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Find Your Role Model

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I teach Japanese language and literature at Vassar College, located in New York State. My specialization is Japanese literature with a special focus on girls' magazine culture and literature. My research interests have recently expanded to *shōjo* manga, and I am currently working on a research project that examines women's history and culture viewed through manga. When I was invited to contribute an essay to this special section, I was unsure if I was a suitable person to write about female leadership, as I do not consider myself a typical leader type. I am timid and a worrywart. However, I read a research article which explains that the "superstar role model" is not always positive; it can pressure people and affect their self-esteem (Hoyt and Simon 2011: 154). My story is full of struggles. However, I would like to share two pieces of advice with readers: (1) Find your mentors and learn from them and (2) Be critical of Japan's colonial past. I would be happy if the readers could take away something from my story.

Find Your Mentors and Learn from Them

I was born in Tokyo in the late 1960s and grew up in Osaka. I went to a local girls' high school and entered a women's college affiliated with the high school. I was a typical *joshidaisei* (female college student) who dreamed about becoming fluent in English. In the late 1980s, Japan was enjoying the "bubble economy." There was a type of TV drama called "trendy drama," in which stylish career women appeared as central characters; they spoke good English, had business careers, and, of course, were involved in romantic relationships. I yearned for the world of trendy drama. In fashion magazines, the word *ryūgaku* (study abroad) was ubiquitous. Without deep consideration about my future plans, I majored in British and American literature at college simply because I wanted to be able to speak English.

During my junior year, I studied in the United States. The school that I chose was located in a town called Alliance, Ohio. I loved the small-town atmosphere and people's hospitality there. However, I found classes difficult. My English level was not high enough to take college-level courses. I thus always felt inferior and also found myself an outsider. While I was there, I read *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson (1919), the early twentieth-century novelist. This book was one of the first full-length English language books I read in the original language, and I enjoyed reading it. *Winesburg, Ohio* consists of short stories about the residents of a small town. All the characters are dealing with trauma from past experiences, suffer from inferiority complexes, and have difficulty in communicating with others. They are nevertheless likable. Somehow, the characters were relatable to me and comforted me. After I returned to Japan, I purchased a collection of Anderson literature to read his other works.

In the early 1990s, I decided to pursue the study of American literature. I chose Illinois State University, where an expert on Anderson, Professor Lewis White, was teaching. By then, I could read and write fairly well but struggled with understanding lectures and expressing my opinions in class. I hated discussion-based classes because I could not participate. On the other hand, I enjoyed giving presentations and was good at it. It was around that time that I became interested in becoming a teacher in higher education.

For the Ph. D. program, I chose Purdue University in Indiana. I belonged to the Comparative Literature Program. Initially, I was going to study Sherwood Anderson and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke from a comparative perspective. However, my research focus shifted in an unpredictable way: I read Yoshiya Nobuko's short story "Suzuran" (Lily of the valley, 1916) in one of the classes I took. Immediately I fell in love with this piece. It is a story about a schoolgirl who witnesses a mysterious Italian girl playing piano at night. The story has no climax but is beautifully written in ornate language peppered with western imagery. I was surprised to find that such an easily enjoyable piece could be a subject of study. For my Ph. D. dissertation, I compared Yoshiya Nobuko with Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women* (known in Japan by its translated title *Wakakusa monogatari*). They share many similarities; not only did they both write stories for young girls but they both were also feminists. They wove their feminist messages into their works. My journey through girls' literary studies had, thus, started.

I received a two-year research scholarship from Purdue, which released me from my teaching assistantship. I was away from school and lived in Chicago with my husband, whom I married around that time. I received (and continue to receive) so much support from him. He proofread my dissertation and pointed out logical flaws, and we read it over and over to make a final polish-up together. Writing a dissertation is a lonely and difficult process for anyone (I felt that it would never end). But constant effort makes a big difference. It is important to make progress —even if each step is small.

In 2003, Japanese popular culture was thriving. My research topic—girls' literature and also *shōjo* manga—was favorably viewed in academia. Luckily, I found a job at Vassar College and we moved to Poughkeepsie, New York. It is conventional for faculty members in Japanese programs at liberal arts colleges to teach language and literature/culture courses. My experience of working as a teaching assistant in Japanese language and literature at Purdue was a significant advantage. The year after I came to Vassar, the Chinese and Japanese department became independent from the Asian Studies Program. I was fortunate to be involved in many initiatives to help grow the Japanese program. My first mission was to look for exchange schools in Japan. My senior colleague, Professor Peipei Qiu (specialist in premodern literature and known for her study of Chinese comfort women) and I visited Japan together, and ultimately Ochanomizu University and Ritsumeikan University became our partner schools. Since then, we have had close institutional partnerships, especially with Ochanomizu: we held many collaborative projects, including a two-month summer Japanese language program at the Ochanomizu campus (which was unfortunately discontinued in 2010), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects, the annual international students' forum, researcher exchanges, and so on. When we had our summer program, my colleague Yuko Matsubara and I took twenty students to Ochanomizu every year and stayed there as directors. I was still un-tenured at that time, so some senior faculty members in other departments/programs told me that I should focus on research. However, as a Japanese language teacher, I felt that this program was an indispensable opportunity for my students. So, I was determined to commit myself to the director's role. In the end, the program was successful, flourished, and continued for four years until the world financial crisis occurred.

The four summers that I spent in Japan brought me valuable connections and friendships. I am, in particular, grateful to the kindness of Professor Kan Satoko, professor of Japanese literature at Ochanomizu University. Professor Kan's research interest was very similar to mine. She shared information that I could not obtain in the United States. She gave me many opportunities to write essays and articles and to present my research. Regrettably, she passed away in 2011. Professor Kan was and still is my role model. She was active in interacting with researchers overseas and cared for students and junior faculty members. I am sure that I am not the only one who admired her and wanted to become like her. My work ethic and ideas about leadership come from Professor Kan.

Thanks to many friends and colleagues' support, I managed to get tenure in 2010. Since then, I have been involved in college committee work, including serving as the department chair. However, I often feel nervous around people and constantly wonder if I am fitting in and not disappointing others. Lack of confidence has always plagued me. One of the major reasons for my lack of confidence is the fact that I am a non-native speaker. Research shows that a "clear marker that draws a line between white and non-white, citizens and immigrants, competency and non-competency, and mainstream and periphery" is attributed to one's accent in English (Hoyt and Simon 2011: 169). The number of non-native Asian women leaders in the arena of American higher education is small. My colleague, Peipei Qiu is one of a few Asian female leaders on campus. I feel fortunate to be able to work with her and, more importantly, learn from her. I always tell myself that as long as I do what she does, nothing will go wrong. Of course, mere copying is not always good, but we can grow only through learning from others. You can eventually cultivate your own style. It is, therefore, important to find a role model near you from whom you can learn.

Although I have always suffered from insecurity, lately I feel myself slowly overcoming it. Fifteen years after I completed my dissertation, I finally published a book, *Age of Shōjo: The Emergence, Evolution, and Power of Japanese Girls' Magazine Fiction* (SUNY Press 2019). This is a diachronic study of girls' magazine culture, examining the birth of *shōjo shōsetsu* (girls' stories) and following the development of this genre. I discuss women writers' resistance against male-centered society and female gender norms presented via the voices of girl characters. There were always stereotypes associated with girls' story writers—their stories are viewed as immature and only for children—but they as feminists

fought against male critics who trivialized them by pulling their female readers to their side as their allies.

Some people may consider that girls' magazine stories are commercial products and, therefore, their readers are passive consumers. However, the authors constantly encouraged readers and taught them to believe in their potential. I am one of the readers who grew up reading girls' stories and was empowered by them. Encouragement by the female writers—sometimes optimistic and sometimes unrealistic—is a manifestation of feminism. I believe in the positive energy and power residing in girls' culture.

After I completed this book, I arrived at one realization: I do not have to be constantly worried about people's opinions about me, but I should secure my own community in which I feel comfortable. My job now is to offer a healthy and non-hostile academic space where young scholars can feel safe, encouraged, and motivated, just like my role models have always done for me.

Be Critical of Japan's Colonial Past

Since the fall of 2021, I have been serving as the director of the Asian Studies Program at Vassar College. Before I came to Vassar, I did not have many opportunities to interact with those who are in the Asian Studies field because I always belonged to the Foreign Language Department, English Department, and Comparative Literature Program. After coming to Vassar, I was suddenly surrounded by colleagues and faculty members who specialize in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. Lately, I feel a strong need to learn more about Asia and think about myself as an Asian.

An incident made me realize how indifferent I had been to Japan's colonial history and its residue embedded in today's culture. When I became in charge of the fourth-year Japanese-language course, I introduced material about Yamakawa Sutematsu, one of the five girls who came to the United States as *ryūgakusei* (study abroad students) in 1872; Sutematsu studied at Vassar. Upon graduation, she returned to Japan, helped Tsuda Umeko, a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, establish her English school, raised funds to establish a nursing school, and also got married to Ōyama Iwao, a general in the army. As teaching material, I used an episode of a TV show called *Rekishi hiwa historia* which focused on Sutematsu. Her support of her husband during the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) is described thus:

> In 1904, the Russo-Japanese war broke out…. When Ōyama Iwao was sent to continental China as the supreme commander of the Japanese army forces, his wife, Sutematsu, took it upon herself to support the Japanese war effort (*koko de katsuyaku shita no ga Sutematsu desu*). She advocated for Japanese interests abroad. Sutematsu actively sought media coverage using her position as the wife of an army commander and her English language skills, appearing in media worldwide to promote international support and understanding for Japan…. As a result, the Japanese were able to end the war as victors (*kono kekka Nihon no shōri to iu katachi de sensō o oeru koto ga dekita no desu*). (Ōyama Sutematsu 2012)

Sutematsu's contribution is glorified, which is evident from the terms that are used, *katsuyaku* (contribution) and *shōri* (victory). But one Chinese student in my class pointed out: Yamakawa's *katsuyaku* is *katan* (to be accomplice) for the invasion of the Chinese continent. Indeed, the Russo-Japan war took place in Manchuria, northern China (Ōyama Iwao served as a commander in the Sino-Japanese war [1894-1895] as well and captured Port Arthur). After the war in 1905, Korea was made a Japanese protectorate. "The Russo-Japan war" and the word "invasion" for the first time were linked in my mind.

Because of the influence of popular historical novels, films, and TV dramas, Meiji figures, including those involved in wars, are often portrayed as brave and respectable hard workers who devoted themselves to the modernization of Japan. However, it is dangerous that this popularized and dramatized world is taken as truth without broader colonial historical context. The positive portrayals of the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo Japanese War in NHK's 2009–2011 TV drama *Clouds above the Slope* (*Saka no ue no kumo*), which is based on Shiba Ryōtarō's novel, for instance, have been criticized (Daigo 2010). These views toward the Meiji era parallel the national rhetoric of the government (Gluck 2020: 11). Abe Shinzō's 2018 New Year's Day address compared the gravity of Japan's economic crisis today with conditions in the Meiji era when Japan faced an increase of foreign power in the region and asserted that, just as the Meiji people built a modern nation in response to their problem, Japanese citizens should face this new situation with "a sense of urgency" (Abe 2018) and strive to rebuild the nation. The wars of the Meiji era were legitimized and transformed into positive historical memories, where the idea of Japan as colonizer is absent. Historian Keiichi Fujiwara (2006) states: "War memories…have been highly selective and significantly different from neighboring Asian countries. The disparate historical

memory has become an area of contention" (145). Today, it is crucial to examine the history of your own country in context and be the most critical person of Japan's colonial history. This might sound obvious, but we should be aware of the fact that there are still many issues that have not been resolved since the war. Indifference to and ignorance of our own country's past is disrespectful to others. Now I often incorporate readings on Japan's colonial history into my language class.

I often ponder why teaching a language is important. I teach Japanese not because I want to teach Japanese culture or to increase the number of "fans of Japan" but because I want students to understand the importance of diversity and respect others' opinions. In upper-level language classes, I treat Japanese as "a lingua franca": Just like English, Japanese can be a common linguistic means through which people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can communicate and exchange opinions. The annual student forum, part of the COIL project, initiated by Professor Moriyama Shin (Ochanomizu University), is held based on this belief (Moriyama 2021: 4). The participating students, using English and/or Japanese, collaboratively research pressing global issues (environmental, climate, racial, and geopolitical issues, for example) and discuss how they can work together to create a better future. Through this experience, I have learned how important it is for us to develop cultural sensitivity and an understanding of other cultures, which are essential tools for conducting harmonious yet robust global communication.

Final Remarks

The Asian Studies program at Vassar has over thirty years of history and over twenty faculty members. Serving as the director of this program is a significant challenge for me. But I am at the same time excited about learning new things. I struggled a good deal over the course of my academic career. Before getting tenure, I was always worried about my research and publications and sometimes neglected other important aspects such as socialization and fulfillment of my private life. I realize that harmony between people creates a healthy academic environment. Now, I am making an effort to participate in the college community more actively.

I hope that my pieces of advice—finding a role model, belonging to a community where you feel protected, being critical of Japan's colonial past, and nurturing cultural sensitivity—will be beneficial to you, future Asian leaders. Just like I did, you might encounter some hardships on the

course of your academic career: publishing scholarly articles, for example, is not an easy task. However, struggles only make people strong. If you fail, you only need to correct your mistakes. You don't need to make all your achievements at once. The most important thing is to make constant progress while aspiring to become like your role models.

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