

Definition of Comprador :

1. An intermediary; a go-between.
2. A native-born agent in China and certain other Asian countries formerly employed by a foreign business to serve as a collaborator or intermediary in commercial transactions.

Definition of tai-pan :

(Chinese: 大班) was an influential foreign businessman doing business in China or Hong Kong in the 19th century. The Chinese term is now used in a more general sense for business executives of any origin. The Chinese term literally means *big class* which is equivalent to the English term *big shot*.

The name was commonly used to refer to high-powered business executives and entrepreneurs in Hong Kong when it was under British control, referring to those in charge of major companies such as Jardine Matheson.

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Headline –

Be a Hong Kong "Smartie" – take a lesson from the Comprador Dynasty.

Comprador - a rising group of Chinese after the Opium War. They were hired at foreign firms and act as the "go-between" to deal with the Government of the Chinese Qing Dynasty. It was a unique "Profession" in Hong Kong's modern history.

In Hong Kong's early dates, these "Smarties" dealt with the two groups above. Simultaneously working for their foreign masters in the expansion of business in China, they developed their own "entrepreneurship" with advantages that came with the position and accumulated enormous wealth while achieving high social status. Some of them eventually become Leaders amongst the Chinese population in Hong Kong.

Professor TING Sun-pao 丁新豹, a previous director of the Hong Kong Museum of History, revealed in an earlier Historical forum the “Comrador Dynasty” – The three generations of “Mok’s Comrador Legend”, starting with 莫仕揚. (our 12th generation ancestor)

If you want to be a Hong Kong classical “Smartie”, you can perhaps learn from these “Ancestors”.

According to Professor Ting, the 莫仕揚 family qualified as a “Legend” in Hong Kong’s modern history. From 1870 till 1937 when the Comrador system was abolished, the three generation of Moks (including 藻泉 the son of 莫仕揚, and his grandson 幹生) were all compradors for the Taikoo Company. During this period, over a thousand Moks worked in the Taikoo Company as well. The talk at Taikoo was: “The Mok Family is better known here than the foreign tai-pan’s (Managers)”.

The three generations of Moks above also served as officials for the “Tung Wah Group of Hospitals charity organization and became local Chinese Leaders.

The birth of Compradors had a unique historical background. In 1685, the Qing Dynasty Government set up customs offices and began to regulate foreign commerce. Whampao became a Merchant ship harbour. Qing government adopted a “Close-door” policy and forbade foreign merchants to trade with Chinese. They only allow the foreign merchants to deal with the 13 Stores (13 Chinese Companies that were granted monopoly to handle foreign trade), which made them very dissatisfied.

Abolishment of the 13 Stores and the rise of Compradors

After the Opium War, the foreign merchants made the Qing Dynasty abolish the “13 Stores system” to enable them to deal directly with the Chinese. This attracted a stampede of foreign merchants to Hong Kong and making its commercial position surpassed that of Guangdong (Canton). Since the foreign merchants are not fluent in Chinese, and lacked the commercial connections for trade, they had to hire a group of Chinese who received education overseas as Compradors.

At that time, the foreign merchants had a lot of clout, and when they caused troubles after getting drunk, the Police did not dare to offend them but called on their Compradors to assist and resolve any issues instead.

Taikoo's first Comprador 莫仕揚

According to the Mok's Ancestral Registry, 莫仕揚 was born on 1820 in the "Comprador's village" of Hong Kong. He came from a rich family and spent his youth working in one of the 13 Stores (同順行 to be exact). Some say that he was actually one of its co-founders.

Professor Ting did not agree. "同順行 was established in 1830 at which time he was only 10 years old!". There was also a story that his son married the daughter of that Company's owner. Nevertheless, 莫仕揚 familiarized himself with dealings opposite foreign merchants, and built a foundation for his future transition to working as a Comprador.

Historical archives recorded that prior to joining Taikoo, 莫仕揚 was working for another Company named 瓊記 . An 1859 "Guarantee document" from this Company showed him as the signatory person backing someone with trading money thus showing his enormous wealth. In 1869, the Suez Canal opened up Euro-Asian shipping and further elevated Hong Kong's position as a Shipping centre. Taikoo entered the Shipping business and purchased a fleet of merchant ships. 莫仕揚 was hired as its first Comprador and developed connections to Shanghai, Tianjin, Dalian thus increasing Taikoo's fortune.

The Riddle of Comprador Inheritance.

As reported in the year 1880 by the Hong Kong Daily Press, 莫仕揚 died on June 3, 1879. He was twice the Chairman for the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Charity organization and described as a significant Chinese Leader. When Professor Ting researched into the archives of the above organization, he discovered that one year prior to Mok's death he was noted as the owner of another company (和泉南北行) and not a comprador for Taikoo. This contradicted the records of Pearl Delta Historical Celebrities that he died in 1890, and was a comprador for Taikoo.

“Was he or was he not a comprador for Taikoo before his death ? If not, who took over his position there ?” Professor Ting was intrigued.

Professor Ting is leaning towards the death in 1879 theory. According to reports on the China Mail newspaper in 1889, a person name 吳協 (Mr. Ng) was the comprador at Taikoo for 10 years, starting in 1879. He died at his resident at Wyndham street in October of 1889. Professor Ting believed that Mr. Ng took over the job of comprador from 莫仕揚 after his death in 1879 instead of Mok’s son 藻泉 aka (字冠銜). Mr. Ng’s will indicated that he named 藻泉 as the Executor of his will and let him inherited the entire legacy of ten thousand dollars.

Professor Ting suggested that Mr. Ng was the mentor for 藻泉 after his father’s death.

The Brilliant Trading skills of 藻泉公

Professor Ting used the word “Brilliant” to describe the trading career of 藻泉. He was behind the projects for Taikoo to establish shipping docks and sugar refineries. He organized his cousins and relatives to set up head offices in other ports and trading areas. At the same time, he established a company 同利棧 to collect bi-products from sugar refineries named 吉水 , for resale to other factories for production of wine and soya sauce. He also established sugar warehouses, and stored up Taikoo sugar inventories to manipulate the prices of sugar. Furthermore, he also set up his own Burlap factories to supply Taikoo with Burlap sacs.

Other than just an investor with connections, he was also great insight on real estate value and speculations. Government archives showed that he bought the lot for #9 Lyndhurst Terrace (Central District) for the sum of \$7600 in 1894, and resold it for \$11,000 in 1898. As the Taikoo comprador, he automatically became the Chairman of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals in 1901. On Sept 4, 1917, South China Morning Post reported that he died at the age of 61 and Taikoo lowered its flags to half-mast for remembrance.

The Third Generation of Moks and their receding actions

幹生 Son of **藻泉**, inherited the job of Taikoo Comprador in 1917 and pushed the Moks powers to its peak. A 1928 archive recorded that he contacted the Public Works Office through his architect, indicating that he had purchased number 41 Conduit Road (Today's Realty Gardens) and he wished to build a 15 feet wide, private road worth \$9000.00. The Mansion would also include an Observatory with elevator facilities. In 1948, he requested a British Passport from the Colony's Administrative Officer. He could not provide any supporting documents for his nationality but simply stated that he was a Justice of the Peace and therefore the status of his British Nationality cannot be questioned.

幹生 was rich beyond imaginations. He provided funding to build a number of Schools, including the Government Central School, the Munsang College, and the University of Hong Kong Taikoo Engineering School. In the 1925 General strike of HK and Guandong, the tide of fortunes turned. The economy was in a depression, and Taikoo's business came to a halt. Some compradors actually "skipped town". In 1931, he resigned, and passed away in 1958.

Rumors had it that Taikoo was suspicious about the Moks fortunes. There were tai-pans who were unhappy with the Moks buying up luxurious Mansions. According to Taikoo archives, the Company actually had certain "reservations" on **幹生**'s performance.

The comprador system demanded "honesty". Perhaps the foreigners had finally mastered the Chinese trading business, and no longer needing the assistance of the "middleman". They wanted to hire employees on the "up and up" and so they abolished the Comprador position in 1931.

Finally, Professor Chow **周佳榮** from the Hong Kong Baptist University History department in charge of the Forum stated, "To understand the history of Hong Kong one must discuss and include the Compradors. To understand historical figures, one must understand his family and his surrounding relationships. These are very tough tasks. The essence of studying a person is to leave some room for conclusions. Do not make a verdict on unclear areas so that other researchers will have some more room for further explorations".

The Famous Moks

Professor Ting feels that after the abolishment of Comprador system in the 20th century, the Moks may have gone into real estate development and no longer rely on Comprador positions. Yet the Moks are a strong clan, its descendants have become Professionals like Doctors, Accountants etc. Some had gone into areas of athletics, arts and politics.

One of the descendants was the founder of the South China Athletic Association – 莫慶 . He graduated from Diocesan Boys' School and in 1904 and formed the first Chinese football (soccer) team with some students who loved soccer. In 1910, he started the South China Football Club. In 1920, the South China Athletic association was established and he became the Vice-chairman. Later on, he returned to a career in commerce.

Another famous person is Doctor 莫慶義, member of a generation after 幹生 . He returned to Guangdong with his father when he was young and attended the Lingnan University. After his graduation, he was assigned to work in Beijing. In the 70's, he returned to Hong Kong, with a specialty in Internal medicine. Many politicians requested his services. His son, Warren Mok is a world- renowned tenor.

Warren held a Masters degree in music from the Manhattan School of Music. In 1987, he had his debut at the Deutsche Opera Berlin. In recent years, Mok has been active in Asia not only as a singer but as a producer, with a mission to bring the culture of western opera to the mass audience. He is the Artistic Director of the Macao International Music Festival and Advisor since 2000. He has been an advisor and conductor for various HK/Macau Orchestras.

Legco (Legislative Council) celebrity 陸恭蕙 Christine Loh's mother was a granddaughter of 藻泉. In 1992, the Governor of Hong Kong (Christopher Patten) appointed Christine to Legco. In 1995, she ran in direct elections for Legco and won by large margins. She retired in 2000 and established *Civic Exchange* – a Hong Kong Think tank where she remains as the chief executor to-date.