CHAPTER TEN

RAILWAY TIME: TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER
AND THE ROLE OF CHINESE EXPERTS
IN THE HISTORY OF TAZARA

Liu Haifang & Jamie Monson

Abstract

During the construction of the TAZARA railway in Tanzania and Zambia in the 1970s, African and Chinese workers not only laboured side by side but also engaged in what was known as ‘technical cooperation’ as Chinese railway experts trained their African counterparts in the workplace and in technical training workshops. This cooperation continued to develop over the years following the railway’s completion, as a total of 14 successive teams of Chinese experts were sent to Dar es Salaam to provide technical support. Far from being a ‘white elephant’ stuck in the politics of an earlier era, as some critics have claimed, TAZARA has been changing over the past 34 years in the context of political and economic liberalisation. Yet it has at the same time retained many of the qualities that made it a ‘vanguard’ of Chinese development assistance at its inauguration.

TAZARA and the rhythm of time: 1968-2010

Inside the offices of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority (TAZARA) headquarters in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the clocks on the wall stand still, quietly telling visitors that they were brought here from Shanghai as early as the 1970s. Under this apparent stillness lies a different and more dynamic story, the story of the diverse forces that have shaped the current of time that flows towards the past. The flow of time for TAZARA is calculated according to many different rhythms, not only the ‘railway time’ so familiar to railroad observers but also the successive protocols of technology cooperation that have been signed between the Chinese, Tanzanian and Zambian govern-
ments since 1967. Throughout the history of these multi-year protocols, the guiding principles of cooperation between the three countries have been calculated and negotiated. Their implementation in practice has been undertaken by the members of the Chinese Railway Expert Teams (CRET), who have continued to work together with their Tanzanian and Zambian counterparts over the past 34 years, bearing witness to the flows of time and history.

On the third floor of TAZARA headquarters, immediately opposite the main stairway, is the door to the office of the Chinese expert team leader. It bears a white nameplate identifying it as belonging to ‘CRET’. A slightly faded red Chinese knot hanging on the door is the only ‘Chinese characteristic’ of this room – the Chinese working inside it share the same office facilities with TAZARA’s other employees and managers, including the resting clocks, the unreliable plumbing of the toilets, and the worn-out air conditioners.

The atmosphere is brightened now and then by warm words of greeting in Chinese, ‘ni hao?’ or ‘how are you?’, sometimes followed by delighted laughter and a small conversation in broken Chinese, English, Kiswahili or some mixture of the three languages. The keen African practitioners of the Chinese language may have brought it back with them from China many years ago along with the formal degrees they earned from Communications (jiaotong) or Railway Universities in the 1970s; others learned Chinese on the job during and after construction of TAZARA. Younger African workers have had more recent opportunities to practice Chinese as they travel to China for technical training, often supported by the latest protocol agreements. The Chinese experts also try to improve their English and Kiswahili through daily contact with their African colleagues, although each expert still brings an interpreter (also categorised as an expert member of the team) whenever they speak with their counterparts ‘officially and seriously’. If it happens that one of the support staff responsible for the everyday needs of the Chinese experts comes to headquarters for some reason, he will make conversation with the Tanzanians in the building using very fluent Kiswahili. As the primary administrator and purchaser for the CRET workers’ residence, he is the most integrated with the local Tanzanian culture.

Some 110 miles westwards from Dar es Salaam, there is similar evidence of ‘time standing still’, which belies the dynamic flow of TAZARA’s history from 1976 to the present. At the former TAZARA workshop in Mang’ula, where steel foundries, lathes, drills and