The Mechanism of Cross-Ethnic Social Capital Accumulation in Qing Dynasty Beijing Merchants' Guildhalls

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Abstract

During the Qing Dynasty, Beijing served as the national capital and a hub of commercial activity, attracting merchants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This paper explores the mechanisms through which merchants' guildhalls in Beijing facilitated the accumulation of cross-ethnic social capital, enabling trust-building, resource-sharing, and collective action among Han, Manchu, Mongol, and Hui merchants. By analyzing historical records and commercial practices, this study highlights how guildhalls functioned as platforms for intercultural negotiation, ritualized interaction, and institutionalized cooperation. It argues that these organizations were crucial in mitigating ethnic tensions and fostering a cohesive commercial culture. The findings suggest that the social capital accumulated through these guildhalls contributed significantly to the stability and prosperity of Beijing's urban economy.

Keywords

Qing Dynasty, Beijing merchants, guildhalls, social capital, cross-ethnic cooperation.

1. Introduction

The Qing Dynasty witnessed rapid development of Beijing's guild halls, which included both scholarly associations and significant commercial guilds. The emergence and evolution of Beijing's scholarly guilds were deeply intertwined with the bureaucratic political system, demonstrating distinct political attributes. Whether scholarly or commercial, these regional institutions served as public welfare organizations that connected fellow townspeople and compatriots. Through fostering social harmony, strengthening community bonds, and honoring ancestral deities, they created a space for cultural integration between the scholar and merchant classes, allowing their distinct cultural identities to intermingle.As an organizational group, whether it is a hometown association or a guild, the origin of guilds can be examined from two aspects: legends and historical facts. First, in terms of legends, their origin can even be traced back to ancient times, even to the pre-Qin era. According to the Western scholar Ma Shi's "A Study of Guilds in China" and Avignon's "China's Guilds of Industry and Commerce," the founding time of China's guilds or guilds was much earlier than that of Europe. The origin of guilds can even be traced back to the prehistoric mythological era of Emperor Shun. It is generally believed that the oldest Chinese guild organization appeared in Ningbo, with its charter stating that the association was founded during the Zhou Dynasty. For example, in Beijing's "Blind Association" (also known as the Three Sovereigns Association), there are even preserved charters from the Han Dynasty. This claim is limited to Western citations and is merely a retrospective statement about the charters of guilds and guilds, which cannot be verified by historical records.The most distinctive manifestation of Qing Dynasty commercial

culture in business practices was its profound integration of national identity, folk customs, and local traditions. The fusion of folk culture with commercial operations formed an essential component of this cultural framework.

Commercial culture embodied linguistic conventions. Traditional Chinese folk customs emphasized seeking blessings, avoiding misfortune, and pursuing prosperity. The use of auspicious language and characters reflected merchants 'mindset of warding off harm and attracting good fortune in commercial activities. For instance, shop names often adopted symbolic terms like "prosperity," "abundance," "vitality," "wealth," and "happiness" -all representing thriving businesses and abundant wealth. Proverbs, as time-honored expressions passed down through daily life, were repurposed by merchants to encapsulate business wisdom and industry norms. Examples include "No duplicate pricing; no cheating young or old" and "Harmony generates wealth," along with the timeless maxim "Old debts don't carry over into the new year." These crystallized merchants' practical experience and wisdom, serving both as operational guidelines and ethical standards in commercial conduct.Historically, after the Sui and Tang dynasties, the rise of the imperial examination system led to the proliferation of private lodgings established by local authorities in the capital Chang 'an. During the Song Dynasty. Bianliang in the capital and Yuan Dynasty's Dadu (present-day Beijing) both had so-called "Zhuangyuan Dian" (imperial examination guesthouses) for scholars taking imperial exams. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the capital similarly had "Zhuangyuan Jiyu" (imperial examination guest residences) rented by private households as temporary accommodations. However, the high rents left most scholars financially strained, while borrowing official residences or private mansions proved inconvenient and insufficient for many. This urgent need for more accessible lodging naturally became one of the primary reasons for the emergence of guild halls.

This is extensively documented in stele inscriptions of scholar guild halls. For instance, the "Shanyin-Huiji Guild Hall Records" from Zhejiang states: "During the Ming Dynasty, outstanding provincial and metropolitan examination candidates were accommodated in the Imperial Academy's dormitories, which could not fully accommodate all. Many guilds were established in the residences of officials serving in their hometowns. No guilds were officially established to gather examination candidates. Since provincial examination candidates were not affiliated with the Imperial Academy, and the quota for provincial candidates expanded, officials began establishing guilds in their hometowns to accommodate their compatriots, thus giving rise to provincial guilds.The Qing Dynasty witnessed unprecedented commercial expansion in Beijing, where merchants from various ethnic groups converged to participate in a thriving urban economy. Previous studies, such as those by Ni [1] and Zhou, have examined the business strategies and brand development of Beijing merchants, yet few have systematically analyzed the role of guildhalls in building cross-ethnic social capital. This paper adopts a historical-institutional approach, drawing from archival materials and commercial records to elucidate how guildhalls served as intermediaries in fostering trust and cooperation among ethnically diverse merchant communities. The study not only enriches our understanding of Qing economic history but also offers insights into the dynamics of intercultural trade networks[2].

2. Historical Context and Data Sources

In reality, to address the funding of scholar guild halls, these institutions typically levied membership fees. For instance, the guild charter of Xiuning Guild Hall in Anhui stipulated: "One tael of silver for provincial and metropolitan examination fees, two taels for metropolitan examination fees, six taels for educational subsidies, and two taels for examination-related donations." The Hunan Guild Hall similarly mandated: "Newly appointed filial and incorruptible officials contribute two taels per person, newly qualified jinshi scholars pay four taels, those

selected for the Imperial Academy or promoted by one rank contribute eight taels, while newly arrived tribute examiners pay one tael. These fees are collectively managed to fund annual hall renovations." However, these funds were far from sufficient to cover daily operational costs. Many scholar guild halls, driven by survival needs, resorted to commercial practices. Consequently, it was not uncommon for scholar guild halls to operate as commercial establishments. This research relies on a variety of primary and secondary sources, including local gazetteers, merchant account books[3], guildhall regulations, and memoirs from the Qing period. Key documents such as the Shuntian Prefecture Gazetteer and Yanjing Miscellany provide detailed descriptions of commercial practices and interethnic interactions. Data processing involved textual analysis and cross-referencing of historical accounts to identify patterns of social capital formation.During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties Ma Shaoqing[4], a native of Huang County, established an oil, salt, and grain shop within Chaoyang Gate in Beijing[5]. This marked the earliest grain store opened by Shandong merchants in the capital. In the mid-Qing period Du Jia Liu Fang from Wang Village, Huang County, founded Xitiancheng Grain Store on Gulou Street. Subsequently, other grain stores including Yongtai, Tianzeng, Yonghe, Wanyu Hou, Dashunhao, Fuxingsheng, Hezeng, and Yongdeng also opened successively. Xia Renhu documented in his "Notes on Beijing": "All old rice shops in Beijing were operated by Shandong merchants a tradition that has persisted for generations hence called 'Shandong Hundred Rice Shops. The aged rice, a coarse and aged grain, was exclusively used for distributing to officials and Eight Banners soldiers while "the common people consumed the leftover grains from official rations." [Aged rice required processing by a roasting room to become refined grain. This trade was controlled by Shandong merchants who thereby dominated Beijing's grain market.During the Qing Dynasty, merchants in Beijing had in-depth knowledge and research on business. In their daily commercial activities, they placed great emphasis on how to conduct business well, as well as on trust in business, selling quality products, and promoting good culture.

3. Guildhalls as Platforms for Cross-Ethnic Interaction

3.1. Institutional Structure and Membership

Guildhalls in Qing Beijing were often organized by trade or regional origin, yet many evolved to include members from multiple ethnic backgrounds. These institutions provided a formal space for dispute resolution, credit allocation, and price negotiation. For instance, the Shanxi Guildhall regularly hosted meetings where Han and Hui merchants discussed market trends and coordinated supply chains. Throughout Beijing's centuries of commercial evolution[6], socioeconomic development has driven industry specialization and intensified market competition. Merchants gradually developed brand consciousness as the capital sustained a concentration of imperial nobility and high-ranking officials, creating higher consumption standards and heightened quality expectations. This environment fostered brand recognition-specific industries or products became synonymous with premium quality in Beijing shops. The dual forces of brand cultivation and consumer trust laid fertile ground for time-honored brands[7]. Beijing's urban infrastructure stabilized and expanded during the Yuan Dynasty, enabling enduring commercial establishments that became essential for century-old businesses. Throughout the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, iconic commercial hubs like Dongsi (East Fourth), Xidan (West Single)[8], and Gulouqian (Drum Tower Front) remained vibrant. These districts served as prime locations for time-honored brands, with most Beijing's heritage enterprises clustered within their boundaries.

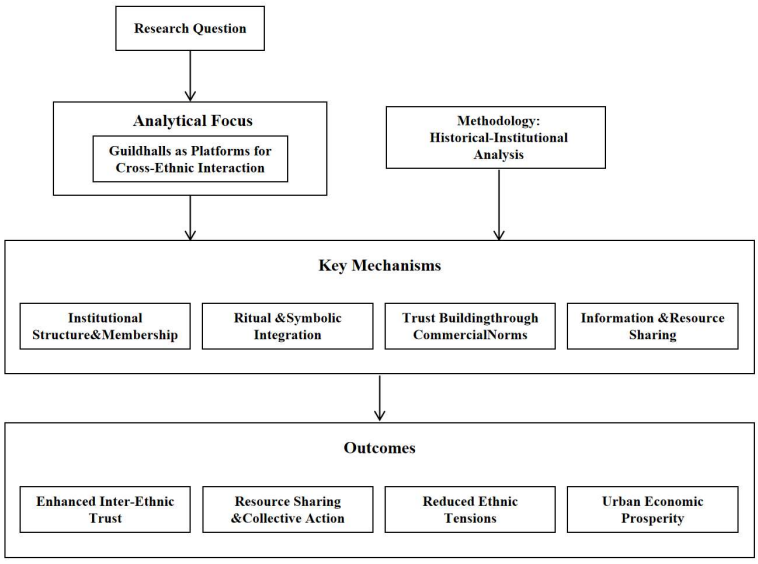

Fig.1 research framework

In the Qianmen area, there are Tongrentang Pharmacy, Ruifuxiang Silk Store, Neilian Sheng Shoe Store, Zhang Yiyuan Tea Shop, Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant, Douchu Shao Mai Restaurant, Zhengyanglou Hotel, Changchun Tang Pharmacy, Guanghe Lou Theater, Xinbaobei Photo Studio, and Tianxingju Stir-Fried Liver. In the Dongsi area, there are Yongantang Pharmacy and Bai Kui Restaurant. In Xidan area, there are Tianfu Hao Braised Pork, Wan Roast Meat, Tianyuan Sauce Garden, Guixiangcun Food Store, Chang 'an Grand Theater[9], and Capital Cinema. In Xisi area, there are Tongheju Restaurant, Shakongju White Meat House, and Chengwenhou Account Book Store. In Xinjiekou area, there is Liuquanju Restaurant. In Wangfujing area, there are Hengdeli Clock Shop, Shengxifu Hat Store, Tongshenghe Shoe Store, Daming Eyewear Store, Cuihua Lou Restaurant, Donglaishun Restaurant, Quansuzhai Vegetarian Restaurant, and Daoxiangcun Food Store. In Caishi Kou area, there are Heniantang Pharmacy and Tanjia Restaurant. In Liuli Factory area, there are Rongbaozhai, Laixungenge, and Yidege. Among these renowned old establishments are Tongrentang, which originated in the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty providing secret prescriptions and medicines; Neilian Sheng, established in 1853 during the Xianfeng era as the first Chinese cloth shoe manufacturer for imperial relatives and court officials; Ruifuxiang Silk Store, developed in 1870 to meet the refined fashion needs of Beijing's elite[10]; and Liubiju, founded in the mid-Ming Dynasty for producing delicious pickled vegetables. These time-honored brands are inseparable parts of Beijing's commercial culture and serve as historical evidence of its prosperous commercial economy.

3.2. Ritual and Symbolic Integration

Ritual activities, such as communal worship of industry deities and participation in festivals, played a vital role in bridging ethnic divides. The Lantern Festival, for example, was not only a commercial opportunity but also a moment for collective celebration, reinforcing a shared identity among merchants beyond ethnic lines.First, the Beijing Guildhalls were frequently overseen by officials and literati. Take the Jiangsu Provincial Governor Wu Yuansan's Beijing Guildhall as an example. Established by merchants during the mid-Ming Dynasty, it was originally located inside Zhengyang Gate. In the early Qing Dynasty, it was relocated to the upper section of Changxiang Alley in Maodachang, outside Qianmen Gate. The guildhall underwent three major renovations in 1654 (11th year of Shunzhi), 1696 (35th year of Kangxi), and 1803 (8th year of Jiaqing), each accompanied by commemorative inscriptions. The inscription lists officials by rank: Jin Zhijun, Grand Secretary of the Hanlin Academy and

Minister of Personnel during the Shunzhi era; Han Tan, Vice Minister of Rites during the Kangxi era; Jiang Sheng, Viceroy of Zhili during the Jiaqing era; followed by local gentry and merchants in descending order. During the expansion and renovation of the guildhall in the Kangxi and Yongzheng reigns, local scholars and officials repeatedly expanded its foundations and redesigned its layout.The bonds of hometown connections and their social ties. When people live in foreign lands, fellow townspeople form associations with deep historical roots. As early as the Song Dynasty, the capital had established organizations like "Xianghui" (Hometown Associations). During the Southern Song period, "migrants from other prefectures" in Hangzhou began mutual aid activities, even forming "social associations." Quan Hansheng, citing two arguments from Wu Zimu's Menglianglu, argued that although Hangzhou during the Southern Song lacked explicit "huihuan" (association halls).

the activities of migrants in Hangzhou were indistinguishable from later association hall operations, clearly indicating their existence. This speculation is undoubtedly insightful. By the Hongzhi era of the Ming Dynasty, officials from Wuxi County in Changzhou Prefecture began organizing hometown gatherings during seasonal festivals. The first such event occurred in the spring of Hongzhi's sixth year, when Shao Bao, "presenting himself to the imperial court," met fellow townspeople at the Gu family's residence "Qinxuan" and composed poems as mementos. Subsequently, on festivals like Yuanxi, Shangsi, Qingming, Dragon Boat, Qixi, Mid-Autumn, Double Ninth, and Chongyang, over 20 officials from Wuxi in the capital would gather, known as "festival gatherings." Particularly during the Double Ninth Festival in Hongzhi's eleventh year, officials from Wuxi in the capital reunited, composing a collective poem titled "Poems of the Double Ninth Gathering." These Ming Dynasty gatherings emphasized "festival reunions to strengthen hometown bonds," clearly aimed at maintaining connections among townspeople.

4. Mechanisms of Social Capital Accumulation

4.1. Trust Building through Commercial Norms

The traditional business philosophy of "good wine needs no bush" remained deeply ingrained, resulting in outdated marketing strategies that prioritized product refinement over innovative approaches. During the Qing Dynasty, this situation underwent significant transformation. As Beijing's commercial sector expanded, the proliferation of shops intensified competition among similar businesses, while certain industries developed widely recognized trade names and brands. Street vendors innovated distinctive calls to attract customers, creating what became modern advertising. Whether for competitive advantage or brand promotion, advertising became essential. Merchants in Qing-era Beijing spared no expense on signage to maximize visibility. "Signs at Zhengyangmen's East-West Streets towered over three zhang (approximately 10 meters), adorned with gold-painted plaster or bamboo inlays, sometimes featuring carved golden oxen, white sheep, and black donkeys as identifiers. Wine shops displayed horizontal plaques connected by pillars, while others hung wooden jars or tin cups with tassels. The silverware shops in Dashilan, Jewelry Market, Xihexian, and Liulichang dazzled with carved beams and painted rafters, their golden splendor creating a dazzling spectacle. As for taverns and restaurants, they lit lanterns and candles, hosted dice games and drinking contests, and hosted nightly Yuanxiao Festival celebrations that surpassed all other places" Others lavishly decorated storefronts with gold to demonstrate their financial strength and operational stability, assuring customers of reliable business continuity. By the late Qing Dynasty, Beijing had witnessed the emergence of numerous official, privately-run, and foreign newspapers, where newspaper advertisements became a new advertising format. The 1907-founded Political Official Gazette explicitly permitted "advertising on behalf of others" and established advertising regulations, paving the way for commercial advertisements in major newspapers thereafter.Guildhalls established codes of conduct that emphasized honesty,

fairness, and reciprocity. These norms were enforced through collective sanctions, creating a reliable environment for cross-ethnic transactions. The widespread use of commercial proverbs such as "Honesty brings wealth" and "No difference in price for young or old" reflected this shared ethical framework.

4.2. Information and Resource Sharing

Guildhalls functioned as information hubs where merchants exchanged market intelligence, credit reports, and technological knowledge. This flow of information reduced transaction costs and enabled merchants from different ethnic groups to collaborate on large-scale ventures, such as the distribution of seasonal goods or the organization of trade fairs.During the Qing Dynasty, Shanxi merchants from Beijing demonstrated remarkable prominence in industries including paper production, pigment manufacturing, tung oil processing, dried fruit trade, homespun cloth, and fur goods. These merchants often held dominant positions . Historical records reveal that among four tobacco shops operated by individuals from Qixian, Jiangzhou, and Yicheng, the Wanbaoquan Tobacco Shop run by Nie Jinhou from Yicheng was documented as a member of the Hedong Tobacco Guild. However, the author found no mention of this shop's name in the inscriptions on the Wutong Hedong Guild Stele compiled by Professor Li Hua during the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns.

Guildhalls also served as platforms for resource sharing. Merchants could pool their capital to invest in joint ventures, reducing individual financial risks. For instance, in the silk - making industry, merchants from different regions would collaborate by sharing raw materials, production techniques, and sales channels. This not only improved the quality and quantity of silk products but also expanded their market reach. Moreover, guildhalls provided a space for the training of apprentices. Experienced merchants would pass on their skills and knowledge to young apprentices, ensuring the continuity and development of various trades. Through these information and resource - sharing activities, guildhalls played a crucial role in promoting economic growth and social integration during that period.In summary, in the capital, the establishment of guild halls as public spaces solved the housing problems of bureaucrats, scholars, and merchants in the city, but the true value of guild halls went beyond this. In a sense, guild halls unconsciously attempted to bridge the gap between the scholar and merchant classes. Although hierarchical differences between officials and merchants still existed within guild halls, the traditional notion of scholars being esteemed and merchants being devalued had been somewhat challenged in exchanges premised on clan-based concepts such as kinship and hometown ties. However, it is not difficult to see from the complete acceptance of scholars by guild halls and the discrimination of merchants by scholar guild halls that the hierarchical differences between scholars and merchants still constrained people's behavior at the time. This inevitably led to a severe bias in the direction of their mobility, which was also one of the reasons why the merchant power in China's feudal society struggled to grow and could not produce a Western-style urban class.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the role of merchants' guildhalls in Qing Dynasty Beijing in facilitating cross-ethnic social networks, revealing their key mechanisms in accumulating social capital among Han, Manchu, Mongol, and Hui merchants. The study shows that guildhalls functioned not merely as regional or trade-based organizations, but as multifunctional platforms integrating institutionalized cooperation, ritualized interaction, and the sharing of information and resources. By establishing commonly upheld commercial norms, hosting culturally inclusive ceremonies and festivals, and providing spaces for credit guarantees, joint investments, and skill transmission, guildhalls effectively reduced uncertainties in cross-ethnic transactions, strengthened mutual trust, and promoted resource circulation and collective

action. This model of social capital accumulation-rooted in regional ties ("xiangyi") and trade regulations ("hanggui")-helped mitigate ethnic tensions and foster commercial and cultural integration, thereby significantly contributing to the stability and prosperity of Beijing's urban economy. Thus, the guildhalls of Qing Beijing were not only vehicles for commercial organization but also vital institutional innovations that enabled social integration and economic collaboration among diverse ethnic groups within the urban context. This study offers profound historical insights into how informal institutions in traditional Chinese society facilitated cross-cultural economic interactions.

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