



6-1-2008

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Kai, Miwa (2008) "Naomi Fukuda, 1907-2007 Reminiscences," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*: Vol. 2008 : No. 145 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2008/iss145/8>

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NAOMI FUKUDA, 1907-2007 REMINISCENCES

Miwa Kai
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The name Naomi Fukuda represents for me an outstanding pioneer in the history of modern librarianship in Japan.

I first met Naomi San in the summer of 1961 when, as a representative of the Japanese Collection of the East Asian Library, Columbia University, I visited Japan. This was my first trip to Japan since having left there in 1940. I had made reservations to stay at the International House near Roppongi during the few days I was scheduled to be in Tokyo. Although my itinerary was to cover all of three months, the period of my stay in each individual city was extremely limited since, during my allotted time, I was scheduled to visit libraries of universities, colleges, private and public institutions located in Tokyo and west as far as Kagoshima.

Upon registering at the International House the very first person I planned to call on was Naomi Fukuda, who, at the time, was serving as Librarian of the International House Library. Our initial meeting took place in the lounge of International House. This was an opportunity I had hoped for and looked forward to for many, many years and to mark this long anticipated occasion, I had ordered drinks for us. Without noting what was being served, Naomi San took her first sip when, suddenly discovering what it was, her eyes popped open wide in utter surprise, if not dismay. It had not occurred to me that a librarian would be unfamiliar with or unaccustomed to a drink of this kind. When she managed to catch her breath, we both burst out laughing at this unexpected "comedy of surprise," and this unforeseen happening made us forget the usual restraints of a formal first encounter. Instead, we both bubbled over with humor and appreciation.

Naomi San's contribution to the world of librarianship is noteworthy for her lifelong endeavor to modernize and internationalize professional library practice in Japan. I admire how she devoted untold time and effort toward introducing and developing up to date American library practice in an environment committed to traditional Japanese precedent.

Although our paths in life crossed but infrequently, the warmth of our relationship developed and grew into an enduring lifelong friendship. Both of us are bilingual; comfortable in communicating in Japanese or English, switching from one to the other depending on the circumstances, environment, or requirement of the moment.

I recall with admiration the occasion when in November 1959 she came to this country as the leader of a specially appointed group of eight gentlemen librarians to participate in the U.S. Field Seminar on Library Reference Services, which included a schedule of visits to major libraries, both private and public. The group was made up of leaders in their respective library fields: three from the National Diet Library, one from a national university library, one representing private universities, two representing prefectural and local libraries, and one representing the first postwar library. Under the leadership of Fukuda, these librarians visited the principal libraries throughout this country, observing and absorbing at first hand the system of organization, management, training, and services offered in this country at all levels of librarianship. Under her leadership, they acquired first hand knowledge through direct observation elaborated by Fukuda's thorough-going and detailed explanation provided in Japanese. This invaluable experience undoubtedly contributed toward the rethinking and revising of functions and services at all levels of librarianship in Japan. Her pioneering efforts in introducing Western library practice and fostering direct and professional services to the readership, were trend-setting achievements toward the modernization of libraries in Japan.

In the early 1980s, when Naomi San was serving as Japanese librarian at the University of Michigan, there were occasions for chance encounters during library conferences, although due to our respective official commitments, very little time was available for personal conversation.

When Naomi San was ready for retirement, she chose Honolulu as her place of residence and in May of 1998, during a brief stop-over following one of my hurried trips to Tokyo, we had another chance for a reunion. In the patio coffee shop of the hotel where I was staying, we immediately took up from where we had last left off—plunging into a rapid and lively exchange of professional and personal information, reminiscing and steeping ourselves in the enjoyment of our reunion.

Diminutive in stature but always full of energy and purpose, Naomi San took her leave after our all-too-brief reunion and departed, walking briskly in her distinctive and inimitable style. As I watched her disappear through a bend in the walkway, I was assailed by a sense of dismay and insecurity at not knowing when I would be seeing her again. Alas, as it turned out, that occasion was to become our last farewell: a closure of thirty-seven years of a unique and unforgettable professional and personal relationship.

Naomi San will be long remembered as an enthusiastic, energetic, and resourceful librarian, who, through her outstanding contributions, helped build bridges between Japan and the Western World.

New York
October, 2007