



The chances of seeing steam locomotives working for their living are now getting smaller and smaller, one of the few places is where they were last built, China.

Even here they are not common, there is no more steam on China Rail and what is left is on industrial lines, though these can be quite extensive and sometimes offer passenger services as well as freight.

As a last chance to see what is left I was lucky enough to get on a rail trip in late September 2006. The start was not auspicious as a day or so before we left my fellow traveller Julian Brown phoned to say that he had fallen and broken his ankle. After some discussion he decided to go anyway with the aid of a borrowed wheel chair and a pair of National Health crutches.

At the airport there was some consternation when the airline were uncertain if we would



make the connection in Paris, as there was only 45 minutes to get to a different terminal. In the event the connection went well though the wheel chair that was sent to collect us shed a tyre, the attendant disappeared to get another but after waiting a short time we decided to leg it, or hobble it, down the nearest escalator and on to the connecting bus service.

After a nine hour flight from Paris we emerged in to a new day in Beijing, and met the rest of the people on the tour. Some brave

souls had already been on the tour for two weeks, we were only doing the second half of

a four week stint. One of these was people was John Moore, a Maxitrak customer, who thought I might be gathering data for a Maxitrak QJ 2-10-2! No doubt he would have preferred me to be back in Blighty making the engine he had ordered rather than train spotting in China!

We spent the first afternoon at the Beijing February 7th Rolling Stock Works where three steam engines were at shunting about. One of these was a JF class 2-8-2, it looked like all the other Chinese engines but I was assured that it was probably the last of its class at work and a rare sight in deed.

We were supposed to visit the works itself but on arrival we were told that there had been a derailment and we were not allowed in. We went to the back of the factory where the factory siding joins the main line and looked over the wall, sure enough a couple of engines worked out along the siding and we were able to get some photos.

Next day were back at the airport for a local flight to Yingchuan and then by bus on to to all sorts of places right off the tourist map, and this is definitely one of those places. There is only one reason for the railway here and that is the carriage of coal from mine to power station as the surroundings are really just desert. There is a stark contrast between the big cities with their wide roads and heavy traffic compared to the countryside where a house is only a small brick room with a bed and a chair and very little else except a satellite dish on the roof for the TV. Most Chinese people are rather taken back when they see Europeans, possibly for the first time. It only takes a smile or friendly wave to break the ice and they are then very friendly.



At the DaGu railway we arrived after the horse had bolted so to speak as the steam engines were just on standby while brand new diesels rumbled by with the trains full of coal. In spite of this they were

engines not to be missed, the legendry QJ class 2-10-2 just about the largest steam locomotives I have ever seen. Just a pity we did not see them turn a wheel.

Our next visit was to the Yaojie mining railway where the landscape was somewhat more mountainous but just a bleak. It was a job to know which parts of the view were made with a bulldozer and which was naturally occurring as neither appeared to support any sort of natural vegetation.

This line connected a number of factories and foundries, climbing a steep valley and offered a timetabled passenger service as well as freight transfer between the various installations. Timetables are



great, you know when to expect a train rather than just turning up and waiting for something to happen (or not as the case may be). Working this railway were SY class 2-8-2 locomotives, just about the most common engine still going as many thousand were built from the 1960's to the 1990's.

Most rural views in China include a couple of factories usually with a number of chimneys belching out smoke, everything is coal fired



and a fine layer of dust covers the locality while smoke hangs in the air sometimes obscuring the view in the distance.

It is reminiscent of the 1950's here where I remember the local cement works covering the surroundings with fine white dust so it always looked like it had been snowing.

We may dislike the pollution but it is not that long ago that we were the same. Some attempt is made to clear up with women sweeping the streets with large brushes, it is a losing battle against the heavily laden lorries shedding coal dust over every bump in the road.

In the towns road traffic is much the same as any other city, except for Beijing where the trolley buses have battery power on board to take them over some of the larger squares and inner city areas where the overhead wires stop. In the country things are very different as the three-wheeler reigns supreme. They come in various different guises from converted motorbikes to some the size of a Ford Transit. The most common is somewhere between the two in size and has a single cylinder diesel engine driving a



combined gearbox and back axle. The transmission consists of three v belts, it obviously works as they are very popular. The pop pop sound of the exhaust is to be heard far and wide in rural areas, after about a week I realized where I had experienced a similar sound effect, on the London to Brighton veteran car run! The sound of a Chinese three



wheeler full of coal is very similar to a 1903 De Dion full of people tackling a hill on its way to Brighton, doing about the same speed. Our next steam encounter was the Liujiaxia local railway, here we saw several JS 2-8-2 locomotives at work, these are

larger than the SY class and have enclosed chimney and domes giving a very distinctive Chinese/ Russian look to the engines rather than the American look of the SY class.



On this line they were used to run a passenger service as well as freight including a terminus station in the middle of a market in the local town. The opportunity was taken to ride the train though this was in the boxcar rather than in the carriages as they were full of cigarette smoke (just like I remember British trains in the 50's). When we left the train it was combined with some freight wagons to form a sizeable mixed train, which set off with one engine on the front and a second on the rear to help up the bank. A good display of steam power ensued.

Our next port of call was the Yaojie Railway whose main claim to fame is a number of large bridges, one over the yellow river. This is a pure industrial line and trains are run on an irregular basis, as we found to our cost

after a several hour wait with nothing to spot but a couple of toads in a ditch. At length we gave up by this particular high bridge and went to the bridge on the Yellow river. This is a long concrete viaduct carrying both the railway in the center and a footpath at either side. The footpath consisted of rather flimsy looking concrete panels with big gaps through which the river below could be seen. Not a time to be thinking too much about concrete cancer or the strength of pre cast panels.

Once over the river we took up position and waited again for some action. After another extended period eventually we heard a whistle in the



distance and an SY came into view slowly crossing the bridge. On single line railways it is usually worth waiting for the train you have seen to clear the section, as there is a good



chance a second train is waiting to come the other way. Sure enough it was only a short time before another working appeared, however it did give a chance for Wesley (a retired teacher from northern England) to get on the bridge but not enough time for him to get off again. In his bright green shorts Wesley was a familiar sight in the corner of many photos!

From here we were on an overnight train to our next destination Xian. Sleeper trains are a very good idea on a railway holiday, you get to your destination without spending nights in a hotel and days travelling. We had about five such nights, fortunately spaced out a bit as facilities are limited, everyone appears to just go to bed in their clothes then get up and carry on the next day without any visible change.

Each carriage has a coal fired hot water boiler, very useful for hot drinks and pot noodles, the usual fare if there is no restaurant car.

The railway system is very well kept, clean and well used. Stations are large and full of people, you are not allowed on the platform until the train arrives so the concourse is always full and large signs tell you what is going on (if you can read Chinese).

On one train we were unable to get the full compliment of tickets in the soft class sleeper so some of us had to travel hard class. This is not as bad as it sounds as all the beds in China, from the best hotel to the worst train, are very hard any way. One of our number had the forethought to bring an airbed with him, which enabled him to tackle any Chinese bed with impunity.

It is many years since I was on a sleeper train and I did wonder if I would get any sleep, I need not have worried as the movement of the train had a very soporific effect and I only woke up when we stopped. In the hard class sleeper cars the bunks are three high and there is no compartment door to keep the rest of the world out. The train we were on was very full and our car was put in as an extra, having a number out of sequence with the



rest of the train that was over twenty cars long. It was a lot older than the other cars, in fact the same as one of the cars in the Railway museum.

Hard class is better in some ways as you see much more of the local life, people are going to and fro in the train all the time, a large number being train staff. There would appear to be no shortage of jobs or people to do them on the railways. One particular journey took us up a mountain range on a twisting and turning line to rival any Swiss railway. We had one of the large two unit electric locomotives as a helper on the front of our normal engine. Anywhere else this line would have been a tourist attraction in it's own right diving in and out of tunnels and crossing turbulent rivers, here the line is already used to near capacity with trains waiting in every loop of the single track and tourists would probably just be an inconvenience.

Our train arrived at Xian in the pouring rain and unloaded what appeared to be several thousand people on to an already overcrowded station. We had a long walk in the wet to find our tour bus which then took us to see the terracotta army, very interesting, but not as exciting as a working steam engine.



Our next train took us to Chengdu in the Szechwan province where the food is pretty hot. From here we went by bus to the Shibaxi railway, the Chinese equivalent of the Festiniog railway and the highlight of the tour as far as I am concerned. To begin with this railway is 2ft 6" gauge, what one of my friends describes as "the correct gauge for railways in heaven" (I think it may be 2ft gauge, but in either case I am not likely to discover which is actually correct).

The line was built in the early 1950's to carry coal from a mine high in the mountains down to the Yangtze River for onward shipment. A second mine was also connected lower down the valley and this lower section is electrified. The output from the top mine was not sufficient to warrant full electrification, in fact the top mine is now abandoned but a small third mine provides some traffic to the top of the line.

There are a number of Chinese built 0-8-0 C2 Class steam locomotives providing motive power on the non-electrified line, they are all of the same type, typical post war eastern block engines to an originally Polish design.

The town of Bagou is situated at the top of the line and was presumably built up round the original mine, due to the mountainous nature of the countryside this town is only accessible by train, on foot or by motorbike following the line. Most





of the trains on the upper part of the line are for passengers, composed of a delightful collection of four wheel coaches with one bogie coach in the centre of the train. This is used to take all the produce as well as passengers, anything from pigs to telegraph poles. There is no continuous brake, each coach is provided with its own brake and a brake person to operate it. I would not like to say how effective it would be in the event of an emergency stop as it takes a lot of handle twiddling to get the brake on.

Coal trains consist of four-wheel side hopper wagons, also each having its own brake though they are only manned on about every fourth or fifth wagon. The electric hauled trains can be forty to fifty wagons long but the steam hauled ones to the top of the line are much shorter. In a move typical of the idiosyncrasies of narrow gauge operation at a point about half way up the line the engine has to change ends. This is accomplished in a very short space of time, to such an extent that if you get off to take photos you are likely to be left behind.



Pin and bar couplers are used, outlawed many years ago in the States for being dangerous. The Chinese make operation look easy, each shunter is equipped with a piece of bent wire and a whistle. He stands on the front of the engine giving a series of short blasts on his whistle as the train is approached. He then hooks the bar with his piece of bent wire and drops in the pin giving a triumphant blast on his whistle like a referee when a goal has been scored.

There are no less than five tunnels on the line, going through these on the train is quite exciting as one is plunged into complete darkness and the coaches which have no glazing rapidly fill with smoke, especially when going up hill with the engine working hard. The line is used as a right of way for pedestrians and motorbikes, and this also includes the tunnels! Some tunnels have the odd light in the middle so pedestrians are not in

complete darkness and some, but not all, have an attendant at each end to say when the line is clear.



In order to get to one photographic spot we chanced our arm through one of the tunnels. At the other end we waited for the next train and saw a continual stream of people coming out of one tunnel and into the next.

Julian was getting about a little better with his broken foot, you can imagine the looks we got when first a whole lot of Europeans arrived followed by one more on crutches. By this time Julian was having his foot wrapped in polythene tied with string to keep out the mud, making him look like Charlie Chaplin in the Gold Rush after hunger had forced Charlie to eat his shoes. The spectacle of Julian hobbling off into the tunnel with cameras round his neck and his foot wrapped in polythene is one of the enduring memories of this trip.



The steam engines look a little scruffy and down at heel but they certainly give a good account of themselves. With their big cylinders and little wheels they have plenty of go and are very sure footed, both when starting a passenger train on a gradient and when shunting

freight. This shunting is usually done in what is best described as a “spirited” manner amid much whistling from both the locomotive and the shunter. There were a couple of very derelict diesel engines in the lower depot bought to replace the C2’s but obviously well out of favor with steam handling all the passenger traffic.



In China there is little sex discrimination, most of the brake people and station staff on this line are female. We even saw three very healthy looking ladies who were shoveling ballast off the road and in to hopper trucks, filling them in a very short space of time. Most of the staff have recently been fitted out in smart uniforms with a high-speed train design on the pocket, quite out of place on a line like this.

Between the trains locals use home made flat trucks made by placing a board on wheels set to fit the track. This will then be loaded up and either rolled down the grade or pulled up, sometimes with a motorbike! Fortunately oncoming trains make a lot of noise as they approach and there is enough warning to get off the track, though I am sure the railway authorities do not approve of this unofficial use.

This line was faced with closure only a couple of years ago when the top mine ceased production, however local interest in such an unusual railway has led to a new lease of life and a cameraman from the local television station arrived to video our visit. It is to be hoped that the long term future for this line is now secure and it may be following the same path as the Festiniog at the beginning of the preservation era.



The trip then took us further south to a steel works at Panzihua, where SY class engines pull heavy molten steel and slag wagons round this extensive factory complex.

Our overnight train was caught for two hours waiting for a path on the single track line in to Panzihua, the rain fell like a monsoon and we were not very optimistic about conditions for photography. When we eventually got started we were in and out of tunnels beside a steep river gorge. As we came out of the tunnels we could see torrents of water blocking the road on the side of the gorge. We went in to the last tunnel and when we came out of the other side the weather was fine, it was like someone had waved a magic wand and the skies were clear.

At the factory itself our first sight was an SY on standby with a diesel working the train,



oh no we thought no working steam, we need not have worried though as further on in the works we found at least three more SY's all working hard pulling the heavy molten steel cars under the furnace to be filled. All the engines here were well kept, one in

particular had much polished brass and carried a beautiful red and brass headboard. It is just a pity we can't read Chinese to know what it says.



This turned out to be a very photogenic spot, we were even able to get the steel pouring in to the cars, from a safe distance! At one point a slag car started to bubble up and overflow leaving molten slag building up at the side of the track. The driver was asked to pull the train forward, a good idea except that the slag set fire to a pile of wooden sleepers beside the track. The train was shunted back under the building and a bundle of some sort dropped in to the molten slag. This cooled it down and the sleeper fire was also put out, all part of the days work obviously. You would not want to get too near these wagons, the heat could be felt standing several metres away and several rows of them were in the sidings cooling off. As we climbed



aboard the sleeper train going back we all agreed that this had been a very good end to what had looked like dismal start. In addition we thought that Panzihua looked like one of the nicest towns to live in, not too dusty and dirty and built on different levels by the riverside.

Our next port of call was a change from the itinerary as one of the lines had closed. This was another steel works industrial line recently found to be still be using steam. In such a big country it is difficult for enthusiasts to keep track of all the working steam locations and new ones are being found on a regular basis. This was the Jingyou steel



works and was so new that we think we were the first tour to visit. They had about eight SY locomotives of which at least three were at work. First we had a look round the engine shed where one of the locos was undergoing an overhaul in a very large, clean and well equipped shop. It was interesting to be able to see in full size the components we are used to making in miniature. Outside there was an early SY out of use, built in the 1960's this must have been one of the oldest members of this class

around. Next we went to the yard where one engine was in steam by the water tower. Two others then came to join it, or at least their drivers did diving upstairs into the nearby building for a cup of tea and a bowl of noodles. We set off to a nearby level crossing to see the train due out after the tea break.

In spite of being unused to visitors the staff were very friendly and helpful. The train crew were asked to "give the engine a bit of stick" up to where we were on the crossing, this they duly did. The engine thundered by at a heck of a pace with the whistle blasting, great on the video, and a bit of a surprise to the locals who are used to a much quieter life.

We then all went to a restaurant with a couple of people from the works. We were served by a group of waitresses who as the meal went on started giggling and whispering in the background. It turned out that one of the girls had taken a fancy to one of our group, you can imagine my surprise when it turned out to be me! This only goes to show what a lot of grotty old gricers she had to chose from and confirms my theory that Asian people find it hard to tell how old European people are, and visa versa.

This theory was largely due to my brother who is just four years younger than me but lives in Tokyo with a Japanese wife younger than my daughter. It only remains to say that this episode did no harm at all to this particular grandfathers ego!

I should at this juncture tell you about Chinese meals, as they are not like anything experienced before. Everyone sits round a big table with a turntable in the middle, dishes are put on the



turntable in random order I assume as they are cooked. Each person has a small bowl, a plate about the size of a saucer and chopsticks. The turntable is moved round and every one takes a little from each plate. Some are not easy to handle, especially noodles about the same length as spaghetti. Experienced travelers came equipped with normal spoons and forks but I was pleased to think that I had risen to the chopstick challenge and battled my way to a full belly using only a couple of wooden sticks.

The only dish I recognized was like a big omelette, all the others are a voyage of discovery including such delights as battered bone and gristle, fungus and meat, etc. There is quite a variety in the various dishes but as you have more or less the same for lunch and dinner every day it all begins to seem the same. It is also difficult to tell how much you have eaten as normally you have a plate full and go through it, here you just keep on picking until you think you have had enough. Even the breakfasts are usually noodles though we did get the occasional egg or bit of toast. One thing different at breakfast is a sort of sweet soup thing that looks like badly mixed wallpaper paste and tastes similar. As we were on our way early most mornings we usually avoided breakfast and were supplied by our Chinese courier Mike with moon cakes, bananas and small sausages in an impenetrable plastic wrapper. Moon cakes are only available a few weeks before the moon festival in early October and are like a small pork pie except that they



come filled with anything from jam to nutmeat seemingly at random. In Beijing we greeted the local KFC (Kentucky Fried Seagull) with open arms and when home could not look another Chinese takeaway in the eye for at least a couple of weeks. As we were nearing the end of the trip we now said goodbye to a new friend Bob Cross, a semi retired teacher come bus driver and the only person I know to include his degree in his e-mail address. Bob lives in Hong Kong and traveled both ways by train

to be on this trip. There was no point in him going north to Beijing so he arranged to stay with an old student friend for a couple of days and then head south back to Hong Kong. He was last seen on the back of a bicycle heading in that direction.

Meanwhile we took the plane back to Beijing next day and had time to visit the Beijing railway museum in the afternoon. Here we found several rows of locomotives lined up in a large exhibition hall. Most had the connecting rods removed for ease of movement even though they had not been moved in years. The few other visitors included children climbing over the engines in a way that would get them thrown out of any British railway museum. We also saw the sleeping car identical to the one on our earlier train though I am pleased to say the one we slept in was a lot cleaner.

On the last day we had just one more steam railway to visit. This was a short industrial line in a mountainous region to the southwest of Beijing. Originally we were to go by train but there were no tickets due to the moon festival putting extra pressure on the rail services, so we went on the bus.

After a couple of hours we began to get in to the mountains and here encountered a long traffic jam on a narrow winding road caused by a broken down truck. The situation was not improved by the Chinese habit of going round the outside of any vehicle that has stopped, all very well on a wide road but not helpful when it blocks the path of traffic coming the other way.

Eventually we arrived at the Buddha Valley Railway where three SY class engines pull low gondola cars with a cargo of what is best described as coke marbles. This turns out to be pelleted iron ore quarried and processed nearby. It arrives by lorry at the railhead still hot from the process. From here two of the locomotives are used to take the load about a mile and a half to the mainline junction. Even though the line was short it included several large bridges and a short tunnel, many of the industrial lines here include large civil engineering projects. Unfortunately the only train due that day had already been run but the driver was retrieved from his home and the engine, which was still in steam, run up and down the loading bay a few times.



All three engines had been renumbered with Chinese lucky numbers, 666, 888 and 999.

In spite of this they were just about the dirtiest and most unloved of all the engines we saw. This was in contrast to the train staff who were very friendly and enthusiastic.

This was the end of a very enjoyable trip and most likely the last time I will be on a normal service train pulled by a steam engine.