Review on The Railway Station: A Social History - Jeffrey Richards and John Mackenzie (with a focus on interactions between people; Chapter 4: Station and Society and Chapter 6: Class, Race, and Sex)

Extremely vividly painted is the central role of people in railway stations in this passionately written book, as one is led to be submerged in the beautiful narratives of the grand movements of people flowing in and out of these stations, absorbed by their mystique. The book covers the extent and influence of railway stations in the less explored themes of art, literature, movies and drama. One is left impressed by the convicting stance of both authors; that railway stations have shaped social, political and economic trends, but mostly the people who have transformed under its influence. The authors adopt a concentric circle approach, always starting with the station; the station is always the backdrop for the life that unfolds in it (station staff, users of the place), and station societies around it. Though little is covered about China (the rail began very slowly, with heavy reluctance and an antipathy to railways due to China’s resistance to the West, and also suffered massive mortality), the large stations constructed in modern China suggest that the valuable roles seen in their counterparts overseas have now been transferred over.

What kind of interactions take place here, according to Richards and Mackenzie? There are plenty of opportunities and yet deterrents for interactions.

Though the railway station is seen to be a very lively place, and also a valuable and unique place for the congregation of diverse users, its lively features often do not promote interactions and may hinder them; often rendering themselves uninviting and segregating; making it an ironically lively but antisocial place.

The Clock

The railway station is seen to be a highly disciplined place, governed by the clock, which holds a central role in the station; as a vital meeting place, as the dictator of all events in the course of a day, and thus appointed station staff as governors or order, regulation and discipline. Therefore, there is a certain processional and inflexible element to the space, creating deterrents for voluntary interactions between people.

Crime

The railway station also has a dark underside, a criminal half-life that coexists with its public face. It is a haven for all forms of predators, where squalor, self-abuse and raw greed intermingle. It was primarily the job of the railway police in dealing with crime here (However Bonnet’s article has also pointed to the efficacy of community organizations in dealing with the marginalized).

An agent of spectacular careful social mixing

The station was an extraordinary agent of social mixing, offering travelers brief windows into each other’s lives, across racial and class boundaries. However, it was also designed to avoid these encounters across class and racial boundaries as much as possible. These included the following measures:

- Class differentiated waiting rooms
One main way of class indication: **Time spent waiting** at the station and the **quantity of baggage** they had with them as they passed through (the rich would have the shortest waiting times, calling their servants to the station prior to a trip to book tickets and check baggage) → Somewhat similar in the case of **苏州站**, with some degree of class differentiation between those who book tickets online and collect at self-serving stations and those who buy their tickets only at the railway station; immigrants and foreigners.

Purpose of using the station also indicated class; beggars, hawkers, pilgrims, itinerants use the station apart from travelling purposes. This has been a problem everywhere in the world, but the sheer scale of it in Asia is tolerated (observations at **苏州站** has found many hawkers extremely entrepreneurial, setting up stalls with very simple apparatus and a consistent present group of them indicates that there is indeed some money to be made; however their immediate scattering in sight of the police also suggests that the railway station perceives them to be a problem).

The story of railway stations must include a story of the people who flow through it, and only a portion of them are rail travelers. Although the book largely covers observations of social activities in pre-1980s railway stations (coverage of around 150 years), many of their observations are still valid, when one strips away technological differences (though not much is mentioned about high-speed trains and the transformation of social activities which have been created or transformed by this breakthrough in rail technology). The railway station still remains a great platform of ‘interactions between different’: and still holds its mystique as a gateway, as a social mixer, as an icon.