

My Japan Journey - Episode 2
Andrew Gordon: Making Sense of Today Through History

[Music]

Andy Gordon 0:05

So don't be afraid to embrace something that comes your way unexpectedly if it grabs your heart and mind.

[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.

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

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So, welcome Andrew Gordon to our second podcast interview at the Japan Society of Boston. Thank you for joining us!

Andy Gordon 1:15

You're very welcome.

Yuko Handa 1:16

Andrew Gordon is the Lee and Juliet Folger Fund Professor of History at Harvard University, and also our board member at the Japan Society of Boston. So Andy, where did your Japan journey start?

Andy Gordon 1:31

Right, so it started in the summer -- or the spring actually of 1969 when I was a junior in high school in Newton, Massachusetts. I was planning to take a cross-country trip. That was a very popular thing to do among teenagers then, and probably now, in a caravan. It was going to be in, I think, a couple of vans or station wagons with a group of eight or ten kids, and that would have been fun.

But then in May, I heard from my social studies teacher, Mr. Lorette, that another social studies teacher, actually, the head of the Social Studies program, was running a trip to Japan, and they didn't have enough people enrolled. It was May, as I recall, and the program was going to start in June. And so he desperately

needed two warm bodies more. And it struck me as... Wow! Something that might be neat. And I could probably go across the country any old time. But when could I ever go to Japan?

And so, I signed up. And the only places I had heard of -- I remember this distinctly, looking at all of these names of cities -- were Tokyo and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I had never heard of Kyoto, and -- or Osaka as far as I can remember, which sounds ridiculous. But, you know, I was seventeen in 1969. Japan's presence in American society was not as much as it is now. And that was, I think, a typical state of knowledge -- or state of ignorance for an American high school kid. Even going to what was considered a really good high school with strong history or social studies programs. So that was the point of departure and it was a remarkable experience. And it just sparked a lifetime of interest in Japan.

Yuko Handa 3:31

That is a remarkable story, but it does make me ask a few more questions in terms of... So there's Andy, the teenager Andy from Newton, Mass., who didn't know Kyoto, who didn't know anything about Japan, didn't have anything to do with Japan. And yet, you were able to jump to that opportunity. Was that just a teenage energy and spirit? Or was there something more that sparked your curiosity?

Andy Gordon 4:03

You know, I've wondered about that, but I don't think there was any particular latent hidden curiosity about Japan that got sort of rekindled that I can think of. It was simply, "here's someplace interesting." This was about something that seemed far away, and probably exotic, and really interesting. And so, why not?

I was rather struck by what was modern and familiar. And maybe it was because of the very expectation of it being unfamiliar and strange that I was so struck by what was -- my dominant impression was, "Okay, here's a place that's remarkably like my world." We met students who were deeply politicized. I mean, I was interested in Vietnam -- not as a place to go -- as a place I didn't want to go. I mean, the Vietnam War was at its peak then of intensity for the American -- at least the American-Vietnam War. And I was very much opposed to it and, actually, rather concerned about whether someday I might get drafted.

I ran into, you know, students. One of the homestay family's brothers, one of the -- one of -- another homestay family, not mine, had a daughter and a son, and that son or homestay brother was very active in the Zengakuren¹, the student movement. And so, we had all these conversations about the student movement. And they were against the war in Vietnam, and so that struck a chord with me.

And then, the music; our homestay sisters and their family -- others, we met, were listening to the Beatles and it was similar. And the TV shows they saw included American TV shows. And the patterns of daily life-- my homestay family's father got on a train and went to Osaka for his job which was a paralegal office he ran. And, the mother was a stay-at-home mom tending to the family. And that had been my mother's life until about... when I was thirteen or fourteen. So until a few years before that. Then she had gone back to school and started to work. But the whole configuration of family life, of political concerns of young people, of popular culture, it all felt so familiar. And that was my big surprise.

¹ 全学連. All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations

Yuko Handa 6:35

So that is very interesting, because your perception that it would be different, and the reality that it was actually quite similar-- is it because you saw a human connection? So this was not just America-Japan, but it was, you know, Andy, and a person?

Andy Gordon 6:58

Yeah, it was partly that. But, it was not just the person to person, but it was... I mean, I wasn't a sociologist, but I was thinking about the wider society. And that also -- it seemed very familiar. But, you know. The first day in Tokyo, we went to Shinjuku. I remember thinking, "Oh my goodness, there are so many Japanese people!" And I was sort of surprised. Then I thought, "Well, that's kind of stupid to be surprised, of course." But I had never seen so many Japanese people in my life.

So at first, it looked like a mass that then -- gradually, I began to get to know people individually and as families and -- but even the mass impression was of Sunday department stores, everybody out shopping, bustling, modern. It wasn't, sort of, everybody in kimonos and incense and temples and stuff. I mean, we saw some of that in Kyoto, but the initial impression was Tokyo for ten days, and then the homestay family. And that struck me more as a matter of similarity. That was intriguing. Even at the first visit, I mean, my overall impression was, "I'm really surprised at how recognizable this world is." From the dynamics of family, from youth culture, from the sort of general infrastructure of the society.

But, I do remember one conversation with my homestay sister about future plans and, "what are you going to do when you grow up?" kind of thing. And she was going to go to Doshisha College, which is an escalator from the high school, so... And then, she was going to hope to meet some guy and get married. But if she didn't, then her parents would arrange a marriage for her, an *omiai*². And that was the point at which I had a moment of, sort of, *naruhodo*.³ "I see, okay, so this isn't completely the same." Because for me, as a 17-year-old, the idea that I would let my parents choose the person I married, or choose the potential person -- I didn't really understand exactly what an *omiai* was except that it was an arranged marriage, and I think actually misunderstood the degree to which the couple themselves had no say in the matter. But anyway, that was a moment of "Okay, wait a minute. Yeah, mostly familiar and similar, but not completely."

And so, that was a pivot moment for me that made things even more interesting. I mean, later I realized that on the one hand, an *omiai* is basically like a blind date, and the two couple -- that the man and the woman in the potential couple both have a say to go forward or not, and it's actually hardly different from a blind date, or even what Americans do now online, where they defer a lot of their partner-seeking to others. So, you know, I've changed my views of that, but at the time it struck me as really weird.

The other thing that struck me is -- that surprised me, although -- it was something about a different configuration of the modern way of being -- I mean, I didn't have that vocabulary then -- you know, had a big impact on what I decided to do as a historian was the visit to a factory. We had in our 10 days in

² お見合い. Formal marriage interview.

³ なる程. I see; that's right; indeed.

Tokyo, a number of kengaku⁴ -- number of not just tourism, but sort of educational visits. And one that I remember was to the Sony factory in Shinagawa. Right near the Shinagawa station, that was an assembly line -- I forget for what -- for TVs or for transistor radios. Anyway, the guide explained to us a couple things. That the company really took care of both the women and the men in different ways.

The women -- who were young -- they were high school age. They had been hired out of middle school, and the company was funding them to attend high school classes in the evenings after work, and that they would get their high school degree while working. And then they would probably leave and go home and get married. And the men would be hired out of college or high school with the expectation that -- mutually -- that they would stay for their whole careers, and this thing called lifetime employment.

So that was my first exposure to Japanese-style employment. And that really... That was another big surprise. It didn't make a lot of sense to me. How could...? Why...? From both sides, I was thinking, "Why would the people who were working there want to work there for 30 or 40 years?" And also, "Why would the company not want to be able to, sort of, change who they hired?" And so that struck me as something quite different.

But then, a couple years later, I was a freshman in college and I took a class with the late Ezra Vogel. That was actually my first time to meet him. And I went in and said, "You know, I'm really -- I'm thinking of writing about lifetime employment and how it works and why it came to be." And he said, "You know, Andy, I think that's a big topic. I don't think -- that's too big of a topic for a term paper for this course." And he suggested that I do something. When I did that a few years later -- go to grad school -- I decided through college that although I was initially interested in contemporary Japan, I wanted to study more and learn more about Japan, but -- and about Asia -- but it was really how things got to be the way they were. The history that is behind the present. That was more interesting to me than the present itself. So I started to look into that history more seriously. And Ezra Vogel was right, it was much too much to write in a little term paper, so I wrote three books about it.

Yuko Handa 13:21

But that is fascinating because, how interesting that Japan and your interest in history are so intertwined. There is a part of me that wonders if that trip when you, Andy, the high schooler -- if you had gone to say, India, could you have become a historian specialized in Indian history?

Andy Gordon 13:50

Absolutely. I'm positive that is what would have happened. Or fairly positive. I've often thought, "Well gee, if I'd have had a social studies teacher who was running the trip to Brazil, and I signed up for that, I'd probably be I probably have learned Portuguese and Spanish and I'd be a professor somewhere, or a teacher, or researcher looking at Latin American history or Brazilian history."

Yuko Handa 14:11

⁴ 見学. Study by observation; field trip; tour.

Isn't that fascinating, how life happens that way? That it's, you know, it's just one *kikkake*⁵, as we say in Japanese, one moment that in certain ways really changed your life. Completely. Who would have thought? Your friends or your family?

Andy Gordon 14:28

My family was astonished, yes. Absolutely. And my friends were a little baffled too. And yeah, it's so serendipitous. So I'm a big believer in -- it's not fate, I think that's silly. Or at least, I mean, some people might not think it's silly. I don't think it was fated. But anyway, something happened more or less randomly. And yeah, it was really important.

Yuko Handa 14:52

That's wonderful, though, I do have to ask -- I am curious -- you could have this serendipity, right? This *kikkake* of getting to know Japan. You could have ended up being a sociologist. You could have ended up being an art historian. You could have ended up being more interested in business. But it was this question that you had of, "This looks modern and similar, and yet it's different. Why?" But you asked it in the "why?" in terms of looking at its history. What is it about that? What is it about history that attracted you so much?

Andy Gordon 15:33

Yeah, it wasn't completely clear to me at any one moment, like a light switch went off, that it would be -- the direction I should go would be history. In college, I took only two history courses. And other than that I took literature, I did sociology, I did anthropology. And they were all interesting. So at that point I was still wavering, because I was interested in understanding the present that I had experienced three or four years ago, and as an ongoing interest, to make sense of Japanese society. As I thought about where my true interests lay, it was in the process by which the present had come to be.

I did a senior honors project in East Asian Studies at Harvard that looked at the American occupation of Japan. I was interested in the place of the United States in remaking Japan, or you know, how that project went, as a political project and a social project. So that was also an experience that made me realize that I -- my interests were sort of in the past and its connection to the present.

Yuko Handa 16:52

It's really fascinating, especially as we're talking to -- everybody's Japan stories. And Japan as a *kikkake* is the same for everyone. Japan as -- you know, there's some serendipitous reason why somebody is attracted to Japan, but what comes after that is different. In your case, it led you to a life of being an historian. Your first visit to Japan really sparked your interest in the Japanese labor and where that came from and how that came to be. But are there other parts of Japanese history that, if you were talking to somebody who's just beginning or whose interest is just starting, where you say, "You've got to look at this part of Japan or this part of Japanese history"?

Andy Gordon 17:42

⁵ 切っ掛け. Chance; start; cue; excuse; motive; impetus; occasion.

It began with labor and management in production, but it shifted later to the emergence of the middle class and consumers and the role of women in the sort of -- generating a modern consumer economy. I've become more and more interested in the 19th century and, you know, the transformations that came to Japan through -- from the 1850s through the end of the 19th century that can be summed up in "modernization," or the rise of capitalism, the emergence of Empire. All of that, the sort of -- the hows and the whys of that story are just fascinating to me.

Even comparing the extent of transformation after the Second World War, which was profound, I see more that was already in place as a kind of framework or foundation that made the post-war transformation of Japan not so much of a transformation as a re-- a picking up of threads that were already there. And of course, even with the -- you know, the end of the Tokugawa⁶ and the start of modernizing efforts in the Meiji⁷ period, you can find its continuities.

But the degree of transformation was extraordinary. The youth of the people who were leading the transformation was extraordinary. The idea that the past had to be jettisoned completely, even if it wasn't the idea that that's what had to be done. The idea that all of a sudden, knowledge needed to be sought from everywhere in the world. You know, there was so much that was put forward that was different. I think it really is fascinating.

But the one thing I push back on a little bit is that for women and for men, the speed was completely different. Men -- especially in the leadership -- they dropped their kimono, their *hakama*,⁸ their samurai dress, immediately. They dropped their top knots and hairstyles, immediately. And they, within the space of a generation or even a half a generation, went Western in their dress, in their facial hair, and hairstyles.

Women did not. Women, for the most part, were wearing, as daily wear, *wafuku*⁹ of one sort or another. And hairstyles, too, changed only gradually. And it wasn't really until the 1920s and 30s that for urban women, what they wore began to change dramatically. And it wasn't a total turnaround until after WWII, when kimono wearing became a kind of ceremonial thing, almost like a museum piece that you just wore on January 15th, or to weddings or funerals, for the most part.

So one thing that's fascinating is that this transformation in daily life was fast and profound for men, especially in a certain social status. The artisans, they -- you know, they continued to wear the *happi* coat¹⁰ in a certain style, even into the early 20th century. So what was, I think, exciting and maybe bewildering. And I think for some people that was fun, or for some people, it was -- a concern, was that the coexistence of these multiple styles... So, you know, for some, I think it was really exciting. And others were very concerned that the essence of -- you know, Japanese men didn't want the women to change their styles as quickly as the men changed because they wanted somebody to preserve the tradition, while they went ahead and modernized.

⁶ 徳川時代. Tokugawa period (i.e. the Edo period, 1600-1867 CE).

⁷ 明治時代. Meiji period (1868-1912).

⁸ 袴. Man's formal divided skirt.

⁹ 和服. Japanese clothes.

¹⁰ 法被. Traditional Japanese straight-sleeved coat.

Yuko Handa 21:45

That is so interesting, but I'm so tempted to draw that parallel to your experience of hearing your homestay sister say that, despite all the modernization that you saw, despite the similarities that you were drawing between US and Japan -- the teenager Andy -- despite all that, she said, "In the future, I want to find someone. And if not, I am going to do *omiai* and find -- you know, my parents will find someone." I wonder -- I'm almost tempted to draw a similarity there between the Meiji era when the women were changing slower, and here you are a teenager, Andy, in Japan, and you're looking at all these modernized Japanese, and yet your home-sister says, "I'm going to let my parents choose my -- who I get married to." Interesting sort of *mujun*,¹¹ as we say in Japan, I guess.

Andy Gordon 22:42

Yeah. I mean, I felt it contradictory to have such a modern -- seemingly modern life, and at the same time to have that attitude. But I don't think, in her mind, it was contradictory. And anyway, in the end, she met a guy in the volleyball club that she fell in love with and married.

Yuko Handa 22:58

For those young people today, listening to this podcast, what would you want to say to them?

Andy Gordon 23:06

Don't be afraid to embrace something that comes your way unexpectedly, if it grabs your heart and mind. And you know, I did, in the end, have an *omiai*, essentially, because my parents met a young woman at a Christmas party in my hometown -- which is where I live now, Newton, and -- who was from Japan -- and who was studying at the SUNY Buffalo campus. And they said -- they actually had no intention of arranging a marriage. They thought it would be good language practice. And it was holiday time so I was at home. And then I met her to, sort of, exchange English and Japanese. And then we ended up getting married. So there's... yeah. That was also serendipity.

Yuko Handa 23:56

Oh, I didn't know this. Oh, wonderful.

[Music]

I mean, have we already discovered all of the surprising things about Japan? Is there nothing that people can say, "Oh, my goodness, I gotta try that, because I never heard or, you know, seen that before?"

Andy Gordon 24:20

That's... that's an interesting question. "Is there anything left that isn't already, sort of, if not common knowledge, sort of, not surprising?" Well, the COVID-19, to get serious for a moment, has made me realize that something I thought was silly, which is wearing masks, is not. And I remember a conversation with a cousin of mine, an American guy, who came to Japan with his family for the first time when my wife and I were there. And it was winter, and we showed him around, and a lot of people were wearing

¹¹ 矛盾. Contradiction, inconsistency.

masks. This was, you know, a decade ago. So it had nothing to do with COVID-19. It just had to do with the standard thing that many Japanese people do, especially in winter.

And he was so scornful. He said, "Why is everybody wearing masks?" And, we said, "Well, you know, it's to prevent colds." And he said, "Oh, but, you know, those things aren't gonna really filter out the microbes and the germs. It's silly." And so I belie-- he's a doctor -- so I believed him. My wife didn't. She thought it made sense.

And I've been doing some study on the history of mask-wearing. And it's so ironic because that practice started out in the West, I mean, the invention of respiratory masks came out of the 19th century and -- to help prevent industrial disease and protect coal miners. And then it started to be used for disease prevention and airborne transmission and the flu pandemic of, you know, the so-called Spanish flu pandemic. That led Americans to adopt mask-wearing. But then, the practice didn't take root, and it took root in Japan and elsewhere in Asia through a long complicated process that I'm beginning to study a little bit.

So there's something that we ought to try. Now, many Americans are trying it, but the degree of acceptance of it, as you know, is pretty contested here in the United States. So that would be something. Public health, you know, public -- the idea of modern hygiene and public health came into Japan from the West. From Germany, especially, but from elsewhere in the second half of the 19th century. And I'd say the Japanese have embraced public health practice for the most part -- vaccines are a little different story -- but for the most part, more fully than at least the United States has. And that -- we've learned that in the last year. So, yeah that would be another recommendation I'd make to people. Try out masks.

Yuko Handa 27:13

It's interesting how today is so connected, to some extent, yesterday, as in history. What you have also shown us is that the world has always been interconnected. To your COVID example, a lot of people often talk about how COVID has shown us that the world is interconnected and interwoven. But your story of public health, your story of where mask-wearing came from -- the world has always been interconnected. I think, to my mind, I'm hearing history is showing us that the world is not that large, that we've always been influencing each other and making each other curious.

Andy Gordon 27:58

Yeah, I think you're right. I think -- I mean, going back, you know, centuries and centuries, the Silk Road is an example. And then, more recently, what we've just been talking about with health and disease. I mean they're -- not all the connections are happy ones, because the diseases are -- can be devastating, but absolutely interconnected for sure.

Yuko Handa 28:18

Thank you so much, Andy Gordon. It's been a phenomenal journey with you, even just these small minutes that we had with you. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Andy Gordon 28:31

Thank you for asking me to do this, I've had a lot of fun doing it.

[Music]

Japan Society Boston 28:39

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END OF TRANSCRIPT