

**My Japan Journey - Episode 5**  
**Maria Toyoda: A Special Relationship with Another Culture**

[Music]

Maria Toyoda 0:03

Whenever you open yourself up to differences, cultural, linguistic, you know, political, you always have something to gain by that. But when you develop a special relationship with another culture, you know, and I've been fortunate enough to have this connection with Japan and my friends and colleagues there, just the fulfillment is really amazing.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 0:37

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]

Yuko Handa 1:24

Thank you Maria for joining us. It's a real pleasure to have you on our podcast.

Maria Toyoda 1:29

Oh, thank you. It's an honor to join you.

Yuko Handa 1:31

Maria Toyoda is Provost at Western New England University and former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Suffolk University. So wonderful to have you, Maria.

Maria Toyoda 1:42

Oh thank you, Yuko.

Yuko Handa 1:43

So Maria, I always start with this question: where did your Japan journey start?

Maria Toyoda 1:49

Where? Hmm. Or “when,” I think is another way of putting it. My Japan journey predates me by quite a bit. It starts with my parents who are immigrants from Japan, both from the Kanto area, Tokyo area. My father came from a military background originally. But with the end of World War Two, his very young military career ended early. So when it became clear that his military career wasn't going to happen, my father spent some time going to college, working for MacArthur's General Headquarters as an interpreter.

But my father got very interested in show business. He performed for American G.I.s in the clubs, the clubs that Americans would frequent. And my mother, at the time, was also involved in show business through her older brother who was a jazz musician. You know, she was practically raised in that environment by her older brothers and became a sort of a self-styled talent scout and an agent and she did a lot of work to try to get talent in a nightclub environment that was actually pretty vibrant after World War Two. If you can imagine, you know, just the occupation and Americans coming to Japan and looking for entertainment, combined with, you know, I think a sort of a public relations need on the part of the US to rehabilitate Japan's image, you know, from one that was an image of the enemy to one that was an image of an ally in the early years of the Cold War. So I, you know, I think that's the milieu that was where my parents were working.

My father then appeared on “The Ed Sullivan Show” in 1957 and then again in 1958. And at the time there were other talk shows, you know, variety shows like “The Dinah Shore Show,” Jackie Gleason, all of those performers who had their television shows and he was often a guest. And he was billed as kind of like the Japanese Frank Sinatra, although I think he would have said that he was probably more the Japanese Tony Bennett.

That brought them to the United States, in particular to Miami, Florida. And, you know, by the time I came along, the family had been moving back and forth between Japan and the US. And so I spent some of my early childhood in Japan, in Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture, and then other parts of my childhood in Miami, Florida. I have a connection to Japan through family, through my parents, but it really wasn't until I was in graduate school that I had a personal interest.

Yuko Handa 5:10

That's really interesting, because I think there are a lot of people who grew up in the United States being born under Japanese parents, but not everybody chooses a career path with Japan. But you took it a little further. I'm curious, you just said this was in graduate school. I mean, what happened?

Maria Toyoda 5:29

Yeah, well especially, Yuko, you know, for people of my generation, there weren't very many people of Japanese descent living in, particularly in, Florida. And that was a, I think, a period of time where immigrant families, no matter where they came from, were seeking more to assimilate into the dominant culture than they were looking to preserve elements of their immigrant heritage.

So my parents were mostly concerned about us succeeding as Americans and didn't really encourage our being bilingual. They wanted us to focus on English, they wanted us to do well in school. And so I didn't really grow up speaking Japanese, and it remains, you know, a challenge. But in graduate school, I was getting my degree in political science, my doctorate in political science, and became really fascinated with

Japanese politics. And, in particular, with the Fiscal Investment and Loan Program, which is like Japan's second budget. And that stuck with me. I've been so interested in financial politics and political economy and that was a real incentive for me to go and learn Japanese.

And after a couple of years, I was given a *monbusho*<sup>1</sup> scholarship by-- I know they're called something else now, but that sent me to Japan for almost two years, where I took more language classes and did some more research. I, you know, was spending a lot of time interviewing people at banks, at government offices, spending a lot of time at the Diet Library.

And I think back to the time on my own in Japan as a student as the time when I think I learned how to function in intercultural situations. And so it's kind of been an ongoing feature of my career that I've spent a lot of time in other countries. And, whether I speak the language or not, I have a certain level of confidence when I go someplace new and know that, you know, I will meet people, I will be able to listen to what they have to say, I will figure it all out.

And so I think that that point in my life, and Japan's interesting, you know, as a place to start to build that confidence. In some ways it's the easiest place in the world to build one's confidence. It's a relatively safe environment, you can take risks, personal risks, that you really shouldn't be taking in other places. And in other ways, it's a really daunting place, you know, to try and build that confidence and competence because it's so easy to assume that things that look to you like they are familiar, you assume that they are, but they're not. You know, there's a different meaning behind it, different rationale. And just because it looks the way you think it's supposed to look and it sounds the way you think it's supposed to sound, the meaning is completely different.

Yuko Handa 9:00

That is so interesting because I think we've been hearing this over and over in our podcast about how it looks so similar and yet it's so different. Or, in certain ways, how it looks so modern and yet it's not. Can you think of an example of, you know, "This feels so familiar and yet I found out that it's completely different?"

Maria Toyoda 9:21

When you spend an extended time in Japan, it's almost like, you know, I always think about Through the Looking-Glass, Alice in Wonderland. I mean, Japan is a wonderland in so many ways, but, you know, unless you're there for longer periods of time, it's easy to miss the hardships of people and the parts of Japan that are actually kind of really difficult to cope with. When you first get there it is like a wonderland. It's-- for many people it's their lifelong dream to go to Japan and they're just mesmerized. I mean, there is so much to be mesmerized by.

But it hit me when I was in Osaka and there's an area there called *America-mura*<sup>2</sup>. It's a little shopping district that has stores that sell things that they think are American or evoke Americana. And so you see the Stars and the Stripes flying there, you see t-shirts, you see things that the Japanese shopkeepers, you

---

<sup>1</sup> 文部省. The *monbusho* scholarship, now known as the *monbukagakusho* scholarship, is an academic scholarship offered by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

<sup>2</sup> 村. Village.

know, really think of as American, lots of tchotchkes, you know. But in fact none of it is really American, you know. It's stuff made in China and probably designed by the Japanese and it's there as a almost like a set piece. And I remember walking through there and it just seems strange, just really, really seemed surreal.

And then, you know, some of that surreal-ness, you know, can be found too when you visit, like, military bases. So I went to a football game at Yokosuka Naval Base, you know, and then, you know, at another time I went to a, you know, an Air Force Base up in northern Japan. And they're bubbles, you know, they're just American bubbles. And yet there's something off about it, there's a lot of, you know, you can go to the PX<sup>3</sup> and get anything, you know, practically anything you want, you know, imported. But there's a strange mix of Japanese and American there. But the American parts are also just off, not quite right.

So much of the appropriation that the Japanese do of other cultures, you know, I think it's benign and it's fun. It makes for a really interesting mix of things because, you know, Japan is a culture of appropriation. But at the same time, it's not, you know. It becomes Japanese.

Yuko Handa 12:02

So I grew up in Japan but I went to an international school all my life. I learned my Japanese history from an American person. The textbook that he wrote, that we learned from, the one thing that really stuck to me was “Japanese are great at adopt, adapt, and then adept,” right? So they adopt something, they adapt it to suit their needs, and then they make it better and oftentimes bring it back to the culture where it came from. The good example that he was talking about, I think, was either shumai or gyoza. It was adopted by Chinese immigrants to Japan, adapted to taste so that the Japanese everyday housewives would make it, and then it was exported back to mainland China. And then, of course, he was talking about cars as well, right? It was adopted, adapted, adepted. There's definitely a culture of, "I'm going to learn whatever I can from the outside world and bring it in and just make it better.”

Maria Toyoda 13:08

In Lisbon, I don't know if it's there anymore, but there was a cafe that was opened by a Portuguese man and his Japan-born wife. And the specialty of that cafe was castella. The thing is you can't really find castella cake in Portugal anymore, and so the shop was kind of celebrated for-- this is cake from Japan that was really Portuguese. I like-- I love the "adopt, adapt, adept" thing because I think that's a really concise way of characterizing.

You know, it's a country with, as they always say, scarce natural resources. What do we have other than human capital, right? And human capital has been the thing that has gotten Japan past, you know, the *Kurofune*<sup>4</sup> Period to the Meiji Restoration<sup>5</sup> to World War. Even past that into things like the oil crisis and the collapse of the bubble. Japan has somehow always adapted and refined things in a way to make it work for them. And there must be something appealing about that translation to the rest of the world. I

---

<sup>3</sup> A PX or Post Exchange, also known as a BX or Base Exchange, is a sort of retail store operating on US military installations worldwide.

<sup>4</sup> 黒船. Black Ships: the name given to Western ships that arrived in Japan in the 16th and 19th centuries.

<sup>5</sup> 明治維新. Meiji Restoration: a political event that restored practical imperial rule to Japan in 1868 under Emperor Meiji.

think people, again, they recognize a kernel of authenticity, and-- but there's something about the refinement of that original kernel that is appealing to people.

Yuko Handa 14:36

Very interesting, very interesting. Actually going back a little bit to your, you know, "It looks so familiar and yet it was so different," can you apply that to your research interests?

Maria Toyoda 14:48

So everyone today is really interested in lean management. And, you know, I am personally interested in how we apply lean management techniques to higher education administration. I think that there's a value in, you know, focused-- strategic focus and in strategic allocation of resources, and in sort of the more inclusive ways in which lean management, and in Japanese it would be the *hoshin kanri*<sup>6</sup> style of management, that was derived from, like, the Toyota Motor Company that I think has gotten a lot of, you know, it has had a lot of success in many sectors here in the US.

But, you know, just as a reminder, that whole lean management system came from the Americans. It came from the sort of, well, I forget exactly the sequence, but "plan," "do," you know, "review," that kind of thing, which was part of the industrialization process, you know, after World War Two. And so much of those management techniques were brought to Japan, adapted, refined, and made, you know, and re-exported back to the US. That's an example, I think, where that refinement has really made all the difference in lean management techniques.

Yuko Handa 16:22

I am going to actually fall back a little bit onto your personal story, because I do see in your profile that you were a biology major in college. Is that correct?

Maria Toyoda 16:35

I was always interested in biology and at one point I really was interested in possibly, you know, doing pre-med or going to medical school. But then when I got to Stanford University, where I did my undergrad degree, and they had, and they still have, an amazing interdisciplinary major called human biology. I don't think I've seen it anywhere else, really. They have what they call an A side and a B side. It was a seminar style where you would have faculty team teaching and they would come from the, sort of, the physical sciences and the biological sciences. So, you know, you would do genetics from 9 to 10am and then the social scientists, or anthropologists and so forth, would come in from 10 to 11. And you would, you know, continue the seminar with a psychologist or an anthropologist or, you know, archaeologist.

And so you got-- that's where the human side of it came. It was an understanding of how, you know, societies and individuals were in dialogue with the genetics and hereditary and physical sciences. And it was so fascinating. And they always say to you, and this is true, that when you major in human biology, you can go on to do anything. It was a fantastic major and I just-- it really opened my eyes to methodology, being as open as possible to different explanations, different modes of inquiry.

---

<sup>6</sup> 方針管理. Policy management: a process used in strategic planning in which strategic goals are communicated throughout the company and then put into action.

Yuko Handa 18:13

Even so, I think it still is a big jump to go from somebody who was doing biology thinking she's going to be pre-med, to saying, "I am going to graduate school in political science." Even if Stanford was doing an excellent job with the interdisciplinary studies and, you know, you were exposed to the human side of things. Maria, it still is a big jump.

Maria Toyoda 18:35

Well, there was a bridge to that jump, Yuko. I spent several years working in a hospital thinking this would be a wonderful way of finding out, like, what sort of medical specialization I might be interested in. But the work itself had nothing to do really with the medicine part of things.

I ended up running a unit at the hospital called International Medical Services, which was kind of a liaison office for people from around the world who wanted to get their medical care at Stanford University Hospital. And that put me into contact with some pretty amazing people: people who are celebrities from Hong Kong or government ministers from Kuwait. I mean, just a huge, you know, range of people which made me all the more interested in culture, in global politics.

You know, I'd always been a big reader and I've always had interest in politics, but I, you know, the thing is that when people are interested in politics, what they don't yet understand is, as an academic discipline, politics and political science are two very, very different things. And I quickly learned that the politics narrative, the horse trading, all of that is really just, you know, those are anecdotes. They're-- it's not about the systematic study of politics.

But I actually found that my background in science was really valuable in the study of political science. It was becoming more and more important to be able to put together things in a methodological way, you know, quantitative ways and, you know, applying rudimentary analytics. And so a background in science actually served me pretty well.

Yuko Handa 20:38

I do feel like I see a little trend in your story in a sense that you've always been open to who you are, for one thing, but also to what comes your way: to be always sort of being open to being curious.

And with that said, I have a question for you. You mentioned that, back when you were growing up, there weren't a lot of Japanese American, or Japanese American families, in Florida. But you went to school in the West Coast. I'm just curious. I'm going to assume that there were more Japanese families or more Japanese American families in the West Coast versus the East Coast and Florida. Did you see any difference there? Did you find-- are there any journeys that you can share with us from that perspective?

Maria Toyoda 21:34

Oh, yeah, sure. I mean, not only were there no, you know, very few Japanese families in South Florida, but just very few Asian families period. So I do kind of have a funny story about, you know, Miami. My parents had a business in downtown Miami and it was a flower shop. And at the time there was a Korean grocery store down the block.

And so there you have two, you know, businesses, one Korean, one Japanese. And the city, you know, I guess it was the Chamber of Commerce, came one day and visited my parents and then visited Mr. Chung down the block and brought, you know, us together for a meeting. And I remember, kind of, because I was there and they said, "You know, we're thinking that it would be a great idea for Miami if we had a Chinatown. You know, we already have the gate, you know, we bought the *mon*<sup>7</sup>, the gate. It's in storage. And, you know, we think it'd be great if you could be like anchors for this Chinatown." My dad said, "Well, who else?"

Yuko Handa 22:39

Two businesses: one Japanese, one Korean.

Maria Toyoda 22:41

And one Korean, you know, and they wanted to anchor a Chinatown district in downtown Miami. I think that they were quickly disabused of the idea that it could happen.

But the, you know, thing I remember being struck by when I went to California was how different the experiences of the Asian Americans there were compared to my experience growing up. But not just my experience, but the experience of my parents. So my parents, you know, were immigrants from Japan. They grew up, you know, in wartime and postwar Japan. And so that's, you know, that shaped my childhood because I did not grow up with the same awareness of the issues facing Asian Americans here in the US.

So it was the first time when I went out to California and of course, you know, Stanford University, lots of Asian students, you know, people at Berkeley and so forth, lots of Asian Americans. But they grew up with a different awareness. They grew up with parents and grandparents who were coming from, you know, an experience of internment camps. And this was the first that I had heard of that, really, you know, it was just new to me. It was very fascinating.

But those sort of, you know, experiences, those family experiences and what you pass down through oral tradition and so forth, you know, "My *obaa-chan*<sup>8</sup> had to cook and clean, you know, in these little tents that they had in these camps, and this one up in Seattle, this one down in Arizona," and so forth.

And then there's a fairly close-knit community, particularly of Japanese Americans through the JACL<sup>9</sup>: very activist, very politically aware, lobbied for things. So I came into contact with, you know, a lot of people working with the JACL and just sort of discovered this whole community that I knew nothing about. But also didn't really feel like I was as connected to that tradition as people who'd grown up in California were, because, again, more of a recent immigrant, so I didn't have that family history.

Yuko Handa 25:13

---

<sup>7</sup> 門. Gate.

<sup>8</sup> お祖母ちゃん. Grandma.

<sup>9</sup> JACL is the Japanese American Citizens League, an Asian American civil rights charity headquartered in San Francisco.

So in your story of your experience of growing up as a Japanese American in Florida being different from the experience of growing up as a Japanese American in California or Hawaii, to me is a representation of how rich and how diverse and how big the United States is.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 25:47

Maria, I always ask at the end of our podcasts if there are young people, or maybe not so young people, who's just starting their Japan journey, or people in Japan who's just starting their US journey, what would you say to them?

Maria Toyoda 26:06

Oh, that the rewards are endless, and it doesn't really even have to be just a Japan/US connection, but whenever you open yourself up to differences, cultural, linguistic, you know, political, you always have something to gain by that.

But when you develop a special relationship with another culture, you know, and I've been fortunate enough to have this connection with Japan and my friends and colleagues there, just the fulfillment is really amazing. I know people feel that way about, you know, they have a particular connection, say, to Ireland or to Italy, and mine happens to be with Japan, but the rewards are just never-ending.

I think long after my career, you know, in academics is over, or at least the administrative part of it is over, I will always feel like I have more work to do, you know, in terms of learning about Japan, teaching about Japan, meeting people. We always talk about the importance for young folks getting involved, engaged, and interested to start networking and start networking early, whether you join as a student, the local Japan Society, or whether you start taking lessons, whether it's through Duolingo, or online or, you know, at the local Consulate.

You know, there's just so much there and, you know, it's all about taking that first step, making some friends, and starting to feel invested. I think those are all important steps to what's going to be a lifetime of fulfillment.

Yuko Handa 28:01

Thank you. Thank you so much, Maria. Thank you.

Maria Toyoda 28:05

Oh, you're welcome. Thank you.

[Music]

Japan Society Boston 28:11

Support for My Japan Journey comes from the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership and the Toshiba International Foundation. To learn more about the Japan Society of Boston and our guest speakers, or to find the transcripts of each episode, please visit our website at

[www.japansocietyboston.org/podcast](http://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 and additional music is composed and performed by Pianimo.

[Music]

END OF TRANSCRIPT