

the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the Americans dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, along with the assorted bits and pieces of information that they might have gleaned from Grandma and Grandpa's dinner table stories—this book affords all students the opportunity to visit Japan and the Japanese during World War II. While many of our history books often present a general overview of life and times in America during the war years, few offer even a general commentary on what life was like during this period for the Japanese. To the best of my knowledge, there are very few first-hand accounts from Americans who actually lived in Japan during the war years. This in itself makes *Bridge to the Sun* a valuable document.

This being said, *Bridge to the Sun* is not just about World War II and one family's fight to survive. In many ways it is larger than that, for it is the story of every family that has ever been entangled in the jaws of war. ■

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Old Man Thunder

Father of the Bullet Train

By Bill Hosokawa

DENVER: SOGO WAY, 1997
MAPS, INDEX, GLOSSARY. 224 PAGES

Its official name is *Shinkansen* ("New Trunk Line"), but its sleek lines and distinctively shaped front end make it instantly recognizable as the Bullet Train even outside Japan. It began operation on October 1, 1964, just before the Tokyo Olympics opened. Both the train and the Olympics signaled Japan's remarkable recovery from the devastation of World War II in less than two decades. Yet few people outside Japan are aware of how the Bullet Train came to be built and even less that it was due primarily to the vision and tenacity of one man: Sogo Shinji.

Sogo's life and career paralleled the transformation of Japan from an agricultural to a high-tech country. Born on a farm on Shikoku (the smallest of the four main islands) in 1884, he escaped his rural environs through the selflessness of his older brother and graduated near the top of his class at Tokyo Imperial University. He was hired by the new Railway Agency in 1906 and helped consolidate the many private lines that had proliferated. In 1916 he went to the United States and spent a year studying

administration and finance. Posted to Dairen (Dalian), China, in 1930 to serve as a director of the South Manchurian Railroad, he saw firsthand how the Kwantung Army ruthlessly exploited the puppet state of Manchukuo. He tried, with limited success, to help China develop its economy, but was ultimately frustrated by the militarism and ultranationalism that led to all-out war, first against China, then against the United States and its allies.


During the first part of the war he headed a volunteer student group that undertook public works projects. He left Tokyo briefly during the early part of the Occupation, but returned in 1946 and resumed work for Japan's railroads until high blood pressure forced him to retire. A series of disasters involving Japan National Railways in 1954 led to the resignation of its president as the traditional means of accepting responsibility. Sogo, his health improved, was persuaded to assume the post the following year, although he was then seventy-one years old. His years of experience in rail transportation, administration, and dealing with politicians well suited him to oversee this aspect of the revitalization that was crucial to Japan's economic recovery from the war, and he needed to call on all these resources for his vision of a standard-gauge, high-speed passenger train to be realized. Its success is unquestioned now, but Sogo had to fight entrenched bureaucrats and elected officials—sometimes with guile and adroit maneuvering but with consummate patience—to see the project through to completion. His patience, though, did not always extend to his subordinates. His tirades earned him the affectionate nickname, "Old Man Thunder."

This, in broad outline, is the narrative presented by Bill Hosokawa, a Japanese-American journalist. He explains in the Introduction that he first became aware of Sogo on a visit to Japan in 1964 to research an article for *Reader's Digest* on the nearly completed high-speed train. (His article appeared in the August 1965 issue.) He didn't meet Sogo on that trip, but by chance Sogo's son retired to Denver, where Hosokawa worked as a journalist, and asked him to write a book about the elder Sogo. The younger Sogo's wife translated a biography of Sogo written by a noted Japanese writer, but additional research was needed to flesh out the story. What Hosokawa found out and wove into his biography makes the story of Sogo Shinji and how he almost single-handedly built the Bullet Train more dramatic and well worth reading by advanced secondary and collegiate-level students who have some knowledge about Japan. Those who teach about Japan can also benefit from reading it for the reasons given below. The author is careful to explain things a general reader might not know, and there is a glossary and list of terms. Note, however, that in the text and in the list of Chinese names, "Chang Jiang" is given as the Wade-Giles or Postal Atlas rendering, and "Yangtze River" as the Pinyin version. It is the other way around.

Besides being an engrossing story of a determined man who succeeded despite obstacles, *Old Man Thunder* can be recommended on other grounds as well. The reader can learn through the experiences of Sogo Shinji some important elements

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of Japanese history and politics during the last century. As a university student, army draftee, official in the South Manchurian Railway, and finally as the president of Japan National Railway, Sogo's life provides details that never appear in standard texts. Of particular interest is the insight Hosokawa gives to the workings of Japanese politics: Sogo's need to deal with both elected politicians and civil servants reveals much about the interaction of these two elements of Japan's governmental system.

And finally there is the fascination with the Bullet Train itself, which this reviewer has ridden. Information available for the first thirty years of operation (1964–94) states that almost three billion passengers had been transported more than a trillion kilometers (650 million miles) without a single fatality. (According to a Web site consulted in preparation of this review, one person was killed in 1995, falling off a platform just ahead of a train.) During rush hour, trains leave Tokyo and Osaka at precise six-minute intervals. The fastest schedule (i.e., with the fewest stops) averages 205 kph (128 mph); the slowest about 154.5 kph (96.6 mph). A bank of computers controls each train's speed, using sophisticated sensors located all along the route. There have been no collisions. Welded rails cushioned against concrete ties provide a smooth, quiet ride. Although the original line extended just 515 kilometers (322 miles) from Tokyo to Osaka, it has since been extended to 2,260 kilometers (1,412 miles) from the southern island of Kyushu to the northern part of Honshu, the main island, with further extensions both under construction and being planned.

As a marvel of modern transportation, the Bullet Train has helped Japan to be seen as innovative rather than just imitative. Sogo Shinji's vision has been amply vindicated, and he lived to see it. When he died on October 3, 1981 (five months before his ninety-eighth birthday), the Bullet Train had been running proudly, safely, and on time for seventeen years. He would be proud of the improvements that have been made on the solid foundation he built. ■

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