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## Discovering economic history in footnotes: the story of the Tong Taisheng merchant archive (1790-1850)

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:** Ma, Debin and Yuan, Weipeng (2016) *Discovering economic history in footnotes: the story of the Tong Taisheng merchant archive (1790-1850)*. [Modern China](#), 42 (5). pp. 483-504. ISSN 0097-7004  
DOI: [10.1177/0097700415606872](https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700415606872)

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2016

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**Discovering Economic History in Footnotes: The Story of the Tong  
Taisheng Merchant Archive (1790-1850)**

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**Abstract:** The Tong Taisheng (统泰升) merchant account books in Ningjin county of northern China in 1800-1850 constitute the most complete and integrated surviving archive of a family business for pre-modern China. They contain unusually detailed and high-quality statistics on exchange rates, commodity prices and other information. Utilized once in the 1950s, the archive has been left largely untouched until our recent, almost accidental rediscovery. This article introduces this unique set of archives and traces the personal history of the original owner and donor. Our story of an archive encapsulates the history of modern China and how the preservation and interpretation of evidence and records of Chinese economic statistics were profoundly impacted by the development of political ideology and in modern and contemporary China. We briefly discuss the historiographical and epistemological implication of our finding in the current Great Divergence debate.

**Keywords:** Tong Taisheng, Ningjin, Rong Mengyuan, merchant account books, economic statistics.

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**Acknowledgement:** This paper has been supported by the Global Price and Income Project funded by National Science Foundation 2004-2014, headed by Peter Lindert and Philip Hoffman and by a research grant awarded by the Center for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy (CAGE), University of Warwick for May 2012 – May 2013. In addition, Debin Ma acknowledges support from Leverhulme Research Fellowship 2013-14 and Weipeng Yuan to Chinese Social Sciences Foundation Fellowship (No.12BZS046). We are grateful to archival assistance, during different stages of our project, from Cai Jiahong, Gong Guan, Ji Xin, Pan Sheng, Yang Qiulin, Song Wenting, Yan Xun and Yang Xiaoyan. Our special thanks go to Rong Weimu for an oral interview and to Richard Macve who offer invaluable suggestion and encouragement at different stage of our project. We have greatly benefitted from comments and discussion with Loren Brandt, Steve Ivings, Linda Grove, Philip Hoffman, Peter Lindert, Peng Kaixiang, Evelyn Rawski, Thomas Rawski, Tirthankar Roy, Osamu Saito, Jan Luiten van Zanden, and Patrick Wallis. Thanks also go to Kathryn Bernhardt, co-editor of *Modern China*, and the referees. All errors remain our own.

## **Discovering Economic History in Footnotes: The Story of the Tong**

### **Taisheng Merchant Archive (1790-1850)**

The recent Great Divergence debate spurred by the provocative claim that living standards in 18<sup>th</sup> century China – at least in the advanced region of the Lower Yangzi – may be comparable to Northwestern Europe as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century has promoted a flurry of new research re-examining China’s price and wage history in comparative perspective.<sup>1</sup> The debate, however, has also brought to the fore serious deficiencies in surviving Chinese historical statistics. Reviewing the existing evidence, Allen et al. (2011) points out that the claims of a higher living standard in 18<sup>th</sup> century China “relied on indirect comparisons based on scattered output, consumption, or demographic data”; in contrast, “our knowledge of real incomes in Europe is broad and deep because since the mid-nineteenth century scholars have been compiling databases of wages and prices for European cities from the late middle ages into the nineteenth century when official statistics begin” (p. 9).<sup>2</sup>

The nature of Chinese historical statistics itself raises a critical question germane to the core of the debate: could the paucity of statistics itself be a result of poor record keeping in historical China – which itself may be a reflection of the nature of her economy and society – or more a reflection of the poor state of academic scholarship and archival collection in China’s subsequent tumultuous modern history? Can one surmise that the richly endowed Western historical statistics preserved from former times are themselves testimonials to the high level of economic development or even rationality in the West historically?<sup>3</sup>

Given the critical importance of historical statistics in the current Great Divergence debate, it is surprising that the historiographical dimension of data issues has so far received sparing attention. In this article, we illustrate this thesis through our unique encounter – during the last seven years of our research - with the merchant account books of Tong Taisheng 统泰升 (referred to as TTS hereafter) and our rediscovery of the original owner or donor. The TTS archive – consisting of over 400 volumes for a single store - contains detailed records of actual market transactions not just in grain but mostly non-grain commodities and also includes local copper cash/silver exchange rates from a largely unknown North China

village township in Ningjin 宁津 county of Shandong province in 1800-1850 – a period before China’s forced opening to the West. The original TTS record had been used once by a group of eminent Chinese economic historians in the 1950s but has lied largely incognito since.

This article represents the first of our series of systematic efforts to reconstruct, both thorough statistics and a historical narrative, the history of the TTS archive, the TTS firm, Ningjin county, and the larger North China economy on the eve of the Opium War. The focus of our current work is on the archive itself and the people connected with it from the initial donation, to preservation and to our rediscovery. As you will see, the history of the TTS archive and the story of the individuals involved is itself a miniature history of modern China, of tradition-bound elites and new generation of modern intellectuals getting caught up and muddling through one and half century of ideological and political vicissitudes. It raises some important epistemological question on the nature of historical evidence and statistical records on Chinese economic history.

## **I. The TTS Archive**

In a widely used statistical manual for Chinese economic history compiled in 1955 by Professor Yan Zhongping (严中平) and ten other eminent economic historians, two tables (Tables 30 and 31 on pp. 37-38) and a figure (p. 39) are included that provide relatively continuous annual series of copper cash/silver exchange rates and two price indices for agricultural and handicraft goods (in copper cash) respectively for the period of 1798-1850. These three pages of highly condensed statistical series stand out as a glaring anomaly in the dark alley of Chinese historical statistics. Despite the brevity of the explanation, they have not escaped the attention of researchers: the Ningjin series appeared frequently in some of the most influential works on China’s pre modern monetary sector and often served as the key (or only) systematic data series for evaluating China’s balance of payment crisis caused by silver outflow, leading eventually to the fateful Opium War of 1842 – a watershed event in modern Chinese history (See for example, Lin Man-houng 2006, Chen Chau-nan 1975, Vogel 1987 for the use of the Ningjin series).

Embedded in the footnotes to these two tables are brief explanations of the statistical

methodology of constructing the exchange rate series and the number of items included in the construction of these price indices. They also indicated that the original data were extracted from a grocery store called Tong Taisheng, located in the town of Daliu 大柳镇 of Ningjin county in the northern part of Zhili province (roughly corresponding to today's Hebei province). The footnotes mentioned that the original TTS archives were housed mostly in the National Library and a small segment in the library of the Institute of Economic Research of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. In 2005, we keyed in – just on the off chance - the TTS merchant accounts in the online catalogue of the National Library in Beijing and, to our complete disbelief, the title just popped up on the screen. Eventually, our archival compilation in both the National Library and Institute library of the Chinese Academy of Social Science turned up 437 volumes of these account books for the period of 1798-1850.

Like all traditional merchant account books, physically the books are light in weight with paper bindings (normally a soft blue cover with red identification strips glued on), approximately 20cm square and approximately 3-4 cm thick. They are string-bound and handwritten with a classical brush pen. Pages are not numbered or indexed (although we have seen some later ones with printed ruled pages). Number of pages and records vary in different account books. In the Appendix, we present two photo pages of the account book. The first is an image of the cover the of account book. The second is the image of an account page with actual records. Table 1 provides a breakdown of all the volumes by decade.

Table 1, The Existing volumes of Tong Taisheng Merchant Accounts by decade

Decades	Total Volumes	Annual Average	Notes
1798-1810	67	5.2	Only 2 volumes for 1798
1811-1820	54	5.4	
1821-1830	85	8.5	
1831-1840	104	10.4	
1841-1850	100	10	20 volumes for year 1844 only
unclear	27		
<b>Total</b>	<b>437</b>	<b>8.2</b>	

Notes: Except for five volumes archived at the Institute of Economic Research of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the rest are in the National Library in Beijing.

The account books reveal TTS to be a local retail grocery store selling a large variety of dry goods including rice, iron tools, paper, cloth, cord pieces, pigment and daily necessities like oil, vinegar sauce, wine, grains and so on. We can broadly classify the TTS account books into four categories according to their contents and functions. The first is the original account book of the sales counter, mainly journals or day books 流水账 kept by shop assistants to record transactions of cash and goods in copper cash and silver. This occupies a large portion of the TTS account books. The second type of account is known as the ‘posted account book’ such as the “general trade ledger” 交易总账, which were recorded according to the name of a business house or a customer respectively. The third category includes summary account books, such as strung coins account, profits and dividend account. The final category includes various miscellaneous account books, which cover temporary dealings and transactions, accounts of loans, land purchases, income from interest on loans etc.<sup>4</sup>

Both the detail and quality of the data are staggering for a micro-data set for Chinese economic history. As an illustration, using only 17 journals or books of silver accounts, we can already accumulate over 11 thousand data points of copper-silver exchange rates with transaction dates and quantities, five and six different types of silver used, loans and interest rates and names of clients, all in daily frequency (See Ma and Yuan, research in progress). There are also detailed prices of about 40 or 50 types of commodities with similar degrees of detail. We are confident that careful research based on a systematic exploitation of this rich and high-quality data set could offer new insights on critical debates on Chinese economic history and global history. For example, the relatively complete and integrated nature of the TTS account allows an in-depth, primary source based study of the pre-modern Chinese accounting system (see Yuan, Macve and Ma 2015). The consistent and high quality time series of copper-silver exchange rates that can be reconstructed from the TTS can offer important clues to our understanding of the traditional Chinese monetary system and the impact of opium trade and the silver outflow on the Chinese economy during this period. Finally, the systematic information on the volumes and frequencies of transactions at annual, monthly and daily frequencies can for the first time quantify the landmark study on traditional Chinese marketing structure by William Skinner (1964). Clearly, the original



study by Yan Zhongping et al., a critically important one in its own right, only utilized a tiny fraction of the data sets.

It is notable that economic statistics culled from family business archives - despite their understandable limitations in terms of representation – have superb qualities unmatched by the more commonly used government or public statistics, which are often subject to either deliberate manipulation (for taxation and other purposes) or bureaucratic negligence. Statistics recorded from private family archives are likely to be more accurate and reflective of actual market conditions, something that is essential for calculating internal profit and revenue.<sup>5</sup> But the significance of the TTS archive goes beyond mere economic statistics. As the complete set of account books were recorded before China's forced opening to the West in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the entire TTS archives are in traditional Chinese format with string-bound Chinese paper, hand-written (with ink brush pens) in classical Chinese in vertical format. With traditional numerical codes and indigenous Chinese accounting system, transcribing and interpreting the account book material requires specialized learning and expertise on the part of researchers.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the challenge to decipher these files also affords unusual insights into the internal logic and mechanism underlying the pre-modern Chinese market, business organization, monetary system, accounting methods or even social customs.<sup>7</sup>

Where does this archive come from? Who was the owner of this archive? Why was so little information divulged about this archive? Why was this record preserved in such an exceptionally good and well-ordered condition? How did a pile of archives mentioned in some footnotes in 1955 survive through decades of political turmoil in Mao's era?

## **II. The Re-discovery**

In April, 2008, we visited Ningjin county and the towns of Daliu, Changwan (长湾) and Chaihu (柴胡). Daliu, where the TTS firm was located, was a small market town in Ningjin county, currently a county of Dezhoushi prefecture (德州市) in Shandong province. It was about 240 kilometers south of Beijing, close to the border of Hebei province east of the historical Grand Canal. With the massive building of rural highway infrastructure during the past two decades, commercial activities in these towns have largely shifted out of the

traditional town center, called the “old street” 老街, in Daliu towards a spattering of stores and restaurants along a rural highway, modern, dusty and homogenous. What remained alongside the original “old street” were clusters of residences interspersed with a few shops, postal offices and governmental buildings built or rebuilt largely during the Mao era. For the few locals with whom we conversed, the “old street” evoked tales of the 1950s rather than the 1850s. Our visit to the Ningjin county archival office turned up nothing on TTS.

We located the Ningjin county gazetteer that dated back to the reigns of the Kangxi (1661-1722) and the Guangxu (1875-1908) emperors. The gazetteer reports Daliu town as holding periodic markets (集场) on every 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> day of the month, in addition to a temple festival (庙会) every September.<sup>8</sup> Yan et al. (1955) noted that over ten branch stores of TTS spread across a couple of nearby market towns such as Changwan, Chaihu, each within about a 10 kilometres radius of Daliu. Based on our estimates from the account books, the annual average volume of transactions at TTS would rank in the category of medium sized business as classified by Xu Tan for average size of merchant firms in Shandong province during the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> For anybody familiar with the landmark study on Chinese rural markets by William Skinner (1977), Daliu town and the TTS firm are almost a postcard illustration of the standard market towns across North China during the Qing. They appear among the tens of thousands of mercantile stores and market towns across 19<sup>th</sup> century China, modest, inconspicuous and undistinguished.

Just as we thought we had got to the end of the thread on this archive, a completely unrelated browse through a book titled *History of Retail Business in Modern Shanghai* 上海近代百货商业史 (1988) took us on an entirely unexpected and opportune turn. On page 10 of this book, a footnote (yes, another footnote) mentioned a TTS grocery store located in Daliu of Ningjin county. It cited a newspaper report published in the *Central Daily* 中央日报 on August 13, 1936, by Wei Zeying 魏泽瀛, which discussed the traditional Chinese accounting system based on the TTS merchant account books. The Wei article cites another article by Wan Sinian 万斯年 published in *Ta Kung Pao* 大公报, Supplement (Books) on August 8, 1935. Wan (1935) offers the following critical passage on the source of this archive:

“While the Peiping (i.e. Beijing) library (today’s National Library of China) had long intended to collect the account book materials, it was prevented from doing so due to its busy engagement in other priorities. Last winter, suddenly the Library received a letter from Mr. Rong Mengyuan (荣孟源) from Daliu town, Ningjin county. Mr. Rong indicated his willingness to offer his collection of old account books to the Library, which we very much welcome. Mr. Rong noted these account books had information on rural economy and commodity prices. He did not ask for any remuneration except for the shipping cost from Ningjin to Peiping. We are of course grateful for such a hearty donation.

.....

It is reported that the account books arrived in a rather messy condition in two boxes. After a rough compilation by Mr. Zhao Jinghe (赵静和), we arrive at a total of 145 volumes for the Jiaqing reign (1796-1820), and 323 volumes for the Daoguang reign [1821-1850]. The earliest volume dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Jiaqing (1798), and the final volume goes to the 30<sup>th</sup> year of Daoguang (1850), covering a span of more than fifty years. Dating back to more than 130 years from now, these account books are indeed a rare find.”

While most descriptions in both Wei (1936) and Wan (1935) matched what we have been able to find independently in the extant TTS account books, Wan’s tally of all the volumes added up to a total of 468 volumes, more than the 437 volumes we have been able to locate so far.<sup>10</sup>

The key man mentioned above, Rong Mengyuan (1913-1985), as it turned out, was no average donor. In the PRC era, Rong was an eminent historian on modern China and an authority on historical archives of the Qing and Republican period. He was the author of more than 70 journal articles, and multiple volumes of works on archival materials of major political events such as the Taiping and Boxer Rebellions, as well as the 1911 Revolution. He was also the founding editor of the journal *Materials on Modern History* (近代史资料) that has been published continuously from 1954. The thread of Rong Mengyuan opened a new horizon for the TTS archive. Based on our subsequent interview with his surviving son, Mr. Rong Weimu, 荣维木, in Beijing and the discovery of the Rong genealogy last published in 1903 (archived in Nankai University in Tianjin), we can piece together the profile of the Rong lineage in Ningjin county, and the man and the history behind the archive.<sup>11</sup>

### **III. The Man behind the TTS archive**

The Rong genealogy was last printed in 1903, compiled from the culmination of six

previous editions. It traced the lineage back to as many as 16 generations over a span of 491 years, with editions updated in 1894 (by the 16<sup>th</sup> generation), 1880 (14<sup>th</sup> generation), 1813 (no indication of generation), 1771 (10<sup>th</sup> generation), 1756 (9<sup>th</sup> generation), 1745 (8<sup>th</sup> generation), 1717 and 1719 (8<sup>th</sup> generation). The Rong family first migrated from Zhu Cheng 诸城 (also in Shandong province) to Daliu in Ningjin county in 1404 during the early Ming dynasty. Starting as farmers, the lineage amassed a certain amount of wealth through diligence and thrift and began to engage in a money lending business as well as some charity activities in the local town by the third generation (possibly during the 17<sup>th</sup> century). By its sixth generation (about the early 18<sup>th</sup> century), the Rongs claimed to have accumulated over 300 *mu* (48 acres) of land. After some set-backs in family wealth partly owing to a series of bitter legal disputes over financial matters with another lineage (by the name of Yin), the seventh and eighth generation made a comeback through commerce.<sup>12</sup>

Like generations of successful merchant lineages in traditional China (and perhaps also drawing lessons from their disastrous legal disputes), the Rongs turned to invest in the education of their offspring to enter the highly competitive ranks of the civil service examination System, a critical step up the ladder in the Chinese political and social hierarchy. The efforts seemed to pay off as the genealogy reported steady progress with members attaining low level degree of *shengyuan* and from the ninth generation on, making successive entries in the ranks of the official examination system. Meanwhile, family wealth and business clearly stabilized with the rise in social and political status secured by these examination achievements. Moving into the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the period recorded in the TTS account – the Rong lineage wealth may have peaked as the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> generation added newly purchased land of 800 and 300 *mu* to the family wealth. The Rongs were clearly the elite of the town as a member of the 13<sup>th</sup> generation was the trusted person in town who would be called upon to mediate and resolve village disputes. The prosperity of the Rongs continued beyond the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the period in which the extant TTS archive ends.<sup>13</sup> As we were informed by Rong Weimu, the Rongs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century allegedly owned nearly half of the houses in Daliu town. Besides the retail business, they operated a few cottage workshops in flour milling, vinegar processing, and textile handicraft and also managed some agricultural cultivation largely based on the use of long and short-term

laborers.

Like elites in traditional China, the Rongs' route to wealth and power was secured through generations of mercantile thrift and land acquisition and legitimized through their entries into the national civil service examination.<sup>14</sup> But from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the onset of Western imperialism in China, the world in which the Rong lineage had been thriving for generations was slowly falling apart. Two years after the final 1903 edition of the Rong Genealogy was compiled, the civil service examination itself was once and for all abolished by the late-Qing Constitutional Reform. In 1911, two years before Rong Mengyuan was born, the Qing dynasty simply collapsed.

Rong Mengyuan started his education in a traditional private school 私塾 but also enrolled in one of the new style secondary schools that emerged following the 1905 abolition of the civil service examination. In 1931, Rong went to Beijing to study in a graduate program in Chinese history headed by Lü Zhenyu 吕振羽, a prominent Marxist historian teaching in Zhongguo University.<sup>15</sup> It was in Beijing where the young Rong Mengyuan, a man from a relatively privileged mercantile family background, encountered the new Marxist historiography and Communist ideology. But for health reasons, Rong soon had to prematurely quit the graduate program and return to Ningjin for recuperation. Following Japan's full scale invasion of Chinese Manchuria in 1931, Rong joined the protest campaign and shuttled between Ningjin and Beijing. Later on, in 1935, he donated the TTS archive to Academia Sinica.

In 1936, Rong Mengyuan joined the Communist Party and two years later travelled to the Party's base in Yan'an in Shaanxi province. There Rong became a teacher in the high school which was later to become Yan'an University. But before too long, Rong Mengyuan landed in political trouble and, in 1941, was stripped of his Party membership because of a dispute with the Communist leadership.<sup>16</sup> The founding of the PRC in 1949, however, brought Rong the promise of a new intellectual career as an archival researcher to assist Fan Wenlan 范文澜, then China's designated official Marxist historian, on his new Marxist textbook version of Chinese history.<sup>17</sup> Given his political mishap, Rong's intellectual focus on historical archives, which is presumably more factual or "objective" than ideological, seemed like a viable career strategy.

But how did one of China's most eminent archivists remain completely unassociated with the set of his family accounts that he himself had earnestly offered up in the 1930s? Rong Mengyuan died in 1985, leaving no trace or mention of the TTS archive in his own voluminous works on historical archives. Neither was his family, according to Rong Weimu, aware of the TTS archive (or even the Rong Genealogy). As none of the eleven authors in the Yan statistics volume currently survive, we cannot determine for sure if Yan and his colleagues' reticence on the Rong origin of the TTS accounts was simply due to sheer neglect or something else.<sup>18</sup> We believe, however, some light could be shed on this mystery by looking at the change in the political climate and its effect on scholarship between the 1930s and the 1960s.

#### **IV. The Rise and Fall of an Archive**

Although the initial introduction of the Marxist framework of modes of production and stages of social development into Chinese historiography in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a relatively open and free intellectual endeavour, the framework itself quickly hardened into a political dogma following the founding of the PRC in 1949.<sup>19</sup> The so-called relations of production and universal stages of social development in the Marxist framework of historical materialism turned into an ideology of class warfare that pitted the so-called oppressed against the oppressors, the exploited against the exploiters – with the former represented by the proletariat, the workers and peasants and the latter by capitalists, the merchants and landlords. As is well known, by classifying people according to “birth origin” (often traced far back into their ancestry), the scheme underpinned massive political persecution such as the anti-rightist campaign in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Rong's privileged mercantile and landlord “birth origin” would do him no good in this scheme. He and his family were officially labelled as a “landlord”.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, as if to extricate himself from his inglorious birth origin, Rong published an article in 1955 to attack the “birth origin” of Hu Shi (胡适), China's best-known liberal intellectual who left Chinese mainland after the CCP's victory:

“How much land did Hu Shi's family own? He himself did not explain, but he did say that

every autumn, he will follow his grandmother to the field to supervise harvesting by tenants. Hence, his family indeed is that of a landlord...”

“Hu Shi’s family has three stores (as far as I know)... Judging from his snobbish attitude of late, mercantile ideas must have had a large influence on him... Hu Shi clearly inherited the tradition of a bureaucratic-landlord-merchant family.” (Rong 1955/1983 p. 371)

Only two years later, Rong himself fell victim to the 1957 anti-Rightist campaign. An article published in the *People’s Daily* (August 14 1957), the Chinese Communist Party’s official mouth piece, denounced the then disgraced “Rightist”, Rong Mengyuan:

“Rong Mengyuan’s anti-party activities have been consistent throughout. Born in a *landlord* family, he joined the (Communist) revolutionary cause in 1932, only to betray it at a critical juncture... By concealing his personal counter-revolutionary history, he sneaked back into the Party... He continued with his anti-Party activities in Yan’an in 1941 ... only to be expelled.... By the end of 1953, the Party criticized his factionalist anti-party activities within the Research Institute... But in the end, it was to no avail as Mr. Rong remained an inveterate anti-revolutionary and should be condemned as an imposter in the history profession.” (italics added by the authors)

It is striking to see that Rong Mengyuan’s brief respite back to his hometown of Ningjin in 1932-35 (for health reasons according to our interview with Rong Weimu) – during which he donated the TTS archive to Beijing – was now trumped up as his “betrayal” of the party “at a critical juncture.” It is clear that by then that Rong’s one-time strategy to seek safe haven in the “relative neutrality” of the archival material was no longer enough to spare him from the political storm (*People’s Daily* August 14<sup>th</sup> 1957).

Similarly, the political tension between the identity of the owner or producer of statistics and the nature of the statistics was foremost on the minds of Yan Zhongping and his team when compiling their statistics volume published in 1955. Recounting in 1956 their experience of compiling this volume, Yan remarked that:

“Among our comrades, a minority of them believed that since foreign language material was produced by imperialists, they cannot be reliable and should not be accepted as these imperialists were speaking from the stance of aggressors. They should not be used even when no comparable Chinese records existed. This view, however, is narrow-minded. While duly recognizing the aggressive nature of the imperialists, they may still inadvertently divulge their criminal deeds.”<sup>22</sup>

Yan's seemingly comic defence of the use of non-Chinese language sources was actually no laughing matter then. They were the flicker of sanity on the eve of China's descent into the abyss of the Great Leap Forward when statistics could simply be concocted or fabricated. More importantly, whatever may be the truth, Rong's anonymity and Yan's reticence on the "birth origin" of the TTS archive turned out to be a blessing in disguise. While the TTS archive languished in dust for the next three decades, Rong himself - despite being labeled an outright "Rightist" - and his family, according to Rong Weimu, managed to lie low and undergo only relatively mild phases of persecutions.

From the late 1970s, the arrival of a new era under Deng Xiaoping heralded in a gradual but decisive shift away from Maoist radicalism.<sup>23</sup> As part of this reversal, the Deng regime also reined in the class warfare and even sought to re-embrace the once denigrated and persecuted capitalists, "exploiters" and "oppressors". Like countless others, Rong Mengyuan (and Yan Zhongping) re-emerged from his intellectual exile and re-established himself as an authority on Chinese historical archives with a prolific publication record in the 1980s. The new era saw a revival of academic interest in traditional China's indigenous commercial tradition and in the explorations of private merchant business archives, often filled with tales of valuable archives discovered or rescued by sheer accident while others were lost through continued neglect.<sup>24</sup>

While generations of scholars are set to benefit from the re-discovery of TTS and other archives, when Rong Mengyuan passed away in 1985, he himself may have harboured no pride or interest in his connection with that pile of family archives he donated five decades earlier. It is curious to note that throughout the 1980s Rong Mengyuan remained a loyalist to an ideology of a bygone age and his writings then continued to be infused with the stridently leftist rhetoric of identity politics. In his 1983 book, he lamented recent attempts to revamp the reputation of Hu Shi as a scholar by reminding people of Hu Shi's past as a running dog of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic-capitalism (Rong 1983, pp. 382-3).

## **Conclusion**

From beneath the small-font footnotes emerges an extraordinary living tale of a private



merchant archive owned by an ordinary merchant family in 19<sup>th</sup> century rural China. The journey of a pile of traditional archive materials through its initial donation, to subsequent anonymity and our rediscovery divulges a personal story of individuals surviving through contradictions, ironies and even betrayals. It is a tale of a nation caught up in a manifest destiny to confront 19-20<sup>th</sup> century Western challenges, in the process of which she saw herself turned upside down several times over by the overpowering forces of ideology and politics and her historiographical traditions ruptured, re-joined, and sometimes reinvented.

The story of the Tong Taisheng archive offers powerful lessons on the nature and quality of historical evidences – quantitative or otherwise – used in debates such as the Great Divergence. It is important to note that the 1930s Beijing which Rong Mengyuan encountered saw the high tide of modernization ideology and social engineering based on the tools of statistical and social surveys.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, the discovery, preservation and utilization of the TTS archive is no accident as the men whose hands had touched the archive, - Rong Mengyuan, Wei Zeying, and Yan Zhongping – came of age in a new intellectual era that found new value in a pile of old private merchant archives beyond mere personal and familial nostalgia. Ironically, it was this vision of social engineering pushed to the extreme by the Communist ideology of identity politics of the 1950s that returned the origin of the same archive into incognito. What happened in China during the 1930s and 1950s shapes and reshapes our vision of history and record before 1850s. Or alternatively, the visions and theories of history interfered with history. Hence, our knowledge of, and sources of evidence on, the past are shaped as much by how posterity studied the past as by the past itself - assuming there existed such an “objective” and “abstract” past. The preservation, compilation, utilization and ultimately the discovery or re-discovery of historical evidence are themselves profoundly dependent on the changing tempo of our research agenda, ideologies and paradigms.

Large discontinuity and ideological reversals carry real consequences for comparative studies in the current Great Divergence debate. Even in the case of TTS which is “rescued” from anonymity, an entire three decades’ worth of potential research scholarship was lost while the TTS remained largely unexamined, leaving Chinese economic history with a glaring statistical abyss especially with regards to the current Great Divergence debate.

Furthermore, the introduction of new Chinese writing scripts and modern numeral and accounting system initiated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century New Cultural Movement and massively enforced through the PRC era meant have rendered materials such as traditional merchant account books far less accessible to an average contemporary researcher (apart from the few with the specialized training and expertise).<sup>26</sup> All these predispose our reconstruction of the past towards source materials recorded in the more familiar modern or – in the context of former colonies – “European” and colonial framework. These issues are not restricted to modern China alone, but rather are common experiences shared by nations that had experienced abrupt revolutionary transformations - the 18<sup>th</sup> century French Revolution and 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian revolution as obvious examples – or massive implementation of modernization framework that saw the creation of not only new ideologies but also new writing scripts such as modern Turkey or Korea.<sup>27</sup> With the surge of Chinese economic miracles during the past three decades and the Chinese economy poised to regain her past global supremacy, the historiographical and epistemological issues behind the quality and nature of evidences on China’s past – quantitative or otherwise – are becoming increasingly pertinent or even urgent.

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Appendix Photo 1: The Cover Page of TTS account book (General Trader Ledger) in Jan. 1804



**Appendix Photo 2: General Trader Ledger account from Daoguang 26 (i.e. starting in 1846 AD) (the main store)**



Note: For details on the reading of the account book, see Yuan, Macve and Ma 2015.

The account page gives a good illustration of the ‘four columns’ system (四柱法) in traditional Chinese Account:

The First Column (marked as ‘A’ on the picture) is what is traditionally referred to as the first column, *jiuguan* (旧管) which refers to the credit/debit balance brought forward from the previous account is a polite way of saying owing money.

The Second Column: the entire upper half of the account page records all the money received. It is known as *xinshou* (新收).

The Third Column: the entire lower half of the page records all the payments made out. It is known as *kaichu* (开除).

The Fourth Column (marked as ‘B’ on the picture): the ending balance is known as *shizai* (实在).



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<sup>1</sup> See Pomeranz 2000 for the claim of a high living standard in the Lower Yangzi. For those interested in the debate, see a special issue on the Great Divergence debate in *Journal of Asian Studies* / Volume 61 / Issue 02 / May 2002, especially see the article by Philip C. C. Huang 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, good quality data for constructing basic Chinese economic statistics such as price indices or wages at the regional or national level for the 18-19th centuries remains wanting. The only reliable benchmark, national level Chinese GDP, is for the early 1930s, see Ma 2008.

<sup>3</sup> This argument is echoed somewhat by the existence of far richer statistical records for territories colonized by Europe (or even by Japan in the case of Korea and Taiwan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) than those untouched by colonization. See Mizoguchi and Umemura 1988 for Japanese colonial statistics of Taiwan and Korea.

<sup>4</sup> The details of the accounts are presented in Yuan, Macve and Ma 2015 and also Yuan and Ma 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See Brand, Ma and Rawski 2014 on problems with official data in Imperial China.

<sup>6</sup> See Yuan, Macve and Ma (2015) for details on the account books.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it provides a rare opportunity to study Chinese economic history on its own terms or what Paul Cohen (1984) famously declared to “discover history in China”, purged of the possible Eurocentric or “colonial” bias in area studies derived from Western language-based source materials or modern (or Western) conceptual frameworks.

<sup>8</sup> Ningjin County Gazetteer, vol. 2, pp. 25-27.

<sup>9</sup> In Xu’s classification of large, medium and small scale businesses, the medium were the

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most numerous ranging from 35% in the reigns of Jiaqing (1796-1820) to 57% of the total number of firms in Daoguang (1821-1850), See Xu 1998, pp. 186-187.

<sup>10</sup> On the donation of the TTS account, Wei (1936) added the remark that “... after the Rong family business declined since the reign of Tongzhi (1862-1875), these account books covering several decades would have looked like a pile of waste papers to laymen or just good materials for wallpaper.” Yet alas, continued Wei, “thanks to the conservative and “nostalgic” nature of our people, remarkably, this set of account books was preserved within the Rong family.”

<sup>11</sup> Rong was survived by four children. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> of 2012, we interviewed his son, Rong Weimu, who is currently a senior researcher at the same Modern History Institute and also serves as one of the editors of *Materials on Modern History* , the journal founded by his father.

<sup>12</sup> The Rong genealogy noted in particular a member of the eighth generation (1673 – 1740) “trudging through the muddy trading routes” to rebuild family wealth through commerce.

<sup>13</sup> During the Guangxu reign (1875 – 1908), members of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> generation attained the much higher degrees of *juren* and *jinshi* within China’s examination ranks. These may be signs that the Rongs were starting to gain a foothold in the higher echelons of the late Qing political hierarchy as attested to by a marriage liaison with a member of the lineage of Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837-1909), one of China’s most powerful officials of the era. Based on the Rong Genealogy and also our oral interview with Mr. Rong Weimu.

<sup>14</sup> For Chinese elite strategies in traditional China, see the edited volume by Esherick and

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Rankin (1990). For the importance of political status and civil service examination in imperial China, see Brandt, Ma and Rawski (2014).

<sup>15</sup> In an article commemorating Lu, Rong fondly recalled his encounter with his Marxist historian mentor, see Rong 1983.

<sup>16</sup> According to Rong Weimu, Rong Mengyuan became entangled in a bitter dispute over the appropriation of a cave dwelling by Gao Gang 高岗 who was by then a very powerful Communist leader. The eventual intervention of Mao himself worked against Rong Mengyuan. As is well-known, Gao Gang himself became a victim of the first wave of Communist purges in the early 1950s.

<sup>17</sup> For the rise of Fan Wenlan and his personal connection with Mao Zedong, see Li Huaiyin (2012), especially chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> We have good evidence that Yan Zhongping or his team knew the Rong origin of the TTS archive. Yan Zhongping started working for the Social Science Research Institute of Academia Sinica in 1936, the same year as Wei Zeying. We find a research summary report published by Academia Sinica in 1936, which listed research on TTS merchant accounts as one of their forthcoming projects, see Academia Sinica (1936). Also, in the 1950s, the Modern History Institute of Academia Sinica, where Rong Mengyuan had long been associated, and the Institute of Economic Research, where the Yan research group was based, are both subordinate institutions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), which was a partial successor to the Academia Sinica of pre-1949 China.

19. See Feng 2006 on the introduction of Marxist historiography in the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the debates generated, which engulfed scholars of different camps and persuasions

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including the young revolutionary Mao Zedong himself.

<sup>20</sup> For a recent in-depth examination into the brutality of class warfare in the 1950s, see the recent work By Frank Dikotter 2013.

<sup>21</sup> According to Rong Weimu, Rong Mengyuan's father, Rong Xinghuan 荣星桓, had been a sympathizer to the Communist cause in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and sheltered the Eighth Route Army. After the Communist victory, Rong Xinghuan was classified as a "landlord". In a reversal of fortune, the long-term labourer who once worked for the Rong family became a party official with a glorious 32 years of Communist party membership. But in the new China, the labourer looked after the elderly Rong Xinghuan, apparently to repay the past kind deeds of his former landlord in the old days.

<sup>22</sup> See Yan 1956. It is also interesting to note that Yan actually went to the UK in 1947 on a scholarship for three years, where he systematically collected a large amount of English language materials related to the Opium War. In 1950, Yan returned to the new China with all these materials but was only able to make limited use of them.

<sup>23</sup> The most dramatic case is that of Rong Yiren 荣毅仁, the son of the illustrious Rong brothers who were China's legendary industrial tycoons in pre-Communist Shanghai, hailed as the "King" of cotton and flour, the symbol of modern Chinese industrial entrepreneurship. After two decades of lying low as a denigrated former capitalist, Rong Yiren re-emerged from the 1980s as China's new patriot entrepreneur and rose to the political rank of Vice President of the nation (1993-1998).

It is possible that the Rong Mengyuan lineage were also distantly related to the lineage of the Rong brothers who could be traced back to Jining 济宁 of Shandong province and had

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migrated to Wuxi of Jiangsu province in ancient times. Based on

<http://baike.baidu.com/view/680816.htm> accessed Sept. 13<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>24</sup> The case in point is the massive Shanxi merchant archival volume compiled by Huang Jianhui (2002). He recounts how pages of the original account books of China's first Shanxi banking house, Rishengchuang (日升昌) - now proudly displayed in the popular Shanxi bankers museum in the city of Pingyao (平遥), Shanxi province – were rescued in 1995 from the wallpaper used in the original site, which had fortunately survived the radical Cultural Revolution era (See Huang, 2002, p. 1 of notes to the supplementary second volume. In another recent book that made use of massive amounts of Shanxi mercantile accounts, the author, Li Jinzhang, recalled how in the past, since the private business accounts of the rich, the “landlord” or “bourgeoisie” were viewed in the Mao era as valuable records of exploitation and oppression, many files survived only with their cover page torn out or the name of the merchant scratched out. But lately, when the value of these records was rediscovered by academics, a private market emerged with petty merchants collecting and peddling these archives. To maximize the sale values of these volumes, these small-time archival traders would divide a complete set of archives into disparate piles for sale - often inadvertently mixing or mislabeling files in the process. See Li 2012, pp. 308-9. See Yuan and Ma 2010 for a summary of a series of other new economic history research based on the use of merchant archives.

<sup>25</sup> See Yung-chen Chiang 2001 and Li Zhangpeng 2008 for the rise of social surveys and the pioneering role of Western sociologist based in China in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. In particular, Sydney Gamble – an American sociologist based in Yenching University in

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Beijing - and his Chinese colleagues pioneered the use of private merchant account archives to extract economic information about China's past (Gamble (1943) utilized what seemed a large collection of merchant account books of a fuel store near Beijing roughly for the period of 1790-1850, almost identical to that of TTS account. Unfortunately, the existence and location of the original accounts remain unknown. See discussion in Allen et al. 2012.

<sup>26</sup> See Kaske 2007 for language reform in modern China.

<sup>27</sup> For a vivid illustration of how our knowledge is shaped by archival survival, see the example given by Stephan Schwarzkopf (2012): "Take as example the well-organised and well-funded archive of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency (JWT), for a while the world's largest ad agency, at Duke University's Hartman Centre for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History. Almost all parts of the collections there are searchable to file level, many items have been digitised, and the archive gives generous bursaries to international scholars. The archive is conveniently located on a beautiful university campus in North Carolina, where people play golf ten months of the year. The sheer availability and convenience afforded by the JWT collection feeds into a discourse and a set of historical narratives which privilege American marketing and advertising expertise over that found elsewhere in the world. Put simply, if one only studies existing archival sources which are provided, cared for, sponsored and promoted by American organisations, then the course of global marketing history indeed appears to be dominated by American organisations." (p.6)