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## Chance, Choice, and Cheerful Chaos: A Journey to Leadership

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### The Parental Game of Chance

I usually think of myself as coming from a rather ordinary middle-class Japanese family. Ordinary middle-class can mean different things at different times, but around me, it meant a father who was employed full-time at a large corporation and a mother who stayed at home to take care of the kids. What was not so ordinary—and affected dozens of women my age, perhaps hundreds if you think of my decade or generation—is that my father’s job took the family outside Japan, first to Germany, and then to the United States.

A recent phrase making the rounds in Japanese social as well as mainstream media is *oya gacha*. It combines the words for “parent” and *gacha-gacha*, the onomatopoeic name for the toy-capsule vending machines ubiquitous in shopping malls. The idea is that you cannot choose your parents—as with these capsule toys, it is all a matter of luck whether you end up with excellent parents, or shitty ones. The phrase has also come to stand in for a sense of social inequity and lack of social mobility. One cannot choose the social class and family circumstance one is born into, and these factors seem to play an increasingly determinative role in one’s own educational and employment prospects. The phrase “parent *gacha*” bluntly encapsulates the idea that one might be lucky or unlucky in where one is born, and that this is the end of the story. It denotes resignation about social mobility, which is no doubt in decline in twenty-first century Japan.

By contrast, it was my parents’ generation, born in the 1930s and coming to adulthood in the postwar decades, that probably had the most mobility in modern Japanese history, both upward and downward. Specifically, this was the historical moment when a boy born to humble circumstances could aspire to get into a good college by working hard, and then get a good job and become economically comfortable. That was the



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case with my father, who was born in the northern hinterlands of Japan, and whose family's business had gone bankrupt when he was still a child, but who was able to attend a national university on a scholarship and then was hired by one of the big banks that eventually sent him abroad.

Being born as his daughter was my good luck. But as other observers have pointed out, “parent *gacha*” tells only part of the story.<sup>1</sup> We must also talk of “nation *gacha*” and “generation *gacha*.” The fact that I was born as a child in Japan in the 1960s to a set of parents whose trajectory matched the social mobility of the postwar years, and that my father was part of the generation of worker bees being sent abroad on the wave of Japanese economic expansion—it is not an exaggeration to say that this determined where I ended up today.

I bring this up because when we speak of leadership or career paths, it is tempting to speak primarily of our individual choices. I have decided to emphasize the generational nature of my own experience, although it goes against how it “felt” to go through it: I have felt like an oddball and outlier for much of my career, a minority among minorities. It is only in the last few years that I have come to see my own career within the larger story of postwar Japan. (There is also a story of postwar U. S. higher education and its gender and racial dynamics that plays an important role, but I am going to set those aside for the sake of brevity.)

### **Dreaming of Equal Employment**

I became a freshman at a co-educational Japanese private university in 1985, the year the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was passed. This law made it illegal, but not really punishable, to discriminate in the hiring and promotion of female versus male employees. As most Japan observers know, this did not exactly result in doors to corporate management and top government positions flying open to welcome women (see for example Nemoto 2016).

I had arrived at Keio University because it was one of several that had started accepting graduates of foreign high schools through a special exam. And I had graduated from a high school in the suburbs of New York City because my father had been assigned to a job in New York by his company. Earlier he had been assigned to a job in Frankfurt, so I had spent kindergarten and part of elementary school in Germany. If it were not for this set of circumstances, I do not know whether I would have ended up at one of the highly ranked Japanese universities, and I also doubt I would

have landed there with a firm sense that women deserved to be treated as equals of men.

But despite that belief, and despite the recently passed law, all around me were women who assumed the path to a career was narrow and perilous. Most assumed that they would work in an office of some kind for a few years, then marry and have children. They might continue working if circumstances allowed, but they might also quit, and then return to work later, creating a so-called M-curve of employment. Nearly 70% of women of my generation quit work by the time their first child was born. Most did not return to the same kind of full-time position even after the children were older.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, it is probably also true that in the mid-1980s, at the beginning of the EEOL era, female college students like myself were allowed to dream of having careers in a wider range of fields than ever before, and that we were not yet jaded from decades of mere lip-service being paid to the idea of gender equality and women's empowerment. The ideas were still a bit new, and the energies of the women's liberation movement could still be felt in certain pockets of society. It was also the beginning of the era of feminist scholarship, and the presence of charismatic and articulate women scholars in the classroom and on the pages of an increasing number of books.<sup>3</sup> This surge in feminist scholarship would eventually face a backlash, as I have described elsewhere (Kano 2011). But the 1980s and early 1990s was still a heady time for feminist scholarship.

It must also be said that our generation of female college students was receiving an ambivalent message about women's roles in society. Although we might dream of having careers, the greatest source of a woman's happiness and social belonging was supposed to be marriage and motherhood. Combining these with careers was understood to be extremely difficult. No one knew of a high-profile female politician, or female business leader, who had managed to combine these roles. There was Ogata Sadako, who would eventually become the head of the UNHCR, but at that time she was not yet well-known. In 1980 Takahashi Nobuko was appointed as the first female ambassador from Japan (to Denmark). But these were rare exceptions.

On the one hand, my generation was strangely ambitious. And it was materialistic, in direct correlation with the bubbly economic climate. But on the other hand, it was a generation that had been actively demobilized from the student movement of the previous years. I can remember from

experience how much the “deprogramming” of students took place through the warning of our professors to avoid any political activities that might harm our future. And I want to remember that for female students at the time, this “future” was only recently made to include a potential future *career*, under the banner of equal employment. In the 1980s we had more to lose perhaps, than female students in the 1960s and 1970s who courageously demonstrated in the streets and barricaded themselves inside campus buildings. *We* might have a chance at a career, and we did not want to jeopardize it through involvement in political activism. That this was a generational experience is also something I have been learning through scholarship of experts of the 1960s and 1970s (Schieder 2021, Steinhoff 2018).

But instead of activism, and instead of a career in Japan, or marriage and motherhood in Japan, I launched myself side-ways into an academic career in the United States. This also was not unique, but a little less usual, and is related to my being an oddball. But here I must acknowledge that what allowed this side-ways launch was precisely the cultural capital (English, German, knowledge of European literature and culture) that was gained through my lucky “parent *gacha*” and growing up near the financial capitals of the world. In other words, without fluency in these languages, and a deep interest in comparative literature that included German and British theater as well as Japanese, I would not have landed in a Ph. D. program in the United States.

### **Academic Career and Challenges**

Landing at Cornell University was probably the most consequential good luck of my academic career. I chose it over six other programs for a number of reasons, but I had never talked to a single person there. It turned out that Cornell was at the time one of the most interesting places to do Japan Studies anywhere in the world. And I was lucky to be able to find three feminist professors (one each in German, English, and Japanese) to serve on my dissertation committee, and several people I would go on to consider important mentors and internal interlocutors.

When I landed at the University of Pennsylvania in January of 1995, having defended my dissertation just the previous month, I was naively fearless. Youth and naive fearlessness are wonderful things—I cannot imagine anyone now being hired for a tenure-track position who knows as little as I knew back then, but I also wonder how much more pressure someone starting out now must experience.

To cut twenty-six years into a few sentences: I finished my first book (2001) and got tenure (2002). And then I decided I was ready to have a baby (2004). And then another baby decided to join the fun (2006). And before I knew it, ten years had passed since my first book, and I needed to decide whether or not to climb the mountain of writing a second book, which at my institution is considered essential for being promoted to full professor.

This is where this story becomes a story connected to leadership. For a good while, I was not sure whether I wanted to aim for the promotion. It would come with very few concrete perks, as far as I could see. I would stay in the same office and do the same amount of teaching and research. I would probably serve on more and more committees and spend more and more time on administrative work. I had already been undergraduate chair for a number of years as an associate professor. As a full professor I could, and would at some point be expected to, become graduate chair or department chair, two leadership positions at the departmental level traditionally open only to full professors. But who in their right minds wanted to take on those roles?

In the end, I decided that the consequences of my not being a full professor were serious enough that I was willing to climb the mountain (or move the mountain, which is what it felt like at times) to write the second book and go through the process of applying for promotion. I needed to be able to speak up as a full professor in some situations. And I wanted to put an end to feeling beneath others in rank. Writing the second book and going up for promotion was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It felt harder in some ways than the first book and going up for tenure, because I had been in my institution for almost twenty years by that point, and I was no longer young, naive, or fearless.

But I wrote, and I got promoted. I believe I am the first Asian woman to be promoted to full professor in my department. Meanwhile I was raising two young boys. Raising them is of course *the* hardest thing I have ever done, but also the most cheerful chaos possible. I was living the juggling life that I could only vaguely imagine when I was in college. One consequence of how hard it has been to get to this stage is that I have lacked the bandwidth to be very active in our local community of Philadelphia, in the children's schools, and so forth. But at the university, I have sought out friendship beyond my department, and have found opportunities to create connections in many places.

One of the larger communities I have taken a lead in sustaining is an annual faculty writing retreat. It takes place during the first week of June, and about 20–30 faculty members from a number of different departments at Penn gather in one space and write from 9 am to 5 pm. We break for lunch and conversation in the middle of the day. Free coffee, snacks, and some editorial consultation is provided as well. This program was initially started by two senior faculty members in 2012, and I signed up out of curiosity. It turned out to be so helpful that I decided to make sure that it would happen the following year, and the year after, and the year after. At some point I pulled together a grant proposal and received funding from several different administrative offices on campus. We have continued now for nine more years, including the last two years in online format because of the pandemic. Helping colleagues enjoy writing has been for me a deeply meaningful exercise in leadership, because this is part of our job that we tend to do alone. Seeing a large group of other faculty members writing intently hour after hour, day after day, and then sharing struggles and strategies about writing, building a loose but life-sustaining sense of connection year after year—this has changed the way I view my profession and my university.

### **Half-Baked Advice**

I have been Graduate Chair of my department (East Asian Languages and Civilizations) for the last three years, which came with the promotion to full professorship. Our graduate program has about a dozen Ph. D. students and 20–30 M. A. students. It is a complex organism with many challenges, and I am still trying to figure out how to lead and manage the program in the best possible way. Perhaps in another decade I will be able to reflect and distill the lessons.

But because I have been advising graduate students for many years, perhaps I can pass on some general advice about leadership from that perspective. Most graduate students enter academia not because they want to become leaders, but because they love to read, think and write, and sometimes to teach. Teamwork and leadership are often not the forte of graduate students, and because I recognize the lack of training in these areas in my own career, I would urge students to seek out opportunities during their early graduate years. At Penn, our department's graduate students have organized graduate conferences for the last few years. It requires a lot of negotiating with each other, with faculty members, and with university bureaucracy, but I heartily encourage the effort. I would

encourage students everywhere to become involved in these types of activities early.

Finding good role models is also crucial. I was lucky in having many women leaders as role models throughout my academic career. I met extraordinary female professors at Keio and Cornell and at the University of Pennsylvania. As I write this, our university president, Amy Gutman, is close to the end of her term. Her predecessor, Judith Rodin, was president when I first started teaching here. Her soon-to-be successor M. Elizabeth Magill, will assume the presidency on July 1, 2022. There have been multiple female deans and associate deans throughout the School of Arts and Sciences. Not many Asian or Japanese women have been in leadership roles, but I have found it relatively easy to identify with women of other races (typically White, but also increasingly Black and Latino women) who have navigated the various challenges of leadership in academic environments.

I remember reading a few years ago that women leaders find it easier to exert their power on behalf of others, than to wield it for themselves (Amanatullah and Moris 2010 cited in Sandberg 2013). I don't know if this is always true, but I have found it rings true for myself: I made a conscious decision to step up, rather than side-step the promotion process, when I felt like I might be able to help other people, specifically junior faculty colleagues, by having more power.

So, be open to the idea of helping others through leadership—I think if I could go back to dispense advice to my younger self, that is what I would say. Be open, be prepared, and try to keep a sense of humor in the cheerful chaos.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Doi Takayoshi, interviewed by Inagaki Naoto, “‘Oya gacha denaku, kuni gacha’: Ronsō no hitsukeyaku ga kataru seditan gyappu” (‘It’s not parental luck but national luck’: The instigator of the debate discusses generational gaps), *Asahi shinbun dejitaru*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com>

<sup>2</sup> On obstacles facing women’s continued participation in the labor force after marriage and childbirth, see Nemoto (2016).

<sup>3</sup> For my own formation as a scholar, the most inspiring were sociologists Ehara Yumiko and Ueno Chizuko, as well as philosopher Kanai Yoshiko (Kano 2002).

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