

## Brokers and “Guild” (*huiguan* 會館) Organizations in China’s Maritime Trade with her Eastern Neighbours during the Ming and Qing Dynasties

© Angela Schottenhammer  
(Munich University; El Colegio de México)

In the course of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties numerous of so-called *huiguan* 會館 (mostly translated not quite correctly as guilds in English) emerged in the economically more developed regions of China, such as the Jiangnan area.<sup>1</sup> In particular during the Qing dynasty, going along with the development of commerce, *huiguan* became important institutions of and for merchants who wanted to improve their competitive position as outsiders in regions where they were not so familiar with local environment. The *huiguan* also served as locations to meet like-minded people from the same home regions and to cherish local customs. Common geographic origins thus played a vital economic and social role when merchants founded such *huiguan* with characteristics of native-place associations (“Landsmannschaften”) established in connection with long-distance trade. With economic development these institutions gradually more and more specified also according to different commercial areas. The *huiguan* served as meeting places to inform each other about market and price developments, about changes in the demand for certain products, effective sale strategies, and of course about the undermining of one’s one trade and business area by competing merchant groups and last, not least, the government. While most *huiguan* were thus directly linked with supra-regional and long-distance trade, they simultaneously seemingly for the most part remained domestic trade institutions.

Despite of the ever increasing commercial network of local merchants also to overseas markets, the *huiguan* inscriptions found in China, only rarely attest to merchants’ activities abroad but are generally rather restricted to domestic long-distance trade. If information is provided, it is as a rule, very general. Conversely, we obtain more information from the inscriptions of *huiguan* founded overseas by overseas Chinese, who sometimes cooperated with foreign merchants and institutions. These foreign inscriptions mention at least where the merchants originally came from and, normally, also provide some details on the trade they were engaged in. An analysis of *huiguan*-based merchant association and their relation to maritime trade can therefore only be carried out by a thorough comparison of a variety of both Chinese and foreign textual and archaeological sources.

Many *huiguan* were obviously in particular established to resist the influence of brokers and agents for the sale of commodities on commission (*yahang* 牙行). The government issued a broker’ licence (*yatie* 牙帖) and expected the brokers to control trade on behalf of the government. This would of course imply contradictions with non-governmental private merchants, as those organized in *huiguan*. Numerous *huiguan* also organized own markets on their grounds and built stores for the commodities of particular local or even foreign merchants.

In places like Fujian, since Ming times authorized brokers were appointed by the government to manage foreign trade. As Fu Yiling has already noted, they were shop-keepers (*pushang* 舖商) from Haicheng, the maritime centre of that time and were selected from among the registered shop-keeper households (*puhu* 舖戶).<sup>2</sup> By the *yongzheng* reign *puhu* households and *hang* households (*hangjia* 行家) existed side by side, *hang* merchants

---

<sup>1</sup> Jiangsusheng bowuguan 江蘇省博物館 (ed.), *Jiangsusheng Ming Qing yilai beike ziliao xuanji* 江蘇省明清以來碑刻資料選集 (Beijing: Sanlian shuju, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Fu Yiling 傅衣凌, *Ming Qing shidai shangren ji shangye ziben* 明清時代商人及商業資本. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1956), pp. 132-133 and 200.

overshadowing *puhu* households without *hang* affiliation.<sup>3</sup> These organizations, thus, had a clear relation to foreign trade. After the 1720s, as Ng chin-keong has shown, the specialization among merchants engaged in maritime trade became more complex. They were both exporters of native products to the Southern Seas (Nanyang 南洋) and importers of foreign goods for domestic trade, thus controlling both coastal domestic and foreign overseas trade.<sup>4</sup> These organizations were called *yanghang* 洋行 or *yanghuo hang* 洋貨行 and emerged in international ports like Guangzhou or Xiamen.

Organizations managing foreign trade consequently seem rather to have developed from a cooperation of more or less official brokers than a cooperation of various private merchants engaged in the same business branch. But, as the case of Xiamen may show, also private merchants were involved.

How important, now, were such organizations as *huiguan* and *yanghang* in the Dongyang 東洋 trade, that is in trade relations with China's eastern neighbours, in particular Japan and the Ryūkyū Islands? Can we depict a distinction between private *huiguan* and government controlled *yanghang* and what do we know about the role of “private” and “government controlled” maritime trade with the Eastern neighbours? Were maritime merchants active in the Dongyang trade organized in *huiguan* or did they at least use their structures? Or were they organized as official *yanghang*? Was there a similar kind of competition between *huiguan* and *yahang* as we know it from domestic trade?

In order to shed more light on these questions, in particular on the specific organization structures of maritime trade with the Dongyang and the specific roles of “private” and “official”, this paper intends to introduce two examples of organization structures that played an important role in Jiangnan-Fujian trade relations with the Ryūkyūs and Japan.

The first example, having its origins in the Ming period, discusses the organization of maritime trade at Fuzhou with the Ryūkyūs, first via the *Rouyuan yi* 柔遠驛 and by later Qing times through so-called *Qiu* 球-merchants and the *Qiushang huiguan* 球商會館 – Guild house of *Qiu*-merchants in Fuzhou, originally named *Qiongshui Qiushang Tianhou gong* 瓊水球商天後宮 (Tianhou being another designation for Mazu 媽祖), because Mazu was the god to be sacrificed there. The second example analyzes merchants, “ocean guilds” and guild organizations of private and official merchants engaged in the Qing period copper trade with Japan, with emphasis on the *qianlong* and early *jiaqing* period.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ng Chin-keong, *Trade and Society. The Amoy Network on the China Coast 1683–1735*. (Singapore: Singapore National University, 1983), pp. 168–169.

<sup>4</sup> Ng Chin-keong, *The Amoy Network* (1983), p. 169.