

# Trains as a Window on Contemporary Japan

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As a third-generation Japanese-American who spent his childhood in Japan and who visits Japan every few years for research, I am both insider and outsider. After a 12-hour flight from Los Angeles, my first moments in Japan are always spent on the Narita Express from Narita Airport to Shinjuku Station. I have noticed without fail that I experience, as if for the first time, a sensation (that puzzles me) of how foreign the mostly Japanese passengers appear. This is perplexing, for as my photograph shows, I blend right in. And, as an educator in Southern California specializing in modern Japanese literature, I work, socialize, and interact with native Japanese as well as Japanese-Americans every day. What causes me to feel that these Japanese riding the train are so alien? I don't know quite how to answer this question, but as a way to understand it, let me present what might appear like random observations from riding the rails and walking through the commercial wonderlands called train stations in contemporary Tokyo.

When I began coming to Japan (after a long hiatus) in the 1980s, I relied on TV to accelerate my reintroduction. Along with other forms of mass media, TV undoubtedly contributes to an ongoing sense of shared culture that binds the Japanese, and for outsiders it offers captivating, if often baffling, programmes and commercials that reveal something about contemporary Japan. But over the years, I have noticed that my tolerance for this medium, which is pitched at a younger age group, could no longer command my attention. In its place, however, I have come to view riding trains as a surer, more immediate, and clearer window to everyday life in Japan.

As a youngster I grew up riding the trains in Tokyo and remember feeling that the private lines were somehow less forbidding than what was then Japanese National Railways (JNR). Even as a child I could sense the difference in scale, as the

JNR trains were larger, longer, and the distances between stations further. But there was something more that I couldn't place my finger on—until I noticed that something on my most recent trip to Tokyo. During rush hour, there is little to distinguish the two types of trains with commuters silently enduring packed conditions. But in the hours between commuting times, the atmosphere is very different, especially in the cars on the private lines, where the passengers seem more relaxed and people converse with friends and neighbours, sometimes with strangers. I was reminded how private lines had developed more or less along the ideas pioneered by Hankyu Railways of Kansai, developing land and building communities along their lines, complete with housing, shopping, and recreational facilities—in effect manufacturing living corridors along train lines. And from these neighbourhoods, friends and relatives—primarily women who were not part of the earlier commuting wave—were taking trains to go shopping, run errands and the like. Sometimes by design and other times by accident, they would board the trains with neighbours and acquaintances. The edge one feels in the crushing rush of morning commuting is absent, and in its place conviviality and easy conversation set the mood. But by the time these women reach their terminal stations in the heart of Tokyo and transfer to the JR lines or the subways that cut through the circumference of the Yamanote Line, they part company and proceed on the next leg alone, and in silence. It is as if between rush hours, JR and the private trains reassert their earlier history separating public and private train space.

The crush on Japanese commuter trains is a stock image for representing contemporary Japan, a perception neatly reinforcing the widely-held fiction that Japan is an almost classless nation consisting of an undifferentiated middle class. But

the off-peak trains show a more diverse population including students, unemployed people, housewives, the elderly, off-hour employees (temps, part-timers, night workers), and even the homeless. I read somewhere that in the 1930s, Japanese leftists engaged in cat-and-mouse games with the secret police by reading subversive literature on the trains. Today, we are likelier to witness different 'transgressions'—youngsters playing pocket electronic games, an animated young woman talking on the portable phone, men reading sports newspapers with photos of naked women—hardly seditious, but much more annoying.

The priority seats for elderly and disabled people have become an institution, and I take cars with reduced air-conditioning as a kindred policy designed to accommodate elderly and frail people. But my impression is that despite the sharp increase in the elderly population of Japan over the last decade or so, they avoid the trains—even during off-peak hours. This does not surprise me, since the effort required to board a train—walk up a flight or two of stairs to the wicket, purchase a ticket, walk back down again, fight for a seat, and repeat the climbing and descending of stairs any number of times depending upon the transfers—can be formidable. The city buses, on the other hand, provide free rides to senior citizens—as if to recognize the barriers faced by the elderly in riding trains. I am in favour of this policy, especially if it is complemented by efforts to make inner-city train travel more accessible to the frail, elderly, and disabled. After all, trains represent the mainstream urban transportation in Japan.

For me, railway transport (trains, subways, light rail) distinguishes Japan not only from the USA which relies heavily on the private automobile, but also from Western European nations, particularly in the way Japanese terminals are designed as spaces for shopping and recreation.



Cardboard village on west side of Shinjuku Station

(Author)

During my most recent visit in October 1996, the most jarring and memorable sign of the times was not on the trains but in Shinjuku Station. Shinjuku is the world's busiest railway station, through which over 1.5 million commuters, pleasure seekers, shoppers, tourists, students find their way each day. But it has also become home to several hundred homeless people over the last few years. In the USA, the homeless are visible because their numbers are too large to miss. But by gathering in busy Shinjuku Station, the far smaller group of homeless in Tokyo has become a highly-visible social issue. Some of their orderly cardboard dwellings are elaborately adorned with artwork, slogans, practical touches such as makeshift entryways where shoes are neatly kept, while others are boxes without roofs, a mere piece of large cardboard serving as a blanket. As I observe the wide variability, I am struck by the absence of chaos, as if an invisible hand of orderliness and cleanliness is reigning over this village. It is a remarkable self-discipline that helps maintain order and it probably serves as part of a social contract that helps preserve what is a precarious existence.

It is ironic that Shinjuku Station's west side, which is the site of this cardboard village, was redesigned in the 1960s to eliminate what was a public square and replace it with a ramp bringing motor

vehicles from street level down to the basement terminal. Cynics might view the decision as a calculated measure to eliminate space for public gatherings (after all, the renovation did take place in the turbulent 1960s). Long after the trains have ceased running, the west side of Shinjuku Station cannot be closed because it is open for the length of this road. Perhaps it was bureaucratic miscalculation that helped make that part of the station a refuge for the homeless today. Trains themselves help discipline a society. Because I live in Southern California, I am forced to rely on automobiles virtually everywhere I go. This means that there is no public corridor separating me from my destination, so, for example, I feel freer to wear whatever is appropriate for where I am going. I could wear spandex to the health club without bothering to change there. (In fact, I have never worn spandex nor belonged to a health club.) Despite the impersonality that defines commuting, the train is a public space traversed *while doing noth-*

*ing*. However much a half-filled Japanese train invites hiding behind a book or magazine or in sleep, it is still a space where we notice how others appear. This public space of forced idleness has shaped everything from the length of Japanese books, to the sales figures of comics and other publications designed for quick consumption, and it also engendered the Walkman and other portable and solitary pleasures and escapes. But it also keeps people in line—telling them what they should and should not wear and what they can or cannot carry. If in America the destination dictates what one wears, in Japan, the knowledge that one will be on display in a closed, very public space with strangers helps denominate acceptable attire. By the time I am ready to return to California—a scant 5 weeks after arriving—the feeling of strangeness I experienced in relation to Japanese passengers on the trip from Narita Airport is gone. Twelve hours later in Los Angeles, it is Americans, especially immigration officials, who appear so alien. But instead of a train ride back home, I am whisked away by car—a far more alienated space than the anonymous public space of the train. In America, I have to turn on the TV for a quick check of the pulse of contemporary society. And until I re-enter, Americans appear foreign to me—just the way I experienced Japanese on the Narita Express. I miss the crush of humanity and the comforting sway of the trains in Japan more than ever. ■



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