Ming-Qing Guilds

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A type of economic organization generically referred to as the "guild" made its appearance in many of the world's major civilizations at one point or another in their histories. Organizations which, at least on the surface, appear similar to the guilds of medieval and early modern Europe emerged in South Asia, China, and Japan, each at a time which seems to mark a distinctive stage in the intensification of commercial exchange. (Their notable absence in North America is often seen as an anomaly, a key feature in the perceived phenomenon of "American exceptionalism." But to what extent is this surface similarity illusory or coincidental, or to what extent revealing of genuinely universal patterns or processes of cultural evolution? To what extent were Chinese guilds uniquely distinctive? Indeed, is our use of the term "guild" to describe Chinese institutions merely a matter of convenience in labelling, or do we really mean to imply an essential comparability to the European experience, in which the term first arose? What, in other words, were the defining features of guilds in late imperial China?

Although they had antecedents as least as early as the Tang dynasty, guilds in China effectively emerged as a prevalent type of social organization during the era of greatly intensified interregional commerce and geographic mobility in the late Ming and early Qing. They remained important socioeconomic actors through the first decades of the twentieth century. Nomenclature for these institutions varied, including such terms as bang, hang, huiguan, and gongsuo. But while the specific term employed in each case sometimes provided a clue to the organization's special character, probably as often it did

2 For example, Alan Dawley, Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn, Cambridge Mass., 1976.
4 The factor of geographic mobility, especially in connection with the civil service examination system, is stressed in He Bingdi, [Ho Ping-ti]Zhongguo huiguan shihun (On the history of landsmannschaften in China), Taipei, 1966. See also Peter Golas, "Early Ch'ing Guilds," in G. William Skinner, ed., The City in Late Imperial China, Stanford, 1977, pp.555-80.
not, as increasingly the terms came to be used interchangeably. At least by the mid-Qing, listings of such institutions in local gazetteers demonstrate that contemporaries had come to recognize them as belonging to a single broad species of organization.

Chinese guilds have been intensively studied by scholars, and it is fair to say that there are as many explanations of their functional rationale as there have been observers. One view, probably in fact the oldest but forcefully restated in a recent article by and Fu-mei Chen and Ramon Myers,\(^5\) emphasizes the beneficial effects of merchant association in reducing certain types of overhead (termed by Chen and Myers "transaction costs") to levels which permitted generation of profits, thereby stimulating the entry of capital into the area of commodity circulation and, by extension, production. Perhaps equally venerable, however, is the counterargument that guilds operated in restraint of trade, by restricting entry of potential participants through exclusionary membership policies and by using this leverage for price-fixing. This view of what guilds were up to was probably held by many contemporaries, and prompted the imperial administration's repeated prohibitions on "bachi," a term often loosely translated as "monopoly" but more accurately meaning any sort of market intervention deemed inimicable to the flow of goods (monopoly itself was not always so conceived). This perspective also largely informed the earliest detailed work on guilds by Chinese and Japanese scholars such as Quan Hansheng and Negishi Tadashi.\(^6\)

Yet a third general view of guild functions focusing on their role in the marketplace was articulated in a landmark 1956 article by the Chinese economic historian Peng Zeyi.\(^7\) Applying a model drawn from Western economic history, Peng saw the essential role of guilds as attempting to forestall the rise of capitalism. The targets of such rear-guard action were as often colleagues within the trade as outside competitors. The threat came when one or several of the essentially household-scale enterprises involved in the trade rose out of the pack and began to supplant or subordinate the others, by means of enjoying some special competitive advantage - better access to markets or suppliers, or an ability to produce or operate at lower cost, for example by producing lesser quality goods in bulk. The outcome would be an increased scale of enterprise for the favored party, the replacement of the apprentice system by purer forms of wage labor, and, perhaps eventually, the reduction of previously independent and co-equal artisanal proprietors to the status of sub-contractors or employees of the victorious entrepreneur. The role of guilds was to prevent this process by imposing limitations on the scale of members' enterprises, by prohibiting price-cutting competition, and by upholding quality control and the integrity of the apprentice system. Peng presented evidence in the form of revised guild regulatory codes to argue that this activity was especially characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century, as the threat to inherited business practices posed by Western capitalist influences became severe.

Other observers have been inclined to emphasize the social role of Chinese guilds more centrally than their market functions. The pioneering Japanese scholar Niida Noboru, for example, stressed their activities in the provision of a wide range of welfare functions for their memberships, noting the trend over time for such services

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\(^6\) Quan Hansheng, *Zhongguo hanghui zhidu shi* (History of the guild system in China), Shanghai, 1933; Negishi Tadashi, *Shina no girudo no kenkyû* (A study of Chinese guilds), Tokyô, 1938.