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Michio Tomita (1952-2013)

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Michio Tomita
1952-2013

Michio Tomita, the pioneer of the Open Source Movement in Japan and the force behind the creation of Japan's Internet-based archive of Japanese literature and non-fiction *Aozora Bunko*, died of liver cancer at the age of 61 on August 16, 2013 at the Gifu Prefectural Hospital.

In 1997 Michio Tomita and three friends, inspired by Project Gutenberg and Voyager Company's Expand Books, began a free online library they named *Aozora Bunko*, or "Blue Sky Library," because they wanted the library to have an unlimited future. *Aozora Bunko* is now the richest digital collection of modern Japan literature and contains over 11,700 Japanese works in the public domain, works that are either out-of-copyright or that the author has chosen to make freely available. "Tomita and his army of volunteers, currently numbering more than 800, have revolutionized the way modern Japanese literature is read, making it available anywhere with an Internet connection," said Ken K. Ito, professor of Japanese Literature at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. "Once researchers learn how to fully exploit its search and linking capacities, *Aozora Bunko* will revolutionize the way Japanese literature is understood."

Considered Japan's equivalent of *Project Gutenberg*, "in the last decade *Aozora Bunko* has emerged as a real force in Japanese culture, creating an indispensable bridge between Japan's rich literary past and its high-tech present," reflected Michael Bourdaghs, University of Chicago professor of Japanese literature and culture. *Aozora's* dedicated volunteers actively transcribe works of major Japanese authors as their copyright expires, making them available on their own website, and also easily available through *Internet Archives*.

In recent years Mr. Tomita and his colleagues at *Aozora Bunko* have become vocal public policy advocates working to ensure preservation and continued access to their growing catalog of e-books, becoming particularly vocal in opposing extension of Japanese copyright law, currently 50 years. As part of negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Japan has been under pressure from the US to extend their copyright period to 70 years after the death of an individual, and 95 years in the case of a corporation, uniform with that in the US.

Michio Tomita was born in Hiroshima, Japan, in 1952, and following graduation from Waseda University worked as an editor in the publishing industry. After contracting Hepatitis C in his late thirties Tomita retired to devote his time to writing, the creation and expansion of *Aozora*, and advocacy for open source content. He is the author of seven books including *Hon no Mirai – The Future of Books*, published in 1997 and made available to *Aozora Bunko* on the day of his death, August 16, 2013.

“Long before open access sources and eBooks became popular, *Aozora Bunko* had already become an integral and natural part of most Japanese literature programs in North America,” said Sarah Frederick, a specialist in Japanese literature from Boston University.

“Tomita almost single-handedly expanded the availability of Japanese literature exponentially. For readers outside Japan, where print versions of these works are either hard to find or non-extant, *Aozora Bunko* has become an indispensable window to the rich world of Japanese literature,” said Susanna Fessler, professor of Japanese literature at the University at Albany.

(Compiled by Victoria Bestor, Executive Director North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources, the NCC)