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# Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century

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Penang  
Chinese  
Commerce  
in the  
19th Century

The Rise and Fall of the Big Five

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



# 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



# LIST OF TABLES, DIAGRAMS AND MAPS

## Tables

Table 2.1	Penang's Import and Export of Straits Produce and Chinaware from and to the surrounding states, 1819–24 and 1835–40	18
Table 2.2	Ten Major Hokkien-owned Shipping and Trading Companies in Penang, 1860s–90s.	24
Table 2.3	Percentage Distribution of trade in Tin between Singapore and Penang, 1870–1910	26
Table 2.4	Coconut Estates of the Big Five and their Associates	31
Table 2.5	Import of Pepper from Sumatra (Aceh & Deli) and Export of Pepper from Penang (in piculs)	33
Table 2.6	The Annual Rental Rates of Penang Opium Farm 1860–1909	36
Table 2.7	Penang's Opium Revenue Farm Annual Rent as a Percentage of Total Revenue of Penang, 1876–1900	37
Table 4.1	Dialect Factions and Leaders of the Ghee Hin, 1860s–90s	64
Table 4.2	Business Involvement of the Ghee Hin Leaders, 1860s–90s	65

Table 4.3	Ghee Hin's Branches and Leaders in the Region, 1870s–90s	66
Table 4.4	The Leaders of the Kian Teik Tong or Toa Peh Kong, 1850s–60s	68
Table 4.5	Penang Opium Farm Annual Rent, 1855–70	74
Table 4.6	Perak's Major Revenue Farms and Farmers, 1880–82	80
Table 5.1	Leaders of Phuket's Kian Teik Tong	94
Table 5.2	List of Tin Mines controlled by Sit San's family in Lenya Township	96
Table 6.1	The Business Backgrounds and Family Relationship of the Singapore Hokkien Merchants	107
Table 6.2	The Shipping Agents of the Straits Steamship Company in Southeast Asia in 1920s	111
Table 6.3	The KPM's Four Shipping Lines to Sumatra	113
Table 6.4	The Family and Business Backgrounds of the Directors of Eastern Shipping Company	118
Table 6.5	The Board of Directors of the Penang Khean Guan Insurance Comoany, 1886	125
Table 6.6	The Financial Accounts of the Penang Khean Guan Insurance Co., 1886, 1891–1900, and 1905–6	127
Table 6.7	The Board of Directors of the Penang Khean Guan Insurance Company, 1897	128
Table 6.8	The Overseas Agents of the Penang Khean Guan Insurance Company	130
Table 7.1	Share of Malaysian and Siamese Tin Output held by Western and Chinese, 1906–1940 (in percentage)	143
Table 7.2	Number of Chinese, Javanese and Indian Workers in East Sumatra, 1883–1930	148

Table 7.3	Freight Capacity and Cost of Rail/Land/Water in Malaya	151
-----------	--	-----

Table 7.4	Straits Settlements Government's Expenditure, 1900–5	155
-----------	--	-----

### **Diagrams**

Diagram 2.1	Brig Emma's Shipping Voyages and Cargoes	23
-------------	--	----

Diagram 3.1	The Inter-marriages of the Five Families and Others Families in Penang	52
-------------	--	----

### **Maps**

Map i	Penang and Its Surrounding States in the Nineteenth Century	xxii
-------	---	------

Map 4.1	Areas in George Town (Penang) affected by the 1867 Riots	72
---------	--	----

Map 7.1	Railway Network and the Distribution of Rubber in Malaya, 1924	150
---------	--	-----



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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).

IMAGE 1

A Tin Distribution and Smelting Agency Operated by Khoo Low Chang (standing on the left) in Penang



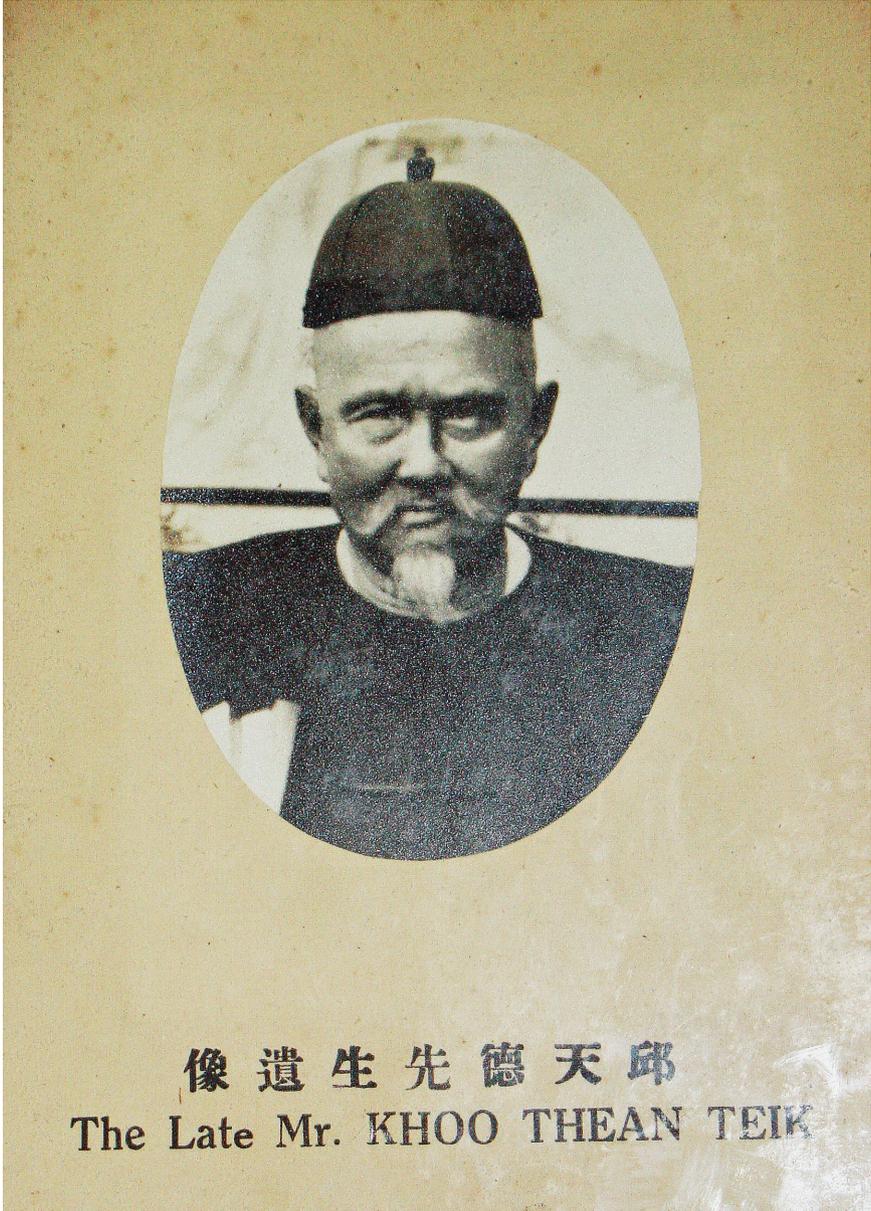
Source: Emil Helfferich, *Behn, Meyer & Co.* — *Arnold Otto Meyer: A Company History*, vol. II (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1983), p. 74. Courtesy of Khoo Salma Nasution.

**IMAGE 2**  
**Sir James Hugh Low**



*Source:* Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archive of Malaysia).

IMAGE 3  
Khoo Thean Teik



*Source:* Taken by the author in Penang with the permission of Boon San Tong.

**IMAGE 4**  
**Chung Keng Kwee**



*Source: Courtesy of Tan Yeow Wui.*

IMAGE 5  
J.W.W. Birch



Source: Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archive of Malaysia).

IMAGE 6  
Loke Yew



*Source:* Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archive of Malaysia).

**IMAGE 7**  
**Tan Wee Ghee**



*Source:* Courtesy of Tan Yeow Wooi.

