

NEGOTIATING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES AMONG THE SABAHAN HAKKAS: THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HAKKA MOUNTAIN SONGS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

While significant scholarly attention has focused on Hakka identity concerning language preservation, religion, and kinship, the decline of traditional Hakka mountain songs remains underexplored. This gap is pressing because mountain songs historically served as vital cultural mediums for community bonding, intergenerational transmission, and the reinforcement of ancestral values among the Sabahan Hakkas. As their alleged disappearance—particularly as younger generations gravitate toward pop-style Hakka music—threatens cultural continuity and weakens diasporic identity, addressing this problem is essential to understanding how cultural erosion shapes identity reconstruction and re-negotiation in this furthest state in Malaysia away from its capital city. This study investigates how the disappearance of Hakka Mountain songs affects the construction of transnational identity among Sabah's Hakka community. It employs a qualitative approach through the case study method, drawing on semi-structured interviews with nine individuals from Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan, including association leaders, composers, and a museum commissioner. Findings indicate that the erosion of traditional music reflects more than cultural loss; it embodies ongoing identity negotiation and explores how a new border identity among the Sabahan Hakka community is formed but also continuously adjusted. Participants expressed complex sentiments toward homeland and motherland and still reinforced a distinct sense of transnational belonging. The decline of this typical music signals not merely musical change but a deeper cultural rupture, as younger generations renegotiate diasporic identity across shifting political and cultural boundaries. This study provides practical insights for community-based strategies aimed at preserving intangible heritage and strengthening cultural transmission among youth.

Keywords: Border identity, Hakka Mountain songs, cultural erosion, diasporic identity, identity negotiation