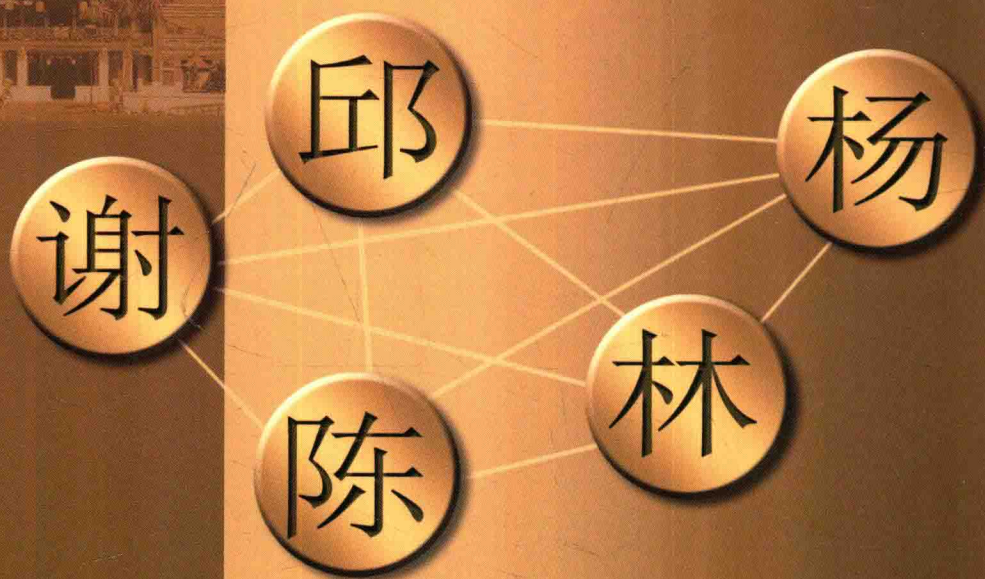




# Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century

The Rise and Fall of the Big Five



WONG YEE TUAN

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First published in Singapore in 2015 by  
ISEAS Publishing  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614

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### **ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

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Wong, Yee Tuan.

Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century: The Rise and Fall of the Big Five.  
(Local history ; 24)

1. Family-owned business enterprises—Malaysia—Pulau Pinang.
2. Business networks—Malaysia—Pulau Pinang.
3. Pulau Pinang (State)—Economic conditions—19th century.
4. Pulau Pinang (State)—History—19th century.

I. Title.

II. Series: Local history and memoirs (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) ; 24.

DS501 I595L no. 24 (2015)

2015

ISBN 978-981-4515-02-3 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4515-03-0 (E-book PDF)

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Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

Penang  
Chinese  
Commerce  
in the  
19th Century

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**For Si Shuk 四叔 (my late father)  
in memory of his love, sacrifice, and foresight**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some content of this book have appeared as articles in *Asian Culture* and *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*. I would like to record my thanks to these journals for allowing me to reproduce them here.

This work succeeded to materialize with the advice, help and support given unreservedly by many people. Their contributions have added to its strengths in different ways while in no way absolving me from the responsibility for its weakness. First and foremost, I would like to express my wholehearted gratitude to my supervisory panel — Dr Li Tana, Dr Nola Cooke, Emeritus Professor David Marr, and Professor Carl A. Trocki. As a supervisor, Dr Li provided valuable guidance during the course of my academic pursuit. She not only gave lots of her time and comments which influenced my writing but also showed me how to strive for a good presentation. Her unique viewpoints always pushed me to improve my arguments. Her enthusiasm and tight supervision also facilitated the pace of my research. For all this, I am immensely indebted to her. Despite her role as a co-supervisor, Dr Cooke showed a strong interest in my work throughout the period. She generously and patiently commented all the draft chapters. Her insightful feedback and meticulous editing greatly helped to improve my writing. Without her assistance, I would not have been able to produce a readable scholastic work. All of them have had a great influence on the development, execution and writing up of this study, their intuition and knowledge have been invaluable, and I feel very fortunate and grateful to have them as my guiding light.

In regard to my field research, I would like to extend sincere thanks to a long list of people and institutes. Without them, my collection of data and information would have never been easy and smooth. In Hong Kong, thanks go to the University of Hong Kong for allowing me to use its libraries, with its excellent collections and facilities. The friendly service of the librarians made my research work enjoyable. To Ip Kwok Kwan,

I owe a real obligation for his friendship and help that made my stay in Hong Kong memorable. In Singapore, I thank the National University of Singapore and National Library of Singapore for the permissions to access their collection of materials. I am particularly grateful to Liu Yan, who helped me during my research at the National University of Singapore. I am sincerely thankful to Professor Ng Chin Keong and Dr Twang Peck Yang for being so generous with their time and dialogue. In Malaysia, my thanks go to the the National Archive of Malaysia, University of Malaya, Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies in Kuala Lumpur as well as the Penang State Public Library in Penang. Of course, I cannot forget those individuals who had assisted my research. They are too many to name here but a number of acknowledgements must be made. Danny Wong Tze-Ken, a close friend of mine since 1998, deserves a word of appreciation. He never turned me away when I dropped by his office. In our conversations, he very generously shared with me his ideas, views and knowledge, which brought constant intellectual stimulation. I owe a debt of gratitude to Khoo Boon Dar and Lim Seng Haw, who helped me to obtain some very useful materials.

Special appreciation also goes to all the friends and informants in Penang. Among them, I am particularly grateful to Tan Yeow Wooi, who not only showed me around in George Town, but also brought me into contact with the Big Five clan *kongsis*. Without his help, I could have wasted a lot of time to obtain the needed information. Most of all, he selflessly devoted his time and personal collection to my research. His friendship has played a unique role in my academic pursuit, for our shared interest in the history of Penang and the Big Five. Heartfelt thanks are due to my friends in Canberra — Hoang Dat, Huang Zhi, Ng Kee Siong, Michael Churchman, and Lynnette Ng who rendered many needful helps to me and my family.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents for their unstinting support and continuous encouragement. I am sure that they are delighted to see my work has eventually taken shape. I have accrued unrepayable debts for their total and unqualified love and support. For my wife, Phooi Yoke, I am forever indebted. I earnestly thank her for the encouragement, patience, understanding, and moral support and most of all for giving me the strength to believe in myself throughout the entire duration of this endeavour. My two beloved daughters, Ngi Chin and Ngi Xian, have been my great company during the revision of the manuscript.

Needless to say, I alone am responsible for all the errors and shortcomings in this book.

Yee Tuan  
Penang  
9 March 2015



# GLOSSARY

Attap or Atap	Leaves of palms used for thatching.
Baba	A male descendant of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements who married the indigenous women. It also refers to creolized Chinese man.
Chandu	Opium prepared for smoking.
Chop	A trade name or trademark used by the Chinese businesses, it served as the name of the firm.
Coyan	A weight equivalent to approximately 1,334.7 kilograms.
Hui	A Chinese society or triad.
Kapitan	The head of the Chinese community, usually appointed by the government.
Kati	A weight equivalent to 0.60477 kilograms.
Kongsi	A partnership, company, secret society, or other shareholding socioeconomic grouping.
Orlong	An area equivalent to 1.333 acres.
Parang	A broad heavy knife used for slashing and chopping.
Picul or Pikul	A weight equivalent to approximately 60.48 kilograms.

Rupee	The basic Indian unit of currency; worth about one-half of a Spanish or Mexican silver dollar.
Seh	A Chinese family name or surname organization.
Singkeh	Literally “new guest” refers to a newly arrived Chinese immigrant from China.
Tahil	A weight equivalent to about 38 grams.
Towkay	A business owner or boss; used to refer to a merchant.

# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

A.V.R.O.S.	Algemeene Vereeniging van Rubber Planters tier Osstkust van Sumatra (General Association of Rubber Planters of the East Coast of Sumatra)
CO	Colonial Office
KPM	Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Dutch Packet Company)
p., pp.	Page or pages in an article or book
PGSC	Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle
PAMA	The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser
Rs	Rupee
Sp	Spanish Dollar
vol.	Volume

## NOTES ON SPELLING AND NAMES

Throughout this book, the names for Chinese individuals, associations, and companies are mostly in the spelling used in the sources — Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, or Cantonese. Where I was unable to discover the Chinese characters, I use only the transcripts. Except for the names of the places in China which are in *Hanyu Pinyin*.

## NOTES ON CURRENCIES

The symbol of \$ refers to Spanish dollar which was the standard currency used in the nineteenth-century Straits Settlements. From 1903 to 1934, Straits dollar replaced Spanish dollar as a standard unit of account for trade in the Straits Settlements and Southeast Asia.

\$ 100 .....	210.85	Sicca Rupees
\$ 100 .....	252.27	Dutch Guilders
\$ 100 .....	26.50	Sterling
\$ 100 .....	7	Sterling

## MAP I

### Map of Penang and Its Surrounding States in the Nineteenth Century



Source: John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago: containing an account of the manners, arts, languages, religions, institutions, and commerce of its inhabitants*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Edinburgh, 1820).

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables, Diagrams and Maps</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>Glossary</i>	xvii
<i>Abbreviations and Acronyms</i>	xix
<i>Notes on Spelling and Names</i>	xxi
<i>Notes on Currencies</i>	xxi
<b>1. Introduction</b>	1
Why the Big Five Hokkien Families?	3
Methodology and Sources	10
Outline of the Book	11
<b>2. Penang and the Big Five in Regional Context</b>	14
The Continuing Prosperity of Penang	14
Hokkien Merchants in Penang	20
Shipping and the Big Five	21
Entrepot Trade and the Big Five	25
Tin and the Big Five	26
Rice from Southern Burma and the Big Five	29
Coconut and Sugar and the Big Five	30
Pepper and the Big Five	33
Opium and the Big Five	35
Coolie Trade: Another Arm of the Big Five	39
Conclusion	41

<b>3. Kith and Kin: The Big Five Familial Web</b>	47
Agnatic Kinship of the Big Five Families	48
Affinal Kinship of the Big Five	51
Intermarriages among the Big Five	51
Intermarriages between the Big Five and Other Families	53
Conclusion	58
<b>4. Opium Farm Rivalry</b>	62
Sworn Brotherhood <i>Hui</i> : The Ghee Hin and Kian Teik Tong	62
The 1867 Penang Riot	69
The Krabi Riot of 1878	74
The 1879 Coolie Riot of Taiping	76
The 1884 Plantation Coolies Revolt of Deli	78
The Dominance of the Big Five and the Decline of the Ghee Hin	79
Conclusion	81
<b>5. The Contest for 'White Gold'</b>	86
Larut and the Big Five's Tin Mining Interests	87
The Outbreak of Larut Wars: Tussles over Tin Mines	88
The Involvement of Tan Kim Ching	89
The Resurgence of the Big Five's Interests in Larut	93
Another Front of the 'White Gold': Phuket and the Big Five	93
'White Gold' from Southern Burma: The Big Five and the Ghee Hin	96
Conclusion	98
<b>6. Western Mercantile Elite and Their Challenge to the Penang Chinese</b>	102
From Liberalism to Management	102
Western Merchants Prior to 1880s	103
Straits Steamship Company and Straits Trading Company	106
Royal Dutch Packet Company or Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM)	113
The Response of the Big Five to the Western Shipping and Trading Challenge: The Eastern Shipping Company	117
Insurance Business: The Big Five versus the Westerners	122
Implications of the Western Competition for the Big Five	129
Conclusion	133

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<b>7. New Regional Order and the Decline of the Big Five</b>	137
The Tin Industry	138
The Rubber Industry	144
The End of the Big Five Revenue Farms and the Rise of Government Monopolies	152
Centralized Land Policy	156
The Collapse of the Khaw Group and the Demise of the Big Business Empire	157
Family Feuds	159
Conclusion	163
 <b>8. Conclusion</b>	 170
 <i>Appendices</i>	
Appendice 1	179
Appendice 2	186
Appendice 3	196
 <i>Bibliography</i>	 205
<i>Index</i>	219
<i>About the Author</i>	228



# 1

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## INTRODUCTION

As a Hakka boy born and raised in Perak, despite its proximity, I only learned about Penang as a trading port established by Francis Light from school history texts. It was not until a trip in the year 2000 that I came to know Penang better personally. Walking around the streets of George Town, the business centre of Penang, I was amazed to see five temple-like *kongsis* houses standing magnificently in the middle of the town. These five *kongsis* are believed to have owned at least half of the shops and houses in the old part of George Town. More interestingly, they were once connected with each other by some secret passages and started the worst riots in the British colony at that time. Later, I came to know that a group of wealthy merchants from five Hokkien families founded these *kongsis* in the nineteenth century. Despite all this mythology, surprisingly, no one has ever seen fit to place them under a scholarly examination. Who were these Hokkien merchants and what roles did they play in Penang? How important were they? It was questions like these that stimulated me to ponder the relationship between those little-known Hokkien merchants and Penang about two centuries ago and to embark on researching the story about them.

In the existing literature, Penang's history has been framed within a colonial paradigm and studied from a top-down angle. The rise of Penang as a hub of commerce and trade, to many scholars, was due to the British free trade and free port policies as well as the legendary Francis Light. As L.A. Mills commented in 1925:

During these years from 1786 to 1800 the population and trade of Penang were rapidly increasing... This seems to be traceable to three principal causes — the remarkable energy with which Light pushed