

Old Man Thunder: Father of The Bullet Train

Bill Hosokawa, Published by Sogo Way, Denver, Colorado,
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By Ikemi Kiyoshi

Japan celebrated two historic events in 1964: the hosting of the first summer Olympic Games ever held in Asia and the launching of a new "bullet train" service between Tokyo and Osaka. Shinkansen (which literally means "new trunk line" but is known as the Bullet Train everywhere else in the world) has subsequently been extended to cover many other parts of the country, and the author says that in the 30 years since its first scheduled run on October 1, 1964, the *shinkansen* has "covered 650 million miles – the equivalent of 1,300 round trips between Earth and the Moon. They have carried 2.8 billion passengers without a single fatality..."

This book is about Sogo Shinji (1884-1981), the man who pushed the idea of building an entirely new railway line over the 320-mile distance between Japan's two largest cities in defiance of a conventional view that railways had become an outmoded means of moving people. While in the United States a plan to build a national highway system "sounded the death knell of American railroad passenger service," even in Japan Sogo was "among the few who were convinced railroads would remain Japan's primary mode of transportation."

Bill Hosokawa says Sogo "had chutzpah in the sense that, in pursuit of what he believed was best for his country, he flaunted convention in a land where and a time when conformity was the only accepted mode for respect and success. Nurtured in a society built on reverence for precedent, protocol, and for strict adherence to rules, he rose through the ranks of government bureaucracy. Yet there were early hints of underlying rebellion and independence. In the final years of service to his country, he dared to mislead tradition-bound superiors, without zealotry, because he was convinced that what they were about to do was a mistake."

While the book is primarily about the

biography of Sogo, the author skillfully combines his life with many important events in modern Japanese history, and gives a detailed description of Japanese society during the late 19th century and early 20th century.

In connection with Sogo's service at the Manchuria Railway from 1930 to 1934, Hosokawa reviews the role played by that railway in protecting Japan's interests in northeastern China following its victory in the Russo-Japanese war, how Japan's elite Kwantung Army became powerful and instrumental in the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932, how the China Development Co., which Japan founded to promote economic development in China, helped the Japanese army march into northern China, and how General Tojo Hideki, ex-commander of the Kwantung Army, rose to head the government which declared war against the United States.

These passages give readers a clear understanding of the events leading up to Japan's military expansion into China and other parts of Asia, and ultimately to its entering into war in the Pacific.

Hosokawa also writes in detail how Sogo was able to finish school because his elder brother sacrificed himself, the way Sogo chose a woman to marry despite a firmly established rule of a father selecting a son's spouse, and how his wife Kiku served him and his parents.

These features make this book quite enlightening and revealing to those who are interested in the basic historical facts of Japan from the time it was struggling to emerge from centuries of feudalism to its rise as a major power, to the devastation it suffered in World War II and to a remarkable recovery in the postwar years.

In 1955, Sogo, at the age of 71, was pulled out of his retirement and named to head the Japanese National Railways (JNR) just as Japan was barely starting

economic reconstruction. He immediately revived his long-cherished dream of building an entirely new, standard gauge railway line between Tokyo and Osaka. In the process, however, he had to fight a lot of red-tape. When his subordinates estimated that the total costs would come to ¥300 billion, he ordered that a final plan to be submitted to the National Diet for approval call for a budget of ¥194.8 billion. The reason: the lawmakers would surely reject a huge sum like ¥300 billion but would probably accede to the smaller sum. Sogo insisted that the "important thing is get the job started."

The groundbreaking ceremony for the new railway line was held in 1959. The Diet funded additional sums of money, while Sogo successfully persuaded the World Bank to provide a loan of \$80 million for the project which the bank was not initially enthused by.

His term as president of JNR expired only a year before the first scheduled run of the train on the new track. An official ceremony celebrating the start of the new service was attended by the Emperor, the Empress and "a bevy of cabinet ministers, politicians, and Railways Ministry officials." Sogo, the "Old Man Thunder," was also there but "sitting with the lesser guests." In the euphoria of the occasion, he was noticed "by hardly anyone." Nor was he invited to cut the ribbon to free the 16-car train to head down the track.

Hosokawa concludes his book with these words: "Sogo is not to be found in words or monuments, but in the safe, reliable, swift-moving, pulsating shinkansen transportation system that unites his nation as nothing else can."

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