Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

FREDERICK GENTZ

BA (University of Victoria, 1993)

“Bridging in Shanghai’s Commercial Revolution:
Compradors, Bureaucratic Merchants, and Returned Overseas
Businesspeople as Capitalist Middlemen in Late Qing and Early
Republican China”

Department of History

Wednesday, November 25, 2020
10:00 A.M.
Conducted Remotely

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Guoguang Wu, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Neilesh Bose, Department of History, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Andrew Marton, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Patrick O’Hara, Department of Geography, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Chinese compradors, official managers, and overseas Chinese capitalists have received scholarly attention of late with special notice to studying their contributions to China’s industrial modernization. This thesis shifts this emphasis to seeing these three groups of Chinese merchants as types of Chinese capitalist middlemen, whose principal efforts were in the commercial sector during the late Qing and early Republican periods. Specifically, it focuses on their activities within Shanghai’s International Settlements, where the openings for entrepreneurial innovation could be made the most of with little interference from Chinese state officials. The market created by Chinese capitalist middlemen is distinguished from the greater Chinese economy by its concentration in Shanghai’s International Settlements and its being a commercial revolution.

Particularly, this thesis links entrepreneurial business history with New Institutional Economics by placing the entrepreneur at the heart of Chinese commercial development beginning in the 1860s. It emphatically investigates how the above three types of middlemen’s commercial activities impacted the structural organization of the traditional family firm, reshaping this organization into a modern operation. As the traditional Chinese family firm emerged in a political institutional framework that both favored firms’ risk reduction and official sponsorship, Chinese capitalist middlemen played a part in structurally re-organizing the family firm into the modern firm. Chinese entrepreneurial behavior arose through a social process of bridging whereby daily interactive commercial activities in Western firms in Shanghai provided a means of acculturating Western business practices and a spirit of capitalism. In the cases of compradors, these acculturated practices were employed in their own family firms and reflected a novel risk-taking pattern wherein they engaged in new fields of enterprise. In the cases of guandu shangban enterprises, official managers evolved these firms to absorb the pricing mechanism and lower transaction costs to benefit customers and the firm’s revenue. In the cases of returned overseas Chinese capitalists, in this thesis Australian ones are examined, they capitalized their department stores’ operations through reinvesting overseas Chinese surplus income that had traditionally been returned as remittances home to China. All of them fashioned a cosmopolitan view of themselves and fostered a moral view that combined Confucian and Christian ethics giving rise to a notion of human capital as a form of commercial welfare.