

BOOK REVIEW

The Xaverian Journey: The Story of a Lasallian School in Penang, Malaysia 1787–2019, by Francis Loh Kok Wah, Cecilia Ng and Anthony Rogers.
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The genesis of modern schools in Malaysia can be traced to the oldest English medium school in Malaysia as well as Southeast Asia, the Penang Free School (PFS), founded in 1816, with its first Tamil class—the earliest of its kind at the same time (Sivachandralingam n.d.). The first Malay school was established in Gelugor, Penang in 1826. As for Chinese schools in Malaysia, “School of the 5th Happiness” (1819) – reputed to be the first, was followed by other pioneers of modern Chinese schools, namely The Chung Hwa Confucian School (1904) and the first secondary Chinese school, Chung Ling High School (1923), all of which were located in Penang. It is astonishing to find out that all those early English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools were founded and based in Penang. St. Xavier’s Institution (SXI), founded in 1852 at a “pioneer educational hub” of Penang with its origins dating to 1787 later joined their ranks, becoming the first Lasallian educational institution in Asia (p. xv).

For the past five years, some of these pioneering schools in Penang were celebrating their anniversary starting with PFS with its bicentennial celebration in 2016, and Chung Ling High School with its centennial celebration in 2017 as counted from the founding of its primary school in 1917. Several Chinese schools subsequently celebrated their centennial anniversary on a grand scale, including the Jit Sin Schools (2018), the Han Chiang Schools (2019) and the Penang Chinese Girls’ Schools (2020). Such coincidences of centennial celebrations of Chinese schools for the past several years stemmed from the spurring development of

modern Chinese schools in Penang after the 1911 Revolution (Chen 2017b). Those commemorations had extended beyond the celebration of events, activities and banquets, and extended into the publishing of their bicentennial or centennial coffee table book, starting with PFS's *Live Free: In the Spirit of Serving* published by The Old Frees' Association, Singapore (Tan 2016). As for Chung Ling High School, in the capacity of a Chung Ling alumnus and past author of research articles on Chung Ling, I was delighted to be invited as part of the editorial team in producing *Bincheng Zhongling bainian xiaoshi* (Centennial History of Chung Ling School Penang 1917–2017) (Chen 2017a).

The PFS and Chung Ling books were published in one volume each. Centennial history books were bulkier; some were published in three volumes. For example, Han Chiang Schools produced three volumes, viz. *Bainian Hanjiang shuxi: diyiji: Bainian Hanjiang yu Chaozhou: Xueshu lunwenji* (1st Volume: 100 Years of Han Chiang & Teochew: Conference Proceedings) (Huang 2019), *Bainian Hanjiang shuxi: dierji: Bainian Hanjiang: Lishi yingxiangji* (2nd Volume: 100 Years of Han Chiang: History & Images) (Ye 2019), and *Bainian Hanjiang shuxi: disanji: Bainian Hanjiang: Gushi yu huishengji* (3rd Volume: 100 Years of Han Chiang: Stories & Echoes) (Lin 2019). This publication trend was followed by The Penang Chinese Girls' Schools' three volumes *Binhua bainian xuefu xiaoshi huiji: san ce* (The Penang Chinese Girls' Schools A Centennial History: 3 Volumes) (Jin 2020).

In 2019, *The Xaverian Journey: The Story of a Lasallian School in Penang, Malaysia 1787–2019* was published. Different from the publications on school history produced in conjunction with their schools' centennial or bicentennial celebration, *The Xaverian Journey* came out not in conjunction with any school anniversary celebration, but it is a detailed study conducted by three alumni of SXI comprising two academicians, Francis Loh Kok Wah and Cecilia Ng Choon Sim, and Director of SXI, Brother Anthony Rogers. It has the purposes of research into the history of SXI and at the same time honours and recognises Xaverians. As highlighted in the book's side cover:

The Xaverian Journey is a chronicle of the founding, growth and progress of a Lasallian school in Penang ... This book honours those Brothers, Lay Teachers and students who served the school. It also recognises Xaverians who contributed towards nation-building and the making of the modern Malaysian economy and society.

In "Preface and Acknowledgements," the authors emphasise their study of SXI's historical development and pioneering role as well as the contribution of Xaverians to Lasallian education in Asia:

This document highlights the original foundation of St. Xavier's Institution, Penang and the subsequent growth and development of this first Lasallian educational institution in Asia ... Put another way, this story is not only about events and happenings but about the life-long imbued legacy of Xaverians, who in each era and with every generation brought new dimensions to the core meaning of Lasallian education in Asia ... unlike any of the earlier publications, *The Xaverian Journey* is a document that traces the heartbeat of the Brothers, teachers, students and alumni and alumnae of St. Xavier's Institution for some 200 plus years, from 1787 to 2019. It highlights the changes that occurred under different Directors and wider socio-political developments. It also reports the ebb and flow of various school organisations, and discerns how particular good practices took root and became long lasting traditions which influenced the character of the students and the teachers while they studied and taught in St. Xavier's. (*The Xaverian Journey* pp. xv–xvii)

Standing alone as a volume of 173 full-colour pages, *The Xaverian Journey* – an 11-chapter book with various photographs, illustrations and charts is organised around three main sections. First, six thematic chapters (Chapters I to VI) structured in historical chronology order from 1787 to 2000. Second, the next section of three chapters (Chapters VII to IX) on genealogical details of SXI. The final section comprises two chapters (Chapter X and Conclusion), providing options for the unique Lasallian education as we enter the 21st century and finally concluding with hope and a positive outlook on new challenges and opportunities awaiting SXI to embrace and develop.

Chapter I traces the beginning of SXI from originally St. Francis Xavier Free School, named after St. Francis Xavier and established by a French Priest, Bishop Arnaud-Antoine Garnault, at Church Street in 1787 as a Malay school before it was converted into an English School in 1825. Subsequently, nearly a century of SXI's development (1852–1940) is narrated in Chapter II starting with newly arrived La Salle Brothers from Belgium to Singapore and then to Penang in 1852. This group, which upheld education for the poor, took over the existing St. Francis Xavier Free School and renamed it SXI. They relocated it to Farquhar Street in 1858, with its lasting motto *Labor Omnia Vincit* or Labour Conquers All. SXI's excellent education and nurturing of a caring ethos led to an increase in student enrolment and expansion of its buildings especially the notable Baroque-style one. Success of SXI's education relied on its practicality and “integral” character. Its practicality showed by adapting the Asian and colonial contexts through English as the medium of instruction and production of skilled professionals. Its human and spiritual education stressed character-building and the inculcation of integrity.

Prior to the Second World War, SXI's success was built on three factors, namely the visionary leadership of both Br Aloysius Gonzaga Pin and Br James Byrne, followed by its good relations with both church and government which earned recognition from officials, and lastly academic excellence displayed through remarkable achievements in Junior and Senior Cambridge Local Examinations as well as the Queen's Scholarship. Such impressive experience led to at least 10 other schools in Asia being founded which replicated the "St. Xavier's Penang model." SXI expanded beyond Farquhar Street, complemented by Noah's Ark in Pulau Tikus (Primary 1, 2 and Standard 1), "Branch School" in Kelawei Road (Standard 2–8) and a boarding school whose boarders were not limited to orphans and Catholic youths but came from all over Malaya and Southeast Asia. Viability and visibility of the first Lasallian project in the Far East propelled the founding of St. Joseph's Training College (SJTC) in 1918 at Kelawei Road not far from SXI to recruit and train local Brothers who would serve and lead Lasallian schools in Malaya. Indeed, the strong base of La Salle Brothers in Penang with SXI as the pioneer had witnessed how they took over the running of five other similar schools in Malaya: St. Francis Institution (Malacca), St. John's Institution (Kuala Lumpur), St. Paul's Institution (Seremban), St. George's Institution (Taiping) and St. Michael's Institution (Ipoh).

Similar to other schools in Malaya during the Japanese Occupation period (1941–1945), SXI also went through "War, Sorrow and Pain" as expressed in the title of Chapter III. Different from its functions during British colonial rule, SXI and other Lasallian schools turned into public schools teaching in Japanese. Nevertheless, the Allied bombings in Penang on 1 February 1945 which severely damaged SXI and consequently led to the demolition of almost all of its buildings was perhaps the biggest catastrophe to have hit any Lasallian school in Malaya. Chapter IV, "Re-opening of St. Xavier's after The War 1945–1957," tells readers the story of SXI's revival. Following a brief period of hardship studying under attap huts, SXI's enrolment rose by 1948, encouraged by nationwide cooperative efforts of the School Building Fund Committee, out of which came SXI's new fine building in 1954. Apart from the physical expansion, this chapter also narrates the revival of Brothers' Quarters and Boarding Department, Branch School in Pulau Tikus and then George Town, as well as the setting up of St. Xavier's "Private" School catering for students who were over-aged or had other constraints to continue learning. The Boarding Department and "Private" School, however, were gradually phased out from the 1970s due to the change of medium of instruction from English to Malay. The leading role of SXI in "looking after" other schools moved on by the dawn of independence when it assumed responsibility of several "associated schools" formerly run by the Catholic Church parishes in Penang, Kedah and Perlis.

As elaborated in Chapter V, the period of 1957–1970 marked an era of “Growth and Restructuring” for SXI. From a mission school, SXI adapted to post-independence developments by adopting the new National Education System (NES). In fact, it enjoyed rapid growth due to students moving from Chinese-medium to English-medium schools. The primary school in Farquhar Street, then known as Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan St. Xavier, relocated in 1990 to the former site of La Salle School in Air Itam – established in 1962 but phased out in 1981. Added to the development of its primary school were the starting of sixth form classes in 1955 with pioneer female students, and the acceptance of visually disabled students in SXI. Leading Brothers such as Br Michael Jacques, Br Joseph McNally, Br Lawrence Spitzig, Br Charles Levin and Br Michael Paulin Blais steered SXI through such pioneering reforms.

Chapter VI looks at new challenges and impacts experienced by SXI in the post-New Economic Policy (NEP) period c. 1970–2000. While the anticipated full aid was hard to come by, a loss of autonomy was gradually experienced by La Salle schools including SXI. The change of medium of instruction from English to Malay impacted all Lasallian schools, compelling Brothers and Lay Teachers to acquire Malay language skills. The 1971 Aziz Report transformed teachers into government servants, depriving Mission Schools of the right to appoint their own teachers and principals, and to control student admission. As educational and administrative matters were taken over by official educational authorities, Brothers were left with only general welfare and development of the schools to look after, resulting in an inevitable loss of a distinctive “Lasallian character and ethos” (p. 56). Against all odds, the last three Brother Principals, viz.: Br Director Charles Levin (1967–1979), Br Director Casimir Hannon (1980–1993) and Br Principal Paul Ho (1993–2009) managed to delay further erosion of the school’s spirit and ethos by embarking on character-building changes. Br Charles Levin prepared Civics textbooks in Malay and restored the statue of St. John Baptist de La Salle. Br Casimir Hannon gave SXI a special identity as a school of excellence and youth character formation with upgraded school facilities. Br Paul Ho set up the baking department for students and oversaw further repairs and upgrading of the school facilities.

Chapters VII to IX of *The Xaverian Journey* present genealogical details of the SXI. Taken together, the chapters provide glimpses of the personalities who led, administered, served, associated, taught, were educated and were trained at SXI throughout its distinguished history. Chapter VII: “Roll of Service” introduces the leaders of SXI, the Brother Directors and Lay Principals, La Salle Brothers, clergy, head teachers, teachers, student leaders such as head prefects, King or Queen Scouts or Pengakap Raja, and leaders of SXI Boards of Governors, Parent-

Teacher Association and its Alumni. Chapter VIII: “Roll of Honour” is a rich source on outstanding Xaverians since SXI’s establishment, ranging from Queen’s scholars, public office, politicians, musicians and artists, professionals, journalism and publishing, sportsmen and sportswomen, to academicians, researchers, scholar activists, NGO activists, social workers and businessmen benefactors. Several notable ones highlighted include Tan Sri Dato’ Sri Wong Pow Nee, Karpal Singh and Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dato’ Dr Syed Jalaludin. Beyond personalities or particular individuals, Chapter IX looks into school organisations and practices at SXI as a living legacy that could change lives of generations based on the Lasallian ethos: Moulding Minds, Touching Hearts and Changing Lives, infused with a Lasallian spirituality whose influence extended into non-student organisations such as the Parent-Teacher Association, The Old Xaverians’ Association (OXA) and the Xaverian Club Kuala Lumpur (XCKL). As a result, Xaverians continue to uphold practices such as an emphasis on English, teaching and learning of science and mathematics taking into account corresponding IT-based developments and organisation of unique charity drives with its Social Action Group (SAG).

The final two chapters present options as SXI faces new challenges and opportunities in the 21st century. Chapter X foregrounds efforts at preserving Lasallian values and ethos in the wake of changing political scenarios and education policies. In recognition of such realities, one of the milestones adopted was the document “Being Lasallians in Malaysia: Our Educational Mission the Way Forward 2008–2010.” Revitalisation of the Board of Governors/Managers since 2008 played a vital role in the continuous development and direction of the school in such respects as funding, physical well-being, preservation of heritage and learning opportunities for weaker students. The final concluding chapter poses challenges for SXI in the years ahead, from demographic ethnic composition to the non-selection of students and how steadfast are the current teachers and formatters to the vision of their predecessors especially old Brothers.

The Xaverian Journey is by far the most complete and in-depth study of the history of SXI. However, this book has room for improvement in its consultation of sources and lack of comparison with parallel developments in Penang’s contemporaneous educational scene. SXI’s performance could actually be gauged by comparing it with that of several notable English-medium schools such as the PFS (1816), the Convent Light Street (1852) and the Anglo-Chinese School (1891). A primary source that could be consulted here is the 12-volume *Annual reports of the Straits Settlements, 1855–1941* edited by Robert L. Jarman (1998). Such a comparative framework would have allowed readers to tell the extent to which “St. Xavier’s Penang model” has been successfully replicated in not only five other schools in Malaya but also 10 other schools in Asia. Another dimension that the authors

missed out is in accounting for the rapid growth of SXI owing to students moving from the Chinese-medium schools following SXI's adoption of the NES.

Notwithstanding the minor imperfections above, *The Xaverian Journey* is undoubtedly a pleasant read. It is a must-read not only for Xaverians, but also for serious readers who wish to delve into the history and evolution of Malaysian education from the colonial to modern times as it particularly affected the country's multi-ethnic communities.

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