

My Japan Journey - Episode 7
Patricia Maclachlan: Japan Through the Lens of its Post Offices and Agricultural Co-ops

[Music]

Patricia Maclachlan 0:06

Conversations are built rather than asserted, at least that seemed to be my perspective. I think that experience, those two years, really taught me how to listen better, listen and put myself in other people's shoes.

Yuko Handa 0:25

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.

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

[Music]

Yuko Handa 1:13

Welcome, Patricia, to our Japan Journey podcast. It is a great pleasure to have you here with us today.

Patricia Maclachlan 1:19

And it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

Yuko Handa 1:21

Patricia Maclachlan is Professor of Government and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Professor in Japanese Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Patricia, I always, always start with this question: where did your Japan journey start?

Patricia Maclachlan 1:39

Well, my Japan journey started kind of later in life. A lot of people get very, very interested in Japan when they're in high school. And for me it was mostly at the college level, although I had a bit of a subliminal influence when I was growing up.

My father was a musician and he also ran a small piano shop. And the main piano that he sold was Kawai Piano, of course from Japan. And so I always recall in the background, when my dad would come home from work, praise for Japanese manufacturing ingenuity. He really liked the piano, it sold well, and I think it was a good business decision from him. So I kind of got introduced to it through the back door to Japan at the dinner table. I also played the piano and a lot of my friends who were playing piano, or who were competing against me, were Japanese Canadians living in Vancouver.

But it was really not until I got to the University of British Columbia as an undergrad and I started taking courses in Japan and I got the bug, so to speak. And then there was this one episode. It sounds a little silly in retrospect, but it was sort of a before and after moment for me in my quest for learning about Japan. One of my history professors invited his friend from downtown, as we would call it, a businessman who worked a lot with Japan in exports and imports to give a talk to our class. And I still remember this man standing in front of me and telling us, "If you can combine knowledge of Japanese, the Japanese language, with a marketable degree, you stand to do really well in life."

And at that point, I was in my second year, I was a sophomore, at that point I thought I was going to go to law school. And I immediately thought, "I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to take Japanese!" And so I started learning Japanese when I was 19 years old. And I never looked back! I never went to go to law school either, but Japan stayed in my life from that moment.

The Japanese businessman, needless to say, never offered me a job at that point. He just got me thinking, got my wheels turning, and after that point I decided that I would take more courses in Japan. I majored in political science and was in a program that enabled me to do a lot of really deep research on Japanese politics and history. And then after I graduated I decided, "Well, I'm just going to go to Japan."

And I think it's important to remember, too, this is the 1980s, the mid-1980s, so by the time I graduated, the bubble economy had started and everyone was abuzz about Japan. Japan then was what China is to us today: a fascinating country, a country that challenged our models of production and the so many facets of our daily life. And there was an intense curiosity about Japan in the media and also in our universities. And so I rode that wave.

And so when I graduated, I decided, "I'm going to take some time off before I go to graduate school." And I ended up accepting a job with a YMCA in Northern Hokkaido in a small city called Kitami, which is, I will say, closer to Vladivostok than it is to Tokyo. And I stayed for two years and while I was there I gave up on the law plan and decided I was going to go to graduate school and give it a try. So it was a great experience for me.

Yuko Handa 5:17

So, take us back to that day when you landed in Kitami.

Patricia Maclachlan 5:21

It was late August and so, of course, it was warm, it was beautiful. In some ways, I felt like I was home because it was mountainous and green and lush and not terribly heavily populated. In fact it was one of the most remote places I'd ever seen! And when I arrived I had a wonderful experience that just... I had a homestay for the first little while, then I moved into my own apartment, and I made good friends.

I was an English teacher so I didn't make as much opportunity for myself as I perhaps should have to speak Japanese because everybody wanted to speak English with me, because I was the local English teacher. But there were no other foreigners, maybe one or two others that I met occasionally. All my friends, all my acquaintances were Japanese. And they were very welcoming and they made it just a fabulous experience.

Yuko Handa 6:18

Share with us, there must have been some expectation before getting to Japan. Were they all true? Or were some things completely not true? Were there things that surprised you? Not surprised you?

Patricia Maclachlan 6:32

Absolutely. Well, when I was learning about Japan, I was thinking— I read a lot of books, I talked to people who had been there, my professors were experts in Japan. So, I was book-learned in terms of Japan, I think you could say. So I thought I knew a lot, but when I got there I realized I still had a lot of learning to do.

So I did experience a kind of culture shock. It was very subtle in many ways. So after the first two to three initial weeks of feeling welcome and getting used to Northern Japan finally passed and I was settling into the workaday culture, getting used to my job, that's when I really learned the subtleties of human interaction in Japan. That's when it started. And at first I felt like a fish out of water. So the old adage that Japan looks like the rest of the world on the surface, looks like any other Western community, more or less, was certainly true. But the culture was different and it took me a while to get used to it.

Yuko Handa 7:46

Can you share with us? When you say subtleties, I'm curious, what were these subtleties?

Patricia Maclachlan 7:52

Well, the things that I should have paid more attention to in Japanese class, but never really did, so I learned the hard way. For example, at least in the community where I lived at that time, and this is 1986 to '88, it's really true, that stereotype the Japanese don't say "no" bluntly. But I did! I was learning how to be an assertive young woman. I was 22 years old and I would use the word "no." And sometimes I would push back and was often frustrated that the response from my— whoever I was speaking to, whether it was my boss at the language school or other teachers, when I would assert myself, I did not get a direct response in reply.

And that was hard. It took me a while to figure out. In fact, one very kind teacher took me aside and said, "You gotta get used to this. This is not how we do things here and you're coming across as kind of aggressive," which was funny because in Canada we're supposed to be less aggressive than Americans, but I was still too much so for my Japanese colleagues.

So that was one example, direct communication. It was more subtle and more collaborative conversations in Japan. Conversations are built rather than asserted, at least that seemed to be my perspective. I think that experience, those two years, really taught me how to listen better, listen and put myself in other people's shoes. I didn't always get it right, but that was a good learning experience for me.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 9:40

Did you experience any other parts of Japan while you were there?

Patricia Maclachlan 9:44

I did! Since I was working on the academic school year, teaching was very light during the summer and there was a long break at around New Year's, and so I had a chance to travel all around Japan. And I actually met with friends or other colleagues who also worked for YMCAs in other parts of the country. Friends in Kitami took me to hot springs, Akan National Park, Lake Akan, Shiretoko Peninsula, beautiful parts of Hokkaido. And I went as far south as Hiroshima as a result of this network.

So yes, I had a chance to travel through Japan through those two years, and also outside of Japan. I went to Hong Kong and Taiwan and South Korea, a little venture into China and Thailand, so that was an exciting time for me.

Yuko Handa 10:35

So, take us— this two year ends, you travel through Japan and through a lot of Asia. I am going to assume you came back to British Columbia?

Patricia Maclachlan 10:44

Just long enough to unpack my suitcases and repack them because, about three weeks after I got back to Vancouver, I headed off to graduate school. So while I was in Kitami, I gained admission to Columbia University. So right after that I started my graduate work.

Yuko Handa 11:02

At that point have you already decided that Japan is going to be a part of your academic career?

Patricia Maclachlan 11:09

Yes, yes. And again, this is— Japan was so fascinating, for different reasons today, than perhaps today. The economy was going gangbusters, the bubble economy was in— going full force. The major shifts in Japan's global presence and its financial power. So I was fascinated in the middle of all of this to watch the economy growing and challenging that of the United States. And I really did want to know why. So, what was driving this movement by Japan?

Yuko Handa 11:47

Now, I understand that you did a big research on the Japanese postal system.

Patricia Maclachlan 11:55

That's right.

Yuko Handa 11:56

I have to admit not a lot of people study the Japanese postal system. I mean, they do study the Japanese government and politics or women or history.

Patricia Maclachlan 12:06

By the way, I did a little of that. My first project as a PhD student, and then my first book, was on the Japanese consumer movement. And that was led by *shufuren*¹ women, women's groups and housewives groups. So I did dabble in that a little bit. And then I moved on to the post office. So yes, that was my second big project as an academic.

Yuko Handa 12:27

But why? I grew up in Japan, and I know what the postal system is, but for our listeners who don't know why, why? What fascinated you about the Japanese postal service?

Patricia Maclachlan 12:38

Well, you're right to ask why, because a lot of Americans, when I tell them I'm doing that, their response is, "Why on earth? Why would you spend time on that?" Well, the short answer is that the Japanese post office is more than a place to mail a letter. And as I discovered for myself when I lived in Japan, the post office is also a major savings bank, and it's a place to buy life insurance, and it offers all kinds of services. And the postal savings system became so large by the 1990s that it earned the distinction of being the world's largest savings bank. That's my entry into this topic.

And so by the time I was interested and had the time to move into this postal project, Koizumi Junichiro was becoming the Prime Minister of Japan in 2001. And his number one goal, and he had held this goal since the early '90s, was to privatize the post office, particularly the postal savings and insurance systems, for one or two important reasons. And I'm summarizing things perhaps a little too generally, but here they are.

The first reason was that all that money that went into the postal savings system is deposits, household deposits, and the premiums to buy insurance policies were all channeled through, first the post ministry, and then into the ministry of finance, where the government decided where that money should be invested. And they would channel those postal proceeds through what's called the Fiscal Investment and Loan Program, or the FILP, into government financial institutions that in turn gave loans to various targeted recipients targeted by government policy.

So during the rapid growth period from roughly 1960 to the early to mid- early 1970s, those funds were channeled into industry to help them achieve an edge in export markets, for example. And then after that a variety of different projects gained descendants. Filled funds, i.e., postal savings and insurance funds, were helping local governments build roads and schools and parks. They were helping clean up the environment when environmental pollution was an issue.

Now they're being channeled into- in a different way, but now the FILP is used to help small businessmen and small businesses and other projects. So that use of household savings, in a way that positioned the government to be a financial intermediary between savings and recipients, really skewed the public financial system in Japan and Koizumi wanted that changed. He wanted the postal system privatized in a way that would create a more level playing field between the postal system and commercial banks.

¹ 主婦連. Japan Housewives Association.

The other reason he wanted to privatize it, and this was the political scientist in me getting really interested in the post office, is that the post office, or at least the, usually, men who ran it, 24,000 plus postmasters, were one of the largest vote-mobilizing organizations for the Liberal Democratic Party through the postwar era. And their pressure on the LDP was largely responsible, or at least partially responsible, in a very significant way for keeping this whole financial network I described in place and immune to reform.

And so Koizumi thought if we privatized the postal system, we weaken the postmasters as an electoral arm of the LDP that clamored on behalf of these traditional institutions that Koizumi thought should be relegated to Japanese history. They had no part in a mature economy. And so that's why I dived into the post office and discovered all kinds of interesting things along the way.

Yuko Handa 16:45

I was just thinking about my own experience, a little bit personal experience, a little bit there, of how the postmaster was always a powerful figure in the community. But not in the “I am running for office” way, but more so in the you would see him at *undokai*,² at sports day. And you would see him at the summer festival, at the *omatsuri*.³ And everybody knew his wife, for instance.

Patricia Maclachlan 17:17

Exactly!

Yuko Handa 17:18

And it was so— it's also so fascinating because in many, many ways Japan is modern. I grew up in a modern Japan, and yet it's not. You know, when you— I mean, I grew up in a big suburb of Tokyo, you know, just like any big suburb in the United States. But it was, in certain ways, a very small community.

Patricia Maclachlan 17:41

That's exactly right. And the postmasters were, in some communities, central to all of this. What is interesting from a social and cultural perspective of the postal system is that the bulk of Japanese postmasters, although they were civil servants, at least before privatization legislation was passed in 2005, most of them that ran small post offices inherited their post offices from their fathers, their grandfathers, great grandfathers, and so on. Some postmasters that I talked to traced the lineage of their post office back to the early Meiji period,⁴ the 1870s, and they were historical sites.

So, whereas most bureaucrats in Japan are forced to change their positions or their locale every three years, so they get billeted to one community, they get shifted out after three more years, and some of the postmasters of really large post offices, *futsū yūbinkyoku*⁵ or just regular post offices, would do just that, the postmasters in these *tokutei yubinkyokuchō*,⁶ or commissioned postmasters or specially designated

² 運動会. Sports day.

³ お祭り. Festival.

⁴ 明治時代. Meiji period (1868-1912).

⁵ 普通郵便局. Regular post office.

⁶ 特定郵便局長. Specific postmaster.

postmasters, would spend their entire lives in that job. And so did their fathers and their grandfathers and so on.

So they have social stature. And they translated that stature into social capital that was used to not only bring business into the post office, but also to contribute to a sense of community. So yeah, these fellows were— they led, sometimes they headed the PTA. Sometimes they coached children's soccer teams, as you noted. They would host children in the post office on a field day and teach them letter writing and so on.

For decades in the mid 20th century, the post office was often the only locale of village radio. And so people, when they heard the surrender speech of the Emperor of Japan in August of 1945, heard it sitting in the postmaster's office or home, because that's where the radio was. So, a real center of community affairs and that in turn gets translated into political capital.

So those postmasters would use their networks to gather the vote. They wouldn't, at election, they wouldn't actually do it themselves, because it was illegal for many decades, at least until 2005 when privatization was introduced. They would mobilize their wives or their retired colleagues to do the job for them. And so they became a really, really powerful electoral arm of the LDP. And as such, their social and political roles, as well as their role in mobilizing financial capital for the developmental state, make some really important figures of a very now-traditional model of political, social, and economic development.

Yuko Handa 20:40

And you saw all this through the post office.

Patricia Maclachlan 20:44

Yes, yes. So, like I said, the post office is more than just a place to mail a letter. And I think, too, that those services, which are really convenient— imagine, not only does the local post office, and there's one in every neighborhood, it's usually one post office within a child's walking distance, was the word. There's not only a post office in your neighborhood, but the post office comes to you, particularly if you're older, and you can do the banking on your doorstep. That's incredible! So all of these services are so convenient.

And also the post office became, at least in the Meiji era, very much a symbol of modernization, of the state playing a positive role in bringing Japan into a new future. It was the trusted face of the state at the local level. So all of these dimensions of the post office combined to create, I think, a real love of the institution at the local level. People really love their post office in Japan. You can't say that so much about the US post office.

And that got translated into a lot of opposition in the 2000s to Koizumi's push to privatize the postal services. And as a result of that, although Koizumi did get his way, he passed his legislation with a lot of modification that was a nod, I think, to those forces of resistance, as he called them. But that legislation that was supposed to go online 2007, the stipulations were postponed, and then eventually postal privatization legislation was reformed somewhat in 2012 to enable the government to retain a heavy footprint, I think, within the services. So it will never be fully privatized.

Yuko Handa 22:40

I remember this, actually, the constant debate on the TV. It was definitely– the privatization of the Postal Service was just always on the news.

Patricia Maclachlan 22:51

And it wasn't just a financial debate or even a political debate. It was a cultural conflict. A new Japan versus an old, warm and fuzzy, traditional “this-is-what-makes-us-distinctive” Japan. Very different.

Yuko Handa 23:06

Because imagine, right? Imagine me as this, you know, typical kid in Japan. You see your postal *tantōsha*,⁷ the person in charge of your house, you kind of grew up with them, right? Because he comes to your house every single month, once a month, every day on either the 10th or the 15th, or whatever day, you know, they designated would come. And they see you go to elementary school, then congratulate you for, you know, being accepted to the high school that you wanted. And they saw me off go to college in the United States.

Patricia Maclachlan 23:41

When Koizumi was first deliberating on this with his right-hand man on that, the Keio University economist Takenaka Heizo, they debated– they had a vision at first of a really broad privatization that would, with some modification, turn the post offices into small businesses. And they eventually modified their goals and the postal blueprint that they put forward for legislation.

Recognize that the network was important, of those 24,000 or more post offices needed to be maintained. And this was because of pushback from local areas and politicians representing underserved rural communities who were really worried that, if privatized, a lot of post offices would go out of business and they'd shut down. Who's– how are the *tantōsha* gonna get to your mother's doorstep if that's the case? And just that issue of what will happen to my local post office? Will I still get the same service, the same face-to-face service? That drove a lot of the groundswell of opposition to what Koizumi wanted to do.

Yuko 24:59

I know you do research on many topics that's beyond the post office. What are some other factors playing in Japan that caught your attention?

Patricia Maclachlan 25:11

Well, I was really sad when I finished my book. You know, on one hand, I was happy, don't get me wrong. Publishing a book is a lot of work and it drags on for so long. So I was pleased to see it finished, but then sorry to see that, "All right, that chapter in my life is closed. Will I ever find anyone as interesting as those postmasters?" I really loved the research.

And the answer is pretty much I did. I was really lucky. I have been partnering with a University of Pittsburgh professor named Kay Shimizu, and we are writing– we've just finished a book, actually, on agricultural reform of cooperatives or *nōkyō*⁸ within JA, or Japan Agricultural Cooperatives. And much to

⁷ 担当者. Person in charge.

⁸ 農協. Agricultural cooperative.

my surprise I found, once again, the— how embedded this network of co-ops is and local, this time rural society in particular, more so than the post office. And so a lot of the same themes came out for the story about agricultural cooperation and its reform.

It's very hard to change these institutions that have been embedded in local society, intermeshed with local networks for so many generations. You can't just privatize them, you can't just reform them, you can't just order them from on high to change the way they go about doing their thing. It doesn't work that way. These aren't firms or corporations that are primed organizationally and, in terms of their ideas that buttress them, to simply change on a dime whenever prices in the market change. They are social institutions. They represent certain cultural values. They represent a state society approach to dealing with common affairs. And to just simply legislate them away is well nigh impossible.

So, I saw some very similar themes play out in the case of Japanese agriculture. And then some also very new ones. So I got— whereas the post office was, most of my research was done in urban and semi-urban areas, some trips into rural communities, of course the story of agriculture is a rural story. And so this time I saw a side of Japan that I didn't know very well before. And that is farmers, farm households, the *nōka*,⁹ and the relationship with a local co-op. So there are a lot of interesting things to unearth, dig up, on that project as well.

And also the co-ops had a similar feature to the post office and it's even much broader. So they provide services, they sell implements, seed, fertilizer, machinery to the farmer. They market the farmer's product. They're multipurpose. They also do the farmer's banking. So the JA, the network was also a bank, this time for farmers mostly.

They also provided a whole gamut of services depending on the locality. They ran gas stations, grocery stores, A-Coop as it's called. They provide wedding halls, travel services. Some of them even had car sale networks or they would sell tombstones. They also did provide social welfare services for the elderly: eldercare, homecare workers.

So it was a one-stop shop, a multi-service provider, which, and this sounds very much like what I saw with the post office, really annoyed reformers who would like to see Japan be more market-oriented, but was also very much protected and defended by those who thought Japan has a more distinctive approach to economic and political development. That— one that pays more attention to the costs on society.

Yuko Handa 29:19

I'm also hearing a story of push and pull, right?

Patricia Maclachlan 29:23

Oh, yes.

Yuko Handa 29:23

⁹ 農家. Farmer, farming family.

This is a country that, you know, after the war, really going through major transformation. And it's not the first time. I mean, you know, when you look at the Japanese history, there's also a major point of transformation during the Meiji era.

Patricia Maclachlan 29:37

One thing I would say, though, that the Meiji period and the postwar era, the postwar period, the occupation, were two moments in history in which change was radical. But when I look back on the postwar period, from 1952, let's say, when the occupation is finished, Japan is now an independent country. And from '52 to today, in retrospect, yes, there's been a lot of change, but change is slow and incremental. It doesn't happen overnight.

Every once in a while you get a Koizumi Junichiro who wants to speed things up for the postal system, or an Abe Shinzo who tried to do it for JA and the agricultural system. But for the most part change is slow, one step at a time, and a lot of friction. And I think it has to do with the interconnectedness of the sectors of Japan: economic, social, political, cultural, and these institutions that embody all of that. It's like untangling a skein of yarn. It's so enmeshed in so many different walks of Japanese life, you cannot target just one set of, say, service provisions without having to make complementary changes to the context of those services.

Yuko Handa 31:06

And I love that you mentioned that, because it is so true. There are certain changes that happened really rapidly, very few in Japan, I have to admit, those moments. But there are also really changes that happen very, very slowly. And that's why I think sometimes people think that rapid change is only possible from immense external pressure, which was obviously true of Meiji period and of postwar.

It's the Japanese way of going through change. It's not right or wrong, it's just the Japanese way. And I find it fascinating that you really immersed yourself in there.

Patricia Maclachlan 31:49

It was a lot of fun, I'll tell you. When I was a grad student my, as I mentioned, my first project was the consumer movement. And I went into that topic thinking that consumer activists would think like Ralph Nader in Japan, in the United States, excuse me. That there are businesses and there are consumers and the two shall conflict.

But in Japan, consumer activists were far more conciliatory toward business, at least small business and farmers. They wanted— they aimed for a more holistic approach to serving the consumer interest. They didn't see a line in the sand between business versus consumers. They saw more, “Sometimes business strays and hurts us a little. We need to pull them back. But we're all in the same family, basically, and we need to learn how to cooperate.” So even there, that...what's the word? Adversarial approach to the political system, of us versus them, was absent in the consumer story that I discovered.

Yuko Handa 33:00

And all this, in certain ways, started with the Kawai piano.

Patricia Maclachlan 33:04

I guess you could say that. I never would have dreamed that it would have gotten me where it has, the Kawai Piano! Which, by the way, I played just a few notes last summer when I was home in Vancouver and the piano that we had in our house is still there.

Yuko Handa 33:21

Oh, how beautiful! That is so wonderful. Patricia, I also have to ask, there are many people, young people especially, who are just about to start their journey, their Japan journey. What would you say to them?

Patricia Maclachlan 33:37

Well, I have many things that I would want to say to them, and I think this is a great question, but let me focus on just one thing. In some of the organizations I belong to, we've worked very hard, including the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission and CULCON, CULCON in particular, Japan-U.S. Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange. That organization has worked so hard, along with the Bridging Foundation, those three organizations, to promote study abroad.

And any young person thinking about going to Japan, I urge you to explore your institution's study abroad connections with Japan. It's a wonderful way to get there. You can go as a tourist, of course, but study abroad, I have only great things to say about. I wished I had done it when I was an undergraduate. And I think that's a wonderful and very meaningful way of introducing yourself and immersing yourself into everyday Japan.

Yuko Handa 34:43

And last but not least, if you could do it again, would you still go to Kitami, Hokkaido?

Patricia Maclachlan 34:49

Yes, I would. Yes, I would. Although I will confess I don't want to pay too rosy a picture. When I first got to Kitami and winter started at the end of September, I wasn't sure I would last two years. But I did and I'm so glad I did because I had such a great experience and met so many terrific people.

Yuko Handa 35:08

Thank you so much, Patricia. That was such a beautiful, beautiful Japan journey.

Patricia Maclachlan 35:14

Well, thank you for having me. It was my pleasure.

[Music]

Japan Society of Boston 35:25

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. 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.