

# A Photograph's Exemplification of Borderless Christian Hakka Identity



*Fig. 1 "Mittelschule Kayintschu. Mühleisen, Walter, Lauk." taken by Georg E. Walter*

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*“Anthropologists have used many different approaches to analyze or attempt to “define” ethnic groups and their identities. ...Language, place of origin, clothing, food, religion, and numerous other cultural criteria have all been used to define ethnic groups. The case of the Hakka demonstrates the problem with such an essentialist approach. No single cultural trait or group of traits can determine who is Hakka and who is not.”*

—Nicole Constable, *Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits*, pp.10-11.

## **Introduction**

The Hakka Chinese, usually abbreviated to simply Hakka, are a minority sub-ethnic group found within the majority ethnic group Han Chinese. Unlike other Chinese sub-ethnicities such as the Shanghainese, the Cantonese, or the Sichuanese, the Hakka are unique in that they do not have a place of origin. In fact, Chinese ethnographers today still aren't completely sure where they originate from. According to the Taiwanese Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, “the term “Hakka” was not originally a designation for a certain ethnic group living in a particular area” (OCAC). Fittingly, the Chinese characters in the word “Hakka” is defined literally as “guest families”. Although the name Hakka has a literal meaning, the connotation of the word changes depending on who you ask. To some, Hakka is used complimentary, to describe a proud, hard working people. To others, Hakka is used derogatorily, to describe those with a “poor, uneducated country” background (Constable 9). Because of these different connotations, the definition of Hakka identity itself is hard to define. I argue that because Hakka identity is debatable and seemingly undefinable, Hakka identity itself is symbolic for an idea that transcends social boundaries. To prove that point, I will be analyzing the photograph titled

“Mittelschule Kayintschu. Mühleisen, Walter, Lauk”, taken by Basel Mission<sup>1</sup> photographer Georg Ernst Walter in Meixian, China around the early 1900’s. Despite its first-glance appearance of an unremarkable class photo, the photograph, when analyzed figuratively, portrays the Hakka in a unique light: that is, the representation of the hybrid, paradoxical *Christian* Hakka Chinese identity appears.

As mentioned earlier, the photograph is framed typical to that of any other school class photo: it shows all of the school’s students positioned youngest to oldest (front to back), and also endeavours to honor the teachers’ importance via their central positioning. Upon closer analysis, four important symbols of identity emerge through the school children, the background space, the Chinese teachers, and the European missionaries. These symbols are critical in proving that definitions of identity are malleable and relative. By observing how Christian Hakka identity is defined through these symbols, the idea of a “malleable and relative” identity can be extended to apply to any individual. In this sense, the photograph is used to portray the “borderless” Christian Hakka identity: an identity key in dismantling walls of race and nationality that separate people today.

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<sup>1</sup> The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, also known as the Basel Mission, was a Swiss missions group that came into close contact with the Hakka (Constable 16). An example of a close encounter between the two occurred after the end of the Taiping Rebellion. Because the Hakka were "under the threat of massacre" by Qing authorities, many “sought refuge with the Basel missionaries” (Constable 16).

## I. The Hakka “Uniform”: A Representation of Superficial Identity



*Fig. 2 Blurred teachers to highlight the student body*

In this section, I will be explaining the significance of the students’ positioning and uniforms. As mentioned earlier, the students are positioned based off of a hierarchy: the oldest students are in the back while the youngest sit in the front before them, as a sign of respect. According to Erbaugh’s research article, “The Secret History of the Hakkas”, the Hakka are “genetically the same as other Han [Chinese], and share very similar religion and customs”, (Erbaugh 941). As such, this hierarchy exemplified by the students is symbolically a nod to mainstream Chinese culture, which embodies ideas of “parental control, obedience, strict discipline, ... filial piety, respect for elders, [and] family obligations” (Lin 429). Although the

Hakka respected these Chinese values—as seen by how the students were positioned according to an age and class hierarchy—there was a saying by the Guangdong Hakka that superseded such values: “acknowledge your dialect, not your surname” (Erbaugh 952). In relation to mainstream Chinese culture, a culture which values “elderly respect” and “family obligations”, that Hakka saying is very peculiar (Lin 429). This is because the phrase literally defines Hakka identity to be based on language rather than on heritage. To this extent, the Hakka used language to separate themselves from other Chinese, despite being culturally the same. As such, although the younger Hakka students sit in the front before their older peers, as a respectful nod to Chinese culture, they still consider themselves to be uniquely Hakka. This is seen by how each student wears the “school uniform” of the Hakka, a symbol which associates Hakka social identification by language. In other words, the school uniform allows the wearer to visibly and noticeably show others their personal identification with being Hakka; in this sense, the school uniform is an *external* identifier. The reason it is not also an *internal* identifier is because identity, what others consider or categorize you to be, is superficial in nature in adherence to society. To illustrate, when Nicole Constable was conducting research in Hong Kong for her work “Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits”, she met Hakka market women who spoke Hakka but “refused to label themselves as such”, despite being known to others in the market as Hakka (Constable 5). One such market woman said to Constable, “My ancestors were Hakka, but I am not” (Constable 5). Earlier, I mentioned a definition of Hakka identity that was based on language, rather than on heritage. In this instance, the market woman rejects that aforementioned definition, despite the fact that she is socially *defined* as Hakka because of her language and her heritage. This ties in with the superficiality of the Hakka “school uniform”: it is an *external* identifier and not an

*internal* identifier. Much like the school uniform, identity is something an individual can “put on” or “take off”. In this particular instance, the market woman has chosen to “take off” the uniform of the Hakka in order to identify as something else.

## II. The “Body” of Christian Hakka Identity Manifested in the Courtyard



*Fig. 3 Emphasis on the courtyard and the surroundings*

In this section, I will be explaining how the Christian Hakka give definition and meaning to a space by their presence. As the Christian Hakka literally fill both the photograph and the courtyard with their presence, this suggests another fulfillment of Chinese culture. In traditional Chinese culture, every building and structure was built meticulously in conformance to a

Confucian idea called *feng shui*<sup>2</sup>. One such performance of *feng shui* is seen by how Hakka houses are structured based on the human body. For example, because the arms of the human body represented an “embracing pattern of mountain ranges” that offered “protection to [its] inhabitants”, its form was integrated into the design of the Hakka home (Poon 48).

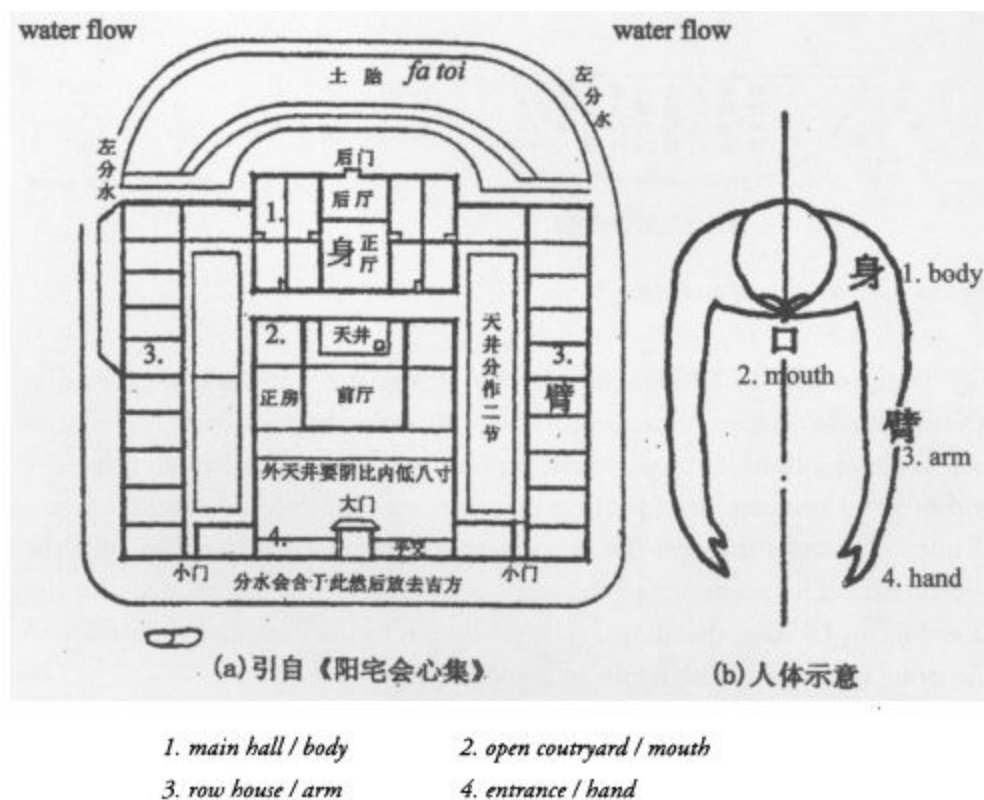


Fig. 4 Analogy between a house and the human body<sup>3</sup>

In terms of Georg Walter’s “Mittelschule Kayintschu. Mühleisen, Walter, Lauk.”, the open courtyard “mouth” is much more relevant and substantial. As seen in Figure 4, a house’s “open courtyard” is representative of the human body’s “mouth” (Poon 48). The purpose of the human

<sup>2</sup> “*Fung* [sic] *shui* literally means ‘wind and water’. A fundamental idea of *fung* [sic] *shui* is that force, *hei*, will be dispersed by wind... Humans try to gather more *hei* for the place they occupy and to prevent the loss of it... The practice [of] containing wind and obtaining water, will bring fortunes to the occupants. Consequently, *fung* [sic] *shui* entails a set of practices for the control of wind and water to the advantage of humans” (Poon 46).

<sup>3</sup> Original caption: “Fig. 34 Analogy between a house and the human body” (Poon 48).

body's mouth is to communicate to others: to assert ideas and to convey thought. In terms of Georg Walter's photo, the idea being asserted is Christian Hakka identity itself. This is represented by how the school's student body, the "body" of Christian Hakka identity, manifests itself on the courtyard in order to communicate its own unique existence. In this instance, the Christian Hakka identity *conforms* to a mainstream societal value, in this case *feng shui*, in order to convey *non-conformance*: the Christian Hakka identity. This paradoxical statement is supposed by observing the Christian Hakka perception of *feng shui*. As mentioned earlier, *feng shui* is a *Confucian* ideal, not a Christian one. When Nicole Constable asked how the Christian Hakka of Shung Him Tong addressed *feng shui*, they gave her mixed answers. Some said *feng shui* was a "superstition," implying that it is a false belief, particularly if it is "taken too far", others considered *feng shui* a "secular, 'scientific' logic, or as an intuitive aesthetic sense that 'all Chinese people know'", and some considered it more simply as just "common sense" (Constable 121). Although Constable writes these conflicting views off as a "process of reconciling Hakka Chinese and Christian identities", I disagree: this is not a reconciliation. I instead consider these contradictory statements as proof that culture itself, as is formed by society and what identity depends on, is relative to each person (Constable 126). In this regard, the definition of Christian Hakka identity is defined relative to each individual's opinion and experience. As such, the Christian Hakka identity lives in a borderless world of undefinability. If you viewed that idea as a "process of reconciliation", that process would be unending. This is because identity will always be relative to each person; everybody will always have a differing opinion. Georg Walter's photograph figuratively communicates this idea by literally placing the student body, a manifestation of borderless Christian Hakka identity, onto the courtyard.



### III. The Amalgamation of Hakka Identity



*Fig. 5 The six Hakka teachers*

Next, I will analyze the significance of the Hakka teachers as a representation of the borderless Christian Hakka identity. All of the Hakka teachers except the third from the right are wearing “culturally appropriate” clothing. This suit-wearing Hakka teacher, holds a two-fold meaning: one, he is representative of the Christian Hakka identity in the presence of socially expected Hakka identity; and two, he is representative of the undefinable, malleable Hakka identity, as shown by the following example.

In 19th century Thailand, Chinese laborers flooded the Thai workforce due to the country’s demand for Chinese labor (Wang). Hakka who came to Thailand to find new

opportunities found themselves being absorbed into the culture due to Thailand's assimilation policies (Wang). As such, their descendants have given mixed reactions regarding Hakka identity. Some of these Thai Hakka have lost their mother tongue, and don't know "how to identify the 'Hakkas' or why they need to be 'Hakka' in Thailand" (Wang). Other Thai Hakka have redefined Hakka identity, arguing against the Hakka identity defined in a previous section that Hakka language is the most important social identifier:

"Hakka identity should be built upon the Hakka spirit such as freedom, hard working, and care for education. In Thailand, I believe that the Hakka spirit is the most important part of the identity. It is difficult to emphasize on the Hakka language. With the Hakka spirit, we can inherit the Hakka identity with the Thai language or other languages" (Wang).<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, Hakka identity is once again being redefined based on an individual's relative experience. Because these Thai Hakka have experienced life differently compared to the Chinese Hakka, it simply does not make sense to compare their definitions of Hakka identity.

In terms of the symbolic duality of the suit-wearing Hakka teacher, this idea shows how Hakka identity that deviates from what is socially expected is not inferior or superior to the "socially expected" Hakka identity. This idea is ultimately signified by how all six Hakka teachers are sat on the same level, a metaphorical statement for the homogeneity of Hakka identities. Since the Hakka are able to reconstruct their identity relative to social pressures and personal experiences, the Hakka are living proof that definitions of race and culture—both important in the composition of an individual's identity—are superficial in nature. As Nicole Constable describes it, "no single cultural trait or group of traits can determine who is Hakka and

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<sup>4</sup> Although this was cited from Wang's work, it was not said by him. This quote came from an interview: "Interview with Professor Gu, Kang-lin on 5 July 2010, Central World, Bangkok." (Wang).

who is not” (Constable 11). As seen by the case of the Thai Hakka and the photograph’s suit-wearing Hakka teacher, that statement is true. To expand on Constable’s statement, the fact that no group of traits can determine “who is Hakka and who is not” is telltale to the fact that identity *itself* is impossible to define. This fact is important in realizing that concepts such as racism and nationalism should not exist because race and nationality are traits of an undefinable, *relative* identity.

#### IV. Comprehending Eurocentric Christian Hakka Identity and Other Outsider Perceptions



*Fig. 6 The three Basel missionaries: Mühleisen, Walter, and Lauk*

Finally, I will analyze the significance of the European missionaries’ centrality to the photograph and I will also be explaining their symbolic purpose. Located directly in the middle

of the photograph are the three Basel missionaries. Unlike the Hakka teachers who are not identified, the photograph names these three missionaries from left-to-right: Mühleisen, Walter, and Lauk. It can be deduced, due to the emphasis on the missionaries, that this photo's sole purpose was to be physical proof that successful missionary work was being done in China<sup>5</sup>. Based on this assumption, the photograph is centralized around the European perspective. Although it may seem like this is a display of European dominance, I'd like to argue otherwise: there is no power structure at play here. It is factual to state that the Christian Hakka identity is based around a popular European religion. This is shown in the photo by how the Hakka students and teachers are literally placed in a perimetrical manner around the Basel missionaries.

Figuratively, these European missionaries represent the outsider's perspective of the Hakka. As seen in previous sections, Hakka identity is malleable and relative; a Hakka's identity is formed based on their own personal experiences. Similarly, this idea can be seen in the various definitions outsiders give the Hakka. To some, the Hakka are defined as a "degraded race", a "party of tramps", and as a "peculiar race or tribe ... who are of a lower social rank than the Chinese" (Campbell 471). On the contrary, there are outsiders who believe the Hakka to be "the purest blood of the Han race", that the Hakka are to "play an increasingly important part in the progress and *elevation* of the Chinese people" (Constable 23, Campbell 481). Although these outsiders attempt to impose their racial stereotypes onto the Hakka, their various definitions and

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<sup>5</sup> "Lechler's biography of Li Tsin Kau [a Hakka Christian convert] is one of many biographies and reports on Chinese converts sent back to mission headquarters in Switzerland to communicate the work the missionaries had accomplished and to ensure the continued support of the mission" (Constable 166). The "mission headquarters" mentioned here refers to the Basel Mission, the *same* mission photographer Georg Walter and missionaries Mühleisen, Walter, and Lauk come from. Nicole Constable writes of Li Tsin Kau's account in Appendix 1 of her work, "Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits".

reactions to what Hakka *is* and *should be* is irrelevant to what Hakka identity means to an individual; the Hakka refuse to be constrained to the categories outsiders place them in.

The photograph demonstrates the Hakka's social refusal as well. As expected, even the missionaries had their own assumptions of the Hakka, classifying them as "less xenophobic, more monotheistic, and more receptive to the Christian faith than other Chinese" (Constable 23). As such, it could be the case that the photograph's three missionaries—Mühleisen, Walter, and Lauk—thought similarly of the Hakka in Meixian. This would imply that the photograph's depiction of Christian Hakka identity was fabricated from cultural assumptions. Although the Christian Hakka identity is centralized around European religion and ideas, it is irrelevant to what the Christian Hakka identity *represents*. Choosing to identify as Christian Hakka, despite the culture contradictions that come with it, shows that identity itself cannot be constrained by society. Even though the Christian Hakka identity was created in conformance to the categorization of outsiders, those who identify as Christian Hakka go beyond those restraints.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Christian Hakka identity is proof that societal definitions of identity are malleable and relative. This is seen in Georg Walter's photograph by how Hakka identity is like a school uniform that can be "put on" and "taken off"; how the class is manifested in the courtyard to convey the existence of the unique Christian Hakka identity; how the Hakka teachers are representative of an undefinable Hakka identity; and how the European missionaries illustrate both the importance and irrelevance of outsider perceptions to Christian Hakka identity. By observing the photograph's symbolic exemplification of the malleable Christian Hakka identity, we are able to see the significance of the photograph: every person's identity is relative

to their own unique existence. In that regard, only by observing the borderless Christian Hakka identity can separatory walls of race and nationality begin to crumble.

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