

2017 FYP FORUM HIGHLIGHTS

2nd Prize

Hakkas Who Don't Speak Hakka:

A Study of the Decline of Hakka Language in Hong Kong

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I am a Hong Kong Hakka. Since my childhood I have been exposed to Hakka language. Yet my Hakka-speaking senior family members never talk to me in the language. To me it has always been reserved for the adults. As I grew older and became curious about my Hakka identity, I was astounded by how common and rapid the decline of the language within local Hakka families has been in the past few decades. According to census reports in the last two decades, the proportion of Hakka speakers in Hong Kong has dropped to 4% or thereabouts, compared with the peak of 15% in the beginning of 20th century. The extinction crisis confronted by my ethnic language has since then been a lingering question on my mind.

As I entered college, I remember often being asked what I wished to study for my final year project. I believe this is a golden opportunity for me to really take some time to look into this tragic cultural-linguistic phenomenon in which I have taken part. That's how I end up with this FYP topic: Hakkas who don't speak Hakka---a study of the decline of Hakka language in Hong Kong.

There are basically two areas I want to explore through the study. The first one is the development of Hakka language in Hong Kong, a history of its rise and fall between the 17th century and now. To reconstruct the historical development I have relied on a variety of materials, ranging from colonial archives, historian and linguistic works, informants' oral history to online discussion threads. What has astonished me is that Hakka could have been a prominent language in Hong Kong. First of all, it has a long history. Hakka speakers have settled in Hong Kong (not least New Territories) for over 400 years and their language has naturally taken root. Second, it used to have a number of considerable language users. As a result of a continuous influx of Hakka

speakers from Guangdong to Hong Kong, Hakka people make up more than half of the population in N.T. (As far as urban districts are concerned, Hakka is still the second biggest Chinese ethnic group after Cantonese, despite heavy influx of Cantonese immigrants into urban area since the 19th century). Third, Hong Kong used to be the stage for a series of Chinese and global Hakka movements driven by Hakka scholars. However, these favorable conditions were offset by the unfavorable colonial policy in the late 60s in which Cantonese became the only legitimate language on radio, television and in education. I argue that the language policy had a devastating effect on the survival of many non-Cantonese languages such as Hakka and that people's negative attitude towards their non-Cantonese mother tongue, a possible explanation for language decline, was in fact more of a product of the explicit and implicit institutional suppression, rather than a decision based purely upon the speakers' agency.

The second area is to explore the possibility of reviving Hakka language in today's Hong Kong. In this part I have relied on my own online questionnaires interviewing young Hakkas about their perception of the language and see if there is a change in Hakkas' attitude toward their ethnic language. I have also analyzed the new trend of Hakka in recent years, both culturally and politically. Lastly, I studied the successful cases in Taiwan and Malaysia and leave some advice for Hakka's revival. In short, Hakka speakers need to challenge the existing discourse that turns Hakka from a subject to an object, from visible to invisible, from self to others.