

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nexus of self-organization: the expansion of collective responsibility networks among boatmen in nineteenth-century Chongqing

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Abstract

This article investigates the collective responsibility organizations among boatmen in nineteenth-century Chongqing, when the city became one of the most important metropolises on the southwest Qing frontier. It also introduces two successive turning points in self-organization that were associated with two different classes of boatmen – skippers and sailors. First, in 1803, skippers gained the authority to institutionalize their organizations through their negotiations with the local state regarding official services and service fees. Second, when similar service and fiscal tensions emerged between skippers and sailors in the mid-nineteenth century, the skippers facilitated and supervised the institutionalization of collective responsibility organizations that were run by the sailors themselves. By contextualizing this expansion of collective responsibility organizations within the multilayered interactions between skippers and sailors, this article proposes that the perspective of interclass networks is crucial for deepening the study of state–society interactions, the capital–labor relationship, as well as the tension between imperial integration and regional diversity in early modern China.

Key words: Chongqing; collective responsibility network; migrant laborer; nineteenth century; river transportation

Introduction

This article retells the story of Qing explorations in empire-building in the nineteenth century through the perspective of a grassroots-level group: The boatmen converging in Chongqing – a river metropolis arising in that century of challenges and institutional innovations.

As Susan Mann and Philip Kuhn articulate in their field-shaping overview of nineteenth-century China, the challenges for the Qing included the doubling of the population during the eighteenth century, the vastly increased volume of migration, the greatly expanded scale of commercialization, and the proliferation of sub- and extrabureaucratic networks in managing public resources.¹ Continuing Mann and Kuhn's inquiry, scholars have extensively investigated the regionally contextualized administrative innovations that tackled these changes related to population, migration, and commercialization. William Rowe, in his study of Hankow, illustrates the significant role of merchant guilds in accommodating migrant or sojourning populations.² Tracing the creation of “city-wide guild alliances” in the late nineteenth century, Rowe argues that the merchant guilds became more publicly engaged with local administration in the late nineteenth century, which signaled “the genesis of a more effective and ‘modern’ urban governmental apparatus under the very encouragement and

¹Mann and Kuhn 1978, pp. 107–62.

²Rowe 1984, p. 215. According to Rowe, migrants moved to cities with the intention of permanent relocation; sojourners normally intended to stay for only a short period.

patronage of the declining imperial order.”³ Robert Antony and Jane Kate Leonard, gathering rich case studies of extrabureaucratic administrative initiatives, point out that the Qing relied on two bifurcating but interconnected frameworks for governance. One was “a powerful overarching and integrating superstructure” that was “responsible for a limited number of explicit security tasks.” The other was “a matrix of diverse local governing units,” such as “assistant bureaucratic” personnel and “extra-bureaucratic economic organizations.” Each of these units “revolved around discrete particularistic features and interests,” which varied from local surveillance to the management of water control projects. Since the central state accommodated the flexibility of these local governing units, “different elements of the local power structure” – bureaucratic, subbureaucratic, or extrabureaucratic – should negotiate with each other to try to achieve social stability.⁴ Chongqing exemplifies crucial cases for investigating such intergroup negotiations because the merchant and occupational guilds there were particularly diverse and complex. This was because Chongqing witnessed several waves of demographic upheaval and migration to the Qing southwest frontier from the end of the Ming through the flourishing of the Yangzi-based long-distance trade in the eighteenth century. Following Maura Dykstra, this article uses the term “collective responsibility network” to encapsulate the various guilds in Chongqing. “Members of collective responsibility units were administrated as a group” and “organized to carry out local projects as a group.”⁵

Historians of Chongqing have significantly enriched earlier discussions of state-guild negotiation and interguild cooperation in two particular ways. First, scholars such as Liang Yong and Zhou Lin have comprehensively studied the Eight Provinces Guilds – an overarching network of guilds for sojourning merchants in Chongqing.⁶ Increasingly, in the nineteenth century, the Eight Provinces Guilds became the most important administrative intermediaries of the Chongqing government, and they were responsible for managing levies and corvée, reporting bandits and other illegal groups, and resolving disputes, along with other security and fundraising tasks.⁷ The existing scholarship on the Eight Provinces Guilds’ negotiations with more specialized guilds has given us far more concrete local knowledge of how guild alliances worked in Chongqing than was available to Rowe for his study of Hankou. Second, Maura Dykstra, Zhou Lin, and Fan Jinmin study a core mechanism that sustained state-guild cooperation and negotiation: The local state commissioned specialized guilds to provide official services (*chai* 差), while these guilds gained monopoly and self-governance within a particular industry in return.⁸ Dykstra, in particular, highlights that this mechanism reflected the state’s formal recognition of self-organized groups as “deputies of the local state in the procurement of goods and resources.” Her emphasis on the “complicated process of negotiation between local authorities, individual merchants, and merchant groups” has added considerable nuance to Rowe’s more dichotomous framework for analyzing the state–society relationship.⁹

Although the aforementioned scholarship has extensively illustrated the roles of collective responsibility organizations in urban governance, an important social group has been largely neglected in these discussions: The migrant laborers who carried out the official services and provided the infrastructural foundation for long-distance trade in and beyond Chongqing. Zhou Lin’s article on the Chongqing porters contributes rare materials that reflect how transportation laborers organized

³Rowe 1984, p. 337.

⁴Antony and Leonard 2002, pp. 16–19.

⁵Dykstra 2014, pp. 73–124.

⁶The heads of the Eight Provinces Guilds were called “guest heads.” The guest-head system (*kezhang zhi* 客長制) was applied throughout Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan to regulate the migrant population beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. The guest heads were selected from the sojourning merchants who resided mostly in Sichuan but had not changed their place of registration. In nineteenth-century Chongqing, the Eight Provinces Guilds included the Huguang, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Jiangnan, Guangdong, Fujian, Shanxi, and Shaanxi guilds.

⁷Liang 2007, pp. 31–33. Zhou 2011.

⁸Dykstra 2014, pp. 245–48, Fan 2009, Zhou 2016. Susan Mann reaches a similar conclusion about the interaction between merchant self-regulation and state-building in her *Local Merchants and the Chinese Bureaucracy, 1750–1950*; see Mann 1987. Dykstra, Zhou, and Fan use local archives to enrich Mann’s observation, which focuses more on the central state.

⁹Dykstra 2014, p. 229, p. 248.

themselves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Probably because of the specific industry that she investigates, Zhou frames such networks among porters as forces resistant to the local power structure, rather than simultaneously enabling and limiting it.¹⁰ Although the materials Zhou presents are important, those materials and her interpretation overlook the fact that some migrant laborers' organizations did have some legitimacy and could work with other more recognized guilds and the local government. It is worth contemplating whether Zhou's interpretation and the materials she uses reinforce the stereotypical image of migrant laborers as potentially dangerous groups whose organizations lacked institutional legitimacy and efficacy. Nanny Kim's recent monograph challenges this stereotypical image. As she articulates, most of the boatmen in the Upper Yangzi had household registrations, and they were not simply dangerous vagrants. She also reminds historians to carefully differentiate the different classes of boatmen rather than flattening them into a single image.¹¹ In his article on the shipping guilds in Chongqing, Chiu Peng-sheng shows similar caution regarding class differentiations among the boatmen – particularly between the skippers and the sailors. However, because of his limited access to archives when he wrote the article, Chiu mainly reconstructs self-organization strategies among skippers – the elite group among boatmen – while he did not illustrate much about collective responsibility networks among sailors.¹² Building on Kim and Chiu, this article reveals the multilayered nexus of self-organization among boatmen by acknowledging their inner differentiation and unpacking the interactions among them. This article highlights the class differentiation between skippers and sailors, which inspires a more comprehensive and dynamic way to understand the self-organization processes of boatmen. Skippers were the elites among the boatmen because they owned boats and, in some cases, properties on land, organized shipping teams, and enjoyed various kinds of authority. "Sailor" is used as a general term for all migrant laborers in the shipping industry. Sailors could be more specifically categorized according to their technical specializations, which included oarsman, boat tracker, rapids master, and salvage master.

This article reconstructs and contextualizes the collective responsibility organizations among sailors more comprehensively, not only to give voice to this long-marginalized group but also to revise our current framework for analyzing collective responsibility networks in early modern Chinese cities. Existing studies of self-organization initiatives still predominantly focus on the elite sector in society, be they scholar-officials, merchants, or occupational elites within a particular industry. This over-emphasis on the elite sector limits historians in digging deeper into the core inquiry that shapes the existing debates on collective responsibility networks: How did the Qing state, which maintained a relatively small formal government, mobilize labor and resources from society, particularly beginning in the late eighteenth century? This article argues that it is important to investigate the following questions: How did the elite sector mobilize and negotiate with commoners and laborers from the bottom of society? How and to what extent did commoners and laborers participate in the empire-building process of the Qing? In sum, this article proposes that the perspective of interclass networks is crucial for deepening the studies of state–society interactions, the capital–labor relationship, as well as the tension between imperial integration and regional diversity in early modern China.

To take these empirical and methodological steps forward, this article introduces the expansion of various collective responsibility organizations among the boatmen based out of the Upper Yangzi and Jialing Rivers. Research on these boatman organizations is based on new materials from the Ba County Archives.¹³

¹⁰Zhou 2018.

¹¹Kim 2019, pp. 147–96. Igor Iwo Chabrowski's monograph on Sichuan boatmen also contributes important materials for understanding how boatmen perceived their relationships with other groups in society. He also tries to reconstruct the employment and networks of boatmen in the first chapter. However, perhaps because of the limit of sources, some of his reconstructions, such as the speculation about the connection between secret societies and the employment of boatmen, are not precise enough. See Chabrowski 2013.

¹²Chiu 2009.

¹³During the Qing dynasty, Ba County was the core area in the Chongqing prefecture. The [Sichuan Provincial Archives of Ba County](#) (SPABC) is one of the largest county-level archival collections of the Qing period and preserves rich official and legal documents from the Ba County government. Chiu Peng-sheng's earlier study of the shipping guilds in Chongqing was

This article focuses on two successive turning points regarding these organizations in the nineteenth century. First, in 1803, skippers gained the authority to institutionalize their organizations through their negotiations with the local state regarding official services and service fees. Second, when similar service and fiscal tensions emerged between skippers and sailors in the mid-nineteenth century, the skippers facilitated and supervised the institutionalization of collective responsibility organizations that were run by the sailors themselves. These sailor organizations replaced government-run sailor stations (*raoguaijufanpu* 橈拐鋪/飯鋪) in designating official services and providing facilities. The sailor organizations also empowered sailors to negotiate their wages and public roles with skippers, merchants, and the local state.

Additionally, this article participates in the rewriting of working-class histories by revealing new materials and experiences within Asian contexts. This article joins Jan Breman in investigating the migrant laborers who sustain the informal sector economy – a social group that has long been neglected in Western historiography of labor history but is particularly important in Asian contexts.¹⁴ Particularly, this article draws inspiration from Breman’s framing of the jobber–laborer network. In Breman’s studies of West India, jobbers were job brokers who recruited migrant laborers for agricultural or proto-industrial employers, while the jobber–laborer network largely shaped laborers’ opportunities for collective action. Breman’s findings have inspired the articulation of the skipper–sailor network and discussions of how such a network shaped the experiences and organizational capacities of the sailors in this article. While Breman’s cases from postcolonial India illustrate that the jobber–laborer network trapped migrant laborers into continuous exploitation, the skipper–sailor networks in Chongqing show the possibility of having empowered the sailors. It is worth contemplating how certain differences between skippers and jobbers – such as the necessity of labor cooperation in shipping and the dual identities of skippers as both the recruiters and the ultimate employers – exemplify new perspectives that expand Breman’s analytical framework.¹⁵

Chongqing within the expanding empire

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Chongqing had become one of the most important cities in the Upper Yangzi Region. The rise of Chongqing as a regional commercial center was attributable to its geographical position. Qing officials in Chongqing normally described the city as the place where “three rivers converge.” The “three rivers” were the segment of the Yangzi River between Chongqing and Hankou, another segment of the Yangzi between Chongqing and the origin of the Yangzi, and the Jialing River, which joined the Yangzi from the northwest (Fig. 1). The Yangzi and Jialing Rivers, on the one hand, connected Chongqing with the highlands of Yunnan, Guizhou, and southern Shaanxi in western China. These provinces were rich in natural resources, such as copper, zinc, salt, medicine, timber, and coal, which became increasingly important to the rest of China during the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the convergence of these two eastward rivers increased the water volume at Chongqing and made it suitable to be a transitional port for long-distance trade that would ultimately reach the prosperous economic centers in eastern China. In sum, the riverine conditions surrounding Chongqing secured this city’s role as an important

based on an edited collection of some documents from the Ba County Archives, *Qingdai qianjia dao baxian dang’an xuanbian* (DAXB, 清代乾嘉道巴縣檔案選編). That collection, however, only selected a few cases from the Ba County Archives. Moreover, the collection only included particular sections of those cases, rather than complete cases. This article includes many original cases from the Ba County Archives, which Chiu was unable to consult when he wrote his article.

¹⁴Since the 1960s, Jan Breman has spent decades studying migrant laborers in India, Southeast Asia, and China. The migrant laborers studied by Breman were often stuck in the “informal sector economy,” which Breman defined as “low wages, payment by piece rate or job work, un or low-skill work, casual and intermittent employment, erratic working hours, no written labour contracts and an absence of institutional representation.” See Breman 2009, p. 4. The experiences of these migrant laborers have often been neglected in Western historiography, which focuses more on the working class in industrial factories. However, within Asian contexts, the experiences of these laborers are important and materials about them can inspire reflections on several dichotomies, such as the division between “rural” and “urban” or the contrast between the “formal” and “informal” sectors.

¹⁵For an exemplary case study conducted by Breman, see Breman 2010.



Figure 1. Chongqing and the three river segments during the Qing dynasty. Illustration made by the author based on Chen *et al.* 2017.

port for channeling the flows of commerce between the economic centers in southeastern China and the southwestern frontiers that were difficult to penetrate but were rich with resources.

Chongqing was a hub of mobile people – ranging from merchants to porters – when both the empire and the southwest region underwent great demographic shifts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the Qing empire confronted the continuous expansion of its population, which increased the socioeconomic tensions and administrative challenges in its existing core areas, such as Jiangnan. The population of the Qing empire doubled from approximately 150 million in 1700 to more than 300 million in 1800 and further increased to 380 million by 1850.¹⁶ Sichuan, however, had experienced traumatic depopulation during the mid-seventeenth century because of Qing battles with the Zhang Xianzhong (張獻忠, 1606–1647) regime and other resistant military forces during the Ming–Qing transition, as well as an outbreak of plague. Driven by the combined goals of repopulating Sichuan and incorporating the internal frontiers within and adjacent to Sichuan, the central government initiated several waves of migration into Sichuan, as well as into Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi, from the late seventeenth century through the mid-eighteenth century. Such state-encouraged migration was followed by continuous free migration into the southwest throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Since Chongqing and its adjacent areas were covered with tortuous mountains and rivers, a large portion of migrants to Chongqing did not resettle down as farmers, as the Qing state wished, but instead found livelihoods as merchants, brokers, transportation workers, or wage laborers in proto-industrial workshops. These migrants played important roles in building Sichuan’s commercial connections with the frontier further west and reorienting Sichuan’s economic activities around the Yangzi River axis.¹⁷ Both trends helped strengthen Chongqing’s role as an important point for transshipment and gradually elevated the economic importance of Chongqing by the early nineteenth century.¹⁸

Parallel to the flourishing of long-distance trade in Chongqing, this city also became an increasingly important staging ground for two expensive imperial wars fought near Sichuan: The Second Jinchuan

¹⁶Rowe 2009, p. 91; Skinner 1986, p. 75.

¹⁷Smith 1988, pp. 49–50.

¹⁸Lin 1994.

War (1771–1776, costing 61,600,000 taels of silver) and the “White Lotus” War (1796–1804, costing 200,000,000 taels).¹⁹ These two wars exerted great fiscal pressure on the central and local governments and propelled the latter to more widely employ a mobilization strategy: Commissioning social groups, particularly the merchants, to carry out tasks that the state had previously organized itself.²⁰ This mobilization practice stabilized after the wars, while the range of services and the social groups involved continued to expand throughout the nineteenth century. In return for their services, merchants taking on commissions could gain government support in monopolizing a particular sector of the market. Since Chongqing was a transshipment and commercial center, a large number of migrant merchants were widely involved in such service commissions.²¹ Because the local state had frequent demand for river transportation in both war and peace times, boatmen based out of Chongqing were in charge of various transportation services along the Upper Yangzi and Jialing Rivers. In the early nineteenth century, the basic services provided by boatmen included shipping various military supplies, transporting imperial copper and zinc, salvaging sunk imperial metals, and providing regular rides for officials; the range of services continued to expand throughout the century.²² As the following sections show, negotiations over such services were the main driving force that propelled the continuous institutionalization of various collective responsibility organizations among boatmen. Before delving into these institutionalization processes, I first introduce the labor network and class differentiations among the boatmen – another important factor that shaped the self-organization of boatmen.

The labor network in river transportation

On the Yangzi and Jialing Rivers, skippers (*banzhu* 板主 or *chuanhu* 船戶) enjoyed the authority of building and sustaining a network of river transportation that involved boatmen with different technical specializations. On the one hand, skippers were different from sailors in terms of their property ownership, household patterns, and occupational stability. On the other hand, since river transportation relied on close labor cooperation among members of an entire crew, skippers should also secure their networks with different types of boatmen. This section overviews such differentiation and cooperation among boatmen. Since Nanny Kim has provided a comprehensive reconstruction of the different types of boatmen in the Upper Yangzi, this section relies on the findings of Kim while supplementing them with additional materials from the archives.²³

Skippers were the elites among boatmen. Nanny Kim has shown that skippers owned their boats, which might cost 600–700 taels of silver for a large boat in 1810 and 500–600 taels for a boat with a capacity of 90–100 tons in 1896. Aside from boats, some skippers could even “acquire respectable family homesteads with more than one courtyard.” As Kim summarizes, skippers were the only people among the boatmen who “operated with a capital of certainly several hundred and probably several thousand [taels].”²⁴

¹⁹The two Jinchuan Wars (1747–1749 and 1771–1776) were fought between the Qing and the local tribes along Sichuan’s western frontiers. The “White Lotus” War was composed of a succession of regional revolts that kept breaking out in the provincial borderlands between Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Hubei at the turn of the nineteenth century. Scholars regard the Second Jinchuan and the “White Lotus” War periods as transitional periods during which the Qing began to encounter serious fiscal crises. See Dai 2001; Kuhn 1970; Wang 2014.

²⁰Maura Dykstra emphasizes that we should not simply understand “official service” as a type of tax. She argues that it is more precise to interpret “official service” as a mechanism through which the state commissioned a part of a specialized government authority to a particular social group. This article follows this interpretation; see Dykstra 2014, pp. 233–34. For how the Second Jinchuan War propelled the Qing government to widely mobilize merchants, see Dai 2001.

²¹Fan 2009.

²²For a list of the official services provided by boatmen in 1804, see DAXB, p. 403.

²³Kim 2019, pp. 144–230.

²⁴The statistics about boat prices are based on an eighteenth-century regulation titled *Chuandong zeli* 川東則例. It was quoted in *Tongyun shengguan jue* 銅運升官訣, which was an anonymous handbook that collected various regulations on transporting imperial copper. Nanny Kim has provided a transcription of *Chuandong zeli*. See Kim 2019, p. 532.

Skippers normally limited their permanent crew members to under five people. These other crew members included one to two helmsmen (*duogong* 舵工), a cargo master (*jingong* 經工), a cook, and a drummer (*laoqingong* 老勤工). These permanent crew members enjoyed a higher social status than ordinary sailors because of their technical specializations and more stable occupational orientation. They would follow a skipper and “worked on the same boat for at least a season and possibly throughout their career.”²⁵

Sailors were normally recruited as the remaining crew members per shipment. Sailors served two main roles during a journey – rowing the boat and tracking the boat at particularly difficult upriver segments. As the nineteenth-century official Yan Ruyi (嚴如燿, 1759–1826) observed, an upriver shipment of a large boat normally needed 40 more sailors than a downriver shipment because of the greater demand for boat tracking, especially between Yichang and Chongqing.²⁶ As a result of this technical factor, many sailors would stop at Chongqing for a period and wait for recruitment for downriver voyages. Some sailors switched between different wage labor occupations during the waiting period – working in salt mines or timber workshops, or even joining vagrant gangs.²⁷ Because of such flexibility in the sailors’ occupational orientations, scholar-officials and merchants tended to stigmatize sailors as a suspicious group.²⁸ Scholar-officials viewed networks among sailors with suspicion, worrying that such networks might have connections to secret societies.²⁹

Because of skippers’ socioeconomic authority among boatmen, they were the individuals who organized the shipping teams and logistics for every shipment.³⁰ At large river ports, such as Chongqing or Hankou, merchants and officials recruited only skippers, while these skippers were in charge of recruiting sailors. Merchants and officials normally paid the skippers more than half of the shipment fee at the beginning of a voyage and paid the rest after the shipping team had passed through a particularly important point along the voyage, such as a customs pass, an extremely dangerous shoal, or the half-way point. Skippers in turn distributed the money among their crew members.³¹ Following the payment practices of officials or merchants, skippers also paid a portion of the wages to the sailors at the beginning of a shipment and reserved the rest until the end of that shipment. To prevent sailors from running away halfway or destroying the boat on purpose to embezzle cargo, skippers permitted sailors to carry a reasonable amount of private cargo (i.e., grain, coal, fibers) on board so that the sailors would have something to lose if they fled or destroyed the boat.³²

We can reconstruct how skippers organized their crews through the full roster of a shipping team that transported imperial copper from Chongqing to Hankou in 1767. The shipping team consisted of eleven boats. Each of these boats was led by a skipper (with himself as the helmsman) and another helmsman, accompanied by 18–24 sailors per boat. The roster documents the registered native places of all crew members, which are noteworthy in three regards. First, except for one skipper and three helmsmen, all the skippers and helmsmen on this team came from Donghu (東湖) County in Hubei, which reflects a certain degree of geographical alliance among the skippers. Second, in contrast to the clustering in the native places of the skippers, the registered native places of the sailors were highly scattered: The 236 sailors were from 42 different counties or departments in Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, and Jiangxi. Figure 2 visualizes the geographical distribution of the sailors’ native places. As Figure 2 illustrates, nearly all the native places of the sailors were distributed along the Yangzi

²⁵Kim 2019, pp. 156–66.

²⁶For downriver journeys, skippers usually needed 15–25 additional sailors for a medium boat or 35–45 sailors for a large boat. For exemplary records that reflected the sizes of crews, see SPABC 006-001-00178; Xu 2018, *Yuntong jicheng jiaozhu* 運銅紀程校註, p. 47.

²⁷Yan 2013, *Sansheng bianfang beilan* 三省邊防備覽, p. 968.

²⁸Kim 2019, pp. 144–54.

²⁹For an exemplary study on the potential connection between the organizations among sailors and secret societies, see Chen 1996.

³⁰As I discuss below, for official shipping tasks, the recruitment of sailors was once mediated by sailor stations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though these stations did not function very well.

³¹For detailed cases that indicate payment methods, see SPABC 006-002-02998, 006-004-03821 and DAXB, p. 421.

³²*Chuangdong zeli*, in Kim 2019, p. 532.



Figure 2. Geographical distribution of sailors. Source: SPABC 006-001-00178.

River or its branches. These places were oriented around Donghu and Hankou. This pattern suggests that the skippers from Donghu traveled between Chongqing and Hankou regularly, while Donghu and Hankou were two other important stops where they could pick up sailors for upriver journeys. Third, the scattered geographical origins of the sailors were also reflected on each boat: The twenty or so sailors on each boat were generally from 10 to 16 different places. Although we currently lack direct evidence to explain why the eleven skippers consistently kept geographically complicated crews, this detail further confirms that skippers were capable of mobilizing and organizing sailors from a broad geographical range – they constituted the centers of the labor networks in the shipping industry.³³

Skippers also recruited various temporary sailors who worked off-board at particular river segments because of the fluctuating riverine conditions in the Upper Yangtze. The segment between Yichang and Chongqing cuts through a series of mountain ridges that could reach up to 2,000 meters in height. The riverine landscape thus presented constant transitions between open valleys with meanders and narrow gorges that created torrents. Skippers needed additional local trackers, rapids masters, and salvage masters to navigate through such a tortuous landscape.³⁴ Skippers needed additional trackers at difficult sites to pull the boat against the river current, allowing the boat to pass through. According to an eighteenth-century manual, more than 200 boat trackers might be needed to pull one upriver boat along the river segments between eastern Sichuan and western Hubei.³⁵ Another particular type of needed sailor was the rapids master. Since the river between Chongqing and Yichang had many dangerous shoals and ledges, each shipping team would hire two to four rapids masters when passing through these shoals. Rowing small boats that traveled ahead of the shipping teams, these rapids masters observed the height and flow of the water, estimated the location and shape of ledges, and sent navigation guides back to the crew through hand gestures, thunderous shouts, or drum beats.³⁶ In

³³SPABC 006-001-00178.

³⁴Kim 2019, p. 68.

³⁵Xie 2016, *Chuanchuan ji* 川船記, p. 140.

³⁶Xie 2016, pp. 139–40.

addition, skippers relied heavily on salvage masters, who were skillful in diving and salvaging sunken metals, to secure the transportation of imperial metals.³⁷

In sum, transportation tasks along the Yangzi River were carried out by boatmen, who varied widely in their social status and specialized riverine knowledge. Skippers had connections to this broad range of boatmen and could mobilize them when necessary. The relationship between skipper and sailor parallels the jobber–laborer network encapsulated by Jan Breman in many ways. In West India, where Breman conducted his research, “jobbers” were the job brokers who mobilized and organized migrant laborers for employers with sugar cane fields, brick kilns, and so on. Similar to the skippers in this case, the jobbers owned certain capital, they were familiar with the conditions of the worksites (because they also worked there once), they determined payment methods, and they were the “foremen” of the gang of laborers that they recruited and contracted. Breman observes that jobber–laborer bondage largely shaped laborers’ opportunities to move, their patterns of circulation, and their chances for collective action. Breman points out that this jobber–laborer bondage contributed to the expansion of capitalism in postcolonial India, but it also continuously blocked migrant laborers from moving upwards or accessing urban facilities.³⁸ Breman’s research inspired the articulation of how the skipper–sailor network shaped the experiences, struggles, and organizational capacities of sailors. This case, however, also exhibits interesting differences from Breman’s jobber–laborer framework in that the skipper–sailor networks appeared more as nexuses of self-organization, rather than sources of continuous bondage and exploitation. As the three sections below show, the labor network between skippers and sailors provided incentives and logistical opportunities for the expansion of collective responsibility organizations among boatmen, which provides new perspectives for comparing and conceptualizing the experiences of migrant laborers.

The institutionalization of skipper guilds

This and the next sections introduce two parallel transformations regarding boatmen in the first half of the nineteenth century, when expanded military services, decreased fiscal capacity, and an increased volume of human mobility affected the imperial and local governments alike. First, skippers organized themselves into the Three Rivers Guilds in 1803, which empowered skippers to distribute official services on their own, raise collective funds, and gain authority on legal and infrastructural issues. The institutionalization of skipper guilds successfully helped the Chongqing government relieve its service and fiscal pressures for half a century, although these guilds also began to confront service and fiscal quandaries in the 1860s. Second, sailor stations, an intermediary recruitment system that once mediated between skippers and sailors, became increasingly deficient beginning in the 1820s. I argue that an institutional turning point resulted from the convergence of these parallel transformations: The expansion of collective responsibility organizations from skippers to sailors. This institutional innovation was crucial because sailors – a group long stigmatized by the government – were then entitled to self-organize, negotiate wages, and establish intra- and intergroup regulations. As this and the next two sections argue, although the service commission mechanism had only limited effectiveness in relieving the fiscal pressures of the Qing empire in the nineteenth century, it helped expand the core principles of collective responsibility networks – including delegation, funding autonomy, and self-governance – in various industries and across different classes. The expansion of these principles empowered a wide range of social groups to participate in the organization and negotiation of various public responsibilities in the social sphere.

For boatmen based out of Chongqing, this expansion process started with the institutionalization of an overarching system of skipper guilds – the Three Rivers Skipper Guilds (*sanhe chuanbang* 三河船幫). The Three Rivers Guilds were officially institutionalized for the better designation of official services in 1803. Before the nineteenth century, the Chongqing government had already relied on boatmen to carry out transportation tasks. The local state once relied on governmental funds to recruit boatmen, but this

³⁷Yuntong *jicheng jiaozhu*, p. 59.

³⁸Breman 2010.

method became increasingly ineffective. Despite the dysfunction in such recruitment methods, the government's demand for shipping laborers greatly increased in the second half of the eighteenth century because of a series of wars in Sichuan. The Second Jinchuan War (1771–1776) marked a transitional juncture during which the Qing government began to widely mobilize capital and labor from commoners to organize war logistics. The government continued and expanded this practice in the “White Lotus” War, during which boatmen on the Upper Yangzi and Jialing Rivers also helped the Chongqing government carry out various tasks. As the war concluded, the Chongqing government, sharing the empire-wide quandary of revenue shortage, could not pay for the transportation tasks carried out by the boatmen. In 1803, skippers based out of Chongqing demanded the establishment of guilds. They requested to be entitled to distribute official obligations among themselves and collect membership fees (*chaifei* 差費), which would function as collective funds for the guilds. The local government granted the requests of the skippers. Through the mediation of the Eight Provinces Guest Heads, the skippers based in the Upper Yangzi and the Jialing organized themselves into the Three Rivers Guilds.³⁹

The Three Rivers Guilds were three federated organizations: the Big River Guild (*dahe chuanbang* 大河船幫), the Small River Guild (*xiaohe chuanbang* 小河船幫), and the Downriver Guild (*xiahe chuanbang* 下河船幫). They regulated a group of subordinate guilds (also of skippers) that were formed according to geographical ties. The Big River Guild oversaw the guilds based along the Yangzi segment west of Chongqing, the Small River Guild managed the guilds based along the Jialing River, and the Downriver Guild controlled the guilds based along the Yangzi segment east of Chongqing. The Three Rivers Guilds and the subordinate guilds all elected and rotated their guild heads annually.⁴⁰ Table 1 illustrates the structure of the Three Rivers Guilds in 1804.

In 1804, the Three Rivers Guilds stipulated three main types of regulation based on the consensus of the guild members. First, the Three Rivers Guilds clarified the distribution of official service burdens among all the subordinate guilds. The basic principle was that each guild would be responsible for specialized routine services (such as shipping clothes and food for government and military members) in the river segments that they traveled most often. Moreover, upon emergent military actions, the heads of the Three Rivers Guilds would “negotiate collectively to distribute those additional services (協同公辦),” rather than being commanded by the local government randomly.⁴¹ Second, the Three Rivers Guilds designed meticulous regulations that entitled subordinate guilds to collect membership fees from skippers entering Chongqing. Functioning as collective guild funds, these fees would later be used to pay for the boatmen who carried out official services for the government. According to the regulation in 1804, whenever skippers harbored at Chongqing, they should pay a certain fee to one of the three overarching guilds to which they belonged. The ratio of this fee was tailored for each subordinate guild. While the general rule was to differentiate the fee based on the size of the boat, some subordinate guilds needed to pay their fee according to the weight of the cargo in a shipment. Table 2 specifies this fee ratio.⁴² Third, the Three Rivers Guilds also entitled the subordinate guilds to occupy particular docks in Ba County: The Small River Guild occupied the docks north of the Chaotian Gate Dock, while the Big and Downriver Guilds occupied the docks south of the Chaotian Dock. Figure 3 reflects this spatial division among the guilds.

Although the 1804 regulations mainly defined the core functions of the Three Rivers Guilds in terms of self-management of official services, the guilds gradually took on legal, infrastructural, and sheltering responsibilities for boatmen in general (including sailors). First, whenever legal disputes occurred between boatmen – whether they were between guild heads, skippers, or sailors – the litigants and the county government often invited the heads of the Three Rivers Guilds to intervene and

³⁹SPABC 006-023-01010.

⁴⁰DAXB, pp. 405–06.

⁴¹DAXB, p. 403.

⁴²SPABC 006-007-00796. In 1825, all the guilds were further entitled to charge all the boats that passed through their designated docks.

Table 1. Structure of the Three Rivers Skipper Guilds (1804). *Qingdai qianjia dao dang'an xuanbian*, pp. 402–04

Big River Guild 大河幫	Jiading Guild 嘉定幫
	Xufu Guild 敘府幫
	Jintang Guild 金堂幫
	Lufu Guild 瀘富幫
	Hejiang Guild 合江幫
	Jiangjin Guild 江津幫
	Qijiang Guild 碭江幫
	Changning Guild 長寧幫
	Qianfu Guild 犍富幫
Small River Guild 小河幫	Three Gorges Guild 三峽幫
	Hezhou Guild 合州幫
	Suining Guild (Upriver till Mianzhou and Tongchuan) 遂寧幫(上至綿州、潼川)
	Suining Taihe Town Guild (Downriver till Anju) 遂寧太和鎮(下至安居)
	Anju Guild 安居幫
	Baoning Guild 保寧幫
	Qu County Guild 渠縣幫
Downriver Guild 下河幫	Xiangxiang Guild 湘鄉幫
	Baoqing Guild 寶慶幫
	Chen Guild 辰幫
	Yichang Guild 宜昌幫
	Yichang Huangling Temple Guild 宜昌黃陵廟
	Hubei Guizhou Guild (Beyond the Gorges) 湖北歸州峽外
	Hubei Guizhou Guild (Within the Gorges) 湖北歸州峽內
	Zhongzhou Guild 忠州幫
	Zhongfeng Guild 忠豐幫
	Kuifeng Guild 夔豐幫
Changfu Guild 長涪幫	

negotiate these disputes before they were formally passed on to the court.⁴³ The Three Rivers Guilds later also became responsible for building and maintaining the infrastructure at dangerous shoals along the Upper Yangzi. Updated guild regulations in the 1880s indicated that the Three Rivers Guilds should regularly dredge dangerous shoals and reconstruct the boat-tracking infrastructure (疏淘灘漕修理縵路) between Yichang and Chongqing.⁴⁴ The Three Rivers Guilds were also in charge of constructing lifeboats (*jiusheng hongchuan* 救生紅船) and organizing lifeguard teams at the docks near dangerous sites.⁴⁵ Furthermore, as the skipper guilds accumulated collective funds, they used these funds to procure properties in Chongqing and build temples. Guilds used such temples

⁴³For cases that reflected how heads of the Three Rivers Guilds served as legal representatives, see SPABC 006-003-00475, 006-006-00573, 006-007-00715. Chiu Peng-sheng and Maura Dykstra have also extensively analyzed the importance of the Three Rivers Guilds in resolving legal disputes; see Chiu 2009 and Dykstra 2014.

⁴⁴SPABC006-050-38803.

⁴⁵SPABC006-033-05541.

Table 2. Membership Fees of Different Guilds (1804). *Qingdai qianjia dao dang'an xuanbian*, pp. 402–04

Three Rivers Guilds	Subordinate Guilds	Membership Fee (<i>wen</i> 文)/Per Shipment		
		Big Boat	Medium Boat	Small Boat
Big River Guild 大河幫	Jiading Guild嘉定幫	1200	800	600
	Xufu Guild敘府幫	800	600	400
	Jintang Guild金堂幫	1000	800	600
	Lufu Guild瀘富幫	600	400	200
	Hejiang Guild合江幫	1200	800	200
	Jiangjin Guild江津幫	600	300	100
	Qijiang Guild碁江幫	1200		100
	Changning Guild長寧幫	1000		
	Qianfu Guild犍富幫	800		400
Small River Guild 小河幫	Three Gorges Guild三峽幫	<i>Duo</i> Boat 舵船 48		<i>Shao</i> Boat 梢船 24
	Hezhou Guild合州幫	<i>Duo</i> Boat 112	Small <i>Duo</i> Boat 96	<i>Shao</i> Boat 84
	Suining Guild (Upriver till Mianzhou and Tongchuan) 遂寧幫(上至綿州、潼川)	Big <i>Qiu</i> Boat大秋船 400		
	Suining Taihe Town Guild (Downriver till Anju) 遂寧太和鎮(下至安居)	Big <i>Qiu</i> Boat 300	Size Two <i>Qiu</i> Boat 290–300	
	Anju Guild安居幫	Big <i>Qiu</i> Boat 140–150	Small <i>Duo</i> Boat 100	
	Baoning Guild保寧幫	400		
	Qu County Guild渠縣幫	350–400	150–160	
Downriver Guild 下河幫	Xiangxiang Guild湘鄉幫	5600 per <i>dan</i>		
	Baoqing Guild寶慶幫	2000	1200	800
	Chen Guild辰幫	200		

Yichang Guild宜昌幫	800	Size Two Boat 600	Size Three Boat 400	200	
Yichang Huangling Temple Guild宜昌黃陵廟		600		300	
Hubei Guizhou Guild (Beyond the Gorges)湖北歸州 峽外	2400		1200	800	
Hubei Guizhou Guild (Within the Gorges)湖北歸州 峽內	1000		800	500	
Zhongfeng Guild忠豐幫	2400	Size Two Boat 1200	Size Three Boat 800	300	
Kuifeng Guild夔豐幫	800		500	300	Wuban Boat五板拖 蓬船 200
Changfu Guild長涪幫	1000	Size Two Boat 800	Size Three Boat 600		

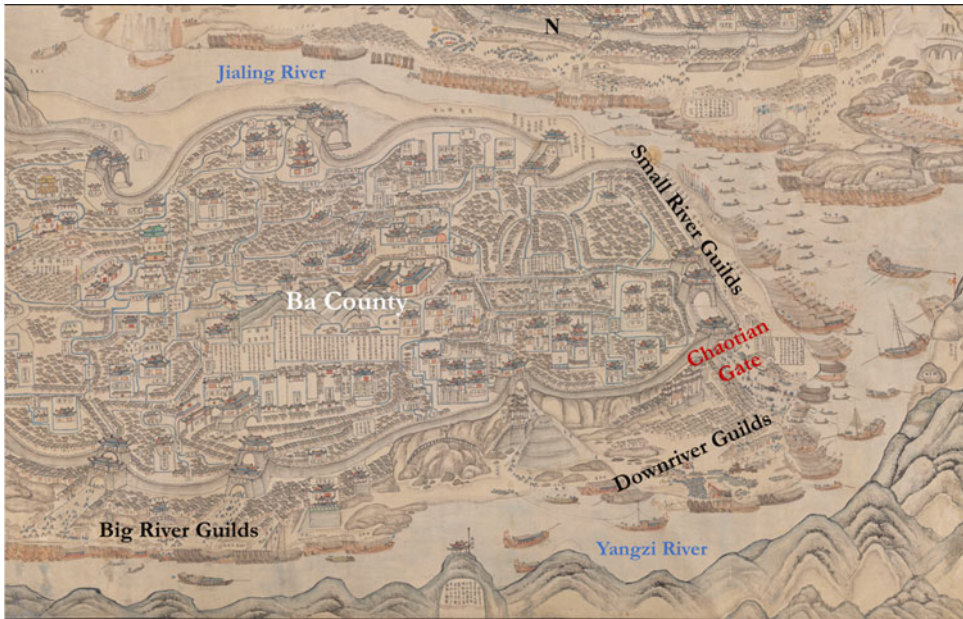


Figure 3. Distribution of docks among the Three Rivers Guilds. Illustration made by the author based on Ai Shiyuan, *Illustration of Chongqing*. Source: [Bibliothèque nationale de France](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55009588k), “Yu tch’eng Tch’ong-King Pa-hsien tche t’ou,” <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55009588k> (accessed July 2, 2020).

to organize meetings, resolve disputes, or offer sacrifices to the river gods.⁴⁶ These temples often also sheltered the sailors recruited by the skippers in the guilds, particularly when the sailors suffered from illness or sudden death. The foregoing analysis reflects the similarity between the Three Rivers Guilds and other more recognized guilds in terms of institutional development. Although skippers originally organized the Three Rivers Guilds to gain agency in designating official services, they gradually developed routines for collectively deciding and organizing other public affairs for boatmen in general.⁴⁷ These routines paved the way for the further institutionalization of collective responsibility organizations among the sailors – a phenomenon that the next two sections address.

The Three Rivers Guilds helped skippers manage official services and maintain order for at least half of a century. Nevertheless, when another round of warfare and rebellion flared up in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Three Rivers Guilds confronted the challenge that once trapped the Chongqing government: The difficulty of raising enough funds to mobilize a large number of military laborers. The guilds first confronted such a quandary on the eve of the First Opium War (1840–1842), which is reflected in the following case about the Fu County Salt Guild (富邑鹽幫). In 1839, the Fu Guild received a command to assist military actions in Guangdong. To mobilize enough sailors for this mission, the guild needed to raise 255,000 *wen*. The savings of this guild, however, were only 117,000 *wen*. Given the emergency, the head of the Fu Guild, Wang Dalong (王大龍), had to pay the remaining 138,000 *wen* himself, for which he was never reimbursed.⁴⁸ Du Hongshun (杜洪順), a skipper belonging to the Downriver Guild, encountered similar emergent situations. Under the request for emergent military service, Du should sell one of his boats to procure the funds for recruiting sailors.⁴⁹

If the stories of Wang and Du reflected only potential crises for the small subordinate guilds and individual skippers, the following report from Hu Yuanpu (胡元圃) and other heads of the Downriver

⁴⁶SPABC 006-007-00798.

⁴⁷SPABC 006-033-05650.

⁴⁸SPABC006-014-14996.

⁴⁹SPABC006-019-03552.

Guild indicated deeper crises that affected the Three Rivers Guilds as a whole. According to these heads, during and after the Taiping Rebellions (1850–1864), the Three Rivers Guilds responded to the military mobilization of the Qing and assisted in a series of battles in Guangxi. From the start of the Taiping Rebellions to 1867, the total military service fees that the guilds were required to pay had amounted to more than 100,000 taels. More importantly, the continuous military service and accumulating debts drove the Three Rivers Guilds into a vicious cycle. As Hu points out, several guilds, such as the Baoqing Guild, became bankrupt during this process, which meant that the remaining guilds had to take on even heavier military and fiscal pressures.⁵⁰ The stories above illustrate that by the latter half of the nineteenth century, skippers, subordinate guilds, and the Three Rivers Guilds as a whole were all confronting very large fiscal pressures to satisfy the military mobilizations of the time.

Also beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the sailors gained more autonomy in establishing collective responsibility organizations and collecting funds on their own. These organizations of sailors replaced government-run sailor stations – an intermediary system designed to recruit laborers for official transportation services. More importantly, the Chongqing government and the Three Rivers Guilds increasingly recognized the sailor organizations as reliable institutions for local governance or for forming contracts with. Although the commissioning of official services did not resolve the underlying fiscal crisis of the Qing, this mechanism did allow a wide range of social groups to form their strategies for self-governance and intergroup negotiation.

The decline of sailor stations

This section introduces the decline of government-run sailor stations in the first half of the nineteenth century – another important factor that facilitated the expansion of collective responsibility organizations from skippers to sailors. According to the available archives from the nineteenth century, sailor stations (known as *raofu pu* 橈夫鋪, *raoguai pu* 橈拐鋪, *fanpu* 飯鋪, or *fandian* 飯店 in Chinese) were formal institutions for recruiting sailors for official transportation services (particularly the transportation of imperial copper and zinc) and were a part of the official courier station system.⁵¹ Aside from their main function of recruitment, sailor stations were also often restaurants that could accommodate penniless commoners (開設飯店站宿窮民苦買活家併認辦銅鉛船隻水手).⁵² In Ba County, most of these sailor stations were established near the Chaotian Gate Dock (朝天門) – the most important dock located at the intersection of the Yangzi and Jialing Rivers.⁵³

Since the transportation of imperial metals was the predominant service that the sailor stations had to organize (particularly in the eighteenth century), I here use records of copper and zinc transportation to illustrate how sailor stations normally mediated among officials, skippers, and sailors. When a copper or zinc shipping team arrived at Chongqing, the managers of sailor stations would first receive tickets (*piao* 票) and shipping funds from the officials. Being authorized by the tickets as governmental deputies for the recruitment task, the managers then recruited sailors and paid them a portion of their wages with the funds from the shipping officials. A record from 1833 indicates that a manager paid each sailor 290 *wen* upon recruitment.⁵⁴ Most of these sailors were recruited for shipments between Chongqing and Yichang, although they were occasionally recruited for longer trips to Hankou or Tianjin.⁵⁵ On official documents, the shipping officials required the managers to check the

⁵⁰SPABC 006-023-01010.

⁵¹Zhu and Xiang 1939, *Baxian zhi*, juan 14, 2b.

⁵²SPABC 006-006-07078.

⁵³SPABC 006-006-07078, 006-016-19910.

⁵⁴SPABC 006-016-19910. According to Nanny Kim, the daily wage of a sailor along the Upper Yangzi River ranged from 100 to 140 *wen* in the late nineteenth century. See Kim 2019, pp. 198–224. As mentioned above, aside from receiving a portion of their wages from sailor station managers, sailors might also receive a portion of their wages from the skippers, who also received the funds from the shipping officials.

⁵⁵SPABC 006-007-00818.

backgrounds of the sailors and submit their name rosters. This requirement might have been practiced rarely: Station managers constantly emphasized the extreme difficulty of collecting such information in governmental records.⁵⁶

Beginning in the 1820s, the managers of sailor stations complained more openly about the difficulty of completing the recruitment tasks. Archival records indicate that the quandaries of the station managers were rooted in the following three factors: first, the expanded range and frequency of official services; second, the increased difficulty of obtaining funds from shipping officials; and last, the labor cooperation between skippers and sailors, in which sailor stations – as a third party – had difficulties intervening.

First, sailor stations started to receive more recruitment tasks during the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Feeling anxious about the expanded recruitment requests, station managers sometimes forcefully recruited sailors from upriver ships beforehand. Such was the attempted strategy of Zhou Qishan (周岐山) and two other station managers in 1824. Zhou, together with Long Zaiyan (龍在延) and Liu Sanhe (劉三合), needed to find sailors for a copper shipping team heading downriver. Having difficulty fulfilling the tasks upon the day of departure, the three managers waited along Shanbei Shoal (扇背沱), a downriver site near Chongqing. On seeing an upriver ship passing through the shoal, the three managers jumped onto the ship, grabbed the sailors' beddings, and threw the beddings onto their small boats, hoping that this strategy would force the sailors to work for them on their downriver journeys.⁵⁸ This attempted trick reflected the fact that recruitment tasks had already become burdensome by the 1820s. Moreover, recruitment demands from imperial shipping teams also became more frequent and unpredictable beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century. For instance, in 1844, the zinc ship skipper Lai Tingfu (賴廷福) issued two additional recruitment requests to the station manager Wang Tianxiang (王天相), asking the latter to find more than 200 additional sailors three days before his departure.⁵⁹

Making things worse, the expansion of recruitment tasks paralleled the increased difficulty of obtaining governmental payments. In the case of transporting imperial metals, shipping officials already had difficulty offering shipping funds on time in Sichuan in 1814 because the funds were often used to meet other local fiscal demands in Yunnan and Guizhou before the shipping team arrived at Chongqing (水腳銀兩已在雲貴本省抵扣別項，以致在渝缺乏).⁶⁰ The increasingly frequent and unpredictable recruitment demands from the shipping teams further worsened the fiscal quandaries of the station managers. In the aforementioned case of Lai Tingfu, since the recruitment requests arrived suddenly, station manager Wang Tianxiang needed to pay out of his own pocket first (墊錢僱夫) in order to recruit the more-than-two-hundred additional sailors.⁶¹ Given these combined factors of expanded tasks and increasingly unstable funds, station managers tended to more openly avoid or resist recruitment tasks upon the arrival of shipping teams (各飯鋪人等每遇銅鉛船隻訂期開幫之時避縮不前) beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, which added to the dysfunction of sailor stations.⁶²

Apart from the aforementioned factors, the deficiency of sailor stations was also rooted in the labor cooperation patterns in the shipping industry. Although the shipping officials had long relied on station managers to recruit seemingly more “reliable” sailors, neither the officials nor the station managers could enforce the recruitment of such “officially selected” sailors throughout the shipments.

⁵⁶SPABC 006-006-07078, 006-007-00687. I have found only one document (1767) in the Ba County Archives that recorded the age and household registration information of every sailor on board, SPABC 006-001-00178. Most of the rosters in the Ba County Archives only recorded the ages, household registrations, and facial characteristics of the skippers, SPABC 006-007-00687.

⁵⁷SPABC 006-018-01034, 006-018-01100.

⁵⁸SPABC 006-015-17478.

⁵⁹SPABC 006-007-00818.

⁶⁰SPABC 006-003-00400.

⁶¹SPABC 006-007-00818.

⁶²SPABC 006-007-00818.

As station manager Zhou Houmei (周後美) mentioned in a suit in 1809, it was a common practice among the skippers and cargo masters to expel the officially selected sailors near the Shanbei Shoal and then recruit a new team on their own (銅鉛船隻攬頭經工在渝接領水手推運至扇背沱泊靠船隻，將前水手趕逐，另招趕幫水手)。⁶³ This was because the skippers often demanded to use sailors with whom they were familiar, as successful shipments depended on well-organized cooperation within the entire crew. Station manager Du Hongshun (杜洪順) precisely summarized the tension between sailor stations, skippers, and cargo masters: “If cargo masters recruited sailors [on their own] and did not mediate through sailor stations, it would be troublesome to allocate responsibility when problems arose. If sailor stations were in full charge of the recruitment, skippers could not ensure the skills of the sailors and might fail to organize the crew effectively. (缘经工认识而饭铺不知其根底，一旦舞弊滋事，固难究其由来。若仅饭铺认识，而经工不悉其人之技艺，又有呼应不灵之虞。)” Recognizing the skippers’ demands for teamwork, station managers had long implicitly permitted cargo masters to recruit sailors on their own and only supplied station-recruited sailors when the masters could not organize a full crew (向由經工陸續僱募，人不敷用之時，然後向飯鋪添僱足額)。⁶⁴

As the foregoing analysis illustrates, sailor stations – as government-run organizations mediating between skippers and sailors – became increasingly incapable of providing official services under the combined factors of increased workload, decreased government funds, and the complexity of labor cooperation among boatmen. This decline of the sailor stations and the fiscal pressures faced by skipper guilds thus provided space for collective responsibility organizations to emerge among the sailors; they became a new local force in regulating official services, mobilizing resources in society, and balancing intergroup negotiations.

The expansion of collective responsibility organizations among sailors⁶⁵

This section introduces the emergence of collective responsibility organizations among sailors, particularly how such an institutionalization process among sailors was intertwined with interclass interactions between sailors and skippers. The first half of this section uses the earliest available case to introduce the basic structure and function of sailor organizations. The second half unpacks the multi-layered interactions between the sailor organizations and the Three Rivers Guilds.

An 1821 record (“the 1821 case” hereafter) of a boat tracker guild allows us to reconstruct the basic structure and function of collective responsibility organizations among sailors. This guild was composed of boat trackers (*qianfu* 繚夫) in Guangyuan (廣元), Lüeyang (略陽), and Chaotian (朝天). This boat tracker guild owned docks at all three stops, where the guild had established three Dragon King Temples (王爺廟). As the guild members claimed, the temples were used to “accommodate the old and ill members and bury those who had passed away (老弱無力在廟供食，病斃者給棺安埋).” The funds for building these temples came from membership fees (*lijin* 釐金銀) paid by boat trackers.⁶⁶ The 1821 case indicates that the boat trackers had added such fees into their charges to the merchants and skippers who needed their services. One of their customers, La Yutai (賴裕泰),

⁶³SPABC 006-006-07078.

⁶⁴By the mid-nineteenth century, station managers only promised to reclaim their authority over recruitment under government pressure. In 1838, after the sailors employed by skipper Shuai Yongyuan started a large incident of resistance, shipping officials then required station managers to strictly oversee the recruitment process beginning in 1839. However, it is difficult to tell how effective such governmental commands were. SPABC 006-007-00687.

⁶⁵While contemporary people consistently used the term “guild (*bang* 幫)” to refer to the collective responsibility organizations among skippers, people used various terms to refer to similar organizations among sailors, such as “shelter house (*qiliu suo* 棲流所),” “association (*hui* 會),” “guild,” and so on. Therefore, this section chooses the more general term “collective responsibility organization” to discuss the sailor organizations.

⁶⁶During the Qing dynasty, *lijin* (釐金) started as a type of membership fee in merchant or occupational guilds and gradually became a type of commercial tax in the late nineteenth century. Propelled by their fiscal pressures after the Taiping Rebellions, the local states in different provinces formalized *lijin* as a commercial tax at different time points. In Chongqing, the local state started to charge *lijin* as a type of tax in 1856. For the transformation of *lijin*, see Mann 1987, Xu 2007, and Zhou 2015.

refused the surcharges and sued the guild at the Ba County government. Interestingly, when the county magistrate decided on this case, he recognized the guild's right to collect fees. He mainly emphasized that the guild could only collect funds "if sailors or other people were willing to contribute a part of their wages (俟後凡屬撐船水手人等, 自願捐給身工錢文)."⁶⁷ It is noteworthy that although the magistrate denied the boat trackers' right to transfer surcharges for membership fees onto their customers in this specific case, he implicitly recognized "labor wage" as an acceptable way for the boat trackers' guild to collect funds. Later records reflect that collecting membership fees gradually became a routine practice in similar collective responsibility organizations for sailors. In the late 1840s, members of the Boom Association (*xinxing hui* 新興會) – an organization for sailors based out of Qu County (渠縣) – regularly submitted 100 *wen* (per person) to the guild whenever they arrived at Chongqing.⁶⁸

All the organizations for sailors exhibited complicated relationships with the Three Rivers Guilds. On the one hand, the Three Rivers Guilds enjoyed a considerable degree of supervision over the sailor organizations, particularly when the latter were newly established. On the other hand, the sailors gradually became more independent in negotiating their claims through their organizations, while the Three Rivers Guilds also recognized such increased independence of the sailor organizations.

Some sailor organizations were initially established by subordinate guilds under the Three Rivers Guilds. The sailor organization in Qu County, for instance, was originally established by the Qu River Guild under the Three Rivers Guild. The heads of the Qu River Guild would sometimes host the management of the sailor organization, especially during the early stages of the latter. It is worth highlighting that skippers and sailors used different names to refer to this organization: The former typically referred to the organization as the "Shelter House (*qiliu suo/qiliu gongsuo* 棲流所/棲流公所)," while the latter called their organization the "Boom Association."⁶⁹ This record about the connection between the skipper guild and the sailor organization in Qu County, particularly the intriguing detail about the different names of this organization, provides some clues for the following reconstruction of the potential institutional origins of sailors' organizations. As I have mentioned above, it gradually became common practice for skipper guilds to shelter sailors at their temples near their docks. Some guilds would even construct special shelter houses for shipping laborers, particularly when they hoped to expand their dock ownership. For example, the Jiayang Guild (嘉陽幫) under the Three Rivers Guilds proposed constructing new docks in 1894. In their proposal to the Ba County government, they emphasized that they would also establish a "Shelter Hospital (養病院)" on the new dock. They further specified that the guild head would collect fees from sailors (30 *wen* per person for each shipment) to raise funds for this shelter hospital.⁷⁰ As the aforementioned cases reflect, sailor organizations – be they the boat trackers' guild in northern Sichuan, the sailor organization in Qu County, or the shelter hospital in Jiayang – all shared the practice of collecting fees from individual sailors and providing sheltering services for them. Moreover, collective responsibility organizations for sailors might have started as branch departments under the skipper guilds and gradually become more independent organizations.

Because of this institutional connection between the sailor organizations and the Three Rivers Guilds, sailors normally regarded the heads of the Three Rivers Guilds as some of the legal representatives who might help them resolve disputes. In 1843, members of the sailor organization in Qu County had a serious dispute about the ratio for charging membership fees. Before bringing this case to the court, the sailors first invited the heads of the Three Rivers Guilds, along with neighborhood heads, to organize negotiations. Even after this case had passed on to the court, the county magistrate also instructed the heads of the Three Rivers to continue their intervention and

⁶⁷SPABC 006-007-01067.

⁶⁸SPABC 006-010-07470.

⁶⁹SPABC 006-010-07852.

⁷⁰SPABC 006-033-05650.

negotiations.⁷¹ This case indicates that both sailors and the local state acknowledged the institutional bond and hierarchy between the Three Rivers Guilds and the sailor organizations.

Although the institutional connection between the sailor organizations and the Three Rivers Guilds continued throughout the nineteenth century, sailors increasingly identified the sailor organizations as institutions for their class and more actively demanded benefits and facilities in the name of their organizations. In the aforementioned 1821 case about the boat trackers' guild, the shared identity of "boat tracker" effectively mobilized trackers to form an alliance that transcended geographical bonds. Although the exact group that needed to raise funds was boat trackers in Lüeyang, the boat trackers based out of Guangyuan, Chaotian, and Chongqing all agreed to contribute funds and helped solicit money from skippers and merchants. To achieve the latter goal, the boat trackers based out of Guangyuan and Chongqing even "called on a large crowd and rang gongs noisily (鳴鑼糾眾千餘人)" to urge skippers and merchants to increase their payments.⁷² As these actions indicate, although the boat trackers were scattered across a broad geographical range, they had already developed effective strategies for communication, mobilization, and mutual support within their class.

More importantly, the Three Rivers Guilds and the local state also guaranteed the institutional independence of the sailor organizations by the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1840s, for instance, several skippers and sailors in Qu County had fierce disputes when they played cards with each other. Some of these quarrels were so fierce that they developed into homicide cases. To prevent future violence, the skipper guild and the sailor organization in Qu County reached a consensus through negotiation (板主與橈夫兩幫協議) and drafted a formal contract (均允書立合約) in 1847 that stipulated that skippers should never play cards with oarsmen. In the next year, an oarsman named Zhu Dengui (朱登貴) caught a skipper playing cards with the oarsmen on his boat. Following the newly set interguild regulation, Zhu sued the skipper Li Dagui (李大貴) before the head of the Qu River Guild. The head of the Qu River Guild decided to punish Li and asked him to pay 10 *jin* of oil as a fine.⁷³ This case suggests a crucial institutional feature of the sailor organizations by the mid-nineteenth century: The skipper guilds already recognized the sailor organizations as independent and reliable institutions that the guilds could establish interguild regulations with. Moreover, in the case of Li Dagui, the head of the skipper guild, the county magistrate, and the other local authorities, such as the neighborhood head, all acknowledged the authority of such an interguild regulation. These different parties' support for the enforcement of the interguild regulation indicates that the broader society had recognized the institutional independence of sailor organizations by the mid-nineteenth century.

Sailor organizations stabilized as a part of the local power structure in river transportation and security by the end of the Qing dynasty. In 1908, the inspector of the Eastern Sichuan Circuit (*chuan-dongdao* 川東道) established a system of riverine police (*shuidao jingchao* 水道警察) who were in charge of surveilling the Upper Yangzi.⁷⁴ Following the long-developed strategy of expanding revenue from the commercial sectors in the nineteenth century, the Eastern Sichuan Circuit commissioned the Three Rivers Guilds as fundraising organizations for the riverine police department. When the Chongqing government designed logistics for this policy, it invited the heads of the Three Rivers Guilds and the heads of the sailor organizations (*raopu huishou* 橈鋪會首) to discuss, negotiate, and establish regulations for these fund-raising responsibilities together. As a result of this negotiation, the Three Rivers Guilds and the sailor organizations paid an annual fee of 1000 strings of cash

⁷¹SPABC 006-010-07470.

⁷²SPABC 006-007-01067.

⁷³SPABC 006-010-07852.

⁷⁴The riverine police belonged to the Inspecting Police Bureau (*xunjingdao* 巡警道) in Chongqing. The establishment of Inspecting Police Bureaus in different provinces was a part of empire-wide bureaucratic reforms at the turn of the twentieth century, through which the state either eliminated or formalized a series of subbureaucratic institutions, such as the Baojia Bureau (*baojiaju* 保甲局) and the Cart and Horse Bureau (*fumaju* 夫馬局). See Peng 2015, p. 87.

collectively.⁷⁵ This case signals crucial institutional transformations of sailor organizations in two ways. First, in this case, the Chongqing government referred to the heads of the sailor organizations as “association heads (*huishou* 會首),” which indicates that the local state had recognized sailor organizations as a type of occupational guild rather than as sheltering organizations for the urban poor. Second, by inviting sailor organizations to join the discussions on fundraising responsibilities, the state also acknowledged the sailor organizations as an important extrabureaucratic force that should participate in negotiations over public affairs rather than simply as a source for soliciting resources.

Through this brief reconstruction of various sailor organizations in the nineteenth century, we see that sailor organizations were derived from branch departments of the Three Rivers Guilds and gradually gained institutional independence in self-governance, intergroup negotiations, and engagement with public affairs. Aside from the active negotiations of sailors themselves, skippers also greatly contributed to the formation, logistics, and independence of sailor organizations. As I have suggested above, skippers might have actively facilitated the expansion of collective responsibility organizations among sailors because of the quick expansion of military service and the fiscal quandaries of the skipper guilds beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. It is also worth contemplating how certain features of the shipping industry, particularly the high degree of labor cooperation between skippers and sailors, shaped the development of collective responsibility networks among boatmen in general. The conclusion below opens up discussions about the interactions between labor cooperation, collective responsibility networks, and innovations in local governance and empire building in nineteenth-century China and beyond.

Conclusion

Concentrating on the boatmen converging in Chongqing, this article illustrates how Qing empire-building might have been intertwined with interclass negotiations on the ground. This article has introduced a series of self-organization processes triggered by the state initiative of mobilizing labor, resources, and capital from society. As we have seen, by commissioning skippers to provide specialized official services, the local government in Chongqing not only restructured its relationship with skippers per se but also largely intensified the interactions between skippers and sailors – two different sectors of society. The resultant skipper–sailor relationship exemplified the coexistence of exploitation, patronage, resistance, and cooperation. On the one hand, as skippers confronted the increasing fiscal pressures exerted by the state in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they in turn transferred a share of such fiscal pressures onto the sailors by mobilizing sailors to collect service fees on their own. On the other hand, along with this transfer of fiscal burden, the skippers also transferred strategies and logistics for self-organization to the sailors. This article illustrates that the state initiative of commissioning official services could have opened up a social space where different classes learned to establish logistics for negotiation and cooperation. Such interclass interactions are crucial and worth further investigation because they allowed the imperial state to mobilize groups beyond the more elite social sectors that they could directly reach.

In the analysis above, this article compares the skipper–sailor network to the jobber–laborer network framed by Jan Breman. Both networks were crucial when migrant laborers constituted the main force sustaining an expanding market. Within both networks, the jobber/skipper largely influenced the laborers/sailors’ job opportunities, their circulation patterns, and their capacities for collective action. Nevertheless, the skipper–sailor relationship was more multilayered than the bondage between jobbers and laborers, as the former exemplified patronage aside from exploitation and cooperation along with

⁷⁵SPABC 006-031-01348. Archives indicate that the Three Rivers Guilds and the sailor organizations were to raise these funds through the methods they used to collect membership fees: Skippers would submit a certain amount to the Three Rivers Guilds based on the sizes of their boats, while sailors would submit 20 *wen* per person whenever they arrived in Chongqing. The records do not specify exactly how the Three Rivers Guilds and the sailor organizations distributed these fund-raising responsibilities. However, the Chongqing government did require the two types of organizations to set rules for the distribution ratio (轉收船戶槳夫錢文, 亦當各有區分, 方昭公允) and report this ratio to the government.

resistance. This article argues that two particular factors shaped the more complicated interactions between skippers and sailors. First, the skipper–sailor relationship reflected less exploitation and fewer conflicts because skippers and sailors were also collectively negotiating their responsibilities and benefits with the local state, while the postcolonial Indian state was less present in Breman’s jobber–laborer cases. Second, and perhaps more importantly, skippers and sailors needed to cooperate to complete tasks, while such labor cooperation did not exist between jobbers and laborers. This labor cooperation factor was crucial because it also differentiated sailors from other laborers in Chongqing. According to Zhou Lin’s study of porter organizations in Chongqing, the porter organizations had not been entitled to collect organizational funds, build organizational temples, or participate in the process of regulating official services throughout the nineteenth century. Based on the comparisons laid out above, this article proposes “state presence” and “labor cooperation” as two new perspectives for comparing and enriching the histories of migrant laborers under different regional contexts.

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