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“What Does Hakka-Studies have to teach the world?”

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**PART ONE: THERE IS NO HAKKA STUDIES**

Good morning. It's a great pleasure to be with you this morning. When I told my father Dennis, (who is in the audience today), the title of my talk --“What Does Hakka-Studies have to teach the world?” he said to me simply, that's a “damn good question.” “I sometimes wonder,” he said in his understated by earnest way, “what the hell we're doing all this for?”

To be clear, I don't have any damn good answers. In fact, the question I offer to you might itself be misleading as it might suggest there is a “Hakka Studies” headquarters somewhere we call and pose the question, “What do you have to teach the world?”

There is no such headquarters, as far as I know, no place that will provide such easy answers. To be sure, there are many volumes of work published around the globe (the large majority from outside of North America) on Hakka people, cultures, religion, language, food, politics, and history. And there are self-identified “hakkologists”--anthropologists, linguists, historians, geographers, and geneticists--who have written about Hakka in Taiwan, Malaysia, China, the Caribbean, Africa, South America and the U.S. and Canada. There are international Hakka conferences. But even if we were to stack all these volumes of materials together—even if we place them in an office with a big neon sign proclaiming Hakka Studies Headquarters—the answer to that question will still elude us.

But even if there is no singular body of Hakka Studies—and I mean this especially in North America—that does not mean we can't foray into some Hakkology today, to think about what Hakka Studies might have to teach the world at this particular moment.

The plain secret of all academic disciplines—all fields of knowledge production and inquiry—is that they are constructed by their practitioners—they don't come from the heavens above, nor do the objects of study simply present themselves already packaged in a textbook. They are fashioned by people—sometimes with credentials, sometimes without—who reach a consensus on particular theories, claims, ideas, evidence, and experiences—that will serve as the authoritative basis for their respective fields. And as such, they are subject to the influences that operate on all of us—our current political conditions, our histories, our experiences and our prejudices.

## **PART TWO: “ROOTS”**

An influential Jamaican-born theorist named Stuart Hall, pictured here with his wife on Hellshire Beach, has suggested that there are two ways people often consider group identity.



Catherine and Stuart Hall reading *The Caribbean Review of Books* at Hellshire Beach, Jamaica; June 2004. Photo by Annie Paul

The dominant way is to think about it as a matter of “roots” R-O-O-T-S. Hall thought a lot about these questions, as he was born in Jamaica but emigrated to the UK on a Rhodes scholarship in the early 1950s, so questions of group identity (are you a Londener? An Englishman? An immigrant? A black man? A West Indian?) were always at the fore.<sup>1</sup>

To get to such “roots” is often taken as a question of getting to our origins—those primordial and essential characteristics and common traits that all members of the group are alleged to share. These origin stories are part of what makes groups recognizable and distinctive. Think of all the direct to consumers ancestry DNA tests where you spit in a cup or swipe your cheek and send it to a lab which will in turn send you a report purporting to tell you the distribution of your genetic origins—25% here—35% there—40% there. Though geneticists have long cautioned about interpreting the results in this way, they’ve only grown in popularity precisely because it seems to connect us to some kind of origin story—an algorithm that magically reveals our roots.

We can certainly try and tell a story about Hakka “roots.” We can describe a series of migrations, starting perhaps in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, from North Central China, and continuing into other displacements and movements in the second millennium within China, and then into the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century when Hakka people migrated to other corners of the world. And from this “roots” story, we can fashion and distill a set of characteristics said to constitute the “Hakka” spirit. A fierce hardiness. Egalitarian gender roles, which we derive from the lack of foot-binding practices. A strong work ethic. Independent. Adaptable. Tenacious. Survivors.

Now this sounds like a good origins story to me—who wouldn’t want to think of themselves as descending from such innocent, industrious and virtuous stock. And shoot, we know other groups take some liberties with their origins stories—the Pilgrims, Columbus, the Pioneers—why can’t we? What’s the harm?

Here is where I want to be provocative. Stuart Hall suggests that to try and return to our “roots” will always leave us with a thin understanding of our shared identity, because by definition this way of understanding ourselves lies outside of history. If we say these traits—this basis of our shared identity--is “timeless,” then it dismisses what actually makes us human—our lived, changing, and dynamic experiences in the world.

I would add also that when we are talking about a global diaspora of Hakka—estimated to comprise between 50 and 75 million people--distributed across many dozens of countries and six continents, any talk of shared characteristics or traits is going to be fraught.

A recent volume of scholarly essays on this very question argues that “that there are few, if any, actual observable cultural differences that distinguish Hakka from others across the board... But ideas about Hakka distinctiveness—that they have distinctive gender roles; that they are cooperative, hard-working, egalitarian, or frugal; and that they share a common past—

persist.”<sup>2</sup> The authors suggest that a recitation of shared characteristics is likely to obscure as much as it reveals.

And I think if we are being honest, while its lovely to tell an origins story that’s virtuous and innocent, this one isn’t terribly distinctive or original. Can you think of any other groups that also explain themselves as hard-working, family-oriented and frugal? Isn’t that some version of everyone’s story? And if it is the story, then what do we in fact have to say to the world that’s new? Work hard? Love your family? That can’t be the sum total of our *Intro to Hakkology* text book.

### **PART THREE: ROUTES**

Hall suggested there was another way to account for group identity—a different kind of “routes”—R-O-U-T-E-S. For Hall, this meant thinking about the ways that our lived experiences, our journeys and movements—shape how we see ourselves and understand the world. Hall said these are the “different points by which [we] have come to be now; [we] are in a sense, the sum of those differences.” He described this as “an unfolding sense of the self.”<sup>3</sup>

So to inquire about “routes” is to move away from timeless shared characteristics into the much messier world of differences and of stories and of contradictions. And if Hakka can be translated to mean “guest people”—a people on the move—then we know we have stories. Distinct stories. Stories about being guests, about being strangers, and about the ways we make home. The stories in this room.

I want to get to a few of those stories in a moment—stories in particular about the Chinese presence in Jamaica. But I want to first say something about the context for these stories.

The movement of Hakka and others out of China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did not happen spontaneously of course. It unfolded in the context of colonial expansion and the emergence of global markets of goods and people—as well as the abolition of slavery. These conditions relate to the question facing every guest: “What brought you here?”

It is an especially important question for the earliest generation of Chinese workers who made their way to Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the Haitian Revolution at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when enslaved people took up arms against the people who declared themselves their masters, and killed a good number of them, there was widespread anxiety and fear from the seats of empire. Who would be next?

And this question is intimately tied to the Chinese presence in the Caribbean. In a letter described by my colleague Lisa Lowe in her wonderful book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, a British colonial administrator wrote in 1804 to his colleagues about “the danger of a spirit of insurrection being excited amongst the Negroes in our colonies.”

They plainly feared Black uprising, and this is when Chinese laborers are first considered. The administrator suggested: “no measure would so effectually tend to provide a security against this danger [of Black Rebellion], as that of introducing a free race of cultivators into our islands, who, from habits and feelings could be kept distinct from the Negroes, and who from interest would be inseparably attached to the European proprietors... The Chinese people.. unite the qualities which constitute this double recommendation.”<sup>4</sup>

That is, the Chinese would both work hard enough to maintain the profitability of the colonies, while not casting their lots with rebellious Black people. Another administrator described the Chinese as “a barrier between us and the Negroes with whom they do not associate.” He further promised, “their industrious habits, and constitutional strength, will I think greatly aid the planters.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed the colonial administrators were fixated on the idea that the Chinese “must be kept in the first instance distant and separate from the Negroes, not only at their work, but also in their dwellings.”<sup>6</sup>

This, I want to point out then, is one danger about making arguments about the industrious Hakka or Chinese spirit in this context—its risk of complicity. It was the Chinese people’s “industrious habits, and constitutional strength” as well as their alleged clannish characteristics—(they won’t mix with the Black people)—that could make them so valuable to the planters and such an adversary to people demanding their freedom. The danger here then is that to celebrate one’s “industriousness” in this context is to risk being complicit in another’s subordination.

I’ve thought about those letters and those plans when I recently came across a copy of periodical that some of you may know about called *The Pagoda* published in Kingston in the 1950s that sought to “represent the point of view of the Chinese section of the Jamaican population.” The 1950s, as you know, was a time of growing ferment in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean, as the calls for independence, Pan-Africanism and Third Worldism, workers’ rights and decolonization were growing louder by the day.

If you flip through the pages of the *Pagoda*, these conflicts barely register. It reads remarkably like a middle-class magazine from anywhere in the US and England—advertises for cars, insurance, toothpaste and travel; wedding announcements; an advice column on social

manners. While one editorial announces that “we shall do our best to lead and direct the efforts of the Chinese community towards the improvement of all sections of Jamaican life, not forgetting that we are first of all Jamaicans,” the paper is largely an archive of middle-class social and consumer life, seemingly content with prevailing relations of colonial power.<sup>7</sup>

If the ghosts of the colonial administrators who announced their designs for Chinese laborers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were to read the *Pagoda* 150 years later, I sense they wouldn’t be too displeased. Even after the plantation economy was surpassed, their hopes and predictions about Chinese “industriousness,” political loyalties, and group identities seemed to have been realized.

This is one story of Hakka routes and stories that I think we must acknowledge, if we are being honest. In a moment of ferment and turmoil, in which a poor and overwhelmingly Black country wrestled with its fate in a vastly unequal world, many Hakka stood on the sidelines, and remained ambivalent about the plight of the large majority of Jamaican people.

#### **PART FOUR: WHAT HAKKA STUDIES CAN TEACH THE WORLD**

But this is not the only story. For we know that our “routes” did not just keep Chinese Jamaicans in the polite parlors of uptown Kingston. The British colonial dream that all Chinese would be kept “distant and separate” did not fundamentally succeed. As we know, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many thousands of Chinese moved to rural parts of Jamaica and made lives, families, businesses and worlds that exceeded this vision. They didn’t simply assimilate into a singular and dominant Jamaican culture, nor did their indomitable “Hakka” spirit impose its will on their surroundings. Instead, they became co-producers of a varied 20<sup>th</sup> century Jamaican



culture that was dynamic, evolving and shaped by the routes of many different people—it was itself a product of many places.



This is one of the lessons I've learned from my grandmother, Viva Chin, pictured here behind the counter at one of shops she ran. It is difficult to call her story a testament to a culture of gender equality. She was forced to quit school at the age of 16 in order to wed a man many years older than her (my great-grandfather) in a marriage arranged by other older men who worked in the business association. She had four children by the time she was twenty and was left by this man; the association then arranged another marriage. These unions were an important part of the business relationships that brought Chinese men to Jamaica, but the gender roles were hardly equal. More than one of the shops she tended as a young woman was burned to the ground (including one time when the family was home) and while a culprit was never identified, the suspects were thought to be other Chinese shop owners. People are complicated.

Later, she emigrated to the US and found work in as a home health aide and nursing home worker in Flushing—and helped sponsor eight of her children to join her. She was a union member, and worked alongside and for people from all over the world.

Her story, and the many routes she traveled across Jamaica and eventually to the US, prompted me to think about what it means to be a guest. About setting up a shop in a small town where you are a guest, and playing a role in the life of that place. About coming to a city entirely foreign to you and engaging in care work—learning the stories about new people and the places from which they came. My grandmother always has stories—sometimes about her experiences but often about the experiences of other people she'd met. Other newcomers whose lives became tied to hers. To be a guest is to enter in the lives of others—it's the insight I take from Paula's beautiful film and of her mother's life in Harlem.<sup>8</sup> It is to think of “home” in an expansive way—never tied to a single place or a single way of being. I think there are many stories like that in this room.

We live today in a world on the move. A UN report recently placed the number of displaced persons—people forced to migrate against their will--globally at 68 million. Nearly 250 million people today live in a different country from where they were born—approaching 3 percent of the world's population.<sup>9</sup> This includes nearly 50 million people living in the US. I'm not sure the term “guest” is an appropriate way to describe all of these people and their experiences. But in a world in which so many people find themselves living in unfamiliar circumstances and unfamiliar times, it seems to me that the stories of a “guest people” might have tremendous resonance and relevance. This is the Hakkology in which I'm interested—the stories of routes—of movement, accommodation, reciprocity—that lead to the making of new identities, places, and kin. We are imbricated in one another's lives. We are related in

complicated ways. The British colonial office imagined the guest people would disavow the people they met and remain loyal to the empire. Some times that happened; many times it did not.

The stories of our R-O-O-T-S surely provide some comfort, and some sense of grounding or rootedness. I'm not suggesting we abandon those. But we might also foreground our routes—about the ways you can be connected to multiple places at the same time, the ways you can fuse multiple experiences and lineages and traditions into something new. A process of continually becoming that always requires you to attend to your surroundings, and requires a capacious understanding of who it is that makes up your people. Our society desperately needs to hear and learn from these stories. This is what Hakka Studies has to teach the world. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> For one statement of Hall's position here, see, Annie Paul, "Stuart Hall: 'Culture is always a translation'" *Caribbean Beat Magazine*. Issue 71 (January/February 2005). <https://www.caribbean-beat.com/issue-71/culture-always-translation#axzz5iZPKVkkL>

<sup>2</sup> Nicole Constable "What Does it Mean to Be Hakka?" in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005) 33.

<sup>3</sup> "A Conversation with Stuart Hall." *The Journal of the International Institute*. Volume 7, Issue 1, Fall 1999. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0007.107>.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 31

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 35

<sup>7</sup> *The Pagoda*, Volume XXIX, No 1, January 8, 1955. Yuk Ow Papers, Box 16, Folder 15, Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley. I thank Robbie Short for this reference.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Madison, *Finding Samuel Lowe*. Director: Janette Kong. (Virgil Films and Entertainment, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Edwards, "Forced Displacements at Record 68.5 Million." UNHCR June 19, 2018 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/6/5b222c494/forced-displacement-record-685-million.html>