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# MIND YOUR AGE: WHY HAKKA WOMEN MARRY YOUNG?

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## Introduction

Marriage is an important step forward in a woman's life in the Chinese society. A Chinese woman cannot remain with her parents or natal family forever. She has to marry and only then, will she have a permanent dwelling in her later life and also afterlife. Her natal family's house will be taken over by her male siblings. If she remains single and stays on in her natal home, she will have to be subordinates to her brothers and sister-in-laws after her parents pass on. Her status in the family will be downgraded to the like of a housemaid, helping with house chores and having no control in all decision-makings. In many instances, these single old women were jeered at by the sisters-in-law and are topics of gossip by others. One who is not married is sometimes ridiculed as weird, mentally unsound, anti-social and so forth. So, even today, modern Chinese girls are still pressured to find their suitors and marry young. It is believed that marrying young is an advantage because one can have more options when selecting her man and furthermore, she is definitely more attractive when still young. It is still not very common to find men willing to marry older women in the Chinese community. The older people were married at very young age because of the poorer social and economical state then. Education was hard to attain and therefore, employment opportunities were little and many resorted to working in the farms and villages.

With the progress and development of education, where both male and female have equal opportunity for education, there are disparities in terms of employment options and gender roles within the Chinese community. The potential resources of married Chinese woman, including educational training if she ever received one, are not fully utilized, simply because of the restrictions of the traditional role expectations at home (Yao, 1983). For a Chinese woman, her feminine behaviour [婦德], speech [婦言] and moods [婦

容] must be decent to her father, husband and son throughout her life, in order to be useful to the society and to uphold the Chinese traditions of respecting the male gender. In her work [婦工], she must be able to perform most chores in the domestic sphere such as being able to weave, work in the farm, wash and cook, all the actions that man is not willing to do. Briefly, the ideal perceptions of a traditional a Chinese person is that the husband and children have esteem status in the family. A Chinese woman unquestionable priority upon marriage is to bear children, take care of them and never challenge her husband's wishes or demand so that she can live up to be a virtuous wife and a good mother.

### **Tapah Village**

Tapah is a small village situated at KM36 of the Kuching-Serian road in Kuching Division, Sarawak, Malaysia. The village falls under the jurisdiction of Siburan District Office. The population of Tapah is around 2500 people with 485 households to date. The village consist mostly Chinese of Hakka origin, which account for 97% of the population there. They are primarily involved in agricultural activities, notably vegetable farming and animal husbandry. The vast expanse of land in Tapah are used for growing vegetables and fruit trees, where they are sold mostly in the larger city such as Kuching. Tapah is familiarly linked with the vegetable icon of a 10 feet concrete structure of a Chinese spinach 'pak choi' which stands majestically at the junction to Tapah village, greeting every visitors to the village or passer-bys traveling along the Kuching-Serian highway. Poultry and chicken egg farming are also practiced on a large scale here.

Other major business activities in Tapah include bird nests processing and shop keeping. Altogether there are 30 licensed birdnest processors, ranging from very small to very big ones with fully equipped factories which cater to international markets. The larger producers have about 40 daily paid workers who are, mainly women who work seven days a week. The majority of these workers are Bidayuh staying in villages in the vicinity of Tapah. The small business operators, usually consisting of women and housewives living nearby, receive unprocessed materials from suppliers and larger producers, to work in their own homes.