



A man pedals through downtown Tokyo. Japan has a cycling culture, with bicycle parks conveniently located. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

## MY THOUGHTS

# Transported by Japan's roads and trains

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

IT HAS been said that the favourite mode of transport in Singapore must be the BMW – not the German car model but bus, MRT and walking. Public transport affects just about every aspect of our lives, especially for those of us who take the bus or train daily.

It was to explore how our transport systems could be improved that I went on a study trip to Japan in May, as part of a module under the **Scholars Programme** at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The trip was experiential learning at its best. From taking the plane there to boarding the subway and the Shinkansen high-speed bullet train, I found plenty to learn from the Japanese:

### ■ CULTURE OF CONSIDERATION

The Japanese make a conscious effort to keep their country clean, and courtesy is commonplace: I frequently saw young Japanese giving up seats to the elderly on buses. And talking on mobile phones

is frowned upon in trains, so train journeys are pleasantly quiet. In fact, I was on the train in Tokyo when I absent-mindedly picked up a call on my phone, inviting disapproving stares.

Eating and drinking are not forbidden on Japanese trains, yet they are squeaky clean. It was a real contrast with Singapore, where commuters are not even allowed to drink water on the MRT unless they get permission from the control station staff. Perhaps we should relax the policy of preventing commuters from drinking water on the train, to make for a more pleasant journey, and instead focus on educating commuters to keep the trains clean.

### ■ INFRASTRUCTURE

Japanese transport infrastructure is also cleverly designed to maximise speed. For example, gantries in the train stations of Tokyo and Osaka are open by default but will close if you try to go through them without a ticket. In Singapore, however, the MRT gantries are closed by default and open only when

you tap the ez-link card on the machine reader. Installing Japanese-style gantries in Singapore may allow for faster and smoother entry.

### ■ CULTURE OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

In Japan, bicycle lanes line the roads and pavements, with bicycle parks conveniently located. This cycling culture promotes an environmentalist ethos, which Singapore can certainly emulate. I think that we can afford to have more “cycling towns”, besides Tampines, to cut down on urban pollution.

Also, energy-efficient fuel-cell vehicles are becoming more popular in Japan. I had the opportunity to ride around Yokohama in one. Singaporean drivers could do their part for the environment by opting for such vehicles.

Singapore may have a first-class transport system but there is still room for improvement. And we could learn a lesson or two from Japan, where both commuters and transport operators do their part to make travelling a breeze.

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