

# 理学部見聞録

What brought you to RIGAKUBU?

第10回

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## Science Fiction, Trains, and Real Life

Many visitors to Tokyo have considered the city to be a premonition of the future. Soaring panels of glass and silicon frame a skyline surrounded by the most populous metro area in the world, evoking imagery from famous works of science fiction from the likes of Cixin Liu, Neal Stephenson, and Phillip K. Dick. But for me, there is an even more apt comparison between Japan and the worlds of science fiction than architecture—namely the train.

On my flight to Japan, I watched the movie 'Our Departures (かぞく いろいろ—RAILWAYS わたしたちの出発—),' in part about a father and son who both loved trains. The movie itself was heartwarming, but I found the fascination with trains to be a bit curious. Many young children love trains, but it is not generally a common pastime for adults. However, over the past few years, I have come to be enamoured with



Hiking three mountains in one day with Jin Beniyama. This picture was taken at the top of Otake-san. Thanks to Jin for the picture.

the system of trains here in Japan because, quite simply, they can take you anywhere.

Public transportation is a subject of fascination for science fiction authors, with good reason. Given the immense improvements of public transportation over the last century, predicting how it may look in the future is an exciting exercise. Whether it be Mukta's children from Ada Palmer's Terra Ignota series--- public flying cars that can circle the globe in a couple of hours--- or the circumorbital trams from Iain M. Banks' Culture series--- which by my rough estimation travel at 10 million km/h--- science fiction authors love to posit a future where travel is quick, efficient and available to everybody.

Though many countries possess efficient train systems, what sets Japan apart is the ease with which one can go from bustling city to beatific countryside. The JR and other local train companies cover so much of Japan's harsh, mountainous terrain that almost everywhere is easily accessible. In the past year, I've visited Mitake-san (御岳山), Hakone (箱根), Katsuura (勝浦), Niseko (ニセコ), Rusutsu (留寿都), and Lake Toya (洞爺湖). On each excursion, I worried about whether public transportation would really bring me to and from such remote

### Profile

Chris Nagele is a graduate student in the Astronomy department studying with Professor Umeda. He was born and attended college in Philadelphia, though since then he has lived in New York, Shanghai and now Tokyo. In his free time, he enjoys sports, the outdoors, and reading science fiction and fantasy.



Skiing side country at Niseko (gate 4) with the other side of Yotei-san in the background. Thanks again to Marissa for the picture.

(Background photo) Lake Toya. The central mountains are islands in the middle of the lake, while the mountain on the left is Yotei-san. Thanks to Marissa Gorman for the picture.

destinations, yet the train or bus always arrived as scheduled.

The ability to hop on a train at any time, and a couple hours later arrive at a picturesque mountain or beach lends a sense of freedom vastly out of proportion to Japan's physical size. This is especially poignant because though my home country, the United States, contains a plethora of scenic destinations within its significantly larger borders, most are not accessible by public transit. The rational part of my brain knows that this can be explained by the economics of population density, but the rest of me can't help but admire the simple beauty of trains in Japan.

The prompt for this article was, 'What brought you to Rigakubu?' I guess the answer must be, 'A train.'