

Japanese Christian Literature

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My country, Japan, is known as a Buddhist and Shintoism country. Though Christianity was introduced in 16th century, Christians are only 2% of its entire population. And yet, there have been many Christian writers in Japan. Therefore, when I think of the influence that European literature gave to Japanese literature, I came up with the word "Christians".

According to Sasabuchi Yuichi, the history of contemporary Japan can be divided into four stages. First, 1868 to 1890. Christianity was forbidden until then. With westernization, Christianity, hymns and bible were reimported. Second is 1890 to 1910. Christianity was digested and its humanism largely influenced Japanese writers. The third period is 1910 to 1941. This is the pre-war period of social confusion. Humanism of Christianity lost its power and influential power. There were less Christian writers in this period. Then during the war period, Christianity was oppressed as a western religion.

(キリスト教と日本近代文学 笹淵友一 日本の神学1963 P153)

After WWII, Japanese Christian literature has developed. Numbers of Christian Japanese novelists, especially catholic novelists left names in Japanese literature. Most notably, a big writer called Shusaku Endo is very famous, his oeuvre is known for being strongly tied to Christianity, problem of sins and forgiveness.

He is from a catholic family which was quite rare at that moment in Japan. He was raised up by comparing with his clever brother, so because of this painful experience and his parents' marital discord, his childhood was not joyful. So he always had something dark side in himself which is portrayed in his novels as main character's personality. When After he started studying literature at a university, he entered a catholic university dormitory. He met lots of young japanese novelists there, and his interests in of French literature was nurtured has been growing there. He was especially influenced by Goerges Bernanos and Francois Mauriac.

To pursue Christian literature, he decided to study abroad in France in 1950, he stayed in Lyon for 2 years. He has done some research on Francois Mauriac and Paul Claudel, he has visited occupied territory by Nazi during the war.

So the book I would like to introduce today, is called 白い人 in English "A White Man", a story during World War II in 1941 Lyon, France. He won the Akutagawa Prize, one of the most coveted literary japanese award in 1955 for this work.

This story is about a French collaborator who assists the Nazi occupiers of Lyon with their interrogation and torture of a Catholic seminarian, his friend and his cousin. This is a kind of shocking story, but actually it is not a story of feeling the anguish of punishing his friend. Rather, the main character enjoys doing it. But why can he do such terrible torture to his friends? It is said that his strict stoicism shadowed the plot of the novel. It goes back to his childhood, As his father was a very dissolute man, his mother raised him up to be stoic which makes him an opposite person, who psychopathically has strange consciousness. So

his idea is based on a thought that receiving a torture = being blessed by God which is a martyr delight for the catholic seminarian.

A man of faith with sacrifice is a strong figure. It can be said the ideal figure of a Christian. At the same time, the narrative unfolds in the form of the collaborator's diary, in which he securely struggle with the enduring cruelty and sadism of human beings, and ponders as well the Christian desire for redemption(罪の償い). He is a representation of a weak self, who long for strongness of Christians and God's blessing and yet can never be free from earthly easiness. He also present hidden cruelty of mankind.

This novel asks a question which is also the main theme for Endo's whole work that : What can be the meaning of Christianity given what that war revealed about humanity?

In conclusion, as it is written that "I write down about the whole story on 28th January, 1942", in other word this novel is written in the set of the collaborator is writing a diary throwing back to one year ago, which might mean that He still thinks it was good to be a Nazi collaborator, torture his friends for God. This might be a fact that The "I" did not brand from the burning and is still living with the source of evil although he confirms the existence of God in the back of his head. Endo might have wanted to illustrate that this is what we(human-beings) are. I found the Eastern Catholicism differs from the Western one, but is strongly influenced by it. This is one of the unique characteristic of Japanese modern literature.