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10. Merchant and Craft Guilds

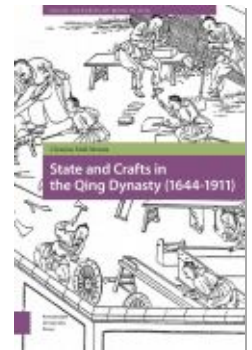
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10. Merchant and Craft Guilds¹

While the previous chapters addressed the relationship between the state and artisans from the perspective of the concerned state institutions and specific branches, we now turn our attention to the modes of organization of representatives of the crafts and their interaction (or avoidance of interaction) with state authorities at the local level. Chinese associations of merchants and artisans that are commonly referred to as ‘Chinese guilds’ originate from the late sixteenth century. Initially, they were alliances of travelling merchants who, due to the intensified interregional trade and geographic mobility, had settled down in the regions of their sales markets. Guilds exclusively for craftspeople existed, but in many cases the division between both can barely be made.

Unlike their counterparts in most European countries which were disbanded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Chinese guilds proliferated from the mid-eighteenth century onward, and their numbers soared after the intercession of the Taiping rebellion and the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century. They began to decline during the last decade of the Qing dynasty, superseded by chambers of commerce that were promoted in the state’s economic and political reforms. Subsequent governments of the Republic of China, both at Peking (1912-1927) and Nanjing (1927-1937), first launched branch-specific commercial and industrial associations and eventually ordered the re-organization 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.

This chapter gives an outline of the rise and spread of the guilds, their typologies and functions and their relationship to the government, power relations within the guilds, and finally their transition in the twentieth century within the framework of the increasingly active involvement of the state in the economic sphere in the course of the late Qing and early Republic.

Origins and Typology of Chinese Guilds

Early types of urban business associations (*hang* ‘[business] street/line’, *zuo* ‘manufacturers’ or ‘workshops’, *tuan* ‘associations’) had been established

¹ This chapter is partly based on the author’s article ‘Chinese Guilds, Seventeenth through Twentieth Centuries: An Overview’.

by government order since the eighth century.² These organizations served to recruit artisans for public works and to coordinate the delivery of taxes-in-kind by the merchants, and also to maintain urban security. As the cities expanded, the concept of one trade line per street could no longer be maintained. This may have led to the formation of voluntary merchant associations beyond the government-ordered restrictions.³ However, while the guilds from the mid and late Ming period onwards published and perpetuated their regulations in stele inscriptions, no comparable epigraphy exists for the earlier periods. Scattered evidence suggests that the meeting places of the early trade associations were temples, such as the temple of the silk-loom god established between 1078 and 1085 in Suzhou. The earliest reference to a *gongsuo* (public hall), that of the silk weavers of Wu Prefecture (Suzhou), dates from 1295.⁴

The link between these early guilds and those founded after the mid-Ming is tenuous. In their epigraphic writings, the Ming and Qing guilds do not claim origins earlier than the late Ming.⁵ Although the new type of guilds from the sixteenth century still coordinated the merchants' and artisans' obligations to the government, their main purpose was to regulate access to markets and homogenize business opportunities for their membership.

One early instance of such a new guild may be found in the fifteenth century,⁶ but more solid evidence is available from the Wanli era (1573-1619). The names of twelve Ming dynasty guild houses – nine of which were located in Peking and one each in Hunan, Suzhou, and Foshan (near Canton) – are known.⁷ Nine were expressly entitled *huiguan* (houses of assembly), and with the exception of the potters' guild in Foshan, they were all merchant guilds.

The *huiguan* were based on the membership criterion of common geographic origin. Another important form of trade association was based on the principle of common occupation and most often designated as *gongsuo*

2 Peter Golas, 'Early Ch'ing Guilds', pp. 555-557.

3 Katō Shigeshi, 'On the Hang or Associations of Merchants in China', pp. 45-83. Compare also Shiba Yoshinobu, *Commerce and Society in Sung China*, p. 2, who characterized the change from the Tang to the Song guilds as a transformation 'into something more nearly approaching an autonomous trade association.'

4 Guo Rongdong, 'The Silk-Weaving Craftsmen in Suzhou', p. 10.

5 Golas, 'Early Ch'ing Guilds', p. 555.

6 Michel Marmé, *Suzhou*, p. 137, for a reference to a 1466 foundation of a guild of cotton cloth merchants from the Jiangsu districts Jiading 嘉定, Kunshan 崑山, and Suzhou, at Linqing 臨清, an important entrepôt city on the Grand Canal in Shandong.

7 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui*, 'Short table of the Chinese craft and commercial guilds, 1655-1911', pp. 997-1048; hereafter 'Short table'.

(public hall). For the *gongsuo*, common geographic origin could play a role but was not a necessary requirement. Other designations for guilds were *bang* (literally, mutual help associations) or *shuyuan* (Confucian academy), named after their places of assembly, or houses of Daoist and popular religious worship.

Generally speaking, the earlier guilds were more of the *huiguan* type, while in later periods the *gongsuo* prevailed. Some *huiguan* guild houses in Suzhou were renamed *gongsuo*, with the specification of their particular trade. The guild historian Liu Yongcheng believes that this occurred because the common origin set too narrow limitations on the activities of merchants and craftsmen in one trade.⁸ However, the opposite trend that several *gongsuo* combined into a *huiguan* was also possible.⁹ Wang Rigen defines the difference between *huiguan* and *gongsuo* as one of scope: *huiguan* were larger, and within *huiguan*, several *gongsuo* could exist. *Huiguan* were more formal organizations, and their demands on their members regarding representation and contribution were higher than those of the more informal *gongsuo*.¹⁰ The *huiguan* served not only economic purposes. On the contrary, they were first established as meeting places and hostels for officials on duty away from their home places, and for students preparing for official examinations on different levels – local, regional, provincial, or imperial in Peking. Peking was the city with the most *huiguan* – more than 400 – but only a fraction thereof were used predominantly as assembly houses for merchants and craftspeople.¹¹ From Peking we also find a case where scholar-officials and merchants preferred to keep to themselves, as was the case with the Guangdong merchants who in 1712 built a *huiguan* of their own, the Xiancheng *huiguan*, and moved out of the Canton *huiguan*.¹² However, since merchants and scholar-officials relied on each other for power and finances, *huiguan* were also the places where both parties could easily get together if they wished.¹³

8 Liu Yung-ch'eng, 'The Handicraft Guilds in Soochow', pp. 124-125.

9 For instance, the Timber merchant guild in Shanghai, Mushang *huiguan* 木商會館, established in 1858, that was first a *gongsuo* and in 1897 changed its name to *huiguan* ('Short table', p. 1019).

10 Wang Rigen, *Ming Qing minjian shehui de zhixu*, pp. 186-187.

11 Li Hua, *Ming Qing yilai Beijing gongshang huiguan beike xuanji*, p. 20, estimates that 86 percent of the Peking *huiguan* houses were established as hostels and meeting places for scholar-officials. See also Belsky, *Localities*, pp. 59-60.

12 Li Hua, *Ming Qing yilai Beijing gongshang huiguan beike xuanji*, p. 1; Wang Rigen, *Ming Qing minjian shehui de zhixu*, p. 183; Belsky, *Localities*, pp. 91-92.

13 Wang Rigen, *Ming Qing minjian shehui de zhixu*, pp. 186-187.

A marked difference between Chinese and European guilds is the fact that it was not necessary to be a formally registered citizen of a particular city or place in order to become a guild member. Instead, the Chinese guilds – at least for the *huiguan* type – required that members belonged to a particular place of origin.

Not all guilds or proto-guilds disposed of guild houses, written regulations, and official recognition.¹⁴ The guilds that featured all three criteria were mostly founded or re-organized in the late nineteenth century and showed a certain degree of organizational sophistication.

Distribution in Space

An essential statistical overview of Chinese guilds is the ‘Short table of the Chinese craft and commercial guilds, 1655-1911’,¹⁵ which contains a list of ca. 600 dated and 130 undated guild houses and associations. Since few stele inscriptions were considered for its compilation, it is certainly not complete and requires enlargement,¹⁶ but we can assume that it gives a first impression that is not too far off the mark for features such as distribution over time and space as well as the regions of origin of the guild members. According to this list, guild concentration was the highest in the Lower, Middle, and Upper Yangzi (the provinces of Jiangsu, Hubei, Hunan, and Sichuan which include the cities Suzhou, Shanghai, Changsha, Hankou, and Chongqing respectively) and along the coastline in Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Zhejiang, Zhili, and Fengtian. These were the economically most advanced areas with the most treaty ports in the second half of the nineteenth century. The inland regions such as Sichuan, Jiangxi, and Yunnan but also the northwestern and northeastern frontiers such as Inner Mongolia¹⁷ and Manchuria appear to have been quite underrepresented. It is probable that the existence of many more *huiguan* with economic functions will come to light as research in Chinese local archives and field research intensifies.¹⁸ Further research and statistical compilations have so far reached a total of more than 2,800

14 Peng Nansheng observed that ‘trades without associations and associations without regulations’ were a common phenomenon. Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 22.

15 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui*, pp. 997-1048.

16 Vincent Goossaert, ‘Matériaux et recherches’, p. 210.

17 See the epigraphic materials contained in Imahori Seiji’s survey on the social groups of Hohhot, *Chūgoku hōken shakai no kikō* (The structure of feudal Chinese society).

18 Lan Yong, who studied the *huiguan* in Sichuan province, based on written evidence and field research has arrived at a number of 1,400 houses (Lan Yong, ‘Qingdai Sichuan tuzhu yimin

guilds of all types, including both the more economy-orientated merchant and craft guilds and guilds with social and administrative functions.¹⁹

Typical outsending regions, which can best be observed by the names of guild houses of the *huiguan* type, were the coastal provinces of Guangdong, Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Zhili as well as the home provinces of the famous local bankers, the Shanxi merchants, and the wealthy salt traders, the Huizhou merchants from Anhui.

Merchant Guilds and Craft Guilds

As we have seen, the earliest guilds were merchant associations. The first Shanghai guild, for instance, was the shipping merchant guild house, Shangchuan huiguan, which was established in 1715.²⁰ This was one of the richest and most influential guilds in Shanghai, which was involved in the sea transport of grain tribute after the Grand Canal was no longer navigable. It was professionally organized, employing directors and monthly managers from 1844. All of the managers owned large fleets of merchant ships,²¹ mostly of the *Shachuan* type for coastal navigation. According to one stele, the costs of its renovation in 1891 – including big hall, drum and bell tower, southern and northern aisle, tower, gate, and posterior wall – amounted to 2,304 British pounds, 106 Shanghai tael, and 118,000 cash.²² Between 1863 and 1868, its facilities were used as the Jiangnan Arsenal's office buildings.²³ While sixteen further shipping guilds are included in the 'Short table',²⁴ only two guild houses that expressly represented the Ningbo and the Zhejiang shipwrights are recorded.²⁵

fenbu de dili tezheng yanjiu', and personal conversation with the author, October 2007), while Richard Belsky, *Localities at the Center*, p. 37, records only 586 *huiguan* for Sichuan.

19 'Chinese Guilds Database' and 'Datasets – Guilds – China – Craft guilds: Report on the data collection', compiled by the author et al., Website *Institutions for Collective Action*, installed 2012.

20 'Short table', p. 1002.

21 Chen Zhongping, 'The Origins of Chinese Chambers of Commerce', p. 170.

22 *Shanghai beike ziliao xuanbian ji*, p. 196. For comparison, in the Shanghai embroiderers' and tailors' guild, a total of 154 members donated a sum of 406 Dollar (*yangyuan*), thus about ca. 304 tael (*Shanghai beike ziliao xuanbian*, p. 301–304). The exchange rate of the British pound to one tael in 1891 was about 0.22 (Peng Xingwei, *A Monetary History of China*, p. 763). 2,304 pound would thus amount to over 10,000 tael. This is more than thirty times of what the embroiderers and tailors could afford.

23 'Shanghai zui zao de huiguan'.

24 'Short table', p. 1003–1046.

25 The 1853 Zhejiang red network of ship carpenters, Zhejiang hongbang muye gongsuo 浙江紅幫木業公所, 'Short table', p. 1018, and the Siming muye changxing hui 四明木業長興會, 'Short table', p. 1018.

Regarding the division between commercial and craft guilds, a clear categorization is often more difficult for craft guilds than for unequivocal merchant guilds like those of the shippers or bankers. With roughly 250 commercial guild houses and 250 craft or both craft and commercial guild houses, by far not all entries in Peng Zeyi's 'Short table' allow for a clear-cut attribution to one or the other. However, Peng's tabulation is not the last word on the quantity and distribution of Chinese guilds. Therefore, the result of an almost equal number of exclusively merchant and craft guilds can only be tentative. Burgess' study on the Peking guilds in the 1920s, for which he and his team conducted field research in the guild houses, has about the same half-half ratio with 40 craft, 60 commercial, and 11 'professional' guilds of the service trade.²⁶ Yet Li Hua, in whose opinion the specialization of Chinese craft and commercial guilds occurred extremely late, claims that among the 36 (sic) pre-Opium-War craft and commercial guilds in Peking, 25 were exclusively commercial guilds, 13 were both commercial and craft guilds, one was both agricultural and commercial (the vegetable traders' guild), and only one was an exclusively artisan guild.²⁷ This may be a problem of conflicting definitions. Nevertheless, Li Hua's observation for Peking corroborates our view on the importance of the merchant image for craftspeople.

Niida Noboru, a Japanese specialist on Chinese law and society, also pointed out the difficulty of differentiating between merchant and craft guilds in his monograph on the Chinese guilds. He discussed the different types of crafts in Peking that produced on demand only and therefore can be considered 'pure' handicraft guilds, such as the building trades, hairdressers, and some shoemakers, while others maintained a stock that they sold throughout the year, such as the sheep hide tanners.²⁸ For Niida, who throughout his book took a comparative perspective, the difference between the merchant and craft guilds was not as marked in China as in Europe.²⁹ He maintained that in Europe, especially in Germany and Holland, the merchants gradually forced the craftsmen out of the guilds due to their contempt for the latter's 'dirty hands' and 'blue fingernails'. The craftspeople thereafter established their own guilds and fought with the merchants for political participation in the municipal governments in what was known as the 'Zunftkampf' (battle of the guilds). Niida thought that the Chinese guilds could 'not even dream' of having the same prerogatives in municipal

26 John S. Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 119-120.

27 Li Hua, 'Lun Zhongguo fengjian shehui de hanghui zhidu', p. 107.

28 Niida Noboru, *Chūgoku no shakai to girudo*, pp. 46-48.

29 Ibid., pp. 45-46.

administration as their European counterparts.³⁰ This view requires some qualification. The Dutch guild historian Maarten Prak posits that conflicts among the guilds of the Low Countries occurred not so much between craft and merchant guilds but between the rich guild members and the poor within the same guild, or between the non-affiliated urban elites and the guilds.³¹ Guilds and elites were united in their aim to preserve 'political autonomy [from princes and ministers] for their local community' and ensured that working classes were kept excluded from local governments.³² Moreover, in more recent German historiography, the opponents in the struggle for political participation are not simply reduced to 'guilds' and 'patricians', and the term 'urban conflict' (*Stadtkonflikt*) is preferred to 'guild conflict'.³³ For the Chinese context, William Rowe's research on Hankou identifies the guilds of that city from the late nineteenth century as the unofficial city government that wielded great power. After the revolution broke out in October 1911, the city was actually administered by the 'All-Hankou Guild Alliance' (*Ge huiguan gongsuo lianhe hui*), an association that had evolved from earlier, pre-Taiping networks – the 'Upper Eight Guilds' (*shang ba hang*), to be precise, of the merchants, not the artisans.³⁴ Earlier, in the city of Chongqing in Sichuan on the Upper Yangzi, an eight-province guild house network had formed that also had largely taken over administrative functions from the municipal government. Niida was aware of these tendencies and also referred to the Chongqing case, but he stressed that the functions of the guilds were – like those of twelfth and thirteenth-century England – 'supplementary' to those of the urban administrations and not legally defined.³⁵ Thus, while Niida looks at the legal foundation of the guilds – inspired by Max Weber, Karl August Wittfogel, and Charles Gross³⁶ – Rowe considers their actual influence. It is no wonder that both arrive at different conclusions.

Concerning the late emergence of craft guilds relative to merchant guilds,³⁷ Timothy Bradstock has offered a plausible explanation in his study

30 Ibid., p. 46.

31 Maarten Prak, 'Corporate politics in the Low Countries', p. 105.

32 Ibid., p. 106.

33 Mathias Puhle, *Magdeburg im Mittelalter*, p. 85, with reference to Karl Czok, 'Zunftkämpfe, Zunftrevolutionen oder Bürgerkämpfe?', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig* 7, 1956/57, pp. 129–142.

34 Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 334.

35 Niida, *Chūgoku no shakai to girudo*, p. 51.

36 Charles Gross, *The Gild Merchant: A Contribution to British Municipal History*, Oxford 1890.

37 For the situation in the Low Countries, compare Bert De Munck, Piet Lourens, and Jan Lucassen, 'The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries', pp. 42–43, which gives 1400 as the date of the full maturity of the guild system and points out that 'at

on Chinese craft guilds. Incidents from the early eighteenth century show that the Suzhou city administration denied unskilled workers the right to form a guild.³⁸ The rising number of the craft guilds in the eighteenth century may be attributed to the fact that guild managers and business owners became more prosperous and, unlike unskilled workers and journeymen, were able to establish better ties with officials, for instance by purchasing titles. From the perspective of the authorities, a knowledgeable and educated guild leadership was a reliable agent of self-control and the maintenance of propriety, including such functions as tax collection and the organization of public works.³⁹ The local authorities therefore allowed trusted craftspeople to form guilds under the leadership of the employers and shopowners in each trade, but they formally reserved the right to endorse guild regulations and in extreme cases also to dissolve the guilds. The craft guilds – like the merchant guilds – thus ‘filled a vacuum created by urban growth and the rise of commerce, one which the central government had neither the means nor the inclination to take responsibility for until the twentieth century’.⁴⁰

Functions and Internal Organization

The constitutive elements of 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. The last three characteristics indicate the transition of a guild from informal to formal organizational status.⁴¹ Qiu Pengsheng outlines the process of formalization of the Suzhou guilds as follows: individual artisans or merchants mobilized colleagues to form a group on grounds of common homeplace, religious beliefs, and the necessity of mutual help. They raised funds for a meeting place and sought recognition from the local administration. In a second

first only merchants and woollen workers had guilds, within a few centuries a whole range of occupations had become organized, particularly in industry’.

38 The Suzhou calenderer’s strikes between 1670 and 1734 are well-explored labour incidents of the Qing dynasty and have been discussed by a great number of researchers. The stele materials that record the incidents are contained in *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji*, pp. 53-82. For relevant studies, see Terada Takanobu, ‘Soshū no tambogyō no kei’ei keitai’; idem, ‘Tambogyō ni kansuru hikoku’; Tsing Yuan, ‘Urban Riots and Disturbances’, pp. 279-320; Paolo Santangelo, ‘Urban Society in Late Imperial Suzhou’ pp. 81-116; idem, ‘Alcuni aspetti di vita urbana’, pp. 1-45.

39 Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 5.

40 Ibid., p. 6.

41 Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 257.

step, the group negotiated and formalized measures for the protection and use of its common property.⁴²

Like most craft and commercial associations worldwide, the Chinese guilds combined economic, social, and religious functions. In the economic field, guilds regulated prices and wages and tried to obtain monopolies within their territories by including all actors in the trade. As a rule, guild regulations stipulated that rather than keeping newcomers out, everybody in the trade should be forced into the guilds.⁴³ Another important task was to secure access to raw materials and training the labour force. Guild regulations most often fixed the duration of apprenticeship – three years as a rule – but did not specify the contents of professional training. The number of apprentices a workshop could take on was restricted and often limited to only one. The duration of the three-year apprenticeship actually regulated wage costs and work quality at least as much as the amount of skill that could be learned within that period.⁴⁴ Chinese guilds did not formally test the master's qualifications. Whoever had the funds to open a shop and to pay the entrance fees for the guild could do so.

One specific function for the *huiguan* more than the *gongsuo* was labour recruitment. In the case of the Shanghai ship transport and shipbuilding firms, including the Jiangnan Arsenal, many of the shippers, dock workers, and shipbuilders, were recruited from exterior provinces. The labourers typically came from Ningbo and Canton but also Shaoxing in Zhejiang, Zhangzhou in Fujian, and Chaozhou in Guangdong. Labour contractors (*baotou*) from the particular regions introduced newcomers to specific shipping and shipbuilding companies or to the Arsenal. Since local dialects, religious veneration, and eating habits differed widely, the guild houses provided shelter, food, and entertainment to their fellow countrymen. For instance, at the Ningbo guild house, which was known as both Ningbo *huiguan* or Siming *gongsuo*,⁴⁵ labour contractors recruited shipwrights from Ningbo for Ningbo employers.⁴⁶ The Ningbo ship carpenters also had their own association, the Siming *muye changxing hui*, from 1879.⁴⁷ At the Arsenal, the forgers belonged to the Wuxi network (*Wuxi bang*), and the

42 Qiu Pengsheng, *Shiba, shijiu*, p. 190.

43 Rowe, 'Ming-Qing Guilds', *Ming Qing yanjiu*, Sept. 1992, p. 60.

44 A representative of the Peking barbers' guild informed Niida Noboru that big and reputable shops employed few apprentices and many journeymen, and only small places had many apprentices. Niida, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshū*, II, p. 298.

45 'Short table', p. 1012, established 1797.

46 Johnson, 'Dock Labour at Shanghai', p. 273.

47 'Short table', p. 1028.

painters and metal workers were organized in the North Jiangsu network (*Subei bang*).⁴⁸ The division of labour could be quite precise: for instance, a 'red group' of Zhejiang carpenters (Zhejiang hongbang muye gongsuo) registered in 1869,⁴⁹ constructed only steamboats, while a 'white group' specialized in house construction and was not supposed to encroach on the work of others. The forgers (*duangong*), who venerated Laozi as their patron saint, assembled at the Laozi temple (*Laojun miao*). In the shipping industry, both the *huiguan* and the *gongsuo* were vertically organized and stood under the control of the employers.⁵⁰ However, as the samples given in the 1975 Arsenal history show, this did not mean that the workforce did not organize on their own. The networks remained informal and could be defined as religious rather than occupational groups.

The social functions of the guilds included the provision of welfare facilities like communal cemeteries, elementary schools, and poverty relief to members as well as municipal tasks in firefighting, policing, maintaining infrastructure (especially streets, bridges, and piers), and last but not least, entertaining in the form of theatrical plays and processions for the guild patrons.⁵¹ Certainly not all guilds could fulfil all of these tasks for everybody, but at least in Hankou, where commerce thrived in the second half of the nineteenth century, charity and community service was not restricted to guild members.⁵²

William Rowe has discussed the specific devotional piety which serves as a form of self-assertion and which creates a feeling of responsibility and accountability towards the patron saint(s) of the guild. In nineteenth-century Hankou, virtually every guild was a religious fraternity.⁵³ Burgess and Niida, who studied 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 conclusion that if religious service was not practiced, this was the result of a lack of funds rather than disenchantment and religious scepticism.⁵⁴

As a rule, Qing guilds were organized in management boards with directors that were recruited among its members. Cases of rotational leadership are

48 *Jiangnan* 1975, p. 26.

49 'Short table', p. 1018.

50 Johnson, 'Dock Labour at Shanghai', p. 273.

51 Rowe, 'Ming-Qing Guilds', p. 49

52 Rowe, *Hankow*, pp. 265-6.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

54 Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 214; Niida, 'Industrial and Commercial Guilds', p. 181; Bradstock, *Craft*, pp. 248-249.

known, as well as those where the guild offices were hereditary.⁵⁵ In a recent monograph on Chinese guilds, Peng Nansheng also reflects on this organizational system, which combined 'rudimentary democracy, authoritarianism, and customary law'.⁵⁶ He sees democratic elements in the system of yearly rotating directorship of some guilds, in the elections held by other guilds, in the fact that a *quorum* was necessary for important decisions, and in the practice followed by some guilds to put controversial decisions to a secret vote.⁵⁷

The 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 common-origin guilds started to include several smaller guilds or networks (*bang*).⁵⁸ As their membership swelled to several thousands of people and they gained considerable corporate property in the form of large guild houses and other real estate, the tasks became more 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 make arrangements for sacrifices, theatrical performances, plenary meetings, and banquets.

Relationship to the Government

As in the case of guild functions, opinions are divided about the relations between the government and the guilds. Some studies stress the importance of the guilds being recognized by local authorities. Bradstock assumes that the known craft guilds all were sanctioned by the local authorities, and that in fact the main rationale of these guilds was to assist the government in the administration of commerce and crafts, and especially to control unruly elements. He argues that the increasing number of guilds in the latter half of the eighteenth century coincides with the dilemma of population growth

55 Morse, *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. Niida, *Pekin kōshō girudo*, III, p. 529, heard from a representative of the hatmakers' guild that leadership positions were now rotational but had been hereditary before 1928.

56 Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, p. 32.

57 Ibid., pp. 32-33, 40.

58 This process has been described by Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 264, as the formation of 'multiplex guilds'.

without a concomitant increase of administrative personnel.⁵⁹ To prevent worker' strikes and riots from breaking out, local administrations preferred to depend on employers' guilds rather than allow journeymen or unskilled labourers to form their own associations. The strike incidents of the Suzhou calenderers, which occurred time and again from 1670 until 1729, are a case in point. Calenderers worked woven and dyed cotton cloth by pressing it with heavy foot rollers, holding onto a kind of railing.⁶⁰ This was low-wage, unskilled, physical labour exerted by migrants who came to the industrial city of Suzhou in great numbers: 7,000 to 8,000 in the early Qing era, and about 10,000 by 1730.⁶¹ The conflicts that flared up in early Qing Suzhou between these workers and their employers, the owners of the calendering workshops, who processed the textiles as contractors for cloth merchants, concerned mostly wage issues. In order to drive home their demands, the calenderers also resorted to violence against their employers' property. In addition to demanding wage raises and threatening strikes, in 1715 some calenderers also requested the prefectural government grant them the right to build a guild house, an orphanage, and a hospital. The government sided with the employers and refused to allow the calenderers to build a guild house, chastising their representatives with corporal punishment on the grounds that 'Once a *hui-kuan* is completed, all those vagabonds without any proper registration will be quartering there with their factions and crowds, and the harm will be incalculable.'⁶² The unrest was suppressed for a while but broke out again in 1723 and in 1729, when it became part of a greater anti-Qing conspiracy that involved wider circles of the Suzhou society.⁶³ It was discovered and crushed, and no separate guild foundation of the calendering workers is reported in Suzhou thereafter.

One less long-lasting case that did not pose the same potential threat to the authorities as that of the calenderers is that of the Suzhou printers. The issue here was not the establishment of a guild house, as the Suzhou bookstore owner–publisher–printer (*shufang*) guild house, Chongde gongsuo, was an early establishment founded in 1671.

59 Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, pp. 63–66.

60 Santangelo, 'Urban Society in Late Imperial Suzhou', p. 109. Fang Xing et al., 'Cloth Processing in Suzhou and Songjiang', Xu Dixin et al., *Chinese capitalism*, p. 225, complements this description: 'After dyeing, most cloth shrinks and requires pressing or calendering, especially cloth dyed in light colours. Calendering was done by rolling the cloth with a wooden roller, applying weight and movement by means of a vaguely rhombus-shaped stone, rocked backward and forwards. This work was done by strong and agile men, mostly at night, and was a specialised occupation.'

61 Tsing Yuan, 'Urban Riots and Disturbances', p. 307.

62 Ibid., p. 305. *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji*, p. 66.

63 Tsing Yuan, 'Urban Riots and Disturbances', pp. 305–306.

For comparison, Peng Zeyi's 'Short table' includes relatively few booksellers' guilds and, as we might expect, even fewer character carvers' guilds:

The bookstore guilds are:

- Chongde gongsuo 崇德公所, established in 1671 in Suzhou ('Short table', p. 1001);
- Wenchang huiguan 文昌會館, established in 1864 in Peking; actually two sites, one of the Southern and one of the Northern booksellers ('Short table', p. 1021);
- Book trade association in Wugang 武岡, Hunan, which negotiated guild regulations in 1904 ('Short table', p. 1037);
- Shuye shanghui 書業商會, the Shanghai bookseller's association, established in 1905 in Shanghai ('Short table', p. 1039);
- Wenlin gonghui 文林公會, the 'Forest of Learning Association', established in 1908 in Changsha, Hunan ('Short table', p. 1041);
- Zhibao tang 至寶堂, established between 1875 and 1908 in Wuzhou 梧州, Guangxi, a guild for the trade of paper, books, and fireworks ('Short table', p. 1044);
- Wenchang association 文昌會, established in 1910 in Taoyuan 桃源, Hunan ('Short table', p. 1046).

The character carvers' guilds include:

- Jike gongsuo 劓剗公所, established in 1739, in Suzhou ('Short table', p. 1005);
- The guild of the character carvers of Hunan, Changsha, established between 1736 and 1795, ('Short table', p. 1005);
- Kezi hang gongsuo 刻字行公所, Character carvers' guild house, Peking, established in 1897 ('Short table', p. 1035);
- Character carvers of six classes Liumen diaobang 六門雕幫, established in 1909 in Changde 常德, Hunan ('Short table', p. 1035).

The Chongde gongsuo in 1845 reported to the magistrate of Wuxian (Suzhou) that the printers (*yinshou*) – thus the employees, not the owners of the printshops – had unilaterally set up regulations for this guild, which previously had not had any written binding rules. These regulations had provided for training apprentices, hiring additional labour, and an increase of the festival bonus (*jieli*). Moreover, the printers had 'cheated newcomers into paying guild fees'. A first attempt to make the bookshops accept the new regulations had failed, and after the printers had tried a second time, the bookstore owners appealed to the authorities for support. The verdict was

that a festival bonus had to be paid but that the bookshops did not need to accept any other rules.⁶⁴ Those printers who had set up the regulations were forbidden to return to Suzhou and stir up trouble again, and the booksellers were ordered to set up a stele at their guild house with the official record of the matter.

The incident did not remain an isolated occurrence in Suzhou. At least four more examples are known in which the Suzhou authorities intervened against 'private' (in the sense of 'secret', unregistered) guilds.⁶⁵ A secretly founded guild of tobacco processors was banned in 1867 for 'trying to monopolize the market'. In the same year, in reaction to a complaint by eighteen candlemakers' 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 declared illegal, too. In 1870, brocade weavers were not allowed to 'try to establish a guild house (*gongsuo*), set up a guild leader and guild regulations, and molest their colleagues by enforcing donations'. It was also forbidden for the guild to re-open under another name or define itself as a religious community. In the fourth case, a magistrate prohibited the establishment of a second guild for cloth 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. Control over existing guilds was, moreover, intensified by local governments after the mid-nineteenth century: they were required, or forced, to collect the transit tariff *lijin* and perform community tasks like firefighting, policing, and building and maintaining municipal infrastructure.⁶⁶

But while the local authorities enforced their power to sanction, the guilds also could gain more autonomy by cooperating with officials.⁶⁷ 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 1940s on behalf of the Chinese state, took a completely different perspective on the power relation between the guilds and the authorities. In one of the earliest studies on Chinese guilds, Morse presented China as a caretaker state that only collected taxes and provided security services by installing police forces, and stressed the independence of the guilds from the government: 'The trade guilds [...] have moulded their own organization,

64 *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji*, pp. 95-96; Fang Xing et al., 'Paper Making, Printing and Publishing', p. 247.

65 Peng Nansheng, *Hanghui zhidu*, pp. 58-59.

66 Peng Zeyi, 'Shijiu shiji houqi', p. 91.

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

sought their own objects, devised their own regulations, and enforced them in their own way and by their own methods.’⁶⁸ In an assessment that was frequently cited later, Morse formulated that ‘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.’⁶⁹ Actually, Qing legislation issued by the central government does not include any provisions on guilds. Legal texts did call for vigilance against the ‘monopolistic formation of cartels’,⁷⁰ but the manner of converting this warning into action was entrusted to the judgment of the local authorities. Thus, it was not the central government but the local authorities that interacted with the guilds. This explains why the handicraft regulations (*jiangzuo zeli*) issued by the central government for officials who managed building and production for the state contain no references to the guilds, although the artisans hired from private workshops were certainly organized in guilds. In the guild stele writings, only a few clues show that central government institutions were aware of the guilds,⁷¹ although officials – at least on the Peking stele inscriptions – frequently appear as authors, editors, or calligraphers of these inscriptions – off duty, but conveying authority and probity to the respective institution.⁷²

In Hankou, guilds were not coerced by the local government into registering; rather, it was the advantages of registering a guild that prompted guilds to seek official recognition. 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 for official recognition only 27 years after its foundation.⁷³ Informal existence was possible if the guild could make do without administrative protection.

68 Morse, *Gilds of China*, pp. 20-1.

69 Morse, *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).

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

71 Niida, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryō shū*, IV, p. 682 (1899) and p. 723 (1792) among the names of donors for the embellishment of two guild temples includes the names of the Bureau of Construction of the Ministry of Public Works, *yingshan (qingli) si* 營繕(清吏)司 and the Office of Palace Construction of the Imperial Household Department *yingzao si* 營造司.

72 In Li Hua’s stele text collection for 38 trades, at least 25 steles have inscriptions by mid-level officials. Officials of the highest ranks are few – only one Minister calligraphed the characters for the guild house of the actors, *Liyuan gongsuo* 梨園公所. See Li Hua, *Ming Qing yilai*, p. 105. Officials of the Imperial Household Department or the Ministry of Public Works have left no traces as authors or calligraphers of stele texts for the Peking guild houses.

73 Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 258.

How can these contradictory views of tightening control versus laissez-faire approach on the part of local governments be reconciled? To a certain extent, they may reflect regional variance. From early on, Suzhou was one of the most important manufacturing centres, 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 the authorities in Suzhou were more likely to try to obtain closer control especially of the workers' guilds than local governments in other regions. For Hankou, however, at least one case has been quoted where a guild – that of the itinerant fish peddlers – was not prohibited, but whose exclusive sales right were not acknowledged by the local authorities.⁷⁴ On the whole, the Hankou case shows yet another instance of government support for the guilds as well as the attempts of the guilds to actively court Hankou and provincial officials by, for instance, conferring honorary titles on them.⁷⁵ It is quite feasible that Hankou officials were more accommodating towards guilds than their colleagues in Suzhou. The balance of power also depended on the distribution of commercial and craft guilds in the respective localities. We may safely assume that merchant guilds provided better resources and possibilities to make the authorities act on their behalf. In sum, cooperation between local officials and guilds and their interconnection certainly were much more complex than Morse believed (which Max Weber took over from him), with significant variation from place to place.

Power Relations within the Guilds: 'The Master and the Man'

The relationship of guilds and would-be guilds to the government in the cases cited for Suzhou at the same time also reflect the vertical relationship between the guild members. As a rule, journeymen could belong to the guilds, which were, however, dominated by the shopowners. Observers of guild relations in early twentieth-century Peking have found relative harmony between 'master and man'. John Burgess defined as one of the characteristics of Peking guilds that they aimed at the welfare of all members of the guilds, which were mostly face-to-face groups with close personal relationships between master, journeymen, and apprentices.⁷⁶ There can be no doubt that this was a paternalistic and hierarchical bond, especially between

⁷⁴ Rowe, *Hankow*, pp. 297-8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 334-7.

⁷⁶ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 211.

masters and the journeymen they had personally trained as apprentices. As one retired carpenter told the Niida team, previous apprentices were considered family members and had the duty to participate in the master's family celebrations, and when the master passed away, they were expected to wear the same mourning clothes as his family members. However, the care was mutual, so that a master was also obliged to support his previous disciples after they had finished their apprenticeship.⁷⁷ A representative at the tailors' guild specified that journeymen who had not served as apprentices in the workshop where they worked did not wear mourning clothes, were not expected to assist in the master's family rituals, and were not taken care of by the master after they had left his shop.⁷⁸ This implies that conflicts were possible and did occur, even if as a rule the relationships of employer and employee were close or at least respectful from the side of the hired workers.

Yet this was not always the case. Generally speaking, the central and southern Chinese workers and hired artisans staged more strikes than their colleagues in Peking, but even in the capital, work stoppages occurred after the mid-nineteenth-century. In the Peking shoemakers' guild, for instance, the journeymen went on strike and obtained wage raises in the 1850s and subsequent years until 1882.⁷⁹ Although both journeymen and shopowners belonged to the same guild – the shoe and boot guild *Xuexie hang* – the degree of organization of the journeymen was obviously better than that of the employers. The journeymen's *Hemei hui* (Assembly of United Beauty) was able to enforce wage raises until in 1882 the shopowners took the initiative to unite and establish their own association, the *Caishen hui* (Assembly of the God of Wealth) within the shoe and boot guild. In the end, 120 shopowners were involved and took the continuing wage conflict to court for arbitration. The workers' demands were rejected, and the victorious shopowners set up a stele in commemoration of their achievements.⁸⁰

77 Niida, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshū*, IV, pp. 654-655. The legal historian Niida Noboru (1904-1966) collected information on the Peking guilds in two fieldwork periods in 1943 and 1944, with the assistance of colleagues, among which Imahori Seiji 今堀誠二 (1914-1992) and Okuno Shintarō 奥野信太郎 (1899-1968). They recorded stele inscriptions, took photographs of the guild houses, and interviewed the representatives of the guilds. His study mentioned above was based on the insights gained during these research periods. The materials were edited and published between 1975 and 1983.

78 Niida, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshū*, II, p. 235.

79 Documentation is included in Niida Noboru, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshū*, III, p. 489 ff. and in Li Hua, *Ming Qing yilai*, p. 164 ff., and analysed in Niida, *Chūgoku no shakai to girudo*, pp. 207-209.

80 For a translation, see Moll-Murata, 'Social Harmony and Social Unrest', pp. 269-271.

This was a rare case in which the journeymen were organized earlier than the employers. Contrary examples are known for central and south China. If the skilled, hired craftspeople felt the need to combine, they did so in informal groups known as *hang* (trade line), *bang* (mutual help group or 'gang'), *dang* ('faction'), *tuan* ('association'), and the like. The Canton silk weavers, for instance, split into the Xijia hang (Employees' trade) and the Dongjia hang (Employers' trade).⁸¹ The Changsha tailors had seven associations in the last decades of the nineteenth century, of which two were for the masters and five for the journeymen, but these were all reunited after which they revised their old regulations. The separate masters' and journeymen's associations of the Changsha brushmaking shops also reunited during the same time period but kept their respective separate regulations.⁸² For other guilds, it was expressly stated that they were open to masters and journeymen, or that masters or shopowners and journeymen negotiated the guild regulations together.⁸³

Cases in which employers and employees associated in separate guilds are also known, apart from those mentioned, for three other Hankou guilds.⁸⁴

Burgess and Gamble, whose writings are based on their observations in 1918 and 1919, predicted that even in Peking the harmonious relationships within the guilds would dissipate in the process of industrialization and that this would bring an end to the craft guilds.⁸⁵ However, in small-scale handicraft production, guilds or informal proto-guilds survived longer. Thus the craft guilds that had phased in later than the merchant guilds during the commercialization of the sixteenth to eighteenth century were also later in phasing out.

Outlook to the Twentieth Century

In recent years, the transition of the guilds from 'traditional' to 'modern' has been intensely researched by Chinese scholars. The establishment of

81 Liu Yung-ch'eng, 'The Handicraft Guilds in Soochow', p. 145.

82 Peng Zeyi, 'Short table', pp. 1042-1043.

83 Examples in the 'Short table' are the Changsha incense makers in the Jiaqing reign (1796-1820, p. 1014), the Hankou biscuit roasters in 1860 (p. 1019), the Hankou gold leaf makers in 1870 (p. 1024), the Changsha lacquerers in 1887 and 1906 (p. 1030), the Changsha restaurant trade, which included journeymen since 1898 (p. 1042), or the Sichuan embroiderers in 1842 (p. 1017). The cases from Hunan and Hubei seem overrepresented in Peng Zeyi's table.

84 The coal and charcoal maker journeymen's guild, established in 1871 ('Short table', p. 1025), the plasterer journeymen's guild, built in 1867 (p. 1022), and the Hankou firework trade journeymen's association of 1890 (p. 1032).

85 Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 236.

chambers of commerce in the late Qing era 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, alliances of several guilds are not found in the cities and market towns of the Yangzi Delta. In a complex process of cooperation and competition of elite merchants with the local, provincial, and central governments, the Qing state in 1904 finally prioritized the promotion of commerce in its 'New Policies' through the chambers of commerce. The central government approved that these chambers had their leadership recruited from and elected by elite merchants. The role of the guilds therein was not specified in the 1904 decree. In practice, not all guild members could join the chambers of commerce but only the leaders of the most influential guilds.⁸⁶

After the fall of the Qing, the subsequent Republican governments at Peking and Nanjing tried to strengthen state control of commerce and industries, and in their legislation they gradually eliminated the traditional forms of association. The National People's Party (*Guomindang*) had consolidated its government in Nanjing in 1927, and economic development ranked high on its agenda. The 'Regulations on the craft associations'⁸⁷ that were promulgated in late 1927 stipulated that the pre-existing guilds should all reorganize and report to the authorities in charge.⁸⁸ 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. 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 situation of their trade.⁸⁹ Together with the 1929 'Law on Industrial and Commercial Associations' (*Gong shang tongye gonghui fa*) and the 1930 '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 within a certain branch.⁹⁰ The old-style guilds were to be reorganized within one year and had to report

86 Chen Zhongping, 'The Origins of Chinese Chambers of Commerce', p. 191.

87 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui*, pp. 990-995, 'Gongyi tongye gonghui guize', promulgated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Industry (*Nonggong bu* 農工部) on 1927/11/21.

88 Ibid., 'Regulations on craft associations', p. 995, par. 36.

89 Ibid., p. 990, par. 2, 3, 12.

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

to a supervisory committee (Shangren tuanti zhengli weiyuanhui). The names of the associations were unified, and almost all of them were renamed.

In the Republic of China, the actions of the commercial associations were closely monitored and presented in municipal statistics. By 1934, *Wuhan* (the conglomeration of what was previously Hankou and the adjacent districts of Hanyang and Wuchang) had 159 new associations; Shanghai had 236 (of which 40 were industrial, 1936 figures), and Chengdu in Sichuan had 111 by 1939. By 1933, there were a total of 4,185 new associations in 21 provinces.⁹¹ This is certainly more than even the closest reading of Qing texts and steles will ever reveal. The process of transformation seems to have been concluded by the 1930s.

Guilds in Transition

When Niida Noboru and his colleagues and students conducted another extensive investigation on traditional guilds and their successors, they visited about fifty previous guild sites, recorded the existing stele texts, and interviewed guild representatives.

These interviews show that little enthusiasm was felt for the new trade associations, while nostalgia for the guilds remained. The main reason for this was that the new associations had less autonomy than the guilds. One informant from the barbers' association said that the statutes of their association had been imposed on them in 1942 but that these were not considered the 'real' rules of the trade.⁹² To a representative of the hatmakers' guild, the inheritance of leadership positions seemed preferable to rotational directorship.⁹³ Several interview partners confirmed that belonging to an association brought little or no benefit.⁹⁴ This led to a situation in which the 'old' *huiguan* and the 'modern' associations coexisted – sometimes in competition with each other but at other times complementing each other. The rule of sole representation of one trade branch was sometimes avoided

91 Ibid., p. 78.

92 Niida, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshū*, II, p. 294.

93 Ibid., III, p. 529.

94 Ibid., interview at the furriers' association, III, p. 561 ('there was no advantage in establishing commercial or trade associations'); carpenters' guild, IV, p. 652: ('the only advantage of guild membership is being able to see the theater performances'); jade carvers' association, I, p. 38 ('it is no advantage to be a member of the [new] association (*gonghui*)'); gold and silver smelters' association, I, 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*, p. 247.

by declaring the reason for association as one of common geographic descent rather than of common occupation. A Shanghai guidebook published in 1930 lists nine guilds in the tobacco trade, nine dyers' guilds, and three lacquerware guilds, many of which in their names suggest common-origin associations.⁹⁵ In general, the guild members were more disposed towards the *huiguan*, which retained some of their social, religious, and cultural functions. They rejected the new associations also because they considered them as instruments of the authorities, which in Japanese-occupied Peking restricted and fixed prices and their access to raw materials.

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, and guild morals – resented the top-down reforms that restricted their degree of self-determination and called into question the pre-existing hierarchy and didactic methods. Nonetheless, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the last remaining traditional guilds were closed down.

Guilds in Jingdezhen

What can we know about the guilds that were located beyond the great and well-documented centres of Peking, Suzhou, Shanghai, and Hankou? In spite of the lack of documentation, a look at the producer city of Jingdezhen can illustrate the existence of guilds, the characteristics of proto-guilds, and their survival until the twentieth century.

In Peng Zeyi's 'Short table', Jiangxi province in general does not rank high among the host regions. Likewise, for Jingdezhen, the largest porcelain production centre in China in the Qing period (and, until the late eighteenth century, in the world), the 'Short table' mentions only two associations – 'Perfect Porcelain' (Taocheng) and 'Celebrated Porcelain' (Taoqing) – even though in its eighteenth-century heyday, hundreds of thousands of workers are said to have been engaged in the porcelain trade in and around this market town.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Bradstock, *Craft Guilds*, p. 242.

⁹⁶ The figures are disputed. Tang Ying, the Superintendent of the Imperial Kilns, mentioned one hundred thousand workers in 1743 (Kerr, *Ceramic Technology*, p. 200). In the *Decennial Reports*, p. 204, several estimates are discussed, the highest of them referring to a workforce of one million.

How is it that so little about Jingdezhen guild activity is known? Artisan and commercial activities of 'trade lines' (*hang*) and 'networks' (*bang*) are referred to here and there in Qing contemporary writings on Jingdezhen as well as surveys and histories of the Republican era, but stele inscriptions or other contemporary guild documents have not survived. However, customary rules of the trades were recorded in local gazetteers and monographs on porcelain production in Jingdezhen. They report that the division of labour was very detailed, with at least eight production lines: kiln firing; the forming of the blanks (on the wheel or in moulds); the painting of ornaments; the production of saggars, the protective clay containers used for firing porcelain objects; the packing and transporting; the forming and attaching of the standing rim of the vessels; the production of tools for porcelain making (especially knives for cutting and carving the clay); and the service trades (especially cart builders and the horse guild). These were again split up into 36 subdivisions, which explains the saying that each finished porcelain vessel had passed 72 hands. There were 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*) existed. The difficulty is to assign these networks to localities and to the guild houses, which in Jingdezhen are of the *huiguan* (common-origin) and *shuyuan* (Confucian academy) type rather than the *gongsuo* (common-occupation) type.

About half of the *huiguan* that have survived to this day carry alternative names of Confucian academies. They were places of assembly for members from the following outsending regions: ten for people from different prefectures in Jiangxi, two for people from Guangdong, two Anhui *huiguan*, one each for people from Zhejiang, Hubei, Hunan, Fujian, three for people from Jiangsu, and one for people from the remote northwestern province Shanxi. The dates of origin of the houses are not recorded, but the names of a few of them occur in eighteenth-century texts.

The home regions of the ceramic workers within Jiangxi province are also known. Duchang⁹⁷ people were engaged in almost all trades of the high, medium, and low-skill varieties. They were kiln workers, formers of 'round forms',⁹⁸ kiln fillers, kiln builders, painters, and sagger makers. Potters who produced 'open forms'⁹⁹ came from Fuzhou, which was at a distance of 200 km by river; only

97 On the northern shore of lake Poyang, ca. 100 km waterway from Jingdezhen.

98 'Round forms', *yuanqi* 圓器, refers to items that were formed either on the potters' wheel or in a mould.

99 'Open forms', *zhuoqi* 琢器, are pieces such as vases and ceremonial vessels that are ornamented by cutting, embossing, or carving out patterns on the clay, or that are polygonal.

the top-quality kiln builders of the Wei family hailed directly from Jingdezhen but were later superseded by the Yus from Duchang. Those who performed the high-skill trade of forming and carving vases were from Fengcheng, about 250 km waterway. Workers in low-skill trades such as saggar makers first came from the relatively nearby districts of Leping and Poyang (25-40 km away) but later also hailed from Duchang, Fuzhou, and Raozhou. People from all five northern and central prefectures in Jiangxi province worked as packers of small items.¹⁰⁰

Concerning the networks of artisans, information is relatively scarce.¹⁰¹ An 'old' and a 'new' network were comprised of people from Duchang and Poyang; the 'Perfect Porcelain' and 'Celebrated Porcelain' network convened at the Jingyang Academy (Jingyang shuyuan). These were kiln workers specializing in pine faggot kilns ('Perfect Porcelain') and in brushwood kilns ('Celebrated Porcelain') respectively. The Jiangzhen guild house (Jiangzhen gongguan)¹⁰² was built with donations from the Duchang potters. It was not reserved for potters but was also frequented by Duchang people who came to Jingdezhen for academic formation, hence its alternative name 'Old Southern Academy' (Gu nan shuyuan).

Although guild regulations did not exist or were 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 contracts 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 some of them stayed on.¹⁰³

Merchant networks, also called *bang*, are well documented for the twentieth century. For 1936, 26 such networks were reported.¹⁰⁴ As business was thriving after the Second World War, these networks increased to as many as 76. According to a twentieth-century observer, owners of ceramic

100 Liang Miaotai, *Ming Qing Jingdezhen chengshi jingji yanjiu*, p. 216.

101 'Jingdezhen de fengqing'; *Zhongguo cidu*, vol. 2, pp. 775-781, 'Ciye hanggui' (Rules of trade of the porcelain makers).

102 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo jindai shougongye* I, p. 184, quoting from a gazetteer of Duchang county compiled in the 1870s, *Tongzhi Duchang xianzhi*.

103 'Jingdezhen de fengqing', sect. 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.'

104 See Jiangxi sheng qingongye ting (ed.), *Jingdezhen taoci shigao*, p. 322: seven from Hubei, six from Jiangxi, two from Manchuria, two from Zhejiang, two from Anhui, one each from Tianjin, Guangdong, Henan, Sichuan, Peking, Jiangsu, Hunan.

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 was required before a newcomer could begin manufacturing, and the guild had to approve beforehand what type of ware could be made.¹⁰⁵

An industrial history of Jingdezhen from the 1930s, which gives a relatively clear overview, classifies 'trade associations' according to the criterion of common occupation. 21 branches are listed under their traditional names, among them the venerable 'Perfect Porcelain' and 'Celebrated Porcelain' associations. They are all designated as *she*, which implies a sacrificial community. The author was obviously not favourably inclined towards these associations. He informs us that they existed of old but that they no longer had much to do. They merely congregated several times a year and offered sacrifices.¹⁰⁶ After the foundation of the People's Republic, such associations were deemed even more dubious in retrospect and seemed to be the breeding ground for the underground activities of secret societies. Such insinuations are formulated in the most generalizing way,¹⁰⁷ so that the illegal potential of these old Jingdezhen guilds can hardly be assessed. The respective groups existed until the 1950s and are said to have offered considerable resistance to the collectivization of the porcelain trade.¹⁰⁸

In an interview with the vice president of the Jingdezhen Ceramics Museum, Hans Wilm Schütte was told that in the 1930s, brawls between the different local-origin groups that at the same time represented different trades burst out in the city as a consequence of diminishing opportunities to earn a living in the traditional handicraft sector.¹⁰⁹

Thus the range of guild and proto-guild activities, especially of the informal *bang* networks that were not officially registered, could also include clandestine and violent action and thus constitute the 'reverse' side of their relationship with the government.

Conclusion

The investigation of the guild system shows that the argument that craft-people were subordinate to merchants is also valid in view of the potential

105 Rose Kerr, *Ceramic Technology*, p. 771, fn 230, quoting Stanley Wright, *Kiangsi Native Trade and Taxation* (Shanghai, 1920), pp. 191-192. Fees were pre-determined, and conditions were very restrictive.

106 Wang Siqing, *Jingdezhen ciye shi*, pp. 183-185.

107 *Jingdezhen taoci shigao*, p. 299.

108 Hans Wilm Schütte, 'Perfektion als Hemmschuh?', p. 72.

109 Ibid. The interview was conducted in 1986.

impact of their associations. For one, craft guilds were established later than merchant guilds because artisans as a rule had fewer possibilities to attract the attention of local authorities than merchants. If they wanted their guild regulations endorsed, artisans had to enhance their respectability like the merchants by purchasing titles and convincing the officials of their probity. Conversely, the guilds with the most influence in municipal governments in the later nineteenth century were merchant guilds that could afford to finance the 'liturgical service' of charity, maintaining infrastructure, and installing local militia, rather than the craft guilds.

Relationships within the guilds were hierarchical, and shopowners dominated the decisions of the associations. Evidence of separate journeymen's guilds is from the late nineteenth century. Before that, local authorities would rarely allow journeymen or unskilled labour to set up their own guilds or to formulate unilateral guild regulations in existing guilds where employers and employees were both represented.

Craft guilds survived until the twentieth century, even if central governments tried to eliminate and transform them into bodies that could be more easily controlled than the traditional associations. However, the Qing government did not touch the craft guilds. By the 1920s and 1930s, the formally acknowledged guilds slowly disappeared, but groups that had always existed as proto-guilds remained. Religious associations and the veneration of a common patron saint played an important role from early on and could also serve as a rationale of occupational assembly until the mid-twentieth century.

In the Republican era, industrial workers in the cities probably preferred to organize themselves in workers' unions rather than to join the traditional guilds. Power and decision-making structures in unions were more democratic, while in the pre-existing guilds, the masters frequently decided questions of price fixing, wages, and hours of work among themselves.¹¹⁰ Moreover, membership in trade unions had to remain voluntary, unlike in 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, the basic policies of the Guomindang included the building up of labour unions, the legalization of strikes, the promotion of arbitration by government commissions and the principle of voluntary membership, all of which it enforced at its power base in Canton.¹¹¹ A 1927

¹¹⁰ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 224.

¹¹¹ Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking*, p. 230. Canton was the capital of an alternative military government established in 1917 under Sun Yatsen.

survey of the Canton city government shows that, out of 180 labour unions, 74 were reorganized guilds.¹¹² Apprenticeship was evolving into a system in which 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.

Among the organizations surveyed, the *huiguan* proved to be the most persistent, even if they are no longer occupational representations. Some of the old buildings are being renovated and serve as museums or theatres for traditional opera performances. The principle of regional representation in the capital or in provincial cities in hostels with restaurants and entertainment sector has never been given up. Although most of the old *huiguan* have not been preserved in their original buildings, the institution per se is perpetuated in capital liaison offices for provinces, special economic zones, and lower-level administrative areas, of which many hundreds are present in Peking.¹¹³ The flair of the *huiguan*, however, as stages where important people meet in a representative setting, has been imaginatively adopted by the hotel and restaurant caterers who also know how the designation of this venerable institution translates into English.

112 Ibid., p. 225, quoting Ta Chen and S.K. Sheldon Tzo, 'The Unionization of Labour in China', *Monthly Labour Review*, Washington.

113 Belsky, *Localities*, p. 25.

Figure 27 Toothpick cover, collected at the 'All-Shanxi huiguan' (Quan Jin huiguan) in Taiyuan, April 2006



Source: Author's photograph.

