

# Exploring Shared History, Preserving Shared Heritage: Penang's Links to a Siamese Past

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In Penang, history is being kept alive through a growing appreciation of the heritage of its historic port, which once served as a regional port for Thailand's south-western seaboard, Sumatra, and the northern peninsular Malay states. The local heritage movement pushed for international recognition of George Town, which was jointly nominated by the Malaysian government together with the older city of Melaka, to the UNESCO World Heritage list. The "Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca" were gazetted as UNESCO sites on 7 July 2008. As part of this movement, the Penang Heritage Trust organized "The Penang Story," a series of colloquia and an international conference in 2001–2002. This multi-level exercise involved both academics and community historians in sharing the social histories of the port city's diverse multicultural population. In the following year a conference on "Shared Histories" explored Penang's historical connections beyond borders. These two conferences have stimulated historical interest in Penang, uncovered Penang's links to its Siamese past, and also helped to identify Siamese and Thai heritage in Penang.

The pre-British history of Penang is inseparable from the history of Kedah, a kingdom which has been under the sway of Sri Vijaya, the Chola dynasty of South India, and then Siam. Ancient Kedah was at a confluence of maritime and overland trading networks – sea routes poised at the entrance to the Straits of Malacca and fanning out to the Indian Ocean and trans-peninsular land routes reaching over to the Gulf of Siam and South China Sea. This strategic position was usurped by the British trading post at Penang, which emerged as the most modern nexus of old regional trading networks.<sup>1</sup> Envisioned by the English trader Captain Francis Light, Penang offered free port facilities, favourable terms of land alienation and freedom of worship, and succeeded in attracting thousands of settlers within the

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<sup>1</sup> Phil King, "From Periphery to Centre: Shaping the History of the Central Peninsula," PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2006.

first few years. Chinese, Indians, Hadrami Arab and other foreign traders created permanent trading colonies, using Penang as a convenient station to venture into the surrounding hinterland.

### Francis Light, Martina Rozells, and the Transfer of Catholic Institutions from Siam to Penang

The circumstances of the British occupation of Penang Island in 1786, and its consolidation with the annexation of a larger territory on the mainland in 1801, have been debated by historians for decades. Although trade rather than territorial expansion was the East India Company's initial motivation, the forced cession of Penang heralded the gradual encroachment of British imperial power on the Siamese-Malayan peninsula. Relations between Kedah and British Penang were embittered from the beginning. Captain Francis Light, a country trader who pushed for the establishment of this British trading post and became its first Superintendent, is painted with a negative brush in the indigenous versus foreign dialectic of Malaysian history, and often portrayed as someone who betrayed the trust of the Kedah Sultan. By contrast, the Thalang letters which run from 1773 to 1792 show him to be a respected friend of the Governor of Thalang and his wife, Than Puying Chan. Light was apparently bestowed the title "Phyaratchakapitan" (Phraya Raja-Capitan) by King Taksin in 1778.<sup>2</sup> Operating from Sapam bay in Phuket (also called Thalang or Junk Ceylon) for more than 20 years and trading to and from the Coromandel, Bangkok, and around the Straits of Malacca, Light had developed complex relationships with the rulers and traders of Kedah and other Malay kingdoms. These relationships will only be better understood with the gradual exposition of the 1,200 or so of "The Light Letters" kept at the School of Oriental and African Studies.<sup>3</sup> Much new material on Light's early life in England and his family has already been uncovered by his descendant, Noel Purdon.<sup>4</sup>

Light's legacy is still tangible in George Town, the town founded by him, where he built Fort Cornwallis and Government House (now in the grounds of the Convent Light Street) as well as his Suffolk Estate on the way to Ayer Itam. He lies buried in the Christian cemetery on Northam Road and a memorial to his memory

<sup>2</sup> Kachorn Sukhabanij, "Siamese Documents concerning Captain Francis Light", in K. G. Tregonning, ed., *Papers on Malayan History* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 1-9; E. H. S. Simmonds, "The Thalang Letters, 1773-94: Political Aspects and the Trade in Arms", in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1963), pp. 592-619.

<sup>3</sup> A few of the letters have been reproduced in Annabel Teh Gallop, *The legacy of the Malay letter / Warisan warkah Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: British Library for the National Archives of Malaysia, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Noel Purdon is based in Adelaide and has presented a paper entitled, "William Light and his Family" to the Pioneers' Association of South Australia on Commemoration Day, 2012.

was later erected in the grounds of St. George's Church.

Some mystery surrounds Francis Light's Catholic wife Martina Light also known as Martinha Thong Di. She is a likely candidate for the anonymous woman emissary whom Light met in the Acehnese court with a proposition from the Sultan of Kedah. Her identity (recorded as Siamese, but also variously thought to be part-French, Portuguese, or Malay), her status (whether she had connections to the Kedah and Siamese courts), her marriage to Light (whether common-law or conducted under certain rites), and the identity of their Kedah-born son William Light, chief surveyor and acknowledged founder of Adelaide, has been subject to much speculation.<sup>5</sup> The inability of British administrator-historians to deal with cultural complexities in this part of the world has contributed to the muddle, resulting in disrespectful asides against this pioneering woman who most likely played a key role in bridging many cultures and power relationships. Hailing from Phuket or elsewhere in Siam, she was a contemporary of the Governor's widow Than Phuying Chan and her sister Khun Muk, honoured as Thao Thep Kasatri and Thao Si Sunthon, heroines of Thalang who led the defence of Thalang against Burmese invasion in 1785. In Penang, there is a strong tradition that Rozells started an orphanage, and a street in Penang is informally called "Martina's Lane" after her.

Early Penang attracted various groups which had been left in a vulnerable position after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. Three separate Catholic institutions were established in early British Penang.

The Church of the Assumption was established on Penang Island in 1786, having been relocated from nearby Kuala Kedah. The Bishop Arnaud-Antoine Garnault of the Missions Étrangères de Paris had started a church in Kuala Kedah four years earlier, under the protection of the Sultan of Kedah; the parishioners comprising of Siamese-Portuguese families who had recently fled there from Phuket and Ligor. In Penang, the church and bishop's presbytery were located at Church Street and Bishop Street respectively, two of the first streets in George Town. Significantly, the earliest known school in Penang was started here for the Catholic families. In 1860, the church moved to its present location on Farquhar Street.

The College-General, a famous seminary set up by the Missions Étrangères de Paris in Siam, had to relocate several times after the Burmese conquered Ayutthaya in 1766, before finally finding its permanent home in Penang in 1807, occupying large tracts of land in Pulau Tikus (until 1986) and Mariophile in Tanjung Tokong (until today). The seminary trained priests for Catholic churches in Asia, drawing students from all over Asia and as far as Mexico. Among some of the renowned seminarians trained here were those martyred in Korea and Annam (Vietnam) and later beatified.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Morson, *The Connection, Phuket Penang and Adelaide* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1993); A. Francis Steuart, *A Short Sketch of the Lives of Francis and William Light, the founders of Penang and Adelaide: with Extracts from their Journals* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1901).



The Church of the Immaculate Conception in Pulau Tikus (Figure 1) was reconstituted from the remnants of the Siamese-Portuguese Catholic parishioners of the Church of Our Lady Free from Sin in Phuket. As a result of the devastating Burmese sack of Thalang, the parish priest father John Baptist Pasqual moved the church to “Civitate Penang” in 1811, where they were welcomed by earlier Siamese-Portuguese settlers. The descendants of this community were notably involved in the development of Penang’s education, cuisine, and musical traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1. Church of the Immaculate Conception (courtesy of parishioner Michael Weber)

### The Siamese invasion of Kedah in 1821

Early depictions of Penang island are found in two Siamese maps dated circa 1810 (see Figure 2), charting the region possibly to secure better defences against Burmese threats as well as to inform future military designs on Kedah. Seen from a Bangkok perspective, Fort Cornwallis is conspicuous on the map while a few European-style buildings appear randomly placed over the island, qualifying a caption that Penang is a “farang” camp or settlement.<sup>7</sup> In addition, two flagstaffs are represented by drawings of tower-like structures. The first flagstaff was located near the fort on the north-eastern promontory and the second on top of Flagstaff Hill (in Malay, Bukit Bendera), now popularly known as Penang Hill.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Sibert, “Phuket-Penang Shared History through the Penang Eurasian Community and the revived Malaysian Catholic Church in the 19th century,” paper presented at the Shared Histories Conference, Penang, 2003; Anthony E. Sibert, ed., *Church of the Immaculate Conception, Pulau Tikus Penang, 1811-2011, Parish Bicentennial Celebration 2010-2011 Souvenir Magazine*, 2011 (Penang: Parish Council of the Church of Immaculate Conception), pp. 3, 5–7.

<sup>7</sup> Santanee Phasuk and Philip Stott, *Royal Siamese Maps: War and Trade in Nineteenth Century Thailand* (Bangkok: River Books, 2005), pp. 31, 91.



Figure 2. Penang in an early Siamese map, circa 1810 (from Santanee Phasuk and Philip Stott, *Royal Siamese Maps*, reproduced with permission)

During the Siamese invasion of Kedah in 1821, the Sultan of Kedah and most of his population fled Kedah to seek refuge in Penang Island and Province Wellesley (Prai). The population of Malays in Province Wellesley (annexed by the British since 1800) jumped from 5,000 souls, prior to the invasion, to 42,500 in 1835, while those on the island also increased to 16,436 out of about 40,000.<sup>8</sup> Some families from the “Siamese Malay States” have at various times sought refuge in Balik Pulau on “the other side of the island” (an area glossed over by the Siamese maps of 1810), where their descendants are living still.

In *Old Phuket*, Gerini writes that in 1821, an official Burmese letter addressed to the Raja of Kedah instigating the latter to a rebellion against the Siamese monarch, was intercepted by a Macao Chinese named Lim Hoi, a resident merchant of Thalang returning from business in Penang. Lim was rewarded by King Rama II with the title of Luang Raja-Capitan and a tin-smelting monopoly for Phuket.<sup>9</sup> The delicate balance of power in this region opened the door to Chinese entrepreneurship in tin mining, encouraged both by Siamese policies and a growing British presence in the region. The British signed the Burney Treaty with Siam in 1826, acknowledging

<sup>8</sup> James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang (with an introduction by James Jackson)* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972 [1836]), pp. 125–6.

<sup>9</sup> G. E. Gerini, *Old Phuket: Historical Retrospect of Junkceylon Island* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1986), p. 97. Anthony Farrington, *Low's Mission to Southern Siam, 1824* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007), pp. 50–52.

Siam's rule over Kedah and other northern Malay states, to the dismay of the exiled Kedah Sultan and some of the Penang European-Eurasian mercantile community.

### Penang Hokkiens and Straits Chinese on the Siamese tin-mining frontier

British Penang became an important gateway for Chinese migration to the northern Straits of Malacca. From the early nineteenth century onwards for about a century, a handful of Penang-based Chinese clans and families provided the capital, labour, and entrepreneurial skills for the development of southern Siam. As a result, the early town centres of Phuket, Trang, and Ranong, with their rows of shophouses, were largely developed by Chinese traders and miners and bear great resemblance to the streetscapes of George Town. The Chinese dialect spoken in those towns is Penang Hokkien, a local version of the southern Fujian dialect.

Several early connections with Siam emanate from the family of Koh Lay Huan, the first Kapitan China of Penang, being a pioneer settler who came over to Penang from Kuala Muda in Kedah in 1786. His eldest son Koh Kok Chye served from 1821 as Siamese governor over Kuala Kedah and as an agent of the Ligor court at Pungah (Phang-Nga). Koh's daughter, who had married into a prominent na Nakhon family, sponsored Khaw Soo Cheang to become governor of Ranting in 1844.<sup>10</sup> With their Koe Guan Company firmly ensconced in Penang, the Khaw created a "Sino-Thai tin-mining dynasty" (as the scholar Jennifer Cushman called it) with firm ties to the local Siamese elite in southern Thailand.<sup>11</sup> The Khaw family, later styled na Ranong, provided the leadership in harnessing Chinese commerce and labour to develop the south-western seaboard of Thailand.<sup>12</sup>

The Chinese in the Straits Settlements typically consisted of merchants, shopkeepers, planters, landed proprietors, and revenue-farmers, making up a class of permanent settlers well-connected to each other through family ties and long acquaintance. Through their distinctive material culture, the few elite families differentiated themselves from the Chinese *hoi polloi* – thousands of illiterate labourers and artisans who were short-term sojourners returning after a period of three years or so. In between were the newly-arrived shopkeepers and petty traders who attempted to save some money to return home or settle down in the Nanyang (literally, "South Seas").

<sup>10</sup> Phuwadol Songprasert, "The Implications of Penang's Historical Connection with Southern Thailand", *Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geography*, Vol. 33, Nos. 1 & 2 (2002), pp. 1–10.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer W. Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-mining Dynasty 1797-1932* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> The name "na Ranong" was bestowed on the family by Rama VI, who introduced surnames to Thailand.

As immigration of women from China was restricted, Chinese men trading in Penang tended to buy Balinese, Javanese, or Nias slaves as concubines, or else look for wives in the Siamese territories. James Low, observing Chinese-Siamese intermarriages in 1824 remarked that, "as the religious institutions of both people are free from the unsocial restrictions of caste, they assimilate easily together".<sup>13</sup> Their offspring were typically brought back to Penang to be raised and educated in Straits Chinese ways, so that these children could be registered as British subjects and gain the advantage of an English education. Thus the Straits Chinese – local-born or naturalized Chinese of the Straits Settlements – took advantage of the Bowring Treaty of 1855 which granted extra-territorial rights and legal immunity to British subjects.

Rising tin prices in the 1840s led to a great influx of Chinese groups to the peninsula, competing for tin-fields. In the nineteenth century, Penang became a regional centre for the outlying towns in southern Siam, offering greater proximity and ease of travel compared to Singapore and Bangkok. It was also the refining and export centre for the rich tin belt which stretched from Ranong in the north to Taiping in the south. Malaysian textbooks highlight the involvement of Cantonese and Hakka tin miners in Perak and Selangor but leave out the larger transboundary picture that show Hokkien Chinese venturing earlier into southern Siam. Many mining techniques were introduced from Phuket into Perak, the tripod "Tongkah furnace" being an obvious one. A comparison can be done of Khaw Soo Cheang's fort in Ranong, Phraya Wichitsongkram's residence in Tha Rua in Phuket, the Mantri of Larut Ngah Ibrahim's residence in Matang, Perak, and the Gedung Raja Abdullah in Selangor – these were all tin factories, centres of tin revenue collection, containing the chief's residence, court house or audience hall, and warehouses, the whole brick-built complex fortified to prevent tin theft, smuggling, and enemy raids.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese entrepreneurs who could mobilize labour to exploit tin were leaders of "sworn brotherhoods" (the Hung league, or Heaven and Earth Society), which the British called "secret societies", imagining them to be much like their own Freemason lodges. These Chinese brotherhoods originated in China where they had an anti-Qing government ideology. These societies served as an effective way of organizing labour, self-protection, and business syndication on the untamed mining frontiers of Southeast Asia. Both bosses and coolies on the Siamese and Perak mining frontiers belonged to branches of societies based in Penang, where tin traders, tin financiers and labour contractors had their homes.<sup>15</sup> The Khian

<sup>13</sup> Farrington, *Low's Mission to Southern Siam*, pp. 50–52.

<sup>14</sup> These comparisons are based on the author's observations made during various visits to Phuket and Ranong.

<sup>15</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, "Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier: The Penang Connection and the Emergence of the Phuket Baba Community", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*, Vol. 82, Pt. 2 (2009), pp. 81–112.

Teik Society in Tongkah, Phuket, answered to the private temple headquarters in Armenian Street, Penang, which still stands intact today on Armenian Street.<sup>16</sup> The Ghee Hin and Ho Seng, societies with branches in southern Siam, also had their headquarters in Penang. The Phuket Ghee Hin consisted mainly of Hokkien people, while their counterparts in Perak were mainly Cantonese. In both Phuket and Perak, native chiefs first invited Chinese entrepreneurs to bring in coolies, organized under society leadership and control, in order to exploit the tin resources. However, the native chiefs soon found the Chinese fraternities too hot to handle when feuds broke out between competing groups. Inter-society feuds had a way of spreading from one place to another, across porous borders. In the Penang Riots of 1867 and the Phuket disturbances (or massacre) of 1879, the Khian Teik gained an upper hand over their Ghee Hin rivals.<sup>17</sup> The prohibition of secret societies in the British territories in 1890, and in Siam a few years later, brought about a new social order.

The Chinese pioneer of Phuket was Tan Tham or Tan Gaik Tham (circa 1802-1877). He was a contemporary of Khaw Soo Cheang and similarly affiliated with the Small Swords Society in China. Backed by the deputy governor of Phuket, Phra Palatt Tatt, Tan Tham opened tin fields in Tongkah and became its first “town-builder”, laying out what are now Thanon Thalang and Thanon Thepkasatri. Rice and other provisions were supplied to the Phuket mining population by tin traders who had shops on Beach Street in Penang. The Phuket Chinese also became the main consumers of opium distributed by the Penang opium syndicates. A Chinese trading and mining oligarchy emerged in Phuket, composed entirely of Hokkiens, many of them hailing from the Tan clan and having connections to Penang. According to the family biographer Andrew Beattie, Tan Tham’s son Tan Lean Kee was one of five “Phuket Tans” who in 1878 were principal donors to the rebuilding of the Tan Kongsu, a clan association along Beach Street.<sup>18</sup>

Capital accumulation for the early Hokkien Chinese was mainly accomplished through tin mining and revenue farms, and consolidated through clan-based corporations formed on the basis of common lineage and with the objective of venerating common ancestors and patron saints. The Tans were one of the five big clans (Cheah, Khoo, Yeoh, Lim, Tan) based in Penang and related to each other through marriage. While the Tans were primarily engaged in Phuket, some families traded to other parts of southern Siam, peninsular Malaya, and Sumatra. The web of kinship binding the five major Hokkien clans in Penang allowed the collective accumulation of financial and social capital. Their collaboration in

<sup>16</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, “Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier”, pp. 81–112. Jean DeBernardi, *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Tan Lye Ho, *Bestowing Luck & Prosperity on All* (Penang: Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> G. A. C. Beattie, “A Forgotten Tan Family of Penang and Puket”, paper presented at the Shared Histories Conference, Penang, 2003.

business cartels and wide-ranging political networks spanning British, Dutch, and Siamese territories is painstakingly documented in the historian Wong Yee Tuan’s growing body of work.<sup>19</sup> The clan associations of the “Big Five” are today preserved in the core zone of the George Town World Heritage Site.

Under the leadership of the Khaws, the Tans, and the Ongs, the Phuket Hokkien community became a cultural satellite of the Penang Hokkien community, and a historical demonstration in Straits Chinese place-making. Phuket streetscapes with Penang-style shophouses fronted by five-footways and a few European colonial-style commercial buildings convey the influence of Penang architecture and townscape. Phuket temples dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy and the Song-dynasty Buddhist monk Cheng Chooi Chor Soo have the same functions as older ones in Penang. Even the Hokkien working-class fishing village of Bang Neow is reminiscent of the Bang Leow in Penang’s Tanjong Tokong. And finally the hill park Khao Rang and seaside promenade of Saphan Hin were apparently directly inspired by Penang Hill and Gurney Drive.<sup>20</sup>

Though most cultural traditions can be ultimately traced to China, Penang was the immediate provenance or reference point for many of the Phuket Hokkien traditions and cycle of festivals. A notable exception is the Nine Emperor Gods festival, which originated in the tin mines of Phuket and spread to Trang and other parts of the peninsula including Penang.<sup>21</sup> As Straits Chinese families in southern Siam gradually intermarried and assimilated with the local Siamese elite, they gradually adopted Theravada Buddhist beliefs and the folk veneration of Siamese ancestral spirits or *tok nenek* (Malay word for ancestors).<sup>22</sup> By the time the colonial authorities had abolished secret societies and terminated the revenue farming system, the role of religious patronage and philanthropy had intensified as a means for prominent businessmen to maintain their leadership of the Chinese community. This included Chinese patronage of Theravada institutions in southern Siam as means of expressing loyalty to the king and their adopted home.

For its hinterland, Penang provided an important reference point, a modern administrative system, and advances in technology. Khaw Sim Bee effectively

<sup>19</sup> Wong Yee Tuan, “The Big Five Hokkien Families in Penang, 1830s-1890s”, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 1, 2007; Wong Yee Tuan, “Penang’s Big Five Families and Southern Siam during the Nineteenth Century”, in Patrick Jory and Michael Montesano, eds., *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2008), pp. 106–115.

<sup>20</sup> During my research in Phuket in 2005, I was fortunate to be personally guided by Pranee Sakulpipatana, the Phuket expert on the common heritage of Penang and Phuket.

<sup>21</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, “Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier”, pp. 85, 89–90. Also see DeBernardi, *Rites of Belonging*.

<sup>22</sup> This was the case with the paternal side of my family, which had strong connections with southern Siam in the late nineteenth century. Emeritus Professor of Malaysian History Khoo Kay Kim also asserted this link between Baba Nyonya families and Siamese *tok nenek* in a public talk in 1998.

transferred some ideas and institutions to Trang and Phuket. Using national archives sources, the Thai scholar Phuwadol Songprasert's thesis shows that with the signing of the Anglo-Siamese secret convention, the Penang resident councillor A. M. Skinner negotiated with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab to convince the central government to promote Khaw Sim Bee from governor of Trang to superintendent commissioner of Monthon Phuket. As Khaw had spent his childhood in Penang, Skinner expected a strong ally in him for British business, but later complained about Khaw's creative business strategies and subtle thwarting of British penetration. Although the Khaw family did not have a strong presence in Phuket before Khaw Sim Bee's appointment, the latter quickly won the cooperation of the local Phuket business elite.<sup>23</sup> Khaw Sim Bee, who was awarded the title Phraya Phraya Ratsadanupradit Mahitsaraphakdi, made full use of his family connections to the Penang "Big Five" clans to create transboundary cartels and syndicates in mining, opium trade, labour recruitment, shipping, finance, and eventually rubber, and also to bring in Penang talent in the form of shopkeepers, accountants, and architects, rapidly modernising Phuket from 1900 up till his assassination in 1913.<sup>24</sup>

Considering the unprecedented rate of Chinese migration to southern Siam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, intense patronage by the elite was instrumental to ensuring cultural assimilation and instilling loyalty to the Siamese throne. The Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat Sen visited Siam four times – in 1903, 1906, and twice in 1908 – where he inspired a clandestine following among the Bangkok Chinese, the majority of whom are of Teochew (Teochiu or Chaozhou) descent. At first Khaw Sim Bee took Sun Yat Sen to visit the minister of interior but then distanced himself from the movement when radical elements in Bangkok started citing Sun Yat Sen's anti-Qing rhetoric to instigate the overthrow of the Siamese regime.<sup>25</sup>

From 1906, Sun Yat Sen's political movement, the Tongmenghui (China Revolutionary Alliance), established a strong presence in the region from its Southeast Asia headquarters in Singapore. A branch was established in Phuket, called the "Baba Tongmenghui" presumably because it was formed by the Phuket Baba (in this case "Baba" is a term applied to the local-born Hokkien elite). However, it should be pointed out that in contrast to anti-monarchists in Bangkok, the Hokkien Chinese leaders in Phuket were utterly devoted to their Siamese king (especially King Rama V) whom they saw as their protector. Indeed, the Baba Tongmenghui in Phuket, headed by a wealthy tin-miner Tan Pek Khiad, titled Luang Pithak Chinpracha, looked not so much to Bangkok as to Penang, which assumed the role of the Southeast Asian Tongmenghui headquarters, after

<sup>23</sup> Phuwadol Songprasert, "The Development of Chinese Capital in Southern Siam, 1868-1932", PhD. Thesis, Department of History, Monash University, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 268–270.

<sup>24</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, "Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier", pp. 91–104.

<sup>25</sup> Phuwadol, "The Development of Chinese Capital", pp. 314–321.



Figure 3. Phuket Thai Hua School, founded in 1911, now a museum (photo by Khoo Salma, 2005)

it was transferred from Singapore by Sun Yat Sen himself in 1910.<sup>26</sup> In November 1910, Sun launched the fundraising campaign for the Huanghuagang Uprising in Penang, and the overseas Chinese in Siam contributed significantly.<sup>27</sup> The Penang movement mobilized funds and fighters for the revolution in China, but also emphasized local community building through civic institutions, media, and schools, in their country of adoption. Two important Tongmenghui leaders in Penang were Ng Khim Kheng, son-in-law of Khaw Sim Kong, governor of Ranong styled Phraya Rattanasetthi, and Tan Sin Cheng, a rubber tycoon in Phatthalung, southern Thailand.<sup>28</sup> The Phuket Chinese reaffirmed their ethnicity by founding the Hua Boon Chinese School, which opened at Krabi Road in 1913. Khaw Sim Bee suggested to Prince Damrong to place the school securely under the Ministry of Education as a bulwark against any potential political subversion. The first teachers were recruited via Penang connections.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution "Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier", p. 89. The Tongmenghui

<sup>27</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *Sun Yat Sen in Penang* (Penang: Areca Books, 2008). Sun Yat Sen gave the inaugural fundraising speech at 120 Armenian Street, the Tongmenghui reading club, now the Sun Yat Sen Museum, which was visited by the governor of Bangkok M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra in early 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Kuang Guo Xiang 邝国祥, *Bincheng Shan Ji 槟城散记* [Anecdote about Penang]. (Singapore: Shijie Shuju 世界书局, 1958), p. 143.

<sup>29</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, "Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier", pp. 104–106. The

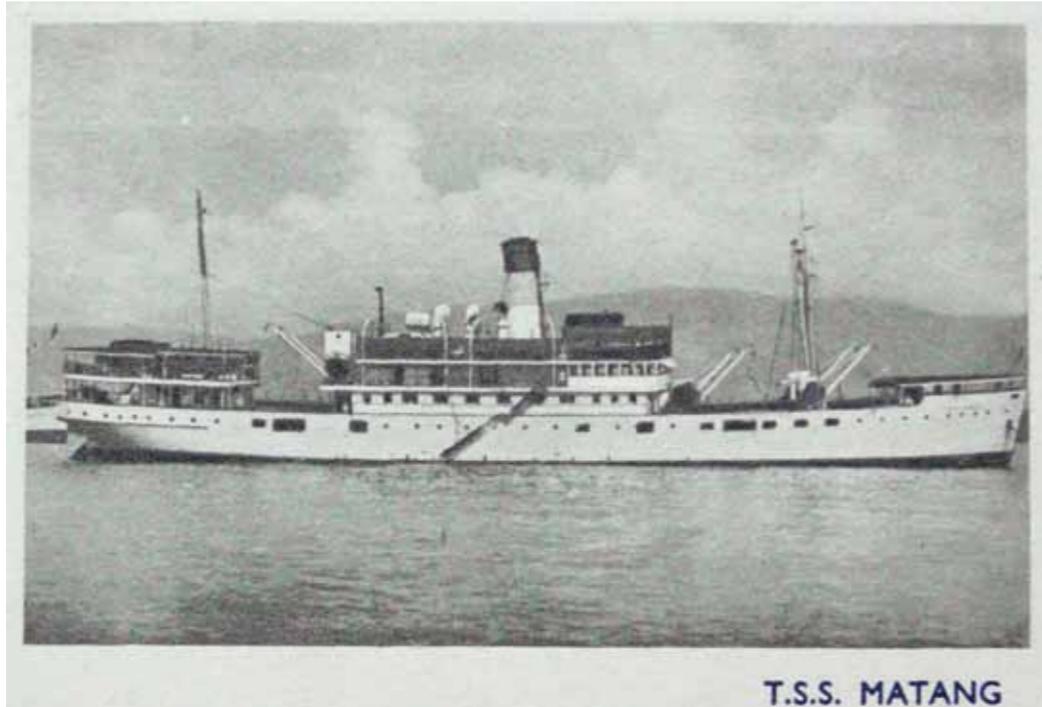


Figure 4. The Straits Steamship Matang, which ran a weekly service between Penang and Phuket until the early 1950s

Steamships plying the west coast routes were operated by the Khaw family and their associates, initially through Koe Guan Steamship Company and then through Eastern Shipping, thus providing weekly links between Penang-Phuket-Trang as well as Penang-Phuket-Takuapa-Ranong-Mergui-Rangoon. The coastal trade operated by the Straits Chinese greatly expanded Penang's entrepôt role in the region while developing the export economy of its hinterland. Thai scholar Chuleeporn Pongsupath (now better known as Chuleeporn Virunha) provides empirical data to show that Penang's entrepôt function had matured by around 1890.<sup>30</sup>

The growing importance of Penang started to attract Western capital, but this however influenced government investments in port development, and policies in shipping, tin production, and trade which favoured British enterprise to the disgruntlement of local Chinese and Tamil shipping operators. By floating companies such as Tongkah Harbour Tin Dredging, Eastern Smelting Company, Eastern Shipping Company, and Khean Guan Insurance, the Khaw family and their Straits Chinese associates attempted to modernise their operations in mining, smelting, shipping, and finance with the help of Australian technology and capital

Hua Boon School is now the Phuket Thai Hua Museum.

<sup>30</sup> Chuleeporn Pongsupath, "The Mercantile Community of Penang and the Changing Pattern of Trade", PhD thesis, University of London, 1990; Loh Wei Leng, "Penang's Trade and Shipping in the Imperial Age", in Yeoh Seng Guan, Loh Wei Leng, Khoo Salma Nasution and Neil Khor, eds, *Penang and Its Region: The Story of an Asian Entrepôt* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2009).



Figure 5. Siamese princes and nobles at Ranong House, Penang, on 5 December 1897

in Phuket and German expertise in Penang. However, ultimately they could not compete with British enterprise, bolstered by international finance, in a changing economic landscape.

The Khaw family maintained an important commercial base and social presence in Penang over three generations, building or refurbishing European mansions along Northam Road and Penang's north coast, within minutes of the port. The Khaw Soo Cheang Estate donated "Ranong Ground", where *Rajah Lodge* once stood, to the Penang public to serve as a playing field; it is now the site of the city's arts auditorium, Dewan Sri Pinang. Khaw Sim Bee's *Chakrabong House* was demolished in 1962.<sup>31</sup> However, many Khaw mansions survived till the 1990s, long enough to be appreciated as "heritage" and to become implicated in heritage controversies. *Brook Lodge*, former home of Khaw Joo Choe, was illegally demolished over Chinese New Year of 1992. *Asdang House*, the former home of Khaw Joo Tok which welcomed King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII) in 1929, had been converted into Hotel Metropole for some decades before it was demolished over the Christmas of 1993.<sup>32</sup> This was Penang's first major heritage scandal, which implicated the politicians of Penang's ruling government. A small fine was imposed but the developer was soon allowed to build a 29-storey condominium. Khaw Sim Kong's mansion *Hardwicke* survives but had an office tower built behind it; this is often shown as an example of bad heritage "facadism". The mansion of Khaw Bian Cheng (Khaw Sim Bee's grandson) at Pykett Avenue was

<sup>31</sup> Lim Kwee Phaik, *Life at Chakrabongse House: Khaw Sim Bee, Phraya Rasadanupradit Mahisornpakdi* (New South Wales, Lim Kwee Phaik), 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Kim Gooi, "Sad Tale of Beauty Felled", in *The Sunday Nation* (Bangkok), 28 May 2000.



Figure 6. Na Ranong ancestral hall in Ranong (photo by Khoo Salma, 2007)

illegally demolished in 2010. And most recently, one of a pair of bungalows on Burmah Lane, which welcomed Thai prime minister Phraya Manopakorn Nititada, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, and Prince Svasti Sobhana, was demolished while the other will be incorporated into a new condominium block. The Khaws were landlords of the E&O Hotel property developed by the Sarkies Brothers, and now a flourishing heritage hotel. The Koe Guan Kong Lun had its office at 63 Beach Street until the trust was wound up in 2004. Its mid-nineteenth century warehouse and coolie quarters were demolished, and the office building was sold and has been turned into an Indian saree shop.

The prominence of the Na Ranong family is still recognized in Thailand today, whereas in Penang, it is only the older generation who remember the Khaw family were once Siamese “regents” (Hokkien, “Siam Ong”). The Na Ranong clan still maintains an ancestral hall in the ruined tin fort in Ranong, near Khaw Sim Kong’s Rattanakong Palace.<sup>33</sup> The close relationship between Penang and Ranong or Penang and Phuket has faded into distant memory. In Phuket only the older generation of the old families still speak a little Hokkien, while the younger generations only speak Thai and many are learning Mandarin. Many traditions,

<sup>33</sup> Clement Liang, “Penang’s Disappearing Thai Heritage”, in PHT Newsletter (Leslie James, editor), No. 100 (October 2011), pp. 11–12

such as the cuisine, have naturally evolved and incorporated dominant southern Thai influences. However, the urban heritage remains intact and recognizable. Though often called Sino-Portuguese, much of Phuket Old Town would be more correctly interpreted as a Sino-Thai offshoot of Straits Settlements architecture.

### Expansion of German commercial interests from Penang to southern Siam

While Siam could rely on Chinese entrepreneurs to develop the south through tin and rubber, its reliance on German commerce and technology to keep the British out of the Thai south was thwarted by the larger play of international events. William Thomas Lewis, who served as resident councillor of Penang in the late 1850s, was appointed Siamese consul at Penang in 1863 under King Mongkut, with the title of Luang Dwip Siam Kich (Thawip Siamkit). His second wife Maria Antonetta Neubronner was the daughter of a German Johan Anton Neubronner, who arrived in Malacca in 1789 and worked as a German book-keeper for the Dutch East Indies Company. Connected to several important Malacca Dutch Eurasian families through marriage, his nine children exerted considerable influence throughout the Malay States in the nineteenth century, as intermediaries between the Siamese, Malays, Straits Chinese, and Europeans. After Lewis’s death, an Armenian was provisionally in charge of the Siamese Consulate before Lewis’s and Maria Antonetta’s nephew, Alfred De Windt Neubronner (1844–1915; see Figure 7), took over the position about two years later.<sup>34</sup>

Neubronner was appointed agent for Perak and responsible for revenue collection there and in the western provinces of Siam. While acting as Siamese consul general he was also an employee of the Khaw family’s Koe Guan Company, which gave rise to the occasional conflict of interest. When the baht was first issued in southern Siam, Neubronner played a role in manipulating the currency market in favour of the opium syndicate operated by the Khaw family and their associates. Neubronner was eventually given the title Phraya Thawip Siamkit, the highest rank that could be attained by the civilian foreigner. His obituary stated that “He could speak the Siamese language and was an authority on subjects connected with the Kingdom of the White Elephant.”<sup>35</sup>

Alfred De Windt’s son, Henry Alfred Neubronner (1871–1919), took over as Siamese consul but apparently lacked his father’s political talent. Instead he will be remembered as Penang’s first European-trained architect, accredited by the Royal Institute of British Architects. Henry Alfred Neubronner’s legacy in Penang are his well-designed banks, mansions, clubs, schools, and religious monuments

<sup>34</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *More Than Merchants: A History of the German-Speaking Community in Penang, 1800s–1940s* (Penang: Areca Books, 2006), pp. 70–79.

<sup>35</sup> *Pinang Gazette*, 26 October 1915.



Figure 7. Consul-General of Siam in Penang, Alfred De Windt Neubronner (1844-1915) (courtesy of the Stanley family)

which gave Penang a distinctive new look in the early twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

By the 1870s, Anglo-German commercial rivalry in the peninsula had prompted Britain to change her policy of non-intervention and push for the installation of British advisors to the Malay States. The plan for a “German railway” and Behn Meyer’s proposed leasing of Langkawi islands are the subject of several books and theses. During the period leading up to the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, sensitivities were tested by the famous Penang-based German photographer August Kaulfuss (also royal photographer for Kedah) who repeatedly applied for a large mining concession on the critical Kedah-Rahman border.<sup>37</sup>

The powerful German companies that expanded their shipping, tin and trade interests in the northern peninsula were based in Penang. Friedrichs & Co., a firm founded in Penang by F. H. Friedrichs from Hamburg, was involved in refining Siamese tin. Its smelting business was taken over by the Singapore-based Behn Meyer. The Hamburg merchant families of Sturzenegger and Pickenpack were also involved in the Penang-Bangkok trade. British merchants found the Germans overly competitive in the race for resources in both southern Siam and Malaya, and were relieved when German firms were closed down and their properties confiscated during the First World War. Today, the former merchant offices of Behn Meyer and other pre-Second World War German firms which once had such grand commercial ambitions in Siam can still be seen along Weld Quay on the George Town waterfront.<sup>38</sup>

### Royal visits and soft diplomacy

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) first visited Penang with a large entourage in December 1871. As Patricia Lim wrote in her account of this visit, “His stopovers in Penang were brief but important because they gave the King an opportunity to keep in touch with developments in his southern dominions and with the people involved in those developments. Penang played a significant role in the trade and economy of these provinces and was adjacent to Kedah which was then a vassal state of Siam.”<sup>39</sup> From then on, various Thai kings have visited Penang, at times as a stopover to and from Europe. In 1890, for example, King Chulalongkorn was a guest at Phraya Ranong’s house, the Penang Botanic Gardens, the Residency, the New Town Hall, Cheah Tek Soon’s hill retreat, and the Straits Settlements Governor’s

<sup>36</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *More Than Merchants*, pp. 80–88.

<sup>37</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *More Than Merchants*, pp. 71–73.

<sup>38</sup> A “German Heritage Trail in Penang” was launched by the Penang Heritage Trust in 2012. It consists mainly of pre-First World War sites, with the exception of Swettenham Pier which was used by German U-boats during the Second World War.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Pui Huen Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King: The Travels of King Chulalongkorn to Malaya* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), pp. 27, 32.

Bel Retiro on Penang Hill. At the Infant Jesus Convent, “he met a Siamese nun from Phuket and another Siamese girl who worked there. The convent had a school that accommodated over 200 students, of which six or seven girls were Siamese, originally from Phuket. The King and Queen gave a donation to the convent for which the nuns were highly grateful and praised the King and Queen’s kindness.”<sup>40</sup>

The diplomat Isorn Pocmontri, who is studying the royal visits from 1868 to 1965, emphasizes that the Thai nobles and royals were consistently welcome in a dignified and preferential way by local British authorities. Furthermore, the visiting royals and nobles could expect the loyal support and service of the local Sino-Thais such as the Khaw family and also renew their friendship with Malay princes and nobles from Kedah and Satun.<sup>41</sup>

The Rajah of Satun was the Kedah-born Tunku Baharuddin bin Tunku Meh (1848–1932), better known as Ku Din Ku Meh. An efficient administrator, Ku Din Ku Meh was given the title Phraya Purminard Pakdi in 1902 and was responsible for modernizing Satun until his retirement in 1916. Ku Din Ku Meh was considered a traitor to the Sultan of Kedah, for undermining Kedah’s historical claims upon Satun out of his personal loyalty to the Siamese regime. Around the year 2000, his former mansion in Satun was restored and turned into a museum by the Thai authorities. He left at least two heritage buildings in Penang: a town bungalow *Segara Ninda* on Penang Road, which is now a budget heritage hotel in the World Heritage Site managed by Ku Din’s descendants; and a country mansion Udini House (built in 1882) on top of a hill in Gelugor, the ruins of which today command a view of the Penang Bridge.<sup>42</sup>

After the *coup d’état* of 1932, Prince Damrong lived in exile in Penang where he was joined by Prince Svasti Sobhana and other Thai royals. Prince Damrong lived in a house called Cinnamon Hall at 15 Kelawai Road where he wrote his memoirs, returning to Thailand only in 1943. The 1933 coup ousted Phraya Manopakorn Nititada, the first prime minister of Siam. He also fled to Penang, was initially put up in a bungalow at Burmah Lane and later moved to a permanent home in Bagan Jermal. After he passed away, Jalan Mano and Solok Mano in the Pulau Tikus suburb were named after him.

<sup>40</sup> Rajaphruet Bunga Raya: 50 years of Everlasting Friendship between Thailand and Malaysia 1957-2007 (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Talk by Isorn Pocmontri, ambassador attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of the Permanent Secretary, on “Significant aspects of the relations between Thai royalties and Penang (1868-1965)” at the seminar, “The Siamese Heritage and their Footprints in Penang”, organized by Penang Heritage Trust, 6 July 2012. He touched on the visits to Penang of King Chulalongkorn, King Vajiravudh, King Prajadhipok, King Ananda Mahidol, the Queen Grandmother, as well as King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

<sup>42</sup> Incidentally, both the Udini House in Gelugor and the Cinammon Hall in Kelawai Road originally belonged to an earlier Tengku Kudin, a prince of Kedah who became the son-in-law of the Sultan of Selangor considered a traitor to Kedah for his role in the nineteenth-century Klang War.

## The Siamese community and Buddhism in Penang

The site of the Pulau Tikus Siamese Temple, the oldest Siamese temple in Penang, was cleared in 1795 and a Burmese temple was established there since the early nineteenth century. Around 1830, the Siamese and Burmese community totalled 648 out of a population of about forty thousand.<sup>43</sup> In 1845, during the term of W. J. Butterworth as governor of the Straits Settlements, the East India Company made a grant of land to the Burmese and Siamese inhabitants to be jointly held by Nongmay and Boonkhan as representatives of the Burmese community, and Nankayo and Boonsoon as representatives of the Siamese community. The first head priest was Phra Kuad. Inscriptions showed that the building of the temple had been largely due to the philanthropic efforts of Chinese Buddhists. In the nineteenth century, the Lark Phra festival was observed by conveying a beautiful chariot containing a Buddha image from this temple to the Penang Waterfall (at the present Penang Botanic Gardens) but this was discontinued. In 1910, Mrs. Lim Leng Cheak was patron of the nine sacred stones (Loog Nimit) consecration ceremony. Another lady benefactor was Nang Churne Pradheep na Thallang, wife of a mining engineer C. C. W. Liddelow, who sponsored the furnished residential quarters for the priests and a bronze Buddha image from Bangkok in 1930.<sup>44</sup> This temple was renamed Wat Chaiya Mangkalam in 1948, and its famous Reclining Buddha statue was unveiled by the Thai king and queen before a crowd of 5,000 during their official trip to Malaya in 1962.<sup>45</sup>

Tan Say Seang Neo (ca. 1851–1930) was in her younger days a planter and miner in Kedah. Her husband Lim Leng Cheak was a wealthy rice-miller of Penang and Kedah, and his mother was from a Siamese noble family.<sup>46</sup> Tan herself was known to the Siamese as Meh Nya Siang,<sup>47</sup> and as a wealthy widow, she was entirely responsible for providing the site and building the Wat Sawan Arun, later better known as Ang Hock See, a temple at Perak Road.<sup>48</sup> Her obituary read, “She was an ardent Buddhist and had made many pilgrimages to well-known shrines in Siam, Burma, Ceylon and China. The Pagoda at Kotahena Temple, Ceylon, was one of her numerous gifts in Buddhist interests in Ceylon. She erected a nunnery in Bangkok

<sup>43</sup> Low, James, *The British Settlement of Penang*, p. 126.

<sup>44</sup> [Nai Deng Sararaks], *Souvenir in Commemoration of the Inauguration Ceremony of the New Buddha Image Wat Chaiya Mangkalam (Pulau Tikus Siamese Temple)*. c. 1948.

<sup>45</sup> *Straits Times*, 26 June 1962, p. 1

<sup>46</sup> Teoh Shiaw Kuan 张少宽 张, *Binlang Yu Fujian Gongzhong Ji Jiazhong Bei Ming Ji 檳榔嶼福建公冢暨家冢碑铭集* (Epigraphic Inscriptions of Penang Hokkien Public and Family Cemeteries), (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1997), p.31.

<sup>47</sup> [Nai Deng Sararaks], *Souvenir in commemoration of the inauguration ceremony of the New Buddha Image*.

<sup>48</sup> Benny Liow Woon Khin, “Buddhist Temples and Associations in Penang”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 62, Pt. 1 (June 1989), pp. 72–73.



Figure 8. Stupa at what is now Wat Chaiyamangkalaram, Penang (courtesy of Malcolm Wade)



Figure 9. Buddhist philanthropist Tan Say Seang Neo (1851-1930)

and endowed agricultural land for a monastery at Foochow.<sup>49</sup> She was also the main donor to the King Rama VI Pagoda of the Kek Lok Si (Temple of Supreme Bliss) in Ayer Itam. The monumental building project of a Buddhist priest was begun by the abbot Beow Lean in 1893 and supported by the leading Penang Chinese. King Rama V visited this temple in 1907. King Rama VI laid the foundation stone of a pagoda during his visit in 1915, but construction was interrupted during the First World War. Completed in 1930 with a \$200,000 donation by Madan Tan, the King Rama VI Pagoda is distinguished by a syncretic design combining Chinese, Siamese, and Burmese architectural elements.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to note three other old Theravada temples, the Wat Buppam from the early twentieth century and two temples in Green Lane on the southern side of George Town from the late nineteenth century. The Green Lane temples were initially called Wat Candaram or Wat Nai (inner temple), now the Malayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, and Wat Nok (outer temple). In 1934, Wat Nok was officially named Wat Pin Bang Onn by Prince Svasti Sobhana, who passed away the following year and was cremated in a special pavilion in front of the ordination hall. His funeral service was attended by key Siamese dignitaries such as Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prince Purachatra Jayakara, as well as Arthur Mitchel Goodman, Resident-Councillor of Penang (Figure 10).<sup>51</sup> When Phraya Manopakorn passed away in Penang in 1947, his remains were preserved for some time in a special catafalque before removal to Thailand. During the Japanese invasion of 1941, about 400 Chinese and Thais sought refuge at Wat Pin Bang Onn, as Japanese military officers were strictly ordered not to interfere in Buddhist temples.<sup>52</sup>

### Continuity and change in modern times

The expansion of Chinese entrepreneurship into southern Siam continued into the early twentieth century, especially with the expansion of rubber small-holdings. Phuwadol Songprasert highlighted the Penang and Medan investors' stake in the Bangkok-Southern Railway Construction Co., and Penang businessman Cheah Ky See's ownership of 1,000 trading shops in Hat Yai during the 1920s.<sup>53</sup> Michael Montesano's work documents the links between Penang and Trang particularly the educational links through the Chinese schools in Penang.<sup>54</sup> During the decades

<sup>49</sup> *Straits Times*, 22 September 1930, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Liow, "Buddhist Temples and Associations in Penang", pp. 71–72; Khoo Salma Nasution and Malcolm Wade, *Penang Postcard Collection 1899-1930s* (Penang: Areca Books, 2011 [2003]), pp. 235-241.

<sup>51</sup> Prince Svasti Sobhana's funeral was dated 22 December 1935.

<sup>52</sup> Liow, Benny, "Buddhist Temples and Associations in Penang", pp. 62–64.

<sup>53</sup> Phuwadol, "The Implications of Penang's Historical Connection with Southern Thailand", pp. 1-10. See Cushman, *Family and State*.

<sup>54</sup> Michael J. Montesano, "The Commerce of Trang, 1930s–90s: Thailand's National Integration in



Figure 10. At Prince Svasti Sobhana's funeral at Wat Pin Bang Onn in Penang, 1935, from left to right, Prince Purachatra Jayakara, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Arthur Mitchel Goodman, Resident-Councillor of Penang (Courtesy of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab Library, with the help of Prapassorn Posrithong).

of tin restrictions, Western tin-mining companies expanded from Perak to southern Thailand. For many tin and rubber enterprises, the accountant as well as machinery and provisions would almost invariably come from Penang where the agency houses, banks, rubber exchange, and tin-smelting operations were located.

It was only after the Second World War, that the Bangkok-centred Teochew (Teochiu) Chinese economically overtook the Penang-centred Hokkien Chinese in southern Thailand.<sup>55</sup> In the early twentieth century, affluent Chinese families in southern Thailand would send their children to Penang schools: Ranong boys

Social-Historical Perspective", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1999.

<sup>55</sup> Yan Liu, "Trust, Identity and Commercial Advantage: Hainanese Upward Mobility in the Rice Trade on the East Coast of Peninsular Thailand (mid-nineteenth century-1980s)", MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007.



Figure 11. House of Phra Pithak Chinpracha Tandavanitj in Penang (courtesy of Sanchai Tandavanitj)



Figure 12. House of Phra Pithak Chinpracha Tandavanitj in Phuket, circa 1940 (courtesy of Sanchai Tandavanitj)

to Penang Free School, Phuket boys to St. Xavier's Institution, and Trang boys to Chung Ling High School. The girls were sent to Convent Light Street. These connections are largely continued in recent times through alumni associations and business networks. Today, the Chinese schools, notably Han Chiang and Chung Ling in Penang, are most popular among Thai families of Chinese descent.<sup>56</sup>

As Penang and Phuket as well as other parts of south Thailand are being transformed by tourism, social histories start to surface. Here are several different aspects of Penang connections with southern Thailand.

<sup>56</sup> Apasra Hongsakula, the first Thai woman to win the Miss Universe crown in 1965, went to boarding school at Convent Light Street in Penang. Her classmate and housemate married my uncle and became my aunt.

From the late nineteenth century up to the 1970s, the Shaikh Haji or pilgrim brokers who used to bring their flocks of pilgrims to Penang to await the Hajj ship would also buy Muslim religious tracts printed in Acheen Street, Penang, for use in the *pondok* schools in Pattani. Penang was a centre for Muslim intellectuals returned from Mecca and Cairo who involved themselves in Islamic schools and the Malay press. Today, an Arab from Pattani still owns a shop, Almuariff, in nearby Buckingham Street, selling Penang-printed Islamic books to an old clientele.

Tan Iu Ghee, a China-born educated Hokkien woman came to Penang from Phuket. She joined the Anglican mission in Penang, translated the *Book of Common Prayer* into Chinese and helped recruit Chinese students for the fledgling St George's Girls' School founded in 1885. Her daughter Lim Beng Hong went on to become the first woman lawyer in Malaysia.<sup>57</sup>

One Tan family's Penang-Phuket connections lasted for more than a century. Tan Neo Yee, who came to Phuket from Penang in the 1850s, became the largest tin mine owner in Phuket. His son Tan Ma Siang studied in Penang and built two Penang-style houses in Phuket, as well as a house in Penang. He was a consultant to the Royal Department of Mines and given the title Luang Pithak Chinpracha as well as the family name Tandavanitj. His son Tan Joo Ee went to St. Xavier's Institution in Penang and in 1928 married the grand-daughter of Mrs. Lim Leng Cheak. Tan Joo Ee became the second MP for Phuket in 1937, titled Khun Chyn Sathan Phithak. He was the Phuket agent for the Straits Steamship Company and the Penang agent for the Thai Airways Company after the Second World War.<sup>58</sup>

In the early twentieth century, a migrant from Tai Pu district from Chaozhou started a shop in Penang before relocating north, where he founded the Guan Choon Tong herbal shop at 16 Thalang Road, now the oldest Chinese herbal shop in Phuket. For decades, the shop maintained family links to a medical shop in Carnarvon Street, Penang.<sup>59</sup>

Expat managers stationed in the tin mines and rubber plantations of southern Thailand would travel out to Penang periodically to visit the agency offices, accompanied by their wives for a shopping spree at Whiteaways Department Store. The weekend would not be complete without a dinner and dance at the E&O Hotel.

Up to the 1960s Penang island was a free port, and therefore an attractive shopping centre for many people from across the border – they also came for the cinemas, amusement parks, and to update themselves on modern trends and fashion. Incidentally, a great deal of smuggling was done by operators in small boats, carrying cigarettes, liquor, watches, and condensed milk back to Phuket.

In recent times, revival of diaspora identities and connections are being carried

<sup>57</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, Alison Hayes, and Sehra Yeap Zimbulis, *Giving Our Best: The Story of St George's Girls' School, Penang, 1885-2010* (Penang: Areca Books, 2010), p. 170.

<sup>58</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, "Hokkien Chinese on the Phuket Mining Frontier", pp. 95, 103.

<sup>59</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, field survey in Phuket, 2005.

out through cultural societies. The annual Peranakan Convention was started in Penang in 1986 and has since been organised by Melaka and Singapore associations by rotation. Pranee Sakulpipatana who grew up in her family shophouse at Thalang Road, joined the network around 2000 and spearheaded the formation of the Thai Baba Peranakan Association. This association first hosted the annual convention in 2006 and is now a full member of the circuit. In the meantime, the Phuket Old Town Association, which also aspires to conserve its heritage shophouses, has organised study trips to George Town. The Peranakan revival in Phuket has been facilitated by budget travel and the use of social media.



Figure 13. Pranee Sakulpipatana (third from left) at Hongyoke House (photo by Khoo Salma 2005)

The Penang Heritage Trust held a seminar sponsored by the Thai Consulate-General, entitled “The Siamese Heritage and their Footprints in Penang” in July 2012. The seminar showcased oral history drawn from 93-year old Prabanh Sanasen, who had accompanied Phraya Manopakorn Nititada to Penang in 1932 as the sister of his late wife Khun Nit Sanasen, daughter of Phra Wisutkosa. The seminar culminated with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque at Phraya Manopakorn’s cenotaph at Wat Ping Bann Onn in Green Lane, Penang, on 8 July 2012.<sup>60</sup>

Ku Din Ku Meh’s granddaughter Tengku Sepora Tengku Mahadi of Penang,

<sup>60</sup> Phraya Mano’s history in Penang is now documented by the Thai scholar Prapassorn Posrithong, as well as Clement Liang and Vasana Salifa of Penang Heritage Trust. The project has the special encouragement of the Thai Consul-General Voradet Viravakin.

speaking of her grandfather, expressed the dilemma of cultural identity: “We, his descendants, always thought of him as Malay but when I went to Thailand, they told me he was a hundred percent Thai.”<sup>61</sup> Where previously there was cultural fluidity, plurality, and overlapping worlds, the solidification of nation-states and divergent paths of nation-building have turned porous borders into walls, determining the way we construct our stories and identities.

## Conclusion

The social history of the region can partly be told through the stories of old elites. The movement of elites and subalterns across porous borders during pre-national times resulted in the formation of transboundary networks linking nodes of social and cultural capital. Personal relationships and marital unions, familial ties and tribal loyalties, the establishment of religious institutes and the recurring performance of ritual and patronage, helped to create the social conditions for secure economic investment and productivity. The British colonization of Malaya did not deter but rather intensified and expanded these transboundary networks and movements, as the Penang port developed into a modern capital of a sub-region which was being increasingly absorbed into the global economic system. Ironically, it was the hegemonic nature of modern nation-states, of both Thailand and Malaysia, which severely restricted natural trans-border movements and undermined old relationships, preferring instead to strengthen the centrifugal political-economic forces of Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur respectively.

In Malaysia, academically-constructed national histories and textbook histories have not been successful in creating a sense of cultural inclusivity. On the other hand, the proliferation of media stories linked to cultural identities, migration histories and diaspora communities have done better in capturing the popular imagination and rekindling social memory. In tandem with the movement for popular social history is the movement in recovering cultural heritage which supports a sense of place and belonging.

Cultural heritage could be interpreted as selective evidence of the past which we value today. With the fast rate of physical change and development since the late twentieth century, places of cultural significance in many Asian cities, small towns, and rural landscapes have been quickly eroded and replaced with globalized architecture and industrial infrastructure. We are witnessing a cultural “tragedy of the commons”, and soon we shall have little left of the past except constructed histories.

Historians have warned that heritage-based approaches to history may give rise

<sup>61</sup> Talk by Tengku Sepora Tengku Mahdi, “Ku Din Ku Meh and his Thai Heritage in Penang”, at the seminar, “The Siamese Heritage and their Footprints in Penang”, organized by Penang Heritage Trust, 6 July 2012.

to nostalgic, inaccurate, or biased interpretations of the past. However, it cannot be denied that heritage in the age of cultural tourism and information communication technology has helped to generate fresh questions and new discourses in history. By placing a high value on unique genealogies and cultural difference, the construction of new local histories tend to affirm diaspora identities, religious minorities, and communities of mixed ancestry, even when these same cultural identities might be contested at other levels.

Once the importance of the principle of cultural diversity is acknowledged, heritage can be easily understood as a common resource for people-centred development, with growing applications in education, the knowledge economy, cultural industry, and creative industry. Furthermore, with the internet making it easier for people to research their genealogies and re-establish transboundary links with their long-lost relatives, it is now easier for diaspora communities to discover their cultural roots, as well as homeland or overseas heritage. This phenomenon leads to the increasing relevance of the concept of transboundary “shared histories” and “shared heritage” worldwide.

George Town has been listed as a World Heritage Site for three outstanding universal values (OUVs): its cultural diversity and layered history as a trading port; its living intangible cultural heritage; and its built heritage within a historic townscape. The challenge to preserve these values has led to deeper inquiry into local histories in all its cultural complexity. A great deal of cultural evidence of the past is still there to be explored. It is hoped that this article will arouse greater curiosity in the connected threads of local histories across the Malaysian-Thai border, and encourage the preservation of places where cultural resonance and historical friendships can be rekindled.