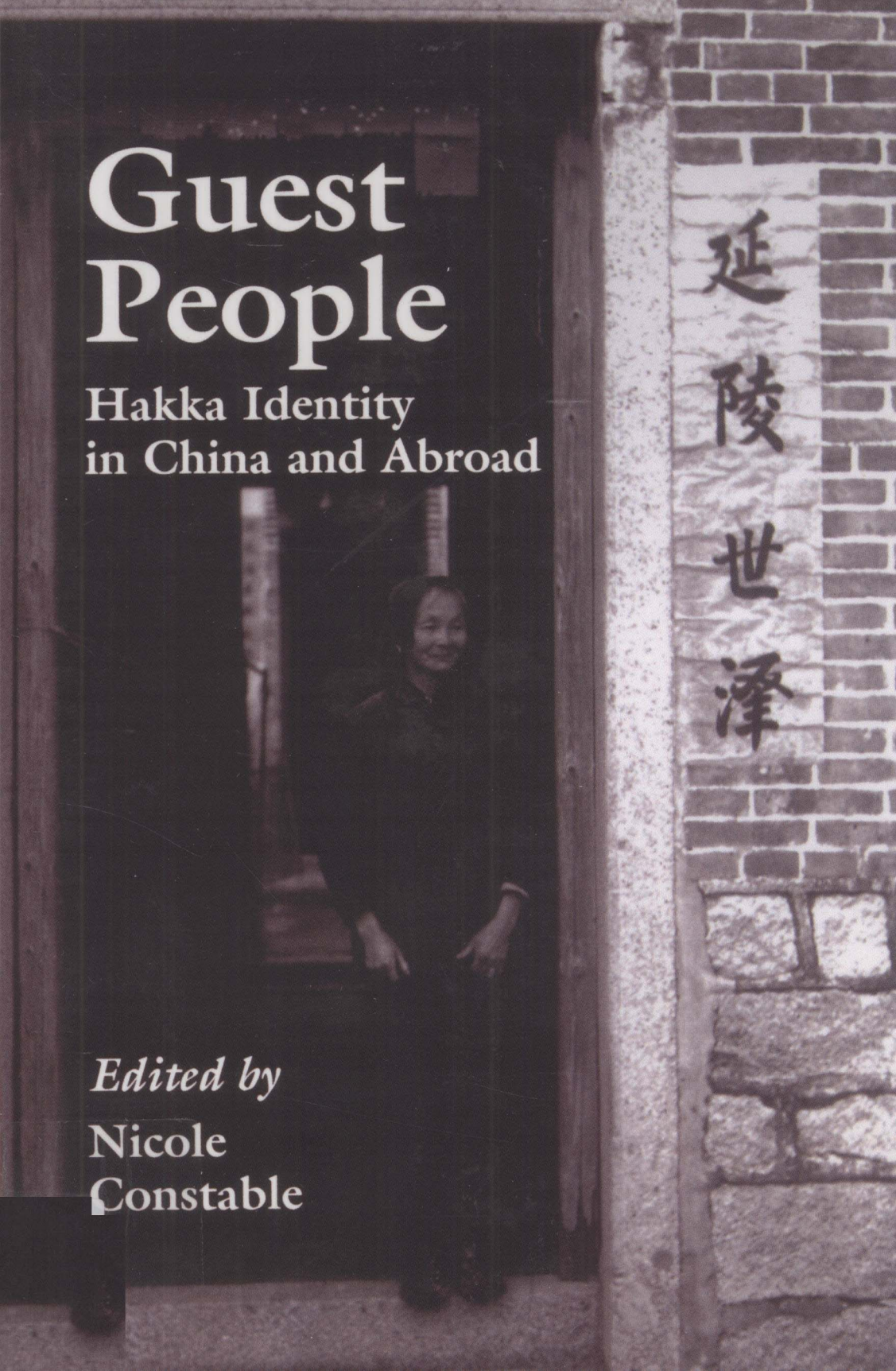
Guest People

Hakka Identity in China and Abroad



Edited by

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GUEST PEOPLE

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NICOLE CONSTABLE

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STUDIES ON ETHNIC GROUPS IN CHINA

Stevan Harrell, Editor

STUDIES ON ETHNIC GROUPS IN CHINA

Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers
Edited by Stevan Harrell

Guest People:
Hakka Identity in China and Abroad
Edited by Nicole Constable

TO THE HAKKA AMONG WHOM WE HAVE BEEN GUESTS

Note on Romanization

Most of the Chinese terms in this volume have been romanized in Mandarin pinyin with several exceptions: The terms Hakka (Mandarin: Kejia) and Punti (Mandarin: Bendi) are written according to their most familiar English spellings rather than in their less-common pinyin forms. Place names outside the People's Republic of China generally follow local custom (e.g., Hong Kong, not Xianggang), and personal names follow either individual or personal preferences or the standard recognized spelling (e.g., Sun Yat-sen, not Sun Zhongshan). Unless otherwise indicated, oral colloquial expressions are cited in the dialect in which they were spoken. A glossary of Chinese characters appears at the end of this volume.

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Introduction

What Does It Mean to Be Hakka?

NICOLE CONSTABLE

The term Hakka, which literally means "guest people" or "strangers," is the name of a Chinese ethnic group whose ancestors, like those of all Han Chinese, are believed to have originated in north central China. Estimated to number in the tens of millions today, Hakka now reside mainly in Southeast China, Taiwan, and regions of Southeast Asia, but the Hakka diaspora extends to virtually every continent in the world.

The main question we pose in this volume—"What does it mean to be Hakka?"—may appear deceptively simple. The easy answer—which has been accepted and even preferred by many scholars who have worked in Hakka communities—is that Hakka are simply those who call themselves Hakka or who are so labeled by others. While we agree that this is an important starting point, it has too often been assumed that to merely "know" that a person, a community, or a custom is Hakka is sufficient. As we argue in the course of this volume, this is not enough. We need to examine the cultural and historical construction of Hakka identity, and its social, political, and economic relevance in different locales and particular contexts.

The number of English-language anthropological works based on field research in Hakka communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and in other regions has greatly increased during the past two decades, but most of this literature does not pose questions pertaining to Hakka identity. Important and interesting though such studies of the Hakka may be for their contributions to sinology and anthropology (e.g., Myron L. Cohen 1976, Pasternak 1972, Strauch 1984), the fact that the subjects of the study are Hakka as opposed to members of other ethnic or dialect groups has not been considered of great importance. Although there are some important exceptions (cf. Blake 1981, Myron L. Cohen 1968, and Lamley 1981),[1]

1. This includes the majority of the very interesting papers that were presented at the first International Conference on Hakkaology, held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, September 24–26, 1992.

Hakka has generally been treated as an essential, unchanging, unproblematic label—a given or objective truth, rather than a topic for analysis in and of itself. Thus scholars of Hakka language, religion, or community structure, for example, have been less concerned with the Hakka factor of the equation than with the topic in question. They largely gloss over or ignore the question of *who* exactly the Hakka are, and *what* Hakka means in different contexts.

In the chapters that follow, Hakka ethnicity is not treated as a given. In our attempt to develop a more complex understanding of Hakka identity, we do not neglect issues of who is labeled Hakka, or of Hakka self-ascription. These issues have long been acknowledged to be of central importance to the study of ethnicity. Nor do we avoid popular notions and generalizations about Hakka origins and history. These, however, we take as starting points in an attempt to separate objective Hakka history and experience from the more localized constructions and expressions of Hakka identity.

The contributors to this volume have also been influenced by the growing number of anthropological works on the cultural and historical construction of identity that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Blu 1980, Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, Daniel 1984, Kondo 1990, Michelle Rosaldo 1980, Eric Wolf 1982), as well as those that emphasize both the experiential side and the symbolic expressions of various types of identities (e.g., Alter 1992, Behar 1993, Lavie 1990, Renato Rosaldo 1986, Turner and Bruner 1986). In this volume we collectively describe the diverse histories of Hakka communities, the way Hakka identity is culturally constructed and symbolically expressed in different contexts, and the sociological significance Hakka identity takes on in each setting.

It is not enough to speak of a monolithic Hakka identity. The Hakka diaspora reaches well beyond the geographic borders of mainland China. Although their estimates are judged as high, members of various international Hakka associations claim that there are as many as seventy-five million Hakka worldwide today, with thirty to thirty-five million residing outside mainland China.[2] Since the seventeenth century, and particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hakka who came mainly from Guangdong agricultural communities emigrated to Taiwan, Malaya, and other regions of Southeast Asia, and as far as South Asia, Africa, Oceania, Europe, the Caribbean, and North and

2. Many scholars consider these estimates, particularly the ones for Hakka outside the mainland, excessively high. For further estimates, see Erbaugh (this volume).

South America. Hakka emigrated for a number of reasons, but their motives were mostly economic and, in some cases, political.[3] They often worked as manual laborers, taking up opportunities created by capitalist and colonial expansion. They built railways, labored in mines or plantations, worked as farmers, or set up small businesses. The descendants of these early Hakka immigrants speak different languages, eat different foods, and belong to different economic classes and political parties, yet they may retain the name Hakka and identify themselves as such.

In and of itself, this cultural diversity does not create a significant problem for anthropologists, whose models have long rejected the naive equation of an ethnic group as a cultural unit.[4] But this does raise the practical and theoretical question of what these Hakka share with one another, with those who still reside on the mainland, and those who have emigrated in recent years, besides the label Hakka.

As we see in this volume, Hakka identity is of widely varied political, economic, social, and personal significance. Its relevance varies depending on time and place. The settlers of the Hakka communities we examine left mainland China at different times—as early as the seventeenth century and as recently as the twentieth—and Hakka now live in extremely diverse situations. But Hakka communities are not so endlessly varied and infinitely distinct from one another that they preclude any useful analysis. The communities we describe in this volume are distinct, but they share historical origins in South China. Moreover, they share certain ethnic processes that are of more generalizable significance. We do not, in other words, simply accept the Hakka claim that Hakka all share an *innate* bond, nor do we acquiesce to the postmodern dilemma that there appear to be such infinite subjectivities of Hakka identity that they defy wider social or cultural patterning. As John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff have argued for anthropology in general, "If our models are supple enough, they should make sense of even the most chaotic and shifting social environment. . . . Absence and disconnection, incoherence and disorder, have actually to be demonstrated"

3. Following the Taiping Rebellion (1851–64), for example, many Hakka—including those who were not involved in the uprising—fled South China for fear of political persecution. At about the same time, and following the Hakka-Punti Wars (1850–67) and the turmoil of the late nineteenth century, members of many Hakka Christian congregations are also known to have fled to Hong Kong, North Borneo, and elsewhere in order to escape religious and ethnic oppression (see Constable 1994:37).

4. See Bentley (1983:2–3) for a critique of the equation of social groups with culture units.

(1992:24). Our challenge is to make sense of shifting Hakka collective identities, their similarities, apparent discontinuities, and divergences.

A central question that this volume raises is the extent to which common mainland cultural origins—not to say Hakka identity—explain the similarities we find among Hakka communities, or whether some of the patterns we witness arise from more general processes of social change or ethnic interaction in the new setting. We need to account for the common stereotypes found in many of our cases regarding, for example, hardworking Hakka women, political patriotism, cooperativeness, and agricultural or working-class occupations, and we also need to question the extent to which these ideological patterns are reflected in social reality. In the diverse ethnic contexts in which Hakka now reside, they may be recast in a subordinate social and economic position or find themselves in different situations of hierarchy or inequality. These may replicate, to some extent, earlier ethnic hierarchies from mainland China, or they may be quite distinct. Thus one question we raise relates to the connection between Hakka ethnic consciousness and class or other systems of inequality.

Because many of our observations regarding the Hakka contribute to understanding ethnicity and ethnic processes in general, I have found it particularly useful, throughout this introduction, to refer to some of the general propositions and patterns regarding ethnicity described by Comaroff and Comaroff (1992:49–67). In general, the contributions to this volume support the Comaroffs' view that ethnicity is the product of historical processes but is not primordial; that ethnicity is not "a unitary 'thing,' " but it "describes a set of relations and a mode of consciousness" (1992:54); that ethnicity originates in systems of political and economic inequality; and that ethnicity "tends to take on the 'natural' appearance of an autonomous force, a 'principle' capable of determining the course of social life" (ibid.:60). Our cases also clearly illustrate the way ethnicity "may be perpetuated by factors quite different from those that caused its emergence, and may have a direct and independent impact on the context in which it arose" (ibid.:61).

Whereas Comaroff and Comaroff draw mainly on examples from Africa, the Hakka cases in this volume support and further illustrate many of their points. The social patterns we observe in Hakka communities generally have more to do with the wider ethnic processes and sociological patterns of which they are a part than with the "fact" that they are Hakka. On the other hand, some of the cultural patterns upon

which the idea of social differences is inscribed appear to be more uniquely Hakka, despite differences in the social contexts in which they occur.

HISTORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF HAKKA CONSCIOUSNESS

One answer to our central question, as many Hakka are likely to suggest, and the contributors to this volume would agree, lies in Hakka history. Hakka are not only those who define themselves or are so labeled by others; they are those of whom it can be said that their ancestors shared a real or imagined history. There are two types of history in which we are interested in this volume. One is the collective history that Hakka believe they share, and that is often the most basic theme in the rhetoric about what it means to be Hakka. The second refers to the particular *historical forces* out of which Hakka ethnicity first emerged. These forces may have since caused Hakka ethnicity to diminish, to be perpetuated, or, possibly, to become a potent force in its own right. These two histories are not necessarily the same, but they may overlap.

The first history is fairly easy to collect or solicit from Hakka informants, and because it is simply a subjective point of view, we need not necessarily be concerned with its accuracy or "factual basis," or with reducing it to one authoritative version. Its importance is primarily in the belief by Hakka themselves that it is true and based on fact. As such, it can take on a special power in the mobilization of ethnicity as a social force. This type of history is reflected in the quotations from my own informants and those cited by Ellen Oxfeld, in Howard Martin's citations from spokespersons in the Taiwan Hakka movement, and in Sharon Carstens's translations from Hakka association (*huiguan*) volumes.

The second kind of history, which, as Myron Cohen, Mary Erbaugh, and other authors illustrate, may be derived in part from the first, is far more difficult to critically and accurately ascertain. It involves an attempt to identify the historical forces through which Hakka ethnicity is constructed. Through this type of history, as Comaroff and Comaroff propose, our objective is "to show as cogently as possible . . . how realities become real, how essences become essential, how materialities materialize" (1992:20). This second kind of history is, of course, like the first, a mental construct claiming a basis in fact. But it is perhaps best described as a "second order" construction of history, one that attempts