

IN MEMORY OF ROBERT K. SAKAI
MIDWEST CONFERENCE ON ASIAN AFFAIRS
OCTOBER 2, 2004

SIDNEY DEVERE BROWN, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA, EMERITUS

I have the sad duty of reporting the death of my friend, Robert K. Sakai, on August 15, 2004 at the age of eighty-five. He was a stalwart member of the Conference on Asian Studies (CAA) in its early years, and our seventh president in 1959 when we met at the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana. Bob was also the founder and editor of *Studies on Asia*, a hardback annual of our best papers, published by the University of Nebraska Press for nearly a decade, beginning in 1960.

During his University of Nebraska career, 1951-1966, Bob attended every meeting but one when he was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Tokyo in 1955-1956. Twice he was our host in Lincoln, at the old Cornhusker Hotel in 1954, and at the new Kellogg Center (of which he was very proud) in 1963.

When Bob Sakai spoke at our informal early meetings, people listened, as when he advised us on how he treated Buddhism in his survey courses, as otherworldly in India, family-oriented in China, and nationalistic in Japan. He brought a high level of professionalism and scholarship to the Conference with papers on his research specialty, Satsuma *han*. At Macalester College, St. Paul, in 1957 he read a paper on Saigo Takamori, an ambiguous Meiji figure, whose statue in Kagoshima showed him in the European uniform of the commander-in-chief of the Meiji armies, whereas the more famous statue in Ueno Park, Tokyo, had him dressed in a traditional tunic with his dog, the exact reverse of the expected, Bob said noting the irony. Another paper in 1963 explained Satsuma feudal institutions that made the *han* the most conservative domain in Japan, and led to the Southwest Rebellion of 1877.

Bob was born on a truck farm in California. He held the B. A. from the University of California, Berkeley, and the Ph. D. from Harvard University. During World War he spent time at the Poston Relocation Center in Arizona, where he assisted the anthropologist Ralph Linton in his noteworthy study, *Revolt in the Desert*. On entering the U. S. Army as an interpreter he finished his Japanese language studies right here at Fort Snelling.

Bob was versatile. He went to Nebraska to fill in the Russian history position when Andy Anderson went on sabbatical, but a tenure-track position was created for him in East Asian history the following year by Dean Oldfather, his superior, who was Edwin Oldfather Reischauer's uncle.

Bob's Harvard dissertation dealt with Ts'ai Yuan-p'ei, the Peking University Chancellor, and his educational policies in the second decade of the twentieth century. But he switched to his second field of Japanese history for his Fulbright in 1955, and stayed in that research field for the rest of his career. He was only scholar to contribute both to the John K. Fairbank collection, *The Chinese World Order*, and the Ryukyus as a tributary state, and to the Edwin O. Reischauer *festschrift*, *Personality in Japanese History*. He studied with and honored both of these great Harvard professors.

Bob's warm personality will not be forgotten as he encouraged me as my *sernpai*, helping immeasurably with my first research trip to Japan in 1956-1957 for contacts both at Todai and at the University of Kagoshima. He was a sports fan, and we sometimes discussed the Game of the Century in which Nebraska defeated Oklahoma in football in 1971 for the national championship. He and his wife Sadi extended hospitality to me during stopovers in Honolulu on trips to Japan, inviting several scholars to join us at dinner in their home twice, George Akita, Minoru Shinoda, James Araki among others, who shared Bob's sports enthusiasm. Once after dinner he asked if I would mind watching the University of Hawaii basketball game on TV with his dinner guests, and I was treated to the odd spectacle of five Japanese-American Nisei professors watching with rapt attention five African-Americans from the mainland play winning basketball for their team. He served as Chair of the History Department at the University of Nebraska, and as Dean of the Summer Session at the University of Hawai'i. He had administrative skills as everyone liked him. Our executive secretary, Roy Hanashiro, was a Sakai Ph. D. at Hawai'i, so the Sakai banner is carried on in MCAA (Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs) in 2004.