

The Making of "Convergence Codes": Trade Networks and Cultural Interweaving in Multi-Ethnic Merchant Guildhalls of Early Qing Beijing

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Abstract

This article takes the multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing during the early Qing Dynasty as the research object, and explores the mechanism of ethnic communication, exchange, and integration under the dual dimensions of "trade network" and "cultural interweaving". By analyzing the distribution pattern and background of multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing during the Qing Dynasty, the construction mechanism of cross ethnic trade networks, and the micro manifestations of cultural interweaving, the "fusion code" of "economic symbiosis cultural identity" is extracted. Research has found that during the Qing Dynasty, the Beijing Merchant Guild Hall served as an important platform for multi-ethnic trade and cultural exchange. Through institutional innovation and cultural adjustment, it successfully constructed a mechanism to promote ethnic communication, exchange, and integration, providing valuable historical experience for contemporary ethnic exchanges.

Keywords

The early Qing Dynasty, Multi-ethnic Merchant Associations, Fusion Code, Cultural Interweaving.

1. Introduction

The early Qing Dynasty (1644-1840) was an important period for the formation and development of a multi-ethnic unified country in China, as well as a stage of deepening ethnic exchanges, communication, and integration. As the political and cultural center of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Beijing played an important role in the formation of a multi-ethnic unified country, becoming the only city where the Great Wall Cultural Belt and the Grand Canal Cultural Belt intersect. In this historical context, the organization of guild halls in Beijing was particularly developed. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, there were more than 460 guild halls distributed in the southern part of Beijing. These guilds are not only social organizations established by fellow townspeople in the guest area, but also important carriers of multi-ethnic trade networks and cultural interweaving [1].

The guild halls in Beijing during the Qing Dynasty were roughly divided into two categories: one was the Yanle resting place established by officials and gentry from various provinces, prefectures, and counties in the capital according to their hometown, known as the hometown guild hall; Another type is a place of shared residence built by merchants and artisans in the capital city based on their hometown or industry differences, called a trade association. These two types of guilds often intertwine in practical operation, becoming typical spaces for the integration of merchants and scholars. There have been many studies on Beijing guilds, but

most of them focus on case studies of guilds from a certain hometown or industry, lacking a comprehensive exploration of the trade network and cultural interweaving mechanism in multi-ethnic merchant guilds. This article attempts to systematically examine the generation mechanism of the "blending code" in the multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing during the early Qing Dynasty from the dual dimensions of "trade network" and "cultural embedding", in order to deepen the understanding of ethnic relations and commercial development in the Qing Dynasty and provide historical references for contemporary ethnic exchanges.

2. The Distribution Pattern and Background of Multi-Ethnic Merchant Associations in Beijing During the Qing Dynasty

2.1. Spatial Distribution Characteristics

The multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing during the Qing Dynasty were mainly concentrated in the Nancheng area, forming a pattern of "rich in the east and noble in the west". Specifically, the wealthy indigenous families were concentrated outside Chongwenmen, while outside Xuanwumen became a gathering place for Han officials and literati. This spatial distribution pattern is closely related to the "Manchu Han Separation" policy implemented in the early Qing Dynasty. On the second day after the Qing Regent Dorgon led the Qing army into Beijing, he issued a decree designating the "Inner City" as the base of the Eight Banners. Within three days, all Han people who originally lived in the "Inner City" were relocated to the "Southern City" or other places, implementing the policy of "Manchu, Han, soldiers, and civilians living in separate cities".

Table 1: Distribution of Beijing Guildhalls in the Qing Dynasty

Region	Representative Street	Number of guilds	Main functions
Outside Xuanwu Gate	The top, bottom, head, second, and third branches of the Chinese toon tree	8	Scholar's Guild Hall, Trial Hall
	Teaching Field Head to Six Articles	10	Fellow Association, Industry Association
Outside Chongwen Gate	Long Lane Up, Down, Head to Five	22	Merchant Guild Hall, Industry Guild Hall
	Grass Factory Headlines to Ten Articles	24	Fellow Association and Merchant Association

2.2. Background and Motivation for Creation

The establishment of multi-ethnic merchant associations in the early Qing Dynasty was the result of the combined effects of political environment, economic development, and the needs of merchants themselves. Among them, the political pattern of "unification" provides institutional guarantees, the development of commodity economy creates market conditions, and the survival and development needs of merchants constitute the direct driving force.

(1) Political Guarantee: Dual Support of "Great Unification" and Ethnic Policy

Although the early Qing Dynasty implemented the policy of "separating Manchu and Han cities", it did not restrict the trade of ethnic minority merchants entering Beijing. The "Regulations on Prohibiting Travel and Commerce" promulgated during the Shunzhi period clearly stipulated that "all Hui, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Han merchants who bring roads to Beijing for trade shall listen to their dealings and shall not make things difficult." During the Kangxi period, restrictions on commercial guilds were further relaxed, allowing merchants to "form alliances with local parties and build guilds," providing a system basis for the establishment of guilds. In addition, the Qing government's support policies for border ethnic trade enabled large-scale

entry of border ethnic merchants into Beijing, giving rise to the establishment of Hui and Mongolian merchant associations [2].

(2) Economic drivers: the driving force of the capital's consumer market and cross regional trade

As the capital city, Beijing has a huge consumer group consisting of the royal family, bureaucrats, gentry, and millions of citizens, forming a multi-level consumer demand and providing a broad market for multi-ethnic goods. According to the "Qing Shilu - Kangxi Dynasty", during the mid Kangxi period, Beijing consumed "one million pounds of tea, 100000 pieces of silk, and 50000 sheets of fur per year". These goods came from different ethnic groups such as Jin merchants, Hui merchants, and Hui merchants, forming a corresponding relationship of "one item, one merchant group, one guild hall".

At the same time, the development of cross regional trade in the early Qing Dynasty made it difficult for a single merchant group to complete the full chain operation of "origin transportation sales", and had to rely on the cooperation of multi-ethnic merchant groups. For example, after Shanxi merchants bought tea from Mount Wuyi in Fujian, they needed to ship it to Hankou via the Yangtze River controlled by Anhui merchants, then to Zhangjiakou via the camel caravan of Hui merchants, and finally to Mongolia by Manchu merchants. This cross regional and cross ethnic trade chain requires the establishment of stable cooperation mechanisms between business associations, and guilds become a natural platform for coordination [3].

(3) Social Needs: Dual Demands for Risk Avoidance and Identity Recognition

The commercial activities in the early Qing Dynasty faced multiple risks: firstly, market risks, such as fluctuations in commodity prices and supply-demand imbalances; The second is institutional risk, such as tax officials exploiting and local evil forces extorting; The third is cultural risks, such as language barriers and customs conflicts between different ethnic groups. The guild provides merchants with comprehensive risk avoidance measures by integrating resources: in terms of market risks, the guild collects and publishes business information to help merchants adjust their business strategies; In terms of institutional risks, the association protects the interests of businessmen through collective bribery, joint petitions, and other means; In terms of cultural risks, the ethnic tolerance mechanism within the association has reduced the friction cost of cross ethnic communication.

3. Mechanism for Building Cross Ethnic Trade Networks: Operating Logic Centered on Guild Halls

The trade network of multi-ethnic merchants in Beijing during the early Qing Dynasty was not a loose collection of individual transactions, but an organic system centered around guilds and supported by the three dimensions of "information trust commodity". The association has achieved the scale and normalization of cross ethnic trade by building an information sharing platform, establishing a trust guarantee system, and coordinating the circulation chain of goods, laying an economic foundation for cultural integration.

Table 2: Three major operational mechanisms of the cross ethnic trade network in Beijing during the Qing Dynasty

Mechanism type	Specific form	Functional effect	Case representative
Information sharing mechanism	Intelligence exchange, market analysis, and business opportunity co creation	Reduce information asymmetry and improve market efficiency	Shanghai Merchant Shipping Association sets up a shipping liaison station in Niuzhuang
Trust guarantee mechanism	Rural friendship, collective punishment, religious constraints	Enhance cooperation trust and reduce transaction risks	Shanxi Guild Hall Worshipping Guan Gong and Strengthening Integrity Awareness
Resource integration mechanism	Capital aggregation, logistics collaboration, policy advocacy	Optimize resource allocation and enhance competitiveness	The Indigo Guild Hall dispatches its own agent to resist extortion by dental firms

3.1. Information Sharing Mechanism: The Guild Hall Serves As A "Gathering Place for Business Information"

In the Qing Dynasty, when transportation and communication were underdeveloped, information asymmetry was the main obstacle to cross ethnic trade. The multi-ethnic merchant association integrates information from production areas, transportation, sales, and other links by establishing a "hierarchical information transmission system" to provide a basis for merchant decision-making. This information sharing mechanism can be divided into two levels: "internal aggregation" and "external diffusion".

(1) Internal aggregation: centralized sorting of business relations among fellow townspeople
Within the guild hall, scattered information of fellow townsmen is aggregated into a systematic business report through "regular meetings" and "dedicated personnel recording". Taking the Jin Merchants' Pigment Guild as an example, the guild stipulates that "every month on the New Year's Day, the guild holds a meeting to report the prices of pigments from the place of origin, transportation losses, and sales in Beijing. The guild's accounting department compiles the report into a book called 'Pigment Merchant Record'. This internal aggregation not only covers price information, but also includes key content such as policy changes and risk warnings. This type of information aggregation solves the problem of scattered ethnic business groups and information barriers, providing basic data for cross ethnic trade.

(2) External diffusion: the exchange of information across ethnic groups
The guild hall achieves cross ethnic business sharing through the "Business Alliance" and "Information Exchange". In the early Qing Dynasty, the multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing formed three major "information alliances": the first was the "Jin Hui Alliance", led by the Jin merchant associations and the Hui merchant associations, sharing price information on tea and silk; The second is the "Hui Man Alliance", led by the Hui Chamber of Commerce and the Manchu Chamber of Commerce, sharing trade information on fur and ginseng; The third is the "North South Alliance", led by the Guangdong Chamber of Commerce and the Jin Chamber of Commerce, which shares financial information on sea goods and ticket numbers. The specific ways of information exchange include "regular mutual visits" and "document transmission". In addition, the associations also release public information through "joint notices" and translate the official tax regulations into Chinese and Hui to ensure that merchants of different ethnic groups are aware of policy changes.

3.2. Trust Guarantee Mechanism: The "Cornerstone of Credit" for Cross Ethnic Cooperation

The biggest challenge facing cross ethnic trade is the lack of trust - differences in language, religion, and customs among different ethnic groups can easily lead to suspicion and conflict between trading parties. The multi-ethnic merchant association has resolved the trust crisis in cross ethnic transactions by establishing a triple trust mechanism of "geopolitical guarantee religious constraint contractual guarantee", becoming the core of maintaining the trade network.

(1) Geographical Guarantee: Credit Endorsement Based on Rural Boundaries

The geographical attributes of the association provide the first layer of guarantee for cross ethnic trust. During the Qing Dynasty, merchants often used "fellow townsmen" as a credit link, and guilds, as fellow townsmen organizations, naturally became the "credit guarantors" of merchants. For example, when Jin merchants conduct transactions with Hui merchants, they can provide a "guild introduction letter" to prove their identity and financial resources; Hui merchants can gain the trust of Jin merchants through the "hometown guarantee" provided by the Camel Guild Hall. The effectiveness of this geographical guarantee is also combined with the "flag status" for the Manchu merchants and other "banner merchant gangs". According to the regulations of the Manchu merchants' ginseng association, all merchants who join must "provide a flag bearer document and an association guarantee letter". Dual identity authentication makes it easier for them to gain trust when trading with Han and Hui merchants. During the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, due to the arrears of silk payments from Huizhou merchants, the Huizhou Merchant Association directly sent a letter to the Manchu Merchant Ginseng Association. The association then deducted Wang's "membership deposit" and repaid his debt, maintaining the credit order of cross ethnic transactions.

(2) Religious Constraints: Behavioral Norms under Consensus of Belief

Religion, as a spiritual force that transcends geography, has played an important role in building trust among multi-ethnic businessmen. In the multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing, there are two types of religious constraints: one is "internal constraints within a single religion", and the other is "cross religious consensus of faith".

For Hui merchants, Islamic faith is an important means of self-restraint. According to the regulations of the Hui Shang Camel Association, merchants must "recite Halal language, swear not to deceive or lose weight" before trading. If they violate the oath, they will be expelled from the association and reported to the national Hui Shang network. The effectiveness of this religious constraint allows Han merchants to trade with Hui merchants without the need for inspection and to believe in their religious constraints. For Han merchant groups such as Jin merchants and Hui merchants, the belief in Guan Gong has become the core of credit constraints - both Jin merchant pigment guilds and Hui merchant guilds have related public temples, and merchants need to "worship Guan Gong and make a pledge of integrity" before trading. Guan Gong's "loyalty and righteousness" image has become the moral code of Han merchants.

(3) Contract Protection: Institutionalized Risk Prevention and Control

The guild has institutionalized trust relationships by developing a "Cross Ethnic Trade Contract Model" and a "Dispute Mediation Mechanism". In the early Qing Dynasty, the contract templates of Beijing's multi-ethnic merchant associations usually included core clauses such as "commodity specifications, prices, payment methods, and breach of contract responsibilities", while taking into account the differences in customs among different ethnic groups. For example, in the fur trading contract between Hui merchants and Han merchants, it is specifically stated that "the weight of the goods shall be based on Hui merchants' scales, and payment time shall avoid Sundays", reflecting respect for ethnic customs. The dispute mediation mechanism of the guild hall, for small disputes, a "mediation committee" is jointly

formed by the guilds of both parties to the transaction for arbitration; For large disputes, the guild hall jointly appeals to Shuntian Prefecture or Lifan Court. This institutionalized contractual guarantee greatly reduces the risk of cross ethnic trade.

3.3. Commodity Circulation Mechanism: "Full Chain Coordination" With the Guild Hall As The Hub

The core of cross ethnic trade is the circulation of goods, and guilds become the hub of commodity circulation by integrating the three major links of "warehousing transportation sales" [4]. The division of labor and cooperation among guilds of different ethnic groups have formed a nationwide commodity circulation network, among which the exchange chain of "Jin merchant tea - Hui merchant fur" is the most representative.

(1) Warehousing process: The guild hall serves as a "cross ethnic warehouse"

In the early Qing Dynasty, multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing generally had "public storage warehouses", which not only provided warehousing services for fellow townsmen but also opened up to cooperative cross ethnic merchants. For example, the warehouse of the Jin Merchants Pigment Guild is divided into "Ben Bang District" and "Ke Bang District". "Ben Bang District stores Shanxi pigments, while Ke Bang District stores Hui Shang fur and Huizhou silk". The advantage of a guild hall warehouse lies in its safety, reliability, and low cost, as well as the provision of professional storage personnel, which reduces the loss of goods.

For perishable goods, the association also provides "expedited warehousing services". The Haihuo Guild Hall of the Guangdong Chamber of Commerce is located outside Chongwen Gate and has an "Ice Cellar Warehouse". It refrigerates seafood transported from Guangzhou with ice cubes and provides "storage and sales" services for Shanxi and Anhui merchants. Shanxi merchants can store tea in the Haihuo Guild Hall's warehouse and exchange it for seafood to be shipped to Shanxi for sale; Guangdong merchants can utilize the transportation network of Shanxi merchants to sell sea goods to the northwest. This "warehousing exchange" model achieves efficient circulation of different goods.

(2) Transportation Link: Cross ethnic Intermodal Transportation Led by the Guild Hall

The transportation capacity of a single merchant guild is limited, while the guild has integrated the transportation resources of different ethnic merchant guilds through a "intermodal agreement". The coordination role of the association in the transportation process is also reflected in the "cost sharing of transportation" and "risk sharing". According to the inscription of the Hui Shang Camel Guild Hall, the transportation costs between Jin merchants and Hui merchants are shared in proportion to the weight of the goods. If theft or natural disasters occur during transportation, the losses will be compensated proportionally by both guilds from the "public savings". This "intermodal sharing" model not only reduces transportation costs, but also improves the safety of commodity transportation.

(3) Sales Process: The Guild Hall as a Cross Ethnic Trading Platform

The guild hall is not only a distribution center for goods, but also a direct place for cross ethnic transactions. In the early Qing Dynasty, multi-ethnic merchant associations in Beijing generally had "trading halls" and regularly held "temple fair style transactions". For example, the Jin Merchants Pigment Guild holds a "Pigment Trade Fair" on the fifteenth day of each month, attended by Hui merchants, Hui merchants, Manchu merchants, and others. At the trading site, the guild sends people to "inspect and price" to ensure fair transactions. The Hui Shang Camel Club holds a "fur and fur fair" every autumn and winter season, attracting Han and Manchu merchants from all over the country to come and purchase. The club also provides "customer sales" services, saving time and costs for out of town merchants.

In addition, the association also extends the sales process to the production area through "order agriculture" and "pre-sale system". For example, the Jin Merchant Pigment Guild and the Hui

Merchant Camel Guild jointly issued a "pre-sale order" to the northwest fur production area, specifying the specifications and prices of the fur, and the Hui merchants organized production according to the order; At the same time, Hui Shang issued a "tea order" to Jin Shang, and Jin Shang purchased tea from Fujian according to the order. This "production based on sales" model reduces the risk of unsold goods and achieves precise cross-border trade integration.

4. Micro Manifestations of Cultural Interweaving

4.1. Integration of Sacrifice and Worship

Sacrificial activities are an important manifestation of the interweaving of guild hall culture. The first deity worshipped in the guild hall is often the "God of the City God of Wujun", and "Enjoying sacrifices during the Spring and Autumn period to promote their blessings". But in order to cater to the different religious needs of the village party, statues and plaques of various immortals are also set up in some guilds, making it easier for the village party to seek what they need and seek common ground while reserving differences. This diverse sacrificial phenomenon reflects the characteristics of multi-ethnic cultural interweaving. The Shanxi Guild Hall highly worships Guan Gong (Guan Yu of the Three Kingdoms), not only because he is a fellow townsman from Shanxi, but also because Guan Gong values righteousness over profit, becoming a model for Jin merchants who follow the style of managing alone and cultivate pottery and vermilion. The main function of the examination hall is to serve the imperial examination system, and the main deity worshipped is the Wenchang Emperor who blesses the provinces to achieve success in the imperial examination. Various industry associations also worship the gods who protect the prosperity and development of industries.

4.2. Customs Mutual Learning

As a space for multi-ethnic communication, the guild hall promotes the mutual learning of different ethnic customs. For example, in the Qing Dynasty in Beijing, every temple held festive activities, and during the pilgrimage of believers and disciples to the top, many incense festivals were active. These incense festivals are often jointly participated by banner and folk people, promoting mutual learning of customs between the Manchu and Han ethnic groups. This custom of mutual learning is also reflected in various aspects such as festival celebrations, food culture, and clothing styles. For example, the Ditan Spring Festival Cultural Temple Fair has been held for 30 years, following the theme of folk, folk, and ethnic activities, emphasizing cultural and public welfare, mainly reflected in cultural activities, folk art, traditional snacks, and other aspects. The performance not only showcased the sacrificial customs of the Manchu people, but also attracted the participation and appreciation of other ethnic groups such as the Han people, promoting mutual learning of customs between ethnic groups.

4.3. Artistic Integration

As a space for cultural activities, the association promotes the exchange and integration of different ethnic art forms. The theatrical performances in the guild hall also reflect the characteristics of multi-ethnic art integration. For example, during the Qing Dynasty, the southern city of Beijing became a hub for entertainment and leisure, with a plethora of unique activities such as listening to plays, playing tea parties, passing tickets, and watching acrobatics. Various local operas have been exchanged and integrated in Beijing, forming distinctive forms of opera with Beijing characteristics. For example, Beijing Opera is a fusion of various forms of opera such as Huizhou Opera, Han Opera, and Kunqu Opera. In addition, the architectural art of the association also reflects the integration of multi-ethnic cultures. For example, the architectural style of Anhui Guild Hall combines the characteristics of southern Anhui residential buildings and Beijing courtyard houses, while Shanxi Guild Hall combines the styles

of Jin style architecture and Beijing official architecture. This fusion of architectural art is a material manifestation of the interweaving of multi-ethnic cultures.

5. Conclusion

In the early Qing Dynasty, Beijing's multi-ethnic merchant associations served as the core venue for cross ethnic trade and cultural interaction, nurturing the "fusion code" of "economic symbiosis cultural identity". The generation mechanism of this password is manifested as follows: under the background of the "unified" political pattern and the development of commodity economy, multi-ethnic merchants use guilds as carriers to build a cross ethnic trade network through information sharing, trust guarantee, and commodity circulation, forming an "economic symbiosis" relationship; On this basis, cultural integration is achieved through the fusion of sacrificial rites, mutual learning of customs, and artistic integration, extracting shared values such as integrity and loyalty, and forming a "cultural identity"; Economic symbiosis and cultural identity mutually promote each other, ultimately forming a virtuous cycle of "economic interdependence cultural inclusiveness identity deepening".

This "code of integration" not only has important historical significance - it consolidates the economic integration foundation of multi-ethnic countries, cultivates cultural genes shared by multiple ethnic groups, strengthens recognition of the central government, but also provides profound inspiration for contemporary ethnic exchanges: in the new era, promoting exchanges, exchanges, and integration among various ethnic groups, we should build economic and trade cooperation platforms to consolidate the economic foundation, cultivate shared values to strengthen cultural ties, deepen interaction in multiple fields to build a social foundation, and thus achieve the goal of "all ethnic groups tightly embracing each other like pomegranate seeds".

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