

KL-Singapore HSR may not be a good idea



The fast train connecting Dali-Kunming — Pic courtesy of Habhajan

Monday, August 19th, 2024 at [News](#) | [Opinion](#)

If we are going to eventually spend money, we might as well spend it for the betterment of as many Malaysians as possible

WE ENTERED the train station at Dali, a popular tourist destination in China's southwestern Yunnan Province, where women are primary breadwinners.



After touring the Erhai Lake and Dali's ancient walled city, we were looking forward to experiencing the fast train ride. This is not a bullet train, but one notch down, travelling below 200kph. China's bullet trains can hit a top speed of 350kph.

We paid ¥145 (RM90) each for a second-class ticket to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, a first-tier China city with a population of 6.6 million.

We will travel 352km, about the same distance should the proposed Kuala Lumpur (KL)-Singapore High Speed Rail (HSR) materialise. The journey will take between two and 2 1/2 hours, depending on the number of stops.

The train left on the dot, and arrived as scheduled. No delays, no hiccups. It was smooth sailing all the way. The trains with sharp-nosed engines gleam in the sun. For the trigger-happy photographers in our midst, a shot with the train in your background is a must.

What about a similar ride from KL to Singapore? Are we game for it? A fast train would cut down travel time to about 90 minutes. On the surface, it sounds awesome.

This is not a new item on the agenda between the two neighbouring countries. The plan for the rail connection was first approved in 2013 but ditched seven years later due to disagreements over costs and other matters.

In 2019, one round of cancellation saw Malaysia having to cough up S\$102.8 million (RM320.3 million) to Singapore for costs incurred for the development of the project, and in relation to the extension of its suspension.

The project has found a new life, again. This time around, the Malaysian authorities are mulling whether to give the nod to the KL-Singapore HSR project, albeit one undertaken by the private sector.

Last month, Transport Minister Anthony Loke told a wire agency that Malaysia will decide on the viability of the project by the end of the fourth quarter.

"Once we have a policy decision to proceed with the HSR, we will start negotiations with Singapore," he told *Bloomberg*.

So, the Malaysian government may allow private parties a bite at the multi-billion ringgit project.

At the heart of the project is MyHSR Corp Sdn Bhd, the government's project delivery vehicle for the HSR. It has reportedly whittled down to three potential suiters led by YTL Corp Bhd, Berjaya Land Bhd and China Railway Construction Corp.

So, are we good to go with the KL-Singapore HSR?

One local fund manager has argued vehemently against the idea, instead urging the government to channel the funds towards building more rail links between local cities.

Capital Dynamics Sdn Bhd MD Tan Teng Boo has urged to drop the project and instead focus its attention on domestic connectivity which "will lift Malaysia up, and it will lift Malaysia up in an equitable manner."

"With this fast, efficient train link between Singapore and KL, I can sleep in Malaysia and work in Singapore. That's brain drain," he argued in a recent presentation.

Singaporeans will not be drawn to work in Malaysia, even with the KL-Singapore HSR. They may come in the weekend to eat and play and shop, pushing up the cost of living for ordinary Malaysians who are forced to be stuck in the Klang Valley, Tan added.

But a brain drain is just one of the lesser reasons to drop the project, he argued. He has asked if the government had addressed the supposed adverse social, political and economic consequences.

Let us look at the China experience.

The fast train symbolises China's coming out party as an advancing economic power. The second-largest global economy has built an extensive network of train routes. Since 2008, they span some 45,000km, connecting major cities as well as hundreds of smaller towns.

The idyllic Dali used to be served with one train during the day and two trains running overnight. Today, it has close to three dozen fast train services per day!

Imagine if we can bump up the services between KL and Ipoh as well as KL-Johor Bahru. Imagine if we have services – timely and frequent – between other Malaysian cities.

But it comes at a cost. In China, the extensive development has seen the rail system reeling under the weight of accumulated debt. The China State Railway Group alone is said to be holding some US\$870 billion (RM3.86 trillion) in debt.

The train services are heavily subsidised by local governments. The spike of municipal debts has constrained the space for them to keep prices low. The local authorities are under pressure to raise prices. But, as can be expected, price hikes for vital public services like commuting is a minefield.

The folks who are about to make the KL-Singapore HSR decision should take into consideration the objections by the likes of the fund manager above.

Even though it supposedly involves private money, looking at our history, you don't want to rule out the possibility of taxpayers' money eventually coming into play.

If we are going to eventually spend money, we might as well spend it for the betterment of as many Malaysians as possible. A good network of fast trains locally would give Malaysia a tremendous boost. That looks like a better bet.

Let us build our own Dali-Kunming links. We can then travel to see how our men and women are faring elsewhere.