

# Anne in Japanese Popular Culture

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• Judy Stoffman •

**Résumé:** Anne Shirley est, au Japon, une vedette de la culture populaire. Personnage littéraire à l'origine, elle est devenue un symbole de la culture occidentale dans les manga, les dessins animés, la publicité, etc. **Akage no An** a même deux clubs d'admirateurs. Toutefois, la version nipponne du personnage, plus conservatrice, est perçue comme une initiatrice aux valeurs familiales à l'occidentale. Sa très grande popularité vient du fait qu'elle semble réconcilier l'individualisme nord-américain et l'idéal japonais de l'harmonie sociale.

**Summary:** Anne Shirley is a star of Japanese popular culture. There she has made the transition from a purely literary character to a symbol of western life exploited in manga comics, cartoon shows, advertising and in the names of shops, travel agencies and language schools. **Akage no An** even has two fan clubs. But the Japanese An is a more conservative figure than the one her Canadian readers know, valued in large part as an instructor in homemaking, western style. She demonstrates for the Japanese that the western ideal of individualism can be reconciled with the Japanese ideal of social harmony. This may be the key to her immense popularity.

Perhaps nowhere outside of Canada is Anne Shirley so deeply embedded in the popular imagination as in Japan. When the Tokyu department store puts an image of a red-headed girl in a long dress topped by a straw hat on its Christmas shopping bags, it can count on millions of people recognizing the reference. In Japan, Anne has made her escape from the pages of Lucy Maud Montgomery's book and into pop culture. Many people who adore her have not read the actual books in which she appears: they know her only through television programs, comic books, plays and through the names of bakeshops, guesthouses, language schools and travel agencies. "Anne atmosphere" magazines like *Moe* sometimes publish pictorial spreads illustrating her story.

Masashi Matsumoto, a writer, told me: "If you ask a Japanese person who are the three most famous Canadians, he will say Pierre Trudeau, Ben Johnson and Anne Shirley."



fare on school or college curricula in Canada, they are frequently taught in Japan where schools favour texts that yield moral precepts. The valuing of literature for its didactic content is part of the Confucian tradition, carried over from China.

Professor Yoshiko Akamatsu teaches English at Notre Dame Seishin Women's College in Okayama . She uses a different Montgomery novel as her text each year. When I met her students, they were studying *Rilla of Ingleside* (which they inevitably pronounced Lilla). "The books give the reader hope, to keep trying: if you have dreams, they may be fulfilled," Professor Akamatsu said. "It is good, helpful literature for study."

An is more than a literary figure; she is a commercial icon. You can sip tea at An's Café in Tokyo and buy puff-sleeved dresses at An's Room boutique. In Chiba-ken, An's Flower House will sell you a bouquet; in Nagano, you can stay at several An guest houses; in Osaka, go to the An Shirley Cookie Store or the Green Gables gift shop; learn English at An's Academy in Kyushu or by reading *Anne's World* magazine. In Okayama, the School of Green Gables nurses' training institute is dedicated to turning out cheerful, hardworking graduates like An. Its walls are decorated with photos of PEI's meadows and shores, and students take part of their training in Charlottetown.

Masashi Matsumoto edited a book of essays three years ago titled *After All, I Still Like An* in which more than two dozen celebrities describe the role the book played in their lives. In contrast, when Arlene Perly Rae asked well-know Canadians what children's books shaped them – she compiled the results into the book *Everybody's Favourites* – no one mentioned *Anne of Green Gables*, though several women opted for *Emily of New Moon*.

Among those contributing to Matsumoto's book was Sampei Sato, whose syndicated cartoon strip satirizing the typical "sarariman" (office worker/salary-man) appears in dozens of Japanese newspapers and magazines. Sato first read *Akage no An* twenty years ago when he was in his 40s: "The book inspired me to be more daring and work harder."

Tall, willowy and articulate, Fumi Dan is one of Japan's most celebrated actresses and television personalities. Since her childhood, she has read the An books more than 100 times she told me in an interview, and has modelled her perky personality on her heroine: "When my mother told me not to talk so much, I answered her the same way An answered Marilla: 'If you only knew all the things in my head that I restrain myself from saying, you would not think that I talk so much.'" At 39, Fumi Dan is still single because, she admits, she has not yet found her Gilbert.

Traditionally, Japanese marriages were arranged by parents and family friends, and some vestiges of this custom still survive. Professor Yuko



A page from the Kumon Manga Library  
*Anne of Green Gables, Part 1*

Izawa, who teaches English at Miyagi College for Women in the city of Sendai north of Tokyo, noted in conversation : “One effect of reading *An* is that the book persuades readers to wait to find the mate who would not simply make her do the household chores. Some feminists criticize *An* and say that Montgomery leads her readers only to getting married. But usually it works the other way — her books tell us we don’t need to marry until we find the ideal husband.”

Canadian literary scholars argue that Montgomery encoded a critique of patriarchal society in her books. In the country of her birth Anne is a model of female self-respect and assertiveness, a feminist before her time. But this reading is rejected in Japan. When I asked the cartoonist Yumiko Igarashi, creator of a popular five part “manga” (comic book) issued in 1996-97 covering *Anne Of Green Gables*, *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of the Island*, if she thought *An* was a feminist, Igarashi looked puzzled:

She is a strong girl, talkative and strong willed. She is a girl one can find anywhere. But a feminist? I don’t think so. That gives the impression that she is self-centred. In Japan, when you say ‘He is a feminist’ it means he is kind to ladies. ‘She is a feminist’ means she cares only for herself.

Sumiko Yokokawa, a professor of children's literature at Mimasaka Women's College in Okayama, has published an award-winning and sophisticated book titled *The Challenge of Akage no An*, in which she contrasts *Anne of Green Gables* with *Little Women*: "Some readers think An is very progressive and independent; she wants to have a job, be a teacher. But I don't think so," she told me:

I am very interested in her motivation — why she wants to be excellent at school. It's not for herself, but to please Matthew and Marilla, to make them proud of her and to maintain contact with Gilbert Blythe. She does not have her own ambition. So I don't think it's a feminist book.

Professor Izawa, who has travelled widely in Canada, points out

In the Japanese view, An is a conservative figure; she gives a fantasy, an illusion about marriage. In Canada, the feminist reading is different. Of course academic critics and ordinary readers read differently.

"The way An is read in the East is not your way," a young man named Minol Saitoh explained as we ate apple pie and drank English tea with milk in Tokyo at a meeting of Buttercups, the biggest of the An fan clubs. (Sherlock Holmes and Peter Rabbit also have fan clubs in Japan.) "We are curious what kind of cookies she ate, what she wore — Japanese people adore the lifestyle of Western culture because we feel that western style is the goal to achieve."

Traditionally, Japanese kitchens have had no ovens, although this is changing. The ones I saw boasted microwave ovens. Bakeries with excellent bread and French pastries have become widespread in the past decade, but young girls who can bake cakes in their own kitchens still fill readers with wonder. Descriptions of food preparation and needle crafts that seem commonplace to Canadian readers become exotic when seen through Japanese eyes.

Formed in 1983, the Buttercups currently number 137, but hundreds more have joined and left over the years. At the tea party I attended, I met Buttercups ranging in age from 21 to 55. All spoke of An as of a personal friend whose example encourages them when life seems difficult.

Another fan club named Lupins, with about 100 members, meets three or four times a year in Japan's second largest city, Osaka. It was founded by Aoi Nozawa who organizes An-themed tea parties and craft shows for department stores in the Kansai region of Japan. "When I first read An, I was so timid I was afraid to speak. She helped me to change," Aoi Nozawa said. Four years ago, when Nozawa organized a promotion of PEI crafts and products at Hankyu department store, she persuaded a local confectioner to



*Book cover for the Muraoka translation,  
published by Kodansha*

make a scale model of Green Gables in sugar. She has since donated it to a PEI museum.

I was struck, as I travelled in Japan seeking out fans of Red-Haired An, by the way the Japanese thought of her as a contemporary, rather than as a character from the late-Victorian era created in a faraway country. Take Keiko Ochiai, a feminist author, famous for her books about rape and the scandalous treatment of rape victims in Japan. A former radio host, she founded Crayon House in the late 1970s, a multi-level Tokyo emporium that contains a children's bookstore, a women's bookstore and an organic restaurant:

I first read the An series when I was ten or eleven during a summer when I had twisted my ankle and couldn't do much else. I reread the series in junior high. It was a girls' school and I didn't enjoy it because they wanted girls to behave like the girls — the stereotype. At thirteen, An was a role model for me but later many questions arose. An became such an excellent teacher, but when she married she gave up her profession.

Oblivious to the novels' historical context, Ochiai felt betrayed. "I thought it a pity. The people of my generation opened up more opportunities for women to work. I wanted An to keep her profession as well as her family, to be independent economically."

*Akage no An* arrived in Japan after World War II; that makes it a more modern book for the Japanese than *Anne of Green Gables* is for us and this may partly explain the different way it is read. *Akage no An* first appeared in Japanese translation in 1952, ten years after Montgomery's death. But to understand how she became so deeply embedded in Japanese popular culture one must go back to the Meiji period in the late nineteenth century. Japan, conscious of how far behind it had fallen during its centuries of isolation under the shogunate, became enamoured of all things Western. The Emperor Meiji, at whose shrine in Tokyo people still worship, opened the door to westerners including the first Protestant missionaries from Canada and the United States. There had been a brief period in the sixteenth century when Roman Catholic missionaries, led by the Spanish Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier, had been allowed to proselytize; but by 1639, the Tokugawa shogunate had begun a merciless persecution of Christians and had decided to exclude all foreigners except the Dutch and the Chinese. The missionaries who arrived in the nineteenth century established schools and championed the education of women in particular.

Hanako Muraoka, who became An's translator, was a Christian who learned English at the Toyo Eiwa girl's school, established by Methodist missionaries from Canada in 1884, nine years before Muraoka was born, and still in existence. Muraoka herself wrote haiku verse and stories for girls. She began her translations after the death of her first-born son as a kind of memorial to him. Many of the classics of western literature for young adults, including *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Christmas Carol*, *The Secret Garden*, *Little Women* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* all arrived in Japan via her pen.

Of all the books she translated, *Anne of Green Gables* was her favourite. A Canadian missionary friend, Loretta Shaw, gave her a copy of the book as a parting gift when Shaw was forced to leave Japan on the eve of World War II. Muraoka was delighted to discover that the heroine had an education like the one she herself received at Toyo Eiwa: there the students used Canadian textbooks, wrote on slates, and memorized Tennyson and Wordsworth. "My grandmother worked on An throughout the war and whenever the air raid siren sounded she took the manuscript, tied in a silk scarf, with her to the shelter," says Mie Muraoka who lives with her parents and her sister Eri in the old Muraoka home in Tokyo. "It was dangerous because anyone caught with foreign literature was suspect." Mie and Eri graciously showed me around their grandmother's book-lined study, now a museum.

After the war, when the shattered publishing industry was re-established, Muraoka's translation was an immediate hit. The book's success was due in part to there being almost no realistic Japanese children's literature, particularly for girls. A female in traditional children's stories usually turns out to be a ghost or a malevolent spirit.



*Hanako Muraoka (1893-1968)*

Then, too, *Akage no An* fits perfectly into the Japanese value system, which prizes filial piety. It fits the paradigm of *Momo-taro*, the Peach Boy, a traditional tale every Japanese child can recite by heart: a boy springs from a peach pit and is raised by an old childless couple. When he grows up the Peach Boy goes off to slay a monster and bring back the monster's treasure to his adoptive parents. An wins the Avery scholarship — her treasure — but then gives it up to stay with the ailing Marilla, just as any good Japanese daughter would.

Over the next two decades the novel appeared on the annual list of books recommended by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, a list that carries weight with librarians and educators. Then in 1979, Japan's leading animation artist Hayao Miyazaki created an animated An television series that ran every Sunday evening for a year. It raised the An craze to a new high.

Readers of Muraoka's translation find her version highly literate but full of inaccuracies. For example she thought that "crocus" refers to a colour not a flower, and she had difficulty finding Japanese equivalents for foreign items like ice cream. She or her publisher inexplicably cut a crucial section near the end of the novel where Marilla tells Anne that she loves her as though she were her own flesh and blood.

What is more remarkable than her errors is Muraoka's apparent success at conveying the feisty character of her protagonist despite the rigidities of the Japanese language. "The Japanese language is based on relationships

— male/female, older/younger, superior/worker,” Yuko Izawa explained. “The language itself has hierarchy built into it. Women’s language has no swear words or a way to give strict orders. What we can do with women’s language is plead or request. Some words like ‘wa’ or ‘ne’ are softening words usually used by women. These days older men complain that secondary school girls use boys’ language, which is more aggressive.” The structure of the language presents huge difficulties for any translator. “If you try to translate Anne in a womanish way, her persistence in claiming or demanding justice is quite difficult to explain.” Muraoka used conventional language, but more recent translators have experimented with other approaches.

One other thing should be noted about Muraoka’s contribution to the An story: as I’ve already mentioned, she was a Christian and was thus willing and able to give her readers an understanding of the moral code that governs the adherents of this western faith. “In Japanese society we don’t have a basis for religion. The Japanese have an image of Christians that is superficial and highly idealized,” Yumiko Fujikake told me. According to this young teacher whom I met in Sendai, Japanese girls all desire to be married Christian-style in a chapel wearing a long white dress “for the atmosphere” without realizing that there is more to Christianity than this.

Less than one percent of Japanese are Christians, yet among the An devotees I met at least a third said they were. In Japan, being a Christian goes with being a dissident. Masashi Matsumoto, the editor of *After All, I Still Like An*, actually had himself baptized after reading *Akage no An*, of which he owns a first edition. Matsumoto belongs to the Japan-PEI Society, which disseminates information about the Island and has many other Christians among its members. On one of his trips to PEI, Matsumoto hired a horse and buggy to go from Bright River railway station to “Green Gables” so that he might calculate how long it took Matthew to drive the distance when he met An. The fact that Matthew never existed is lost on many Japanese.

Matsumoto has not only visited PEI four times, but also has travelled to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, where the motherless Montgomery lived for a year with her father and his second wife before returning to her repressive grandparents’ home on the Island. He also made pilgrimages to Dalhousie University where Montgomery studied and to Leaskdale and Norval in Ontario, where she lived with her husband, the Reverend Ewan Macdonald. “I interviewed women who Montgomery taught in Sunday school,” he said. “They were very old.”

Wherever I went in Japan I asked people why they thought An has become such a beloved character. I discovered that some people were annoyed by the question. One librarian in Tokyo, Hitomi Ando, a reader of the Montgomery canon for 30 years said, in a written reply:

To tell the truth, I've had it up to here with the question 'Why is Anne of Green Gables so popular in Japan?' Have you any prejudice on Japanese? Have you ever ask same question people from European countries? [Sic]

The answer, of course, is yes, I would ask Polish or Scandinavian readers the same question. It is worth studying any foreign country where the devotion to a Canadian book has become so intense. Such inquiry can reveal how books travel across the language barrier and shift their meaning depending on the cultural context.

Other people gave me more straightforward answers — answers that were more or less the same. There are four reasons, said Yoko Kawai, a member of Lupins and my translator in Osaka, for the popularity of An in Japan:

An's character is admirable and strong; nature is described in beautiful detail; there is a sense of community we like in the books because we feel abandoned in big cities today; and the original translation was good.

In other words, the reason why An has become so popular is because *Anne of Green Gables* is a good book — a simplistic view since there are many other good books that do not command the same fanatical devotion.

My own conclusion was different. Japan is a small island nation with a racially homogeneous population of 115 million — a population density of 309 people per square km., compared to two in Canada. For centuries manners and mores have evolved to ensure that no one steps on anyone else's toes. The Japanese speak of themselves as "we Japanese" — a seamless community of shared values and interests. At the same time, many western things — western technology, western dress, western entertainment — have seeped into Japanese culture. As the century ends, the Japanese are torn between their desire for western-style me-first individualism and their fear that this would irrevocably rend their tightly woven social fabric. Individualism looks seductive, but if everybody did just as he or she pleased it might lead to chaos, in their view. One has only to look around a packed Tokyo subway car at the men all wearing nearly identical dark suits, white shirts and dark ties to see that most people avoid standing out in any way.

The struggle over individualism being waged in the Japanese soul is well illustrated in the recent film *Shall We Dance?* directed by Masayuki Suo, in which a bored and unhappy office worker (sarariman) decides to follow an impulse to take dance classes. He finds fulfilment in dancing but feels he has to hide his unconventional hobby from his colleagues and even from his family until, eventually, he is found out.

The reason An has touched a chord in the Japanese soul is because her character embodies a reassuring message: you can have it both ways. An

is a feisty individual, marked as such by her red hair and soaring imagination, but she is not a true rebel. She's an outspoken young person, but ultimately she becomes a pillar of her family and community. Her individualism does not rend the social fabric. The Japanese feel a lot better knowing that this is possible.

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