Wong Yee Tuan

Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century. The Rise and Fall of the Big Five.

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(paperback).

This study of an interconnected network of Chinese Hokkien mercantile families reveals an intimate history of Penang and its wider regional economy. The 'Big Five'—the Khoo, Cheah, Yeoh, Lim, and Tan families who originated from Fujian province in southern China—exercised their economic dominance over regional trade and shipping, as well as cash-crop planting, tin mining, and opium revenue farming during their century-long reign over Penang's commerce. Unraveling the entangled links which connected family and business networks through generations of intermarriage, Wong has produced a persuasive account of the economic ascendancy of an important mercantile diaspora, explaining too the erosion of their commercial networks through encroaching competition by the early years of the twentieth century.

The book aims to reconcile the traditional narrative of the rise of Penang as a product of British colonial influence, with that of the 'Chinese century', as Anthony Reid has called it, the transformation of the region through the expansion of Chinese maritime trade and migration. Wong presents a more complex story, of how colonial and elite Chinese interests 'interacted, intertwined and operated in a wider regional arena' (p. 2). At the same time, he challenges the essentialised cultural and national frameworks through which histories of Chinese business networks have often been approached. The economic lives of the Chinese diaspora in multi-ethnic Southeast Asia, he argues, necessitate a more fluid, transnational methodology. As a result, the families of this study form an intricate web connected by institutional, organisational and familial ties, operating both within and across political and ethnic boundaries. The broad geographical unit defined by the families' economic interests included Burma, Siam, the western Malay states and Sumatra, while marital, business and associational alliances connected the families to other Chinese dialect and locality groups, as well as the region's Malay, Indian, Arab, Siamese and other ethnic communities.

The book begins by asserting the continuing centrality of Penang to the economic life of the region during the nineteenth century. Although commonly believed to have been eclipsed by the economic ascendancy of Singapore after 1819, Wong illustrates that both port cities enjoyed mutual economic success, in which the Hokkien merchants of his study played a central role. Chapter 3 explores the growth of their business networks through the lens of family and kinship, mapping the extended consanguineal lineages and strategic intermar-

riages, which bound the Big Five to other prominent Hokkien and Hakka families, to Indo-Malay families in Penang, Kedah, Perak, and northern Sumatra, to Siamese and Chinese families in southern Siam and Burma, and to each other. Chapters 4 and 5 explore the key industries on which their economic success was based: opium and tin. They relied principally on the system of opium revenue farming in the Straits Settlements, which allowed private companies to hold monopolies over the distribution and sale of consumable opium in return for rent paid to the government. Wong traces the intense, often violent competition the Big Five encountered from the Ghee Hin, a sworn brotherhood or secret society controlled by the Cantonese, Teochew, and Hakka business elite, as well as Siamese local chiefs and British officials who challenged their monopoly. Their economic interests in the tin mining industries in Perak, Phuket, and Mergui were similarly governed by intense competition and careful cooperation. In Perak, the Big Five were able to marginalize the Ghee Hin through alliances with other dialect groups, Malay chiefs, and British officials, while they used their own secret society and Chinese labor recruitment network to halt the efforts of a clique of powerful Singapore Hokkien merchants who vied for dominance over the industry.

Yet their economic dominance was increasingly challenged in ever more effective ways. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the growing challenge from European commercial companies and agency houses after the 1880s, as they expanded their shipping, tin-trading and smelting interests in the region. Wong traces the rise of a new regional order by the early twentieth century, as European merchants gained control over the tin and rubber industries through their larger capital reserves and modern technology, while the expansion of colonial bureaucracies and restrictive legislation removed their revenue farming monopolies and access to land. The regional family-based partnerships on which their success was based, disintegrated in favor of large-scale international business networks and the Big Five 'faded into oblivion' (p. 164) during the early twentieth century.

The study offers an innovative contribution to the economic history of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. It is a transnational history told through an intimate lens, moving between local, national, and regional histories connected by family, marriage, and kinship. It is particularly striking that these connections were so often interethnic, which is of deep significance in contemporary Malaysia where the rigid categorisation of cultural and ethnic identities has tended to erase these more fluid spaces of connection and intimacy from the national historical narrative. While the author has consulted a range of sources, including newspapers and government records, the use of private company records and family archives might have given an insight into the

relationships, debates, and conflicts within the network as well as the external competition its members faced over the course of their rise and fall from affluence and influence. Indeed, the sudden disintegration of the commercial world of the Big Five in the twentieth century might also take on a different appearance, perhaps suggesting other ways in which the families adapted to the pressures of economic competition, modernity, and high colonialism.

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