
Recent renewed interest in mobility has brought attention to the meanings, bodily experiences and representations of movement in general, including the role of transportation in understanding daily life. It is within this context that we find Alisa Freedman’s cultural and literary history of pre-war Tokyo as revealed through its evolving mass transit system. She navigates the city’s early commuter trains and buses to argue that the daily commute in pre-war Japan, which forced strangers unsegregated by class or gender to share an intimate space, changed how people saw both each other and the urban changes around them. Mass transportation inspired writers and other artists of the time and has played an important part in defining modern Tokyo in the decades since. Turning briefly to the ideas of Michel de Certeau about the practices of everyday life, Freedman argues that we can learn much about the meanings of the lived urban experience by closely studying depictions of pre-war commuters. The depictions Freedman uses are mostly works of fiction by a handful of authors not necessarily known for their transit-inspired stories, including Mori Ogai, Kobayashi Takiji, Natsume Sōseki, Hayashi Fusao, and Kawabata Yasunori. She analyses these authors’ lives and their works alongside guidebooks, newspapers, gazetteers, comics, photographs, train and bus timetables and more to explain the transportation network’s role in modernising Japanese society, including public behaviour and the construction of gendered stereotypes.

The book encompasses the years 1900–1940, but it focuses on two periods of especially dramatic growth: the years immediately following the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and the years after the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923). A Tokyo constantly in transition passes by the reader via Freedman’s carefully selected and explained depictions of its transit system. The book consists of an introduction and four chapters, but no conclusion. The introduction provides an overview of Tokyo’s mass transportation system, including its origins and current importance, as well as the social practices, cultural artefacts and literary depictions it has engendered up to the present. After some delay, Freedman returns to her thesis and outlines the remainder of the book. Chapter 1 describes the early development of the transit system and the emerging categories of salaryman and schoolgirl. Chapter 2 examines the coinciding bodily mobility of male university students and their concerns about the “failed promises of socioeconomic mobility” (p. 23). Chapter Three explores written accounts of Shinjuku Station, a critical node in the transportation network with particular cultural and social importance. Chapter 4 hops on Tokyo’s buses, turning its gaze on female bus conductors, or ‘bus girls’, and describing their simultaneous role(s) as “modern girls in motion, model employees, exploited laborers, and figures of nostalgia” (25). Freedman ends the book with the first English translation of Kawabata Yasunori’s novella The Corpse Introducer, a dark tale about two female bus conductors, a frequent object of the gaze of both bus riders and writers. Freedman’s analysis of the story is included in Chapter Four, but the novella could be read on its own. Given her goal of capturing the sights, sounds, and emotions of the era through its transportation-inspired literature, the inclusion of Kawabata’s story is not out of place, although this reviewer would have appreciated a final chapter to conclude the entire book.

Freedman’s overall goal is ambitious: “To prove that examining depictions of prewar Tokyo businessmen, women workers, and students and mass transportation together
provides much insight into ways in which the urban experience has shaped human identity, literary movements, and material culture” (17). By portraying the history of Tokyo’s mass transportation system through literature, Freedman enlivens what some might consider a dull topic. The pieces she interprets paint a vivid picture of the trains, stations, buses and commuters of the era. However, contradictions emerge in Freedman’s argument. For instance, she claims depictions of Tokyo’s rapidly expanding mass transportation system and riders illuminate “how individuals experienced urban modernity and capture otherwise unrecorded aspects of daily life” (17). Here, she claims that literature, which inscribes “ordinary people into the annals of history” (19), enables us to understand ordinary people’s experiences of modernity. However, she later wavers on precisely what this process of inscription entails and how much understanding of daily life is possible via these depictions. In fact, she admits she is “more concerned with cultural images of new gender roles than with the ideas and experiences of actual members of these groups,” (30) and that most portrayals of students, salarymen, bus conductors, and others of the time were extreme caricatures, “reflecting but also parodying lived reality” (30).

This disconnect may lead readers to question how much literature can reveal about the daily lives of Tokyo’s commuters and their experience of modernisation. In fact, one might argue the book provides more insight into the writers who represented commuters than the commuters themselves. Freedman relies on the stories of particularly well-educated, highly literate and incredibly observant authors who inscribe commuters for their own and future generations. This is not to detract from the beautiful depictions produced by these writers who were inspired by the social experiment enabled by Tokyo’s expanding mass transit system. It is only to temper Freedman’s claims about how much these accounts reveal about the actual lived experience of everyday Tokyoites. 

Tokyo in Transit will be useful for scholars of Japan’s early twentieth century, especially those interested in urbanisation, literature and mass culture. The book could be assigned in graduate seminars related to Japanese modernity and everyday life, and graduate students attempting to integrate Japanese history and literature will find the work insightful. Finally, general readers fascinated with Tokyo’s transit network may enjoy the book for its combination of transport literature and encyclopaedic facts, like the first daily departure of the Chūō line in 1907 (4:45am), the fare on the Tokyo Horse-Drawn Railway in 1903 (three sen), and the year automatic ticket machines were introduced in Tokyo (1925). Unfortunately, Tokyo in Transit is too narrow in historical and geographical focus to appeal to non-Japan specialists. It does not seriously engage with wider scholarship in the humanities and social sciences on mobility, nor does it substantially develop theories about the practice of everyday life. That said, it is an enjoyable read that provides great detail on how Tokyo became the vast, highly accessible metropolis it is today.

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