

SECTION 3
RELATIONS IN FOCUS

10

LIBERATING LABOUR? CONSTRUCTING
ANTI-HEGEMONY ON THE TAZARA
RAILWAY IN TANZANIA, 1965-76

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In the dry month of August in 1965, a small team of Chinese railway experts and their African guides set off on foot from the town of Kidatu in the southern interior of Tanzania, heading southwestward towards the Zambian border. Carrying their supplies and equipment on their backs, this intrepid group would cover a distance of over 400 miles before returning safely to Dar es Salaam nine months later. Their job was to scout possible routes for the construction of a railway that would link the Zambian Copperbelt with the Indian Ocean. As they cleared their path across the landscape they were said to have left behind them a trail of bamboo marker poles with small red flags fluttering in the breeze.¹

1 R. Hall and H. Peyman, *The Great Uhuru Railway: China's Showpiece in Africa* (London: Gollancz, 1976), pp. 107-8; Ali Mohamed Sendaro, 'Workers'

This Chinese survey team was ridiculed in the Kenyan white settler press as an example of the ineptitude of 'communist aid' in Africa. These were not genuine surveyors with proper surveying equipment, reported the *Kenya Weekly News*, but ordinary railway technicians imported from China who (the *News* implied) had no business carrying out such an enterprise.² The project was deridingly called the 'bamboo railway', a phrase that simultaneously conjured up the communist threat (represented by the red flags marching into the interior) and Chinese technological backwardness (represented by the bamboo marker poles).³

The United States responded to China's foray into East African railway development with alarm. TAZARA (the Tanzania-Zambia Railway) was referred to as the 'great steel arm of China thrusting its way into the African interior', in a US congressional hearing; a *Wall Street Journal* article stated ominously in 1967, 'The prospect of hundreds and perhaps thousands of Red Guards descending upon an already troubled Africa is a chilling one for the West.'⁴ The CIA had warned of the leftward shift of Tanzanian politics in a 1965 report that devoted several pages to the friendly relationship between Julius Nyerere and the 'Communist Nations', especially China. It was true that China was using development assistance in East Africa to achieve larger international strategic goals. And there was certainly a

Efficiency, Motivation and Management: The Case of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Construction' (PhD Thesis: Department of Management, University of Dar es Salaam, 1987), p. 250; George Yu, *China's Africa Policy: A Study of Tanzania* (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 130; Bruce Larkin, *China and Africa, 1949-1970: The Foreign Policy of the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 99; Interview with Mr Du Jian, Dar es Salaam, April 2000.

- 2 'Communist aid', *Kenya Weekly News*, 29 April 1966, p. 29.
- 3 Mr Waziri Juma, the railway's political coordinator, asked the delegates to a TANU party conference in 1971 to 'dispel slanders spread by imperialists that the Railway will be made of bamboo and be of low quality.' TNA C/2112/71, IS/L.317, 23 September 1971. He told delegates that construction work was of the highest quality and long durability.
- 4 'Red Guard line of China chugging into Africa', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 September 1967.

'thick ideological flavor' to China's public announcements of support for the proposed Tanzania-Zambia railway link.⁵

Yet the division of world politics into leftward and rightward turns was more an American than a Chinese position in the 1960s, at least in terms of African development assistance. Anxieties about scores of Chinese railway workers descending upon African villages revealed more about American fears of communism than about China's development intentions or the way they were experienced by Tanzanians during TAZARA's construction. For in the public statements about the railway that proliferated in China and Tanzania at the time, the emphasis was not so much on the clash between capitalism and communism, but on the similarities between the United States and the Soviet Union. In Chinese propaganda, it was clearly stated that China's development role in Africa would be to counter the neo-imperialist and hegemonic tendencies of the two superpowers.

China claimed at this time to belong with Africans to the 'Third World', a category that was defined racially (as non-white) and historically (as formerly colonized). The United States and the Soviet Union, on the other hand, were described as both European and imperialist. These statements resonated with the ideologies of Julius Nyerere and the TANU party, for whom citizenship in the new nation was defined in opposition to *unyonyaji* or 'exploitation'.⁶ In a speech he gave in China in 1965, it was reported that Julius Nyerere distinguished Chinese assistance from other forms of foreign aid when he stated that 'China is a Third World country', and that although some other countries might use economic aid to exploit or to politically dominate Africans, 'it is not China's policy at all.'

Chinese public statements depicted the Soviets and the Americans as expansionist, profit-seeking imperialists in Africa. The Chinese described themselves in contrast as the sympathetic third world part-

5 He Wenping, 'Fifty Years Through Wind and Rain', Unpublished paper presented to International Conference on Blacks and Asians: Encounters through Time and Space, Boston University, April 2002.

6 The popular term for exploitation was *unyonyaji*, literally 'sucking'. James Brennan, 'Blood Enemies: Exploitation and Urban Citizenship in the Nationalist Political Thought of Tanzania, 1958-75,' *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), pp. 389-413.

ners of African countries: the true 'all-weather friends' of Tanzania and Zambia. During TAZARA's construction, China's development principles were articulated as anti-hegemonic, and these principles were intended to be carried out through both policy and practice.

The practical blueprint for anti-hegemonism lay in the application of China's eight principles of African development, introduced by Zhou Enlai during his 1963-4 visit to Africa. These development principles emphasized the importance of self-reliance, while appealing to an ideal of community and shared history between China and other Third World nations. The last two of the eight principles had particular relevance to the construction of the TAZARA railway:

7. In giving any particular technical assistance, the Chinese Government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master such techniques;
8. The experts dispatched by the Chinese Government to help in construction in the recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities.⁷

With these principles China intentionally highlighted the differences between its own approach to foreign aid and that of other donors, in particular the United States and the Soviet Union. The TAZARA project was called the Great Freedom Railway because it was intended to free Zambia's landlocked mining economy from its historical dependence upon transportation routes through the white settler-ruled territories to the south. As an anti-hegemonic development project, the construction of TAZARA also promised another kind of freedom: a work experience that would liberate Africans by offering them an alternative to the exploitation of neo-imperialist post-independence projects.

The construction of the Freedom Railway would also be liberating for the African worker because it constituted a significant departure from the recent colonial past. Unlike colonial overseers of African

7 Yu, *China and Tanzania*, p. 74; Larkin, *China and Africa*, p. 106.

construction projects who were remembered by one worker as ‘standing aside, hand-in-pocket, directing workers by finger-pointing’, the Chinese project leaders would work side by side with their African counterparts, teaching by example.⁸ Relationships between African workers and Chinese management would be characterized by cross-racial friendship and worker solidarity rather than by the exclusion of colonial racial hierarchy. Workers would be paid fairly and on time, and benefits such as health care would be made available to them in the worker base camps. The management structure would also incorporate worker participation through regularly scheduled solidarity meetings.

The construction of TAZARA was intended to be liberating in yet another way. The experience of participating in a complex technological project would free African workers (as well as the rural populations living along the railway) from their alleged ignorance and backwardness. Workers would become modernized as they acquired new skills from the Chinese technical experts who offered them education and training. Through their practice of mentoring and teaching by example, the Chinese experts would impart important values such as hard work and worker discipline to their less experienced African counterparts. The transfer of technology would bring modernity to Tanzania’s economy by developing a segment of the workforce that could then be deployed in other national development projects.

And finally, the construction of TAZARA was envisioned as a liberating work experience because it was pan-African in its original intent. Not only would Chinese and African workers come together in the construction camps and lay tracks together in the trenches, but Zambians and Tanzanians would also work side by side. The work experience during TAZARA’s construction was structured managerially in ways that highlighted the partnership between Tanzania and Zambia. Thus the railway project, by bringing together workers from two newly independent neighbouring countries, could exemplify

8 Sendaro, ‘Workers’ Efficiency’, p. 23. A similar method of worker management and instruction is described for West Africa in Deborah Bräutigam, *Chinese Aid and African Development: Exporting Green Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 149-51.

the possibilities of pan-African solidarity in regional development cooperation.

The construction of the Freedom Railway was therefore envisioned in multiple ways as a liberating project for African workers. The workers would be freed from the exploitative models of development pursued by the neo-imperialist hegemonic powers. They would be brought into modernity through the labour process as they earned wages, practiced work discipline, and mastered new technology under the supervision of their Chinese mentors. And Zambians and Tanzanians, by labouring side by side, would provide a model for post-colonial worker solidarity through this pan-African development project.

The TAZARA labour process was burdened with multiple and expansive expectations well before construction began. The project was also being closely scrutinized by a sceptical world audience that, at least in some corners, desired to witness its failure. In this challenging context, to what degree were the hopes and expectations for an alternative labour experience actually met, according to the memories and limited records available to us from the project?

For many of the young Tanzanians and Zambians who were recruited to join TAZARA's labour force, the experience of construction was in fact a liberating one. They acquired skills that ranged from the most basic fundamentals of building the permanent way to the advanced engineering technology mastered in the foundry. A select group of workers was promoted from the level of digging ditches to management positions, where they learned and practiced leadership skills. Others (about 200) were sent to China to study railway maintenance and operations, and also learned the Chinese language there. In these ways the project fulfilled China's seventh principle: the recipients of Chinese donor assistance should 'fully master' the techniques of development. Upon TAZARA's completion, Tanzanian Prime Minister Rashidi Kawawa announced that Zambian and Tanzanian workers had received 'the best kind of training' from the Chinese experts during TAZARA's construction, and that this expertise could now be applied to other development work.⁹

9 'Tanzania, Zambia celebrate railway completion', NCNA 24 October 1975.

At the same time, there were contradictions in the application of China's development principles in the TAZARA corridor. The emphasis on hard work and discipline that characterized both Chinese and Tanzanian development principles was frequently at odds with the need to train and educate a future workforce. Many workers complained of the gruelling pace of construction, and some left the project altogether. The way daily work was organized—on an hourly rather than a task basis—was reminiscent of work struggles in the colonial period. And the push to complete the railway ahead of schedule—in order to show the world what could be accomplished through pan-African and Third World solidarity—made the goal of skills transfer more difficult to achieve. In the end, Tanzania and Zambia asked the Chinese to leave behind a team of railway specialists to assist in TAZARA's operations.

There were also contradictions in the effort made by the Chinese to live and work side by side with their African counterparts. In the camps where workers spent most of their off-duty time, Chinese and African workers lived mostly segregated lives. The Chinese emphasized worker solidarity and brotherhood (for example in worker meetings), and the theme of friendship had become ubiquitous in Chinese development assistance. Yet while the Chinese workers referred to their Tanzanian counterparts as 'friends', they referred to themselves as 'experts.' These identities reveal the unavoidable hierarchy that existed between Chinese railway specialists and the African workforce: the Chinese technical experts were nominally friends and brothers, but in practice they were teachers and supervisors.

The African workers, on the other hand, were mostly younger men with limited schooling and experience who were recruited on the basis of their physical health; those that showed aptitude for technology and leadership were promoted but the majority remained engaged in manual labour. These hierarchies meant that for the workers there were differences in work experience as well as in the kinds of training they received. Those who were promoted gained technical skills and experienced their Chinese counterparts as friends and mentors; for those who hauled stone out of quarries and dug the ditches and culverts, the Chinese were more distant figures.

Nevertheless, these hierarchies of age and experience were experienced positively by many Tanzanian workers. Even though there were differences in age and experience between the Chinese and the African workers, and their tasks were not equivalent, they reportedly showed one another mutual respect. African workers described their relationships with the Chinese as those of juniors and elders, emphasizing the mentoring and teaching role played by the Chinese 'experts'. For many of these younger African men, building the railway is remembered as a coming of age experience, a time of moving into adulthood under the guidance of their Chinese leaders. Many recall the experience of earning a wage, learning the Chinese language and mastering railway technology as a liberating entrance into a modern, post-colonial world. In this sense, perhaps more than any other, those who built the Freedom Railway recall their work experience as a liberating one.

Hard work

From the beginning, it was clear that the construction of the TAZARA railway would involve hard physical labour. The project design was labour-intensive and tens of thousands of African workers were hired to take on jobs ranging from quarrying stone to forming the permanent way. Workers had to endure challenging conditions as they laid track through the uninhabited wilderness of the Selous Game Reserve and over the steep escarpment between Mlimba and Makambako. The idea of hard work was also an important component of Tanzanian post-independence ideology; it was repeated often in Chinese and African official communication with the workers. 'Hard work' was therefore both a material reality experienced by TAZARA's workers and a component of the ideology put forward to inspire them. It was also an integral part of the framing of the project's public image for audiences in Africa, China and the rest of the world.

The labour process was organized through twelve base camps, each of which had a resident work team and was responsible for a given section of the railway line. Chinese railway experts supervised and trained the African workers, who were divided further into sub-

teams directed by Chinese field assistants. The sub-teams were each given a specific task to fulfil—some were assigned to build bridges, while others dug ditches, constructed the raised railway bed, or connected telephone lines. Each sub-team set up a temporary camp where they lived until they had completed their assigned tasks. They would then pack up their camp and move on to the next section. The sub-teams worked in even smaller gangs, sometimes as few as eight to ten people, supervised by Tanzanian foremen under the direction of a Chinese counterpart. The work gangs were spread out along the railway line during the day, some two to three miles apart. One field team could be made up of thousands of workers; at Mwale base camp in 1972, there were 64 labour gangs with about 5,500 labourers.¹⁰

The first phase of the construction project moved quickly, and the initial length of 110 miles of track from Dar es Salaam to Mlimba was completed within one year. Yet even this first section held challenges. Much of this track was laid within the boundaries of the Selous Game Reserve, where workers lived in isolated conditions far from village life, surrounded by wild animals. The next section of track—the notorious tunnels section that connected Mlimba with Makambako—was even more challenging and took almost the whole of the following year to finish even though it comprised only half the distance. The engineering and construction challenges of this section had seemed almost insurmountable to each of the successive teams of surveyors that had inspected the route. One third of the civil engineering works for the whole line were built here: not only 18 of the 22 tunnels but also several high bridges over steep ravines. The work required extensive road building and earthworks, and more construction sub-camps per kilometre than any other section. There were also more casualties here than in other sections, including Chinese casualties.¹¹ Worker injuries resulted primarily from dynamite blasting and from cave-ins. Heroic descriptions of the construction of the tunnels were published in Chinese news accounts, and this

10 Sendaro, 'Worker's Efficiency', p. 169; interview with Daniel S.M. Momello, Njombe 2002.

11 TNA file A/932/71 IS/L.317, 18 April 1971, 'Majivu ya Mafundi wa Kichina Yazikwa'.

section came to symbolize more than any other the 'hard work' of the railway workers who struggled through day and night to complete the project.

By June 1973, the construction work on the Tanzanian side had been completed—the tunnels section between Mlimba and Makambako, and most of the basic structures for the permanent way up to Kasama in Zambia. Tracklaying followed and the rails reached Kasama in December 1973. As the peak of construction work passed the overall workforce was gradually reduced, and Tanzanian workers were replaced by Zambian workers as the project moved across the border.

In practice, the Tanzanians recruited to build the TAZARA railway found the work to be challenging and exhausting. Each morning the work teams would be transported from camp out to their work sites. 'When you arrived at the work site,' recalled one worker, 'you got hold of a shovel or a spade or any work tool and worked with it under the direction of the Chinese expert.'¹² In uninhabited areas far from the reach of camps and settlements, workers were fearful of wild animals, especially lions. 'A lot of the work was dangerous and difficult,' remembers Raphael Chawala, 'we had to use our heads and be watchful.'¹³ Many found the work to be so difficult, and the conditions so demanding, that they abandoned their jobs.¹⁴ Hashim Mdemu worked at Namawala sub-camp digging culverts, a job he described as so physically strenuous that he could not continue after one year.¹⁵ Those who stayed with the project only managed to survive the suffering they endured in these sections, according to Gilbert, through their own fortitude: 'We persevered here with the Chinese.'¹⁶ Rogatus Nyumayo used the same term when remember-

12 Letter from Administrative Assistant, 17 May 1971, cited in Sendaro, 'Worker's Efficiency'.

13 Interview with Raphael Chawala, Ifakara, 20 April 2000.

14 Interviews with Rogatus Nyumayo, Mlimba, 26 July 2000; Salum Mwasenga, Mang'ula, 30 July 2000; Hashim Mdemu, Ifakara, June, 2000. Hall and Peyman, *The Great Uhuru Railway*, p. 128.

15 Interview with Hashim Mdemu, Ifakara

16 Interview with John Gilbert and Hosea Mngata, Ifakara, 20 April 2000.

ing the tunnels construction, where the work was extremely challenging, 'but we ourselves just persevered.'¹⁷

At the sites of large-scale projects, such as tunnel blasting and bridge construction, the Chinese installed electricity generators to allow work shifts to continue during both day and night. John Gilbert remembers working at Kisaki building bridges as part of a 24-hour crew. In the tunnels section workers put in successive eight-hour shifts around the clock: 'You worked for eight hours, you then rested eight hours, then you started again,' recalled Beatus Lihawa.¹⁸ During resting shifts the workers retreated to their temporary shelters in the worker camps. Electricity generated at the Base Camps also allowed for day and night activity. At Mang'ula Base Camp, engineers who worked in the factories and workshops often put in twenty-four hour shifts with rotating rest breaks.¹⁹

Work on the railway was difficult and rigorous in part because of the Chinese approach to the larger project of railway construction. The Chinese had committed themselves to building the railway using a labour-intensive rather than a capital-intensive model. With this strategy China hoped to minimize the importation of expensive capital goods and equipment, particularly from outside China.²⁰ The labour-intensive approach meant that there were thousands of job opportunities for Tanzanians and Zambians who had little previous education or work experience. The vast majority of those jobs required back-breaking manual labour such as digging ditches, spreading gravel and hauling heavy materials. The possibilities for transfer of technical skills were slight for many of these workers.

Strenuous working conditions were made more difficult by the determination of the Chinese authorities to finish the project well

17 Interview with Rogatus Nyumayo, Mlimba, 26 July 2000.

18 Interview with Beatus Lihawa, Mlimba, 20 July 2000; D.D.S.M. Momello, 'Final Report on Tunnels Construction', p. 9.

19 Interview with Salum Mwasenga, Mang'ula, 30 July 2000.

20 Using Tanzanian trade statistics, George Yu estimated that capital goods imports for TAZARA's construction went up from \$33.6 million to over \$60 million between 1970 and 1971. While basic machinery was manufactured in China, larger items such as trucks and earth-moving equipment came from Japan and Europe. Yu, *China's African Policy*, pp. 142-3.

ahead of schedule. The Chinese management was willing to push the workforce night and day to show what could be achieved—and to build African confidence—at a time when the world was watching. The Chinese signed on to work 14-hour days, and they expected the Africans to join them. Tanzanians and Zambians, however, had a mixed response to this approach to labour. While many joined in the Chinese enthusiasm for hard work, they were not always willing to endure such a strenuous timetable. Conflicts took place, for example, when African workers completed their assigned duties before the end of the work shift. The workers felt that they had finished for the day and were entitled to rest; their supervisors insisted that they take on additional work until the end of their shift. These conflicts over the definition of work and the workday were similar to those that had been experienced in colonial East Africa, and were exacerbated by language difficulties.²¹

African workers remember Chinese railway technicians in ways that reveal these contradictions and the ideals that accompanied them. The Chinese are remembered as strict supervisors who doled out harsh discipline to workers who were lazy or errant. ‘They were very harsh,’ remembers Chawala, ‘if you were lazy or a liar or a thief, they would chase you away. They would send a report to other stations so that you couldn’t work there.’ Others recall that the Chinese were tough but fair: if you did your job properly, you would be paid on time without question. Those who failed to do their work, on the other hand, would be asked to leave. Stories circulated about particular supervisors who were unusually demanding: one was known as *kapitula* or ‘short trousers’, because he always wore safari-style shorts. When he confronted a worker who was falling down on the job, he reportedly reached into the pocket of his shorts, took out a bundle of

21 Sendaro, ‘Workers’ Efficiency’, p. 187. Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China’s Encounter with Africa* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), p. 173. These conflicts are similar to those described by Keletso Atkins for sugar cane workers in nineteenth century Natal in South Africa: Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead, Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of a Zulu Work Ethic* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993), and those described by Frederick Cooper for colonial Mombasa, ‘Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa’, in Nicholas Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 209–46.

shillings and handed it to the worker saying, 'Take this pay, you are now dismissed.'²² There are also many stories of ingenious methods that African workers devised to avoid working at the Chinese level of effort. According to one local story, if a worker wanted to rest all he needed to do was to open a copy of Mao's 'little red book' and seat himself in the shade of a tree. He could sit that way for hours, and his supervisor would leave him be.

The theme of 'hard work' was proclaimed in official statements as a liberating ideal—the Chinese in particular stated that through hard work and discipline, young African workers would gain self-confidence. A similar claim was made for Tanzania and Zambia as young nations—by working hard to complete the railway ahead of schedule, they would show the world what they were capable of, and gain confidence both as individual states and as pan-African partners. At the same time, however, much of the hard work in practice was challenging and difficult. The struggles over the length of the work day—as well as the definition of work obligation according to time shifts rather than specific tasks—were reminiscent of struggles over work in the colonial era. Thus while 'hard work' was a liberating ideal on the one hand, in practice it could be reminiscent of the impositions of labour regimes in the colonial past.

Working side by side: friends and strangers

Relations between African and Chinese participants in the construction project, mirroring the larger relationship between Tanzania, Zambia and China, were described officially as embodying friendship, brotherhood and solidarity. This solidarity was held up by project leaders as pan-African as well as Afro-Asian; transnational as well as cross-racial. In practice, however, there were significant differences in age, experience and status between the workers. And in the construction areas, while their working conditions were largely the same, Africans and Asians were segregated within work camps and in their off-duty lives.

22 Interview with Salum Mwasenga, Mang'ula, 30 July 2000.

The African workers who were recruited for the project were young men, and the theme of youth and youth development was repeatedly emphasized in the way the Kiswahili term *vijana* (youths) was used to describe them in government announcements and media reports. 'These youths are working on shift basis for 24 hours,' stated TANU secretary Major Hashim Mbita in 1971, 'and many of them can now understand the Chinese language and work independently. They will be a great asset to the Tanzania and Zambia industries when the railway is completed.'²³

Education and training were at the heart of the Chinese model of development in Africa.²⁴ During the recruitment of railway workers in Tanzania and Zambia, therefore, the emphasis was on good health, character and discipline rather than extensive prior education or work experience. These young recruits would be trained on the job by their Chinese counterparts, often through observation and simulation. The labour-intensive approach to TAZARA's construction meant that the majority of the workers would be engaged in strenuous manual labour in challenging environmental conditions. For this reason, physical fitness was a primary requirement for those seeking to work on the railway. Rogatus Nyumayo remembers that young men in Iringa had to submit to a physical examination, to ensure that they were fit for the demanding labour of railway work. 'They measured us up like we were soldiers,' he recalled. Those who did not measure up were left behind. Rogatus had been living in Iringa in 1971 when he responded to an announcement posted at the TANU office there. 'They took 800 people from Iringa in one day,' he remembers, 'in about five buses from Iringa town. They took us straight to camp at Mkela Base Camp, to work on the tunnels. After about three days they divided us up into work teams.'²⁵

Workers were also recruited through the Tanzanian National Service or JKT (*Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa*). A group of 7,000 Tanzanian

23 TNA file C/1396/71 IS/1.317, 21 June 1971, 'TANZAM Workers Praised'.

24 See Deborah Bräutigam's work on rice projects in West Africa in *Chinese Aid and African Development* for a description of these aspects of China's development practice.

25 Interview with Rogatus Nyumayo, Mlimba, 26 July 2000.

youths were recruited from the National Service in 1970, given a two-week training programme including military drill, and then sent out to construction camps between Dar es Salaam and Mlimba.²⁶ Most of the recruits who responded to this national campaign were young men aged 16-25 (this was in contrast with the Chinese workers, who tended to be in their 30s and 40s), and few had much education beyond the primary level. The TAZARA project recruited these youths from the National Service, D.S.M. Momello remembers, because they were supposed to have 'discipline, dedication and energy'.²⁷

Raymond Ndimbo describes being called up to work for TAZARA in July 1971 when he was newly graduated from school and working for the National Service, based at Handeni. He was taken with a group of his counterparts to work on bridge construction at Mdagaji near Mlimba, where they stayed for two months. He was worried initially about joining the TAZARA project, because he had heard rumours of the hard work and demanding conditions. 'I was losing heart,' he remembers, but in the end Raymond became committed to the project with the encouragement of his camp leader as well as his Chinese mentors.

The Chinese railway technicians who served in East Africa during TAZARA's construction, in contrast with their African counterparts, were older and more experienced railway workers who had been recruited from throughout China. Retired Chinese engineers who worked on the project recall that those who were asked to join the project included the most respected and highly qualified personnel from China's railway ministry.²⁸ Their ocean journey to East Africa from the southern seaport of Guangzhou took fifteen days. Over the five years of TAZARA's construction a total of some 30-40,000 Chinese railway workers would arrive at Dar es Salaam, staying only briefly at their coastal base camp before heading up country in truck

26 Sendaro, 'Workers' Efficiency', pp. 199-205; D.D.S.M. Momello, 'Final Report on Tunnels Construction, Mkela Base Camp', internal TAZARA document, 1972, p.13; *The Standard*, 19 February 1970.

27 Momello, 'Final Report'.

28 Interviews with Wang Hui Min and Li Jin Wen, Tianjin, 6 July 2007.

convoys.²⁹ Each work team would serve for a two-year period before returning to China; on their return journey they were reportedly allowed to travel by air.³⁰ Cargo loads of construction equipment including rails, cement and other goods were also unloaded onto the docks at Kurasini. As each new ship pulled into the harbour, crowds of curious onlookers gathered to greet them. The Chinese railway workers wore identical grey cotton suits and caps, and each carried a small blue suitcase balanced on his shoulder. As they disembarked from their ship, martial music blared from the ship's loudspeakers.³¹

The Chinese stated frequently during TAZARA's construction that they were committed to following development principles in Africa that were based on solidarity and friendship. In practice, Chinese railway technicians were expected to work shoulder to shoulder

29 It is extremely difficult to verify the actual numbers of Chinese railway workers that took part in the TAZARA project. TAZARA official archival reports are not yet open to the public in China or in Tanzania and Zambia, although some published accounts have cited closed archival records. Published estimates range from 15,000 to 50,000 for the number of overall Chinese workers; this discrepancy reflects some confusion over the actual period being considered, i.e. whether the pre-construction survey and design teams as well as the post-construction technical cooperation teams are counted. In a recent interview, retired Chinese railway expert Qin Hui stated that 50,000 Chinese workers went to East Africa during the four phases between 1965 and 1986 ('Qin Hui ... the person who dreams about the Tanzania-Zambia Railroad,' *People's Daily*, overseas edition, 25 January 2007), a figure also cited in Hu Zhichao, 'The Past, Present and Future of the Tanzania-Zambia Railroad,' *Economic Research of Railroads*, February 2000, pp. 46-7. At the peak of construction in 1972 there were 16,000 Chinese workers according to Jin Hui, while the TAZARA annual report for 1972-3 lists a high of 13,500 in July, 1972 declining to 11,500 in 1974. See also Zhang Tie San, *You Yi Zhi Lu: Huan Jian Tan Zan Tie Lu Ji Shi* (*The Road of Friendship: The Memoirs of the Development Assistance of the Tanzania-Zambia Railroad*) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tui Wai Jing Ji Mao Yi Chu Ban Shi, 1999) for more specific details and statistics.

30 Interview with Yang Weimin, Shanghai, July 14, 2007.

31 Interview with Lao Wan, Ifakara, July 2000; Interview with Du Jian, Dar es Salaam, April 2000; Hall and Peyman, *The Great Uhuru Railway*, p. 122; *Drum Magazine*, November 1973, from A. Smyth and A. Seftel (eds), *The Story of Julius Nyerere: Africa's Elder Statesman* (Dar es Salaam: Fountain Publishers, 1993), pp. 186-7; Larkin, *China and Africa*, p. 99; personal communication with Thomas Spear, who witnessed the unloading of Chinese ships at Kurasini harbour in the early 1970s.

with their African counterparts, demonstrating new skills and new forms of work discipline in a brotherly manner. This construction work experience was meant to be an uplifting one, both for the individual worker and for the nation, thus representing an alternative to colonial and neo-colonial African work experience.

For many of the workers on TAZARA, these ideals were fulfilled. The Chinese approach to work—especially the way they joined in on every task—did inspire the Tanzanian and Zambian workers. In response to a survey conducted in the mid-1980s, former TAZARA construction workers remembered that their Chinese supervisors had helped them the most by actually working together alongside them. ‘It was a true friendship,’ says John Gilbert of his relationship with Chinese technicians, ‘even if you did not understand something, they explained it to you until you understood it.’ Another worker stated, ‘The Chinese [expert] taught us with honesty. He left you knowing that you had learned your job well.’³²

For many, the experience of working closely with Chinese counterparts was a meaningful departure from the segregated work experiences they had during the recent colonial era. Hassan Mkanyago, a Tanzanian who was stationed at Mang’ula as camp foreman, remembers that ‘this [railway construction] was a time of big changes. We could ride together in the back of a lorry, we could eat together, even have celebrations together.’ He was moved by the possibilities for interracial interaction during TAZARA’s construction, comparing them favourably with the behaviour of Europeans: ‘I did not expect that I would find myself sitting at the same table as white person.’³³

Over a five-year period, tens of thousands of Chinese and African workers lived together and toiled side by side along the railway line. As they camped in rudimentary shelters, dug ditches, constructed bridges and occasionally shared a meal together they had many occasions to interact. Friendship was an especially important theme in the isolated workplaces and temporary camps where the workers spent most of their time.

32 Interview with Rogatus Nyumayo, Mlimba, 26 July 2000.

33 Interview with Moses Hassan and Benedict Mkanyago, Mngeta, 7 July 2000.

Yet despite the ideology of brotherhood and the Chinese willingness to 'muck in' to tackle difficult tasks, life in the construction camps remained largely segregated. Here again, there were contradictions in the role played by the Chinese: at the same time that they were socialist brothers, they were also bosses. They were older than their African counterparts and far more technically experienced. And despite the best efforts of Chinese and Tanzanian leaders to cultivate an ideal of friendship, antipathy occasionally slipped through. While the workers in camp were officially known as friends, their experiences on the ground were often like that of strangers.

In these dispersed mobile work camps accommodation could be quite rustic. Once a new campsite had been cleared and graded, shelters or *bandas* and canvas tents in some cases were erected across the compound. Accommodation was constructed on one side of the camp for the Chinese, and on the other for the Tanzanians. *Bandas* were built using locally available materials; pole frames were used as supports for mud walls topped with roves woven from grasses or palm fronds. These simple dwellings offered little protection from wild animals or malaria-carrying mosquitoes; ants, termites and snakes were among the unwelcome visitors.³⁴ The workers also constructed canteens, latrines, bathing facilities and a medical dispensary at each camp. At the larger camps electric wires were hung overhead that allowed work activity to continue through the night.³⁵ In the early stages of construction there were housing shortages at some sites. At Signali, for example, the main camp accommodated only 86 of the 681 workers when construction began. Several Tanzanian workers roomed in the homes of nearby villagers.³⁶ This was not an option for the Chinese workers, whose relations with villagers were carefully restricted.

34 Interview with Hashim Mdemu, Ifakara, 2000; Interview with Jin Hui, Beijing, 5 July 2007. In my interview with Du Jian, who was an interpreter during construction, he said that some African workers brought mosquito nets with them to the camps. Interview with Du Jian, Chinese Railway Expert Team, Dar es Salaam, July 2000.

35 Interview with Du Jian, Dar es Salaam, July 2000.

36 Sendaro, 'Workers' Efficiency', p. 243.

Life in camp mirrored the segregation of the compound housing. When they were not working, the Chinese enjoyed leisure activities such as reading, smoking cigarettes, playing board games and table tennis. They also played active outdoor sports, especially volleyball. These games were occasionally shared with Tanzanian workers, but for the most part the Chinese kept to themselves. When they went walking outside the camp boundaries they always went together in a group, avoiding contact with local people. Chinese supervisors were very strict about the behaviour of their workers, even off duty. A worker who did something out of line could be sent back to Dar es Salaam, and from there to China.³⁷

The African workers, in contrast, mingled more freely with the local people. In the evenings at Mang'ula workers would go out to the neighboring settlements to relax and drink home-brewed beer (alcohol was not allowed at the work camps).³⁸ In Mchombe village, women remember that workers from the railway often visited the beer clubs where they sold local brew. Railway workers would come after their shifts to relax and drink, and to make contact with local women. Several women remember that the workers 'found wives' at Mchombe, and some of these partnerships are still intact.³⁹ Life for African workers thus differed from the lives of the Chinese workers in important ways. The two groups lived in similar conditions and worked side by side. In their off-duty lives, however, there was distance between them.

Liberation through modernity

The reputation of the Chinese for demanding hard work from the railway construction teams spread widely throughout East Africa. News of the challenges of working on TAZARA had already reached

37 Interview with John Gilbert, Hosea Mngata and Raphael Chawala, 20 April 2000. Sunil Sahu wrote that Chinese workers engaged on the railroad construction were instructed to stay clear of politics and propaganda. Supposedly Chairman Mao assured Nyerere that 'any hint of subversion reported to him would be immediately dealt with.' Sunil Kumar Sahu, 'Sino-Tanzanian Relations', *United Asia*, 23, 2 (1971), pp. 78-80.

38 Interview with Salum Mwasenga, Mang'ula, 30 July 2000.

39 Group interview with women at Mchombe, 16 July 2000.

the ears of Raymond Ndimbo before he learned that he and other members of the national service would be sent to work on the railway. He ended up working on the tunnels section, based at Mpanga, and then stayed on to become a specialist in communications. Ndimbo credits his work experience on TAZARA's construction for the progress he has made in his life. His ability to speak Chinese was an enormous asset for him, he says, one that he feels was central to his personal progress and the well-being of his family. 'When learning a language,' he stated, 'the most important thing is to have the right intentions.' Ndimbo felt he had to know Chinese well so that he could help the Chinese experts. Yet in the end, it was their language that helped him—knowing Chinese allowed him to obtain and hold a good job, to build a house, and to educate his children. One of his sons now lives in England.

For the young men who participated in TAZARA's construction, building the railway was an experience of modernity. Most of them were from rural areas and had limited experience with technology beyond what they may have learned in primary school. For many of these young men it was their first time to be employed for a wage and to follow a structured and regimented work schedule. Workers themselves describe their experiences during construction as a process of maturation, as a coming of age. They remember joining the workforce as very young men, unmarried, many having served briefly in the National Service (most of the African workers were between the ages of 16 and 25). They recall that the experience of construction was demanding and difficult for them. At the same time, they developed skills and in many cases developed a viable trade that gave them a new position in society. The experience of building the railway, wrote D.E. Stambuli after TAZARA's completion, had lifted workers and their families out of their deteriorated condition into 'a modern civilized type of life'.⁴⁰

Hosea Mngata described his construction experience this way: 'I was still a very young man when I started working, I had just finished school. I had a very young age [he was 26], and then I had a great de-

40 D.E. Stambuli, 'Staff Commentary', Appendix IX in 'Final Report on Tunnels Construction, Mkela Base Camp', D.D.S.M. Momello, 1972.

sire for work, and my Chinese brothers liked me very much.' Mngata began working first at Mang'ula, breaking up stones at the quarry in the forest. After 1973, when the Tanzanian workforce was reduced, he was one of the fortunate workers to be kept on. 'We kept working with the Chinese for a long time,' he remembered, 'almost three years, and then the Chinese left us on our own. Indeed, until today we are caring for the railway, we had grown experienced ourselves by that time.' Mngata's memory conveys the coming of age not only of himself, as he learned skills and eventually assumed responsibility after the Chinese departure, but also of the larger Tanzanian workforce.

The theme of modernity as a liberating process was common in interviews with TAZARA workers who continued to work for the railway after the Chinese departure. It is possible that workers who left the project after a year or two felt differently about the transformative possibilities of building the railway. Still, those who worked on the project were given certificates upon its completion that verified their training and work experience, and they were viewed nationally (even, perhaps, internationally) as a unique group of trained labourers. News accounts had praised the successes of 'our youth' who were building the railway. Public officials lauded the project for helping to create a cohort of young people who had learned skills and practiced discipline, and who were now ready to undertake the challenges of building the nation.

Conclusion

The TAZARA railway was called the 'Great Freedom Railway' because it was intended to liberate the economies of east-central Africa from their reliance upon transport routes through the countries under white settler regimes to the south. After the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Southern Rhodesia in 1965, the need for such a transport alternative appeared urgent. The decision of the Chinese government to finance and supervise the construction of the Freedom Railway was in large part a response to this post-independence and Cold War political context. At the same time, China was implementing principles of development assistance in Africa that made claims to promote another kind of 'freedom', a freedom from the

neo-colonial and neo-imperialist hegemony practiced by the United States and the Soviet Union. The eight principles of China's development assistance for Africa were applied to financing (in the form of long-term interest-free loans) and also to the practice of development, including relationships between Chinese and African counterparts. To the degree that they shaped the Afro-Asian experience of development during the construction of the TAZARA railway, these principles can be seen as embodying anti-hegemonic development assistance through practice.

The approach to TAZARA's construction was intended to be liberating for the African worker and for other African populations in multiple ways. The most important theme was that of working side by side in transnational, pan-African and cross-racial friendship and solidarity. In this and other ways, the TAZARA project would lift up the African youth who were recruited to join the project to new levels of skill and self-confidence, thereby bringing them and their nations into a form of modernity. This would provide a powerful contrast with their experience of the recently ended colonial period, thus resulting in a new form of liberation rather than a second colonization by neo-imperial hegemonic interests.

In practice, there were multiple contradictions within the construction work experience. The transnational, cross-racial solidarity promoted in official statements was compromised by the actual segregation of everyday life in the work teams and camps. There were struggles over the definition of work tasks and the work day, and many workers ended up leaving the project because of labour demands that must have been reminiscent of the colonial work models that the project intended to supplant. Even the vision of pan-African solidarity that had shaped the project from the beginning was only implemented in limited ways, for Tanzanian workers dominated on the eastern side of the border until 1973, when the project crossed over into Zambia and Zambian workers were hired to replace them.

The workers who participated in the construction of the TAZARA project recall their work experience as a coming of age. They were recruited as young men, just out of school or recently recruited to the National Service, and were taken into remote regions where work was hard and conditions were rustic. Some gained technical skills

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and learned to speak Chinese, while others engaged in more manual forms of labour. All received a certificate at the end of their work experience that documented the work they had done and the special training they had received. For most it was an initial experience with earning a wage for their labour, for a defined work day.

Working on the TAZARA project was experienced as a form of modernity for the Tanzanian workers, an entry into 'a modern, civilized kind of life', in the words of Stambuli, especially for those select few who were promoted to positions in engineering, management and communications. This cohort of workers, the *vijana* or youth, were celebrated in the press as construction proceeded across the southern interior's challenging landscapes. And the 'construction generation' of TAZARA's workers continues to be highly respected in Tanzania until today; despite a contested layoff in 1982 of 116 workers, their positions have been among the most stable and remunerative in post-colonial Tanzania. TAZARA's workers credit their participation in this post-colonial, Cold War project with helping them to build their lives. In this way, the construction of the Freedom Railway can be seen as bringing a form of liberation for labour.

