Negotiated Power in Late Imperial China

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The Zongli Yamen and the Politics of Reform

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To the memory of my parents
Rome and Kathleen Rudolph

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN NOTES

Archives:

ZYQD — *Zongli Geguo Shiwu Yamen Qing Dang* 總理各國事務衙門清檔 (The Qing dynasty Archives of the Office for Managing Foreign Affairs). Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

ZYJLJB — Jinling jibu 禁令缉捕 (Documents concerning the prohibitions and seizures).

ZYDFJS — Difang jiaoshe 地方交涉 (Documents concerning conduct of foreign relations on a local level).

Published Collections of Documents:

DQHD — *Qing hui dian* 清會典 (Collected Statutes of the Qing Dynasty). Guangxu edition. Reprint, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1991.

DQLS — *Da Qing lichao shilu Dezong chao* 大清歷朝實錄德宗朝 (Veritable records of the successive reigns of the Qing dynasty, Dezong [Guangxu]) reign). Compiled by Da Manzhou diguo guowuyuan. Tokyo: Okura Shuppan Kabushiki Kaisha, 1937–1938.

DYZZ — *Dierci yapian zhanzheng* 第二次鴉片戰爭 (Collected documents of the Second Opium War), edited by Qi Sihe 齐思和, et al. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1978–1979.

GCDX — *Guangxu chao donghua xulu* 光緒朝東華續錄 (The Donghua Records, continued: Guangxu period), compiled by Zhu Shoupeng 朱壽朋. Shanghai: 1909.

GZD — *Gongzhong dang: Guangxu chao zouzhe* 宮中檔光緒朝奏摺 (Secret Palace Memorials of the Guangxu period), edited by the National Palace Museum. Taibei: National Palace Museum, 1973–1975.

ZWZJ — *Jindai Zhongguo waijiaoshi ziliao jiyao* 近代中國外交史資料輯要 (A sourcebook of imperial documents relating to the modern diplomatic history of China). Compiled by Jiang Tingfu (Tsiang T'ing-fu) 蔣廷黻. 1931–1934, Reprint, Taibei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1958–1959.

QGF — *Qingting zhi gaige yu fandong* 清廷之改革與反動, parts 1, 2 (Qing Court reform and reactionism). Vol. 7 of *Geming yuanliu yu geming yundong* 革命源流與革命運動 (Revolutionary origins and the revolutionary movement). Zhonghua Minguo kaiguo wushi nian wenxian bian wei yuanhui 中華民國開國五十年文獻編案員會 comp. Taibei: Zhengzhong Shuju, 1963–1965.

QSG — *Qing Shi Gao* 清史稿 (Draft history of the Qing dynasty). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994.

QSL	*Da Qing lichao shilu* 大清歷朝實錄 (Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty). 60 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985–1987.
QSLZ	*Qing shi lie zhuan* 清史列傳. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987.
QXWT	*Qingchao xu wenxian tongkao* 清朝續文獻通考 (A supplement of the Qing Classified Historical Documents). Compiled by Liu Jinzao 劉錦藻. 1935. Reprint, Taibei: Xinxing shuju, 1963.
QWS	*Qingji waijiao shiliao* 清季外交史料 (Historical materials concerning foreign relations of the late Qing). 218 *juan*. Compiled by Wang Yanwei 王彥威. Beijing: Waijiao shiliao bian zuan chu, 1932–1935.
YWSM	*Chou ban yiwu shimo* 籌辦夷務始末 (The complete management of foreign affairs) 1929–1931. Reprint, Taibei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1970–1971.
YWSM-DG	80 *juan* for the Daoguang reign
YWSM-TZ	100 *juan* for the Tongzhi reign
YWSM-XF	80 *juan* for the Xianfeng reign
YWYD	*Yangwu Yundong* 洋務運動 (The Westernization movement). Edited by the Chinese Historical Society. Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1961.

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REIGN TITLES OF THE QING EMPERORS (1644–1911)

Abbreviations used in text and notes

SZ	Shunzi	1644–1661
KX	Kangxi	1622–1722
YZ	Yongzheng	1723–1735
QL	Qianlong	1736–1795 The Qianglong Emperor also ruled from 1796–1799, after abdicating the throne.
JQ	Jiaqing	1796–1820
DG	Daoguang	1821–1850
XF	Xianfeng	1851–1861
TZ	Tongzhi	1862–1874
GX	Guangxu	1875–1908
XT	Xuantong	1909–1912

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THE ZONGLI YAMEN IN TIME AND PLACE

IN LATE 1850S CHINA, AFTER TWO HUNDRED YEARS of relatively peaceful rule, the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and its leaders found themselves in the midst of a hailstorm of challenges. Internal uprisings raged in the north, south and west, with the most notable—the Taiping—extending over one-third of the empire's heartland and lasting nearly fifteen years (1850–1864). Suppression of the Nian Rebellion, which destabilized the area between Beijing and the Taiping capital of Nanjing from 1851 to 1868, occupied imperial forces as well.[1] The scope of the rebellions reflected the dynastic crises that had been building within China since the late eighteenth century. Weakening and dividing China, the internal conflicts opened the way for Euro-American imperialist inroads into the Qing Empire. Western countries assaulted the dynasty along the coast with demands for market access and higher-level diplomatic relations. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, much to the Qing Court's dismay, Great Britain took the lead in backing its demands on China with formidable military might, culminating in the Opium Wars of 1839 to 1842 and 1858 to 1860. The constant threat of military action behind Western demands for treaties and their enforcement established gunboat diplomacy as the primary means to compel Chinese acceptance of expansive Euro-American economic interests. The breadth and frequency of the internal and external threats motivated the Qing

Court to experiment with new and old tactics alike in its search for methods and strategies to reestablish peace and maintain rule. The founding of the Zongli geguo shiwu yamen (hereafter referred to as the Zongli Yamen), China's first Foreign Office, in 1861 proved to be a pivotal moment in this quest for survival, as it marked the adoption of a new policy toward the West and, perhaps more importantly, marshaled the flexibility and dynamism of the Qing system to steer the dynasty through another fifty years of challenges.

Spanning the turbulent years from 1861 to 1901 and heading the Qing efforts to regain control of its empire through the Self-Strengthening Movement, the Zongli Yamen played a seminal role in the direction and survival of the Qing regime.[2] By virtue of its position in the government hierarchy and the timing of its creation, the Zongli Yamen's existence and actions had a significant impact on questions of central government strength vis-à-vis local activism and the government's ability to cope with internal and external problems. Consequently, analysis of the Zongli Yamen provides a window for viewing two of the most important questions of the day: the shifting balance of local, regional, and central power in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion, and the nature of reform during the Self-Strengthening period.[3] In other words, a close study of the Yamen's development and functioning within the Qing system contributes to the debates revolving around the nature and capacity of the late Qing state.

The Zongli Yamen also helps illuminate the possibilities for viable and effective institutional change in the late Qing. Scholars now recognize that major institutional change occurred during the dynasty, especially in its early years; the second half of the dynasty, however, is still commonly perceived as geared toward protecting existing structures, rather than as engineering innovative solutions to the complex of problems that faced society and the government. Despite the bias against the late Qing, the Zongli Yamen represents a major example of institutional reform, if the only one during that period. Scholars can no longer ignore the key that the Zongli Yamen, through its formative process and functioning, holds to our understanding of the capacity for reform in nineteenth-century China.

Delving into the Zongli Yamen as a positive case study for meaningful change allows for a clear and improved picture of how the Chinese state viewed reform and under what circumstances it was accommodated.

The scholarly literature has frequently portrayed the nature and extent of change in imperial China, whether intellectual or institutional, as constricted by the confines of Confucianism. Full examination of the Zongli Yamen shows, however, that change, if examined in context, was not only possible within the Chinese bureaucracy, but significant mechanisms existed by which to generate it. In the late Qing, the goal of the Zongli Yamen was to strengthen China's system in the face of threats, revealing the vitality of a mature bureaucracy in restructuring itself. The various stages in the Zongli Yamen's founding and development suggest transformation rather than continuity and exhibit the dynamism that allowed the Qing regime to last nearly three hundred years. In the complicated world of the late nineteenth century, as in the complex world of the new millennium, exploring the process of reform is well worth our attention. Through this study of the Zongli Yamen, I provide an example of institutional reform that speaks to how the mature Qing bureaucracy restructured itself to meet the exigencies of the day.

Views of the Past

Because the Zongli Yamen played an important role in navigating the problematic relationship with Western countries, early accounts of it view the very act of establishing the institution as a move toward adopting Western methods of diplomacy; consequently, they focus primarily on its state-to-state interactions, excluding its domestic functioning and internal meaning. The diplomatic emphasis is partly due to past scholarly expectations that the creation of the institution itself and the subsequent Self-Strengthening period resulted solely from Western diplomatic and commercial actions in China and that the efforts, believed to be aimed at achieving Western-style modernization, were wrought from the Chinese government by the impact of Western actions. This approach is predicated on the

assumption that the inherent nature of the Chinese governmental system was static and required exogenous stimuli in order to progress substantially toward modernization and that all efforts to achieve modernization were in response to Western actions. The first assessments of the Zongli Yamen, written in the 1950s and earlier, contain the above assumptions and fall under the "impact-response" rubric of analysis. Most notable are the accounts of the Zongli Yamen in treatments of coastal treaty ports and diplomatic history, with Ssu-yű Teng and John King Fairbank's influential *China's Response to the West* (1954) as a prime example.[4]

A corollary to the "impact-response" treatment of the Zongli Yamen is an approach that stresses the steadfastness of Chinese tradition at the expense of modernity. In these accounts, conservative Confucianism obstructs the Chinese road to progress, as defined by the Western path to modernity. In studies of nineteenth-century Chinese governance, this modernization approach regularly highlights China's qualitative deficiencies in its response to Western stimuli. Scholars, with one eye on the Euro-American bar, aim to discern what went wrong with China and to ascertain why China did not manage to meet that standard by modernizing like the Euro-American nations or even Asia's own Meiji Japan. With their concentration on deficiencies in Chinese society that prevented China's effective response to the West, the works either dismiss Chinese reform efforts as inherently inadequate and "traditional" or they sacrifice Chinese actors' agency in those efforts by over-emphasizing that of Western actors. The underlying question in both approaches of why China did not make a stronger, more sustained and more significant effort to meet the challenge of the West shapes the historical narratives that result.[5]

Stressing linear development consistent with Western experience and expectations, modernization literature portrays a China dominated by a static Confucian state incapable of generating meaningful reform. Within this framework, the Zongli Yamen is judged by Western expectations for change and action leading to modernization.[6] The seeming ineptitude of the Qing to meet the challenges of the day

ultimately led to the 1911 Revolution. Responsibility for the failure of the Qing dynasty, according to this school of thought, lay with the persistence of traditional approaches, with the Zongli Yamen as a collaborator protecting tradition at the expense of change.[7] To further this line of reasoning, the Zongli Yamen, because it emerged from Chinese tradition, simply could not represent a significant change in institutional form and was incapable of either generating or leading real constitutional reform. The Western-centric orientation of the basic assumptions behind the modernization framework has prevented a more balanced examination of the process and possibilities of change within the traditional Chinese system.[8]

Many scholars of political change in late Qing China have focused on the reign of the Tongzhi emperor, known as the Tongzhi Restoration (*Tongzhi zhongxing*, 1862–1875), and the Self-Strengthening period as critical times of lost opportunity in imperial China's history, times when China could have chosen the path of modernization and did not.[9] The decade-long Tongzhi Restoration was a respite of sorts for China from Western aggression. The Qing Court and government had already been forced to accept diplomatic relations with Western countries by means of the unequal treaties. The new Tongzhi emperor seemingly changed the orientation of the court toward a cooperative relationship with the treaty powers, allowing the signatory powers to enjoy political and economic privileges and status, in the hope that additional warfare could be avoided. During the Restoration, the Qing Court restored internal order following the Nian and Taiping rebellions, as well as the military assaults from the West. The former left the court struggling to reassert central control over areas torn by the effects of the rebellions and dependent on local elite for stability. The latter posed the problem of asserting sovereignty in the face of foreign aggression and intimidation and devising strategies for retaining legitimacy while addressing the complexities of the foreign encroachments. Through the upheaval of the Second Opium War that immediately preceded the Tongzhi emperor's reign, three leaders emerged who steered China in its new policy direction, changing key aspects of the

political machinery of the Qing bureaucracy in the process. Under their guidance, the Qing Court created the Zongli Yamen and adopted the new policy of adherence to treaty obligations. To its Euro-American counterparts, China seemed to be joining the Western system of international relations and the "family of nations."[10]

Despite Western hopes, Qing government and society did not Westernize according to Western expectations; nor did the atmosphere of Sino-Western cooperation last through the events of the early-1870s. Because of the unmet expectations, modernization scholars have argued that the Tongzhi Restoration adopted the superficial approach of placing new policies on old institutions to manage the West. Accordingly, as portrayed, the policies of the period had no roots in the Confucian system and therefore could not flourish, or alternatively, the Confucian system was too inflexible to generate or absorb innovative policies. In either case, the resulting assessment is the same: Tongzhi policies were doomed to failure. Modernization scholars determined that Tongzhi Restoration reformers were not interested in reform or modernization in the Western sense; rather they aimed to restore the glory of the Confucian system, as the name given the period implies.

The contribution and influence of Mary Wright's *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism*, one of the main works exploring the Zongli Yamen, continue today; however, the limitations of her modernization approach diminishes that book's analytical power in explaining the value of change in Chinese terms. Wright presents Confucianism as posing the biggest obstacle to Chinese modernization. Meaningful institutional reform could not occur until Confucianism was overcome. Thus, the Zongli Yamen, in Wright's account, ultimately becomes less significant than it is, because it emerged from within the Confucian framework.

Although modernization paradigm scholarship associates the Zongli Yamen with the Tongzhi Restoration, its origins are actually in the Xianfeng reign (1850–1861). Because the tones and concerns of the two reigns differed in many respects, the association with one or the other is noteworthy. Scholars who have utilized a modernization

approach have portrayed the Xianfeng emperor as dismissive of the West and not open to modernization. Instead of the study of international law and treaty fulfillment, he and his reign are marked by war advocacy and hostility toward the West. Nonetheless, the Xianfeng emperor and his advisors approved the creation of the new Qing Zongli Yamen, which strove to reestablish and maintain peace through diplomacy. Therefore, despite Western depictions of the reign as stagnant or inflexible, sufficient momentum for action and reform existed, if out of necessity, by the end of the Xianfeng reign. The Tongzhi reign, on the other hand, has long been associated with the restoration of a more peaceful and stable Confucian rule. By often designating the Zongli Yamen as a Tongzhi creation, scholars construct it as "Confucian," meaning it was structurally and socially nonchallenging. This ideological identification defines the capacity for institutional change as equally limited and does not allow for serious consideration of the potential for institutional change within the existing system. At issue are the interpretation of change, the identification of innovation, and the assessment of the equivalency of the concept of reform in the nineteenth-century Chinese and nineteenth-century Euro-American contexts.[11]

For other Zongli Yamen scholars, the issue of personality has the greatest explicative value for understanding the organization. In these renditions, Prince Gong, one of the Yamen founders, and his relationship to the Court determined the fate of the Zongli Yamen's efforts.[12] Like Wright, Fairbank and Hsu, personality scholars seek to identify dysfunction and explain the failure to achieve modernity at the expense of examining the processes that indicated substantial institutional change was underway. By focusing on personality rather than the questions with which the personalities concerned themselves, the resulting works do not recognize that powerful Qing officials not only viewed institutional change as possible, but also were actually attempting to implement it.[13] More importantly, owing to their concentration on personality as the critical component behind the evolution of the Zongli Yamen, they discount institutional factors.