

Relationships between Railways and Tourism

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Changes in Travel Styles with Opening of Railways

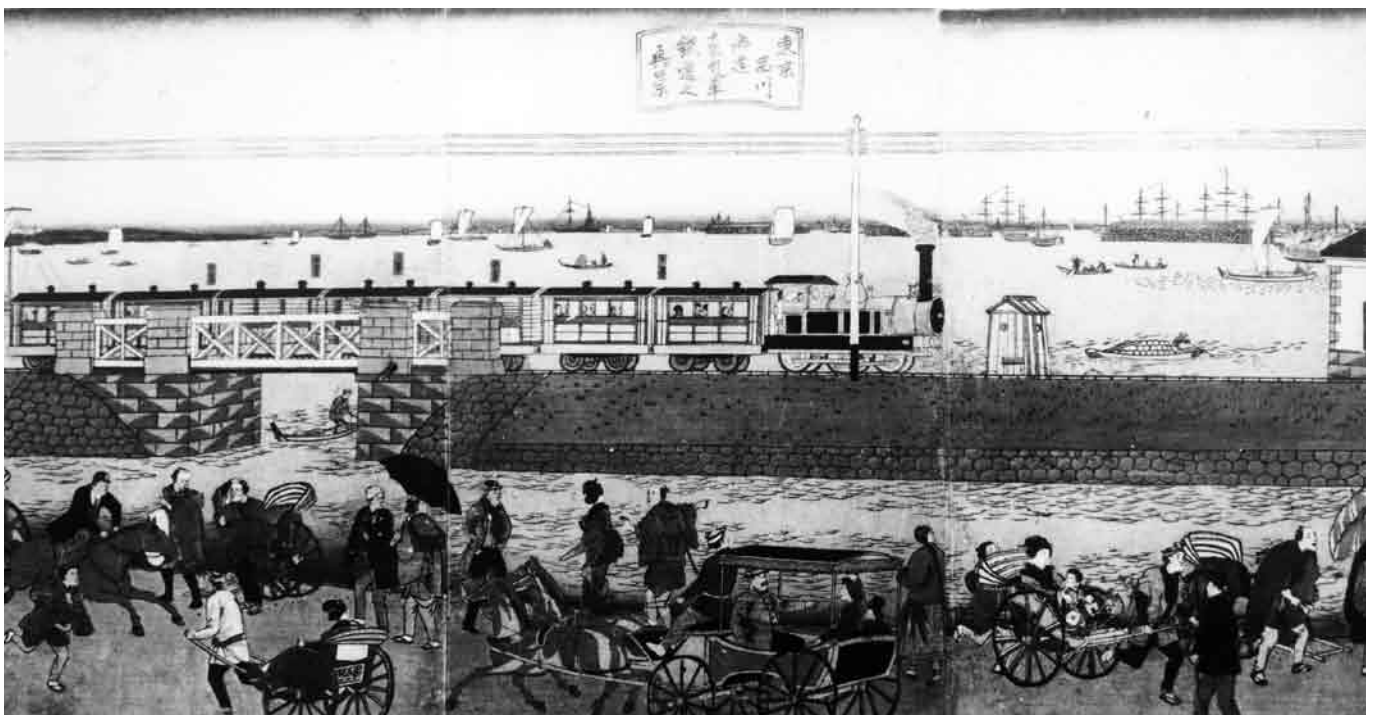
The first section of railway in Japan opened in 1872 between Shimbashi and Yokohama. Just a few years before, Japan of the Tokugawa Shogunate era was still a feudal state ruled by lords and their sword-carrying samurai retainers. The country had been almost completely closed to the rest of the world until the 1858 Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the USA. Even within Japan, there were checkpoints at important locations on major post roads and commoners were forbidden from travelling outside their local regions.

One exception was the popularity of pilgrimages to worship at Ise Shrine, 450 km west of Tokyo, which could be described as the predecessor of tourism today.

With the birth of mass transport by rail just a few years later, the style of travel changed suddenly and the relationship between railways and tourism started as soon as railways began. Records of the time show that operators

put information on sightseeing spots along their lines in pamphlets and in other media to attract passengers and advertise. Fares at the time probably seemed high compared to general price levels of that time and inter-regional business was not as active as today. As a result, creating demand for tourism along lines and increasing passengers was probably an important issue in providing stable growth for railway operators. Active efforts to attract tourists and promote tourism along the lines can be regarded as a tradition that started at that time. Apparently, this was also true outside Japan with tourism promotion and advertising often starting with the opening of railway lines. Even in Australia where I lived 20 years ago, tourism advertising was conducted first by railway operators, such as New South Wales Government Railways.

With the expansion of railways throughout Japan, people could move more easily, boosting social interaction. Timetables also started advertising sightseeing spots near lines and began functioning as general travel guides.



Woodblock print of train running near Shinagawa, south of Tokyo, in 1873

(The Railway Museum)



Students on school excursion train *Hinode* in 1959

(The Railway Museum)

Many Japanese private railway operators, such as Tobu, Odakyu, and Kintetsu, put major effort into boosting and developing tourism in trackside areas. However, this article mainly discusses the involvement and efforts in tourism of the former Japanese National Railways (JNR), which became the JR group of railway operators and subsidiaries in 1987.

Development of Group Tours and Domestic Tourism

How did domestic tourism start in Japan? Japan has a fairly unusual type of travel—school excursions—where groups of students escorted by teachers visit places far from their home region. Such overnight travel allows the students to experience things they do not see in day-to-day life. These school excursions are officially planned and run as part of each school's educational curriculum.

Such school excursions started in 1886 as a 12-day, 11-night round-trip trek from Tokyo to Choshi in Chiba Prefecture run by the Tokyo School of Teachers (later consolidated into Tokyo University of Education, and now University of Tsukuba). No train service was available in that area at the time, but the excursion was implemented to broaden students' experiences and also for the purposes of military training through carrying of training rifles and for improving physical fitness. This rationale was a reflection of the then prevalent idea of a 'prosperous country and

strong army.' As railways expanded, they were used more for school excursions to give young people an opportunity to see the new society of Japan; railways were a symbol of modernization and an effective means of demonstrating the power and prestige of the Meiji government to the nation.

Discounts for student groups started in 1897 and special trains were also run to avoid large student groups mixing with other passengers on already crowded trains.

To meet the growing demand for school excursions effectively, special trains that travelled around major tourist areas were planned in advance. The process of creating travel packages by adding lodging, chartered buses, etc., to these school trains is said to have occurred based on the knowledge and experience fostered by school excursions.

It is said that the world's first travel business was the result of Thomas Cook of England arranging outings to temperance (alcohol abstinence) events, but modern Japan's travel and tourism industry developed from arranging, brokering, transporting, and accommodating school excursions.

Railways were Japan's only form of mass transport until the mid-1960s as automobiles and roads were not fully developed. In the earliest days, making sightseeing trips by rail was beyond the reach of common people and they could not easily travel. Improved railway capacity and the appearance of travel agencies helped bring prices down to a cost that seemed reasonable, spurring demand by creation

of mass transport and block booking for groups. This allowed domestic travel to develop in Japan. The development of group tours by railways probably contributed greatly to establishment of the modern domestic tourism industry as demonstrated by the growth in Japanese domestic tourism and the establishment of travel businesses.

The development of domestic group travel was paralleled by the liberalization of overseas travel for Japanese after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, creating a surge in travel abroad as well as falling prices thanks to services using large and economical Boeing 747 jets.

With the completion of the Tokaido Shinkansen in 1964, Japan's railways saw growing capacity between Tokyo and Osaka. In addition, enhancement of the conventional line limited express network was completed by the October 1968 timetable revision. Both shinkansen and conventional limited expresses carried huge numbers of passengers to the 1970 Osaka Expo as well. Until the Osaka Expo, most Japanese had only been on group tours, but the Expo provided the opportunity for individual travel.

JNR started its 'Discover Japan' media campaign in October 1970 to expand individual travel and offset the expected drop in demand after the end of the Osaka Expo. JNR also worked to promote sales by issuing tickets for travel, including mini-excursion tickets where individual

passengers could get on and off trains freely at any tourist destination in a specified area.

The JNR shinkansen network was expanded during the campaign, starting service to Okayama in 1972 and Hakata in 1975. Meanwhile, women's magazines *an-an* and *non-no* were founded in 1970 and 1971, respectively. These magazines introduced the so-called 'little Kyotos' of various regions, the chic cityscapes of Kurashiki and Hagi, and quiet post towns like Tsumago-juku, and Magome-juku along the old Nakasendo *kaido* (post road), creating the individual 'an-non' travel style for young women (adapted from the names of the two magazines). Many small groups of women came to visit these sightseeing areas and people in those areas are said to have realized the need for town planning targeting women.

The campaign matched the social change that saw expansion of individual travel by women. It changed the Japanese domestic travel market dramatically.

Highway networks gradually expanded across Japan from around 1970 (in line with improvements in automobile and bus performance and comfort) and regional airports were established with comprehensive domestic routes. These developments accelerated the diversification and individualization of travel styles.



Series 0 Tokaido Shinkansen running parallel to Meishin Expressway, which also opened in 1964

(The Railway Museum)



Discover Japan campaign poster

(The Railway Museum)

Changes in Rail Travel Needs with Development of Competing Transport Modes

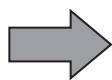
Until the mid 1960s, railways had the major share of domestic long-distance passenger transport with growing volumes. However, the opening of the Meishin Expressway between Shiga Prefecture and Kobe in July 1963 marked

the completion of Japan's first full-scale expressway. Development of Japan's road network had lagged behind that of other countries, so railways until then had a nearly exclusive hold on transport with demand growing year-on-year as the economy grew.

From the mid-1960s, many small and medium-size private railways were forced to close lines due to concentration of

Figure 1 Shift in Passenger Transport by Mode from JNR Era

- Rapid growth of private car transport
- Development of air transport

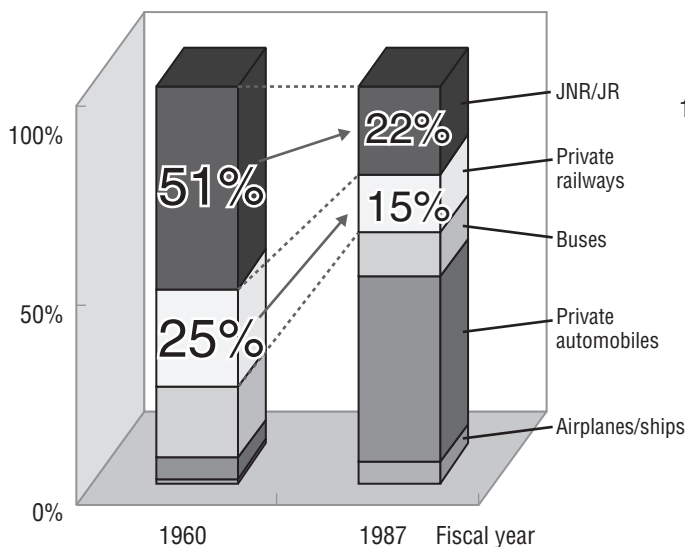


Large drop in JNR share

Modal Shares of Domestic Transport

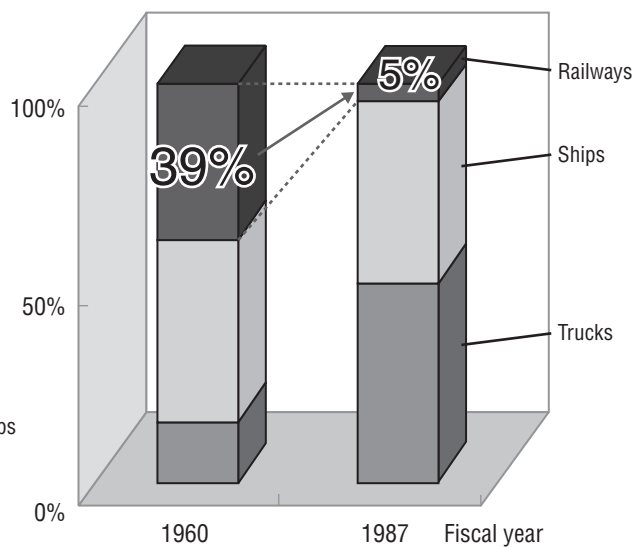
Passenger

(passenger-km)



Freight

(tonne-km)



population in major urban areas accompanying changes in industrial structure during the high economic growth era and falling passenger numbers due to the rise of private car ownership. Long-distance rail transport demand dropped again in the 1970s due to lower air fares, construction of more expressways, expanding air routes connecting regional airports with major urban areas, and an increase in numbers of automobiles and airplanes as real oil prices dropped after the oil shocks of the 1970s.

To help offset these declines by stimulating passenger demand, JNR started a major tourism campaign called 'Destination Campaign' from November 1978 in conjunction with the regional governments of Wakayama Prefecture and local tourism operators.

These 'Destination' campaigns continued after the 1987 creation of the JR group of companies and still run today. The 'Kyo no Fuyu no Tabi (Travel Kyoto in Winter)' campaign for Kyoto City in particular drew an enthusiastic response thanks to efforts by the community and a combination of posters in JNR stations and trains and promotions in mass media, resulting in a major increase in tourists. The annual

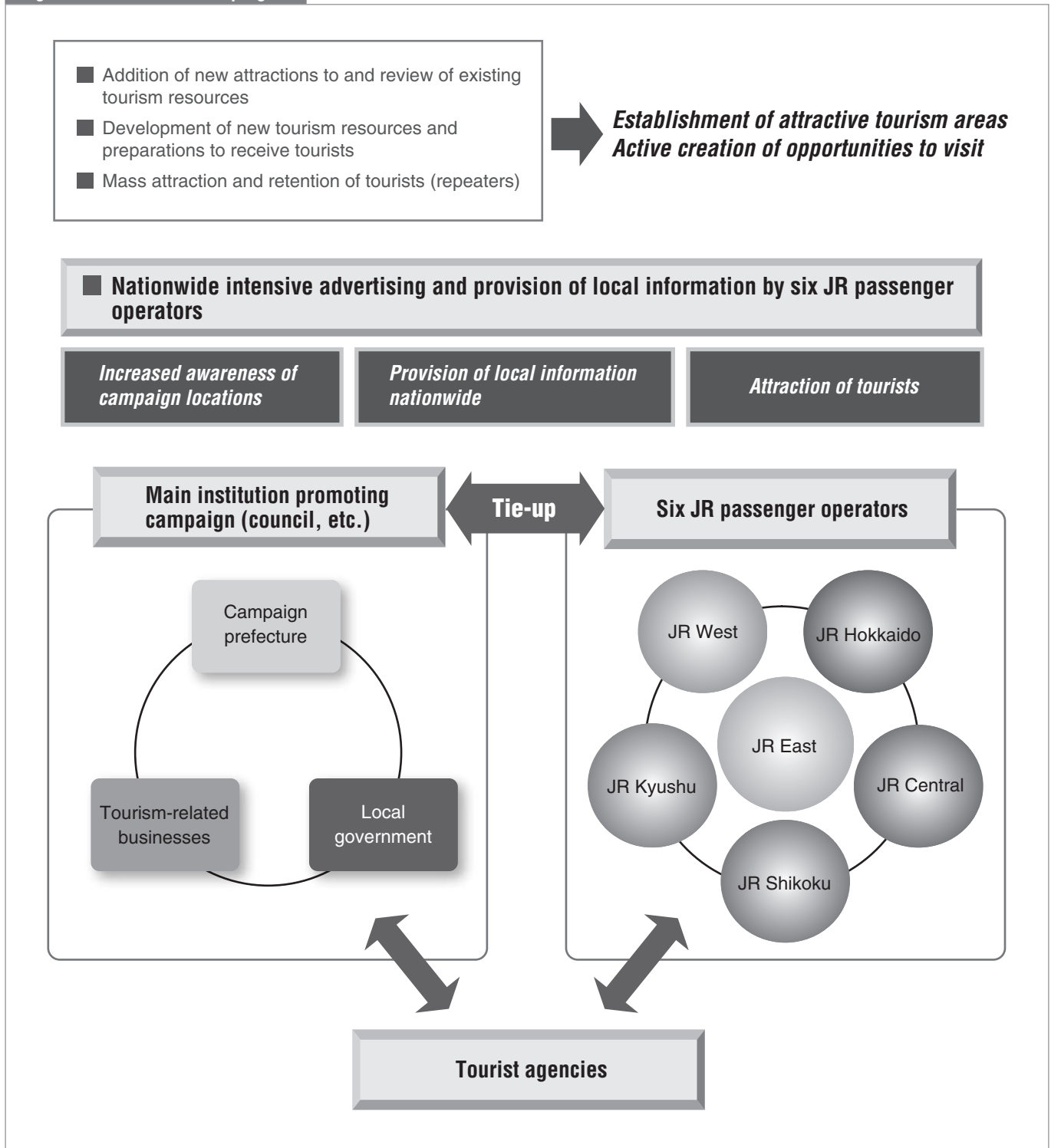
winter event features temples and shrines holding special exhibitions and operation of regularly scheduled tour buses on special routes during what was traditionally the slow winter season. This method has become a model for success in stimulating tourism using railway transport.

JNR's huge accumulated debt became a major issue after 1980 and the resulting annual fare increases and labour disputes drove passengers away. Drives to cut the losses forced closure of unprofitable local lines, putting major tourism campaigns on the back burner.

The timetable revision and other measures in the last days of the JNR era were mainly aimed at reducing the number of trains and promoting efficiency; effective transport measures to increase tourism were visibly absent. The start of low-priced highway bus services across Japan also resulted in a remarkable drop in railway tourism.

During this period the Tohoku and Joetsu shinkansen started operation in 1982 between Omiya (later Ueno, and now Tokyo) and Morioka and Niigata, increasing tourism from greater Tokyo to Tohoku and Niigata. However, the previously strong advantage of railways as a means of

Figure 2 Destination Campaigns



mass transport connecting major urban areas diminished gradually overall.

Meanwhile, JNR also applied discounts to package tours for individuals sold by travel agencies. It began issuing special passes such as the Japan Rail Pass that allows travellers from abroad to get on and off any JNR train as they wish. In 1981, it released the *Full Moon Couples* green pass for older couples that allowed unlimited travel

in first-class Green Cars, creating a boom by the middle aged and elderly. The *Seishun 18* ticket allowing unlimited travel on local and rapid service trains all day during specific periods was released in 1982. In 1983, the *Nice Midi* pass went on sale for groups of women aged 30 or older allowing unlimited travel on all JNR trains. Other measures included the establishment of the *Jipangu Club* for senior citizens, providing discounts on JNR tickets along with



Series E26 *Cassiopeia* sleeper express

(JR East)



Series 251 *Super View Odoriko*

(JR East)



Joyful train *Kirakira Uetsu* using refurbished Series 485

(JR East)

other services. These and other new marketing strategies focused on specific customer segments, creating a great deal of attention. The effect of creating new tourism demand through such strategies was significant and most were continued by the six passenger operators in the JR group of companies after 1987. Since then, the individual companies have worked to create tourism demand in areas along their lines. Joint campaigns by the six operators, include joint discount tickets started in the JNR era. Unfortunately, unlike the JNR era, there are no large-scale campaigns to stimulate domestic travel nationwide.

Roles of Railways and Issues to Overcome

Japan today is experiencing dropping birth rates and population aging along with re-urbanization. As a consequence, large urban railways and some regional small and medium-sized railways are seeing drops in the number of people on lines connecting urban centres with the suburbs.

However, there are still some urban lines with trackside development where volume is still increasing year-by-year. One example is the new 58.3 km Tsukuba Express line connecting Akihabara in Tokyo with Tsukuba in Ibaraki

Prefecture. In some regions, measures to make rail more competitive with road and air have increased volumes. However, these success stories are relatively rare and the overall situation of railways is increasingly severe.

Following the Democratic Party of Japan victory in the general election last August, the new Hatoyama Cabinet has raised the priority of tourism playing a role in Japan's economic growth. Although I am pleased that the new administration is continuing the previous policy of making Japan a country 'good to live in and good to visit,' the prolonged weak economy requires specific and effective measures for stimulating tourism. I believe the role of railways will be increasingly important in meeting these goals.

JR East currently operates the Tohoku and Joetsu as well as Akita/Yamagata and Nagano shinkansen, providing high-speed coverage through most of its area. The shinkansen network will be mostly completed with the extension of the Tohoku Shinkansen between Hachinohe (Aomori Prefecture) and Shin-Aomori at the end of 2010 and the Hokuriku Shinkansen between Nagano and Kanazawa in 2014.

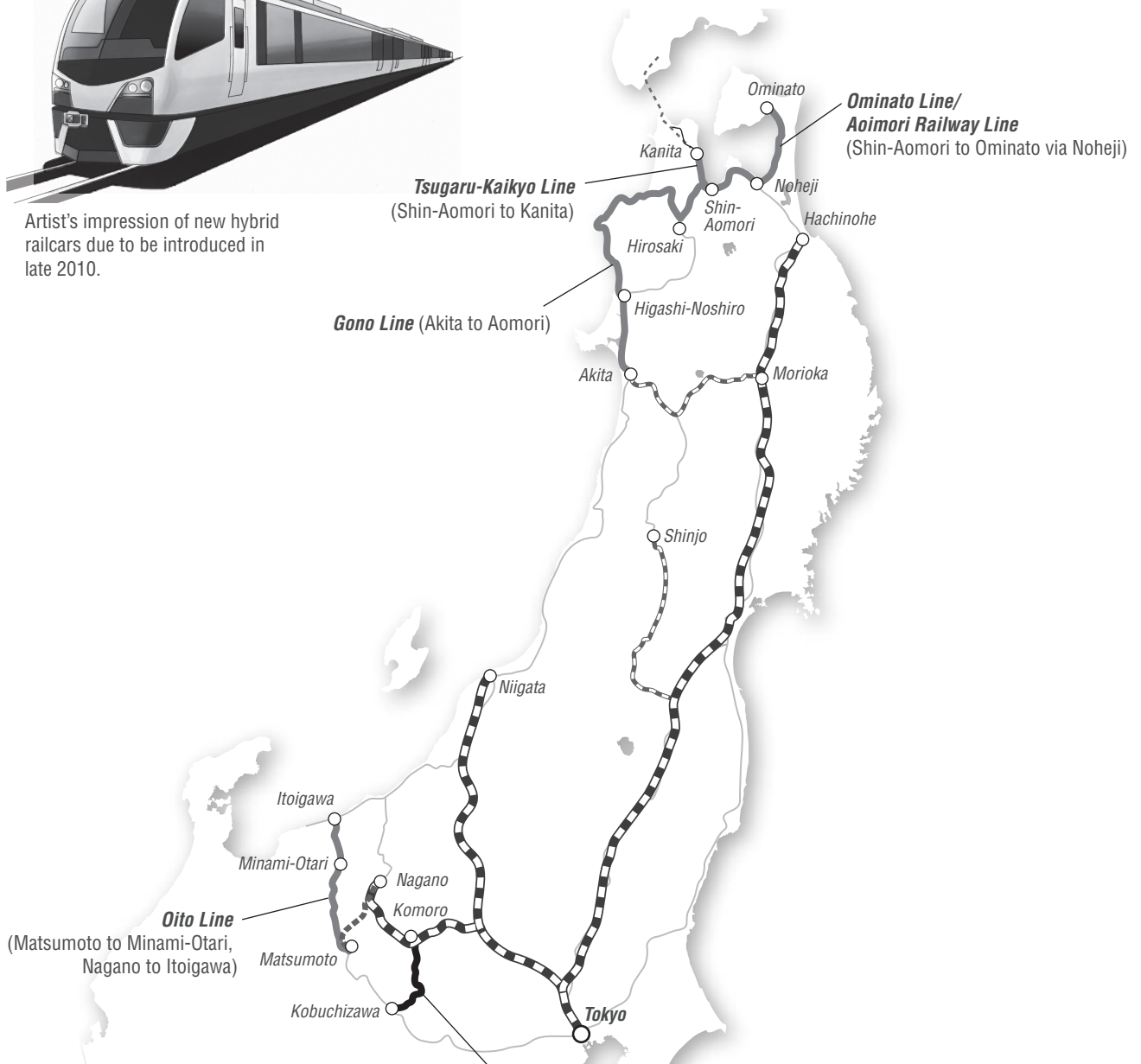
Also, JR East has been making long-term efforts to position the *Hokutosei* and *Cassiopeia* sleeper limited expresses and the *Super View Odoriko* limited express as high added-value products, instead of being viewed merely

Figure 3 Future Resort Train Plans

Planned deployment of new hybrid railcars as resort trains



Artist's impression of new hybrid railcars due to be introduced in late 2010.



Series *Kiha* E200 hybrid railcars (using diesel engine and batteries) in service since 2007 on **Koumi Line** (Kobuchizawa to Komoro)

World's first commercial hybrid rail service!





Class C57 steam locomotive hauling *Ban'etsu Monogatari Go* tourist train
(JR East)

as a means of transport. Unlike the Tokaido Shinkansen, JR East shinkansen have relatively few business travellers to provide a stable income. They are characterized as lines to tourist destinations as well as for intercity transport. Since depopulation is expected to be most severe in regional areas, active measures are being taken to create tourism demand. These include further capture of the senior market, attracting foreign visitors to the JR East area and coordinating and cooperating with the Japan Tourism Agency and local governments to promote revitalization of communities through tourism.

Railways are characterized as high-volume transport linking cities and Greater Tokyo with tourist destinations. As customers' needs become more diversified, tourism is changing from large groups doing the same thing to customized plans tailored to the tastes of individuals, especially targeted tourism offering specific experiences and activities. To present different features of regions as tour products, in 2009 we launched sales of 'travel market' package tours focussing on specific recommendations by tourist destinations. Furthermore, we have enhanced the

'Destination' campaigns that have been simply advertising-centred, creating a system where JR East supports communities and ensuring sustained tourism development after the campaign period.

Connecting the shinkansen network and coordinating with local lines serving the region and with local bus lines is especially important. As part of this effort, we are running special sightseeing trains on lines with attractive trackside views. We are also considering running new special sightseeing trains on lines in Aomori Prefecture with the extension of the Tohoku Shinkansen and on the Oito and Iiyama lines connecting to the Nagano Shinkansen. Our '*Otona no Kyujitsu Club* (Adult Holiday Club)' with about 1 million members further enhances services for *Jipangu Club* members by offering various trips for active seniors, resulting in a growing membership.

Attracting foreign tourists to areas served by JR East, especially regions outside Tokyo, is a major issue. In 2004, we started the JR East Japan Bound Tour Operation Centre. We also actively developed sales of package tours for individuals as well as low-price rail passes. The Operation Centre is working to catch up with the Kansai, Kyushu and Hokkaido regions by attracting foreign visitors to the Tohoku and Shin'etsu regions. We are also pushing forward with setting up English-language information counters at New Tokyo International Airport (Narita) and major stations. Future measures include establishment of large information centres at Tokyo International Airport (Haneda) when the new international terminal is completed in October 2010, as well as at Tokyo Station when restoration is completed in FY2012. We hope these new services will welcome foreign visitors and make travel in the JR East region easier for them.

Of course, JR East will continue strengthening ties with the Japan Tourism Agency, local governments and related companies to grow the tourism sector, which we hope will lead to revitalization of communities countrywide. ■



Hitoshi Saimyo

Mr Saimyo is a deputy general manager in the Management Planning Department at JR East. He also serves as a member of the Committee on Tourism at the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren).