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Sounding Hakka Spaces in Taiwan

Matthijs Verzijden

Abstract

In this article, I explore how notions of space are crafted and contested through singing and listening to Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan. Through five case studies, I show that local initiatives create space to sing mountain songs in reaction to national policies, and that local space to sing mountain songs is challenged by transnational developments. Furthermore, the case studies reveal how audible differences between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs are used to distinguish between China and Taiwan as different spaces. Lastly, they demonstrate that Hakka people claim their space in Taiwanese history and contemporary society through singing and listening to mountain songs. I situate my discussion in the framework of the Sinophone, which denotes places of cultural production by linguistically and culturally Chinese people worldwide who relate to one another rather than to a shared homeland in China. I aim to redefine this concept as "spaces that sound Chinese", placing music and sonic culture at large at the centre of debates on what it means to be Chinese. This enables me to provide a perspective on the nexus of music and space more specific to the lived experiences of Taiwanese Hakka people, demonstrating that Hakka people sing mountain songs to craft Hakka spaces both in and beyond Taiwan.

Keywords: music, space, Hakka mountain songs, Sinophone, Taiwan

Music, as a cultural form of sound, is intrinsically bound to space: sound needs space to be heard, travels through it, and is altered by its different shapes.[1] Music and sound can both be ways for people to understand space and place, contribute to the social production and transformation of space, and play a major role in claiming space for diverse identities.[2] In this paper I explore how notions of space are crafted and contested through singing and listening to mountain songs in Taiwan. Mountain songs (*sân-kô* 山歌) are a sonic cultural expression of the Hakka people, an ethnic group of approximately 65 million people who live in China, Taiwan, and a worldwide diaspora.[3] In Taiwan, Hakka people are involved in a complex dynamic between cultivating relations with their ancestral places of origin in southern China and the struggle for recognition as a less dominant group within Taiwanese multiethnic society. This dynamic evolves to the background of a looming yet ever more probable conflict between China and Taiwan. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2025 and January 2026 in northern Taiwan, I analyse five case studies.[4] These case studies show how Hakka people shape, negotiate, and challenge the dynamic described above in local, national, and transnational spaces through singing and listening to mountain songs.

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[1] Andrew J. Eisenberg, "space," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 193–194.

[2] Matt Sakakeeny, "music," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 118.

[3] I provide Hakka pronunciation in the Vernacular Script (*pha̍k-fa-sṳ* 白話字) transcription system, Taiwanese Southern Min pronunciation in Tâi-lô, and Mandarin pronunciation in Hànyǔ Pīnyīn. For personal names, I follow individual preferences. Corresponding written forms are given in traditional characters.

[4] During this period, I attended festivals, opera and pop music performances, and singing competitions, over 20 events in total. Alongside, I participated in four mountain song classes with 20-30 participants each: weekly for three months in the principal one and more incidentally in the others. In these events and classes, I combined participant listening and observation with audio and video recording. Additionally, five private singing lessons expanded my understanding of mountain song singing. Lastly, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with key actors in the field.

Attending to mountain songs as an embodiment of such a dynamic, I take inspiration from the *Sinophone*. This concept, coined by Shu-mei Shih, denotes cultural production by ethnically and linguistically Chinese people worldwide who relate to one another rather than to a shared homeland in China.[5] Most Hakka people can be considered ethnically and linguistically Chinese: they share ancestral relations to southern China and speak a Sinitic language, Hakka.[6] However, historically they have been stigmatised as outsiders and non-Chinese, reflected in the name Hakka, which means 'guest families' (*hak-kâ* 客家).[7] In response, many have tried even harder to prove their Chineseness, reclaiming their outsider status as proof for a migration history that links them to the Central Plains, seen as the birthplace of Chinese culture.[8] In the various places around the world that Hakka people now call home, they are seen as Chinese, might self-identify as Chinese, but also may identify either with these various places of residence or with Hakka communities all over the world, therefore potentially rejecting Chinese identities.[9] Investigating these relations within the Sinophone gives 'space' to all these layers, challenging the one-to-one relation between people, ethnicity, identity, language, citizenship, and nationhood, which are often subsumed under the term *Chinese*.[10]

Nevertheless, the concept of the Sinophone also has its limitations. Despite the suggestion raised by the term, *Sino-phone*

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[5] Shu-mei Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 716.
[6] Nicole Constable, *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad* (University of Washington Press, 1996), 5; Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 222.
[7] Constable, *Guest People*, 14.
[8] Thoralf Klein, "Constructing Subjects of Knowledge Beyond the Nation," *Monumenta Serica* 69, no. 1 (2021): 167.
[9] Paul B. Tjon Sie Fat, *Chinese New Migrants in Suriname: The Inevitability of Ethnic Performing* (Vossiuspers, 2009), 46; Wang Lijung, "Diaspora, Identity and Cultural Citizenship: The Hakkas in 'Multicultural Taiwan'," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 5 (2007): 880.
[10] It should be noted that this is in particular a problem of English (and other European languages). Sinitic languages have several corresponding terms to *Chinese* that offer more fine-grained distinctions, although these do not take away the issues pointed out here. In any case, this discussion deserves a different paper.

meaning 'Chinese-speaking', its use has been mostly relegated to visual cultural expressions such as written literature.[11] Recently, however, sonic cultural expressions such as sound in film, spoken language, and music have started to receive attention.[12] Attending to music in particular can advance the concept in three ways. First, the combination of visual and sonic modalities in music bridges earlier with newer work in Sinophone studies. Second, studying the spatial movements of music demonstrates the politics of music circulation and translation across borders.[13] Through making music, social and spatial boundaries are created, and music forms a powerful tool for political movements.[14] Third, as a sonic cultural expression through which affective relations are (re)created, music moves across the spectrum that ranges between longing for and rejecting Chineseness.[15] By studying how Taiwanese Hakka people navigate between being Hakka, being Taiwanese, and being Chinese through singing and listening to mountain songs, I aim to show the potential of interpreting *Sino-phone* alternatively as 'spaces that sound Chinese'. Taking this theoretical angle also contributes to extant literature on Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan and beyond: this field has focused on the form and content of the songs rather than on relations between mountain song singing and processes of Hakka identification, or the connections made through singing mountain songs within and across Hakka communities at a global level.[16]

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[11] Nathanel Amar, "Editorial: Including Music in the Sinophone, Provincializing Chinese Music", *China Perspectives* no. 3 (2019): 3.

[12] Lim Song Hwee, "The Voice of the Sinophone," in *Sinophone Cinemas*, eds. Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Tom Hoogervorst and Caroline Chia, *Sinophone Southeast Asia: Sinitic Voices across the Southern Seas* (Brill, 2021); Howard Chiang and Shu-mei Shih, *Sinophone Studies Across Disciplines: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

[13] Amar, "Music in the Sinophone," 3–4.

[14] Georgina Born, "Introduction," in *Music, Sound, and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experiences* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22; Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1–2.

[15] Lily Wong, "Moving Serenades: Hearing the Sinophonic in MP & GI's Longxiang Fengwu," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 3 (2013): 227.

[16] Hsu Hsin-wen 許馨文, "Dǎoyán: Táiwān Kèjiā yīnyuè yánjiù de huígù yǔ qiánzhān 導言：臺灣客家音樂研究的回顧與前瞻 Introduction: Studies of Taiwan Hakka Music, A Review and New Perspectives," *Global Hakka Studies* 12 (2019): 57–58.

Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan

In Taiwan, Hakka people number 4.6 million, amounting to 19.8% of the total population.[17] This makes them the second largest ethnic group in Taiwanese society, after the far larger group (70%) of Hoklo people. Like Hakka people, Hoklo people have roots in southern China, but in a slightly different area, and both groups speak different languages: Hakka and Taiwanese Southern Min.[18] Because of their dominant position in Taiwanese society, Hoklo people are often simply called 'Taiwanese', and they typically identify much more strongly with Taiwan than Hakka people do. Both Hakka and Hoklo people started to arrive in Taiwan from southern China from the 17th century onwards, pressing the more than twenty Indigenous peoples of Taiwan into the margins over the following centuries. Two other populations have moved to Taiwan more recently: *mainlanders*, or people from all over China following the Republic of China government in their retreat to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949, and *new residents*, a diverse group of labor migrants arriving since the 1990s predominantly from Southeast Asia.[19] Together, they make up the highly diverse and complex society that Hakka people navigate by singing and listening to mountain songs.

Hakka mountain songs were traditionally sung during farming, forestry, and mining work in the hills that range across the adjacent cities and counties of Taoyuan, Hsinchu, and Miaoli in

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[17] Hakka Affairs Council, *110 Nián quánguó Kèjiā rénkǒu jì yǔyán jīchǔ zīliào diàochá yánjiù* 110 年全國客家人口暨語言基礎資料調查研究 [*The 2022 National Hakka Population and Language Elementary Information Survey Research*] (Diantong Co., Ltd. 2022), 6.

[18] Both languages belong to the Sinitic language family, but they are mutually unintelligible. See also: Gareth Price, *Language, Society, and the State: From Colonization to Globalization in Taiwan* (DeGruyter Mouton, 2019), xiv.

[19] Executive Yuan, *The Republic of China Yearbook 2014* (Executive Yuan, 2014), 48-49. *Mainlanders,* being the conventional English term, is a mistranslation, as the original (*wàishěngrén* 外省人) means 'extra-provincial people' (Taiwan is the province here) and *mainlanders* (*dàlùrén* 大陸人) refers to current citizens of the People's Republic of China, i.e. China. With origins all across China, mainlanders initially spoke various Sinitic languages. However, as representatives of the Republic of China government, they most prominently introduced Mandarin as the dominant and government language of Taiwan.

northern Taiwan.[20] Through the songs, Hakka people could express romantic and erotic feelings that were taboo in everyday speech in the village and the household.[21] Furthermore, experiences of mobility and expressions of belonging also formed major themes in the songs.[22] Later, mountain songs became an important part of opera and theater performances and were sung at religious festivals and festive occasions. Since industrialisation and urbanisation started to reshape Taiwanese society in the 1960s, efforts to sustain the songs as intangible cultural heritage have folklorised and commercialised them as an art form performing Hakka culture.[23] Nowadays, the songs are mediatised on CD, radio, TV, and social media, are the subject of singing competitions, and get adapted into opera and pop music.[24]

Formwise, the songs typically consist of one or more rhyming quatrains. In singing, the seven semantically active syllables in each line are alternated with padding syllables that are part of the melody.[25] Typically, multiple song texts are sung to the same melody. In Taiwan, melodies are categorised as either one of the Three Major Tunes (*sâm thai thiau* 三大調), including the Old Mountain Songs (*ló-sân-kô* 老山歌), Mountain Ditties (*sân-kô-chṳ* 山歌仔), and Equal Metre (*phiàng-pán* 平板) melodies, or as a Little Tune (*siáu-thiau* 小調). While minimally six varieties of the Hakka

[20] Yang Kuo-hsin 楊國鑫, *Auˇ sanˊgoˊ: Táiwān Kèjiā gēyáo yǔ wénhuà* 詏幺ˇ・山歌 臺灣客家歌謠與文化 [*Debating Mountain Songs: Taiwanese Hakka Folksongs and Culture*] (Cradle Studio 搖籃工作室, 2012), 26–27.
[21] Mei-ling Chien, "Leisure, Work, and Constituted Everydayness: Mountain Songs of Hakka Women in Colonized Northern Taiwan (1930-1955)," *Asian Ethnology* 74, no. 1 (2015): 53–54.
[22] Wilt Idema, *Passion, Poverty, and Travel: Traditional Hakka Songs and Ballads* (World Century, 2015), 16; Chien, "Leisure, Work, and Constituted Everydayness," 40.
[23] Idema, *Passion, Poverty, and Travel*, 23.
[24] These developments are audible and visible in the performance of an Old Mountain Song on TV by Lai Jen-cheng, professional mountain song singer and musician, and in the pop song 'Taking Flowers Along' (*Lám fâ hi* 攬花去) by Lo Si-rong, which draws from a mountain song melody called Equal Metre. Both are accessible via QR codes 1 and 2, respectively, in the Appendix.
[25] Idema, *Passion, Poverty, and Travel*, 15; Phâng Ngiān-Jî 彭彥儒, personal communication, March 2024.

language are spoken in Taiwan, mountain songs are mostly sung in the Sixian (*si-yen* 四縣) variety. Recent years have seen some efforts to popularise singing in other varieties, a development from which I will start my discussion of how Hakka people create and challenge notions of space through singing and listening to mountain songs.

The Beipu Hailu mountain song competition

Across Taiwan, Sixian and Hailu (*hói-liu̍k* 海陸) are the most spoken varieties of the Hakka language, accounting for 56% and 42% of the total number of Hakka speakers.[26] In Hsinchu city and county, my main area of research, Hailu speakers actually form the majority. Nevertheless, Sixian enjoys government recognition as the standard Hakka variety, and is dominant in public as well as educational space throughout the country. This is reinforced by a rapidly declining proficiency in the Hakka language as a whole, under the pressure of Mandarin and Taiwanese Southern Min.[27] Likewise, mountain songs in Taiwan are sung in the Sixian variety even by singers who do not speak this variety in daily life, as is the case for a third of the participants of one of the mountain song class I attended: they only speak Hailu. My research participants tend to explain this discrepancy from the differences in linguistic tones between the varieties, arguing that the Sixian variety sounds more joyful than the Hailu variety. Therefore, Sixian would be more suited for singing mountain songs, which, probably because of their origin as work songs, should sound happy and energetic. Hailu, on the contrary, would only be appropriate for funeral chants. However, to many of my research participants that speak Hailu or other Hakka varieties, this preference for Sixian amounts to 'Sixian chauvinism'.

In response, small-scale movements to develop mountain song singing in the Hailu variety have emerged. One of them is the Hailu mountain song competition held in Beipu, a small village in the hills of Hsinchu county that profiles itself as a center of Hakka culture. Singing competitions, and the mountain song classes that

[26] Huei-ling Lai, "An Introduction to Taiwan Hakka: Focusing on its Sounds, Morph-Syntax and Social Background," in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis*, ed. Chris Shei (Routledge, 2019), 583.
[27] Ralf Vollmann and Tek Wooi Soon, "Convergence of Hakka with Chinese in Taiwan," *Global Chinese* 8, no. 2 (2022): 225.

prepare contestants for them, are a common strategy of sustaining musical cultural expressions in Taiwan, but the Hailu competition is unique in promoting singing in a specific variety of the Hakka language. On 30 November 2025, I attended the third edition of this competition. Forty-five people participated in the afternoon-long event, each singing two out of a total of eighteen preselected quatrains drawn from an accompanying lyrics writing competition. Among these eighteen song texts, six took up Hailu mountain song singing and its inheritance, whereas the rest dealt with morals and life ethics, both common themes in mountain songs. The organisation of a read-aloud competition for children and teenagers as side event and the continued presentation of the event in Hailu further demonstrate how the event tried to promote the Hailu variety.

The existence of a competition specifically for mountain songs in the Hailu language variety demonstrates how spaces for group identity can be constructed on a local level, by both challenging and making use of the linguistic and ethnic policies that work to construct the Taiwanese nation. By establishing Sixian as the dominant Hakka language variety in Taiwan, these policies stimulated the emergence of a countermovement advancing cultural expression in the Hailu variety. The policies also provide a positive stimulation to this movement through subsidising and marketising ethnic and linguistic difference. Since difference can now be sold, every sub-group can have an opportunity to represent itself, or in sonic terms, every voice can be audible. People that do not speak Hailu, or even fervently oppose singing mountain songs in any other variety than Sixian, can all take part in this contest or provide lyrics for it and win prizes, supported by the local and national governments.

Although the Sixian-Hailu debate seems of local relevance only, it has larger implications. Indeed, the dominance of the Sixian vis-à-vis the Hailu variety is particular to Taiwan. Outside of Taiwan, these varieties are not spoken.[28] Moreover, Taiwan is the only

[28] Wu Zhongjie 吳中杰, "Kèjiāhuà de zhǒnglèi 客家話的種類 [Varieties of Hakka]," in *Rènshì Táiwān Kèjiā* 認識臺灣客家 [Getting to Know Taiwanese

country worldwide to recognise Hakka as an official language—China only recognises Standard Mandarin.[29] On the other hand, in Hakka-speaking areas in southern China, issues of language decline are not as imminent as they are in Taiwan. Therefore, there is less need to 'save one variety rather than lose them all,' which seems to be the case in Taiwan. Thus, the Sixian-Hailu debate that underlies the Beipu Hailu mountain song competition works to create space for group identity not only on a local but also on a transnational level, as it contrasts Taiwan with China. In the next section, I show that the interplay between local and transnational space is bidirectional, investigating how transnational developments affect local society.

The Daqi mountain song class

Under rising tensions between the Chinese and Taiwanese governments, Taiwan increasingly relies on its Sacred Mountain Protecting the Nation (*Hù Guó Shénshān* 護國神山). For long, this Sacred Mountain was physical: the Central Mountain Range protects the island from typhoons from the Pacific while also harbouring its natural and cultural diversity. However, in a time when AI and access to computer chips dictate international politics, it is Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) that now forms the country's metaphoric Sacred Mountain. Yet, the forty-year development of this company at the Hsinchu Science Park has been and continues to be at the expense of natural environment—the foothills of the Central Mountain Range—and local society, formed by the Hakka people. In this section, I discuss how these transnational developments influence mountain song singing at the Baosheng Temple (*Pó-sên-kiûng* 寶生宮) in Daqi.

Daqi is a village part of Baoshan Township in Hsinchu County, at the border between the foothills that form the environment of northern Taiwan Hakka society and Hsinchu City.

Hakka], eds. Lin Pen-Hsuan 林本炫, Wang Li-rong 王俐容, and Lo Lieh-shih 羅烈師 (Hakka Study Association Taiwan, 2021), 60–63.

[29] Henning Klöter, "One Legacy, Two Legislations: Language Policies on the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait," in *Language Diversity in the Sinophone World*, eds. Henning Klöter and Mårten Söderblom Saarela (Routledge, 2020), 111–114.

The village, founded some 200 years ago, was once surrounded by rice paddies, farmland, and bamboo groves. However, its close location to the city also made it prone to urbanisation and economic development. After the government of the Republic of China that ruled Taiwan lost international recognition in the early 1970s, it sought renewed international and domestic legitimacy through economic development.[30] Major steps in this development were the establishment of the Industrial Research Technology Institute (ITRI) in 1973 and the Hsinchu Science Park (HSP) in 1980. In 1987, TSMC was founded as a spin-off of ITRI. Over the course of the following thirty years, the HSP slowly grew, initially within the borders of Hsinchu City. Yet, with the second phase of the Baoshan Expansion plan, announced in 2019, the growth of the Science Park started to influence Daqi directly.[31] For the construction of TSMC's newest 2nm chip fabs, the entire village was expropriated by the government, its inhabitants offered housing elsewhere, and their homes demolished. As the final step in this process, Baosheng Temple was closed and its god statues moved to a new location for the temple.

Until its closure, Baosheng Temple was the location for a monthly mountain song singing event organised by the Hakka Folksong Study Association (*Hak-kâ Mìn-yàu Ngàn-kiu Hia̍p-fu̍i* 客家民謠研究協會). On each second day of a lunar month, musicians and up to a hundred singers from Daqi, Baoshan, and beyond came together at the temple square to sing and make music together, cook, eat, and socialise. The half-open location central in the village enabled outsiders to the event to take a look or join right away.[32]

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30 Murray A. Rubinstein, "Taiwan's Socioeconomic Modernization, 1971-1996," in *Taiwan: A New History* (M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 370.

31 Ann Cheung 張家安, "Xīnzhú Kēxué Yuǎnqū duì Kèzhuāng shèhuì biànqiān zhī yíngxiǎng: yǐ Bǎoshān kuòjiàn jìhuà'àn wéi lì 新竹科學園區對客庄社會變遷之影響：以寶山擴建計畫案為例 The Impact of the Hsinchu Science Park on Hakka Community's Social Transformation: A Case Study of Baoshan Expansion Program" (MA thesis, National Yangming Chiaotung University, 2024), 106.

32 Daqi Literature and History Workshop 大崎文史工作室, "Jìlùpiàn: Shénshānxià de Kèjiā shān'gē 紀錄片｜神山下的客家山歌 [Documentary:

After the closure of the temple, the event moved to the community center that was newly-constructed in between the existing Science Park and the former village. Here, the event is held inside, with place for just about fifty people, and cooking is not possible. This is how I experienced the mountain song classes and other events at Daqi during my fieldwork period. Many of the participants continued to attend, yet others had moved too far away. The various Hakka dishes prepared in cooperation had been replaced by preordered lunchboxes. Lastly, a rectangular concrete building surrounded by parking lots had substituted the temple, losing all connection to the community history and the religious connotations of the singing events. Changes like these demonstrate how transnational developments, like the growing importance of the computer chip industry to the world economy and increasing tensions between the Chinese and Taiwanese governments, directly limit the space in Taiwan for mountain songs to be sung.

Hearing difference

In the previous sections, I discussed how national policies working to construct the Taiwanese nation, and transnational developments that form the difference between life and death for that Taiwanese nation, directly influence the space for singing and listening to mountain songs. In this section, I turn towards perceptions of mountain song singers and listeners: to them, Taiwanese mountain songs are audibly different from Chinese mountain songs. Participants in my fieldwork would declare a mountain song to be Chinese immediately after hearing a few seconds of a recording. Not only do the melodies differ, but Chinese mountain songs also vary more in lyrical length: whereas Taiwanese mountain songs only feature lines of seven syllables, Chinese mountain songs also feature lines of five syllables. To mountain song singer Lai Jen-cheng 賴仁政, Taiwanese mountain songs sound much more happy than Chinese mountain songs. He argues that this difference originates from the much higher life-standard in Taiwan compared to China

Hakka mountain songs under the Sacred Mountain]," *Youtube*, posted 18 October, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EocrpwkDx_8&t=99s, accessible via QR code 3 in the Appendix.

over the last hundred years. As music reflects the social and natural spaces in which it sounds, mountain songs from both sides differ considerably.[33]

Folk scholar Yang Kuo-hsin 楊國鑫 offers a different explanation, based on the socioeconomic history of Taiwan. To early migrants from China in the 17th and 18th century, including Hoklo as well as Hakka people, Taiwan was a new, empty land that needed to be developed. Most early migrants were men, who often migrated back to China after some time. Because of this, Yang suggests, there was little space for any cultural expressions in early Taiwanese society.[34] Only after society started to stabilise in the 19th century, mountain songs reemerged in Taiwan and continued to develop independently from their counterparts in China. Therefore, he argues that there is no direct, ancestral relation between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs, although he acknowledges that there has been and continues to be mutual influence.[35]

Furthermore, Taiwanese mountain song singers stress the similarities of Little Tunes, one of the categories of mountain songs distinguished in Taiwan, to other Taiwanese musical expressions, such as Hoklo folksongs. For example, the Hakka song 'Poling a Boat' (*Chhang-sòn-kô* 撐船歌) is very much the same as the Hoklo song 'Peach Blossom Takes the Ferry' (*Thô-hue kuè-tōo* 桃花過渡).[36] This adds to the argument that contact and mutual influence between Taiwanese mountain songs and other, non-Hakka Taiwanese musical expressions is as (if not even more) profound than contact between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs. Finally, the categorisation of mountain songs in the Three Major

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[33] Interview with Lai Jen-cheng, held on December 10, 2025; the idea that music reflects its physical and social environments matches with theoretisations of the relations between music and space such as Steven Feld's *acoustemology* and R. Murray Schafer's *soundscape*. See also: Eisenberg, "space," 197–199; Sakakeeny, "music," 118.

[34] This view, however, wipes out the presence of Indigenous societies with their various cultural expressions at the time.

[35] Interview with Yang Kuo-hsin, held on December 24, 2025.

[36] Recordings of these songs can be accessed through QR codes 4 and 5 in the Appendix.

Tunes and the Little Tunes as discussed in the second section is actually a heuristic particular to Taiwan. According to Lai Jen-cheng, this categorisation does not exist as such in China: it was developed in Taiwan during the late 1960s as part of the competition circuit that was just established at the time.[37] Working from the various audible differences between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs as discussed here, in the following two sections I elaborate on how these differences are used to claim space for Hakka in Taiwanese history and present.

Songs of the Islanguage

On November 23, 2025, the Riverside Red House Performance Hall in Taipei's most uptown Ximen district staged an afternoon-long concert called *Songs of the Islanguage* (*dáoyǔ zhī gē* 島語之歌). This quirky title makes good use of the fact that in Mandarin, the second syllable of 'island' (*dáoyǔ* 島嶼) is homophonous with 'language' (*yǔ* 語). Put together by Hakka singer and artist Lo Si-rong 羅思容, the concert featured performances by Seredew Sang Mei-chuan 桑美娟, an Indigenous singer of the Paiwan people who sings in the Paiwan and Amis languages, Tudi-Voice, a grassroots band from rural western Taiwan singing in Taiwanese Southern Min, and the organizer herself.[38] After each performed their own music, the concert came to a closure with a collective performance of 'Song of Four Seasons' (*Si-kui-fùng* 四季紅), composed by Teng Yu-hsien 鄧雨賢 (1906–1944). Hailed as the Father of Taiwanese Folksong (*Táiwān gēyáo zhī fù* 台灣歌謠之父), Teng was one of the first writing popular music in Taiwanese Southern Min, although he was Hakka himself. To this song, each performer incorporated the sonic cultural expressions representing their group: Paiwan songs, Hoklo folksongs, and Hakka mountain songs.

I analyse this concluding performance as a sonic embodiment of the argument underlying the concert. As emerges

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[37] Lai, Interview.

[38] The activist character of Tudi-Voice comes out much more clearly in their name in Mandarin, The Village Armed Youth (Nóngcūn Wǔzhuāng Qīngnián 農村武裝青年), but in English, they style themselves as Tudi-Voice, *tǔdì* 土地 meaning 'soil'.

from the title, this concert aims to present the music representative of this island, simultaneously incorporating 'language' into 'island'. 'Song of Four Seasons' is then taken as a musical framework representing Taiwan, made possible by the ethnic, linguistic, and historical background of its composer. To this framework, each of the ethnic and linguistic groups adds their music and language, just as Taiwan also consists of these parts. Thus, the argument presented by the concert holds that Taiwan's identity can be expressed through sonic cultural expressions as music and language. Furthermore, this identity consists of the very music sung and the languages spoken at this performance: Indigenous in all its varieties, Hoklo, and Hakka. Notably, this selection excludes Mandarin, the dominant and government language of Taiwan and China, and any references to Chinese music.

However, there is more to this argument. While Tudi-Voice mostly used Taiwanese Southern Min and Lo Si-rong some Hakka when talking to the public, the prevailing language outside of the songs was Mandarin. In fact, an event like this would not work without Mandarin: as a common language, it acts as a bridge between the three groups. In some sense, Mandarin also works as a neutral language, as it is the language of none of these groups, that would not have been willing to learn each other's languages in the past. Furthermore, as Mandarin is now the Taiwanese *lingua franca* and sounds differently from Mandarin as spoken in China, it might also be a sonic cultural expression that defines Taiwan, alongside the Indigenous, Southern Min, and Hakka languages. In this way, the aim of the concert to claim space in Taiwan for Indigenous, Hoklo, and Hakka cultural expression is limited by the ethnic and linguistic constellation of Taiwanese society.

This notion is reinforced by the concert location, as Taipei is the only place in Taiwan where Indigenous, Hoklo, and Hakka people and cultural expressions all come together. During industrialisation and urbanisation from the 1960s onwards, these three groups experienced the same process of migration to the capital for work, disappearing in the immense, indifferent space of the city, and trying to recover connections to the cultural expressions of their home society from there. Thus, Taipei harbours the largest Hakka population of Taiwan, yet it is not seen as a city with Hakka

identity.[39] Similar to the issue of Mandarin as common language at the event, organising the concert elsewhere in Taiwan would be seen as promoting one ethnic group over the others. The concert shows how Taipei forms a stage to claim space for ethnic, linguistic, and musical variety, necessary in order to be heard in Taiwanese society. *Songs of the Islanguage* claims space for Hakka, alongside Indigenous and Hoklo, people and cultural expressions in contemporary Taiwan.

Xu Xiang and *Wu Tangxing*

In this final case study, I turn from pop music to opera. I focus on two pieces of the Rom-Shing Hakka Opera Troupe, which is well-known in Taiwan and abroad for sustaining Tea-Picking Opera (*chhái-chhà-hi* 採茶戲), a Hakka performance art of which mountain songs are an important part. In sustaining this art form, the Troupe emphasises two aspects: maintaining the Sixian variety of the Hakka language as their main language of performance and retaining the prominence of mountain songs in the opera pieces. Adhering to these two principles, they produce two new plays each year in an innovative approach, adapting all kinds of stories into opera instead of only performing traditional pieces. Among their productions are two pieces staging the efforts of Hakka gentry in defending the Republic of Taiwan (*Táiwān Mínzhǔguó* 臺灣民主國) against the invasion of the Japanese army in 1895: the 2008 play *Loyalty in the Resistance War: Wu Tangxing* (*Yǐwèi Dānxīn—Wú Tāngxìng* 乙未丹心ㄧ吳湯興) tells the story of Wu Tangxing, and the 2025 play *Hero of the 1895 Resistance War: Xu Xiang* (*1895 Yǐwèi Yīngliè – Xú Xiāng* 1895 乙未英烈ㄧ徐驤) that of his fellow guerilla commander Xu Xiang.[40]

[39] Hakka Affairs Council, *2022 National Hakka survey*, 6–7; R. Scott Wilson, "Making Hakka Spaces: Resisting Multicultural Nationalism in Taiwan," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 16, no. 4 (2009): 426–427.

[40] HakkaTV 客家電視臺, "Yǐwèi Dānxīn Wú Tāngxìng xúnyǎn jiéhé fǎn huìxuǎn 乙未丹心吳湯興巡演 結合反賄選 [Loyalty in the Resistance War Wu Tangxing tour combines with anti-election fraud campaign]," *Hakka Village News* 客莊新聞, 24 February 2008, http://web.pts.org.tw/hakka/news/detail.php?id=17653.

Following the philosophy of the Troupe, both plays feature a large number of mountain songs: within the two hours of playing time, around 30 mountain songs are sung, complemented by about 10 songs from other genres. In *Hero of the 1895 Resistance War: Xu Xiang*, mountain songs are also important in a different way: the play portrays how many Hakka women joined the resistance, some by fighting, others by providing intelligence on the movements of the Japanese army to the guerilla fighers through mountain song singing.[41] In the last act, when Xu Xiang is the last one still fighting Japanese soldiers, his wife Lin Shimei sings a mountain song in the background, as to accompany him from afar. Both these songs and the actors' stage lines convey the sentiment that Wu Tangxing, Xu Xiang, and their compatriots would not flee to China as they were losing to the Japanese. Rather, they would perish together with Taiwan, as this was where they were born and where they had taken root. I argue that this is a portrayal of Hakka people defending Taiwan as their homeland, (re)claiming space for Hakka people and cultural expressions in the historical narrative leading up to contemporary Taiwan.

This space is also claimed physically. *Hero of the 1895 Resistance War: Xu Xiang* was performed indoors, in theatre halls around Taiwan during the late summer and autumn of 2025, similar to *Loyalty in the Resistance War: Wu Tangxing* during its initial tour in 2008. However, to commemorate the 130 years since the 1895 Resistance War, the latter play was restaged on the square in front of Tongluo train station in Miaoli County. This small village is the birthplace of Wu Tangxing, and his efforts in the 1895 war are memorialised in the Tongluowan 1895 Culture and Life Hall (*Tùng-lò-vân 1895 Vùn-fa Sên-fàt-kón* 銅鑼灣 1895 文化生活館), adjacent to the train station and the performance location. Staging the play outside claims physical space, tangibly by blocking the road several days in a row, and audibly through the sounds of the play that are not kept inside the walls of a theater hall. Furthermore, it alludes to the traditional yet ever more sparse practice of performing Tea-Picking Opera outside, either next to a temple or near a central place

[41] This is audible from 2:40 in the trailer the Troupe made for this piece, accessible through QR code 6 in the Appendix.

in a village such as the market or the train station. Finally, the fact that the restaging of *Wu Tangxing* on the Tongluo station square was sponsored by the national government's Hakka Affairs Council shows how attempts to craft space for Hakka cultural expressions on a local level relate to efforts to claim space for Hakka people in the Taiwanese nation.

Sounding Hakka spaces in Taiwan, sounding Taiwan in the Sinophone

In this article, I have explored how Hakka people navigate the dynamic between being Hakka, being Taiwanese, and being Chinese through singing and listening to mountain songs. Together, the five case studies demonstrate how space is created and challenged through singing and listening to mountain songs while tying local, national, and transnational levels together. Moreover, they show how Taiwanese Hakka people engage with their ancestral homes in southern China, their current homes in Taiwan, and Hakka communities all over the world. This challenges the idea of the nation-state and the assumption of a binary opposition between China and Taiwan. Sinophone studies aim to highlight the experiences of ethnically or linguistically Chinese people outside China, such as the Taiwanese Hakka people that I have given prominence to in this paper. Additionally, the case studies discussed here make clear that relations with diverse people inside China also need to be considered in Sinophone studies, without reducing them to citizens of the Chinese nation-state or members of a unitary ethnic group called Han-Chinese. Crucially, it is through investigating how space is crafted and contested by making and listening to music that these nuances come to light.

Attending to Hakka mountain songs shows how music is shaped by the spaces in which it sounds: the sound of Hakka mountain songs does not resonate between hillsides anymore, but is mostly kept between the walls of private homes, community centers, and concert halls. Mountain songs travel through space as they circulate between Hakka villages and the capital Taipei, between Taiwan and China, and across the Sinophone world. By singing and listening to mountain songs, Hakka people adapt to the drastic changes in their environment and society, foster relations with the

other groups making up Taiwanese society, and navigate the varying political constellations of the Taiwanese nation-state. Singing and listening to mountain songs is a key part of efforts to claim space for Hakka people and their cultural expressions sonically and physically, in Taiwan and beyond.

Mountain songs articulate the Sinophone: they are a sonic embodiment of all that is complicated about language, nation, ethnicity, culture, and power. This insight underlines the importance of music and sonic culture at large in debates on what it means to be Chinese in all its diversity. As a first attempt of such an approach, I have provided a perspective on the nexus of music and space that acknowledges the complexity of Taiwanese Hakka people's lived experiences. Mountain songs make audible how Hakka people relate to China and Taiwan, and how their struggle for space in Taiwan is part of a larger effort to contest space for Taiwan in the world.

Appendix

1.

Old Mountain Song performed by Lai Jen-cheng

   edu.nl/wbmct

2.

'Taking Flowers Along' by Lo Si-rong

   edu.nl/3ynn3

3.

Daqi mountain song class

   edu.nl/gwqfm

4.

'Poling a Boat'

   edu.nl/wkpam

5.

'Peach Blossom Takes the Ferry'

   edu.nl/d8jp3

6.

Trailer for the play *Xu Xiang*

edu.nl/wdd4a

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