Chinese Guilds: A complement to Prak’s analysis

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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 *Citizenship without Nations* goes on to analyse methods of political power for citizens in the medieval world.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Great Divergence debate has led historians to look at various aspects of Chinese society and history.[[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 this gap and examine Chinese guilds in their own right. Therefore, this paper will firstly look at answers to the 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 economic role of *hanghui* and guilds.

Discussing common characteristics among Chinese guilds requires various 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*, while*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 were an organization of people, they were not linked to citizenship[[10]](#footnote-10) and had an economic role. Because of the limited 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, lasting until 1912. Although early forms of organization existed in the form of *hangzuo* and *hangzan*, the *hanghui* 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 by 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 *hanghui* are varied as they varied wildly in their function. One of them were ritual and religious roles.[[14]](#footnote-14) *Huiguan* provided a common burial ground for members too poor to have their remains shipped home.[[15]](#footnote-15) 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*.* Religion and worship of deities was also an important feature of *hanghui*. *They* often worshipped various local deities, which were often somehow connected to the *hanghui*. [[16]](#footnote-16)Many of them had altars within their buildings. An example would be worship of Caishen, the god of wealth.[[17]](#footnote-17) 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*.[[18]](#footnote-18) All of these rituals and religious functions were used to promote local sentiment as well as consolidate a collective identity.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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 been attributed to efforts of the Catholic church.[[20]](#footnote-20) It is mirrored in the attitude of the Guilds, which did not place the much importance on common native place.[[21]](#footnote-21) Therefore, the uniting need for religion was 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.[[22]](#footnote-22) The doctrinal foundation of communal practice meant that Guilds themselves never took the duty of worship spaces themselves. However, guilds did not separate themselves from religion. [[23]](#footnote-23) During the early Middle Ages they adopted patron saints.[[24]](#footnote-24) 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; [[25]](#footnote-25) 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.[[26]](#footnote-26)

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.[[27]](#footnote-27) *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. [[28]](#footnote-28) *Hanghui* acting as lodges meant that they were able to enforce their rules on newcomers into the city, rules for worship and against intoxication. *Hanghui*’s lodging role also meant that they formed a bond with their members. Similarly, guilds had guild halls in which they conducted business. However, there has been less work done on the practices within guildhalls.[[29]](#footnote-29) 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.[[30]](#footnote-30)

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 *hanghui* to secure profit, they fixed their prices.[[31]](#footnote-31) The collective protection *hanghui* offered is further emphasized by the fact that very rich merchants did not belong to any *hanghui*. Instead, they had direct links to officials.[[32]](#footnote-32) However, to characterize *hanghui* as anti-government would be disingenuous. They 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.[[33]](#footnote-33) In the late Qing they collaborated closely with the municipal authorities.[[34]](#footnote-34) The state would often offload taxation and urban control duties onto them.[[35]](#footnote-35) This dependency would go both ways, as *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 in Europe, *hanghui* were not independent from the administrative apparatus.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The most notable difference for guilds is that they were legally acknowledged and constituted a separate entity.[[37]](#footnote-37) However, unlike *hanghui*, guilds played a role in the local governments.[[38]](#footnote-38) In fact in some instances guilds influenced directly the election of certain city officials.[[39]](#footnote-39) 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.[[40]](#footnote-40) This made them particularly subject to political whims. For example, Chinese guilds began to decline when the distinction between private and public arose.[[41]](#footnote-41) 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.[[42]](#footnote-42) 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.[[43]](#footnote-43) *Hanghui* filled in this function. In pursuit of their own interests, *they* 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.[[44]](#footnote-44) An example of this monopoly was 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.[[45]](#footnote-45) 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.[[46]](#footnote-46)

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 a monopoly did not imply the exclusion of products from the market.[[47]](#footnote-47) 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.[[48]](#footnote-48) However, these rights were restricted to particular locations and therefore they were not price takers, often responding to changes in prices.[[49]](#footnote-49) 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.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Going back to Prak. in his work he overlooks nuances of *hanghui*; for example, his comment “the most notable difference is the absence of ‘monopolies’”. [[51]](#footnote-51) This imposes the western notion of monopolies. *Hanghui* imposed rules on trading with non-Guild members, just like European guilds. However, this was done to encourage membership to a Guild, unlike European guilds. His focus on mostly western notions means that he misses out on the nuances of how lodging impacted *hanghui*. Prak also misses out entirely on the community aspect of guilds, which impacts both his assessment of religion and brings in the Orientalizing view of Weber of “a primitive attachment to lineage”.50 While Prak’s observation is true in that *huiguan* were connected by place of origin. However, this was born out of necessity since these merchants found themselves in a completely different city with no social networks. The main issue with Prak’s work is not necessarily the categories he uses but that he oversimplifies to the point of inaccuracy. The broad outline he provides is suitable for an analysis, it points to broad aspects of *hanghui*.

Worth acknowledging is that, just like Prak, an essay of this scope cannot address both of these regions with the same weight. This work is meant to compliment Prak and draws on his work to outline basic notions of Europe and points of comparison. Prak’s work also conducts a diachronic analysis while this analysis is synchronic. This means that the nuances of the time period are left out, especially the later evolution might have been impacted by the century of humiliation.[[52]](#footnote-52) All in all this work is meant to provide a perspective focused on China and seeks to complement Prak’s work.

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