



High Ancestors among The Hakka Chinese, Past and Present, Rural, Urban, and Global

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The anthropology of ancestor worship has largely focused on genealogically close ancestors shared by small clusters of agnates, with an emphasis on death ritual and the transition from a deceased kin as object of mourning to an ancestor worshipped as such. More remote ancestors gain anthropological attention largely in the context of lineage organization and insofar as a residentially defined lineage community or lineage segment takes its founding ancestor as a shared symbol of lineage cohesion. Even such more distant ancestors are quite close to home in that they are localized at the lineage level.

Based upon research in Hakka regions in southern Taiwan and in northern Guangdong Province on the China mainland, in my talk I want to stress the importance of ancestors at a much higher genealogical level, so far only sporadically dealt with in the literature, largely in terms of so-called urban or overseas Chinese “clans.” First these Hakka areas share with other parts of China the genealogical importance of higher level founding ancestors, by which I mean ancestors held to have been founders of the national surname itself, or at a somewhat lower genealogical level, founding ancestors for very large areas of China.

These ancestors are intimately linked to the imperial Chinese state as high officials and founding ancestors within an administrative framework, that is as a particular surname’s founding ancestor for a province, prefecture, etc. Second, the appearance of these ancestors in highly variable institutional and religious contexts indicates the deep penetration of genealogical knowledge, certainly in imperial China, but even today in the People’s Republic, Taiwan, and in overseas Chinese communities in southeast Asia and elsewhere.

