

Networks of Modernity— Rail Transport and Modern Japanese Literature

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The first passengers on the Tokyo-Yokohama run are said to have removed their shoes when boarding the train, leaving behind a neat row on the platform.

Japanese Modernity

As this century reaches the new millennium and the voices heralding Japan as the ultimate embodiment of postmodern society have quieted a little, the danger of once again dismissing Japan as an exotic and ultimately unknowable nation rears its familiar head. Ever since Japan arose from the ashes of the Pacific War, its anomalous status as the only modern Asian country has perplexed and intrigued Western scholars and journalists, who tend to equate modernity with the West. In a recent interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Peter Drucker, the guru of business management, revealed these blinders by saying, "The great achievement of the 19th century was the ability to make people move. The great breakthrough of this century is that we can move information and ideas easily....There is only one big city in the world where public transportation still works, and that is Chicago. Los Angeles is hopeless. New York is demeaning and London is not much better."

Since Mr. Drucker was talking about the world today, why didn't he mention Hong Kong, Singapore, Osaka, or Tokyo? They

are all large in terms of population or area, and all have very efficient public transportation networks. Even in our so-called global age, it is unfortunate that the West's general awareness remains stubbornly Euro-American as evidenced by Mr. Drucker's failure to consider modern non-Western cities.

To understand how the Japanese themselves perceive what might best be called their own alternative modernity, this article examines Japan's transformation into a modern state from the perspective of Japanese literature. And, by focusing on the establishment of rail transport in Japan—which originated in the West—it should become clear that it is not merely inadequate, but grossly misleading to think of Japan's modernity as "borrowed". While the railway stamped Japan's experience of modern urban life as no other single innovation has done, its role in contemporary Japan certainly does not simply imitate or reflect some American or European model. The developed world has wholeheartedly embraced the automobile. In Japan, although the percentage of passengers traveling by car outstripped those traveling by rail in the 1960s, the nation still remains committed to rail transport. While the railway played a critical role in the industrialization drama of almost every modern nation, it has been most important in Japan's experience of modernity, and its development on Japanese soil deserves attention.

Trains and the "Civilizing" of Japan

Japan's abrupt change in 1868 to a modern nation state from a fiefdom ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate was almost simultaneous with its development of railways. In *Before the Dawn* (*Yoake mae*, 1929–1935), Shimazaki Toson⁽¹⁾ (1872–1943) depicts the struggles of the rural elite as clan-based rule dissolved with the Meiji Restoration. The central character, Aoyama Hanzo, is the hereditary headman and official in charge of the Magome post station (*shukuba*) on the old Kiso Road linking Edo (the old name for Tokyo) to Kyoto and Osaka in the west. The forces of dramatic change—foreign pressure to draw the nation into global commerce, new forms of governance, the influx of new technologies and ways of thinking—quickly find their way even into the sheltered communities of the mountainous Kiso region. One of these intrusions is a visit by Gregory Holsom, a British railway engineer employed by the Japanese government to help determine whether a new railway linking Tokyo to the Kansai region should run inland or along the coast. Toson writes, "Holsom's party left the Miuraya and continued on down the road to Mino. The people whose fates were bound up with the fate of this ancient highway still knew nothing about having been bypassed by the plans for the railway." Holsom's journey



New codes of clothing and conduct

(The Archives of Japanese Cartoon History)



Passengers relaxing in 2nd class

(The Archives of Japanese Cartoon History)

took place in 1879 when the road checkpoints (*sekisho*) regulating travel under the Tokugawa Shogunate had been abolished, allowing unrestricted transport by rail. The narrator of *Before the Dawn* asks plaintively, “With the elimination of the shukuba and all the hereditary offices associated with them, what was happening to these people?”

By the time Natsume Soseki⁽²⁾ (1867–1916), arguably the most revered writer of modern Japan, arrived on the literary scene at the turn of the century, rail transport was already playing a significant role in everything from nation building to everyday life in the cities. The technology of train travel helps engender a feature common to advanced, industrialized nations—the development of a metropolitan center that becomes the site of intense manufacturing, commerce, politics and education. In *Sanshiro* (1908), which opens with the protagonist en route from Kumamoto to Tokyo where he will study at the Imperial University, Ogawa Sanshiro’s attention is drawn to an old loud country bumpkin (*inaka mono*) who jumps onto the train and strips to the waist, exposing unsightly scars from moxa treatment on his back. Railways vastly increased the possibilities of encounters with strangers (a distinct feature of modern life), and although the episode of Sanshiro sharing lodgings with a young woman while he is heading for Tokyo seems more like the fantasy of a male writer, it may also be viewed as an exercise in responsible self-discipline (Sanshiro is chided by the woman for passing up his opportunity) which was assiduously promoted by the Meiji government.

Another sign of such “enlightenment” values can be seen in the astute observation of the social historian Harada Katsumasa⁽³⁾ that Sanshiro’s judgmental gaze directed at the moxa-scarred man represents the reaction of someone who has internalized new codes of conduct in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War which made such behavior a misdemeanor. There was simply



People queuing for crowded streetcars in early 1920s

(Transportation Museum)

no room for such unruly manners in a “civilized-nation” (*bunmei koku*) that had just vanquished a Western power. Sanshiro’s tacit disapproval of stripping to the waist is context-specific since such an act would have been more acceptable at a local festival or some other rural or informal venue. Here, the new public space of a train compartment functions as a mobile “civilizing” space, traversing the length of western Japan. But, as the cultural critic Nomura Masaichi⁽⁴⁾ has observed, disrobing on the train could also signify an act similar to the removal of shoes. “Even on trains,” he notes, “travelers used to take off their trousers, neatly folding them and then placing them on the overhead rack, immediately after taking their seats. They would then remain quite unperturbed, often sitting in a most dignified manner in only their half-length muslin drawers.”

Soseki’s work is replete with inner-city streetcars and suburban electric rail transport in addition to long-distance trains. In *After the Spring Equinox* (*Higan sugi made*, 1912), streetcars map out the modern grid of Tokyo which the late critic Maeda Ai⁽⁵⁾ has juxtaposed to the serpentine and narrow alleys of the *roji*, vestiges of backstreet Edo. Rail travel multiplied the opportunity of chance encounters with others from varying walks of life. A “mass” dimension to such increased collective activity is addressed by Maeda who notes that the very

same electric streetcar lines that transformed inner-city Tokyo into a new modern grid also made possible the swift congregation of a large crowd at Hibiya Park that led to the Hibiya Riots of 1905, an event touched off by citizens angry with the Portsmouth Treaty for inadequately rewarding Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War. And, in March of 1906, the streetcars themselves became the target of widespread violence in response to a petition for a fare increase by the streetcar companies. This time, over 10,000 people were reported as gathering in Hibiya Park to protest the increase. Similar protests involving streetcars took place in 1907–1908 and in 1911.

Trains, War, and Modernity

Befitting the work of a novelist who has come to epitomize Japanese modernity, Soseki’s work also addresses Japan’s expansionism on the Asian continent—in which trains played an integral part. Like the Western nations whose imperial ventures throughout the globe helped strengthen their own material and cultural achievements, Japan embarked on a similar path of modernity. Soseki’s travels to Japanese-occupied China (Manchuria) and Korea—documented in his travelogue *Here, There in Manchuria and Korea* (*Mankan tokoro-*

dokoro, 1909)—came at the invitation of his close friend, Nakamura Zeko, then president of the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMR). Soseki's serialized newspaper accounts of the journey are punctuated by frequent reunions with old school friends who had become important figures in the Japanese colonial system, making it possible for him to make considerable use of SMR facilities throughout his travels. And in such novels as *Pillow of Grass* (*Kusamakura*, 1906) and *The Heredity of Taste* (*Shumi no iden*, 1906), there are scenes of conscripts receiving ceremonious send-offs at train stations.

It is clear that the planned, explicit use of rail transport by the authorities both in Japan proper and in occupied continental Asia abetted both nation building and the transformation of Japan into a modern, imperial nation. In recent years, cultural critics have demonstrated the central role played by printing (newspapers and popular fiction) and radio in creating a sense of cultural belonging so essential to the formation of the modern nation state. More obviously, the effects of a well-developed rail network linking temporally-distant parts of Japan into conveniently traversible land cannot be underestimated. Well into the Meiji Era (1868–1912), people's sense of belonging remained restricted to local geographic and political units, be they former feudal domain, village, or even dialect. Rail not only made travel to other cities a much likelier event for increasing numbers of rural and non-metropolitan Japanese, it also "created" connections to Tokyo (or Osaka) in the form of a transplanted son, brother, or sometimes female family members or friends, working in the capital. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch⁽⁶⁾ notes, "The regions, joined to each other and to the metropolis by the railways, and the goods that are torn out of their local relation by modern transportation, shared the fate of losing their inherited place, their traditional spatial-temporal presence...." In Japan, *jokyo*, or relocation to Tokyo, became a rite of passage for

those destined to play a significant role in government, politics, commerce, or the arts. To use Soseki's works as a convenient example, everyone from Botchan to Sanshiro and the "I" in *Kokoro*, moves to Tokyo from somewhere in the provinces. The establishment of a metropolis is at once the symbol of a modern (imperial) nation and its enabling condition.

The Great Divide—The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923

When we think of the technological achievements of various rail transport such as streetcars, electric commuter trains, and elevated railway lines together with the cultural life of Tokyo in the first decades of the twentieth century, it can mislead us into thinking that the whole of Japan had been transformed into a nation of white-collar, middle-class workers. The novels of Tokuda Shusei⁽⁷⁾ (1871–1943) allow us to see the instrumental role that rail development plays in shaping modern, urban life in the grittier register of working class figures. Although not widely read today, Shusei who is often described as the most naturalistic of the naturalist writers, has been enthusiastically praised by everyone from the Nobel-Prize winner Kawabata Yasunari, and Akutagawa Ryunosuke, the pre-eminent writer of the Taisho Era, to the late Nakagami Kenji, a giant among Japanese postwar novelists. In *Kabi* (*Mold*, 1911), a work often viewed as prefiguring the I-novel (*watakushi shosetsu*) of the Taisho Era, Shusei captures the enervating social reality of a couple living in quiet desperation. The tale depicts the life of Sasamura, a writer who sets up house in Tokyo. When his housekeeper-maid returns to her country home to tend to an illness in the family, her daughter, Ogin takes her place in Sasamura's household. By the time the mother returns, Sasamura and Ogin are living as a couple. There is an accidental quality to this passionless marriage, and the registration of Ogin as

his second wife comes almost as an afterthought when they register the birth of their daughter (35 chapters and several years after they begin living together). At various times, an uneven stream of friends, nephews, in-laws, Ogin's father, Sasamura's parents, and cousins come to live with the couple for extended periods of time. Instead of a neatly demarcated middle-class family, *Kabi* gives us a portrait of an informal, unsettled, and unhappy family. Constant movement from one neighborhood to another, from city center to suburbs, is an index of disquieting urban life. Occasionally Sasamura escapes by train to the countryside, but he always returns to the numbing familiarity of a lifeless, moldy marriage.

Their marriage lacks the trappings of modernity that will flourish after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923—there is no courtship period in cafes, no walks along Ginza (a fashionable shopping street), no trips to the cinema—but, nonetheless, theirs is an emphatically urban life. The frequent trips by train to the countryside and the succession of drop-in visits by relatives and friends belong to the new rhythms of city-living. Much of Japanese literature of the early decades of the twentieth century reflected the condition of *jokyo* mentioned earlier and experienced by the majority of those who would come to be counted as Tokyo residents. And like the I-novelists who would follow him, Shusei's characters frequently thematized the relationship of city to countryside in seeking subjecthood. The nonchalance with which Sasamura's household composition changes expresses the reality of working-class urban life that is enabled by the technological possibilities of swift, cheap public transport.

City life changed the patterns of social contact, with friends, relatives, and work associates, displacing family and village socialization determined largely by proximity. Harada Katsumasa notes that by 1904, streetcars were serving Ryogoku,



Evacuating to countryside after Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923

(Transportation Museum)

Fukagawa, Kanda, Hongo Sancho, Mita, Aoyama, Ueno, and Kudanshita, forming convenient transit loops in Tokyo. In a few more years, elevated railway lines complemented existing streetcar lines to link more of Tokyo's perimeter. In the loosely-zoned residential neighborhoods of Tokyo and its outskirts, Sasamura comes to find something soothing in the mechanical sounds of trains and machinery emanating from the cottage industry that dotted the Tokyo landscape. But these are not simply the sounds of small-scale industry, these are the factory sounds engaged in Russo-Japanese War production. In this and in other works written in the same era such as *The Wild One* (Arakura, 1915) and *New Household* (Arajotai, 1908) trains are frequently mentioned, not only as means of travel by the protagonists, but as transport for the War. In *The Wild One*, Oshima, the strong-willed protagonist, struggles valiantly to support herself as a seamstress, and eventually the opportunity to make uniforms for the War brings some financial reward. Tokuda Shusei's prose focused on the liminal figures, working class transplants to the city from the countryside living a new everyday life. Once removed from the *haikara* (a Japanese phonetic interpretation of "high collar", denoting western and modern) ways of the Meiji elite, or the "cultured life" (*bunka seikatsu*) of the dandy and flapper (*mobo* and *moga* meaning

modern boy and modern girl) in the later Taisho years, they move to the city and live lives of uneven financial gain and struggle and, most significantly, the ability to travel quite freely within the city, and between city and country. Shusei's figures live the simultaneity of a split existence (city and country) as everyday life.

Trains, Suburbs, and Modern Pathology

By the 1920s and 1930s, Japan's experience of modernity shifts gears. Tokyo by all accounts, had become one of the liveliest metropolitan centers and the most populous city in the world. It also came to be represented by what we think of as "Western" cultural artifacts and practices of modern, everyday life—cafes, dance clubs, beer halls, world fairs, fashion-conscious flappers and dandies, cinema, Dadaism, surrealism, revues, and by the 1930s, department stores. The virtual temporal simultaneity of modernity in Europe, the USA, and Japan may come as a surprise to us in the late 1990s, when Westerners still tend to see Japan as a late modernizer. The capacity to showcase novel entertainment and practices originating in the West in the inner city was related to the rise of the metropolitan base population itself which grew sharply in the first few decades of the century. The after-

math of World War I brought economic prosperity that translated directly into the expansion and development of private rail lines radiating from Tokyo into what would become an extensive network of suburban towns and bed towns. The defining pattern of Japanese suburban private rail development was set by Kobayashi Ichizo, well known as the pioneering head of Hankyu Railways in western Honshu. Kobayashi's success with Hankyu would later be replicated by Tokyu Railways in Tokyo, which developed garden cities along their railway lines, building houses, and eventually achieving a thorough vertical integration of passengers' lives by building shops, amusement parks, and department stores at terminal stations. The earliest modern Japanese life was found in the city proper—Ginza with its gas-lit, brick-lined streets, cafes, and the like—but by the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, modern life had become a mass phenomenon and had reached the suburbs. *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (*Asakusa kurenaidan*, 1929–30) by Kawabata Yasunari⁽⁸⁾ provides a revealing snapshot of an underclass youth culture living on the

Due to copyright issues, the original photo cannot be shown.

Poster depicting Tokyo subway in 1927

margins of inner-city amusements like revue houses and cinemas. Its suburban counterpoint is depicted by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro⁽⁹⁾ in *Naomi* (*Chijin no ai* or *A Fool's Love*, 1924). Tanizaki's work depicts the Pygmalion-like story of Joji, a young salaried engineer and Naomi, his Lolita-aged partner, with whom he explores the after-hours suburbs of Tokyo—Kamata, Omori, Shinagawa, and Meguro. He soon adopts her as his young bride and they rent a "culture house" (*bunka jutaku*), an impractical atelier-like space in the verdant suburbs of Omori. The story traces the gradual reversal of power between the 28-year-old Joji, and the poor young girl from the slums of inner-city Tokyo whom he attempts to transform into an accomplished and cultured young woman befitting a salaried member of the new middle class. By the end of the tale, he has created a strong and wilful woman who seizes the dominant role in what has been a master-slave relationship from the beginning. *Naomi* depicts modern urban life played out both in the private space of a suburban "culture home" and in the inner-city glitter of dance halls and cafes as being fetishistic, decadent, and excessive.

In *Terror* (*Kyofu*, 1913), an earlier piece, Tanizaki shows how the inscription of railways as a commonplace artifact in everyday life gives rise to new "modern" forms of pathology. Once the novelty of train travel was dimmed by its naturalization into the fabric of everyday life, sensations such as speed, the train vibration, and the deafening sounds of the steam engines, brakes, and mechanical parts, led to accumulated stress. The first-person protagonist in *Terror* admits to a railway phobia called "Eisenbahnkrankheit". He must take the train to reach Osaka for a conscription physical, and the story details his panic response to this train ride. While fear of military service might have played a part, the narrator makes it clear that his neurosis extends to streetcars, automobiles, theaters—in short, any crowded bustling place.

Unlike Tanizaki, who fled the Tokyo-Yokohama metropolis for Kansai after the Great Kanto Earthquake, many Tokyoites left the inner city for the suburbs. When the journalist and writer Yumeno Kyusaku⁽¹⁰⁾ left Kyushu for Tokyo to write a series of newspaper articles about the city, starting on the first anniversary of the Earthquake, he noted the transformation of Tokyo into a sea of shanties (*baraku* meaning barracks or shack), as well as the presence of a new Tokyoite (*gendai Tokyo-jin*) that threatened the small remaining population of old sons and daughters of Edo (*furui edokko*). Yumeno's assessment of Tokyo 1 year after the Earthquake departs markedly from his account of the city in the days immediately following the quake, when he was impressed by the spirit of the people, cooperation between strangers, and the comforting sight of electric trains and trolley cars running through the smoking rubble.

The final chapter in Japan's industrial (pre-war) modernity culminates in the gathering storm clouds of Fascism on the way to the Pacific War. But in exploring the role played by Japanese rail networks, it is not simply the overt function played by trains in mobilizing troops and transporting war materials that deserve attention. If we examine the effects of rail culture as numbing features of modern everyday life—lengthy commuting in crowded trains, shopping and amusement structured as nodes of transport, the role trains play in shaping public and private conduct—we might hopefully come to understand the still largely uncharted realm of rail transport as it shapes and mutates human per-

ception, values, and even thought. Japan is uniquely situated to provide some answers to such questions that spill over into the postmodern age. ■

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Notes

- Japanese names in this article follow Japanese usage with family name first.
- The cartoons are by Georges Bigot (1860–1927), a well-known French illustrator who lived in Japan.



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