ITINERANT HAKKA WEAVERS

In the course of general historical enquiries among old village persons in Kowloon and the Southern District of the New Territories, it has been established that in their youth it was a regular practice for itinerant Hakka persons, mostly men it seems, to come yearly to villages in this area some time after the second rice harvest (October — November) to weave locally-grown hemp thread into cloth. The finished product was then dyed and used by local people to make clothes, or sold to others for a like purpose.

For example, one man born in 1885 in Nga Tsin Wai, one of the old-established Cantonese villages of Kowloon, said:

Most families grew hemp when I was young. It was harvested in the 8th or 9th moons. None grew in the winter as the plants needed water. My mother manipulated it into thread and it could be woven at home or sold to weavers in the Kowloon City shops: sometimes these people came to the village to buy it. We villagers usually relied on strangers to weave our hemp. Every year about the 10th to the 12th moons some Hakka people from Mui Yuen and Hing Ning [districts in North-east Kwangtung] came round the village. They would rent an empty house and stay as long as there was work for them. Then they moved elsewhere. They only wove cloth. It was generally known as tai min po (大捊布) and was very hard-wearing, lasting for several tens of years. The villagers made clothes, quilts, mosquito nets etc., with this cloth, and most clothes were home-made at that time. I went to sea at 18 and the Hakkas came regularly up to then. I didn’t come back to settle in the village until I was 45 and by that time they no longer came, no doubt because ready-made clothes were available in the shops.

I came across this kind of information by chance, but was pleased to have it corroborated by what Rev. Rudolf Lechler, the celebrated missionary of the Basel Mission [which specialised in evangelical work among the Hakkas from about 1850 onwards], has to say about this subject in an article “The Hakka Chinese” which appeared in The Chinese Recorder in October 1878:

In some parts as e.g. in the prefecture of Kia-yin chow, the women spin cotton, and are also able to weave the yarn into
cloth, of which they make their winter dresses. In the Jin-on district [= San On 新安] the spinning of the hemp of which grass-cloth is made, is more frequently seen, but the women do not weave it, and there are journeymen weavers who go round in the villages with their primitive looms to do the weaving for the families.

It is interesting to note that these Hakkas did not restrict their visits only to Cantonese villages in this region, but that their services were also utilised in Hakka ones. An old Hakka man born in 1886 in the village of San Tsuen at Pui O, Lantau Island states:

When I was a boy we wore clothes made from hemp cloth. We grew the hemp ourselves and the village women cleaned and sorted it and prepared it for weaving. They did not weave the cloth themselves but relied on itinerant Hakka-speaking men from the Lung Kong and Tam Shui districts who came yearly to our village and the nearby settlements to weave the hemp yarn into cloth. They brought their tools with them. I think this was an old practice and had been going on for a long time before I was born. These people stopped coming when I was about thirteen or fourteen years old. The cloth they wove was very strong and hard-wearing, suitable for wear in both seasons but best for summer use. Though they did not weave, our village people knew how to make clothes. Clothes were much simpler then and much wider, the sleeves being 6-8 inches wide.

San Tsuen is a Hakka village in a mixed Hakka-Punti complex where both dialect groups are of equally long settlement. According to his family’s genealogical record, my informant’s ancestors have been settled there since about 1710.

Yet it appears that not all local Hakkas relied on visits from their fellow-countrymen from North-east Kwangtung. An old Hakka woman who was married into the Hakka stone-cutters’ settlement of Ngau Tau Kok in East Kowloon at the age of nine in 1897, recalls that her sister-in-law bought hemp in Kowloon City market and brought it home to weave, took it back to Kowloon City to be dyed and later brought it back to the village to make into clothes for the family. Making bed-clothes and mosquito nets was also mentioned. Most items were dyed black in colour. Her
husband's family were Hakkas from near Tam Shui and they had then been in Ngau Tau Kok for three generations.

These accounts are selected from others known to the writer, and are intended to illustrate a feature of old village life in the Hong Kong region at the end of the last century and, no doubt, for centuries before.

By way of a postscript it appears that travelling Hakka craftsmen were not only to be found in South China. Agnes Smedley's book *The Great Road — The Life and Times of Chu Teh* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1956) mentions regular visits from such persons at his home when he was young. He was born in a village near the market town of Ma An Chang in I Lung (儀隆) district in Szechuan in 1886. The following extracts are of interest:

From time to time during the year, itinerant artisans left the big towns and cities and came along the Big Road, wandering from village to village to work for such families as needed their special skills. Carpenters, metalsmiths, mat weavers, cloth weavers and others, all were skilled artisans who owned and carried their own tools of trade... An old weaver, whom General Chu referred to simply as “the Old Weaver”, came each winter to weave cloth from the cotton thread spun by the women of the Chu family. The coarse woven cloth was then dyed an indigo blue, hung on long bamboo poles to dry, after which the women cut and sewed it into garments for the family, into quilt coverings or other uses of the household... These itinerant artisans were a part of the peasant economy... Coming from the big towns or cities, they were much more advanced and independent than the peasants, to whom they brought new ideas. They were even folk historians and some of them could read and write. They lived in the homes where they worked, and each evening the family gathered about to listen to their talk... The Old Weaver who wove cloth for the Chu family each winter seems to have been a Hakka also. He was a grim old fellow with a scalding tongue who would set up his long narrow loom in the courtyard or, if it was too cold, in the kitchen, and begin his weaving... the old man's long brown hands worked as swift as light. He could weave twenty chih, some twenty to thirty feet of cloth, a day, for which
he charged two or three cash a *chih*, with food and a place
to sleep as was the custom. That was a lot of money for a
man to earn; he could live for a week on one day's labor.

At page 53 it is mentioned that a few years later, at or about
the Boxer time, the Old Weaver no longer came to the Chu home
to weave cloth each winter, and that no one took his place, it being
then cheaper to buy British or foreign cloth in the market.

1. For descriptions of hemp spinning wheels from Chekiang see
pp. 167-169 of Rudolf P. Hommel's *China at Work ...* (New York,
The John Day Company, 1937). Photographs of two such wheels
are at pp. 170 and 171. I have not yet come across any such relics
from the Hong Kong region.

2. The Hakkas of Hing Ning district, mentioned above, appear
also to have played a large part in weaving foreign cotton yarn
imported via Swatow. Consul F.S.A. Bourne in his section of the
*Report of the Mission to China of the Blackburn Chamber of Com­
merce 1896-7* (Blackburn, The North-east Lancashire Press Com­
pany, 1898) at pp. 153-4 mentions them as using foreign yarn for
weaving cotton cloth "sent down the Canton East River past Hui­
chow Fu to Fatshan where it is dyed black and called *ch'ung-
th'ang-ch'ing* i.e. imitation long black. This cloth, like that of
which it is a copy, is very largely exported to Singapore."

3. For local, i.e. Hong Kong, place names see *A Gazetteer of
Place Names in Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories
(Hong Kong, Government Printer, 1960).

Hong Kong, 1968.

JAMES HAYES

THE TUNG CHUNG FORT (LANTAU ISLAND,
HONG KONG)

For earlier references in NOTES AND QUERIES see Vols. 3
(1963) and 4 (1964) of this Journal at pp. 144-145 and 146-152
respectively.

In late January 1966, I heard of, and spoke with, an old lady
aged 90 *sui* (歲) born on 2nd October 1877. She had spent all her
days in the Tung Chung valley, having been born in Wong Ka
Wai and married into Sheung Ling Pei village. A series of ques-