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Hakka and Cantonese in the Chinese Diaspora: Notes on the Tahitian Chinese Community

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Since at least the Tang dynasty, Chinese have been traveling from their homeland. Some were merchants seeking short-term trading opportunities; others became part of more permanent communities, largely settling in Southeast Asian, and especially in Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Southeast Asia as a region has become home to approximately 30 million of the estimated 40 million overseas Chinese. Outside of Southeast Asia, the US, Canada, Peru, and Russia all have at least a million people of Chinese decent, comprising another approximately seven million. The remaining three million overseas Chinese are found around the world in small, yet often established communities.

Polynesia is home to many of these small communities. The Tahitian Chinese diaspora numbers some 13,000 (about 5% of the population) and includes both Hakka (the majority) and Cantonese speakers. Counting Tahitians of mixed background this estimate rises to over 20,000. The Chinese presence in Tahiti dates to 1851, but has waxed and waned with political and economic changes locally and in China.

This paper describes the linguistic context of the quickly changing Tahitian Chinese community and includes field notes from interviews with Chinese Tahitian informants. In addition, the study also includes annotations on borrowings between French, Tahitian, and Chinese.