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Introduction to Special Issue by Guest Editors, Eun-Ok Im^a and Marion Broome^a

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Women's Leadership in Asian Cultures

The world has become closer than ever before with advances in transportation and communication. As in other fields, the nursing discipline has embraced new perspectives and practices as a result of the “globalization of health care” (Jones & Sherwood, 2014, p. 59). The globalization of health care results in incremental inter-connectedness across countries, systems, structures/organizations, and processes in order to improve global health, which subsequently results in inter-connectedness in all areas of nursing across the countries (Jones & Sherwood, 2014). Nurses, the largest workforce in every country that impacts the health of its citizens, must foster their inter-connectedness with colleagues across the globe. Thus, for future nurse leaders, it is essential that they understand globalization and how cultural, political, and contextual practices within their own and other countries impact nursing leadership. Cross-cultural leadership will in the future become a critical success factor for multinational leadership across the nursing discipline.

The current literature on leadership, especially women's leadership, is based on North American experiences and values (Den Hartog & Dickson, 2004). Den Hartog and Dickson (2004) pointed out that the underlying assumptions of North American values were frequently not fully adopted in other cultures, and that different cultures would require different approaches to leadership based on different dimensions of the societies and cultures in which individual leaders live. Yet, little is known about leadership, especially women's leadership in other cultures including Asian cultures.

Nursing is still a women dominated discipline in all countries (McDonald, 2013). As a result, nurse leaders across the globe frequently encounter gender-related challenges in developing their leadership style (McDonald, 2013). This is especially true for those women in the countries embedded within strong

patriarchal cultural heritages, who often experience more structural/organizational barriers and challenges, compared with women in more gender-neutral cultures (McDonald, 2013). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Asian cultures, which are based on patriarchal cultural values and attitudes, have likely influenced nursing leaders in Asian countries differently when compared to women leaders in Western cultures. Indeed, studies among Asian populations, including Asian Americans, have reported unique cultural values and attitudes related to gender in Asian cultures and their influences on women's leadership (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Hu & Scott, 2016; Pyke & Johnson, 2003).

This special issue entitled “Women's Leadership in Asian Cultures” discusses various issues in and challenges for women leaders within Asian cultures from various perspectives of nursing leaders from different countries. Each country has its unique cultural, social, and political situations that women leaders in each country have experienced. Subsequently, these individual articles reflect the unique leadership development experiences of these leaders in the unique contexts of their countries.

Across the articles, however, some important commonalities can be identified, one of which is the emphasis on human resources and networks. “Harmony” is the key value for Asian leaders who were all influenced by their leadership journeys. Even Drs. Inouye and Alpert, who are well known leaders of Asian Americans in the United States, mentioned “harmony” as the key when they discuss potential

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conflicts between Asian cultural values, attitudes, and communication styles and Western cultural values, attitudes, and communication styles. This strong cultural influence may come from their cultural heritages based on Buddhism, a religious philosophy that many Asian cultures were based on in the past. Buddhism emphasizes a few salient concepts related to leadership. An example would be “Karma”; good and bad Karma could influence people’s later life and their rebirth (Spector, 2012). Thus, Asians unconsciously or consciously strive to avoid bad Karma and initiate good Karma in their present life, which influences women’s leadership in Asian culture. That may be the reason for the emphasis on “harmony” in Asian women’s leadership.

Another prominent aspect of Asian women’s leadership is their leadership journeys have been influenced by their patriarchal and hierarchical cultures. Because these authors are women leaders within a women dominated professional culture, but in a male dominated society, their leadership journey was greatly influenced by their gender. Drs. Yi and Oh discussed the influence of their family on their leadership journey. Dr. Yi described the strong influences of her father and husband on her decisions on career and leadership development. She mentioned the Korean cultural values called, “Sam-Jong-Ji-Do,” that prescribed a woman to follow the decisions made by her male family members (her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after the death of her husband). Dr. Oh also discussed Korean cultural values related to “Heon Mo Yang Cheo” (wise mother and good wife) and how the values influenced her leadership journey negatively and positively. She recounted how she needed to learn to juggle the responsibilities of both home and her profession through trial and errors.

Finally, across all the articles, strong support of mentors for these leaders’ leadership journeys were highlighted. Without the mentorship of established leaders, the leaders’ growth as a nurse leader might not be possible. Dr. Sakashita described the influence of her great mentor, Dr. Hiroko Minami (a former ICN president). Dr. Oh also discussed her prominent mentor, Dr. Mo Im Kim (a former ICN president and a former minister of health in South Korea) and how that relationship was the key to her development. It is clear from reading these articles that mentoring is also an important cross-cultural experience for some. Many of these authors, early in their leadership journeys also learned from and were mentored by Ph.D. prepared nurse leaders in the United States. Their mentors

influenced them and they influenced their mentors’ understanding of the importance of bi-directional learning between mentor and mentee.

The articles in this issue are so important for two groups: emerging nurse leaders in these Asian countries and nurse leaders in other countries. Young men and women nurses in Asian countries need to learn about the experiences that shaped their nurse leaders and how those experiences within the profession and the context of their society will shape their own journeys. The wisdom of these authors and their reflections on how important it is to blend and balance home and professional lives, reflecting their cultural values is timeless and invaluable. In contemporary societies across the globe, pressures and stressors are considerable and the examples of these women are points of light that can inspire all of us.

Another group these articles may enlighten are nurse leaders in other countries. In order for nurses to “link minds, hearts, and arms” to improve health across the globe, we must understand and appreciate our cultural values and differences. We also must seek to develop relationships that will build on this understanding in order to identify commonalities and strengths. This deep understanding can cement relationships that will serve as a foundation for global nursing initiatives in the future. Nurses united can be a powerful force and improve health of the world’s citizens—especially those who are underserved and who require better access to care and support in order to improve their health.

In conclusion, this special issue includes exemplary articles sharing Asian women’s leadership experiences across countries reflecting the leaders’ unique perspectives, experiences, and suggestions for emerging leaders. Across all these articles, there is great leadership advice and wisdom for future Asian women’s leaders. We want to conclude this editorial with a famous quote on exemplary leadership by Chinese philosopher, Laozi (Lao-tzu), which emphasizes human resources and networks as an important aspect of leadership.

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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