

Exploring how the world's first bullet train captivated the globe

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The train—frequently referred to as the “dream super-express” by the Japanese press—was completed in 1964 and made it possible to move more people faster. Credit: Kenny Kuo on Unsplash

In the lead-up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Japan was abuzz with anticipation. But it wasn't just the upcoming games that was generating excitement. People across Japan, and the globe, were also eagerly waiting for the launch of "Tōkaidō Shinkansen"—the world's very first bullet train.

But in an era of luxury jet travel and a race to be the first country to land on the moon, how did a train capture the imaginations of people across the globe?

A new book—titled "Dream Super-Express: A Cultural History of the World's First Bullet Train" by Jessamyn Abel, associate professor of Asian studies at Penn State—examines the stories of the people affected by the technological advancement, to help find the answer.

And the answer, Abel found, was complicated.

"The train ended up meaning different things to different people," Abel said. "This was a time when Japan was in the process of recovering from World War II, about to host the Olympics, and trying to show how well the country was doing. And this train was something they could show to the world and prove that they were making a comeback."

The train—frequently referred to as the "dream super-express" by the Japanese press—was completed in 1964. It ran from Tokyo to Osaka, shortening the [travel time](#) between the two biggest cities in Japan from seven hours to three. This made it possible to move more people faster, helping to relieve a transportation bottleneck that had been building on the main industrial transportation route.

According to Abel, the bullet train's track is located on the most densely populated and densely industrialized strip of Japan. While there was already a railroad running between the cities, it wasn't enough to move

people and goods to their destinations. The new bullet train helped alleviate this pressure and ended up changing the way people thought about their country at the same time.

"The new ability to visit one of these cities and return home all on the same day helped change the way people thought about space," Abel said, "both the geographical space between Tokyo and Osaka and the relationship and position of those cities to each other and within the nation of Japan."

But in her research, Abel also found the new railroad wasn't a blessing for everyone. In order to build the new tracks and corresponding stations, construction crews had to forge a path through the landscape, including land that was already occupied. Houses, businesses and whole communities were destroyed in the effort to build the new track.

While the original planned route didn't go through Kyoto, Abel said city leaders lobbied to have the train go through and make a stop there to help add a "global sheen of modernity" to the ancient city's reputation. But, Abel wrote, that was probably "cold comfort for those whose communities were destroyed, families evicted, or businesses ruined" by the newly forged tracks.

Abel said one of the things that surprised her while researching the book was how much the train inspired not just dreams about the future, but memories of the past.

In 1931, the Japanese empire invaded and eventually created a puppet state in the Chinese province of Manchuria, lasting until the end of the war in 1945. Under Japanese control, the South Manchurian Railway began running a luxury express train that was the third-fastest in the world and superior to any in Japan.

"Having the fastest train in the world made people think back to a previous moment of railroad glory: of the super express in Japanese-occupied Manchuria," Abel said. "The bullet train seemed to trigger two very different kinds of nostalgia. Some people thought back in a rosy way of what they saw as the successes of the empire. But others were thinking back to the pain and misery of wartime."

Abel said that while she was excited to learn about the experiences of people who were directly impacted by the train, she was also interested in exploring the significance and impact of infrastructure on society.

By the time the bullet train was built, Abel explained, the airline industry was booming and Japan was even beginning to develop a space program. Railroads, even at that time, were seen as an old, declining form of infrastructure. Still, the "dream super-express" enchanted the public.

"The bullet train was built to move people at high speeds from one city to another, but it also moved people's hearts and minds in more subtle ways," Abel wrote. "It conveyed meanings, instilled feelings, and evoked emotional responses. Those intangible and malleable historical, social, and cultural functions are the subject of this book."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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