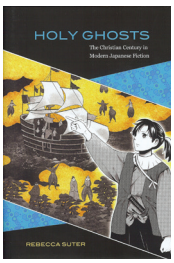

Rebecca Suter, *Holy Ghosts: The Christian Century in Modern Japanese Fiction*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 194 pages. Hardback, $45.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-4001-3.

One of the most difficult tasks for a student of Japanese history is to truly understand the ebb and flow of Japan's contacts with the outside world. There appears to be a struggle within Japanese society whether Japan should retain its own "unique" culture or whether it should be engaged in a form of "hybridization" of its cultural norms with worthy elements of foreign cultures. At times Japan closes itself off from the outside world, while at other times it appears to open itself up to foreign influences.

Rebecca Suter visits this question in great detail in *Holy Ghosts*. Her focus is the so-called "Christian century of Japan" (1549–1638) when Japan made its first real contact with the West with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, the final Christian revolt, and the formal ban on Christianity by the new Tokugawa Shogunate. She is particularly interested in the repeated appearance of the "Christian century" in modern Japanese fiction and how modern writers such as Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Endō Shūsaku, and others have handled Japan's reaction to penetration by foreign cultures. She argues that although the topics of these stories focus on this earlier period, these writers are really debating Japan's position in the modern world.

Throughout her work Suter has discovered a tendency by domestic and foreign media "to characterize Japanese culture as exceptional/exceptionalist" (108). The term *Nihonjiron* is based on the presumption that "the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogenous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistoric times down to the present day," and that they "differ radically from all

other known peoples" (108). Suter notes that in many *Nihonjinron* texts, Japan and the "West" are dissimilar in every possible way, but with the idea that in discussing Euro-American stereotypes, Japan is portrayed as "superior, rather than inferior, to its Western counterparts" (109).

Suter begins her analysis with a look at the late Meiji and Taisho literary authors who used the "Kirishitan" to reflect on the "complexity of Japan's relationship with the West." She focuses on Akutagawa's collection of stories *Kirishitan mono*, published between 1916 and 1927. Suter feels that these stories highlight "the cross-cultural negotiation in which Jesuit missionaries and Japanese converts engaged during the early stages of the Christian century provide a powerful analogy for the combination of fear and desire toward the West that Japan was experiencing in the modern age, and demonstrate how the same dynamics apply to all cultures when they are faced with an Other" (170). These writers also reject the Western self-identification with "science and rationality" and their depiction of Asian cultures as "superstitious" and "primitive." Japanese writers of the period, Suter notes, often portray European culture as being "irrational" and "emotional," thus deflating the Western idea of the West's "civilizing mission," which included Christian missionary objectives. These writers thus invert the idea of "Orientalism" so that it is Asia that now appears primitive and superstitious. These stories, concludes Suter, oblige us to "rethink conventional notions of East-West relations and mutual representations" (170).

The second half of the book focuses on postwar literature, with a more intense reaction to the West from those writers who express a fear and loathing of things foreign—two sentiments dominating the thinking of *Nihonjinron*. "Thus from the 1960s to the mid-1990s representations of the Kirishitan in the realm of fiction transformed them into a symbol of the danger, rather than the excitement, of cultural hybridization, and presented them consistently in a negative light, as inherently evil characters" (171). One finds in these writings an incessant demonization of the Kirishitan characters.

There was yet another transformation in literature in the late 1990s and early 2000s. During this time, Suter notes, "the Kirishitan began to participate in the dynamic play of gender and cultural subversion that is the staple of the genre of *shōjo* manga and related subcultural practices such as Lolita fashion. The queer Kirishitan became the harbinger of a critique of Japanese heteropatriarchy and, at the same time, marked the transition towards a new model of interaction with foreign culture, a third way beyond the assimilation/rejection dichotomy that had characterized their previous incarnations" (171).

Reading Suter requires considerable stamina. Her stilted, excessively detailed, and very dry writing style is often hard to digest, but the content of her scholarship is both profound and groundbreaking. The depth and quality of her research is impressive. Her thesis that an examination of "Kirishitan" literature also reflects Japanese attitudes towards Japan's contacts and relations with the West is strongly supported through her analysis of writers like Akutagawa and Endō. Any serious Japanese historian or anthropologist would surely gain new insights through Suter's work.

Daniel A. Métraux
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