

WOLF TIETZE, D. Sc.
Magdeburger Str. 17
38350 Helmstedt, Germany

Traffic Infrastructure
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FIFTY YEARS OF RAILWAYS IN MANCHURIA

A Contribution to the Study of Transport Development in the Far East

ABSTRACT

As in many cases throughout the world, the development of railway lines and railway systems is closely linked to geopolitical issues. This is also true in Manchuria. The completion of the Trans-Siberian by the end of the 19th century and the after all successful attempts of Japan to establish a large territorial stronghold on the continent have triggered a vigorous construction activity to match the Russian transit interests and the Japanese goals of widespread colonization (settlement, agriculture, industry) in Manchuria. While this pattern shaped the first 50-year period, the second (1953-2003) is subject to the striking development in China.

KEY WORDS

Manchuria, construction of railway system, geopolitics

Modern transport development in Manchuria began with the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway. The initiative came from the Russians, who were interested in overcoming the disadvantages of the northern Amur bypass by a direct train connection right across Manchuria to Vladivostok, and at the same time also considering the ice-free coasts on the Yellow Sea. While Count Witte, the then Russian Finance Minister, intended to achieve his aims by making use of economic means with the help of banks and the construction of a railway line, Kuropatkin, the War Minister, preferred military occupation and total territorial annexation of ice-free coasts on the Yellow Sea.

A convenient opportunity for these Russian ambitions arose after the defeat of China in the Chinese-Japanese War of 1894/5. The Triple Alliance had made Japan vacate that part of the Fengtien Province again, which had been annexed by the Treaty of Shimonoseki and, under the leadership of the statesman Li Hung-chang, it was backed by Russia, which in turn was backed by French high finance which saw favourable investment opportunities in the up and coming, large-scale industrialization of Russia.

Following the coronation ceremonies for the Czar Nicholas II in 1896, Count Witte managed to persuade Minister Li Hung-chang into a secret military

pact against Japan, including Article IV which incorporated the concession for the Russian construction of a railway line right across the northern Manchuria to Vladivostok for the express purpose of facilitating Russian troop movements. It was financed by the Russian-Chinese Bank with French capital.

The ambiguous Article V of the Treaty caused prolonged disagreement between the partners to the treaty, containing as it did, details about control and protection of the track, which was now constructed as the East Chinese Railway.

In March 1898 Russia received part of the Liaotung Peninsula from China, together with the concession for the construction of a branch line running from the East Chinese Railway to Port Arthur. In 1903 both the main line and the branch line were completed and handed over for public transport. They were single-track lines of the Russian gauge. The main line was 1480 km long, the branch from Harbin to Port Arthur 990 km. The construction of these tracks, as well as the founding of the two modern towns of Harbin and Dairen are laudable evidence of Russian engineering achievements. The plan furthermore provided for developing Port Arthur as a naval base, whereas Dairen was to be a large commercial port. At the outbreak of the Russian-Japanese War in 1904/5, however, nothing more than the very beginning of this development had been achieved, although ca. 30 million gold roubles had been invested in the project.

After this war the southern part of the Liaotung Peninsula and the East Chinese Railway from Port Arthur to Hsingking (Changchun) fell into Japanese hands. For the period 1905-1917 Russia, on the other hand, restricted itself to those parts of the track it had retained and attended especially to further development of Harbin. Russia and Japan jointly opposed the American efforts to neutralize the track and tackled plans for extending it further north to Igun on the Amur.

After the First World War the East Chinese Railways were first under the control of a joint Chinese - Belarus authority, which only became a Chinese-Soviet Russian one on 31st May, 1924. Though the Soviet

government gave up some of its rights of control, it nonetheless retained a strong influence. The only power with a serious colonizing intention to join into the development of transport in Manchuria was Japan, which appeared on the defence scene against the Russian drive for expansion towards the sea. But even if the Russian-Japanese War of 1904/5 handed the victory to Japan, it had weakened its financial power so considerably that it was not able to pursue its further aims on the continent at the same time. For these reasons it was already being debated whether the parts of the East Chinese Railway it had won as a result of the outcome of the war, but which were very much in need of development, should be sold to the American railway tycoon, E.H.Harriman, when at last a solution was found by establishing the South Manchurian Railway Company.

By the time the year 1932 arrived, this Company had completed a twin-rail track from Port Arthur to Hsingking (Changchun). The Antung-Mukden (Shenyang) Line, originally only a light military supply line of the Japanese, had been fully developed and modernized, and connected to the Korean Railways by a bridge over the river Yalu. In this way a direct link was created by travelling from Japan by ship to Korea (Shimonoseki-Pusan) and onwards by rail through Manchuria and by Trans-Siberian Railway to Europe.

Besides improving the track, the number of rolling stock was increased and most advanced workshops set up at Dairen and at other places, which were capable of producing not only for their own requirements, but also for export to China and Korea. Moreover, the company performed outstandingly well in the field of urban renewal and colonization, so that in 1931, apart from Shanghai, Dairen had surpassed all other Asian ports in efficiency.

During the first three decades of the 20th century a power struggle developed between the South Manchurian and the East Chinese railway companies, which resulted in interesting consequences for the transport geography and its opening up of Manchuria. Between 1924 and 1931 the Chinese, who were intent on undermining the transport monopoly of Dairen, built ca. 1280 km of new railway tracks, some of which benefited from the British financial support, and in 1930 they made great efforts to develop the port of Hulutao on the Gulf of Laotung.

Amongst other things, this embittered competition resulted in clashes between the two opposing sides in the opening-up of Manchuria through transport systems. In contrast to this, the Chinese-Russian Railway Company remained in the background, and continued to serve the Soviet Russian transit transport with Vladivostok, without getting involved in the Chinese-Japanese power struggle. In 1931 the track total of these three companies was about 5800 km, ca. 1700

km of which was run by the Soviet controlled Chinese-Soviet Russian Company, ca. 1120 km by the Japanese controlled South Manchurian Company, and ca. 3040 km by the East Chinese one.

At this stage, the military occupation of Manchuria by Japan took place in the period between 1931-33. In 1934, after a brief period of transition, the imperial state of Manchukuo was founded, with Japan playing a pre-eminent role as the organizing and colonizing power. The three railway companies were converted to the standard track of the South Manchurian Railways and run by Japanese staff.

In October 1933 the North Korean Railways were affiliated to the Manchurian one, with the result that it became much easier to transport directly from East Manchukuo via the North Korean ports and that de facto another, strategically important connection was established from Japan to the Manchurian interior. This was, moreover, the decisive competitive line for the Soviet line via Harbin to Vladivostok.

The Japanese railway construction in the north east of Manchuria took place in the period from 1935 to 1940. The tracks in question are the following: Linkau – Hulin (immediately on the Soviet border), Linkau-Chiamussu and Siao-suifeng-Wanching. This hinterland, further into the interior of the North Korean ports, thus experienced considerable economic promotion, and became the main settlement area of Japanese colonists. – Further simultaneous development of transport in the north west may primarily be ascribed to the reasons of military security. The construction of a track from Hsingking to Taoan, and from there on via the Hsingan Chain to Wentchuan did, in the summer of 1939, indeed result in armed resistance from the Soviet Union and the Mongolian People's Republic (Outer Mongolia). Only in 1941 was a return to law and order possible. Japan, however, refrained from extending the line any further.

In the southwest the Japanese turned their attention to Jehol Province, and as early as 1933-36 they constructed a railway from the Mukden-Shanghai-Kuan-Line via Yehposhou to Chengteh and Chifeng. When the war broke out between Japan and China in 1937, the railway was extended from Chengteh to Peking. This war also led to several other new constructions, which promoted connections between North Korea and Mandchukuo.

After 1940, further development was greatly influenced by the imprint of World War II, and was accordingly slowed down. The new construction was restricted to some shorter feeder and branch lines for the existing system, and to smaller extensions in the north. The completion of a track from Tunghua to Antung on the Manchurian side of the Yalu River was not reliably confirmed. This track was started by the Japanese in 1941 in order to facilitate subsequent ex-

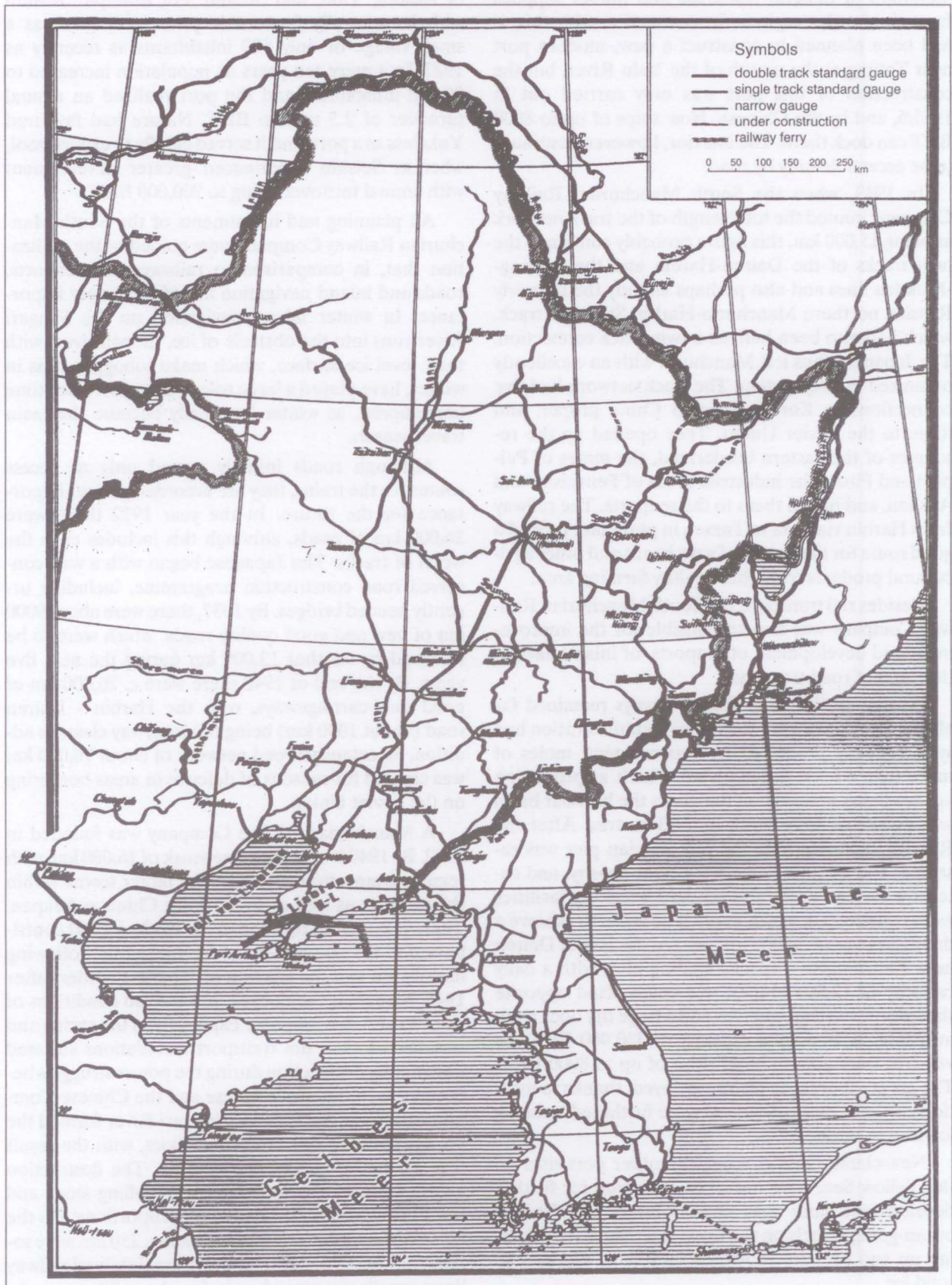


Figure 1 - The railway net in and around Manchuria in 1953

plotation of mineral resources and timber supplies from the border regions. In connection with this, it had been planned to construct a new, modern port near Tatung at the mouth of the Yalu River, but the construction of this port was only carried out in 1945/6, and by the Chinese. Now ships of up to 8000 BRT can dock there. The interior, however, continues to be accessible only by road.

In 1943, when the South Manchurian Railway Company quoted the total length of the track network as being 15,000 km, this figure probably contained the twin tracks of the Dairen-Harbin and the Antung-Mukden lines and also perhaps already the formerly Russian northern Manchuria-Harbin-Suifenhao track, which had also been built as a twin track connection. The Japanese thus left Manchuria with an excellently organized railway system. The track network had five connections to Korea, three to China proper, and three to the Soviet Union. They opened up the resources of the eastern borderland, the mines of Peipiao and Fusin, the industrial areas of Panshishu and Anshan, and linked them to the seaports. The railway from Harbin via Lafa to Tumen in particular proved a good route for the export of soya beans and other agricultural products from this wealthy farming area.

Besides rail transport, the South Manchurian Railway Company was also responsible for the improvement and development of seaports, of inland navigation, and of road transport.

Among all the ports Dairen always remained far ahead. Ever since 1911 the railway administration had systematically promoted its improvement: moles of more than 4.6 km in length were built as protection against heavy seas, and at the quays the harbour basin was excavated to a depth of 7-13 metres. After the Russian-Japanese War the old Russian pier was restored, and another three were built nearby, and extensive storage room and modern weighing facilities were constructed, which made it possible to achieve a daily turnover of 30,000 tonnes. On the Bay of Dairen near Kanchingsu a special coaling pier, with a daily capacity of 12,500 tonnes, was constructed opposite the town. Even ship wharves and a large dry dock were available. With a total capacity of 330,000 BRT the wharves were able to build ships of up to 8000 BRT. The great advantages Dairen enjoyed, thanks to location and generous equipment were furthered by being ice-free in winter.

New-chuang and Antung, the other port sites on the Yellow Sea, were out of the question for further development since they could only be reached by ocean-going vessels on the flood tide, due to their silting up and because in winter they were blocked by solid ice.

The opening up of the more remote interior by railways favoured especially the North Korean ports

of Rashin, Yuki, and Seishin. For example, Rashin with its naturally favourable port conditions was a small village of only 500 inhabitants as recently as 1927. In a mere ten years its population increased to 26,000 inhabitants and the port realized an annual turnover of 2.5 million BRT. Nature had favoured Yuki less as a port, and it served chiefly to export wool, whereas Seishin experienced greater development with annual turnover rising to 900,000 BRT.

All planning and investments of the South Manchurian Railway Company were guided by the realization that, in comparison to railways and seaports, roads and inland navigation are of secondary importance. In winter inland navigation on the Sungari River runs into the obstacle of ice, though rivers with their level ice surface, which make toboggan runs in winter, have played a large role in transport since time immemorial, as winter has really become the main travel season.

Although roads initially served only as access routes for the trains, they are accorded greater importance for the future. In the year 1932 there were 36,000 km of roads, although this includes even the worst of tracks. The Japanese began with a well-conceived road construction programme, including urgently needed bridges. By 1937, there were about 9000 km of new and good quality roads, which were to be followed by another 13,000 km during the next five years. By the end of 1940 there were c. 26,000 km of good dual-carriageways, with the Harbin - Dairen road (about 1000 km) being of motorway class. In addition, an extensive road network of about 70,000 km was created for reasons of defence in areas bordering on the Soviet Union.

A Manchurian Airline Company was founded in 1932. By 1940 it operated a network of 16,000 km, with regular connections between the larger towns within the country, as well as to northern China and Japan. There is no doubt that Japan has made a great contribution to the opening-up of Mandchukuo. Following its collapse and the eviction of Japanese settlers after 1945, Manchuria sank back into the sad conditions of giant East Asian empires. Especially in the spring and summer of 1947 the transport installations suffered devastating destruction during the power struggles between the Nationalist Chinese and the Chinese Communists. For some time the Sungari River formed the border between the two power blocs, with the result that all the bridges were blown up. The destruction and demolition (by the Soviets) of rolling stock and track installations assumed large proportions. On the line, between Hsingking and Mukden, 250 km were totally torn up. The few temporarily maintained railway lines practically served only for the military needs. Particularly affected were the lines between Antung to Mukden, from Peking to Mukden, and from Peking to

Chengteh. The Penschishu - Shoju line was completely dismantled.

There is now a lot of propaganda in favour of reconstruction, which was given a new political face by the war with Korea and the Soviet-Chinese negotiations in Moscow in 1952. With the effect from January 1st 1953, the Soviets forewent all claims on all rights to running or owning railways in Manchuria in favour of the People's Republic of China. Russia even forewent any compensation, though it must be noted that it had received this already from Japan in 1935. Only Dairen and Port Arthur, the naval and airbase, continue to be used jointly by the Soviets and the Chinese until such time as a peace treaty with Japan is signed.

WOLF TIETZE, D. Sc.
Magdeburger Str. 17
38350 Helmstedt, Germany

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

50 JAHRE EISENBAHN IN DER MANDSCHUREI

Wie vielfach auf der Welt ist die Entwicklung von Eisenbahnlinien und -systemen eng verknüpft mit der Geopolitik – so auch in der Mandschurei. Die Fertigstellung der Transsib Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts sowie die schließlich erfolgreichen Versuche Japans, auf dem Kontinent großräumig Fuß zu fassen, hatten lebhafte Bautätigkeit zur Folge, um sowohl russische Transitinteressen zu befriedigen als auch die japanischen Ziele ausgedehnter Kolonisation (Besiedlung, Landwirtschaft, Industrie) in der Mandschurei. Diese Verhältnisse haben die erste 50-Jahres-Periode geprägt, während die zweite (1953-2003) von der kraftvollen Entwicklung in China bestimmt ist.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER

Mandschurei, Eisenbahnbau, Geopolitik

NOTES

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