Uncovering the Myths of Two 19th-century Hokkien Business Personalities in the Straits Settlements

©2012 Wong Yee Tuan*

The aim of this paper is to uncover and clarify the identities of two 19th-century Hokkien business personalities, namely Khoo Thean Poh 邱天保 and Khoo Tiong Poh 邱忠波, who had their business operating centre based in Penang and Singapore respectively, the two most important ports-of-call of the British colonies in Southeast Asia.

Two scholarly works – The Contest for North Sumatra by Anthony Reid and Shiwai Wu Taoyuan Letu Zai Danxin 世外无桃园 乐土在丹心 (No Paradise in the World and Elysium in His Mind) by Qiu Ge Ping 邱格屏, deal with Khoo Tiong Poh, but they both confuse Khoo Tiong Poh with Khoo Thean Poh. In order to rectify this situation, I will point out the reasons for the two scholars making the mistake; present seven sources that distinguish the two Hokkien business personalities and present biographical accounts which illuminate their family backgrounds, sociopolitical connections, and business involvements in the Straits Settlements and beyond.

Reasons for Errors

Reid identified Khoo Tiang Poh as Khoo Tiong Poh, who established a shipping firm Bun Hin & Co. in association with Raja Wichit of Phya Puket in 1874. To Reid, these two romanized Chinese names refer to the one person though there is a spelling difference in the middle names – Tiang and Tiong. It is indeed common for the romanized Chinese name of a personality to be transcribed in different forms in the colonial records or documents. For example, the romanized Chinese name of 郑景贵, a 19th-century Hakka tin magnate and community leader, appears in at least five different spelling forms in colonial records – Chung Keng Kwee, Cheang Keng Kwi, Chong Kang Quee, Chang Ah Quee, and Chung Keng Kooi.

Qiu has revealed that the romanized name of Khoo Tiong Poh is also written in two other forms – Khoo Teong Poh and Khu Poh in colonial records. ‘Khoo Teong Poh’ is indeed a variation in spelling for ‘Khoo Tiong Poh’, but this is not the case with ‘Khu Poh’. Qiu has conveniently assumed that ‘Khu Poh’ and ‘Khoo Tiong Poh’ refer to the same person. However, ‘Khu Poh’ is in fact an alternative name of Khoo Thean Poh.

Why do multiple romanized variants of a Chinese name appear in colonial records? This is primarily attributed to the different ways that British officials in the Straits Settlements grasped a particular Chinese dialect intonation. There were at least four major Chinese dialects spoken at the time, namely Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, and Teochiu. Khoo Tiang Poh and Khoo Tiong Poh were both Hokkien. Hence, their romanized names were transcribed based on Hokkien intonation. Their family name and last name are the same in Hokkien intonation but the middle characters are different.

---

*Wong Yeetuan is a fellow of the Penang Institute, Malaysia. His email address is: <yeetuanwong@yahoo.com.au>


2 Anthony Reid, The Contest for North Sumatra, p.221. (See footnote 2)

pronounced differently — Tiang is 天 (t’ian) while Tiong is 忠 (ti:ng). Not knowing Hokkien, Reid is not able to tell the difference in intonation in the two words. Despite her knowledge of Chinese, Qiu fails to detect that “Khu Poh” and “Khoo Tiong Poh” are names of two different people as the family name and the last name of the two have the same pronunciation.

Evidence from Sources

There are three sources providing information that helps clarify the identity of Khu Poh (Khoo Poh) or Khoo Thean (Tiang) Poh. First, the Perak Government Gazette which published a list of landowners has the names of Khoo Tiong Poh and Khoo Poh Alias as different entries, indicating that they were different persons (see Figure 1). Second, Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohammedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula A.D. 1800-1935 by Mervyn Llewelyn Wynne mentions that Khoo Poh (Khu Poh) was Khoo Thian Poe (see Figure 2). Third, the Foreign Office Series Files (FO 422) which contains a report on the Nisero Incident noted that Khoo Tian (Thean) Poh (Tempoh) was the younger brother of Khoo Tian (Thean) Tek (see Figure 3).

The other sources verify that the romanized name of Khoo Tiong Poh has never been written as “Khu Poh” or “Khu Tiang Poh”. A letter found in the Selangor Secretariat File was written by Khoo Teong Poh addressed to J. P. Rogers, the British Resident of Selangor in 1891 which mentions that Khoo Poh (Khu Poh) was Khoo Thian Poe (see Figure 2). A petition letter was written by Khoo Tiong Pan addressed to the Resident of Selangor about Khoo Tiong Poh’s sons and estate (see Figure 6). Finally there is Khoo Tiong Poh’s last will and testament of 1893 (see Figure 7). These four sources clearly show that there are only two correct forms of romanized Chinese for 邱忠波 — “Khoo Tiong Poh” and “Khoo Teong Poh”.

Biographical Accounts

The materials which I have gathered serve as more than just as a means to authenticate the identities of the two business personalities. They also throw light on their roles in the social, economic, and political developments in local and regional context. Based on the materials, I have compiled biographical accounts of the two Hokkien mercantile personalities:

Khoo Thean Poh, Khoo Tian Poh, Khoo Tiang Poh, Khoo Poh, Qiu Tian Po 邱天保 (1833-1919), trader, revenue farmer, community leader

Khoo Thean Poh alias Khoo Poh was born in Penang in 1833 and was the eighth son of Khoo Guek Chio 邱月照, a merchant, landowner and a leader of the Khoo clan. His

---

4 Li Rong 李荣, 厦门方言词典(Xiamen Fangyuan Cidian), 南京: 江苏教育出版社, 1998. Also see Kam Ui Lim 甘为霖, 厦门方言新字典 Xiamen Yin Xin Cidian (A Dictionary of the Amoy Vernacular), (Taiwan: The Taiwan Church Press), 2004. 在 Hokkien is more commonly romanized as ’Thian’ or ’Thean’.


7 Report on Nisero Incident in Foreign Office Series Files (FO 422), p. 61.

8 Selangor Secretariat File Misc 4728/91. This file is available in the National Archive of Malaysia.

9 The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 1892.

10 Selangor Secretariat File Misc 1633/97. This file is available in the National Archive of Malaysia.

11 The last will and testament of Khoo Tiong Poh can be found in Hong Kong’s Public Record Office.

12 Xinjian Qiu Zeng Shi Zupu 新江邱曾氏族谱 (The Genealogy of the Sin Kang Khoo and Chan Clans), 第 21 卷 - 楼、十九世谱传.
ancestral origin can be traced to Sandu Xin’an (Sin Aun) Village, Hai Cheng district, Zhangzhou prefecture, Fujian province, China.

In the 1860s, Thean Poh was actively involved in the pepper trade with Northern Sumatra, particularly the western coast of Aceh. Together with Khoo Kay Chan, Lim Pet Lean, and Lim Tit, he formed a company that operated seven sailing ships, schooners, barques, and brigs. In order to manage his business, Thean Poh used to live at Melabuh for few years and established a close relationship with Teuku Imam, the Raja of Tenom and Teuku Yit, a prominent Acehnese trader. Besides, he also had one of his daughters married to Syed Mohamed Alatas, a wealthy Acehnese merchant of Arab descent. Having formed such alliances with the Acehnese, Thean Poh was able to secure a monopoly of the pepper trade which the European found hard to break. Thean Poh was also a partner of the Boon Tek & Co., located at 29 Beach Street, which operated as ship chandlers, general store keepers, and general commission agents.

Owing to the wars between the Acehnese and the Dutch and the restriction placed by the Dutch government on the export of pepper, Thean Poh sold all his ships and retired from the pepper trading business in the late 1870s. Later he became actively involved in the opium farm business. Together with his nephew, Khoo Hun Yeang and a few Chinese towkays, he gained control of opium farms in Penang, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

With his success in business, Thean Poh rose to become an important social figure and assumed leadership positions in Chinese organizations. He became the vice-president or Gee-ko of Kien Tek Tong, the most powerful Hokkien hui or “secret society” in Penang. In 1867, he and his elder brother, Khoo Thean Teik, the president or Toa-ko of Kien Tek Tong, formed an alliance with the Red Flag, an Indo-Malay “secret society”, mobilized thousands of coolies and started the Penang Riots, the worst in nineteenth-century British colonies, in order to regain control of the opium farm in Penang. As a result, he was arrested and deported to Kedah. He was later allowed to return to Penang when the British authorities found that he was a natural-born British subject who was not liable to deportation.

Despite the British criminal charges against him, Thean Poh assisted the British to resolve the Nisero Incident in Aceh. In 1884, he accompanied Sir William Maxwell, the Resident Councilor of Penang, to negotiate with the Acehnese chiefs for the relief of the 26 crew of the Nisero, who were detained when their schooner was wrecked on the west coast of Sumatra near Tenom. Being an associate of the Acehnese chiefs, Thean Poh successfully obtained the release of the crew. In recognition of Thean Poh’s help the Government of the late Queen Victoria awarded him a gold watch with the following inscription – “Presented to Khoo Thean Poh by Her Majesty’s Government for services in connection with the release of the crew of the Nisero”.

In 1889, Thean Poh became a board member of Boon San Tong Khoo Kongsi and in 1892 he served as its president. In 1895, he became the secretary of the Chinese Town Hall and Kong Hock Keong dispensary as well as acting secretary of Lam Wah Hospital. Thean Poh also donated generously to cemeteries and temples in Penang for their renovation and restoration. In 1886, he donated $60 to

14 The Penang Directory for the year 1874 including that of Deli, p.32.
16 Mervyn Llwyn Wynne, Triad and Tabut, p.248.
18 The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 21 January 1919, p.7. Also see Straits Times Weekly, 1 October 1890, p.9.
build a rest house in the Batu Lanchang cemetery. In 1890, he made a donation of $60 to build a rest house in the Hokkien cemetery of Pulau Tikus and two years later another donation of $12 for reconditioning the cemetery. In 1891, he made a donation of $162 to build the main hall of Qing Long Gong temple 清龙宫. 20

In January 1919, Thean Poh passed away at the age of 86 and leaving behind four sons, five daughters, and many grandchildren, and great grand children.

Khoo Tiong Poh, Khoo Teong Poh 邱忠波 Qiuzhong Bo, (1830-1892), ship owner, merchant, revenue farmer, tin miner.

Khoo Tiong Poh was born in China in 1830 and migrated to the Straits when he was about 22 years old. His ancestral home was Sandu Xin'an (Sin Aun) Village 三都新垵村, Haicheng district 海澄县, Zhangzhou prefecture 漳州府, Fujian province 福建省.21 He was the eldest son of Khoo Eng Chye 邱应财. In Singapore, he became a partner of chop Teong Ho in Market Street and of the ship-chandlery firm of Ann Bee, Keng Lam & Co. or Chop Sin Bee Siang in Bonham Street. In 1874, Tiong Poh, who retired from Teong Ho, partnered with Rajah Wichit of Phya Puket to establish a shipping and trading company -- Bun Hin & Co. 万兴公司 located at Malacca Street of Singapore.22 Bun Hin & Co. also served as an agent for Man On Insurance Company Limited of Hong Kong and Singapore Patent Paint C. Ltd.

In 1880, Tiong Poh recruited a capable person, Quah Beng Hong 柯孟洪 from Penang, an elder brother of Quah Beng Kee 柯孟淇, as the manager of Bun Hin & Co. Within a few years, the company opened branches in Penang, Hong Kong, Amoy, and Swatow. The branch in Penang was known as Bun Hin Chan located at No. 89, Beach Street.24 At one time, Bun Hin & Co. owned twelve steamers – s.s. Cheang Chew, s.s. Cheang Hock Kian, s.s. Cheang Hye Teng, s.s. Samtor, s.s. Chow Phya, s.s. Petrel, s.s. Chan Tai, s.s. Kedah, and s.s. Hanoi, s.s. Pearl, s.s. Carisbrooke, and s.s. Ferntower.25 Each of these steamers plied different regional and international routes. For example, s.s. Chow Phya sailed between Singapore, Melaka, and Klang; s.s. Hanoi sailed between Penang and Larut; s.s. Cheang Hye Teng sailed between Penang, Singapore and China. The principal commodities carried by these steamers were tin from Perak and Phuket, rice from Saigon, coolies and China goods from China.

Bun Hin & Co. became the largest and leading shipping enterprise in the Straits. This success was attributed to Tiong Poh’s innovative shipping policy: 1. Never sail an empty ship; always carry something, even a cut-price rate, in either direction. 2. Always match the lowest rate/charge until the competitors were out of business and then enjoy the luxury of monopoly. He ran a tight and efficient shipping enterprise. One British sea captain recalled in his memoir that Khoo Tiong Poh’s ships in any Malay ports always had sixty coolies waiting at the dock to load and unload. Such was his impressive no nonsense efficiency.26

20 Teoh Shiw Kuan 张少宽, Binliangyu Fujian Gongzhong Jijia Beimin Ji 槟榔屿福建公会暨家碑铭集 [Epigraphic Inscriptions of Penang Hokkien Cemeteries], pp.118, 130, 149
22 Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years’ History of the Chinese in Singapore, pp.176, 188, 201-2.
23 He married Khoo Sor Peck, the eldest daughter of Khoo Tiong Poh. In 1885, he suffered severe head injuries after being thrown from a horse. After two weeks he succumbed to the injuries and died. His body was buried at his father-in-law’s plantation at Batu Lanchang.
24 Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle, 14 July 1891, p.6.
25 The Singapore and Straits Chronicle for 1891, p.144. Also see Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years’ History of the Chinese in Singapore, p.201.
26 Oral history provided by William Khoo, a fourth-generation descendant of Khoo Tiong Poh. He is currently residing in the USA.
Apart from shipping and trading, Tiong Poh also had business interests in tin mining, revenue farming, planting, rice milling, and insurance. He partnered Ong Beng Tek and Khoo Cheng Sin and ventured into the tin mining and smelting business in Perak. They operated chop Khun San, a shop-cum-smelting house located at Main Road, Kamunting of Larut.\(^\text{27}\) In Kamunting, Tiong Poh owned nine pieces of lands totaling about 16,000 square feet. In Selangor, he owned the chop of Hock San to operate tin mining. Besides having his own tin mines, he also financed other Chinese towkays’ mining operation. In 1886, Tiong Poh became the director of The Straits Fire Insurance Company, Limited, which was incorporated in Singapore. Forming an alliance with the Penang Opium Syndicate, he was successful in gaining control of the Singapore opium and spirit farms 1889-1891 and the Larut coast revenue farm in 1891.\(^\text{28}\)

In Penang, Tiong Poh owned a large plantation near Batu Lanchang. Tiong Poh’s philanthropic deeds in Penang were his donations to the two largest Hokkien cemeteries (Batu Lanchang and the Batu Gantong cemeteries) and four major Chinese temples (Shui Mei Gong 水美宫, Qing Yun Yan 清云巖, Cheng Huang Temple 城隍庙, and Qing Long Gong 清龙宫).\(^\text{29}\) He was appointed to the Selangor Cooly Depot Committee. In 1888, he was given an honourable title – Dao Tai 道台 by the Qing government for his financial contribution for coastal defence and flood relief in China.\(^\text{30}\)

Tiong Poh had three wives (Yeoh Siew Kim, Tan Poo Neo, and Tio Oo Neo), eight sons (Khoo Geen/Phee Soon, Khoo Geen Haw, Khoo Geen Keat, Khoo Geen/Mah Lek, Khoo Geen Choe, Khoo Geen Yew, Khoo Geen Tah, and, Khoo Geen Teow), and four daughters (Khoo Sor Pek, Khoo Sor Tin, Khoo Sor Gan, and Khoo Sor Lan).\(^\text{31}\) On 2 March 1892, he passed away in Singapore following a prolonged illness. His body was brought to Penang by s.s. Cheang Chew to be buried in his plantation. The whole of his estate, including those in Singapore, Swatow, Amoy, and Hong Kong was estimated at $2,000,000. Tiong Poh Road and Tiong Poh Avenue in Singapore are named after him.\(^\text{32}\)

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the romanized Chinese names in different Chinese dialects found in the colonial records pose a great challenge to scholars and researchers of Southeast Asian Chinese history. Without knowledge of Chinese dialects, it is difficult for one to identify and distinguish the Chinese personalities by relying on one or two sources. But this difficulty can be surmounted by consulting more and different type of sources. The identification of the Chinese business personalities indicate who the influential players were in the mainstream of socioeconomic and political affairs in Southeast Asia. More importantly, it enables us to see the different dialect groups they belonged to rather than being lumped together as “Chinese”. These business personalities commanded a web of networks linking to the colonial powers, the grassroots, and the indigenous chieftains and royalty. In this regard, the Chinese business personalities can serve as an entry point for tracing not only the dynamic local, intra-regional, and

---

\(^{27}\) Perak Government Gazette, July-December 1891.

\(^{28}\) The Singapore and Straits Chronicle for 1891, p.153.


\(^{31}\) From the tombstone of Khoo Tiong Poh’s grave is located at his family burial ground at Penang. Also see Qiu Ge Ping 邱格屏, *Shiwai Wu Taoyuan Letu Zai Danxin 世外无桃园 乐土在丹心* (No Paradise in the World and Elysium in His Mind), p.66.

inter-regional economic activities, but also dialect and ethnic relationships in the colonial and indigenous setting.

In the age of the nation-state, the dominance of the country-based and Eurocentric approaches has displaced or suppressed the transnational and cross-ethnic elements that constituted the very fabric of nineteenth century Southeast Asian society, economy, and politics. In this manner, important aspects of Southeast Asian history have been distorted, if not shunned. A reappraisal of existing historical methods and techniques is required to recover the nuanced picture of Southeast Asian Chinese history. The investigation of Chinese business personalities, as undertaken here, provides for a different template and an alternative trajectory from which to make fresh explorations into Southeast Asia’s past.

Figure 1: Perak Government Gazette (Source: National Archive of Malaysia)
This suggests that the old dangerous societies which had run to hide themselves in the remotest part of a Chinese Temple when registration came into force, soon showed their real character again.

On 30th December, 1896, Singapore had a total of 52 societies of all kinds among all nationalities registered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of members in Register</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This map was, no doubt, a member of Tokung like others of his surname. We have seen. The combination of Tokung headmen and prominent farmers who have had trouble in French colonial authorities, and the adoption of the Chinese name due to their association with the Triad and Tabut.

Here we have the Teh Pehs Kong society (Tokung) raising its ugly head with an unlimited membership under the "King" name of the Khoo clan, who have been their hereditary headmen.

We have more to say about the Khoo Kongsi of Penang later on.

**Figure 2:** Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohamedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula A.D. 1800-1935 (Source: The Australian National University's Library)

**Figure 3:** A Report on the Nisero Incident (Source: National Archive of Malaysia)
Figure 4: Letter by Khoo Tiong Poh (Source: National Archive of Malaysia). Note: The author copied this from the original letter found in the National Archive Malaysia.
Figure 5: Pinang Gazette & Straits Chronicle (Source: University of Malaya’s library)
Figure 6: Letter by Khoo Tiong Pan (Source: National Archive of Malaysia)
Figure 7: Khoo Tiong Poh’s Will & Testament (Source: Hong Kong’s Public Record Office)