

Baba Hokkiens, Big Business, and Economic Dominance in Penang and Its Region, 1840s-1900s

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Abstract

This paper intends to reconstruct the transnational, cross-ethnic, and multifaceted experiences of the Southeast Asian Chinese past by centering on the Baba Hokkien business elites in nineteenth-century Penang. These business elites emerged as a preponderant force in the regional economic arena centred around Penang for most of the nineteenth century. How were these Baba Hokkien elites able to achieve such ascendancy in the colonial and indigenous milieu? The answer is that the Baba Hokkien elites successfully established vertical and horizontal strategic alliances not only with the Hakka and Cantonese elites but also the colonial powers, the grassroots, and the indigenous chieftains and royalty and these alliances enabled the Baba Hokkien elites to secure and mobilize labour, capital, power, and network to gain control of a highly diversified range of major businesses that constituted the pillars of Penang's regional economy.

Key words: Penang, Family Business, Clan Kongsis, Baba Hokkien

Introduction

In the age of nation-state, the country-based and Eurocentric approaches come to dominate the Southeast Asian historiography and this has displaced or suppressed the pluralistic, transnational and cross-ethnic elements that constituted the very fabric of the nineteenth century Southeast Asian society, economy, and politics. Similarly, this aspect of the Southeast Asian Chinese history has generally been obscured in the same way. In this paper, I intend to reconstruct the transnational, cross-ethnic, and multifaceted experiences of the Southeast Asian Chinese past by centering on the Baba Hokkien business elites from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries in Penang. It was these business elites that emerged as a formidable and preponderant force in the regional economic arena centering around Penang. Their clan kongsis, sworn brotherhood hui, temples, cemeteries, business partnerships fostered family networks, grassroots mobilization, and power relationships. All these enabled the Baba

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Hokkien merchants to establish vertical and horizontal strategic alliances with the most crucial social and economic elements. With these two alliances, the Baba Hokkien business elites gained control of all the major businesses, such as shipping, entrepot trade, commodity production, coolie trade, and revenue farms. By controlling these major businesses, the Baba Hokkien turned Penang and its surrounding states into one of the most dynamic economic regions in Asia. In this regard, they serve well as an entry point to trace not only the dynamic local, intra-regional, and inter-regional economic activities, but also dialect and ethnic relationships in the colonial and indigenous milieux.

The Baba Hokkien Business Elites in Penang

Among the Chinese business community of Penang, the Baba Hokkien business elites formed an essential component. Hokkien or Fujianese speakers originating from Quanzhou and Zhangzhou had enjoyed long and close trading relations with Southeast Asia since at least the fifteenth century. Over time, many of them settled and established themselves as a merchant-trading group in Southeast Asian port-cities like Melaka, Batavia, Manila, Hoi An, Saigon, Terengganu, Palembang, and Kedah. In the 17th and 18th centuries, these Hokkiens emerged as the undisputed leaders in seafaring enterprise (Ng, 1983: 1; Chin, 1998: 316; Frost, 2005: 34-35).

While conducting trade and commerce in Southeast Asian ports, the Hokkien traders and merchants interacted with the locals and some established families by marrying indigenous women. The descendants of these unions became the *Peranakan* Chinese in Malaya and Netherlands Indies (Tan, C. B., 1988: 298; Suryadinata, 2007: 113, and Khoo, J.E., 1996: 23). The men are known as Baba and the women as Nyonya.

The mercantile Baba Hokkiens were itinerant and moved from one port to another within Southeast Asia, becoming active internal migrants within the region. Individuals and families of this diasporic Baba Hokkien group were among the earliest settlers in Penang, forming the community of merchants and tradesmen of the island. From among them, emerged some of the most influential personalities in Penang. For example, Koh Lay Huan, first migrated to Siam and later moved to Kuala Kedah and eventually settled at Penang in 1786. In 1787, he was appointed by Francis Light as the first Kapitan Cina of the island (Wong, C. S., 1964: 12). Lim It Kim, a planter and merchant who married a daughter of a Siamese local chieftain, moved from southern Siam to Penang around 1810s (Wu, 2010: 45; 张少宽/Teoh Shiaw Kuan, 2007: 11). Khaw Soo Cheang, who established himself as trader in Bencoolen, left Sumatra for Penang in 1822 (*Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 1882: 4).

It is generally thought that Chinese in Southeast Asia came directly from China and were penniless. But the above-mentioned people had migrated to Penang from surrounding states and, more importantly, they were equipped with some business experiences and connections. These Baba Hokkien business elites were instrumental in making Penang not only a regional

entrepot, but also an economic powerhouse. Why and how did they emerge to play such a pivotal role? To answer this, I would employ structural analysis that is to disentangle and examine a cluster of interconnected institutional, organizational, and familial elements the Baba Hokkien business elites had relied on to gain control of local, transnational and interlinked business activities constituting the regional economic pillars of Penang and its region.

The Baba Hokkien Institutions, Organizations, and Connections

Clan Kongsis

Despite sojourning in a foreign land, the Baba Hokkien business elites organized themselves according to the associations found in their ancestral province-Fujian in China. Clan kongsi was one of them. A clan basically consisted of a group of males descended from one common ancestor, all living together in one settlement, owning some property in common and worshipping the same Protector God, and all nominally under the leadership of the man most senior in generation and age or a committee of elders acting as trustees (Freedman, 1958: 4; see also Liu Wang, 1959: 98 and Baker, 1979: 68).

More importantly, these settlers saw their association with a clan kongsi as a means of maintaining direct ties with an ancestral place of origin that many members had lost physical contact with. Hence, these clan kongsis served as mustering points for the Chinese migrants of the same clan in Southeast Asia. It was around early to mid-nineteenth century that the formal clan kongsis began to appear in Penang. The five big clan kongsis or Five Big Surnames (*Goh Tai She*) were the Shi Tek Tong Cheah Kongsi (世德堂谢公司, established in 1810), the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi (龙山堂邱公司, 1835), the Sit Teik Tong Yeoh Kongsi (植德堂杨公司, 1842), the Eng Chuan Tong Tan Kongsi (颍川堂陈公司, 1851), and the Kew Leong Tong Lim Kongsi (九龙堂林公司, 1863) were the most conspicuous in Penang (Wong, Y. T., 2008: 201). A newly discovered land title of the Cheah Kongsi dating back to 1810 is confirmation of two centuries of the formal existence of this kongsi.

These five clan kongsis were localized lineage based on blood, geographical, and dialect ties, whose members claimed common recent ancestry, came from the same village or district, and spoke a common dialect (Yen, 1995: 35). They, like their parental bodies in China, were primarily intended to perpetuate descent lines, to promote clan solidarity, and to foster traditional values which in turn uphold the idea of kinship (Yen 1995: 43). To achieve these objectives, the clan kongsis carried out major functions related to social welfare, religious affairs, and group identity and self-interest. Leadership of the clan kongsis was dominated by the Baba Hokkien business elites. These clan kongsis also established branches in Rangoon and Phuket, and controlled by the Baba Hokkien business elites based in Rangoon and Phuket but maintaining close links with their counterparts in Penang.

Sworn Brotherhood Hui or “Secret Societies”

The sworn brotherhood *Hui*, more commonly known in Western sources as secret societies, were an inseparable element of the nineteenth-century Chinese society in Penang. It is believed that they were extensions of the Tian Di Hui or Heaven and Earth Society in China. Their objectives and organizational activities had by and large been oriented towards group unity and mutual assistance, as well as collective resistance to violence, discrimination and abuses (Tan, 2007: 72). But Trocki (1993: 91) has convincingly defined the sworn brotherhood hui as organized agencies of social control and avenues of economic progress in Southeast Asian context. Based on this definition, I argue that sworn brotherhood hui was a vehicle for Baba Hokkien business elites’ economic gain. The elaborate rite of initiation was an effective tool used by the Baba Hokkien business elites to bind the members of no kinship or other relationships together to achieve their desired goals. In other words, the hui represented god-sanctioned authority designed to integrate new arrivals into the power and economic structure of the Chinese community.

The first local-born Hokkien hui was Choon Sim Hui (存心社), otherwise known as Chiew Chee Kongsí (手指公司) established in 1826 and headed by Ong Eng (Tan, K. H., 2007: 77). In 1844, another Baba Hokkien hui, Kien Teik Tong (建德堂) or generally known as Toa Peh Kong (大伯公), was established (Tan, L.H., 2007: 37). By 1880, Choon Sim Hui had a membership of 1,830 and that of Kien Teik Tong was 8,116 (*Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1880). Their combined membership made up about 20 per cent of Penang’s Chinese population then. Control of these hui was similarly in the hands of Baba Hokkien business elites. The Baba Hokkien hui also formed alliances with other hui such as the Hakka-dominated Hai San Hui (海山会) and the Indo-Malay Red Flag Society. From its base in Penang, Kien Teik Tong established branches in Satun, Trang, Krabi, and Phuket on the south-western coast of Siam, Moulmein, Mergui, Tavoy, Pegu, and Rangoon in southern Burma, Aceh, Deli, Langkat, and Asahan in the North and East coasts of Sumatra, and the western Malay states of Kedah and Perak (Wong, Y.T. 2007a and b).

Temples and Cemeteries

Wherever they have settled down, religious worship is always one of the first community services of the Chinese. In the face of an unpredictable future and hazardous environment, religious worship became the most important part of their spiritual life. Consequently, traditional Chinese temples which housed a pantheon of popular gods and deities mushroomed from late eighteenth-century Penang. Chinese settlers firmly believed that if they did not worship appropriate patron gods or goddesses, they would not have the necessary protection in times of need (Yen, 1986: 10-15).

Given the diversity of Chinese immigrant groups, the patron gods and goddesses had strong regional characters, and were connected with the history of particular dialect and clan

groups. The Baba Hokkien business elites donated generously to build temples for their regional deities, such as Kuang-tse Tsun-wang (广泽尊王), Pao-sheng Ta-ti (保生大帝), and Ch'ing-shui Tsu-shih (清水祖师). Some of these temples were Feng Shan Si (凤山寺), Qing Long Gong (清龙宫), Qing Yun Yan (清云岩) (Snake Temple), and Cheng Huang Miao (城隍庙) (张少宽/Teoh Shiaw Kuan, 2002: 117-122, 129-133, and 135-138).

The managing boards of these temples were dominated by the Baba Hokkien business elites. Establishing these temples was not just a gesture of thanksgiving, but also providing a place for the Chinese masses to worship common deities. The financial contribution of the Baba Hokkien business elites did not confine to temples in Penang but spread across temples in the surrounding states such as Kedah, Perak, and Phuket.

Increasing numbers of Chinese arrivals in Penang and the ravages of tropical diseases were accompanied by rising mortality rates, giving rise to the acute need for burial grounds. The Baba Hokkien business elites took the lead to initiate and support the establishment of three Hokkien public cemeteries. Irrespective of wealth or class, the need for burial sites was universal among the Chinese to maintain their funeral customs and rites and even to provide mourners in the absence of family members (Frost, 2005: 47; see also 陈国伟/Chen Guo Wei, 2005: 89).

The earliest burial ground was the Batu Lanchang Cemetery, believed to date back to the late eighteenth century. In 1805, its area was extended with land donated by Lim Siong Pan and Sit Hook Kee. The second cemetery was sited at Pulau Tikus and was opened in 1842. Among its major sponsors were the Lee brothers (Lee Phee Hean and Lee Phee Seng) and two Baba Hokkien businessmen. The third was the Batu Gantong Cemetery established in 1886, largely due to the initiative of Lee Phee Eow, a Baba Hokkien. He had raised subscription fees amounting to \$22,954.13 to purchase three plots of land, a portion of the “English Estate” owned by the Anthony family (*Straits Echo*, 8 April 1904: 2)

By providing community burial grounds, the Baba Hokkien business elites earned popular respect and subsequently elevated their status and confirmed their leadership within the Chinese community.

Business Partnerships and Companies

The Baba Hokkien business elites' companies were mostly set up as co-partnerships. This form of establishment allowed them to reduce risk of loss and pool their capital for business operation. To enhance profit-making and capital accumulation, the Baba Hokkien merchants established not one but a few commercial companies or arranged cross-shareholding of companies to engage in different types of businesses such as shipping, trading, tin mining, planting, coconut oil and rice milling, insurance, and revenue farms. Based on the 64 principal commercial companies owned by Penang Chinese listed in the *Singapore and Straits Directory of 1890*, at least 50 were owned by the Baba Hokkien business elites. They formed partnership

not only among themselves, but also with business elites of other dialect and ethnic groups such as the Hakka, Cantonese, Indian, Malay, Armenian, German, English, and Chettiar (Chetty). For example, Cheah Chen Eok, a prominent Baba Hokkien merchant, established his own company, Chen Eok & Co., with an Armenian and a Hakka as partners, and at the same time he was a partner of Khy Guan & Co., Cheng Chan & Co., The Penang Khean Guan Insurance Co., and Ban Cheng Bee (Wong, Y.T., 2008: 112).

In the early twentieth century, the Baba Hokkien business elites, in the face of Western competition, moved to form joint-stock companies such as The Eastern Shipping Company, Ltd., The Eastern Smelting Company, Ltd., and Tongkah Harbour Tin Dredging Company, NL. The Eastern Shipping Company, for instance, the largest steamship company in the Straits Settlements, was incorporated with a capital of \$1,400,000 and operated 40 steamers that sailed between Penang and all the surrounding ports (Cushman, 1991: 67). The partners in the company consisted of not only Baba Hokkien, but also two Hakka, a German and a Chettiar.

Connection to the Colonial and Indigenous Powers

Realizing the importance of colonial political and legal frameworks to their business operation, the Baba Hokkien merchants cultivated close relationship with the British. Some of them received English education and improved their language and knowledge. This enabled the Baba Hokkiens to engage in political, social, and economic activities with the British administrators and merchants. For example, Koh Seang Tat, the great-grandson of Kapitan Koh Lay Huan, was educated at Penang Free School, the first English-medium school in Southeast Asia, after which he worked as a subordinate officer in the Penang Supreme Court (Wong, C. S., 1964: 16). This first job had helped him to develop good relationship with the British officials, as evidenced by his appointment as a member of the Penang Municipal Commission for several terms and conferment of Justice of Peace by the Straits Government. He continued to strengthen this cordial relationship with the British through philanthropic acts, such as presenting the town with a fountain, donating a building wing for Penang Free School, and entertaining the Duke of Edinburgh at his mansion (Lee and Chow, 1997: 74).

The Baba Hokkien business elites also cultivated close relationships with indigenous rulers in Aceh, Siam, and the Malay states. Blessings from the indigenous powers were essential for the Baba Hokkien business elites who operated their businesses outside the British colonial orbit. For example, Khoo Thean Poh, a leader of Khoo Kongsi and a pepper merchant, established close ties with Teuku Imam, Raja of Tenom and Tunku Yit, a prominent Acehnese trader by providing financial assistance. Besides, he also had one of his daughters married to Syed Mohamed Alatas, a wealthy Acehnese merchant of Arab descent (Khoo, S.N., 1994: 35).

Lim Leng Cheak, a leader of Lim Kongsi and a merchant, had close ties with the Sultan of Kedah, Tunku Abdul Hamid. Lim acted as a manager, state treasurer, and investor to the sultan,

and managed the sultan's affairs and maintained his houses in Penang.

Khaw Soo Cheang, a merchant from Bencoolen who settled in Penang in 1822, traded with the Siamese provinces on the west coast, principally with Pungah, and married a local Siamese woman (Cushman, 1991: 12). In 1854, he became Governor of Ranong and established the Na Ranong lineage. His sons and grandsons also took Siamese wives and built ties with Siamese political powers and royalty. Among them, Khaw Sim Bee was the most outstanding. The Siamese court made him the Superintendent Commissioner of Monthon Phuket that controlled the west coast provinces from Ranong to Trang (Lee and Chow, 1997).

Vertical and Horizontal Strategic Alliances and Economic Dominance

The Baba Hokkien business elites' institutions, organizations, and connections discussed above formed a web of intertwined horizontal and vertical alliances inextricably binding them together, while also connecting them not only to other prominent individuals or families of other dialect and ethnic groups, but also the masses. These alliances enabled the Baba Hokkien business elites to marshal social, financial, and political resources to establish their dominance in the major commercial sectors of the time.

Through clan kongsis, the Baba Hokkien business elites of the same surname, who dominated the leadership posts, established horizontal alliance among themselves and vertical alliance with ordinary clan members. Forming alliance with a substantial agnatic or blood-related kinship group, the Baba Hokkien business elites could conveniently rely upon their sons, brothers, cousins, uncles and other kinfolk to establish business or manage and advance their businesses. For example, Khoo Leeang together with three kinsmen, Kahoo Seeong, Khoo Gay, and Khoo Chup, entered into co-partnership to engage in the textile business under the brand Swee Tek (*The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1871: 2). Khoo Thean Teik, who recruited his brothers and sons to help manage business, together with Khoo Teong Poh, a kinsman, controlled the "supply chain" of coolie trade in Penang. Teong Poh, who owned Bun Hin & Co., the biggest shipping and trading company in the late-nineteenth century Straits Settlements, sourced coolies from agents, Hock Cheong Chan at Amoy and Tek Ge Hong at Swatow and shipped them to Penang. Thean Teik, who owned the biggest coolie depot, Chop Khun Ho, had a virtual monopoly over the disposition of indebted coolies from Penang to the surrounding states.

By establishing sworn brotherhood hui, temples and cemeteries, and controlling their leadership, the Baba Hokkien business elites of different clans and surnames succeeded in creating a horizontal alliance among themselves and a vertical alliance with the ordinary members from the majority laboring class. Through forming a coalition with other hui, the Baba Hokkiens were able to extend their horizontal alliance with eminent business elites of other dialect or ethnic group who also controlled the leadership of their hui. With this alliance, they were able even to mobilize coolies in their command to secure or defend their economic

interests. This is clearly seen in a series of riots or bloodsheds across the region, such as the 1867 Penang riot, the Krabi riot of 1878, the 1879 coolie riot of Taiping, the Deli plantation coolies' revolt of 1884, the Phuket coolie riot of 1876 and the three Larut wars (Wong, Y.T., 2007a and b). The 1867 Penang riot, for instance, was started by the Kien Teik Tong hui and its ally, Red Flag Society, to re-secure the opium revenue farm in Penang, which had fallen into the hand of Ghee Hin. This riot involved 30,000 Chinese and 4,000 Indo-Malays and paralyzed George Town for ten days (Pieris, 2002: 9, see also Cowan, 1981: 52-53).

Exploiting the riot, the leaders of Kien Teik Tong smuggled a huge quantity of opium in and out of Penang. This was highly detrimental to the opium business of the Ghee Hin whose leaders suffered a great loss of revenue. As a result, the British authority revoked the Ghee Hin's opium farm lease and re-let the farm to the leaders of Kien Teik Tong. In the Larut wars, Kien Teik Tong allied with Hai San to marginalize the Ghee Hin and gained control of the rich tin mining fields in Larut.

By setting up commercial companies with multiple partners or holding interlocking share ownership and directorates of other companies, the Baba Hokkien business elites forged a horizontal alliance with other business elites. This enabled them not only to diversify their business but also operate beyond Penang. For example, Cheah Chen Eok, who had an Armenian merchant, Michael Arratoon Anthony, as partner in his company-Chen Eok & Co., must have utilized this partner's connections to extend business interests across the Indian Ocean in the 1870s. Michael Arratoon Anthony was the eldest son of Arratoon Anthony, who had migrated from Calcutta to Penang in 1819 and founded A.A. Anthony & Co. in 1840, to export local produce to Calcutta (Wright, 2003: 154. See also Wright and Cartwright, 1908: 752).

Michael Arratoon Anthony joined his father's firm as an assistant in 1861 and was made a partner four years later. When his father retired in the late 1860s, Michael Arratoon Anthony took over the family enterprise. In 1873, his younger brother, Joseph Arratoon Anthony also joined the company as a partner. (*The Penang Argus and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1873). Joseph Arratoon Anthony's wife was the daughter of Marcar Gregory, a leading shipowner and merchant in Calcutta. A.A. Anthony & Co., under the management of the Anthony brothers, became one of the leading shipping and trading firms in Penang. The company owned at least five vessels (the 156-ton brig *Dolphin*, the 152-ton brig *R.A. Maria*, the 388-ton bark *Batavia*, the 152-ton brig *Erin*, and the 152-ton brig *Brigard*) and served as an agent for Apcar & Co.'s Steamers and Douglas Lapraikd Co.'s Steamers (*The Penang Almanack and Directory for 1876*: 18; see also *Singapore Directory for the Straits Settlements*, 1877: 98).

Most of the vessels were mainly consigned to trade across Indian Ocean from Penang to Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta or vice versa carrying cargoes of pepper, betel-nut, piece goods, rice, and opium.

Another advantage of including other business elites as partners in a company was to convert a potential competitor into an ally. In this way, the Baba Hokkien business elites were able to extend corporate bonds for business expansion and monopolization. The Penang's

opium syndicates are a case in point. The syndicates composed of mercants who tendered for and managed the opium farms, and partners who took up shares without being involved in the farm's operation. The number of partners ran as high as twenty-one in one case. The Baba Hokkien capitalists of Penang, who led the syndicate to tender for the opium revenue farms in Penang and other states, would incorporate local influential business elites or government officials as partners in order to gain control of the opium farms. For example, Chin Moh Hin, the syndicate led by the Penang's Baba Hokkien to gain control of the Singapore's opium farm, consisted of the Seah and Seet family members, the prominent Teochew and Hokkien business elites based in Singapore (*Singapore and Straits Directory for 1898*: 135). The syndicate which controlled the Kinta General Farm in Perak included the Cantonese towkay, Eu Kong and Clement Robertson Mackie, a British administrator (*Correspondence and Minute on Tenders of Revenue Farms and Opium Farm in Perak*, SP16/7/1). The syndicate which controlled Bangkok's opium farm took in the Siamese business elites Luang Sunthonkosa, Luang Damrongthamasan, and Luang Maitriwanit (Li Thye Phong, son of Li Tit Guan) (Brown, 1993: 233-235, see also Wright and Breakspear, 1908: 156). By incorporating other business or political elites as partners, the Baba Hokkiens were successful in gaining control of not one or two but a ring of opium monopolies that could accelerate the generation of large sums of capital.

The Baba Hokkiens' establishment of close and good relationship with the colonial or indigenous powers revealed a vertical alliance between mercantile class and power-holder class. This alliance was beneficial to the business operation of the Baba Hokkiens. Koh Seang Tat's successful bid for the control of the Spirit Farm for 1873-1876 in Penang was a case in point. Despite a higher offer in the bid by the Cantonese syndicate led by Ng Ah Tye and Lee Coyin, the Straits government let the Spirit Farm to Koh Seang Tat (*Straits Times Overland Journal*, 1873: 2). Another example is Khoo Thean Poh who had a close relationship with the Acehnese rulers. Even when the Katz Brothers, a German firm, offered a higher price for pepper in Tenom, Teuku Imam refused the German and sold the pepper to Khoo Thean Poh ('Report on Nisero Incident' in *Foreign Office Series Files*, FO 422: 61). It was in this way that the Baba Hokkien was able to secure a monopoly of the pepper trade which the European found hard to break.

Having very cordial terms with the Sultan of Kedah, Lim Leng Cheak was given a series of business concessions and aids, such as rice milling monopoly in the whole of Kedah for 20 years, large tracts of land free from payment of rents, monopoly of revenue farms, and loan from Siamese government (Wu, 2010: 48-50 and 71).

Khaw Sim Kong and all his younger brothers, who cultivated close relationship with the Siamese power-holders through intermarriages and satisfying the government's requirements, became the most trusted business partners of Siam's central government. They were given many of the large commercial tin concessions in Ranong and other neighbouring provinces. Their Penang-based steamship and trading company, Koe Guan, was given the monopoly

to import raw opium into the western seaboard states (Cushman, 1991: 48). Besides, the company also had a virtual monopoly in the import-export trade along the coast.

Conclusion

The Baba Hokkien business elites of nineteenth-century Penang constructed and developed clan kongsis, sworn brotherhood hui, temples, cemeteries, commercial companies and connections to political and business elites of other ethnic and dialect groups in order to secure and mobilize labour, capital, and power for gaining control of a highly diversified range of businesses in shipping, entrepot trade, commodity production, coolie trade, and revenue farms. All these linked Penang to southern Burma, south-western Siamese coast, western Malay states, and northern Sumatra as well as to China and India. The socio-political mechanism and business operation of the Baba Hokkien business elites were not confined to a single dialect or ethnic group or to a single state but cutting across dialects, ethnicities, classes and territories.

An analysis of the relevant institutions, organizations, and connections reveals a web of vertical and horizontal alliances with the crucial elements of the age and the region that enabled the Baba Hokkien business elites to accumulate wealth and consolidate their economic dominance in Penang and its surrounding region. This approach enables us to understand socio-economic practices of the Chinese business elites in Southeast Asia. More importantly, the structural analysis contrasts with and contradicts the conventional scholarships that attribute the Chinese business prominence or success to a set of cultural traits such as the Confucian ethic, personal trust, frugality, diligence, and risk taking. Even though Chinese cultural tradition or traits play a role in contributing to Chinese commercial success and dominance, it should not become an analytical cage. Given Southeast Asia as a plural, fluid, and complex environment, the ways or methods the Chinese organized themselves to interact among different dialect groups and to deal with non-Chinese elements should figure prominently in historical research and analysis. This approach will offer more a convincing and in-depth explanation of the Chinese economic ascendancy in the region.

The focus on the Baba Hokkien business elites helps us to identify them as the influential players in the mainstream of socioeconomic and political affairs in Southeast Asia. More importantly, it enables us to see the interaction among different dialect groups rather than assuming *a priori* the “Chinese” as a monolithic historical entity but also endeavour to understand those networks and internal distinctions comprising of ethnicities or even sub-ethnicities (Li, 2004: 6).

Penang as a centre from which the Baba Hokkien networks radiated became a powerful pivot of regionalization, generating not only traffic in terms of merchandise but also transnational and cross-ethnic business and socio-cultural interactions. Strictly speaking, Baba Hokkien business elites were the driving force behind the emergence of Penang as a major trade entrepot that linked Southeast Asian trades to the larger commercial world of the Indian Ocean

and South China Sea.

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