



Foreign Female English Teachers in Japanese Higher Education: Voices from Our Quarter (2020)

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Foreign Female English Teachers
 in Japanese Higher Education:
 Narratives From Our Quarter

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Foreword by Andrea Simon-Maeda



For millennia, people have left their native lands to live and work long-term in other countries. In many cases, the resulting interactions have benefited both those who travelled as well as those who received the travellers. However, the human interaction fostered by this ongoing human exchange does not always benefit all people equally, not to mention its impact on the other animals with whom we share the planet (Steffen, 2011).

The book currently under review sheds light on a particular context in which people travelled to work abroad and a particular type of person. In this case, the travelers came to Japan, mostly from Western countries, and all of those sharing their stories were females who took teaching work in higher education, mostly teaching English language or content courses in English.

The book's three editors explain that the book was first thought of as a sort of "girlfriends' guidebook" for foreign women interested in teaching in Japan. Toward that end, each of the 23 authors constructed autobiographical narratives but without the constraints of a prescribed writing style or any chapter template. According to the editors, seven themes emerged: career building, teaching, professional development, merging the personal and professional, gendered and racialized identity, workplace harassment, and leadership.

While the chapters all shed light on distinct issues in each author's personal and professional lives as they enjoyed and struggled with making a home in a country different from their own, the most inspiring thread running through the narratives is the power of connection. The chapters reveal a wide range of beneficial connections that have made the authors' time in Japan not only bearable but beautiful. These connections ranged from a bond with a single colleague, all the way to the connections that blossom via membership in nationwide teachers' organizations.

Furthermore, while all the chapters are written by females, connections with males – fellow teachers, students, and others – also brought benefits. I have also been an expat teacher, and I have sat in on sessions where the expats gripe about the locals, but this book is not about that. For example, Wendy Jones Nakanishi who wrote about her life in rural, very traditional Japan clarified, "Reader I realize that I'm making my in-laws sound like monsters. This was definitely *not* the case. ... I have found my relatives, male and female alike, to be invariably kind, gentle, civilized, and sweet."

Overall, the authors seem to have been influenced by a reflective, anthropological, qualitative (or whatever term you might prefer) approach to their chapters. For example, this

approach manifests in an emphasis on the evolution of the authors' own identities and the identities of others, including their students. In recognition of the power of identity, one of the authors, Avril Haye-Matsui, wrote, "What we do in class is so much more than just teaching language."

Also, in regard to identity, I learned the term "single story" (Adichie, 2009) from another author, Richa Ohri. Single story is an extreme form of stereotyping, which in Ohri's case as an Indian woman, meant that she was too often perceived of as nothing more than a chai tea sipping, curry eating, saree wearer.

The concept of perception came to mind frequently while reading the book: in particular, perceptions of the role of native speakers in the learning of English, perceptions of what constitutes a native speaker, and perceptions of whether only certain native speaker varieties of English are considered acceptable (Braine, 2013; Holliday, 2006; Kubota & Fujimoto, 2013; Yeo, Marlina, & Jacobs, 2017). Fortunately, these perceptions are moving toward a greater recognition of English being owned by all its users, and chapters, such as that by Donna Fujimoto, promote this broader view.

Quenby Aoki wins the prize for chapter mostly likely to be turned into a Netflix film. She begins with humorous stories from her early days in Japan as a foolishly stubborn learner of all things Japanese, such as the time she reacted strongly when a server brought her a spoon to use to eat curry. In Aoki's mind, the server was treating her like a foreigner who could not use chopsticks properly. Thus, she insisted on being brought chopsticks, only to later notice that all the Japanese diners were eating their curry, not with chopsticks, but with a spoon.

Of course, every popular Netflix story also needs a sweet moment, and Aoki furnishes that by recounting the time her husband was working in another city when she called him at 6am to tell him that their five-year-old daughter was ill and that Aoki could not stay home with her because she was starting to teach a new class. Without a second's hesitation, her husband said, "I'll be there" and braved his boss's consternation by hopping on a bullet train to reach home in time to care for their daughter while his wife went to work. The daughter recovered rapidly, although the boss needed a bit more time to recover from his surprise at the husband's decision.

As a teacher, not as a Netflix watcher, my favorite story amongst the many engaging, informative, and inspiring narratives is Yoshi Grote's tale about when she decided to tell her students that she is gay and to share about her family life. This openness on Grote's part was amply reciprocated by her students, and not just her gay students. More broadly, students began to see the value in people being different and being open to learning about others' uniqueness. As a result of the students' enthusiastic response to her openness, Grote began making team-building and self-disclosure activities a regular part of each of her class sessions, to the effect that class became ever more lively, and it was enveloped in a caring, risk-permitting atmosphere (Shirvan & Taherian, 2020).

To conclude, the authors recount episodes of long-running discrimination as well as particularly painful incidents, e.g., when one of them was repeatedly ignored when correcting a translation in preparation for an important public event, or when another author had her white male counterparts remain silent leaving her to be the only person to speak up against racist and sexist characterizations of Australian Aboriginal women. Nonetheless, the authors persevered, and we, their readers, are wiser for the lessons they gifted us via their lessons. I look forward to the sequel to this book: one recounting the reflections and experiences of the authors' Japanese students, colleagues, and family members. I trust it will also be an overwhelmingly positive book.

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