Culture work can be a somewhat stigmatized profession for men in Taiwan, and 2. Military conscription restrains men in their early 20's from extended participation because of the required two-year commitment.

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