

# **BETTER OFF NOT WORKING: A CASE STUDY OF HAKKA WOMEN IN TAPAH VILLAGE, SARAWAK**

不就业更佳：砂拉越打巴村客家妇女个案研究

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the study on a group of married Hakka women aged 35 and below in Tapah village, Sarawak and is part of a larger doctoral research. Tapah is a resettlement village established during the communist insurgency of the 1960s. Hakka women are often viewed as physically strong and hardworking. In addition to farming alongside their men, they also perform all the child-rearing tasks and domestic work at home. In spite of their secondary education and their proximity to the urban labour market in Kuching, these women have opted to remain in the rural enclave as farmers, housewives and mothers. This paper discusses the reasons for this phenomenon.

## **摘要**

这篇论文是作者博士论文的一部份, 主要研究对象是砂拉越打巴村三十五岁以下已婚的客家妇女。打巴是在1960年代戒严时期而成立的村落。客家妇女常常被视为身强体健和勤劳的一群, 除了和男性一样耕种外, 她们背负养儿育女及打理家务的责任。虽然她们拥有受中学教育的机会, 古晋也需要人力资料, 但她们还是选择留在乡下从事农耕、家庭主妇和母亲。这篇文论将讨论这种现象。

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## Introduction

In terms of marital status, women can basically be classified into four groups: fulltime housewives, working wives, divorced women and single women (Yao 1983: 226). There is no clear distinction between working and non-working married women as it is rather complicated to distinguish them based on the concepts of paying and non-paying work. Upon inquiring what a married woman should do, the reply was that a housewife must dutifully try to fulfill her obligations at home, such as taking care of the husband and children, keeping the house clean, and serving her parents-in-law. Their educational training and other skills are not fully utilized, simply because of the restrictions of the traditional role expectations at home (Yao 1983: 236).

This paper is based on an investigation of the village of Tapah in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Its inhabitants are the Hakka community living in close proximity to one another and are engaged in activities and businesses that complement one another. Despite improvements in living standards in Malaysia, the Hakka women in Tapah village are still encapsulated in traditional post-marital roles such as bearing full responsibility in caring for their own children, to be a subservient wife and daughter-in-law, and to carry out all household chores. Married women are expected to portray certain types of ideal behaviours or they risk being sanctioned by the community and become targets of unfavourable comments. Hakka parents consider marriage as the inevitable future of their daughters and leading the life of a married person represents the essence of their womanhood.

Few studies have been conducted on Chinese women in Sarawak and research on Hakka women is almost absent. The roles and responsibilities of Chinese women within the family and societal circles have hitherto been neglected and overlooked. This study is then an attempt to examine the status of Hakka women from the context of their enhanced opportunities in education and work, their increasingly active participation within the family organization and their social networks. The focus of attention is placed on married Hakka women of up to 35 years of age and who have children. The discussion will cover the following aspects:

- (i) Background of the Hakka communities in Sarawak and Tapah,
- (ii) A review of past research findings concerning women and their status and roles in the community and within the family,
- (iii) A case study of young married Hakka women of Tapah and their participation and roles in employment and motherhood; and
- (iv) The implications on the social setting and positions of Hakka women.

This study is part of a larger research topic on the changing mindsets and perceptions of Hakka women on their married life. The focus group comprises respondents aged 35 and below. It is this generation that has the highest opportunity for formal education attainment and is more exposed to the effects of modernization and developments.

### The Hakka Community in Sarawak

The Hakka community is one of the many Chinese dialect groups which migrated to Sarawak in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They came in large numbers and are now the second largest Chinese dialect group in Sarawak after the Foochow community (see 文平强 / Voon Phin Keong 2007). In the state capital of Kuching, they make up about half of the Chinese population (Table 1). Being largely of agricultural background, the majority of the Hakkas are engaged in farming and rubber production. The Hakka community is very closely bonded by their dialect, origin and identity. This is evident in Tapah, where they live in close proximity, engage in similar agriculture activities, and lead a common lifestyle in a traditional village setting.

Unlike other Chinese dialect groups, the Hakkas in China are not identified with a permanent homeland. They had migrated from north China over many

Table 1: Population of Chinese dialect groups in Kuching in 2000

Sex	Male	Female	Total
Hakka	51,554	50,040	101,594
Non-Hakka	51,278	50,174	101,452
Hokkien	15,666	15,779	31,445
Teochew	13,311	13,159	26,470
Foochow/Hokchiu	9,326	9,151	18,477
Henghua	3,511	3,277	6,788
Cantonese	3,403	3,232	6,635
Hainanese	2,521	2,378	4,899
Kwongsai	120	115	235
Hokchia	157	147	304
Other Chinese	3,263	2,936	6,199

Source: Department of Statistics Sarawak 2005

centuries and are now found in several provinces in south China. They were welcomed into Sarawak during the Brooke era to open up farmland to supply provisions to the local population. They occupied the less fertile land away from the coast and big towns. They were often looked upon the "rural people" and often referred to by the derogatory term of "Shan-tang" (山顶) or mountain people. They have a proud history of overcoming hardship and rejection (Porritt 1965).

### **The Hakka Community in Tapah Village**

The Hakka community in Tapah village was forcibly resettled there under the Hammer Operation during the communist upsurge in the mid-1960s (Lee 1970: 117). Situated 36km from Kuching along the road to Serian, the village is in effect a Chinese New Village similar to those that were established in Peninsular Malaysia in the late 1940s and early 1950s as a strategy to combat the community insurgency. The village comprises of seven rows of old and new shophouses, a Chinese primary school and a government secondary school. There are 485 households in the village with a population of about 2,500 people, of whom 97 per cent are the Hakkas. They are primarily involved in agricultural production, notably vegetable farming and animal husbandry. Other major business activities in Tapah include bird nests processing and shopkeeping.

Tapah has a Chinese primary school with an enrolment of about 500 pupils. Upon completion of primary education, the pupils either enroll in a nearby government secondary school with Malay as the medium of instruction, or to travel to Serian town to attend Chinese schools. The village is well connected with nearby towns by the newly completed Kuching-Serian highway. It also has access to telecommunication facilities including Internet services.

### **Research Method**

Data collection was undertaken between December 2005 and May 2006 by means of face-to-face interviews and through discussions and observations. Introduction to the village's womenfolk was made through the village headman. A selection of households was made for an in-depth interview of an hour's duration. The respondents would in turn introduce other potential candidates for this research. This approach was found to be more "people friendly" than knocking on the doors without prior introduction. Interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes in

the Hakka dialect or Mandarin. The interview was based on a standard questionnaire comprising 68 questions covering such topics as marriage, education attainment, family background, pre-wedding rites, wedding ceremony, division of household chores after marriage, expectation from children, and their opinion on their current situation. Visits were made to 148 households. The interviewees ranged from 21 to 84 years in age. Out of this number, a sample of 40 respondents aged 35 years or below was chosen. The data for analyses and discussion in this paper are drawn from this sample.

### **The Role of Marriage in the Life of Chinese Women**

Marriage is an important issue to the average Chinese family, more so to woman because she cannot remain with her parents all her life. It is through marriage that a Chinese woman will find a permanent home for herself. Her parents' or natal family's house will be inherited by her male siblings. If she remains single and stays on in her natal home after her parents have passed away, she will have to abide by the words of her brothers and sisters-in-law. Her status in the family will be downgraded similar to that of a housemaid, helping to run household chores and having no role in decision-making. There are instances when single old women are jeered by their sisters-in-law or are topics of gossips by others. One who is not being married is sometimes ridiculed as weird, mentally unsound or anti-social. Until today, Chinese girls are under pressure to find their suitors and to marry young. A woman who marries young has more options in selecting the right man as a husband and when she is still blessed with attractiveness and appeal.

To a woman in the Chinese society of Sarawak, marriage is not an option but a universal practice. In 2000, out of the 69,477 Chinese women above 19 years of age in Kuching Division, two-thirds were married or have been married at least once (Table 2). The number of single women is 23,889 or 34.4 per cent among Chinese women aged 19 years and above. Hence married women out-number those who are still single by a ratio of 2:1. In the adjacent Samarahan Division, the percentage of single women is slightly higher at 37.4 per cent.

### **The Traditional Perception of Chinese Wives**

The Chinese community in Tapah village has a general perception on the values and attitudes of a married woman and what her priorities are. A married

Table 2: Population by marital status for Chinese women (aged 19 and above),  
Kuching and Samarahan Divisions

Division	Single		Married		Widowed		Divorced/Permanently separated		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
Kuching	23,889	34.4	41,419	59.6	3,766	5.4	403	0.6	69,477
Samarahan	1,081	37.4	1,598	55.3	192	6.6	17	0.6	2,888

Source: Department of Statistics Sarawak 2005

woman who devotes more attention and time working outside the home is looked upon with disapproval. She may become the target of gossips and portrayed as one who neglects her husband, children and commitments to the family. In short, a married woman's place is the domestic sphere of the home and should leave matters "outside" the home to the man.

On the role of women, almost all the respondents would cite a famous Confucius teaching known as the "Three Submissions and Four Virtues". The three submissions refer to strict obedience of a daughter to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage and to her son when her husband passes away. The four virtues require that a woman to be virtuous in behaviour, speech, mood and work.

Feminine virtue is highly regarded and valued by society. An expression of this virtue is the woman's behaviour according to social propriety and to conduct herself within the limits of social and family traditions. In practice, it calls for strict adherence to proper relations with the three persons upon whom a woman depends throughout her life. In speech, a woman must be polite and correct at all times. She must have a pleasant disposition and never show anger, grief or pain in her moods or cause sufferings or problems to her father, husband or son. In her work, it is her responsibility to perform or supervise household chores and to nurture a harmonious domestic atmosphere. She is skilful in overseeing activities of the domestic sphere such as sewing, washing and cooking, and caring for all the members of the family. In the farm, she is also an indispensable source of labour.

The perception of Chinese family life is one in which the husband and children enjoy a status or position superior to that of female members. The duty of the wife and mother is to take care of her husband and children. She does not go against her husband's words and her priority is to fulfill the duties of a virtuous wife and a good mother.

It is this set of traditional and moral standards that the respondents were aware

of and should adhere to in order to be recognized as "good" women. In the ideal situation, they should assume the role of full-time housewives and avoid non-household work.

### **Women and Family**

The position that a woman holds in a family is one of the significant reasons that determines whether or not a married woman engages in paid employment. Freedman (1970: 2) refers to four main forms of family in which marriage is the main cause of the transfer of women from their natal homes to those of the husbands. The first form is called the "elementary or nuclear family" comprising only the spouses and their children. The second form is the "joint family" comprising the parents and married sons and their wives and children. The "stem family" is one in which only one married son stays behind while the others have moved out of the house. The last form, known as "fraternal joint family", emerges from the joint family when the parental generation passes away and now consists of two or more married brothers with their wives and children.

Of the sample of 40 respondents, 38 were found to be living with the husband's family. Only two respondents continued to live with their natal families but under unique circumstances. In the first case, the respondent's husband worked away from home. Under a prior arrangement, the wife would move to her own family home when the husband was away. She would join her husband again when he returned to the village. The second respondent was a working mother with a young son. The parents of both sides had agreed to this arrangement of convenience.

In contrast, respondents aged 35 and above opted to stay in the husband's family although their husbands were also working elsewhere and returned home only on important occasions. They felt that, once married, they should move out of their natal homes to live with the husband and his family. In a special case, the husband came from Ipoh in Peninsular Malaysia and living with the respondent's family was a matter of practical convenience.

The respondents in this study fall within the "joint family" category. They lived with their in-laws and also their husband's siblings. Generally, wives who live with in-laws or husband's family members would receive help in childrearing. But this is not the case in Tapah village. They felt constrained in their personal freedom and a weakened position in the family. One respondent expressed a desire to move out so that she did not have to be under the watchful eyes of the in-laws, especially her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. However, she confessed that it was difficult for her

to own a house because her husband was only a farmer who worked in the family's vegetable farm.

Although 95 per cent of the respondents still lived with their extended families, they could not depend solely on the assistance of their mothers-in-law or her husband's other family members to take care of her young children. If they did so, they would be faulted for trying to hand over the burden of childrearing to other members of the family.

### **Women and Employment**

Of the 40 respondents, only seven assumed full-time employment. Significantly, all were teachers, five of whom taught at Tapah Primary School, one at Teachers' Training College and one at a kindergarten. The other respondents classified themselves as housewives.

The Tapah village economy is still very much agriculture-oriented and human power is much needed in the fields. This also explains the prevalence of extended families in the village. The role of women is to provide labour in performing household chores and farm work. They are also expected to bear offspring for the family rather than to bring in a monetary income.

The women who were not employed outside their homes contributed to the family income indirectly. The 33 housewives in the study were involved in family-based activities. Some helped out in the family's poultry or vegetable farm and others were engaged in cottage industries such as making pastries. Occasionally, some would take up part-time work during their free time to process bird's nests at home and on a contractual basis. They received their consignments of raw bird's nests from the entrepreneurs in Tapah, who also operated large factories with scores of full-time employees. They would normally begin work in the afternoon when their children were taking their naps. This part-time work could bring an income of about RM1,200 a month.

The full-time working mother was also obliged to carry out the responsibilities of a housewife. All the seven respondents who were employed full-time had to bear their share of domestic chores. For instance, the five primary school teachers taught in the morning and were relieved of the task of preparing lunch for the family. Their chores would take the form of cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and also preparing dinner like all other housewives.

## Marriage and Employment

Of the 33 housewives, a third worked full-time before they were married. They worked in Tapah and nearby towns such as Siburan and Serian for a period of two to five years upon completion of secondary education. Most had worked as sales assistants in shops selling groceries, stationeries or clothes. Four of them had continued to work till the birth of their first child.

Marriage had demanded a complete break from their working life in order to assume the role of housewives. In their new role, their priority became one of performing domestic chores of which caring for the husband and children took central place. This was in fact the expectations of the family, society and even the respondents themselves. The rising cost of living and childcare have also contributed to this inevitability. As the income from full-time employment was insufficient to offset the cost of hired childcare and other expenses, married women had little option but to become housewives. By doing so, they could economize on living costs such as paid childcare, transportation and eating out.

In one particular case, the respondent would earn only RM650 per month if she opted to work full-time as a clerk in a supermarket situated 12km away. She would have to pay a childcare centre to look after her two daughters at a cost of RM450 per month. Her own transport to work would incur another RM100 and incidental costs arising from childcare and workplace would add further to the expenses. Her husband who works in the family vegetable farm received an average income of RM800 a month, and less during months of poor harvests. There was also the need to contribute to the household utility bills borne by the husband's parents and married siblings. The couple would have RM300 left from their wages each month but which was an amount that was not commensurate with the energy and time spent outside the home. Hence, the need to forgo paid employment was a tradeoff for staying home as dictated by the reality of financial needs and considerations.

The situation in Tapah was such that the majority of young married women was not engaged in paid employment or chose not to. Instead, they opted to become housewives to take care of their children and tend to their homes. The reasons that had led to this development may be summarized as follows:

1. Expectations and pressure from the in-laws and husbands to take care of the children. The age-old tradition was that the upbringing of children was best shouldered by the mother rather than by others such as a nanny or a childcare centre.
2. The general lack of confidence in outsiders to take care of the children. Often, mothers-in-law were loathe to see their grandchildren under the care of

babysitters. They might blame the physical shortcomings of the children to uncaring nannies who were doing it for money rather than love.

3. The sub-economic returns from waged employment. Although jobs were available in the city of Kuching, the income from such jobs would not compensate for the expenses incurred from the absence away from home. For clerical jobs which commanded a salary of about RM600-800 per month, in terms of real earnings, the amount was much lower.

The education attained by the women in Tapah had little significance in terms of employment. Contrary to what one would expect of a small town with traditional settings, 80 per cent of the women of 35 years and below had completed secondary education (Table 3). Despite this fact, however, the majority of the respondents opted not to seek paid employment.

4. Role of the mother in children upbringing. The emphasis on mother care in child upbringing was very much evident in Tapah, despite the existence of three childcare centres in the village. These were private centres and therefore very expensive, charging an average of RM250 a month for each child for weekdays only. Full-time employment might bring in RM600-800 a month but this would not only interfere with personal childcare but also the performance of domestic chores.

5. Preserving social status and the question of "face". The closely-knit community in Tapah where all families live in an environment in which domestic and personal affairs barely escape the notice of inquisitive neighbours. In such a situation it is essential that each family maintains its social standing and "face" in the village community. The supreme importance in community life is not to lose "face" and this thought outweighs that of monetary gain. Losing face may also result from such behaviour as a son seen in argument with his mother, or a young woman who runs away with her boyfriend. The common comment in the village would be:

Table 3: Education of Chinese women 35 years and below in Tapah, Sarawak

Education level	Number of respondents	Percentage
Primary	3	7.5
Secondary	32	80.0
College	4	10.0
University	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Fieldwork 2005/06

"How would the family hold up its 'face'?" On the other hand, a great deal of "face" would be derived from such social events as wedding ceremonies. The tendency for families was to compete with one another in holding lavish ceremonies, even at the expense of financial strain.

6. Wives are often not encouraged to work as this would be considered an affront on their husband's manhood for not being able to support the family. This is again related to the concept of "saving face" on which the community in Tapah puts so much emphasis.

### **Conclusion**

This paper discusses the effects of traditional beliefs as reflected in Hakka women's attitudes and behaviours towards marriage, and why they opted to staying at home and not engaged in full-time employment. The young women of Tapah village put little priority in job attainment in preference to marriage and motherhood. Upon marriage, their attention would be shifted towards domestic duties in caring for their children and husbands. These responsibilities demanded that they quit their work to better assume the role as housewives. This action was driven by social factors where the social status of a person and the family within a traditional community setting in Tapah must be maintained. Education was not a major factor that impeded these women from finding decent employment. The low incentives of paid employment and the need to take care of children and their homes did not warrant married women to engage in full-time employment but rather to play the many dutiful roles of mother, wife and housewife. The common aspiration of all married women was simply to fulfill, and to be seen to fulfill, these multiple roles in keeping with the traditions and social norms of the Hakkas in Tapah village.

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