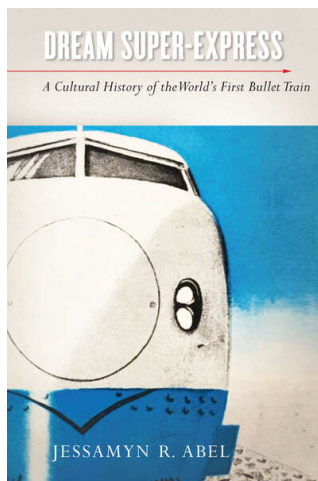


Jessamyn R. Abel, *Dream Super-Express: A Cultural History of the World's First Bullet Train* Stanford CA: Weatherhead East Asian Institute/Stanford University Press, 2022. 302 pp.  
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Japan's Shinkansen 'bullet train', which opened in 1964 in time for the Tokyo Olympics, achieved iconic status both within the country and in other parts of the globe. Nostalgic shots of the train passing in front of Mt. Fuji became one of the key representations of Japan's technological advancement and high-speed growth for contemporaries and remain familiar images into the twenty-first century. Previous scholarly work has offered significant insights into the economic and political context of the Shinkansen's construction and operation, as well as its technological advances, but *Dream Super-Express* breaks new ground in focusing on its cultural history, honing in on the imaginings and dreams associated with technological development and infrastructure building in post-war Japan. A project originally intended to solve a transportation bottleneck seen as impeding industrial growth thus becomes a window through which we view broader aspects of Japan's cultural, economic, social, and political history in the second half of the twentieth century. This story of the bullet train draws on a wide range of historical sources, makes clear its value-added in the context of the existing literature, and offers a

coherent and well thought through narrative that allows the story of the Shinkansen to be embedded in a host of broader and significant issues.

The core content of the book is spread across five chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the political contestation and popular protest that were associated with the building of the line, using Kyoto as a case study to shed light on the existence of disputes between localities and the center. While viewed in many localities as likely to have positive effects, the new railroad could also be regarded as having a negative impact, demonstrating the multiplicity of responses and feelings towards this new infrastructure. Kyoto's special historical and cultural status, and the original decision to locate the nearest bullet-train stop outside the city, raised deep-rooted questions regarding the importance of historical traditions and the need for central planners and decision-makers to go beyond the traditional top-down approach invariably used by central governments and organizations in Tokyo. The second chapter expands the geographical focus to consider the ways in which the new line impacted on the Tōkaidō region as a whole, and on the diversity of local identities within it. It becomes clear that construction of the new line had major implications for the overall process of centralization and urbanization in Japan, and intensified fears that it would fail to deliver the kind of dispersal and distribution of benefits to which some of its architects had aspired. Abel shows how the refusal to sell land for construction emerged as a form of resistance, closely tied to growing fears over homogenization and the

erasing of local differences. The line highlighted the fundamental tensions between economic development, and the visions of a single unified Tōkaidō space associated with it, and the preservation of tradition and individual and local interests. These tensions were closely associated with the emerging debates over Japan as an information society, which is the topic of Chapter 3. Planners and others had contrasting visions of the role of information in society. The development of the Shinkansen project became entwined with national debates on democracy and economic development as the bullet train was conceived by many as a key part of the nation's neural system, as it were, raising broader issues of mobility, freedom and control. While the architect Tange Kenzō and the politician Tanaka Giichi sought to identify potential virtues in the Shinkansen's contribution to mobility and information flow, the urban sociologist Isomura Eiichi emphasized the risks of administrative and cultural centralization posed by the information society, as well as the perpetuation or exacerbation of economic and social inequalities, with control of information often allowing the powerful to oppress the weak.

Chapter 4 moves beyond the imaginings within Japan itself to consider ways in which the planning and imaging of the bullet train linked in to pre-war and wartime experiences, effectively embedding itself within what the author terms a 'nostalgia for Imperial Japan'. Selective memories of Manchuria's pre-war Asian Express and the planned domestic bullet train eventually abandoned in 1943 were linked to the new 1960s train through a similar rhetoric of technological superiority and national spirit. While the Asia Express had undoubtedly served as a tool of Japanese imperialism, however, the post-war discourse emphasized instead its positive contribution and the quality of travelling experience it offered, while accounts of the aborted domestic line emphasized the hardships and valor associated with the early construction efforts. Both were identified in the post-war years as laying the foundations for the new bullet train. But the international imaginings of the new line were in turn also shaped by a vigorous cultural diplomacy that sought to change global perceptions of Japan that still bore the legacy of the Pacific and Second Sino-Japanese wars. Chapter 5 shows how the bullet train was used to convey a new image of Japan as a technological leader, and in countries such as the US helped to establish Japan as a source of technical expertise and a model to be followed. This process, however, as the author shows, was associated with both opportunities and risks. There was an inherent ambiguity in the fact that the bullet train was built with an \$80 million World Bank development loan while Japan at the same time was providing overseas technical assistance to other countries in Asia. The technological profile that was closely associated with the country's economic growth could clearly help promote relations with other countries, but in the case of the US in particular came up against a reluctance to go against the old stereotypes. Japanese technological leadership could also be regarded as a threat, as demonstrated in growing concerns about the country's high-tech exports. The book's conclusion emphasizes the continuities in many of the tropes discussed through the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Discourses regarding the Maglev show many similarities, and the same emphasis on the ongoing role of technology as soft power, and a broader nostalgia in relation to infrastructure development, resonating with China's more recent attempts to utilize replication of train technology with a view to enhancing the global influence of the People's Republic. Monumentalizing infrastructure, Abel concludes, continues not only to have enormous potential but also to pose the possibility of considerable failings.

*Dream Super-Express* sets out its objectives clearly and does an excellent job of achieving those objectives. It is well-written and accessible and makes excellent use of the wide range of historical sources on which it draws. I was particularly impressed, for example, with the imaginative use of contemporary writing and television media in chapter 3 to demonstrate the conflicts and the ambiguous outcomes of construction. Fiction, archival materials and contemporary periodicals are carefully utilized in conjunction with extensive secondary literature both to tell the story of how the construction of the Shinkansen was imagined and interpreted and to locate that story in the context of broader issues of cultural history and technological development. Above all, this book makes a major contribution to our understanding of 1960s Japan by embedding the bullet train in its time and place. The reader gets a real feel for the excitement and enthusiasm that it generated along with the fears and concerns that were provoked at the same time. The discussion brings home the extent to which this was a period of transition in Japan, as well as

one characterized by tensions, contradictions, and contestation. With the bullet train as a window through which we are shown the ambiguities that characterized this period of Japan's history, we are also shown the diversity of individual and local responses and experiences, a diversity often obscured by official rhetoric on the nation's international representation and recurrent assumptions about 'the Japanese'. Like the citizens of other countries, those in Japan had a multiplicity of experiences, responding to the constraints that they faced as individuals and groups of individuals. The story of the bullet train also brings home the extent to which the legacy of the war continued to cast a long shadow while new possibilities were generated by economic growth and the policies of the Cold War. The economic growth and technological superiority that was so closely tied to the bullet train was, as shown by the reliance on a World Bank development loan, in itself highly ambiguous. Was Japan in 1964 a technological leader or still a developing economy? In truth in the early 1960s it was both, as testified by visitors who witnessed for themselves the toll exacted on many Japanese not only by the privations of war but by the harsh conditions of industrial and agricultural labor that continued to be widespread. The Shinkansen may have been the world's most advanced rail system, but the average income of the individual Japanese in the early 1960s was little more than a third of that of the average US citizen. Perhaps the most important contribution of *Dream Super-Express*, therefore, is to bring home the realities and tensions of this challenging period of Japanese history, replete with, to use the author's words (p.228), both the "potentials and failings of monumentalizing infrastructure."

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