

My Four Decades at McGill University¹

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Thank you for giving me a chance to talk about my thirty-eight years at McGill University before my retirement on August 31, 2012.

Last Thursday, April 12, 2012, when I gave my last lectures as a McGill Professor, turned out to be a very pleasant, memorable day for me. Both in HIST 352 Japanese Intellectual History 2, and HIST 359 History of Japan 2 the students listened to my lectures attentively and seemed to truly enjoy them. When my lectures were over, in both courses many students came up to me to express their appreciation for my courses in a very cordial manner.

Virtually every student picked up a copy of my one page essay titled “My lifelong passion: Marathon and long distance running,” copies of which I brought to the classroom just in case some students wanted to have something to remember me by. Later I read messages in the card that the students of HIST 359, several of whom are also enrolled in HIST 352, had given me and opened the present from three students of the same course that they brought to me after class with their thanks written in Japanese. I was surprised to find in the card word after word of warm appreciation, such as, “Your stories of Japan taught me more than any textbooks ever could. McGill will miss you!”, “I’ve learned so much from your class. It was truly a privilege to have taken History of Japan 2”, “Thank you for making one of my own last classes such a wonderful and enlightening experience”, “Thank you for showing to us that being different is awesome!”, and “Tremendously knowledgeable, entertaining, & kind,” and I was moved deeply.

After reading these messages, I read a lengthy e-mail from a person living in England to whom Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935), the subject of my book titled *Basil Hall Chamberlain: Portrait of a Japanologist* (Richmond, Surrey, U.K., Japan Library, Curzon Press Ltd.) published in 1998, is a great-grand-uncle. Apparently he had only recently discovered my book and had written this e-mail to express his deep appreciation for my book as a member of the family. Although I published eleven books so far—all written after I started teaching

1 This is the text of the speech given on April 16, 2012 at the End-of-Year Party of the Department of History and Classical Studies, McGill University.

at McGill—only two of them, *Basil Hall Chamberlain: Portrait of a Japanologist* and *A Woman with Demons: A Life of Kamiya Mieko (1914–1979)*, published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2006, are written in English. I remember that my biography of Kamiya Mieko was also highly appreciated by her family, judging from two letters from her eldest son, a professor of the University of Tokyo, one of which I received shortly after the publication of *A Woman with Demons*. These two books are important books to me personally. I would like to explain why. In order to do that, I would like to begin by explaining how I came to teach at McGill in the first place and how I have remained at McGill much longer than I had initially anticipated vaguely.

I was ignorant about Canada and did not even know that McGill University existed until Professor J. F. H. of the University of British Columbia, a specialist of Japanese history, arrived at the University of Tokyo as a Fulbright Exchange scholar in 1966 and taught two half-year seminar courses in the 1966–67 academic year, which I took. Before his return to Canada, he asked me if I was interested in coming to Canada. I said, “No.” Professor H. then said, “If you ever come to feel like coming to Canada, please remember me.” A few years later after I had started working full-time at the University of Tokyo, for a purely personal reason not at all related to academic matters, I started to look for a place to live outside Japan. I wrote a letter to Professor H., reminding him of his words of a few years before. Thanks to him, I was able to spend the 1972–73 academic year at UBC.

During my year at UBC I got acquainted with Professor B. of McGill University, a specialist of Japanese history. When Professor B. took two years' leave from McGill University during the 1974–75 academic year, I believe he strongly recommended me as his replacement, and the McGill History Department offered a position of visiting lecturer for two years to me, who at the time was still looking for a place to live outside Japan. When I spent the 1972–73 academic year at UBC, I was granted a paid leave of absence from the University of Tokyo. This time I gave up my secure, comfortable position at the University effective on August 31, 1974, and became a visiting lecturer at McGill University from September 1, 1974.

I had never before studied for a degree or diploma anywhere except at the University of Tokyo. I must have looked like a person ill-prepared to start teaching at McGill University. On the other hand, my childhood experience of living in nine different places all over Japan and attending seven different schools before I finished Grade 9 had made me a cosmopolitan of a sort. I always focused on similarities rather than differences between

peoples and cultures. I was shy but I was not particularly intimidated by finding myself in Montreal or McGill University where I had to teach courses in English.

When I went to the Department of History shortly after my arrival in Montreal, a tall handsome man who seemed to know everyone in the Department kindly introduced me to my colleagues. That was R. R., a specialist of Canadian history, who actually arrived only a few days before me to take up his position in the same year with me. I also met a brilliant specialist of Eastern European History, A. H., who, I believe, was replacing somebody for that academic year. I immediately became and remained good friends with people like them, who also treated me as their friend from the beginning. I did not forget that my position at McGill would last only for two years. I realized that if I wanted to remain in North America, I had to obtain a doctorate as soon as possible, forgetting a fairly widespread notion in Japan that a doctorate in the humanities and social sciences was something that would crown your lifework.

I went back to Japan during the summer vacation in 1975 to write my dissertation. My former colleagues at the University of Tokyo enabled me to use a room close to my former office as my study space even during the weekends when the building was closed. Arriving each day with two huge bags filled with books and research notes, I spent many days in that building, writing my dissertation half naked as it was so hot and humid. Several days before the beginning of the 1975–76 academic year, I went to the Graduate Office of the University of Tokyo carrying a large bag containing three copies of my completed dissertation, roughly 1,450 manuscript pages long, the length equivalent of three or four ordinary books, and submitted them.

During that summer, I had an unexpected pleasant reunion with a British scholar named A. C. R., only four or five years older than myself. After teaching at Oxford and MIT, he came to Japan and taught subjects like British Economic History at the University of Tokyo during my student days there. A voluntary reading group met in his apartment regularly while he taught at the University of Tokyo and by attending the meetings of this reading group led by him I learned more than from any formal courses at the University of Tokyo. He was now teaching economics at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. He said that one of the reasons why he had made a stopover in Tokyo was that the University of Canterbury had commissioned him to find a suitable person to teach courses on Japan. When I explained to him that my position at McGill would come to an end at the end of the 1975–76 academic year, he said that he would be delighted to

recommend me for this position. I felt relieved, but before I received a formal offer of a position from the University of Canterbury, Professor B. notified the McGill History Department that he would not return to McGill. A search committee was created to find a person to fill the vacancy created by his resignation, and by the end of March 1976, the Department decided to hire me. In 1982 I was granted tenure. However, by around 1980 the initial reason that made me resign from the University of Tokyo and come to McGill seemed to have disappeared. I had left Japan to achieve a certain goal that was dear to me. Ostensibly, I had failed to achieve that goal, but I felt that I had tried my best and felt no regret.

Now I started thinking of returning to Japan to resume my academic career in Japan. Just around that time, a position as Associate Professor at the Research Center for Japanese Culture at one of the most prestigious national universities in Japan was offered to me. As I published a book based on my dissertation in 1977, my second book in 1979, and my third book in 1981 all from Japanese publishers, apparently I had become quite well known in Japan fairly early, and that was presumably the reason why such a very attractive position was offered to me. I decided to accept it and sent a letter of acceptance by registered mail. Then something quite unexpected happened to me. I had something like an attack of anxiety neurosis and it continued until I sent a telegram to cancel my acceptance of the position offered by that university. I tried to understand what had happened to me.

Mr. T., a very prominent Japanese intellectual, spent the 1979–80 academic year at McGill as a visiting professor. He and his wife, a university professor, showed extraordinary kindness to me and I spent several hours discussing all sorts of things with them in their apartment quite regularly, often until 2 a.m. When he learned the reason why I had come to Canada, he pronounced that I was a person who had a demon within me.

He explained how he had dealt with his own demon. What was important was to keep a promise you had made to your demon. He added, “Mr. Ota, your demon is now standing before you blocking your way, preventing you from doing what you want to do. Your demon may eventually come to help you pushing you from behind in the direction that you wanted to go.” I never took what he said literally. I never believed in the existence of a demon outside the mind, but I thought I understood what he meant to say. To return to the topic of the completely unsolicited offer of a position from a Japanese university, to my surprise, the same university repeated the offer of the previous year. The rational

side of me prevailed, and I sent a letter of acceptance once again. And exactly same thing was repeated. I had to cancel my acceptance once again by sending a telegram. To my amazement, the same university tried to recruit me to their research center for Japanese culture for the third time. This time Professor M. who esteemed me very highly as a scholar and was the driving force to recruit me to the center said that I did not have to reply immediately. I should visit the university, talk with various people, and then decide if I should accept their offer or not. I did visit the university, and my visit made me feel that it was a very attractive place to work. However, I was nervous. Professor M. who was behind the offer of the position to me the two consecutive years previously explained to me that he would have to resign from the university if I accepted their offer for the third time and cancelled my acceptance for the third time. Finally, I accepted the offer.

An attack of anxiety neurosis did not occur immediately, but I continued to feel quite nervous. Things took an unexpected turn. I learned later that when the recommendation to hire me was forwarded to the higher level for their approval, there were people who objected to offering the position to a person who had already rejected their offer twice and the recommendation could not get enough number of votes necessary for its approval. My reaction to this news was a deep sigh of relief.

After my experiences with the research center, I decided that my demon was still very much alive, to use Mr. T.'s term. I decided to live pursuing values as close to those that had made me leave Japan and come to Canada. I also decided not to accept any permanent position in Japan as long as I was not sure that my demon had left me.

Unsolicited offers of university positions continued for a long time. One year the day I arrived in Tokyo to spend the summer vacation, I learned that the president of a private university had phoned me the day before and left a message asking me to return his call as soon as possible. It was again an offer of a position to me. I declined it as politely as possible. I believe that I was already in my late fifties when a professor of a private university in Kyoto tried to recruit me.

Let me explain the reasons why *Basil Hall Chamberlain: Portrait of a Japanologist* is a book for which I have a strong attachment. First, Chamberlain also unexpectedly spent many years away from his native country, England. He was a very sensitive young man interested in literature and philosophy. Instead of sending him to Oxford University, his father made him enter Barings Bank to start a career completely unsuited to him. Chamberlain had a nervous breakdown within a few months, and his family sent him on

a long ocean voyage to help him to recover from his nervous breakdown. He arrived in Yokohama, Japan, in 1873 as a young man of 22 years of age. He liked Japan and did not leave Japan definitively until 1911, that is, 38 years later, when he left Japan to retire in Geneva, Switzerland.

When I also became a person living in a country different from my native country unexpectedly for a long time, I felt that I should live in two worlds in the way he did. Chamberlain regarded himself as an uprooted man, “uprooted,” because he could “never quite [be] satisfied at one end of the world because [he was] equally fond of the other” (as quoted in *Basil Hall Chamberlain: Portrait of a Japanologist*, p. 9). Chamberlain became a Japanologist with a profound knowledge of Japan and deep love for Japan, but at the same time he remained a man with profound knowledge and love for European civilization. I decided to remain what I was, a person born, brought up, and educated in Japan.

After my arrival in Montreal, I quickly acquired the reading knowledge of French necessary to grade examinations and papers written in French by rereading works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, which I had read in Japanese translation, in French translation. Beyond that I did not try hard to assimilate myself to Canada or the North American academic world. I felt that I could make a contribution to McGill by remaining somewhat different. Chamberlain became a person dear to me when I realized that he was a person who embodied values that were also my values. I admired Chamberlain not only as a Japanologist, but also for “his general intellectual probity, freedom from greed for power and fame, and a warm consideration towards other people” (*Basil Hall Chamberlain*, p. viii).

The reasons why *A Woman with Demons* is a book for which I have a strong attachment are, first, because I was also a person with a demon. I used the past tense and the singular “demon” rather than “demons.” Kamiya once wrote, “A person possessed with seven demons—that truly is me” (*A Woman with Demons*, p. xiii), but unlike Kamiya, a very complex person divided within herself, I was and still am a simple person with little inner division. Kamiya was traumatized by the death of a young man whom she wanted to marry when she was twenty. My biography interpreted her life in the light of this loss to which none of previous biographers had paid any attention. I had had an experience that made me a person capable of understanding her loss with empathy. For me that was the only source from which my demon could arise. I tend to think that my demon, a very cute one because what my demon wanted was only that I should continue to center my life around the value of love.

Hiroko, my wife, doubts that I still harbor a demon within me. I also have a feeling that my cute demon decided to leave me when my book *A Woman with Demons* was published. After all, *A Woman with Demons* is a biography that strongly reaffirms the value of love.

I regard my thirty-eight years at McGill as a very fortunate time. I have found close friends not only in Montreal but also in Japan, Europe, and New Zealand. Among them are some unexpected people. Professor M. who tried to recruit me to his university three times in vain and his wife have become very close friends of Hiroko and myself. We spent numerous very happy times together in his house, in our house in Tokyo or at various restaurants. We have become friends with people with whom there did not seem to be much points of contact at first, such as a Canadian journalist and her husband who was a prominent Japanese voice actor. At McGill, too, some people, such as M. S. and C. D., treated not only myself but Hiroko as close friends. It is a shame that many of my McGill friends are no longer members of the McGill faculty. Nevertheless, I feel that my McGill years taken as a whole have been a very blessed time for me and Hiroko.

