

A View from the Train

Edward Talbot

When I first came to Japan, many things surprised me. It was not that I suffered from culture shock. I had already worked in Zambia, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and had travelled widely in Asia and America, as well as Europe. So I was used to being abroad, and I had also read about Japan. It was simply that reality is always better than imagination and than knowledge gained from books.

Having always been interested in railways, I particularly wanted to see Japanese railways, and it was the railways which surprised me most. Perhaps the most surprising thing of all, which somehow sums up many aspects of Japanese life, was that the ordinary local trains had paper advertising posters hanging from the roof just above the heads of standing passengers. In many countries, even if the long-distance trains are smart and comfortable, local trains are less important. They have the oldest coaches and are slow, dirty and neglected. Even in western countries, they are designed for rough treatment, to be vandal-proof.

Yet here were local trains of a completely different kind. Not only were they clean, punctual, perfectly maintained, and no less important than the Shinkansen. They even had advertisements above the heads of thousands of people, none of whom wanted to tear them down (or at least, if any did, they did not do it). This was a different kind of society from any I had met before.

Since that time some seven years ago, I have only once seen one of these posters removed. One day, as a train was stopping at a station, a schoolgirl got up, took down a poster and left the train just as the doors opened. It was timed to perfection, almost before anyone could notice, and she went off with a little smile on her face (not a broad grin—after all, she was Japanese!). No doubt, the poster portrayed her pop idol and was soon put up in her room.

Since those first impressions, I have trav-

elled many miles on trains in Japan. My daily journey to work involves three ordinary trains and, although I have done it many times, it is still enjoyable, as I still see things which are new and interesting. Much can be learnt about Japanese society by observation on local trains.

My first train stops at a terminus and then returns to Tokyo. The arriving passengers get off (many choose the door where they get in because when they get off it will be easier to get through the waiting crowds). Staff quickly check the train, wake up anyone still asleep and recover any belongings left by passengers—on rainy mornings this often includes four or five umbrellas. Then the doors close.

This symbolises the end of one journey and start of another. The waiting passengers, who have queued up in orderly fashion at the places marked on the platform, have hitherto held back, to let the arriving passengers disperse. Now they move forward a pace or two. Their expressions do not alter but somehow there is a tension in the air. Then the doors open and the tension is released as the passengers hurry to the vacant seats. All this happens in silence—as a rule, even in the most crowded trains, no one talks.

To Japanese, of course, it is all ordinary

and unremarkable—it happens thousands of times every day all over Japan. In other countries, however, such crowds would not behave in this way. People would fight their way into the train as soon as it arrived, and might have to be controlled by barriers which would only release them on to platforms when trains were ready. Such measures make it impossible to turn trains round so quickly as in Japan.

Again, only in Japan do people accept having to stand for long journeys, often packed so tightly that they cannot move. In many countries passengers would rebel at such conditions, and the railways would be attacked in the press and in government. But here it is just a part of life.

So, the operation of Japanese railways relies on the orderly behaviour of the people, both passengers and staff. At stations where train crews change, the new crew waits on the platform ready to relieve the incoming crew immediately. Where railwaymen are not so punctual and conscientious, such methods cannot be used. Japan is in fact the only country I know where drivers stop their trains precisely, so that the positions of doors are marked on platforms and passengers wait in the correct places to minimise delay.



Poster advertisements hanging over heads of Tokyo commuters

(F. Yoshida & A. Kubo)

Until recently I had always thought that the eagerness with which passengers rush for a seat was simply because they wished to sit down. Equally, I had always thought that people sleep in trains in Japan simply because they are tired, but after several years here I should have known otherwise. One day a Japanese friend complained that someone on the train had talked to her all the way into Tokyo and had thus deprived her of an hour's sleep, which she was relying on. So obviously, many passengers regard their train journeys as valuable sleeping time and plan accordingly. In Japan, it seems, everything is planned. Nothing is left to chance.

On my second train, I sometimes use the first coach, where I often see the poster-changing man at work, with his little wooden steps and satchel of posters. He puts his steps in position, unclips the fitting, takes out the old posters and puts in the new. The new ones are already folded in a certain way and in a certain order, and he folds the old ones and puts them in a certain order and position too, presumably, so that they are not put back up again. Because passengers are coming into the train all the time, he has to work very quickly, and in any case he only has time to do a couple of coaches. When the rest of the train has its posters changed is a mystery, perhaps when it returns 3 or 4 hours later, but no doubt, it is all planned precisely.

On other days I get in the fourth coach from the end. Once the journey starts, the ticket collector comes through. Sometimes he just asks if anyone needs a ticket. Then one or two people stop him, but no more, and he moves on quickly. At other times, he checks the ticket of every passenger, touching his cap and bowing politely to each one. Then far more, perhaps 20 per cent, buy tickets, and sometimes he does not reach me before I get off. Somehow, whatever makes the passengers behave in an orderly way on the platform does not oblige them to pay the correct fare.



Fashionably loose socks worn by most Tokyo schoolgirls

(F. Yoshida & A. Kubo)

Once on this train I was amazed to see a schoolgirl take from her bag a tube of glue and deftly apply some to the middle of her calves to hold her loose white socks in position. Since then I have seen the whole amazing ritual that most of them follow, changing their socks, their sweaters, and sometimes even their skirts, knotting their scarves so that the label is prominently displayed, 'Burberrys ... Made in England', checking their faces for blemishes and applying their make up, curling their hair with battery-powered electric curlers and using a terrifying-looking tool to curl their eyelashes, and of course rolling up their skirts at the waist to shorten them. Somehow they judge this exactly to a millimetre—any higher and all would be revealed! This of course is the procedure when school is over. The opposite process takes place on the way to school in the morning, when non-school items are carefully folded and hidden away in a bag.

Some might say they are rebelling against the rigidity of the school's rules. If so, the rules they impose on themselves are far more demanding. Japanese women in kimonos follow especially intricate rules, but even women dressed for every day

are no less smart. So the schoolgirls' dress code is just a preparatory stage. They are already behaving like Japanese women. In fact, the preparation seems to start much earlier. Sometimes I see at my home station a tiny girl of seven or eight going off to school by herself. This in itself is an amazing thing, when in 'advanced' western countries any parent sending a child of this age to school by itself would be placing it at risk of being molested. The girl's mother has taken great trouble to prepare her daughter for school. She is wearing a smart sailor-style uniform, with hat, white socks and highly polished shoes. Her hair is in two neat plaits. On her back is her red school bag, with several mascots and other things dangling from it (which must have great significance but are beyond my understanding). Sometimes she carries another bag as well. Doubtless in a few years' time she will be putting glue round her legs and a few years after that she will be sending her own daughter to school in an equally immaculate manner. So when I see the schoolgirls with their loose socks, I am reassured that the future of Japan is in good hands.

Of the boys, however, I am less sure. Shuf-

fling and shambling along in their alternative uniform—carelessly worn jacket, or loose sweater, or in winter baggy anorak, shirt tails outside their baggy trousers that hang low on their bottoms (again judged to a millimetre—any lower and all would be revealed!), the heels of their shoes wearing holes in the bottom of their trouser legs—they hardly look like future *sarariman* (salaried workers) devoted to their companies. But then I think of my own youth—much of it is better forgotten—and realise that this is the view of an old man. So even when I see a boy taking out first his ear-rings and then the pin through his lower lip (putting it carefully in its special box), I remind myself not to make hasty judgments. Perhaps, when doing their part-time jobs in local restaurants and twenty-four hour shops, these unlikely lads become energetic, conscientious and polite.

One aspect of the behaviour of Japanese schoolchildren and young people, however, still shocks me as much as it did when I first came—the popularity of cigarette-smoking. This habit will surely kill many of them, as it will kill many of their parents. Yet no one tries to prevent them from becoming addicted.

My third train is very minor and shuttles back and forth between its termini, serving only three stations. Some schoolchildren smoke on this train—the excitement of breaking the rules must be a great temptation—and during the wait at one of the termini a cleaner gets on board. She is a bent, apparently old, lady and she goes about her duty with complete commitment. Any boy or girl lounging in her way is given a smart rap on the ankles with the broom, so that despite all the mess left by the citizens of the future, the train leaves again in spotless condition.

Similar old ladies (I wonder how old they actually are) clean a main station I use regularly and happily continue cleaning the stairs during the rush hour. Even when hordes of passengers hurry down towards



Young children enjoying the train ride home with friends after school.

(A. Oka)

them, they continue working, their brushes not missing a sweep, and the passengers spilling round them like waves round rocks.

In some western countries, where few cleaners are employed (and trains and stations are much dirtier despite being used by far fewer people), ladies such as these would not be at work but at home. They would perhaps be living on social security and having nothing to do, might be depressed and dependent on tranquilisers. They might have sons who also being unemployed, take drugs and make more social problems. Far better for themselves, the railways and society, if they had useful work and self-respect.

Finally, amid the activity, noise and clutter of Japan one thing always gives me great pleasure on my daily journey in summer. At one station swallows build their nests in the area under the platforms

where passengers walk between the entrance and stairs and where there are kiosks and vending machines. Station staff put up cardboard boxes to prevent the mess dropping on the floor and perhaps on passengers, and when the young birds hatch, the parents constantly fly in and out with food for them. Yet no one complains that they are a nuisance and should be removed, and they seem to be welcomed by everyone. Certainly they are by me, as they remind me of countries far away where nature is closer at hand.

Many foreigners are generous with the advice they give to Japan on how it should run its affairs. When the trains in New York and London are clean, punctual and well maintained, and also have paper posters hanging from the roofs above the heads of passengers who feel no urge to tear them down, then perhaps their views might be worth listening to. ■



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Professor Talbot has a master's degree in applied linguistics from the University of Manchester, and taught English at universities and colleges in England, Africa and the Middle East before coming to Japan. He is the author of some sixteen books and numerous articles on railways, mostly about the history of the London & North Western Railway, the largest of the private companies in England before the four big groups of 1923, but also about British Railways and about railways in Africa and Turkey. He was associate professor of English at Kanda University of International Studies before moving to his present position at Josai International University.