

The inside track on the Yunnan-Vietnam Railway

By HU YONGQI

The Yunnan-Vietnam Railway was the first to link the province with other countries, running 855 km from Kunming to Haiphong in Vietnam. Because of its narrow gauge, the railway is often called "The 1-meter-gauge railway".

Construction of the Vietnamese section began in 1901 and was completed in 1903. The Yunnan section was finished in 1910, and its 425 bridges and 155 tunnels, accounted for 36 percent of its total length. The line began at Kunming North Railway Station and ran to Hekou, via towns such as Yiliang, Kaiyuan, Mengzi and Pingbian.

In 1940, Japanese soldiers invaded Vietnam and bombed the railway. To prevent the Japanese from moving north into Yunnan, the order was given to destroy Hekou Bridge, which connected Yunnan and Vietnam at the time. Some parts of the Yunnan section were also dismantled. The original rails were later used for the Kunming-Qijing railway that carried the international military supplies on the Yunnan-Myanmar Road and the Hump Flights.

In 1946, China regained sovereignty and management of the Kunming-Hekou railway after negotiations with France. The railway was reopened in 1957, and its peak came in the 1990s when the road network was unable to support adequate trade transport. Now, only two or three trains run on the old-fashioned railway each week, according to Kunming Railway Bureau.

'Cheaper and safer'

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Yang Mingying, 58, has noticed a huge difference between the outdated Yunnan-Vietnam Railway and the new trains that run on the Yuxi-Mengzi Railway, which opened three months ago.

After retiring from her job at a railway station in Kunming, Yang had time to ride the new train and visit friends and relatives. On June 23, accompanied by her husband and granddaughter, she took the Kunming-Mengzi train to visit her sister in Tonghai county, Yuxi city.

"I used to repair the 1 meter-wide rail tracks for the Yunnan-Vietnam Railway and I know how slow the old trains were," said Yang. "It took almost a whole day to travel from Kunming to Tonghai on the old track, but now it takes just two and a half hours."

The train departed from Kunming at 8:40 am, reaching its final destination, Mengzi North Station, at 13:10 pm. Yang's granddaughter Xiang Jinyue, 7, was exhilarated to meet a classmate on the train and the two girls chanted, paying no heed to the other passengers.

"The train runs smoothly and is much cheaper and safer than the bus or driving," said Yang. "That's the great benefit for regular passengers like us."

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