

ZHOU Xuexi

Zhōu Xuéxī 周学熙

1866–1947 *Qing and Republican official*

Zhou Xuexi was an official in the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and early Republic of China (1912–1949). After retiring from public service he championed north China's industrial development, rivaling the reputation of Zhang Jian, another magnate who operated his industrial conglomerate at Nantong near Shanghai.

Zhou Xuexi was born in Nanjing, although his father, Zhou Fu, a noted provincial governor in the Self-Strengthening Movement (a period of institutional reforms during the Qing dynasty), kept an ancestral home at Zhide (now Dongzhi) in Anhui Province. In 1886 the younger Zhou began his bureaucratic career as an attaché at the Bureau of Irrigation and Transportation in the Ministry of Works and became a *juven* (provincial graduate; the official designation granted a passer of a provincial examination) in 1893 under somewhat controversial circumstances. After futile attempts at the coveted *jinshi* degree (presented scholar; a degree conferred on successful candidates in the highest-level Civil service examination), he purchased official titles qualifying him to serve at various provincial posts until he found a patron in Yuan Shikai (who later succeeded Sun Yat-sen as president of the Republic of China). Rising quickly through the ranks, Zhou was instrumental in the establishment of state-supervised enterprises such as the Chee-Hsin Cement Co. (1900), Beiyang Mint (1902),

the Lan-chou Official Mining Co. (1907, merged with the Kaiping Colliery to form the Kailian Mining Administration in 1912), and the Beijing Waterworks (1908). Into the republican period he served as Yuan's chief aide in economic affairs and as minister of finance (1912–1913, 1915–1916). He joined the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) briefly to push through the controversial Reorganization Loan, a £25,000,000 political loan granted in 1913–1914 from England, France, Germany, Russia and Japan in support of Yuan Shikai.

However, Zhou's resistance to Yuan Shikai's monarchical bid and Beijing's factional politics soon forced his resignation. Although subsequently he received appointments such as national director of the Cotton Development Administration (1919), he increasingly pursued private industrial development and investment, beginning with the Guangqin Spinning and Weaving Mill in Wuxi in 1917. Amid charges of misappropriating state property, he privatized the Huaxin Cotton Spinning Mill (Tianjin), which soon branched out to Qingdao in 1918. To ensure a steady supply of raw material and financing, he organized the Xinghua Capital Corp. and Xingji cotton brokerage. Successes led to the launching in 1919 of branch mills at Tangshan and Weihui in Henan Province and formation of the Huaxin Corporation. Capitalized at 10 million yuan, the corporation was to coordinate the activities of the mills, although each retained its own board of directors and accounting independence. Profits from the Kailian mines provided the initial capital for the Yaohua Mechanical Glass Co., Ltd. (1921), a joint venture with Banque d'Outremer Consortium Industriel Belge,

Vanishing Owners and Melting Spindles

The rise and ultimate demise of the cotton mills in Tianjin are indicative of the unpredictable growth and development of industry in China. Zhou Xuexi worked toward repairing such unsteady conditions, which were often exacerbated by lax government policies.

The absence of a stable group of industrialists, a problem both caused and compounded by the political instability of North China, meant that local industry grew in erratic fits and starts. Nowhere is this more clear than in the case of Tianjin's largest mechanized industry, cotton spinning. In its bid to become a cotton center of national stature, Tianjin had several advantages: a local class of moneyed investors, access to raw materials, and a large market. Changes in the political scene brought in new entrepreneurs and gave the mills at least three opportunities to flourish—during World War I, in the late 1930s, and immediately after the Allied victory in

World War II. But in each case chronic warfare, as well as government policies that sometimes verged on the cannibalistic, ultimately made it impossible for industry to prosper.

In the year after World War I, most of the Tianjin cotton mills were founded with the sponsorship of specific official or warlord cliques. Four of the mills were built at the southeastern edge of the concessions; two were north of the old city. Cao Kun, of the Fengtian warlord clique, was a major investor in the Heng Yuan Mill. The Yu Yuan Mill was dominated by the Anfu warlord clique. Its largest single stockholder was Ni Sichong (1.1 million yuan), and its original Board of Directors included Ni, Duan Qirui, and various high officials. Zhou Xuexi's Hua Xin Mill and the Yu Da Mill were other attractive targets for warlord investment.

Source: Hershatter, G. (1986). *The workers of Tianjin, 1900–1949*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 34.

which held the patent on the Fourcault process of making flat glass. To maintain control of these far-flung industries, Zhou established the Huaxin central office in 1922 (dissolved 1931) to oversee the four cotton mills, supported by the Huaxin Bank (flourished 1923, dissolved 1931). Declining reappointments to various companies, he attempted to retain control through his Industrial Office in 1924 but soon retired from active management of the group. At the height of his industrial career he controlled assets estimated at over 40 million yuan.

In retirement Zhou dedicated himself to philanthropic work, establishing lineage halls to commemorate the Zhou family lineage and schools and charitable estates at Wuhu, Zhidong, and Tianjin. He also compiled and financed the publication of works on neo-Confucianism,

although he became a practicing Buddhist and vegetarian in 1929. He was buried in Beijing.

Kwan Man BUN

Further Reading

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