



MMS

Modern Media Studies

MMS, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2025, pp.310-318.

Print ISSN: 3078-3151; Online ISSN: 3104-5049

Journal homepage: <https://www.mmsjournal.com>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64058/MMS.25.2.15>



A Clear and Thoughtful Portrait of Publisher Zhao Nangong: A Review of Xian Liqiang's *Chinese Publisher: Zhao Nangong*

Duan Yu

Abstract: The biography “*Chinese Publishers: Zhao Nangong*” by Xian Liqiang is the first systematic study of Zhao Nangong. Based on the collation, verification, and hierarchical application of historical materials, the author presents a comprehensive account of Zhao Nangong’s life and publishing career despite the scarcity of historic materials. The book offers an impartial and objective portrayal of Zhao Nangong as a publisher, highlighting his characteristics and providing an appropriate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Zhao Nangong’s publishing activities while strictly adhering to historical facts. Furthermore, the book offers methodological significance for writing biographies of publishers similar to Zhao Nangong in terms of historical material collection and utilization, grasping the publishing characteristics of the biographical subject, and exercising the author’s subjectivity.

Keywords: Zhao Nangong; Tai Dong Book Publishing Company; publisher biography

Author Biography: **Duan Yu**, a lecturer at the College of Culture and Health Communication of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Research interests: modern Chinese literature and communication, modern Chinese publishing history. E-mail: duanyu@tjutcm.edu.cn.

标题: 对出版家赵南公形象的清晰勾勒与深入思考——评咸立强的《中国出版家·赵南公》

摘要: 咸立强著《中国出版家·赵南公》是第一部系统研究赵南公的传记。作者基于史料的梳理、考证和有层次的运用，在史料缺乏的情况下完整展现了赵南公的生平和出版

经历，公允且持正地呈现了赵南公作为出版家的形象与特点，并在充分尊重史实的基础上对赵南公出版活动的优劣长短进行了恰切的评价。本书也对写作与赵南公类似出版家的传记时，在史料搜集与使用、把握传主出版特质和发挥了作者的主体性等方面提供了方法论层面的意义。

关键词：赵南公；泰东图书局；出版家传记

作者简介：段煜，天津中医药大学文化与健康传播学院讲师。研究方向：中国现代文学与传播、中国现代出版史。电邮：duanyu@tjutcm.edu.cn。

In recent years, with the deepening of publishing history research, the academic community has begun to pay more attention to the study of typical publishers, as stated in the article “*On the Contemporary Value and Academic Significance of the ‘Chinese Publishers’ Series*”, the study of publishers can “to some extent reverse the tendency of ‘seeing things but not people’ in past publishing history research”. In the way of “writing a biography of culture”, “enrich and improve the data reserve of publishing history, and promote the theoretical construction and disciplinary development of editing and publishing studies”. (Fan Jun, Zeng Jianhui, 2019, p156) Writing biographies of representative publishers helps to present the publishing experiences and ideas of publishers in a three-dimensional way and provides beneficial supplements to the study of publishing history from the aspects of life history, mental history, and spiritual history. On this basis, what aspects should be included in the biographies of publishers, how to handle various problems and relationships in the historical materials of publishers’ lives, and how to grasp the academic, historical and popular nature of the biographies of publishers have become questions worthy of consideration for researchers.

Xian Liqiang’s *Chinese Publishers: Zhao Nangong* (People’s Publishing House, 2020, hereinafter referred to as “this book”), is the first study biography of Zhao Nangong in China. As part of the “*Chinese Publishers*” series, this book takes the life experiences of the subject as a thread and presents in six chapters the detailed account of Zhao Nangong’s initial management of the Tai Dong Book Publishing Company (Hereinafter referred to as “Tai Dong”), the reconstruction of the ideal new Tai Dong, the support and cultivation of the Chuang Zao She, the promotion of cultural publishing, the management of the bookstore, and the publishing activities in his later years. The book clearly Outlines Zhao Nangong’s publishing activities, business characteristics, ideological changes, and interpersonal interactions, presenting a three-dimensional image of Zhao Nangong as a publisher. At the same time, the book’s approach to writing and its handling of some real issues have methodological significance for the writing of biographies of publishers, especially for dealing with some issues similar to Zhao Nangong’s life.

1. Make up for the lack of direct historical materials with multi-level use of historical materials

Biographical writing needs to be based on historical materials. But among modern Chinese publishers, there is relatively limited information about Zhao Nangong. There are two main reasons for this. First, Zhao Nangong’s own writings are scarce, and there is a lack of archives kept by the Tai Dong, resulting in a scarcity of direct historical materials related to Zhao Nangong. Although publishers generally have the nature of

“making clothes for others”, most of them entered the publishing industry out of their interest in culture and left some writings in the fields they were interested in, which would be used by later researchers. Zhao Nangong was not a typical “cultural man”. He engaged in business in his early years and later joined the Tongmenghui. His connection with the cultural circle was relatively weak, and he published very few works and left little written materials. According to the 35 biographies of publishers published in “*Chinese Publishers*”, the number of writings and archival materials left by Zhao Nangong and the Tai Dong ranks among the bottom five, and there are less than 10 papers retrieved on CNKI with Zhao Nangong as the subject. Second, the Tai Dong was short-lived and had a high staff turnover rate, resulting in a lack of related indirect historical materials. The Tai Dong was small in size and had a high turnover rate, lacking staff similar to Zhao Nangong’s status who could have accompanied him for most of his publishing career. This led to a lack of sufficient witnesses to Zhao Nangong’s publishing activities, and the recollections of Zhao Nangong by his fans were rather fragmented and lacked systematicness. This is more evident when the subject’s career encounters adversity. Zhao Nangong died in 1938, but information related to Zhao Nangong has been hard to find since 1933.

Based on these two points, the authors of this book first collected and integrated the existing historical materials to the greatest extent possible and established a scientific, well-structured and well-structured system of historical materials. The materials used by the author can be roughly divided into four levels, which are both distinct and coordinated, all aimed at presenting a complete image of Zhao Nangong.

The materials at the first level include Zhao Nangong’s works and recollections of those who worked with him, mainly *Zhao Nangong’s Diary*, and recollections of those who served in Tai Dong such as Shen Songquan and Zhang Jinglu. Although the number of such materials is small, they are relatively close and reliable, coming from Zhao Nangong himself and those directly related to him. Therefore, such historical materials often serve as the starting point for the author to begin a discourse. For example, in section 3 of Chapter 3 of this book, “Wang Jing or Guo Moruo, only one can be chosen,” the author uses Zhao Nangong’s diaries from this period as a clue, supplemented by other historical materials, to analyze Zhao Nangong’s selection and trade-offs of the editorial staff. Based on the fundamental first-hand materials, this book has sufficient credibility for the construction of Zhao Nangong’s image.

At the second level are the relevant materials from the Tai Dong. This is closely related to Zhao Nangong’s “human and social integration” characteristics as a publisher. The so-called “human and social integration” refers to the obvious overlap between the publisher himself and the publishing house where he works. The publisher is the most important and even the only representative figure of the publishing house that can be recorded in history, while other figures of the publishing house may have some fame, but have far less say within the publishing house. This is the case with Zhao Nangong and the Tai Dong. This trait made it possible for Zhao Nangong and the Tai Dong to represent each other to a large extent. Some materials attributed to the Tai Dong, even if they could not be simply determined to be the work of Zhao Nangong, could be basically regarded as reflecting Zhao Nangong’s views and opinions as long as there were no counterexamples to prove that they were contrary to Zhao Nangong’s will. This idea of the use of historical

materials runs through the book and is particularly evident in Chapter 6, “The fallen Wheat does not die”. Zhao Nangong’s later years are desolate and there is a lack of direct historical records. However, through the annual publication and changes of books by the Tai Dong, it is possible to infer and present to some extent the circumstances of Zhao Nangong in his later years. The decline in the number of books published in Tai Dong, the reliance on renting out paper, and the need to sell off the property reflect the financial hardship of Zhao Nangong’s later years.

At the third level are the historical records of the Chuang Zao She and its associates when they worked with Zhao Nangong. In Zhao Nangong’s publishing career, no other group was more important than Chuang Zao She. As the author of this book said, “Among the many small and medium-sized bookstores in China in the 20th century, the Tai Dong was able to stand out and leave its mark in the history of modern publishing mainly because of the Chuang Zao She,” (Xian Liqiang, 2020, p100) Therefore the historical materials of the Chuang Zao She should undoubtedly occupy an important position in the biography of Zhao Nangong. However, the Chuang Zao She and Zhao Nangong ended up parting on bad terms, and Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu, Zheng Boqi and others all had some complaints about Zhao Nangong in their recollections later, and Zhao Nangong himself did not publish articles in response to the Chuang Zao She’s followers, which made the recollections of Zhao Nangong by the Chuang Zao She’s followers to some extent one-sided. Of course, this is not to say that the members of the Chuang Zao She would distort the facts because of the breakdown of the relationship, but as a conflicting party, the relevant people’s evaluation of Zhao Nangong could not be fully trusted. For such historical materials, this book adopts a narrative approach that is based on facts and supplemented by viewpoints. That is, to quote the publishing activities of the two sides as much as possible, and to supplement the recollections of the relevant people. Although this approach may seem to reduce the intensity of the word “Zhao Nangong”, it also does a good job of avoiding making hasty judgments about the subject based on one side of the story.

At the fourth level are various scattered historical materials related to Zhao Nangong. Zhao Nangong’s identity is rather complex. Besides being the head of Tai Dong, he also participated in the Tongmenghui and held positions such as the president of the Shanghai Fourth Road Business Association and a government member. Therefore, there are also some scattered historical materials related to Zhao Nangong in the relevant archives. Most of these materials are not systematic and can explain a limited number of issues, but they can serve as supplementary materials in biographies to explain some problems. For example, regarding the determination of the year of Zhao Nangong’s birth, the author, with *Zhao Nangong’s diary* as the core, referred to the parts related to Zhao Nangong in *Shanghai Chamber of Commerce Monthly* and *Shanghai Bookstore Investigation in 1935*, and thus concluded that Zhao Nangong should have been born in 1882, which is quite credible.

In general, through collection and integration, the author has made full and well-structured use of the existing historical materials in a relatively scarce situation, presenting a complete image of Zhao Nangong from both the front and the side, filling the gap in Zhao Nangong research.

2. Fairly and properly outline the three-dimensional image of the “publisher” Zhao Nangong

As part of the “*Chinese Publishers*” series, the identity of “publisher” should have the same subjective significance as “Zhao Nangong” in this book. As stated in the publication notes of the series, through the writing of biographies of publishers, “from the publishing achievements of one person to a group of people, it reflects the ups and downs of the publishing industry since modern times, and also witnesses the participation of publishing in the cultural and ideological construction of The Times and the profound social and historical content behind it.” Therefore, how to reflect Zhao Nangong’s identity as a “publisher” is another important issue that this book aims to address.

Chapter Five, “The Management of Zhao Nangong’s Bookstore,” best exemplifies Zhao Nangong’s identity as a publisher. As mentioned earlier, Zhao Nangong was not a typical “cultural man”. Although he consciously advocated the publication of new cultural works, his ideas regarding specific book topics and editing were relatively rough. In contrast, Zhao was slightly more accomplished in running bookstores and supporting new talents. However, Zhao’s management of the bookstore was not flawless, as is reflected in his handling of interpersonal relationships. In addition to his fellow workers at the Chuang Zao She, Shen Songquan, Zhang Jinglu, Zhang Yiqu and others who had worked at the Tai Dong and later made a name for themselves in the publishing industry had some conflicts with Zhao Nangong. Therefore, the exploration of management and business ideas is indeed the focus of the study of Zhao Nangong’s publishing activities. The author’s in-depth understanding of Zhao Nangong is presented in a separate chapter.

From the specific content of Chapter Five, the author has well addressed the strengths and weaknesses of Zhao Nangong in data management. The author summarizes Zhao Nangong’s management of the bookstore as “jiang-style family management,” which is manifested in the apprenticeship of staff, the involvement of family members in management, and the separation of work and family life. This “family-like” management made the Tai Dong more flexible compared to large bookstores and more efficient in recruiting people who were in the early stages and relatively less famous. But once the relevant personnel have accumulated some achievements and fame, such a management approach seems less respectful. As the authors of this book put it, “For an unfamous genius, the first thing to consider is not a contract, remuneration, or a stable and reasonable promotion mechanism, but a stage and opportunity to fully display one’s talent.” “By the time one of the partners specifically raises questions such as contract, remuneration, and clear statements, it means that the basis that previously led to the cooperation between the two sides is no longer there. It’s either that the bookstore is dissatisfied with the lack of talent and the cost is not small, or that truly talented people are hard to be retained by the shallow bookstore.” (Xian Liqiang, 2020, p. 209-211)

On this basis, the authors of this book also meticulously summarize several specific manifestations of Zhao Nangong’s family-like management. Zhao often introduced part-time jobs to his staff, which was detrimental to the improvement of the quality of editing and proofreading in the bookstore, but due to the family-like management and the bookstore’s occasional financial difficulties, Zhao had to adopt this method of robbing Peter to pay Paul; The wavering of the publishing direction was partly due to Zhao’s own lack of clear thinking about the direction of data development despite having strong control over the bookstore. When

thefts occurred at the bookstore, Zhao was also unable to handle them openly and impartially. All these remarks hit the mark on why Zhao Nangong was able to recruit talented young men and rely on their power to open up publishing, but always parted ways with them on bad terms.

The book's stereoscopic portrayal of Zhao Nangong is also reflected in its fair and objective evaluation of his merits and demerits. As mentioned earlier, Zhao's interpersonal relationships were rather poor, and he offended many "intellectuals" who were willing to put their grievances to paper, while Zhao himself responded rarely. This also led to a rather negative image of Zhao in the historical documents. But by simple reasoning, it is not difficult to judge that if Zhao Nangong were merely a profit-driven publisher, he would not have had to risk censorship or even imprisonment to engage in the publication of new literature. The author of this book, an expert in the study of the Chuang Zao She, was not influenced by the attitude of his fellow creators towards Zhao Nangong. Instead, with an objective attitude, based on historical materials and evidence, combined with a sympathetic understanding of historical figures, he made a relatively fair and correct evaluation of Zhao Nangong's behavior.

From the examples given in the previous text, it can be seen that the author did not blindly praise Zhao Nangong. For instance, the author clearly demonstrated the drawbacks of his family-like management. The author's understanding of sympathy for Zhao Nangong is reflected in many chapters. When commenting on the dispute between Tai Dong and the Chuang Zao She, the author does not agree with the evaluation of Zhao Nangong as a "shrewd merchant" at that time, and the Chuang Zao She series "though widely sold, all the profits go into the bag of the owner of Tai Dong, Zhao Nangong, and the royalties of a group of authors such as Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu are nowhere to be found". (Shi Yin, 1943) instead of referring to "*Twenty Years in the Publishing world*" : "During the ninth and tenth years of the republic of China, although there were publications of the Chuang Zao She: *Chuang Zao Ji Kan*, *Chuang Zao Zhou Bao*, and new books similar to the Chuang Zao She series, such as *the Decline, the Fossil of the Impact Period, the Autumn of Xuanwu Lake, and the Yuanluo Xing*, were not very popular at that time." (Zhang Jinglu, 2005, p. 68). It emphasizes that for a considerable period of time, the Tai Dong had to borrow money from Zhao Nangong to keep operating normally. When analyzing the copyright dispute between the two sides, it is not entirely on the author's side, but rather that "the paper type belongs to the Tai Dong, and the work belongs to the author. In the absence of a special agreement, the bookstore has the right to continue printing with the original paper form, and the author has the right to handle the work otherwise," and the conflict between the two sides is more likely to stem from "limited resources within the literary field, and the root of the contradiction is the competition for the market." In the conclusion of this book, the author also combines the views of Shen Songquan, Zhang Jinglu, Wen Zichuan, Mo Luo and others to summarize Zhao Nangong's contribution to publishing, neither exaggerating Zhao Nangong's role nor belittling it blindly.

In the work of writing biographies of famous people, there has always been the question of "flattering the grave or writing about the person". This book examines and observes Zhao Nangong with both praise and respect, presenting to readers a vivid image of Zhao Nangong as a publisher in a fair and upright manner.

3. The combination of history and theory fully and without overstepping the boundaries, the author's subjectivity is exerted

While the subject plays a fundamental role in a biography, the subjectivity of the biographer cannot be ignored either. A biography is not simply the accumulation and organization of historical materials about the subject's life, but rather an accurate presentation of the author's image while revealing the author's understanding of the subject. *Modern Biographies* holds that the subject is the "historical subject" and "textual subject" of a biography, while the author is the "writing subject" (Yang Zhengrun, 2009, p45). A good biography should be one in which the author, as the subject of writing, re-creates the subject's "historical" experiences into a complete "text" through his own understanding and writing. In this process, the author's subjectivity should be fully exerted without overstepping the boundaries. If not fully, the biography may become a mere compilation of historical materials; If it oversteps the line, it will dilute or even disregard historical facts, making the biography like water without a source or a tree without roots.

This book has a perfect grasp of the relationship between the subject and the author's subjectivity. This is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, the author did not simply give a linear account of Zhao Nangong's life in chronological order, but seized on the Chuang Zao She, the most important collaborator in Zhao Nangong's publishing activities, as the criterion for chapter division. The first two chapters can be regarded as a prehistory of Zhao Nangong's collaboration with the Chuang Zao She, and through the discussion of Zhao Nangong's early publishing activities and the new Tai Dong of rebuilding ideals, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the internal logic and inevitability of Zhao Nangong's collaboration with the Chuang Zao She; Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the process of Zhao Nangong's collaboration with the Chuang Zao She; Chapter 5 analyzes the characteristics of Zhao Nangong's management of the bookstore in light of the problems arising from the cooperation between Zhao Nangong and the Chuang Zao She and in light of relevant historical materials; Chapter 6 provides a supplementary account of Zhao Nangong's later years after parting ways with the Chuang Zao She. The chapters are detailed and concise, providing a complete account of Zhao Nangong's life and publishing experience without being confined by his linear life, demonstrating the author's accurate judgment of the important nodes of Zhao Nangong's publishing career and achieving a reasonable combination of the subject and the author's subjectivity.

Secondly, in the specific discourse, the author is able to make an evaluation of Zhao Nangong based on historical materials, and there is an organic combination of "narration" and "discussion". Many examples have been mentioned in the previous text, such as the judgment of Zhao Nangong's birth year and the discussion of Zhao Nangong's family management model. For example, in Section 3 of Chapter 2 of this book, "Persistent Recruitment of Li Fengting", the author, in combination with Zhao Nangong's diary, Li Fengting's responses, and Li Fengting's actual connection with the Tai Dong, provides a relatively complete account of Zhao Nangong's recruitment of Li Fengting, but does not simply attribute it to Zhao Nangong's eagerness for talent and his courtesy towards scholars, Instead, it is noted that "publishers are not philanthropists after all, and their purpose is not to educate and cultivate people; When it is possible to recruit good and mature editors, not many people would do the opposite, but rather make trouble by using some novices," "Zhao Nangong did

have the idea of hiring excellent talents, but it was very difficult to implement and not very successful." (Xian Liqiang, 2020, p96-97) This view is incisive, providing evidence of Zhao Nangong's craving for talent without exaggerating or belittling him in an unrealistic way. There are many similar views in the book, but due to space limitations, they will not be listed one by one.

The exertion of the author's subjectivity gives this book full academic significance while presenting the life of Zhao Nangong in its entirety, filling the gap and adding depth to the study of Zhao Nangong.

4. It provides methodological significance for the writing of biographies by publishers

Zhao Nangong, as a representative of the "human and social integration" type of publisher, is somewhat typical among many modern publishers in China. Wu Liande, the founder of Liangyou Book Printing Company, Hua Zhihong, the founder of Guiyang Wentong Bookstore, Shen Junsheng, the general manager of Dadong Bookstore, and Zhang Yiqu, the founder of Children's Bookstore mentioned in the publication notes of this book, all have certain similarities with Zhao Nangong. These publishers have made remarkable achievements in the history of modern Chinese publishing and have certain research value. However, due to the small size of the publishing house or its remote location, or the fact that he himself did not write, there is a scarcity of historical records about it, making it difficult to conduct a detailed study. The writing method of this book can, to some extent, provide reference value for the study of such publishers.

In terms of the collection and use of historical materials, the scope of the collection of historical materials should first be defined in combination with the identity of the subject. For example, the collection of historical materials of Zhao Nangong could be within the scope of the Tai Dong, the Chuang Zao She, the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce, the Shanghai government, etc. Theoretically, the scope of the collection of historical materials of the subject should not be restricted, but considering the practical problems, It is better to start with several areas closely related to the subject. If the scope is too broad, it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack; if it is too narrow, it will lead to bias and omissions. In addition, when using historical materials, attention should be paid to the hierarchy of historical materials, with direct historical materials as the thread and core, supplemented by indirect historical materials as evidence, in order to enhance the credibility of the biography.

Regarding the presentation of the subject identity of the subject, the identity of "publisher" should be observed and considered on an equal footing with the subject himself, revealing the subject's ontological significance as a publisher. Among modern Chinese publishers, many have complex identities, such as Lu Xun and Ba Jin, who lived as literary figures, but their publishing activities also have ontological significance. Therefore, when writing their publishing biographies, it is necessary to focus on publishing and briefly describe content that is not closely related to publishing. For activities that are related to but not led by them, they should be given sufficient attention.

For the exertion of the author's subjectivity, there should be a combination of "history" and "theory". This requires the author to have a profound and appropriate judgment of the subject's life experiences and the main traits of being a publisher. A mere compilation of historical materials naturally has its academic

significance, but a biography is not a simple compilation of historical materials. The work of historical materials should be valued, but not overly rigid.

This book, as the first complete biography of Zhao Nangong, has achieved remarkable results in terms of the selection of historical materials, the presentation of the subject image and the development of the author's subjectivity in the content related to the Chuang Zao She. The author's writing style also has certain methodological significance for writing biographies of publishers similar to Zhao Nangong, not only filling the academic gap in the study of Zhao Nangong, It also provides a useful model at the level of research paradigms. It is believed that with further exploration of historical materials and further exchange of research experience, both the study of Zhao Nangong and the study of biographies of publishers will achieve more remarkable results in the near future.

基金项目：本文系四川省教育厅人文社会科学（郭沫若研究）项目“‘e考据’背景下郭沫若史料的整理与修订研究”（项目编号：GY2022C05）之成果。

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Duan Yu ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2487-8798>

References

范军、曾建辉（2019）：“论‘中国出版家’丛书的时代价值与学术意义”，《河南大学学报（社会科学版）》（02）：152-156。
[Fan Jun, Zeng Jianhui (2019). “Compiling Features and Value of the Times on Series of Chinese Publishers.” *Journal of Henan University (Social Science)* (02):152-156.]

史蟬（1943.6.1）：“记创造社”，《文友》第一卷第二期。
[Shi Yin (1943, June 1). “Some Record of Chuang Zao She.” *Wen You* 1(2).]

咸立强（2020）：《中国出版家·赵南公》。人民出版社。
[Xian Liqiang (2020). *Chinese Publishers: Zhao Nangong*. People's Publishing House.]

杨正润（2009）：《现代传记学》。南昌大学出版社。
[Yang Zhengrun (2009). *A Morden Poetics of Biography*. Nan Chang University Press.]

张静庐（2005）：《在出版界二十年》。江苏教育出版社。
[Zhang Jinglu (2005). *As a Publisher in Twenty Years*. Jiangsu Education Press.]