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Memories of Miss Miwa Kai

I have many memories of Miwa Kai, whom I knew for over 65 years. I first met Miwa in the East Asiatic Library in 1945 or early 1946 on returning from service in the U.S. Navy during the war. In her late years Miwa often told the anecdote of seeing Ted de Bary and me, both in naval officer's uniform, when we entered the library for the first time after the war. The reading room had a staff of three—a librarian, and one person responsible for Chinese books and another for Japanese. It was time of rapid expansion, particularly of Japanese books, and Miwa, with little or no help had to devise a system of temporary arrangement and numbering of the books. At the time she lived in an apartment on Fort Washington Avenue in the same building as Tsunoda sensei, whom she served like a daughter.

I remember of her apartment the grand piano. I learned in later years that before the war, while living in Japan, she had been acclaimed as a youthful genius. At an annual competition held in Japan she won first prize. No second prize was awarded in order to distinguish her performance from that of the next best pianist. I remember posters in her room of concerts given in Warsaw and other European cities, and we occasionally met at piano recitals in New York in later years. I never heard her play, nor do I know on what occasion she gave up the piano. Perhaps it was when she was sent to a "relocation center" in 1942, along with all the other Americans of Japanese ancestry. She discussed the experience. She somehow was able to leave the camp and headed for New York. She knew no one in the city, but with typical courage she set about looking for work. For some reason, she went to Columbia University. She met a kind woman in some office who offered her a job as a secretary. As I recall, Miwa could not type or do shorthand, but the kind woman helped her in every way. Miwa's loyalty to Columbia was absolute, no doubt because of this experience.

With the general, marked improvement in the East Asian Library after the move to Kent Hall, Miwa had an office for the first time. She worried a great deal about the handling of the collection, and sometimes expressed dissatisfaction with a collection that was so largely created by herself. But she was beloved by teachers and students. I myself turned to her again and again. I remember that I once needed to know how the Japanese word for "century" was coined. I had read an article on the subject but had failed to take notes. She found the article in a remarkably short time. This was typical. She helped me and Ted de Bary when we were unable to decipher the extremely difficult handwriting of one correspondent. I have no idea when she acquired this facility. She was not one to boast.

I shall not forget her. Nor will anyone else who knew her.

Donald Keene
As a doctoral student at Columbia in the very early 1960s I received what was perhaps the most precious gift any student scholar can receive—the motherly and scholarly encouragement of Miss Miwa Kai, a woman more deeply knowledgeable about Japanese books in the Columbia library, or almost anywhere, than any of the exclusively male students and faculty who surrounded me. And I was not alone. Daily I saw the most eminent names on the faculty go to her for her detective-like expertise in finding whatever it was they needed in their widely diverse areas of research. She had an extraordinarily deep knowledge of what already existed in print, be it published texts of Japanese and Chinese literary works, or monographs, articles and books in Japanese about literary history. And if the Columbia library did not have what was needed, she knew how to get it.

But what astounded me most was on my return from doctoral research in Japan when I mentioned needing to find a musician who could perhaps create a written musical score from vocal tapes I had made of etoki nuns and priests chanting their dramatic tales to go with their hanging picture scrolls. Suddenly a whole other world in New York City opened up when Miss Kai introduced me to a young Japanese woman studying at Juilliard who, at our first meeting, spoke in awe of “Kai-sensei,” the great pianist, revered in Japan by young pianists as one of Japan’s first pioneer musical artists to represent them abroad. At Columbia, treated kindly but often patronizingly as necessary staff, Miwa Kai among Juilliard students was a hero of immeasurable inspirational importance.

As we both aged proportionally and I eventually joined the Columbia faculty, “Miss Kai” gave way to “Miwa” and we met frequently after her retirement from the library to her own research desk on the same floor as my office. She was not only a faithful friend but a supporter of my every activity, attending every conference or event I would present.

An odd thing to remember, but she and I were the only ones who would try to counter the stark depressing atmosphere of the ladies restroom on our floor by gracing it with lovely, peaceful calendar photographs of Japanese gardens and such, only to have them regularly torn down by maintenance staff as counter to the sanitary rules they had to follow for Columbia buildings. We ended up taking turns caring for a small green plant she brought in one day and that for reasons unknown was never either stolen or removed. It lived a very, very long time, giving quiet, silent, comforting pleasure to everyone who took the time to glance its way.

Some things and some people you want to be there forever. Miwa Kai-sensei was one of those remarkable rare gifts in the lives of those who knew her. A splendid flowering cherry tree now grows in the small patch of lawn outside the front door of Starr East Asian Library at Columbia in fitting tribute to the extraordinary woman who lived almost a century among us. As long-lived as cherry trees are, it may grow in her memory for centuries yet to come. But personal memories are sometimes more
intimate, and her brave little green plant, stalwart in intent and purpose, is what leaps to mind whenever I think of her.

Barbara Ruch

I joined the faculty at Columbia after Miwa Kai had retired. But I think it took me several years to realize that she WAS retired. She was so active and so engaged! I got to know her primarily through the Columbia Japan Studies seminar, which was at that time held once a month or so. She and Arthur Tiedemann were always there together, separated only by about 3 feet of difference in height!

Miwa Kai should be remembered not only as a librarian and great friend to many researchers, but also as a scholar and writer in her own right. Her ""Diary of an Inn-Keepers Daughter," a translation of a diary kept by a young woman around the end of the Meiji period, is a gem, and highly accessible for teaching.

I am saddened to learn of her death, but glad to celebrate her memory and contributions!

Ted Bestor
えて、お話されていた。そのお元気なお姿の甲斐さんを真ん中にして、野口さんと私の一家と記念撮影をした。ロビーのシニアの方が親切にも撮影役を申し出てくれた。

甲斐さんに初めてお会いしたのは、1975年4月1日、私が国立国会図書館（以下、NDL）から派遣されてコロンビア大学東アジア図書館の職員となった時であった。派遣の2年間は、甲斐さんの部下として、限りない薰陶を受けることになる。同館の歴代の日本人図書館員の受け入れ数は、東洋文庫、早稲田大学図書館、NDLからと、私が知るだけでも5人にのぼっている。

甲斐さんの職場での指導は、あらゆる面で極めて厳格であった。一方、仕事を終えた夕方の時間、当時のLibrary Schoolの科目を聴講することを親切に手配もしてくれたり、アメリカ図書館協会やCEALの行事参加で職場を離れることも、よろこんで許可してくれた。甲斐さんの Treatonとして、日本からの派遣職員が、職場以外の場でも、アメリカ社会から多くを学んで帰国できるように、細かな心遣いをしていただいたことを実感している。毎週末、私と妻をドライブに出し、市民生活のさまざまな面の見聞をさせていただいた。

この丸2年間の経験は、帰国してからの30年以上、NDLでの自分の持ち場を果たす上で、さらにその後の大学の教壇に立つ際にも、かけがえのない発想の源であり続けている。私の中では、特にNDL関西館開館までの20年近くを関わって、国の内外からNDLを活用していただける現在の体制づくりに情熱を傾けることができた源のひとつは確実に、甲斐さんを通じてアメリカ図書館界から受けることができたさまざまな刺激にある。

そういえば、2012年1月から本格稼働されたNDLサーチで「甲斐美和」と入力すると、甲斐さんに関する2件が検索できる。ひとつは、1932年9月号『少女倶楽部』の記事「天才少女ピアニスト甲斐美和子さん」（名草芽生稿）で、第1回日本音楽コンクールのピアノ部門大賞に輝いた甲斐さんについて、当時19歳の写真とともに紹介されている。もうひとつは、1937年8月号『月刊ロシヤ』への甲斐さん自身の「音楽の都モスクー」という寄稿で、「書斎の窓辺に憩ふ甲斐姫」と題する写真も掲載されている。いずれも著作権の関係でNDLサーチ上では館外から原文まで見ることはできないが、最近のNDLの大型計画でデジタル化された戦前の雑誌記事の書誌情報が活用できる結果、もうひとつの甲斐さんが歩んだ道の一端を辿ることができた時代になっている。

このたびの甲斐さんの突然の訃報は、わずか119日前にはあのようにお元気なご様子だっただけに、まったく信じられないことであった。あの夕べ、野口さんと共に約1時間の再会後、またお会いする機会があることを約して辞去する際、甲斐さんは杖を使い、ゆっくりした足取りながらも、我々をWilliamsの玄関ドアまで見送ってくれた。ドアのガラス越しに手を振られていた甲斐さんのお姿は私にとって生涯懐に残ることになるだろう。甲斐さんを真ん中
中にして撮った写真をクリスマスのご挨拶にはお送りしなければと思っていたが、ついに甲斐さんのお目にかけることができなかったことは、私にとってとても残念のこととなった。

遠く東京から、甲斐美和さんに対する限りない感謝の念を込めて。合掌。

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Why is it, among all of the colleagues in Japanese Studies I have known and admired at Columbia since I joined this faculty in 1980, that I think of Miwa Kai as the dynamo—the center of energy for our whole enterprise? Others, surely, are of greater renown, in Japan or around the world. She never attended faculty meetings, did not seek out speaking opportunities (she shunned them), and could not be called an imposing physical presence.

But she was a presence. Over my thirty years on the faculty here, there is no one I saw more constantly in Kent Hall—in the library stacks, in her corner fifth floor office, in the corridors, at a lecture or symposium in our fourth floor Lounge. If that were all, it would still be a mark of her rare dedication, her profound attachment even after retirement, to the Japanese collection and to Japanese studies—especially related to literature and the arts—as it was centered in Kent.

It was more than that. Miwa Kai brought to every encounter a brimming vitality and the fullness of her being. She smiled like a woman who knew more than most of us—not just from the books she embraced but from her experiences—not all of them happy—of life. It was a smile that more than anything else, kept you honest. And, in an era and milieu where the preferred drink is chardonnay or herbal tea, she drank whiskey, and looked you straight in the eye as she was doing it.

We are losing this sense of connectedness to one another, at all of our universities, as our digital media make it possible to work at a distance from an office, a library, some physical space that we share and inhabit. Our networking may make us feel immediately linked to the wavy image of someone anywhere, but detach us from specific persons in the flesh who once grounded us.

So long as I live and work at Columbia, I know that every time I enter Kent, go to our library or to my office or to a classroom there, I will move through a space that was totally inhabited by Miwa Kai. I feel blessed for that. Some, even the famous, will come and go from Columbia. But Miwa Kai is here, in Kent Hall, for any duration that is meaningful to me.

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