

2011

“How Can We Hope to Make a Living if Our Roots are Cut?”: Track-laying, Modernization, and People’s Livelihood in Republican Beijing

Jared Hall

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Hall, Jared, “How Can We Hope to Make a Living if Our Roots are Cut?”: Track-laying, Modernization, and People’s Livelihood in Republican Beijing” (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 905.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/905>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

“How Can We Hope to Make a Living if Our Roots are Cut?”: Track-laying, Modernization, and People’s Livelihood in Republican Beijing

July 13, 2011 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

By Jared Hall

In [a post yesterday at this site](#), I discussed recent cleavages between the rapidly expanding Beijing Subway and segments of the public the system is meant to serve. In that post, I pointed to residents who voiced concerns about property seizures, safety lapses, and excessive noise from nearby tracks. When the subway corporation attempted to shut out community objections related to each of these issues, residents then utilized a common repertoire of protest that included petitions, visits to government offices, and public demonstrations.

While our understanding of each of these incidents must to a certain extent be conditioned by the contingencies particular to their contemporary moment, significant parallels with previous eras beg closer attention. Long before the subway—opened to the public only in 1984—earlier generations of track-bound infrastructure provoked similar debates among Beijing residents.

In the two decades after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, railways and streetcars were central to elite modernizing visions for Beijing. It was in the first heady years of the post-revolutionary order that Sun Yat-sen, acting as director for national railway planning, drew up plans for a nationwide network connecting Beijing to every provincial capital in China. His total vision, still unrealized to this day, was designed to serve as the backbone of a national economic development program that would transform the country. Within the capital, political and commercial elites together with leading intellectuals cheered on streetcar development as a revolution in urban mobility. In a 1919 manifesto, Li Dazhao, the Beijing University librarian and future co-founder of the Communist Party, called on the government to “build a municipally managed streetcar system at once.”

Just as today, undertaking such an ambitious task of infrastructure development was costly. In financial terms, the construction demands easily exceeded the capacity of the weakened post-Qing state. Instead of a publicly-run system as Li Dazhao had envisaged, the city’s streetcar development was entrusted to a French banking conglomerate that then issued stock to wealthy non-resident investors. Since the 1880s, railway development had proceeded along much the same path, with new infrastructure predominantly financed and controlled by foreigners. Ironically, it was resistance to precisely this type of foreign encroachment that animated the rights-recovery movement that had helped give the ailing dynasty a final shove in 1911.

Even so, there was more reason than patriotism alone to oppose external control over transportation networks. Streetcar and railway routes, like subways in present-day Beijing, posed social challenges that outside investors had little incentive to address. Rickshaw pullers, [as David Strand has vividly detailed](#), were one group that had good reason to fear the arrival of new transportation technology. They worried that fast, convenient trolleys would render their services redundant. Local merchants also raised alarm once construction was underway, objecting to the disruption caused by debris that clogged roadways and the partial demolition of shop fronts to make way for the tracks. The concerns of both groups remained unacknowledged until the Chamber of Commerce pressed its case with a boycott of shop taxes and police license fees.

In the freewheeling political atmosphere of Republican Beijing, protest tactics only escalated from there. On the day the streetcar service was slated to launch in December 1924, rickshaw men boldly threatened to block the tracks by laying down en masse. Tragedy was avoided only after the protest were called off, though the incident might be seen as an ominous prelude to

streetcar-smashing riots that broke out just four years later. While it is true such tactics point to a wide gap between the protest strategies of the 1920s and today, the underlying pattern of closed, unaccountable planning process being met with grassroots opposition persists. Moreover, the discourse of “people’s livelihood” (民生) that pervaded popular discussion during the period has remained a viable discursive claim down through to the present. Originating from the vocabulary of Confucian moral economy, the term was elevated to the heights of Republican political discourse as one of Sun Yat-sen’s Three People’s Principles (三民主義), only to be reappropriated once again by the Communists, this time with a distinct Marxist inflection.

The same pattern of elite planning being met with popular resistance and similar rhetorical debates over the political content of people’s livelihood also appear centrally in [Madeleine Dong’s account](#) of another incident from the period, the removal of the Beijing city walls around Xuanwu Gate (宣武門). The project, which began in December 1928 after having been mired in a decade of delay, aimed to alleviate traffic congestion by straightening a stretch of railway and widening the road that passed through the gate. Unlike streetcar development, which was handled solely by a corporation autonomous from public control, responsibility for the project was shared jointly by the Municipal Council and the Beijing-Hankou Railway, though the latter’s role was limited to financial support. Without private interests clouding the planning process, the path should have been cleared for an inclusive approach. Still, area residents and shopkeepers remained shut out by bureaucrats driven by a technocratic vision of public interest.

Neighborhood shopkeepers, while conceding the broader benefit of increased mobility, nevertheless wanted their interests considered when weighing public welfare. One merchant framed the issue in exactly these terms in his petition to the Department of Public Works: “How can we hope to make a living if our roots are cut? It is necessary to make transportation convenient, but at the same time, attention should also be paid to people’s livelihood.” When initial pleas like this were shrugged off, members of the community worked together to lobby the mayor. When they found information was blocked and compensation denied, they filed still more petitions and refused relocation.

Like more recent struggles between Beijing’s municipal government and city residents, the former retained an advantage over the latter by controlling information about the project and claiming a monopoly over the right to define the public interest. However, some residents were able to expose political vulnerabilities within the bureaucracy and did ultimately receive compensation for property destroyed during construction. Undoubtedly, certain strategies from the Republican era are no longer possible for present-day Beijingers (the last hope for a wide-scale cross-class alliance, to take one example, collapsed in the summer of 1989). Yet, this process of contestation, joined with the popular ability to force the debate over people’s livelihood into a more widely-accessible public realm, represent important continuities with the present battles over subway and other transportation expansion projects in contemporary Beijing.

Jared Hall lives in Beijing, where he teaches Chinese and World History at the International Division of Peking University’s Affiliated High School. He can be found online on [Twitter](#) and on his blog, [Beijing Time Machine](#).