Covering South Korean and Japanese Politics in 2022

An Interview with Michelle Ye Hee Lee

South Korea and Japan are Asia’s two most vibrant democracies, marked by competitive and partisan domestic politics. They are also economic and security powerhouses in the region, making the impact of their respective domestic politics on foreign policy especially important to understand. The Journal invited Ms. Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Tokyo bureau chief for The Washington Post, to discuss topics at the intersection of South Korea and Japan’s domestic politics and foreign policy, including the 2022 South Korean presidential election, the new Yoon Suk Yeol administration’s approach to North Korea, and the effect of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the region. She also spoke about her career and offered professional advice to students.

Journal: Could you please tell us about how you started working at The Washington Post and eventually became Tokyo bureau chief covering Japan and Korea?

Lee: I was born in Seoul, raised in Guam. My parents and I moved to Guam when I was seven, and I grew up there and moved stateside for college. I have always been interested in Northeast Asia. As I decided to pursue journalism in college, I thought it would be cool if I could become a foreign correspondent one day.

However, I had no idea how to do it. [When I first started reporting,] I was covering local government, and I wondered, “How do I go from a county government reporter to finding a job abroad?” I had no idea, so I tried to meet a lot of journalists who made that path. I was not sure exactly how I would get there. In the meantime, I pursued things that I enjoyed covering and signed up for new assignments that caught my eye. I tried to write all types of stories and make myself a versatile reporter.

I started my career at the Arizona Republic in Phoenix, where I covered local and state government and politics and did investigative reporting. That led me to a job at The Washington Post in 2014 to be on the Fact Checker, because I wanted to cover national politics from an accountability angle. Since joining the Post, I was on the Fact Checker for three years fact-checking the 2016 presidential campaign. Fact-checking was very
busy then. Afterward, I joined the political enterprise team, covering a variety of topics like campaign finance, political donors, fundraising, federal election commission, election administration, voting rights, and lobbying. Then I applied for this job! At the *Post*, I knew I wanted to apply for [Tokyo bureau chief], and I expressed my interest to my editors. To their credit, they sent me on temporary reporting assignments to Seoul to help me get the experience and see how I would do. I took trips to Seoul in 2017 and 2018 for two weeks at a time, and it helped me get a sense of what the rhythm might be like, especially living and working in such different time zones. It was a good training experience. I got the job and now I am here!

*Journal:* Now that you have become a foreign correspondent, do you feel like you have hit that rhythm and that this is what you have always wanted to do?

*Lee:* I still pinch myself every day. I am like, “Oh my God, I’m finally covering the region I have wanted to cover for so long!” With that also comes a lot of self-inflicted pressure, like “Am I living up to what I hope to do?” But, in every job the first year is the hardest. The first year of the beat is especially tough—getting to know people, introducing yourself, and learning the issues. Often, each story is a topic you have never written about or do not feel comfortable with, so it is a huge learning experience. Everyone warned me coming out that the first year would be the hardest because, on top of the challenges of the first year, there is living in a new country, COVID, and a language barrier.

So, I think this is definitely a big transition period. With every story, I feel more comfortable and confident, and I think I am finding the rhythm. But, the sleep schedule throws me off and my language training is not going as quickly as I would like it to.

*Journal:* How does your intersectional identity as a Korean-American woman affect your work, especially as you transition into working in two different countries and cover topics like feminism in South Korea?

*Lee:* Certainly for the transition itself, it is a lot easier for me. Being Korean-American and also having traveled to Japan before, I understand both cultures and the dynamics in this region. I am not learning from ground zero for both countries, so that has been helpful.

In terms of my approach to reporting and the role of my identity, I believe that as a Korean-American woman who was born in Korea, raised in Guam, worked in the United States, and then moved out here—my first time living in Asia since I was seven—I bring a unique insider-outsider perspective to my job. There are certain issues I inherently understand as an insider. I have a deep expertise in life and culture and Korean society because I have family living in South Korea. Half of them are from North Korea, and my family loves to visit Japan, so I have ties to all three countries.
However, I am an outsider because I have not lived in the region since I was seven. I am a naturalized American. I chose to become American. I consider myself American before I am Korean, so I think I bring a distance to the reporting that helps me see it from a different context than a native Korean might. I also find that it is easier for me to humanize trends, whereas it is easy to come into a new country and approach stories like, “Oh, here is this weird thing that makes no sense to me.” I try very hard not to take that approach. I try to make sure I am bringing empathy and sensitivity to every story, even if, on the surface, it can seem like a silly, fun story. I want to make sure it is still humanizing the communities that I am covering. I try to make sure I am bringing empathy and sensitivity at a level I think everyone deserves.

Journal: Given Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, U.S. allies might be questioning the value of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. How do you expect the Yoon and Biden administrations to approach North Korea’s March 24 ICBM test differently from the Moon administration?

Lee: Well, Yoon is still very much a question mark in terms of how he will govern because he has never governed before. I think he is going to be facing tests and will have to figure out his foreign policy approach as he does the job. We are already seeing a bit of a difference between his campaign rhetoric and governing style. He has talked about taking a tougher stance on North Korea, and I believe recently there was a campaign official who wanted to make it clear that Yoon’s approach does not necessarily mean a hard line. It means they are going to look at certain cases and decide how to respond, but they are going to take a bolder step than the previous administration. I think they are going to have to weigh that balance as they deal with these issues.

Already, though, we see Yoon calling the ICBM test a “provocation,” which is a very loaded word that the Moon administration shied away from. They [Moon officials] do not want to call things provocation unless they really had to, and that is one obvious rhetorical way the Yoon government is going to be dealing with North Korea differently. They are probably not going to be skimping on the words here, because they are ready to face it head on.

You are going to see the Yoon government work closely with the Biden administration, which obviously for the Biden folks is good news because they want to be working more closely with South Korea, and they want to be coordinating on military drills. They want the military drills every year to be consistent and do this show of force to indicate that the alliance is strong. There are already plans to bring back the drills at a full scale, and so I think you are just going to see a lot of these changes in terms of both rhetoric and possibly policies, drills, practices, and coordinated efforts by both the Yoon and the Biden government.

I think the test will be, if North Korea switches to diplomacy during Yoon’s tenure, how he is going to handle that and how much of a role he is going to play in helping both sides [North Korea and the United States] come together. We saw the Moon government play a very active role in mediating and trying to make sure they bring both sides, and
I think it will be interesting to see how the Yoon government will handle it.

**Journal:** How will the war in Ukraine change the South Korean public’s view on nuclear armament? Could you speak to the shifting dynamics of the public opinion on this issue, and what that might mean?

**Lee:** I have been reporting on how the South Korean stance on wanting to have nuclear capabilities has become mainstream. For a while people would talk about it as if it is a faraway fringe view, but we saw it take a very upfront role in the presidential primary in the conservative side last fall. We saw it really come out in the public debate then. The majority of South Koreans want to have their own nuclear capacity, and that is even when they feel the alliance is strong and even when they feel confident in their own military. I think that highlights how the South Korean public value their autonomy. They want to feel a sense of security on their own and not feel like they are leaning on someone else to make decisions for them. They look at the North and think, “Well, they have nukes, why don’t we? It has been a long time since we have been able to make these kinds of decisions. We are a richer country, and we should be able to protect ourselves in the exact same way that our northern neighbor is.” With Ukraine, obviously there is a lot of solidarity pouring out from Korea toward the Ukrainians, but I think you are also going to see this mainstream view harden even more. It is already very widespread.

From the [Moon] government’s perspective, I think there was a realization [in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine] about the limitations of how South Korea is prepared to actually respond as a U.S. ally, [and] how quickly it can pivot to things like sanctions, especially when it has its own economy to consider. We saw South Korea hesitate for a week before joining in on sanctions. At the time, a week was a really long time and the Yoon team was critical of this. Their [the Yoon administration’s] view is, “Whenever we are expected to take action, next time we want to be right there, we want to show we are a U.S. ally, even beyond North Korea, and that we are a global player.” I think from the Yoon camp’s perspective, it was an eye-opening moment.

**Journal:** You recently wrote about how the international sanctions regime is increasing the price of seafood in Japan. As sanctions inflict costs on consumers and businesses in Asia, do you think Japan and South Korea’s support for sanctions will prove resilient?

**Lee:** I am more familiar with Japan sanctions, because Japan has had more sanctions and the pace of sessions has been different from Korea. I know they [ROK government] were seeking some exemptions so that they would not have to pass on the pain to their industries. But, I can speak to Japan, where they have been ramping up sanctions on Russia in all sorts of ways.

I recently wrote about the unintended consequence of how limitations on Russian imports to Japan ended up limiting a lot of popular fish items sold in fish markets and in fast-casual sushi restaurants. It actually started hurting consumers because it started raising prices for popular sushi items like crab, salmon, and sea urchin. After consumers,
businesses, and fish markets started raising concerns, the Kishida government indicated they are probably not going to keep that import ban anymore to help Japanese businesses. They are already starting to sort of walk back, once they have realized how much it is going to hurt consumers.

I do not know if it is a matter of whether they did not fully anticipate the range of people who would be affected by this or if they did not realize it would happen this quickly, but they are responding. They are very mindful of how this is going to come off to the Japanese public because sanctions like this are abnormal for Japan. They have to keep tabs on the domestic response and impacts as they weigh the Russian sanctions.

Still now, a lot of sanctions experts and Russia experts in Japan have pointed out to me that Japan has not quite moved to limiting energy dependence on Russia. So in the areas where it might hurt, they [Japanese government] have not quite gotten there. They initially diverted some liquified natural gas supply to Europe to help at the very beginning, but now Japan is also going through its own energy shortage. So, if they are asked to do that [divert energy to Europe] again, I do not know how they would respond.

**Journal:** Your reporting on Yoon’s changing positions on gender equality received a lot of attention leading up to the elections. After Yoon submitted a reply to the Post defending himself as feminist, he retracted the statement due to pushback from his young male supporters. What does that say about the sensitivity of gender equality issues within the presidential campaign? How will Yoon’s anti-feminist stance affect South Korea’s future interactions with other global players, especially democracies like the United States?

**Lee:** Yoon’s reply to the Post underscored how sensitive and central the gender issue was to the election. The timing made it extra sensitive: it was International Women’s Day and the day before the election. Everyone knew the election was going to be close and that a statement like Yoon’s in the headlines could flip the outcome. Both sides understood that every single vote mattered. In the end, the 200,000-vote difference was a testament to the type of election it was—the two candidates were unlikable, neither of them could gain support, and the race was neck-and-neck. All of the drama culminated in Yoon’s last-minute reply to the Post.

On the diplomatic front, South Korea’s poor record on gender equality will be an obstacle to relations with allies who want to further gender equality. We might see the United States and its allies try to shape South Korea into a more gender-equal society. However, because South Korea and Japan have both ranked very low in measurements of gender equality—especially in the workplace—gender equality will be a long-term fight. Pressure to uphold gender equality from Western allies is not new and will likely continue.
The Yoon government has so far hired a majority of older males to the presidential transition team. We will see how he handles the Gender Ministry and who he hires to the Blue House. The Yoon administration promised a hiring system based on merit, and they held up that rhetoric during the transition.

**Journal:** In addition to gender equality and foreign policy toward North Korea, another key issue in the 2022 election was COVID-19. South Korea’s COVID-19 response was praised in the early phases of the pandemic, but now the public believes the Moon administration failed. Why do you think the South Korean public is so disgruntled with the Moon administration’s COVID-19 policies?

**Lee:** In South Korea, the public’s feelings about the COVID-19 response are tainted by other frustrations with the political leadership, especially problems with the economy and housing prices. South Koreans are angry that the younger generation cannot afford rent and that the older generation cannot hold onto their homes. Income inequality, wealth inequality, and housing inequality are guttural issues, and they are intensified by political scandal and hypocrisy. There is a phrase called *naeronambul* (내로남불) that means, “When I do it, it is romance. When you do it, it is an affair.” That phrase has become a defining criticism of the Moon presidency.

During the Moon administration, there were a few scandals among top government officials which colored the public’s view of the competency of the leadership. That is why Lee Jae-myung tried to frame himself as a party outsider, even though he has been a governor and mayor. He tried to demonstrate that he is not a part of the *naeronambul* government and that his duty is to serve the people. It is crucial to understand these underlying frustrations in order to understand why the public reacts so strongly when they feel there is a blunder on COVID-19. South Korea also made a few early blunders that inflamed the public, such as major outbreaks at churches and nightclubs that made South Koreans question the judgment of the people in charge.

I was in South Korea in November 2021 when the country was “reopening” and trying to promote the idea of living with COVID-19. But then the Omicron variant hit and within days the government reinstated lockdowns. It was moments like that—when the government said one thing and then did the opposite—that eroded public trust. These are some of the complexities that shape South Koreans’ view of the COVID-19 response, even though, from the outside, South Korea’s low case numbers and high vaccination rate appear to be a success story.
Interviews

Journal: What is next for you? What are you looking forward to career-wise?

Lee: I want to give this job my all and do my best to do the region and its stories justice. Eventually, I want to move into news leadership. I am passionate about improving diversity policies and hiring practices, which are objectives that I have advanced through my work at the Asian American Journalists Association. News leadership could also benefit from individuals who have experience covering the news in this moment of journalism, when digital technologies and social media are changing the reporting industry. For now, though, I am having too much fun reporting.

Journal: Do you have any career advice for students?

Lee: I recommend networking with people who otherwise would have not talked to you if you were not a student. If you admire a person's career, go up to them and say, “I want your job when you retire.” I have done that before. People appreciate the earnestness when you are a student. When you are not a student, people will say, “Are you kidding me?” Everyone is always willing to help when people are still in school, even if it is graduate school.

Michelle Ye Hee Lee is The Washington Post’s Tokyo bureau chief, covering Japan and the Koreas. She is based in Tokyo. Previously, she covered money and influence in politics and voting access on the national political enterprise and accountability team and was a reporter for The Post’s Fact Checker. Prior to joining the Post in 2014, she was a government accountability reporter at the Arizona Republic in Phoenix. She is serving her second term as the president of the Asian American Journalists Association, a non-profit founded in 1981 with more than two thousand journalists across the United States and in Asia.