

A Scholar Remembered

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My first and most abiding impressions of Professor Oka were of his scholarship, his modesty and his kindness. We met on my first visit to Japan, in the spring of 1993. On that occasion, we were both contributors, with Professor S. Yaginuma, at an interdisciplinary conference organised by IIAS (International Institute for Advanced Studies). After the conference, Professor Yaginuma and I moved from the luxury of the Kyoto Century Hotel (then a large building near the modest station but now seemingly insignificant, dwarfed by the grand new Kyoto eki) to the rather more Spartan surroundings of Kyodai Kaikan. But there was a much greater contrast to come. My first visit to the old Bungakubu building at Kyodai was a revelation: the grimy walls and peeling paint suggested a complete lack of maintenance. However, a university cannot be judged by its buildings; and when I gave my seminar (on Euripides' *Hippolytos*) it was clear that the minds of the audience were not in a similar state of neglect.

When I first met Professor Oka, I could not have dreamed that I would follow him in the department of classics at Kyoto. And still, after three years in post, I am deeply conscious of the honour and responsibility this entails. The model of his rigorous professional standards remains ever before me. And that first visit to Japan remains as vivid as if it were yesterday. On a memorable day of the soft spring rain I now know to be typical, we went in a group of four - Oka, Yaginuma, Nakatsukasa and I - to Manpukuji where we enjoyed a visually stunning and utterly delicious vegetarian feast; then on to Byodo-in. That day, when we covered so much ground in conversation, seems to me in retrospect to mark the beginning of my close friendship with the classicists of Kyoto. I well remember too meeting, at the reception after my seminar, a

beautiful woman wearing a simple elegant dress of deep purple, Mrs Oka; and exchanging ideas then with Tetsuo Nakatsukasa and Hiro Takahashi, now the most congenial of colleagues.

When we first met, Professor Oka and I talked at length on classical topics, and especially about his beloved Homer. I became aware of his linguistic virtuosity, which to my awe extended to Sanskrit; and of the depth and range of his learning, light and self-deprecating as he was in its deployment. Since I came to work in Japan, we have met on many further occasions: at the conferences of the Classical Society of Japan, at departmental seminars when students and junior colleagues presented their work and (more rarely) at excursions or other social events. At academic meetings Professor Oka carried an air of unmistakeable distinction; and his judgments, though always constructive and expressed gently in his own unassuming way, could be stern: he expected others to aim at, and even to attain, his own high level of precision in content and clarity in presentation.

Many former students, colleagues and associates have spoken to me about Professor Oka. In their reminiscences I recognise the humanity and the dedication to scholarship which were his hallmarks. I have heard from a contemporary of his perfectionist preparations for the first talk he ever gave at the Classical Society; from a former student of the day he was so engrossed in teaching that he quite forgot to eat his bento lunch; and from a colleague of the dignity and intellectual power he maintained throughout the indignities of his last illness. Everyone speaks of him with affection, respect and admiration. We all felt the better for knowing him, and he will be deeply missed. His generation is that of the pioneers in classics in Japan and, like all pioneers, he achieved something very special.