

My Japan Journey - Episode 1
Susan Napier: Finding Creativity in Japanese Artists

[Music]

Yuko Handa 0:05

Susan, where did your Japan journey start?

Susan Napier 0:09

Well, this is gonna sound kind of weird, Yuko-san, but it actually started in Europe.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 0:18

A single moment of curiosity can lead to unexpected opportunities, some ending in a lifelong involvement with Japan. Our conversation partners all have a unique Japan journey to tell, one that's steeped in connections that have enriched their lives and altered them in deep, meaningful ways. Join us in their Japan journey and be inspired to embrace what's unfamiliar. Your next single moment of curiosity could lead you to possibilities you've never dreamed of.

[Music]

This is My Japan Journey. I'm Yuko Handa from the Japan Society of Boston.

[Music]

Welcome, Susan Napier.

Susan Napier 1:08

Thank you.

Yuko Handa 1:08

Susan Napier is the Goldthwaite Professor of Rhetoric and Japanese Studies at Tufts University. It's great to have you, Susan. Thank you for being with us.

Susan Napier 1:18

Thank you for inviting me, very kind of you.

Yuko Handa 1:20

So I am going to start right away and ask you, Susan, where did your Japan journey start?

Susan Napier 1:28

Well, this is gonna sound kind of weird, Yuko-san, but it actually started in Europe, kind of the law of unintended consequences. I was just thinking about it. My parents were both academics. They taught at

Harvard. My mother was an art historian. And when I was ten, they went to Germany and brought me along and sent me to a German school for a year. And my mother dragged me to -- or from her point of view, she was trying to cultivate me and make me a sophisticated cosmopolitan person. But she dragged me to cathedrals and museums and all kinds of cultural stuff like that. And I hated it. I just hated it. It just seemed all old and kind of heavy and dark. And even when it wasn't dark, like Versailles, I really hated it because it just was so -- sort of alien. And so my parents just kind of gave up and thought, "Oh, well, she's just going to be a Philistine."

And then we got back to Cambridge. And we were having lunch at this Chinese restaurant in Harvard Square, which is still there, and I saw this scroll on the wall of, you know, a kind of pretty pagoda with cherry blossoms or something. And I said, just spontaneously, "Oh, that's nice." My mother pricked up her ears because she hadn't heard me say anything nice about an art object my whole life -- this when I was about twelve. She said, "Well if you like that, I can take you to a place that's even better." And she took me to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. And that's really where the journey began.

I loved the Japanese landscape paintings and the woodblock prints. I just totally fell in love with this beautiful, clearly very rich, very interesting, very sophisticated culture that was also -- I actually felt comfortable in it in a way that I didn't feel comfortable looking at a European painting with a lot of human beings, you know, angels and stuff, and pink flesh and everything. Instead, in the Japanese paintings, you'd have mountains and clouds and a stream, and maybe a few people just kind of enjoying themselves against this background, but kind of being part of a larger, natural world. And I just felt like, "Yeah, I -- this is great. I feel good here." And so that's really how it started.

And then I also -- I had a friend in sixth and seventh grade who is Japanese American. And I was saying to her, "Oh, I'm reading Haiku." Because I also -- I picked up a little Haiku book at the museum. And I thought -- I was very proud of myself to be reading Haiku. And she said, "Oh, it's not any good unless you read it in Japanese." And I thought, "Well, okay. I guess I better learn Japanese." So a couple of years later, I was in another school, a small girl's school in Cambridge called Buckingham. It's now Buckingham Browne & Nichols. And I was talking to the Head, a woman named Mrs. Stowe. And I said, "Well, you know, I'd really like to take--" and I remember my conversation with Margaret -- "Japanese." And she said, "Fine."

I still remember those days of learning, and it was terribly exciting. You were kind of learning all these new things. Like even the "*Ee, wakarimasen.*" "Yes, I don't understand." And you learn that "yes" has a different way of being used in Japanese code. Just, you know, on the first page, you're already learning these really interesting cultural details as well as linguistic ones. Then Mrs. Stowe had this great idea. She said, "You know, we send a lot of people to Paris for, you know, senior year. Why don't you go to Japan for a year?"

I ended up going to a school called Nichibei Kaiwa Gakuin in Yotsuya, in Tokyo, and it's -- that's Japan English -- Japan American conversation school. And mainly, it was to teach English, but they had a small Japanese program there. And at that point, I didn't have a high school diploma because it was my senior year. So I couldn't go to a college like Sofia or Waseda, so I went to Nichibei. And that turned out to be really fun.

There were only about five or six other students in my class, and they were all much older and really interesting people. There was an American traveler -- we used to have travelers back then, kind of a hippie -- who was going around the world. And we had a Thai -- a man from Thailand -- young man from Thailand, who was a film director. And my best friend turned out to be a Dutch woman who actually had her MA in linguistics from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands but had kind of been a traveler herself and been traveling around the world. And she was wonderful. She was so -- just kind of interesting, and very, very smart. And to kind of summarize things quickly, I was living with a Japanese family, but eventually, we did not work out. And they said, "You need to leave." And so she helped me get a job at Nippon Daigaku Igakuin, the medical school at Japan University.

Yuko Handa 6:25

And this is when you were sevent-- sixteen, seventeen?

Susan Napier 6:27

Yeah, seventeen. I just turned seventeen, yeah. And so I would go out and kind of talk English for like, an hour in front of these, you know, medical students. And then I also got a job at a kind of fly-by-night English language conversation school. It was in a school that advertised itself by saying it had only women teachers. In fact, the advertisement said something like, "*Chaamingu na Americajin wa anata ni eigo o shiemasu.*"¹ And no -- it sounds really awful. But it really wasn't that bad. Because, actually, a lot of mothers and children really prefer that, because they were afraid of these big, burly, you know, Americans. And so I had a very varied student body and that was really -- that was nice. And yeah.

So I ended up living on my own. I found -- my real estate agent found me a lovely little apartment, outside of Shibuya.² For a couple of months I was on my own and, you know, supporting myself. And I didn't have a lot of money, but I had enough. I remember the first month I ate a lot of eggs and rice. And I was still going to Nichibei, so I was learning Japanese and teaching English, and it was the best year of my life. I mean, I had such a wonderful time.

Yuko Handa 7:42

But Susan, it's not just a Japan journey. I mean, living on your own at seventeen. Making -- you know, supporting yourself, meeting all these non-high schoolers --

Susan Napier 7:54

Yeah. Yes. Yeah.

Yuko Handa 7:55

--is just an amazing story in itself.

Susan Napier 7:58

It was really amazing.

¹ チャーミングなアメリカ人はあなたに英語を教えます。“Charming Americans teach you English.”

² 渋谷 A ward in Tokyo, known as a major commercial and financial center.

Yuko Handa 8:00

So this story leads me to ask you -- take us to when you actually decided to come back. I mean, I'm going to assume that there was an end date that you had to come back.

Susan Napier 8:09

Yes. Actually, I loved Tokyo so much that I thought I want -- might go on and go to like, ICU, International Christian University or something, because I really, really liked it. I was fascinated by the culture and wanted to learn more. But in the fall, I had applied to two universities, Yale and Harvard. And I thought, "Oh, well, I probably won't get into either of them. So great. I'll be going to ICU." But then I did get in. I think at that point I was a little bit, you know, missing, you know, my *furusato*,³ my Cambridge and all that.

Yuko Handa 8:42

Right. So that September, you started--

Susan Napier 8:47

At Harvard. Yeah. I had a great time as an undergraduate at Harvard. I think having been on my own, you know, I was pretty relaxed. All these fascinating, you know, Harvard students. And I had a great roommate whom I'm still very, very fond of. She was from Iran, and she had lived all around the world.

Yuko Handa 9:04

Do you think it was Harvard that kept your interest in Japanese? Because there are a lot of people who are really affected by their experience in Japan but choose not to take the Japan career path. They don't major in Japanese, they end up majoring in something else.

Susan Napier 9:22

This was the year that economics was very big at Harvard, and a thousand students were taking something called EC10. And so I said, "Oh, economics. That sounds exciting." And I really thought I would do EC10 and -- economics and Japanese. Because also at that time -- this was when Japan was hot, in terms of business, and everyone was just starting to get on the Japan train. And so I thought, "Alright, yeah, I'll do Japanese and economics, and..." However, I flunked. Really flunked my first exam in EC 10. So I struggled through economics and got the worst grades of my life.

And then I thought, "You know, really, I don't think I'm going to do economics." And there was a kind of choice between doing a more -- very, very cultural, literary kind of degree, which was known as East Asian Languages and Civilizations, or doing a more sociological, more contemporary degree, which was East Asian Studies. And everyone said, "Oh, Susan, you love literature, you should go into EALC." But I thought, "No, I really believe that literature is part of a big continuum that -- you know, it's affected and impacted by what's going on around us, and I really want to know more about what's happening in the world." And also, Ezra Vogel was in charge of East Asian Studies, and I already was very, you know, reverential towards him. And I thought, "Yeah, you know, I should go with -- in that one." It was -- I've never regretted it.

³ 故郷. Home town, birthplace.

In graduate school, there was a period of about ten years when people were saying, "Oh, you know, you don't care about the author, you don't care about the culture, you just need to do the text." And I always thought, "That's ridiculous." There's so much -- the text is related to so many other things. And you have to know about language and culture and history and society and things like that. So yeah, that was probably my biggest choice. And then, in the end, I got married and I didn't go to -- into diplomacy. And somehow, maybe having both parents who had PhDs sort of, you know, pushed me or led me into becoming an academic.

Yuko Handa 11:27

So talking of you as an academic, you are very well known for your deep knowledge of anime. So far, none of anime have shown up in your stories. Where did that intersection happen in your life?

Susan Napier 11:42

Actually, that was quite a lot later. I mean, my first love was Haiku. I really love the imagery in Haiku poetry. So beautiful. And then my next love was literature in general. And I read *Yukiguni*, Kawabata's *Snow Country*, in high school. And I remember feeling like, wow, this is really different. I really like this. It's just such a beautiful novel. That may have made me, kind of, more willing to accept anime. I find it sometimes a little difficult to talk about because I started in literature and that was fine. And everyone said, "Yes, good girl." And I wrote on Yukio Mishima and Kenzaburo Oe.

But then I started going into fantasy. And doing fantasy, I became aware of manga. And -- because my students were reading manga, and I thought, "Gee, well this is kind of interesting." Again, the imagery was really striking. And then I ended up in London at University of London. I was teaching over there for a couple of years at SOAS, School of Oriental and African Studies. And, you know, I was aware of this manga called *Akira*⁴ because it really had struck me -- a student had shown it to me, and I just thought, "Wow, this is a dark, interesting, complex work."

And as it happened, that -- I think the next year, the year after I arrived in London, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London had a showing of -- the first-ever European showing of the movie -- the animated movie version of *Akira*. It is just a powerful, propulsive, kinetic piece of a two-hour -- almost two-hour-long animation that brings in dystopias, politics, apocalypse, a very heart-rending story of friendship. Just an amazing work of art. It is absolutely a masterpiece. And it has -- also, the last half hour has the most grotesque, most visceral, most upsetting scene I've ever seen in my life. I mean, to the point where I was kind of hiding under my chair. I mean, it was just like, "Woah, I didn't know they could do that." And, you know, if you're used to Disney movies, which are very pretty and charming, *Akira* was sort of like, "Oh, my gosh, they are going into place I never imagined."

And then I really got lucky again. Some friends of mine were -- decided to organize a first-ever conference on Japanese popular culture in America. And we also showed *Akira* in Berkeley at the conference that spring. And the reaction was very interesting because half the people who were older than I was -- I was very young at that time, in my very early 30s -- and half the people who were older than I just hated it. They just thought it was revolting and this was not their Japan. This is not their Japanese

⁴ 1988 Japanese animated film directed by Katsuhiro Otomo

culture. How dare this animation Balderdash come in. They were really openly hostile. It was quite interesting.

And the other half, people around my age or so, were a bit more, kind of, maybe a bit skeptical, but curious. And they knew that their students were interested. And they thought, "You know, at this point, we want to bring in more students. Maybe, you know, can you write this up?" And so I wrote it up, and it appeared in a journal, the *Journal of Japanese Studies*. And for quite a while it was one of the most downloaded articles that ever appeared in that journal. It was called *Panic Sites*.⁵ And people -- it got people's attention. And as you may imagine, it took a very long time, and it's still not finished to get people to take anime seriously. And it's still a kind of a cross to bear. I still have problems.

I mean, early on, when I finally decided that somebody better write a book about it, and I waited around, nobody did. So I thought, "Okay, I'll write a book." But you know, the first ten years or so it was really pretty daunting because people would say, "You're writing a book on... Japanese... cartoons?" And be like, "First of all, a book on cartoons? No way." And then, "A book on *Japanese* cartoons?" And really, people would look at me as if I'd grown a third head.

So -- but I persevered. And -- because I thought this is so interesting. There's a vast amount of anime out there. So I had to kind of figure out what was important, what was worth talking about. And there was so much there, it was so rich and so, so much material. After all, I finally decided to do a book on Miyazaki, who is, you know, almost certainly the greatest animator in the world today, and he happens to be a Japanese animator. So that's been pretty much my life for the last -- goodness, is it -- almost 30 years now, that I have been very much embroiled in anime.

Yuko Handa 16:29

So it's really interesting because I did want to ask you, if you've had, you know, difficulties establishing anime as an academic sort of subject, and I think you shared a little story about that. But I'm listening to your stories and I'm wondering -- you are able to see more than just the artistic surface of an anime. I think you are able to see a little deeper into anime. You know, you mentioned the darkness of anime.

Susan Napier 17:05

Yes.

Yuko Handa 17:05

Do you think your experience of living in Japan at such a young age -- do you think that had anything to do with you -- to help you see that? Beyond just the imagery and beyond just the art? Because you do need to understand the Japanese society, big time, from an inside person to really understand that darkness.

Susan Napier 17:31

Wow, that's really interesting. No one's ever asked me that before. Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think I had many Japanese friends when I was there. And I also was, you know, part -- I was living and taking part in

⁵ *Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from Godzilla to Akira*.

the society. I wasn't, you know, hanging out with a bunch of other American teenagers. What I realized in dealing with Japan was how little I did know about it, and how I needed to kind of go on peeling, you know, going -- looking under layer and layer and layer and seeing.

I think I had always been able to not be worried about what people thought about my judgment. I think my mother was also very important in this because she would do contemporary art. And, you know, she taught -- in the end, in her 70s, she was teaching something called the Radcliffe seminars. This was a time when a lot of women were sort of coming back to the workforce or thinking about it after they'd had children, and they would take her seminars on art history. And they'd be very nice ladies from, you know, Lexington or Concord or somewhere like that, you know, somewhere very nice. And they'd come in with their pearls, and they would go to the museum, and they would want to go see the Monet's. And they would see the Monet's, but also, my mother would insist that they look at contemporary art, pop art, early 20th-century art, but sometimes really, really art that just was coming out of the 70s and 80s. And they'd be like, "No, no, no, we want to see the Monet's." And she'd say "No, you have to look at what society is doing now." And that was tremendously inspiring for me.

Animation can seem vulgar, but I really was willing to keep looking at it and watching and looking at all different kinds of animes. Some of it was funny and some of it was vulgar. Some of it was absolutely exquisite and incredibly moving. There are anime series that are so beautiful, incredibly touching, that absolutely -- and one thing I do so appreciate is from the -- I also interviewed many people about why they liked anime over the years. And these young Americans would say, "Because it reaches me. It's more real than Hollywood cinema. They do talk about dark stuff. They do talk about sadness and fear and depression and things like that." And sometimes it's expressive, these amazing, animated images, but they're -- they don't insist on the Hollywood happy ending. They don't insist on tying everything up with a ribbon. And I can relate to that.

And I think it's true -- also, not just Americans, but I think -- of many people out in the world that Hollywood doesn't necessarily always speak for people. That there is a desire to, you know, see that things don't -- you know, things don't always end up perfectly, and what do you do then? How do you keep on going? And that's one reason why I like Miyazaki so much because I think he's very -- he's family-friendly, but his works are complex works that don't give away -- give you easy answers.

I did a book on which I spent quite a lot of -- a couple of years going to anime conventions and interviewing fans. And that was one of the key things they said was they appreciate that there were no obvious villains, often, in anime. That people could be multi-layered, that they could be complicated, that they could have good sides and bad sides. And that, again, was very reassuring. Because you don't always want to be in this sort of black and white world where, you know, it's one thing or another, it's always a duality. But you know, life isn't necessarily full of dualities. It's lots of gray areas. And certainly not just I, but these people I was talking to, these anime fans were saying, yeah, they like the gray areas. They really appreciated that and, you know, the nuances.

Yuko Handa 21:13

And I was just thinking, could it be -- you know how it -- when you grow up in Japan, when you're a Japanese person in Japan there are many -- sort of roles that you're supposed to play. I grew up with my

parents always telling me that nails that stick up get hammered down. But when I went to college in the United States, I went to a women's college in the United States. So you know, there was Yuko who was told by her friends, like, you need to step up, you need to advocate for yourself, you need to, you know, speak up and be more opinionated. And 14 hours later, just 14 hours in the plane later--

Susan Napier 21:52

Oh my gosh.

Yuko Handa 21:52

--I'm told you need to, you know, nails that stick out get hammered down. That's an extreme example, but I think all of -- a lot of Japan -- a lot of people in Japan experienced that. Right? For instance, you are a salaryman, a businessman, and you're supposed to play a certain role when you're young. A certain role when you're older. You are a housewife. You're supposed to play a certain role of being the model housewife. And I almost feel that that pressure of really being your own self and yet maintaining harmony in that society kind of creates that sort of dual -- you know, there's no right and wrong. That's both me. Do you -- do you see any of that?

Susan Napier 22:37

Oh, I think that makes a lot of sense. I hadn't thought of it quite that way. But I think it does make sense that -- yeah. Because you're aware of just how, you know, *honne* and *tatemae*,⁶ how you appear to other people and your real self, and it's complex. Whereas Americans are always like, "Oh, I'm me and you gotta take me for who I am."

You made me think of something -- I gave a talk a couple of years ago at Tokyo University, Todai, on Mishima and Miyazaki. And one thing I was -- I thought about when I was writing that talk was -- it's also not just Mishima and Miyazaki but people like Murakami, Murakami Haruki, and you know, all these -- and Oe -- I mean all these really great, creative people. And I thought, is it possible because in Japan you have the nail sticking up that gets hammered down, that almost in reaction to this, when people are creative, they are really creative? I mean, they are just really off-the-charts exciting. Oh, and Murakami Takashi, the artist. This, you know, very distinct, compartmentalized, and hierarchical society. Because there -- when you get free of that in the creative world, you can suddenly just plumb in the depths of your psyche, reach down, and just take out anything from your head and your soul and create these marvelous things.

I'm actually thinking about Zen ink paintings, you know, from the 16th, 17th century. Those are often very crazy, very strange, grotesque even. Yeah, this -- I mean, you think about Japan as a small country, but its art tradition is so amazing. It was almost like a yin and yang thing of the pressure and the conformity and the -- you know, the collectiveness. And then the other side kind of expressing itself in this exceptional, you know, creative -- bursts of creativity.

Yuko Handa 24:20

Susan, I have to ask you this question. If you were to step back, how do you think your connection to Japan has changed your life?

⁶ 本音 and 建前. One's true feelings and desires (*honne*) vs. one's public face (*tatemae*).

Susan Napier 24:37

Japan has meant so much to me, it's just meant so much. And it's -- I mean, I think it's given me a new way of -- definitely a different approach to the world. I think one thing that's been very important is I've been -- always been interested in the environment. I did actually grow up partly on a farm. And I think teaching Miyazaki and sort of getting into, kind of, Shintoism and the sort of way people in Japan are -- traditionally have seen the connections with nature and the environment and humans in a very different way from the West. So that's one way that I think I can see, absolutely, my whole worldview shifted.

But also, just -- I think knowing that a place like Japan exists is also kind of important to me. That there is still a world of graciousness. That even now, you know, I'll go into a coffee shop in Japan, and there will be politeness and a kind of sense of a work ethic. And just a kind of -- a world that is, you know, it -- definitely, Japan has its tremendous issues, but it still kind of works pretty well as a society. And knowing that Japan is there in a world that is so -- kind of chaotic and dark right now, I do see it as a kind of, very, you know, special place. I always think of -- Miyazaki has this movie called *Kaze no Tani no Naushika*, or *Nausicaa and the Valley of the Wind*, which is a great movie. But even greater is his manga that he wrote with it. It's a seven-volume manga. And at the end of it, Nausicaa, his heroine, is having this kind of big debate with someone about, you know, what -- sort of the meaning of life, really. And he says to her, you know, "Life is light." And she said -- and this is where the dark side comes in Yuko-san. She says, "No, life is a light that shines in the darkness." And to me, that's a very Japanese vision. That yes, there is darkness, but there's also light within there. And it still will -- it can illuminate and be radiant and give us hope.

Yuko Handa 26:47

Oh, wow. That's so beautiful, Susan.

Susan Napier 26:52

Well, I hadn't actually anticipated saying anything like that, but yeah.

Yuko Handa 26:54

What advice would you give to someone who's just starting their Japan journey?

Susan Napier 26:58

I would have to say start learning the language pretty quickly. I mean, it is a difficult language. And I think, also, you know, it's -- if you possibly can, go there. Even going for a month or so. I mean, I have many students who just went for like, you know, six weeks or something. And they're still -- they come back really quite transformed. They've seen a way of life that, you know, yes, it's urban, and it's modern, and in some ways, it's Westernized, but it's also different. And that is a very cool thing to learn as part of your journey, just how many other cultures are out there. And if this culture works for you, it can be incredibly revitalizing and can give you a new way of looking at the world and life itself.

Yuko Handa 27:55

Susan Napier, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Susan Napier 28:01

It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Yuko Handa 28:03

And hopefully more -- many more journeys, both for you and for everybody else who's in the US-Japan journey. Many, many, many journeys to come.

Japan Society Boston 28:16

Support for my Japan Journey comes from the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership. To learn more about the Japan Society of Boston and our guest speakers, or to find the transcript of each episode, please visit our website at www.japansocietyboston.org/podcast. My Japan Journey is produced by the Japan Society of Boston and edited by Luci Jones. Our theme music is These Times by Blue Dot Sessions.

END OF TRANSCRIPT