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? To do this paper looks at the religious role, spatial, political and economical role of *hanghui* and guilds.

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 and location**, Chinese history spans millennia with various dynasties therefore this paper restricts itself to the Qing dynasty which covered a vast territory and was proclaimed in 1636 and lasting until 1912. 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. This era saw a rapid growth in population which was accompanied with an increase in the population of major cities,[[12]](#footnote-12) this essay focuses on mostly large cities like Beijing and Shanghai.[[13]](#footnote-13) Therefore, this essay will refer to *hanghui* during this period. The **final aspect** worth acknowledging is that the current field is undergoing a significant transformation, especially regarding Europe. The wide narrative of guilds preventing capitalism is being questioned. This paper will adopt the current position within European scholarship, that being that a comprehensive view of guilds must abandon the preconceived notion of guilds as an obstacle to innovation.

Characteristics of the *hangui* are varied as they varied wildly in their function. One of them was ritual and religious roles.[[14]](#footnote-14) *Huiguan* provided a common burial ground for members too poor to have their remains shipped home. This practice was done mostly in merchant and trade *huiguan*. Providing burial grounds also connected *hanghui* and their merchants to the local community. However, burial was not the only ritual function of *hanghui.* Religion and workship of deities was also an important feature of *hanghui*. *Hangui* often workshipped various local deities, this local deity was often somehow connected to the *hangui*. [[15]](#footnote-15)Many of them had altars within their buildings. An example would be worship of Caishen, the god of wealth.[[16]](#footnote-16) One of the reasons for worship separate from the state is that the state held a monopoly on Confucianism. Sacrifices to Confucious could not be made in the *hanghui*.[[17]](#footnote-17) All of these rituals and religious functions were used to promote local sentiment as well as consolidate a collective identity.[[18]](#footnote-18)

One of the key differences between China and Europe was the importance of familial ties, with Europe placing less emphasis on these; this has sometimes attributed to efforts of the Catholic church.[[19]](#footnote-19) This is mirrored in the attitude of the Guilds, which did not place the much importance on common native place.[[20]](#footnote-20) Therefore, the uniting need for religion was not present and is not as present in guilds. Christianity was a religion that was practiced in public spaces, in fact in its inception Christianity removed the pagan element of worship at home.[[21]](#footnote-21) The doctrinal foundation of communal practice meant that Guilds themselves never took the duty of worship spaces. However, guilds did not separate themselves from religion. [[22]](#footnote-22) Guilds during the early Middle Ages adopted a patron saints.[[23]](#footnote-23) This patronage, however, should not be equated to the Chinese worship. Christianity is monotheistic and therefore patronage simply implied protection and an intercessor in heaven, [[24]](#footnote-24) it did not imply worship like it did in the traditional Chinese polytheistic religion. Christianity had priests and the Church to act as intermediaries, therefore often Guilds participated in the mass and donated money to the Church on behalf of their members. On top of that they often complied with Christian rules and codes. These rules, like rest on Sabbath, had economic impact on the Guild.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The difference in emphasis on community is also observable when comparing the use of space by these institutions. One of the functions of *Hanghui* was hostels and meeting places.[[26]](#footnote-26) *Hanghui* in Shanghai were constructed in the style of government offices while the ones in *Beijin*g were based on a residential style. The Shanghai guilds emphasized authority while *Beijing* focused on welcoming the visitor. [[27]](#footnote-27) *Hanghui* acting as lodges meant that they were able to enforce their rules on newcomers into the city, rules such as worship and against intoxication. *Hanghui*’s lodging role also meant that they formed a bond with their members. Guilds similarly had guild halls in which they conducted business. However, there’s been less work done on the practices within guildhalls.[[28]](#footnote-28) Some research indicates that members sometimes donated material objects to the guildhall, things like windows, with the objective of preserving their memory in the guild.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The next aspect is government and their relation to the government. 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.[[30]](#footnote-30) 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.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, to characterize *hanghui* as anti-government would be disingenuous. *Hangui* had the ultimate goal of gaining legitimacy to negotiate directly with the government. They also wanted to retain political autonomy, thereby opposing princes and ministers but allying with their local governments.[[32]](#footnote-32) In the late Qing they collaborated closely with the municipal authorities.[[33]](#footnote-33) The state would often offload taxation and urban control duties onto them.[[34]](#footnote-34) This dependency would go both ways, *hanghui* did not have a separate authority structure, their lack of legal acknowledgement meant that they were limited in their jurisdiction. Repeated violations of their rules were often appealed to local magistrates and in legal conflicts they could not use customary law. Therefore, unlike Europe, *hanghui* were not independent from the administrative apparatus.[[35]](#footnote-35) A more accurate description would be to say that the circumstances under which *hanghui* formed resulted in a clash of interests with the government.

The most notable difference for Guilds is that they were legally acknowledged and constituted a separate entity.[[36]](#footnote-36) However, unlike *hanghui*, guilds played a role in the local governments.[[37]](#footnote-37) In fact in some instances guilds influenced directly the election of certain city officials.[[38]](#footnote-38) Guilds, like *hanghui* cooperated with legal authorities. This points to the fact that for *guilds* and *hanghui* to develop, the state needed to be willing to delegate certain tasks like taxation.[[39]](#footnote-39) This made them particularly subject to political whims. For example Chinese guilds began to decline when the distinction between private and public arose.[[40]](#footnote-40) The legal character of guilds meant that legislation, like the one imposed by Charles V, could curtail Guilds.

The example of Charles V also illustrates the fact that guilds required concessions from the government to exist.[[41]](#footnote-41) In China there existed a gap in Qing law, the legal contained few provisions for civil law, there was little regulation of the financial world.[[42]](#footnote-42) *Hanghui* filled in this function. In pursuit of their own interests, *hanghui* often established specific rules that they enforced. The enforcement of these rules was internal; *hanghui* permitted a remarkable amount of internal judicial authority. The ability to enforce rules meant that theycould engage in collective action. Another important economic function was their establishment of monopolies yet *hanghui* themselves were inclusionary, often requiring incoming merchants to be part of a guild to do business.[[43]](#footnote-43) An example of this monopoly is when foreign merchants decided to boycott the Hankou Tea *Hanghui.* As a response The Hankou *Hanghui* boycotted them right back, forbidding any member from trading with foreigners until their demands were met.[[44]](#footnote-44) The lack of regulation meant that *hanghui* and their jurisdiction was purely functional, *hanghui* were not mentioned in law. However, by filling in a role that the state lacked they justified their existence.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Guilds, like *hanghui* had a monopoly and monopsony over certain goods. These privileges were often codified by law. It is worth pointing out that the notion of monopoly during the Medieval period is being questioned. Some scholars assert that in England monopoly did not imply the exclusion of products from the market.[[46]](#footnote-46) The formal privileges were often accompanied by informal ones and as a result there was often a conflict of overlap between merchant and craft guilds.[[47]](#footnote-47) However, these rights were restricted to particular locations and therefore they were not price takers, often responding to changes in prices.[[48]](#footnote-48) A key feature which distinguishes guilds from *hanghui* is the exclusionary nature, regarding its membership. Certain guilds viewed that the only way to raise incomes was to restrict supply of labor. Therefore, they limited the apprenticeship or impeded immigration.[[49]](#footnote-49)

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3. Prak, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Prak, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lucassen, De Moor, and Van Zanden, “The Return of the Guilds,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Christine Moll-Murata, “Chinese Guilds from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries: An Overview,” *International Review of Social History* 53, no. S16 (December 2008): 214, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859008003672. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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9. Christine Moll-Murata, “Merchant and Craft Guilds,” in *State and Crafts in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)*, Social Histories of Work in Asia (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 322, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66331. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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11. Moll-Murata, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ma Rong, “Population Growth and Urbanization,” in *Understanding Contemporary China*, ed. Robert E. Gamer, 4th ed., Understanding: Introductions to the States and Regions of the Contemporary World (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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14. Timothy Barker, “Auto-Organization in Chinese Society,” in *Civil Society in China*, 1st eds (Routledge, 1997), 28, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781315705613-4/auto-organization-chinese-society-timothy-brook. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Richard Belsky, “Native-Place Rituals,” in *Localities at the Center: Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 119–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See John Stewart Burgess, *The Guilds of Peking* (Columbia University Press, 1928), 188. for a detailed list of god’s worshipped by *hanghui*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Liu, “Chinese Merchant Guilds.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Belsky, “Native-Place Rituals.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lucassen, De Moor, and Van Zanden, “The Return of the Guilds.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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30. Liu, “Chinese Merchant Guilds,” 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Liu, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Moll-Murata, “Merchant and Craft Guilds,” 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Moll-Murata, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Barker, “Auto-Organization in Chinese Society,” 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Joseph Fewsmith, “From Guild to Interest Group: The Transformation of Public and Private in Late Qing China,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 4 (1983): 622. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Black, “The Guild: History.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Prak, *Citizens without Nations*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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39. Lucassen, De Moor, and Van Zanden, “The Return of the Guilds,” 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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