

François Gipouloux

The network of temple fairs and their actors: religious communities, brokers, and merchants in late Imperial China

Introduction

A second commercial revolution¹ took place in China in the mid-sixteenth century with the opening up of new trade routes, the formation of trans-regional networks of merchants, and changes in the perception of the role of the merchant, all of which reshaped the economic fabric of the empire.² Within a myriad of more or less connected, nested, or disjointed small markets, three structuring forces stood out: specialised market towns, periodic markets in rural areas, and temple fairs.

Studies of the countryside have focused on the organisation of agricultural production and consumption patterns without giving full importance to markets—their radius of activity, their limits, and their periodic nature. Temple fairs (*miaohui*, 廟會), also known as “incense-burning fairs” (*xianghuohui*, 香火會) or “temple markets” (*miaoshi*, 廟市), have been an essential component of traditional Chinese markets. Temple fairs were ceremonial gatherings during which a group of buyers and sellers met at regular intervals, determined by a religious festival. One important feature to keep in mind is that during the Ming dynasty, the territorial unit was formed around the earth god (*she*, 社) who represented the entity around whom tax collection was arranged. Ming statutes required members of a territorial community to abide by the laws and maintain the moral standards of the community. In this way, the sense of belonging to a given community, conferred by territorial sacrifice, was integrated into the administrative require-

1 A preliminary version of this chapter was presented at the international conference *Configuration of European Fairs: Merchants, Objects, Routes, 1350–1600 (CoMOR)* in Turin on 30 June 2023. I would like to thank the members of the CoMOR programme, in particular Jean-Louis Gaulin and Susanne Rau for their comments. I am also grateful to Alain Arrault (École française d'Extrême Orient), Paola Calanca (École française d'Extrême Orient), David Faure (Hong Kong Chinese University), and Vincent Goossaert (École Pratique des Hautes Etudes).

2 The first commercial revolution took place under the Song in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

ments formulated by the State. Similarly, in the city, the parade of the city gods was a replica of the magistrates' inspection tours.³

Temple fairs appeared very early on. Under the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), Buddhist monastery fairs in Luoyang (in Henan province, northern China) brought together tens of thousands of people and were already playing a major economic role. Each temple held an ostension of Buddha statues, and people travelled from far and wide to witness the spectacle.⁴ It was around the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) that fairs developed on a large scale. Wars and natural disasters at the end of the dynasty and the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) led to massive losses of people and goods. Rural markets were also dislocated, before being gradually restored during the reigns of Kangxi (1661–1722) and Yongzheng (1722–1735).

Punctuated by the liturgical calendar, temple fairs were events based on the principle of offering sacrifices to various divinities. After the religious ceremony came all sorts of cultural events—traditional opera, acrobatic performances—and, of course, commercial transactions. Temple fairs were generally held before the spring ploughing season (second to fourth months of the lunisolar calendar) and after the autumn harvest (ninth to eleventh months of the lunisolar calendar).⁵ Sometimes, arrangements were made to coincide a deity's birthday with a period when work in the fields was not too intense. The temple fairs were intended to satisfy farmers' needs in terms of farming implements or grain purchases during the lean season, but they also covered a much wider spectrum, as we shall see.

A number of issues here resonate with European market fairs and with the concerns of the CoMOR research programme:

1. The vitality of the fairs and their proliferation invite us to revisit the much-debated question of the city-countryside continuum and the proto-industrial impasse of late imperial China. In what way were temple fairs a relevant indicator of the intensity of commercial activities in the countryside from the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) onwards?

³ Zhao Shiyu. Town and Country Representation as Seen in Temple Fairs. In *Town and Country in China Identity and Perception*, David Faure, Tao Tao Liu (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, 41–57.

⁴ Wang Xingya 王兴亚, Ma Huaiyun 马怀云. MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu (yi) 明清河南庙会研究 (一) [Study on temple fairs during the Ming and Qing period]. *Tianzhong xuekan* 天中学刊 10:1 (1995): 23.

⁵ These are the months of the lunisolar calendar traditionally used in imperial China. The Chinese calendar is a combination of two calendars: a solar (agricultural) calendar and a lunisolar (civil) calendar. The first day of each month (of 29 or 30 days) coincides with the new moon and the fifteenth day with the full moon.

2. How do rural markets, specialist market towns, and temple fairs fit together in the structuring of an empire-wide market?
3. Do the temple fairs reflect the separation of commercial and financial functions that characterised the growth of trade in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages?
4. What kind of relationship did local authorities have with these events which had religious, social, and commercial implications?

This article focuses on the place of temple fairs in a highly differentiated economic structure, where proto-industrial activities in the countryside were well developed. It then analyses the links between rural markets, market towns, and temple fairs, and finally seeks to elucidate the relationship between temple fair organisers and the local administration.



Fig. 1: Map of Chinese provinces, highlighting Henan province (Shutterstock, Image-ID: 323312816).

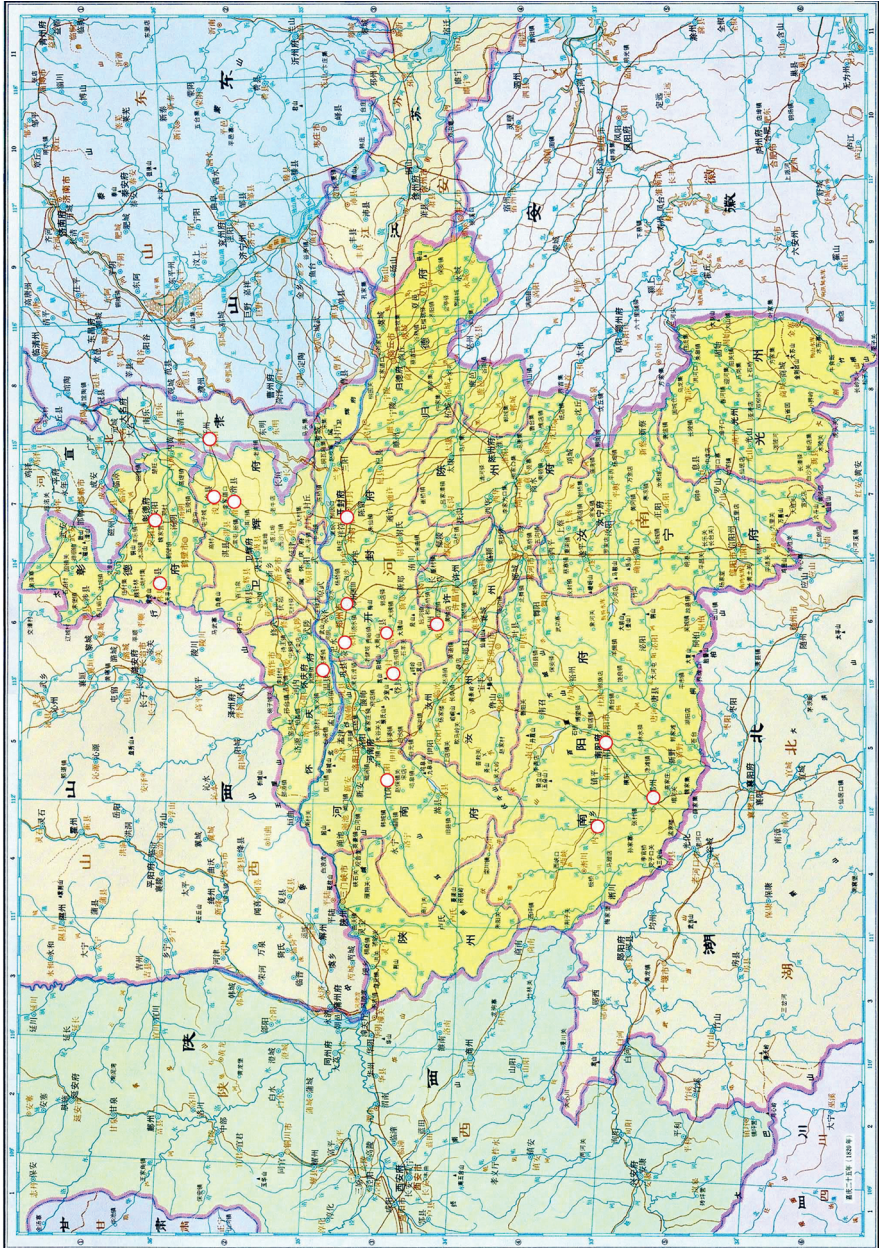


Fig. 2: Tan Qixiang, 谭其骧 *Zhongguo lishi ditu ji*, 中国历史地图集, *The Historical Atlas of China* Beijing, China Cartographic Publishing House, 1982–1988, Vol. 7 (Yuan & Ming dynasties). Henan province, p. 57–58.

The development of proto-industrial activities in the countryside: the case of Henan province

Temple fairs were held in towns, villages, or places that were neither, such as pilgrimage sites. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Henan temple fairs were held throughout the province, in both towns and rural areas. They lasted from one day to one month. Temple fairs were located at the junction of two networks of authority: the *yamen* (local government) and the temple, whether it was a territorial temple centred on the community of inhabitants of a district or village, or other religious institutions managed by guilds of merchants or craftsmen.⁶ These fairs contributed to the circulation and exchange of material goods between town and countryside as well as opening up the local economy.

Frequency of temple fairs

No exhaustive statistics have been compiled on the number of fairs held in Henan province during the Ming dynasty, but these gatherings left their mark on local chronicles (*difangzhi*) and popular literature. For example, the fair at the Temple of the City God (*chenghuang miao* 城隍廟) in the city of Dengzhou was first recorded in 1372, at the very beginning of the Ming dynasty. In Yongcheng district, local records indicate that during the Jiajing era (1521–1567), the Prince's Fair (*wang hui*, 王會) was held on the thirteenth day of the fifth month.⁷

Buddhist temples (*si* 寺), temples of the ancestors (*ci* 祠), or Taoist temples (*gong* 宮, *guan* 觀 or *miao* 廟)—these various establishments were all eligible to hold fairs throughout the year. The temple fairs were, in fact, as we have seen, directly associated with the local gods and goddesses. Thousands of deities were venerated in Chinese temples: they belonged to the Buddhist or Taoist pantheon, to popular or community religions, but also represented the patrons of commerce, medicine, fire, and many more. The most influential deities in Henan province included the Dragon King, the God of Soil, the God of Wealth, the God of Fire, Maitreya, etc. There was a clear link between the proliferation of temples and fairs.⁸ Each district of Henan organised several hundred temple fairs every year. There were 231 temple fairs in the Lin district, 243 in the Wen district,

6 Vincent Goossaert. La gestion des temples chinois au XIX^e siècle: droit coutumier ou laisser-faire?. La coutume et la norme en Chine et au Japon. *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 23 (2001): 10.

7 Wang, Ma, MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu (yi), 23.

8 Wang, Ma, MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu (yi), 21.

247 in the Rongyang district, 269 in the Shi district, 283 in the Huaiyang district, 450 in the Mi district, and 600 in the Yu district.⁹

Kaifeng, the capital of Henan province, had a population of over a million under the Ming and Qing dynasties, and fairs were held in every street where there was a temple. A book from the early Qing dynasty, recording accounts handed down from ancient times, reported that in Kaifeng there were, among the temples and sanctuaries, some dedicated to the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha (*dizangwang* 地藏王), who comes to the rescue of the dead in the underworld, and some dedicated to the god and judge of the dead, the ruler of the underworld (Yanwang 閻王). To these were added temples dedicated to the King of Medicine (Yaowang 藥王), Guandi (關帝), the holy warrior who personifies righteousness and courage, Caishen (財神), the god of Wealth, and Maitreya (彌勒).¹⁰

Proliferation of fairs in the countryside

Whether they took place on a regular or irregular basis, not all temple fairs were necessarily held in a district capital or even in densely populated villages. What is more, their size varied considerably from one place to another: some were attended by just a few hundred people, while others brought together thousands or even tens of thousands. The decision to hold a fair did not depend on government initiatives, nor was it linked to the economic situation of the locality where the temple was located. A determining factor seems to have been the prestige enjoyed by the deities of the temples in which they were held, as demonstrated by the fame of the Lingshan fair in the Yiyang district, the fair at the Dushan zushi temple in Nanyang, and the fair at the Taishan temple on Fuchu mountain in Jun district. Their implicit aim, from the point of view of the religious community, was to attract worshippers and increase donations.

During the reign of Qianlong (1735–1796), there were no less than a thousand temple fairs in the Lin district, both in market towns and in rural areas. But fairs were also held in ordinary towns. Under the Ming and Qing dynasties, temple fairs were spread throughout the province in a denser network than the marketplaces in Skinner's typology.¹¹ In fact, temple fairs filled gaps in the market and continued to grow and prosper throughout these two dynasties.

⁹ Wang, Ma, *MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu* (yi), 22.

¹⁰ Wang, Ma, *MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu* (yi), 22.

¹¹ William G. Skinner. Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China: Part I. *Journal of Asian Studies* 24:1 (1964): 3–43.

Date setting and duration of temple fairs

The date of a fair was generally set according to the day on which sacrifices had to be made (*jiri* 祭日) or on the birthday (*dan* 誕) of the temple's tutelary deities. The seventh day of the first lunar month was celebrated as the birthday of the Fire God while the ninth day of the first month was celebrated the birthday of the God of Jade, the God of Wealth was celebrated on the 21st day of the seventh month, and so on. But fairs were also held according to the needs of agricultural activity.

The duration of the fairs varied considerably from one temple to another: ranging from one to five days or from nine to eighteen days in most cases, they could last over a month or even longer, as was the case with the Temple of the City God in Zhengzhou.¹² The duration of the fairs was determined by a number of factors: the prosperity of the local economy, the prestige of the temple in the eyes of the local population, as well as its geographical location and ease of access. However, it should also be noted that the duration of the fairs depended on two other factors: the scale of the festivities (opera, acrobatic shows, and suchlike) organised to thank the deities, and the progress of the commercial negotiations, which took longer than the sale of products at the regular markets, given that temple fairs typically involved high-quality—and therefore expensive—items.

Organisation and management

As fairs were associated with temples, organising them required the involvement of temple association officials (*huishou*, 會首). Yet there were no institutions or officials specifically designated to take charge of the preparation and management of fairs under the Ming and Qing dynasties. Instead, the head of the local assembly, also known as the head of the religious community,¹³ was in charge. This was usually a well-known and respected figure who was appointed by the residents (by drawing lots or by rotation between the heads of different families) for a term of one to three years. Various trades also formed communities.¹⁴ In the *Lu Book of Customs* (*Lushi minsu zhi*, 盧氏民俗志), it is noted that “the head of

¹² See details in Wang, Ma, *MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu*, 23–24.

¹³ Called *huishou*, 會首, head of religious association, or “head of the gods” (*sheshou*, 社首, *huizhang* 會長, *huitou* 會頭, *shentou* 神頭).

¹⁴ For example, the Xiao Cao Association for civil servants, the Wen Chang Association for scholars, the Wu Sheng Guild for merchants, and Lu Ban Zao Jun 魯班灶君 for carpenters and the God of the Home (*gongren*). See Wang, Ma, *Ming Qing Henan miaohui yanjiu*, 25.

the community (*huitou*, 會頭) was responsible for all matters relating to the organisation and management of the temple fair.”¹⁵ In practical terms, this meant that in winter and spring, the peasant community collected funds and formed a group to go and buy incense in the neighbouring town.

One of the functions of the temple fairs was to forge lasting and extensive commercial links. The event lent itself to this because it combined the performance of religious rites (burning incense), almsgiving to beggar monks, and trade—the purchase of incense sticks, food for pilgrims, and various utensils for everyday use. Yang Shida, magistrate of Tangying district during the reign of Qianglong (1735–1796), put it bluntly: “To institute a temple fair is to attract merchants.”¹⁶

To ensure that transactions ran smoothly, some of the major fairs planned the location and layout of the various stalls in advance, depending on the goods on sale. During the reign of Kangxi (1661–1722), the temple fair at Dengfeng in Henan province was organised into a large number of stalls, each with a specific function. There were stalls for farm implements, bazaar items, metal goods, needles, umbrellas, fabrics, powders, hats, fans, Beijing goods, books, medicines, copper goods, silk, second-hand clothes, fabrics, black and white goods (*heibai huo*), hard goods, soft goods, hanging goods, and foreign goods. Each stall had a manager responsible for ensuring that exhibitors set up their stands in accordance with the designated locations.¹⁷

The organisation of a fair involved considerable expenditure, for which the entire local community was called upon. The financial resources allocated to the preparation and organisation of a temple fair came from the remaining funds raised for the construction or repair of the temple, donations made by the faithful, and income from the land owned by the temples (*miaotian* 廟田). But these three sources of income were far from sufficient to cover the expenses incurred by most of the fairs: the manufacture and installation of decorations, the processions, the performance of the various rituals, the erection of altars, and the organisation of recreational activities all proved very costly. Whether Buddhist or Taoist, the members of a community retained their religious beliefs but were nonetheless obliged to contribute financially to the fairs at the temple irrespective of its religious affiliation, because it was the symbol of the common good. Buddhism and Taoism were very much at home with this type of communal religion.¹⁸

15 Cao Jincai 曹金財. *Lushi minsu zhi* 卢氏民俗志 [Folklore record of Lushi]. Zhengzhou: zhongzhou gujichubanshe, 1991, quoted by Wang, Ma, *Ming Qing Henan miaohui yanjiu*, 25.

16 Wang, Ma, *Ming Qing Henan miaohui yanjiu*, 26.

17 Wang, Ma, *Ming Qing Henan miaohui yanjiu* (yi), 26.

18 Wu Cheng-han. *The temple fairs in late imperial China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, 125.

Fees had to be levied on local merchants and taxes collected on stalls and transactions carried out during the fair. This was not a general rule, but Wang and Ma report that in Henan province, half of the sums collected went to the administration, with the remainder going to the temple to cover its maintenance and repair costs. However, mutual distrust must have been the order of the day, as the sources provide abundant documentation of stormy meetings of the tax collection committee.¹⁹ Last but not least, voluntary contributions (*juanzhu* 捐助) were solicited, which were often more or less forced donations.²⁰ There were, however, some compensations: the day after the end of the festivities was a day of great drinking, as certain literary accounts in the vernacular language testify:

When the shows and ceremonies were over and the crowds had left, only the elders who ran the fair remained to share the god's blessings by eating what was left of the offerings. The festivities continued to the point of intoxication. This is a custom that has been established for many years.²¹

Typology of temple fairs

An initial typology of temple fairs can thus be sketched out here, based on their field of activity and location:

- Fairs, the main purpose of which was to sell basic necessities such as firewood, oil, salt, dried fruit, garlic noodles, tea, and groceries but also manufactured goods such as tables, chairs, stools, clothes boxes, make-up boxes, shelves, bookcases, mirrors, brocade clothes, tinware, soap, crockery, silk coupons, scarves, combs, felt blankets, shoes, velvet, oiled boots, mud clogs, umbrellas, satin boots for men and women, ink, ink stones, straw shoes.
- Fairs specialising in the sale of agricultural equipment such as ploughs, spades, hoes, hoe and spade handles, whip handles, scythes, sickles, knives, spades, brooms, netting, ropes, traction equipment, axles, bamboo items, rain hats, straw hats, etc. This type of fair was held in the spring and summer.
- Fairs specialising in the sale of livestock. The temple fair in Anyang district to the north of Henan province was a fair for mules and horses and also sold all the items needed to harness them. In the district of Neixiang to the southwest of the province, the Neihu temple fair was devoted to cattle and horses, although pigs and sheep were also sold.

¹⁹ Wang, Ma, *MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu* (yi), 26.

²⁰ Wang, Ma, *MingQing Henan miaohui yanjiu* (yi), 26. See also Wu, *Temple fairs*, 122.

²¹ Ling, Mengchu 凌濛初. *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇. Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju 正中書局, 1977, ch. 2: 16, cited by Wu, *Temple fairs*, 123.

- Fairs specialising in the trade of medicinal herbs (Henan province was a renowned producer of medicinal plants).
- Fairs specialising in the sale of stationery and theatrical utensils, such as the scholar's "Four Treasures" (paper, ink, inkstone, brushes), flutes, trumpets, gongs, swords, arrows, knives, masks of the Monkey King and other famous characters from Chinese operas, paper roosters, embroidered handkerchiefs, bibs, bracelets, necklaces, padlocks, and more.

In Jiangnan, there were temple fairs specialising in silk around Lake Tai, a major centre of sericulture in the lower reaches of the Yangzi River:

Whenever there was a new silk market, customers gathered. In the town of Linghu, many silk merchants from all directions came to Ling'ao, and in the 4th and 5th months, boats laden with silk lined the creek and moored up to 50 kms upstream and downstream of Linghu.²²

The links between rural market networks, specialised market towns, and temple fairs

Moving on from Henan province, we shall now examine the situation in other provinces of the empire to understand the difference between periodic markets and fairs, a local chronicle describing the economic situation in a poor district of Shanxi province in 1765 provides the following information:

The city market, which opens every morning, is located on Mingyuan Street (明遠街). There are also three temple fairs held from 1st to 6th day of the fourth month, from 24th to 28th day of the seventh month, and from 1st to 6th day of the tenth month. The small market and around a hundred shops are located in Mingyuan street, but only supply items such as fabrics, cereals, vegetables and firewood. Other goods are sold at the fairs.²³

Temple fairs therefore differed from both periodic markets and the sedentary trade offered by shops in that they offered items that the latter could not supply. With regard to the relationship between periodic markets and temple fairs, there are two points to be made here: 1) Compared with rural markets, temple fairs covered a wider range of goods, but the nature of the two events was different. Their relationship is more complementary than competitive. 2) The temple fairs

²² Quoted in Chen, Xuewen, 陈学文. MingQing shiqi Huzhoufu shizhen jingji de fazhan, 明清时期湖州府市镇经济的发展 [Development of Town Economy in Huzhou Prefecture during Ming and Qing Periods]. *Journal of Zhejiang*, 浙江学刊 4 (1989): 88–94.

²³ *Tongguan xianzhi*, 同官縣志 [Shansi] (1765), ch. 2: 3, quoted in Wu, *Temple Fairs*, 105.

were essential support points in the formation of long-distance trade networks, which in turn contributed to the relative economic integration of an immense empire.

The function of rural markets

At the most basic level, it was obviously the rural markets that met the needs of small farmers in terms of production and subsistence. Although rural markets have a long history, they only really expanded under the Ming and Qing dynasties. The function of rural fairs was to satisfy peasant needs in terms of agricultural equipment and to facilitate the distribution of resources (surplus grain, in particular). From this point of view, they consolidated, as it were, a system of self-sufficiency in the countryside.

Each individual market compensated for surpluses and shortages between smallholders to meet their respective needs. However, the function of the network of rural markets went beyond this, providing the basis for the distribution of goods on a large scale and over long distances. For a long time, goods traded in China's commercial system passed through the cities, while the countryside was kept out of the way. Under the Ming and Qing dynasties, this pattern of trade changed radically: basic necessities were combined with luxury goods in long-distance trade, and small farmers became both producers and consumers of these different items. The rural and the urban, the small farmer and the market, – as well as the national circulation of goods – were now linked.

Rural markets had to be reachable in less than half a day's walk and, in mountainous areas, in a day's walk; in regions crisscrossed by rivers, the journey was much shorter as there were waterways. The network of rural markets was a decisive link in an economy dominated by smallholders. It was formed as a result of the marketing of basic products and made it possible to optimise the distribution of resources through the movement of goods between regions. This regular, large-scale movement linked regions with different natural environments and degrees of development. In other words, the movement of goods made it possible to redistribute work between regions and optimise the allocation of resources.

The network of rural markets was fully established in most Chinese regions during the reigns of Qianlong (1735–1796) and Daoguang (1820–1850). This network, made up of market towns and cities, enabled fluid communication between rural and urban markets and became the vehicle for a national system for the movement of goods. As a place of sociability and a point of contact with the outside world, the market functioned as an irreplaceable forum for the exchange of information, spreading news from one village to another on such matters as

safety in the countryside, banditry, epidemics, etc.²⁴ Ultimately, however, rural markets ensured the perpetuation of a peasant economy made up of a myriad of small producers.

Temple fairs: merchant terminals in a distant trade network

Finally, temple fairs were crucial nodes in long-distance trade networks. The example of the temple fair held every year from the fifteenth to the twentieth day of the third month in Dali, a prefecture of Yunnan province in south-west China, is illuminating. In the sixteenth century, it attracted merchants from the rest of the empire.²⁵ This is a measure of the efficiency of the long-distance trade network without which itinerant merchants from distant provinces would not have been able to arrive in time to attend a fair that lasted just five days. The fairs therefore functioned as trading terminals for everyday consumer goods transported over medium and long distances by peddlers.

Market towns and specialisation

The third component of this empire-wide trading system was the market towns. These played a key role in structuring rural markets. However, just like the larger towns, they could also have their own fairs. Opening at midday and closing at dusk, these fairs enabled peasants to sell their fresh produce (fruit, vegetables, and fish) and city dwellers to buy supplies. The town of Wangjiangjing in Zhejiang province had various fairs specialising in salt, rice, fish, and seafood.²⁶ The participants in these urban fairs were essentially peasants, merchants, and city dwellers. However, it is fair to say that these fairs had lost their original function and had become integrated into the general landscape of the urban economy.

Using the methodology developed by the German geographer Walter Christaller, William G. Skinner established an equivalence between market towns and rural markets.²⁷ But China's economic fabric was far from homogeneous. Dense and prosperous in the lower reaches of the Yangzi river, it was much less so in the central and western regions of the empire. As a number of recent studies have shown, many reg-

²⁴ See C.K. Yang, *A North China Market Economy*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1944, 13.

²⁵ *Dalifu zhi* 大理府志 [Gazetteer of the Dali Prefecture, Yunnan] (1563), vol. II: 62, quoted in Wu, *Temple Fairs*, 109.

²⁶ Ren Fang, The rural market in late imperial China. *Asian Social Science* 6 (2010): 43.

²⁷ Skinner, Marketing and Social Structure, 3–43.

ular, uniform markets appeared in the countryside rather than in towns.²⁸ In regions with ethnic minorities or in frontier areas, trade was difficult and the economy was underdeveloped. Rural fairs provided a remedy for the absence of medium-sized towns and the atrophy of market mechanisms. It is therefore unfounded to imagine periodic markets with a uniform distribution across the whole of China.

Moreover, Fu Yiling, one of the pioneers of the economic and social history of China, considerably renewed the paradigm of urban studies of the Jiangnan region by developing the concept of the specialised town (*zhuanyezhen* 專業鎮).²⁹ The first factor to be taken into account here is the high degree of specialisation in rural society. This varies greatly from one region to another. In Jiangnan, for example, far from producing everything they needed, peasants concentrated on producing certain goods and relied on the market to acquire others. Although there were also markets for rice, most of the commercial activity in the towns along the lower reaches of the Yangzi river concerned the purchase of textiles made by rural producers. The buyers—itinerant merchants—had plenty of cash at their disposal and used brokers to buy the produce made by farmers during the off-season.³⁰

When broadening the scope of the analysis, one can observe that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in certain regions such as Jiangnan, cash crops accounted for 60% to 70% of the value of all agricultural production.³¹ As agricul-

28 Fang Xing 方行. Qingdai qianqi nongcun shichang de fazhan 清代前期农村市场的发展, [Development of Rural Markets in Early Qing], *lishi yanjiu* 历史研究. *Historical Research* 6 (1987): 78–93; Huang Qichen 黄启臣. MingQing zhujiang sanjiaozhou shangye yi shangren ziben de fazhan 明清珠江三角洲商业与商人资本的发展 [Development in Business and Merchant Capital of Pearl River Delta in Ming and Qing Dynasties] *Zhongguo shehui jingji yanjiu* 中国社会经济史研究. *Studies on History of Society and Economy in China* 3 (1984): 37–50; Li Longqian. 李龙潜, MingQing Guangdong shehui jingji yanjiu 明清广东社会经济研究. *Research on Society and Economy of Guangdong in Ming and Qing Dynasties*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing Company, 2006, 120–169; Xu Tan, 许檀 MingQing shiqi chengxiang shichang wangluo tixi de xingchengji yiyi 明清时期城乡市场网络体系的形成及意义 [The Formation and Significance of the Urban and Rural Market Network System in the Ming and Qing Dynasties]. Beijing: Social Science Press, 1998, 298–302; 305–306.

29 Fu, Yiling 傅衣凌. MingQing shidai Jiangnan shizhen jingji de fenxi 明清时代江南市镇经济的分析 [Analysis of Town Economy in the Lower Reaches of the Yangze River during Ming and Qing Ages], *lishi jiaoxue* 历史教学. *History Teaching* 5 (1964): 9–13.

30 The phenomenon has been well studied by Li Bozhong. 李伯重. Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua (1550–1850) 江南的早期工业化 (1550–1850) [Early Industrialization in the Lower Reaches of the Yangze River (1550–1850)]. *Asian Social Science* 6 (2010): 42–49.

31 Liu Shiji, 劉石吉. MingQing shidai Jiangnan diqu de zhuanye shizhen 明清时代江南地区的專業市鎮 [Professional Towns in the Lower Reaches of the Yangze River during Ming and Qing Ages]. *Shihuo yuekan* 食貨月刊 *Economy Taipei* 6 (1978): 26–43, 7, 30–41, 8, 15–30.

ture became more diversified, demand in rural areas increased and trading centres multiplied. Becoming the focal point of a rural area, the specialised market town gained a more complete economic structure fulfilling a dual function: first, as a concentration point for the distribution and processing of the region's agricultural produce, and second, as a retail centre for the livelihoods of the region's farmers. In the lower reaches of the Yangzi river, the market towns specialised in products such as cotton yarns and fabrics, mulberry trees, silkworm rearing, woven silk, and rice. There were also more than a dozen market towns specialising in salt, oil, paintbrushes, mining and metal products, pottery,³² fish farming, mountain products,³³ embroidery, tobacco, cart making, shipbuilding, and services such as freight transport.³⁴

In the coastal regions, there were also a number of districts where merchants converged and markets were held day after day. Markets were held daily in the districts of Haiyang (Shandong) and Chenghai (Guangdong). In the middle reaches of the Gan river in Jiangxi province, there were four or five market periods every ten days. Under the Qing dynasty, there were one, two, three, or five markets opening three or four times a month, and so on. By the reign of Qianlong (1735–1796), most of the country's provinces and regions had formed a network of rural markets covering a vast area and operating freely. This network of basic markets was linked to the commercial towns located on the main distribution routes, bridging the gap between urban and rural markets and forming a national commodities distribution network. Thanks to this network, virtually every district and even every village had economic links with other provinces and regions.

Trade fairs and local government

The establishment or cancellation of a rural fair was generally decided by the district magistrate, the smallest and last administrative unit in the empire where a representative of imperial authority still sat.³⁵ As a general rule, the local authorities viewed the fairs favourably because this festive occasion helped to calm tensions and perpetuate or restore social harmony. Most of the time, the local govern-

32 Shushanzhen, Qianjiyaozhen, Lutouzhen, Pinyaozhen.

33 Shanmaizhen.

34 Chen Zhongping 陈忠平. MingQing shiqi Jiangnan diqu shichang kaocha 明清时期江南地区市场考察 [An Examination of the Market in Jiangnan area during the Ming and Qing Dynasties], *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* 中国经济史研究 2 (1990): 24–40.

35 Ren, The rural market, 42–49.

ment did not interfere in the running of the fairs and let the trade take its course. According to the neo-Confucian orthodoxy in force, the vocation of virtuous government was to act with humanity and concern for the living conditions of the population.

From this point of view, facilitating the establishment of a market and the movement of goods through fairs could only be seen as a positive contribution to maintaining social peace. The magistrate did not act alone in this endeavour—his actions were relayed by powerful clans and influential notables who formed the backbone of local society, such as retired civil servants, scholars, landowners, and wealthy merchants.

By contrast, the management of temple fairs under the Ming and Qing was, as we have seen, the responsibility of the local communities and enjoyed the benevolent attention of the administrative authority. However, the heads of the various local communities were not chosen from among the officials in place, were not appointed by the government, and did not receive subsidies or preferential treatment. Although the benevolence of the administration was also perceptible, it was tempered by numerous difficulties—such as chronic understaffing, inadequacy, and corruption—in the system of taxation imposed on the fairs.

The tax system applicable to trade fairs

Due to insufficient manpower, most local administrations preferred to require an annual quota set in the form of a licence imposed on brokerage firms (*yatieshui* 牙貼稅). According to an early seventeenth-century source:

In addition to the four social categories—scholars, farmers, craftsmen and merchants—brokers make up the largest group. They are commonly known as “agents” (*jingji* 經紀) and are all licensed by the local authorities. Without their intervention, any attempt to hire carts, boats or pack animals to transport fish, salt, beans or grain is doomed to failure. In addition to the usual fees, they must be paid an extra commission.³⁶

At the fairs of certain well-known temples that attracted large numbers of worshippers, the local authorities tried to levy a tax on the donations of worshippers rather than on the goods traded. The high cost of collecting trade taxes at the many small fairs scattered across the countryside made regular taxation of these fairs virtually impossible. To tax medium-sized fairs, the local administration

³⁶ *Yangzhoufu zhi*, 揚州府志 [Gazetteer of Yangzhou Prefecture], 20 (1601): 5, quoted from Wu, *Temple Fairs*, 127.

adopted an easy-to-implement but inefficient method, imposing fees on local brokers rather than itinerant merchants. When temple fairs attracted more worshippers than merchants, the taxes were levied not on the goods, but on the charitable donations of the worshippers who, in the opinion of the tax collectors themselves, were more easily identifiable.³⁷

Finally, the local authorities felt that it was easier to tax large fairs where the huge volume of goods traded prevented any sudden shifts in the dates and places of trade. The issue became a technical one, but the method of levy had to be devised by a chronically understaffed local administration.

Conclusion

Temple fairs were a central part of the marketing system in late imperial China. Widely distributed throughout the empire, their sheer number formed the basis for the development of the merchant economy in the countryside. How can we situate the temple fairs in this subtle organisation of markets which link the traditional economy with a complex urban economy? Temple fairs were a particular form of market, allowing an extension of the marketing area, a diversification of the products sold, a specialisation of the markets, a relative standardisation of measures, and means of exchange. However, there are still many points on which the local chronicles provide us with no information: credit mechanisms, the circulation of capital, and the spread of financial innovations. Nevertheless, two tentative conclusions can be drawn from the above development:

1. The dissociation between goods fairs and meeting places for financiers, observed in European fairs from the late sixteenth century (Besançon, Plaisance, Novi),³⁸ does not seem to have occurred in China. Financing agencies (pawnbrokers, local credit institutions) remained rudimentary and modest in size. What is more, there was no evidence of the emergence of instruments guaranteed by private commercial law which would take into account the interests of merchants, secure their transactions, and encourage them to expand their businesses and start manufacturing.
2. Rural fairs and markets were a vehicle for the reproduction of the family economy in the countryside during a period (16th–18th century) when market production (cereals, cash crops) and family industry were fully developed. But the growth of rural markets meant that proto-industrial activities and

³⁷ Wu, *Temple Fairs*, 127.

³⁸ On this aspect, see the contributions of Markus A. Denzel and Claudio Marsilio in this volume.

textiles in particular were confined to the family. Farmers needed little investment, used rudimentary equipment, and exploited family labour during the off-season. The profitability of their production was assured if the cost of equipment and raw materials (silk or cotton) was amortised. At the other end of the chain, merchants and brokers played off the competition between peasant households and had no interest in investing to create more efficient workshops or in getting involved in the production process themselves, as demonstrated by the limited role played by merchant manufacturers.³⁹

Despite the blossoming of the mercantile economy, the “high equilibrium trap” (that particular equilibrium between supply and demand formalised by Mark Elvin⁴⁰) closed—the combination of a large population and flourishing markets broke the link that had been forged between the market and technological innovation, between the market and the spread of manufacturing techniques or financial innovations. What attracted the attention of merchants were the conditions under which the market operated, not technological improvements in the production process.

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³⁹ François Gipouloux. *Commerce, argent, pouvoir: l'impossible avènement d'un capitalisme en Chine, XVI^e-XIX^e siècle*. Paris: CNRS Édition, 2022, 104–105.

⁴⁰ Mark Elvin. The High-Level Equilibrium Trap: the Causes of the Decline of Invention in the Traditional Chinese Textile Industries. In *Economic Organization in Chinese Society*, W.E. Willmott (ed.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972, 137–172. See also Mark Elvin. *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973, 298–315.

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