

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KEK LOK SI TEMPLE IN PENANG AND THE EARLY MALAY CHINESE COMMUNITY

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to reveal the significant impact of the establishment of Kek Lok Si Temple in Penang, Malaysia, in the late 19th century on the local Chinese community. Kek Lok Si Temple is the first Chinese Buddhist temple in Southeast Asia and was built by Master Miaolian, a high monk from Yongquan Temple in Gushan, Fujian. This development opened a new chapter for the spread of Chinese Buddhism in the region. By analyzing a substantial amount of historical materials from both Malaysia and China, it becomes evident that Master Miaolian promoted the development of Kek Lok Si Temple within the secular environment of Penang through his own Buddhist studies and cultural cultivation. Additionally, due to his Hakka identity, Master Miaolian played a crucial role in securing the support of the vice-consul, the highest political representative of the Chinese community in Penang. The findings of this study indicate that during the establishment of Kek Lok Si Temple, Chinese social groups from various provinces effectively reintegrated through donations and other means. As a result, regional identity began to surpass dialectal identity, emerging as a new trend in Chinese identity in the modern era.
Keywords: Malay peninsula, Kek Lok Si temple, Penang Chinese community, Chinese Buddhist temples

Introduction

Buddhism, one of the three major world religions, was founded by Siddhartha Gautama in ancient India in the 6th to 5th century BCE. It later spread along two main routes: south into various countries and regions in South Asia and Southeast Asia, and north via the Silk Road into several East Asian countries (Montgomery, 1991). Upon entering China, Buddhism evolved into a religious system that adapted to traditional Chinese culture, playing a significant role in ancient Chinese society and becoming a crucial pillar of many people's spiritual lives. As a result, with many Chinese people seeking livelihoods overseas, significant elements of the Han Buddhist system were also carried to other places, forming distinct religious practices with Chinese characteristics (Saunders, 1923). Malaysia, a pivotal country on the Southeast Asian peninsula, attracted a substantial number of Chinese immigrants following its opening. Penang, also known as the Isle of Betel, emerged as one of the primary gathering places for early Chinese migrants. In this context, the Kek Lok Si Temple was established by the Fujian monk Master Miao Lian in 1891, symbolizing the rich cultural fusion present in Malaysia. Kek Lok Si Temple developed within a broader network of Buddhist temples and associations that served religious, social, charitable, and community-organising functions among Penang's Chinese population from the nineteenth century onward (Liow, 1989). Its construction marked the formation of the Buddhist community in Penang and reflected the immigrants' longing for spiritual solace and cultural continuity. Master Miao Lian believed that "the mind is Buddha, and Buddha is the mind," which guided him in blending Southern Chinese architectural styles with local elements, resulting in a temple that embodies both traditional Chinese charm and local

characteristics. Kek Lok Si not only provided a space for practice and learning for Penang's Buddhists but also became a cultural and religious bridge between China and Malaysia. As historians note, "Architecture is frozen history," with each brick of Kek Lok Si recording the struggles and faith of Chinese immigrants abroad. Here, we will focus on the temple's significant impact on the local Chinese community both before and after its establishment (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. Early period of the establishment of the Kek Lok Si Temple.

Chinese society before the establishment of the Kek Lok Si temple

Penang's expansion as a colonial port was closely connected to the growth of regional commerce, revenue farming, mining, and competition among political and commercial interests in the western Malay states (Khoo, 1972). With the rapid development of the Industrial Revolution in England, the country began its global colonization and exploitation. In 1786, British colonizers established a foothold in Penang, marking their first entry into Malaysia and a significant point in the historical development of the Malay Peninsula. Later, with the opening of Singapore in 1819 and the Netherlands ceding Malacca to Britain in 1824, British colonists established three significant footholds along the coast of the Malay Peninsula. Initially, Penang was administratively classified as a subordinate jurisdiction under the governance of the Bengal Governor and Council. In 1805, it was elevated to the status of a province, on par with Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, and came under the direct command of the Governor-General of India (Winstedt, 2024). In 1867, the Straits Settlements were placed under the authority of the Colonial Office, thus becoming part of the Crown Colony. Throughout this period, Penang remained under British colonial rule until its incorporation into the Malayan Federation in 1946. With the opening of Penang, various ethnic groups, including the Chinese, flocked to the area in search of opportunities. However, Penang was established as a colonial outpost by British colonizers primarily for the efficient extraction of resources, which resulted in a significant lack of institutional frameworks. The interests of the region were long monopolized by a small number of capitalists, particularly in industries such as tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and narcotics, which were predominantly controlled by the East India Company. Although officially managed by the local colonial administrator, real power was often wielded by the "Kapitan." Immigrants labored under these harsh conditions, while local colonial companies and guilds offered limited protection for their workers. Aside from the Straits Chinese community, known as the "Baba Nyonya," who benefited from their

cross-cultural advantages and a small number of astute political and business leaders, the majority of lower-tier laborers struggled to make a living, facing significant oppression and bullying from various sectors. In this context, riots and acts of resistance were common. The differing attitudes of immigrant groups in response to adversity resulted in severe developmental imbalances among them. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, "social Darwinism" permeated Southeast Asia, making Penang one of the most emblematic locations illustrating the capitalist notion of "survival of the fittest."

At the onset of Penang's establishment as a trading port, many Chinese immigrants from the Guangdong and Fujian provinces arrived, making these regions the primary sources of migration from mainland China. Historical inscriptions at the Kuan Yin Temple in Penang indicate that, in the early days following the island's opening in 1786, the affluent Fujianese community played a pivotal role in shaping the local Chinese demographic, leveraging their financial resources to establish themselves as a dominant force. However, following the 1820s, a significant shift occurred. Merchants from Guangdong began to prosper, largely due to their participation in gray industries, such as the "Farmer System." This development marked the emergence of a competitive dynamic between the Fujian and Guangdong communities, resulting in a more pronounced rivalry. Consequently, the social landscape of the Chinese community became increasingly fragmented. This historical evolution illustrates the complexities of migration patterns and the economic forces that influence social structures. The initial predominance of the Fujianese was challenged as Guangdong merchants gained economic power, highlighting the ongoing impact of external factors on community dynamics. In summary, the history of Chinese immigration to Penang reflects not only the diverse origins of its settlers but also the shifting balance of power among these groups. The rivalry between Fujian and Guangdong merchants significantly influenced Penang's economic landscape and contributed to the social stratification within the Chinese diaspora. To bridge the divisions within the Chinese community, the Kuan Yin Temple was constructed in 1800 through the collaborative efforts of immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian. This temple played a crucial role in mediating internal disputes among the Chinese, fulfilling an essential function in the community during its early years. However, with the rapid growth of the "Farmer System" gray industries in Penang, conflicts over interests intensified. Organizations based on local dialects and clan affiliations began to expand their influence, leading to ongoing struggles that, to some extent, undermined the effectiveness of the Kuan Yin Temple.

The violent events of the 1867 Penang Riots and the Larut Wars from 1872 to 1874 significantly undermined the cohesion of the Chinese community. As the Kuan Yin Temple's ability to mediate internal conflicts waned, it struggled to fulfill its original purpose (Khoo, 1975). In response to the escalating tensions among various Chinese factions, several cross-clan coordinating organizations were established. A notable example is the Ping Zhang Guild, founded in 1881, which comprised fourteen council members, evenly divided between representatives from Guangdong and Fujian. Although its capacity was limited, the guild aimed to restore the spirit and structure of the Kuan Yin Temple, thereby contributing to conflict resolution within the community to some extent. Although the Kuan Yin Temple initially played a crucial role in unifying the Chinese community in Penang, its effectiveness diminished as internal conflicts intensified. The establishment of new organizations aimed to tackle these challenges, underscoring the persistent struggle for cohesion within a fragmented social

landscape. *Table 1* illustrates a significant demographic shift within the Chinese community in Penang, indicating that the proportion of Fujianese immigrants increased from 27.5% in 1891 to 49.2% by 1911, approaching half of the total population. The influence of Penang's leading Hokkien families extended beyond commerce because their kinship networks, clan institutions, regional partnerships, and relationships with colonial authorities shaped the wider organisation of Chinese society (Wong, 2015). In this context, both the Cantonese and Teochew groups found it increasingly challenging to compete with the Fujianese, particularly as the Teochew population declined rapidly. Consequently, the Cantonese had to ally with the Teochew and Hakka communities to create a united front.

Table 1. Demographics of Chinese dialect groups in Penang around 1900.

Dialect groups	1891	1901	1911
Fujian (Minnan people)	24246 (27.5%)	29072 (29.8%)	54528 (49.2%)
Guangdong (i.e. Cantonese)	17400 (19.7%)	18355 (18.8%)	22575 (20.4%)
Hainan	2850 (3.2%)	2880 (2.9%)	4166 (3.7%)
Hakka	7216 (8.20%)	7951 (8.1%)	12898 (11.6%)
Chaozhou	19218 (21.8%)	15085 (15%)	16482 (14.8%)
Fuzhou	--	661 (0.6%)	--
Overseas-born Chinese	16981 (19.3%)	23500 (24.1%)	--
Total	87911 (100%)	97504 (100%)	110649 (100%)

This coalition is exemplified by the establishment of the Fujian Public Cemetery, alongside the Guangdong and Tingzhou Cemeteries, the latter of which is associated with the Hakka community. Notably, during this period, the predominantly Minnan-speaking Fujianese from Zhangzhou and Quanzhou did not align with the Hakka. Research by Mai Liufang highlights the economic dominance of the Fujianese in Penang, indicating that their financial resources were unparalleled. He asserts that the economic power of Guangdong merchants was thirteen times less than that of the Fujianese, and when compared to their counterparts in Singapore, the Guangdong community experienced even greater pressure from the more influential Fujianese. The intricate web of clan-based local powers created a unique situation for the Chinese community in Penang during this era. Against this backdrop, the establishment of the Kew Leong Temple in 1891, initiated by Master Miao Lian, emerged as a unifying force for the various Chinese groups in the area, helping to consolidate their collective identity and resources. The demographic changes and the complexities of clan dynamics have significantly influenced the social landscape of the Chinese community in Penang, paving the way for new forms of collaboration and unity amidst rivalry.

Master miaolian and the establishment of Kek Lok Si temple

With the significant influx of Chinese immigrants to Malaysia, Chinese Buddhism began to take root. The earliest Chinese temple, the Qingyun Pavilion, was established in Malacca in 1673, followed by the Guangfu Palace, jointly founded by Cantonese and Fujianese immigrants in Penang in 1800. The inscription on the foundation stone states: "The former kings established teachings through divine ways; those who have made contributions in this world, regardless of mountains or seas, where boats and vehicles can reach, must establish temples to worship their deities." This inscription does not specify which deity is being referred to, nor does it mention any Buddhist connotations; it merely reflects that the local Chinese community built the temple to seek blessings. Although various Chinese temples gradually emerged across Malaysia, their maintenance primarily relied on donations from worshippers and the performance of

rituals. These secular matters did not significantly impact the development of Chinese Buddhism in Malaysia. To revitalize Buddhism in a region, the presence of esteemed monks is often essential, as the essence of Buddhist development lies in the promotion of Dharma, which requires long-term practice. Furthermore, robust socio-economic development is a crucial factor for the flourishing of Buddhism. As the local Chinese community and merchants on Penang Island prospered, there was a growing trend of donations to Chinese temples, serving as a means to gain prestige within the Chinese community. In addition to traditional worship and welcoming activities for deities, some Buddhist monks from Fuzhou began traveling to Southeast Asia to propagate the Dharma and raise funds. According to inscriptions from the Xishan Temple in Fuzhou, Abbot Wei Miao Zen Master raised funds in Penang from 1884 to 1886, targeting the Fuzhou expatriate and merchant communities in Southeast Asia. He brought back significant donations to rebuild the Xichan Temple in Fuzhou. Subsequently, Master Miaolian (1845–1907), the abbot of Yongquan Temple, arrived in Penang in 1887 and was invited to reside at Guangfu Palace. One of his responsibilities was to restore the reputation of Guangfu Palace, which had suffered due to the previous monks' failure to uphold monastic discipline.

Master Miaolian is recognized as the first prominent monk to propagate Chinese Buddhism in Southeast Asia. To understand his background, we can examine the Yongquan Temple in Gushan, Fuzhou. Yongquan Temple, located in the eastern suburbs of Fuzhou and also known as Shigu, was officially named in the fifth year of the Yongle era (1407). The temple's architecture adheres strictly to the principles of Chinese Buddhist temple design, featuring main buildings aligned along a central axis, including the Heavenly King Hall, the Mahavairo Hall, and the Dharma Hall. On the east and west sides, there are additional structures such as the Bell Tower, Drum Tower, Sutra Printing House, Treasury, Monastic Training Hall, Amitabha Hall, Sacred Arrow Hall, Wishful Hall, Nianfo Hall, Baiyun Hall, Dining Hall, Ancestor Hall, and Guanyin Pavilion. The temple features a North Song Dynasty ceramic pagoda, large bronze and iron cauldrons, nearly ten thousand Buddhist scriptures, and wooden sculpture panels, which contribute to its renown both domestically and internationally. Outside the temple, there are hundreds of valuable rock carvings. The temple boasts a rich collection, including over twenty thousand volumes from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as more than seven thousand works by prominent monks Yuanxian and Daopei from those periods. Additionally, it houses over ten thousand printed texts and six hundred seventy-five handwritten scriptures by ascetic monks. During the early Republican period, Japanese scholars referred to it as "China's First Dharma Cave." In April 1929, Master Hongyi visited Gushan and discovered early Qing editions of the "Avatamsaka Sutra" and its commentary in the sutra repository of Yongquan Temple, noting their rarity in modern times. Consequently, Master Miaolian's arrival played a crucial role in the dissemination and development of Chinese Buddhism on the Malay Peninsula, offering spiritual solace to early Chinese immigrants in Malaysia. The temple's development reflected the broader institutional expansion of Chinese Buddhist temples and associations in colonial Penang (Liow, 1989).

Master Miaolian, originally surnamed Feng, hailed from the Guizha area in Fujian. His father, Shitai, was renowned for his talents and entered monastic life at Yishan, dedicating himself to the practice of releasing animals. His mother, from the Yang family, also adhered to the precepts. Although his father was less diligent in business, he fulfilled his filial duties. At the age of thirty-three, he returned to visit his family, and

his father said to him, "Your time has come; your affinity lies at Shigu, so do not neglect it." Consequently, he became a monk at Gushan, taking Qi Liang as his teacher and receiving full ordination from Master Huaizhong of the same mountain. Master Miaolian was known for his kind and gentle nature, bringing joy to all who met him. When the main hall at Gushan fell into disrepair, he single-handedly sought funds in Taiwan and other locations to assist with the restoration, eventually becoming the abbot. In the year of Jia Shen, as Master Liang retired due to age, the community chose him to succeed as the abbot. He stated, "From a young age, I entrusted myself to the empty door and diligently practiced facing the wall for over twenty years." Master Miaolian served as the abbot of the esteemed Yongquan Temple for more than two decades, inheriting the Dharma lineage of the Linji school as its 42nd generation. In comparison to earlier Buddhist monks on the Malay Peninsula, Master Miaolian possessed considerable religious stature and influence. His arrival ushered in a revitalizing breeze for Chinese Buddhism in Penang. Transitioning from the serene Yongquan Temple to the bustling Guangfu Palace in Penang represented a significant shift. The noise level at Guangfu Palace was overwhelming, and its scale was vastly different from that of Yongquan Temple. According to Volume 7 of the "Gushan Records," the properties of Yongquan Temple extended extensively across Gushan. In contrast, Guangfu Palace was cramped on Coconut Foot Street, creating an uncomfortable environment. "Guangfu Palace is situated in a crowded area; if there is no distinction between movement and stillness, it becomes a burden for Master Lian." Consequently, for long-term planning, Master Miaolian "chose a suitable place and sought a tranquil location, eventually finding the site for the temple in Ayer Itam." Ayer Itam, with its beautiful mountains and clear waters, provided a serene and unique setting ideal for meditation and practice. Ultimately, he sought an appropriate location for cultivation, which led to the establishment of Jile Temple. In promoting Chinese Buddhism on the Malay Peninsula, Master Miaolian obtained permission from Yang Xiumiao, a Fujianese, to purchase a property on the hillside of Ayer Itam in 1891. This site was designated for temple construction and meditation. He invited two fellow monks, Deru and Benzhong, to travel south to assist with fundraising and oversee the temple's construction. By September 1893, the colonial government officially confirmed the property (Khin, 1989).

The establishment of Jile Temple was not a straightforward process; the internal buildings were constructed at different times. As shown in *Table 2*, construction began with the Ksitigarbha Hall in 1894 and continued until 1907. The first buildings completed in 1894 were the Ksitigarbha Hall and the Fushen Cave. The Ksitigarbha Hall is typically a significant annex in Chinese Buddhist temples, so why was it the first structure built at Jile Temple? According to the "Jile Temple Chronicles," "the monk's quarters are on both sides," indicating that the area surrounding the Ksitigarbha Hall served as accommodation for the monks. For the newly arrived Master Miaolian and his companions, addressing the accommodation issue and attracting devotees were two pressing challenges.

Table 2. List of the construction time of the internal buildings of Jile Temple in the Qing dynasty.

Building name	Time	Founder
Ksitigarbha Hall	Guangxu Jiawu Year (1894)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Fushen Cave	Guangxu Jiawu Year (1894)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Tianwang Hall	Guangxu Yiwei Year (1895)	Miao Lian, De Ru, Ben Zhong
Zhusi Pavilion	Guangxu Yiwei Year (1895)	Miao Lian

Daxiong Hall	Guangxu Dingyou Year (1897)	Miao Lian, De Ru, Ben Zhong Tong
Dharma Hall	Guangxu Wuxu Year (1898)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Scripture Library	Guangxu Jihai Year (1899)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
East and West Guest Hall	Guangxu Jihai Year (1899)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Haihui Pagoda	Guangxu Xinchou Year (1901)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Baifu Pond	Guangxu Xinchou Year (1901)	Miao Lian, De Ru, Zi Lai
Ganlu Spring	Guangxu Xinchou Year (1901)	Miao Lian, De Ru
Bell and Drum Tower	Guangxu Xinchou Year (1901)	Ben Zhong
Xigui Hall	Guangxu Xinchou Year (1901)	De Ru, Shan Qing
Dining Hall	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Xiang Ji	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Bathroom	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Zaode Pond	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	De Ru, Ben Zhong
Jiejie Gate	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	Ben Zhong, Shan Qing
Dashi Hall	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	Miao Lian
Baiyun Hall	Guangxu Renyin Year (1902)	Miao Lian
Abbot	Guangxu Guimao Year (1903)	Miao Lian, Shan Qing
Storeroom	Guangxu Guimao Year (1903)	Miao Lian, Shan Qing
Zaode Pavilion	Guangxu Jiachen Year (1904)	Ben Zhong, Shan Qing
Zuanu Hall	Guangxu Jiachen Year (1904)	Miao Lian, Ben Zhong, Shan Qing
Huawu	Guangxu Yisi Year (1905)	Miao Lian, Yi Tong
Release Pond	Guangxu Yisi Year (1905)	Miao Lian Zao
Rancho Garden	Guangxu Bingwu Year (1906)	Ben Zhong, Shan Qing
Stepping Path	Guangxu Dingwei Year (1907)	Ci En, Yi Tong
Buddha Foot Pavilion	Guangxu Dingwei Year (1907)	Upasika Chen Xixiang

The Ksitigarbha Hall is dedicated to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, who is present wherever there is suffering, particularly in hell. Ksitigarbha's fundamental vow is, "I vow not to attain Buddhahood until hell is empty." This profound aspiration, combined with the willingness of sentient beings to be saved, establishes a unique connection between Ksitigarbha and beings in the Saha world, especially during the era of the five turbidities. Consequently, in the minds of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia during the 19th century, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva held unparalleled appeal. The Fushen Cave was constructed in harmony with the mountain, making it relatively easier to build. To its left lies the monk's quarters, which is one of the earliest architectural features of Jile Temple. Additionally, Master Wei Miao's activities in Penang during the 1880s further illustrate this connection. He was also active in Fujian Yishan, where he dealt with matters of life and death, highlighting the significant relationship between monks and the community at that time. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is frequently venerated in Buddhist ceremonies for the deceased, so the early establishment of the Ksitigarbha Hall at Jile Temple served both social and religious functions. In 1895, the second year of construction, the Heavenly King Hall and the Abbot Pavilion were completed. The Heavenly King Hall is the first building encountered upon entering the mountain gate, featuring statues of the Four Heavenly Kings on either side and a central statue of Maitreya Buddha, with Weituo Bodhisattva positioned behind him. This layout has become one of the primary indicators of a Chinese Buddhist temple. The Abbot Pavilion, situated behind the Ksitigarbha Hall, serves as a self-commemoration by Master Miaolian of his time in Penang. In 1899, the Sutra Repository and the east and west guest halls were constructed. The Sutra Repository is situated above the Dharma Hall and houses several volumes of the Tripitaka, which were bestowed by the late Qing Emperor De Zong and are stored in six cabinets. The east and west guest halls are located in the two wings in front of the Mahavairo Hall, serving to accommodate male and female guests, respectively. In 1901, the Haijue Pagoda was built, located on the back mountain of the temple, where the ashes of monks who have attained nirvana are interred.

In addition to these tangible constructions, Master Miaolian undertook an even more significant initiative. In 1902, he resigned from his position as the abbot of Yongquan Temple, which was subsequently taken over by Master Guyue. In 1904, Master Miaolian traveled to Beijing to meet with Emperor Guangxu, requesting the imperial bestowal of two sets of scriptures to be stored at Jile Temple in Penang and Nanshan Temple in Zhangzhou. The emperor also granted him a monk's robe and several plaques, including "Appointed Abbot by Imperial Command," "Return to the Mountain by Imperial Order," "Imperially Granted Tripitaka," "Imperially Bestowed Jile Zen Temple," and "Long Live the Emperor." At this time, Jile Temple finally received official recognition from the state. Through his efforts, Master Miaolian transformed Jile Temple into a site acknowledged by the imperial court, acquiring personal plaques from Empress Dowager Cixi and the emperor, which served as valuable social resources for the temple. This recognition had an unparalleled impact on overseas Chinese communities during the late Qing dynasty. These initial constructions roughly established the basic scale of Jile Temple. In the subsequent years, it became fully operational and developed recreational attractions, drawing a significant number of devotees. Many scholars formed friendships with Zen Master Miaolian through their interactions. A report from the Penang New Gazette in 1907 documented a visit by a British prince:

"The Prince of Wales arrived on the seventh day of the month to assess the military readiness in the East. Upon his arrival, local dignitaries hosted welcoming ceremonies to demonstrate their loyalty, marking a momentous occasion. The Princess, along with her attendants, was captivated by the island's stunning scenery and visited Jile Temple at six in the evening, accompanied by the Chief Minister's wife and other dignitaries. Monks greeted them in ceremonial attire, rang bells for worship, and offered blessings, providing mountain tea as refreshments. Acknowledging the significance of the occasion, they requested a photograph to commemorate the visit, with all attendees signing it as a memento, leaving their marks as a remembrance for the future."

This report indicates that, although Jile Temple was still in its early stages, it had already become a popular tourist destination on Penang Island.

The relationship between the establishment of Jile temple and the Chinese community in Penang

The establishment of a temple has never been solely the responsibility of monks; it requires donations from devotees and strong support from local gentry. Beginning in the late Ming Dynasty, significant wealth from local elites began to flow into temples, resulting in institutions with regional influence. From the late Ming period onward, Buddhist monasteries increasingly depended on networks of patronage involving local gentry, merchants, scholars, and officials. These relationships provided temples with financial resources, political protection, cultural legitimacy, and opportunities for institutional expansion (Brook, 1993; Yen, 1986; Tan, 1983). Local officials were also eager to utilize temples as venues for engaging with the gentry. This interaction effectively created a tangible protective network comprising local officials, retired officials, and local elites (Brook, 1993). Maintaining relationships with these individuals was essential for safeguarding the temple, a strategy well understood by Zen

Master Miaolian of the Yongquan Temple in Fuzhou, China. In many instances, the establishment of a temple signifies the role of the presiding monks as intermediaries between the Buddhist institution and secular society. The rock inscriptions left by officials and scholars since the Northern Song Dynasty at Yongquan Temple exemplify this relationship. For these visitors, leaving behind their calligraphy holds lasting significance, while for the temple, it represents intangible assets. Through these interactions, Yongquan Temple experienced remarkable growth. Official inscriptions acted as a protective shield for the temple, while scholarly inscriptions served as valuable cultural resources. Frequently, the identities of officials and scholars overlapped. Shortly after arriving on Penang Island, Zen Master Miaolian encountered a considerable number of individuals with similar backgrounds, particularly Chinese merchants who held official titles from the Qing Dynasty. Due to financial constraints, the Qing government implemented a policy of selling official titles to overseas Chinese. This practice aimed not only to assist those affected by natural disasters in China but also to encourage overseas subjects to align with China, uphold traditional values, and foster their political loyalty to the Qing dynasty. The Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya welcomed this as they had previously experienced discrimination from the Qing government. Most titles were obtained through donations to relief funds, which fell into four categories: donations for honorary titles, donations for rank, donations for promotions, and donations for official appointments. However, significant official positions or ranks were not sold, which meant that overseas Chinese remained excluded from the bureaucratic system of the Qing Empire.

Although the Qing government altered its traditional policies regarding overseas subjects in 1893, the practical situation remained largely unchanged. This exclusion was partly due to the high number of individuals competing for a limited number of official positions and partly a result of the Qing's longstanding policies. Psychologically, overseas Chinese harbored a strong desire to acquire official titles, driven by a traditional value placed on bringing honor to one's family, as well as the social prestige associated with such titles. Most importantly, Qing titles served to recognize and affirm an individual's actual and potential leadership status within the Chinese community. Those Chinese merchants who held honorary titles from the Qing dynasty, although not formally integrated into the Qing bureaucratic system, were widely recognized by society as individuals possessing political capital. Among these individuals, those who served as deputy consuls in Penang enjoyed the highest status. The Qing government established a consulate in Singapore in the third year of the Guangxu era (1877), appointing local Chinese merchant Hu Xuanzhe as consul, although his authority was limited to Singapore. In 1881, the first consul directly dispatched by the Qing government to Singapore was Zuo Binglong, a translator from the Chinese embassy in the United Kingdom. In December 1880, the consulate was elevated to a general consulate, overseeing affairs in Penang, Malacca, and various British islands, with a consulate established in Penang. The first general consul was the renowned poet Huang Zunxian, while the first deputy consul in Penang was local Chinese merchant Zhang Bishi. Zhang was not a scholar-official by traditional examination standards; therefore, the Qing government appointed him deputy consul in recognition of his status and influence within the Chinese community in Nanyang. Within the Qing bureaucratic structure, consuls were regarded as officials with specific responsibilities, whereas the titles granted to other overseas Chinese through donations were merely honorary and lacked practical duties. In this context, after 1890, Penang saw the emergence of a

Chinese elite primarily composed of individuals holding these honorary titles, with the deputy consul at the helm.

The prominent figures associated with Jile Temple were primarily Hakka. Many scholars overlook the significance of Zen Master Miaolian's origins; he was born in Guihua County, Fujian (renamed Mingxi County in 1933). Mingxi is one of the pure Hakka counties in Fujian, with the Hakka population mainly concentrated in the western regions of Fujian, southern Jiangxi, and northern Guangdong. From dialects and customs to the migration of surnames, Mingxi exemplifies a typical Hakka county. During the formation of the Hakka community, the Hakka dialect also developed in this region. By the late Qing period, Guihua County was recognized as a Hakka county, and there is no doubt that Zen Master Miaolian had Hakka roots. Upon arriving in Penang, he was invited by the Pingzhang Association to reside at Guangfu Temple. However, George Town was predominantly an environment dominated by the Guangfu factions. For a monk from Fuzhou who spoke Hakka, the linguistic landscape he encountered was primarily composed of Hakka speakers. Zhang Zhenxun, known by his style name Bishi, was originally from Dapu, Guangdong. In his youth, due to his family's financial struggles, he ventured overseas and settled in Batavia, a Dutch territory. By the end of the 19th century, he had emerged as one of the most prominent and affluent figures among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, as well as a highly respected leader within the community. In 1890, the Qing government appointed Zhang as the first consul of Penang. By 1895, he advanced to the position of consul general in Singapore, marking the beginning of his dual career in both official and commercial sectors. Recommended by Li Hongzhang, Zhang returned to China and held several key positions, including assistant and director of the Guangdong-Hankow Railway. Emperor Guangxu summoned him multiple times, valuing his proposals to resist foreign goods, promote industrial development, and manage railway affairs independently to prevent profits from leaking abroad. Consequently, he was appointed Minister of the Imperial Stud and received various honorary titles, including a first-rank cap. Among overseas Chinese, he held the highest political status, not only due to his official rank but also because of his repeated audiences with Emperor Guangxu, which conferred an unparalleled honor within the Chinese community in Penang.

Zhang Yunan, also known by his style name Rongxuan, was born in 1851, the first year of the Xianfeng reign, into a poor farming family in Meixian, Guangdong. During his childhood, he attended a private school in his hometown for several years. As he grew older, he helped his father with a small rice trading business in Songkou, where they struggled to make ends meet. During this time, the lifting of maritime trade restrictions encouraged many villagers from Meixian and Jiaoling to seek their fortunes overseas, resulting in numerous individuals achieving business success. Inspired by these opportunities, Zhang Yunan obtained his father's consent and ventured south in 1868 to seek his fortune. He first arrived in Penang, a British territory in Malaya, and subsequently moved to Medan in Sumatra, part of the Dutch East Indies. Once he established himself, he invited his younger brother, Hongnan, to join him, and both worked under the guidance of Zhang Bishi, gradually being promoted to senior positions. Eventually, they established their own business, serving as the Kapitan and "Miao" appointed by the Dutch, and became prominent figures within the overseas Chinese community in Southeast Asia. From July 1894 to May 1898, he served as the Deputy Consul of Penang. Xie Rongguang, originally from Meixian, Guangdong, was born in 1847 in Kundiang. After reaching adulthood, he moved to Sumatra to seek his

fortune. Due to his contributions to the Dutch, he was successively awarded the titles of "Leizhenlan" and Kapitan, becoming a prominent leader within the local Chinese community. Around 1890, he relocated to Penang, where he, along with his son-in-law Liang Biru (who later succeeded him as Deputy Consul of Penang), managed the Pahang mines and collaborated with Zhang Bishi on mining ventures in locations such as Bentong, Pahang. Xie Rongguang was also connected to Zhang Yunan by marriage, which motivated him to actively engage in the railway construction initiatives promoted by Zhang Yunan in the Chaoshan region. He served as the Deputy Consul of Penang during two terms: from May 1898 to January 1903 and from December 1906 to December 1907. Following Zhang Bishi, the first Deputy Consul of Penang, Xie Rongguang, Zhang Yunan, Liang-Tingfang, and Dai Chunrong—who were all Hakka compatriots and relatives, successively held the position. This succession contributed to the emergence of strong Hakka community leadership in Penang. The foundation for this shift was the significant influx of Hakka migrants in the late 19th century, which disrupted the previous dominance of the Hokkien and Cantonese communities. This group of Hakka merchants, who rose to prominence in the Dutch East Indies, leveraged their appointments as Deputy Consuls of Penang by the Qing dynasty to gain relatively advantageous political resources.

The position of Deputy Consul of Penang served as a central point for collaboration among affluent Hakka merchants. Notably, Zheng Siwen, a prominent leader of the Jile Temple, was the esteemed Kapitan Zheng Jingui (1821–1898) from Pahang, originally hailing from the Hakka community in Huizhou. Although Zheng passed away several years before the establishment of a benefaction tablet, he was still recognized as the fifth-largest donor, underscoring the significant influence of Hakka individuals around 1900. This suggests that, due to their shared dialect, the Hakka community emerged as a formidable force during this period, a fact that Master Miaolian likely acknowledged. Although the Hakka people were dispersed across the Fujian and Guangdong provinces, the Hakka community in Penang primarily originated from the Tingzhou region and had assimilated into the broader Guangdong community. Consequently, Master Miaolian, due to linguistic affinities, was able to establish connections with the Hakka community in Penang early on. His frequent interactions with the Hakka community in daily life further solidified these ties. In the early days of its establishment, the temple was nothing more than a thatched hut, providing shelter from the wind and rain, and dedicated to the Great Bodhisattva. The abbot invested significant effort in seeking funding for its construction; however, despite his endeavors, he was unable to secure the necessary contributions, which became a source of regret. At this juncture, Deputy Consul Mr. Gong Quan visited the temple, where the abbot joyfully exclaimed, "Your presence brings happiness to the temple! Perhaps with your support, we can secure the funds needed for proper construction!" The abbot earnestly hoped for this outcome. During his visit, Mr. Gong admired the site's natural beauty and suggested, "Why not promote the construction of the temple?" The abbot replied, "This is indeed my wish; it solely depends on your support." Mr. Gong made a resolute commitment of substantial funds to the project. He also enlisted the support of prominent philanthropists, including Zhang Zhenxun, Xie Rongguang, Zhang Yunan, Zheng Siwen, and Dai Chunrong, as well as other gentry and merchants from Fujian and Guangdong, who generously contributed to the cause. This collaboration gradually facilitated the expansion and eventual successful completion of the temple.

Master Miaolian encountered challenges during the initial stages of the temple's establishment, particularly in securing funding and attracting donors. This situation may be attributed to his Hakka identity, which, at that time, held limited influence in Penang. However, a significant turning point occurred with the arrival of Zhang Yunan, the Deputy Consul of Penang. Upon his arrival, he swiftly established a positive relationship with Master Miaolian. Zhang identified himself as "Kapitan in the winter of the Guangxu year of Jiawu, serving as the acting consul of Penang." He managed multiple responsibilities, frequently engaging with friends such as Yang Shanchu. Together, they visited the temple to discuss Buddhist scriptures and the principles of karma. These interactions provided him with a brief respite from worldly concerns and allowed him to cultivate a profound connection with the abbot. After Zhang Yunan's rise to prominence, he became eager to acquire titles, donating 100,000 taels of silver to obtain a nominal fourth-rank official title from the Qing dynasty. Balancing both official responsibilities and business ventures, he emerged as a cultured patron, indulging in poetry and calligraphy. He often practiced the characters for "Fushou" (Fortune and Longevity) to present to his friends. In traditional Chinese monasteries, high-ranking monks often exhibited considerable cultural refinement, which enabled Master Miaolian to earn Zhang's trust through their discussions on Buddhist texts. Zhang Yunan made significant contributions to the temple, expressing his hope for the flourishing of Buddhist teachings. In the year of Yimi, he purchased a plot of land known as Fuyuan to support the temple's operations. Furthermore, he initiated charitable activities and sought to enhance the temple's resources, despite facing challenges such as a limited water supply and insufficient provisions for the monks and visitors. Eventually, he discovered a pure and clear spring behind the mountain and subsequently acquired that land for the temple as well. He also constructed iron pipes to channel the spring water into the kitchen, naming it Baorong in tribute to his virtuous actions. Ultimately, Zhang Hongnan, utilizing his influence, helped establish a donation framework for the temple, with six Hakka leaders taking on significant roles, supported by contributions from the Hokkien and Cantonese communities (*Table 3*).

Table 3. List of donations from officials with official titles on the Jile Temple Merit Tablet in 1906.

Name	Official title	Donation (RM)
Zhang Zhenxun	Conferred the title of Guanglu Dafu and Minister of Commerce	35000
Zhang Yu-nan	Granted the title of Guanglu Dafu by imperial decree, former consul of Penang	10000
Xie Rongguang	Consul of Penang	7000
Zhang Hongnan	Granted the title of Guanglu Dafu by imperial decree, former consul of Penang	7000
Zheng Siwen	Second rank, title candidate, four levels higher	6000
Dai Chunrong	Second rank, award of flower feather, candidate for title	3000

In 1906, the merit tablet of the Jile Temple recorded total donations amounting to 210,003 yuan. Among these, six prominent leaders contributed a combined total of 68,000 yuan, which constituted nearly one-third of the overall donations. When including contributions from other Hakka merchants, such as Liu Jinbang from Nanjing County (4,000 yuan), Hu Zichun from Yongding (2,000 yuan), Liang Tingfang from Meixian (2,000 yuan), Li Tongsheng from Meixian (2,000 yuan), Yao Keming from Pingyuan County (2,000 yuan), Wu Baishan from Xinning County (1,200 yuan), and Xie Xueqian (father of Xie Rongguang, 1,000 yuan), the proportion of Hakka donations to the Jile Temple would be even higher. Additionally, Hakka individuals from various regions also made donations. For instance, Ye Guansheng, the last Kapitan of Kuala Lumpur, and a Hakka from Chixi, Taishan, donated 500 yuan. It is noteworthy that

many individuals from Fujian also participated in the donations. For example, Yan Wumei from Yongchun donated 3,000 yuan, and Qiu Hanyang from Haicheng also contributed 3,000 yuan. Qiu Hanyang was a disciple of Qiu Tiande, the elder of the Jiande Hall (the Great Uncle Association), and received the title of "candidate for the Dao" from the Qing court, along with a third-rank title. Yang Xiumiao, a Fujianese merchant who sold land to Master Miaolian, donated 500 yuan. Even Chen Ruohai, the master of the Qingyun Pavilion in Malacca, contributed 200 yuan; he was also from Yongchun, Fujian. Among the Cantonese, notable contributions came from Yu Dongxuan, the son of Yu Guang, the founder of the renowned "Yuren Sheng," who was also a prominent miner and donated 200 yuan. While one might argue that the donations were a deliberate act by the Hakka community to strengthen their identity, I believe this interpretation may be an overreach. In the social structure of the Chinese community in Penang, the Hokkien people represent the dominant group from Fujian, while the Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, and Hakka from Jiaying form the Guangdong representation. Due to the strong exclusionary sentiments from the Hokkien, the Hakka from Tingzhou were unable to be buried in Fujian's public graves, compelling them to align with the Guangdong community, thus establishing the foundational structure of the Guangdong and Tingzhou public graves.

This social dynamic is not only evident in George Town but also in the Chinese community structure in areas like Pulau Tikus, where the Triune structure of the Hokkien community is represented by the Tzu Shan Temple, Fujian public graves, and the Fujian Association, while the Guangdong community is similarly structured through the Xuanwu Temple, Guangdong public graves, and the Guangdong Association. The Hakka exist within the framework of the Guangdong and Tingzhou communities. British surveys, which relied on dialects, highlighted the presence of the Hakka, yet within the Hakka consciousness, they still identified as Guangdong people. For instance, in the inscriptions of the Jile Temple, Zhang Yunan was signed as "Zhang Yunan of Guangdong" in 1904. During the allocation of board positions at the Pingzhang Association, the representation remained balanced between the Cantonese and Hokkien, reflecting that Hakka individuals operated under the umbrella of the broader Guangdong identity, often regarded more as Guangdong people than as distinct Hakka. Initially, the control over the Fujian public graves was held by individuals from Zhangzhou and Haicheng, particularly by the four prominent surnames: Chen, Xie, Lin, and Qiu, who prohibited the Tingzhou Hakka from being buried there, even excluding Hakka from Zhao'an, which also belonged to Zhangzhou. It wasn't until 1886, when Li Pi'ao established the Ba Zhuyan East Fujian public graves, that Hakka and Zhao'an individuals were allowed burial. However, demands for Zhao'an burials in the Guangdong and Tingzhou public graves continued until 1929, when they were ultimately denied[25]. The inscription "Jiu Yi Liu Fang" in the Hanjiang ancestral hall in Penang distinguishes itself from the "Teochew Eight Counties" terminology used in other regions of Malaysia, as it includes Dapu County from the Hakka region without excluding it based on dialect. This suggests that in Penang, regional identification based on administrative divisions has, to some extent, transcended dialectal affiliations. However, this situation has led to the Hakka being dispersed across two provincial identities, resulting in a fragmented sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The establishment of Jile Temple marks not only the creation of the first Han Buddhist temple in Southeast Asia but also exemplifies how Master Miaolian garnered support through interactions with the secular society, enabling Han Buddhism to take root in the region. As a high monk from the Guanyin Temple in Fujian, Master Miaolian's profound Buddhist knowledge and cultural refinement served as critical assets in his engagements with the Penang community. His Hakka identity also played a significant role in securing the backing of the highest-ranking Chinese political figure in Penang, the Deputy Consul. Master Miaolian understood that the successful establishment of Jile Temple relied fundamentally on top-down advocacy. Following the arrival of more monks to propagate the Dharma, a new phase of Han Buddhism's spread in Southeast Asia began after 1900. Furthermore, the donations to Jile Temple not only elevated the status of the Hakka within Guangdong but also fostered greater interaction between the Cantonese and Hokkien communities, providing additional opportunities for collaboration beyond the Pingzhang Association. Consequently, through the act of donating to Jile Temple, the secondary social dynamics of the Guangdong community in Penang underwent a reintegration, with ancestral identity beginning to transcend dialectal distinctions, emerging as a new trend in Chinese identity in this evolving era.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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