

Remembering Work on the Tazara Railway in Africa and China, 1965–2011: When “New Men” Grow Old

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Abstract: In China, Tanzania, and Zambia, state officials participate in an ongoing articulation of official memory of the TAZARA railway project of the 1970s. In high-level diplomatic relations, the TAZARA project and its construction workers are continually held up as a foundational legacy for China–African development cooperation and friendship. However, the now-retired workers who built the railway tell very different kinds of stories about their experiences. In the context of recent economic liberalization policies, retired TAZARA workers draw on individual and collective memories of railway building to achieve both recognition and material security in a world in which they feel forgotten. They seek resolution of their grievances in old age through the telling and retelling of narratives of their youth. By doing so, they claim their own right to remember in the face of ongoing official efforts to reinvent heroic pasts.

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Résumé: En Chine, en Tanzanie et en Gambie, les responsables politiques participent à un projet de commémoration de la construction des chemins de fer TAZARA dans les années 70. Pour les relations diplomatiques de haut niveau, le projet TAZARA et ses ouvriers représentent continuellement un modèle fondateur pour la coopération et l'amitié entre la Chine et l'Afrique. Les ouvriers à présent retraités qui ont construit le chemin de fer ont de leur côté des histoires bien différentes à raconter sur leur expérience de la construction. Dans le contexte des politiques récentes de libéralisation économique, les ouvriers retraités du projet TAZARA utilisent des souvenirs collectifs et individuels de la construction pour rechercher à la fois une reconnaissance une sécurité matérielle dans un monde où ils se sentent oubliés. Ils font appel à la prise en compte de leurs doléances dans leur vieil âge en racontant sans relâche les histoires de leur jeunesse sur le chantier. Ce faisant, ils réclament leur droit de commémoration face aux efforts politiques en cours de réinventer un passé héroïque.

Introduction

In April 2011 China released a new “white paper” on its policy of foreign aid to Africa. At a conference held on April 26, Chinese Vice Minister of Commerce Fu Ziyang was invited to brief the press on the contents and significance of the paper. As he opened his remarks, he used the example of the TAZARA railway to recall the historical relationship between China and Africa. His comments on the significance of TAZARA are worth quoting in their entirety.

A few days ago when I was paying respect to the Chinese workers who sacrificed their lives for the construction of Tanzania-Zambia Railway at a public cemetery in Tanzania, I could not help bursting into tears. What did they come here for? Along the more-than-1800-km-long Tanzania-Zambia railway surrounded by rugged mountains and turbulent rivers, there was no electricity, no clean drinking water, and no sufficient food. It was in such poor circumstances when the western countries literally abandoned the newly independent African countries that the Chinese people came to help out. To build the Tanzania-Zambia Railway we lost 69 lives. Tens of thousands of Chinese workers labored side by side with the Tanzanian and Zambian people to build the railway successfully. Why did they do this? The Chinese people did this purely for friendship. Some media people, academics, politicians today are skeptical towards China's activities in Africa. Though I think that is just normal, friendship is of paramount importance in China-Africa cooperation and there is no doubt about it, nonetheless. (News.china.com.cn 2011)

Five years earlier, in 2006, the late Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa had made a public address in Lusaka in which he also used the example of TAZARA to praise the historical relationship between China and Zambia. It

was a sensitive moment for Zambia–China diplomacy because Mwanawasa’s political rival, Michael Sata (now president of Zambia), had been using anti-Chinese rhetoric in his campaign. To counteract Sata’s statements, Mwanawasa reassured the Chinese government that “it was irresponsible for anyone to threaten to chase away Chinese investors who have massively contributed to the development of the country through construction of railways, roads and industries” (peopledaily.com 2006). He then went on to cite the TAZARA Railway as the most important historical example of Chinese friendship and cooperation.

And in 2008, the legacy of TAZARA was invoked similarly as a powerful symbol of China–Africa friendship, this time in Tanzania. During the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, Tanzania was the only country in Africa selected to host the Olympic torch relay. The relay route in Dar es Salaam started at the main station of TAZARA, then proceeded through the city to the new Chinese-built sports stadium in Chang’ombe. The torch relay thus followed a symbolic path that traced China’s relationship with Tanzania from the railway’s construction in the 1970s through the present.

It is difficult, in fact, to find a public speech or ceremony about present-day Chinese development cooperation that does not mention TAZARA’s foundational role in building friendship between China and Africa. The TAZARA railway was surveyed and built between 1968 and 1975 to link the Zambian copperbelt with the Indian Ocean. Called the “Freedom Railway” because it aimed to liberate Zambia from dependency on South Africa and Rhodesia, TAZARA was China’s largest development assistance project in Africa. Remembering the railway, especially the sacrifices that were made by the railway workers, has become a customary gesture in China–Africa diplomatic relations.

Vice Minister Fu’s reflection on his tearful visit to the Chinese worker cemetery illustrates the ways that TAZARA railway workers in particular continue to be brought forward as an example of Chinese “pure friendship” toward African countries. For not only did the three partner countries collaborate on a state level; during construction Chinese and African people also made historic interpersonal connections. Thus both the tangible legacy of the railway itself and the memory of the Chinese and African workers who labored “side by side” are revived by state officials as a powerful weapon to counteract the current skepticism of Western critics toward the Chinese presence on the African continent.¹

If the three partner states continue to participate in constructing an official memory about the railway workers and their place in history, what about the workers themselves? How have the Chinese and African workers who participated in the project recalled and reconstructed their own experiences over time? To what degree do these memories resonate or conflict with those of state actors? And if there is a form of collective memory and historical consciousness among TAZARA’s now retiring “construction generation,” to what degree has this been fortuitous, contested, stable, or dynamic over the past thirty years since the project was completed?

Historical Consciousness and the Memory of Work

The railway workers who built TAZARA, both Chinese and African, maintain their own individual memories of its significance in their lives. They have also constructed a collective historical consciousness which, like official discourse, acknowledges the contributions they made to the modernization of newly independent African nations in the 1970s. Yet their memories are at the same time narratives of loss, told through accounts that trace not only their heroic deeds, but also the failure of contemporary states to recognize their sacrifices materially. In China, Tanzania, and Zambia, retired TAZARA workers seek simultaneously to retrieve public recognition and to make claims to material security through the process of remembering.

In some ways the narratives of retiring TAZARA workers can be read as similar to those of other groups in Africa that mobilize memory in order to “overcome their sense of loss, insecurity, displacement and deterritorialization” in the postcolonial world (Werbner 1998:4). Like veterans of anticolonial struggles, they feel that the state has only selectively—even divisively—recognized the sacrifice of railway construction work, for some are perceived as receiving benefits that others do not. And like workers in the southern African mines, TAZARA retirees feel that the dignity of hard work has been undermined by the dishonor of layoffs and of insecurity in old age. Remembering work has therefore been a means to gain resolution through the telling and retelling of individual and collective experience. TAZARA workers claim their own right to remember in the face of ongoing official efforts to reinvent heroic pasts. In so doing, the workers often mobilize the very same state discourses that they contest.²

Yet there is also something distinctive about TAZARA worker experience and its contexts of reminiscence. For this railway was not only a postcolonial state-led development project. It was also a socialist project, carried out by workers from three nations at a specific historical moment of ideological commitment to the construction of those nations and their citizens. The TAZARA project was not only designed to build a railway; it also proposed to build a cohort of African “new industrial men” (and some women) by shaping youth into maturity through hard work (Yinghong Cheng 2008:28–29). These “new men” would be formed through pedagogies of work that emphasized practical training, exhortation, and role modeling—pedagogies that were literally drawn from the textbooks of China’s revolutionary industrial experience.³

The workers who joined the project in the 1970s—both Chinese and African—were aware of their role in making nations and, in the process, in “making history” (Trouillot 1995). This message was imparted to them publicly through slogans, worker meetings, official ceremonies, and other performances. It was also experienced in practice, through the work process itself and especially in the railway training schools and workshops. The workers who participated in the TAZARA project therefore developed

historical consciousness in several ways. At the moment of construction, they were participants in a “history-making” state project in which they played a central role; indeed it was their own refashioning as workers that was expected to lead to industrial progress and modernization.⁴ At the same time, as a cohort of railway workers they developed their own form of historical consciousness through their collective use of memory as a social resource over time. They have deployed this resource in direct engagement with state-level discourses at specific historical moments: both in collective contexts such as labor disputes, and in individual grievances such as pension payment.

In a sense, then, the memories of these retired workers provide a glimpse into the formation of historical consciousness for a generation of “new industrial men” who are now growing old. At the time that they were recruited, trained, and deployed in East Africa, TAZARA railway workers were acutely aware that they were part of a unique moment of Afro-Asian and pan-African solidarity. It wasn’t simply state-level ideological transmission that made them aware of this role; many workers remember their own enthusiasm for the project at the time. Over the ensuing decades, as they have lived through postsocialist processes of liberalization, these workers have developed powerful narratives of nostalgia about this youthful experience that both match and contest those of the nation. Ironically, TAZARA workers seem to have felt most profoundly neglected and forgotten at precisely the moment when government officials have begun to deploy their memory in celebration of the enduring friendship between China and Africa.

Stages of Work, Stages of Memory

Like the U.S. autoworkers interviewed by John Bodnar (1989), TAZARA workers frame their memories using narrative structures that reflect not only their personal life courses but also larger patterns of change in the institutional and social order. These narrative “plot structures” convey meaning by fashioning experience within specific moments or conjunctures of historic significance. For the Studebaker workers interviewed by Bodnar, for example, the early years of the company’s operation in the 1930s were recalled as a time of stability and order, while after WWII the plant was remembered as torn by conflict. Because contexts of remembering—both personal and institutional—are constantly shifting, these narrative “plots” are not fixed but fluid, as they are constantly reconstructed.⁵

For the TAZARA project, three broadly defined eras have framed worker memory and historical consciousness. The first is the period of railway construction, lasting roughly from 1968 to 1975. The second is the period of economic reform (in both Africa and China) starting in the mid-1980s, when institutional restructuring led to worker layoffs at TAZARA. The third period, which began in the mid-1990s, has been characterized by commercialization policies that have affected TAZARA’s construction generation just at the time of their retirement.

Construction: Building a Railway, Making History

The TAZARA railway was built between 1970 and 1975, following a two-year survey and design period.⁶ The full 1865-kilometer rail line was officially opened and handed over by China to Tanzania and Zambia in July 1976 in a formal ceremony at New Kapiri Mposhi. Although precise figures are not known, it is estimated that some thirty to forty thousand Chinese railway workers were joined by about twice that number of African workers during construction. At the height of the project in 1972, there were 38,000 African and 13,500 Chinese workers.

Work on the project was organized through twelve base camps, with centers of operation at Dar es Salaam and Mang'ula in Tanzania. Teams of workers were sent out from the base camps in smaller subteams directed by African foremen and Chinese field assistants. The work gangs varied in size; at one base camp in 1972 there were sixty-four 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 eight-hour shifts, with diesel generators providing electric light.

The first section of the rail line, from Dar es Salaam to Mlimba (502 kilometers), was completed within one year, despite the challenges of construction in the unpopulated Selous Game Reserve. The next section, a 158-kilometer climb over the steep escarpment of the Udzungwa Mountains, took a full second year because of the engineering challenges of the steep terrain. It was in this section that the majority of the tunnels, bridges, and culverts were constructed. Once the plateau highlands of Mbeya had been reached in 1973 and the rails were laid across the border into Zambia, the remainder of the construction work progressed quickly (see Monson 2009; Yu 1980).

The construction phase of the TAZARA project required the application of both hard physical labor and technically sophisticated engineering skills. In the first years of the project African workers carried out the bulk of the unskilled manual labor while the Chinese workers took on more technical responsibilities. From the beginning, however, the project emphasized training of the African workers so that they would be able to take over and manage the railway after its completion. Worker training was therefore put forward as the key to self-reliance for the African workers and their newly independent countries. One Chinese instructor explained it this way:

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. They will then invite foreign countries, which means the West. Inviting foreigners to operate the railway is equivalent to having Westerners hold this railway; specifically, the railway would be held by imperialists as in the past. Under these circumstances, we decided that the Chinese government should let us cultivate their own people. In other

words, the management has to be localized, which means that we will help Tanzania and Zambia to cultivate their own talent to manage this railway. Therefore, we will not only build this railway for them but we will make them feel that they are managing the railway themselves. (Interview with Yao Pei Ji, Beijing, 2005.)⁷

The agreements that were signed by the three countries explicitly stated that a primary goal of the project would be the training of an African railway worker cohort. The bulk of this training would take place at the work sites rather than in formal training institutions. There were several reasons for this emphasis on “on the job” technical training. It would allow construction to begin immediately and to progress quickly, in keeping with the TAZARA project’s goal of early completion (see Monson 2010). It also reflected the focus in China at the time on learning through practical lessons instead of in the classroom. The tripartite agreement signed in 1969 specified that “training of technical personnel in various fields shall, in the main, be carried out in the practical work of construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway and be supplemented with necessary theoretical lectures.”⁸ Learning through experience was the official Chinese government approach to instruction at that historical moment, remembers one retired teacher: “They believed that practice was the only [training] standard that examines truth” (interview with Yao Pei Ji, Beijing, 2005).

Yet from the beginning there was also a bifurcated structure to the TAZARA training program. While the rank-and-file workers were trained on the job, a carefully selected group of educated African workers was sent to China for a two-year course of study at Beijing Jiaotong [Communications] University. And engineering instructors from that university also established formal training schools at Mang’ula, Mbeya, and Mpika.⁹ While these three schools had only trained some one thousand or so railway workers in total by the end of the construction period, it was the workers with this level of technical education who went on to become the management and operations staff of TAZARA.¹⁰ A small number of these engineering- and management-level TAZARA employees returned to China in the 1980s and the 1990s to gain further education including Master’s degrees; some were also sent to Europe and to the United Kingdom.

The Chinese workers also participated in the “hard work” of manual labor during TAZARA’s construction. The memory of Chinese workers’ willingness to join in with Africans in every task—from ditch digging to blasting tunnels—remains one of the most powerful images from TAZARA’s construction. A Zambian worker remembers,

We were expecting what we used to see with the Europeans from England or Germany, where someone is the manager: a white manager just sitting in the office.... But they themselves [the Chinese] were engaged in the actual labor work. If it was digging they were there, if you were supposed to dig a foundation for a certain building they were also involved in that.

So because of that, the Zambians were happy. They said, these guys, they can even do this kind of work, and there was no difference [among different levels of workers]. (Interview with John Mulenga, Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia, August 2010)

The Chinese dedication to performing manual labor during railway construction was closely connected to the pedagogical focus of the project. The lessons that they hoped to impart to their African “friends” included not only technical know-how but also the “all-around skills” of work discipline and character building. Working hard under “bitter conditions” would therefore be the best form of education for the African youth recruits. This was also the form of education that had taken hold in China during the years of the Cultural Revolution; the engineering experts of the Chinese Railway Expert Team who became leaders of the TAZARA worker training program had themselves been posted to rural areas of China just before the African project began, and many of the Chinese rank-and-file workers had participated in the grueling railway building projects of China’s “Third-Line Defense” and the Korean War.

The new African “industrial men” that TAZARA’s founders envisioned would therefore be shaped through labor practice: they would gain technical know-how, work discipline, and other skills of modern citizenship from their Chinese mentors. The Chinese technicians in turn would serve as role models for emulation; in revolutionary China, “to be a model meant not only fulfilling one’s own duty well but also helping others by example” (Cheng Yinghong 2008:33). A slogan that was used at the time of TAZARA was “one helps one, both become red,” meaning that one-on-one assistance would cause both African and Chinese technical partners to become ideologically strengthened (interview with Li Jin Wen, Tianjin, July 2007). Emulation rather than exhortation was emphasized in the mentoring relationships between Chinese and African workers. As one Chinese expert remembers, he was not allowed to expose his own political ideas in the workplace; thus “we really did not have any official way to motivate them [the African workers] except through our own example.... Everyone was a ‘China *rafiki*’” (Kiswahili: Chinese friend).¹¹

African workers who participated in the TAZARA project have strong memories of their work experience and recall specific details that highlight the challenging parts of railway work—for example, building the tunnels and bridges from Mlimba to Makambako. For the TAZARA construction workers who are now retiring, their sense of “making history” as railway workers is closely linked to their experience of working under the tutelage of the Chinese experts. The transfer of technical skills through the Chinese method of teaching *shou ba shou* (hand in hand) is an especially powerful component of their memory of work, and of their capacity as a cohort of workers to operate the railway after the handing over. One retired worker remembered a Chinese demonstration of work practice in this way:

The Chinese were teaching us using actions, to the extent that, for example, if we had just arrived there at the workplace, [the Chinese worker] began to work [at first] all by himself. He told us, “you all just rest, the work that you are about to begin here is done like this,” and then he did the work so intensely [*kweli kweli*] that sweat began to pour [from his body]. Then he asked us all, “Okay, friends, have you seen the work?” (Interview with Isaya Jasho Kiwugila, Mang’ula, Tanzania, August 6, 2010)¹²

Nevertheless, technology training was experienced differently for different groups of TAZARA workers, in ways that belie the retrospective reconstruction of a common or collective experience of this first generation. The most significant difference was probably that between Tanzanian and Zambian recruits. Retired Zambian workers are more ambivalent than Tanzanians about the roles played by modernization strategies and technology transfer during their lives working on TAZARA. Although both countries placed an emphasis on recruitment of youth workers who could then be molded into trained technicians and disciplined citizens, most of the Tanzanian workers, who were recruited in much larger numbers during the first phases of the project, started out with only some primary level education. They were recruited through the offices of the TANU party, many of them through the National Service, and came from all regions of the country; the greatest percentage came from the districts along the line of rail in southern Tanzania, particularly from the Southern Highlands.

Zambian workers, by contrast, often described themselves as urban youth (or youth destined for modern urban life) who had been sent out to the unfamiliar and backward countryside to build the railway. Overall, many of the Zambian recruits had higher levels of education and technical background than those in Tanzania, and according to their accounts, the costs for them of staying with TAZARA rather than moving into the mining and industrial sectors in Zambia could be high. Like many of their contemporaries, they recall the 1960s and 1970s as a time of industrialization and technological advancement, when those with secondary school and vocational educations hoped to find a secure and well-remunerated place within the Zambian mining-industrial economy (see Ferguson 1999). In this sense, their narratives of railway construction incorporate a theme of disappointment. John Mulenga, for example, remembers that young Zambian men like himself who were accustomed to the urban life of the copperbelt found it difficult to work in the rustic TAZARA camps. He compared his working conditions unfavorably to those of his high school classmates who he felt had better opportunities:

[TAZARA construction] was in the rural areas, so all the amenities that we used to know where I came from were not there. Like going to cinema clubs, going to watch football on the weekend and all other amenities which were found in the urban areas, they were not there, you have to

forget them. Then...the issue also of the railway salary came in... [meaning that it was low]. And then those fellow colleagues that you know in school, they went on to colleges and universities, but we just continued working [at TAZARA] hoping that after construction we will be happy. (Interview, Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia, June 30, 2010)

Even those who were sent to China for higher education sometimes described China in similar terms, as representing a backward step in their own modernizing (and capitalist) progress (interviews with Moses Mutuna, Mpika, Zambia, June 20, 2010; John Mulenga, Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia, June 30, 2010).

Tanzanian workers were also more likely than Zambians to spend several years in the company and tutelage of Chinese mentors, from whom they learned Chinese and a diverse array of skills. Those who worked for long periods of time, learned Chinese, and had a close interpersonal relationship with a Chinese mentor were most likely to view their technical education and skill levels favorably. Retired workers praised this development of “all-around skills” and tended to emphasize their years of experience working under the guidance and supervision of the Chinese experts as the asset that divides them from other workers, especially younger workers who received their education from vocational or university institutions. As one commented,

I carried out almost all types of work, especially during the period of constructing the TAZARA railway, because when you do work with the Chinese you are transferred from one kind of work to another. And this was done because they wanted us to have knowledge of many different types of work, and this was a form of assistance to us individually and for the nation as a whole. (Interview with Magani Gani, Chimala, Tanzania, July 23, 2010)¹³

“We received a very high level of experience from the Chinese,” this worker concluded, “a level that now surpasses even that which people receive from the universities.” On this particular issue retiring Zambian workers were not in disagreement: Most felt that they had learned valuable skills that could not be easily measured against classroom learning. Even John Mulenga, looking back on his own experience, concluded,

So I learned a lot of skills from the Chinese without having gone to college or university. And most of the Zambians who learned skills from the Chinese perform better than those who come from colleges or universities. Because later on after handing over...they started recruiting people who didn't participate in the construction [who were degree and diploma holders].... But when it came to actual work the Zambians who had been in the construction, who learned skills from the Chinese, performed better than those from the universities. Even today those Zambians who participated in the construction are better than those from the universities, they

are better in terms of actual performance. Be it in engineering, be it in accountancy, be it in revenue collection whatever...they are better. (Interview, Kapiri Mposhi, Zambia, June 30, 2010)

Chinese retired workers also emphasized this aspect of training and education, especially the education that took place in the workplace.

Reform and Retrenchment: The 1980s

In 1976 there were approximately seventeen hundred formally trained workers among the six thousand African workers who continued to be engaged with TAZARA at the time of the handing over. The remaining workers were let go, to return to their former lives or build new ones (Mpika Training School 1976). According to workers' recollections, the Chinese instituted a careful selection process for determining which workers would stay on to become salaried. They recommended workers who showed qualities of good character, hard work, and discipline. Paschal Kihanza, a worker from the bridge team, recalled that

the Chinese really wanted a person who had good manners.... If you were very arrogant, well then they would just look at you and keep quiet. Now when it came time to reduce the labor force, they would begin to choose those who had discipline. Those who were respectful were the ones who were selected to work [as salaried workers]. (Interview, Iringa, Tanzania, July 20, 2010)

Those who were selected for salaried employment were also drawn from the group of workers who had been recruited for advanced training in workshops in Tanzania and Zambia, as well as those who had received higher education in China. They were first given an examination that tested them on their railway skills and basic education. As Kihanza remembers, each worker also had to undergo an interview:

He had an interview, and if he had been educated he would be employed.... He was given an examination. Even if he had studied up to standard seven and he had a certificate, there were additional questions that he was asked, for example "so, will you really be able to do this work?" Because there was a lot of work to be done: To conduct this railway you needed to have some education. On the train itself you had to have training, you just couldn't just go there on your own. There was a conductor. There was a driver among those who were driving. There was that other person who looks after the wagons, the train guard. Aaah, it was necessary to have had an education. (Interview, Iringa, Tanzania, July 20, 2010)¹⁴

The workforce that was brought on board as the first cohort of salaried TAZARA employees after the inauguration of the railway in 1976 was

therefore made up of laborers who had participated in the construction and then gone through a recruitment and selection process that emphasized education and training as well as personal character. The individuals of the “construction generation” that formed at this moment in TAZARA’s history had several attributes in common. They had carried out the “hard work” of railway building. They had been trained by Chinese railway experts, most of them by this time not only on the job but also in training schools or workshops. And they had passed a test of their qualifications based on both technical and personal preparedness. This moment therefore marked an important moment in worker consciousness, as a selected group of workers passed from the category of casual worker to become a salaried cohort of TAZARA staff members.

It did not take long for the mobilization of this TAZARA worker consciousness to become necessary in defense of railway workers’ rights. In 1982, remembers University of Dar es Salaam law professor Issa Shivji, three hundred TAZARA employees from Tanzania were made “redundant” (interview, Dar es Salaam, August, 2007). They were laid off as part of economic reform policies that identified an “excess labor” problem within the railway operations. Layoffs were needed, the railway authority argued in public, for cost reduction, since “TAZARA had fallen into making losses through thefts, negligence and indiscipline among workers,” and “the shortage of motive power and spare parts had further aggravated the situation” (*Daily News* 1986). In private, some laid-off workers felt at the time that they had been targeted for their class status—many in their group were “field workers, not well educated.” And they suspected that managers may have hoped that they had limited knowledge of their rights as workers (interview with Benedict Mkanyago, Dar es Salaam, August 2010).

The group of laid-off workers met and sought assistance from the Legal Aid office at the University of Dar es Salaam, where Issa Shivji agreed to work with them. Although the Tanzanian national labor union (JUWATA) refused to support them, they took their case to the labor court, the Permanent Labor Tribunal (PLT), which ruled in favor of reinstating 116 of the workers on the grounds that their dismissal had been illegal. This ruling was then appealed to the Tanzanian high court by TAZARA, and appealed again by the workers. In the end the railway authority was forced to reinstate the workers (*Uhuru News* 1985, 1986).

The railway workers who had been laid off had all been part of the construction teams. This aspect of their background and experience was held up by Shivji in court: “The workers who were made redundant were almost all the original construction workers,” he remembers. “Those who remained on the job included some who had come later—and TAZARA actually hired new workers to replace those who had been made redundant.” As he presented their case, Shivji argued that this group of workers had been trained by the Chinese through on-the-job experience: “These workers were ex-primary school people who were trained in skills, who then took

over the operation of the railway.” In his case, he argued that their experience and training with the Chinese experts made them a national treasure. The workers were well organized throughout the hearings, he remembers, and they became skilled at collecting evidence and participating in the development of their own case (interview with Issa Shivji, Dar es Salaam, August, 2007).

One of the leaders of this group of workers (who wished to remain anonymous) remembers that he and other workers mobilized themselves during the 1980s layoffs on the basis of their consciousness of themselves as members of a unique generation. Under the tutelage of Issa Shivji, they went on to learn about labor law and workers’ rights. Armed with this background, they were able to provide advice and support to other aggrieved workers in the years that followed. This knowledge and experience of labor issues, this worker remembers, was a cause for concern at TAZARA headquarters (interview, Dar es Salaam, August 2010). A core group of ten worker activists from the 1980s court case were posted afterward to a remote rural station in Tanzania. They were now viewed as agitators, he explained, who could cause trouble if they were based in the city. But as we will see below, their rural posting did not prevent them from taking up future legal actions.

Commercialization and Liberalization in the 1990s

The management turn toward economic reform and liberalization intensified in the decade of the 1990s. During this period TAZARA faced additional economic pressures as southern African states achieved independence and the rail routes from Zambia to the south were opened. In March 1995 the managing director of TAZARA announced that the railway would lay off as many as 2,600 workers over the next fourteen months. According to the press announcement,

The TAZARA boss said that a careful multiple redundancy scheme had been worked out, in which some incompetent and unsuitable personnel have been identified. He said TAZARA would also welcome voluntary retirement offers from those displaced as a result of organizational restructuring and work methods improvements. He, however, refused to disclose if there were plans to reward the retirement volunteers with a “golden handshake” incentive package to enable them to start off well the new life. (*Daily News* 1995a)

According to an editorial that appeared the following day on the front page of the *Daily News*, the decision to “streamline” TAZARA operations was the right one. The “political” rationale for the railway had now passed with the removal of the white settler regimes that once ruled southern Africa, this writer argued, and the TAZARA leadership needed to change with the times. In a somewhat contradictory way the writer went on to observe,

“Worst still, TAZARA running staff have lost all the good qualities the general public used to know and love them for. The poor services of the private firms contracted to run buffet services do not help matters one little bit” (*Daily News* 1995b). Thus even in his support for commercialization and layoffs, this writer tipped his hat to an earlier generation of TAZARA workers. Ironically, it was the older generation of railwaymen who were most affected by the changes this writer advocated. Many of them were near retirement and some took early retirement options in the 1990s, only to discover that their pension packages were not forthcoming. There was no golden handshake.

The commercialization package was not only promoted by the Western countries that were advising the TAZARA management at the time of economic liberalization. It was also supported by the Chinese Railway Expert Team that had continued to provide support to the railway since 1976. When Chinese Vice Premier Zhu Rongji visited Tanzania in 1995, he stated that the railway’s commercialization would improve performance and that there was no alternative to laying off workers.¹⁵ In 1996 the railway management took another step and restructured the workforce into two grades: a top grade for management-level workers and a lower grade for all other salaried workers. This reclassification created a dual system of salaries, benefits, and other privileges that came on line just as the construction generation was nearing retirement.

The workers who began to retire in the 1990s were almost all members of the cohort of railwaymen that was hired at the time of the handing over in 1976—a momentous event both in their own lives and in the history of the railroad. The commercialization measures that created divisions in the workforce and excluded them from the material and symbolic recognition of higher salaries, benefits, and other privileges felt like a betrayal. At the moment when they were about to retire, they felt dishonored and betrayed. Many in both Tanzania and Zambia have not been paid their pensions, or they have received only partial payments. This has meant that they have no means to invest in business or farming enterprises that could sustain them into their later years.

In the last decade, the worker consciousness of TAZARA’s construction generation has been rallied once again—perhaps for the last time—as a retiring cohort of experienced railway workers bring court cases against TAZARA for failures by the railway authority to pay their pensions in full or on time. Workers who retired between 2000 and 2005 had not received their full pensions in 2011, or had only received them piecemeal. Yet their pension funds (now bankrupt) were built through deductions from worker salaries. Those who have elected to take their case to court do so once again with a collective consciousness of their special place in history. They believe—some citing lessons learned during the 1980s when they turned to Issa Shivji for assistance—that their rights and their important role in history can be fully recognized only if they make their cause a legal and national one. “We were all hired

at the same time and we have all been given retirement at the same time [but without pensions],” explained one retired worker who wished to remain anonymous. “It is a big issue and a national question” (interview, Dar es Saalam, August 2010).

In response to worker claims, the TAZARA management has requested that the governments of Tanzania and Zambia find the resources to settle the pension issue. But this will take time.¹⁶ Meanwhile, it is not only the loss of financial resources but also the symbolism of the issue that is important to the construction generation. One recently retired worker from Zambia (who also preferred to remain anonymous) expressed his views in this way:

During the period of railway line construction, it was a time of working. We worked according to the guidelines given by three governments: China, Tanzania, and Zambia. We all worked together from the beginning of railway line construction to the end. After the railway construction was over, we thought it would have been proper for the two governments [Tanzania and Zambia] to consider what to do for us when we retire. For example, we hoped that they would find settlements and farmland for us where we would live with our families. But the situation is not like that, so it's a very big problem.... What we did during construction was such a significant job indeed, but it turns out that they are not respecting us now. We [retirees] are living as if we had never worked on the railway's construction at all, they treat us as if we did not do a great and noteworthy thing. (Interview, Mpika, June 2010)

“What makes us sorrowful is that we are not given our rights,” explained one Tanzanian retiree. “What would make us very happy would be if [the railway authority and the participating states] would give us our rights because we suffered so much when we built this railway” (interview with Isaya Jasho Kiwugila, Mang'ula, August 2010). Another worker declared his deep frustration with government officials who praise the railway in their public statements yet fail to honor the workers in practice. These comments often compare leaders of the past like Julius Nyerere of Tanzania with those in the present, expressing bitterness over the faith they placed in promises made in the 1960s and 1970s that they feel have not been honored.

The grievances brought forward by retiring TAZARA workers have to do with state-level financial and other social security promises. Equally and perhaps even more painful for retiring workers is a feeling that they are no longer valued, whether for the heroic labor of their youth or for the wisdom of experience that they developed over their working lives. Worst of all, retirees feel that the newly hired workers who have replaced them over the last decade do not understand the intricacies of operating “their railway,” having been educated in the generic curriculum of vocational institutions rather than through the hands-on, experiential process

of mentoring favored by the Chinese. “The train is being operated by very, very young men” who have no experience, explained one retiree. And when elders with experience are hired back as contract workers they are just treated as casual laborers (*vibarua*). “You come back as an expert and you should be treated as an expert,” he stated, “but now you are just paid as a casual worker, there are no privileges” (interview with Isaya Jasho Kiwugila, Mang’ula, August 2010).

What was “made” when TAZARA was constructed was therefore not only a railway but also a cohort of trained workers and a set of experiences that have continued to be remembered and reconstructed over the course of time. Retired workers and state officials alike call on the legacy of the TAZARA project to meet their discursive needs in the present. Retiring workers “made” and continue to “make history” through their narration of an ongoing relationship to a specific event in the past. By emphasizing the sacrifices they made as a cohort of young men who participated in a nation-building project, they intentionally implicate the state in their claims for recognition and support in their old age. As one retiring worker explained,

In the year 1976 we were promised...by Minister of Transportation Job Lusinde that if we did our work well, we would be made into experts [i.e., permanent railway staff] after the departure of the Chinese. And on our retirement we would be paid very good money. But now I do not know, the location of this good money itself is something that is impossible to understand (*haieleweki kabisa*). (Interview with Isaya Jasho Kiwugila, Mang’ula, August 2010)

The fact that a number of retired workers have already died without seeing any resolution to the pension issue has caused a whole new discourse of martyrdom to develop among the workers, more than thirty years after the deaths of the Chinese experts memorialized in the cemetery visited by Fu Ziyang.

Conclusion

In a recent editorial in the Tanzanian *Daily News*, the reporter argued that if only the Chinese had been allowed to do more infrastructure development in Tanzania during the last two decades (as they are currently doing in Kenya), not only would the country as a whole be better off, but the ruling party would be enormously popular:

The Chinese using old technology in the 1970s, spent five years in building a 1,800 railroad, and traversing across some of the most difficult terrains in the world—from Dar es Salaam to Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia. Had the same people been given the massive project of handling the central railway line in 2006 from Dar es Salaam to Kigoma and Mwanza, Tanzanians would have been enjoying the most reliable rail transport in the country by the time they were going to polls last year and one does not need to be

Goebbels in order to appreciate the massive propaganda the project would have provided to the ruling party, CCM, during its election campaigns. (Tagalile 2011)

The Chinese, this observer suggested, used technology to build TAZARA that may have been outdated when compared with what was available in the rest of the world at the time. Their initiative succeeded, however, because they have a “pragmatic way of handling urgent issues” that has continued to this day. In fact, the technology used to build TAZARA stood up to the abuse of the El Niño flood of 1997, an episode that wiped out the Central Railway Line. The editorial writer also stated in no uncertain terms that Chinese infrastructure assistance was an invaluable legacy that would serve as a “propaganda” tool for the government over time—reflecting the actual ways that the TAZARA partnership has been touted by states in support of their development agendas and their relationship with China.

States, newspapers, and workers all point to the history and memory of TAZARA in the context of present-day concerns. The technology itself, whether described as “old” or as irreplaceable, plays a strong role in these narratives. The members of the official Chinese Railway Expert Team based in Dar es Saalam were themselves wary in the mid-1980s when Western technical assistance and technical experts were brought into the TAZARA system and for the first time they worked with “blond haired and blue eyed European and American experts.”¹⁷ Workers from China and Africa who participated in the project recall its significance in technological terms, at a time when pulling together the personnel, the machines, the operations manuals, and the training materials was an enormous challenge.

The imperative to train African workers while completing a project of global visibility in the midst of the Cultural Revolution was accompanied by a call to heroic action on the part of the Chinese experts. For the Africans who joined TAZARA in their youth, the experience of working with the Chinese has become an identifying marker of knowledge and practice for a construction generation. Those who now seek recognition as the heroes and martyrs of the TAZARA project have challenged state memory with their own individual and collective historical consciousness. Their sense of having “made history” was formed at the moment of construction itself, then reconfigured and renarrated over time as Africa, China, and the world have undergone the upheavals of economic liberalization. And as China’s role in Africa has shifted, the narratives of TAZARA, with its heroes and martyrs in the foreground, continue to be told and retold in the public forums of diplomatic speeches, legal actions, and newspaper editorials.

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Notes

1. As Julia Strauss (2009) has demonstrated, Chinese public discourse about its relationship with Africa has remained remarkably consistent since the 1970s, despite the dramatic changes that have occurred in China’s domestic economy and foreign relations.
2. See Werbner and Terence Ranger (1996); Iliffe (2005:350); Gordon (1977); Harries (1994); Ferguson (1999); Bodnar (1989); Werbner (1998); Glassman (1991).
3. And this Chinese revolutionary approach to “new industrial men” was in turn influenced by Soviet models (Yinghong Cheng 2008). See also Straker (2009); Schmidt (2007).
4. Like one of the South African migrant workers interviewed by Jean and John Comaroff in 1987, they understood their experience as a “key to the present world” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1987:192).
5. Because our oral history methodology involves long-term relationships and multi-year conversations with retired workers, we have been able to witness and document some of the complex ways that memories can shift and change, even when stories are told to the same listeners.
6. These are the official construction dates; in fact some construction-related activities began earlier as the survey and design teams established forward

- bases along the planned railway route; 1975 was the year that the first trials began along the full length of the line.
7. Interview conducted by a reporter, Ru Sheng (2005–6), and shared with the author. Translation by Claire Yanjing Du.
 8. National Archives of Zambia (NAZ), MFA 1/286/144, “TAZARA Brief Progress Report,” March 16, 1970.
 9. While they adjusted their curriculum to meet the revolutionary expectations prevailing in China in the early 1970s, these professors also incorporated much of their earlier curricular material into these courses. Interviews with Liu Qing Dong and Yao Pei Ji, retired Beijing Jiaotong University professors, conducted by CCTV reporter, 2005. Archives of Beijing Jiaotong University.
 10. Archives of Mpika Training School, Mpika Zambia; Archives of Beijing Jiaotong University; interviews with retired workers in Zambia, Tanzania, and China conducted between 2009 and 2012.
 11. Interview with retired railway workers, February 7 Factory, Beijing, June 2009.
 12. Interview conducted by George Mwambeta. The image of sweat pouring from the body, or even bleeding due to heavy exertion, is a characteristic of the “self-scarifying” heroic labor of the socialist “new man.” See Cheng Yinghong (2008:28), citing *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, “Russian Communist Youth League.”
 13. Interview conducted by George Ambindwile.
 14. Interview conducted by Frank Edward.
 15. Archival records of Chinese Railway Expert Team from TAZARA Headquarters in Dar es Salaam. I am grateful to Liu Haifang for assistance in accessing these records.
 16. See interview with Conrad Simuchile, TAZARA Public Relations Manager, in *East African Business Week* (2012).
 17. Archival records of Chinese Railway Expert Team, TAZARA Headquarters, Dar es Salaam. Transcription of CRET internal meeting minutes, March 3, 1987, translation by Liu Haifang.