BBC News - Changing China seen from the 'hard

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13 October 2012Last updated at 01:08 GMT Changing China seen from the 'hard seats' of a train
By Angus FosterBBC News, Beijing

Travelling with a cheap rail ticket provides a snapshot of any country's underbelly. Doing it twice at an interval of 26 years, in a country like China, provides a fascinating snapshot of the country's rapid development.

Sixteen hours sitting bolt upright on a train gives you a bit of time to reflect on how much a country has changed.

It had started to go wrong when I got to the ticket booth in China's capital Beijing and found a queue snaking round the corner.

It was the lead-up to the mid-autumn holiday and half the city was headed for distant homes.

When I asked for a ticket to Wuhan, an all-night journey south, the young sales girl snorted her derision. Tickets were sold out for the next three days.

"Ying zuo," she said, and looked up as if throwing down a challenge.

China's nominally classless Communist Party splits its trains into four classes, from the relative comfort of a four-bunk cabin, to the most basic and cheapest, ying zuo, or hard seat.

When I first travelled ying zuo - in 1986, as a student - it was like being initiated into the Chinese peasantry.

Chickens and goats swung upside down from luggage racks. Once all the bone-breaking wooden seats and standing room was packed,Replica Celine Cabas Handbags, more people clambered through open windows, pulling bags and bundled children behind. The ends of each carriage were invisible through cheap cigarette smoke.

All this time later was I ready for that challenge? After all, I could have flown to Wuhan. But the chance of regaining a glimpse of the past spurred me to hand over my money.

China's rail network - like the country - has been transformed by its economic rise. New lines have been added every year. Steam locomotives have been replaced by diesel and electric engines.

Most ambitiously, China assembled the world's longest high-speed rail network, buying technology from Germany and Japan, and building specialised lines which now levitate above the sprawling suburbs and squeezed agricultural land between its major cities.

But then an accident in the eastern city of Wenzhou in 2011 punctured all that ambition. Two high-speed trains collided and several carriages derailed. Official reports said 40 people died, though an attempted government cover-up compounded the loss of trust.

The crash was eventually blamed on signalling equipment, which was China's own technology. For many Chinese, the accident seemed to confirm what they had long suspected, that the country was developing too fast, cutting corners to catch up with the world, whatever the risks.

Almost overnight, the sleek-nosed white trains which had swept aside concerns about their cost, rationale or environmental impact became symbols of new doubts about the very model of China's development.

More than a year after the accident,Fake Dior Handbags, when I told friends in Beijing I was going to Wuhan by train, some asked if I was worried about the risk.

I arrived at Beijing West station during Friday evening rush hour, herded through waiting rooms to a platform long enough for 30 carriages. Each had its own attendant and mine studied my foreign face and ticket suspiciously, as they always had before.

But that was one of the few things that were familiar. Inside the train, a different world unfolded.

This was not one of the speedy new services, mine was an all-stations rattler. But even so there were no goats or chickens. People were packed into every corner but no-one boarded through the windows - these had been sealed. The carriage had air conditioning instead.

The hard seats of ying zuo were no longer hard, upholstered now with blue covers. Even the air smelled moderately clean, as each carriage's many smokers dutifully headed for a smoking area near the lavatory.

There were not many peasants left aboard. In my cubicle of six seats, all five fellow passengers had mobile phones with internet access. Two had laptops and watched subtitled Hollywood action movies at full volume.

They were young and middle-aged workers, people who lived in Beijing but did not have the much-prized residency permit that would allow them to settle with their families.

They included a cook, a shoe saleswoman, a student and a bottle factory driver. They grumbled about Beijing's rents and food prices, but they also knew they were doing all right - at least compared to people in their home towns.

Of course it was a snapshot, as unreliable as it is unrepresentative. Half of China's population still lives in the countryside and the gap between them and the cities gets wider every year.

But as we finally trundled into Wuhan, overtaken by yet another sleek-nosed high-speed train, I asked a fellow traveller about China's upcoming leadership changes. He did not want to talk about politics - that had not changed either.

But he said whatever happened in the coming years, and of course there would be setbacks, he was optimistic about his own and China's future.

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