

THE JAPANESE COLLECTION - 26th year

When I started to work as a librarian for the San Francisco Public Library in June 1966, I was assigned to the Literature dept. This seemed logical enough as I had done graduate work in literature, especially American literature and I had a good background in that field. But when I reported for work, I was told that one of my duties would be to develop a Japanese collection. So I guess I was hired because I could read and write Japanese.

As for my background, I had studied some Japanese at the Japanese language school I used to go on Saturdays but it wasn't until I was a junior at UCLA when I changed my major to Oriental Languages that I really learned Japanese. Now my parents had always been avid readers of popular fiction so I grew up seeing such magazines as King and Fujin Club which were popular at the time; as a teenager I remember reading a romance by Kume Masao in one of those magazines. When I was a graduate student at UC, Berkeley, I had the pleasure of meeting Enji Fumiko, a prominent woman writer of Japan, who was making her first visit in this country. I guess that was the extent of my background in modern Japanese literature.

So in 1966 I began work on the collection with the emphasis on popular works. I gathered catalogs of Japanese titles and studied the listings. The books were at first ordered directly from Japan through a company that I believed was called Japan Publication Inc. As a rule, I ordered two copies of each title, one for the Literature dept. at the Main Library and the other for the Western Addition Branch. After several months the books arrived and I would catalog them; after the cards were prepared and the books processed, one copy of each title would be sent out to this branch. That is how this collection began. It was a slow process at first and it would be several years before one even noticed that there was such a collection.

But the collection proved popular with the Japanese-reading patrons from the very beginning. In time I became quite familiar with the writers and their works; of course, I didn't have access to the books so in selecting the titles I went by the reputations of the writers; I took note of the prize winners--Akutagawa, Naoki, Noma and other prizes. I don't know what the policy is now, whether

reprints of classic titles have been purchased, but in the beginning the emphasis was always on current works.

When the collection in the Literature dept. was discontinued and the books were transferred to this branch, this collection became the sole Japanese Collection of the San Francisco Public Library.

I continued to work with the collection and when I was head of this branch in 1969 and 70, I was more directly involved with the books. When the Kinokuniya Bookstore opened in Japantown, we had more direct access to the new books and we were able to make them available to the patrons sooner than before. I remember going to the bookstore, handling the new arrivals, the current bestsellers, and making the selections. Patrons were bringing their recommendations; they realized what a great service we were providing; the cost of books was going up rapidly--what was marked in Japanese yen often became the dollar price. I don't remember the exchange rate at the time but it was quite a hefty markup. I should note that the manager of Kinokuniya and staff members were very supportive and always helped us with their expertise. The collection grew and the circulation increased; I believe the circulation of the Japanese titles made up at least half of the branch circulation which resulted in a larger budget allotment for the collection.

As I mentioned earlier I was here at this branch for almost two years but the collection followed me wherever I went and it was understood that I would spend at least an afternoon a week working on the collection. This continued until about 1982.

Through the years many people have worked with the collection; I have purposely left out names but I really should mention Mr. Kumamoto of the Nikkei Lions Club who was responsible for the support of that group from the very beginning. The Japanese Collection was one of their pet projects; at the beginning they provided us with yearly subscriptions to such magazines as Bungei Shunju, Chuo Koron, Fujin Club and others; later I believe they provided monetary support. Other groups have joined in support of the collection but that was after my time.

For quite a while our Japanese Collection was the only one of its kind on the Pacific Coast and I remember we used to get requests from other libraries, and there were patrons who made monthly trips

here, driving many miles to use the collection. Other libraries have started similar collections but none is as extensive as ours .

As we celebrate today, I would like to thank and commend all those people who have worked on the collection--helped to sustain and develop it through the years. And I want to thank Mrs. Jitodai and others responsible for this program for giving me this opportunity to talk about my part in the origin of what is now a fabulous collection--the pride and jewel of the San Francisco Public Library.

--Hiroshi Kashiwagi
Retired Librarian
March 15, 1992