Southampton to Shanghai by train: One climate change researcher's quest to avoid flying

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Academics travel a lot. Whether for fieldwork or conferences, we're often encouraged to do it. Often internationally, invariably by aeroplane. But while globetrotting might make us feel important, a recent study suggests there's no connection between academic air-miles and career

advancement.

With the obvious realities of the climate crisis, and with air travel being the single quickest way an average person can contribute to climate change, some academics are trying to stay on the ground whenever possible. Within a broader campaign to encourage people to go "flight-free," there's a community of academics challenging the reliance on flying that's typically sat uneasily at the heart of their careers.

I'm a member of that community. I pledged not to fly in 2019 and 2020, and then won a fellowship to study Chinese attitudes to sustainability which required me to go to China for fieldwork. Suddenly, the consequences of my pledge became very real.

Life on the rails

When I told my managers that I intended to get to China by train, I was met with a mixture of responses. Some thought I was mad, some admired my principles, some thought I was an awkward bugger. Maybe they were all right. In any case, what I was doing had certainly created more work for myself.

I began trying to convince senior staff to release funds from my research budget to arrange visas, and thinking through the nitty-gritty of a trip across Europe, Russia and a big chunk of China itself. The cost of the trains was over £2,000, dwarfing the £700 I could pay for a London to Beijing return flight. Time-wise, the train trip took just under two weeks each way. But in terms of carbon emissions my trip was a steal, contributing just 10% of the emissions of the equivalent flights.

The cost, complexity and discomfort of such a long solo trip did occasionally make me wonder if it wouldn't just be easier to fly (answer: it would). But I was determined to honour my pledge and show other

academics—by my own extreme example—that it is possible to do international work without flights.

Considering it involved 21 train connections, my journey went surprisingly smoothly. I took a series of "short" trips from Southampton, changing in London, Brussels, Cologne, Berlin and then onto my first sleeper train from Warsaw to Kiev (avoiding Belarus which would have required another visa).

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My first experience on the Kiev-bound, Soviet-style sleeper train was something of a shock. Unsure of the etiquette when sharing a tiny cabin with two or three others with limited English, I soon learned that body language, Google translate and sharing food breaks the ice. Luckily, my

no-flying trip was a recurring source of conversation, fascination and bafflement for many of my fellow travellers.

After one night in Kiev, I took another overnight train to Moscow. Russia was something of a test—on my return journey I travelled 2,600 miles between Irkutsk and Moscow, spending 90 hours on a single train. Had this not been a work trip, I would have gladly stopped more often. Making friends with fellow passengers—mainly Russians on work trips or family visits, or European and Chinese tourists doing the bucket list Trans-Siberian route—certainly helped pass the time. The Siberian scenery—millions of trees on a seemingly endless loop—became somewhat repetitive, but the monotony afforded me time to read, write, plan and contemplate.

The most spectacular journey was the Trans-Mongolian section, passing the edge of Lake Baikal, the world's largest lake rimmed with snow-capped mountains, over the green steppes of northern Mongolia, across the Gobi desert, and finally through the mountainous valleys encircling Beijing. It's hard not to be awed and inspired that these train lines exist in such remote parts of our planet.

Calling at Beijing

China now has more high-speed railways than the rest of the world combined, and they do it in style. Beijing to Shanghai, a trip covering 1,300km, takes less than four and a half hours, with a solid internet connection throughout and the most legroom I enjoyed on any of my trips. The downer is that China's electrified trains will, like most of their electricity, be powered by coal. But on the upside, these trains are likely to take passengers off domestic flights—a lesson for Europe and the US.

I enjoyed using them to visit my other field sites in Hangzhou and Ningbo before finally retracing my steps back, over 6,000 miles to the

UK, clutching a load of new data, a heap of memories, and a sore back. The focus group data I collected in China, with members of their urban middle classes, has enforced my view that both 'bottom-up' social and cultural pressure, as well as "top-down" infrastructure and fiscal policy will be required in any country facing up the complex challenges of climate change.

I admit that my story is somewhat privileged—not everyone can take the train to China for work, and I doubt I'll make a habit of it. Much depends on geography too. The UK is relatively well connected by surface transport options like rail, but many still fly—the UK has the third largest air passenger market, behind only the US and China.

The bigger policy goal is to make train tickets less expensive relative to flights. In the meantime, academics can play a leadership role, both individually and institutionally. Universities could consider publishing records of staff flights, building low-carbon travel modes into grant proposals by default, and making videoconferencing facilities fantastic.

Recent research has shown, unsurprisingly, that climate researchers are taken more seriously if they practise what they preach. If we can lead by example in reducing our own flying carbon footprints while still conducting great research, then others—students, policymakers and other professionals—are far more likely to take notice.

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