

22. February 2012, Guangzhou - Urumqi (and the attempt to get to Hami)

Some railway companies say, the biggest challenges for their operations are seasonal weather (and, as some critics add, passengers as well). Our plan said to continue by train to Hami after our arrival at Urumqi's airport. Our scheduled departure was 23:32, but we noticed upon arrival at the main railway station that our train was listed on the board but did not show any departure time.

It was soon discovered that the train got hold up by masses of fresh snow around Kashi since some hours and the railway guards asked us to wait.

Well, „waiting“ in a badly heated waiting hall of China Railways wasn't the thing we wanted to do after 20 hours of travelling and we discussed our options: flying out of the foggy Urumqi would be a risk, too. Even more risky was a night ride on China's roads. Thus we decided to gamble a little bit: as we were told that „our“ train K7982 would definitely run next morning, we walked to a nearby hotel and booked some rooms for a few hours of sleep.

Even if the train would be delayed further more, we could easily switch to the next regular working from Urumqi next morning.

23. February 2012, Urumqi - Hami - Sandaoling

Sudden departure this morning: our train had made up time (something we haven't been used to at home anymore) and should arrive at Urumqi any time from now. So we walked to our platform and entered a nearly empty double-deck express train: most of our fellow local co-travellers had chosen to take earlier trains, even if their reservations would not be honoured for the new trains. A clean DF11 diesel locomotive headed our consist, and we were soon on our way. All our guys found it interesting to enjoy the route at daylight this time as we normally travel at night and do not enjoy anything else than a local beer on the regular timing...



First sunset at Xibolizhan



Except for the first Kilometers out of Urumqi the entire line sees various stages of electrification: some sections have only poles set, on others the complete wiring has been installed already. Over a long stretch we saw the building sites for the new highspeed line Lanzhou-Urumqi which where all deserted because the Chinese government stopped the expansion of the highspeed traffic in this area due to financial losses and a foreseeable lack of profitability. .

We finally arrived at Sandaoling in the afternoon – already from the motorway we could spot an JS steam locomotive shunting at the deep mine #2. We learned later

that mine #1 had been closed meanwhile... The rest of the day was spent at Xibolizhan.

24. - 27. February 2012, Sandaoling and an excursion to Yamansu

The open cast coal pit at Sandaoling is still the currently biggest steam show on earth: you won't find more and heavier freight trains, all steam hauled, running every 5 minutes sometimes. A lot of railway fans shake their head when asked about Sandaoling... of course you do not need to go there if you are keen on boring "Plandampf" with sometimes ridiculous trains instead. And yes, there is no war locomotive running here. You will "only" witness the world's steamiest place, some of the most challenging operational conditions, and an basically unrestricted access to the objects of our desire. If this is not enough...

JS 8076 departs from the open cast pit's coal loading area



JS 8081 followed only 15 minutes later with another loaded train bound for the washery



We enjoyed more than 200 steam train movements in average per day, crashing full-throttle departures on both ends of the pit (if Chinese steam loco staff will even come close to a “full throttle” operation), saw SY 1304, and of course JS 6224, 8027, 8040, 8053, 8076, 8077, 8078, 8080, 8081, 8089, 8090, 8144, 8167, 8173, 8190, 8194, 8195, 8314, 8358, 8366, 8368. JS 6203 was undergoing a major overhaul at the repairshop. The morning worker’s train was hauled by SY 1304 all the time, no other working SY could be spotted during our visit.

JS 8076 starts its heavy train from one of the loading points



JS 8167 pushes its spoil train to the next upper level



JS 8081 waits for new coal and water on a cold morning at Dongbolizhan



An unknown JS steams out of the “hole” with a loaded coal train



We had a great time here, enjoyed some unusual steam locomotive operations, photographed the rock-plough in best morning light, got some good nightshots, and were treated by our guide, Mrs Qi, with freshly made Jiaozi and Baozi each day at lunch time. So the end of our stay at Sandaoling, some long-noses sat on the western site of the pit and had stopped taking pictures although the cavalcade of hard working steam trains below them hadn't stopped. Those guys simply enjoyed the sights and sounds with a beer in their hands...

JS 8028 at Yamansu



Action on the secondary line from Shankou to Yamansu wasn't that relaxed: on our day along the line 2 trains were scheduled: one steamed to Shankou from 07.00-11.00, the second one was due to leave Yamansu at 14.00... But without the big boss being present on the spot, railway workers didn't observe the time and the train left Yamansu at 17.00 instead. The locomotive crew also added suspense to the question whether the train would make it to our photo position before or after sunset by stopping enroute for a lengthy inspection of the brakes. The shadows won.

The current schedule for dieselization says "July 2012". the new DF12 may arrive any time, we were told – but the railways is stating this since November last year. Anything seems to be possible: an early arrival of the diesel locomotive, another postponement, or no diesel at all. Judging from the current condition of the four JS on the line (JS 6495, 8028, 8152, 8423) an early arrival might be the best guess. But as we learned later on the tour, look doesn't matter...

28. February 2012, Urumqi steel mill

Steam activities ended already in the last millennium, SY 0182 is plinthed outside the perimeter. We got the same welcoming reception by the steel mill's PR-guy as last time and could basically do, whatever we wanted: we took our bis inside the mill and stopped for photography wherever we wanted to.

The East-German built V15/10B diesel locomotives had been scrapped since our last visit – a fact that didn't boost some participant's enjoyment of that day. Even the permission to visit the normally completely visitor-off-limit repairshop in the old part of the steel mill didn't really help... until we were told there that "an old German locomotive" would be available for photography outside of the shop. And indeed: locomotive #02 was parked amidst old wagons and had clearly seen no movement for quite a while. After an intensive inspection of the locomotive, no sign was found that could indicate whether it was an original GDR built locomotive (German class V15 or V10B), or a Chinese modification of it.

Industrial diesel TH4-067 at the Urumqi steel mill



We saw DF12B 0093, GK1C 0037, 0038, 0041, 0054, 0332, 0337, 0396, 0397, 0425, 0459, 0460, 0461, 0462, 0512, 0520, 0641, TH4 049, 067, 068, and V15 02.

Definitely an LKM product from the GDR ... but is it an original or a Chinese modification?



29. February 2012, Urumqi - Shenyang

With so many official and semi-official permissions needed for our tour, it had to happen one day that we were refused to enter a factory ground or to take pictures albeit being able to produce a red stamp on a paper... After our successful visit to the steel mill yesterday, the management decided that they would not honour their permission to let us visit the mill again today.

It is a pity that virtually everybody in China sticks to the two most popular excuses in a case like ours: for the past 20 years it was either a Japanese visitor, who "just last week" fell into a slack pit and burned to death (those poor guys are always Japanese!), and therefore a visit could not be arranged right now. Or, also very popular, is the impromptu management-meeting that is called for the next morning, which also means that visitors are not allowed to enter the compound. In our case, it was management meeting time.

I do not dare to imagine that either half of the Japanese population has been burned on Chinese slack already, or that the success of the Chinese economy is based on management by chaos...

We went to the small pole-free-section of China Railways near Urumqi instead. Weather conditions were not the best with snow fall, grey clouds and little sunshine, but at least the dense traffic gave us a small incentive. Soon it was time to return to the airport for our long flight to Shenyang.



1. March 2012 Gongchangling & Beitai steel mill

Gongchangling is home of heavy electric locomotives: classes EG150 and ZG150 (6-achsle), and 8-achsle Shaofeng (ZG200-1500). Lots of train movements on standard gauge kept us busy for the morning. A small 600mm narrow gauge railway feeds the coal bunkers, allowing to take photographs of trains on two gauges.

JS 8329 and a crane can be found on a small section of the already closed local railway that led through the village of Anping some time ago. The track was once on the site of the small road that has been expanded to a four lane road, keeping the JS in the middle of the spurs now.

Locomotives 32 and 12 at Gongchangling



After the lunch break we started our 3 day visit to the Beitai steel mill, got our hard-hats and off we went to the most fascinating steel mill one could visit nowadays. Beside the SY steam locomotives, a number of diesel engines could be seen: classes GK1C, GKD1A, GK10D in various liveries shunted in and outside the mill. The following SY were in service during our visit (0448, 0825, 0946, 1075, 1077, 1191, 1560, 1561, 1567, 1648, 1684).

2. - 3. March 2012, Beitai steel mill

Each morning we followed the same procedure: first we stopped at the passenger station of Beitai, where we waited for the local passenger train 6315 to Tianshifu, hauled by an orange DF4 each day (2487 and 2346 were spotted during our visit). Occasionally, a CNR freight train would stop at the station's yard, and we saw ND5, HXX5 (an incredible copy of a German model), and HXN3 classes. We then continued to the steel mill, did our morning session there, went to Benxi during the lunch-break-time to photograph the East-German EL1 and EL2, plus modern Chinese ZG150-2002 electric locomotives, and returned to Beitai for the afternoon and night photo session. Thanks to a careful tour planning, we even had time (and the permission) to visit the small depot of the mill, where up to 4 SY waited in front of the photogenic shed building during our visit there.

Beitai is always a truly fascinating place: where can you witness the raw and archaic process of making steel that close and unlimited by official rules than here? Access to the production line of steel is granted virtually everywhere (except in the new part of the mill), and the management is not interfering with anything you do. But this freedom comes for a price and Beitai is the most expensive part of any tour and any time. Yet it is still worth it!

But reality hits pretty badly now: the steel mill is currently building two more new blast furnaces in the new part of the mill. Progress in the construction is made fast and it is expected that the new blast furnaces will be operational by the end of the year 2012. The mill has enough "modern" capacities then to be able to tear down the old work completely. This will also mean the end of steam activities at the blast furnaces, because the new mill is built around belt transport and diesel traction.

Don't miss your chance to visit one of the last highlights of steam activities in China right now. We will return to

Beitai in late autumn this year, again booking enough time to use all photographic options in the best possible way!

SY 0946 + 1567 at Beitai



Scrap metal in the foreground – and soon in the background, too :-)



SY 0448 at the slag tipping...



... while shunting new empties at the blast furnaces



SY 1077 & 1075 wait for new duties



SY 1075 waits until the remaining slack has been emptied from the hoppers



A ZG150-2002 crosses the Taizi river at Benxi



4. March 2012, Beitai - Shenyang - Changchun

We said "good-bye" to the steel work's management today and motored to Shenyang airport, from where the main group returned home, while I continued to Changchun. After an opulent dinner with the staff of our agency in China I continued by train to Qiqihaer.

5. - 6. March 2012: Fulaerji

Reson to come to Qiqihaer were the various steam operations at nearby Fulaerji.

Compared to previous reports nothing had changed: the steelworks and the #1 power plant were still using diesel with a SY in spare at each location.

The Chemical plant used SY 0897 (Tangshan 1974) and 1688 (Tangshan 1990). Both locomotives looked pretty filthy but their shabby look didn't stop them from moving a 1.500 tons trains through the yard pretty easily... Visiting DF5-1605 brought new wagons from the CNR exchange yard.

At the #2 power plant JS 6546 was the main performer on the two days of my visit there, while JS 8312 assisted on the second day with a train to/from the CNR yard at Jiaojie.

As usual with industrial operations like this, periods of idling around change with times of hectic activities without prior notice. Nothing can move for hours...

The weather could have been better, a cold front followed me and it was fairly disappointing to watch the weather forecast each day: the day before my arrival and after my departure: sunshine, during my stay: snow.

SY 0897 leaves for the chemical plant



JS 6546 at the power station #2 (exceptionally sunny)



On the evening of 6. March I took express train 4035 to Yakeshi and enjoyed an empty soft-sleeper compartment.

7. March 2012: Yakeshi / Meitianzhen

The guard knocked at my door at 03.00 ... get up! Yakeshi was cold, only a few fellow travellers made it out of the warm coaches. A hotel nearby the station offered a few more hours of sleep – I took the chance but didn't want to miss a night shot of SY 0232 (1970) at the station's courtyard. Activities on the main line were taken over by DF4 again, hauling heavy freight trains through the night.

Light snowfall and a fairly disappointing weather forecast for today made it hard to be back in action at 07.00 already, but my driver waited for me at the hotel and off we went to Meitianzhen. 60 Kilometres on a small road that had only a small section in the middle of it cleaned from snow that had been pushed to either side of it by the snow ploughs. Each overtaking was an adventure – and my driver was an adventurous man...

SY 0232 at Yakeshi. A well preserved engine, even the headlight works at night!



The controller of the mining railway had told me already that SY 1134 would wait at Meitian CNR station. And indeed, when we arrived at the small village of Meitian, the typical SY steam exhaust could be seen behind the station building. Some loaded wagons had to be pushed on another track where a gang of workers waited already to start the manual unloading. SY 1134 should have taken a rake of empty hoppers back to the mines but the CNR freight train bringing these empties in wasn't even announced yet, so it was decided to return home light engine.

The weather conditions had surprisingly improved (at least it didn't snow anymore), and we drove to Meitianzhen to watch our steam locomotive being serviced. Now everybody waited for the call from the CNR...

Mittagspause in Meitianzhen



I went to Sankuang instead to take some photographs of the narrow gauge electric mining railway operating between Sankuang und Erkuang, where the standard gauge line ends.

Back in Meitianzhen, the phone finally rang around 13.00, the 2nd fireman went back to the locomotive to prepare it for the next run to the CNR station. Before entering the station's yard, the SY was stopped at the entry signal – first DF4-7335 with the freight train had to cross the local passenger train Hailaer-Mangui.

Then everything happened in typical Chinese speed: uncoupling the DF4, attaching the SY to the train, brake test, and off the train went with an impressive start out of the station!

The large spot in the sky observes the small spot on the way to Meitianzhen



Another mine was served on the way, a little bit of shunting had to be done at Meitianzhen before the train continued to Erkuang. Here all coal will be loaded by large wheel loaders. Luckily Chinese mining palnners do not show a lot of fantasy when naming new mines, so the mines in the area are simply named #1, 2, and 3 (Yikuang, Erkuang, Sankuang)...

Weatherwise it didn't get better, snow started to fall again, and we decided to return home after the train's arrival at Erkuang.

The remaining week was spent to prepare Tanago's next China excursion, visiting some of the most attractive public transport networks in Northern China.

Credits for the success of the tour go to all participants, especially for their advise on electric traction and steel work terminology, and to the local agencies involved in the trip for a smooth handling of our sometimes "strange" requests.

Your's,
Peter-H. Patt.

JS 8076 leaves the pit with a loaded coal train at Sandaoling



Don't forget: we will return to China's Northeast in late autumn 2012, more information can be found at www.tanago.de!