

17 December 1972

Dear Harold:

In sending along a John Burns feature (Toronto Globe) from the Washington Post on a train ride from Peking to Nanking, you speculate as to why, apart from guage, the United States has not made a deal to send some of its unused railway cars to China, which could use them.

Chinese guage is standard, so that's no problem. If there were any technical problem it probably would be something like couplings since the Chinese equipment is modelled after the British ~~whom~~ built the first railways in China. It also includes very likely a lot of Japanese-built equipment captured in Manchuria, but that also is built on the British model. Actually, I doubt even that couplings would be much of a problem.

My guess is that the Americans probably realize we shall have to return to rail travel to some extent before too long because of congested highways, pollution and air line hijackings. As for the Chinese, they probably feel more the need of more trackage. I don't remember the exact figure, but I believe that China, which is physically about the same size as the United States, has less than 20,000 miles of railway lines. And this in spite of the fact that the new government has built extensively. So if they were going to spend foreign exchange on rail equipment it more likely would be for more mileage. They can make their own rolling stock and are extremely proud of the fact that they can do so now, in contrast with the days when they had to buy all such stuff abroad, not so much because they didn't know how but because of strings attached to foreign loans and so on. They also now make their own rails and locomotives.

Pullmans would be regarded pretty much as unnecessarily luxurious, and the cost of getting them there would be considerable compared with the cost of producing the equivalent locally. Also I rather doubt if the Pullman system would be popular. The existing equipment in China runs to compartments with from four to six bunks in each. Two bunks, first class.

Apparently the vast majority of Chinese passengers still travel second and ~~third~~ ^{third} class, with only the very uppermost crust going first class and European-type sleeping accommodations which are either Wagons-lits or a locally-produced imitation. Extremely comfortable, by the way, and compared to them the ordinary Pullman berth is a nightmare.

Second class is a sort of bare-bones version with six bunks to a compartment, and third class is even barer, just benches to sit and sleep on. The Chinese don't consider such any great hardship. They make such an occasion out of train travel and enjoy it so much that the physical accommodations don't matter except for the food, which usually is superb. Everyone aboard always has a wonderful time, regardless of what class he's travelling. Burns conveys the feeling exceptionally well, and we thank you for sending it along.

jdw