

The contributions of the Hakka community towards Chinese education in Perak during the pre-World War II era



Subadrah Madhawa Nair^a ✉ | Elvina Stephanie Fernandez^a  | Liew See Yuan^a  |
Tan Yeong Yong^a  | Suzantee Binti Roslan^a  | Esayas Teshome Taddese^b  |
Muhammad Siddique^c  | You Jiao Jing^d 

^aFaculty of Education & Humanities, UNITAR International University, Kelana Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

^bFaculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

^cFaculty of English, Govt. Shalimar Graduate College, Higher Education, Department Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

^dSchool of Music and Dance, University: Hunan City University, Yiyang, Hunan, China.

Abstract During British Malayan rule, the Kinta Valley emerged as a major tin mining hub, driven by Hakka migrants seeking economic opportunities. This study, which is based on archival sources, explores the motivations, challenges, and tangible outcomes of Hakka businessmen's contributions to Chinese education in Kinta, Perak. This research adopts a historical-analytical approach, relying on primary sources such as archived letters, financial records, meeting minutes, and newspaper articles. In addition, secondary sources, including academic journals and historical monographs, were used to obtain the data. A thematic analysis procedure was employed to organize the data into three major categories. First, the practices of Hakka entrepreneurs in the funding and management of Chinese education. Next, the impact of British colonial policies and Chinese political movements on vernacular education. Third, there are long-term effects of these contributions on Malaysian education. The findings indicate that prominent Hakka businessmen, including Foo Choo Choon, Leong Fee, Yau Tet Shin, and Leong Sin Nam played key roles in advancing Chinese vernacular education to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage. Their economic success before World War II enabled the rapid growth of Chinese educational institutions. These businessmen funded schools and actively defended cultural traditions against British colonial rule and the instability of Chinese politics. Their efforts fostered a dynamic relationship between economic development, education systems, and local political forces. Hakka Towkays' contributions reflected strong social responsibility, emphasizing the importance of investing in human capital for community advancement. In addition to financial investments, these leaders establish an enduring educational foundation for Malaysian schools, ensuring the protection of Chinese cultural heritage and promoting long-term educational growth. Their commitment created a legacy intertwined with economic prosperity and cultural preservation of the Chinese community. The research revealed significant findings about the impact of community-driven educational organizations on the development of Chinese schools in Perak.

Keywords: hakka community, quality education, migrant, chinese education, pre-world war II

1. Introduction

The educational history of Malaya was significantly influenced by the Chinese community, particularly because of their migration patterns. Following the discovery of rich tin deposits, the Kinta Valley experienced large-scale Chinese immigration, especially from the Hakka linguistic group, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Renowned for their dedication and determination, many Hakka individuals prospered through tin mining and related businesses (Aijmer, 1967).

To preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage, the growing Chinese population has established educational facilities. Initially, education was conducted in traditional sishu schools, which focused on classical Confucian texts. However, Chinese educational reform movements in China, along with British colonial influence in Malaya, spurred the development of modern Chinese schools (Wicks, 1980).

In the Kinta Valley, prominent Hakka leaders such as Foo Choo Choon, Leong Fee, Yau Tet Shin, and Leong Sin Nam played pivotal roles in advancing Chinese vernacular education. They provided financial support, planned curricula, and ensured effective school operations (Voon, 2024). This research examines how these leaders shaped Chinese education in the region while considering the social and political factors that influenced their efforts.

This study aims to evaluate the motivations behind the active participation of Hakka towkays in advancing Chinese vernacular education in the Kinta region. It seeks to examine the organizational strategies and funding methods employed by

the Hakka community in establishing and sustaining Chinese schools. Furthermore, this study analyzes the impact of external factors, such as British colonial policies and political changes in China, on the development of Chinese education in Kinta. Finally, it provides historical insights into the role of Malaya's business elite in shaping educational institutions through their engagement in policy decision-making (Nair et al., 2024; Al-Zu'bi et al., 2024).

1.1. Problem Statement

The historical development of Chinese education in Malaya is well-documented, yet specific research on the contributions of Hakka *towkays* (Chinese businessmen) in the Kinta region remains limited. Existing studies focused primarily on national educational policies and school histories, often neglecting detailed evaluations of these influential individuals' strategies and motivations.

Under British colonial rule, the administration maintained a hands-off approach to Chinese education, occasionally imposing regulatory restrictions. Moreover, significant political upheavals in China, such as the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the transition to the Republican regime, greatly influenced the educational strategies adopted by overseas Chinese communities.

While the field of Chinese education in Malaya has been extensively researched, certain critical aspects remain underexplored. There is a lack of focus on individual *towkays'* contributions. Researchers highlight the participation of Chinese elites in educational development, yet detailed investigations of individual contributors, such as Foo Choo Choon and other notable leaders, are lacking. There is also limited research on localized political dynamics. The literature fails to assess how regional dynamics in the Kinta region influenced educational decisions during this period (Tan, 2020). In addition, there is insufficient analysis of female education initiatives. Research focused predominantly on male-led activities in Chinese education, neglecting women-led educational establishments (Wong & Gwee, 1972).

There is also an overlooked role of business networks. While studies on clan associations and dialect groups exist, the role of business networks in supporting school financing and management has not been fully explored (Loh, 2020). In addition, there is a lack of comparative studies. There is insufficient comparison of Chinese vernacular education development in Kinta with similar tin-mining regions such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, despite their shared demographic conditions.

This research undertakes an exhaustive review of scholarly work on Chinese vernacular education in Malaya, with the focus on the Kinta District. It explores the socioeconomic and political conditions that influenced the educational contributions of Hakka *towkays* (Chinese businessmen) in Kinta before World War II, while addressing existing research gaps. This research explores these issues to create a detailed understanding of how economic achievement, together with political actions and educational advancement, interacted in prewar Malaya.

1.2. Research Questions

The following three research questions were formulated for this study:

RQ1: What were the key motivations behind the efforts of Hakka *towkays* to establish and fund Chinese vernacular schools in the Kinta region?

RQ2: Beyond financial contributions, what additional roles did Hakka *towkays* play in the development and operation of these educational institutions?

RQ3: How did British colonial governance and political changes in China influence the motivations and decisions of Hakka *towkays* in supporting Chinese vernacular education?

2. Literature Review

This study is grounded in an extensive review of the scholarly literature on Chinese vernacular education in Malaya, with a particular focus on the socioeconomic and political conditions that shaped the contributions of Hakka *towkays* (business elites) to education in Kinta before World War II. Existing research highlights the pivotal role played by these individuals in the advancement of Chinese education, primarily through financial initiatives such as direct school donations, community fundraising efforts, and support for teaching and curriculum development. These efforts significantly improved the quality of education, nurtured a culture of social responsibility, and fostered progressive leadership within the local Chinese community (Lee, 2011).

Archival evidence further confirms that these contributions had a tangible impact on school infrastructure, teaching quality, and the preservation of cultural identity. Despite facing challenges in fund distribution and management, the presence of visionary leadership and transparent financial mechanisms ensures the effective allocation of resources. The synergy among individuals, local communities, and educational institutions helped create high-quality educational environments. The values and principles upheld by the Hakka *towkays* are considered applicable today in improving educational standards across diverse communities (Ding et al., 2024).

Hakka *towkays'* contributions acted as a catalyst for modernizing Chinese primary education in Kinta, improving academic performance, facilities, and cultural preservation. The synthesis highlights their courage and dedication, offering a model of educational development grounded in community values and cultural identity. This comprehensive analysis

underscores how continuous educational contributions left a sustainable legacy in Kinta's Chinese education system. It advocates collaborative efforts between the private sector and educational institutions, emphasizing cultural integration, distributive justice, and innovative fund management to inspire future educational progress.

Historical institutionalism emphasizes how historical events, government policies, and sociopolitical infrastructures shape long-term educational progress (North, 1990). In the context of Kinta, three key factors influenced the development of Chinese vernacular education: British colonial policies, political turbulence in China, and the flourishing tin mining industry (Tan, 2019; Lim, 2021). These factors created an environment in which Hakka towkays emerged as prominent contributors to educational advancements.

Additionally, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital provides a valuable lens to understand these contributions. The Hakka elite viewed investments in education as a means of preserving and enhancing their cultural capital. Their support for Chinese vernacular education was an effort to safeguard their linguistic and cultural heritage. By funding schools and influencing curricula, they aim to transmit their native language and traditions to future generations (Tan, 2020). Recent studies reaffirm that such efforts by Chinese elites not only reinforce their cultural identity but also increase their social standing.

The concept of institutionalized transnationalism is also relevant. It refers to regularized cross-border social and economic practices institutionalized through government, business, and societal frameworks to promote mutually beneficial agendas. Owing to their deep-rooted cultural and ancestral ties, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has actively involved ethnic Chinese business associations in Southeast Asia in transnational. Since 2013, the ASEAN Overseas Chinese Entrepreneur Convention held in Yunnan Province has seen increasing participation, with over 400 Chinese diaspora organizations and nearly 5,000 entrepreneurs establishing connections with the region by 2019. Both Chinese and Southeast Asian governments have relied on business associations as intermediaries in leveraging the BRI, fostering mechanisms that have indirectly supported educational development (Ren & Liu, 2021). Social networks play a critical role in fostering partnerships that enhance the sustainability of Chinese educational institutions.

Chinese education in Malaysia has a long history since the large-scale immigration of Chinese to Malaya in the nineteenth century. Almost 200 years have passed since the establishment of Wufu Shuyuan in Penang, which was the first Chinese school in Malaysia (Xia et al., 2018). Chinese migration also played a foundational role in shaping education in Malaya. The migrant Chinese communities in Kinta not only drove economic development but also established and supported Chinese schools (Loh, 2020). The structure of Chinese society in Perak had a significant influence on educational development (Tan, 2020), while the balancing act between ethnic Chinese aspirations and Malaysia's national education policies remains a continuing theme (Wong & Gwee, 1972). Migration patterns directly impact the formation and sustainability of Chinese vernacular schools.

British colonial policies had a profound effect on Chinese education. While the British adopted a *laissez-faire* stance that permitted Chinese schools to operate with relative autonomy, legislative measures such as the 1920 School Registration Ordinance imposed restrictions (Purcell, 2019). British anxieties about rising Chinese nationalism also shaped educational policies, revealing the political dimensions of schooling during that era.

Chinese political movements significantly influenced educational strategies in Malaya. The May Fourth Movement inspired calls for educational reform (Chow, 2020), whereas Sun Yat-sen's nationalist ideology played a formative role in shaping curricula (Tay, 2021). Educational reforms from the late Qing dynasty also left a lasting imprint on overseas Chinese schooling. These ideological currents, in conjunction with the efforts of individual educators and school boards, guided the transformation from traditional *sishu* to modern Chinese vernacular schools (Lee, 2011). Contemporary challenges—such as integrating Chinese schools into Malaysia's national education framework continue to reflect the evolving sociopolitical context (Wong & Wong, 2021).

This paper aims to rectify this oversight by analyzing primary source accounts drawn from educational board minutes, personal correspondence, and archived newspaper reports. Through these sources, the multifaceted influence of Hakka towkays on regional educational policies and institutions is examined.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research adopts a historical-analytical approach, relying on primary sources such as archived letters, financial records, meeting minutes, and newspaper articles. These materials form the core evidence for the study. Secondary sources, including academic journals and historical monographs (e.g., Chen, 2008; Lim, 2002), provide context for the archival findings. The events were organized chronologically, from the early 1900s to 1941, to illustrate the evolving contributions of Hakka towkays to educational development in Kinta District.

3.2. Validity & Reliability

A thematic analysis procedure separates data into major categories. First, the practices of Hakka entrepreneurs involve both the funding and management of educational institutions. Next, the impact of British colonial policies and Chinese political

movements on vernacular education. Third, there are long-term effects of these contributions on Malaysian education. When a researcher uses several valid sources, they confirm the accuracy of their historical understanding in their work. This approach allows researchers to examine how Kinta Hakka educational efforts differ from those of other Chinese school systems throughout Malaysia.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. RQ1: What were the key motivations behind the efforts of Hakka towkays to establish and fund Chinese vernacular schools in the Kinta region?

Chinese education in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly in the Kinta district, underwent a complex transformation process in the early 20th century. Amidst the changing political and economic environment, Hakka *towkays* (Chinese businessmen) played an important role in providing funds for Chinese primary schools. The financial contributions provided not only helped finance the daily operations of the schools but also contributed to improving the quality of teaching, providing facilities for the delivery of knowledge, and strengthening the cultural identity of the Chinese community (Wong & Wong, 2021).

This study highlights three key themes regarding Hakka *towkays'* contributions to Chinese education in Kinta District: financial contribution, preservation of cultural identity, and collaborative efforts. Hakka *towkay* figures provided essential financial capital that catalyzed the establishment and expansion of Chinese educational institutions. Their initiatives evolved from basic schooling structures in the early 1900s to sophisticated policies and administrative frameworks in later decades (Dar, 2023; Ding, 2024).

The *towkays* exhibited a strong commitment to safeguarding Chinese cultural heritage amidst industrialization. Their investments were driven by the recognition that education was vital for sustaining and advancing the socio-cultural fabric of their community. This dual focus on cultural preservation and economic growth is a recurring theme in archival evidence.

From 1900 to 1941, under British colonial rule, Malaya's socioeconomic landscape, driven by tin mining and agriculture, supported the growth of Chinese communities in areas such as Kinta and Ipoh. The Hakka community prioritized education to improve living standards and preserve cultural identity against Western and colonial influences. Their financial contributions were strategically managed through associations, community representatives, and schools to strengthen education and boost youth competitiveness (Liew, 2023).

Hakka *towkays* demonstrated social responsibility through direct donations to schools, the establishment of neighborhood funds, and initiatives aimed at curriculum development. Direct funding improved school infrastructure, teaching materials, and teacher salaries, whereas neighborhood funds addressed daily and emergency school needs, and were overseen by committees ensuring transparency. Additionally, curriculum efforts have incorporated Chinese cultural values, preserving ethnic heritage alongside modern education practices.

These contributions profoundly impacted education quality in Kinta, enhancing infrastructure, professional teacher training, and academic resources. *Towkays* empowered cultural identity by supporting language courses and cultural programs, fostering both academic and social values. Archival records document consistent improvements in examination results and community involvement, highlighting their role as foundational forces in educational reform.

Methodologically, the study employs literature synthesis focusing on archival documents, school annual reports, and historical memos. Transparent financial records reflect high accountability, building trust between the Hakka community and schools. *Towkays* serve as catalysts, blending economic leadership with cultural values in educational strategies. Criticisms arose around fund distribution disparities between urban and rural schools, suggesting potential political influence in prioritization and highlighting areas for further research on equity.

Despite resource constraints, Hakka *towkays'* contributions significantly advanced Chinese education in Kinta, improving infrastructure, teaching, community spirit, and cultural preservation (Dar, 2023). Their efforts established a collaborative model between the private and public sectors that offers insights for future educational strategies focused on cultural integration, distributive justice, and innovation in fund management. Hakka *towkays'* financial contributions to Chinese education faced several challenges but also demonstrated notable strengths. Challenges included resource limitations, as wealth constraints limited the extent of contributions, affecting the fulfillment of infrastructure and educational needs. Distribution and oversight issues caused inequalities, particularly between urban and rural schools, prompting calls for external audits and stricter management mechanisms. Political and economic pressures from colonial authorities also influenced fund allocation, often favoring schools aligned with strategic economic interests.

4.2. RQ3: How did British colonial governance and political changes in China influence the motivations and decisions of Hakka towkays in supporting Chinese vernacular education?

The study underscores the value of community-driven education. The Hakka *Towkays* demonstrated how private contributions can sustain education when government support is limited while also adapting to British colonial regulations and preserving Chinese cultural identity. Their work emphasized the importance of maintaining heritage language education within multicultural contexts (Wong, 2010; Wong, 2021), offering guidance for contemporary policy improvements in community-

based education systems. In 1920, the British administration introduced the law to prevent alienation and to control the activities of these schools to avoid any communist activities in the schools (Sivalingam, 2021).

According to Nair et al. (2024) China attaches more importance to the role of education in the national economy. During this period of rapid socioeconomic change in Perak, Chinese immigrants, particularly Hakka, emphasized education alongside economic progress. With limited state funding, local *towkays* modestly funded educational programs through sponsorship of fees, donations of books, and infrastructure improvements, laying the groundwork for future development (Wong, 2010).

Fuelled by the economic boom in tin mining, Hakka *Towkays* transitioned from modest support to establishing entire institutions. Archival records reveal the founding of multiple schools funded by these businessmen, along with debates on curricula, teacher recruitment, and the integration of traditional values with modern practices. Letters between *Towkays* and British colonial education officials reflect their collective vision for modernization (Chen, 2008).

Hakka *towkays'* efforts in the 1930s focused on sustaining educational initiatives through financial backing and strategic policy involvement. Collaboration with local Chinese leaders included lobbying for policies to secure funding and autonomy for Chinese schools. Their advocacy also influences the appointment of administrators who are sympathetic to community needs (Tan, 2011).

As war approached, Hakka *towkays'* contributions shifted toward legacy-building, emphasizing long-term educational projects. They established endowments to fund scholarships, libraries, and community centers, transitioning from reactive support to proactive planning. These endowments continued to benefit educational initiatives in the post-war period, leaving an enduring legacy (Lim, 2002). This chronological perspective illustrates the evolution of Hakka *towkays'* contributions, highlighting their pivotal role in shaping educational development in Kinta District.

5. Conclusions

This research highlights the important role played by the Hakka community in the formation of Chinese educational systems throughout Kinta until World War II. The study demonstrated that Hakka business leaders took part in school management roles as well as curriculum creation activities beyond funding education. The people of the Hakka community founded organized vernacular Chinese educational systems that protected traditional Chinese culture during both British rule in Malaya and shifting Chinese politics (Xia et al., 2018).

The research revealed significant findings regarding the historical impact of community-driven educational organizations on Chinese school development in Malaya. This research enhances the literature concerning ethnic education and diaspora studies and ethnic education by using historical institutionalism together with cultural capital theory and social network theory. The discussion maintains importance regarding the economic success connection to educational philanthropy during times of modern educational policy formulation.

While aligned with research on other Chinese dialect groups, such as Cantonese and Teochew philanthropists (Wang, 1993; Wei et al., 2019; Wai, 2018), this study uniquely focuses on Hakka figures in Kinta. Unlike previous research that prioritizes financial contributions, it highlights their role in curriculum design and governance (Raman & Tan, 2015). Furthermore, British colonial policies and shifting allegiances to China heavily influenced their strategies, distinguishing them from other Chinese communities.

Future research should investigate the post-war development of these institutions to assess the long-term impact of Hakka *Towkays'* contributions. Comparative studies with other ethnic and regional groups could further illuminate broader educational dynamics in colonial Southeast Asia. This study emphasizes the necessity of blending economic and cultural perspectives to understand the legacy of Chinese education in Malaya.

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Ethical considerations

This research has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Kelana Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia as stated in the Approval Letter: UNITAR/FEH/REC/2025/01/.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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