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Beijing's Unknown Railway Museum

By **BRIAN SALTER**

MANY residents of Beijing may be surprised if you were to tell them that the capital has three railway museums. Most of them know Zhengyangmen Exhibition Hall, in the old Peking-Mukden Railway Station, on the southeastern corner of Tian'anmen Square; many, too, know of the Eastern Suburb Locomotive Exhibition Hall to the northeast of 798 District, that has over 100 locomotives and rolling stock from different periods of China's railway development. Yet very few have even heard of the Zhan Tianyou Memorial Museum, let alone been there, though it is just a few minutes' walk from the Badaling section of the Great Wall.



[Mogul loco used on the Peking-Kalgan Railway.](#)

The memorial museum has 9,600 square meters of floor space, arranged over two floors, and outside in front is a large-scale granite relief, some 41 x 5 meters, highlighting Zhan Tianyou's portrait and his contributions to the history of Chinese rail. Inside there are 1,000 items on display, such as mapping instruments, drawing paper, books, manuscripts, medals, insignias, and proposal plans, among other things. There are also some 600 photos, showing not just the life of Zhan Tianyou, but also a general overview of the early days of China's railway construction.

Construction of the museum started in 1984, and it was opened to the public in November 1987. It stands at the highest point along the railway line between Beijing and Zhangjiakou City, close to the Great Wall Museum.

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Chinese Dictionary:



Photo of Zhan taken in 1909.

Zhan Tianyou (1861-1919), or Jeme Tien-Yow as he called himself in English, is celebrated as the "Father of China's Railroads." He was born in 1861 in what is now Guangzhou. In 1872, when he was 12 years old, he was chosen – together with 30 boys of the same age – by Qing imperial officials to be sent to the United States as part of the Chinese Educational Mission. In 1878, he entered the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University, where he majored in civil engineering, with an emphasis on railroad construction.

However, the Qing government officials considered the behavior of the foreign-educated students to be "un-Chinese," believing them to have become too Westernized; and instead of utilizing their education to the full, they were detailed to work as translators or as officers in the newly formed Imperial Navy. Zhan was sent to the Fuchow Arsenal in Fujian Province; but a few years later, in 1884, it was destroyed during the Sino-French War.

In 1888, he became an intern engineer, joining Claude W. Kinder, a British engineer, who had been hired to construct a railway that would link Tientsin (now spelled as Tianjin) with the coalmines in Tangshan. He was soon promoted to engineer, and later to district engineer.

Innovative Railway Designs

In 1902, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) wanted a special 37 km stub line built so she could visit the tombs of her royal ancestors; and eventually, Zhan got the position of chief engineer. He managed to complete the project within budget and to a very tight schedule; and it is said that the Empress was so pleased that permission was given to construct more railways in the country.



Opening ceremony of Peking-Kalgan Railway in Nankou.

Following that success, the imperial Qing government decided to build a railway that would link the capital of Peking to the important trading city of Kalgan (now Zhangjiakou City) to the north. Because of its strategic importance it was stipulated that no foreign engineers were to be hired. Capital would come from the government, and Zhan Tian-you was once again appointed chief engineer. He managed to complete the work two years ahead of schedule and came in under budget. It was the first trunk railway designed and built by China and ran through Juyongguan Pass, Badaling Pass, Shacheng and Xuanhua, over a length of 201 km.

Zhan included a zigzag section near Qinglong-qiao Railway Station to overcome the steep gradient; and when excavating the Badaling railway tunnel, he accelerated construction by drilling a vertical shaft into the path of the tunnel, thus doubling the number of digging teams that could be employed. Its construction began in September 1905 and ended in October 1909, when it was finally opened to traffic.



Tunnel entrance of Juyongguan Pass at the Great Wall.

In 1906 Zhan was also a technical advisor for the construction of the Lo Wu Bridge, which was built as part of the Kowloon-Canton Railway. In 1909, Zhan was elected to become a member of the North British Academy of Arts and also to the American Society of Civil Engineers. He was also a founding member of the Chinese Institute of Engineers, and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Hong Kong in 1916.



[Qinglongqiao Station.](#)

He worked on many other railways in his time; but in 1919, Zhan Tianyou died in Hankou, Hubei Province, at the age of 57. His final resting place was at Qinglongqiao Railway Station, where the Peking-Kalgan Railway crossed the Great Wall.

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