

## **An Overview of the Development of Modern Chinese Education in Penang, 1900–1945**

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### **Abstract**

This study revisits the developmental trajectory of Chinese-medium modern education in Penang from the early twentieth century to the end of the Second World War. Structured chronologically, the article divides this historical process into four distinct phases: the *Formative Stage* (early 1900s–1911), the *Period of Rapid Growth* (1912–1925), the *Golden Age* (1926–1940), and the *Dark Period* (1941–1945). By analysing school histories, community records, and colonial educational policies, this study reveals how Chinese education in Penang evolved from the traditional aims of moral instruction and cultural preservation towards a more diversified and utilitarian model of schooling. Findings show that Penang stood at the forefront of modern Chinese education within the Straits Settlements during its formative years. The economic strength of the Chinese community and shifts in social consciousness collectively drove the modernisation of educational structures. By the 1920s, Penang's Chinese schools had expanded rapidly in both scale and hierarchy, demonstrating remarkable institutional maturity and communal resilience. During the 1930s, Chinese education entered its peak, characterised by a comprehensive and multi-tiered system that encompassed primary, secondary, vocational, and teacher training levels. However, this educational framework was systematically dismantled during the Japanese occupation, when policies of cultural assimilation and wartime repression brought about institutional collapse and cultural rupture. This research reconstructs a coherent historical narrative of early modern Chinese education in Penang, filling a significant gap in the historiography of Penang's education between the 1900s and the Second World War. Beyond enriching the understanding of local educational development, it also provides new empirical insights into the dynamics of educational modernisation within the Chinese community under colonial rule.

**Keywords:** Penang; Chinese education; Straits Settlements; Chinese community in Penang; Second World War

### **Introduction**

In the historiography of Chinese education in Malaysia, Penang has long been recognised as one of the earliest and most influential centres of educational development (Kuang 1954, 71). Yet, existing studies often treat Penang merely as the point of origin or a peripheral case in the broader narrative of Malayan Chinese education, without offering a systematic examination of

its formative evolution (Tan 2014, 8). From the early twentieth century to the end of the Second World War, however, Penang was not only a vital cultural hub within the Straits Settlements but also a key site where modern Chinese-medium educational institutions first emerged and expanded. The development of education in Penang thus reflected both the modernising aspirations of its Chinese community and the complex interactions among colonial governance, local economy, and social transformation.

Although numerous studies have explored Chinese education in Malaya, most focus on its relationship with Malaysian politics (Tan 2014, 8) and the broader development of Chinese education in Malaysia (Tay 1998, 45), rather than the specific historical trajectory of Penang. In contrast, the period between the 1900s and the 1940s in Penang has received comparatively little scholarly attention, especially concerning educational practices, school establishment, and community involvement. This era was a pivotal phase in which Chinese education in Penang transitioned from *yixue* (义学; traditional charitable schools) to a more structured institutional system—marking a significant step in the broader process of educational modernisation within the Straits Settlements.

Focusing on Penang from the early twentieth century to the end of World War II, this study reconstructs the historical trajectory of modern Chinese-medium education—from its emergence and expansion to its wartime decline. By analysing the distinct features of each developmental phase, the research seeks to address several core questions: Why did modern Chinese education flourish so rapidly in Penang in the early 1900s? How were its institutionalisation and diversification influenced by economic structures and community organisations? How did its educational system adapt to colonial constraints? And what impact did the Second World War have on Chinese education in Penang?

Methodologically, this study adopts a historically grounded qualitative approach, proceeding in chronological order. The analysis is based primarily on school magazines, institutional archives, clan and guild records, colonial education reports, and contemporary newspapers, supplemented by commemorative publications and oral accounts to capture micro-level details. Through cross-verification of multiple primary sources, this research aims to construct a coherent and evidence-based narrative of Penang's Chinese education before the war. Most importantly, by systematically compiling and analysing first-hand materials from the 1900s to 1945, this study fills a major gap in the local educational historiography of Penang. It not only deepens our understanding of Penang's educational landscape but also provides new empirical foundations for re-evaluating the processes of educational modernisation within the Chinese communities of colonial Malaya and, more broadly, Southeast Asia.

### **The Emergence and Beginnings of Modern Chinese Education in Penang (Early 20th Century–1911)**

Situated strategically along the Straits of Malacca, Penang served as a vital maritime passage for international trade routes. In 1786, Captain Francis Light did not merely persuade but in fact deceived the Sultan of Kedah by promising military protection against threats from Siam and Burma—a pledge that was never formally sanctioned by the British East India Company. Through this stratagem, Light succeeded in acquiring Penang without any legally binding reciprocal commitment (Ahmad Murad and Abd Ur-Rahman 2021), and on 11 August of the same year, he landed on the island and began developing it to consolidate British interests in the region. Thanks to its advantageous geographical position and rapid economic growth, Penang rose swiftly from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. It became not only a major northern port of the British Straits Settlements but also an essential regional trade hub linking Siam, Burma, Sumatra, and the west coast of the Malay Peninsula (Chong 2004, 44–45).

With the flourishing of commercial activities, Penang attracted a large number of Chinese immigrants seeking livelihood opportunities (Zheng 1998, 159–173). In addition to migrants from Fujian and Guangdong, the arrival of the Teochew community also became an important component of Penang’s Chinese society. As one of the earliest urban settlements in the Malay Peninsula where Chinese communities took root, Penang gradually developed a diverse and stable social structure. With the growing number of immigrants and the accumulation of economic strength, various clan and native-place associations were successively established, becoming vital pillars that sustained the Chinese community network. In addition to providing mutual aid and welfare services, these associations actively engaged in educational undertakings, offering opportunities for the schooling of community children. Within this socio-economic context, at the beginning of the twentieth century, several schools founded and funded by Chinese associations and merchants emerged, marking the formative stage of Chinese education in Penang.

On 21 April 1904, Zhang Bishi (张弼士) and Liang Biyu (梁璧如), together with other community leaders, convened a meeting at the *Ping Zhang Hui Guan* (平章会馆; now the Penang Chinese Town Hall) to discuss the establishment of a school that would use the *guanyin* (官音; Beijing dialect or the official pronunciation) as the medium of instruction. This proposed institution, named the *Zhonghua Guanyin Xuexiao* (中华官音学校), aimed to replace Chinese dialects with the then-official national language in teaching, thereby promoting educational modernization (Penang Sin Pao 1904, 22 April). On 15 May 1904, the *Chung Hwa School* was officially founded under the name “Chung Hwa Liang Teng Xiao Xue” (中华两等小学校, Chung Hwa Vernacular Primary School), commonly known as *Chung Hwa* (中华) School.

The establishment of *Chung Hwa School* (中华学校) in 1904 marked a milestone in Penang’s educational history, signalling the transition of Chinese education from traditional *SiShu* (私塾; which focused on classical texts and moral instruction) to a modern, formal schooling system that offered a structured curriculum, classroom-based teaching, and a broader range of subjects including Chinese, English, and mathematics. It was also the first modern Chinese school in the Straits Settlements and British Malaya. By comparison, Singapore’s earliest Chinese school, *Ying Sin* (应新) School, was founded in 1906, while Kuala Lumpur’s *Zun Kong* (尊孔; Confucian School) was established two years later. This chronological lead demonstrates that Penang pioneered the modernisation of Chinese education, serving as a model for subsequent Chinese schools throughout British Malaya.

However, this was not the true beginning of Chinese education in Penang. In fact, most modern schools in Penang evolved from ancestral hall-based *SiShu* (私塾) or family academies. Before the establishment of *Chung Hwa School*, the Chinese community had already founded several private schools, among which the Wu Fu Shu Yuan (五福书院), established in 1819, is generally regarded by most scholars as the starting point of Chinese education in Malaysia. These early *SiShu* (私塾) were often modest in structure, had fluctuating student numbers, and were seldom formally named as “schools” or “academies”; as a result, they were difficult to identify in historical records and gradually faded into obscurity (Kuang 1954, 71).

However, this does not mean that there were no records at all. According to a report submitted by *Dai Xinran* (戴欣然), the Qing Consul in Penang, before the establishment of *Chung Hwa School*, several prominent clans in Penang: including the Khoo (邱), Cheah (谢), Yeoh (杨), Lim (林), Ong (王), Hoo (胡), and Tan (陈) families — had already established *JiaMiao* (家庙, ancestral temples), commonly known as *Kongsi* (公司; clan associations). These *Kongsi* (公司) often operated *TongGuan* (童馆) or *SiShu* (私塾) as part of their

community functions (Kuang 1954, 71). Such education institutions, founded within Candi *Zongci* (宗祠), served as the main vehicles for early Chinese education in Penang. With the passage of time, these *Zongci Sishu* and *Jiashu* gradually evolved into schools with more formalised curricula, forming the institutional foundation for modern Chinese education in Penang.

The establishment of *Zhonghua Xuetaang* (中华学堂) catalysed a rapid transformation in Chinese-medium education in Penang. In 1905, a year after the founding of *Chung Hwa School*, the charitable organisation *Tong Sian Tang* (同善堂) established an affiliated school, *Tong Sian Xuetaang* (同善学堂), later renamed *School Tong Sian* (Shih Chung School 1954, 72). In 1906, Khoo Tek Hoon founded the *KhooShi XueTang* (邱氏学堂), which was initially housed at *Leong San Tong* (龙山堂) before adopting the new name *Sin Kang School* (新江学校) in 1914 (Khoo Kongs, 2025). In the same year, the *Guangfu Xuetaang* (广福学堂) was also established. (Kuang 1954, 71). In 1908, *KewLeong TongLim Kongs* (林氏九龙堂) set up the *Lim Clan Liangdeng Xiaoxue* (林氏两等学校) to provide free education for members of the Lim clan. However, the school was later closed due to restrictions imposed by the Registration of Schools Ordinance (1920) in British Malaya. That same year, *Chong Hwa Xuetaang* (崇华学堂) was established, which was later renamed *Shih Chung School* (时中学校) (Shih Chung School 1954, 72).

It is worth noting that both the *Khoo Clan School* and the *Lim Clan School* were family-based institutions that charged no tuition fees, with all expenses covered by clan temple revenues. This clearly demonstrates that the early development of Chinese education in Penang relied heavily on the financial backing of local clans, associations, and charitable organisations. This also explains why Chinese education in Penang was able to undergo such rapid growth and transformation in the early twentieth century: by this time, the Chinese community had recognised the importance of education, and institutions centred on clan temples and ancestral halls actively assumed responsibility for educating the younger generation, providing robust financial support in the process. These deeply rooted social forces enabled Chinese education in Penang to shift swiftly from traditional private tutoring to modern institutional schooling, displaying remarkable vitality even in its formative stage.

According to the archival report, by the winter of 1908 there were already six Chinese schools operating in Penang. The *Chung Hwa School* enrolled a total of 60 students; the *Khoo Clan School* had the largest number with 85 students; the *Tong Sian School* had 62; the *Kwong Fook School*, 73; the *Lim Clan School*, 36; and the *Chong Hwa School*, 37 (Shih Chung School 1954, 72). Organised in the following table:

**Table 1: Number of Students in Chinese Schools in Penang (1908)**

Name of School	Number of Student
School Chung Hwa	60
School <b>Khoo</b>	85
School Tong Sian	62
School Guang Fu	73
School Lim	36
School Chong Hwa	37

Source: *Shizhong Xuexiao 46 Zhounian Jinian Tekan* 时中学校46周年纪念特刊, [Shih Chung School 46th Anniversary Commemorative Volume], Penang: Shih Chung School, 1954, p. 72.

Based on the table data, it is evident that by this time there were already six Chinese schools in Penang, indicating that the local Chinese education system had begun to take shape. However, compared with the English-medium schools in Penang at the same period, their scale was negligible. For example, *Penang Free School* had a total of 618 students (Shih Chung School 1954, 72), which was more than the combined enrolment of the six Chinese schools. It is therefore understandable that the British colonial government did not intervene in Chinese schools at this stage, and that the establishment of these schools did not require official registration. This situation provided favourable conditions for the initial development of Chinese education in Penang.

Thus, this period witnessed the successive establishment of Chinese schools. Founded in 1909 as an *YeXiao* (夜校; evening school) for shop clerks and apprentices and funded annually by the Penang *Kwong Ting* (广汀) Association, the Commercial School of Penang, officially known as the *Kwong Tung* (广东) Public Commercial School, gradually expanded into a full primary school by 1912 (Penang Kwang Tung and Teng Chow Association 2025).

Significantly, it became the first school in Penang to offer a commerce-focused curriculum, reflecting the local Chinese community's forward-looking recognition of the need for practical and vocational education. This development illustrates that, beyond cultural preservation, Chinese education in Penang was also shaped by an acute awareness of economic opportunity, as community leaders sought to equip the younger generation with skills relevant to modern commercial life. The introduction of such utilitarian curricula reveals not only the educational ambitions of Penang's Chinese associations but also their strategic response to the socioeconomic conditions of the early twentieth century. Such foresight helps explain why modern Chinese education flourished so rapidly in Penang at this time.

Between 1909 and 1912, Hu Zichun (胡子春) founded the *Chung Hwa Girls' School*, the first girls' school in Penang (Chung 2009). Although it closed due to a shortage of qualified teachers, its students joining Chong Hwa School, the school marked the earliest attention to female education and reflected a shift in the local Chinese community's educational values. In conclusion, *Chung Hwa School* founded in 1904, was the first modern Chinese school in Penang and also a pioneering institution in the Straits Settlements. Between 1900 and 1911, Chinese education in Penang gradually transitioned from traditional private tutoring to modern schools. Although the overall scale remained small, development was rapid. Externally, schools did not require official registration, and the British colonial government did not intervene, providing a permissive environment for growth. Internally, the local Chinese community demonstrated proactive engagement and strategic foresight, while strong clan networks and associations provided robust support. Importantly, the emergence of commercial and girls' schools not only reflected the community's forward-looking recognition of the importance of practical and vocational education but also signalled a gradual transformation in educational values. Taken together, this permissive policy environment, active community participation, diversified curricula, and favourable socio-economic conditions collectively facilitated the rapid development of modern Chinese education in Penang during this period.

### **The Rapidly Advancing Chinese Education in Penang (1912–1925)**

Following the founding of the *Zhonghua Minguo* (中华民国), Chinese education in Penang entered a period of accelerated development. The 1911 Revolution and the establishment of the Republic of China stimulated nationalist consciousness and educational enthusiasm among the overseas Chinese, who increasingly viewed school founding as a vital means of national rejuvenation. At the same time, the growing economic strength of Penang's Chinese community, supported by clan associations, guilds and commercial enterprises, provided the

necessary financial resources to invest in education. The combination of patriotic motivation and material capability thus enabled Chinese education in Penang to expand rapidly in both scale and diversity during this period.

During the 1910s, Chinese education in Penang expanded rapidly. In 1911, Zeng Ruifang (曾瑞舫) founded *Wunei* (务内) Girls' School, followed in 1915 by *Biru* (璧如) Girls' School, founded by Liang Biru (梁璧如) (Shih Chung Xuexiao 1954, 72), reflecting the community's early promotion of female education. In the same period, modern schools emerged beyond the city centre, including *Chong Teik* (崇德) School in Balik Pulau (Song 1930, 12) and *Zhong Hua* (中华) and *Shang Ye* (商业; Commercial) Schools in Bayan Lepas, which merged in 1921 to form *Zhong Hua Shanye* (中华商业学校; Zhong Hua Commercial School) (Song 1930, 12).

Inspired by educational surveys conducted in 1917 by Huang Yanpei (黄炎培) and Lin Dinghua (林鼎华), the Penang Philomatic Union (檳城读书阅报社) established *Chung Ling* (钟灵) School, while Penang Eng Chuan Tong Tan Kongsai (檳城颍川堂陈公司) founded *Tan Shi* (陈氏) School and *Xin Hua Zhiye* (新华职业; Xin Hua Vocational) School. Subsequently, *Yok Nam* (毓南), *Tai Shan* (台山), *Moh Ghee* (慕义), *Cheah Si Eok Chye* (谢氏育才), *Wang* (王) Clan, *Pei Nan* (培南), *Yik Wah* (益华), and *Huaqiao* (华侨) Middle Schools were established between 1918 and 1919 (Kuang 1954, 71; Qiaowu Weiyuanhui 1935, 62). *Huaqiao* (华侨) Middle School, the first Chinese middle school in the Malay Peninsula, employed five teachers and forty-one students but closed within two years due to financial difficulties (Wang 2017).

By 1920, new schools continued to emerge, including *Fujian* (福建, Hokkien) Girls' School (Fujian Girls' School 1950, 4), *Han Chiang* (韩江学校) School (Cao 2011, 183–244), and *Sin Min Free School* (新民义学) (Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission 1935, 49). In 1921, *Gong Min* (公民) School was founded in Ayer Itam as a primary school (Kuang 1954, 76), while a new *Huaqiao* (华侨) Girls' School was established along Nam Hwa (南华) Hospital Street (Qiaowu Weiyuanhui 1935, 60). In 1922, Miss Li Hanying (利翰英) founded *Kun Yi* (坤儀) Girls' School on Ta Pek Kong Street, and Lin Fuquan (林福全) established *Chung Hwa* (中华) Girls' School in Jalan Datuk Keramat. Although both schools lacked formal boards of directors, they achieved remarkable academic results (Kuang 1954, 76).

In 1923, *Li Tek* (丽泽) School was established (Qiaowu Weiyuanhui 1935, 52), *Chung Ling* School opened its junior middle section (Chung Ling High School 1926, 92), and *NanYang Nvzi GongShan XueXiao* (南洋女子工商学校; Nanyang Women's Commercial School) was founded (Chung Ling High School 1926, 108). During the same year, *Moh Ghee* (慕义) School was reopened, while *Keong Hoe* (共和) School and *Jie Shan* (介山) School were established in Sungai Dua and Bayan Lepas, respectively (Kuang 1954, 76). In 1924, *Hun Bin* (汉民) School and *Yang Cheng* (养正) School were founded, and *Kun De* (坤德) Girls' School was opened at Chulia Street (Kuang 1954, 76; Qiaowu Weiyuanhui 1935, 60).

Between 1912 and 1925, Chinese education in Penang expanded rapidly in scale and diversity. By 1919, the city had fifteen boys' schools and five girls' schools, with *Chung Hwa* (中华) School enrolling over 400 students and *Bi Ru* (璧如) Girls' School over 200; seven boys' schools and two girls' schools each exceeded 100 students, bringing total enrolment to more than 1,700—almost five times that of 1908 (Hou 1920, 30–41). Schools ranged from primary and secondary institutions to vocational and girls' schools, extending from the city centre to suburban areas. *Chung Hwa* (中华) School stood out for its size, spacious sports

ground, and substantial collection of books, instruments, and teaching materials, reflecting the transition from rudimentary tutoring to a more institutionalised system (Hou 1920, 30–41). Nevertheless, these schools faced challenges, including underdeveloped administration, teacher shortages, and financial difficulties, while the British colonial government began imposing regulatory measures.

By 1919, Chinese education in British Malaya and Singapore was expanding rapidly, but the rise of nationalist sentiment, especially following the May Fourth Movement, alarmed the British colonial authorities. In response, the Registration of Schools Ordinance, 1920, required schools with more than ten students to register, have approved principals and teachers, comply with colonial standards, and prohibited political activities, giving the authorities the power to declare noncompliant schools illegal (Tay 1998, 45).

The implementation of the Registration of Schools Ordinance, 1920, ended the previously relaxed environment for Chinese education in Penang. The new restrictions, combined with existing challenges such as financial difficulties, inexperienced administration, and teacher shortages, led to the closure of many schools. In several cases, including *Hua Qiao* (华侨) High School and *Chung Hwa* (中华) Girls' School, financial problems were the main cause, while Hu Zi Chun's (胡子春) *Chung Hwa* Girls' School also suffered from a shortage of qualified teachers. Overall, at least half of the schools that ceased operation did so primarily due to insufficient funding and inadequate teaching staff, further compounded by the absence of a sound institutional structure and a stable board of directors.

Notable closures after 1920 included *Hua Qiao* (华侨) High School, *Shun Qing Yi Xue* (顺清义学), *Bi Ru* (璧如) Girls' School, Pinang Girls' School (檳榔女学), *Zhou Shi* (周氏) School, and *Mu Zhen* (慕贞) Girls' School (Hou 1920, 30–41). According to statistics, schools that had already ceased operation between 1911 and 1919 included the *Hua Qiao* (华侨) High School, *Xin Hua* (新华) Vocational School, *Liang Yuanzao Yi Xue* (梁元藻义学), *Wu Shunqing Yi Xue* (吴顺清义学), girls' tutoring schools, and various family-run schools such as those of the *Wang* (王), *Lin* (林), *Hu* (胡), and *Yeoh* (杨) clans, as well as *Wu Nei* (务内) Girls' School and *Bi Ru* (璧如) Girls' School (Kuang 1954, 71).

In 1925, the Straits Settlements government promulgated the *Straits Settlements Education Ordinance 1925*, which regulated schools and their boards of governors. The ordinance granted the Director of Education greater authority to refuse the registration of any teacher involved in “subversive” activities. It also prohibited schools from using textbooks deemed “inappropriate” in content. The implementation of this ordinance marked the end of the free-registration era for Chinese schools in Penang. At the same time, however, the ordinance introduced limited government grants that offered some relief to schools facing financial difficulties. More importantly, these grants were only sufficient to cover roughly one-third of total school expenditure, meaning that the colonial government still could not exercise full control over Chinese schools (Kua Kia Soong 1999, 4).

Taken together, between 1912 and 1925, Chinese education in Penang underwent a phase of transition, renewal, and selective consolidation. During this period, both the number of schools and student enrolment increased rapidly, forming an early framework of primary and secondary education, with vocational and girls' schools emerging. Nevertheless, Chinese schools in Penang continued to face administrative, staffing, and financial challenges, alongside increasing regulation by the British colonial government. Despite these difficulties, Chinese education in Penang demonstrated remarkable resilience. This period not only reflected the vitality and dynamism of the local educational landscape but also laid the foundations for the flourishing of Chinese education in Penang in the decades leading up to the Second World War.

### The Flourishing of Chinese Education in Penang before the War (1926–1940)

From 1926 onwards, Chinese education in Penang entered a phase of rapid expansion. Numerous schools were either newly established or upgraded, and the scale and reach of Chinese-medium education in the region advanced to an unprecedented level. Whether measured by the number of schools, total student enrolment, or the size of individual institutions, the development during this period far exceeded that of earlier decades. This expansion not only increased the availability of Chinese-medium education but also led to growing disparities in school size, with large urban schools consolidating their dominance while smaller institutions struggled to expand. Taken together, the scale reached during this period largely laid the foundation for the subsequent development and overall scale of Chinese education in Penang.

According to statistics, by 1926 there were twenty-nine Chinese schools in Penang, of which twenty-one were in George Town. The total enrolment across these institutions exceeded 3,100, including more than 2,750 students in the urban area—an increase of over 1,000 compared to the figures from 1909. *Chung Hwa* (中华) School remained the largest, with an enrolment of 590 students, followed by *Li Tek* (丽泽) School with 280, *Hokkien* (福建) Girls' School with 263, and *Chung Ling* (钟灵) School with 182 students. Other institutions with enrolments exceeding one hundred included the *Shang Ye* (商业) School, *Zhong Hua* (中华) Girls' School, *Tai Shan* (台山) School, *Shih Chung* (时中) School, *Han Chiang* (韩江) School, *Yok Nam* (毓南) School, *Tan Shi* (陈氏) School, and *Cheah Xie* (谢氏) School. In contrast, smaller schools struggled to grow, with *Moh Ghee* (慕义) School and *Gong Min* (公民) School enrolling only seventeen and twenty-eight students respectively. Outside the city, *Sin Min* (新民) School was the largest, with eighty-six students (Kuang 1954, 76).

In 1926, *Tar Thong* (大同) School was established (Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission 1935, 64). In the same year, *ZhongHua* (中华) School and *Gong Shang* (工商) School merged to form the *Zhonghua Gongshang Xuexiao* (中华工商学校), which experimented with courses in agriculture, industry, and commerce (Chung Ling High School 1926, 100). That year also marked *Chung Hwa* (中华)'s attempt to introduce a secondary-level curriculum (Kuang 1954, 76). In 1927, *Pei Qing* (培青) School was founded, and the *Fujian* (福建) Girl's School established a teacher training class, marking the beginning of normal education for women in Penang (Kuang 1954, 76). In 1928, Union (协和) School was established, offering a three-level kindergarten programme (SJKC Union, Penang, 2025).

In 1929, *Sum Min* (三民) School was founded—originally established in 1910 as a night school, it was converted into a day school after more than a decade of operation (Kuang 1954, 76). That same year, *Chong Cheng* (崇正) School was established, and *Li Tek* (丽泽) School opened its second branch campus (Kuang 1954, 76). Also in 1929, *Zhonghua Shangye* (中华商业) School merged with *Jie Shan* (介山) School to form *Zhonghua Shangye* (中华商业) School, which was later renamed *Chung Shan* (中山) School (Kuang 1954, 76). In 1930, *Sum Sun* (三山) School was established, and Xiehe School expanded by adding a primary section (Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission 1935, 64). During the same period, *YaNan ShiFan* (雅

南师范) School was established, but due to limited resources, it ceased operation in 1931 (Kuang 1954, 76). Although it existed for only a short time, its establishment nevertheless reflected the Penang Chinese community's strong enthusiasm for promoting Chinese education.

In 1935, *Chiao Nan* (侨南) School was established by Thai Chinese residing in Penang (Liu 2023). Notably, this was a Chinese primary school founded by members of the Thai Chinese community, indicating that as early as this period, the influence of Penang's Chinese education had already extended beyond local boundaries.

In 1937, Phei Shin (培新) School was founded in Jelutong; in July 1938, JiYou (集友) School was established. During the same year, Phei Shin (培植) School and Ming Yi (明义) School were reorganised as branches of Min Sin (明新) School, while Shih Chung School also opened a branch. In 1939, Union School converted its kindergarten normal course into a junior middle school (Kuang 1954, 77).

It is evident that during this period, Chinese education in Penang experienced rapid growth in both scale and variety. Numerous new schools were established, existing institutions expanded, and curricula became more diversified, encompassing secondary education, vocational training, and teacher education.

In 1938, there were 103 Chinese schools in Penang, with more than 13,000 students (Vaughan 1879, 89).

**Table 2: Chinese Schools in Pulau Pinang from 1929 to 1938 (including Seberang Perai)**

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
1929	89	7,111	286
1930	91	7,401	309
1931	76	6,804	281
1932	70	6,810	288
1933	85	8,191	331
1934	83	9,259	383
1935	83	10,261	430
1936	87	10,855	472
1937	93	11,870	507
1938	103	13,586	584

Source: Data from *Sejarah Ringkas Pulau Pinang (Binglanyu Zhilüe, 槟榔屿志略)*

According to the 1938 survey of Chinese schools in Penang, the number of students in the city was approximately 8,500, with over 1,100 students in the suburban areas, totaling more than 9,600 students—an increase of roughly fourfold compared to twelve years earlier. Including the statistics for Province Wellesley, the total reached about 13,586 students (Kuang 1954, 77), the total number of students in English schools including Province Wellesley was 3,160, but by 1938 it had fallen to around 2,972 (Kuang 1954, 77). In contrast, enrolment in English schools slightly decreased compared to ten years earlier. The number of students in Chinese schools had already surpassed that in English schools, by roughly a factor of five. This

indicates that Chinese schools had gradually become the mainstay of education in Penang.

At the same time, some Chinese schools had already grown to considerable size. In 1938, Li Zek School had a total of 1,402 students, followed by Fujian Girls' School with approximately 978 students, Chung Ling School with 937 students, Chung Hwa School with 720 students, Shih Chung School with 466 students, and SJKC Union (Xiehe) School with 420 students. Other schools with over 300 students included Fu You, San Min, Chung Hwa Commercial, and San Shan schools (Shih Chung School 1954, 77-78).

By the outbreak of the Pacific War, the expansion of Chinese education in Penang had reached an unprecedented level. Chung Ling High School, Fujian Girls' School, and several other major institutions each recorded enrolments exceeding 1,000 students, while Shih Chung School reached 600 and Fu You School surpassed 500 students (Kuang 1954, 77-78). Statistical data from Penang and Province Wellesley show that Chinese school enrolment amounted to 10,855 in 1936, 11,870 in 1937, and 13,586 in 1938—an extraordinary increase of 2,731 students within just three years. This remarkable rate of growth demonstrates that enrolment continued to climb steadily right up to the eve of the Pacific War.

As discussed earlier, although the *Straits Settlements Education Ordinance, 1925* introduced a system of registration and regulation, most Chinese schools were initially reluctant to seek government financial assistance for fear of losing their autonomy. Around 1930, the majority of Chinese schools still operated without government subsidies. By 1929, only twelve schools in Penang were receiving grants totaling approximately 21,321 Straits Dollars. The number of subsidised schools rose gradually thereafter, and by 1938 about thirty-seven schools were receiving assistance amounting to 63,150.50 Straits Dollars (Kuang 1954, 78). This pattern reflects both the Penang Chinese community's cautious approach to accepting government support and the relatively non-intrusive nature of the colonial administration during this period. The government sought to supervise Chinese schools, but refrained from imposing coercive control.

In conclusion, from 1926 onwards, Chinese education in Penang expanded rapidly. Many new schools were established, existing institutions upgraded, and enrolment numbers rose to unprecedented levels—far surpassing those of earlier decades. The system also became more diversified, with the growth of secondary, vocational, and teacher-training programmes. This prosperity developed within a relatively moderate regulatory environment. While the colonial government sought oversight, it did not impose coercive control, and the Penang Chinese community remained cautious about accepting subsidies, thereby maintaining substantial autonomy. Penang's early development of modern Chinese schools and its large overseas Chinese population, which consistently valued Chinese-medium education, provided the essential foundations for this rapid growth. Together, these factors enabled Chinese education in Penang to reach its peak on the eve of the Second World War.

### **The outbreak of war effectively pressed the pause and reset button for Chinese education in Penang (1941–1945)**

The flourishing momentum of Chinese education in Penang was forcibly interrupted by the Pacific War. On the morning of 11 December 1941, the Japanese army bombed Penang. From December 1941 to August 1945, the island remained under Japanese occupation, during which schools of all communities, including Chinese, English, Malay, and Indian, were converted into Japanese-language institutions.

After the occupation of the island, the Japanese colonial authorities carried out a brutal suppression of local Chinese culture. Intellectuals were widely arrested, Chinese books were burned, and the use of the Chinese language was strictly prohibited. According to records, at the beginning of the Japanese occupation, the Japanese military police ordered all bookstores

to surrender their Chinese books for inspection. Except for dictionaries and geography textbooks, all other books were destroyed—an estimated 200,000 volumes were burned (Shu & Chua 1984, 53). The harsh crackdown on Chinese education in Penang was not incidental; it was a deliberate act of retribution against the local Chinese community for their support of China's resistance against Japan.

As early as the aftermath of the September 18 Incident in China, the Chinese community in Penang maintained close ties with China's anti-Japanese resistance. Prominent business leaders led fundraising efforts, ordinary citizens contributed enthusiastically, and many Chinese youths voluntarily joined the national salvation campaigns. For example, Chung Ling High School contributed a total of Straits Dollars 46,660 from 1937 to 1940 and participated multiple times in initiatives organized under Tan Kah Kee's (陈嘉庚) call for the Nanyang Volunteers (南侨机工 Chung Ling High School 1946, 50). These acts of charity and patriotism were widespread, and they were carefully monitored by Japanese spies and reported to the colonial authorities, making the Chinese population across Malaya and the Straits Settlements, including Penang, a prime target for Japanese military repression.

Even before the Japanese invasion, the Japanese government had explicitly stipulated that, upon occupying the region, its educational policy would be to "eliminate all British education and implement Imperial education." In order to "implement Imperial education" and "enhance the relationship between the Empire and Malaya," all schools' curricula and teaching priorities had to be completely revised and reorganized, especially targeting Chinese education, which was considered the most anti-Japanese (Tay 1998, 94).

After the Japanese occupation, Chinese education in Penang suffered unprecedented destruction. Large numbers of teachers and intellectuals associated with Chinese schools were arbitrarily arrested, subjected to harsh interrogation, or secretly executed. On 3 March 1942, a total of 70,699 ethnic Chinese "anti-Japanese" activists were detained (Cheah 1983, 22). Those involved in Chinese education were treated with cruelty: "...teachers (especially Chinese school teachers), students (both male and female), and others who appeared to be 'intellectuals' were all arrested, and many teachers disappeared immediately after being detained" (Chin 1976, 98). According to the records of Chung Ling High School, on 5–6 April 1942, the Japanese military conducted a two-day large-scale purge in Penang, arresting ten teachers from Chung Ling (Chung Ling High School 1946, 50). Under brutal torture, only two survived, and approximately 50–60 students perished. Under such a reign of terror, Chinese education could not continue, and the entire Chinese community in Penang lived in constant fear.

In mid-March 1942, under Japanese military administration, all Chinese schools that had previously received British support or had not received any colonial subsidies were ordered to register with the new authorities. However, most teachers had already fled, and those who remained largely ignored the Japanese orders. As expected, none of these schools were able to reopen by the designated date of 27 April 1942 (Shu & Chua 1984, 52).

At Chung Ling High School, for example, teachers hid their identities to avoid persecution; some changed professions, selling eggs or working as rickshaw pullers. Encounters with former colleagues were fraught with pretense, as everyone had to act as if they did not know one another (Chung Ling High School 1946, 51).

During the Japanese occupation, Chinese education in Penang was completely overhauled according to the Japanese colonial system. In terms of school structure, primary Chinese schools were changed from a six-year system (four years of lower primary and two

years of upper primary) to a seven-year system, while secondary schools were reduced from six years (three years each of lower and upper secondary) to four years. All classes followed Tokyo time, which was two hours ahead of local time.

When schools initially reopened, Chinese language and literature remained the main subjects, while English was abolished and replaced by Japanese. However, within just over two months, Japanese became the main medium of instruction in all subjects, with Chinese being taught for only one hour per day. Eventually, apart from the single hour of Chinese, all other subjects were taught entirely in Japanese. Additionally, school names were stripped of “Chinese” characters and replaced with street names, rendering Chinese schools nonexistent in name. To accelerate cultural assimilation, the colonial authorities implemented a series of measures aimed at indoctrination. Every school was required to hold a morning ritual of paying homage to the Imperial Palace and reading the Emperor’s edict to cultivate loyalty to the Japanese imperial family. School holidays were fully adjusted to align with Japanese standards. Chinese teachers were required to attend centralized Japanese-language training to rapidly expand the pool of Japanese-speaking instructors. Radio lessons in Japanese were scheduled at 11 a.m. every Tuesday and Thursday, and schools with more than forty students were provided with radios to reinforce Japanese instruction. Sources indicate that during this period, the number of students in Chinese schools “plummeted” most sharply, followed by English schools (Tay 1998, 91, 94 & 97).

In conclusion, this period undoubtedly marks the darkest chapter in the history of Chinese education in Penang. During the Japanese occupation, Chinese education was systematically suppressed as part of a broader policy of cultural assimilation. In the early phase of the Japanese occupation, Chinese schools in Penang were closed, Chinese textbooks were destroyed, Japanese schools were established, and students and teachers who resisted were persecuted. The education system was effectively dismantled, bringing Chinese education in Penang to a state of both nominal and practical extinction. This process represented not only a form of colonial conquest and cultural subjugation through education but also a punitive response to the Penang Chinese community’s prior support for China’s war effort. It remains an indelible episode of suffering in the history of Chinese education in Penang.

## **Conclusion**

From the early twentieth century to the end of the Second World War, Chinese education in Penang underwent a complex yet distinctive trajectory shaped by community initiative, evolving educational ideals, and successive waves of political disruption. In the earliest phase, between 1900 and 1911, Chinese education transitioned from traditional private tutoring to modern schooling. The founding of Chung Hwa School in 1904 marked a decisive break with older forms of learning and inaugurated the advent of modern Chinese education in Penang. A permissive colonial environment, coupled with strong community participation and the support of clan networks, enabled rapid early growth. The emergence of commercial and girls’ schools further reflected the community’s widening educational vision. Between 1912 and 1925, this modern system expanded at an accelerated pace. Despite challenges such as administrative shortcomings, teacher shortages, financial instability, and the gradual tightening of colonial regulation, Chinese education achieved significant consolidation. Schools multiplied, student numbers increased, and a rudimentary system encompassing primary, secondary, and vocational instruction began to take shape. These developments laid the structural foundations for the flourishing era that followed.

From 1926 to 1940, Chinese education in Penang reached new heights, marked by large-scale expansion, diversification of curricula, and the establishment of institutions offering higher-level and specialised training. The cautious acceptance of government grants ensured

that Chinese schools retained considerable autonomy. At the same time, the sustained support of Penang's sizeable Chinese community provided vital resources for growth. By the eve of the Second World War, a relatively mature and dynamic educational sector had emerged. This upward trajectory was abruptly halted by the Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945. Schools were closed, Chinese books and cultural materials were destroyed, and Japanese schools replaced existing institutions. Students and teachers who resisted or were perceived as politically suspect faced severe repression. Chinese education in Penang was effectively dismantled, reduced to a state of near extinction. This period represents the darkest chapter in its history, marked by coercive cultural policies and retaliatory measures in response to the Penang Chinese community's earlier support for China's anti-Japanese resistance.

Taken together, the history of Chinese education in Penang from the early twentieth century to 1945 reveals a remarkable story of community-driven growth, institutional resilience, and profound vulnerability to geopolitical upheaval. Its achievements before the war and its destruction during the occupation underscore both the strength of local agency and the fragility of educational institutions under colonial and wartime pressures. By reconstructing this trajectory from the early 1900s to 1945, the research not only fills a significant gap in the historiography of Penang and Malayan education but also provides a critical framework for understanding the processes of educational modernisation among Chinese communities under colonial rule in Southeast Asia.

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