



# ChinaMade Review

**Köll, Elisabeth. 2019. *Railroads and the Transformation of China* (Harvard University Press).**

*David Bachrach, July 2021*

China's global presence is undeniable. In recent decades, China's overseas development projects and foreign investment have attracted scholarly attention (Bräutigam & Rithmire 2021; Goodfellow & Huang 2020; Lee 2017). China is investing in other countries through an array of arrangements—such as infrastructure projects (Oakes 2019) and special economic zones (Bräutigam and Tang 2011). Analyses of global China tend to prioritize the present and the future. A common object of study is the ambitious and forward-thinking nature of Chinese urban development projects, such as the Modderfontein

urban development project casted as the New York City of Johannesburg (Ballard & Harrison 2020). What is striking about Elisabeth Köll's study of railroad development in China is the importance placed on contextualizing China's present and future within its past.

Köll's book, *Railroads and the Transformation of China*, is a work that scholars of China who do not specialize in railroads can read to understand China's development from the end of the dynastic period through the era of the Republic to the consolidation of the People's Republic of China and beyond. Her study of China's railroad system is broken up into four parts, each consisting of two chapters. Each part explores a different historical period with each chapter focusing on a different theme. The conclusion can be considered a fifth part in which Köll places her historical excavation of China's railroad system within contemporary China and the renowned Belt and Road Initiative.

Part 1 takes the reader from the beginning of the railroad system in China during the latter years of the Qing Dynasty through the transitional period of the Republican era. The first chapter presents the railroad system's development under the semi-colonial control of Great Britain and Germany. These semi-colonial circumstances influenced the early construction of China's railroad system as seen in aspects such as surveying. The second chapter analyzes how China, when developing into a nation-state after the end of its dynastic period in 1911, nationalized the railroad system as part of an effort to broadly centralize control. Additionally, in this chapter Köll introduces the railroad bureau structure, which for her is central to understanding the history of China's railroad development, and the regional nature of railroad bureaus that persists today. Köll notes that as China aimed to centralize control of the railroads various aspects of its development reflected the tension between, on the one hand, the central government's desire to be the definitive authority within the railroads and, on the other, regional and foreign influences on railroads, such as the language used within the engineering profession, the form of accounting used by railroad institutions, the administrative structuring of the railroad institutions, and the development of the local labor pool.

Part II examines the development of China's railroad system during the early Republican era (1911-1927) focusing primarily on the period prior to the Guomindang (GMD) decade in power (1927-1937). Chapter 3 examines the economic impacts of the introduction of railroads in China during the early republic. Within this period, railroad development did not promote new large-scale industrialization as it did in other countries where railroads developed. Instead, the lines were closely tied to the older trade routes that existed in eastern China. Furthermore, the urbanization that did result from the development of railroads were in key areas in the supply chain for agriculture, which at the time benefitted more from railroads than industry. Chapter 4 examines the social and cultural impacts of railroads in China. Köll provides a nuanced account of these impacts both within the railcars and in Chinese society. Railroads influenced the development of time discipline, the modern tourism industry, the inclusion of railroad etiquette in textbooks for children, and literary fiction.

Part III examines the eras of the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937), the invasion and occupation of China by Japan between 1937 and 1945, and the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the GMD (1945-1949). Chapter 5 focuses on the development of railroad workers as a professional class and the politicization of its workers. During the years that the GMD were in power the railroad system and its related institutions went through numerous transformations, such as the establishment of the Ministry of Railways in 1928. Köll focuses on the professionalization of the railroad workforce via the state's investment in education as well as the proliferation of professional organizations and use of railroads for government propaganda. Furthermore, Köll examines the politics of the railroad workforce, which contrary to other parts of the world was not a site of labor politics. Specifically, Köll argues, unlike the railroads which served as the vanguard for labor politics elsewhere, railroad labor politics in China were slow to develop given the GMD's power within railroads. The GMD's presence—from occupying positions of power to controlling railroad print publications—left little room for labor politics. Lastly, the state's investment in the railroad system reflected the national unification ambitions of the GMD. In fact, you can find antecedents of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Sun Yat-sen's original hope to connect Europe and China by railroads, which he wrote in 1921. Sun Yat-sen's concept of China's railroad system fit in with his broader plan of development based upon infrastructure. The national railroad system was intended to meet China's domestic goals—solidify its borders and more closely connect the economies of eastern China with the west—and international goals. The international goals set forth by Sun Yat-sen reflect those of the BRI. Sun Yat-sen in 1921 (1922, 7), as quoted by Köll, envisioned an international railroad system that would connect China to Europe and eventually Africa. Chapter 6 examines the relationship between the second Sino-Japanese War and the proceeding civil war between the CCP and the GMD on the railroad system. Köll's analysis during this period focuses on the use of the railroad systems by military and non-military personal. The development of railroad institutions and nation-building that had been occurring under the GMD was unevenly interrupted during this period. Out of the violence, institutional fragmentation, and

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the solidification of power by the CCP following the civil war in 1949 railroads once again became the center of nation building, this time with the Chinese Communist Party at the helm following the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Part IV moves the study of railroad development in China into the era of the People's Republic of China. Chapter 7 begins by analyzing the relationship between railroads and the civil war. However, most of this chapter focuses on the role of the railroad and its institutions in the early years of the People's Republic of China. One of the important institutional transformations was the integration of the railroads into the CCP's organizational structure. Related, Köll emphasizes the role of the railway army corps under the People's Liberation Army in the construction of railroads until 1984 when the railway army corps was demilitarized, and their construction tasks were instead managed by the Ministry of Railways. Additionally, Köll focuses on the economic and political aspects of the railroad during this period. It is in this era that China expands its railroad system further into the interior of China. In addition to building the modern state through the physical expansion of railroads, China also utilized the railroad system to convey socialist ideology, for example it constructed martyr monuments in honor of workers who died building railroads. Chapter 8 continues to examine the railroad system in pre- and post-reform China. In this chapter, Köll provides a fascinating analysis that connects the development of the national railroad system with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Moving into the reform era, the developments of the railroad are placed within the wider restructuring of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, the push for high-speed railroads in China, and the eventual disbanding of the Ministry of Railways in 2013. Following this, two institutions, which are now overseen by the Ministry of Transport, replaced the Ministry of Railways—the National Railway Administration (whose focus is on the administrative side of the railways) and the China Railway Corporation (whose focus is on the commercial side of the railways).

*Railroads and the Transformation of China* ends with a conclusion that solidifies the importance of understanding the complex and fluid history of China's railroad system. Here, Köll convincingly discusses why the history of Chinese railroads is not only of historical importance but is central for understanding contemporary Chinese domestic and international affairs as they relate to topics such as railroads, politics, and economics. For example, the link between use of the train system for past state development and the People's Republic of China's present state development in areas such as Tibet. Furthermore, with an eye to China's One Belt One Road initiative, Köll reflects on the connection between China's current aspirations for international railroad networks and Sun Yat-sen's outline for the development of China's railroad system.

In a book that is written for readers already familiar with China, though not necessarily experts on the historical trajectory of China's rail system, we can gain invaluable insight into development of the Chinese railroad system, its relationship with the general history of China from the last years of the dynastic period to the present and be prepared to analyze China's domestic train development and advancement of high-speed railroad networks abroad within their historical context. Through Köll's tracing of the institutional history of China's railroads, readers of this book are provided a fantastic example of the relationship between technical infrastructure projects, state development, and the relationship between expertise and politics.

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Köll's analysis is insightful and comprehensive, but a more place-based analysis and integration of infrastructure studies' perspectives could further our understandings of Chinese railroads. Throughout her study of the development of China's railroad system, Köll is attuned to the context of place, especially given her focus on a select few rail lines, but because her scope is large—both spatially and temporally—the linkages of the railroads in specific places and their impacts on society at-large could be elaborated further in future research. Furthermore, this study would find an ideal complement in frameworks used within infrastructure studies, which could add further insight into the relationship between power, materiality, politics, and expertise. Many intricacies of the development of railroads in China that Köll analyzes are also commonly discussed in infrastructure studies, such as the role of infrastructure in sustaining life and their symbolic importance (Larkin 2013). In her study Köll draws on frameworks outside of infrastructure studies, but infrastructure studies' informed perspectives may bring to light new understandings and questions related to the relationships between the technical aspects, materiality, and social and political dimensions of the historical and current development of the Chinese railroad system.

Given China's active involvement in developing infrastructure projects abroad, scholars of global China can build from the strong foundation of Köll's work when analyzing Chinese overseas railroad projects, ranging from the financing and construction of a light rail system in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Goodfellow & Huang 2020) to the joint Indonesian-Chinese Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railroad project (Tritto 2020). Taking the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railroad project as an example, one can see the importance of emphasizing both the local and Chinese contexts that influence the project. In particular, the role of infrastructure in Indonesia must be accounted for. For example, while not directly related to railroad infrastructure, the works of both Barker (2005), who analyzed the development of Indonesia's satellite program, and Colven (2017), who studied the Great Garuda Sea Wall project in Jakarta, provide a basis for ascertaining the underlying context for infrastructure projects in Indonesia. This context must then be discussed in relationship to the history of Chinese railroad development. China's current emphasis on overseas railroad development abroad can be traced back to Sun Yat-sen's desire to be an influential member of the international economy via the development of an international railroad system. These interconnected contexts shape our understandings of China's involvement in railroad development abroad. Köll's book is a beneficial resource that provides essential context for examining Chinese railroad development abroad.

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