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A BELATED “THANK YOU” TO JAPAN’S FIRST GEOBOTANIST

Dear Takahashi-sensei

We are writing to thank you for the illustrated volume about the Japan Alps. Please excuse our tardiness in acknowledging your magnificent gift – I’m embarrassed to say that it languished in our club’s archive for some decades before we rediscovered it.

Because the book is in Japanese, it may be that our predecessors failed to inspect it with sufficient care. But, sure enough, inside the front cover, there is your dedication, set out in a neat hand, blue-black ink and fluent German:

“An AACZ Zürich! Von Dr. Kenji Takahashi. Zum Andenken bei der Geburt von unserem AAC Kyoto. (1931. Juni).” I should have recognised your name immediately, Dr. Takahashi, since our paths have crossed before. Some decades ago, two friends invited me to climb a rock pinnacle on Tsurugi (2,999 metres), a rugged colossus (well, relatively speaking) at the northern end of those same Japanese Alps. The crag bore the name of “Chinne”, a nod towards the original Grosse Zinne in the Dolomites. Particularly memorable was the bergschrund-like snow crevasse that we had to jump just to reach the starting point – as is well illustrated in the book.

The guidebook would have told me that we were following in your bootprints. For the record, you put up this climb in August 1927, accompanied by Imanishi Kinji (1902–1992) and Nishibori Eizaburō (1903–1989), two friends from your middle-school days in Kyoto.

For its time, this was a bold climb. The crux, one of a dozen or so pitches, is still graded Alpine V

(A-zero). I found those laybacking moves on the pinnacle quite hard enough, even though I was third on the rope. But you led that pitch, sight unseen, and without the benefits of modern climbing aids. Chapeau, Dr Takahashi!

Then, in your university days, you and the same two companions went on to found the Academic Alpine Club of Kyoto. This was in mid-1931, just when you sent us the book to mark this auspicious event. We are flattered that you regarded us as a peer or perhaps even a model to emulate. For, since then, the AACK has blazed quite a trail through mountaineering history.

Your co-founders made names for themselves as scholars too. Imanishi started as an entomologist, then morphed into an ecologist, an ethnographer and, finally, a primatologist. Outside Japan, he is best known for his original thinking on evolution, as summarised in a book translated as *The World of Living Things*. Along the way, aided and abetted by friends like yourself, he put up a string of new rock and winter routes, both in the Japanese mountains and abroad.

Nishibori is famous too, for his work in electronics and industrial quality control. We’ll pass over the less illustrious episode with the project for a nuclear-powered merchant ship. And, after returning to academia, he led the first Japanese party to overwinter in Antarctica, recording the expedition in a popular book.

But you yourself left less of a footprint in the academic bibliographies. Your dates, 1903 to 1947, give the clue, of course. While your contemporaries reached their eighties,

your own life was cut tragically short. But, judging by that Chinne route, you used your time intensively. The 1930s must have been particularly frenetic. Indeed, we should be amazed and gratified that you had time to think of giving us that book. In 1930, you went to Munich, where you studied how plant distribution is shaped by geography – a field of study that you later helped to propagate in Japan. In April the following year, you moved to Zurich to study under the renowned ETH geobotanist Eduard Rübel (1876–1960), and it must have been during this sojourn in our city that you presented us with the book.

While abroad, you submitted your doctoral thesis – in German, of course – on the subject of the forests on Karafuto, as your compatriots then called the northern island of Sakhalin. After your return home, this research fed into a broader study of treelines in the Japanese mountains. Again, this was pioneering work. The same might be said about your skiing. During your European vacations, you honed your alpine skiing under the tutelage of no less than Johann “Hannes” Schneider (1890–1955), who was just then revolutionising the art.

As most Japanese skiers had yet to hear about Hannes Schneider’s “Arlberg style”, you set out to enlighten them. Back in Japan, apart from writing two books on the subject, you organised training camps where one participant remembers you as “the god of skiing”.

You also found time to fall in love. As you might naturally feel some reticence on this topic, I will take the liberty here of quoting from the lady in question: *In September 1932, on the Tsugaru Strait ferry returning from Hokkaido to Japan’s main island, Honshu, my*

husband-to-be, Dr. Kenji Takahashi, crossed my path. As Japan’s first geobotanist and a pioneer of mountaineering and skiing, he was at home in even the most mountainous regions. The following New Year he took me to Echigo (modern Niigata Prefecture), his beloved «snow country». I had been in Japan three years, roving around the back country on all four main islands; I had read most of the literature on Japan; I prided myself on knowing Japan fairly well. Yet nothing had prepared me for this. From cradle to grave, life here centers around the snow...

Fairly soon, you and Rose Lesser, the young German travel writer, were married. A daughter, Nami, came along in due course. Alas, the match did not meet with the whole-hearted approval of your parents, who stemmed from a prosperous merchant’s family of Kyoto.

And, of course, you were still enthusiastically involved in the new Academic Alpine Club of Kyoto. Unlike our own, your club was founded explicitly to climb in the Himalaya. And you lost no time in practising expedition-style climbing. Over the 1931 year-end, your friends spent two weeks on Mt Fuji, putting four camps on the mountain, and spending several days on the frozen and wind-blasted summit.

Unfortunately, your efforts to reach the Greater Ranges were blocked by the international ructions of the time. Instead, you and your colleagues had to content yourself with a first winter ascent of the ferociously cold Mt Pekto (Paektu) on the Korean-Chinese border. This was in the winter of 1934/35. But these early expeditions did lay the groundwork for the AACK’s postwar Himalayan exploits.

Alas, you never saw these triumphs. When you passed away in 1947, at the much too early age of 44 after a long struggle with tuberculosis, your colleagues were still in the process of reviving the AACK from its wartime dormancy. In 1952, Professor Imanishi led the reconnaissance expedition to Manaslu, which opened the way four years later for the summiting of "Japan's 8000er". And it was also an AACK man who was first to set foot on top in 1956, making this summit "Japan's eight-thousander". The club has been active in the Himalaya ever since, true to the vision of its founders – including yourself.

As for "geobotany", what started out as a specialised academic niche now concerns us every time we go out in the mountains. Needless to say, Japanese researchers are part of an international group studying how

alpine plants are moving uphill under the stress of climate change. But that's the least of our worries, now that entire ecosystems are fraying in the heat.

But let's not end on a depressing note. I've heard that your national broadcaster is giving an increasing amount of news time to ecological topics, such as the changing distribution of trees and other plants. You could say that geobotany has reached the mainstream in Japan. As with your climbing and ski-routes, it seems that you really started something here, Takahashi-sensei. So we will treasure your book as a gift from a true scholar-mountaineer.

*With kind regards
For the Academic Alpine Club of Zurich
Martin Hood (former Bibliothekar)*

