

Conclusion

In 1626, *Prominent Lineages in Xiuning* (Xiuning mingzu zhi), the last of the three Huizhou genealogical gazetteers, was published. It was compiled by the Xiuning gentryman, Cao Sixuan, who fulfilled his father's will to update *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*.¹ It was intended as one of six volumes of the new, expanded version of the 1551 prefecture-wide genealogical gazetteer, with the other five volumes projected to cover the other five counties of Huizhou.² In other words, *Prominent Lineages in Xiuning* was attempted as a separate set of six volumes of a new edition of *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*, not as a county-wide genealogical gazetteer alone. Still, this Xiuning volume suggests that the localist turn went even deeper. Some new features of the Xiuning genealogical gazetteer turned out to enhance the Huizhou identity—with its camouflaged core of mercantile lineages—first established in the *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*.

One notable feature of *Prominent Lineages in Xiuning* lies in its opening list of various social categories.³ Fifteen categories are listed in total (the numbers refer to the historical figures recorded in each category):

- Shuoru (Prominent Confucians): 12
- Xunxian (Eminent Officials and Worthies): 6
- Zhongchen (Loyal Officials): 11
- Xiaozi (Filial Sons): 36
- Wenyuan (Men of Letters): 24
- Huanye (Successful Bureaucrats): 107
- Fengya (Men of Elegance): 39
- Fengjie (Men of Refined and Righteous Manners): 14
- Yinyi (Recluses): 42
- Duxing (Devoted Men): 47
- Xiangshan (Local Philanthropists): 117
- Qishou (Men of Longevity): 32
- Caiwu (Men of Martial Genius): 55

Xuelin (Scholars): 56

Zhenlie (Faithful Maidens and Chastity Martyrs): 256⁴

As the list illustrates, the prominent lineage was still defined by the aristocratic or gentry kinsmen in the political and scholarly realms, which suggests the accommodating orientation between the local society and state even as the focus of regional representation was further localized from the prefecture to county level. Confucian chastity martyrs and faithful maidens were the largest category, numbering 256 in total for the county of Xiuning alone, reflecting the peak of the chastity cult.⁵ Also notable are the various categories of mundane accomplishments in lifestyle or philanthropy, additions since the 1551 *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*, furthering the inclusiveness that resonated with the moral leveling of social distinctions of Wang Yangmingism.

What makes this outline of categories most notable, however, is not what it covers, but what it leaves out. In an age of mercantile lineage culture in Huizhou, there is no category for “merchants,” especially given that so many of them are covered in various lineage entries. In fact, merchants were now honored with more socially elevated terms than in the 1551 genealogical gazetteer. For instance, Cheng Tingzhou of the Xiguan Chengs (an off-branch of Cheng Minzheng’s ancestral lineage in Peigu), sojourned to Jiangxi on trade, eventually settling there. His three sons worked together in the pawnshop business and salt trade, and “started a great enterprise and thereby built a lasting tradition” (*chuangye chuitong*).

This term, reserved in official historiography specifically for the founding emperors of dynasties, recalls the way in which Wang Daokun linked his descent line to the Zhou royal family. When looking further, however, we find that Tingzhou’s second son, Jinan, is highlighted for having taken good care of his orphaned nephews as well as his own aging parents after his two brothers passed away. Indeed, we are told, the entire family lived “harmoniously and happily under the same roof.”⁶ This kinship-centered appreciation of merchant merits is central to the genealogical gazetteers of Xin’an and Xiuning.⁷ And so, without an overall category in which they could be featured, Huizhou merchants are covered in other categories. Cheng Tingzhou, for instance, is honored in “Shanxing” (an alternative for Xiangshan or Local Philanthropists) and Cheng Jinan in “Dajie” (an alternative for Fengjie or Men of Refined and Righteous Manners).⁸

This textual arrangement makes the “conspicuously unmarked identity” of Huizhou merchants look even more pronounced than in the “category-less” *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*. The key development in Huizhou local discourse from the 1551 Xin’an genealogical gazetteer through Wang Daokun to the 1626 *Prominent Lineages in Xiuning* was an increasing discrepancy between the rising importance of merchants and the decreasing visibility of them as a distinct category. The more socially elevated Huizhou merchants became in local writ-

ings, the deeper their lack of singular identity. This can be seen as the culmination of the historical pattern that began with Cheng Minzheng's focus on local kinship values, carried through the Huizhou self-identification in *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*, and developed into the gentrified mercantile lineage culture in the age of Wang Daokun.

Throughout this study, I delineate the historical formation of the Huizhou identity as a land of prominent lineages, while at the same time illuminating its evolving core, which consisted of mercantile lineages. That core, however, was consciously elided in the regional self-identification. This distinction between the Huizhou identification in self-representation and its sublimated core in practice was significant. The identification with prominent lineages was one of the key factors that made Huizhou merchants enormously successful in the specific political and sociocultural environment of late imperial China. Ironically, however, it further hindered the formation of their own so-called class consciousness.⁹ Merchants, in general, were looked down upon in Confucian gentry discourse; Huizhou merchants, in particular, were condemned by outsiders as overly dominant and overly shrewd, if not downright immoral or dishonest. The prominent lineages that sustained Huizhou merchants, however, lent them a sheen of cultural decorousness and moral worth, which shielded their mercantile activities outside of Huizhou. Home lineages also promulgated a strict gender regime to ensure kinswives' devotion to their absent husbands. One of the most important logistical supports sojourning men enjoyed, this regime nevertheless also worked to restrain Huizhou merchants, as it kept regenerating the mercantile lineage. The hierarchical social dynamics of Huizhou mercantile lineages was further embodied in the local religious order and enhanced through local ritual performance.

Understanding this Huizhou story is important not just for its intrinsic historical value. Rather, the practice of sublimating prodigious mercantile activity under the banner of dominant hierarchies and moral systems had tenacious staying power well beyond the Ming and well beyond the borders of Huizhou. The particulars have changed over time, but certain telltale patterns—the embrace of conservative social values and the collusion of business capital with both local power and state ideology—have persisted in China into modern times.