

Tribulations of a Frenchman in Japan*

Dominique Boblet

Like most of his fellow countrymen, the French traveller in Japan is fascinated by anything "Far Eastern". Arriving in Tokyo for the first time, he eagerly checks whether Japan's reputation is true—an ultra-modern country that sets the pace in many fields, with the most efficient organizations, paper houses that shelter "small people" and an earthquake every 5 minutes....

Although he is prepared, the traveller will be surprised and feel out of place more than once. Only after leaving Narita, which is nothing more than an international airport, does he find that the daily transhumance of Parisian commuters is very fluid indeed! He will feel very out of place on discovering that almost no Japanese speak French and very few, English, that he cannot read newspapers or most signposts, and that despite his Paris-experience of Chinese cuisine, he hasn't mastered the use of chopsticks.

He will be astonished to discover that Japan, and particularly Tokyo, is a railway enthusiast's paradise—from the window of the airport bus to Tokyo City Air Terminal, trains cross each other at various levels just like the miniature trains in Christmas shop windows. On discovering Tokyo's railway system, he'll find that it is characterised by two features: crowds and order. The crowds are like a tide of not so small humanity disgorged from railway cars having travelled packed like sardines for as long as 2 hours to get to work—a condition Parisians would never accept. Order because all runs well with hardly a complaint—everyone abides by the rules, waiting in line along marks painted on floors, letting passengers off before getting on.

This would all be unthinkable in Paris given the nature of the French who bump into each other and fly in all directions, everyone for himself. But there is a fly in the ointment, Parisians are used to travelling on a single ticket on all subway lines and would find it difficult buying tickets for transfers from one line to another. And forget the Carte Orange, a transport card sold at a fixed price for a week or a month and good for all travel in the Paris area on buses, subways and trains, irrespective of the number of trips.

If our traveller loves trains, he'll certainly board a Shinkansen at Tokyo or Ueno Station to compare its features with the no less famous TGV. The first difference is the clearance gauge which is wider for the Shinkansen permitting five seats across a carriage compared to four on the TGV. The reason for the wider gauge is historical; until 1958, all tracks in Japan were 1.067 m but when the Japanese decided to build their Shinkansen network, they didn't worry about the existing gauge and

chose what was most practical and comfortable. SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français), or French National Railways, didn't have this freedom of choice; TGVs have to be able to run on high-speed, standard and foreign tracks, so the existing gauge, which is narrower than that of the Shinkansen, had to be respected. These historical constraints are even more severe for the Eurostar TGVs scheduled to run on the Paris-London line through the Channel Tunnel from May 1994, because the British gauge is a few centimeters narrower than the European gauge. In fact, the Japanese have recently had to solve similar problems when, in order to operate the Fukushima-Yamagata line at a reasonable cost, they had to design Mini-Shinkansen fitting the 1.067-m gauge.

The second important difference lies in the train designs. From the outside, the Shinkansen look like standard trains composed of independent cars, but they are motorised along the train to reduce the load per axle and the resultant infrastructure costs. Conversely, the SNCF chose an articulated design where two locomotives are placed at either end of a set of 8 or 10 cars. This means that TGVs have a common carrying bogie supporting the bodies of two adjacent cars. The driving bogies are only at both ends resulting in lighter loads per axle and excellent stability because of the lower center of gravity. This arrangement is also more comfortable for passengers because there are no seats above rolling elements. However, STAR 21, JR East's high-speed experimental prototype, is presently testing a solution similar to the SNCF design.



Orderly queues even during rush hour

Courtesy: JR East

*cf. *Tribulations of a Chinese in China* by Jules Verne

The wider gauge of the Shinkansen means that two-level green cars have been in use in Japan for quite some time whereas two-level TGVs will only start operating in 1996.

Another less apparent difference is that Shinkansen can only run under the overhead lines they were designed for, which means that our traveller must transfer at Tokyo Central between the *Tokaido* and *Tohoku-Joetsu* lines which are electrified differently. In France, all TGVs are two-current type because two methods are used to feed overhead lines. And since much of older Europe has other types of electrification, many of the international rolling stock can run under three or four different currents¹.

The Shinkansen provide our traveller to Osaka with two more pleasant surprises. First, the number of trains. The *Hikari* and *Kodama* trains run at such short intervals that the service is like a high speed RER, the Parisian Express Regional Subway. But of course, the population of the *Tokai* region alone is the same as that of all France. Second, any train can be ridden without a reservation. This is a great benefit compared to the TGV where the traveller needs a seat reservation or must pay a fine. However, this concept is changing and on the new *Nozomi*, one must have a seat reservation just like in France.

Comfortably seated, our traveller can enjoy the service and politeness of the on board staff. These aspects derive from Japanese culture. However, the sites from the window are disappointing, although the viaduct construction of the *Tokaido* Shinkansen gives a commanding view of the surroundings. In contrast to the French countryside, all that can be seen is a continuous succession of small grey houses for 500 km, which explains why the engineers had to reduce the speed of the Shinkansen in order to comply with noise standards. Since the TGV does not run through heavily-populated areas, it can maintain speeds of 300 km/h and even 320 km/h in the very near future on the North Europe sectors.

But our traveller is not here just for sightseeing—he is on business too and is about to make many more interesting discoveries. In France, we are not used to working with *shosha*, the obligatory intermediaries for all import and export business in Japan; we are used to doing busi-



■ 2+3 seating shinkansen car

Courtesy: JR Central

ness directly with the customer. The *shosha* system is not entirely a constraint and its disadvantages are to some extent overcome by advantages like the commercial assistance provided during discussions, the knowledge of Japanese procedures, the absence of worries linked to transport, customs clearance and commissioning, etc.

The area where our traveller has greatest difficulty is in answering the detailed questions asked by his Japanese interlocutors. First, can our businessman traveller make the necessary modifications to his product? Since Japanese don't like to change their habits, they always try to make foreigners join their system such as national standards, profes-

sional regulations, working styles. A quick and accurate answer is de rigueur, and it is not always easy to overcome jet lag and find an instant technical solution. A simple affirmation won't do—reasons, supporting arguments, calculations and diagrams will all be needed. Japanese-style answers to questions with no apparent relevance may also be necessary.

At this stage, many foreign businessmen visiting Japan give up, sit back and just enjoy the travel. But a little perseverance can quickly evolve into mutual trust and understanding of each other's problems leading to a fruitful business relationship that makes train travel in Japan even more enjoyable and "Japan...c'est possible"². ■

Notes ¹ TGV Sud-Est Two Current,	: 25 kV 50 Hz/1500 V (France)
TGV Sud-Est Three Current	: 25 kV 50 Hz/1500 V (France)
	: 15 kV 16 2/3 Hz (Switzerland)
TGV Réseau, Two-level TGV	: 25 kV 50 Hz/1500 V (France)
Eurostar TGV	: 25 kV 50 Hz (France)
	: 3000 V (Belgium)
	: 750 V (UK)
TGV PBKA (Paris, Brussels,	: 25 kV 50 Hz (France)
Köln, Amsterdam)	: 1500 V (Netherlands)
	: 3000 V (Belgium)
	: 15 kV 16 2/3 Hz (Germany)

²"La SNCF, c'est possible" — a popular French commercial for SNCF



Dominique Boblet

Mr Boblet was born in 1939. He studied civil and mechanical engineering at Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Nancy and joined the French National Railways (SNCF). After working in the SNCF for construction of new lines and upgrading of existing trunk lines, he moved to Geismar, the manufacturer of track construction and maintenance equipments, and now he is Managing Director of the company. Through his jobs with SNCF and Geismar, he has travelled across the world and has visited 64 countries.