The role of guilds in European history is well established. They had a vital importance in medieval economies,[[1]](#footnote-1) governments,[[2]](#footnote-2) societal life and structures.[[3]](#footnote-3) Marteen Prak in his work *Citzenship without Nations* goes on to analyze methods of political power for citizens in the medieval world, one of the main methods was guilds.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Great Divergence debate has led historians to look at various aspects of Chinese society and history, one of these has been guilds.[[5]](#footnote-5) Prak ambitiously adds to the discussion of the Great Divergence by discussing Asia and the Americas in his work. However, Prak dedicates little time to China, generalizes and his framework for analysis of Chinese guilds is framed through Western criteria. This essay wants to address that gap and examine Chinese guilds in their own right. Therefore, this paper will firstly look answer to questions *i)* What are some general characteristics found within Chinese guilds *ii)* Is the criteria used by Prak suitable?

Discussing common characteristics among Chinese guilds **requires two caveats**. Firstly, there was two types of Chinese guilds. *Huiguan* and *Gongsuo*. The term to refer to guilds, *hanghui,* which is used by Prak, is an external imposition; the term was not used contemporaneously.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Chinese equivalent for merchant guilds is *Huiguan* and *Gongsuo* refers to trade guilds. *Huiguan* and their membership were tied to places of origin. Merchants who left their hometowns in search of better fortune would band together with merchants from their same province in the new city.[[7]](#footnote-7) By contrast *Gongsuo* was linked to trade and emerged after the *Huiguan*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Clear delineations between them are not always clear, sometimes *Gongsuo* would be found within *Huiguan*.[[9]](#footnote-9) They both included an organization of people, where not linked to citizenship[[10]](#footnote-10) and had an economic role. As a result of scope this essay will use the collective term *hanghui*, where the situation calls for it, this essay points out differences between them. The second caveat is timespan. Although early forms of organization existed in the form of *hangzuo* and *hangzan*, the *hangui* do not claim descendance from them.[[11]](#footnote-11) They originate during the Qing dynasty, around the mid-18th century and decline around the 20th century. Therefore, this essay will refer to *hanghui* during this period.

Characteristics of the *hangui* are varied as they varied wildly in their function. One of them was ritual and religious roles.[[12]](#footnote-12) *Huiguan* provided a common burial ground for members too poor to have their remains shipped home. The state also held a monopoly on Confucianism, as a result guilds often worshipped local gods such as *Caishen* (god of wealth.

18th century China was under transformation, there was rapid economic growth, particularly in the commercial realm.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition there was a decline in the system of obligatory labor that local and central governments used in wages and market.[[14]](#footnote-14) Therefore the *Hanghui* that arise in the 18th century primarily aim to benefit their members, as a result of this purpose they often found themselves in opposition to the government. The government had officially licensed brokers for certain merchandise, therefore, for *hangui* to secure profit they fixed their prices.[[15]](#footnote-15) The collective protection *hangui* offered is further emphasized by the fact that very rich merchants did not belong to any *hangui*, instead they had direct links to officials.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, to characterize *hanghui* as anti-government would be disingenuous. *Hangui* had the ultimate goal of gaining legitimacy. They also wanted to retain political autonomy, thereby opposing princes and ministers but allying with their local governments.[[17]](#footnote-17) In the late Qing they collaborated closely with the municipal authorities.[[18]](#footnote-18) The state would often offload taxation and urban control duties onto them.[[19]](#footnote-19) A more accurate description would be to say that the circumstances under which *hanghui* formed resulted in a clash of interests with the government. However, the interests of its members was to eventually acquire legitimacy to negotiate directly with the government. Therefore, unlike Europe, *hanghui* were not independent from the administrative apparatus.[[20]](#footnote-20) A useful framework would be to analyze guilds and their relationship to the state and administration as two different entities.

1. (Lucassen, De Moor, and Van Zanden 2008, 170) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Prak 2018, 73) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Prak 2018, 109) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Prak 2018, 5) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Lucassen, De Moor, and Van Zanden 2008, 7) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Moll-Murata 2008, 214) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Liu 1988, 9) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Liu 1988, 16; Moll-Murata 2008, 215) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Moll-Murata 2018, 322) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Moll-Murata 2018, 324) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. (Moll-Murata 2018, 323) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Barker 1997, 28) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (Liu 1988, 6) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. (Moll-Murata 2018, 219) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. (Liu 1988, 12) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. (Liu 1988, 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. (Moll-Murata 2018, 327) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. (Moll-Murata 2018, 219) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. (Barker 1997, 27) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. (Fewsmith 1983, 622) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)