

Professor Ray Iwata

Robert Sanders

My relationship with Professor Iwata dates back to 2001 when I attended a conference on tonal languages being held at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Among the participants was Professor Shi Feng, a scholar from Nankai University in Tianjin who I knew and who was a visiting professor at Professor Iwata's former university in Nagoya. Through Professor Shi I was introduced to Professor Iwata, who was also making a presentation at this conference. A few months later when I visited Professor Shi in Nagoya for a weekend I was able to get to know Professor Iwata a little bit better, and found him to be a very friendly and generous person who also happened to share with me both a love of Chinese linguistics and baseball. Little did I know when I departed Nagoya that late Sunday afternoon nineteen years ago that our paths would not just cross again, but in fact would eventually merge together in a very significant way.

Fast forward to 2009 and 2012 when Professor Iwata contacted me to see if I would be willing to help with some of the English translation and editing related to the ground breaking two volume Chinese geolinguistic dialect atlas project that he led. The insights he and his team revealed into how vocabulary evolved and spread in China were eye-opening to me, providing a new perspective on the seemingly chaotic picture that Chinese dialectologists have traditionally either avoided altogether or grossly over-simplified. I was converted.

Fast forward again another three years. Due to family health and health history considerations I had recently made the decision to retire from the University of Auckland and return to Vancouver to spend my golden years with family. On the day in question I had just returned to Auckland after having dropped my daughter off at the University of British Columbia to begin her new life there. At that time my future was right around the corner and that future was a quiet life in Vancouver as a retiree. Imagine my shock when I returned home from the airport and opened my email inbox to find a message from Iwata sensei informing me about a new university that was being planned in Komatsu, with a bold new vision for how Chinese would be taught there. Not only would it be a required year-long course for all first year students, but first year would be taught in English with a focus on the sounds of Chinese

as written with Hanyu Pinyin Romanization rather than the traditional approach normally followed in Japanese universities of decoding written kanji texts from Day 1. He was writing to ask if I would be interested in being part of this innovative program and it caught me completely off-guard. Yes, the bold innovativeness of this vision was very compelling, but so too was retirement. After talking this over with my wife over several days I decided to accept Iwata sensei's invitation to apply for a position. The rest, of course, is history.

Working together with Iwata sensei at Komatsu University over these four years has been a very enjoyable experience due to our shared non-traditional views on Chinese language teaching, our belief in the importance of acquiring genuine competence in a foreign language as a fundamental pre-requisite to understanding another culture and the role of substantive overseas study in achieving this goal. Our love of baseball also led to a very happy time together coaching the University softball club. I have very much appreciated his strong support of my endeavours to deliver the Chinese courses that I teach in a way that matches our shared goal. Additionally, I have very much appreciated his tolerance when I have occasionally violated Japanese cultural practices or behaviour, either half-knowingly, though usually unwittingly, that more conservative people would have been much less understanding of.

Over these same four years I have observed Iwata sensei in his leadership role as Dean and have been impressed by his genuine concern for the welfare both of students and colleagues, sometimes even in the face of managerial indifference, when choosing the road of silence would have been the easier option. This genuine concern for others also allowed him to easily understand the extra burden non-Japanese and their families overseas experience as a result of closed national borders. That he understood this and then tried his best to imagine ways to overcome these problems embodies the empathy he holds for others and the value he places on family. As he caps off his illustrious academic career as an internationally prominent scholar and teacher with the ability to envision a better way of doing things, I wish Iwata sensei both a long and happy life together with his wife, children and grandchildren who I know are waiting with great anticipation for his full-time return, as well as many a good baseball game to watch on TV.