

Railroad(ed) to Death: The China-Tibet Train

With the inauguration on July 1st by Chinese President Hu Jintao of the New Tibet railway, which links Golmud to Lhasa, the assimilation of the “Tibetan Autonomous Region”, as Tibet is known in the Orwellian world of Chinese officialese, into the burgeoning Chinese empire may now be described as having reached the ominous point of no return. No one, except perhaps the most devoted advocates of Tibetan independence, will think of comparing this railway line across “the roof of the world” to the notorious “Death Railway” that most people became aware of through David Lean’s film, “The Bridge on the River Kwai” -- and yet, as shall perhaps become clear, this may be the most apposite comparison at this triumphal moment for the Chinese. As the Japanese military pushed its way across Southeast Asia and sought entry into India, it commandeered a huge labor force of nearly 275,000 men, comprised largely of conscripted Asian workers and allied POWs, to build a railway line from Bangkok to Burma. Working under the most wretched conditions, nearly 100,000 men succumbed to starvation, malnutrition, fatigue from excessive labor, cruel punishment, and diseases such as dysentery, cholera, and malaria. We have a nearly exact tally of the number of British, Australian, Dutch, and American fatalities -- 6,318; 2,815; 2,490; and 131 -- but the Japanese, who are scarcely alone in construing European lives as more worthy than those of miserable Indians, Thais, Koreans, and Burmese, didn’t even bother to count the dead among Asians, some 80,000 of whom are now estimated to have died in less than a year.

The present China-Tibet railway line appears, at first glance, to present a study in contrast. The Chinese narrative about this accomplishment, at least, is unequivocally clear, and the world seems eager to embrace it. By all accounts, this train line across extraordinarily difficult and beautiful terrain is an “engineering marvel”, and the Chinese have been voluble in voicing their opinion that it heralds a new chapter in world railroad history. The latest stretch of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad, from Golmud to Lhasa some 1,142 kilometres away, is largely 4,000 meters or more above sea level, and at 5,072 metres it breaches the highest point of the journey. Oxygen is pumped into cabins to prevent, or alleviate the distress of, altitude sickness; the windows have been equipped with ultra-violet filters to keep out the sun's glare; and a liquid coolant has been added along various stretches to ensure that the permafrost does not melt and thus endanger the structural foundations of the tracks. The official Chinese news agency has released reports which furnish those titbits that habitually enthrall people interested in world records, and among edifying facts it emerges that a record 550 kilometers of the tracks run on frozen earth and that, at 5,068 meters above sea level, the Tanggula Railway Station is now the highest railway station in the world. Railway buffs who salivate at the prospect of exciting tunnel rides can, at 4,905 meters above sea level, travel through the world’s most elevated tunnel, the Fenguoshan, on frozen earth, and at 1,668 meters the Kunlun Mountain Tunnel now becomes the world’s longest tunnel on frozen earth.

One should not, consequently, be surprised that the Qinghai-Tibet railroad has been described in glowing terms as an object lesson for Western engineers who remained skeptical about the viability of the project and as a stunning instantiation of China’s rapid emergence as a world power. Much has been made of the economic rivalry, expected to

grow exponentially over the next two decades, between India and China, but at least one Indian magazine, *Business Standard*, was able to put aside nationalist pride in calling upon Indians to consider that “China’s public miracles “, including the China-Tibet railroad and the gargantuan Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, suggest engineering expertise and project management ability on an awesome scale. The Konkan railway and the Sardar Sarovar dam are simply not in the same league.”¹ The magazine notes that the railway line being laid to Srinagar barely reaches a third of the height scaled by the new train to China. Before the train’s inaugural run, Hu, a trained engineer who also oversaw with his customary efficiency the administration of a martial law regime in Tibet when pro-democracy demonstrations broke out in 1989, described how the world’s highest railway fulfilled a long-cherished dream of the Chinese people and the miraculous enactment of the promise to bring the fruits of socialist modernization to Tibetans and so bring them into the orbit of the civilized world of the global economy. In all these accounts, and countless other similar ones that will continue to emerge in the near future, the story of the China-Tibet railway is writ large in one word: “development”. The argument was put rather more elegantly by the historian William Everdell, who has written that we “call ‘modern’ everything that happened to any other culture after it had built its first railroads.”² If Hu and the global corps of cheerleaders from the business, media, and political worlds are to be believed, with the arrival of the train into Lhasa from China Tibet itself has finally arrived into history.

The cars were installed with environment-friendly toilets, wastewater deposit tank and garbage treatment facilities to protect environment along the railroad.

All the Chinese characters that appear on the electronic screen in each railway car have been translated into Tibetan and English.

The Qinghai-Tibet railway is 1,956 kilometers long, with 960 km of the track located 4,000 meters above the sea level and the highest point at 5,072 meters. The project is dubbed an " engineering marvel" because people used to think the perennial ice and slush along the route could never support tracks and trains.

The railway is projected to help double tourism revenues by 2010 and reduce transport costs for goods by 75 percent in Tibet, officials said.

Backgrounder: Key facts about Qinghai-Tibet Railway

China will open the world's most elevated railroad, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, on Saturday. Below are some facts about the Qinghai-Tibet Railway:

- Qinghai-Tibet Railway is the first railroad linking Tibet with the rest of China.
- China has solved three major difficulties, namely frozen tundra, high altitude and plateau environmental protection, to rewrite the world's history of railway construction with the completion of Qinghai-Tibet Railway.
- None of the hundreds of thousands of railway builders died of altitude sickness in the past five years.
- Qinghai-Tibet Railway is the world's highest railway. Some 960 kilometers of its tracks are located 4,000 meters above sea level and the highest point is 5,072 meters, at least 200 meters higher than the Peruvian railway in the Andes, which was formerly the world's most elevated rail.
- About 29.46 billion yuan (3.68 billion U.S. dollars) had been spent on the Golmud-Lhasa section which runs 1,142 kilometers.
- The basic coach ticket, called a hard seat, sells for 389 yuan (48.6 U.S. dollars) from Beijing to Lhasa, while the price for hard sleeper or bunk costs 813 yuan (101.6 dollars), and the price for a shared compartment or soft sleeper is 1,262 yuan (157.75 dollars).

Chinese President Hu Jintao has opened the world's highest railway, describing it as a "magnificent feat".

The Qinghai-Tibet line boasts high-tech engineering to stabilise tracks over permafrost and sealed cabins to protect passengers from the high altitude.

China says the 1,140km (710-mile) line will bring major opportunities to a poor region.

But critics fear it will be used by China to assert its control over a contested border region.

They also say the railway line threatens not only the delicate Himalayan environment, but also the ancient Tibetan culture.

In parts, the train line has been built on bridges elevated above the most unstable permafrost.

Elsewhere, cooling pipes have been sunk into the ground to ensure it remains frozen to stabilise the tracks.

QINGHAI-TIBET RAILWAY

Connects Lhasa to existing China rail network

New 1,140km stretch cost \$4.2bn

World's highest railway, reaching 5,072m

Oxygen to be pumped into each carriage

Restaurant car's rice cooked in pressure cookers, to mitigate effects of high altitude

Beijing to Lhasa to take 48 hours, cost \$50-\$160 one way

In pictures: New railway

Railway raises fears

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The train carriages have windows with ultra-violet filters to keep out the sun's glare, as well as carefully regulated oxygen levels with spare supplies to combat the thin air.

Zhu Zhensheng of the Chinese railway ministry called the new line a "major achievement" that will "hugely boost local development and benefit the local people".

But exiled Tibetan Lhadon Tethong said the railway was "engineered to destroy the very fabric of Tibetan identity".

"China plans to use the railway to transport Chinese migrants directly into the heart of Tibet in order to overwhelm the Tibetan population and tighten its stranglehold over our people," he said on a Free Tibet Campaign statement.

The Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader in exile since 1959, was more circumspect.

"The railway line itself is not a cause of concern for the Tibetan people," his spokesman, Thupten Samphel, said. "How it will be used is the main concern."

The 2.5 million ethnic Tibetans of the Tibet Autonomous Region (its official name today) are hopelessly outnumbered by China's 1.2 billion Han Chinese. Long before the laying of the tracks, Han Chinese sightseers, entrepreneurs and migrant laborers were streaming into Lhasa, transforming the ancient Tibetan capital with shops and services that cater to lowlander tastes. Of the roughly 100,000 laborers who built the \$4.2 billion Golmud-Lhasa stretch, only 10 percent were ethnic Tibetans, according to Zhu Zhensheng, the Railway Ministry's project chief.

Riding High: A woman walks along the tracks of the railway to the roof of the world

Elizabeth Dalziel / AP

Riding High: A woman walks along the tracks of the railway to the roof of the world

Still, the train has helped bring the Beijing government closer to the Dalai Lama in one respect. The exiled religious leader has said that one of his biggest worries about the railway is its impact on the region's fragile ecology—and China's leaders appear to share his concern. The government has spent nearly \$190 million on environmental protection

along the rails between Golmud and Lhasa, including underpasses designed to keep migrating antelope and other wildlife safely off the tracks. Along some stretches, liquid coolant circulates in the roadbed to keep the underlying permafrost from melting. On virgin grasslands, workers carefully removed sod from the right of way and tended it, in some cases for a year or more, until it could be replaced on the new line's embankments. And the precautions didn't stop with the project's completion. No trash or wastewater is to be discharged from the train anywhere along this section of track.

Beijing is preparing to go even further later this year with the passage of an unprecedented "Tibetan plateau ecological security safeguards plan." The autonomous region's Environmental Protection Bureau is already growing faster than any other sector of the Tibetan government. Authorities have shut down nine polluting cement plants and four substandard refineries since 2000 and, beginning this year, alluvial gold-mining has been banned everywhere in Tibet because of the damage the practice causes to riverbeds. Tougher still, Lhasa's city government has prohibited the production, distribution and use of plastic bags to eradicate "white pollution" from the capital. "It's a first," boasts the environmental bureau's deputy chief, Zhang Tianhua.

Tibet's indigenous humans can only wish they had such protection. Entire monasteries are still subjected to "patriotic education" sessions aimed at ensuring their loyalty to Beijing. Even so, the Dalai Lama, who began warning years ago against the train as a vehicle of "cultural genocide," has softened his tone lately. These days he speaks of Tibetan autonomy, not full independence. But Chinese officials still distrust him, and their sporadic talks with his envoys have yielded no breakthroughs. "He has never abandoned his goal of seeking independence for Tibet," said the autonomous region's Beijing-appointed chairman, Champa Phuntsok, at a press conference last week. After all the green initiatives, in some ways Beijing is as red as ever.

¹ See issue of 14 July 2006: <http://www.business-standard.com/fulltextsearch/srchStoryPage.php?leftnm=4&tab=r&search=Three+Gorges&autono=98210>.

² William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.