

CHENGDU

CARRIAGE TO

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THE PAST

China's high-speed rail network is the world's biggest, but in rural Sichuan province, steam trains – which come with a history of darkness and beauty – offer portals to a slower-paced yesteryear

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At Jiayang, a worker prepares the train's steam engine before the day's first ride

**From left**

Rapeseed fields in bloom along the steam train's route; villagers in Bagou playing cards to kill time

Last December, China's state-owned train system operator China Railway Corporation proudly announced that the country was home to the world's biggest high-speed train network.

State media gushed about 124,000km of standard railway plus 22,000km of high-speed rail lines – more than the rest of the world's combined – zig-zagging across China. By 2030, the latter digit will have more than doubled, we are promised. Critics point to China Railway Corporation's huge debts, deepened by many loss-making routes, but for now, China's train revolution is very much on the rails, its vehicles connecting the hyper-modernising country's cities at speeds sometimes nudging 400km/h.

All this is in extreme contrast to the Jiayang Railway in the rural depths of China's central Sichuan province. Around 200km south of Chengdu – where the population stands at 14.5 million people – on a narrow 19.8km track, the country's last six functioning coal-powered steam trains – hissing, parping, brown-cloud-belching chuggers – trundle along, cutting through bamboo thickets and yellow rapeseed fields at little over human jogging pace.

Jiayang is a rustic, mist-hazed and largely grey town, given an extra sheen of bleakness during my visit with a wave of spitty drizzle. Still, the sight of the train arriving at the town's station with an eardrum-harpooning “TOOT! TOOT!” would be enough to stagger a train-spotter with a mix of adrenaline and nostalgia.

Despite the trains' technology being all but obsolete, according to the railway's management, around 190,000 individual passenger journeys take place on them each year, on two trains from its 1959-built stable plus four made in the 1970s or 1980s. Around 40,000 of these journeys are taken by locals still living along the route despite the area's coal industry having wound down decades ago. The remaining 150,000 trips are made by tourists.

I climb into a carriage from the Jiayang platform and sit on a wooden pew as we lurch forward, our speed quelled by a blue-uniform-clad female conductor cranking a knobby metal wheel under her seat to apply the brakes. We pass locals with bamboo piles strapped to their backs, scrabbling chickens and men wearing Mao-style caps with cigars stuffed in their mouths. Every local man over 40 around here smokes cigars, it seems.



“All is quiet, except for sporadic hoe-thuds from a farmer and chatter from elderly locals sitting outside a crooked farmhouse”



From top
The narrow train tracks that run through Bagou; Li Zhuizhen

Our destination is Bagou, once the central hub of the area's coal industry, now a retro tourist shrine to the era, complete with a mining museum. Coal pits were built around the town in the 1930s, before the train was built to transport the sooty stuff to Jiayang as part of Mao's 1958 to 1962 Great Leap Forward industrialisation campaign. Just before 1988, the year when two of the three pits ran out of coal, Bagou's population was about 7,000 and mainly comprised of mining families. Now, only 1,000 people live in Bagou, many of them retired miners.

With a wheel span of just 76cm, the train offers a bottom-rattling, 14km, hour-long ride from Jiayang to Bagou. Nowadays tourists buy tickets for designated seats, but before 2004, when the line was relaunched after authorities considered replacing it with roads, it was much more of a scrum. "Sometimes we couldn't close the door and people who couldn't get in had to walk home," Yuan Chengfang tells me in the carriage. Turns out, he is a secretary at Jiayang Group, the company that runs the trains.

Yuan joined the organisation in 1981 and loves the trains so much that he published a book of his photographs of them. As his staff lanyard flaps around his shirt, I ask him about his early memories of the line. "Farmers took pigs on the train because they needed them killed in a town with a slaughterhouse," he says. "The pigs somehow knew that the train was the final ride; they wouldn't get on it. It took six people to get a pig on a train."

Doomed farm animals still take their final journeys on the line, Yuan says, but not during my trip. I do get to see photographs of pigs being shooed into carriages, displayed at many of the train's stops, snapshots stoking the fuzzy nostalgia that characterises the area. This fuzz



expands in Bagou, with its early-1970s Cultural Revolution feel. Huge yellow lettering on the walls in the main square urges me to “use Mao’s books as the highest conduct of ethics”.

Sauntering around the square makes you feel like an extra in a nationalistic war film made by a Chinese state broadcaster. Flag-waving tourists from Chengdu dressed as soldiers pose on a stage overlooking the square. Around 45 years ago, the stage hosted “struggle sessions” where alleged anti-Mao individuals were publicly humiliated. Today there is only one moment of mild violence. A large collie dog, owned by a woman in her mid-twenties visiting for a militaristic dress-up session, gets overexcited and gently knocks a toddler over with its front paws. The toddler’s mother dusts him off and cash compensation negotiations begin.

I travel 1.6km further along the line to Huangcun, the final stop. For over 70 years, the coal pit here provided thousands with work. Now, tourists wear novelty miners’ hats during tours of its otherwise disused depths. Most go underground for the Huangcun mine tours, which cost 80 yuan (S\$17), take a few selfies by rusting train carriages slowly being swallowed by greenery, then head back to the more bustling Bagou.

A few hundred yards beyond the tourist throng of bobbing black hats, past faded Cultural Revolution-era propaganda prints adorning semi-derelict buildings, Huangcun’s remaining residents chisel down the hours, largely unnoticed by the visitors. Butterflies meander undisturbed around cabbages. All is quiet, except for sporadic hoe-thuds from a nearby farmer and chatter from three elderly locals sitting outside a crooked farmhouse.

“Sit! Sit!” shouts a woman who introduces herself as Li Zhuizhen. She tells me that she’s 72 and couldn’t afford to relocate when the pits closed, so she and her ex-miner husband

remained, now living off pensions and tending to animals. Our chat is interrupted by squawking from chickens, prompting an even louder cluck of laughter from Li. “Sorry, they can smell that my food is ready,” she says, gesturing to her kitchen.

Wearing a weathered purple smock with red and yellow sleeves poking through it, Li explains that the train has a dark past that didn’t make it onto the panels of Bagou’s mining museum. When the passenger trains became operational in 1962, she says passengers “had to sit on coal, and the carriages didn’t have doors, just holes to let people in and out. It was easy for people to be thrown off.” That’s what happened to her son. “He had his legs amputated. Lots of people lost their lives at that time.”

It’s then that I notice that the forefinger of Li’s left hand is missing. She says that in 1980, train authorities installed carriage doors after pressure from locals, making the journey less dangerous. Now, carriages for locals safely run across five stops, charging one yuan (S\$1.20) per stop.

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Huang Hongmin, a retired miner, has ridden the steam train for the past half-century

“It feels nice to have time and space here to slow down... the city is so fast and stressful”





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The last train of the day pulling into the station in the pitch black night

A ride in one of the locals' carriages, which usually run alongside the standard carriages, is rather different to the tourist trundle. They are officially just for locals, but the staff lets me ride one after nightfall. With no carriage lights installed, and passengers' faces eerily lit by smartphone glare, the experience feels like riding a ghost train. When we go through tunnels, scarves are lifted over mouths as the carriage fills with nostril-bothering coal haze. Stations glow a spectral green, lit by signal lights.

Despite the spooky scene, the vibe is jovial. The conductor giggles and pretends to slap a passenger for making a cheeky comment. Heads nod and shoulders are touched. "We all know each other," says Huang Hongmin, 75, a retired miner carrying a huge wicker bag and wearing oversized sunglasses. He folds open some tattered cash notes and grins. "The conductors

know everyone too, so they don't miss one yuan." Along with the steam-spouting vehicles, people such as Huang, who have ridden the train for the past half-century, comprise this rare route's living history. On the tourist carriages, passengers such as Li Yuchun, a 29-year-old nurse visiting for the day from the Sichuan city of Leshan, pay for its continued existence.

Standing near a tunnel entrance in Bagou – rose-red lipstick applied, white shirt buttoned to the neck – Li readies her selfie stance. "I work in accident and emergency," she says, flicking through the 20 or so selfies she's already taken. "It feels nice to have time and space here to slow down... the city is so fast and stressful."

The by-now familiar "TOOT! TOOT!" echoes from the tunnel blackness. The young Li smiles prettily, and gets ready to capture another image of the moving metal fossil.



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ALL ABOARD

Tips on getting the best out of a ride on the Jiayang Railway

The most popular time to visit the Jiayang Railway is from early March to the end of April, when rapeseed crops blossom. The most efficient way to get there from Chengdu is by car. Hiring one with a driver to get there and back in a day costs about 900 yuan (\$188).

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Tickets for trains with designated times and seating are available from the Jiayang ticket office located near the platform. Trains usually run from Jiayang to Bagou from around 9am until late afternoon, and until early evening in the opposite direction.

JIAYANG

Bagou has a mining museum, town square with a stage, historical buildings and a few restaurants. A free small electric train runs the 1.6km line between Bagou and Huangcun, the final stop on the route, and takes about 10 minutes per journey.

BAGOU

HUANGCUN

Bagou is extremely quiet at night, but you can stay over. Bajiaogou Flavor Hotel costs 320 yuan (\$67) per night and has good rooms, but currently doesn't accept non-Chinese guests. Baixin Hotel only costs 180 yuan (\$38) and accepts non-Chinese guests.