

A VIEW FROM ACROSS THE POND

Michael R Weinman

begins his regular column this month with a report from across a different pond as he reflects on a recent visit to China

Late last year, I was one of five members of the PTSI Transportation team who journeyed to Shanghai to assist a new company that has signed an agreement with China's Ministry of Railways to operate a deluxe tour train on various routes, the predominant one being the new Qinghai-Tibet Railway to Lhasa, commencing in 2007.

While deluxe tour trains are not new to our company, China is – except for one 'old China hand', whose name will be familiar to many *Rail Professional* readers. Ivor Warburton is, of course, well-known for a distinguished career running railways in the UK. But he also possesses a deep knowledge and appreciation of the Chinese language, culture and the country's railways.

Our visit showed us that nothing is to be taken for granted in China. Despite newly developed commercial freedoms – which have turned Christmas into a money-making enterprise just as it is in the West – China's railway remains a bureaucracy.

The market for rail in the country is growing tremendously. But, until recently, control has remained in the hands of the Ministry of Railways. A new commercial thrust aimed at creating railways such as the Qinghai-Tibet Railway Company, which is building the new 1,000km line to Lhasa, is underway. However, as we learned, old habits die hard. The Chinese rarely offer a straightforward 'yes', often holding out promise, while either stalling or simply waiting to see how a particular issue plays out when passed up the line to the Ministry.

US railways have to some extent echoed this bureaucratic response, as they have combined and grown into mega-railways. New commuter or passenger ventures frequently have to deal with local division staff, system-wide passenger and planning staff, and then, ultimately, must wait for the approval of the equivalent of the Ministry, the chief executive or vice president – operations (not



A rail service to Tibet's capital Lhasa, due in 2007, shows the progress made by China's railway, says Michael Weinman.

to mention the choral chants of lawyers). There has been devolution of power resulting in success stories such as Canadian National, Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Norfolk Southern. Eventually, the railway in China must follow this pattern, and – like the Chinese aviation industry – become more closely attuned to modern commercial practice.

This isn't to suggest that Chinese railways are operationally deficient or are not using cutting-edge technology. Advances in high-speed rail and the ability to operate 18-carriage passenger trains on congested routes with 95 per cent punctuality speaks volumes – as does the ability to build the Lhasa railway across such extreme terrain. However, politics and bureaucracy will have an impact on the development of the railway. The new station at Shanghai South, the stainless steel EMU's that will soon roll out of Bombardier Sifang Power's Qingdao plant, and the Tibet railway itself, are no less state-of-the-art, no less 21st century, than the contents of the containers on all those hundreds of intermodal trains rolling eastward daily throughout America from the ports of Seattle, Los Angeles and Oakland, which are largely marked 'Made in People's Republic of China'.

In preparation for a recent address on passenger trains of the Northeast Corridor, I developed a means of evaluating customer amenities and comparing them from train to train. While most of the amenities of the classic streamliners in the Northeast Corridor – and elsewhere – were devoted to first-class trade, it became apparent that the standard-class, or coach market, was much larger, but only infrequently as well nurtured.

For example, the full bar-lounge-observation car

of the old New Haven Railroad Merchants Limited – the prime-time New York-to-Boston train – which had been part of the first-class section, was later added to the coach portion, and eventually, became a commuter bar car. The Pennsylvania Railroad had a full-length coffee shop-tavern for coach passengers on its key trains, while coach passengers had the option of using the full-length 64-seat restaurant car.

More recently, on many modern trainsets including Voyagers, Pendolinos, Acela Express, Eurostar and TGV, first-class amenities consist only of at-seat dining. Standard-class customers enjoy only a trolley service and/or a buffet, the largest of which have a few stand-up counters, with few having standard-class seating for a food and beverage service.

Linear feet on a modern train are precious. In 1950s America, a new train was often 18 cars long, or more than 1,500 feet. Today's trains are far shorter (Eurostar and dual TGV in Europe are an exception). The conflict between extra revenue-earning seats and amenity space will always exist. However, since the demise of the all-first-class Pullman services, it has been obvious that there are almost always two to three times as many standard class passengers as first class, prompting the question: are we doing enough for these passengers, in terms of provision of amenities and in satisfying a latent demand for food and beverages, which in turn might translate into solid revenue?

In the 1970s, Penn Central ran a series of commuter services around New York City in which one car was a full-length bar. There were few if any seats, one bartender, and passengers that squeezed into the vehicle gave a good impression of the

Bombardier

Statue of Liberty, holding high above their heads not the torch of liberty, but the cup of libation. These cars grossed about \$500 per trip (in 1970s prices), and more people were accommodated than would have been possible had a standard coach of 100 or so seats been employed.

To serve between 200 and 400 standard-class passengers from a single take-out buffet counter would seem counter-intuitive and counter-productive. A themed food and beverage area, perhaps more pub-like than buffet-style, with table or seat space, could significantly increase revenues. There is a risk of increased alcohol consumption, but on intercity trains this is seldom the problem it is on local services. An environment conducive to dining would stimulate on-board sales, perhaps at the expense of station facilities. Even the simple technique of having a colour brochure in every seat-back pocket with professional 'foodie' photos showing what was on offer would both facilitate and stimulate buffet and trolley sales. After all, when you are standing in line with a queue of people behind you, or when a trolley is trying to make its way down the aisle, there is pressure to make the decision based on incomplete information – and the easy way out is to buy a cuppa and skip the food entirely, or buy nothing.

Of course the other means of stimulating sales is one adopted by a few US airlines – simply bake

US-style cookies on board, and perfume the air with the mouth-watering aromas!

In 1969, after a hiatus of many years, America gained a new rapid transit system. Designed by a local Philadelphia consultancy and using former Philadelphia area railway and prior transit rights of way, the rolling stock was built by a local manufacturer, the Budd Company.

The Port Authority Transit Corporation

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(PATCO) commenced operations between Lindenwold New Jersey, Camden, and centre-city Philadelphia bringing a new standard of excellence with frequent service, new and clean stations, and automation of both train operation (DOO) and fare collection. The corridor quickly filled, as did the car parks.

Although many plans for extension or supplementary routes have been studied, only the revived commuter rail service to Atlantic City and the DMU light rail service from Camden to Trenton

have been added since. The system is owned by the Delaware River Port Authority (DRPA), an agency of the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania also charged with operating the river bridges and the port itself.

Now handling 35,000 riders a day, PATCO is limited only by its resources. However, a squabble between Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell and the DRPA Board over dredging of the Delaware River, which separates the two states, has threatened this. Rendell, formerly the Mayor of Philadelphia and not someone usually associated with political chicanery, has said he will not approve the Pennsylvania half of the DRPA budget unless the Board approves the dredging, adding that he doesn't care if this shuts down PATCO.

Interstate squabbles have long been hallmarks of US metropolitan areas divided by state lines. However, this attitude toward a specific group of passengers, and indeed, toward a particular and vital mode of transportation, is a new low, and though it will doubtless be settled before the threat is carried out, it clearly shows the lack of regard in which rail (even an economical and efficient system such as PATCO) is held.

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