

CHINA

A decade on, high-speed rail still delivering in western China

1,786-km Lanzhou-Urumqi line puts growth on faster track



A bullet train passes fields of blossoming rapeseed flowers on the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-Speed Railway in Menyuan, Qinghai province, last month. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By YANG ZEKUN
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Each morning, the low, repetitive hum of trains on track is enough to send 50-year-old rail maintenance worker Ma Wanli to sleep in his makeshift bed in his on-site office, safe in the knowledge that his previous five-hour shift has ensured everything is running smoothly.

Ma and his colleagues, of China Railway Qinghai-Xizang Group, are responsible for a section of the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-Speed Railway in Qinghai province, stretching 218 kilometers.

Over the past decade, Ma has witnessed the transformation of various local cities from relative obscurities to tourist destinations, and attributes this to the opening of the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-Speed Railway.

The high-speed railway starts in Lanzhou, Gansu province, passes through Xining in Qinghai, and terminates in Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, spanning a total length of 1,786 km.

The railway began operation on Dec 26, 2014, strengthening connections between Northwest China and other parts of the country. In nearly 10 years, it has transported over 140 million passengers and driven the rapid economic development of cities along the route.

Ma moved from his hometown in Henan province to live in Xining, the capital city of Qinghai, with his parents when he was 7, as his parents were also railway employees working in the province.

He majored in clinical medicine in college, but influenced by his parents, learned a lot about railways and passed the examination to join the China Railway Qinghai-Xizang Group in 1996.

Ma and his team are responsible for the inspection and maintenance of high-speed railway bridges, tunnels, culverts and other critical equipment. They usually work between midnight and 4 am when the train traffic is relatively light.

Despite working at an altitude of more than 3,000 meters for the past 28 years, Ma hasn't missed a single inspection or made an erroneous judgment.

The team needs to promptly identify and address problems and hidden dangers along the route such as whether drainage outlets within protective fences are blocked, if there is floating debris, or if local residents are engaging in activities like



Clockwise from top: Ma Xueting serves passengers on a train on the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-speed Railway earlier this month. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Ma Wanli inspects the Gaojiawan Tunnel on the Lanzhou-Urumqi high-speed line in Ledu, Qinghai province, last month. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Train driver Adil Turdi pilots the first high-speed train from Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region to Xi'an, Shaanxi province, on Oct 11, 2020. SHADAT / XINHUA

burning waste or building sheep pens along the route's fence line.

The environmental issues along the rail line also fall within their scope. In the first few years, Ma and his team encountered villagers dumping piles of straw along the rail fences or burning waste. When they tried to dissuade them, the villagers often didn't understand and refused to cooperate, making the work difficult. They had to collaborate with village officials to address these issues.

The area is prone to strong winds, and debris on the tracks can affect train safety, Ma said. In recent years, increased rainfall and haphazard construction have led to poor drainage, also impacting safety.

After 10 years of operation, the residents around the railway tracks have developed a basic awareness of safety and understand the significant benefits of the railway's safe operation for the local community, he said.

"In maintaining the railway's normal operation, great responsibility, patience, a strong will to keep learning and a continuous spirit of innovation are required," said Ma.

Tracking change

The secret to maintaining his enthusiasm for the job after 30 years is seeing the changes brought about by the development of high-speed trains, making him feel that his work is very meaningful.

Tourism has expanded in Qinghai since the operation of the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-Speed Railway. Menyuan Hui autonomous county, located 150 km from Xining, has leveraged the rail to turn local attractions such as its rapeseed flowers, snowcapped mountains and forest parks into popular tourist destinations. This has helped residents find employment and increase their income. Last year, Menyuan's GDP reached 4.5 billion yuan (\$628 million), five times that of in 2013.

the number of tourists traveling to Qinghai by high-speed train has significantly increased, and the railway station in Menyuan has even had to be expanded, he said.

"Qinghai is a fantastic place known for its yak meat, highland barley, yogurt and wild medicinal herbs. The construction of the railway has spurred local prosperity, bringing visible and tangible changes," he added.

Ma Xueting, 31, of the Hui ethnic group, born and raised in Qinghai, started working for the railway in October 2014, and is currently a train conductor of a Fuxing high-speed train.

When talking about the development in her hometown, she said she felt very proud. She feels honored to participate in the operation of the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-Speed Railway and witness the changes it has brought to her hometown.

Chinese people often say, "To get rich, first build a road". In the past, with the construction of roads, it became much more convenient for people to travel short distances. Now, with the high-speed rail network in place, distances of hundreds or even thousands of kilometers can be covered in a single day, she said.

"Our vast northwestern region spans great distances, with cities often hundreds of kilometers apart. Relying solely on roads can still pose many inconveniences," she said.

Qinghai's resources are extremely rich, not only with unique natural scenery and profound ethnic culture but also as a food paradise. However, due to inconvenient transportation, these rich tourism resources remained largely undiscovered. The railway has allowed millions of visitors to explore this region. Now, passenger trains run on the high-speed railway, with direct trains from Xining to 27 provincial capitals and municipalities, she said.

"Every summer, especially during the peak tourism season from June to September, there is a shortage of train tickets and accommodation in many counties," she said.

Ma Xueting said many of her relatives and friends have started working in tourism, with their annual income being quite good.

According to official statistics, since the opening of the Lanzhou-Urumqi High-Speed Railway, Qinghai has received a total of 340 million tourists. In that time, 337.36 billion yuan has been generated in tourism revenue, with an average annual growth rate of around 10 percent.

Tianzhu connection allows locals to dream big

By YANG ZEKUN

Zhao Tao has always believed that high-speed rail would bring prosperity.

The deputy director of the Development and Reform Bureau of Tianzhu Tibetan autonomous county in Gansu province, now has proof that he was correct after witnessing the opening of a high-speed rail service in his hometown.

The Lanzhou-Zhangye High-Speed Railway's Lanzhou-Wuwei section began operations on June 29. It connects Wuwei to the national high-speed rail network, further improving rail transportation in Northwest China. The travel time between Lanzhou and Wuwei has been reduced from three hours to less than two.

The railway passes through Tianzhu Tibetan autonomous county, a small county with a population of 230,000 located between Wuwei and Lanzhou. The county is taking every step it can to adapt to the changes brought by the high-speed rail.

Long Haishan, 28, a Tibetan of Tianzhu descent, works as a train attendant for China Railway Lanzhou Bureau Group. She expressed her pride in being part of the inaugural run of the route through her hometown.

"Tianzhu boasts the beautiful Sanxia National Forest Park and the ecologically rich Qilian Mountains National Nature Reserve, as well as delicious white yak meat and yak yogurt. I hope more tourists will come to visit and learn about our ethnic characteristics and culture," she said.

Tianzhu is known for its coal, and produces 50 percent of the nation's silicon carbide, which is used in the production of semiconductors, according to the county government. The county is also known for its snowcapped mountains, forests, grasslands, temples, ancient cities, murals and for being the exclusive production area of China's white yak.

Wei Zhonghui, deputy director of the Agricultural Industrialization Service Center of Tianzhu, said that in recent years the county government has developed a rural industrial cluster focused on specialty agricultural products such as white yak, quinoa and mushrooms, with the scale of these industries gradually expanding.

However, due to inconvenient transportation, the products often faced high transportation costs and limited market access, bottlenecks that restricted high-quality and efficient development, he said.

"We've been looking forward to the high-speed rail bringing us traffic and helping us sell our products to more places," said Wei.

The Lanzhou-Wuwei High-Speed Railway has filled the gap in Tianzhu's high-speed railway infrastructure, improved the transportation network and greatly shortened the distance between Tianzhu, Lanzhou and Wuwei in terms of time and space, he said.

Zhao noted that residents in Tianzhu can now reach Wuwei or Lanzhou in less than an hour, bringing tangible benefits to the locals. Currently, there are eight daily trains scheduled at Tianzhu West Station.

Due to the establishment of the national nature reserve, there are restrictions on the county's industrial and agricultural lands. Instead, tourism resources are particularly abundant, which will be the focus of future development, he said.

"Outsiders are often not familiar with our high-quality agricultural products. We are confident that once people come, our products will sell well," he said.

Ma Zhala, 37, a yak breeder in Tianzhu, used to deliver his products to customers in other provinces via mail, incurring high delivery and storage costs. He is planning to open a specialty experience store near the station.

"Our yak jerky is handmade, with a fresh and natural taste. With the opening of the high-speed rail, more people will come and business should be very good," he said.

Embarking on an unforgettable journey to the west

This trip wasn't my first to Gansu province or the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, but it turned out to be the most unforgettable one yet as I journeyed by train from Lanzhou to Xinjiang.

It began in Lanzhou, Gansu, passing through Qinghai province, then heading west toward Zhangye in Gansu, and finally reaching Turpan in Xinjiang.

Heading westward, the continuous sight of snowcapped mountains, vast grasslands, herds of cattle and sheep, endless deserts and barren lands along the way, the

changing scenery reminiscent of scenes from a movie, kept me and my fellow passengers captivated, with expressions of surprise and joy filling our journey.

These breathtaking landscapes once felt like a mystery, almost isolated from the outside world due to poor transportation.

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Li Bai once expressed in his poetry his desire to swiftly return home covering a thousand miles in a day. Around a thousand years later, Li's longings have become a reality.

Heading westward, along the way, what I saw were orderly and

well-equipped waiting halls with modern facilities and a variety of shops.

I interacted with students and their parents who were on a study tour from Shanghai to Turpan.

They were no longer satisfied with the descriptions of the magnificent landscapes of the northwest in textbooks; instead, they were eager to personally travel and experience it. From their words and actions, it was even more evident how proud they were of the rapid development of high-speed rail.

The warmhearted locals in the bustling market at Turpan North

Railway Station, much like the scorching local weather, made me feel right at home. The aroma of steaming naan bread, pilaf, sweet raisins was irresistible and truly made me feel that this journey was worthwhile.

At the station, I encountered a 70-year-old couple from Guangdong province waiting for their train. They had long harbored a desire to visit Xinjiang and finally realized their dream after years of planning. "We want to visit the Flaming Mountain, Hemu, Kanas and other scenic spots. We've been looking forward to this for a long time."



I can relate deeply to the joy they experienced when a long-cherished dream suddenly came true, and their courage is something I greatly admire.

Many young individuals yearn for a spontaneous trip, but the pressures of life and work often hinder them from taking that leap. With modern transportation being so convenient, I hope that everyone will seize the opportunity to embark on their adventures at the right moment.