



Chinese Merchant Guilds: An Historical Inquiry

Author(s): Kwang-Ching Liu

Source: *Pacific Historical Review*, Feb., 1988, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Feb., 1988), pp. 1-23

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3639672>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/3639672?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Historical Review*

JSTOR

Chinese Merchant Guilds: An Historical Inquiry

KWANG-CHING LIU

The author is professor of history in the University of California, Davis. This paper was his presidential address to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at its annual meeting in August 1987 at Occidental College.

We celebrate this evening the centennial of a vigorous liberal arts college, as well as the completion of John Schutz's mission of leading the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association well on its way toward the celebration of its own centennial. This year's program has been a rich one, including panels on Chinese history offered by distinguished world authorities, especially fellow historians from Japan. The growing field of Pacific Rim studies has now received full recognition from our branch of the Association.

The topic I have chosen for the paper tonight, the Chinese merchant guilds, is reminiscent of the merchant associations of America's Chinatowns.¹ My subject, however, is not Chinese merchants in America, but Chinese merchants in China, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My sources include especially the inscriptions on certain stone tablets—one might say stone steles or monuments. The writings on these monuments from the three cities of Beijing, Suzhou, and Shanghai have been collected by the scholars of the People's Republic of China since the 1960s and have been

An earlier version of this essay was presented as Faculty Research Lecture at the University of California, Davis, in April 1987.

1. On merchant associations in Chinatowns in the United States, see *inter alia* the discussion in Eve Armentrout-Ma, "Urban Chinese on the Sinitic Frontier: Social Organizations in United States Chinatowns, 1849–1898," *Modern Asian Studies*, XVII (1983), 107–135.

published in four volumes.² Some of the original stone monuments—typically 10 or 12 by 3 or 4 feet in size—are still standing by buildings now used for some other purpose; others have been moved to museums. I have found the inscriptions on these monuments to be extremely valuable to a study of the guilds and their social context.

The merchant associations that set up these stone monuments are known in Chinese as *huiguan* and *gongsuo*, terms which may be translated here generically as guild, if the term is taken in its simple dictionary sense as “society for mutual aid or prosecution of common object.”³ The usage of this word must, however, take account of the function of the guild in European history, beginning with the late Middle Ages, which included protectionism and exclusiveness. I would argue that the Chinese merchant associations that emerged by the eighteenth century were protectionist and exclusive, although the precise forms these characteristics took were different; it would be a mistake to expect them to be the same as European guilds.

In eighteenth-century China, guilds were predominantly merchant guilds. Craft guilds were a late development and were, moreover, not concerned with the staples of handicraft production. It is difficult, also, to compare Chinese merchant guilds with the European guilds in terms of their relation to government. In the cities of late medieval Europe, guildsmen played an active part in government. Guild members formed

2. These collections of stone inscriptions, which will be cited below in abbreviated form, are as follows:

- BJB Li Hua, comp., *Ming-Qing yilai Beijing gongshang huiguan beike xuanbian* [Selected stone inscriptions of craft and merchant guilds in Beijing since Ming-Qing times] (Beijing, 1980).
- JSB Jiangsu sheng bowuguan, comp., *Jiangsu sheng Ming-Qing yilai beike ziliao xuanji* [Selected stone inscriptions of Jiangsu province since the Ming-Qing period] (Beijing, 1959).
- SHB Shanghai bowuguan tushu ziliaooshi, comp., *Shanghai beike ziliao xuanbian* [Selected stone inscription materials for Shanghai] (Shanghai, 1980).
- SZB Suzhou lishi bowuguan, Jiangsu shifan xueyuan lishixi, Nanjing daxue Ming-Qing shi yanjiu shi, comps., *Ming-Qing Suzhou gongshang ye beike chi* [Collection of industrial and commercial stone inscriptions in Suzhou of the Ming-Qing period] (Jiangsu 1981).

Each of these four works sets forth the texts of the stone inscriptions fully and meticulously. For BJB and SZB, extant stone tablets on which too many incised characters are too faint to decipher are identified and dated whenever possible and listed in the appendices. Many documents in BJB are the same as those in Niida Noboru, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshu* [Source materials on craft and merchant guilds in Beijing] (6 vols., Tokyo, 1975–1983).

3. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 6th ed., 1976.

a component of the municipal government, and they operated in a fairly dependable legal order. From the standpoint of legal and political institutions, China's experience was very different. To indicate how it was different is precisely my task here—for one can hardly assume that history in China went through stages paralleling those in Europe. Comparative history—and I submit that comparative history is inherent in an enterprise such as Pacific Rim studies—must begin by comparing different contexts—the emphasis must be put on structure as well as change.

To indicate how the Chinese background was different, it is necessary to go into earlier Chinese history, beginning at least with the Song dynasty (960–1279), if not before. From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, China experienced remarkable urbanization and commercial growth.⁴ At the same time, there was enduring institutional and cultural development. This included a centralized government structure under unquestioned imperial authority, the examination system by which the civil service was recruited, the ethos of the elite literati (*shi dafu*) class, and the actual government in terms of day-to-day administration in the hands of the sub-bureaucracy and the tax farmers. This background needs to be borne in mind when one discusses the guilds of the later imperial era.

I must also briefly refer to the vicissitudes within the political order and the striking trends in demographic and commercial growth. It was under the Song dynasty that the aristocratic ruling class of medieval China came to be replaced by the civil service, which emerged mainly from the examination system to which the local elite, especially, had access. Already the ethos of the Chinese literati-official class had come into being. Owing their initial opportunity to their family's economic advantage,⁵ the literati as officials had as their dominant concerns service to the state as well as personal cultural achievement. As officials, they were supposed

4. G. William Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 1977), especially 23–31. See also Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250–1276*, H. M. Wright, tr. (New York, 1962); Shiba Yoshinobu, *Commerce and Society in Sung China*, Mark Elvin, tr. (Ann Arbor, 1970).

5. Recent research has indicated that the products of the examination system did not dominate the civil service until the late eleventh century and has, moreover, emphasized the local elite's control of access to the examinations. See Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformation of China, 750–1550," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XLII (1982), 365–442, esp. 405–425.

to attend to the needs not only of their families, but also of the people at large. Yet they did not directly rule the people, even when they were given charge as *paterfamilias* of the county, which was the lowest division of the administration. As the population grew and the number of people in many of the counties increased, the number of civil officials at this low level did not increase.⁶ Instead, a growing number of members of the sub-bureaucracy, men who did not have the benefit of civil service status, were employed to handle affairs. These included yamen clerks and runners—the yamen clerks being the managers and scribes in charge of taxes and of general administration and the yamen runners being agents and policemen. They probably had their origin in the bailiffs or estate-managers and servants of the aristocratic families of the past. They now handled the details of government. Under their supervision, service organizations were created at the level of the village or the city borough to be responsible for taxes and requisitions.⁷

Under Song there was a remarkable degree of urbanization. Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song, had in the early twelfth century a population of 850,000; and Hangzhou, the capital of the Southern Song, had by the middle of the thirteenth century a population of 1.2 million.⁸ In the thirteenth century, Marco Polo was to wonder at the prosperous urban life that he thought surpassed that of Europe. Yet there were factors inherent in China's institutions as well as China's geographical position⁹ that presented long-term constraints to development.

Garrisoned by the dynasty's loyal forces, the large cities and towns were under the imperial authority as represented

6. This fact had often been noted by historians, but its implications were most forcefully brought to their attention by Skinner, *City in Late Imperial China*, esp. pp. 17-23.

7. On the clerks, especially those in the central government, see James T. C. Liu, "The Sung Views on the Control of Government Clerks," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, X (1967), 317-344. On the coercive force possessed by the clerks and applied to service organizations below the *xian* level, see Brian E. MacKnight, *Village and Bureaucracy in Southern Sung China* (Chicago, 1971).

8. Skinner, *City in Late Imperial China*, 29-31, 228-229, 682.

9. See Joseph Needham and Ray Huang (Huang Jen-yü), "The Nature of Chinese Society—A Technical Interpretation," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, XII (1974), 1-16.

by civil officials and actually administered by clerks and runners. In each section of a big city, there were already recognized “headmen” (*hangtou* or *hanglao*) of each business or occupation group. Each specific grouping, according to its trade or the kind of service it provided, was described by the Chinese term *hang* (literally meaning line). The term has been translated by historians as guild, yet there is no clear indication in the record that guildhalls or guild membership as yet existed.

Headmen of the trade or craft associations in the Song era were essentially passive. There were those who essentially served brokerage functions in service trades, such as employment of servants. The headmen of urban trade associations (*hang* or *tuanhang*), which had control over the prices of merchandise such as tea, had achieved their positions chiefly in response to the government’s purchase or requisitioning of goods and services.¹⁰ The *hang* or *tuanhang* were primarily associations in the service of the government, although their headmen would make the best of their opportunity to bargain with the functionaries. Such associations for government service lasted through the urban prosperity of the Song (960–1279) and the Mongol Yuan (1271–1368) and continued into the Ming (1368–1644), the great native dynasty that followed.¹¹

The major political and economic patterns must be kept in mind. Geographical circumstances could partly explain the domination of militarily backed autocracy in the Chinese tradition—the vulnerability to attack from the inner Asian nomads created the need for a large army, while the unreliable rainfall in North China periodically resulted in famine and consequent rebellion.¹² To these facts of life must be added, however, the socioethical orthodoxy of the Confucian tradition—a doctrine that was built into the institutional fabric—of monarchy, family, and the domination of the male sex. During the fourteenth century, under the Yuan and Ming emperors, a Neo-Confucian curriculum was adopted

10. See the sources cited in Fu Zhufu, *Zhongguo jingji shi luncong* [Studies in Chinese economic history] (2 vols., Beijing, 1980), II, 411–442.

11. See the sources cited in *ibid.*, 442–484.

12. Needham and Huang, “The Nature of Chinese Society,” esp. pp. 1–8; Ray Huang, “The History of the Ming Dynasty and Today’s World,” *Chinese Studies in History*, XIX (1986), esp. pp. 3–8.

for the examination system. Confucian social ethics were reinforced by Neo-Confucian self-cultivation reminiscent of Buddhist ideals.¹³ Meanwhile, through rituals and popular religions, Confucian ideas of goodness and success had affected the society at large, contributing to a widely shared respect for order and stability. It was thanks to the orthodox ritual and ethics that the Manchus, less than a million in number, succeeded in ruling China after they captured Beijing in 1644 and declared their public policy of abiding by Confucian principles and thus justifying a new mandate of heaven.

In the long periods of stability under the Ming and the Qing (the Manchu dynasty, 1644–1911), there was growth in the population of China, and with it, expansion of the commercial economy. The Ming had inherited a population estimated at 65 million, which rose to 150 million by the sixteenth century before temporarily declining during the crisis of the seventeenth century. From 1700 on, however, there was rapid population growth, reaching 250 million by 1750 and 400 million by 1850. By the early nineteenth century, the population of China's largest cities was perhaps no higher than that of the imperial capitals of the Song dynasty, but there were more large cities. At least five of them—Beijing, Suzhou, Nanjing, Canton, and the Wuhan conurbation—had a population of more than 575,000 and approaching a million. In the Ming-Qing period, too, there was a development of rural market towns, so that by the mid-nineteenth century there were something like 1,650 market towns in all China except Manchuria and Taiwan with populations of 2,000 or more.¹⁴ Yet the major part of trading was the exchange of farm products and handicrafts among peasants within a small rural area; only the few needs that could not be supplied locally, including especially salt and metal goods, were offered by merchants at the periodic markets and fairs. The merchants served the demand in cities and towns for grain, for other kinds of food, and for clothing materials. Rural-urban trade was substantially one-directional, from country to city, based

13. See my essay, "Socio-ethics as Orthodoxy," in Kwang-Ching Liu, ed., *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China* (forthcoming).

14. See Skinner, *City in Late Imperial China*, 228–229. These figures are for "urban central places" in Skinner's terminology.

on taxes and rents, although operating through a market economy that moved the peasants' grain and sideline products to the towns.¹⁵

Both the administrative environment and the nature of the economy must have had something to do with the fact that between the Song and the Qing, despite the accumulation of scientific knowledge, in practice technology did not significantly advance. Per capita production of iron in China in 1840 was far below what historians believe the per capita production of iron was in the Song dynasty¹⁶—it was, at any rate, far below that of contemporary Europe. Instead of advances in technology, the economic history of the Ming-Qing period is essentially the story of an expansion of production that accompanied the increase in population. There was expansion in commercial goods such as cotton, silk, salt, tea, sugar, and tobacco. The processing of such products was largely done by the peasants' cottage industry, subsidiary to farming. There was a putting-out system for silk-weaving in the cities and towns of the lower Yangtze, beginning in the late Ming period, and in the Qing period, small workshops employing fifteen people or so developed in some lower Yangtze cities for the dyeing, calendering, and printing of the cotton cloth produced in peasant households and collected at the local markets. The production of the cotton cloth itself continued to be entirely a peasant cottage industry.¹⁷

Recent scholarship has stressed that by Ming times, eco-

15. For a statement on this basic fact, see Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo ziben zhuyi yu guonei shichang* [Chinese capitalism and the domestic market] (Beijing, 1985), 196-265.

16. The estimate of Song dynasty pig iron production is from Robert M. Hartwell, "Markets, Technology and Structure of Enterprise in the Development of the Eleventh-Century Chinese Iron and Steel Industry," *Journal of Economic History*, XXVI (1966), 29-58. For a recent work on the non-development of science and technology since the Song, see Wen-yuan Qian, *The Great Inertia: Scientific Stagnation in Traditional China* (London, 1985).

17. Xu Xinwu, *Yapian zhanzheng qian Zhongguo mian fangzhi shougongye di shangpin shengchan yu ziben zhuyi mengya wenti* [The problem of commercial production and the sprouting of capitalism in Chinese cotton textile handicraft before the Opium War] (Jiangsu, 1981); Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo zhiben zhuyi mengya* [The sprouting of China's capitalism] (Beijing, 1985), 139-159, 269-329, 362-410; Albert Feuerwerker, "Proto-industrialization, ca. 1550-1850," in Robert M. Hartwell, Albert Feuerwerker and Robert F. Dernberger, eds., *Region, State and Enterprise in Chinese Economic History, 980-1980* (forthcoming).

conomic development was tied together by a major Chinese institution—the system of officially sanctioned brokerage that came to exist in every city and rural market. The brokers had to be licensed; they were responsible to the government for the behavior of the travelling merchants and for taxes on their transactions. They were given registration books in which facts about each travelling merchant had to be entered. They provided hostelry and dockage and storage facilities to long-distance merchants; they arranged to collect the local produce ordered. Such services included the guarantee of security for the travelling merchant and entailed the cooperation of local officialdom, including the clerks and runners. Eventually, business practices were sufficiently regularized by custom to encourage the long-distance merchants to come back the next time.¹⁸ The clerks and runners received their commissions, and this fact ensured a degree of stability in the marketplace. Yet there was enough potentiality for arbitrariness in the arrangement to discourage long-term investment in the improvement of production. In the Qing period, as population and trade both expanded, unauthorized brokers who operated without license became such a problem that the Qing monarch had to set quotas for the brokers—a total of several thousand for each province—for example, in the mid-eighteenth century, 5,240 for Hubei province and 4,490 for Jiangsi province.¹⁹ The largest concentration of licensed brokers was in the cities—hundreds of them in a city like Suzhou, covering the major wholesale businesses.

It is in this context that the Chinese merchant guilds must be viewed, for the guilds that arose in the late Ming and early Qing periods took over the functions of the officially licensed brokers in some trades, though not in all of them. The new kind of Chinese merchant associations represented,

18. Susan Mann, *Local Merchants and the Chinese Bureaucracy, 1750-1950* (Stanford, 1987), esp. chapters 3-5. On the role of the brokers in the cotton textile trade, see also Xu Xinwu, "Yapian zhanzheng qian," 74-81.

19. See Wu Qiyang, "Qingdai qiangi yahangzhi shisu" [Essay on the brokerage system of the early Qing period], *Qingshi luncong*, VI (1985), 26-52; Wei Qingyuan and Wu Qiyang, "Qingdai yahang libi lun" [On the positive and negative sides of the brokerage firms of the Qing dynasty], *Qingshi yanjiu tongxun*, No. 4 (1985), 13-17. See also Wang Shixin, "Shilun yahang" [The brokerage firms: an essay], *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan jingji yanjiu suo jikan*, No. 8 (1986), 198-226.

in any case, a trend toward the privatization of certain commercial functions. When they first appeared, these Chinese guilds were identified as *huiguan*, meaning literally “club-houses,” formed by merchants whose native place was different and usually far away from the city in which they were sojourning. In this respect, they were not like the usual European guilds, and the term *huiguan* has more appropriately, perhaps, been translated as *Landsmannschaft*—an association of persons of common geographic background in a place away from their home territory.²⁰

* * *

Actually, the phrase *huiguan* referred originally to the hostels that came to exist under the Ming dynasty in Beijing and in some provincial cities and which provided lodging for candidates from the same native place taking the examinations for the civil service. The clubhouse also provided a location for feasts and gatherings for officials of the same native-place origin, and the clubhouses in Beijing served, too, as hostels for qualified degreeholders who came to the capital to await imperial audience and appointment.²¹ The phrase *huiguan* was, however, adopted by merchants by at least the eighteenth century for their own associations in Beijing and in a few other cities, in each case composed of men from the same native place who also happened to be engaged in the same trade. The dating and nature of these associations are attested to by the stone steles that still mark the sites of their temples or meeting halls.

The identity conferred by common geographical origin was the major bond—whether it was that of the same county, same group of counties, or same province. Among the earliest such commercial *huiguan* believed to have been in existence in the late Ming period were five established by merchants residing in Beijing who were from the province of Shanxi, although each group was from a different prefecture

20. *Landsmannschaft* was first used to describe Chinese guilds by D. J. MacGowan, “Chinese Guilds or Chambers of Commerce and Trade Unions,” *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXI (1888-1889), 133-192, esp. 144. The concept was again brought to scholarly attention by He Bingdi (Ping-ti Ho), *Zhongguo huiguan shilun* [A historical survey of *Landsmannschaften* in China] (Taipei, 1966).

21. *Ibid.*, 11-21.

or set of adjacent counties—and, moreover, each group pursued a different trade or set of trades. One group that came from a particular area in Shanxi, for example, traded in dyestuffs, another, from a different area of the same province, traded in metal goods—iron, copper, and tin.²² Common geographic origin had become next only in importance to family and kinship. Yet the guilds were formed also on the basis of the common businesses which the members pursued, which had somehow to be legitimated.

The stone inscriptions reveal unmistakably that Chinese merchants, once they ventured outside family and lineage relationships, had to find common ground in religion and ritual. The guild was usually not the place to worship one's ancestors; and of course one could not worship other people's ancestors. Yet the guilds did not represent the state. The worship of Confucius was monopolized by imperial authority and by the properly authorized officials; sacrifices to Confucius could not be performed in the guilds. They had to worship deities of their own, and these were folk deities, most commonly the martial god, the Lord of Guan, a historical figure of the third century A.D., well known for his loyalty to the Han dynasty as well as to a sworn brotherhood. This martial god, still enshrined in many Chinatowns the world over, was sometimes represented as the god of prosperity. But prominent among the deities worshipped by the Chinese merchants was the god of wealth (*caishen*) himself, who was and still is represented by an image with the headgear of a mandarin and an appearance somewhere between that of an official and a yamen runner—much more cynical than the righteous and dignified Lord Guan. Other deities worshipped by the merchant guilds included the Empress of Heaven (*tianhou*), the protectress of seamen on the China coast. Essentially these patron deities were benignly inclined toward individual wishes for fulfillment and success.²³ They made little demand on the worshipper's inner life, although they

22. BJB, pp. 1-14. For a discussion of these sources, see my article, "Jinshi zhidu yu shangren" [Institutions and merchants in China of recent centuries], in Yu Yingshi, *Zhongguo jinshi zhongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen* [Religious ethics and the merchants' spirit in China of recent centuries] (Taipei, 1987), 25-53, esp. pp. 36-49.

23. For example, BJB, pp. 1-2, 4-8; JSB, pp. 340-341.

commanded a degree of fear and respect that could be invoked in support of guild endeavors.

If it was with the worship of such popular deities that the merchant guilds identified themselves, they yet never lost touch with the major institutions of Chinese society—family and bureaucracy. The guild member's family-mindedness was only in temporary abeyance when he worshipped or watched opera at the guild temple or met with other members on business at the clubhouse. Each member had his own family, of course, and they often returned to live amidst their kinsmen in their home county, although not everybody could afford to do so. One of the guilds' most common functions was to found and manage a temporary or permanent "charitable burying ground" (*yizhong*), especially for fellow-provincials who died in the city of their sojourn and whose families found it beyond their means to have their remains shipped home to their native place. In many cases, the collection of funds for a mortuary and cemetery for fellow-provincials preceded the organization of a guild.²⁴

The merchant guilds were not, however, simply ritual associations, but were founded to meet the needs of fellow-provincial merchants in a certain trade—in some cases to set prices for their merchandise, so that profit could be secured despite manipulation of the market by government-licensed brokers. Among the early guilds in Beijing, the Canton guild (*Xiancheng huiguan*), founded in 1715, made the most explicit statement. The official who wrote the essay inscribed in stone described the concept of "righteousness" (*yi*) in the minds of its founders—apparently without any thought that this might not be the proper view. To the guild, he wrote, "righteousness" lay in doing one's "duty toward the fellow-provincials" (*sangzi zhiyi*). This duty was, moreover, identified with the common interest of the guild members. When merchants who came from the same locality and were in the same trade agreed on prices among themselves, they were serving "common interest" (defined by the Chinese word *gong*), not selfish interest (defined as *si*). Faithfulness (*xin*) to the common interest was regarded as essential, lest the trade fall under the control of the brokers "who would transgress upon and exploit our

24. For example, BJB, pp. 10-12, 203-204.

profits.”²⁵ Merchants in the Chinese cities evidently had to contend continuously with brokers supported by the bureaucracy. In 1753, for example, the merchants of the dyestuff guild in Beijing were confronted by some local person who wanted to levy “brokerage commission” on their profits. In the dispute that ensued, it was only by appealing to the mayor of Beijing that they obtained the injunction that in regard to certain trades not customarily mediated by brokers (*jingji*), “people should be allowed their convenience”—that is, to manage matters in their own way. In 1758, the tobacco merchants from Hedong (Shanxi) in Beijing were threatened by “ruffians who wanted to levy private taxes” on them. This stimulated the Hedong fellow-provincials to elect guild managers who took the matter to the authorities and negotiated a regular tax rate with the city’s tax bureau. The bureau, in turn, helped the merchants to regulate themselves by adopting a uniform scale for weighing tobacco, applicable in assessing the transit tax at the city gate.²⁶

Not all the Chinese merchant guilds that were established in the eighteenth century set the prices for their commodities. They all, however, had to contend with the officially licensed brokers and they shared the common purpose of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the bureaucracy and of the people at large. In the early eighteenth century, the commemorative essays on the steles were mostly written by an official who was a fellow provincial. This was as true of the guilds in Beijing as of those in Suzhou, which was the largest commercial as well as administrative center in the lower Yangtze area. The stone inscriptions of the guilds in Suzhou in the early eighteenth century were often written by a fellow-provincial official who had served in Beijing or at least held the metropolitan *jinshi* degree. Sometimes they were written by a fellow-provincial official who was serving in the Suzhou area as financial or judicial commissioner or as the prefect or county magistrate. Essays written by metropolitan officials or high degreeholders would mention their having stayed at the guild’s hostel. Essays by officials in the Suzhou area who were from the same native place would say how they had tried to get fellow-provincial merchants in Suzhou to form a

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-85, esp. 50-51.

guild and that the effort succeeded only after the merchants themselves raised enough funds to build or remodel a temple. The official would write approvingly of the rituals observed at the merchants' temple and sometimes even promised that county officials would attend the guild's worship.²⁷ On the evidence of the stone inscriptions, I would contend that Chinese merchants were culturally subordinate. They had the advantage of their wealth, yet in their perpetual bargaining with the brokers or with the sub-bureaucracy, they had to keep reasserting their claim to an honorable status. Being members of a fellow-provincial merchant guild and getting officials to write essays in praise of the association helped to give the merchants such legitimacy.

Actually, the really wealthy merchants almost always purchased high official ranks; they had rapport with the officials and did not in fact need the protection of the guilds. This helps to explain why in the great administrative as well as commercial center of Suzhou, the most important provincial merchant groups were often for a long time not represented by a merchant guild. Although merchants from distant Shanxi, as well as those from Huizhou in southern Anhui, had been trading since the late Ming in various commodities in Suzhou, it was not until the 1760s that the Shanxi merchants there first built a temple and a clubhouse. Although a group of merchants from Huizhou attempted in 1773 to establish a prefectural guild in Suzhou, this was not successful because of disagreement among merchants of the several Huizhou counties. A Huizhou guild finally came into being in the Suzhou prefecture only in the 1810s, when one was established at the center of the silk trade in Shengzezhen, near Suzhou.²⁸

This pattern of merchants depending on officials for legitimacy remained true throughout the eighteenth century, yet there were signs of merchant initiative. A century before the opening of China to the West by the Opium War of 1840, those merchant guilds there were had become better organized. There was the emergence of fulltime guild managers. By the mid-eighteenth century, in Beijing or in Suzhou, to arrange for major construction work or to conduct negotia-

27. For example, JSB, pp. 340-377; SZB, pp. 28-29.

28. See the discussion in Liu, "Jinshi zhidu," 49-52.

tions with the authorities, a merchant guild would choose a number of executive directors (*gongzhi* or *dongshi*), and often a number of associate directors, to form some kind of committee. The way these persons were chosen is not entirely clear, except that in cases where the guild was made up of fellow provincials from a number of counties, each county would be represented; there were also cases of the directorship being rotated annually among persons nominated by each county.²⁹ In 1781, the Chaozhou (Guangdong) guild in Suzhou appointed a metropolitan *jinshi* degreeholder as director there. More typically, in the eighteenth century, literate persons without degrees were appointed to this post. Increasingly, from the mid-eighteenth century on, their businesslike calligraphy appears on the stone tablets, in essays composed by the merchants themselves. However, the guilds still could not proceed without the endorsement of an official. The typical format of the guild monuments was to have two tablets or at least two essays on one tablet. One essay would be by an official, who praised the merchants in patronizing style; the other, signed by a merchant director or “jointly signed” (*gongli*) in the name of the guild, would describe its history and the rituals it observed, and provide a list of the donors and the amount each member donated for the construction work. Appended were usually a list of properties that belonged to the guild itself and, significantly, the annual amount of government taxes levied on the guild properties. The tax rates, at least for such properties, were thus literally carved in stone.³⁰

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the newly founded Chinese guilds, more often than not, were called *gongsuo* (meaning meeting hall) rather than *huiguan* (meaning clubhouse). The new nomenclature suggests greater emphasis on common trade, rather than common geographic origin, but the two terms were used interchangeably, and protection still largely depended on the common native-place relationship as well as rapport with the officials.³¹ From the stone inscriptions of the guilds in Shanghai as well as in Suzhou, it is obvious that the opportunity of access to local high officials continued to be very much prized. In Shanghai, throughout the eighteenth century, officially licensed bro-

29. *Ibid.*, 44-49.

30. For example, JSB, pp. 340-345, SZB, pp. 355-359.

31. William T. Rowe has on the basis of a study of the Hankow guilds in the nineteenth century advanced the thesis that the common-place principle in

kers continued to dominate the scene. They formed a guild of their own in the cotton-cloth trade, in contention with the sub-bureaucracy that expected large levies from it. By the late eighteenth-century, independent merchants, as opposed to brokers, were able to control the trade in indigo cloth. They, too, had to contend with the brokers, and in 1767 they set up a guild for the purpose near the City God Temple.³² In Shanghai, various businesses were developed with especial success by the vigorous merchant groups from the nearby province of Zhejiang. A banking guild under the name of *gongsuo* was formed in 1776, chiefly by bankers from Ningbo, displaying a stone stele with an inscription by the Shanghai magistrate himself.³³ Despite the increasing initiative taken by the merchants, they had not become independent in the cultural or political sense.

In the early nineteenth century, a new kind of Chinese guild became important—the craft and service guilds in the big cities. In Suzhou, in 1780–1850, twelve such guilds are documented by the stone tablets—for example, those of tailors, hatters, cabinet-makers, tanners, and butchers.³⁴ Information on these inscriptions always includes the common property owned, the dues to be charged each member, and

the organization of Chinese guilds increasingly gave way to the common-trade principle. See Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1749–1889* (Stanford, 1984), esp. chapters 7–10. Yet it must be emphasized that many important merchant associations called *gongsuo* were actually native-place associations. The prominent examples are Siming *gongsuo* (founded in 1797 in Shanghai by Ningbo merchants) and Guangzhao *gongsuo* (founded in 1872 in Shanghai by merchants of the Canton and Zhaoqing prefectures). SHB, p. 259; Xu Run, *Xu Yuzhai zhixu nienpu* [Autobiographical chronicle of Xu Run] (n.p., 1927), 16–17.

32. Xu Xinwu, *Yapian zhanzheng qian*, 79–80; cf. Tu Li, “Yapian zhanzheng qian Shanghai hanghui xingzhi zhi shanbian” [Changes in the nature of the guilds in Shanghai before the Opium War], in Nanjing daxue lishi xi, Ming-Qing shi yanjiu shi, ed., *Zhongguo ziben zhuyi mengya wenti taolun ji* [Symposium on the problem of the sprouting of capitalism in China] (Jiangsu, 1983), 153–159.

33. SHB, pp. 259–260. See also Susan Mann Jones, “The Ningpo *Pang* and Financial Power in Shanghai,” in Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner, eds., *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds* (Stanford, 1974), esp. pp. 76–81.

34. Cf. a list based on JSB and SZB in Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo ziben zhuyi*, p. 299; see note 35. I do not include the paper and stationery shops, because, as in the case of the dyeing, calendering, and printing of silk and cotton fabrics, the regulations governing workmen were issued by the officials, at the request of the shop headman (*fangzhu* or *fangjia*), who worked with the merchants. These are not really guild regulations, and it cannot be inferred therefrom that a guild had been formed. See JSB, pp. 66–73; SZB, pp. 92–95. Cf. Peter J. Golas, “Early Ch’ing Guilds,” in Skinner, *City in Late Imperial China*, 555–580, esp. p. 562.

the patron deity worshipped—for example, the legendary Yellow Emperor for the tailors. Sometimes the inscription would simply be a statement by the artisans' secretary (*sishi*); at other times, there would be only the pronouncement of the prefect or county magistrate who approved the building of the hall or temple and told "ruffians" and "robbers" to stay away from it.³⁵ In some cases, brief regulations for the guild are included in its own statement or in the official decree responding to the original petition of the guild, authorizing protection of its property. Although craft guild members were usually persons of common geographic origin (typically from some part of Zhejiang province or from some part of Jiangsu province other than Suzhou), persons of different origin were not explicitly barred from membership. Sizeable fees were demanded from those newly entering the trade, however, and for apprentices recruited locally. The terms of service of the apprentices were usually from three to five years. From such stone inscriptions and from copies of written regulations of craft guilds that are also available there seems to be little question that craft guilds that sought protection and regulation were already in existence in the late eighteenth century.³⁶

The craft guilds as well as the merchant guilds were to multiply rapidly in the last seventy years of the Qing dynasty, after the Opium War of 1840. Numerous specimens of the Chinese guild regulations (*hanggui*) dated after 1850 have been collected by Europeans in China's treaty ports, by Japanese scholars who went to China, and by Chinese historians themselves, including those in the People's Republic interested in the foreshadowing of Chinese capitalism.³⁷ From

35. For craft guilds in Suzhou datable to the period before 1850, see SZB, pp. 122-123, 135-137, 142-148, 163-166, 205-206, 250-252, 259-260, 267-274, 294-296.

36. For guild *regulations* included in the stone inscriptions dated before 1850, see JSB, pp. 107-108; SZB, p. 136; SHB, p. 252. Peng Zeyi and his colleagues have found regulations of a few craft guilds, including those in Hunan and Sichuan, dating back to the eighteenth century. They were concerned with making metal instruments (including copper wares), tiles, wooden furniture, and hats and boots, and also with the dyeing of fabrics; see Peng Zeyi, comp., *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* [Materials for the history of handicraft industry in modern China] (2 vols.; Beijing, 1962; 1984), I, pp. 179-198; II, pp. 28-41.

37. Regarding the late imperial period, i.e., up to 1911, Chinese guild regulations may be found in the following sources, in addition to those cited in

the study of materials published for the late Qing period—that is, from 1840 to 1911—it seems that at least in the craft and service trades a number of guilds in Beijing, in the coastal cities, and elsewhere had gained influence over their members regarding such practices as uniformity of weights and measures, restriction of the number of apprentices, their length of training, their remuneration and that of journeymen, and the terms for settling accounts. In a limited number of cases, there were also provisions for fixing prices.³⁸

The craft guilds thus regulated the activities of their members, often relying on the help of the officials in doing so.³⁹ They mediated quarrels among members. Yet their jurisdiction was not independent; from time to time they had to appeal to the officials for settlement of serious disputes. An example is the construction guild (Shuimuye gongsuo) in Shanghai. Including carpenters as well as masons, the guild was founded in 1843, when a temple to Lu Ban, the ancient deity of artisans, was dedicated. The group that founded it was composed mostly of craftsmen who were natives of the Shanghai area. In the 1860s, when artisans from Ningbo and

note 36: “K,” “Chinese Guilds and their Rules,” *The China Review* (July–August 1883), pp. 5–9; MacGowan, “Chinese Guilds” (see note 20, above); *Report of the Mission to China of the Blackburn Chamber of Commerce 1898–97* (Blackburn, 1898), 307–319; Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Gilds of China* (London, 1909); Quan Hansheng, *Zhongguo hanghui zhidu shi* [A history of the guild institutions of China] (1934; Taipei, 1978); Imahori Seiji, *Chūgoku hōken shakai no kikō* [Institutions of China’s feudal society] (Tokyo, 1955), esp. pp. 701–837; Niida Noboru, *Pekin kōshō girudo shiryōshu* (see note 2, above).

38. For early Qing examples of guilds fixing prices and wages, regulating the terms of apprenticeship, and standardizing weights and measures, see BJB, pp. 7, 15–16, 50–51, 132–149. For the tendency toward greater exclusiveness in the late Qing period, see *ibid.*, 133–151; JSB, pp. 18–19, 120–121, 389; SZB, pp. 83–84, 103–105, 124–125, 251–252, 260–261, 278; SHB, pp. 311–312, 405–406, 409–411. The fur guild of Beijing stated in its regulations of 1887 that any shopowner who recruited workmen from outside the trade or from Zhangjiakou (where fur originated) would be “a robber among men and prostitute among women”—in other words, to be ostracized. Niida Noboru, *Pekin kōshō girudo*, III, 543–547.

39. An early example of a guild relying on the sub-bureaucracy to enforce its regulations is in BJB, pp. 50–51, cited above. See also SZB, pp. 231, 236–237, 251–252, 303–304. For the Guangxu period (1875–1908), the following instances are from the guild regulations reprinted by Quan Hansheng. The Shanghai soy sauce guild (Jiangyou ye gongsuo) declared that the guild had requested the police of the local salt administration to detect violation of the standard weights and measurements by the guildsmen. The regulations of a poultry guild in an unidentified place asked members to “receive the steelyard from the provincial Finance Commissioner’s yamen.” See Quan Hansheng, *Zhongguo hanghui*, 169–172; see also pp. 173, 178, 180, 182, 185.

Shaoxing in nearby Zhejiang province came to dominate the trade, disputes arose, and the Ningbo-Shaoxing artisans had to petition the Shanghai magistrate to approve a set of regulations. Carved into stone in 1868, the rules, as approved by official decree, provided for the daily wages of artisans (*jiang*) and apprentices, membership dues, and the monthly rotation of the secretaryship among those nominated by each of the three groups—from Shanghai, Ningbo, and Shaoxing. Actually these groups began to work harmoniously together only after the settlement of a lawsuit three months later, at the end of which the Shanghai magistrate himself endorsed an arrangement by which a particular person acceptable to all three groups was appointed custodian of the temple.⁴⁰

Although silk reeling had remained a rural domestic industry, there was, in a few cities from the late Ming period on, a putting-out system for silk weaving. Yet it is interesting to find that it was not until the 1870s that merchant guilds dealing in silk textiles began to proliferate in Suzhou—at least half a dozen of them by then, each specializing in one or two kinds of merchandise—for example, velvet, damask, gauze, and satin—and each representing the wholesalers (*tzuhao*) who purchased from the craftsmen.⁴¹ In the late nineteenth century, too, there was the increase of cotton textile guilds—associations of wholesalers in Suzhou and other cities who consigned plain peasant-woven cloth they had collected from rural markets to be dyed, calendered, or printed by workmen in specialized shops. In the major center for such trade in Suzhou, such wholesale merchants, including many in the long-distance trade, had long depended on the master (*fangzhu*) of a specialized shop to control the workers, who were strong single men recruited from certain areas of the province.⁴² Ultimately stability in the processing industry depended on the coercive power of the government, which periodically suppressed the workmen's trade-union-like action. During these infrequent outbreaks, workers some-

40. SHB, pp. 308-315.

41. See the sources cited in Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo ziben*, 139-159, 298, 362-382; Lilian M. Li, *China's Silk Trade: Traditional Industry in the Modern World, 1842-1937* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), esp. pp. 30-61.

42. SZB, pp. 80-88. See sources cited in Xu Xinwu, *Yapian zhanzheng qian*, 78-102; Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo ziben*, 382-410.

times claimed to belong to a society (*tang*, to use the Chinese word suggesting sworn brotherhood). Such a combination of workers was regarded by the government as illegal and was always suppressed.⁴³

Meanwhile from the mid-nineteenth century on, merchant associations in other trades also multiplied, still substantially based on fellow-provincial connections. An increasing number of the guilds were now to be those based on a common trade, and did include members from more than one place of origin. In Suzhou the first “common trade” guild for cotton cloth was founded by Huizhou merchants some time before 1832. The first “common trade” guild for the rice trade in the Suzhou prefecture was in prosperous Shengzezhen, where a building was dedicated in 1871.⁴⁴ In such treaty ports as Shanghai, Ningbo, and Wenzhou, however, trade and craft guilds proliferated. Typically these associations regulated business practices, including weights and measures, standards of packaging, terms for storage and for the settlement of credit, and rates of commission. In some cases, the preamble to the regulations explicitly states that the guild was founded because government taxes on the trade had been heavy. One form the taxes took was the *likin*, instituted by the Qing government in the 1850s, to meet military needs in the civil war against the Taiping and other rebels. The collection of *likin* came to be farmed by the guilds, which undertook to produce lump sums for the officials.⁴⁵ Such an arrangement in turn gave the merchant tax-farmers occasion to strengthen their guilds; *likin* tax was often subtracted from the guilds’ compulsory membership dues. In this way too, harassment by clerks and runners was short-circuited.

To facilitate negotiations with officials, the practice developed that a principal secretary of the guild would be

43. SZB, pp. 13-17, 24-25, 36-37, 53-71, 74-82; see sources cited in Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo ziben*, 306-309.

44. SZB, pp. 80, 234-236.

45. The *likin* was specifically mentioned in the inscriptions of the Shengzezhen rice guild, dated 1878. See *ibid.*, 234-236. In his article published in 1889, D. J. MacGowan regards “farming of the inland revenue” as the source of the monopoly enjoyed by the Chinese guilds. Referring to a dispute in Ningbo, he writes: “The complication at Ningpo is due to the farming out of war octrois (or *likin*) to Guilds, and to monopolies thus created...” MacGowan, “Chinese Guilds,” 168 (parentheses in original).

chosen from among degreeholders, who understood the language of both official and merchant; this was now a more common practice than in the eighteenth century. The managers, or the groups of managers that served alternately, were supposed to be elected. Actually, they were often chosen from the fellow-provincial group that dominated the trade, or sector of a trade, with which the guild was concerned.⁴⁶ In terms of resources and power, the trade guilds thus overlapped considerably with the fellow-provincial guilds. Leading merchants of the Canton guild, for example, were active as directors of the tea guild in Shanghai. Throughout the nineteenth century, leaders of the Ningbo guild always included directors of the bankers' guild in Shanghai.

* * *

This essay has indicated that there was a trend toward privatization in the Chinese society and economy during the recent centuries, specifically as reflected in the rise of commercial *huiguan* and *gongsuo*, beginning at least in the late seventeenth century. On the basis of the stone inscriptions for three cities studied here, it seems evident that these were voluntary merchant associations—that an increasing number of them were founded on merchant, not official initiative—and that from the late eighteenth century on, there were also an increasing number of craft associations not primarily for

46. These and other details have been brought out by previous scholars of the Chinese guilds of the late imperial period. See the works by Golas, Ho (He Bindī), Rowe, and Quan cited above; also Wellington K. K. Chan, "Merchant Organizations in Late Imperial China: Patterns of Change and Development," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XIV (1975), 28-42, and Gary G. Hamilton, "Regional Associations in the Chinese City: A Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXI (1979), 346-361. Among the extensive works by Japanese scholars, only a few can be listed here. Note especially Imahori Seiji, *Chūgoku hōken shakai no kikō* (see above, note 37); Kato Shigeshi, *Shina keizaishi kōsho* [Research on Chinese economic history] (2 vols., Tokyo, 1952-1953); Negishi Tadashi, *Shanghai no girudo* [The guilds of Shanghai] (Tokyo, 1951) and *Chūgoku no girudo* [The guilds of China] (Tokyo, 1953); Niida Noboru, *Chūgoku no shakai to girudo* [Guilds and Chinese society] (Tokyo, 1951), also his article in English, "The Industrial and Commercial Guilds of Peking and Religion and Fellowcountrymanship as Elements of Their Coherence," M. Elder, trans., *Folklore Studies*, IX (1950), 179-206. It is impossible to do justice to Chinese works in this note, except to say that works by Xu Xinwu and Wu Chengming (see above, notes 15 and 17) are indispensable.

service to the government.⁴⁷ The use of the term guild to translate the Chinese phrase *huiguan* or *gongsuo* is, I think, justified, for both the merchant guilds that emerged in the early eighteenth century and the craft guilds that appeared in the early nineteenth were devoted to the purposes of protectionism and mutual aid and served to regulate the conditions of trade at least to some extent. Yet it must be pointed out that the socio-economic as well as political contexts were peculiar to China. To say that there were Chinese guilds is like saying that there were Chinese gentry—each concept calls attention to differences as well as to similarities.

There is, in the first place, the question of the economic function the guilds fulfilled. Numerous *huiguan* and *gongsuo* were founded by and protected the interests of merchants engaged in the long-distance trade, involving essentially exchanges of grain, on the one hand, and handicraft products on the other.⁴⁸ They served primarily domestic markets at a time when foreign trade was as yet of uncertain importance. Moreover, they represented the interests of the merchants themselves, not the producers of their merchandise. Nor were the craft guilds that became important in the nineteenth century concerned with the initial manufacturing of the basic commodity of rural-urban exchange, cotton cloth. They were associations principally of those engaged in providing urban services or in processing luxury products. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, with the increase in the import-export trade, Chinese guilds multiplied, and their geographical reach within each province expanded. Yet many economic historians now seem to agree that the pattern of the Chinese peasant economy, including handicraft production, long persisted.

Long persisting as well was the pattern of prestige and power. In China, from the eleventh through the nineteenth

47. One must emphasize, however, that bureaucratic domination of commerce and industry long persisted, as indicated by the late emergence in Suzhou of guilds dealing with rice and cotton cloth and by the dependence of the shops specializing in dyeing, calendering, and printing of fabrics on the government control over labor.

48. Wu Chengming's estimates of China's domestic trade for the early nineteenth century (see above, note 15) are persuasive.

centuries, there was no development of merchant-controlled municipal government.⁴⁹ Indeed, there was the continued domination of the imperial bureaucracy and the examination system, even though there was also expansion of the tax-farming system. The basic political framework survived the Opium War into an era that saw the accelerated development of the Chinese merchant guilds—and of craft guilds as well. As the stone inscriptions as well as the extant guild regulations show, it was especially after 1860 that the exclusive and collective aspects of the Chinese merchant associations became pronounced.⁵⁰ Partly this must be ascribed to the expansion of merchant tax-farming that began with the likin tax in the 1850s, and partly it was a response to the West. Foreigners in the treaty ports found the Chinese guilds acting effectively to ensure monopoly in a manner reminiscent of the European guilds. Time and again, Chinese merchants adopted uniform prices for such major commodities as silk, and they took common action in boycotting European firms on issues of trade practice and of their concern for fellow-provincial burying grounds—as seen in the action the Ningbo guild in Shanghai took in 1874 and 1898.⁵¹

The concerns of the guilds were, however, essentially conservative. During the last forty years of the nineteenth century, the Ningbo guild in Shanghai built up its strength through the Buddhist All Souls' Day festivals it cosponsored with numerous small Ningbo fellow-provincial societies affiliated with various trades in the city, devoted to filial piety, to

49. Harassment at the river waterfront of the cities was a serious problem for commerce. The seagoing junks in the Shanghai area faced irregular levies made by "ruffians" and by brokers and had to appeal to officials to have levies regularized. See inscriptions dated 1788-1867 in SHB, pp. 68-73. Through most of the Qing period, "ruffians" and even government functionaries interfered from time to time with loading and unloading at the river frontage at Suzhou. Guilds had to appeal to the prefect or the magistrate to have the dock cleared of unauthorized persons. SZB, pp. 42-43, 108-109, 233-234, 240-241, 315-318, 320-321, 388-389. These documents are dated from 1627 through 1901.

50. This fact has been noted in Dou Jiliang, *Tongxiang zuzhi zhi yanjiu* [Research on *Landsmann* organizations] (1943; Shanghai, 1946), 77-78, 84, and in Peng Zeyi, "Shiji shiji houqi Zhongguo chengshi shougongye shangye hanghui di chongjian he zuoyong" [The reconstruction and the role of handicraft and commercial guilds in Chinese cities in the late nineteenth century], *Lishi yanjiu*, I (1965), 71-102, esp. pp. 91-94. Guilds at the treaty ports sometimes referred to likin and other government levies in the preambles to their regulations. See Quan Hansheng, *Zhongguo hanghui*, 165-166, 174.

51. SHB, pp. 427-432; Jones, "The Ningpo *Pang* and Financial Power in Shanghai," 73-96, esp. pp. 86-88.

philanthropy, and to the veneration of literacy.⁵² Nevertheless, there is evidence that the Chinese guilds in some treaty ports began to fulfill some civic functions, organizing fire-fighting facilities and hospitals. With the encouragement of the Qing government, the guilds sponsored chambers of commerce in the early years of the twentieth century. For a brief period, in at least some Chinese cities, the guilds appear to have taken part in municipal affairs. To fulfill a few public functions was, however, not the same as to exercise control. The question remains whether the guilds' power in government was at all consequential, in view of the turn taken by the political and military situation in 1911–1912—and, indeed, in later years.⁵³

In this essay, I have presented the context and some details of the history of the Chinese merchant guilds, but the historical inquiry goes beyond the guilds. My further concern is with the problem of structure and change in China—not just commerce, but also the political order and beyond that the cultural order. It seems clear to me from the evidence that by the first decade of the twentieth century, while there were guilds and chambers of commerce in China and while wealthy merchants were able, as individuals, to exert influence, there was still no bourgeois class of significance.⁵⁴ Personal access to government officials, ultimately to the military, remained the principal channel of power. There is little question that there was extensive domestic commerce in late imperial China and that associations of merchants based on common native place played an important part in this trade. But one must not deduce from the existence of the Chinese guilds any basic change in the structure of society. The Chinese guilds, like Chinese cities, must be viewed in the context of a vast agrarian society that was bureaucratically governed and was legitimated by a long-established system of social values—a tradition which even today perhaps has not lost its power.

52. SHB, pp. 261–275, 403–408, 418–432.

53. This pattern of the merchant guilds having acquired some municipal functions and then lost them to local officialdom has been noted by Dou Jiliang, *Tongxiang zuzhi*, 17–18; see also Wellington K. K. Chan, *Merchants, Mandarins, and Modern Enterprise in Late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), esp. pp. 214–216, 241–243.

54. Cf. Rowe, *Hankow*, 344–346; Marie-Claire Bergère, *L'âge d'or de la bourgeoisie chinoise, 1911–1937* (Paris, 1986).