

Debate over justice of rail ticket pricing

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It is a problem that may have been more important when trains were slower, fewer and tickets were more sought-after: Should a ticket without a seat be priced the same as a ticket with a seat?

Today, when the ubiquitous bullet trains travel faster, their cars are more spacious, and booking a train ticket has become infinitely more convenient, the justice of this pricing mechanism has resurfaced recently as a thorny issue.

In bullet-train travel, the controversy could be more accurately stated as whether it is fair to pay the same price to stand as to have a guaranteed seat in a second-class car — a divisive issue, with some claiming it is unfair to pay the same price for different services and others dismissing that line of argument as unsustainable. With a bus or Metro train ride, they argue, you pay the same price, without any guarantee of a seat.

Some also raised technical complications: If a standing ticket could be booked at a reduced price, there might be a run on such tickets, leading to a glut of unsold tickets for seats. That would mean someone could simply pay a lower price for a standing ticket but still be able to enjoy a seated journey.

This has likely been part of the calculations that have gone into the pricing regime. A railway authority response to a recent media inquiry stated that a standing ticket was technically viewed as enjoying the same status as a second-class ticket, for a passenger with a standing ticket could take any unoccupied seat.

“If the price for unseated tickets is reduced, then most people would simply opt for unseated tickets, and then scramble for the seats available upon boarding,” the customer service hotline representative explained.

In 2001, Zhou Huan, a lawyer from Jiangxi Guofeng Law Firm, lodged a suit against a local railway station for selling standing tickets at the same price as seated tickets.

In an initial verdict by the local railway court, it was ruled that the pricing was part of a governmental decision and there was nothing inappropriate with the pricing in question.

The ruling was upheld in the second verdict.

Similar suits, launched either by lawyers or customers, were heard in 2006, 2014 and 2016.

In response to pervading social sentiment, the railway authority replied in 2014 that it saw no need for any changes to the current pricing scheme, explaining that regardless of seated or standing passengers, the cost for the railway authority remains the same, adding that a differentiated pricing regime would entail considerable operational complications.

Such explanations did little to appease the popular discontent.

Guo Naishuo, a National People's Congress deputy, raised the issue during the Two Sessions in 2019. In a written proposal, Guo said that while it is reasonable to sell a certain number of standing tickets to ease travel in the case of too many travelers, marketing standing and seated tickets at the same price is unfair, and in need of improvement.

Meng Bo, a lawyer in Beijing, said in a recent interview with China News Service that growing attention to this issue is a barometer of popular concern, and an indicator of growing legal awareness on the part of the general public.

Meng said that while ticket pricing is a decision subject to the relevant railway enterprise, the pricing should be made in light of the principle of being just, legal and honest.

He added that, according to legal provisions for the protection of consumer rights, consumers are entitled to rights of a fair deal in purchases or services, specifically in terms of quality guarantee, reasonable prices and the appropriate amount.

In an interview in 2016, Feng Zixuan, a legal expert from the Southwest University of Political Science and Law, said that the ongoing dispute has laid bare some defects in the railway-pricing regime.

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