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## Becoming a Woman Leader in the United States: Finding a Place to Shine

Natsuki Fukunaga

### Introduction

My path to a leadership role as a woman in higher education has been long and circuitous, made possible thanks to the impact of many women pioneers before me and leaders in my own life. Starting with my strong-willed mother, my first English teacher in Kagoshima, my former boss who taught me “American English,” my Australian professor at college, my advisor in graduate school in the United States, and the department chair at the time of my job interview were all women. One of the most effective mechanisms of ensuring a bright future for women in higher education is for women to mentor each other to pursue the degrees and qualifications necessary to pick up the leadership torch and bring it into the next generation.

In this essay, I am going to explore how I came to earn a Ph. D. degree and share my experiences as an Asian woman in the US in leadership positions, including director of a Japanese-language program, chair of the Department of Modern Languages (MDL), and mentor for a Japanese outreach coordinator. With COVID-19 and the continuously changing landscape of higher education, we are facing many unanticipated challenges, yet with these challenges also have come new opportunities for Asian women as leaders in academia, language teaching, and in their respective communities.

### Formative Years in Kagoshima

I grew up in Kagoshima, Japan, dreaming about living and working outside Japan. Kagoshima is a beautiful place known for fantastic food, *onsen* (natural hot springs), and Mt. Sakurajima, an active volcano. Unfortunately, Kagoshima is also infamous for the prevalence of a *danson-johi* ideology (respect for the male, contempt for the female). In



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middle school, the class president was automatically a male student, while the vice president was a female student unless someone insisted otherwise. When family members gathered at my grandparents' house, women usually stayed in the kitchen cooking and serving food while the men sat, talked, ate, and drank. My brother was not expected to do much of the house chores while my sister and I were supposed to keep the house clean, wash dishes, fold laundry, cook and serve food. I felt that gender inequality was part of my daily life.

One day, my kindergarten teacher introduced some English words with flashcards in class, unaware that this would truly change the course of my life. I went home and shared what I had learned with my mother. "This is amazing. I can communicate with people in different countries if I know how to speak English!" My mother found my enthusiasm remarkable and found English lessons with a young woman who spent some time in the United States. I entered the world of learning English as a five-year-old girl.

I continued English lessons on and off, and English became my hobby in a way. I would try to listen to English lessons on the radio in the morning, identify places on my globe that I wanted to travel to, listen to The Beatles, watch some of my favorite films in English multiple times to pick up phrases wherever I could. By the time I was in high school, I had set my mind on becoming a Japanese teacher outside of Japan since I wanted to use English and live somewhere else in the world. I started taking English conversation lessons with my future boss. Deborah was from Virginia and ran a small English conversation school with her Japanese husband. She looked, talked and acted differently from any other women I had met. She also challenged us when we tried to stay quiet during classes. She became my ideal image of a strong woman with several pierced earrings.

The fastest and cheapest way to achieve my goal was to study at a local women's two-year college and become fluent in English. Attending a women-only college, I felt free from expected gender roles for the first time living in Kagoshima. All the classes were taught in English by teachers from Australia, the United States, Japan, England, and New Zealand. The students participated in a six-week homestay program in Australia at the end of the language pledge experience. I enjoyed my time at my host family's home in Perth, Australia, especially when I observed and assisted Japanese classes.

After returning, I sought ways to work in Australia, but I did not have enough money or connections, so I got a job in Kagoshima and saved up

money. After working as an OL (office lady) in a small company for a few months, I received a phone call from a former professor in my college about an opportunity to be an assistant Japanese teacher in Ipswich, Queensland, Australia. My parents encouraged me to take the chance since it was apparent that I was not enjoying my current job. The female workers were expected to come thirty minutes earlier than men to clean and serve tea. By the time I resigned from this full-time job, I had severe stomach ulcers due to stress. I returned to Australia and served as an assistant teacher of three Australian female teachers in Japanese classes in the fifth to twelfth grades.

I get nostalgic thinking about how inconvenient (yet fruitful) life was without the Internet, computers, and smartphones. I was the only Japanese person in the small town, and I depended on others to get by. When we had an open day event at school, I served Japanese matcha tea in the *sadō* style. I had only taken a few lessons and hoped that nobody knew the proper manners of the traditional tea ceremony. I was very nervous when a Japanese family showed up out of nowhere. Fortunately, they kindly overlooked my amateurism and thanked me for sharing Japanese culture with their community. This experience made me realize that simply being Japanese is not enough to teach the Japanese language and culture. After returning to Japan, I started taking *sadō* tea lessons and re-educating myself in Japanese cultural practices.

I hoped to go back to college to earn a four-year degree and teaching license, but my parents were not happy with the idea of bearing the financial burden of tuition since I was the youngest in the family. Luckily, my former English teacher, Deborah, offered me a job to teach children English conversation and do some office work. I commuted from my parents' house and saved every penny while studying and teaching English simultaneously. During the pre-Internet era, I completed my undergraduate degree via *tsūshin kyōiku* (traditional distance learning) via mail at Nihon University and earned an English teaching license at the same time.

Thanks to a generous scholarship from Kagoshima Ikuei Zaidan, I came to Georgia to earn my master's degree in teaching English as a second language. I was fascinated with all the students who began learning Japanese because of their interest in pop culture, especially anime and games. As the result of my interest, I conducted a qualitative interview study as a master's thesis. Initially, I intended to complete a master's degree in two years and become an instructor of Japanese. However, my

advisor, Dr. Betsy Rymes, suggested earning a Ph. D. degree by continuing my research on language learners' identity, motivation, and popular culture, which would create more opportunities, including applying for tenure-track positions. My father said "Why? What for? Just come home," but my mother was supportive of the idea. Thanks to the assistance of Dr. Rymes and others, I was able to obtain a graduate teaching assistantship that allowed me to teach Japanese as a graduate student with complete tuition remission for six years. During my studies, my advisor and other teachers who recognized my efforts in teaching and research offered encouragement. While my new life in the United States freed me from the restraints of gender discrimination and mistreatment in Japan, I simultaneously became more conscious of racial discrimination in the Deep South.

### **Becoming a Woman Leader in the United States**

What does a Ph. D. do to an educator? It opens up many opportunities in the United States. The idea of "having choices" as a racial and gender minority in the United States was one of the biggest reasons I endured the long struggle of being a broke and overworked Ph. D. student. Once I finished writing my dissertation, I accepted a tenure-track position as an assistant professor of Japanese and the coordinator of the Japanese program at Marshall University. My primary duty was to establish a new program with a minor and a major in Japanese in West Virginia. With my appreciation for all the non-Japanese teachers and friends whom I met in Kagoshima, I chose to come to a small city with the mission of sharing my joy for learning foreign languages.

### **Department Politics**

During the first three years, I was busy creating new classes, devising the curriculum, advising all Japanese students, working with graduate teaching assistants who taught Japanese with me every semester, and learning how to get by in higher education. I did not miss a day of work and dedicated myself to completing the never-ending tasks. One day, a faculty member came to my office and abruptly said, "Not everyone is happy to have a Japanese professor here. I know you are working hard, but you are going to burn out pretty soon, so watch out." I was thankful that he was honest with me, but I was genuinely shocked and at a loss for words. I realized I had entered the realm of academic department politics.

In the Department of Modern Languages (MDL), there have been French, German, and Spanish majors and two-year language sequences of Arabic, Chinese, Italian, and Japanese for several years before I started working. Due to high demand, a Japanese major was added in 2007, one year after I joined the department, while Arabic, Chinese, Italian were discontinued due to budget constraints and a lack of qualified instructors. Adding a new tenure-track line resulted from taking a position from other language programs, which created tension and rivalries within the department. Showing positive results was the only way to prove that adding a Japanese major was the right decision. Within five years, the number of Japanese majors successfully reached the highest in our department.

To promote the Japanese program, it was necessary to increase Japan-related events and cultural learning opportunities on campus and local communities in West Virginia and increase library resources. To do so, I applied for several grants. The successful acquisition of external funding and the execution of events were made possible by relentless communication and collaboration with Marshall University administrators, the Japan Foundation, the Consulate General of Japan of New York, West Virginia Department of Education, K-12 public schools and libraries, and Japanese business communities such as Toyota in West Virginia. What has been particularly successful is the Japanese outreach coordinator position, which has been sustained for more than a decade. The Laurasian Institute offers a Japan Outreach Initiative (JOI) program which sends a cultural coordinator from Japan to a U. S. host site for two years. We had the first on-campus JOI coordinator in 2010 and have continued to secure a coordinator in the surrounding area for the next ten years. Eventually, Marshall University was able to establish its own Japanese outreach coordinator position.

#### **“Live to Work” or “Work to Live”**

Soon into my appointment, the department chair stopped me in the hallway, asking, “Are you okay? You look pale.” I had severe pain in my lower abdomen, but I said, “My stomach is bugging me, but I am fine.” She insisted that I see a doctor right away, so I had to leave. The doctor told me I would have to be hospitalized and have surgery that day. Later that day, I had an emergency surgery to remove an ectopic pregnancy. My surgery turned out fine, but it forced me to take a hard look at my life. This experience taught me how to balance my desire to achieve with my

nascent desires to have a life of my own. My husband would frequently offer tough-love advice, saying, “Do you live to work or work to live?” “Nobody says ‘I wish I would’ve worked more’ on their deathbed,” and “Don’t be a workaholic.” Admittedly, it took the birth of our two daughters for me to truly take his words seriously. I am now aware that I cannot do everything, so I must keep my priorities straight. Thankfully, I love my work and my family. With many friends and my family’s help, we have survived as a double-income family sharing all the duties fifty percent during our children’s early childhood.

### **Art of Adapting Communication and Leadership Style**

In 2018, I was elected to serve as the chair of MDL after our former department chair retired. Many faculty members, including myself, were not interested in serving as department chair and taking up that leadership role. While there are advantages to being able to make decisions and influence policy, it is challenging to navigate relations with opinionated professors from diverse backgrounds and schools of thought, each with conflicting goals. While I could focus more on my own aspirations in the past, in a leadership role I have to balance the divergent aspirations of many with those of the institution. Historically, there have been tensions between European and Latin American faculty members, and our current members are more diverse than ever, hailing from Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Poland, Puerto Rico, Spain, Russia, and the continental United States. I am the only faculty member from Asia, which brings with it its own series of challenges in obtaining mutual understanding despite differences in communication styles.

At first, I made conscious efforts to send detailed emails, avoiding confusion and misunderstanding. To my surprise, while some responded with “Thank you for taking the time to write this out,” others would reply, “Too long. I don’t feel like reading this.” A separate challenge was dealing with how faculty members differed widely in their average expected response times. Over the weekend, some do not check emails while others reply and expect immediate responses. Setting a shared work ethic is an essential yet incredibly challenging task unique to leadership roles.

Making final, consequential decisions was a challenge for me, in part because I have tried to listen to everyone and come up with the best solution. Saying “no” was also challenging since I prefer avoiding conflicts. When I think about past exchanges of emails and communication as a chair of MDL, there are times I should have talked with individual

faculty members on the phone or in-person instead of solely depending on email exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have realized that being a leader requires problem-solving strategies and the ability to adapt one's communication and leadership style to the situation as it changes.

### **Technology**

Computer and technology skills are one of the unwritten qualifications as a leader in the post-COVID-19 society. I do not consider myself the most tech-savvy person, but to my surprise I found myself sharing tips on technology with other faculty members. Some displayed “tech anxiety,” but university leadership and I helped them to overcome these challenges with multiple workshops, certifications, virtual meetings, and emails. We converted all the classes into an online/virtual format, and thanks to the tremendous effort of each faculty member and on-campus technology service personnel, and the patience and diligence of our students, we were able to provide choices between different delivery modes during the pandemic to meet students' needs.

This technology adaptation has, unfortunately, brought back health issues. I identified unhealthy habits, like constantly having my smartphone and checking emails 24/7. I ended up suffering from Heberden's nodes with hardened joints on my fingers because of intense keyboard and smartphone use. Many middle-aged women worldwide suffer from different types of premenopausal and menopausal symptoms, including physical and mental issues. They are part of aging that we cannot ignore as working women. This topic has also become a bonding opportunity for our female faculty members in MDL. As a woman in a leadership role, I can openly discuss women's health issues and exchange helpful information.

Since the beginning of COVID-19, we have spent long hours using technology at work and at home. Our daughters spend much time with classwork on their school iPad, and watch YouTube on their phones. As a family, we recently started doing meditations at night twice a week. It encourages us to wind down and unplug ourselves from technology—a small effort for a better work-life balance.

### **Conclusion: Finding a Place to Shine**

A few years after the bubble economy burst in the early 1990s in Japan, second baby-boomers entered the job market with fewer opportunities. Many young Japanese felt hopeless after enduring extremely competitive

entrance exams, *ijime* (bullying), and rising suicide rates. I tried to take the expected role of a responsible full-time worker, *shakaijin*, but I was never comfortable doing so. I made many mistakes in my life, but I was determined to follow my future vision and I did not fail to do so. Nobody told me to study English or made me go to graduate school, but I chose my path. When I encounter difficulties, I tell myself, “I decided to be here and do this job. If I cannot tolerate it, I can pick up everything and leave anytime.” This feeling of not being bound to any one place and having many choices open to me helps me stay afloat when I feel down.

The field of foreign language education in the United States is one area in which women are well-represented. Many department chairs are women, including the last two chairs in my current department, making it undoubtedly easier to picture a woman as a leader compared to a similar position in Japan. However, Asian women leaders are a minority since most women leaders are white. It is my hope to encourage future Asian leaders by sharing our stories and experiences.

There are different pathways for success to be a foreign language educator in the United States. If you wish to teach in K–12 settings, you need to earn an undergraduate degree in education. If you have a master’s degree, you can teach in K–12 and colleges. Earning a Ph. D. will also expand the choices of teaching and taking a leadership role in K–12, community colleges, and universities. I strongly recommend taking advantage of the graduate assistantship (GA/TA) system in higher education in the United States since earning a graduate degree can be more affordable and more accessible than earning an undergraduate degree as an international student. As a graduate student, you have the freedom to focus on what you want to study while also gaining needed experience teaching. I realized later in my life that qualifications and education cannot be taken away from you whether you are poor, a woman, or a non-native English speaker. As I shared in this essay, I was a poor international graduate student full of ideas and determination. I appreciate all the hardships I encountered since I grew personally and professionally from them. As I have been the benefactor of assistance from many before me, I strive to provide an example for women in the coming generation of leaders in academia.