

Localization Process and Cultural Inheritance of Hakka Folk Songs in Malaysia

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Abstract: Hakka folk songs in Malaysia serve as a bridge of cultural inheritance and an exemplar of the fusion between modernity and traditional culture. This study combines historical literature review with field surveys to explore the localization process, challenges, and sociocultural value of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia. Particularly against the backdrop of globalization and growing cultural diversity, Hakka folk songs in Malaysia demonstrate how they can adapt and innovate to merge with modern society while preserving their cultural core. The results show that despite challenges posed by technological advancements and cultural exchanges, Hakka folk songs in Malaysia continue to play a unique social and cultural role, garnering attention from the younger generation through education and modern dissemination methods.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the context of accelerated globalization and increased emphasis on cultural diversity, the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage have become international focal points. As a unique cultural expression in Malaysia, Hakka folk songs showcase the lifestyle and spirit of the Hakka people, carrying profound historical and cultural significance. However, with rapid socioeconomic development and deepening cultural exchanges, the inheritance of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia faces new challenges and dilemmas.

1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to investigate the current status and development of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia, analyze the issues and challenges in their inheritance, and propose development strategies. Through this research, we can gain a better understanding of the cultural charm of Malaysia, promote the protection and inheritance of Hakka folk songs, and provide references for the protection of intangible cultural heritage in other regions.

1.3. Research Questions and Scope

This research primarily explores the following questions:

- 1) What are the historical origins, cultural connotations, and significance of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia?
- 2) What challenges do they face in the process of inheritance?
- 3) What are the effects of existing protection and inheritance measures?

By delving into these questions, this paper aims to comprehensively understand the current state and development trends of Hakka folk song culture and provide theoretical and practical support for its future protection and inheritance.

2. Localization Process of Hakka Folk Songs in Malaysia

2.1. Historical Background and Development

Yuan Yiyou's (2023)[1] dissertation, "A Study on Localized Hakka Folk Songs in Malaysia: Hakka Tin Miners and Their Everyday Lives," discusses the localization process of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia. Early Hakka entertainment culture in Malaysia spread primarily through the development of the tin mining industry. Using field surveys and literature review, Yuan analyzed 24 localized Hakka folk songs, revealing their development and localization traits. These songs reflect the living and working conditions and spiritual thoughts of the Hakka people, showcasing their aesthetic elements, content meanings, and social values.

According to Zhang Jiayu's (2015)[2] research, the localization process of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when many Hakka people immigrated to Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia. They brought their cultural traditions and art forms, including Hakka folk songs. In Malaysia, these songs gradually integrated into local culture through various adaptations and innovations, forming uniquely localized Hakka folk songs. These adaptations are evident not only in the lyrics and tunes but also in changes in performance forms and dissemination methods.

Chen Jiufen (2011)[3] in her article "The Transmission and Development of Hakka Folk Songs in Southeast Asia and Their Dynamics" mentions that Hakka folk songs gradually originated, inherited, and developed as Hakka ancestors migrated and settled in Southeast Asia. During the economic depression of the 1930s, Hakka miners and rubber tappers used folk songs to recount their hard lives in markets and rubber plantations. During the Anti-Japanese War, Hakka folk songs became an important tool for national anti-Japanese propaganda due to their long history of anti-Japanese resistance.

2.2. Oral History and Inheritance Observations

From the oral accounts of Zhang Junhua, a watercolor painter and chairman of the Johor branch of the Malaysian Hakka Cultural Association, it is known that the elder Xiao Boshou loved Hakka folk songs. In two earlier visits, we collected his compositions, "Rubber Tapping Song" and "Uncle Tangshan Goes to Nanyang," and recorded his oral history to share with readers. "Rubber Tapping Song" uses the life of rubber tappers as its material, documenting the experience of rubber tappers entering rubber plantations before dawn. It captures the sounds of empty rubber buckets clanging, the cold wind while riding bicycles in the morning, the sensation of insect bites during tapping, and the anxiety of income being affected by rainy weather.

Hakka folk songs and ballads, sung in the Hakka dialect, include folk songs, mountain songs, and nursery rhymes. Ballads are musical poems, and mountain songs and nursery rhymes are forms

of "vernacular poetry" that are "spoken from the heart" and "written with the mouth." Hakka mountain songs are the most representative because they are closely related to social functions such as expressing emotions, moral education, celebrating festivals, and entertainment. As Hakka people migrated worldwide, traditional Hakka ballads spread to distant lands. For instance, my grandmother, who is over seventy years old, taught me a Hakka folk song passed down from her mother, who brought it from Tangshan. She recalled that her mother used to teach her children to sing folk songs under a large tree when she was not washing tin ore.

After our ancestors settled in Malaysia, the foreign land gradually became our home, and these songs from Tangshan gradually disappeared, giving way to Hakka pop songs. In the 1970s and 1980s, renowned as the "Hakka Song King," Zhang Shaolin performed Hakka songs such as "Granny Sells Pickles," "Road Bully," "Mud Girl," and "Talking Money Losing Feelings," providing a different musical experience from Cantonese pop songs. These Hakka songs, adapted to pop tunes, resonated with the social conditions and current issues of the time, such as "Road Bully," which described the social problem of road bullying in Malaysia and struck a chord with many people.

Unfortunately, many young people today do not speak their ethnic dialects, let alone sing Hakka folk songs or pop songs. Seeing these songs, closely linked to our ancestors' lives or our memories of certain times, gradually disappear is very regrettable.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges once said that a thriving civilization is one that uses language as a daily tool to keep the societal machine moving forward. The Malaysian Chinese community originally was a multilingual society with dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hinghwa enriching our cultural connotation. Why have these languages declined? It is time to seriously consider whether the promotion of Mandarin as the "mother tongue" has marginalized the survival space of other dialects. It is also time to "defend" and widely "spread" these dialects to prevent their disappearance from the mouths of this generation.

According to Goh Choon Jin, Chairman of Perfect (China) Co., Ltd., Malaysia has many Hakka people, approximately 1.5 to 2 million out of the 6 million Chinese population. Goh mentioned that the Hakka cultural atmosphere in Malaysia is still strong, with most traditional customs preserved, and many people still sing Hakka folk songs. The Malaysian Hakka Associations are diligent in protecting and inheriting Hakka culture, often interacting with Hakka folk song teams from Guangdong Meixian China or inviting them to perform in Malaysia to relieve homesickness.

2.3. Academic Support and Research Directions

Yuan Yiyou's (2023)[4] research provides academic support for preserving localized Hakka folk songs and proposes potential future research directions, including exploring the relationship between Malaysian Hakka folk songs and imagery, classical poetry, pronunciation, vocabulary, history, and culture. These studies further emphasize the aesthetic and social value of Hakka folk songs and their importance in modern society's transmission and preservation. Zhang Rongjia (2015) [5] highlighted the pivotal role of Malaysian Hakka women in families, revealing their multiple roles and adaptations amid rapid socioeconomic development. Future research topics could extend to gender power relations and household division of labor among immigrant women, the uniqueness of Hakka cuisine in Southeast Asia, and the distinctive experiences of Malaysian Hakka people.

3. Spread and Integration of Hakka Folk Songs in Southeast Asia

3.1. Dissemination Methods and Innovations

The spread of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia has been driven by multiple factors. The Hakka

people began settling in Malaysia in the 19th century, bringing not only labor but also rich cultural heritage. The establishment of the Malaysian Hakka Associations in 1979 played a significant role in promoting and protecting Hakka culture. By organizing various cultural activities and academic seminars, the Hakka Associations actively promoted Hakka folk songs within Southeast Asia, strengthening the cultural identity of the Hakka people.

To integrate with Malaysian society, Hakka people often concealed or blurred their Hakka identity. This process involves complex interactions between ethnic identity, cultural identity, and national identity. The research indicates that the Malaysian Hakka Associations aim to consolidate Chinese identity while maintaining the survival and interests of the Hakka people, thereby reinforcing the overall solidarity of the Chinese community. This identity fusion and adaptation reflect the reconstruction of the Hakka identity in Malaysia's multicultural environment.

Research has pointed out that Hakka folk songs spread to Southeast Asia during the mid-19th century through Hakka migrations. As a cultural heritage, Hakka folk songs became important cultural symbols for Hakka communities in these regions. The spread and innovation of Hakka folk songs in Southeast Asia primarily occurred through three channels: the life experiences of laborers, promotion and creation by prominent individuals, and activities by social organizations. The hardships of Hakka immigrants and their longing for their homeland were often expressed through folk songs. Notable figures like Qiu Huizhong promoted Hakka folk songs within the Malaysian Hakka community by adapting traditional songs and creating new ones, thus integrating the songs into local culture. Social organizations promoted the inheritance and development of Hakka folk songs through events such as folk song concerts and song contests.

3.2. Activities and Impact

The Malaysian Hakka Associations strengthened the internal cohesion of the Hakka community and promoted the transmission and development of Hakka culture through various cultural, educational, welfare, and social activities. For instance, the Associations regularly organize cultural festivals, academic seminars, artistic performances, and community service activities. These activities not only enhance the community consciousness of the Hakka people but also increase their influence in Malaysian society. They showcase the diversity and vitality of Hakka culture, attract more participation from the younger generation, and promote the modern dissemination and innovative development of Hakka culture.

3.3. Cultural Integration and Innovation

The integration of Hakka folk songs with local Southeast Asian music, such as Malay *dondang sayang* songs, has created new Hakka-language songs with local characteristics. This approach retains the traditional elements of Hakka folk songs while incorporating local cultural influences. Through this integration, Hakka folk songs are not only inherited within the Hakka community but also appreciated by people of non-Hakka backgrounds.

Facing the rapid socioeconomic development in Malaysia, the Hakka people actively adapt and integrate local culture, innovatively inheriting Hakka folk songs. This cultural adaptation is evident not only in the changes in language and performance forms but also in the enrichment and development of cultural connotations. The fusion of Hakka folk songs with the cultural elements of other ethnic groups in Malaysia has created new cultural expressions, reflecting the openness and inclusivity of Hakka culture. By studying the modern evolution of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia and the challenges and countermeasures in their transmission, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the adaptation and development of Hakka culture in Malaysia, providing important theoretical and practical support for the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

3.4. Research Significance

The research records the spread and innovative development of Hakka folk songs in Southeast Asia, showcasing how cultures adapt and evolve in different environments, and how traditional culture is rewritten in new cultural contexts. These studies provide important references for understanding the status and development of Hakka folk songs in global Chinese culture. The Malaysian Hakka Associations play a crucial role in maintaining and spreading Hakka culture. Through cultural festivals, academic seminars, and music events, they continually enhance the visibility and influence of Hakka culture in Malaysia. These efforts not only help protect Hakka folk songs as intangible cultural heritage but also contribute significantly to Malaysia's cultural diversity.

4. Development and Challenges of Hakka Pop Songs in Malaysia

4.1. Origins and Influence

Hakka pop songs in Malaysia originated in the 1970s, heavily influenced by Cantonese pop songs. Musicians like Zhang Shaolin and Qiu Qingyun, inspired by Cantonese pop songs, began creating Hakka-language songs in the 1970s, receiving support from major record companies. This support allowed Hakka pop songs, originally considered a niche market, to take root in Malaysia. The Hakka Associations played an active role in promoting Hakka culture, organizing various cultural activities and concerts to facilitate the spread of Hakka pop songs in Malaysia. For instance, over the decades since their establishment, the Hakka Associations have organized numerous national and international cultural exchange activities. These activities not only increased the visibility of Hakka pop songs but also attracted the attention and participation of more young people.

4.2. Musical Content and Style

In Malaysia, Hakka folk songs have not only been inherited as cultural heritage but also displayed new vitality in contemporary society. With the development of technology, Hakka folk songs have gained wider dissemination through modern media tools such as television, radio, and online platforms. Additionally, various cultural festivals and music events often feature Hakka folk songs as part of the performances to attract the attention of the younger generation. Efforts are made to combine this traditional art form with modern music elements to create new styles of interpretation. Malaysian Hakka pop songs primarily consist of covers of contemporary popular tunes, lacking traditional elements. The content and style of these songs are influenced by the local social environment, presenting unique regional characteristics. Despite experiencing a bottleneck period, Hakka pop songs experienced a resurgence in the 1990s and gradually began to be influenced by Hokkien and Mandarin songs.

4.3. Future Development Directions

Currently, there is a lack of systematic research on how the modern young generation in Malaysia accepts and inherits Hakka folk songs. In-depth research on the integration of Hakka folk songs with other minority music in Malaysia is also insufficient. Future academic exploration is needed to discover innovative dissemination strategies for Hakka folk songs to attract a global audience. The study of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia not only reveals the survival and development strategies of a culture in a new environment but also reflects how the Hakka community maintains and reshapes its identity through cultural practices. Future research should focus on how education and technological innovation can further promote and protect this precious cultural heritage. Although previous studies have provided valuable information about the spread and development of

Hakka folk songs in Malaysia, some gaps remain, particularly concerning the impact of folk songs on the younger generation in Malaysia. Future research needs to explore how folk songs can maintain their vitality and relevance in a globalized and multicultural environment and how they can foster communication and understanding among people from different cultural backgrounds.

Despite the strong cultural foundation of Hakka folk songs in Malaysia, they face several challenges in contemporary society. The primary challenge is the lack of interest in traditional culture among the younger generation, leading to difficulties in inheritance. To address this challenge, many cultural workers and educational institutions are attempting to re-engage young people through educational programs and innovative projects. For example, some schools and cultural centers have established workshops and lectures on Hakka folk songs to teach their historical background and singing techniques, emphasizing their cultural and emotional value. Additionally, the rise of social media and online video platforms has provided new opportunities for the dissemination of Hakka folk songs. These platforms allow Hakka folk songs to reach a broader audience, especially young people.

Some innovative Hakka music projects, such as combining Hakka folk songs with pop music, electronic music, and other music genres, have begun to attract more young listeners. In recent years, Hakka pop music has emerged with new original songs through online platforms and modern communication technologies, demonstrating its potential for development. By promoting Hakka folk songs and pop songs through cultural education, community activities, and modern media methods, these musical forms will continue to flourish in Malaysia and beyond, contributing significantly to cultural diversity and the transmission of global Chinese culture.

5. Conclusions

Hakka folk songs in Malaysia have undergone a transformation from traditional forms to contemporary expressions, proving the adaptability and vitality of intangible cultural heritage in modern society. The study shows that Hakka folk songs play a central role in cultural identity and inheritance, while their integration with other musical forms demonstrates the power of innovation. Faced with the challenges of globalization, the continuous development and dissemination strategies of Hakka folk songs offer important perspectives on the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage. Future research should focus on how education and technological innovation can enhance their global appeal, ensuring the sustained vitality of this unique cultural heritage within the global Chinese community.

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