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FROM QING REFORMER TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY PUBLISHER

The Life and Times of Zhang Yuanji 張元濟

1867 - 1959

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of Zhang Yuanji, both as a liberal patriotic reformer in late Qing and as China's leading publisher after 1900. A historical figure hardly known to the West, Zhang contributed substantially to China's modernization in his quiet pragmatic style. When China was challenged by the imperialist West, the response of the nation's scholar-gentry elite ranged from spirited calls for wholesale westernization to a stubborn clinging to the 'national essence'. Individuals at the extremes of this range have received more attention from historians than the middle-of-the-road group of moderates, who in the twentieth century worked for modernization without discarding tradition totally. Zhang Yuanji was a typical figure in this group who attained intellectual maturity under Confucianism and yet was open-minded enough to accept Western philosophies and to adopt Western practices of entrepreneurship.

Zhang Yuanji's intense sense of patriotic obligation to introduce progressive learning for China's benefit while popularizing the best of the classical heritage was coupled with a culturalistic viewpoint that there could be no genuine changes unless a certain percentage of China's thinking population became modernized in outlook, well-informed of world affairs, and imbued with a progressive spirit. Zhang pioneered in modern education from 1896 and remained a dedicated educationalist all his life. His publishing career in the Commercial Press can be viewed as a logical extension of his early aim of modernizing China through the spread of new knowledge.

The history of the Commercial Press and in particular Zhang's part in it have received little scholarly attention, previous treatments of the subject have relied heavily on two official Commercial Press histories and the autobiographical writings of Wang Yunwu, which neglect Zhang's major contributions. The Commercial Press, as the

largest publishing house in modern China, was in the forefront of educational, scholarly, and literary development in China from 1900 to the 1950s, and Zhang played a vital role in promoting progressive publications as well as preserving the best editions of classics and histories. Zhang's efforts to run the Commercial Press successfully through all the political upheavals that beset China from late Qing to after 1949 reveal both the scholar's attempts to keep up with all the latest ideological trends as well as the entrepreneur's ambition to run a modern business efficiently. A study of Zhang Yuanji's life and career is in part a study of the evolution of China's gentry-elite and the emergence of the native capitalists.

The thesis draws on newly-available primary materials, both in the original and in manuscript, including over a thousand of Zhang's letters, several hundred poems and essays, and the extant sections of his business diary. These materials are supplemented by information provided by Zhang's surviving literary and editorial colleagues. Internal publications and source-materials of the Commercial Press are also used to reconstruct this biography of a little-known man who worked for China's modernization by drawing on his solid learning about China's past.

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