

## **“There is a Disbelief in Words in Japan. But Now We Are Coming Back to the Spoken Culture.” An Interview with Tomoyo Nakao**

*Alexander Freund*

Oral history, according to Tomoyo Nakao, is contested ground in Japan. Dr. Nakao, one of the founders of the Japanese Oral History Association, has been trying to keep oral history accessible to all oral history practitioners but has not always been successful. But Tomoyo Nakao is used to difficult terrain. As an associate professor at Okayama University’s Graduate School of Humanities and



Tomoyo Nakao in Guadalajara

Social Sciences, she has been interviewing former Allied prisoners-of-war of the Second World War. These encounters are not always easy. Next to memories of traumatic experiences of the former POWs, Nakao has also had to overcome the men’s anxieties about being interviewed by someone from the former enemy nation.

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In this interview, conducted during the International Oral History Conference in Mexico in September 2008, Dr. Nakao takes us back to the eleventh century and a Samurai society, when Japanese men pretended to be female poets in order to write about their feelings. She explains why Japanese oral historians use the English term 'oral history' to describe their practice. And she describes the great diversity of oral history conducted in Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from ethnographic interviews with farmers, oral histories of women, and life story interviews with Japanese soldiers, atomic bomb survivors, and so-called comfort women. Despite a great interest in people's memories and experiences, oral history - as a method that included the recording and archiving of interviews - took off in Japan only in the 1980s and then quickly collapsed. Dr. Nakao revived the movement at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Now, however, she sees the Japanese Oral History Association - which was established in 2003 and on whose council she served until 2007 - becoming a meeting place mostly for academics. She has plans to establish the Oral History Network Japan West to give both academic and non-academic practitioners of oral history a new forum for exchange.

Professor Nakao has also been Japan's link to the international oral history movement. She was the Asia representative on the Council of the International Oral History Association until 2008 and has been advocating for greater sensitivity in the West toward scholars from cultures that do not use the Latin alphabet.

The interview was conducted in two sessions, on September 23 and 26, 2008, during the 15<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico. The interview is 48 minutes long, the mp3-sound file is 8.2 MB big.

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