

The Evolution of Chinese People's Perception of Railway Value in the Late Qing Dynasty

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Abstract

The railway and its related knowledge had been gradually introduced into China since the 1840s, and became a topic ardently discussed by the Qing officials in the 1860s. Initially, people held a negative attitude towards the railway, arguing that building railways in China would suffer from many drawbacks. This rejection stemmed from both the fear of new things and the concern about issues of sovereignty behind the railway. However, with the increase of national defense pressure and the development of commodity economy, more and more Chinese people gradually realized the direct or indirect value of the railway in national defense, politics, economy and people's livelihood, and finally promoted the railway construction in full swing in the late Qing Dynasty of Chinese history.

Key words: The late Qing Dynasty; Railway value; Evolution of perception

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The railway, with the advantages of large load, high speed, low cost and little influence of environment and climate, have a vital impact on the comprehensive national strength of a country. Since the Opium War, the Chinese nation, once with a glorious history, had encountered national crises again and again. In order to save the nation from subjugation, the people of insight constantly sought a way out. In this course, the outstanding Chinese people also realized the important value of the railway and were busy to start the railway cause.

1. INTRODUCTION OF RAILWAY KNOWLEDGE INTO CHINA

In 1825, the world's first railway was born in Britain. Later, by virtue of rapid, convenient, economic and other advantages the railway showed great superiority, gradually emerged in Europe and the United States, and finally became a monopoly of transport. Although little was known about the West as a whole, since the 1840s a small number of Chinese people had gradually gained information about the railway during their learning about the West and written briefly about the railway and its principle and efficacy in the related works. In 1841, Lin Zexu compiled the "Record of Four Continents", mentioning that "in the areas without rivers steam-trains are used to carry goods, running 20 or 30 li only within an hour." (Lin, 2002) Wei Yuan of the same times also briefly described the transport of American railway in the "Illustrated Records of the Maritime Nations". Xu Jiyu further compiled the "Brief Description of the Ocean Circuit" in 1848, which not only narrated the distribution and operation of railways in various states of the United States, but also briefly described constructing procedures and functions of the railway. For example, "inland roads are mostly made of molten iron for steam-trains to run on." (Xu, 2001)

In the 1960s, with the advancement of Sino-Western exchanges, some Chinese people also went abroad and took trains themselves while opening their eyes to see the world. In 1866, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accepted the invitation of Robert Hart, Inspector-General of Customs, and sent five people, teachers and students including Zhang Deyi from the School of Combined Learning led by Bin Chun and his son, to form the first delegation in modern China to the West. Zhang Deyi recorded the railway operation in the West and his own attitudes towards the railway in his travelogue of the "Voyage and Strange Stories"; he wrote, "This undertaking is once and for all, not only harmless to

merchants and peasants, but also beneficial to the country. This is indeed a reason why Western countries are getting richer and stronger.” (Zhang, 1981) Wang Tao, an early reformist thinker, also went to Europe in 1867, and his travel masterpiece of the “Recording of Traveling” was handed down to later generations. In the book, he wrote in detail about his feeling of taking the train for the first time; he exclaimed, “Steam-trains are really as fast as wind and electricity.” (Wang, 1982) In 1868, the Qing court sent the first official diplomatic mission in modern China to visit the United States. Zhi Gang, one of the members and the Taotai of Customs, made clear his views on the railway function in the “Qing Travelers to the Far West”, thinking that “steam-trains” were “convenient for both the public and the private, and full of endless benefits”. (Zhi, 1981)

2. INITIAL REACTION: STRONG DISAPPROVAL

At the same time, in the 1860s, as the Western powers repeatedly asked to build railways in China, officials of the Qing government were no longer unfamiliar with railways. On the issue of foreign-funded railways, courtiers, generals and governors unanimously expressed “great refusal”, believing that the time to build railways in China was not yet ripe. It could be seen that in China at that time, although some Chinese people had realized the advantages and value of the railway, they were generally opposed to building railways in China.

In their views, railway linking-up would bring about adverse consequences such as destroying tradition, seizing livelihood and undermine social stability. At that time, some people summed up these undesirable consequences as the following six points.

The first was “great benefit to the Western powers, but great harm to our country”. With railways, foreign businessmen would carry their goods faster, and establish a monopoly of overland transport. Thus, the benefit of our businessmen and the wealth of our poor people would be inevitably taken away.

The second was “to damage our farmlands and cottages, seize our livelihood.” Once railways were constructed, plebeian people’s houses would be destroyed, and acres of farmlands occupied. It was more likely to cut off the living means for carters, donkey drivers, and porters, leaving millions of people unable to make a living.

The third was “to hinder our geomancy and ruin grave foundation”. Railway construction would destroy the treasured lands, and bad luck was coming. As for grave foundation, most Chinese people regarded filial piety as a great virtue.

The fourth was “to prevent us from coming in and going out. there were dangers of hurting people and taking lives.” Because of dense population, it would disturb

people, obstruct roads, and bring about inconvenience in daily life when trains flew by. If it happened for bricks and stones to cause trains derail, some people would be disabled or even lose their lives.

The Fifth was “to arouse mass revolts, and government being forced to intervene would lose support of people.” Once the vital interests of people were damaged, they would inevitably gather together and bare their arms to fight. If foreign-funded railways were demolished, foreign powers would control the people by means of the officials. Thus, the officials would poison the whole country against the original intention of compassionating people and protecting country, which would completely lose the loyalty of the people. This could be the greatest harm.

The sixth was “to chisel our mountains and intercept our rivers.” When foreign investors were building railways, hills were cut flat, mountains were hollowed, which deprived us of the natural barriers of canyons, mountains and rivers. Once some troubles happened on the frontiers, foreign enemies took trains directly to the hinterlands and the capital, and the country was in danger.

In fact, among the nearly 400 million people at that time, the proportion of the population that would be directly negatively affected by railways was still very low. From the perspective of efficiency, foreign-funded railways were generally built in coastal or inland areas with relatively developed economies, the ability to bear unemployment and the reemployment probability for most people were also relatively high, not to mention that the rise of railways could also increase a lot of employment while causing a small number of people to lose their jobs. Moreover, even if a small number of people caused troubles, it was under the control of the Qing government. What the Chinese people were really afraid of was not people’s rebellion, but once they permitted a country to build railways in China, other Western powers would inevitably follow up and compete to encroach on China’s sovereignty, railway rights and other related rights and interests. Therefore, fundamentally speaking, people were worried about the railway sovereignty, fearing that the railway would become a tool for Western powers to invade China.

3. WAY OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT AND SHARP WEAPON OF SEEKING WEALTH

Although the disapproving attitude of the railway still occupied social mainstream, with the deepening of the domestic and foreign crises in China, the Chinese people’s desire for “change” was becoming stronger and stronger, and they were also aware of the importance and necessity of building railways. Especially in the late 1870s and early 1980s, as China’s land and sea border crises further deepened, the importance of the railway became increasingly prominent due to the need for rapid transit

of troops and materials. It was from this period that some enlightened officials and early reformist thinkers proposed to build railways in China on the grounds of exploiting the railway value in military, national defense, economy and people's livelihood.

First of all, Li Hongzhang, Ding Richang, Liu Mingchuan and other powerful officials in the late Qing Dynasty realized that the frontier crises were getting more and more serious after the Opium War, the Japanese Landing on Taiwan, and the Sino-French War. They attached importance to the railway value in coastal and land defense, and formed an initial scale of railway self-improvement thought, believing that the railway could not only internally control local areas and quell rebellions, but also externally safeguard borders and defend against other countries. In 1880, Liu Mingchuan submitted the memorial, "Preparation of Building Railways for Self-Improvement", emphasizing that "railways...to be used for transit of troops, are particularly urgent and can't be delayed." (Liu, 2014)

In addition to regarding the railway as a way of self-improvement, since the 1980s, the Qing officials represented by Yi Chen and Zhang Zhidong, as well as early bourgeois reformist thinkers, such as Ma Jianzhong, Xue Fucheng, Zheng Guanying and Wang Tao, had gradually realized that there existed great limitation if railway value was understood solely in terms of military purposes. They strongly emphasized that the railway was of great benefit to improving China's economy and people's livelihood and was an efficient tool for gaining wealth. If the railway was used only for military purposes, the construction and operation costs were very high while the daily usage was very low; Besides, the gradual development of China's national capitalism also put forward the requirements for the railway to serve economy. Therefore, it seemed to them that only by exploiting the economic and livelihood functions of the railway so as to enhance the comprehensive national power could the national security be fundamentally safeguarded. It was beneficial to merchants for railways to join up. One was to "save money", that was, to save the costs of transport and marketing, and the other was to "open sources", that was, to expand markets and promote circulation of goods, and then to increase taxes to facilitate raising grain and pay for the troops. In 1889, Zhang Zhidong submitted the memorial of "Please Delay Building Jin-Tong Railway Replaced with Hinterland Main Lines", emphasizing that compared with the other railway value, the railway was more meaningful for "prosperous sales of local goods" (Yuan, Sun, & Li, 1998). The railway could not only transport manufacturing machines and improve the quality of domestic goods, but also reduce transport cost and improve sales, so as to achieve the effect of competing for profit with foreigners.

In terms of people's livelihood, the railway could relieve famine and solve water transport of grain, which was also the focus of people's discussion around the 1880s. From 1873 to 1879, a severe drought and famine occurred in Northern China, so people began to talk about the significance of railway construction from the transport of grain for disaster relief, thinking that it had the benefit of supplementing the water transport of grain, relieving hungry people, and implementing the decrees for famine relief. In addition, in this period, people also believed that the railway was valuable in facilitating travel, reducing the number of vagrants in the South so as to maintain public order, and so on.

Although some courtiers still had doubts about the railway, with the support of Yi Xuan (Prince Chun), Li Hongzhang and others started the construction of the Tang-Xu Railway (Tangshan-Xugezhuang) in 1881 as a trial strategy of "leading the way" on the grounds of solving the transport problem of the Kaiping Coal Mine. The Tang-Xu Railway was completed and opened to traffic in the same year. This railway greatly increased the traffic volume of coal, ensuring that it could be continuously sold to various places far away from Xugezhuang by waterway, enormously reducing the demand for foreign coal. This made the Qing court really feel the efficacy of the railway, and the attitude of railway construction also changed from opposition to "trial". After this, the social support for railway construction became more evident, and some exams began to include questions about the railway. In 1888, Yi Xuan submitted a memorial of "Please Permit to Build Jin-Tong Railway", calling for continuously building the existing railway to Tongzhou. This proposal was resisted once more by more than 30 courtiers, sparking a most heated debate about the railway. By this time, however, the supporters of the railway had gradually grown powerful and influential, and the memorials of Zhang Zhidong, Liu Mingchuan, Huang Pengnian attracted much attention from Empress Dowager Cixi because of their respective insights. Particularly in April 1889, Zhang Zhidong's memorial, "Please Delay Building Jin-Tong Railway Replaced with Hinterland Main Lines", was well appreciated by Cixi. In the memorial, he took promoting economic development as the primary goal of the railway, and raised his opinions that "it's urgent for railways to be used to transport local goods." He further stressed: "the railway is, first of all, beneficial to the people. Once the people get benefit from the railway, the country will get benefit from the people. The greatest interest of the country is nothing more than conscription and transfer of grain... To defend the country is to protect the people. Therefore, benefit to the country and that to the people actually depend on each other."

¹ On nothing better than building railways for transshipment (1878, June 29). *Shenbao* (p.1).

To this memorial, Cixi replied in an imperial decree: "This matter is an important policy for self-improvement, and must be comprehensively planned from the overall situation of the country. The memorial of the Navy Yamen originally intended to open up the closed social ethos. You can carry out a few railways in turn, not limited to the Jin-Tong Railway. I only hope that it will be good for the country and do no harm to the people. You work out a most appropriate policy that will not change again, and then you can start it resolutely without blindly listening to others." In addition, Weng Tonghe, Sun Jia-Nai and other opponents had also changed their attitudes greatly. Compared with their previous resolute refusals, they affirmed the military role of the railway and plan to trying building railways in the border areas. Through this debate, the Qing Court finally confirmed building railways as the "self-improvement policy."

After the defeat of the Sino-Japanese War (1894), the Chinese nation fell into an unprecedented crisis, and its demand for railways became very urgent. On July 19, 1895, the Guangxu Emperor issued an edict: "What's more, facing the difficult state affairs, both the officials and the people have to unite as one, work hard to strengthen ourselves and eliminate hidden dangers,... and strive to perform practical governance first. Various officials, both inside and outside the imperial court, have been continuously presenting memoranda to state current affairs. Read them in detail, and choose some to implement. Building railways, casting coins, making machines, etc.,...should be run in time." (Zhu & Zhang, 1958)

If the above-mentioned value was entirely based on the most basic transport function of the railway, it was worth noting that people had further developed their understanding of the spillover value of the railway since the 1880s. First of all, the railway helped to maintain national unity. In 1880, Zheng Guanying put forward, in the Railways (Sec.1) of the "Words of Warning to a Prosperous Age", that "the railway will make 23 provinces joined up as a whole with convenient information and integrated culture, so the national power is lifted up." (Xia, 1982) Similar views could also be seen in the book of "On the Advantages and Disadvantages of China's Establishment of Railways" written by Zhong Tianwei in 1886. Secondly, the railway could bring about changes to all economic fields, and promote the development of other sectors, such as postal services, mining, shipping, and steel. In 1895, He Qi and Hu Liyuan proposed that "railways should be built to prosper various sectors" in the "Discussions of New Policies" (Zheng, 1994). Thirdly, during the Reform Movement (1898), Kang Youwei and other scholars had realized that traffic, including the railway, was helpful for popularizing education and developing people's wisdom.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout the evolution of people's perception of railway value in the late Qing Dynasty, it is not difficult to see that this process has two major characteristics.

Firstly, in the overall trend, the Chinese people's cognition of railway value was constantly progressing and deepening. This development followed the law that the spillover function derived from the basic function. In the beginning, people's cognition of railway value originated from its most basic transport function, such as the military value of the railway transport of troops and grain, or the economic and livelihood value of the transport of goods and food. Later, with the increasing practices of railway construction and the deepening of thinking, people gradually realized the spillover value of the railway, such as driving the development of other sectors, opening up closed social ethos, and promoting education and ethnic integration, etc.

Secondly, people's cognition does not emerge groundlessly. It is people's response and reflection on reality. In modern China with the nature of semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, people's understanding of railway value was also constantly adjusted along with the way of imperialist aggression. At first, people attached great importance to the military value of the railway because the Western countries had begun to invade the southeast sea frontiers and built railways close to the southwest, northwest and northeast land frontiers of China, which posed a serious threat to China's border security; Later, with the strengthening of the Western powers' economic aggression dominated by export of capital and commodities, as well as the development of China's commodity economy, people also realized the importance of the economic and livelihood value of the railway, and regarded it as a tool to compete with the Western countries for profit.

The people's perception of railway value conformed to the historical trend of world development, and played a huge guiding role in the policy and practice of China's railways. This kind of cognition was a consciousness of modern thought, which changed the ideological tradition of blindly emphasizing the ethics and morality in modern China, and turned to the pursuit of science and technology. This promoted China's transformation from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial society to a certain degree.

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