

Laotian students visit the Yuxi-Mohan railway, the track-laying base and the Mohan railway station on China section of the China-Laos Railway.



Shanghai-trained Laos students' career on track with railway



Students learn engineering survey technology at the Luang Prabang railway station on Laos' Mowan section of the China-Laos Railway. — All photos by Ti Gong

Yang Meiping and Zhu Yuting

Nine Laotian graduates from the Shanghai Institute of Technology have studied their way to becoming railway engineers and technicians to serve the first modern railway in Laos, thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative.

The China-Laos Railway began operation last Friday after the first train left Kunming, capital of southwest China's Yunnan Province.

The 1,035-kilometer passenger and cargo railway, connecting Kunming with the Laos capital Vientiane, also brings hope of further prosperity and development for Laotians.

"We are so proud that we've participated in the construction and will be the first batch of Laotian engineers and technicians to serve the railway, the first one in our motherland," said La Thor, one of the nine Laotian graduates from the Shanghai Institute of Technology.

In 2017, the institute signed a cooperation framework agreement with Souphanouvong University in the southeast Asia country.

Since 2018, Souphanouvong University has sent 31 undergraduate and master's students to study in Shanghai.

At the end of 2020, the first batch of nine Laotian undergraduates returned home and were assigned to the China-Laos Railway construction site for graduation practice.

After graduation in June, they started working for the China-Laos Railway Company, a Sino-Lao joint venture set up in Vientiane specifically for the construction and operation of the railway.

They are now receiving orientation ahead of their service tenure with the railway.

Thor, from Luang Prabang Province of Laos, said when he was studying in high school, some Chinese workers were conducting surveys related to railway construction in his hometown. Thor and his father had assisted them in doing some work.

"From them, I got to know that the Chinese government planned to help us build railways under the BRI, which would not only help develop the economy of our country, but also make our life better," he said.

"Though I didn't quite know what the BRI was and how complicated it was to build railways, I thought it was great and an idea came to me: I want to study civil engineering and work as an engineer for railway construction in the future."

The next year, he enrolled into Souphanouvong University as a

civil engineer major.

"In classes, our teachers told us that the China-Laos Railway was the largest project in the history of our country with China's support, and it was also the No. 1 project in our country," he said. "At that time, I came up with an idea of studying in China and signed up for classes to learn Chinese."

In May 2018, the school radio broadcast the program of studying railway engineering at the Shanghai Institute of Technology, and many students submitted applications.

Thor was one of the nine who passed interviews with Shanghai teachers to join the program one month later.

"Before going to China, I only knew that China was a great country and Shanghai was a modern city," he said. "When I started learning in Shanghai, I found it was a friendly city. We were happy to live and study there."

Over the following two years, the school arranged plenty of courses for them, ranging from Chinese language and railway engineering to visits to local metro companies and travel by high-speed trains.

"The most exciting moment came in 2019 when we took the Fuxing bullet train to Beijing," said Chengxue Thoryiachor, Thor's classmate.

"I had only seen bullet trains on television, and it was the first time for me to take the bullet train and see the beautiful scenes along the railway. I felt it was much more comfortable than traveling by plane or by car."

"At that time, I really hoped that my homeland would also have high-speed trains and metros like China."

In Beijing, the students went to the Great Wall and the Zhan Tianyou Memorial Museum. Zhan (1861-1919) was the chief engineer responsible for the construction of the first railway in China without foreign assistance and is known as the "Father of China's Railways."

"We all wish to be Zhan Tianyou for Laos," he said.

Now, they are on their way to realizing their dream, embellishing the China-Laos Railway with their wisdom and sweat.

During their internship, Thor had worked with workers from China Railway No. 2 Engineering Group in anchoring, paving rail tracks and laying signs between Luang Prabang and Boten stations.

Leemoua Yiakexaitouxiong, another Laotian student, joined the survey team from the China Railway No. 5 Engineering Group