

Japanese Impression

Han Nhu Quynh

Before visiting Japan, my impression was one of a country famous for kimono, sumo, *sado* (tea ceremony), flower arrangement, earthquakes and electronic products. But when I did visit, I was most strongly impressed by the railways.

I knew that Tokyo is a big, clean, crowded and expensive city, but I had not realized how pleasant the commuter trains are. For me, the idea of trains has never meant clean and comfortable—in Japan I realized I was mistaken.

My second impression was the density of passengers. For example, 300 trains depart and arrive each day at Tokyo Central Station, and the headway on the busy Yamanote Line is only 2 minutes in the rush hour. But even at that high density, I experienced the long queues at the station in the morning. Incredibly, busy stations have staff especially assigned to pack passengers into the train so the doors can shut, and some cars have seats that fold up automatically during the rush hour to leave more space for standing.

The Yamanote Line looping around the city is a good way to observe Tokyo life and architecture, but not in the rush hour. At other times of day, trains are rarely full, giving an opportunity to see normal To-



Author at Kinkakuji Temple, Kyoto

(Author)

kyo life and geography, which is rather like a series of closely linked 'villages'. Stations also impressed me a lot—almost every station building in populated areas has a department store, smaller convenience stores, coffee shops, etc. Some of the larger stations are like underground cities in their own right and I was really embarrassed getting lost my first time in Tokyo Central Station. But signs in both English and Japanese made it easy to find

my way around after the initial shock. Automatic ticket vending machines and ticket gates made me feel more confident too.

Despite an extensive road network, train travel is still popular in Japan and the JR (Japan Railways) group, especially JR East, puts a lot of effort into ensuring that people continue to take trains. The commuter trains are comfortable, but the high-speed shinkansen feels even more comfortable than airplanes and seems almost as fast! For example, the *Nozomi* train service from Tokyo to Osaka averages about 240 km/h. The service is perfect—attendants are polite, and they even bow to passengers as they pass through the cars serving delicious lunch boxes, soft drinks and even alcohol at reasonable prices. Passengers can also make domestic and international telephone calls from the train—explaining why Japanese railways win the competition with airlines over short and medium-haul distances.

Besides training, I was able to explore some special aspects of Japanese culture. I had the opportunity to visit some historic places, enjoy beautiful landscapes and experience pleasant cultural exchanges. I really enjoyed the quiet atmo-



Author with Bakamori Odori (comic dance) performers

(Author)

sphere of the old temples in Kyoto, the ancient capital. The tea ceremony, flower arrangement, *zen* vegetarian meal and *maiko* (trainee geisha) dancing impressed me a lot.

I also visited several castles in Kumamoto, Hiroshima, Kanazawa and had a special opportunity to attend a *kabuki* performance in Ginza, Tokyo.

Tokyo (and Japan) is an intriguing mix of tradition and modernity—while walking

many live in company housing, their friends are people they work with, and in their spare time, they enjoy company-organized sports and other activities. This lifetime employment system creates strong bonds between the business and the work force.

Decision-making is often by consensus and companies encourage workers at all levels to discuss proposals and give opinions. A decision is taken when everyone agrees



Inspecting track from driver's cab

(JR East)

down a street, I often passed by the glare and glitter of a *pachinko* parlor (a pinball gambling game) to be confronted by a quiet traditional temple. Small traditional pubs nestle against modern high rise buildings. Women in kimono walk beside women in business suits.

Although it is dangerous to over-generalize, Japanese are very polite, and bow frequently to each other and to foreigners too! On the whole, society is peaceful and respectful. If they do disagree, people try to express their ideas in ways other than saying 'No', which smoothes over differences and makes life more harmonious—a character I appreciate.

Japanese have a close relationship with their company. They work hard and are loyal to their organizations. For example,

on the right course. I think this way of living and working is a strong point.

Although Japanese take work seriously, life is not all work! They put their heart and soul into a multitude of festivals and public holidays. At festivals, many people, including children, wear traditional dress and join in the dances enthusiastically.

Time after work is time for relaxing together in pubs or restaurants, or singing



Maiko in Kyoto

(JNTO)

in *karaoke* bars. I enjoyed this warm family atmosphere which helps make relationship with colleagues tighter.

Unlike Thai or Indian foods which appeal through a melange of spicy flavours, Japanese foods attract through freshness, and careful cooking and arrangement.

Tempura (deep fried seafood and vegetables) was my personal favourite and *sashimi* and *sushi* (raw fish) were also unforgettable—I had never tried them before but appreciated the special taste. I will always remember *chanko-nabe* (a meat, seafood and vegetable stew) used to strengthen sumo wrestlers.

My visit to Japan left me with many happy memories and a much better idea of Japanese life and culture. I hope that I will have another opportunity to visit again. ■



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