In convergence with the global norm toward more proportional representative electoral systems, many countries in East Asia have adopted quota strategies to address women’s political underrepresentation (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Krook 2009). Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan provide ideal case studies to investigate the impact of these efforts. While these countries share similar economic development, educational levels, and Confucian communitarian ethos, their experiences and progress on empowering women vary. For example, the level of women’s legislative representation in the region ranges from a low of 8.1% in Japan to a high of 33.6% in Taiwan. And while Taiwan and South Korea embarked on constitutional reforms in the 1990s and introduced candidate quotas or reserved seats to guarantee women’s legislative representation at all levels, Singapore and Japan have resisted legislating quotas but instead set 30% women parliamentarians as targets of party strategies. This collection of papers explores this intraregional variation with a comparative view on the origins and impact of quotas on women’s political life. Specifically, we trace the origins of quota adoption and how they interact with the existing electoral and party institutions to improve women’s legislative numbers.

The idea for these papers first emerged from a workshop on the Political Representation of Women in Asia at McMaster University in 2013 that was generously supported by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. Our focus was to investigate the relationship between electoral institutions and...
reforms on women’s political participation and representation in Asia. This is a deliberate departure from the culturalist approach, which typically examines how Asian values or traditional patriarchal structures affect women’s political life or their rise to political leadership positions due to dynastic ties (Ayaz and Fleschenberg 2009; Derichs and Thompson 2013; Thompson 2002). With democratization and waves of electoral reforms in East Asia, a focus on the institutional effects is thus timely and necessary. The empirical and theoretical findings presented here add to the growing body of work on gender quotas and party politics by examining an understudied set of cases.

In this collection, the diffusion of global norms (Krook 2004), feminist movements (Dahlerup 2006b) and contagion effects (Kenny and Mackay 2013; Matland and Studlar 1996) are found to be significant factors influencing the type of quota adopted and how it is applied in all the four countries. For politically isolated Taiwan, Huang Changling shows how international norms on quotas prompted local feminist movements to change its outdated reserved seat system and adopt the “one-fourth” candidate quota rule by parties in the 1990s. As for South Korea, Jiso Yoon and Ki-Young Shin contend that the local feminist organizations were at the forefront of a powerful grassroots movement that successfully lobbied for the adoption of candidate quotas at the national and party levels. Unlike the other three countries, South Korean feminist groups overcame ideological and partisan differences to form a large alliance, which also developed education programs to recruit and train women candidates. In contrast, the global quota norm and women organizations were comparatively weak in Singapore and Japan and have had little effect on party elites. Rather, political parties act more as strategic actors in advancing informal strategic quotas in these two cases.

Within each country, the degree of interparty competition is also crucial in shaping elite calculations to adopt gender quotas to “fast-track” women’s political representation (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005). For example, in Taiwan, Huang shows how the “one-fourth” quota rule used by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) had a contagion effect on the ruling Nationalist Party and on national policy. As for Singapore, I argue that political expedience has led even a socially conservative party such as the People’s Action Party (PAP) to voluntarily adopt a party quota in 2009, so as to rescue its declining vote shares. While Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) recently
set a target of 30% women parliamentarians by 2020, Alisa Gaunder argues that political parties are not on track to meet the goal. A weak feminist movement and the lack of pressure from left-wing parties means that the dominant LDP has no incentive to seriously address women’s political underrepresentation in Japan.

Quota strategies applied in a similar mixed electoral system can produce different outcomes. Taiwan, in postelectoral reform, has successfully combined reserved seats, candidate quotas, and party quotas rules to boost the total number of women politicians in a mixed electoral system. But for South Korea, the use of candidate quotas for the majoritarian tier and the “zipper quota,” or the placement of women in every second place on the party list in the PR tier in a similar electoral system, has brought mixed results. Primarily, the difference between the two countries lies with the quota size, degree of compliance, and party system institutionalization (see Huang and Yoon and Shin in this issue). First, the quota applied to the PR tier in South Korea (30%) was much smaller than Taiwan (50%). Second, candidate quota noncompliance was also higher in South Korea than in Taiwan for the majoritarian tier. Third, frequent party leadership changes and unclear candidate selection rules have made quota enforcement more challenging in South Korea. While there is a higher compliance in the use of “zipper quotas” for the PR tier, the positive effects were undermined at the party level because of noncompliance and weak mechanisms for the funding and selection of women candidates. In sum, the impact of quota strategies varies and may not lead to gains proportional to the quota policy or as expected in more proportional electoral systems. Some quotas can interact negatively or positively with the electoral rule, depending on quota size, sanctions imposed, elite attitudes, or perceived legitimacy of the quota rule (Krook 2009, 11).

In most cases, quotas and electoral institutions have worked to mediate parties’ patriarchal gatekeeping attitudes and cultural biases against women candidates. For example, parties in South Korea and Singapore have been reluctant to nominate women in the more competitive single-member districts (SMDs). However, the PR tier in South Korean’s mixed electoral system and the multimember constituencies based on the plurality party bloc vote system\(^1\) in

\(^1\) In the multimember or group representative constituency (GRC), a voter has to cast her vote for a team of four to six candidates with at least one ethnic minority member. The winning party with a plurality of votes takes all the seats in the multimember constituency.
Singapore are more conducive for parties to field women candidates and improve their electability. For Taiwan, the use of reserved seats for women in the local elections has also altered traditional attitudes toward women candidates. Unlike the past, aspiring female politicians can now receive political resources from their families to run for elections, just like their male counterparts. Additionally, survey data in Singapore show that the increased number of women candidates as a result of contesting in the multimember constituencies has improved public opinion toward women politicians in the last decade. Japan, on the other hand, continues to be a laggard in the region, primarily because no formal measure or quota strategy has been used to ensure women’s political participation.

These critical perspectives illustrate the importance of party commitment in changing the practical and normative institutions that regulate women’s political life. In Singapore, the sudden rise in the number of women politicians in the last two elections shows how changes in elite attitudes to include more women candidates in the party list can bring attitudinal and behavioral changes. The South Korean case also illustrates that women’s nomination and election in the SMDs can be challenging without elite commitment to comply with the candidate quotas. Likewise, it is evident in Japan that without adopting formal quota measures to bind party leaders, women politicians will remain as token symbols, used selectively and strategically for electoral gains.

The contributions here consider gender quota strategies to be necessary but insufficient to bring about substantive change to women’s political lives. Despite the institutional incentives that have helped to push some women forward, women still face enormous work-life balance issues and sociocultural barriers in winning nominations and running for higher elected office. We believe that quota strategies need to be supplemented with long-term, non-quota strategies to promote gender equality in the recruitment, selection, and nomination of candidates at the national and party level (Krook and Norris 2014). Party commitment and shifts in attitudes toward gender roles through education are two key factors that must supplement institutional reforms to bring about a “critical mass” of women in politics (Childs and Krook 2006; Dahlerup 2006a).

We hope these essays will enrich our readers’ understanding of the institutional incentives and constraints to women’s access to political power in East Asia. Clearly, more work lies ahead. More funding and
educational programs are still necessary to recruit, train, and mentor women so as to enlarge the supply of women candidates and improve their electability. We hope the insights and suggestions will provoke debates and inspire efforts to develop both quota and non-quota strategies to promote gender-equitable norms and practices in East Asia — and beyond.

Netina Tan is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at McMaster University, Ontario, Canada: netina@mcmaster.ca

REFERENCES