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**OUR TEMPLE, OUR PAST: MEMORIES OF THE PAST AND
SOCIAL IDENTITY OF A HAKKA COMMUNITY IN
SARAWAK**

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OUR TEMPLE, OUR PAST: MEMORIES OF THE PAST AND SOCIAL IDENTITY OF A HAKKA COMMUNITY IN SARAWAK

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1.0 Introduction

This is a paper about a village, the people and their temple. In the beginning, a community of Hakka people started to settle down at a site where they built their homes freely. The Hakka people, regarded as the late arrivals of the lot of immigrants from China, had to resolve to settling in the outskirts of Kuching as most areas near the town had already been occupied by early Chinese settlers of other dialect groups. The site, presented as the Old Village in this paper, is no more in existence. They were forced into abandoning their homes at Old Village, and were resettled into another site, hereby known as New Village. The new site is a confined area with strictly scrutinized boundary, to counter the threats of communism activities. The community still consists mainly of Hakka origins, but unlike a natural formation, it has become a community that was created by the government and the people were forcibly resettled there. In New Village, the people are marginalized as they were forced to live in an area not of their choice. However, they still uphold unto their identities and religious beliefs, which they have been practicing while at the Old Village site. The borders on maps have only political and administrative representations which were in functioning effects to prevent free movements of people only during the past when communism activities were still thriving. Despite living as a secluded community, a temple, situated beyond the village, draws the community out of their confine, thus extending their social boundary. What does the temple, situated in another site, really mean to the people? Is it a social representation which brings in union the community to venture out of their transparent restrictions of the past?

What were the histories that connect the people so fondly to the temple? Could it represent a form of their identity, with strong relation to their origin as a naturally formed Hakka community? I present here my examination of the Tai Pak Kung temple, and what it connotes to the people of New Village, in relation to their origin, existence and beliefs. I also explore how and why the community attest the temple to their past, where they locate their roots before the force relocation occurred.

Along the Jalan Lama (Old Road), which once connected the town of Serian with Kuching, lies the Tai Pak Kung¹ temple. Today, a new trunk road, which was improved into a dual carriageway in 2007, replaces Jalan Lama and bypasses the temple. The temple, as the name implies, serves the deity Tai Pak Kung. It was built by the early people who arrived and settled in this area.

The name Tai Pak Kung literally means the Great Paternal Granduncle. The term 'Tai Pak' carries the meaning "granduncle", usually to refer to the father's elder brother; and 'Kung' means "duke" – a term of respect commonly used in deity names. The community which once built this temple does not live here anymore. They were forcibly moved, under the government relocation plan to counter the threats of communism in the 1960s, to another site (a village) about 4 km away. In this paper, I use the name New Village to refer to this place. The temple still remains as it is. In fact, it has been well maintained and looked after by the people themselves and also by an appointed caretaker of the temple. It is constantly visited and patronized by the people of New Village. I use the term Old Village to mention about the original settlement along Jalan Lama. The Tai Pak Kung temple is situated at the Old Village site.

2.0 The settlements

New Village is situated along the existing Kuching-Serian Highway and is approximately 35 km from Kuching city. Although relatively a new settlement, established only in the 1960s, New Village has a very

¹ Note on the use of languages in this paper: All vernacular terms, unless otherwise indicated, are written in Romanized form according to the Hakka pronunciation.