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The Indian Hakkas of Vienna

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Abstract

Hakka emigration has created many smaller communities worldwide; where some groups continued their migratory journey. One such example is the Hakkas, who first migrated to Calcutta and then moved on to Vienna and Toronto, clustering in a close-knit social network.

In various sessions, Viennese Hakkas of all age groups were interviewed for their lifestories and linguistic practices. (a) The linguistic competence of the migrants includes Hakka, English and Indian (Hindi, Bengali) but often rather little German; Hakka is important at the workplace (Chinese restaurants) and is transmitted in families; Indian helps establish professional relationships with Indian migrants. (b) The social network is rather closed to Hakka friends from Calcutta or from other places. All Hakkas closely cooperate and usually have only few outside contacts. They consider Calcutta as their old homeland to which they return for Chinese New Year. (c) The younger generation consists of weak speakers of Hakka who are fully integrated into Austrian culture, but also maintain contacts to Toronto and love to visit friends and family in India. To conclude, the Indian Hakkas of Vienna are an interesting example of a two-step migration which first converted some Chinese into Indians, and then planted this Indian subgroup into Europe.

Keywords: Hakka migration, Hakka language, Indian Hakkas

Background

Ethnic Chinese people, especially from Southern China, have continually emigrated to other countries (cf. Wang 1991), with South-East Asia being the main destination (Li and Li 2013; Leo 2015; Carstens 2018). Since the 18th century, a small group of Chinese also lived in Calcutta (Biswas 2017).

One group known for its high migratory mobility is the Hakkas (客家, lit. 'guest people;' cf. Leo 2015) from the mountaineous region between Guangdong and Fujian, having moved there from the north in various migration waves (Cohen 1968; Mong 1980; Leong 1997), spreading out over Guangdong and other provinces. The traditional life of the Hakkas includes closed-group practices for marriage, etc., with great importance given to family ancestry. In migration, these groups continued these closed-group practices with clan associations (huiguan or tongxianghui), endogamous practices, and characteristic professions (cf., e.g., Zhang and Sen 2013; Biswas 2017). The Hakkas are known for often settling in the periphery of economic centres, adopting professions that are also marginal and which provide wealth.

During the politically turbulent 20th century, a group of Hakkas of several thousand, originating from Meizhou, tried to reach Nanyang (Malaya), but for various reasons ‘ended up’ in Calcutta, India. Many started leather processing (shoe making) and tanning, professions which were reserved for untouchables by Hindus (Oxfeld 1993; Oxfeld 1996; Liang 2007; Biswas 2017), and became wealthy (as ‘pariah capitalists;’ cf. Weber 1992: 166; Chun 1989; for the Calcutta Hakkas, cf. Oxfeld 1985, 1992, 1993, 1996 [2007]). Another typical profession for Hakkas was restaurant owner and cook. The multiethnic Calcutta area is divided into “endogamous, occupationally demarcated and geographically clustered groups” (Oxfeld 1992: 268), which makes ‘assimilation’ for any group impossible (cf. Biswas 2017). Thus, the Hakkas of Bengal could easily maintain clearly defined social boundaries towards other ethnic groups (Oxfeld 1992: 268), with mainly intra-group marriage and Buddhist religious practices. In a climate of strong group solidarity, the Hakka language has been maintained throughout the generations.

However, after the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962, many Indian Chinese experienced the mistrust of the Indian authorities by internment, retraction of citizenship and deportation (Oxfeld 1992: 268; Biswas 2017). Furthermore, the Indian authorities enforced environmental protection, which made the polluting tanning business difficult for this group.

Through chain migration, many Hakkas from Calcutta emigrated mostly to Toronto and Vienna in the 1980s and 1990s, but also to a few other places. Group solidarity helped newcomers in the new places to find work and, subsequently a residence permit. In the new situation in Vienna, there was little choice but to open Chinese restaurants or to work in the kitchens of established ones.

At some point, 4000 Indian Hakkas may have lived in Austria – mostly in Vienna. However, the restaurant business became increasingly competitive, and many had been closed. This led to another migration pattern of the Viennes Hakkas moving on to Toronto and other places. The remaining group may have been an estimated 1000 people. This high mobility of new Hakkas with work migration and education at foreign universities led to the arising of ‘astronaut families,’ where family members may have lived on different continents and may have traveled back and forth for business and family reunions (cf. Waters 2005; van Dongen and Liu 2018).

The Hakkas of Vienna have a few remarkable characteristics; due to their endogamous, closed-group lifestyle, they have preserved the Hakka language as their intra-group language, attend a Chinese temple, have a regular weekly meeting, and regularly return to India to visit relatives and friends; if possible, they also visit Meizhou, their ancestral home country.

Material and Method

The authors performed qualitative open interviews with Indian Hakkas in Vienna from all age groups on various occasions in 2018-2019, in Hakka, English, German and Chinese. The aims of this investigation are to observe the following: (a) Language maintenance and language loss of Hakka in the exile situation, (b) competence in German, (c) the socio-cultural circumstances of the Hakka migration in Austria. The following is a summary of the findings from discussions with the Hakka population.

Analysis

Linguistic Competence

Since the Hakkas of Calcutta left China prior to Putonghua, the modern Chinese standard language, was introduced (1956), they only speak Hakka and read Chinese with Hakka spelling. In Calcutta, they learned Indian languages and English. After arriving in Austria, they generally started working immediately, and none had the opportunity to formally learn German. Therefore, their competence in German is a pidgin version of German with Hakka substrate. Their Hakka, however, is not influenced by Putonghua (but they adopt Indian words).

As the families speak Hakka at home, the children understand and are able to use Hakka, but their best language is German. Back in Calcutta, where the group has also shrunk over time, Hakka is also in decline, usually replaced by English as the preferred language. Since many youth also renounced the idea of endogamous partner choice, to the chagrin of their parents, the Hakka language in Vienna may have met its last generation.

Socio-cultural Circumstances

While rich Hakkas in Calcutta see no need to migrate, young adventurous people in search of new opportunities possibly move to Vienna. Some manage to have their own restaurants, and to employ those who come later. People report adventurous journeys until they finally reach Austria, which is their destination as their friends or relatives have already established businesses. Upon arrival, they are immediately employed in restaurants. The German language is only acquired in the workplace; people do not seem to have many Austrian nor Chinese friends who are not Hakkas. One stated that one of their friends from the outside is a Malaysian Hakka who had to adapt linguistically to their dialect in order to be understood.

The German grammatical competence of the Hakkas in Austria is limited. Their language is based on Austrian German (dialectal forms), not standard German. One man from the group considered to be particularly gifted with languages had quickly been introduced to the non-Hakka investigator as an intermediary. This person speaks Austrian German quite well, and somewhat criticised the (low) level of linguistic competence of others who, in his view, were satisfied too quickly with a low level of linguistic competence. However, these migrants had worked all their lives in Hakka environments, and never used German beyond taking orders at their restaurants.

Social Networks

The group has strong internal solidarity. Most Hakka men are married to Hakka women, and report not having contact with other Hân (Chinese), as they usually do not understand other Chinese varieties; although they are becoming accustomed to Putonghua from Chinese TV, they generally do not resonate with China, and remain culturally rooted in India. In earlier years, Hakka men from Austria attempted to marry Indian Hakka women with the help of matchmakers; when this became increasingly difficult, some attempted to find a wife in Meizhou, which also does not seem to be a successful strategy. Some couples met in Austria at their ingroup workplaces.

While many Hakkas are either Christians or Buddhists regularly attending traditional religious events, recent conversion to certain Christian denominations has also somewhat weakened group solidarity.

The Indian Hakkas strive for Austrian citizenship and call Austria their new homeland, despite not having many outside contacts. When asked, the migrant generation frequently states that they are “already used to living here,” or that they have two home countries, India and Austria.

The Hakka restaurants serve all kinds of Asian foods, but can cook Indian Hakka style upon request. While Austria does not seem to be sensitive for such smaller cultural differences, Hakka-Indian cuisine seems to have become fashionable in English-speaking countries. Of course, the Austrian restaurant owners are frequently relatives or friends of their famous colleagues in London and Toronto.

Intergenerational Aspects

Families report being a somewhat dissatisfied with their children being “culturally westerners,” and no longer caring for Hakka traditions, such as endogamy. The children, however, report having learned Hakka, as this is important for their parents. As for their lifeplans, they would not exclude marrying a European person, or moving to Toronto, which reflects their connection to other Indian Hakka groups in the world.

The children grew up with Hakka only until school, and then quickly switched to speaking German. Some are interested in the Hakka heritage, others are disinterested. Their competence in Hakka is limited, and while they are able to communicate, they seem to lack much Hakka vocabulary which they regularly replace by English or German loanwords. They are more comfortable with German than with Hakka. When asked about their identities, they feel like Austrians, with their family and cultural tradition being Indian; the young do not relate themselves to China.

Conclusion

The Indian Hakkas in Vienna are still a very enclosed migratory group identifying with a unique culture as Indian Hakkas. However, in modern times, global migration does no longer allow for the maintenance of such enclosed small-group practices. The younger generation may probably not continue the Hakka language and may not insist on endogamous marriage. As is the case with many groups, families are often spread over several continents. Religion can no longer provide unity. Finally, the specific ethnic profession of a restaurant owner is also maintained only by few families, whereas many of the remaining Hakkas are either retired or work in the food industry outside of traditional Hakka companies.

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