

Non-Japanese Asian Female English Teachers Speak Out: Dismantling White Privilege in Japan

Margaret Kim^{1*} & Nancy Shzh-chen Lee²

¹ English Education Research Center, Kobe College, Nishinomiya, Japan

² Temple University Japan Campus, Osaka, Japan

* Margaret Kim, E-mail: margaret_kim@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Issues surrounding white privilege have been in continuous debate. In Japan, the subject of white privilege is also not straightforward. Past research has been conducted about white privileged males in Japanese universities. We decided to take a different standpoint and examine the presence of white privilege in Japan through the alternative voices of non-Japanese Asian female university English teachers. By interviewing and analyzing their experiences and identities, we were able to examine incidences of white privilege that happened and influenced their lives as non-Japanese Asian female English teachers in Japan. We hope that our work generates interest and attention to the current gender and racial imbalance of native-speaker university English teachers in Japan—an issue that directly or indirectly relates to all students, teachers, administrators and policy makers.

Keywords

White privilege, identity, English teacher, Asian female teacher, Japan

1. Introduction

White privilege is a largely unaddressed area in Japan. Appleby's (2014) work on white western male teachers' construction of academic identities in Japanese higher education is an exception that focused on the existence and effects of white male privilege in academia in Asia. Coming from our own background as non-Japanese Asian female English teachers in Japan, we have experienced white privilege in our daily lives, living and working with different privileges and hindrances that occur in our surroundings. Unlike Appleby, who examined these issues from the perspective of white male English teachers, we aim to flip the coin upside down and explore white privilege in Japanese academia by investigating the identity and life experiences of non-Japanese Asian female English teachers. After reviewing the literature on how race, gender, and privilege intertwine with the experience of white male foreigners in Japan, we examined two university English teachers on their experiences as non-Japanese

Asian females in Japan. This preliminary study aims to examine white privilege in Japan through the lives of non-Japanese Asian female teachers and how they navigate the English teaching world in Japan. Ultimately, we hope that our study offers an alternative perspective for addressing the gender imbalance in the field of English teaching in Japanese academia.

2. Literature Review

2.1 White Privilege

White privilege is a term used to explain advantages such as educational attainment, family wealth, and employment experience by people who are identified as whites over non-whites, under the same social, political, economic, or educational circumstances (Zack, 2015). The discourse of white privilege develops from the realization that white people gain benefits in society because of their white skin. The concept of white privilege enables a critical perspective in outlining racism and how racial differences affect the lives of white or white-skinned people (McIntosh, 1988). This privilege can be obvious and non-obvious; direct and indirect; intentional or unintentional; and can be observed in different professional, educational, and social contexts. Therefore, white privilege has become a common term for addressing racial inequalities.

However, defining white privilege is controversial and how it works varies depending on the place and people who use this term as well as on the context in which it is used (Zack, 2015). For example, people possessing white identities in North America would have a different privilege and social experience as compared to people possessing white identities in non-white countries such as Japan. White privilege also has different influences on different people as they have different past experiences and identities.

Why does white privilege exist? Answering this question is highly complex because of various races and blending of people going through complex and rapid ethnic, cultural, social and racial changes in the world. To some level, white privilege exists as a result of the process of colonialism by white Western Europeans. However, the existence of white privilege is not as straightforward as what was argued to be the result of white Western European colonialism, as white privilege has now also extended to non-Western European colonized countries.

2.2 White Privilege in Japan

White privilege exists in Japan because having whiter skin is an admiration that Japanese people express. It has been argued that white identity wields its power as an invisible and unmarked superiority which makes other races inferior (Kubota & Lin, 2006). Japan's feeling of being inferior to the West has been reported by philosophers throughout history (Pyle, 1969). In the Edo period, one of the women's righteous duties was to wear white powder on her face (Li, 2008). Therefore, for centuries, white skin was considered to be more refined and more beautiful than dark skin (Tanizaki, 1977). Moreover, in the Meiji period, Japan's ports were opened to westernization with the outside world. Japan was moving away from its traditional customs and Japanese men and women self-consciously

copied the stylish clothing, hairstyles, and appearances of Westerners. While Japanese people admired Westerners, they were also worried about the change brought about by such global modernization.

Japan's sense of anxiety with its global stance and the love-hate dynamic of the relationship with the West were again revealed during World War II. Furuya (2000) discussed how ironic it was that the Japanese had such an admiration towards the Americans, even though they had coerced and condemned the Japanese as the yellow race. During this time, on the basis of skin color alone, Prisoners Of War (POW) were classified as being either Western superior or Asian inferior, with Asian POWs being treated far worse than their fellow Western captives (Kowner, 2009).

In the modern time, Japanese' praise for whites continues as having white skin is considered to be a middle class representation (Ashikari, 2003). These days, whitening creams are still a big seller in the Japanese market. Not only as a means to protect skin from the sun but also to look more Caucasian. In Japan, Caucasian people tend to stand out visually because of their skin color difference and thus they are called *gaijin*, meaning outsiders in English. The Japanese media along with advertising often portray *gaijin* to be attractive where stores like H&M, UNIQLO, and Gap have mannequins with western features as their store models. Fifty-four percent of Japanese ads used Caucasian models, with very few local Japanese models for international brand ads (Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008). Even Tokyo Disneyland portrays ideal princesses in the amusement park as all being white. Moreover, there has also been a rise in plastic surgery among younger Japanese who wish to change their Japanese features to look more similar to images of Western beauty (Kuwabara, 1983; Shirakabe, 1990). This increase is clear in results reported by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (2016) which show 1.26 million procedures were performed in Japan in 2014, compared to about 808,000 in 2010.

2.3 *The Gender Gap in Academia*

The academic gender gap refers to the different experiences of male and female scholars working in universities including distinctions in job security, disciplinary areas, qualifications, institutional affiliation, working hours, rank, job satisfaction, networks, length of career, salary and future perspectives (Baker, 2012). Despite recent increases in the number of females in academia, there are still significant privilege gaps between men and women (Baker, 2012; Lund & Carr, 2015). The number of female students, graduates and academics increased dramatically after the 1970s during which English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the United States made remarkable improvement in postsecondary educational attainment and employment equability of men and women between the 1930s to the 1970s (Baker, 2012). As a result, increasingly more women have received PhDs and permanent positions (Brooks, 1997; Sussman & Yssaad, 2005). However, despite improvement in employment of female academics, male academics continue to dominate between 76 and 82 percent of more senior positions in universities in the five above countries (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2008; Sussman & Yssaad, 2005; AAUP, 2006). Male academics are more likely to work full-time with fewer career interruptions, to publish more articles

and consequently be promoted to higher ranks with higher salaries. It was found that female faculty members spend more effort on teaching whereas male faculty members spend more effort on research (Baker, 2012). Unfortunately, many universities continue to prioritize resources and time on research over teaching (Brooks, 1997; Monroe, Ozyurt, Wrigley, & Alexander, 2008).

As male academics continue to have more senior positions and female academics continue entering the academic profession at lower ranks, the cause of the academic gender gap cannot be solely attributed to difference in educational qualifications. Other factors such as gendered family circumstances, household responsibilities, and personal priorities also enlarge this gap (Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006). Systems of hiring and promotions have also preserved the gender gap as well as institutional discrimination toward women and marginalization by men in collegial networks (Curtis, 2005; Drakich & Stewart, 2007).

2.4 The Gender Gap in Japanese Academia

Gender gaps also happen in Japanese academia (Appleby, 2014; Hicks, 2013). According to the “Women and Men in Japan 2015” Facts and Figures, March 31, 2014, the percentage of Japanese male teachers is much higher than Japanese females in higher academic positions in particular universities. There are more female teachers in elementary school at 60%; however, this figure falls to only 20% at the university level. As stated on Japan’s Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office website (2016), compared to other developed countries, Japan lags behind in having an equal status amongst men and women in the workforce. Socially, in this day and age, Japanese women still tend to undertake the main childrearing and household manager roles in the household. Currently, the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office’s goal is to increase female teachers in the university field from 20% to 30% by 2020.

In the Japanese university English teaching field, men are also a dominant presence compared to women. According to Hayes (2013), approximately 80% non-Japanese men are in full-time English teaching positions compared to only 20% non-Japanese women. It has been argued that women who are pursuing academic careers in these situations are negatively affected by white male privilege and by Japanese traditional cultural expectations that continue to accept discrimination between genders in the workplace and home (Hayes, 2013; Hicks, 2013; McMahill, 1998; Simon-Maeda, 2004). According to Kobayashi (2014), it may be an advantage for male native speakers of English to hire other males like themselves for English teaching positions, which is one of the causes for the gender imbalance in the workplace. Appleby (2014) further implied that this imbalance has to do with the full-time male native-speaker teachers outnumbering the female teachers because many male teachers eventually become tied to Japan for financial and personal reasons, and find it more comfortable than if they were to return to their home country and start over.

Not only gender imbalance, but racial imbalance is also clearly apparent because Japanese university native-speaker teachers are mainly white (Kobayashi, 2014). The Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) conference is an example where out of 243 presenters who have Western full names at the 2012 conference, 206 (84.8%) were male and only 37 (15.2%) were female (Kobayashi, 2014).

3. Method

This study adopted an emic approach to research where we interviewed two teachers about their experiences with English teaching in Japan and how their professional and social lives have been influenced by white privilege. Both participants (Teacher A and Teacher B) were non-Japanese Asian female English teachers teaching in Japan. They have both have been teaching English at Japanese universities for more than ten years as native speaker teachers. The interviews were informal and non-structured. We interviewed each teacher for approximately one hour and the interview conversations were recorded. Interview data of Teacher A and Teacher B were transcribed and excerpts from each interview were chosen based on topic relevancy and also the frequency of key words. By analyzing and synthesizing these teacher's experiences, we describe the existence of white privilege in Japanese English teaching academia.

4. Results

The authors interviewed two participants (Teacher A and Teacher B) on their experiences as non-Japanese Asian female English teachers in Japan and the influences of white privilege on their professional lives. Interviews were transcribed and excerpts of Teacher A and Teacher B interviews are listed below.

4.1 Teacher A Interview Excerpts Transcribed

I have worked for 14 years in the Japanese university system as an English instructor and have felt great anxiety because of my gender and race. Females are increasingly outnumbered by males as university Native-Speaker (NS) English teachers. Moreover, the very few females that work at these Japanese academic institutions are white. It is very rare that you see any Asian female NS English teacher, like myself. Universities would prefer to hire female teachers that don't mistakenly look Asian to teach English language for their school. One reason is that students prefer to learn English from a foreign-looking teacher instead of someone that is similar in race to them. It adds to the authentic environment of the English language classroom. Because of this initial confusion, I would break the ice on the first day of class during my self-introduction and have the students guess where I was from and my background. I know they were very confused but curious as to why I looked Asian but spoke English fluently. I had to make an extra effort to win the student's acceptance as their English teacher because I didn't fit the typical mold of the white male.

If you look at Japanese college brochures, more times than less you will see a photo of a white male teacher representing the English instructor for the English program advertised. It is rare to have an Asian portray the English instructor for any school advertisement in Japan. This is another reason where my Asian looks don't play the part of a white male English teacher.

At my current job, the majority of white male English teachers who teach in my department outnumber female teachers. Why cannot they hire more females? Or maybe there are not as many females to hire these days. I feel more and more outnumbered by white males in the workplace.

I was approached once by a white male professor asking me if I'd be interested to work at a women's college. The reason they asked me was because they were desperate to have a woman working in an all male-teacher environment. The professor said that it was difficult to find female teachers to hire these days. The ratio of men to women in the academic field is very warped.

At a job interview I took part in, one of the questions they asked was how I would be able to balance raising children, and family life with work. The interviewer assumed that I had children (and) asked me this question. Would they ask this question to a male interviewee? I was appalled at this stereotypical and yet private question that was not related to the job itself and answered directly that my children and family life are non-existent and I would balance my private life and work just fine. This is a negative and bias aspect of assuming that all women have more obligations at home while the male teacher is the breadwinner and only has to worry about the workload at his job. It was a conservative women's college that I interviewed at which doesn't represent equal opportunities for women fairly. There has to be more balance in the academic workplace in Japan.

According to a female student who I interviewed at a women's college in Japan, she would rather have a white male teacher to charm and entertain them in class rather than a boring Japanese teacher. It makes the English learning atmosphere more stimulating. According to this student, the dynamics of being taught by white male teachers compared to Japanese teachers is different in that the class is more enjoyable and to have a good-looking white male as their teacher makes the students more motivated and willing to learn.

Another student who I interviewed at the same women's college said that she'd feel more comfortable going to a female teacher's office for help on assignments or personal advice than a male teacher. She said if there were personal problems involved that affected her performance in class, she would not feel comfortable to seek advice and disclose the matter with a male teacher. Whereas having a female teacher would be more approachable. I personally have had my female students come and tell me the cause of numerous absences from my class. The problems were concerning pregnancy, part-time jobs, mental and physical illnesses, social disorders and low motivation.

4.2 Teacher B Interview Excerpts Transcribed

I have mixed positive and negative experience working as a non-Japanese Asian female English teacher in Japan. Overall, I would say that I have enjoyed working and living in Japan. I first came to Japan on an exchange program and I liked Japan so much that I decided to pursue my postgraduate studies in Japan. Whilst studying in Japan, I also started teaching English. In Japan, the easiest and highest paying job for English native speakers is English teaching at conversation schools. A lot of Japanese people are obsessed with learning English. Learning English is considered to be sophisticated and one step closer to globalization. Among different English schools such as colleges or juku (private cram schools that focus on exam preparation), English conversation schools are private schools that provide "authentic" talking opportunity with "native" English teachers. Conversation schools usually have small-sized classes with three or four students in each class to mimic authentic

small group conversation. These classes are usually conducted by white native speaker teachers without teaching qualifications nor proper training. Instead, the basic criterion for employment is white-looking native speakers of English. In addition, conversation schools also favor young, genki (energetic) and attractive-looking teachers. Many of these conversation schools offer ekimae ryūgaku, the opportunity to experience “study abroad” in front of close-by train stations. Classes at the conversation schools are usually conducted in a free-style manner where students and the native teacher talk only in English about different free-style topics or topics organized in some textbooks published by the schools. It means study abroad in front of your station. Teachers are expected to provide a “fun”, “interesting” experience so that their customers would want to sign up for more classes. Actual English proficiency improvement is considered to be of secondary importance.

At first, it was difficult to find English teaching positions because I look Asian and therefore not as appealing to many employers. Once at a part-time English job interview at an international kindergarten, I was told by the school director that they could not employ me because the students are young and they would get confused that I am not a native English teacher because I look Asian. I was told that since students’ parents are paying premium tuition fees for sending their children to the “international” school, they need all teachers to look white. The school director did not once mention about my teaching experience, qualification or ability. Despite the fact that I already have a teacher license, master degree in TESOL and several years of part-time English teaching experience.

After many attempts, I ended up finding a position teaching English to infants and young children. According to the owner of the school, she was also concerned that I don’t look white but was relieved later when the kids became fond of me. She said that kids were fond of me because my Asian look relaxes them. However, I was requested by the owner not to speak in Japanese with the children as they might be confused that I am not a Japanese teacher because the kids’ parents were sending their kids to native English conversation schools which are more expensive than English schools with local Japanese teachers.

In my first university teaching position interview, the interviewers looked past me and towards the white male friend sitting next to me. Clearly, both of the white male interviewers showed no interest in me. I wonder whether the interviewers’ reactions would have been different if I was not an Asian looking female, but a Western looking female or a Western looking male. I ended up working for this university for one year because I was the most highly qualified candidate. The first few classes were “interesting” as I showed up to the classes and students looked surprised to see me because they were expecting their gaijin teacher to be a blond person. I had students that asked me why my hair is not blond because the female characters in their high school English textbook had blond hair.

In the second year, I was offered a teaching position by one of the most prestigious universities in Japan. I was told by this department that they liked my high motivation and spirit and was hoping that I could be a role-model for their students. It was a motivating feeling because for the first time, I was not asked if I am a native English speaker or not at the interview. Also, I started to get comments on how

female foreign teachers are more suitable for Japanese students because they are more yasashī (gentle). I started hearing from my male colleagues that they think it is unfair for foreign women to have advantages over foreign men in job hunting because universities would need to have some foreign women teachers to balance out numbers.

5. Discussion

As evidenced in Teacher A's commentary, there is a gender imbalance at Japanese universities. Teacher A repeatedly commented that she is outnumbered being one of the few female faculty members in her department. Teacher A further stated that she was approached by a white male professor asking her if she would be interested in working at her current women's college because they are desperate to have a woman working in an all-male environment. This imbalance is an issue not only in Japan but also around the world. As noted by New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2008), Sussman and Yssaad (2005) and AAUP (2006), male academics occupy approximately 80 percent of senior positions. Teacher A's situation is made worse in Japan because there are limited permanent positions to start with for non-Japanese academics, let alone permanent positions for non-Japanese female academics.

Teacher A's commentary also elucidates biases towards female workers. Her uncomfortable interview experience when an interviewer panel asked if she could balance work and family commitments indicates another sign of gender gap in academics. Women academics are given fewer senior and permanent positions because they are often in the position of carrying out more family commitments such as pregnancy and child raising (Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2016). As a result, female faculty members have more career interruptions, less time to concentrate on academic publications, and consequently are disadvantaged for career promotions (Brooks, 1997; Monroe et al., 2008). However, in Teacher A's case, she was discriminated against for being a female and thus she is expected to be disadvantaged for the abovementioned qualities.

In the case of Teacher B, she felt she was treated with prejudice due to her ethnicity, especially in the earlier stage of her career. She did not have the stereotypical white-look that the conversation school and the international kindergarten school wanted. These incidents confirm our previous assertion that white privilege plays a role in the hiring process of these schools. Employers have the tendency to favor teachers with white skin.

During Teacher B's interview for her first university position, her interviewers did not show interest in her but were interested in her white male friend who was not as qualified for the position. With mostly men on hiring committees, favoritism towards hiring the same sex is apparent. This is what Appleby (2014) described as the all men's club of English teaching academia. In order to become a part of it, female teachers would need to have extraordinary appeal (Appleby, 2014).

Teacher B mentioned that universities need more female teachers to bring equity to the imbalanced male-dominated academia in Japan. Kobayashi (2014) explained that there are only 20% non-Japanese female teachers in academic institutions compared to 80% non-Japanese male teachers.

Despite both teachers' comments on repeated negative experiences for being non-Japanese Asian female English teachers in Japan, there were also positives. Teacher A shared the incident where her student at the women's college commented that she is more comfortable going to a female teachers' office for help on assignments or personal advice. Students, especially female students, find female teachers more approachable. Female students were willing to confront Teacher A when they had problems such as their struggle over pregnancy, part-time jobs, mental and physical illnesses, social disorders and low motivation.

Teacher B has had an all-around experience, from teaching English to kids in kindergarten to students in university. Each experience added one more layer of confidence to her professional career. At first she felt she had a disadvantage because of her Asian appearance, however that was mainly in non-academic English teaching settings such as English language schools. However, she realized that it is not all looks in teaching English, but the teacher-student relationship that makes a difference. Her students seem to bond with her because she is very familiar with Japanese culture and tradition. The trust that the students have in a teacher will be a stepping-stone to their comfort level and will allow students to take more risks in the classroom. This, in fact, was Teacher B's strong point as a teacher as well as her teaching skills because of her vast experience in the classroom. She mentioned that male teachers are concerned that females have more employment advantages because of the need to balance the numbers since there are fewer females than males as English teachers. While balancing the number of teachers in an institution is crucial, more important is the experience and skill a teacher has. Clearly, Teacher B has developed these skills over the years and she has reached a point in her career in which her Asian looks are not a negative factor when being hired as an ESL teacher in academic settings.

There are similarities in the positive experiences by both teachers we interviewed. By being Asian females, they both felt that they have experienced a stronger rapport with their students, especially with their female students. They also felt they were more approachable to their students and eventually became their role-model. Therefore, based on their identities as being non-Japanese Asian female English teachers, both teachers felt that they have perhaps constructed closer interpersonal relationships with their students compared with other white male teachers.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined white privilege in Japan by interviewing two teacher's experiences and identities as non-Japanese Asian female English teachers in Japan. Unlike Appleby (2014), who examined these issues from the perspective of white male English teachers, we flipped the coin upside down and looked into these issues through reflective eyes. Both teachers indicated repeatedly in their interviews that there are clear gender and racial imbalances in the Japanese university. Furthermore, they felt they were treated with prejudice because of their ethnicity and gender. They also had uncomfortable experiences at job interviews as they felt they were unfairly discriminated against for not being able to fit into the stereotypical white male teacher image. Both teachers commented on the

need to have more female teachers to bring equity to the male-dominated Japanese academia. On the other hand, there were also some positives. Both teachers also commented that it was a rewarding experience when students found them more approachable and they were able to develop closer interpersonal relationships with students.

This paper was an attempt to examine white privilege from the perspective of non-Japanese Asian female English teachers. Therefore, it cannot be used to represent the voice of mainstream English teachers in Japan, nor can it make claims regarding all issues surrounding white privilege in Japan. However, despite being a minority group, non-Japanese Asian female teachers continue to have their presence in the Japanese English teaching academia and they are adding another perspective for understanding white privilege in Japan. Many issues in this paper remain open-ended and unresolved. However, this is a start to our work in progress that tries to describe the gender and racial imbalances of teachers in the current Japanese university system.

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