

Ph.D. project: *Wu Bingjian* and his Friends. The relations network of a Chinese merchant in the early 19th century

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The meaning of friendship with respect of group-relations should be researched in my project, namely a case study on *Wu Bingjian* (1769-1843, Chinese: 伍秉鏞, also known as Howqua), one of the leading merchants of the mercantile community in Canton in the early 19th century. Also in China there was a transitional phase, during which the first indications of a profound change in society and state became noticeable. This change was associated with an increasing confrontation with the west. Since the merchants in Canton, namely the so-called “Hong Merchants”, were commissioned to take charge of the foreign trade since the early 18th century, they were an important connection between the late imperial China and the west. In order to fulfill their role as mediator, they must establish and maintain their relationship with their foreign trading partners as well as the circles of the Qing court and other Chinese merchants. This double role makes them particularly interesting for a research about friendship and social relations within the framework of the post graduate program of University Freiburg.

This project focuses on the relations-network of *Wu Bingjian*, who was recorded in “The Rich and How They Got That Way” as one of the 50 richest persons in the last thousand years.¹ He lived in the last decades before the Opium Wars in the middle of the 19th century, as China was forced to open for the foreign trade. But *Wu* had his most successful years during the 1820s and 1830s, as the decline of the Canton System already became visible and most of the Hong Merchants went bankrupt. This is the historical context, in which *Wu* had established a diverse network of social relationship, which is not yet researched, but should be of vital importance for his success.

Since *Wu Bingjian*, just like all other Hong Merchants, must mediate between the Chinese government officials and foreign traders, he had to operate at three levels: with his competitors, namely other Chinese merchants, with the local government officials, who seemed to be a kind

¹ Crossen, Cynthia: *The Rich and How They Got That Way*. New York: 2000.

of patronages to him, and finally with his foreign trading partners in intercultural context. This network consisting of three groups of actors determined the social position of a Hong Merchant and his prestige within the merchant class. Furthermore, he was also a mirror reflecting the worldview of a Chinese merchant at that time.

Relations are of course not always friendship. How to differentiate these two terms in thought and action by the merchants in Canton is one of the leading questions of my project. In addition, it should be clarified that how large was the proportion of instrumentalized – usually asymmetric – contacts within a mercantile relations network. How can we recognize or define a friendship and its affective side? What kind of values and principles of behavior were relevant for the various actors in this network? How could *Wu Bingjian*, who was reliant upon the patronage of the Qing government as well as good contacts with his European trading partners, protect himself in case of conflict? Since traditional China had little legal protection for merchants and the regulation of trade was not really anchored in any codes of law, personal relations (incl. friendship) often functioned as a kind of protection. In this context it must be found out, how did the European, who were characterized by the Enlightenment and the perception-transition from “Sinophilie” to “Sinophobie” and hold another comprehension of social relationship, judge their relationship with the Chinese? With other words: To what extent can we differentiate the Chinese and the western values of friendship during the early 19th century?