

The story of Penang would be incomplete without the Big Five Hokkien families (the Khoo, the Cheah, the Yeoh, the Lim, and the Tan). It was the Big Five who played a preponderant role not only in transforming Penang into a regional entrepot and a business and financial base, but also in reconfiguring maritime trading patterns and the business orientation of the region in the nineteenth century. Departing from the colonial vantage point, this book examines a web of transnational, hybrid and fluid networks of the Big Five comprising of family relationship, sworn brotherhood, political alliance and business partnerships, which linked Penang and its surrounding states (western Malay states, southwestern Siam, southern Burma, and the north and eastern coasts of Sumatra) together to form one economically unified geographical region, having inextricable links to China and India. With these intertwining networks, the Big Five succeeded in establishing their dominance in all the major enterprises (trade, shipping, cash crop planting, tin mining, opium revenue farms), which constituted the linchpin of Penang and its regions economy. By disentangling and dissecting this intricate web of networks, this book reveals the rise and decline of the Hokkien mercantile families nearly century-long economic ascendancy in Penang and its region.

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