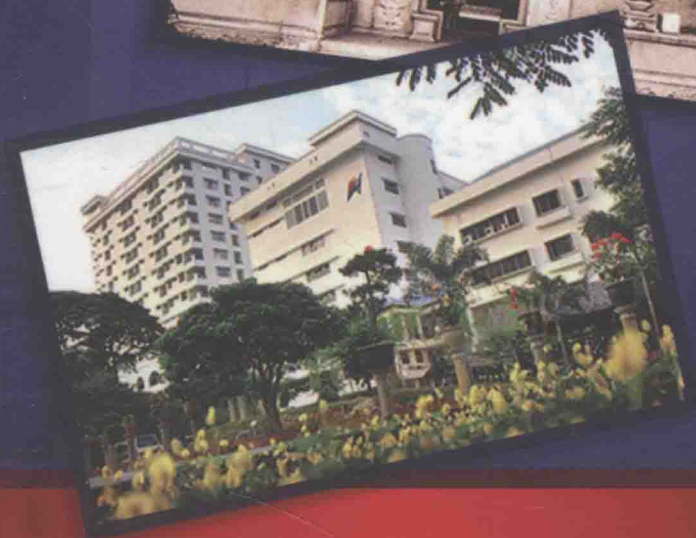
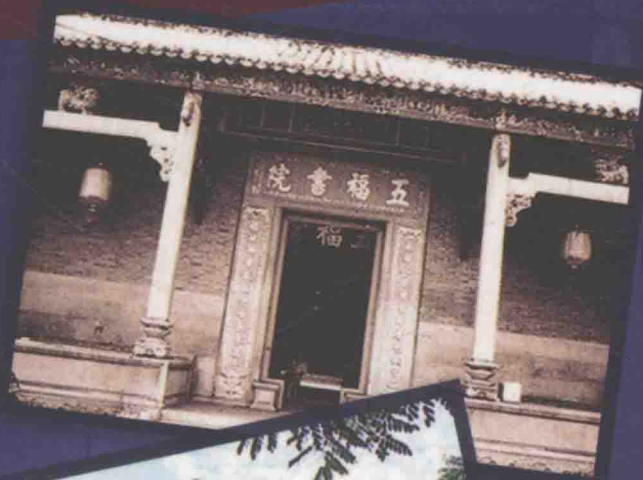


CHINESE SCHOOLS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

The Struggle for Survival

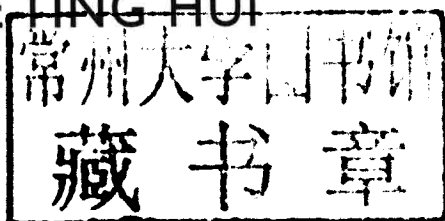


LEE TING HUI

CHINESE SCHOOLS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

The Struggle for Survival

LEE TING HUI



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Singapore

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Cover photo (top): The Wufu Shuyuan [The Academy of Five Blessings] in Penang, founded in 1819.

Cover photo (bottom): The New Era College established by Dong Jiao Zong (UCSCA and UCSTA) and Merdeka University Ltd. Co. in 1998.

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*Lee Ting Hui
Singapore
May 2009*

ABBREVIATIONS

DAP	Democratic Action Party
FMC	Federal Malayan Certificate
Gerakan	Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia
HSC	Higher School Certificate
LCE	Lower Certificate of Education
MCA	Malayan Chinese Association
MCACECC	Malayan Chinese Association Chinese Education Central Committee
MCE	Malaysia Certificate of Education
MIC	Malayan Indian Congress
MNP	Malayan National Party
PAS	Parti Islamic SeMalaysia (<i>Islamic Party of Malaysia</i>)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (<i>People's Justice Party</i>)
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah (<i>Junior Secondary Assessment</i>)
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (<i>People's Alliance</i>)
SC	School Certificate
SJK (C)	Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) (<i>National-Type Chinese Primary School</i>)
SJK (T)	Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil) (<i>National-Type Tamil Primary School</i>)
SK	Sekolah Kebangsaan (<i>National Primary School</i>)
SMJK	Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (<i>National-Type Secondary School</i>)
SMK	Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (<i>National Secondary School</i>)

SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (<i>Malaysian Certificate of Education</i>)
SRJK (C)	Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) (<i>National-Type Chinese Primary School</i>)
SRJK (T)	Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil) (<i>National-Type Tamil Primary School</i>)
SRK	Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (<i>National Primary School</i>)
SRP	Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (<i>Lower Certificate of Educaiton</i>)
STPM	Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (<i>Malaysian Higher School Certificate</i>)
Three-M	Membaca, Menulis, Mengira (<i>Reading, Writing, Counting</i>)
UCSCA	United Chinese School Committees' Association
UCSTA	United Chinese School Teachers' Association
UDP	United Democratic Party
UMNO	United Malay National Organisation
UPSR	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (<i>Primary School Assessment</i>)

NOTES ON COVERAGE AND NAMES

Our account is mainly about events in Peninsular Malaysia, which was commonly referred to as the Malay Peninsula or Malaya before 1963 when it formed Malaysia with Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah. However, the narrative also covers developments in Singapore before 1965 when the island broke off from Malaysia and became an independent country.

Chinese names, whether of persons, schools, or organizations, are retained in their original spellings. Names with spellings which cannot be ascertained are transliterated with *hanyu pinyin*. All these, in addition to appearing in the text, are tabulated in the Glossaries, together with their Chinese characters.

All translations into English from Chinese or Malay sources are the authors' work, unless otherwise stipulated.

All currency references are to the Malayan dollar before the formation of Malaysia in 1963, and to the Malaysian ringgit afterwards.

INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to give an account of how Chinese schools in Peninsular Malaysia struggled to survive and develop between 1786 and 2003, a period spanning more than two hundred years. The overriding consideration is to see how the various governments of the country over these years posed challenges to them and how they responded to these challenges.

In the years before the Pacific War, the British colonial government left the Chinese schools alone. However, when they caused harm to the country's economy by their political activities, the colonial government adopted legislation to control them.

During the years of the Pacific War, when the Japanese who ruled the country closed all the Chinese schools, they had no means of responding.

After the Pacific War, the British were back in the country. Because of the China orientation of the Chinese schools, they sought to transform them into English schools between 1945 and 1955. The Chinese schools responded by reorientating themselves to Malaya and escaped transformation.

From 1955, the country came under the rule — at first partially, but then fully from 1957 — of a Malay government. The new government sought to achieve their “ultimate objective” in education, which was to have all schools use the Malay language as their main medium of instruction. From then until now, this was the challenge posed to Chinese schools, which put in their best effort to meet this challenge.

Our story is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 covers the years from 1786 to 1941, from the first arrival of the British in Malaya to when the British lost it to the Japanese in the Pacific War. The focus of this chapter will be on the founding of modern Chinese schools in Malaya in the twentieth century. Like those in China, these schools were instruments for the modernization of China. As such, they were highly politicized. Soon their political activities became injurious to the economy of the country. As a consequence, the British colonial government adopted legislation to curb

their activities. The challenge of the British action, however, did not affect their growth.

Chapter 2 spans the years from 1942 to 1955. The year 1942 was when the country fell completely to the Japanese, and 1955 was when the British returned partial control of the country to the Malays. The Japanese ruled the country until 1945 when they surrendered it back to the British. While the Japanese were here, they promoted only education through the Japanese language. As a result, all Chinese schools were closed down as they failed to meet the Japanese challenge.

The Chinese schools were revived after 1945. The second part of Chapter 2 narrates how between 1946 and 1955 the British took steps to try to transform the Chinese schools into English schools. The British did this because the Chinese schools placed their loyalty with China instead of Malaya. Eventually, the Chinese schools reorientated themselves and were not forced to change as they met the British challenge successfully. This period also saw the founding of Chinese educational organizations which became defenders of Chinese education.

Chapter 3 covers the period from 1956 to 1969. The year 1956 was when the “ultimate objective” in education was first enunciated, and 1969 was when racial riots broke out between the Malays and the Chinese. The highlight of this period of development was the enunciation of this “ultimate objective” through the Razak Report. Another highlight was the release of the Talib Report in 1960, and the passing of an Education Act based on that report the following year. While the Razak Report did not seek the immediate realization of the “ultimate objective”, the Talib Report and the consequent Education Act did take the first step towards that goal. Under the latter, Chinese primary schools were allowed to continue and receive government aid, but Chinese secondary schools were forced to change to using English instead of Chinese as their main medium of instruction. Or they could choose to remain as they were, but would receive no government assistance. They would thus become independent schools. The chapter also accounts for other but lesser challenges posed by the government to Chinese schools during this period. On the whole, Chinese schools managed to survive.

Developments in the 1970s are covered in Chapter 4. The most significant event during these years was that the government took further steps to bring about the realization of the “ultimate objective”. First, English educational institutions in the country had to change to Malay. Next were those Chinese secondary schools which had earlier changed to using English instead of Chinese as their main medium of instruction to change again,

this time to using Malay as their main medium of instruction. During that time, the government also came out with a Cabinet Report, 1979, to seek the improvement of the whole educational system in the country, but the report paid scant attention to Chinese schools. Other lesser challenges to Chinese schools are also covered in the chapter. Both Chinese primary schools and independent Chinese secondary schools faced serious problems during this period, but a campaign to revive Chinese education proved successful.

Chapter 5 chronicles the events of the 1980s. The push towards the “ultimate objective” on the part of the government persisted. Eventually, a series of events catapulted the government’s drive to a climax in 1987. This was followed by the government launching “Operation Lalang” in which elements opposed to the government, especially prominent Chinese educationists, were arrested and sent to jail. Disputes such as the 3-M Issue are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6 covers the period from the 1990s until 2003, which was when the then prime minister resigned. The period was dominated by what was called Vision 2020. This vision brought both joy and disappointment to the Chinese schools. For instance, the transformation of existing schools into “Smart Schools” was a development welcomed by them, but the conversion of existing schools into “Vision Schools” upset them.

Chapter 7, which concludes the book, summarizes the highlights of events discussed in all the foregoing chapters, examines problems faced by Chinese schools in recent years from 2004 to early 2009, and tries to anticipate what is in store for them in the immediate future.

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1

THE YEARS BEFORE THE PACIFIC WAR

To understand why there were and still are Chinese schools in the Malay Peninsula, we need to know how the land became a British dependency between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries for there were few Chinese living there before the British arrived and even fewer Chinese schools worth noting. The Chinese followed in the wake of the British, arriving to seek a better living which the British could provide. The British initiated vast economic developments which necessitated extensive utilization of manpower. In addition to the attractiveness of the land under British rule, China, from where the Chinese came, was ravaged by wars with foreign powers as well as civil conflicts from about the middle of the nineteenth century, which made life very difficult for ordinary people.

The first Chinese to come to the Malay Peninsula actually arrived in the fifteenth century during the days of the Malacca sultanate, but they were insignificant in numbers compared with those arriving later. Francis Light and Stamford Raffles set up trading stations in Penang and Singapore in 1786 and 1819 respectively, and these stations became great magnets for Chinese traders as well as labourers. In 1826, the British also acquired Malacca from the Dutch and used it for trading. This former sultanate had fallen to Portuguese rule in the fifteenth century and then to the Dutch. Penang, Singapore, and Malacca were then formed into one administrative unit named the Straits Settlements. Then, beginning from 1874, the British moved northwards from Singapore into the hinterland,

to the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang which they formed into a federation called the Federated Malay States in 1896. The metal, tin, was found to be abundant in Perak and Selangor, and this was what drew the British northwards. In 1909, the British and the Thais reached an agreement to divide between themselves some Malay states straddling the present border between the peninsula and Thailand, and so the British also took over Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu. Later, another state just north of Singapore, Johor, was also acquired. All these later acquisitions became collectively known as the Unfederated Malay States. By that time, the Malay Peninsula had come to be known as a land especially suitable for the cultivation of rubber. Thus, by the early years of the twentieth century, the whole peninsula had been taken over by the British.

Penang, Singapore, and Malacca attracted Chinese immigrants because of trade. The rest of the peninsula became interesting to them because of tin and rubber. Drawn by these attractions and pushed by the difficulties of life in China, they emigrated to the Malay Peninsula in ever greater numbers after the British moved into the mainland. Along with their arrival was the establishment of education for their children.

Table 1.1 shows the influx of Chinese immigrants into the Malay Peninsula from 1871 to 1941, and the percentage of these immigrants of the total population in the country over those years.

Table 1.1
Chinese Immigration into the Malay Peninsula, 1871–1941¹

Year	Total Population	Chinese Population	% of Chinese
1871*	308,097	104,615	34
1891	910,123	391,418	43
1901	1,227,195	583,396	48
1911	2,644,489	914,143	35
1921	3,338,545	1,179,551	35
1931	4,345,503	1,703,528	39
1941	5,545,173	2,418,615	44

Note: '1871*': This line refers only to the Straits Settlements.

Source: See note 1.

EARLY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

In the early days, there were three kinds of institutions which afforded Chinese children an opportunity to learn their mother tongue. The first were those established by the Chinese settlers themselves and which may be called old-style schools. The second were those founded by Christian missionaries, and the third were what came to be called the free schools.

Old-Style Schools

An old-style school was known in Chinese terminology as a *sishu*. It was modelled after what prevailed in China during the days of the Manchu Dynasty.

An old-style school could be started by a family hiring a tutor to come to the house to teach its children. Or it could be started by a single person, quite often a family tutor breaking off from his employer to start his own establishment as an independent teacher in his own house, to make a better living. Something on a larger scale than either of the above would spring up when community leaders gathered a larger number of children in the whole community into an ordinary or ancestral temple to begin an institution. Sometimes when the number of students in such a place increased significantly, the school would be moved to a clan or district association where space would be more ample. And on further increases in student intake, the new recruits might be accommodated again in an ordinary or ancestral temple as a branch school. The Wufu Shuyuan [Academy of Five Blessings] in Penang, believed to be the earliest *sishu*, was founded in 1819.²

According to some sources, in 1815, there were nine such establishments in Malacca; in 1829, there were three in Singapore; and in the 1830s, there were three, and even one for girls, in Penang.³ By 1884, the statistics had become twelve in Malacca, fifty-one in Singapore, and fifty-two in Penang.⁴ And it was also reported that in 1901, about 2,000 students attended old-style schools in Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang.⁵

An interesting question is what the students were taught in such institutions. As was well-known, they first learnt the *San Zi Jing* (Trimetrical Classic), the *Bai Jia Xing* (Century of Surnames), the *Qian Zi Wen* (Millenary Classic), and the *You Xue Qiong Lin* (Odes for Children). Later on, they would learn the *Xiao Jing* (Canon of Filial Piety) and then the *Si Shu* (Four Books) which consisted of the *Da Xue* (Great Learning), the *Zhong Yong* (Golden Means), the *Lun Yu* (Analects), and the *Meng Zi* (Book of Mencius).

Next, the more advanced among the pupils would study the *Wu Jing* (Five Classics) which were the *Shi Jing* (Book of Odes), the *Shu Jing* (Book of History), the *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes), the *Li Ji* (Book of Rites), and the *Chun Qiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals). The important point to note about these compilations is that they were all vehicles of Confucianism, and the primary virtues the students were expected to imbibe from them were *zhong* and *xiao*. *Zhong* was loyalty to the ruler of the country, and *xiao* was to be filial to one's parents and ancestors. These were the pillars which upheld traditional Chinese society.⁶

It had been noted that students in the old-style schools could range, in age, from as young as five or six to as old as about twenty. Presumably, the age of any particular student was an indication of which level of the books mentioned he had reached.⁷

Christian Missionary Schools

The first Christian mission to set up schools in the Malay Peninsula was the London Missionary Society, a Protestant organization. The primary aim of this society was to spread Christianity in China. However, the government of the day in that country, the Manchu Dynasty, did not welcome Christian evangelization. So the London Missionary Society decided to set up a station in a place near China to prepare the ground, especially to train Chinese church workers, for the day when China would alter its attitude, open its doors, and would no longer bar Christian activities.

So, in 1815, at the suggestion of Dr R. Morrison, who was the person who originated the idea of the China evangelization project, Dr W. Milne began such a station in Malacca. Later on, similar stations were also opened in Penang and Singapore. For us, the pertinent point to note was that these stations ran schools for children where both the English and Chinese languages were taught, among other things. The mission was to top these institutions with the founding of an Anglo-Chinese College in 1818 in Malacca which would embark upon both cultural and evangelical dissemination at a higher level.⁸

A newspaper in Singapore, the *Singapore Free Press*, reported on 16 December 1823 on the aspirations of these educational establishments:⁹

[The institutions'] immediate object is to impart a thorough education, making religious knowledge an essential part of it, to a select number of

Chinese lads, and the plan is to instruct them well in English, in addition to their own language, as the medium of studying the higher branches of education and acquiring an acquaintance with English literature and the arts and sciences of Europe. The more remote object is to secure, by the blessing of God and the diligent use of proper means, a body of native agency to co-operate hereafter in the more extensive plans of diffusing religious as well as useful and scientific knowledge among their countrymen.

The newspaper was very clear about the purposes of the London Missionary Society's educational efforts in the peninsula.

Another Protestant organization to found evangelical stations and schools for children in the Malay Peninsula in those early days was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. This took place in Singapore and Penang in the 1830s.¹⁰

The establishments of both the British and the American missions, as expected, really turned out to be ephemeral. When China was open to Christian evangelization after its defeat in a war with the British, the Opium War of 1839–42, they were all closed except for one girls' school belonging to the British. Both Christian groups moved the loci of their activities to China.¹¹

The Roman Catholics followed in the footsteps of the Protestants. It was reported that in the 1870s and the 1880s, they managed schools not only in the Straits Settlements, but also in Kuala Lumpur. It is to be noted that they, unlike the British and the Americans, were interested not only in China, but also in the Malay Peninsula in its own right. Nevertheless, after some time, most of their educational institutions also closed down. The reason for this was perhaps that there was an insufficient intake of students.¹²

The Roman Catholic teachers were supposed to have taught their pupils English and Chinese besides arithmetic and geography. Naturally, religious instruction would also have been part of the curriculum, but this was not reported because it was not a subject examined by the inspector.¹³

The Free Schools

According to some sources,¹⁴ the London Missionary Society set up a Penang Free School in 1816, and a Singapore Free School in 1834. Different from

the institutions established by the same organization mentioned earlier, these schools, it seems, though also imparting religious knowledge, only aimed at providing an ordinary kind of education to children. A very distinctive feature was that they were each actually a complex of schools, an English school at the secondary level, and a Chinese school, a Malay school, and a Tamil school at the elementary level.

The lower schools were supposed to be feeder schools for the higher one, that is, the better graduates from them would be promoted to the higher one for further training. The rationale for having such a system was that children should be given a grounding in their mother tongue first and then go on to acquire higher knowledge through the English language.¹⁵ There were also free schools set up by individuals or through public donations rather than by any religious organization, for instance, the Gan Eng Seng School in Singapore set up in 1886.¹⁶

The British authorities had always thought that a school graduate, educated both in his mother tongue and in English, would always be more useful to society than a monolingual person. The fact was, it seems, that the government needed clerks in its various departments, as well as interpreters in the law courts, to be bridges between their own ethnic communities and their British superiors. This kind of thinking was perhaps implicit, for instance, in a speech given by Governor Sir Cecil Clementi Smith in 1893 to the Gan Eng Seng School:¹⁷

The school might be devoted to the study of English, but I am glad that a knowledge of Chinese will also be gained there, which to me appears to be an essential part of the education of a Chinese boy ... The boys who grow up with a knowledge of that language and who also attach to it a knowledge of English will prove better citizens than those boys who throw off the language of the country to which they naturally belong and adopt the English language simply from a utilitarian sense of the time they are going to spend in this Settlement.

These were encouraging words. The government was actually at the time extending financial assistance to non-monolingual schools.¹⁸

The scheme comprising a central institution and a number of feeder schools did not, finally, perform as well as was hoped. Student intake into the feeder schools was insufficient, or teachers for them were in short supply. Eventually, they dwindled into mere vernacular classes in the central school.¹⁹