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SPOTLIGHT ON: RACHEL LENG

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Rachel Leng graduated with scholarships from Harvard University (M.A. in Regional Studies – East Asia) and Duke University (B.A. with double distinction and highest honors in Public Policy Studies, Asian Studies, and Economics). At Harvard, she was the recipient of a Harvard GSAS Merit Fellowship, and was named a 2015 Graduation Commencement Marshal. Born in Singapore and raised in Shanghai, China, Rachel has been recognized widely for her leadership and originality in approaching East Asian affairs.



Rachel's award-winning work includes her Harvard M.A. dissertation, which received an Honorable Mention for the 2015 Joseph Fletcher Memorial Award. At Duke, she wrote two senior honors theses which won the Robert P. Durden and Aptman Prizes for excellence in research. To date, she has published 27 book chapters, journal or magazine articles on topics including contemporary Chinese literature, civil society, cultural history, gender rights, LGBT activism, migrant issues, and environmental policy. As a former Miss Singapore 2013 titleholder, Rachel was named a "Campus Celeb" by HerCampus Harvard magazine as a role model to college women. At the same time, she is a 2013 honoree of Yale University's China Hands "25-Under-25 Rising Stars in China-U.S. Relations." She has been internationally featured in interviews by magazines, TV programs, and newspapers and regularly speaks at seminars around the world. Rachel is currently on the Investment Management team at Whiz Partners, Inc., a private equity fund in Tokyo, Japan. She previously worked as Policy Analyst and Research Associate at Hyundai Group's Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul, South Korea.

Thinking back, what led you to join BOW?

When I was at Duke, I joined BOW as a sophomore and served on the executive council as VP of Membership through my junior and senior years. Initially I was motivated by a desire to learn more about Western-specific business skills and career advice, as I was an international student who had just arrived in the States. Looking back, I am very grateful to have been part of the organization, as I learned a lot about the career opportunities and working environment for women professionals in the U.S. BOW also provided the opportunity to gain exposure to a diverse and global network of successful, motivated young women. Although I have now graduated from Duke, I am looking forward to contributing to BOW by being an alumni ambassador.

Could you talk a little bit about your different careers and how you thought about the transitions between them?

I graduated Duke with a double major in Public Policy Studies and Asian Studies (minor in Economics), and continued pursuing my interest in the intersection of politics, literature, and cultural studies with an East Asian regional focus in graduate school at Harvard. I enjoyed research and writing at Duke and was considering academia, but did not want to go straight into a PhD and so decided to try an M.A. program first. This turned out to be a great decision, as while I certainly enjoyed my graduate school experience, I realized I still wanted to explore other career options – get a taste of ‘the real world’ outside the ivory tower, so to speak. Going into political work at a think tank seemed like the most relevant path to me, as the job scope still involved research and drew upon my public policy/economics background. For over a year, I had the opportunity to meet diplomats and politicians from all over the world and gain invaluable insight into international relations and embassy operations in South Korea. To expand my perspective of the corporate world, however, I realized I needed a better understanding of business and finance. Hence, I am now at a Japanese private equity fund where my job encompasses venture capital, business development, investment management, and Japan-Asia market flows.

Do you have any advice for BOW members thinking about going to graduate school?

Depending on the program you are interested in applying for, your plan will be different. For those thinking about academia, however, I would suggest not to rush into it unless you are 100% sure. Doing a Master’s program before diving straight into a PhD program is a good option for those still hesitant about a career in academia but want to try it out. Personally, my main regret is not having more time between my undergraduate and graduate programs. If I had entered my MA program after working for a year or two, I am certain that I would have prioritized my time and interests a little differently at Harvard – for example, I might have taken different classes or gotten involved in different campus activities. Ultimately, going to graduate school is a personal life decision that takes certain time commitment so make sure to find the right school and program for you.

What were the biggest challenges you faced in moving to South Korea and later Japan?

Starting a new job and moving to a new country are perhaps two of the most stressful, but potentially rewarding, life changes ever. Although many people may have the impression that South Korea and Japan are pretty similar to live and work in due to their geographical proximity, my personal experiences have revealed that they are actually quite different. Some of the biggest challenges I encountered in moving to a new country with a new job in different industries each time (from policy and government in Seoul to finance and private equity in Tokyo) involved settling into distinct work cultures and societal practices. For example, something that may seem as simple as how to greet various people when you meet them, or how to enter a room, or where to sit at the dinner table varies greatly even across East Asian cultures and societies. Dissimilarities in the workplace (especially compared with the West or even other East Asian countries such as China and Singapore) include distinct corporate structure frameworks, particularly in relation to sometimes conflicting values attached to age hierarchy, social stature, and gender roles. Other issues I grappled with included the differing emphasis placed on speed vs. attention to detail, as well as rather divergent approaches to internationalism and foreign entities. Language and communication can also be frustrating. However, my particular experience is somewhat unique as I wanted to be immersed in the local society with domestic companies, rather than being in a multinational company’s branch office where one could arguably work comfortably in a more international/Western environment in Asia.

Do you have any advice for BOW members thinking about moving to a country they do not have connections in?

Moving to a new country where you have no prior connections in is a great adventure as an independent woman, but can be very challenging. The first 6 months are always going to be the hardest – moving and settling in a completely foreign environment, trying to find your way around and start a new job at the same time as making new friends can be very overwhelming and not necessarily an enjoyable experience for everyone. However, I believe the occasion to experience living and working in a new country, and to push yourself out of your own comfort zones (both emotionally and physically) can be very rewarding. In a short time period, you will learn a lot about yourself – your individual capabilities and limits – when you have to establish your own foundation on unfamiliar ground. Although it may be daunting to be surrounded by everything new, it is also exciting for everything to represent a fresh opportunity to learn and grow. Reaching out to an alumni network, or friends of friends in the country you are in or thinking about moving to, is a good way to start learning more about the place and meet new people. For myself, I have found that university networks do extend to all parts of the world, and are usually a reliable source of contacts to reach out to. Attending alumni events are also a good way to start meeting people from different countries and industries – I have often relied on both university

and high school alumni groups when starting out for help and advice. Working in or having friends in a global company will also be a good way to embark on an international career, as there will be more foreigners in the same situation, providing mutual support and relieving some of the culture shock from working overseas.

Could you share about your experience in the Miss Singapore contest and in entertainment?

I had always been curious about the fashion and beauty industry having grown up in Shanghai and being from Singapore (two cosmopolitan, trend-setting Asian cities). Some of my childhood friends and high school classmates were also models, actresses, and beauty queens. Hence, when I had the opportunity to take part in the Miss World Singapore 2013 pageant, I decided to give it a try. It was mostly just for fun – it so happened that year's pageant was taking place when I was back in Singapore during the summer break, and felt that it would be an interesting experience. Although intimidating to not have any pageant or modeling/acting experience prior to auditioning and then participating in one of the main beauty contests, I count myself really lucky to have won a runner up title for Miss World Singapore 2013 and also the "Miss Beauty with a Purpose 2013" title to represent Singapore. After the pageant, I had the chance to work in several fashion shows and modeling or advertising features, and also appear in TV shows (mainly talk shows and interviews, but I also starred in a full length documentary about my life for a Singapore TV series). Nonetheless, a career in entertainment was not the right fit for me, but I learned many lessons about the importance of challenging oneself, keeping an open mind, and also self-branding for media presence.

What is something you've learned along the way?

Mentorship, especially among women, is so important for both the mentor and the mentee. Building such a network not only fosters stronger connections, but also exposes individuals to more diverse perspectives, different backgrounds, and opportunities. It is also never too early to start being a mentor, or never too late to be a mentee – it just really requires you to put yourself out there. By doing so, you will always be surprised by how many people are willing to open up and share insights with you, and how many people you can in turn shape as well. It is also important to work with people who may be quite different from you. For example, I am involved in mentoring programs or activities across China, South Korea, and Japan. Working with other young professionals and students across these countries has exposed me to various cultural contexts and decision making issues, and made me more aware about the pressures and situations people may face in their particular communities. These conversations and experiences have given me a more well-informed and empathetic understanding of what challenges others face, and therefore also insight and ideas to multiple ways of overcoming them.