
Christian Souls



and Chinese Spirits

*A Hakka Community in
Hong Kong*

Nicole Constable

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For three teachers
Andrew Y. L. Cheung
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Note on Romanization

In romanizing Chinese words, I have used the following conventions: Chinese place names outside of Hong Kong, and common terms or concepts (e.g., Qing dynasty, *feng-shui*, Guangdong province) are in pinyin. Place names within the territory of Hong Kong are romanized according to the system found in *A Gazetteer of Place Names in Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories* (Hong Kong Government 1960) or *Hong Kong Streets and Places* (Hong Kong Government 1983, 1985). Where it is important to convey the language in which certain words or phrases were spoken, I have romanized Cantonese terms according to the Yale system as found in Huang's *Cantonese Dictionary* (1970).

With the exception of a few individuals who are known to follow a different convention, Chinese names are given in the traditional Chinese order: surname followed by given name. Personal names presented the most difficulty in romanization. Whenever possible, a name follows the English spelling preferred by the individual (e.g., "Pang Lok Sam") or as found in such written sources as family, church, or government records in Hong Kong. These generally do not follow any one style of romanization. The names of more widely known individuals have been written in pinyin (e.g., Deng Xiaoping). Personal names in the appendices follow the system of romanization used in the archival material in which they were written, unless they could be identified with names appearing elsewhere in the text (e.g., "Hung Syu Tschen" is changed to "Hong Xiuquan"). All surnames and names used repeatedly in the text are included in the glossary.

Chinese terms in quotations that use other recognizable systems of romanization have not been adjusted. Where confusion may arise, an additional transliteration appears in brackets, or in a footnote when some explanation is required. Terms such as Hakka and Punti are given in their most common English spellings. A glossary of Chinese terms is provided at the end of the text.

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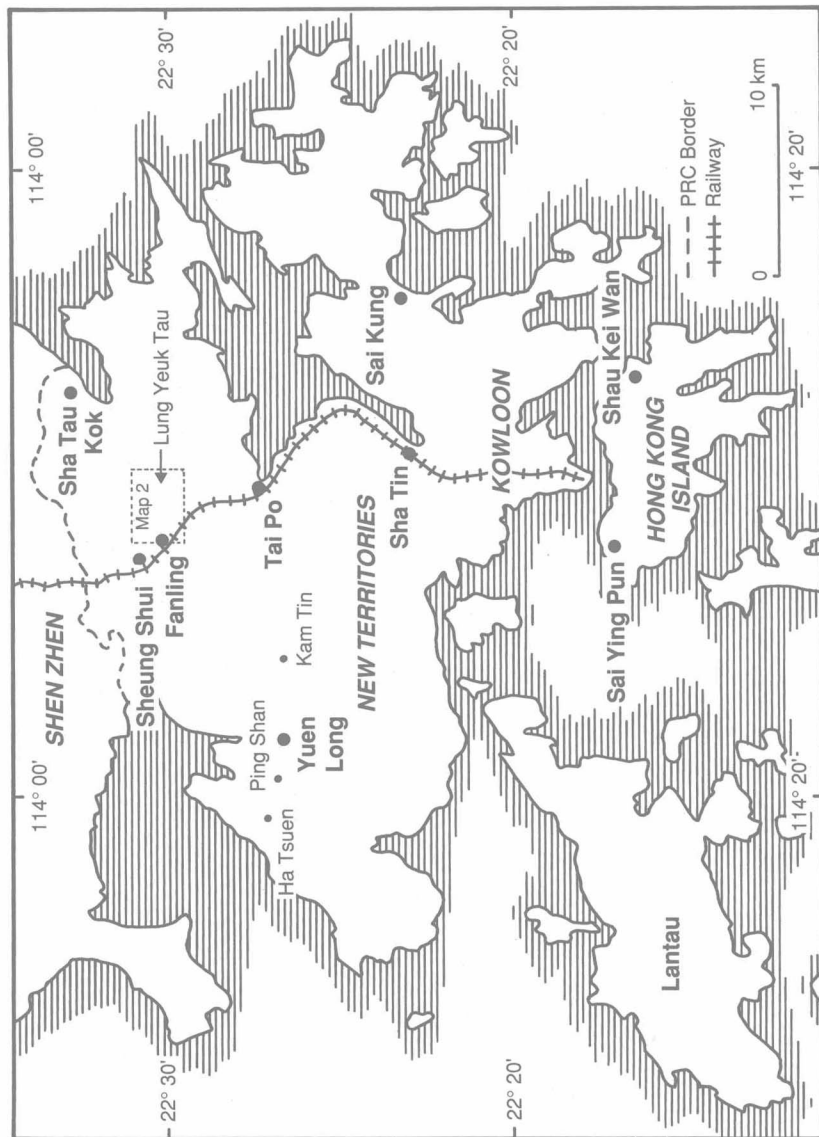
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1 Who Are the Hakka?

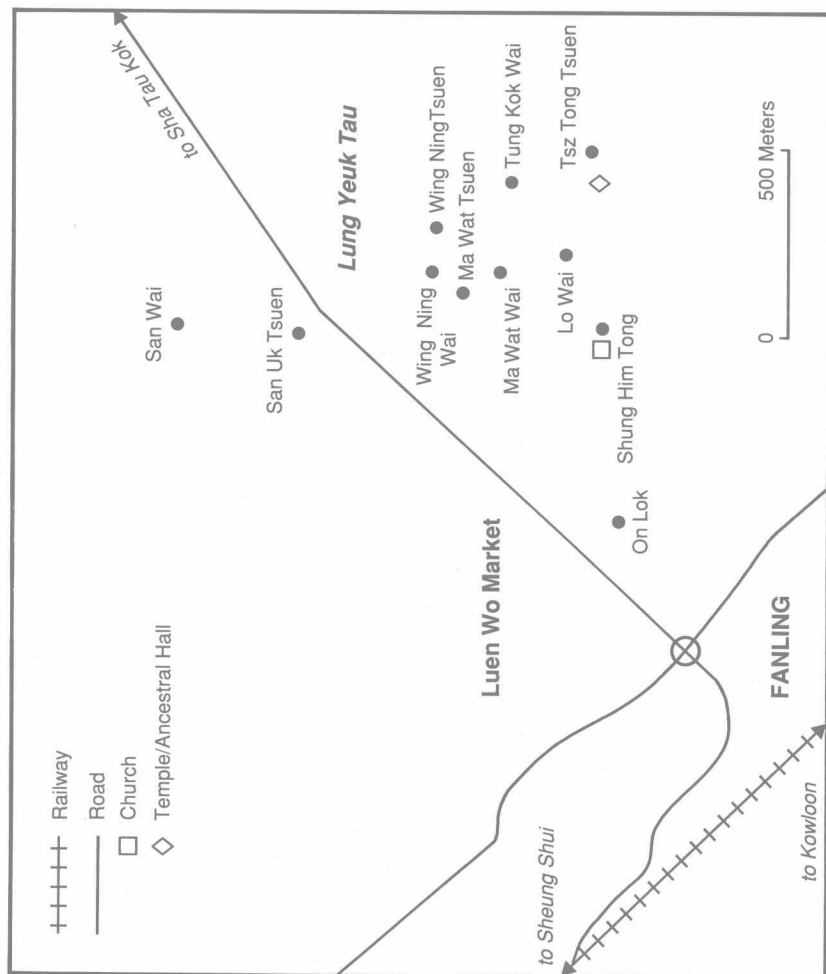
Hong Kong is not, as many people envision it, all high-rises and urban sprawl. In the approximately 350 square miles of the New Territories there are several New Towns with high-rise housing estates erected on the sites of old market towns and surrounded by hundreds of smaller villages nestled in farmland among rolling hills and open spaces. Nor is the population of Hong Kong homogeneous. The dominant language is Cantonese, and Chinese of Cantonese origin are in the majority, but the Chinese population also comprises Hakka, Hokkien, Chaozhou, Shanghai, and Mandarin speakers.

In the northeastern sector of the New Territories, less than one mile from the Fanling train station and the Fanling New Town housing estate, is one small village that stands out visually from the rest mainly because of the church on its main road, a modern blue and gray structure that contrasts abruptly with the surrounding stone houses and vegetable gardens. The village is named Shung Him Tong—"the village of the Hall of Humble Worship" or "Humble Worship Village"—and well over 90 percent of its residents are Hakka and Christian.¹

The village was established by Hakka Christians at the turn of this century in an area of the New Territories that was the ancestral land of the dominant Cantonese-speaking, higher order Teng lineage for over five hundred years. The region, comprising five walled and six unwallled villages and bordered on the west by the Phoenix River, takes its name of Lung Shan or "Dragon Mountain" from the summit looming auspiciously to the southeast. The area is also known as Lung Yeuk Tau or the "Land of Jumping Dragons" (see maps 1, 2). According to local legends, the dragon holds a pearl in his mouth, and it is there on top of the pearl, in a place with powerful geomantic features (*feng-shui*) at the heart of Teng ancestral lands, that Hakka Christians founded their village in 1903.



Map 1. Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the New Territories. Adapted from Hong Kong Government, Lands Department, Survey Division Map (1985).



Map 2. Lung Yeuk Tau. Adapted from Hong Kong Government, Lands Department, Survey Division Map (1985).

As Christians, the current residents claim that it was certainly not the *feng-shui* that attracted their ancestors to the region but its beauty and a host of other practical considerations, including potential escape from the hardships and discrimination faced by earlier generations in Guangdong province. Rarely was I taken for a walk through the village without hearing mention of both the difficulties faced by the early settlers and the geomantic features of the region. Such was the case when, on my first Sunday in the village, as I embarked on a year's study in this Hakka community, I was conducted by a respected elderly man on a tour of the places where the villagers lived, worshiped, studied, played, and were buried.

Our walk led uphill from the church to the school and playground, with a brief reprieve from the summer heat in the shade of some old trees. On our way down the narrow pathways he pointed out houses, gardens, and other landmarks, each evoking stories of the Second World War, when the Japanese used the school as their headquarters, women denuded the hillsides of vegetation in search of fuel, and a church-organized group marched all the way back to Meixian, the region of Guangdong province that many Hakka claim as their homeland. Empty houses evoked stories of families who had moved overseas and who still came back to visit every Christmas or at the Chinese New Year. Traditional horseshoe-shaped graves reminded my guide of wealthy movie stars and overseas Chinese millionaires who had arranged to be buried in auspicious locations along the flanks of the dragon. Fences and bridges suggested alliances or feuds with non-Hakka non-Christians from the neighboring communities. At the village cemetery, rectangular "European" grave markers—with their inscriptions and black-and-white photographs—served as genealogies of the "church family" and elicited from my guide names of many famous Hakka people. The tour ended, appropriately, where it had begun, at the church, the center and focus of the community.

A composite of this walk—repeated many times with numerous companions—is etched in my mind. Each guide related distinct yet similar reflections on the community, its history, and his or her place in it. The villagers' dual Hakka and Christian identity is inscribed in the physical construction of the community and also in their day-to-day lives, which in turn project this identity to the outside world. The main focus of this study is how the people of Shung Him Tong conceive of their Hakka identity, and how they express it through their voices, their daily lives, their construction of the village, and their conceptions of the way their local history links with broader Hakka and Chinese history. A particular focus is on how Christianity has influenced their Hakka identity and how these Hakka Christians have attempted to reconcile their Chinese and Christian identities and maintain—despite accusations to the contrary—that although they are Christian they are still Chinese. Significantly,

images of Christmas and the lunar new year in Shung Him Tong, of Christian and Chinese graves, of the modern architecture of the church juxtaposed with attention to *feng-shui*, produce an uneasy fusion of Christian and Chinese elements. Similarly, the various aspects of their identity—Chinese, Hakka, and Christian—are easily rationalized by members of the community, but they are not so easily reconciled in terms of experience.

THE ORIGIN OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Although the bulk of my research was carried out during twelve months in 1986 and 1987, the project had its roots in my earlier experiences in Hong Kong. It was during my first visit there as an undergraduate studying anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1979–80 that the Hakka first captured my interest. It was then that I first learned from a teacher, the late Barbara E. Ward, about what she called “conscious models” and about occupational specialization among Chinese “sub-ethnic” groups (1965, 1966). I was particularly interested in the women I saw wearing flat circular straw hats with black fringe while they carried heavy loads, worked on construction sites, tended vegetable plots, and hawked their wares in rural markets. These women, I was told, were Hakka. In contrast to the stereotype of Chinese women as delicate and frail, the reputation of Hakka women was one of exceptional strength, both mental and physical—they were known to be sure-footed, hardworking, and proud.

On my second visit to Hong Kong in 1984, I intended to conduct a pilot study of Hakka market women and to learn about the relevance of Hakka identity to their work. But after numerous attempts to interview “Hakka” women in the marketplaces with the help of my assistant, it became less and less clear who actually was Hakka. We found candidates extremely reluctant to discuss Hakka identity. The main problem, we discovered, aside from suspicions that we might be there to discover unlicensed hawkers, was that the term “Hakka” had various, and sometimes negative, connotations. Some who spoke Hakka, and whom others in the market readily identified as Hakka, refused to label themselves as such. As one market woman put it, “My ancestors were Hakka, but I am not.” Another told us, “You are more *hakka* than I am! Compared with you, I am *punti*!” She was referring to the literal translation of Hakka (*kejia*) as “stranger,” “newcomer,” “settler,” or “guest,” and Punti (*bendi*) as “indigenous,” “local,” or “native inhabitant.”

Most of the Hakka people I met during that summer seemed ambivalent toward their Hakka identity until I met a man in his early seventies, whom I will call “Mr. C.,” from Shung Him Tong.² Mr. C. began our conversation by listing all the famous Hakka he could think of, including Deng Xiaoping, Sun Yat-sen, Singapore’s president Lee Kwan Yew, Taiwan’s president Lee