ZHANG YINLIN’S *EARLY CHINA*

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The extraordinary social and political changes of the late Qing and Republican periods provided great challenges for scholars. The new education system and the vernacular literature movement meant that the audience for almost all forms scholarship was growing. But it was also of a fundamentally different character. Scholars found themselves confronting a completely new environment, an environment in which they had to try to manage the transition from fragmenting empire to emerging nation-state. For many historians this meant grappling with the issue of what a ‘national’ history might mean, and how to tell that national story in a way that would give meaning to the inherited cultural legacy yet also engage the new audience for scholarship and thus help shape the emerging nation-state. Some historians were unforgiving, intentionally carrying the rich historiographical tradition of the past into the present and expecting readers to rise to this level. If this was well done, as with Liu Yizheng’s (柳诒徵 1880–1956) *Zhongguo wenhua shi* 中國文化史 (A Cultural History of China) or Qian Mu’s (錢穆 1895–1990) *Guoshi dagang* 國史大綱 (An Outline of the Nation’s History), then an audience was found, albeit one that was deliberately focused on the retention of considerable skill with the classical language.1 Other scholars decided that a new general history must be of completely different order. If it was to reach as wide an audience as possible, such a history could not be written in the same way as had histories in the past. Not only must it be written in the vernacular language, its style and content needed to respond to the great social changes of the recent past. The most successful book of this kind was Zhang Yinlin’s (張蔭麟 1905–1942) *Zhongguo shanggu shigang* 中國上古史綱 (Outline of the History of Early China, hereafter *Early China*), which was first published in 1941 and has been continuously in print ever since.2

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1 See Liu 1932, and Qian 1940.
2 The book has appeared in a number of different editions and under a variety of titles. For details on this see Zhou 2002a: 355. The edition I have used for all references is *Zhongguo shanggu shigang* published in Taipei by Liren shuju in 1982 [Hereafter Zhang
Zhang’s motivation for writing *Early China* was similar to that shared by most other writers of general histories during these years, patriotism and a concern for the fate of the Chinese nation and its peoples. He wrote most of the book while living in Beijing in the period between the Japanese conquest of Manchuria in 1931 and then the invasion of China proper in 1937, and he completed the remaining chapters over the next few years after joining the mass exodus to Kunming. In the preface to the book Zhang stated:

> In the context of these troubled times, looking back over the achievements during the past ten years of the new history, from the collation and the synthesizing of materials through to the articulation of new historical perspectives, I want to write a new general history of China in order to help the nation understand itself in a time of unprecedented change. Is this not what a historian ought to do?

Zhang believed that good history could help Chinese people through this difficult time of invasion and war. In a letter written soon after the Japanese takeover of Manchuria, Zhang wrote that while “the current situation of the country gives people little cause for optimism, if we try to keep focused on wider historical trends we will see that the aggressive Japanese invasion will not last… If I only look to the current situation I am pessimistic, but if I look to the future then I am not.” As Hon Tze-ki has argued, Zhang believed that good history could provide his fellow citizens with “a sense of mission.” One of the lessons of the past was that there had been times in which China had endured similar turmoil, yet it had emerged from this strengthened. Without being overtly patriotic, well written history could help generate a sense of resolve amongst Chinese people, enabling them to look beyond the devastation of the present and to work towards a better future. This was what motivated Zhang Yinlin when he decided to write his general history of China.

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