Another Perspective

Train Culture: The Sociology of Tracks

John Clammer

One of the first things I had to get used to when I came to Japan to live was—like almost everybody else—daily commuting by train. I still remember my first rush-hour commute arriving at the Odakyu Line Shinjuku terminus to transfer to the JR line, getting to my workplace crushed, breathless and, if not actually exhausted, determined to get up before the rush on days when I had to travel in to Tokyo by 9 am. The many cafes and convenience stores in Ichigaya added one more early morning queue on days when I had early classes. Almost everyone knows about the peak crowding and nearly every guidebook to Japan for foreigners has at least one photograph of people being shoved by white-gloved platform staff into a rush-hour train on the Yamanote Line at Shinjuku, Tokyo or Shibuya stations. But clearly this is not all there is to riding Japanese urban trains, and being a somewhat nosy sociologist I found the daily experience fascinating and entertaining as I began to notice patterns and forms of behaviour quite different from my experiences on European trains or indeed trains in SE Asia, India, the USA and New Zealand when I travelled in those countries. In fact, I began formulating the idea that you can tell a lot about a culture from its train behaviour and that Japan is no exception. Like all small spaces where people are thrown together (elevators and plane travel are other examples) a set of unspoken but very widely observed 'rules' emerges. For a foreigner travelling a lot in Japan, one of the first tricks is to learn and observe these rules, leading to a much easier and smoother commuting experience.

Passengers busily passing through the ticket gate at a JR East station (JR East)

At one time I even thought of writing a book of short stories to be called 'Terminal Experience' describing the interactions I had or noticed on crowded trains and the ways in which they dissolved when the train reached its terminal and the crowd swarmed off. Rarely did one encounter the same people on a particular train again (unless—as in England—commuters are creatures of habit and take the same train each day, sometimes leading to long-term social relationships with others, including chess playing). Perhaps because of the generally crowded nature of trains in the major urban centres, the rules soon began to emerge as did the little and subtle ways in which they are infringed.

The basic rules are easy: you get to sit if the seat directly in front of you opens up at an intermediate station; when sitting, you generally hold your bag or briefcase—the rack over your head is for the standing passengers; when waiting for a train, form an orderly queue; wait for alighting passengers to get off and then get on fast if there is a chance of a seat. Once on and seated or standing, one immediately notices certain qualities. First, it is generally surprisingly quiet and normally one does not strike up a conversation unless with friends or colleagues. It is not at all uncommon to see an entire side bench seat occupied by people asleep. Due to the widespread diffusion of mobile phones, iPods, etc., throughout Japan many people text or play games. My impression is that reading, which used to be almost universal on commuter trains, has now declined seriously. But those who are reading, read novels, *manga* comics, fashion magazines, and newspapers, as well as poetry and serious social, historical or even philosophical works, something very rare in Europe except perhaps in France. One thing that still mystifies me (although I know some people use their mobile as an alarm) is how sleeping commuters know to wake up at the right station—a skill I have not mastered!

But what also interests me are the deviations and the extent to which these reflect wider social and cultural changes in Japanese society. Everybody has probably noticed the entertaining 'Please do it at home' posters that have appeared in the last couple of years at stations and in trains, discouraging eating, noisy music, applying make-up, etc., and suggesting that such practices are on the rise.

Likewise the tendency of young people not to offer their seat to seniors is quite conspicuous, even when they are sitting in the Silver Seats with priority for the elderly and infirm. But what many people do not apparently notice is the covert observation going on all the time; suddenly noticing that you are being watched in the reflections of the train windows at night; women studying each other's fashion from behind their magazine or dark glasses; body contact not justified by the actual crowding; and the little signals that pass between strangers in a crowded carriage. Crowding provides exactly the environment for quite intensive, if silent, social interaction—interactions that cease when the train empties out at a busy station or at the terminal. One of the most interesting examples is when a conversation does start, perhaps because a book interests the person squeezed against you, or because that person is much older. Age provides a social licence to do many things implicitly discouraged for younger people, including the right to strike up a conversation with a stranger. The exception is drunks and it is a fascinating cultural fact that whereas western drunks tend to be aggressive and rude, Japanese drunks are usually either sleepy or voluble. As a result, shyness drops away and the happy in-train drunk is only too willing to try out his exceptionally limited English vocabulary on a stranger. I especially remember travelling one time between Shinjuku and Kichijoji on the Chuo Line when a drunk middle-aged man told me repeatedly that he was Japanese and asked where my companion and I were from before informing us again in a very friendly manner that he *really* was Japanese, a fact we agreed to readily without being able to turn the conversation to more fruitful channels. Of course, actually attempting to start a conversation with strangers is less tolerated unless oneself and/or the other are a little drunk. Alcohol is indeed a social lubricant in Japan. I once had a friendly and talkative Brazilian exchange student who out of sheer niceness and desire to practise his Japanese would attempt to start conversations on the train, leading in most cases to his would-be conversation partner getting off at the next station and re-entering it a carriage or two further away!

From these experiences, I soon started seeing Japanese commuter trains as a microcosm of Japanese society, not only the regularity, efficiency, safety (a very significant consideration when one has ridden trains and subways in parts of Latin America where robbers, pickpockets, and beggars are common), consideration for other passengers, and high level of order, but also the ways in which individuality is expressed through dress, accessories, reading materials, behaviour towards the elderly and disabled, increased littering, coffee drinking, and using mobiles on the train. I have even met people who told me they *like* the rush hour because it gives them the physical contact they find lacking in other more formal situations in Japanese society.

An example of manner poster by JR East encouraging people to hold the handrail when riding on the escalator (JR East)

As a consequence, despite the occasional physical discomfort, I really quite enjoy riding Tokyo trains, not for the passing outside scenery, but for the dense micro-interactions making up the social structure inside the carriage. The train provides a kind of moving window into Japanese society and a social setting that is not nearly as anonymous as it may seem at first. It is also a good, if subtle, indicator of social changes and cultural shifts. And if nothing much seems to be happening today, there is always the mass of advertising filling the car above the side windows, and hanging like flags from the ceiling, as well as flat-panel TVs offering news, English lessons, route information, warnings about delays and stoppages on other lines, and even the weather forecast.

Want to know Japan? Ride the train and keep your eyes open! ■

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