

Chinese Guilds in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911): An Overview

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When recently reporting to a leading Chinese craft historian that this October a conference on guilds (*hanghui*) in world history is being held, she was amazed: Why should such an old-fashioned topic as guilds rouse the interest of global economic historians? Later I found out that the term I had been using for "guild" was the problem. This very pointedly shows the importance of names and terms, and therefore we will first discuss issues of terminology and translation.

The Chinese guilds which appear most similar to European counterparts originated in the late sixteenth century. They started to proliferate from the mid-eighteenth century onward and, after the intercession of the Taiping rebellion and the Opium Wars, soared from the mid-nineteenth century on. The establishment of Chambers of Commerce was promoted in the last years of the Qing dynasty, in the course of economic reforms and Western and Japan-oriented trade policies. Subsequent governments of the Republic of China, both at Peking (1912-1927) and Nanking (1927-1937) decreed first the launching of branch-specific commercial and industrial associations and eventually expressly ordered the reorganization of the traditional guilds. Although this command was formally implemented, various transitional modes and arrangements lingered on until the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949.

Over the past few months, this author has been setting up a list of Ming and Qing dynasty guilds. A first draft is now finished, and therefore, the development and the constitutive factors of Chinese guilds as they appear in our overview will be examined. We will then proceed to issues of distribution, internal organization, functions, and their relationship with different levels of the administration in the course of the evolutionary pattern outlined above. From there, we will take a closer look at the end of the guilds in the twentieth century. The paper concludes with a short case study of the Jingdezhen guilds or proto-guilds and an outlook to fields of comparison with European guilds.

Terminology and research situation

What is referred to as “Chinese guilds” is not a one-to-one equivalent to European “guilds”. On the contrary, Chinese trade and craft associations possess similar functions in institutional and political settings that are rather different from those of their European counterparts.

Chinese trade and craft associations first were referred to as “guilds” during the nineteenth century by foreign authors who either directly conducted business with them or investigated them in scholarly research.¹ A second wave of research interest ensued in the 1920s.² Since the 1930s, Japanese historians of China started to use the phonetic rendering *girudo*.³ In Chinese, the generic term *hanghui* (trade-line associations) as a translation of the term “guild” has been applied to the Chinese guilds at least since the 1930s.⁴ The *hang*, “trade lines”, were established in eighth century cities by the government for the purpose of tax collection and recruitment of obligatory artisan labour.⁵ They developed into extended urban “business quarters” during the Song and Yuan dynasties. But actually, the term *hanghui* was rarely used contemporaneously. This is one reason why its use for the Ming and Qing “guilds” has been criticized since the 1980s.⁶ Another, more important reason for rejecting the term *hanghui* lies in the fact that it seems to relegate the Chinese trade and craft associations to the level of the supposedly feudalistic, capitalism-impeding and monopolistic corporations which the

¹ K., “Chinese Guilds and their Rules”, in *The China Review*, 12/1 (August 1883); Mac Gowan, D.J., “Chinese Guilds or Chambers of Commerce and Trade Unions”, in *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 21, 1886; Bach, A.H., “Regeln der Kanton Kaufmannsgilde in Pakhoi”. *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen an der Königlichen Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin*, 1905, pp. 263-6; Morse, Hosea Ballou, *The Gilds of China. With an Account of the Gild Merchant or Co-Hong of Canton*. London: Longmans 1909.

² Gamble, Sidney D., and John Stewart Burgess, *Peking: A Social Survey*. New York: Doran 1921; Burgess, John Stewart, *The Guilds of Peking*. New York: Columbia University Press 1928, reprint Taipei: Ch'eng-wen 1966; Maybon, B., *Essai sur les Associations en Chine*. Paris 1925; Avenarius, G. G., *The Chinese Guilds: Brief sketch of their history with colour printed signs representing different lines of trade*. Harbin: Manchuria Research Society 1928, (Russian title: *Kitajskie cechi*; Chinese title: *Zhongguo gongshang tongye gonghui*); Wada Sei, “Kaikan kosho no kigen ni tsuite” (On the origins of association houses and public halls), in *Shigaku zasshi* (History journal) 33/10 (1922); Shanhai shuppan kyokai chosabu (ed.), *Shina no dogyo kumi'ai to sho kanshu* (The trade associations of China and commercial customary law). Shanghai: Shanhai shuppan kyokai 1925

³ Negishi Tadashi, *Shina no girudo no kenkyu* (A study of Chinese guilds). Tokyo: Shibun shoin 1938; Niida Noboru, “Pekin no kosho girudo to sono enkaku (shohen)” (The Peking craft and commercial guilds and their development, I.), in *Toyo bunka kenkyujo kiyo* (Memoirs of the Research Institute for Oriental Culture) 1, 1943, pp. 239-358.

⁴ Quan Hansheng, *Zhongguo hanghui zhidu shi* (The history of the Chinese guild system). Shengming shuju 1934, and since the 1950s, especially in Peng Zeyi's writings, most importantly the collection of guild materials *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji* (Collection of historical materials on Chinese craft and commercial guilds). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1995, but also in the Chinese literature on the “sprouts of capitalism” of the 1950s to 1980s.

⁵ Wang Shixin, “State Workshops and the Handicraft Industry”, in Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming (eds.), *Chinese Capitalism, 1522-1840*, Houndmills and London: Macmillan Press 2000. (transl. from *Zhongguo ziben zhuyi fazhan shi*, vol. 1, 1985, by Li Zhengde et al.), p. 77

⁶ Lü Zuoxie, “Ming Qing shiqide huiguan bing fei gongshangye de hanghui” (The Ming and Qing association houses are definitely not merchant and artisan ‘guilds’), in *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* (Research on Chinese history), 1982/2, p. 66

European guilds were in the view of Marx⁷. Such reservations have been expressed by historians on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The issue at stake is a more positive evaluation of the achievements of Chinese craft and trade associations beyond presupposed opinions on the rise and decline of Chinese capitalism. Some Chinese authors prefer more explicit, synthetic terms, such as Qiu Pengsheng's *gongshangye tuanti* (craft and trade associations) or make do without a generic term and refer to the original designations (*huiguan* and *gongsuo*) instead. Although the term *hanghui* is still used in some recent publications, such as the important study by Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu de jindai mingyun* (The modern fate of the guild system, 2003), for an initiation of a Chinese "Return of the Guilds", *hanghui* must indeed be applied with care, as the reaction of our Chinese colleagues shows. Nevertheless, while Chinese historians recently tend to outline the differences between their indigenous trade and craft associations and European *jierte* ("guild" in phonetic rendering), in Western studies of Chinese history, the term "Chinese guild" is in general use.

The Chinese trade and craft associations most similar to European guilds are the *huiguan* (Houses of assembly) and *gongsuo* (Public halls), but other designations, such as *bang* (Mutual help associations), *shuyuan* (Confucian academy), or the terms for various religious establishments exist too. These terms indicate the various ratios for association and different functions that may, however, have changed in the course of time. The list in the appendix shows that the most common designations were *gongsuo* (Public hall), which mainly designates common-profession organizations, and *huiguan* (Houses of assembly) referring to common-origin associations, often also rendered as "Landmannschaften". However, by far not all *huiguan* had functions as commercial or craft associations. Especially in the capital, they often served as hostels and liaison offices for fellow countrymen who stayed in Beijing on official business or for academic study and examination.⁸ About 400 *huiguan* are reported in Beijing for the late Qing, but only about ten to twenty per cent of them were commercial or craft associations. In recent years, Western research on *huiguan* and *Landmannschaften* has focused on their political role in nation-building rather than on their economic functions. The studies

⁷ Qiu Pengsheng, *Shiba, shijiu shiji Suzhou cheng de xinxing gongshangye tuanti* (The new associations of merchants and artisans in the city of Suzhou, 1700-1900). Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue wenshi congkan 1990, p. 1-3; cf. also Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu ji qi xiandai mingyun* (The modern fate of the guild system). Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 2003. For a synopsis of mainstream views on European guilds and the position held by Marx, see Ehmer, Josef, "Artisans, Guilds and Craft Regulations in European History and Historiography", in *Chinese Handicraft Regulations of the Qing Dynasty*, Moll-Murata/Song Jianze/Hans Ulrich Vogel (eds.). Munich: Iudicium 2005, p. 65. The classical study which most pointedly criticizes late nineteenth century guilds for impeding the development of capitalism in China is Peng Zeyi's "Shijiu shiji houqi Zhongguo chengshi shougongye shangye hanghui de chongjian he zuoyong" (The reestablishment and functions of Chinese urban handicraft and commercial guilds in the second half of the nineteenth century), *Lishi yanjiu* (Historical studies) 1965/1, pp. 71-102.

⁸ Richard Belsky in his recent in-depth study of the Peking *huiguan*, which he renders as "native-place lodge", describes their main characteristics as being "established and operated by and for native-place compatriots" and holding "corporately owned property." *Localities at the Center. Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2006, p. 20.

by Rowe⁹, Goodman¹⁰ and Belsky set out from the question as to whether common-origins led to particularism and impeded an autonomous citizenship, as Max Weber assumed¹¹. Rowe's study on Hankou, Goodman's for Shanghai, and Belsky's for Beijing all come to the conclusion that Weber erred in this respect. These authors have instead developed models of multiple identities and shown that native-place ties could enhance identification with the host city and eventually, with the nation-state. In recent Chinese research, the end of the guilds and issues of transition and transformation into Chambers of Commerce in the greater framework of the transition to a civil society have attracted the attention of scholars such as Ma Min and Zhu Ying, Chen Zhongping, Peng Nansheng, and Wang Xiang.¹²

Constitutive factors and definitions

Scholars generally agree that what constitutes Qing guilds are a common-interest group of merchants or artisans, a commonly owned or rented place of assembly, written regulations, and recognition by the local administration. William Rowe points out that the last three were "signals" for the transition of a guild to formal organizational status.¹³ Qiu Pengsheng outlines the process of "formalization" of the Suzhou guilds as follows: interested individual artisans or merchants mobilize colleagues on grounds of common home place, religious beliefs and the necessity of mutual help, to form a group. They raise funds for a meeting place and seek for the recognition of the local administration. In a second step of formalization, the measures for the protection and use of the common property are reflected and negotiated.¹⁴

Concerning the origins of the guilds, Peter Golas sees associations of alien, travelling merchants who started to settle down in the region of their sales markets as

⁹ Rowe, William T., *Hankow. Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Pr. 1984, and *Hankow. Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796-1895*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Pr. 1989.

¹⁰ Goodman, Bryna, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1995

¹¹ Weber, Max, *Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (New York 1951), pp. 13-20, quoted after Belsky. We should add, however, that Max Weber, whose informants on Chinese guilds were MacGowan and Morse, did write that the Chinese in cities and countryside practiced self-government, and the individual was extremely dependent on professional associations. See Weber, Max, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*. Ed. by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer und Petra Kolonko. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck 1991, p. 40.

¹² Ma Min, Zhu Ying, *Chuantong yu jindai de erzhong bianzou – Wan Qing Suzhou shanghui ge an yanjiu* (Dual variations of tradition and modernity – A case study of the late Qing Suzhou trade associations). Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe 1993; Chen Zhongping, "The Origins of Chinese Chambers of Commerce in the Lower Yangzi Region", *Modern China* 27/2, April 2001, pp. 155-201; Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*; Wang Xiang, "Jindai Zhongguo shougongye hanghui de yanbian" (Changes in Chinese craft guilds in the Modern era), *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* (Studies on Chinese Economic History) 1999:2, pp. 56-70.

¹³ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 257.

¹⁴ Qiu Pengsheng, *Shiba, shiji shiji Suzhou cheng de xinxing gongshangye tuanti* (The new merchant and artisan associations in eighteenth and nineteenth century Suzhou). Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue wenshi congkan 1990, p. 190.

the first nuclei for the more formalized guilds.¹⁵ One of the first aims of these associations was to support each other with information and bypass local brokers and middlemen. Such guilds that most often formed *huiguan* were based on the membership criterion of common geographic origin (*tongxiang*). The other main form of guilds was based on the principle of common type of work or trade (*tongye*). In these guilds, most often of the *gongsuo* type, the region could play a role, but was not a necessary requirement as was the case for the *tongxiang* type. Thus, the most distinguishing feature between the early Chinese and the European guilds is the fact that it was not necessary to be a formally registered citizen of a certain city or place in order to become a guild member, but – at least for the *tongxiang* type - to belong to a certain place of origin. It is generally agreed that in the course of the nineteenth century, membership to a specific common origin group became less decisive for guild formation. However, the first guilds we know of were of this type.

The criterion 'common type of work' is often divided into the craft and the merchant sector. Rowe thinks that in the case of Hankou, more than elsewhere, this distinction was weak and those who processed a product often sold it as well, such as tea refiners or metal smelters.¹⁶ But we find that it applies for important manufacturing regions such as Suzhou and the porcelain city Jingdezhen.

final point that needs to be stressed is that not all guilds or proto-guilds displayed the three constitutive elements of guild houses, regulations, and official recognition.¹⁷ The guilds that feature all these criteria were mostly founded or reorganized in the late nineteenth century and show a certain grade of organizational sophistication that is due to, among other factors, a growing number of interested persons and enterprises. This level of formalization ensures comparability with guilds worldwide. It does not, however, represent the whole range of co-operative connections and networks which were active in crafts and commerce.

Distribution in Time and Space

The "Short table of the Chinese craft and citing four examples commercial guilds, 1655-1911"¹⁸ contains a list of ca. 600 dated and 130 undated guild houses and associations. It has been compiled from the printed guild materials collected by Peng Zeyi. Since few stele inscriptions, which form an important source for Chinese guild history, are included,

¹⁵ Golas, „Early Ch'ing Guilds", p. 555-557.

¹⁶ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 252-3.

¹⁷ Cf. Peng Nansheng's observation that "trades without associations and associations without regulations" were a common phenomenon. Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu* p. 22.

¹⁸ In Peng Zeyi (ed.), *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shilia*, vol. 2, pp. 997-1048.

it is certainly not complete¹⁹. On the other hand, even very detailed research on the guilds in Hunan may not account for an as exhaustive coverage of the subject as we might wish for. However, it also features a number of associations and groups or “trades” that may not have risen to formal guild status; a fair number of them may not have owned a guild house, but are only known as “business lines” *hang*. Further research will show whether all of the entries in the “Short list” can really qualify as guilds or guild-like associations. In this sense we have used it *faute de mieux*, but we assume that it gives a first impression that is not too far off the mark of features such as distribution over time and space as well as the regions of origins of the guild members. The main areas of guild formation, according to this list (see Table 2), were the Lower, Middle, and Upper Yangzi (the provinces Jiangsu, Hubei, Hunan, and Sichuan with the cities Suzhou, Shanghai, Changsha, Hankou, and Chongqing respectively), and the coastline with Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Zhejiang, Zhili and Fengtian. Further research may add the inland regions which seem quite underrepresented, such as Sichuan, Jiangxi, and Yunnan, but also the North-western and North-eastern frontiers, such as Mongolia²⁰ and Manchuria. Evidence from Foshan stele inscriptions shows that at least ten further guilds that possessed guild houses need to be added for this industrial region in the vicinity of Canton.²¹ Nevertheless we can assume the correctness of the main impression that this list yields: namely a high concentration of guilds down the coast and up the Yangzi River. Typical outsending regions, which can best be observed by noting the names of guild houses of the *huiguan* (Landsmannschaften) type, are the coastal provinces Guangdong, Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Zhili, as well as the home provinces of the famous local bankers, the Shanxi merchants, and the most efficient salt traders, the Huizhou merchants from Anhui. Since the origins of these groups are not always clear and since, as we have seen, probably more than half of the guild houses were not based on the principle of common origin, this category is more elusive than the preceding one. However, we should not expect great surprises from the addition of the information from stele materials, but rather a further clarification of the present evidence.

Distribution over time is shown in Chart 1. The origins of the guilds in the late sixteenth century have been seen in conjunction with intensified interregional trade and geographic mobility.²² They moreover coincide with the decline of the system of obligatory labour that had been applied, in various forms, by central governments since the foundation of the Chinese empire in the 3rd century B.C.E. “Guilds” (*hang*) had been

¹⁹ Cf. Vincent Goossaert, “Matériaux et recherches nouvelles sur les corporations chinoises urbaines traditionnelles (des Ming à 1949)”, *Revue bibliographique de Sinologie*, 17, 1999, p. 210. So far important stele texts from the guild houses in Beijing, Suzhou, Shanghai, Foshan, and Tianjin have been published.

²⁰ Cf. the epigraphic materials contained in Imahori Seiji's study on Hohhot.

²¹ *Ming Qing Foshan beike wenxian jingji ziliao* (Economic materials in Ming and Qing dynasty Foshan epigraphy and printed documents). Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe 1987.

²² Rowe, William T., “Ming-Qing Guilds”, *Ming Qing yanjiu*, Sept. 1992, p. 47.

installed since the eighth century in order to facilitate the recruitment of artisans for public works and to coordinate the taxes in kind which artisans and merchants had to procure for the government. However, since the late seventeenth century, the work services as a rule were no longer requisitioned without payment, for governments, especially in the Qing dynasty, were prepared to pay market or near market labour wages and prices for finished products. The new, more independent guilds from the sixteenth century onward still coordinated their obligations towards the government, but since the private markets had greatly expanded since the late Ming, their main target was to regulate access and homogenize markets and chances for their membership. The slight rise of craft guilds in the eighteenth century has been attributed to the need of the government to enlist the help of employers against their unruly workers. The much bigger increase after the mid-nineteenth century in the view of most authors is due to the challenge caused by the increase of capitalist-style production and its competition with traditional manufacture and commerce.

Functions and Internal Organization

As in the case with most guilds worldwide, the functions of Chinese guilds lie in economic, social, and religious sectors. Various scholars who have attempted to arrive at generalizations or to distil the most characteristic of these functions have arrived at very different conclusions. As has been remarked by William Rowe, "it is fair to say that there are as many explanations of their functional rationale as there have been observers."²³ This fact, however, is by no means restricted to the study of Chinese guilds.²⁴

In the economic field, guilds regulated prices and wages and tried to achieve monopolies within their territories by inclusion of all actors in the trade. It has been stressed that in guild regulations rather than keeping newcomers out, the general strategy was to force everybody in the trade into the guilds.²⁵ Other important issues were access to raw materials and labour force via the apprentice system. Guild regulations most often give the duration of apprenticeship, three years as a rule, but do not specify the contents of learning the trade. Golas observes that "the connection between the time required for a novice to learn a trade and the formal duration of the apprenticeship [was] only remote."²⁶ Indeed, since the number of apprentices a workshop could only take on was very restricted, and often limited to one position only, the duration of three years actually regulated wage costs and work quality rather than

²³ Rowe, William T., "Ming-Qing Guilds", p. 48.

²⁴ Ehmer, "Artisans, Guilds and Craft Regulations in European History and Historiography", esp. pp.65 ff.

²⁵ Rowe, "Ming-Qing Guilds", p. 60.

²⁶ Golas, "Early Qing Guilds", p. 566.

the period of training.²⁷ Nor was testing the master's qualifications an issue in Chinese guilds. Whoever had the funds to open a shop and to pay the entrance fees for the guild could do so.

The two opposing interpretations of the economic role of guilds hold that either they enabled merchants to make profit by reducing transaction costs, e.g. for brokers. The other view is that by restricting the number of players and in general curbing competition, the free flow of trade and eventually, the rise of capitalism was impeded.²⁸ The social functions of the guilds, such as the provision of welfare facilities such as communal cemeteries, elementary schools, and poverty relief to members as well as municipal tasks in fire-fighting, policing, and infrastructure (esp. streets and bridges), and, last but not least, entertainment in form of theatrical plays and processions for the guild patrons, have been emphasized by Niida Noboru and Rowe.²⁹ At least in Hankou, where commerce thrived in the second half of the nineteenth century, charity and community service tended to exceed the membership of the guild proper. However, as the principle of organization along the line of common origin weakened, so did the ties to the home region. Rowe cites as exceptional the case of assistance by the Shanxi *huiguan* to the home province after the big famines of the early 1870s.³⁰

Rowe has also discussed the specific devotional piety which serves as a form of self-assertion and creates a feeling of responsibility and accountability towards the patron saint(s) of the guild.³¹ In his sample, nineteenth-century Hankou, he finds that virtually every guild was a religious fraternity.³² The observers of the Peking guilds were less convinced of the importance of religion in the twentieth-century capital; but Timothy Bradstock, reading the same sources, comes to the conviction that if religious service was not practiced, this resulted from lack of funds rather than disenchantment and religious scepticism.³³

As a rule, Qing guilds were organized in management boards, and directors that were recruited among its members. This could be effected on a rotational basis³⁴, but

²⁷ Cf. the judgment by a representative of the Peking barbers' guild that big and reputable shops employed few apprentices and many journeymen, and only small places had many apprentices. Niida Noboru et al. (eds.), *Pekin kosho girudo shiryoshu* (Collected materials on Peking craft and commercial guilds). Tokyo: Toyogaku bunken sentaa soka 1975-1983, p. 298

²⁸ See Rowe, "Ming-Qing Guilds", p. 48 for a discussion of the controversial positions of Chen/Myers, Negishi Tadashi, Quan Hansheng, and Peng Zeyi.

²⁹ Rowe, "Ming-Qing Guilds", p. 49

³⁰ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 265-6.

³¹ Rowe, *Hankow*, pp. 298 ff.

³² Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 290.

³³ Burgess, John Stewart, *The Guilds of Peking*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1928, reprint Taipei, Ch'eng-wen, 1966, p. 214; Bradstock, Timothy, *Craft Guilds in Ch'ing Dynasty China*, Ph. D. Diss., Harvard University 1984, pp. 248-9.

³⁴ Morse, Hosea, *The Gilds of China*, p. 12, cites as examples the Tea Guild at Shanghai, with "an annually elected committee of twelve, each committee man acting in rotation for one month as chairman, or manager"; the Bankers' Guild at Ningbo with an elected treasurer and a committee of twelve; the Carpenters' Guild at Wenzhou with five elected headmen; the Millers' Guild of Wenzhou, composed of sixteen mill proprietors who elect four representatives annually.

cases where the offices were hereditary are also known³⁵. An English observer in the late nineteenth century found this system showing traits of “almost pure democracy”, as opposed to the English guilds which were subjected to oligarchical rule. In the most recent monograph on Chinese guilds, Peng Nansheng also reflects on this organisatory system with, in his analysis, combined elements of “rudimentary democracy, authoritarianism, and customary law”³⁶. He sees the democratic elements in the yearly rotating directorship system of some guilds and the elections in others³⁷, in the fact that a quorum was necessary for important decisions and that in some guilds, controversial decisions could be decided with secret votes³⁸

he tasks of the board comprised arbitration among the members and active support in cases of official encroachments or unfounded customer claims. Moreover, in the course of the late nineteenth century, some of the guilds based on common origin started to change to encompass several smaller guilds or networks (*bang*)³⁹. Thus, as they gained a huge membership over several thousands of people and considerable corporate property, such as big guild houses and other real estate, corporate tasks became increasingly complex. In such guilds, directors and managers had to handle the financial dealings and allocation of expenses for building and maintaining guild houses and other social facilities like cemeteries and schools, or arranging sacrifices, theatrical performances, plenary meetings, and banquets.⁴⁰

All these tasks do not seem to distinguish Chinese guilds a great deal from guilds worldwide. John Burgess, who had the chance to interview representatives of most Peking guilds in the 1920s, summarizes the most salient features of the guilds as follows:⁴¹

- (1) Guilds are local in character and field of operation
- (2) Their general objective is to conserve the welfare of all the members of the respective groups.
- (3) In the guild, the relationship between employers, employees and apprentices is close and personal.
- (4) The intention of the guilds is to limit unrestricted competition between members.
- (5) They exert solidarity against opposing bodies, such as other guilds, customers or employers, and the administration
- (6) They own corporate property derived from contributions by the members

³⁵ Niida et al. (eds.), *Pekin kosho girudo shiryoshu*, p. 529, interview with a representative from the hatmakers' guild, who said that leadership positions were now rotational but had been rotational before 1928.

³⁶ Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu* p. 32

³⁷ Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu* p. 32-3

³⁸ Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu* p. 40

³⁹ This process has been described by Rowe, *Hankow* p. 264 as the formation of „multiplex guilds“.

⁴⁰ Rowe, *Hankow*, p.

⁴¹ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, pp. 211-2.

Other characteristics he sees as common, but not always present are a struggle to monopolize the market in the guild area; religious worship of a patron saint; an apprentice system; an annual guild meeting, followed by a banquet. It should be added that in contrast to this essentially positive and nostalgic view on corporations, authors such as Peng Zeyi have pointed out the harsher sides of guild practices in the late nineteenth century, such as demanding heavy accession fees for apprentices who had finished their training periods, or in many respects cooperating with the authorities to the disadvantage of the membership.⁴²

In fact, when reading an overview of the functions that European guilds fulfilled⁴³, we find the most similarities on the economic side. Cultural and religious functions vary in concrete expression rather than in substance. But in the fields of training, education, and qualification; inclusion or exclusion of workforce on grounds of gender and geographic origin; and, most conspicuously, the political and legal setting of the guilds, the differences seem much greater.

Relationship to the Government

As in the case of guild functions, opinions are divided on the relations between the government and the guilds. Some studies stress the importance of the recognition of guilds by local authorities. Timothy Bradstock assumes that the known craft guilds all were sanctioned by the local authorities and that in fact, that the main rationale of these guilds was to assist the government in the administration of commerce and crafts, and especially the unruly elements present in these strata of society.⁴⁴ He argues that the rising numbers of guilds after the mid-eighteenth century coincides with the dilemma of population growth without concomitant increase of administrative personnel.⁴⁵ "Relieving the government of some of its burden", in Bradstock's terms, meant first and foremost to ensure municipal security by controlling the workforce and prevent it from striking and rioting. Local administrations would rather depend on employers' guilds than allow the formation of workers' associations. Cases like those of the Suzhou calenderers, who were refused to register their journeymen's guild in 1715, because they were feared by local government and employers as notorious strikers and troublemakers, are well known and described.⁴⁶ Peng Zeyi also discusses the intensified control of guilds by local governments after the Opium wars, when guilds would be required to collect the transit tariff *lijin* and perform community tasks (fire fighting, policing, building and maintaining

⁴² Peng Zeyi, "Shijiu shiji houqi", pp. 93 ff.

⁴³ Ehmer, "Artisans, Guilds and Craft Regulations", esp. pp.65 ff.

⁴⁴ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, pp. 63-66.

⁴⁵ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, pp. 63-66.

⁴⁶ E.g. Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 58 ff.

infrastructure) as described above.⁴⁷ In general, Marxist Chinese researchers are convinced that in the late Qing period recognition by the local government was indispensable for the guilds. For instance, Peng Nansheng, citing four examples from Suzhou, insists that “private” guilds that were not acknowledged by the local government were strictly forbidden.⁴⁸ A secretly founded guild of tobacco processors was forbidden in 1867 for trying to monopolize the market. In the same year, in reaction to a complaint by eighteen candle makers’ shops to the effect that twelve individuals had tried to organize a guild and “instigate the masses [i.e. the workers against their employers]”, this association was also declared illegal. In 1870, Suzhou brocade weavers were not allowed to “try to establish a guildhouse (*gongsuo*), set up a guild leader and guild regulations, and molest their colleagues by enforcing donations.” It was also forbidden that the guild should re-open under another name or define itself as a religious community. In the third case, the magistrate of Wuxian prohibited the establishment of a second guild for printers and dyers on the grounds that the previous guild was well-functioning and active in charitable work, so there was no need for a second guild. The magistrate pointed out that “It is rare that two guilds exist in the same trade.” However, in Peng Nansheng’s view, while local authorities always enforced their power of sanction, on the other hand the guilds also could expand their autonomy in the framework of cooperation with officials.⁴⁹

A contrary position was expressed in one of the earliest studies on the Chinese guilds by Hosea Morse, Statistical Secretary of the Inspectorate General of Customs in China, an institution founded by foreign traders that collected maritime trade taxes between 1854 and the late 1940’s on behalf of the Chinese state. Morse sees the Chinese government as being a caretaker state that only collects taxes and provides security services by installing police forces and stresses the independence of the guilds from the government: “The trade gilds [...] have moulded their own organisation, sought their own objects, devised their own regulations, and enforced them in their own way and by their own methods.”⁵⁰ To Morse, we also owe the frequently dictum “The guilds were never within the law: they grew up outside the law; and as associations they neither recognized the law nor claimed its protection”.⁵¹ William Rowe has qualified these assertions by pointing out that as a matter of fact, Qing legislation issued by the central government does not include any provisions on guilds. Legal texts may call for vigilance against

⁴⁷ Peng Zeyi, “Shijiu shiji houqi Zhongguo chengshi shougongye shangye hanghui de chongjian he zuoyong” (The reestablishment and functions of Chinese urban craft and commercial guilds in the second half of the nineteenth century), *Lishi yanjiu* (Historical research) 1965.1, pp. 71-102 p. 91

⁴⁸ Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 58-9.

⁴⁹ Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Morse, Hosea Ballou, *The Gilds of China*. London: Longmans 1909, pp. 20-1.

⁵¹ Morse, *The Gilds of China*, p. 27. He qualifies as “rare” the case of the Wenzhou carpenters’ guild that was recognized by the city officials in return for corvée duties (p. 12).

"monopolistic formation of cartels"⁵², but the manner of converting this warning into action was more or less entrusted to the judgment of local authorities. Thus, not the central government but the local authorities were responsible for interacting with the guilds.

This can explain why the handicraft regulations (*jiangzuo zeli*) that were issued by the offices of the central government for officials who managed public building projects and craft production at the palace workshops contain no references to the guilds, although artisans were recruited from the open market and certainly organized in guilds. In the writings of the guilds, on the other hand, we have so far only found two slight clues that the authorities of the central government had any contact with the guilds, because the names of two government bureaus were included in lists of donators for the embellishment of two guild temples.⁵³

Rowe explains that at Hankou, the advantages of registering a guild rather than any administrative coercion prompted them to seek official recognition.⁵⁴ A registered guild could appeal to the local authorities if they saw their rights infringed or their collective property violated. Some of the smaller guilds, however, preferred to stay anonymous, but also bigger groups such as the Huizhou huiguan in Hankou applied only 27 years after its foundation for official recognition.⁵⁵ Thus, informal character was possible if the guild could do without administrative protection.

Can these contradictory views of extreme control versus the extreme laissez-faire of local governments towards the guilds be reconciled? To a certain extent, they may reflect regional variance. From early on, Suzhou was one of the most important centers of manufacture, especially for silk and cotton textiles. Conflicts between employers and workers are recorded in the Suzhou guild epigraphy since the early eighteenth century. It is conceivable that Suzhou authorities would try to obtain closer control especially of the workers' guilds than local governments in other regions. On the other hand, the cases cited as proof of the restrictive government actions against guilds hardly seem to warrant a view of extremely harsh control, at least in the late nineteenth century. Rowe cites an example where the Hankou guild of the professional itinerant fish peddlers was not prohibited, but its exclusive sales right were not sanctioned by the local authorities.⁵⁶ However on the whole, Rowe has more instances of government support for the guilds and shows the attempts of the guilds to actively court Hankou and provincial officials by, for instance, conferring honorary titles on them.⁵⁷ Moreover, the Hankou guilds since pre-Taiping days had started to form alliances that eventually culminated in the "All-Hankou

⁵² Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 257, quoting from the legal code *Da Qing lüli huiji bianlan* 15.2-3.

⁵³ Niida et al. (eds.), *Pekin kosho girudo shiryō shu*, p. 682 (1899), and p. 723 (1792)

⁵⁴ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 258.

⁵⁵ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 258.

⁵⁶ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 297-8.

⁵⁷ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 334-7.

guild confederation" in which over hundred separate guilds participated. This body took over most of the city administration after the military mutiny in 1911 that led to the collapse of the Qing dynasty.⁵⁸ As Rowe concludes,

"In nineteenth century Hankow, it seems, there was an unusually wide gap between de jure and de facto systems of political authority. Thus a substantial degree of de facto autonomy had emerged, with real power balanced between officials and leaders of local society; over the course of the century the balance shifted very much toward the latter."⁵⁹

From the picture emerging from Hankou, it might well be that Hankou officials were more accommodating towards the guilds than those of, for example, Suzhou. Moreover, guild confederations as powerful as that in Hankou were not common in other Chinese cities with high concentrations of guilds.⁶⁰ The distribution or concentration of power also depended on the composition of commercial and trade guilds in the respective localities. So far, detailed studies on the differences between trade and commercial guilds are missing, but we may safely assume that merchant guilds provided of better resources and possibilities to make the authorities act on their behalf. In sum, cooperation and interconnection of local officials and guilds certainly were much more complex than Morse believed (and Max Weber took over from him), but the concrete situations may have differed from place to place.

Outlook to the Twentieth Century

In recent years, the transition of the guilds from "traditional" to "modern" has been researched intensely by Chinese scholars. The establishment of Chambers of Commerce in the late Qing is a focal point for this transition and for the further fate of the guilds. In an important case study, Chen Zhongping has described the beginnings of the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce. Unlike in Hankou, guild alliances did not exist in the cities and market towns of the Yangzi Delta. After several preliminary forms, through trial and error, and in a process of complex cooperation and competition of elite merchants with the local, provincial, and central governments, the Qing state in 1904 finally set it on the agenda of its "New Policies" reforms to foster commerce through the Chambers of Commerce. The government allowed these Chambers to be organized and have their leadership recruited from and elected by elite merchants. The role of the guilds therein was not specified in

⁵⁸ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 334.

⁵⁹ Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 339.

⁶⁰ Chen Zhongping, "The Origins of Chinese Chambers of Commerce", p. 169, esp. note 7.

the 1904 decree. However, in practice not all guild members could also join the Chambers of Commerce, but only the leaders of the most influential guilds.⁶¹

After the fall of the Qing the subsequent Republican governments at Peking and Nanking tried to strengthen state control of commerce and industries and in their legislation gradually eliminated the traditional forms of association.

The 1918 "Regulations on Industrial and Commercial Associations"

The first legal provisions that concern Chinese trade associations in particular trade lines were the "Regulations on industrial and commercial associations".⁶² They were promulgated in 1918 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce of the Peking government. The main intention of these regulations was to establish special new associations for industries and commercial branches which so far had no associations. Enterprises with handicraft production were expressly excluded.⁶³ The pre-existing trade associations, such as *huiguan* and *gongsuo*, were allowed to continue their operations, but were expected to submit their regulations to local authorities for official inspection.⁶⁴ The new associations had to get their regulations endorsed as well. They had to include seven points (1) name and place of the association, (2) objectives and methods, (3) election procedures for the board and its limits of authority, (4) rules of assembly, (5) procedures of entrance and withdrawal, (6) fees and their collection, (7) sanctions in case of violations. Since these regulations allowed for the coexistence of old and new associations and excluded handicraft trades, they contained no incentives for existing craft guilds to reorganize. The interviews which John Burgess and his research associates carried out in 1926 and 1927⁶⁵ reflect this situation where the legal existence of traditional guilds was still acknowledged, but the guild people already felt the upcoming crisis – not only in the form of mechanization, but also the threat to their self-determination posed by authorities. As the binding force of traditional guild regulations grew weaker, members lost interest in guild meetings and common religious worship⁶⁶; the previous rules could hardly be enforced, and guildsmen became increasingly reluctant to punish offenders or report non-members.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Burgess' informants pointed out that the situation was less exacerbated in Peking than in the south, because up to

⁶¹ Chen Zhongping, "The Origins of Chinese Chambers of Commerce", p. 191.

⁶² Peng Zeyi (ed.), *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao*, vol. 2, pp. 985-986, "Gong shang tongye gonghui guize" (Regulations on Industrial and Commercial Associations), Decree no. 45 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, Nongshang bu, promulgated 1918/4/27.

⁶³ "Regulations on industrial and commercial associations" 1918/4/27, p. 985, par. 2.

⁶⁴ "Regulations on industrial and commercial associations" 1918/4/27, p. 986, par. 9. The commercial and craft associations founded before these regulations were issued are referred to as *gongsuo*, *hanghui*, and *huiguan* – an early occurrence of the term *hanghui*.

⁶⁵ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 65.

⁶⁶ Burgess reports that guilds with a relatively recent date of foundation, such as the dye stuff guild and the electricians' guild, had no patron saints. *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 175.

⁶⁷ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 214

then, few mechanized factories operated there and the city enforced high import tariffs.⁶⁸ On the whole, the situation in 1926/7 was ambivalent: representatives of eighteen guilds maintained that membership and general interest in the guilds were decreasing, sixteen said the contrary was the case, and five declared that the situation had not changed⁶⁹. A detailed analysis shows that two types of guilds were disappearing: those which manufactured goods no longer in demand, such as queue accessory makers, sword makers etc., and those which offered business prospects too huge to have themselves constricted by guild rules. In Peking the case in point was the production of rugs, for which an export market had opened⁷⁰. But generally, industrial production and the changed labour relations played a less important role here than in the big treaty port cities along the coast. In Shanghai, for instance, the small workshops were driven from the market much faster, and "the guilds went with them" – like the former Shanghai cotton guild. At the same time, new guilds opened for electricians, car and bicycle dealers that were, as Burgess affirms, "organized along the same lines as the ordinary Peking commercial guild".⁷¹

Most important, however, was the fact that employers' and employees' or workers' associations were parting ways. Journeymen's guilds, as has been discussed above, had fought for their right of existence since the early eighteenth century. Their numbers, however, were few. The "Short List" contains six references to existing journeymen's guilds⁷², two more are mentioned by Niida and Bradstock⁷³. They all were founded in the second half of the nineteenth century. Similar to the case of the trade associations, in the transitional phase in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the "traditional" journeymen's associations increased, and at the same time "modern" labour unions were established under the growing influence of the Comintern, the Guomindang (National People's Party) and the Communist Party,. The differences between the two lay in the variant scope – labour unions united several trade branches,

⁶⁸ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 214

⁶⁹ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 215/6 and table XIX.

⁷⁰ Guild membership dropped from 354 to 40. Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 221.

⁷¹ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 223.

⁷² No. 267: Hubei, Hankou, Earth emperor palace (Tuhuang gong), built in 1867 by the journeymen plasterers of the Wen network at the Juren ward; No. 305: 1871, Hubei, Hankou, Sun guildhouse (Taiyang gongsuo), built in 1871 by the coal and charcoal journeymen's guild (Meitan shiyou gongyi hui); No. 417: Hubei, Hankou, Four saints hall (Si shen dian), the guildhouse of the firework journeymen, built in 1890; No. 389: Hunan, Changsha, Regulations (*tiaogui*) negotiated in 1887 by the journeymen of the lacquerer's shops; No. 554: Guangxu era (1875-1908), Hunan, Changsha, Western network tailors' trade (Xi bang chengyi ye). The Changsha tailors had seven associations. The Xuanyuan and the Luck Supporting Association were organized by the masters, the Lords of luck, Luck and excellence, Rising luck, Luck producing, and Luck and bliss associations were organized by the journeymen. In the Guangxu era the colleagues reunited and revised their old regulations; No. 555: Guangxu (1875-1908), Hunan, Changsha, Fair business hall (Zheng ye tang), established by journeymen and masters of the brush shops (*bidian*). Formerly journeymen and masters belonged to separate networks (*bang*). After the construction of the Fair business hall, they united, but their separate regulations still applied.

⁷³ See Moll-Murata, "Social Harmony and Social Unrest: Guild Activities in Qing Dynasty Peking", in *A Passion for China*, Chiu Ling-yeong and Donatella Guida (eds.). Leiden: Brill 2005, pp. 265-6 for the strikes of the shoemaker journeymen's guild that was founded some decades before the respective shop owners' association. Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 231 further mentions a Changsha tinplate smiths journeymen's guild.

while the journeymen's guilds represented and negotiated only for the membership within a particular branch. Power and decision making structures in unions were more democratic, while in the pre-existing guilds, masters frequently decided questions of price fixing, wages and hours of work among themselves.⁷⁴ Moreover, membership in the trade unions had to remain voluntary, a factor again different from the traditional system, in which, persuasion and pressure could be applied informally in order to make everybody in the trade or from a particular home region join the guild. Instances of fusion of guilds with labour unions were also reported. In fact, building up labour unions, legalization of strikes, arbitration by government commissions and the principle of voluntary membership was one of the basic policies of the Guomindang which it enforced in its power base Canton⁷⁵. A 1927 survey of the Canton city government shows that out of 180 labour unions 74 were reorganized guilds.⁷⁶ Apprenticeship, another vital sector of the previous guilds, apprenticeship, was evolving into a system where the rights and duties of the apprentices were regulated more clearly, and which entailed more theoretical training in schools that were often operated or supervised by the government. Finally, the newly established Chambers of Commerce – by 1915 869 openings in cities and towns were reported⁷⁷ – became control organs that supervised the activities of the old guilds as well as the new trade associations. In Peking, the Chambers were becoming increasingly powerful. They collected taxes, and in the court of the Chamber of Commerce arbitrated disputes among the guild members which had formerly been settled by neutral members from within the guild. The Chambers, in contrast to the guilds and guild federations in the cities, were interlinked on the provincial and national level.

The 1927 "Regulations on craft associations"

After the National People's Party had consolidated its government in Nanking in 1927, economic development ranked high in its program and agenda. The "Regulations on the craft associations" (Gongyi tongye gonghui guize)⁷⁸ were promulgated in late 1927. While the legislation of the previous government was more focused on the reform of the merchant associations, these new regulations now formally set an end also to the traditional craft guilds. They stipulated that the pre-existing guilds should all reorganize

⁷⁴ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 224.

⁷⁵ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 230. Canton was the capital of an alternative military government established in 1917 under Sun Yatsen.

⁷⁶ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 225, quoting Ta Chen and S.K. Sheldon Tzo, "The Unionization of Labour in China", *Monthly Labour Review*, Washington.

⁷⁷ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 227-9.

⁷⁸ Peng Zeyi (ed.), *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao*, vol. 2, pp. 990-995, promulgated on 1927/11/21 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Industry, 37 paragraphs.

and report to the authorities in charge.⁷⁹ This was to be applied to all production enterprises, regardless of whether these were mechanical or handicraft manufacturers. In any administrative region the associations were the sole representatives of their respective trade branch.⁸⁰ As in the 1918 regulations, the associations were obliged to set up regulations according to a given pattern. Moreover, they were expected to cooperate with government authorities by answering questionnaires on the state of the trade.⁸¹ Together with the 1929 "Law on Industrial and Commercial Associations" (Gong shang tongye gonghui fa) and the 1930 implementation rules "Detailed Regulations for the Execution of the Law on Industrial and Commercial Associations" (Gong shang tongye gonghui fa shixing xice), this body of commercial legislation now emphasized compulsory membership and cooperation with government authorities and secured the inclusion of all firms with a certain branch.⁸² The old style guilds were to be reorganized within one year and had to report to a supervisory committee (Shangren tuanti zhengli weiyuanhui). The names of the associations were unified, and almost all of them were renamed "xxx tongye gonghui" (Public association of the xxx branch). In sum, control of state and the National People's Party was enforced.⁸³

Unlike under the Qing, in the Republic of China the actions of the commercial associations were closely monitored and presented in municipal statistics. Wuhan (the conglomeration of previous Hankou and the adjacent districts Hanyang and Wuchang) by 1934 had 159 new associations, Shanghai 236, thereof 40 industrial (figures of 1936), Chengdu in Sichuan 111 by 1939. By 1933, a total of 4185 new associations in 21 provinces was recorded;⁸⁴ this is certainly more than even the closest reading of Qing texts and steles will ever reveal. The process of transformation seemed to be concluded by the 1930s.

Guilds in transition

During the 1940s, another large scale investigation on traditional guilds and their successors, the trade and craft associations, was conducted in Peking by the Japanese law historian Niida Noboru and his colleagues and students. They visited about 50

⁷⁹ "Regulations on craft associations", p. 995, par. 36.

⁸⁰ "Regulations on craft associations", p. 990, par. 2 and 3.

⁸¹ "Regulations on craft associations", p. 990, par. 12.

⁸² Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 76.

⁸³ Cf. the oath of allegiance to the Guomindang to be pledged by newly elected directors and board members of the Shanghai silk and satin association recorded by Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 76, quoting from Shanghai zhouduan ye tongye gonghui dang'an, S230-1-13. "We most sincerely will to follow the leadership and orders of the National People's Party, believe in the Three People's Principles, respect the teachings of the late Prime Minister [Sun Yatsen], accept the wishes of the representatives, will never violate discipline or seek private gain and practice graft. If we should break this vow, we will accept the most severe punishment."

⁸⁴ Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 78.

previous guild sites, recorded all the existent stele texts and interviewed guild representatives.

While Burgess was already sceptical about the future of the guilds, the tone in most of Niida's interviews is even more sombre. Evidently, little enthusiasm was felt for the new trade associations, but nostalgia for the guilds remained. Why was that so? First and foremost, the new associations entailed less autonomy than the guilds. One informant from the barbers' association said that the statutes of their association had been enforced on them in 1942, but that these were not considered the "real" rules of the trade⁸⁵. To a representative of the hatmakers' guild, inheritance of leadership positions seemed preferable to rotational directorship.⁸⁶ Several interview partners confirmed that belonging to an association brought little or no benefit.⁸⁷ This led to a situation in which the "old" *huiguan* and the "modern" associations coexisted – sometimes in competition, but also complementing each other. Moreover, the rule of sole representation of one trade branch was sometimes avoided by declaring the reason for association as one of common geographic descent rather than of common trade. A Shanghai guidebook published in 1930 lists nine guilds in the tobacco trade, nine dyers' guilds, and three lacquer ware guilds. The names of many of the guilds listed suggest common place associations.⁸⁸ This shows that common descent was (and in fact is still) a decisive factor for association.

In general, the interviewees in Peking in various ways expressed discontent towards the new associations and were friendlier disposed towards the *huiguan*, which retained some of their social, religious, and cultural functions. One important factor here is that the new associations were considered instruments of the authorities which in occupied Peking acted according to the exigencies of a war economy by restricting and fixing prices and the access to raw materials.

Thus the transition from the guilds to the trade associations may not have roused as much antipathy in other cities with bigger industrial sectors where the guilds, and especially the *huiguan* were not as omnipresent as in the ex-capital. Clearly, the representatives of small scale handicraft business who had known the traditional system with values such as solidarity, relative economic autonomy, guild morals, would resent top-down reforms which restricted their range of self determination and called into

⁸⁵ Niida Noboru et al. (eds.), *Pekin kosho girudo shiryoshu*, p. 294

⁸⁶ Niida Noboru et al. (eds.), *Pekin kosho girudo shiryoshu*, p. 529

⁸⁷ Niida Noboru et al. (eds.), *Pekin kosho girudo shiryoshu*, interview at the Furriers' association (Pihang, lao yangpihuoye tongye gonghui), p. 561 ("there was no advantage in establishing commercial or trade associations"); Carpenters' guild (muzuo, wazuo), p. 652: ("the only advantage of guild membership is being able to see the theater performances"); Jade carvers' association (Yuqi ye tongye gonghui), p. 38 ("it is no advantage to be a member of the [new] association (*gonghui*)"); Gold and silver smelters' association (Yinghang jindian ye tongye gonghui), p. 127: "Nobody wants to become a director of the association (*tongye gonghui huizhang*). It [is a rotational task that brings no advantages] and only costs money." See also Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, pp. 247.

⁸⁸ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 242.

question the pre-existing hierarchy and didactic methods. In Bradstock's words, guilds and their immediate successors, the trade associations, were merely becoming "an institution with which one registered, largely for taxation purposes, rather than an association that engendered in members a feeling of affinity and a true sense of belonging. Many guilds did little more than limp along until the Communists completed their conquest in 1949. Those still in existence after that time were gradually superseded by new labor unions and trade associations led by the Communist Party."⁸⁹

Short case study: Jingdezhen

What can we know about guilds beyond the great consumer, producer, or entrepôt cities such as Beijing, Suzhou and Shanghai, or Hankou, from which abundant material is available? The following short case study can illustrate the lack of documentation in spite of obvious existence of guilds or informal proto-guilds, the qualities of proto-guilds, and existence well into the twentieth century.

As can be seen from the "Short list", Jiangxi province in general does not rank high among the receiving regions. The one item registered rather vaguely refers to "the ceramic crafts" in Jingdezhen, the biggest porcelain production center in the Qing (and, until the late eighteenth century, in the world). Only two groups, "Perfect porcelain" and "Celebrated porcelain" are listed as guilds. In the heydays of Jingdezhen in the eighteenth century, about one million workers are said to have been engaged in the porcelain trade in and around this market town which, like Hankou and Foshan, was not a discrete administrative unit.

How come that so little Jingdezhen guild activity is recorded in Peng Zeyi's collection? In this case, this is not due to the compiler's neglect of epigraphic material as for Foshan. For Jingdezhen, artisan and commercial activities of "trade lines" (*hang*) and "networks" (*bang*) are referred to here and there in Qing contemporary writings as well as surveys and retrospections of the Republican era, but stele inscriptions or other contemporary guild documents have not been transmitted to our days. However, customary rules of the trades were recorded in local gazetteers and monographs on porcelain production in Jingdezhen. They report that division of labour was highly developed, with at least eight great production lines: Kiln firing; Forming of the blanks (on the wheel or in moulds); Painting of ornaments; Saggars making (saggars are the protective clay containers used for firing the porcelain); Packing and Transporting; Forming and attaching the standing rim of the vessels; Production of tools for porcelain making (especially knives for cutting and carving the clay); Service trades (especially cart

⁸⁹ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 249.

builders and the horse guild). These were again split up into 36 subdivisions, which explains for the saying that any porcelain vessel when finished had passed 72 hands. There are no easily identifiable formal “guilds”, but rather proto-guilds that roughly tally with the subdivisions, so that basically as many trade networks (*hangbang*) as trades (*hang*) exist. The difficulty is to assign these networks to localities and to the guild houses, which in Jingdezhen are of the *huiguan* (common-origin guild house) and *shuyuan* (Confucian academy) type. Very few *gongsuo* (common trade guild houses) are reported.

Walking through the streets of present-day Jingdezhen, according to a publication of 2004⁹⁰, one should be able to spot 24 guild houses, thereof 22 common-origin and 2 common trade houses. About half of the *huiguan* have alternative names of Confucian academies. The geographic distribution of the outsending regions of these houses is as follows: Jiangxi 10 (same province, different prefectures), (neighbour provinces) Guangdong 2, Anhui 2, Zhejiang 1, Hubei 1, Hunan 1, Fujian 1, (Lower Yangzi) Jiangsu 3, (remote North-western) Shanxi 1. The date of origin of these houses is not recorded, but the names of a few of them occur in eighteenth-century texts.

These texts also have information on the home regions of the ceramic workers. Accordingly, Duchang⁹¹ people were engaged in almost all trades of the high, medium, and low skill varieties. They were kiln workers, formers of round forms, kiln fillers, kiln builders, painters, and saggar makers. Formers of open forms came from Fuzhou (ca. 200 km water way); only the top quality kiln builders Wei hailed directly from Jingdezhen, but were later superseded by the Tu’s from Duchang. Those who formed and carved vases, a high-skill trade, came from Fengcheng, about 250 km water way. Workers in lower skill trades, such as saggar makers first came from relatively nearby Leping and Boyang (25-40 km), but later also from Duchang, Fuzhou and Raozhou. Eventually, the packers of small items came from all five northern and central prefectures in Jiangxi province.⁹²

Concerning the networks of artisans, information is relatively scarce.⁹³ An “old” and a “new” network were comprised of people from Duchang and Boyang; the “Perfect porcelain” and “Celebrated porcelain” network convened at the Jingyang Academy. These were kiln workers specialising in pine faggot kilns (“Perfect porcelain”) and in brushwood kilns (“Celebrated porcelain”) respectively. The Jiangzhen guildhouse⁹⁴ was built with

⁹⁰ *Jingdezhen taolu tushuo* (Illustrated account of the Jingdezhen porcelain kilns), by Lan Pu and Zheng Yangui, ed. by Lian Mian. Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe 2004, p. 14.

⁹¹ On the northern shore of lake Boyang, ca. 100 km waterway from Jingdezhen.

⁹² Liang Miaotai, *Ming Qing Jingdezhen chengshi jingji yanjiu* (Research on the urban economy of Ming and Qing Jingdezhen). Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe 1991, p. 216

⁹³ “Jingdezhen de fengqing yu meili de zhuanishuo” (Jingdezhen customs and beautiful legends”), <http://auto.sohu.com/20050727/n240199132.shtml>, installed on July 27, 2005

⁹⁴ Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo jindai shougongyeshi ziliao* (Materials on early modern Chinese craft history), vol. 1, p. 184, quoting from a Duchang gazetteer of the 1870s, *Tongzhi Duchang xianzhi*.

donations from the Duchang potters. It was not reserved for potters, but also frequented by Duchang people who came to Jingdezhen for academic formation. Therefore it was also called "Old Southern Academy."

Although guild regulations did not exist or are not transmitted, customary rules offer some insights into the activities of the networks. Most of them concern the riskier part of the production and distribution processes, namely firing, unloading of the kilns, and packing. Rules are further recorded for the critical periods in the twelfth lunar month, when work was stopped, the beginning of work in the third lunar month, and the renewal of contract or dismissal of labourers and foremen in the seventh lunar month. When work was interrupted during the winter period, workers could return to their home regions, but obviously some of them stayed on.⁹⁵

Merchant networks, also called *bang*, are well documented for the twentieth century. For 1936, 26 such networks were reported.⁹⁶ As business was thriving after the war years, these networks increased to as many as 76. According to a twentieth century observer owners of ceramic businesses had to be members of one of the guilds, or form a partnership in which one of the members belonged. The sanction of the guilds were required before a newcomer could begin manufacture and the guild also approved beforehand what type of ware could be made and mandated only approved wares.⁹⁷ From the 1930s, we also have a relatively clear overview over "trade associations" that according to the trend of the time have been classified according to common branch (*tongye*) criterion, but were not formally registered new style craft associations. 21 branches are listed here under their traditional names, among them the venerable "Perfect porcelain" and "Celebrated porcelain" associations. They are all designated as *she*, which basically implies a sacrificial community. The author of this Jingdezhen industrial history was obviously not favourably inclined towards these associations. He informs us that they existed of old, but now didn't have much to do. They merely congregated several times a year and offered sacrifices.⁹⁸ After the foundation of the People's Republic, such associations in retrospect were deemed even more dubious. They seemed the breeding ground for the underground activities of secret societies. Such insinuations are formulated in the most generalizing way⁹⁹, so that the actual illegal potential of these old guilds Jingdezhen guilds can hardly be assessed. We may note,

⁹⁵ "Jingdezhen de fengqing", point 10: "After production is stopped in the XIIth month, the workers have nothing to do. For making a living, they sell loads of vegetables, other regional products and eel, small fish, and fresh-water snails in the streets."

⁹⁶ *Jingdezhen taoci shigao* (A draft history of Jingdezhen porcelain). Beijing: Sanlian shudian 1959, p. 322: 7 from Hubei, 6 from Jiangxi, 2 from Manchuria, 2 from Zhejiang, 2 from Anhui, one each from Tianjin, Guangdong, Henan, Sichuan, Beijing, Jiangsu, Hunan.

⁹⁷ Kerr p. 771, fn 230, quoting Wright, Stanley, *Kiangsi Native Trade and Taxation*. Shanghai 1920, p. 191-2. quoting Fees were pre-determined, and conditions were very restrictive.

⁹⁸ Wang Siqing, *Jingdezhen ciye shi* (History of the ceramic industry in Jingdezhen). Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju 1936, p. 183-185.

⁹⁹ *Jingdezhen taoci shigao*, p. 299.

however, that the term “Mutual help associations” (*bang*) had a negative connotation at least since the Guomindang under Chiang Kaishek made use of the so-called “Green network” (*qingbang*) to suppress the Communist trade unions in Shanghai during the Northern Expedition in April 1927 in an act of treachery that violently ended the first United Front between Guomindang and Communists. The Green network had in the eighteenth century formed as an occupational group with a rigid organisational structure in which boatmen in the Ming-Qing grain tribute system were associated.¹⁰⁰ The range of guild and proto-guild activities could also encompass clandestine action and thus constitute the reverse side of their relationship with the government.

Outlook to Europe and Research Perspectives

Many of the features outlined above will seem very familiar to guild historians worldwide, and in fact, when studying overviews of European guild history, similarities seem to outweigh the differences. After this conference the following synopsis will be expanded to include common and distinctive features of Indian, North African, and the Ottoman guilds.

Economic functions: Chinese guilds tried and often succeeded in regulating and dominating markets for raw materials, labour, and sales. One of their objectives was to exert monopolies by complete inclusion of potential members in the same trade lines. They assumed that markets for work or business in any locality were “basically finite”.¹⁰¹

Membership: Compulsory membership, although it may have been the ideal of the guild functionaries worldwide, was obviously not easily enforceable; neither was, in many cases, sole representation of a trade in a certain territory. A difference between European and Chinese guilds lies in the rationale for group formation. In China, the first guilds obviously were united by common origin in an unfamiliar, perhaps even hostile, surrounding. Common trade as a bond for guild members was a slightly later development. In Europe, we know of similar structures in the form of the Hansa. But in comparison, we would suppose that Chinese common origin associations as institutionalized in the *huiguan* are stronger and much more persistent. However, the functional range of *huiguan* is larger than that of craft and commercial associations.

Time frame: Concerning the temporal setting, evidently Chinese guilds came to rise either later or earlier than the European guilds, depending on the definition. We have discussed the two phases of government organized “trade lines” between the 8th and ca. mid-fourteenth century and the “guilds” that rose in the seventeenth century and ended formally by 1927 and informally, and with much reduced profile, existed on until ca. 1949.

¹⁰⁰ Rowe, William T., „The Qingbang and Collaboration under the Japanese, 1939-1945: Materials in the Wuhan Municipal Archives”, *Modern China*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Oct. 1982), p. 491-499

¹⁰¹ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 253.

We would thus not challenge the opinion that the Chinese guilds, especially the craft guilds, under additional government pressure, gave way to mechanization, large scale production and capitalist labour relations.

Local setting: The range of operation was confined to particular localities. Even though the common home region formed an important reason for guild formation, the relation to the home place was in most cases – at least in the big cities – not very close. This may have been different for production regions such as Jingdezhen, Foshan, and Suzhou, where migrant workers would sojourn periodically and return to their region of origin which often was not very distant.¹⁰² Municipal guild confederations did occur, as in Hankou, but seem to have been extremely rare. Cases where guilds developed branches or partner guilds in other localities are barely known.

Relation to government: As individual organisations, guilds stood completely out of the reach and the interest of the central government. It was up to the local authorities to acknowledge the existence of guilds and sanction their self devised regulations. In return, cooperation of the guilds in tax collecting and several municipal functions as well as charitable activities was expected. The issues as to whether Chinese guilds were completely autonomous and whether guilds could exist without formal government acknowledgement, has been discussed controversially by Chinese and European authors. The government formally and practically increased its control on guild structures and activities after the Qing dynasty.

Class relations in the guilds: Contemporary observers note the relative harmony in the guilds between “master and man” (Burgess). Although workers had applied for (and were not granted) official recognition for their own guilds already in the early eighteenth century, such cases were first rare, but increased in the late Qing. Capitalist labour conditions in big scale industrial enterprises would soon bring an end to the guilds as “face-to-face groups” (Burgess) where employers and employees were both represented, and separate labour unions and employers’ trade organizations would be established in these business fields. Where small scale handicraft production prevailed, guilds or informal proto-guilds could survive.

Training and testing: In the entire formation process, guilds did not carry out formal examinations of the skills of either apprentices at the end of their three-year term or of masters when they independently opened a workshop. It was not a requirement that finished apprentices should serve as wandering journeymen for any period of time. In some craft branches apprentices were allowed to stay on in the workshop of their master after they had finished their term, but since they were not paid, the incentive was strong

¹⁰² In Jingdezhen, for example, workers would leave the town during the winter month when no or little procelain was produced. “Jingdezhen de fengqing yu meili de zhuanhuo” (Jingdezhen customs and beautiful legends), <http://auto.sohu.com/20050727/n240199132.shtml>, installed on July 27, 2005: “Kiln prohibition” between XIIth and IIIrd lunar month.

to leave their first workplace. In the twentieth century, late Qing reformers and subsequent Republican governments set up vocational schools for crafts/industries and commerce.

Intellectual property rights were not an issue for the Chinese guilds. Bradstock's assertion that it was not possible "to keep a skill secret from other members: everything had to be shared with the others in the guild."¹⁰³ is probably too extreme. A bigger problem was that intellectual property rights were not protected by legislation. They had to be defended by keeping secrets of the trade within families. Well-known examples for this strategy of preserving craft knowledge over generations are the court architects Lei, who constructed the imperial villas at the Yuanmingyuan near Peking, or the kiln builders' family Wei in Jingdezhen. Imperial protection may have been closest to the patent rights of the West. The Wei family had offered their services to rebuild kilns at the imperial factory of Jingdezhen that had been damaged in a 1674 revolt. Thereafter, they obtained the hereditary rights to execute bricklaying and repairs at twenty private kilns that fired imperial wares.¹⁰⁴

Welfare, municipal, and religious functions seem very similar to those of European guilds. Religious services for guild patrons are recorded from early on. It is characteristic for the Qing dynasty stele texts from Peking that they concern, for the greater part, the building, maintenance, and embellishment of temples for the patron saints. If guilds could afford it, the first priority in the field of internal welfare would in most cases be the provision of burial grounds. Municipal and security functions increased after the mid-nineteenth century. In the cultural field, the priority lay in the arrangement of stage plays for the entertainment of the membership and the patron saint. The bigger guilds would all provide theatres with elaborate stages and audience rooms.

Women in the guilds? Like in Europe¹⁰⁵, women are hardly ever mentioned in guild documents or stele texts. However, some early modern European cities have preserved rich archives which allow insights, for example, on female owners of craft workshops, who most often were the widows or daughters of previous masters. For China, such documentation is extremely rare. We know that women were engaged as permanent or temporary workforce either in the workshops, but more frequently at their own homes. This seems to have been so in the case of a Chongqing embroiderers' guild in 1849, from which it is known that "the male workers, the owners, and the journeymen negotiated new regulations."¹⁰⁶ Most probably this means that women produced half-finished

¹⁰³ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 254.

¹⁰⁴ Kerr, Rose, and Nigel Wood, with Ts'ai Mei-fen and Zhang Fukang: *Ceramic Technology*. Vol. VI, pt. 2 of *Science and Civilisation in China*. Cambridge UP 2004, p. 212.

¹⁰⁵ Ehmer, "Artisans, Guilds and Craft Regulations", p. 72-3.

¹⁰⁶ "Short list", p. 1017

products that were processed by male workers. Perhaps these women were represented in that particular guild.

Guild free zones. Eventually, and again like in Europe, in some regions or branches where we would expect guild formation, it did not occur. Yangzhou, for instance, a large and wealthy city on the Lower Yangzi, had very few guilds or even non-commercial common-origin associations. Antonia Finnane attributes this to the fact that the city was actually built by merchants from Huizhou (Anhui) who were so numerous present and thus constituted a critical mass so homogenous that neither common-origin, nor, amazingly, formal common-trade associations were necessary.¹⁰⁷ The other, probably much wider field is that of informal guild formation which, in China as everywhere else, poses a much greater challenge to historical enquiry.

Appendix

All the following tables and graphs are based on Peng Zeyi (ed.), *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao* (Chinese craft and commercial guild materials). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1995, vol. 2, pp. 997-1048, "Zhongguo gongshang ye hanghui jianbiao" (A short table of the Chinese craft and commercial guilds)

Table 1: Designations for Qing dynasty guilds

Designation	Translation	Guilds with dates of foundation	Remarks	Guilds without dates of foundation	Sum	Percentage
<i>Gongsuo</i>	Public hall [Common origin] Assembly	221		47	268	41,55%
<i>Huiguan</i>	house	141		69	210	32,56%
			can be combined with other			
<i>Tang</i>	Hall	41	design-	1	42	6,51%

¹⁰⁷ Finnane, Antonia, *Speaking of Yangzhou: A Chinese City, 1550-1850*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 2004, p.

			nations, such as <i>gongsuo</i> can be com- bined with other design- nations, such as <i>gongsuo</i> can be com- bined with other design- nations, such as <i>gongsuo</i> can be com- bined with other design- nations, such as <i>gongsuo</i>		
<i>Gong</i>	Palace (for religious veneration)	30		30	4,65%
<i>Dian</i>	Hall	20		20	3,10%
<i>Bang</i>	Mutual help group, work gang	12		12	1,86%
<i>Miao</i>	Temple (Daoist)	11	1	12	1,86%
<i>Hui</i>	Association	10		10	1,55%
<i>Gonghui</i>	Public association	8	2	10	1,55%
<i>She</i>	Altar (for ancestor veneration)	5		5	0,78%
<i>Shuyuan</i>	(Confucian) Academy	4		4	0,62%
<i>Ge</i>	House	4		4	0,62%
<i>Zhuang</i>	Cottage	3		3	0,47%
<i>Gongguan</i>	Public mansion	3		3	0,47%
<i>Hang</i>	Trade line	3	2	5	0,78%
<i>Ci</i>	Shrine	2		2	0,31%
<i>Si</i>	Sacrificial shrine	2		2	0,31%
<i>Si</i>	Temple (Buddhist)	1	combined with <i>huiguan</i>	1	0,16%
<i>Hanghui</i>	Guild	1	1	2	0,31%
TOTAL		522	123	645	100,00%

Table 2: Distribution of guilds in provinces and cities

Provinces	Dated	Not dated	Total	Thereof: Cities	Dated	Not dated	Total
Jiangsu	235	58	293	Suzhou (Jiangsu)	101	31	132
Hunan	150		150	Shanghai (Jiangsu)	113		113
Hubei	90	7	97	Changsha (Hunan)	92		92
Beijing	45	7	52	Hankou (Hubei)	88		88
Sichuan	36		36	Beijing	45	7	52
Guangdong	23	6	29	Nanjing (Jiangsu)	5	27	32
Fengtian		15	15	Chongqing (Sichuan)	24		24
Guangxi	12	2	14	Tianjin (Zhili)	2	9	11
Zhili	3	9	12	Fuzhou (Fujian)		10	10
Fujian and Taiwan	1	10	11	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)	6		6
Zhejiang	7		7	Canton (Guangdong)	4		4
Yunnan		5	5	GRAND TOTAL	480	84	564
Shandong	1	3	4				
Shanxi	4		4				
Anhui	3		3				
Jiangxi	1		1				
GRAND TOTAL	611	122	733				

Table 3: Outsending regions (provinces and cities)

Provinces	Dated	Not dated	Total	Thereof: Cities	Dated	Not dated	Total
Guangdong	30	13	43	Ningbo (Zhejiang)	11	2	13
Zhejiang	24	5	29	Suzhou (Jiangsu)	8		8
				Shaoxing			
Shanxi	20	6	26	(Zhejiang)	3	1	4
Anhui	16	7	23	Changsha (Hunan)	3		3
Fujian and				Chaozhou			
Taiwan	14	9	23	(Guangdong)	3		3
Jiangsu	20	3	23	Zhangzhou (Fujian)	3		3
Hubei	16	4	20	Shanghai (Jiangsu)	2		2
				Hangzhou			
Jiangxi	9	5	14	(Zhejiang)	2		2

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Hunan	8	5	13	Tianjin (Zhili)	2		2
Shandong	3	8	11	Nanjing (Jiangsu)	1		1
				Canton			
Shaanxi	5	1	6	(Guangdong)	1		1
Guangxi	1	4	5	GRAND TOTAL	39	3	42
Henan	4	1	5				
Zhili	1	4	5				
Sichuan		2	2				
Yunnan	1	1	2				
Fengtian		1	1				
Gansu	1		1				
Guizhou		1	1				
GRAND TOTAL	173	80	252				

Chart 1: Guild foundations in the Ming and Qing dynasties

