

A Railway Service Close to People's Lives

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In many developed countries, people nowadays view trains as a backward form of transportation. Air and roads save time and offer convenience; they also play a role in social development, help expand markets and speed economic development. Consequently, many railways face the reality of reduced freight and economic losses. However, social development won't stop just because railways are losing money, making it imperative that they explore ways to keep up with society.

China Railways has responded with its own economic reforms to expand business, and it has made remarkable progress in offering better services to passengers. But we are still new to many business ventures, so I was especially excited at the opportunity to lead a research team to Japan from October to December 1995 at the invitation of JR East.

Perhaps I am unduly influenced by my profession, but the thing that interested me most about Japan is its rail system. I was especially impressed by how Japanese railways have grown with society. Today, Japanese railways are modern and efficient, and also devote great effort to expanding the scope of their business operations and making profits.

JR East has taken advantage of its two greatest resources—real estate and commuter flow—to expand its service market, cultivate market potential and pursue profitable lines of operation.

In recent years, it has made profound changes shifting from a transport service industry to a consumer lifestyle service industry, and has successfully transformed into a rail-oriented conglomerate composed of many dynamic businesses. Specifically, nearly 80 large and medium train stations are being developed into major hubs of economic activity complete with restaurants, shops, etc. Office buildings, hotels and residential units are also being developed near stations. In

this way, residents are within easy walking distance of shopping and recreational facilities as well as the trains taking them to work and other places. This undoubtedly increases the competitiveness of rail compared to roads, especially since the roads in Japanese cities suffer almost constant jams and congestion.

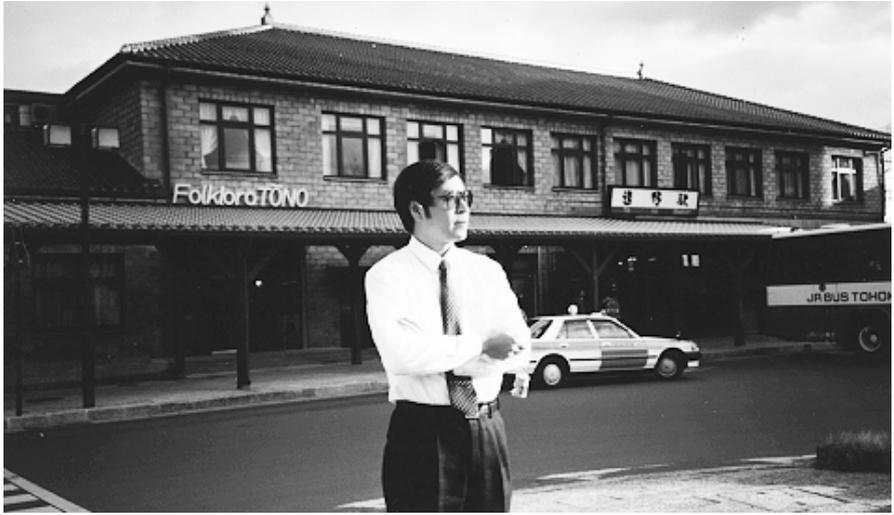
Our research included both seminars on management of diversified businesses, as well as field trips to visit railway-operated hotels, restaurants, kiosks, shopping centres, holiday resorts, sports facilities, etc. By taking advantage of their considerable land holdings and convenient transportation, railway companies have also opened travel agencies near stations to attract consumers to take the train to visit new areas developed by the companies. The JR East-operated Gala Ski Resort in northwest Honshu is a good example. Skiing is popular with Japanese, so JR East runs a special train several times a day during the ski season to take skiers from Tokyo directly to the slopes at Gala. Tokyo skiers have responded enthusiastically to this innovative move which provides safe, convenient transport to and from the slopes, reasonable hotel accommodation and last but not least, a retreat from the city's

busy lifestyle.

Our stay in Japan was not all business. We visited Asakusa following a boat trip up the Sumida River, rode the unmanned Yurikamome train to reach the new waterfront development in Tokyo Bay, and caught a glimpse of Mt. Fuji from a boat off the Izu Peninsula. One highlight was a stay at a Hakone hot-spring hotel. Hot springs are popular in China, but our hot-spring culture is no comparison to that of the Japanese—a national passion indeed! To our great surprise, Japanese people visit open-air hot springs even in winter. Japanese cuisine is quite different from Chinese food. Although many of us were not used to *sashimi* (raw fish), we appreciated the wide assortment of tastes offered in a traditional Japanese meal.

In general, Japanese people are very polite, and it is not uncommon to see people bowing deeply to each other many times during a short conversation, which is quite different from what is commonly practiced in China where people shake hands when meeting. Toward the end of our stay, we even acquired the habit of bowing when speaking.

During the weekends, we took long walks to visit neighbouring cities and towns,



The author at 'Folkloro' Tono

(Author)



Visiting the Izu Peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture

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trying to get to know Japan and its people more. Language did not present as much of a barrier as we had anticipated because we could still read many of the Japanese kanji which originally came from China almost 2000 years ago. A kanji character is an ideograph symbolizing the idea of a thing without expressing the sound, so although we could not understand spoken Japanese, we could understand some of the meaning of written Japanese. Rather funnily, I used English and sign language for spoken communication with many Japanese and once people learned we were JR East trainees, we were received warmly. We even had the good fortune of a discount from the owner of a small Japanese restaurant upon showing our JR name cards.

Railway service in Japan is very close to people's lives. In addition to providing safe, timely and speedy transportation, railways offer communities quick accessibility to shopping, entertainment, information, cultural activities and community services. For railways to face the ever-increasing competition from air and road transport, profitability has become ever more closely linked to business diversification. The strength of rail-related businesses will allow this supposedly 'backward' form of transportation forge ahead into the 21st century.



Mr Zhang Ning and his team at a JR Seminar

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