

## **XIA RUIFANG AND COMMERCIAL PRESS**

Draft of Speech Presented by Chi Wang at the University of Columbia  
*October 4th, 2014*

I am honored to be here today as we remember the life and works of Xia RuiFang. I'd like to provide a brief glimpse into Xia RuiFang's work, his role in China's Commercial Press, and his importance to China's printing industry as well as China's culture and growth as a whole.

When I look at Xia RuiFang's life, it is from the perspective of someone familiar with the great importance of the written word. I worked for nearly 50 years at the Library of Congress. During my time there, I worked to grow the Library of Congress' Chinese collection from 300,000 volumes to over one million by the time I retired in 2004, making it the top center for research on China. I have seen government workers, officials, and academics from around the world come consult these books for their research.

Many of the books I saw used while I was at the Library of Congress were printed by Commercial Press. The Library of Congress has over 50,000 Commercial Press titles that were printed from 1897 to 1958. As far as I know, the Library of Congress doesn't have a record of how many Commercial Press books are in its collection from 1960 until today, but if you added those in I'm sure the total number would at least double. Simply by looking at the numbers, the continuing influence and importance of Commercial Press is clear.

Xia RuiFang is the father of China's modern publishing industry, but he started from a humble background, having been born in a poor village outside Shanghai. It was at an American missionary school in Shanghai where he was first exposed to the Western education system, and even more importantly, the Western style textbooks Commercial Press would later embrace and become a pioneer of in China. It was also there that he took his first course in publishing.

After leaving school, Xia began working for Western newspapers in Shanghai. It was during a time when the influence of the industrial revolution was growing inside China and Western concession zones in Shanghai were bringing in modern influences from the West.

Xia RuiFang and his friends from school, the Bau brothers and Gao Fengchi, shared a dream of opening a Chinese run printing press at a time those didn't exist. There were eight original investors who used \$4,000 to open the printing press. It was founded in 1897 and they named it Commercial Press or Shangwu Yin Shu Guan.

Xia began as the general manager and soon took charge of all aspects of Commercial Press. It began simply as a print shop with only ten workers. Xia grew Commercial Press from these humble beginnings and encouraged reinvestment and expansion so that it soon became a publishing house.

Their first book was printed in 1898. It was *English Primer*, an English textbook printed in both Chinese and English. It was a huge success, with the first edition selling out in days. Commercial Press began printing fiction, scholarly work, and textbooks from all disciplines. They even published the first Chinese-English dictionary. Under Xia's skill and determination, Commercial Press was able to keep up with changing times and technology, attract new talent, and become the forerunner for the industry.

Xia RuiFang valued his work at Commercial Press over all else. It was about more than just business. He saw the importance of publishing and education. He understood the value of books and of being exposed to a wide range of ideas and views.

Commercial Press, with its motto, "promoting education to enlighten the public," was formed at the right time to make a real impact on Chinese society. It was started during the Qing Dynasty as Western influence was growing and soon after the Sino-Japanese War. It was a time when the Chinese were beginning to realize that they needed to end the old system and embrace modernization. The goals of Xia and the Commercial Press aligned perfectly with these new attitudes.

Xia chose to print Western style textbooks and encourage modern education during a time of great transition. What Commercial Press chose to print influenced China's education and encouraged modernization. It helped steer the course of China's cultural development and growth. As a professor who has been teaching since 1969, I am acutely aware of the difference the choice in textbook makes. Textbooks have the power to shape generations of young minds. Commercial Press did just that.

Everyone who grew up in China has read some book or textbook printed by Commercial Press. When I was in elementary school, I used a Commercial Press textbook. In high school I used Commercial Press textbooks. And in college. Its influence has also expanded worldwide, including the many Chinese diasporas and other Chinese speakers internationally. The success of Commercial Press has been beyond expectation.

It isn't only Commercial Press textbooks that have had a lasting impact. In 1904, Commercial Press published its first magazine, *Eastern Miscellany* or *Dongfang Zazhi*. Even today, past issues of this magazine provide valuable insight into the many periods of transition China went through after 1904. It is not surprising that the Library of Congress houses every issue of this important publication. Commercial Press also published *Women's Magazine*, *Short Story Magazine*, *Youth Magazine*, and more. This wide variety of Western concept magazines made an impact in every field.

Over the years, practically every major Chinese language author has had one of their books published by Commercial Press, drawn to Commercial Press' well-respected reputation based on a long and notable history. I am proud to count my own personal memoir among these publications.

Commercial Press also served as a major publisher for Chinese classic literature, such as the *Analects of Confucius*. They popularized the reading of these rare books and classics, with thousands of books being shown to a new generation. No other publisher could achieve this feat. During a tumultuous period of change in China, Commercial Press provided a people searching for new identity with both a link to its past, through Confucian and the classics, and a guide to move forward and modernize, through its Western inspired publications. This combination of modernity and the past would end up shaping China's future identity.

Xia RuiFang founded Commercial Press just one year before the Hundred Days Reform Movement in 1898. The timing cannot be ignored. Zhang Yuanji was among the well-respected scholars who took part in the reforms. He earned a jinshi in the national imperial civil service exams, which was the highest scholarly achievement. He was a teacher, China scholar, advisor to Emperor Guang Xi, and champion of education reform. In 1903, he joined Xia RuiFang at Commercial Press, further combining its goal of publishing with ones of textbook and education modernization.

The Commercial Press became more than just a publishing house. It became a center for China's intellectual activity -- a place where many now well-known Chinese scholars met and exchanged ideas. They went on to become revolutionaries, government officials and more. Zhang Yuanji, for example, eventually served on the National People's Congress. The long-term influence of these individuals, and on the positive atmosphere created by Commercial Press, is unimaginable and extends well into today.

Today we are marking 100 years since Xia RuiFang was shot and killed in January 1914 at the age of 43. At the time, Commercial Press had only been open for 17 years. Now, 100 years after his death, Commercial Press is still going strong and is located in the three major urban centers of Beijing, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The founders' small initial investment had grown to an amazing \$500,000 by Xia's death and has only continued to grow.

Despite the many years, much of what was important to Commercial Press under Xia RuiFang still is today. I remember in 1982, receiving an invitation from Chen Lifu to visit him in Taipei. Chen Lifu was a Kuomintang leader during the Republican Era who had retired to Taiwan after briefly trying his hand at chicken farming in the U.S. In Taiwan he discovered a love for Chinese classics.

When I met with him, he told me about his plan to publish the complete 1,000 volume set of Siku Quanshu. It is the largest and most comprehensive collection of classic Chinese literature and history. This was a huge undertaking, and Chen Lifu wanted to make sure there would be interest. He told me that if the Library of Congress agreed to buy a set, he would move forward with printing. I went back to DC and spoke with the Librarian of Congress at the time, Daniel Boorstin, who was also a well-respected scholar of American history. He told me to purchase two sets -- There's a good lesson in this. If you have a good relationship with your boss, you can do almost anything.

Chen LiFu was very excited at the news, although my colleagues at the Library of Congress were not as excited about receiving the shipment of 2,000 books. Chen was ready to go forward with printing. And of course, it was Commercial Press who had agreed to attempt this ambitious printing project. Their risk paid off -- They ended up selling hundreds of the full sets.

The ongoing success of Commercial Press is a testament to Xia RuiFang's strong leadership skills and even stronger ambition. It was Xia's vision that set the foundation today's Commercial Press was built upon. Not even the Chinese Civil War and transition into a Communist China could destroy what Xia had built. He truly understood the value and longevity of books and knew, as those of us here today know as well, that nothing is more powerful.

I am glad that I was able to share my thoughts here with you today and am honored for the invitation from the Columbia University East Asian Library and the China Institute. I used to be a frequent participant in China Institute events and I have spoken at Columbia in the past. I am honored that, even after retiring from the Library of Congress ten years ago, you still remember my work and are interested in hearing my thoughts.

Thank you for listening.