

The Big Five Hokkien Families in Penang, 1830s–1890s

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Introduction¹

In the narratives of Malay nationalist historiography, Penang has been too much viewed from the Peninsula. As Philip King has argued, southern Thailand actively participated in Penang's formation and prosperity via close overland connections.² But I want to look at Penang from another aspect again, from the water, to argue that it formed a single economic unit with its surrounding maritime and agricultural or mineral-rich states. To shed light on this connection, I will focus on the big five Hokkien families of nineteenth-century Penang, the Tan, the Yeoh, the Lim, the Cheah, and the Ong.

Why this big five? At the end of the nineteenth century there must have been at least 200 Chinese merchants plying the seas and accumulating wealth in this region, so why highlight such a seemingly local and apparently insignificant group? The quick answer is that the big five Hokkien families of Penang comprised merchants and capitalists who had moved about and conducted business in their region since at least the early eighteenth century, not only as maritime traders but also as agriculturalists and miners. As this paper will show, by the mid-nineteenth century they had achieved a real regional economic ascendancy. If not as important as influential Chinese in Singapore like Tan Kim Ching and Cheang Hong Lim, who operated on a higher and larger platform, this regional dominance placed them in the middle rank of the Nanyang Chinese mercantile elite, ahead of better-known families like the Khaw of Ranong, the Choong in Kedah, or the Wu in Songkla, who operated on more on a local basis.

So how was this cluster of families able to achieve so much? My paper will answer this question by considering certain important commercial elements of their operations—mainly focusing on their interests in tin mining, labour recruitment and revenue farms—as well as discussing how they were able to adapt socially and culturally to the regional framework in which they carried out their business.

Tin Industry and the Big Five

To place the big five in their regional context, I want to begin with the tin industry and present some statistics comparing the tin imports and exports of Penang and Singapore between 1870 and 1910 (see Table 1 below). As the table shows, more tin was imported into Penang than Singapore and the amount exported from Penang often competed closely with Singapore. Tin flowed into Penang in these years because of increasing production in the mines in Perak and Phuket, from 1868 to the 1890s especially. Singapore's tin imports, on the other hand, almost stagnated after 1850, mainly because Straits' capitalists almost wholly neglected the mines of Pahang, which were its main supplier.³ To compensate for the shortage, Singapore began importing tin from Penang in 1860s. By 1890, tin exported to Singapore took up 34.3 percent of the total value of Penang's merchandise trade, and Singapore was the largest customer for Penang tin,⁴ which it largely re-exported. Ready access to Perak and Phuket, those two

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Second Water Frontier workshop, Phuket, Thailand, on 18-19 February, 2006.

² Philip King, "Penang to Songkla, Penang to Patani: Two Roads, Past and Present," *Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 33, no.1&2 (2002): 93 – 95.

³ Wong Lin Ken, *The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965), p. 31.

⁴ Chuleeporn Pongsupath, "The Mercantile Community of Penang and the Changing Pattern of Trade, 1890 – 1940," Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1990, p. 60.

tin-rich states, transformed Penang into a port whose tin exports surpassed Singapore during the 1860s–1890s.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Trade in Tin between Singapore and Penang, 1870–1910

Year	Import of Tin		Export of Tin	
	Singapore	Penang	Singapore	Penang
1870	6.15	73.70	47.23	52.77
1875	6.15	71.18	40.89	59.11
1880	4.24	71.72	54.60	45.40
1885	15.31	69.79	33.16	66.84
1890	29.13	69.89	59.82	40.18
1895	31.57	68.43	62.00	38.00
1900	19.68	80.32	56.76	43.24
1905	39.55	60.45	48.00	52.00
1910	30.72	69.28	45.93	54.07

Source: Chiang Hai Ding, *A History of Straits Settlements Foreign Trade 1870–1915* (Singapore: National Museum), 1978, p.188

The prominent Hokkien merchants and capitalists of the big five families were the most dynamic force in this vibrant tin production and trade. Tan Gaik Tam (or Tan Tam) of the Tan family, an established merchant who had migrated to Penang in the late eighteenth century, had extended his business to Phuket in the early 1820s.⁵ Tin mining had been carried out there, and in nearby Trang and Phang Nga, for centuries. With financial help from a Siamese tax officer, in 1825 Tan Tam and his associate, Yong Ching Siew, expanded commercially to set up the Hup Hin Kongsi, a tin mining and trading company.⁶ Their business peaked in the 1850s and 1860s, when Tan Tam ultimately owned 320 hectares of tin mining lands and exclusive export rights for Phuket tin.⁷ Besides the Tan, the other prominent families also held enormous interests in the tin industry. The Yeoh alone owned five mining companies and employed about 700 coolies.⁸ Thanks partly to the extensive involvement of the big five in tin mining, Phuket's average annual output of tin ore reached 5000 tons (84,000 piculs) in the 1880s.⁹

Perak, a western Malay state, was another rich tin producing area for the big five Penang families. To tap its mineral riches, the five families collaborated with Che Ngah Ibrahim, an influential local Malay ruler, and with Chung Keng Kwee, a Hakka miner and leader of the powerful Hai San society that controlled 15,000 coolies and most of the tin mines in Larut through the provision of financial support for their activities.¹⁰ In one case, Khoo Thean Teik and Koh Seang Thye supplied \$60,000 in goods, money and ammunition to Chung Keng Kwee and Tan Yit Hoon for their mining activities and their militant action against the archrival Ghee Hin, a Cantonese-dominated *hui*.¹¹ In

⁵王重阳,“泰国普吉省华人拓荒史”南洋文苑, vol. 6, no. 5, 1965, p. 29.

⁶王重阳,“泰国普吉省华人拓荒史”, p. 30

⁷G.A.C. Beattie, “A forgotten Tan family of Penang and Phuket,” paper at the Shared Histories Conference, Penang, 2003, p. 3.

⁸Phuwadol Songprasert, “The Development of Chinese Capital in Southern Siam, 1868–1932,” Ph.D. thesis, Monash University, 1986, pp. 109–10.

⁹Ibid, p. 90.

¹⁰Khoo Kay Kim, *The Western Malay States 1850–1873: the Effects of Commercial Development on Malay Politics*, p. 209. See also Wong Choon San, *A Gallery of Chinese Kapitans* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1963), pp. 77, 78, 104.

¹¹*Cases heard and determined in her Majesty's Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements*, Somerset: Legal Library (Publishing) Services, vol.4 (1885/1890), pp. 136–40.

return, Chung Keng Kwee and Tan Yit Hoon repaid the two creditors with seven-tenths of the percentage on the tin they produced.¹²

Especially before the 1880s, capital provided by the big five and certain Siamese (in the case of Phuket) played the most important role in developing the tin mining industry in nearby Siamese and Malay states. For example, Phraya Wichitsongkham, the Governor of Phuket, was able to invest up to 160,000 baht of state funds annually in local tin mining.¹³ In addition, English and Armenian capital played an indispensable role in financing tin mining ventures. As John Drabble noted, the English mainly invested in trade before 1860s and 1870s, but their indirect funding for mining was considerable.¹⁴ In Penang's case, a rich English merchant called Captain Weber provided \$40,000 to one of the big five, Lim Teo Jong, to open tin mines in Phuket.¹⁵ Two rich Armenian brothers in Penang, Michael Arratoon Anthony and Joseph Manook Anthony were the close mining partners of the Cheah family. They also became partners in Perak mining companies during the 1860s and 1870s.¹⁶ With this English and Armenian involvement, the capital that the big five invested in mining was clearly mixed rather than only of Chinese or Siamese origin.

The tin was usually transported to Penang by ships or junks, which were mostly operated by the big five or their associates. Khoo Teong Poh, for instance, had two steamers shipping tin from Phuket and one carrying tin from Perak; Cheah Chen Eok always chartered a steamer to take his tin from Perak.¹⁷ Most of the tin was then redistributed to the United Kingdom, United States, Singapore, Calcutta, Hong Kong, and Amoy by agencies that were mainly controlled by the big five and their associates. From 1860 to 1869, Penang exported about 350,000 piculs and 107,000 piculs of tin to Britain and America respectively,¹⁸ all through the mighty hands of the big five.

The Coolie Trade, Another Arm of the Big Five

As mining was labour intensive, a large number of coolies was recruited for Phuket and Perak. By the 1880s, Phuket had a workforce of 50,000 coolies.¹⁹ Since the members of the Tan, Yeoh, Lim, and Ong families owned most of the tin mines in Phuket, they employed at least two-thirds of these coolies. When rich tin deposits were discovered at Klian Pauh in 1848, Larut (Perak) instantly drew thousands of Chinese coolies.²⁰ By 1862, the local Chinese population was about 20–25,000 men; in the next decade it increased to about 30–40,000.²¹ Cash crop cultivation also made a heavy demand on coolies. By 1860, there were about 8000 labourers in the estates of Province Wellesley; by 1894 Perak had 7500 estate workers.²² But the largest coolie force worked in the tobacco plantations of the east coast of Sumatra: by 1890, Chinese coolie numbers there had reached 53,806.²³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," p. 92.

¹⁴ John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia, 1800-1990: the transition to modern economic growth* (New York: St. Martin's Press in association with the Australian National University, Canberra, 2000), p. 55.

¹⁵ Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," p. 134.

¹⁶ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 28 February 1879, p. 3; see also *The Penang Almanack and Directory for 1876*, p. 31 and Nadia H. Wright, *Respected Citizens: the History of Armenians in Singapore and Malaysia* (Australia: Amassia Publishing, 2003), p. 156.

¹⁷ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 14 & 17 January 1879, p. 4; 2 July 1886, p. 5.

¹⁸ "Penang Market Report" in *The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 March 1870, p. 3.

¹⁹ Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," p. 90.

²⁰ Khoo, *The Western Malay States*, p. 69. See also Wong, *Malayan Tin Industry*, p. 26.

²¹ Wong, *The Malayan Tin Industry*, p.27.

²² Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London: Oxford University), 1948, p. x. Also see Lim Teck Ghee, *Origins of a Colonial Economy: Land and Agriculture in Perak 1874–1897* (Penang: Federal Publications), 1976, p.104.

²³ Anthony Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehese & Other Histories of Sumatra* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), p. 223.

This colossal number of coolies was undoubtedly recruited from Penang, at the time the major distribution centre of coolies at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca. It is no surprise that the big five families played an important role in supplying coolies to those states. Khoo Thean Teik, for example, was a powerful coolie broker who had at least two coolie depots in Penang to receive the labourers shipped by his fellow clansman, Khoo Teong Poh, from their Swatow coolie agent.²⁴

Revenue Farms and the Big Five

Alongside the coolie trade, the big five were also deeply involved in revenue farms, especially the opium farm. With tin mining and plantation coolies in these states, opium monopolies became a booming business. Opium was an absolute necessity for the coolies and thus a lucrative commodity for merchants. Gaining a monopoly of opium production and sales could generate a high level of cash flow and thus create large pools of capital, which in turn helped the big five to open larger mines or plantations to employ more coolies, who in turn would consume more of the opium and provisions the big five supplied. Competition for opium farms in the region was a cut-throat business, so the big five and their associates always organised themselves into syndicates to secure farms in Penang and other states.

In partnership with Chung Keng Kwee, the Hakka *Kapitan Cina* of Perak, the big five families spent more than \$2.8 million to dominate all the revenue farms from upper to lower Perak for seventeen years, from 1880 to 1897.²⁵ In Kedah, Lim Leng Cheak, a leading Lim family merchant, his Penang associates, and the Cantonese *Kapitan* of Kedah successfully controlled the most profitable opium farm in Kulim, the main Chinese town in Kedah for six years (1886–91).²⁶ In the mid-1890s, the big five, led by Lim Kek Chuan and some prominent Hakka, grouped themselves into the Penang Opium Syndicate. They formed an alliance with Kedah's Choong family, close friends of the Sultan, and pumped in about \$1.4 million to keep the leases of all Kedah opium farms for fifteen years (1895–1909).²⁷

By closely allying with local Siamese rulers, the big five families kept control of most, if not all, nearby Siamese opium farms for decades. Thus the Tan (Tan Tam, Tan Chuan, and Tan Kae Yee) collaborated with Phraya Wichitsongkhram (1853–1878), the governor of Phuket, to monopolise the wholesale and retail trade of opium on the island;²⁸ Cheah Peck Yee, a leader of the Cheah Kongsu in Penang who went to trade in Krabi in 1861 or 1862, was appointed by the governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat in 1866 to manage all tax farm in Krabi,²⁹ and Khoo Bun Kiad, a wealthy merchant and a creditor of the Raja of Satun, monopolised the revenue farms in Satun until 1890.³⁰

The big five even extended their control of revenue farming to Dutch territory. Their revenue farming interests in the east coast of Sumatra had been established before the Dutch extended their influence there in 1858–65. This was particularly the case in Asahan, where the collection of import and export duties, as well as the opium and gambling monopolies, had been entrusted to a close associate of the big five, the Penang merchant Ong Boon Keng.³¹ He was Khoo Kay Chan's partner in the firm of

²⁴ Reports of the Protector of Chinese for 1879 and 1881, *Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1880 & 1882, pp. 92 & 175. Report of Committee appointed to consider and take evidence upon the condition of Chinese labourers in the colony, *Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1876, p. 10.

²⁵ *Penang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 31 October 1879, p. 4; 10 October 1891, p. 5; 30 October 1894, p. 3. This figure is only the total for 1880 to 1891. The amounts for the other years are not available.

²⁶ Wu Xiao An, *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882–1941: Kedah and Penang*, pp. 43–44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 87–89.

²⁸ Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," p. 117.

²⁹ *Penang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 9 & 16 August 1879, pp. 3, 4; Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," p. 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 64.

³¹ Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier*, p. 196.

Ching Hong in Penang,³² as well as heading the Penang opium farm from the 1850s to 1870s, in which Khoo Thean Teik, Lee Toh, Lee Kee and Ong Boon Eng were partners.³³ In the later 1880s and early 1890s, the big five also gained control of the revenue farms in Deli, while in 1908–10 they cooperated with certain prominent Hakka figures of Medan to obtain the opium monopoly for the entire east coast of Sumatra.³⁴

A Snap Shot of the Big Five's Regional Operations

Apart from tin mining, coolie trade, and revenue farming, the big five held extensive interests in a number of other commercial or productive ventures. To give some idea of the range of their activities, I would like to examine a trading list between Penang and Phuket at the end of 1860s. In 1869–70, there were 2509 *coyans* of rice, 2115 piculs of brown sugar, 2052 piculs of coconut oil, 228 *corges* of China trousers, and 98 jars of China salted vegetables imported into Phuket.³⁵ Similar amounts were also transported to other states like Perak and Deli, in Sumatra. All this trade was carried out by the big five.

Rice came from southern Burma. When Kedah rice became scarce in Penang following the political disturbances of 1838–39 there, the Hokkien merchants imported an abundance of cheap Tavoy and Maulmain rice³⁶ which they were able to sell at Sp\$40–48 per coyana, making it the second costliest after the Kedah rice.³⁷ Although Phuket is located between Burma and Penang, it is interesting to see that this rice was always shipped straight to Penang before being sent to Phuket. In the mid-nineteenth century, the big five also shipped rice to Singapore, North Sumatra, Hong Kong, and Amoy. From 1844 to 1850, Penang exported about 6832 coyans of rice to China and about 22,618 coyans to Singapore and Malacca,³⁸ so that Penang played an important role in feeding the population in Singapore and Malacca. During this period, the big five and their associates controlled two-thirds of the rice imported into Penang. Despite Burma's rice business being mainly managed by Indian merchants who largely shipped the rice in other directions, the big five were still able to divert a portion of Burma's rice to the southwestern Siamese states, North Sumatra, China, and Singapore, at much profit to themselves.

The coconut oil and brown sugar on the list came from crops grown in estates on Penang. By 1874, the island had about 17,000 acres of coconut estates,³⁹ most of which were owned by the big five and their associates. They also owned vast coconut estates in Kedah. In addition, the big five operated most of the oil mills, such as Khie Heng Bee Mill, one of the largest oil mills in northern Malaya.⁴⁰ This oil mill could produce 100 piculs of oil in a twelve-hour working day.⁴¹ In 1830s, James Low had noted only about 900 acres of sugar estates and 20,000 coconut trees in Province

³² *The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 September 1871, p. 3.

³³ *The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser*, 22 February 1872, pp. 2–3.

³⁴ Dirk A. Buiscool, "The Chinese Commercial Elite of Medan, 1890–1942", paper at the Shared History Conference, Penang, 2003, p. 3.

³⁵ G E Gerini, *Old Phuket: Historical Retrospect of Junk Ceylon Island*, p. 172. One coyana is equivalent to 40 piculs and one corgie is equivalent to 20 pieces.

³⁶ *The Maulmain Chronicle*, vol. II, no. 90, 9 January 1839, 1; E.A. Blundell, "Letter dated 9th December 1839," in *Selected Correspondence of Letters Issued From and Received in the Office of the Commissioner Tenasserim Division for the Years 1825-26 to 1842-43* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Govt, Printing and Stationary, Burma, 1928), p. 182. The rice was also obtained by barter.

³⁷ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 2 February 1839, p. 4.

³⁸ Tabular Statements of the Commerce and Shipping of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca for the Official Year 1844-45, pp. 72, 82 & 86; 1845-46, pp. 26, 36 & 39; 1847-48, p. 41; 1848-49, p. 44; 1849-50, p. 23.

³⁹ *The Penang Directory* for the year 1874, including that of Deli, pp. 45-46.

⁴⁰ Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, Ltd., 1908), pp. 824-828.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 824.

Wellesley,⁴² but by 1860 there were 10,000 acres under sugar and 12,000 acres under coconut palms.⁴³ Such industrial-scale planting of these two crops chiefly reflected the high demand from Pungah, the Tenasserim coast, and Singapore. From 1844 to 1853, Penang sent 11,796 piculs of sugar to Maulmain and about 4590 piculs of sugar and 4352 piculs of coconut oil to Pungah, plus a further 3048 piculs of oil to Singapore and Malacca.⁴⁴

Although the amount of investment by the big five families in these estates is unknown, some family members had clearly built up their wealth on these two agricultural products. Cheah Eam, an established merchant who was one of the founders of Cheah Kongsı in 1820 and a good friend of the Sultan of Kedah, also owned vast estates in Province Wellesley.⁴⁵ Khoo Guek Chio, one of the founding members of Khoo Kongsı in 1835, also owned some sugar lands and refineries in Bukit Tambun and Batu Kawan in Province Wellesley.⁴⁶

Finally, the big five were also the main suppliers of China goods to Phuket and other states. These goods included everyday items like crockery, salted foodstuffs, vermicelli, mats, iron pans, and clothing. The amounts involved could be huge: in 1837–1840, 806,250 pieces of Chinaware went from Penang to Maulmain alone.⁴⁷ All these China goods were mainly brought by the big five's ships from China to Penang and then transhipped to the surrounding states. Khoo Seck Chuan of the Khoo family and Cheah Chow Phan of the Cheah family were the chief importers of China goods in Penang, with at least four vessels engaged solely in fetching those goods from China.

In view of all this, it is clear that the big five played a major role in supplying Penang with its staple food as well as miscellaneous other provisions and daily appliances that were equally shipped to its adjacent states.

Dialect/Ethnic Alliance: Kongsıs and the Big Five Families

As the foregoing discussion has shown, the big five Penang families operated a highly diversified range of businesses, which encompassed production, processing, transportation, and distribution spreading well beyond Penang. To succeed in these diverse and extensive enterprises, we have already seen that the big five families actively partnered with people from other dialect or ethnic groups, like Hakka, Cantonese, Indo-Malay, Armenian, Siamese, and English. They did this in two main ways, in the form commercial companies and of sworn brotherhoods (*hui*). By so doing they were able to take advantage not only of the wealth of their business partners, but also of some crucial overseas connections. My research note ends by briefly considering these two forms of local adaptation.

Commercial Company

Commercial companies, mostly set up as co-partnerships, were the most common of the big five's business organizations. One such cross-ethnic alliance already mentioned above was between M. A. Anthony, a wealthy and influential Armenian businessman, and Cheah Chen Eok of the Cheah family.⁴⁸ The Armenian had wide connections in Calcutta. His younger brother, Joseph, had married the daughter of Marcar Gregory, a

⁴² James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang*, pp. 44, 49; See also T. J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 69, 103.

⁴³ Khoo, *Western Malay States*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ The figures are compiled from Tabular Statements of the Commerce and Shipping 1844–1853.

⁴⁵ Oral information provided by the Cheah Jin Teong, Chairman of the Cheah Kongsı in July 2004.

⁴⁶ *The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser*, 27 February 1868, p. 2.

⁴⁷ The amount is compiled from the weekly export list published in *The Maulmain Chronicle* of 1837–1840.

⁴⁸ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 28 February 1879, p. 3; see also *The Penang Almanack and Directory for 1876*, p. 31 and Wright, *Respected Citizens*, p. 156.

leading shipowner and merchant in Calcutta,⁴⁹ while his own firm ran a shipping and insurance business.⁵⁰

Chen Eok's company was equally well connected to the South China Sea through a Hakka partner, Foo Boon Sean. A brother-in-law of Chen Eok, he came from a well-connected family: his father, Foo Tye Sin, was an established merchant and well-known community leader with links to the Hong Kong merchants who founded the On Tai Insurance Company in 1877.⁵¹ In 1878, this Hong Kong insurance company appointed Foo Tye Sin its agent in Penang.⁵² In addition, Chen Eok and Co. enjoyed links to Sino–Thai merchants through Cheah Tek Lee, a clan kinsman and partner of Chen Eok, who was also the brother-in-law of Khaw Sim Kong, the Governor of Ranong, and of Khaw Sim Tek, the Governor of Langsuan.⁵³

Chen Eok also bought shares in other companies, like the Khy Guan & Co. of Rangoon and Penang, a rice trader and insurance agent, and Cheng Chan & Co., a general trading and shipping store in Penang.⁵⁴ In partnership with Cantonese, Hakka and English businessmen and proprietors of their own companies, the big five also established the first Chinese insurance company—the Penang Khean Guan Insurance Company Limited in the Straits Settlements on 10 July 1885.⁵⁵ (For its Board of Directors in 1886, see Table 2 on the next page.) Apart from providing marine and fire insurance, this Company acted as a financial institution, making loans on promissory notes and investing in property mortgages in Penang and Hong Kong. By 1887, the amount invested in mortgages and promissory note loans totalled \$203,160.80 and \$128,680 respectively.⁵⁶ The Company's business also reached as far away as China, Japan, Hong Kong, Siberia, and Tonkin.⁵⁷

By teaming up with these multiple partners, big five family members could not only diversify but also take their business to another level. Through interlocking share ownership and interlocking directorates, they created a vertically and horizontally integrated structure of companies that could facilitate co-ordinated business transactions and operations. But however modern these business structures appeared, the big five also used more traditional Chinese means to advance their economic interests. I conclude with a glance at their role in the sworn brotherhoods (*hui*) that were an inseparable element of nineteenth-century Chinese society in this region.

⁴⁹ Wright, *Respected Citizens*, pp. 154–57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157. See also Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, p. 752.

⁵¹ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 9 February 1886, p. 2. Foo Tye Sin also joined Koh Seang Tat to set up Tye Sin Tat & Co., a general store in Beach Street, Penang.

⁵² *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 7 January 1879, p. 5.

⁵³ Teoh Shiaw Kuan (张少宽), *Epigraphic Inscriptions of Penang Hokkien Cemeteries (檳榔嶼福建公冢暨家冢碑铭集)*, (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies (新加坡亚洲研究学会), 1997), pp. 186–88. See also Jennifer W. Cushman, *Family and State: the Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-mining Dynasty 1792–1932* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 20, 134, 138. Cheah Tek Lee, who was the brother of Tek Soon and Tek Thye, married two sisters to the two Khaw brothers.

⁵⁴ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 29 January 1886, p. 4; 29 April 1887, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 9 February 1886, p. 2.

⁵⁶ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 29 November 1887, p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 25 March 1895, p. 2.

Table 2: The Penang Khean Insurance Company Board of Directors, 1886

Name of Partners		
Tan Ley Kum	陈俪琴	Chairman
Lee Phee Yeow	李丕耀	Chong Moh & Co.
Cheah Eu Ghee	谢有义	Chie Hin & Co.
Khoo Thean Teik	邱天德	Chin Bee & Co.
Khoo Sim Bee	邱心美	Ee Soon & Co.
Cheah Tek Soon	谢德顺	Sin Eng Moh & Co.
Ong Beng Tek	王明德	Ban Chin Hong & Co.
Foo Tye Sin	胡泰兴	
Yeoh Cheng Tek	杨清德	Hong Thye & Co.
Khaw Sim bee	许心美	Koe Guan & Co.
Cheah Leng Hoon	谢凌云	Eng Ban Hong & Co.
Gan Kim Swee	颜金水	Aing Joo & Co.
Tan Lim Keng	陈锦庆	Kim Cheang & Co.
Cheah Chean Eok	谢增煜	Secretary
Ong Boon Tek	王文德	Treasurer
Logan & Ross		Solicitors

Source: *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 9 February 1886, p. 2.

Sworn Brotherhoods or Hui

Sworn brotherhoods appeared as simply secret societies to Western eyes, but there can be no doubt that they were organised as both an agency of social control and an avenue of economic progress.⁵⁸ The Kian Teik Tong (or Toa Peh Kong) was the sworn brotherhood *hui* closely associated with the big five. Strictly speaking, it was an instrument for the big five to achieve or secure their own economic interests and advance. The big five always dominated its core group from its inception in 1841, something that enabled them to order the Kian Teik Tong to operate side by side with their business establishments. From its Penang headquarters, Kian Teik Tong's extensive branches extended to the southwest coast of Siam (Satun, Trang, Krabi, and Phuket), southern Burma (Maulmain, Mergui, Tavoy, Pegu, and Rangoon), the north and east coasts of Sumatra (Aceh, Deli, Langkat, and Asahan) and the western Malay states (Kedah and Perak).⁵⁹ Most branch leaders were not only closely related to the big five families but were also locally established merchants and community leaders in their own right. For instance, Tan Lwee, who was a Kian Teik Tong committee member in Rangoon, owned

⁵⁸ Carl A. Trocki, "The Rise and Fall of the Ngee Heng Kongs in Singapore," in *'Secret Societies' Reconsidered*, ed. David Ownby & Mary Somers Heidhues (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 91.

⁵⁹ Jennifer W. Cushman, "Revenue Farms and Secret Society Uprisings in Nineteenth-Century Siam and the Malay States," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 23 (1989): 6–11; Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," pp. 140–152; 方雄普, *朱波散记 - 缅甸华人社会掠影*, pp. 33–34; Mervyn Llewelyn Wynne, *Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohamedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula A.D. 1800–1935*, (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1941), pp. 403–417. The first branch of Kian Teik Tong in Burma was established in Maulmain in 1843. By the late nineteenth century, there were about seventy branches in Burma. The North Sumatra branches were most probably affiliated with the Ho Seng.

shipping and rice-milling businesses there and served on the Municipal Committee for nine years;⁶⁰ in Phuket it was Tan Gaik Tam, who operated tin mines and monopolised the tin export of Phuket.⁶¹

Apart from having family members leading its overseas branches, the Kian Teik Tong also formed alliances with other *hui* like the Ho Seng, which contained Hokkien, Malay, Indian, and Jawi Peranakan members, the Hakka-dominated Hai San, or the Indo-Malay Red Flag. These societies also had branches in states like Perak, Kedah, Phuket, and Deli. With such cross-state, cross-ethnic, and cross-dialect allies, the big five could effectively and conveniently mobilise the Kian Teik Tong to support their business pursuits, including the control of revenue farms and tin mines. Such support might involve violence and bloodshed, as occurred in the case of the plantation coolies' revolts of 1884 in Deli.⁶²

During the last four months of 1884, Deli on the east coast of Sumatra witnessed a sequence of coolies' riots across the tobacco estates. The coolies, belonging to two different secret societies, the Ho Seng and Ghi (Ghee) Heng, took up arms ranging from sticks and parangs to revolvers to fight against each other.⁶³ Bindjey, Medan and Laboean were the hardest hit by these riots. Mobs of coolies, especially the Ho Seng members, charged the towns and raided brothels and houses seeking members of the Ghi Heng to kill.⁶⁴ By December 1884, the riots engulfed more estates and spread to Serdang.⁶⁵ In one estate, all three hundred coolies stoned the manager and three assistants.⁶⁶ Many Chinese were killed or injured, along with members of other ethnic groups such as Batak, Malay, and Dutch officers.⁶⁷ By increasing their military forces and arresting the ringleaders, the Dutch eventually suppressed the riots.

For the Dutch authorities, these estate riots were just criminal acts committed by coolies, who were in turn influenced by the secret societies. However, the riots were rather more than that. They resulted from a plot by some wealthy Chinese businessmen, who included a government officer and leaders of the secret societies, to weaken their rival for the revenue farming business in Deli, which was to open for tenders at the end of 1884.⁶⁸ Gaining control of the revenue farms here was a highly profitable business since Deli was a one of the most important tobacco-producing regions in the world, housing about 20,000 coolie customers by 1884.⁶⁹ Khoo Teng Ko, the Lieutenant of Chinese in Laboean, Lim Tek Swee, the Kapitan China of Deli,⁷⁰ and Lim Tjing Keh, the Lieutenant of Chinese in Bindjey, were most probably the leaders of the Ho Seng and closely connected to the big five in Penang. Khoo Teng Ko, for example, was an active patron in Penang: from 1882 to 1890, he had donated 2000 *yuan* to most of the temples and public cemeteries managed by the big five.⁷¹ In addition, he had gone into partnership with Khoo Soo Ghee and Eow Chaw of Penang to establish a general trading store,

⁶⁰ Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Burma*, p. 314.

⁶¹ Phuwadol Songprasert, "Chinese Capital in Southern Siam," p. 142.

⁶² Wynne, *Triad and Tabut*, pp. 245–89; Cushman, "Revenue Farms and Secret Society Uprisings:: 2–11; Wu, *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State*, pp. 49–52.

⁶³ *The Penang Times*, 3 & 10 September 1884, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *The Penang Times*, 20 September 1884, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *The Penang Times*, 3 December 1884, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *The Penang Times*, 21 January 1885, pp. 2–3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *The Penang Times*, 27 September 1884, p. 1. The advertisement about bidding for the east coast revenue farms often appeared on the first page of the *Penang Times* from early September.

⁶⁹ Reid, *Indonesian Frontier*, p. 223.

⁷⁰ Lim Tek Swee was the main donor who contributed 1000 *yuan* to reconstruct the Lim Kongsu of Penang in 1893. In 1866–91, he also contributed a substantial amount to the public cemeteries and temples managed by the members of the big five families.

⁷¹ Teoh Shiau Kuan (张少宽), *Historical Anecdotes of the Chinese in Penang Book II* (槟榔屿华人史话续编), (Penang (檳城) : 南洋田野研究室, 2003), p.235.

Chop Ee Seng, on Beach Street in Penang⁷² Through this intricate network of association with the leaders of Ho Seng in the east coast of Sumatra, it seems very likely that the big five's Kian Teik Tong could have allied itself with the Ho Seng to play a part in organising the coolies' riots as a form of economic leverage in intra-elite commercial competition.

Conclusion

With all this in view, it is clear that the big five, with their strategic partnerships and multi-branch network of kongsis, were able to construct an interlocking group of businesses that spread throughout the adjacent states and interconnected closely in terms of operation and ownership. The commodities the big five produced, shipped, and traded were in demand and good profits could be made in both regional and international markets in the mid-to-late nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries. With the control of such trans-national and interconnected businesses and kongsis, the big five families were able to establish a regional business network that covered Penang and its adjacent states and extended as far as Calcutta, Hong Kong, and Swatow. In its hey-day, it was this interwoven regional business network that ensured the big five families' wealth and socio-political influence in the Penang-centred region of the northern Straits of Malacca. When times changed as the twentieth century progressed, the big five proved unable to adapt to the new demands and eventually faded into oblivion, although their eventual demise takes nothing away from their significance in the period under review here.

⁷² *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 2 August 1879, p. 6.