

Miwa Kai (1913-2011)

Miwa Kai, former Head of the Japanese Collection at Columbia University Libraries, passed away from natural causes in her residence in the early afternoon of December 10, 2011. She was 98 years old.

Miss Kai was born in San Francisco in 1913, and was living in San Francisco at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The following year she was sent to the Topaz War Relocation Center, an internment camp in Utah. In 1944, after being discharged from the camp, she was hired by the Columbia University Library as a typist at 60 cents an hour. In 1945 Miss Kai catalogued and then became Head of the Japanese Collection. She served as librarian from then until 1983, when she reached the age of 70, the mandatory retirement age at that time. She worked strenuously to develop the Japanese Collection, succeeding in making it the superb collection it remains today. For example, after the war ended she spent two months at the Library of Congress helping to process books confiscated from libraries all over Japan. There she acquired thousands of duplicate books, which she was able to bring back and add to Columbia's collection. In the years that followed she worked with and trained many Japanese librarians sent to Columbia by their home institutions in Japan, including the National Diet Library and the Waseda University Library. In 1957 she published *Political Chronology of Japan, 1885-1957*, with Professor Philip B. Yampolsky as co-compiler. Miss Kai's work as a librarian left a profound impact not only on the Columbia community but on all librarians and scholars who worked in Japanese Studies before and after 1945.

In 1983, to mark her almost four decades of service, a metal plaque was dedicated to Miss Kai in the reading room of C.V. Starr East Asian Library, and a cherry tree was planted in her honor outside Kent Hall. Despite her official retirement that year, she continued to work tirelessly, serving until very recently as researcher and bibliographic assistant to the University Committee on Asia and the Middle East and carrying on many projects of her own at the same time. In her knowledge of the Japanese Collection at Columbia she was like a living dictionary. She continued to assist visiting scholars with their research and attended special lectures whenever possible, always sitting in the front row. Her major accomplishments after retirement were her compilation and publication of *The David Eugene Smith Collection of Works in Japanese on Japanese Mathematics* in 1986 and of *Japanese Woodblock Printed Books and other Unique Japanese Materials at Columbia University* (2 volumes in 4 parts) in 1996. These catalogs have been great resources not only for librarians but also for researchers. After these milestone publications, she began writing a comprehensive history of the Japanese Collection in the East Asian Library, which she continued to work on almost until the last day of her remarkable life.

In 1995, the Japanese Government conferred on Miss Kai the Order of the Precious Crown, Wistaria, for her longtime contributions to the understanding of

Japan, the development of Japanese Studies, and cultural exchange between the United States and Japan.

Before she became a librarian, Miss Kai was prominent as a talented pianist. Starting from the Beethoven Prize she received at the Piano Playing Tournament in San Francisco in 1927 at the age of only fourteen, she went on to win first prize at the Music Concourse in Japan in 1932. In 1937, she represented Japan as a participant in the Third International Frederick Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland. The reasons she left her promising career as a pianist remain a mystery.

Starr Library is working with the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures and with Miss Kai's family to plan a memorial service. Details will be announced once the date is set.

We will all dearly miss Miss Kai for her energy and wit, and we will remember her fondly with a glass of her favorite drink, Wild Turkey.