

My Japan Journey - Episode 8
Gerry Curtis: An Outsider with An Open Mind

[Music]

Gerry Curtis 0:03

It was like peeling an onion, the more I learned about Japan, I wanted to get down to the next layer. And you do and then what do you discover there's still further layers to penetrate. And so I've been peeling this onion for an awfully long time. Yeah, I've still got a lot more to learn.

Host 0:23

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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[Music]

Host 0:58

Gerry-san, it's a pleasure to have you on our podcast.

Gerry Curtis 1:01

My pleasure.

Host 1:02

Gerald Curtis is Burgess Professor Emeritus of political science at Columbia University, former director of Columbia's Weatherhead East Asian Institute, and chairman of Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation. Professor Curtis is the author of numerous books and articles written in both English and Japanese, including *Seiji to Sanma: Nihon to Kurashite 45 nen*, *Japan story*, *The Logic of Japanese Politics*, *The Japanese Way of Politics*, *Election Campaigning Japanese style*, and many others. Welcome, Gerry-san, thank you for joining us.

Gerry Curtis 1:38

I'm happy to be here.

Host 1:40

Looking at some of these titles, it's quite obvious that you have a big connection to Japan and to Japanese politics. But before we go there, I'd like to ask the big question of this podcast, where did your Japan journey start?

Gerry Curtis 1:52

The answer is a little complicated, because in my case I really didn't have any particular interest in Japan beyond what was sort of normal, average people in the 1960s had, because Japan was a rapidly growing economy. It was like China today, things were booming. And everybody, you know, the next century was going to be the Japanese century and so on. So I guess that awareness was there.

But I have a rather checkered history. I was, well I wasn't interested at all in academic work when I was in high school, I was basically interested in becoming a jazz musician. And I spent the first couple of years at college, at a music conservatory, concluded that I wasn't a Bill Evans or Felonious Munk and I left that school. I actually ended up in New Mexico. I'm from Brooklyn, New York. But I'm a graduate of all places of the University of New Mexico. I actually went out there as an adventure, to try something different.

And I went to this university, which you know it's not a research university, but they had some wonderful professors, including one professor of international politics, who was a Columbia PhD. Looking back on my life, I think the critical role that several professors played in my journey was very impressive. And it's always made me think that being a professor actually can change people's lives.

They changed mine, first I had the one professor when I was studying music, who said, you know, if you're not into music, you want to do something else, you should get out of here, and go to a school that has a bigger curriculum and you can develop your, my newfound interest in politics. And then I had a professor at the University of New Mexico, who said, you really should go to graduate school, and you can get a fellowship, I'm sure you can get a fellowship. And that's what happened.

So I came to Columbia, to go to graduate school, figuring I'd spent just one year in graduate school, they had a one year MA in those days in political science. Then I would decide what to do with my life. So I did that. And at the end of the year, I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I had to take a seminar in American foreign policy as a first year graduate student, and the professor it turned out was some wizard Japan specialist. His name was James Morley, a wonderful human being, and a great teacher and he took an interest in me and towards the end of the semester that I took a seminar, he said, from what I can tell you don't really seem to know exactly what you want to do. Why don't you enter the PhD program and see if you like it. And I think you can get a fellowship. And if you don't like it, so then you decide next year what you want to do.

So that's what I did. I got a grant. I started studying Japanese actually that summer. In those days, you could do the first year Japanese in the summer, second year Japanese in the fall, third year Japanese in the spring. And that's what I did. So it was very intense. And also I was trying to, taking classes in international politics and political science. And then I got a fellowship, to go to Japan and study Japanese. So suddenly, I became involved with Japan, purely coincidental or serendipitous reasons, I had not intended to become a Japan specialist.

And my impression is that most young people end up doing things that they never intended to do. Now you're young people who look at me and say, wow, he must have known from the time that he was a young child that he really was interested in academics and he wanted to be a Japan specialist. None of that is true.

Host 5:36

So you're telling me that those who are lost, and who have no clue what they want to do, in their high school or in their twenties shouldn't be concerned. And it sounds like you yourself was a late bloomer.

Gerry Curtis 5:47

That's right. Late bloomer in the sense one being interested in scholarship. I was very late to the game. But then I tried to make up for lost time. I was really into learning a lot about politics, political science, international relations, and so on. And then, you know, the Japan connection, there was nothing planned, nothing intended. And as I said, I know a lot of people who have very similar histories in the way they got into Japan. You know, I was in Japan for the first time to study Japanese language in 1964, which was the year of the Tokyo Olympics. And it was a very exciting time in Japan, the country was booming, the politics was very exciting, very dynamic.

I got really entranced by Japan, and then you know, a lot has changed. It's almost 60 years ago, 58 years, I can't believe that I've been at this for so long. A lot has changed in more than half a century that I've been involved with Japan. That fascination with the country, with the society, with the culture, the political system and so on. That has never dimmed. Even after I became an assistant professor. I didn't know that I was going to be, spend my life as a Japan specialist. When I started teaching, it was more comparative politics and IR. I got further and further, it was like peeling an onion, the more I learned about Japan, I wanted to get down to the next layer. And you do and then what do you discover there's still further layers to penetrate. And so I've been peeling this onion for an awfully long time. Yeah, I've still got a lot more to learn.

Host 7:25

And do you feel that strongly today as well? That you're still learning new things?

Gerry Curtis 7:30

The more you learn, the more you know what you don't know. It's a never ending challenge to try to get under the skin of what Japan is all about. Yeah, it's fascinating. And it can be frustrating, of course, but it's also very enjoyable. And I make this point for younger people who might be listening to this podcast, and interested in Japan, or interested in anywhere in the world where they don't speak English. If you want to understand the country, you have to make a strong effort to understand the language in which they exchange ideas, in which they talk to each other and write to each other and read each other. The idea that you can be a Japan specialist and not have a command over the language is just a terrible mistake. But it's a mistake that a lot of political scientists take for granted.

When I started out, to get a PhD at Columbia in comparative politics, you'd have to take exams in two foreign languages. Today, you can pass the exam or take the course in game theory, in quantitative methods, and then you don't need any foreign language. And you can get a PhD in comparative politics. Frankly, that is ridiculous. But you know, game theory is a language, quantitative methods is a language. So what's the difference? I don't think I need to explain to this audience, the differences is huge.

I think people who don't have a sufficient command of language, they end up being like, someone walking around a room with his eyes covered with a- so they can't see. So you've tried to figure out what the room looks like by touching things, feeling things. Okay, this must be a chair, that's a TV. But what comes out at the end is a rather distorted picture of that room, because you've never really seen it. And so if you want to see the room that is Japan, well, open your eyes, learn the language. That's the key.

Host 9:27

That's an interesting point that you've shared with us. From your perspective and your books, it sounds like you are able to see both sides of the coin. As an insider and an outsider, maybe even an in-betweenener.

Gerry Curtis 9:38

No, I think you hit on something that's important. When you get really deeply involved with another culture and another language, it changes you as a human being. I just got back from Japan a few days ago, I was there the last couple of months. And when I'm in Japan, of course, I'm still me. But when I'm speaking in Japanese, there's an aspect of my personality that comes to the fore that's different than when I'm in the US and speaking in English. I'm still the same person but I'm the same person with a much broader view of things, I think, than if I hadn't gotten involved with another country, another culture, like I have with Japan.

I'm interested in politics, but I'm not a kind of mainstream political scientist in the sense that my interest is really in people. And in what makes them tick, and how they behave. And so I'm less interested in kind of these macro theoretical views of politics than I am in the actors, the politicians, the voters, and so on. So you know, my first book, one called Election Campaigning Japanese style, which is not a gripping title, but it is in Japanese. The book was very popular in Japan. It's called Daigishi No Tanjo, the birth of

Japanese diamonds. So I spent a year living with a family of this candidate for the diet, and tracked how he got elected. Quite popular book in Japan, it's still in print, and amazingly, still being read. Because it was the first and still in some ways the only book, that decided to find out more like an anthropologist than a political scientist. How do you put together a campaign and end up getting voters to vote for you? So that's the way I've always approached my study of politics.

So I know a lot of politicians. I've known every prime minister since the mid 1960s, since Prime Minister Sato. You know, a lot of people have asked me, why are politicians so open to you? I've written some of the stories about my interactions with political leaders, a lot of them become very open and I've got good friends among political leaders. The key reason, to the extent that I've had kind of this unusual access, is that I'm genuinely curious about them and their lives. And what they do. People are very responsive when you make it obvious that you really want to know.

Politicians today, it's a tough business. They're successful at it. If you ask them, how come you're so successful at it? Well, that kind of opens up a lot of conversation. They want to let you know. Whether it be the study of politics, or anything else. Going in with a sense of humility, they have something that you want to find out about, you don't know what it really is, but you're going to ask kind of open ended questions to find out. That's what makes it interesting.

To go in with a theory and now find out what does this fellow have to say that fits or doesn't quite fit in with my hypothesis, I don't buy it. I don't think that's what's happened in political science, pressure we put on students to go in with already packaged theories and test them. That doesn't interest me. I think it's largely a waste of time. So I feel for young people who want to study about Japan, become enslaved by politics. They have to do this kind of mainstream, identify your independent variables, dependent variables, and so on and so on. Use a lot of quantitative method. But to what end? The question is, to what end? What do you learn from it? Well, there are some terrific political scientists who use those techniques, and they make a contribution. That isn't what interests me. What interests me is trying to get inside the head, people whose behavior interests me. So it's kept me going. I haven't gotten bored yet.

Host 13:37

I think there is a lot of value in that sort of human perspective. Trying to get to know another culture from the inside and really getting to know these people, not just studying them from the outside.

Gerry Curtis 13:47

That's fair, but I have to add, you can never not be an outsider. I cannot not be an American. I cannot be someone who had a particular kind of upbringing. So the idea that you can get so much, so far inside, that you become Japanese, no, I don't buy that. But you can get inside enough to be empathetic with what is going on, get a lot of understanding. But then it gets filtered through your own values, and history and so on. You know, my Japanese language ability is, I'm told is quite good. I know a lot of people in this business of politics. We sit around and we drink and talk and I think a lot of times people, they never quite forget that I'm gaijin, but I think I've overcome a lot of that.

Getting inside, by maintaining your, some degree of distance, so that you can bring something to the table in the way of analysis that would be, that is different from what a real insider might find. The biggest audience of my writings, it's Japanese, everything I've written has been translated into Japanese. I've written a couple of books in Japanese. And I do a lot of columns and articles and so on for a Japanese audience. And I think to the extent that Japanese are interested in what I have to say, it's because I say something that's somehow different. So that's also another reason why learning about a foreign culture, getting deep inside another, another language, another political system in terms of if you're a political scientist. That's what makes it really interesting, worthwhile.

Host 15:32

Thank you for that. I think many people may have a similar experience, not just political scientists and people who it is their profession, but also people who have experienced a sense of outsider-ness through their background. Nowadays there are so many third culture kids, or people who maybe just struggle with finding the place where they belong, which is not in one specific country for them. What is your take on this sense of belonging or lack thereof?

Gerry Curtis 15:49

Well, I think what you're hearing from me is that I don't have any problem being an outsider. If I'm in Japan, I'm not Japanese, but I can be very comfortable in Japan. I can bring something to a conversation that someone who's only been in Japan his or her whole life wouldn't bring. That's not a problem, that's kind of an advantage. Feeling like you're somewhat on the outside, I sometimes feel that way in the US. A lot that goes on in the United States I can't really identify with and then having had such a long experience in Japan.

I got back from Japan just a few days ago, and went out to dinner. And the people at the next table, they were talking so loud, I could hardly hear what my dinner companion was saying. You don't run into that in Japan, and people are aware that there are other people in the restaurant, so keep your voice down. Well, that's a beautiful quality of Japan, which unfortunately, here you know, yeah you want to talk loud, no one can tell you can't talk loud.

These kinds of differences you become much more aware of when you get deeply involved with another country. And when I go to Japan, and everybody's wearing a mask, yeah, I wear a mask too. And I think it's a little weird, that people are wearing masks when there's absolutely no need to and you're outside fresh air and so on. That's the way they do it. So you go along with it. But the basic point is, you can be an outsider. And you can have a lot of empathy for what's going on in the country of that you're involved with. You can get pretty deep into it. But you always have something a little bit different about your perspective.

Host 17:30

Yes, it's important to have the sense that being an outsider is not necessarily a negative thing. You can still form friendships, have deep conversations, and feel what people in Japan feel. And as you mentioned even more, have something new to add that wouldn't have been observed or realized if you were part of the in group.

Gerry Curtis 17:49

I think that's right. I guess my point is, don't worry about being different. Don't worry about not feeling like you're really part, it's probably the case that most people don't really feel totally comfortable about everything in their surroundings. Accept it, and make the most of it. You can try to somehow deny it or some foreigners go to Japan to become, they try to become more Japanese than the Japanese. It's not going to work for one thing, but so if you're an outsider, but you really know and love being in Japan, you love Japanese food, you love Japanese culture, and so on, love the study of Japanese society and politics. Well go for it and make the most of it. I think people who do that end up having a really good time, and you want to have a good time in life to the extent you can.

Host 18:43

It's a great message to encourage those who may be hesitant about immersing themselves in a new country. I was actually wondering if we could go back to your start in Japan. As you mentioned, as a high schooler you wanted to be a jazz musician, but how would your past self look at what you've accomplished with Japan and your career?

Gerry Curtis 19:03

I'm not sure really what the full answer to that question is, but what immediately comes to mind. When I was in high school, and had a band and I spent the summers in, playing in a hotel in the Catskills every summer for a few years. And thought I'd be a musician and then started studying music in college. I was dissatisfied. And I didn't feel like I had enough sort of God given talent to become a leading- I could make a career and make a living at it, but I'd never be a great musician. And then, for the reasons already indicated, coincidental reasons that I started studying Japanese.

I realized one day that I was trying to learn a lot of kanji, Chinese characters in Japanese. And I would spend 3, 4, 5 hours a day studying kanji. And then I was thinking, you know, when I was in music school, I'd spend four or five hours a day practicing the piano, and it was painful. But here I'm studying kanji, and I'm enjoying it. And what it told me is you need to find out, find what your real passion is. I discovered it was more about Japanese and the Japanese language than it was about just playing jazz piano. Although in later years, I've actually played a lot of piano and I play with jazz musicians in Tokyo. So it's become an important part of my life, but my passion was not there, it turns out for music. And I was lucky that I discovered somehow by coincidence, I discovered I have a passion for studying about Japan.

So my advice to young people is try to find what your passion is. Everybody has it, sometimes it takes a while to discover it. But don't just give up. Try to find what you're really passionately interested in, because if you do find it, then it becomes a joy. From sitting in a piano practice room for five hours, and thinking I'd rather be outside doing something else. But yeah, so they're big jazz fans, there are a lot of great jazz musicians in Japan. I played with some of them. Sadao Watanabe. And so that's opened another world for me, there are lots of worlds in Japan, like anywhere else. And so I've seen several different worlds, the world of politics, world of music, jazz music, and so on. That's what I do.

Host 21:36

If I could ask you one last question, I think you've already given great advice for young people who are navigating their purpose in life. But I wonder with your serendipitous beginning encounter with Japan, if you had the chance to do it all again, would you still choose Japan?

Gerry Curtis 21:53

You know, when I first got involved with Japan, I was young. I was like 22, 23 years old. And Japan was very dynamic, changing very rapidly, less than 20 years after the end of the Second World War. So the country was still poor. But the people's spirit was surely not poor. It was rich, and Japan's culture was rich. There was a great sense of optimism about the future. I think virtually every Japanese believed that life of their children would be better than their own.

Fast forward 58 years. Now, probably the majority of Japanese believe that life for their children probably will not be as good as it has been for their generation. The sense of possibility for new horizons to be reached, is not what it was in the 60s. So I think for someone who's young, and going to Japan. In many ways it's become, it's old in the sense of the demographics for one thing, it's become the country with the largest elderly population.

So for me, it's fascinating, because I have a comparative reference going back 50, 60 years, but I think if I were young I'm not sure that I would find Japan as fascinating and exciting. It depends on what you work on, you know, if you're into Japanese literature and manga and anime, that's the place to be. But in many respects, I think there's a sense that the best days are over, is pretty strong in Japan. May not be true. I hope it's not true. I can understand why young people might decide they want to study somewhere else.

Although I have to add. What always surprises Japanese when I tell them this, is that there is an enormous amount of interest in Japan among young people, contrary to what I've just been saying. American interest in studying Japanese language is very strong. When I was younger, I went to the Inter-University Center for Japanese language, which is in Yokohama, run by Stanford University for a consortium of schools, a great school. I think there were 17 or 18 of us in the class. I'm a graduate of the second class. But I think this year, they have 65 students. The place is bursting at the seams, there's a lot of interest. And you know, the interest in Japanese pop culture is very strong.

But for me, interested in politics, I'm not sure. I gravitated to Japan, partly because I had a professor, this professor Morley of Columbia who introduced me to it in a way that made me really curious. There is something about Japan that has always captured my imagination, and has fascinated me, and has entranced me. And if given the opportunity, I probably would do the same thing, in terms of my interest in Japan.

This country still has great potential, and tremendous strengths that we don't have in the US. We have our own strengths, innovation in particular. The Japanese have sense of group responsibility, community, good manners. When I went to Japan a couple of months ago, for the first time in three years, because of COVID. What strikes you right away is people have good manners, they're kind, the place is sparkling clean. The food is unbelievably delicious. These qualities of Japanese culture haven't changed over 58 years that I've been about Japan, very much the same as it was in the 1960s. A lot has changed, but a lot hasn't changed. So being able to track all of that has made it interesting for me.

But I wonder if I were young, if I was 22 or 23 years old, and given all the choices you face and what you might do with your life? Would I be interested in studying Japanese politics? I don't want to say no, because there I want young people to do it, so I don't want to discourage that in any sense. And I think anybody who does it can have a really fascinating life. But in that sense, it's a very different place than it was.

Host 26:14

So Japan is maybe not so unique? Say your mentor was a professor of Latin American studies, do you think your life could have taken you to Latin America and gone on to become a specialist there?

Gerry Curtis 26:27

It's possible, of course. I studied Russian when I was in school. But nothing really clicked for me until I went to Japan. And then everything kind of clicked. And it's just a really curious thing, how that happens with people. And I'm not unique in this respect at all. There are a lot of people I know, have kind of similar histories, whether it be with Japan. Something clicks. This is a country or this is a subject that just fascinates me and I want to learn more about it. So I consider myself very lucky to have discovered that that was Japan. No reason, I didn't have any background in Japan. My family had nothing to do with Japan. But it clicked. When you're looking, trying to figure out what to do with your life, just keep looking around until you find something that kind of clicks for you. Eventually it does.

It's not an easy process and it can be frustrating, and discouraging and so on. But just stick with it. And then one day, hey, this is what I really want to do with my life. If you can get that feeling, that is priceless. I know a lot of people go through life, not knowing what they really want to do with their life, and maybe the next life, they'll do better. But you only got one life. You got to do what you got to do and make a living and so on. But at the same time, you need to try to keep on looking, searching for what it is that turns you on. You find it, then, the rest is just very enjoyable.

I think if you're studying a foreign culture, a foreign country, be respectful. Don't go in there thinking that you're going to tell people, lecture them. Especially when I was young and starting out. Now Japanese are very good about saying, professor, what do you think we should do about this, that, the other thing? And my response is, I don't know what you should do, I want to find out what you think you should do.

Don't get carried away with the Japanese politeness about tell us how we should run our country. No, you avoid that. Be respectful. Be curious. Have some humility. And as you say, be open minded. Try to listen. Try to listen, before you draw conclusions. Put the conclusions on the shelf for a while. Listen, learn, then, figure out what you make of it. But don't go in there thinking you know what to make of it. Now you want to find the confirmation or the dis-confirmation of it. So yeah, I think that's really what it's about.

Host 28:52

Thank you very much, Gerry-san. This was a wonderful conversation.

Gerry Curtis 28:56

Well, thank you for having me. It's been enjoyable talking with you.

[Music]

Host 29:03

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. Our theme music is "These Times" by Blue Dot Sessions. Thank you for listening.