

INTRODUCTION

We understand a group of people best by understanding what they have worried about.

—Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*

In 1858, after 16-year-old Zheng Guanying (1842–1922) failed his imperial exam for the elementary *xiucai* degree, he arrived in Shanghai from his native area, Guangdong's Xiangshan County, and became a junior employee in the British firm Overweg and Company [*Xinde yanghang*]. Forty years later, the Guangxu emperor designated Zheng Guanying's book *Words of Warning in a Flourishing Age* [*Shengshi weiyang*] as a reformist reader for provincial officials to promote the 1898 reform movement. At the time, Zheng held the position of manager of the China Merchants' Steamship Company [*lunchuan zhaoshangju*]. The book provided inspiration to both Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925). About forty years after 1898, when Edgar Snow interviewed Mao Zedong in Yan'an in 1936, Mao acknowledged that a book called *Words of Warning* by Zheng Guanying had encouraged him

to continue his studies as a teenager. Zheng's writing about reform and self-strengthening also influenced Koreans as early as the 1880s.¹

One of the most important political thinkers of the late Qing period, Zheng Guanying did the most research on the Western parliamentary system and was the first to openly call for it.² It is believed that he was the earliest and most outspoken advocate for women's rights and education,³ and he was one of the first reformers to advance the idea of economic nationalism.⁴ Unlike Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), who was a high-ranking official,⁵ or Wei Yuan (1794–1856), who influenced policymaking largely because of his prestige as a classical scholar and official policy advisor to prominent officials, Zheng was the only noted merchant-reformer in late Qing China and perhaps the first reformer of modern China who mastered a Western language.⁶ His weak background in classical education and his identity as a merchant defined his success as a reformer and exceptional publicist. Zheng Guanying's systematic reformist agenda and his foresight on multiple issues such as the role of commerce, economic nationalism, law and education, and the establishment of a parliament are still provocative even for today's Chinese. But unlike other reformers such as Guo Songtao (1818–1891), Wang Tao (1828–1897), Zeng Jize (1839–1890), Ma Jianzhong (1845–1900), and Kang Youwei, Zheng had essentially no experience in political and diplomatic interactions with the West.⁷ Rather, Zheng Guanying was a merchant as well as an intellectual who came of age in the cultural and economic environment of the treaty port city of Shanghai. To tackle the issue of his hybrid identity and the contrast between his intellectual breadth and his humble traditional educational achievement, I will examine Zheng Guanying's life and career as a new type of Chinese intellectual arising in the broad context of modern Chinese urbanization and study his relationship with China's coastal cities and treaty ports. Thus, Zheng Guanying's career and thought will be analyzed within the cultural and intellectual milieu in which he lived. As Rhoads Murphey points out when he discusses Shanghai's relationship with China's modernization, "The flow of ideas and of non-economic institutions was perhaps of greater revolutionary importance [than economic development] in the

long run.”⁸ It was in this relatively tolerant environment of circulating ideas and new cultures that thinkers such as Zheng developed their ideas that were revolutionary in changing Chinese society.

Zheng Guanying both benefited from and contributed to an urban cultural space that distanced itself from the dominant cultural space of the state as well as the traditional gentry culture.⁹ Zheng Guanying’s emergence as both a commercial and intellectual figure in Shanghai was rooted in late-nineteenth-century urbanization. He belonged to a rising urban elite community in nineteenth-century Chinese cities.¹⁰ This community was not merely people living together but was a group of people who shared common interests and concerns and were linked with one another through print media, correspondence, and new social institutions. Zheng Guanying’s intellectual articulation and social activities symbolized a process leading to the formation of such a cultural and political space and its attachment to as well as alienation from the state. Many of the activists in this space had failed their imperial exams and were thus denied the avenue to government employment. Moreover, influenced by new ideas and media from the West, they became increasingly critical toward the state.

In Chinese-language scholarship, Zheng Guanying and his reformist thought have received attention since the 1980s.¹¹ In 2002 a government-sponsored meeting was assembled to commemorate the 160th anniversary of Zheng Guanying’s birth in today’s Zhongshan City of Guangdong Province, and an academic symposium was held in honor of Zheng in the same year. So far, very few English-language books have focused on Zheng Guanying, and main journal articles discussing him appeared in the late 1960s. While the English-language articles seldom mention Zheng’s cultural environment, studies of Chinese urban history in recent years have provided us a new perspective to examine him. This trend helped change the stereotypical perception of China as a large agricultural society ruled by its officialdom and lacking urbanization worth studying on its own terms. As early as the 1970s, Rhoads Murphey regarded the May Fourth Movement as an urban affair.¹² Mary Rankin, in *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang*

Province 1865–1911, stressed the urban character of late Qing gentry.¹³ Hao Chang stressed the urban character of the politically active intellectuals of the 1890s, such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who left their Cantonese hometowns and undertook most of their reformist activities in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Chang also argued that the urban-based activism of the 1890s marked the birth of a new social group—the Chinese intelligentsia.¹⁴ In the preface to the second edition of *Reform and Revolution*, Joseph Esherick pointed out that the most important characteristic of the 1911 revolution was its urban nature, and he pointed to the rise of an urban gentry class that was involved in new commercial and industrial activities.¹⁵ While the earlier works addressed the “urban nature” of social upheavals, more recent studies since the 1990s directly focus on the city as a specific space. In *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, Leo Ou-fan Lee highlighted the interaction between Shanghai’s urban environment and the rise of China’s literary Modernism and a modernist writers’ group as a cultural community.¹⁶ In a later essay, Lee further argued that Shanghai, not Beijing, was the birthplace of China’s modernity because of its developed commercial print media.¹⁷

Urban studies of modern China are integrated into the discussion of a Chinese “public sphere” because the presumably equal and open-to-all space and politically oriented public opinion can supposedly only be found in modern Chinese cities.¹⁸ Thus, this current work bridges the academic interest in late Qing reform and the newly rising interest in Chinese urban history, and it further discusses the possibility of an autonomous Chinese urban cultural space by illuminating Zheng’s life and career. Jürgen Habermas conceptualized the three stages for the transformation of the public sphere: from the “town” to “the public sphere in the political realm” via “public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the *salons* and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies).”¹⁹ If this pattern is applied to the Chinese context, then modern commercial development provided the conditions for the first stage, and the rise of commercial newspapers like the *Shenbao* marked a formation of the intermediary “world of letters,” in which Zheng Guanying played

a role. The political public sphere was developed in the period after the Sino-Japanese War and was marked by a political press. Zheng Guanying thus served as a linkage point in the development of the Chinese “public sphere” from commercial economy to politicization.

In the late Qing treaty ports, there was a new group coming of age—an urban elite composed not of mandarins but of merchants, compradors, journalists, and political activists. Possessing knowledge of foreign languages and experience with foreign-related affairs and capital, the new elite established a collaborative relationship with the reform-minded officials among the old ruling elite and also developed interactions with literati-reformers and even foreign missionaries who were concerned with China’s reform. Zheng Guanying was an exemplary member of this elite. In this urban space, his self-identity, concerns, and worldviews constantly shifted. He both worked with the officials and resented their interference in business; he was dissatisfied with the state but still bought his way into its officialdom. Many concepts widely used today, such as “nationalism,” “public,” and “public opinion,” were all used and interpreted by the reformers and urban elite in different ways in Zheng Guanying’s time and space. Western ideas and Chinese reformist ideas overlapped as well as clashed because both had their own cultural roots and ideological and political agendas. Internally, the state and merchants struggled against each other for domination while they pursued economic nationalism against the West. The urban merchants showed both antagonism and dependence on the state. The urban space was largely an “in-between” space characterized by its hybridity.²⁰ Even living in an urban sphere and well known for his reformist writings, Zheng still stuck to Confucianism and Daoist mysticism. In terms of his spiritual pursuit, Zheng Guanying identified with the unchanged Way [*Dao*], which rendered his fundamental thoughts not much different from the ruling ideology of the state.

Chapter one of this study sketches Zheng Guanying’s migration from Guangdong to Shanghai in the context of urbanization, migration, and social mobility. It focuses on Zheng Guanying’s relationship to the cultural spaces of Shanghai and his native Guangdong Province, highlighting the role media, modern schools, and social connections played in

transforming the identity of the urban elite. If the broader involvement in national politics by lower literati was a main theme of Wei Yuan's constitutional agenda, as Philip Kuhn suggested, then Zheng Guanying epitomized a new trend following Wei Yuan's era—this participation further expanded to include merchants and people with no academic degree.²¹

In chapter two, I discuss Zheng's experiences as merchant and socio-political activist: his experience and activities as a young comprador in foreign companies to becoming an investor and eventually a manager of Chinese enterprises; his involvement in education; tours in Southeast Asia as a short-term diplomat; and his attitudes toward the 1898 reform movement as well as the 1911 revolution. This chapter highlights Zheng's role in the semi-official enterprises and in late Qing informal diplomacy toward Southeast Asia and Japan, as well as Zheng's visions of a maritime China and an East Asian community. The narrative on Zheng's interaction in the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 provides an interpretation of the 1898 reform movement from the perspective of moderate Shanghai gentry-merchants.

Chapter three examines public opinion in both Chinese and Western print media and focuses on the *Shenbao*, one of the most influential print media outlets in China before 1949. The examination of the background, editorial principles, and opinions of the *Shenbao* demonstrates that the commercial newspaper was introduced into Shanghai as a Western-style mass medium and forum of public opinion. Although British merchants owned and managed the *Shenbao*, the Chinese urban elite edited it and contributed to it. As a result, they helped form public opinion to articulate Chinese national interests and express explicit nationalistic concerns and the pursuit of social progress. By publishing in the *Shenbao*, Zheng Guanying found a new channel to articulate his ideas to the public and joined the formation of this elite public opinion in the 1870s. More importantly, I argue that a loose network of independent and critical intellectuals was formed among the editors, authors, and advisors of the newspaper and that this network was an indispensable component of the new urban space.

Chapter four is devoted to the reading and interpretation of Zheng Guanying's nationalistic ideas as manifested in his works and private letters, in order to demonstrate how the simultaneous strengthening of the state's capacity and people's power were two pillars in Zheng's thinking. By tracing the formation of Zheng Guanying's worldview and ideas about China's global position, I explicate the nature and multiple implications of incipient Chinese nationalism in the late Qing. I argue that Zheng Guanying's thought was an important contribution to the formation of a Chinese conception of a democracy-based nationalism. While he advocated the strengthening of the state's capacity to manage social affairs, he was not a supporter of authoritarian centralization. On the contrary, Zheng's nationalism showed traits of liberalism and populism. I also point out that the earliest territorial imagination and reconceptualization of China as a finite nation-state appeared in Zheng Guanying and his generation, though Liang Qichao, thirty-one years younger than Zheng, developed a more thorough narrative on this issue.²² In addition, Zheng can be seen as a transitional figure between "culturalism" and "nationalism" as defined by Joseph Levenson.²³ To retain his cultural identity, Zheng showed a strong commitment to Confucianism and an anti-Christian bent.

In chapter five, I turn to the concrete reform plans of Zheng Guanying and focus on his ideal of building a more active and engaging state and promoting the organic connection between the state and society and between different regions of China through education, media, and modern communications. Because Zheng never set foot in Europe or America, his descriptions of the "West" were largely a result of cultural imagination, in which he idealized Western superiority in social management and politics. However, this imagination reflected Zheng's desire to search, wittingly or unwittingly, for a liberating force that could prompt the Chinese to reform and improve their country to attain a higher standard of world civilization. At the same time, to make his ideas more acceptable to the ruling elite, Zheng drew on the "historical" experiences of China's Golden Age of the Three Dynasties and actually romanticized the ancient times in order to legitimize reform within the framework of Chinese tradition.

Chapter six examines Zheng Guanying's lifelong concern about morality and the metaphysical Way and his dedication to religious Daoism in his senior years. This chapter shows that the spiritual world of late Qing reformers, as a hidden, private space, was still fundamentally traditional, though not necessarily orthodox, and moral perfection became the last stand of an enlightened thinker who had been largely frustrated by reality. Moreover, this chapter will question the former research paradigm that overemphasized Zheng's identity as a Westernized thinker by focusing on his Daoist religious identity. A consideration of this question will hopefully attract more interest in the relationship between twentieth-century Chinese reform and traditional belief systems.

Above all, this story is essentially a research monograph on the career and thought of an important social thinker in late imperial China. But it attempts to go beyond an analysis of ideas and activities. Rather, my work relates the object, Zheng Guanying, to late imperial China's changing social situation and the larger cultural environment—from rapid urbanization and industrialization to transregional migration; from the formation of a critical intellectuals' group to the emergence of modern print media and public opinion; from Zheng's attempt to integrate Western learning with Chinese tradition to his wrestling with the complexity of Chinese traditions; and from his own activities to his social network. Zheng Guanying provided a new perspective toward understanding late Qing reform and the meaning of being Chinese in these turbulent years.