

Professor Dr. Akira Nakamura, 1940–2026

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing away, on 16 May 2026, of our great colleague, mentor, and friend, Akira Nakamura, professor em. of Public Administration at Meiji University in Tokyo, and member of the Advisory Board of Halduskultuur.

For decades, he was the face of and bridge to Japan for the global-Western academic community in our field, and many of us owe our first academic visits there, or parts of it to him as well. Prof. Nakamura served as Ragnar Nurkse Department Visiting Professor in 2017, delivering a magnificent class on "Public Management and Public Policy from an Asian Comparative Perspective", and he stayed closely interested and in touch ever since.

As an indefatigable champion of both Asian and global cooperation in the field, he attended many conferences and gave many lectures abroad, so one could always meet and catch up with him. Akira Nakamura was not only a legendary figure in global Public Administration, but he was extraordinarily kind and friendly on the personal level as well, so he will be sorely missed in many respects. The PA world is much poorer without him, and we will always cherish his legacy.

As an academic memorial, we are publishing below an obituary of Professor Nakamura by Professor Pan Suk Kim, an old friend and colleague of the former, who is likewise a Halduskultuur board member (and author) and who also served as Nurkse Visiting Professor, in 2022, half a decade after Prof. Nakamura. Other Nurkse Professors have included Jayati Ghosh, Andrew Massey, Conrado Ramos, Datuk Norma Binti Mansor, L. Randall Wray, Leslie Pal, Hiroko Shimada-Logie, Lhawang Ugyel, Eko Prasajo, and, in May 2026, Reuben Ng. Professor Pan Suk Kim wrote this obituary specifically for Halduskultuur.

WOLFGANG DRECHSLER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, HALDUSKULTUUR

Akira Nakamura: A Bridge Between Asian and Global Public Administration

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Abstract

This article honors the life, career, and scholarly legacy of Akira Nakamura (1940–2026), one of Asia's most distinguished public administration scholars. It traces his academic journey from Japan to the United States and back and examines his subsequent contributions to public administration education, governance studies, crisis management, and international academic cooperation. The article also highlights his contributions to international development, capacity building, and scholarly exchange across Asia and beyond. Beyond his academic accomplishments, Nakamura is remembered for his intellectual generosity, collegiality, integrity, and commitment to advancing public administration as a global field of study. His passing represents a significant loss to the international public administration community. His legacy continues to influence both the theory and practice of public administration across Asia and the wider international community.

Keywords: Akira Nakamura; Japanese Public Administration

Life and Academic Career

Akira Nakamura, Professor emeritus of Public Administration at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan, passed away peacefully on 16 May 2026, surrounded by his family. He was widely recognized as one of the most influential public administration scholars in Japan and the broader Asian region. Throughout his distinguished career, he made substantial contributions to public administration education, governance studies, crisis management, and international academic cooperation.

Born and raised in Osaka, Japan's historic commercial and industrial center, Nakamura developed an early interest in public affairs. He received a Bachelor of Laws from Kwansei Gakuin University in 1963. At a time when overseas study remained uncommon among Japanese students, he embarked on an international academic journey that would profoundly shape his intellectual development and future career.

Nakamura earned a BA in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1966, followed by an MA in the same field from San José State University in 1969. He subsequently completed his doctoral studies at the University of Southern California, receiving a PhD in Political Science in 1973. During his time at USC, he was strongly influenced by Professor George O. Totten, a prominent scholar of East Asian politics and former director of the USC East Asian Studies Center (NAPA 2022). He also gained early teaching experience as a lecturer at California State University, Fullerton.

Following his return to Japan, Nakamura joined Meiji University in 1976 as an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science. Over the following decades, he rose through the academic ranks and served in numerous leadership positions, including Department Chair, Dean of the Graduate School, Vice President, and Special Advisor to the Chair of the Board of Trustees. His commitment to education and institutional development culminated in the establishment of the Graduate School of Governance Studies, which strengthened governance education and professional training in Japan.

Beyond the university, Nakamura played a pioneering role in promoting crisis and emergency management studies. In 2006, he founded the Japan Emergency Management Association (JEMA) and served as its inaugural president. He also served as President of the Japan Association for the Study of Local Government (JASLG) from 2010 to 2011, contributing to the advancement of local governance research and practice.

Contributions to International Public Administration

Leadership in IIAS and the Development of AAPA

Nakamura's influence extended far beyond Japan. He was deeply committed to strengthening international scholarly cooperation and played a central role in fostering networks among public administration scholars across Asia and the wider world.

I first met Akira Nakamura in the late 1990s at a conference of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS), where he was introduced to me by Professor Hiromitsu Kataoka of Waseda University. Over the following three decades, our professional relationship developed into a close friendship and enduring academic partnership.

Established in 1930 and headquartered in Brussels, the IIAS has served as one of the world's oldest organizations devoted to public administration research and practice. During my tenure as President of IIAS from 2010 to 2013, Nakamura served as Vice President for the Asian region and provided invaluable leadership and support. He also chaired the Programme and Research Advisory Committee, contributing significantly to the organization's research agenda and conference programs.

Nakamura consistently promoted cooperation among scholars from diverse countries and intellectual traditions. His diplomatic approach, intellectual openness, and commitment to academic exchange helped strengthen Asia's presence within the global public administration community.

His contributions were equally significant in the development of the Asian Association for Public Administration (AAPA). The origins of AAPA can be traced to a meeting held at the City University of Hong Kong in March 2001, where scholars including Christopher Hood, B. Guy Peters, Akira Nakamura, Anthony Cheung, John Burns, Jon Quah, Robert Gregory, me, and others explored possibilities for sustained regional collaboration (Hood and Peters 2003). What began as a collaborative book project evolved into the Asian Public Management Forum (APMF), an annual gathering of public administration scholars across Asia. Following the three foundational meetings at the City University of Hong Kong (2001–2003), the APMF adopted a rotating host model to foster regional inclusivity, convening annual conferences in Tokyo (2004), Seoul (2005), Singapore (2006), Jakarta (2007), Bangkok (2008), and Puli (2009).

Building on this foundation, AAPA was formally established at Meiji University on 29 January 2010. Nakamura served as the Association's founding President and played a decisive role in shaping its mission, organizational structure, and regional identity. Under his leadership, AAPA became an important platform for scholarly exchange and cooperation throughout Asia. His efforts laid the foundation for the Association's subsequent growth and international recognition.

Throughout his career, Nakamura remained deeply engaged in advancing scholarship on Asian public administration and governance, particularly through comparative and regionally grounded perspectives (Nakamura 2012; Nakamura 2021; Cheung 2013; Kim 2012; Kim 2017; Kim and Massey 2025). Nakamura asserted that the Asian model of public administration stands distinct and looks salient when it is compared to the United States model from three essential features: the separation of administration from politics, the relationships between public and business administrations, and the inductive or deductive approaches to the study of public management (Nakamura 2021).

Contributions to ASPA and Public Administration Scholarship

Nakamura's contributions to the American public administration community were equally noteworthy. In 1987, he served as a Guest Scholar in Governmental Studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. Later, he became International Editor of *Public Administration Review* (PAR), the flagship journal of ASPA, serving from 2009 to 2011.

His appointment reflected the growing internationalization of the field and his standing as a leading global scholar. As noted by Stillman and Raadschelders (2009), Nakamura assumed this role following the tenure of Christopher Hood, further strengthening PAR's international engagement.

Nakamura's scholarly interests covered a broad range of topics, including governance, public management, comparative administration, and crisis management. Regarding the Kobe earthquake, which occurred on 17 January 1995, Nakamura argued that the earthquake revealed that both the central government and local governments were inadequately prepared for large-scale disasters (Nakamura 2000). He argued that maintaining crisis-management capacity requires continuous commitment rather than temporary reactions to disasters. His work on emergency and disaster management became particularly influential. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster of March 2011, he and Masao Kikuchi published an important analysis in *Public Administration Review* examining the institutional and managerial lessons arising from the catastrophe (Nakamura and Kikuchi 2011). Their study emphasized the importance of accountability, regulatory oversight, and crisis preparedness in modern governance systems.

In recognition of his outstanding scholarly achievements and international contributions, Nakamura became the first Japanese scholar elected as a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) in 2015.

Service to the United Nations and International Development

Nakamura also made significant contributions to global governance through his service to the United Nations. Following the establishment of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) in 2002, he was appointed as one of its inaugural members. CEPA serves as the principal advisory body to the United Nations Economic and Social Council on matters relating to public administration, governance, and institutional development.

His appointment reflected both his scholarly reputation and his commitment to improving governance worldwide. Through CEPA, he contributed to international policy discussions concerning public sector reform, institutional capacity, and sustainable development. Because he was active in CEPA, other public administration scholars in Asia, including myself, subsequently had similar opportunities.

In addition to his UN service, Nakamura devoted considerable effort to international development and capacity-building initiatives. He worked extensively with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), supporting training programs and institutional development projects across Asia and other regions. His contributions to international cooperation were recognized through numerous honours, including a Medal of Honour from the Government of Malaysia in 2007 and a Presidential Recognition Award from JICA in 2008.

Nakamura also served as Adjunct Professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) from 2012 to 2020 and at the Local Autonomy College under Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Through these appointments, he contributed to the education and professional development of public servants from Japan and around the world.

His engagement with Korea was particularly extensive. Over many years, he participated in academic exchanges with Korean universities and public institutions, including the National Human Resources Development Institute and the Local Government Officials Development Institute. His efforts contributed significantly to strengthening academic and professional cooperation between Japan and Korea.

Furthermore, he maintained a longstanding relationship with the Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration (EROPA), where his contributions to scholarship, professional development, and regional cooperation were widely recognized. In 2017, EROPA awarded him the Raul P. de Guzman Award for Distinguished Contributions to Public Administration (EROPA 2017).

His international academic engagement also extended to visiting appointments at the University of Victoria in Canada, the University of Utah in the United States, and Tallinn University of Technology (TalTech) in Estonia. At TalTech, he served as Visiting Professor in the Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance in 2017 as well as a member of the Advisory Board of *Halduskultuur*. His continued engagement with Estonian scholars reflected his enduring commitment to international intellectual exchange.

Concluding Reflections

While Akira Nakamura's scholarly achievements were remarkable, they represent only part of his legacy. Those who knew him personally remember a warm, gracious, and intellectually curious individual who combined academic excellence with humility and kindness. He possessed a distinctive sense of humour, enjoyed discussing movies and culture, and approached professional relationships with sincerity and generosity.

Despite occupying numerous leadership positions throughout his career, he remained approachable and collegial. Younger scholars frequently benefited from his mentorship, encouragement, and willingness to share his knowledge and experience. His ability to build friendships across cultures and institutions was one of his most remarkable qualities.

According to his family, shortly before his passing he reflected that he had lived a life without regrets. Few individuals can make such a statement with greater credibility. His life was characterized by intellectual accomplishment, professional service, international engagement, and personal integrity.

Akira Nakamura will be remembered as one of the leading figures in the development of public administration scholarship in Asia and as a bridge-builder who connected scholars, institutions, and professional communities across continents. His influence will continue through his publications, the organizations he helped shape, and the many colleagues and students whose lives he touched.

His passing represents a profound loss to the global public administration community. Yet his legacy endures as an inspiration for future generations of scholars and practitioners committed to advancing good governance, public service, and international cooperation.

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