

Remembering Professor Kiyooki Nakao

Brent de Chene

If asked to characterize Professor Kiyooki Nakao, I think anyone who knew him would say that he was active, energetic, and outspoken. When he retired from Waseda University at the age of 70 in the spring of 1987, he looked no older than 60 and had the same direct and lively manner that had probably characterized him from earliest youth. As a result, no one who knew Professor Nakao was surprised when he lived to the age of 97, one of a small group of people who had personal memories of both the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake of 2011.

I was never Professor Nakao's student, and I was his colleague for only one year, so my understanding of his role in and relationship to the English department is necessarily somewhat inferential, but I believe a few facts allow us to sketch at least a partial picture. First, in contrast to all people who have served as head of the department since and probably most before, Professor Nakao was department chair not for a single two-year term but for nine full academic years, from 1975 to 1984. Second, while Japanese was Professor Nakao's first language, his schooling in English from an early age resulted in his becoming for all intents and purposes a native bilingual. Since he found his own command of English essential in teaching the language, in guiding others in how to teach it, in writing in English, and in translating from Japanese into English, I think it became natural for him to believe that in principle, any member of a university English department ought to have something like the same level of competence in the language as he did himself. Finally, since he was outspoken, as we have already noted, and often made little effort to conceal his opinions, this belief of his stood little chance of remaining hidden from the

other members of the department. In fact, I have it on good authority that during his long tenure as chair, Professor Nakao made little secret of the fact that he would really have liked to conduct departmental meetings in English and was prevented from doing so only by the less than ideal oral English skills of his colleagues. By the time I joined the department, one year before Professor Nakao retired (and, I should add, as a direct result of his having sponsored my candidacy), most of this history was far in the past, but small ripples or aftershocks could be detected from time to time.

My correspondence with Professor Nakao after he retired was sporadic for many years, but only as a result of poor epistolary habits on my side. My experience was that any time I sent him a letter, his handwritten reply would be in my mailbox within two days. He maintained an interest in the affairs of the English department, so I tried to keep him up to date on who was chair, who was on leave, who was retiring, and who had been newly hired. In recent years, our correspondence became a little more regular, and it was a great privilege for me to hear his thoughts on a number of matters, from the personal to the political. By happy circumstance, I discovered his interest in flowers, and after I sent him a couple of photographs of hydrangeas that I had taken in the Ijinkangai of Kobe, I was rewarded with a number of paragraphs on the varieties of hydrangeas and their care and cultivation. I will remember Professor Nakao as interested to the end of his long life in all aspects of the world around him and as cultivating at the same time an acceptance of the vicissitudes of existence and a sense of submission to higher powers.

(Professor, School of Education, Waseda University)