

# Railway Posters—Illuminating the Role of the Railways in Promoting Social and Economic Development in Japan

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## Introduction

There is little dispute about the role played by the railways, both national and private, in the economic and social development of Japan. This article seeks to reflect that role through the significance of the railway posters published by Japan's railway companies over the past century. Posters have been chosen as the medium because they do not just communicate commercial messages, but transcend their marketing roles by encapsulating entire social epochs. Thus, while they seemed, at the time of their issue, to be simply advertisements designed to tempt the public to use trains, railway posters can now be seen as a reflection of important economic and social trends. Successful posters issued by the Japanese National Railway (JNR) and by the many private railway companies have gone beyond their original short-term purpose, and have been able to represent major changes in Japanese society and, thereby, to show the contribution made by the railways to the country's economic growth. Of course, it was not the prime purpose of advertising posters to be decorative nor artistic, but rather to communicate a direct commercial message. However, the best of the genre have succeeded in combining communication with artistic value, and railway posters in particular have thus illustrated many of the significant developments in Japan's economic and social history through the 20th century.

## Development of Railway Network

This article describes some of the best examples of the considerable number of Japanese railway posters, which demonstrate the importance of the railways in contributing to the nation's economic and social development. The posters selected are in broadly chronological order matching the development of the Japanese

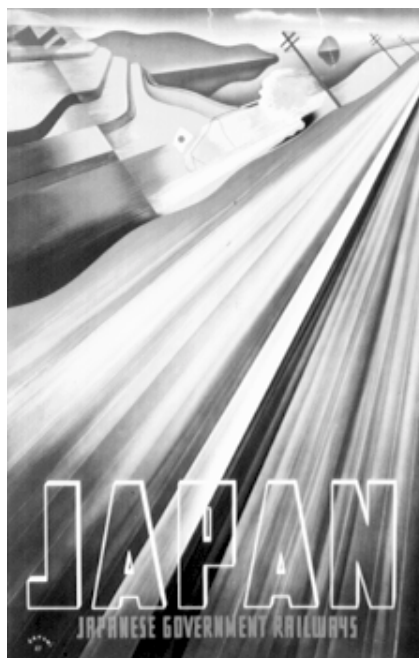
railway system as follows:

- Establishment of government and private railway system, 1872–1905; nationalization of trunk lines and formation of private commuter railway companies, 1906/7–1920s.
- Development of government railways network (passenger & freight); growth of private companies, and formation of first subways, 1920s–1940s.
- Establishment of JNR; formation of shinkansen network, and diversification of private railway companies into non-railway operations 1949–1987.
- Privatization of JNR with establishment of JR group of companies, and continuing development of private railway companies 1987–1999.

## Early Railway Posters

The earliest posters show the significance of the speeding up of rail services,

Figure 1 Japanese Government Railways 1937



contributing both to the nation's economic growth and social life. The government railway example (Fig. 1) is a brilliant evocation of speed, the artist—Satomi Munetsugu—provides a classic impression of a train (although unseen) speeding through the Japanese countryside. This poster was commissioned by the Board of Tourist Industry (an external department of the then Ministry of Railways) and doubtless encouraged many foreign tourists and Japanese families to use the government railways to travel within Japan.

The early private railway company poster (Fig. 2) advertises the opening of the electrified main line from Tobu Railway's terminus in Asakusa, Tokyo, to Isesaki. Again the emphasis is on attracting leisure travel, but this example of the provision of faster services also heralded the development of what was to become a highly significant factor in private railway operations—commuter services linked to the building of 'new town' housing.

Figure 2 Tobu Railway Line Electrification 1927

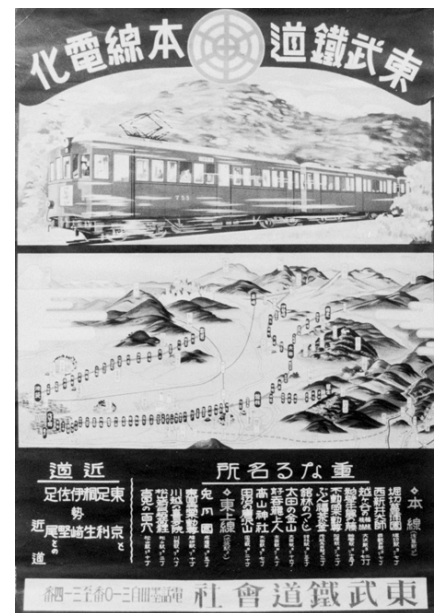


Figure 3 Nagoya Railroad Winter Travel



### Leisure Travel

The nationalization of private railways in 1906/7 divided the network into two categories, government railways trunk lines, and local short-haul private companies. The latter group were adept at making the most of their local quasi-monopolies by developing a range of services that complemented their railway operations. These included retail stores at the main stations and, as already mentioned, provision of low-cost suburban housing for commuters travelling by rail to work in major cities.

The private companies were also quick to exploit their markets in developing services to accommodate the growing demand for leisure travel. Two seasonal examples illustrated this trend—Fig. 3 shows Nagoya Railroad’s promotion of winter sport travel and Fig.4 shows Mikawa Railway’s (part of today’s Nagoya Railroad) promotion of summer travel on their lines to leisure centres in their operations area (Mikawa is now east Aichi Prefecture). These two posters both communicate a simple, clear message of the benefits of rail for leisure

travel. The poster campaigns had a dual effect of benefiting the railway companies by increasing passenger volume and of promoting the development of holiday areas that they served. Despite the growth of domestic air travel (and car ownership), the ‘partnership’ between the railways and the main Japanese vacation centres remains a potent force in the country’s leisure markets.

### Subways

Complementing the growth of ‘rural’ leisure-related railway services, communicated through the dissemination of posters as the prime marketing tool, was the establishment of inner city underground systems for urban travellers. The Tokyo subway system pioneered such developments with the opening of the initial Asakusa–Ueno section of today’s Ginza Line in 1927, a further extension to Shimbashi in 1934 by the private Tokyo Underground Railway, and the completion of the line under Tokyo—a breathtaking engineering accomplishment—in 1939. Fig. 5 celebrates 70 years of operation of

Figure 4 Mikawa Railway Summer Travel



Figure 5 Celebrating Seventy Years of the Ginza Line



the Ginza Line and incorporates the original poster advertising the opening of the first section from Asakusa to Ueno. According to the poster, the Tokyoites appeared to have dressed up for the opening!

In 1941, Tokyo's subway operations were transferred to the Teito Rapid Transit Authority, a public corporation known also as 'Eidan'. Figure 6 illustrates a further development of the Eidan commemorating the 1954 opening of Phase 1 of the Marunouchi Line from Ikebukuro to Ochanomizu. Again, it seems that it was very stylish Japanese ladies who planned to take the subway, the railway companies clearly intending to make subway travel synonymous with contemporary fashion.

The final Eidan poster in this selection (Fig. 7) confirms that poster art is not dead as far as the subway is concerned. Dating from the 1990s, this poster shows the temples that can be visited at New Year using the Eidan network. It depicts *hatsumode*, the first New Year's visit to a temple and an important social custom; although younger than the women depicted in the Marunouchi Line poster, the children in this modern poster are no less stylish than their predecessors.

Figure 6 The Opening of the Marunouchi Line 1954



### Posters in the Modern Era

In an era of rapid technological change with TV, computers, and the Internet, one would guess that a simple and old-fashioned advertising medium such as railway posters would go the way of the dinosaurs and disappear completely. However, railway posters have not disappeared, as a stroll through any JR, private or subway station will attest.

Further evidence that the poster remains a powerful medium by which railway companies communicate with their customer base comes from the post-JNR privatization period from both the JR group of companies and their private counterparts. The style theme is continued in the Tobu Railway poster (Fig. 8) showing a modern fashionable lady planning a trip to a scenic avenue of Japanese cedar trees. Apparently more mundane is the contemporaneous Tobu poster (Fig. 9) showing the then new SPACIA train, the message being 'The

Figure 7 EIDAN New Year Celebration Travel



Weight of G—G signifying 'well designed' products approved by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). However, the good design theme also allows us to categorize this recent poster under communication of a commercial objective—travel by Tobu Railway—through a stylish message.

The modern JR posters are no less successful in combining commercial messages with artistic presentation, as seen in Fig. 10, the Full Moon Pass. While living in Japan, my wife and I travelled throughout Japan using a Full Moon Pass visiting amongst many other places, Otaru in Hokkaido, the location of this poster. The final modern JR poster (Fig. 11) contains a message that, more than any other, symbolizes the enduring spirit of Japan—cherry blossom viewing. JR East exhorts us to 'Join up under the cherry blossoms!', an invitation made all the more alluring by the view of the cherry trees in full bloom.

Figure 8 'Fantasy Theatre' —Tobu Railway 1991



Figure 9 SPACIA  
—'The Weight of G' 1990

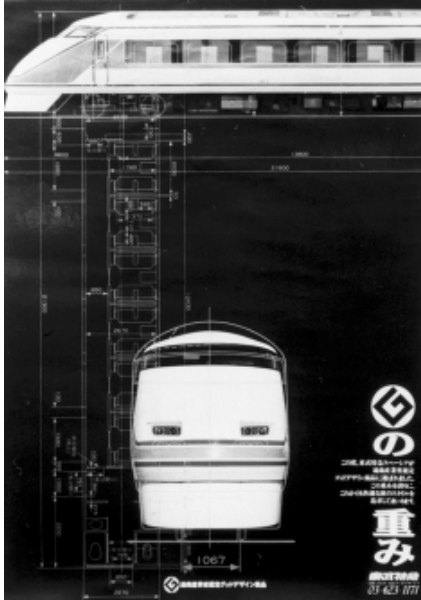


Figure 10 'The Full Moon Pass'  
—JR East



Figure 11 Cherry Blossom Viewing  
—JR East



## Conclusion

The continued use of posters by national and private railways right from the earliest days, through the JNR era and on into the JR era pays testament to the straightforward, visual impact of the railway poster as a powerful form of communication. Long may these posters continue their prime role in railway marketing campaigns, to stimulate our imagination with the delights of rail travel, and to provide decorative lasting images of Japan and its comprehensive railway system. After all, the continuing success of railway posters proves that good art is good for the business of running railway companies. ■

## Figure Notes:

Fig. 1

Original in the collection of Musashino Art University Museum & Library

Figs. 2, 8 and 9

Originals in the collection of Tobu Railway

Figs. 3 and 4

Originals in the collection of Nagoya Railroad Co., Ltd.

Figs 5, 6 and 7

Originals in the collection of The Subway Museum (*Chikatetsu Hakubutsukan*), Tokyo

Figs. 10 and 11

Originals in the collection of JR East

## Acknowledgements:

The author is very grateful to have been able to access the above mentioned collections, and to reproduce the images selected. Acknowledgement is also made to Imashiro Tomoki for his invaluable help in tracking down the main collections of Japanese railway posters, and for photographing a substantial number for use in future publications.

## Note:

The family name is given first in Japanese names in this article.



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Dr Smith is a lecturer in the Business School of Napier University, Edinburgh. His main teaching subjects are International Business and Business Ethics, and he retains a research interest in rail transport. In the early 1990s, he spent 2 years carrying out transport research as a Visiting Scholar at Daito Bunka University, and as Ishikawa Research Fellow of the Institute of Transport Statistics, both in Tokyo. He has published articles in a number of Japanese journals, including past issues of *JRTR*.