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Liang Jingguo and the Development of Tianbao Hong in the Qing Dynasty

Ruiming Cao

The Affiliated High School of South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China
coco@noblelight.cn

Abstract. This paper examines Liang Jingguo and the development of Tianbao Hong, one of the Canton Thirteen Hongs. Founded in 1808, Tianbao Hong grew amid mounting Chinese-British trade tensions, heavy official exactions, foreign debts, and widespread hong bankruptcies. Drawing on Chinese, British, and American records, this paper shows how Liang's honesty, commercial caution, credit, official honors, and ties with foreign merchants and Howqua helped the firm survive. By 1830, it rose from last to fifth in trade share, dealing in tea and silk with British and American partners. After 1833, however, it declined due to Indian tea competition, Qing financial demands, and systemic weaknesses. The study highlights how individual merchant experience reflects the Canton trade system, Chinese-British relations, and Qing merchants' social position. This study also notes gaps in surviving records and suggests further research on Tianbao Hong's domestic networks and the Feng family firm.

Keywords: Liang Jingguo, Tianbao Hong, Canton Thirteen Hongs, Sino-British Trade under the Qing Dynasty

1. Introduction

In 1685, during the twenty-fourth year of the Kangxi reign, the Qing government reopened overseas trade. A new trading system began to develop. The Canton Thirteen Hongs were licensed by the government and became the main businesses connecting Chinese and foreign merchants. In 1758, the twenty-third year of the Qianlong reign, the Qing government placed stricter limits on foreign trade. It closed the customs offices in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian, leaving the Canton Maritime Customs as the only official route for this trade. Canton became the only port allowed to handle this foreign maritime trade. As a result, the Thirteen Hongs became the Qing government's main official link to overseas business and cultural exchange.

In traditional Chinese society, scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants were ranked in that order (shi–nong–gong–shang). Merchants had a low social position, so their work and historical role often received less attention. Studies of the Canton Thirteen Hongs have usually focused on trade policies and the overall trading system. Fewer studies have looked closely at how individual merchants ran their businesses and dealt with daily problems. Researchers have also paid more attention to large firms such as Tongwen Hong and Yihe (Ewo) Hong. Smaller firms have received less study. Tianbao Hong is one example.

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Liang Jingguo founded Tianbao Hong in 1808, the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign. It became an important part of the Canton trade during the middle and late Qing periods. This paper looks at Liang's life and business experience to understand how Tianbao Hong developed. From the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, trade problems between China and Britain became more serious. The Qing government also placed more controls on foreign trade. Hong merchants faced debts to foreign traders, heavy demands from officials, and strong competition. Many firms went bankrupt. By 1808, only ten hongs remained [1]. Tianbao Hong still managed to grow during this difficult time. It did well for more than twenty years before it began to decline. Its history helps us understand the hong system, changes in Sino-British trade, and the lives and social position of merchants in Qing China.

2. Liang Jingguo's early life and business experience

2.1. A Poor childhood and honesty

Liang Jingguo was born into a poor family in 1761. He lived in Fengpu Village, in the Huangpu area near Canton, now called Huangpu Historic Village. He also used the name Zuoyuan [2]. During the Jiaqing reign, Qiu Jiawei wrote an inscription in memory of Liang's father, Liang Zhaoxu. The inscription described the village in this way: "He grew up in Fengpu, where foreign ships gathered, textiles passed through in abundance, and the traffic of goods made it a great commercial town." [3]

Fengpu, also known as Huangpu Village, was a busy place near the port of Canton. Foreign sailors stayed there, and many foreign ships came to the area [4]. Textiles and other goods were traded there. Many villagers worked in jobs connected to overseas shipping, such as trade agents (compradores), dockworkers, and craftsmen [5]. Liang grew up in this busy trading area. From a young age, he had the chance to learn about foreign trade and how it worked in Canton.

Although Huangpu Village was busy and wealthy, Liang's own family was very poor. His father, Liang Zhaoxu (1727–1767), whose courtesy name was Yunkui, taught at a private school in the village [2]. According to Liang Qinggui (1858–1931), Liang Jingguo's great-grandson, Zhaoxu, taught dozens of young children and worked hard every day but still lived in poverty [5]. Teachers of young children did not earn much and had a low social position. After his father died in 1767, Liang and his mother had almost nothing left. They had no land or stored food and had to depend on each other. When Liang was seven, he carried goods to Canton during the day and sold them to earn money. At night, he helped his mother weave cloth, sometimes working until morning [3]. Canton was about thirty li away from their home.

These years taught Liang a great deal about business and the rules of trade. They also helped him develop a strong belief in honesty. He once explained that he would rather be late in paying taxes and take the blame himself than cause losses to his customers. Later, he paid off the unpaid duties and gained more trust from those customers [2]. He understood that trust was important for keeping good business relationships. His poor childhood also made him careful with money. Even after becoming rich, he continued to live simply. He did not care much about expensive objects, rare animals, fish, or decorative stones that many wealthy people wanted [6]. This attitude also influenced Tianbao Hong. Some other hongs, such as Wancheng Hong, entered risky trades like opium and then quickly failed. Liang preferred the more stable trade in tea and cotton. He wanted to avoid unnecessary political and business risks.

Because Liang had little chance to study when he was young, he later placed great value on education and government service. He believed that working as an official was more respected than working as a merchant. Even when he was busy with business, he continued reading at night,

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sometimes until morning [1]. He also followed Confucian ideas about good behavior. He often told his children that accepting a loss could sometimes be a good thing [6]. Liang put these beliefs into practice by giving money to public projects. He helped repair canals, build schools and grain stores, support family temples, and provide meeting places for merchants. Through these donations, he followed the Confucian belief that successful people should also help society.

Liang continued to care about education after becoming a successful merchant. He paid for good teachers for his children and built the Zuoshu family school and Wenlan Academy [6]. Many of his descendants later chose careers as government officials. This shows how important education was to his family.

In 1778, the forty-third year of the Qianlong reign, Liang started working at the Feng family's foreign-trade firm in Canton. He was eighteen years old. A family record says that he worked for others and slowly saved money [1]. The Feng firm bought foreign goods and sold products from China and other countries. While working there, Liang learned how to manage accounts, move goods, and communicate with foreign merchants. He worked hard and gained the owner's trust. When the owner went overseas for more than ten years, he left Liang in charge of the business. Liang handled orders, trade contacts, shipping, and accounts. After the owner returned, Liang gave back all the records without any missing money or errors. The business had even grown during those years. This experience helped Liang build a good reputation and make useful contacts. The Feng family's support later provided an important source of money for starting Tianbao Hong [1].

2.2. Business ethics and credit

2.2.1. Difficulties in trade

In the early nineteenth century, foreign-trade businesses in Canton faced serious money problems. The Qing government kept tight control over trade through Canton. Taxes and other charges on Hong merchants also increased, making business more expensive. In a letter to British traders in 1827, Liang wrote that Tianbao Hong had to pay more than 108,000 taels of silver in duties and other charges that year. It had already paid over 70,000 taels, but still owed more than 30,000. The deadline was close, and the firm did not have enough money [7]. This example shows that some merchants had to borrow money just to pay the government's demands.

Problems between China and Britain also hurt trade. In 1808, British warships occupied Macau and moved toward Humen (the Bogue) and Whampoa. Wu Xiongguang, the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, told Hong merchants to stop trading with British ships [6]. Tianbao Hong had just started business when this conflict happened. In 1810, the Huang Yasheng case showed further disagreement between China and Britain over legal rights, trade, and control of foreign merchants. Hong merchants had to spend time handling disputes and following government orders. They also had to stop foreign ships from leaving without permission. These duties made ordinary trade more difficult.

Unpaid debts from foreign merchants were another problem. It was hard to collect money from people who had gone overseas. In 1810, Tianbao Hong wrote to the British East India Company about unpaid customs duties on agate beads from the seventh and eighth trading years. The goods were connected to a country-trade ship recorded as Xiyao Shenlinzhi. The firm said that a total of 8,591 in silver currency had not been paid and asked the Company to help recover the money [7]. This case shows how unpaid bills could leave Hong merchants short of cash.

To deal with these problems, Liang tried to keep a good relationship with the Qing government. He donated money to the government many times. In return, he received several official honors and

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titles. These included ranks related to deputy prefect, prefect, and circuit intendant, as well as a recommendation for the honorary title Tongfeng Dafu. These titles and his connections with officials helped him face fewer problems when doing business.

Liang also used the trust he had built with foreign merchants to borrow money. Other Hong merchants sometimes promised to pay if Tianbao Hong could not repay a loan. This helped the firm get more money to keep operating and deal with problems. The British East India Company was one of its main lenders. Tianbao Hong borrowed 20,000 taels in 1813, 56,378 taels in 1820, and 32,264 taels in 1827. Much of this money was used to pay taxes and other government charges.

Liang was able to borrow from the East India Company more than once because people trusted him to keep his promises. He tried not to take on more business than he could manage and wanted to repay his debts even when money was short. In a private letter from 1837, he explained to British lenders why he could not pay on time. Other hongs had already failed after refusing to repay debts or hiding from lenders. Liang instead said that he would pay the money as soon as the firm's business was sold [7]. This shows that he did not want to avoid his responsibilities to lenders.

The Thirteen Hongs had a system in which merchants guaranteed each other's loans. This made it easier to borrow money, but it also brought risks. In 1835, six hong merchants acted as guarantors for a loan to Tianbao Hong. This gave the foreign lender more confidence. However, when one Hong went bankrupt, the other firms that had guaranteed its loans could be required to repay their debts. Tianbao Hong faced this problem after Tongtai Hong, connected to Mai Jingguan and also known as Ponequa's Hong, went bankrupt in 1824, the fourth year of the Daoguang reign.

Wu Bingjian (1769–1843), known to foreign merchants as Howqua, was one of the people who helped Liang. He was a merchant of Yihe (Ewo) Hong and was well known in Canton for his wealth and good credit. In 1827, Liang tried several times to borrow from the British East India Company to repay debts left by Tongtai Hong, but he did not succeed. Howqua then helped him. He promised to support the loan and wrote to the Company for Liang. He also helped Tianbao Hong speak with the Company and suggested giving Tongtai Hong's former share of trade to Tianbao Hong. These actions helped solve the firm's money problem. In his reply, Liang thanked Howqua for helping him get the loan and said that he was very grateful [7]. He also thanked the East India Company.

2.2.2. Trade with foreign merchants

Historical records from China, Britain, and the United States give details about Liang Jingguo's trade with foreigners. Tianbao Hong regularly sold tea and silk to British merchants and bought goods from overseas. The firm had steady business with these traders. It often sent goods in smaller groups instead of all at once and shared information with buyers. This helped protect the quality of the goods, make deliveries safer, and build trust with customers.

Trade records from Canton show that Tianbao Hong also worked with American merchants, not only British merchants. By working with more foreign partners, the firm had more ways to raise money and sell goods. It also depended less on trade with Britain.

Because Tianbao Hong traded with different partners and kept its promises, its tea trade with Britain grew from 1811 to 1830. In 1811, it ranked last among the hongs. By 1830, it had risen to fifth place among ten firms [8].

However, a larger share of trade did not always mean the firm had enough money. Some of Tianbao Hong's growth, including its gains around 1827, may have come from taking over trade from firms that went bankrupt [8]. Taking over this business could also mean taking responsibility for the other firms' unpaid debts. For this reason, more trade did not always solve Tianbao Hong's

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money problems. In his later years, Liang had to borrow money many times to keep the firm running.

3. Conclusion

Liang Jingguo founded Tianbao Hong in 1808, the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign. At that time, many Canton hongs were going bankrupt. Over the next twenty years, Tianbao Hong grew even though the whole trading system was facing serious problems. Liang's hard work and honesty helped the firm succeed. By 1830, the tenth year of the Daoguang reign, Tianbao Hong had moved from last place to fifth place in trade share, near the bottom of the four largest firms. After 1833, however, its business began to decline. Britain had started growing tea successfully in Assam and other parts of India, while Canton's tea exports became smaller. The Qing government also demanded large payments for military costs, and bankruptcies among other Hongs continued. By the time of the Opium War, Tianbao Hong was in decline. The firm's problems were not only caused by Liang's own decisions. They also reflected the weakness of the trading system and the pressure from foreign imperialism and Qing government officials.

There are limits to this study because some historical records are missing. We still do not know much about Liang's early business life or the exact role of the Feng family firm. This paper has mainly discussed overseas trade. It has paid less attention to Tianbao Hong's business inside China, including its connections with tea-producing areas. More records about the Feng firm could help us better understand Tianbao Hong's trading network and how the Hong system changed over time.

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