

Japanese Language and Literature

Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese

jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 56 | Number 1 | April 2022 | DOI: 10.5195/jll.2022.247

ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

Our Stories as Female Asian Leaders: Introduction

Satoko Suzuki and Junko Mori

This special section presents stories from eight female Asian faculty who have served in leadership positions in U. S. institutions of higher education. Our purpose in putting together this special section is threefold: to celebrate female leadership, to inspire future leaders by discussing the lived experiences of our challenges and successes, and to offer some practical advice.

Women leaders have been in the spotlight recently both in the United States and in Japan, with, for example, Kamala Harris becoming the U. S. vice president and Yuriko Koike becoming the governor of Tokyo. In the broader world we see young female leaders such as Malala Yousafzai (a Pakistani activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work advocating education for girls). Female leadership in higher education has also attracted attention with the publication of titles such as *Women and Leadership in Higher Education* (Longman and Madsen 2014) and *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Strategies for Feminist Leadership* (Cole and Hassel 2017).

In addition to being women in academia, which has been characterized as a “masculine” field (Czarniawska and Sevón 2008: 235), all of the contributors were born and raised in Japan and are of Asian descent. Kim, Twombly, and Wolf-Wendel (2012: 44) observed that international faculty as a group “are often overlooked and frequently underestimated and misunderstood.” Among international faculty, women of color, as Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang (2015: 534) noted, must confront the daunting “triple threat” of being foreign-born, female, and non-white. We may also add that our being raised in Japan, where women’s status is considered extremely low in international comparisons, intensifies the challenge.¹ In this special section, we are putting a spotlight on female Asian faculty who have overcome (or at least are in the process of overcoming) these multiple obstacles to achieving leadership status.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

As its readers are aware, *Japanese Language and Literature* typically features outcomes of research and pedagogical innovations. However, we proposed this special section because we believe the journal can play a pivotal role in the professional development of its readers in the area of program development and administration. In this special section, we will discuss our experiences of coordinating and advocating for our departments/programs/divisions, applying for grants, and managing interpersonal relationships in the workplace. We are grateful to the journal's coordinating editor, Dr. Hiroshi Nara, and the language and linguistics editor, Dr. Yumiko Nishi, as well as the Executive Director of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ), Ms. Susan Schmidt, for their encouragement and support.

In selecting contributors for this special section, we took care to represent diverse experiences and perspectives. Some are literature specialists while others are theoretical or applied linguists. Our institutions also range from liberal arts colleges and private universities to public universities. The leadership roles we have occupied include chairing departments focusing on East Asian languages and cultures as well as larger departments that include European, Slavic, and/or Arabic language faculty, directing Asian Studies programs and various institution-wide projects, and serving as associate dean of a college. Some of the contributors are relatively new to leadership responsibilities while others are seasoned veterans. In addition, although it was not planned in advance, after receiving the essays, we realized that our journeys originated in different regions of Japan (Kantō, Kansai, Kyūshū, Hokuriku, Shikoku).

We asked each contributor to tell her own story, but requested that each essay address the following three areas:

- (1) Journey to their current position
- (2) Challenges and triumphs in their leadership roles
- (3) Advice to future leaders

In covering these areas, the contributors refer, to varying degrees, to aspects of their private selves. Some of us discussed our upbringing or our ethnic or socioeconomic background, while others wrote about personal and inner conflicts experienced along the way, including lack of confidence in one's English, struggles with ascribed identities, post-tenure blues, and juggling a career with motherhood. As editors of this special section, we are delighted to see our contributors generously open their hearts to readers. We are proud to say that each essay provides a rich

narrative of the lived experiences that are so rarely glimpsed in academic writing.

As you will see, the contributors' journeys touch on several recurring themes. One thing we would like to highlight is that none of us dreamed of becoming a leader at an American institution during our youth. Thanks to encounters with life-changing teachers, mentors, or programs, we were inspired to study and work outside of Japan and to launch careers in teaching and research in the United States. In this process, our potential as leaders was recognized by others who encouraged us to step up. With some hesitation, or under compulsion in some cases, we took on these challenges out of a sense of responsibility to others in our communities. Through our experiences, we continue to learn and grow, and to find renewed sense of purpose in our work. We hope that our readers, who may or may not consider themselves leader types, will find these stories relatable and recognize their own potential.

We also observe that the journeys of these contributors, all born and raised from the late 1950s to the 1980s, are shaped by some aspects of Japan's period of rapid economic growth. By expanding the notion of *oya gacha* 'parental lottery; fate or luck of being born to particular parents', which was Shōgakkan's 2021 selection for new word of the year, Kano (this volume) eloquently discusses the impacts of "nation *gacha*" or "generation *gacha*" on this generation of Japanese women.² Behind these contributors' appreciation of English as an enabler of personal transformation and their desire to explore opportunities abroad we can discern Japan's positive outlook and outward orientation at that time. At the same time, the slow progress in the improvement of women's status in Japan, as exemplified by the limited impact of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1985, also appears to have affected the contributors' decisions to leave Japan. Incidentally, some of the contributors acknowledge their mothers, who assumed domestic roles themselves but nevertheless supported their daughters' ambitions to study and work abroad. Further, the rise of Japan's economic power (1980s to early 1990s) and soft power (from the late 1990s on), which contributed to the expansion of Japanese language and culture programs in the United States, coincided with the time these contributors began their academic careers in the United States. This climate of the times is reflected in all of the narratives, despite our diverse backgrounds and the very different aspects of our lives that each contributor decided to foreground in the limited space.

The contributors' accomplishments in leadership roles, on the other hand, illustrate how different types of institutions as well as types of administrative positions give rise to different kinds of challenges and triumphs. In light of this, we hope these essays serve to demystify the work of administrators and help the readers, especially those who have not yet assumed such positions, develop a better understanding of the kind of considerations that go into the operation of different units and activities on campuses. Indeed, we believe that improving awareness of how our everyday practices as educators and researchers are situated in the local dynamics of respective institutions is an important way to increase empowerment for all.

In the first four essays, for instance, Suzuki, Fukunaga, Lee, and Dollase discuss how they developed, expanded, and represented their relatively small Japanese programs. They worked tirelessly to advocate for their programs, as they organized many extracurricular and outreach activities, negotiated with colleagues who specialized in other languages or subject matters, and persuaded some unsupportive upper administrators to continue or expand Asian language programs. In some cases, they were confronted with rather blunt statements from colleagues questioning the need for a Japanese program or dismissing them as full-fledged members of the campus community. The nature of the politics they have had to navigate differs, however, especially depending on whether their Japanese program is situated in a department of East Asian languages and cultures (Suzuki at Macalester College and Dollase at Vassar College) or in a department of modern languages (Fukunaga at Marshall University and Lee at Lehigh University).

The next four essays, by Kano, Sadler, Kondo-Brown, and Mori, on the other hand, reveal different aspects of the operation of R-1 universities.³ In these larger universities that offer graduate education and emphasize research productivity, the Japanese program had been fully established by the time these contributors began their appointments, and their programs' continuation has not been under threat. The challenges they have tackled instead lie in coordinating a larger number of colleagues spread over the campus to identify common goals or to establish a sense of community. Kano at the University of Pennsylvania, for instance, discusses her work as a coordinator of an annual faculty writing retreat, which supports faculty across different departments, and as a graduate chair, responsible for leading and managing a program with a few dozen Ph. D. and M. A. students. Sadler at the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign serves as a director of a National Resource Center for East Asia, which serves nearly a hundred affiliate specialists on East Asia on campus. One of her most critical responsibilities as the center director is to secure the Title VI grants for international and foreign language education awarded by the U. S. Department of Education. The final two essays, by Kondo-Brown and Mori, both refer to the processes of organizational restructuring that have taken place at a number of public universities in recent years. Kondo-Brown at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa writes about this process from the perspective of an associate dean of a college that houses over three hundred faculty members and twenty-four hundred undergraduate and graduate majors in seventeen academic departments. Mori at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, on the other hand, shares her experience of leading a faculty committee that developed a restructuring proposal and had to secure buy-in from members of two departments and three different area studies centers contributing to Asian Studies.

Despite these differences in contexts, positions, and experiences, our voices resonate with each other when it comes to advice for future leaders. Indeed, our recommendations tend to reflect a few fundamental principles of professional conduct, as epitomized below:

- Communicate clearly, honestly, effectively, and efficiently.
- Strive to be rational, fair, consistent, and patient.
- Value and nurture your colleagues and act as a team player.
- Maintain a bird's-eye view and develop a vision, but also remain flexible.
- Understand that the work of a leader can be invisible and thankless, but also rewarding and gratifying.
- Identify role models and mentors, and learn from them.
- Create support mechanisms and try to keep a work-life balance.
- Trust yourself and own your decisions.

Embracing these principles in one's professional life can help anyone develop their potential as a leader. While the future will likely bring different sets of problems and solutions, we believe these fundamentals will remain the same and help future leaders keep their teams on an even keel as they navigate the challenges they will surely encounter.

When we began conceptualizing this project, we were a little apprehensive about our ability to persuade a sufficient number of contributors to share their experiences, which we expected would include some delicate matters. We were also not certain we could convince the

journal to accept this unconventional proposal for a special section. Nevertheless, we pushed forward because of our conviction that we are responsible for passing on our collective knowledge and experiences to the next generation. The final outcome is beyond what we hoped, and we thank the contributors for taking a chance and joining forces with us. We also would like to acknowledge the existence of a number of other female Asian leaders—our predecessors or contemporaries—whose visible and invisible work has established, defended, and enriched our field. We hope they will also enjoy reading this special section, perhaps with nods and smiles of recognition, and consider adding their own voices to this discussion and celebration through formal or informal channels.

Finally, we want to stress that although this special section is framed as stories of female Asian faculty, some elements of our stories will be recognized as common to all female faculty, or all leaders, regardless of their ethnicity or gender. We conclude this introduction with optimism that we will continue to see a number of female Asian faculty rising to the occasion and that someday it will become unnecessary to discuss their accomplishments as remarkable because of their gender and ethnicity.

NOTES

¹ Japan ranked 121st out of 153 countries in the *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

² *Daijisen ga erabu shingo taishō 2021*. (2021 New Words Awards selected by Daijisen.) <https://daijisen.jp/shingo/>

³ See Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education for information regarding the classification framework. https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php.

REFERENCES

- Cole, Kirsti, and Holly Hassel, eds. 2017. *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Strategies for Feminist Leadership*. Abingdon, U. K.: Routledge.
- Czarniawska, Barbara, and Guje Sevón. 2008. The Thin End of the Wedge: Foreign Women Professors as Double Strangers in Academia. *Gender, Work, and Organization* 15 (3): 235–287.

- Hernandez, Kathy-Ann C., Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, and Heewon Chang. 2015. Exploiting the Margins in Higher Education: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Three Foreign-Born Female Faculty of Color. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28 (5): 533–551.
- Kim, Dongbin, Susan Twombly, and Lisa Wolf-Wendel. 2012. International Faculty in American Universities: Experiences of Academic Life, Productivity, and Career Mobility. *New Directions for Institutional Research* 155: 27–46.
- Longman, Karen A., and Susan R. Madsen, eds. 2014. *Women and Leadership in Higher Education*. Charlotte, N. C.: Information Age.