

1970

In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s, the Chinese Communist Party recast its foreign policy into a 'Third World' struggle against the twin imperialisms of the United States and the Soviet Union. In concrete terms, this translated into increased Chinese foreign aid to fellow non-aligned, autonomous socialist countries, with work teams from China having a hand in constructing dozens of turnkey aid projects all over the world. By committing their own labour power and expertise to develop infrastructure in these countries, Chinese leaders sought to position China as the beaming sun from which Third World socialism emanated. The African continent occupied a privileged position in this diplomatic effort. In particular, the Tanzania-Zambia (Tan-Zam) Railway, built in the first half of the 1970s, is to this day held up fondly by the Chinese authorities as a symbol of Sino-African friendship. This essay looks into the lived experiences of the Chinese workers and technical experts who helped build the railway.

Building *Uhuru*: Chinese Workers and Labour Diplomacy on the Tan–Zam Railway

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'Serve the Revolutionary People of the World', 1971. Image courtesy of the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection, chinese posters.net/posters/e39-614.php.

On returning from his visit to Tanzania in 1968–69, civil rights leader and author Robert F. Williams reflected on his ten-day, 1,470-mile (2,366-kilometre) round-trip motorcycle adventure from Dar es Salaam to Kapiri Mposhi in the journal *The Call*. During the trip, which he undertook to emulate 'the long marches of the young Red Guards' and 'the cross-country treks of China's youth', he was struck by the initial construction of the Tanzania–Zambia (Tan–Zam) Railway. As he rode along it, witnessing Chinese technicians working alongside Tanzanian and Zambian labourers, he concluded that 'Africa's potential will be unlimited'.¹ Similarly, at a banquet during his second visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1968, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere reminisced about observing 'the revolutionary spirit' of the

Chinese people on the occasion of an earlier visit in 1965. He expressed the wish that ‘all the people of Tanzania could visit China and witness for themselves what a determined people can accomplish.’² He continued:

If we really want to move from national independence to the real independence of the people, and if we really want to make sure that the African revolution will ever move forward, and not degenerate into neocolonialism, then I say that we should learn from you [China]. Indeed, from what I have seen of China in 1965, I must say that if you found it necessary to begin a cultural revolution [to] make sure that the new generation would carry forward the banner of your revolution, then certainly we need one.³

Nyerere wondered how he might transmit the Chinese work ethic, discipline, and revolutionary spark to his homeland. After his return home, on inspecting Chinese-financed Tan–Zam construction sites and the Urafiki (Friendship) Textile Mill—another landmark Chinese-funded project—Nyerere was taken aback by Chinese technical workers’ work ethic, vigour, zeal, and competence. ‘Disciplined work is essential,’ he noted, ‘and here once again our Chinese technicians have set us a great example.’⁴

Although many Tanzanians made the journey to China to study and train, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also sent its nationals to Tanzania. In exchange for ‘unfettered access’ to Tanzanian ports, and only after Euro-American firms refused to pledge aid to the country, the PRC ‘flooded Tanzania with teachers, doctors, technological support, monetary aid, cultural productions, and a range of other collaborative and unilateral assistance.’⁵ Unilateral assistance, in particular, stood out as Maoist China’s greatest contribution to the developing world. In 1964 alone, China dedicated more than US\$45 million in aid to Tanzania—about half of Beijing’s yearly aid commitment on the continent.⁶ The sum also covered the transport of a Chinese Railway Expert Team (中国铁路专家组) of 40–50,000 technical personnel, their living accommodation, and the employment of 50–60,000 local labourers. In the midst of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities committed to loan to Tanzania and Zambia 988 million yuan, 868 million of which (approximately US\$400 million) was interest-free, which both countries would use for infrastructure projects and repay over three decades after a five-year deferral.⁷ Beijing’s goal was twofold: 1) to spur economic development in both Tanzania and Zambia by linking the latter’s Copper Belt (Zambia

exported 700,000 tonnes of copper annually) to the former's ports; and 2) to decouple both countries from dependency on apartheid South Africa and white-dominated Rhodesia by securing cargo transport in East and southern Africa, thus facilitating Zambian support for anticolonial struggles in Angola, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa.⁸ As one Chinese Railway Expert Team member recalled, the Tan–Zam Railway 'accomplished its mission in both senses'.⁹ A third goal, however, underpinned this substantial commitment: the export of model labour as the quintessence of Third World socialist solidarity.

A Leap Forward in African Development

Chinese labour on the Tan–Zam Railway was a material manifestation of the greater China–Tanzania friendship, which was solidified in a 1965 treaty that spanned the next decade. Du Jian, an interpreter who joined the Chinese labour team in Tanzania in 1969, witnessed the railway's construction firsthand and continued to track its growth across four decades. For him, the Tan–Zam Railway stood as a lasting embodiment of the friendship between China and Africa: 'It is no exaggeration to say that China exerted all its strength—in terms of manpower, materials, and funds—to build this railway.'¹⁰ China was, of course, undergoing the radical iconoclasm and political tumult of the Cultural Revolution, yet the CCP insisted on fronting the whole cost of the railway's construction. 'China shipped out more than 1.5 million tonnes of materials, including steel rail, cement, and dynamite, and daily necessities, even though it suffered itself a dire shortage of all commodities,' Du recounted. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, in fact, 'personally oversaw a nationwide mobilisation' to vouchsafe that China was sending only its highest-grade supplies to Tanzania, and that Chinese factories, including the Wuhan Iron and Steel Plant, 'operated day and night' to meet material production quotas for the railway.

Why did the CCP commit to such a selfless, yet costly, endeavour? Between 1949 and 1965, socialism in China shifted from emphasising class revolution to a widescale anticolonial project aimed at casting out Euro-American imperialism from the Global South (see also Sorace and Zhu's essay in the present volume).¹¹ In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split of 1962, Chinese leaders made rhetorical commitments to waging Third World struggle against both US capitalist and Soviet socialist imperialisms, with Zhou declaring on his 1964 African tour that the continent was

‘ripe for revolution.’¹² But words only went so far. Sino-African relations in the 1960s were reflective of China’s foreign policy, as Beijing fostered economic and diplomatic ties with newly independent countries and anticolonial movements in an ‘international united front’ (国际统一战线).¹³ By 1972, Chinese work teams had a hand in constructing nearly 100 different turnkey aid projects globally, and in 1973 the CCP had pledged aid to nearly thirty African nations.¹⁴ Through these accomplishments, China burnished its credentials as an epicentre of anti-imperialism during the global 1960s and well into the long 1970s.¹⁵

The CCP sent teams of railway workers, engineers, and technicians—all of whom had to possess ‘strong bodies, strong minds, and strong skills’ in conjunction with a high ideological loyalty—to Tanzania to assist in developing socialism autonomously.¹⁶ As a living, labouring embodiment of the CCP’s global vision and a show of Beijing’s dedication to socialist development in Tanzania, these Chinese work teams laboured shoulder-to-shoulder with Tanzanians to build the Tan–Zam Railway from 1970 to 1975. As Jamie Monson wrote, Chinese workers’ model labour ‘conveyed the values of modernity and progress through the practice of self-discipline and hard work’ and exhibited ‘socialist principles ... [of] international solidarity and brotherhood [to] foster worker discipline.’¹⁷ In this new type of ‘labour diplomacy’, Chinese leaders positioned the PRC as the beaming sun from which Third World socialism emanated, and Chinese experts and labourers stood as embodiments of that ideology.¹⁸ Through infrastructural development, Chinese technicians were to plant the seeds of socialism so the sun’s rays could nourish them. Chinese technical workers’ work ethic and vigour—both shaped by the Cultural Revolution’s radical ethos—were also to be transmitted to their East African comrades. As Deborah Brautigam recounted:

A local farmer told me how he was inspired to follow the example of the Chinese, who worked in the paddy fields by lantern into the night. ‘You see the Chinese man there [in the fields] and you come.’ Once a visiting member of parliament came to consult a doctor and was surprised to find him scrubbing the floor of the office. While the World Bank recruited chiefs for its integrated agricultural development projects, the Chinese asked to work only with ‘peasant’ farmers ... [T]he mobilization spirit of the Cultural Revolution reached its zenith in China’s most audacious achievement in Africa: the Tanzania–Zambia railway.¹⁹

If the Chinese sowed the seeds, Tanzanians and Zambians were to tend the saplings and cultivate the flowers of autonomous socialist development. As one Chinese instructor, Ya Peiji, explained:

After we complete this railway, if they [Tanzanians and Zambians] themselves do not know how to manage it, they will not know how to operate the railway ... the management has to be localized, which means that we will help Tanzania and Zambia to cultivate their own talent to manage this railway ... we will not only build this railway for them but we will make them feel that they are managing the railway themselves.²⁰

Decades after its 1975 opening to the public—two years ahead of schedule, no less—the Tan–Zam Railway’s lasting legacy as a monument to both the friendship between China and Tanzania and the international aspirations of the CCP has been recoded in the discourses that the Chinese authorities put forward to justify their Belt and Road Initiative (see also Halegua’s essay in the present volume). Despite the enduring materiality of the railway, China’s post-Mao marketisation has abandoned the Maoist imperative of world socialism via interest-free development, in pursuit of profit-driven resource acquisition for China’s benefit.

Building the Railway

According to an agreement signed on 5 September 1967, the CCP pledged nearly one billion yuan (US\$406 million, or US\$2.62 billion inflation-adjusted) to build the nearly 2,000-kilometre-long railway. Originally conceived as a north–south Africa rail link by late-nineteenth-century British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, the Tan–Zam Railway eventually became China’s ‘largest international development project and the third-largest infrastructure development project in Africa.’²¹ After an initial 1968–70 survey and design period, for which the CCP dispatched its surveyors to conduct a comprehensive appraisal of the terrain, construction began in 1970. Conditions were unfavourable, and access to first aid was limited to the extent that when one Chinese surveyor suffered a poisonous bee sting, he died.²²

Problems were compounded with the arrival of Chinese technicians and management personnel. Alongside local workers, the Chinese Railway Expert Team endured food shortages, sweltering heat, isolation, an omni-

present risk of disease, and limited availability of medical care for illness or injury. Work was highly regimented and the hours were long. As Jamie Monson wrote:

Work on the project was organized through twelve base camps, with centers of operations at Dar es Salaam and Mang'ula in Tanzania. Teams of workers were sent out from the base camps in smaller sub-teams, directed by African foremen and Chinese field assistants. The work gangs varied in size; at one base camp in 1972 there were 64 labor gangs involving some 5,500 workers. Work took place in isolated conditions, as the gangs could be spread out two to three miles apart during the workday. In some critical sections work continued around the clock in 8-hour shifts, with diesel generators providing electric light.²³

Food was shipped from China, but the half-month voyage meant that staff on the ground were confined to eating dehydrated vegetables. Even soy sauce was a luxury. Sometimes, when supplies arrived, the wheat flour was already mouldy. Living in tents in the wilderness was dangerous, too. The men always had to check their shoes for snakes before putting them on in the morning. At night they could hear lions roaring outside.²⁴

Veteran workers also encountered hardships while working on the project. An interview that was part of a *China Central Television (CCTV)* program included one account by an anonymous veteran of the Tan-Zam Railway that told of water scarcity, overwork, and extreme pressure to meet construction deadlines. 'Sometimes we had to drink the water that we found in the elephants' footprints,' the interviewee noted.²⁵ In all, more than 160 workers, sixty-four of whom were Chinese, died during the railway's construction.²⁶ Yet, in spite of all this, what truly mattered to many of those workers were the bonds of friendship and solidarity that they forged through shared struggle in the face of the world superpowers, and the conviction that they were building world socialism.

On the Tanzanian side, local communities also experienced significant duress during the Tan-Zam Railway's construction, as Nyerere ordered state seizures of farmland to make way for the railway. The state offered limited compensation for these lands and holding the authorities to account was often extremely difficult. For years after workers drove the final spike into the Tan-Zam Railway, many farmers complained of long-ignored compensation payments due for their lost crops and

revenues. These losses were compounded by Nyerere's massive '*Ujamaa*' villagisation program, as state authorities forcefully relocated more than 1,300 households to establishments closer to the railway to safeguard the structure from damage and contribute to the state's massive agricultural production initiatives.²⁷

At the national level, there were growing fears that Chinese investment would signal a forfeiture of Tanzanian economic and political sovereignty. However, government officials in Dodoma held that the construction of the Tan–Zam Railway and the stipulation of economic treaties with the PRC did not imperil either. Nyerere fervently asserted that the Tan–Zam Railway, like any other project of that kind, 'was a railway whether it was built by Chinese or Italians and it was not necessarily Red'.²⁸ He reiterated that Chinese assistance did not mean that Tanzania had deviated from its resolute commitment to self-reliance, autonomous socialist development, and nonalignment. Tanzanian Minister for Communications, Labour, and Works, J.M. Lusinde, echoed Nyerere's statement: 'The Tanzanian people are determined to see to it that the whole of Africa is liberated. And the construction of the railway is a contribution to the total liberation of Africa.'²⁹ Nyerere often dismissed charges that China was manipulating Tanzanian affairs through the Tan–Zam partnership and stressed Tanzania's agency in international exchanges.³⁰ He even remarked in response to Euro-American media's interpretation of his wearing the widely imitated 'Tanzania suit'—itself somewhat resembling a Mao suit—as indicative of his desire to imitate Maoist China: 'I gather that even the suits I wear have been adduced as evidence of pernicious Chinese influence.'³¹

Remembering the Railway Labourers Today

Decades after its completion, the Tan–Zam Railway holds contemporary relevance as a lasting monument to Maoist China's commitment to global anti-imperialism. For many in contemporary China, it remains a 'pinnacle of the kind of struggle, hardship, and "glorious achievement" pushed by Mao'.³² The PRC's emphasis on collective sacrifice, especially in memorialising veterans and Chinese Railway Expert Team members who perished, not to mention Tanzanian and Zambian workers who also paid a price, 'parallels the tales of Daqing's Iron Man Wang Jingxi' and the 'agricultural brigade at Dazhai' (see also Clinton's essay in the present volume).³³ State officials from both China and Tanzania continue

to make widely publicised visits to commemorate the heroic sacrifices of Chinese workers on the Tan–Zam Railway. Most notably, on 23 June 2006, Tanzanian Prime Minister Edward Lowasa joined PRC Premier Wen Jiabao in Dar es Salaam, where both leaders paid their respects at the Chinese Railway Expert cemetery on the city’s outskirts at Gongo la Mboto, where sixty-four Chinese technicians who died while working on the project are buried. Wen laid flowers and a wreath on the monument to the ‘Glorious Sacrifices of the Comrade Chinese Aid Experts in Tanzania’ (中国援坦专家光荣牺牲同志), after which the officials observed a moment of silence.³⁴

That same year—which in China was celebrated as the ‘Year of Africa’—Chinese state media ensured that the Tan–Zam Railway story was broadcast throughout the country.³⁵ ‘It is hard to find a speech or newspaper account about contemporary Africa–China relations that does not contain a glowing reference to the Tan–Zam Railway project and the heroism of the men who built it,’ one journalist recounted.³⁶ At a press conference on Chinese aid to Africa, Vice-Minister of Commerce Fu Ziying noted how moved he was when he visited the railway personally:

A few days ago, when I was paying respect to the Chinese workers who sacrificed their lives for the construction of [the] Tanzania–Zambia Railway at a public cemetery in Tanzania, I could not help bursting into tears for the tens of thousands of Chinese workers who laboured side-by-side with the Tanzanian and Zambian people to build the railway successfully.³⁷

Despite the Tan–Zam Railway’s domestic significance when it was built, the railway project was not without its critics in its time. The criticisms levelled against it curiously resonate with discussions today about Chinese engagements abroad. As mentioned above, some in Tanzania pointed to deals with China as signals of an impending loss of sovereignty. In spite of Chinese pledges to ‘resolutely implement’ Mao’s teachings, Zhou’s eight principles of foreign aid, and later Chairman Hua Guofeng’s instructions to help develop the national economies of Tanzania and Zambia, there were still grave concerns about the scale, cost, and labour involved in a foreign-funded project. Even more worrying was the fact that Tanzania and Zambia, although contributing most of the workforce for the railway’s construction, committed to trade agreements favourable to Beijing.³⁸

Activists pointed to these unequal trade agreements—most notably, one that gave the PRC unfettered freedom to pump its surplus goods into East Africa, effectively eliminating local competition. As one commentator noted, this rapid influx of Chinese products endangered local industries:

African recipient countries are often in the difficult position of virtually having to take whatever is available [so] shops in Dar es Salaam are full of unsold ‘make-weight’ Chinese goods ... The influx of simple industrial goods tends to inhibit the recipient country from establishing that sort of industry within its borders.³⁹

Several Tanzania-based African-Americans also highlighted unfair treatment of local workers by the Chinese Railway Expert Team, including degrees of discrimination in hiring practices and lack of protection of worker safety.⁴⁰

After Mao’s death in 1976, the gradual transition to Reform and Opening Up completely reoriented the relationship between China and Tanzania. Gone were the days of China’s rhetorical, ideological, and material commitments to Third World anti-imperialism and autonomous socialist development. PRC-funded factory and rail-building aid initiatives for Tanzanian economic autonomy from apartheid South Africa gave way to a unilateral relationship in which Chinese profit was prioritised. PRC firms hired largely for ‘capitalist exploitation’ and depended primarily on easily exploitable ‘casualized Tanzanian labor in enclaves of industrial production, resource extraction, and infrastructure construction.’⁴¹ The situation in Tanzania also played a part. In pursuit of international debt cancellations for the country, Nyerere’s successor, Benjamin Mkapa (who took power in 1995), discarded the socialist policies of his predecessor, privatised state-owned companies, and instituted liberal market policies to promote economic growth. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank enthusiastically supported these neoliberal measures.⁴²

Such significant changes to the nature of the Sino-Tanzanian relationship in recent years notwithstanding, for many Chinese and Tanzanians alike, the Tan–Zam Railway stands for something much greater than the hazards brought about by the neoliberal world order. Tan–Zam Railway veteran Li Yongzen from Tianjin, who worked in Tanzania as an engineer in 1970, reflected on the symbolic importance of the railway as a monument of the China–Tanzania friendship: ‘To have aided in the construction of the Tan–Zam Railway remains an unforgettable memory for me.’⁴³ His

grandson, Li Shangyi, who followed in his grandfather's footsteps by working in Tanzania and, later, Malawi, as a technician for a project that connected thousands of rural households to satellite television, recognised the importance of carrying on the mantle of the China–Africa friendship. He said that in this new era, 'we from the younger generation ought to contribute as well to the traditional friendship between China and Africa.'⁴⁴