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Japanese Jesus: Presenting the Character of Christ in an Eastern Context

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JAPANESE JESUS; PRESENTING THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST IN AN EASTERN CONTEXT

By

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BACHELOR OF ARTS

In

English

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3-22-2011
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To the faculty and students of Tokyo Christian University

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ABSTRACT

This Captstone Project looks at the differences between Western and Eastern literature, focusing on the Asian genre of manga, a graphic novel. This project culminates in a Japanese graphic novel entitled *Rosalee*. It attempts to unite the Western concept of Christianity with the Eastern literary conventions, bridging a gap between un-churched Japan and the truth of the Gospel. The story is designed to inspire readers to read the bible and learn more about Christ

Keywords: Japan, Christ, Manga.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this capstone project was to construct an evangelistic tool that would be relevant to an Eastern audience, particularly the youth of Japan. Most of my information has been gathered during my one year study abroad experience where I studied at Tokyo Christian University. More secondary research was conducted when it came to specifics in literature, but not for the culture at large, because I had experienced it first hand. Japan has a Christian population that is estimated to be less than one percent. It is important to create resources that are easily accessible to these people in order to spread the Good News. This project, however, is not a strict gospel narration. It is intended, not to reveal the details of the Christian faith or outline theological truths, but to provide a glimpse into such faith and inspire the audience to want to find out more. Many aspects of the story either go unexplained, or have a delayed explanation, in the hopes that these unanswered questions will spark investigation. The content of my project will be presented as a mini-manga (Japanese novel). Because this literary form is so prevalent in Japan, being read on the trains by school children and business men alike, it should have a greater effect than if I had proposed to write a non-illustrated story.

I strove to create a narrative that demonstrated the core of the Christian faith—Christ's death atones for our sins and brings salvation—without resembling typical Sunday school stories. There is already a small amount of Christian manga, such as *The*

Manga Bible, and they illustrate various scenes from the Bible. This is a step in the right direction, but I believe that in order to relate to a non-churched culture, the literature should not follow typical church format. My story, *Rosalee*, has mild violence, sexual implications, and short skirts and tank tops. None of which are widely accepted in a church context; however, it is not the church that I am trying to appeal. By reviewing what stories are popular, and what elements unite those stories, I have tried to give my Christian story a more secular appearance. It is my hope that by having a neutral appearance and appeal, the story will attract readers who would typically avoid church-literature. In this way, by avoiding the overly church-like appearance, non-church readers can have access to this glimpse into Christ's redeeming love and sacrifice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

WESTERN VS EASTERN FICTION

In order to relate to an Eastern audience through literature, it is important to understand the differences between Western and Eastern literature, especially fiction. This distinction between Non-Western and Western, and its relation to modernity, is important because within the Asian tradition, "both Japanese words [for 'modern'] indicate that the modern is defined by the process of Westernization" (Washburn 3). Furthermore, the fact that print culture became "an institution of the modernity in the 'West'" places Western fiction in "a position of primary importance" (Lynch & Warner 97). When compared to typically "Western" standards, Asian literature appears unpolished or inferior. However, Asian literature is growing and developing. It is interesting to note "how Japan's interaction with the West resulted in new expressions of self-identity" (Washburn 8). Rather than accepting obscurity in the face of Western ideals, Asian literature recognizes their differences and celebrates and expands their non-Western traditions.

Western scholars have difficulty defining Asian fiction as they do Western fiction because "[the] patently fictitious (from the modern rationalists perspective) elements appear in all other forms of early literature, both philosophical works . . . and history (in fabricated conversations and fantastic events)" (Hegel 394-5). Asian fiction is nearly indistinguishable from other forms of Asian literature because all writing stems from the

same Eastern worldview, one where “gods and fairies, ghosts and demons, fox spirits and animal spirits become true-to-life characters who participate in the affairs of the human world” (Dong Gu 313). While supernatural elements are excluded from serious Western literature, particularly non-fiction, it is perfectly credible in an Asian context.

According to Ming Dong Gu’s article, *Theory of Fiction: A Non-Western Narrative Tradition*, “[T]raditional [Asian] fiction theory considered fiction as evolved from street talk and popular gossip,” rather than the Western concepts of “epic and romance” (312-3). Dong Gu also talks in his article about the Western concept of realism. When comparing traditional Asian literature to the standard of Western realism, the Non-Western literature will ultimately fall short. The supernatural component is often considered immature, reserved only for fairy tales and bed time stories in the Western tradition.

Rather than portray real life as literally as possible, as many Western novels aim to do, Asian literature “came into being as a result of an individual’s desire to create something out of nothing” (318). With this basis, it is obvious to see why realism is not the central focus of Asian literature. While aspects of the story will be true to life in order to instill a sense of recognition, Asian literature is not as bound to fact as Western literature is. Imagination and creative supernatural elements are welcome in a literary system that values expression over imitation. In Chinese, “to create something out of nothing” is “wu zhong sheng you” (319), which linguistic connotations stress the

importance of imagination in the creative process. The Asian consciousness of accepting narrative that originated from primarily imaginative processes allows the reader to relate to and believe in the un-real. In essence, the un-real becomes real.

JAPANESE MANGA

This acceptance of the un-real is evident in today's popular Asian literature. An original Asian literary genre is the Japanese manga (graphic novel) which has been adapted in popular Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese cultures. In these narratives, which range in length from one sixty-page volume to over fifty consecutive one-hundred page volumes, supernatural elements are incorporated seamlessly into the modern day (Brenner). Plot lines commonly pivot around the workings of spirits, and protagonists will often have supernatural powers. A high school student who can summon spiritual companions and wield magical powers would never be taken as serious literary material in the Western tradition, but this archetype is found in a large majority of modern day manga. For instance, in the series *Death Note*, which has growing popularity in America as well as Japan, the main characters have *shinigami*, or "death gods," who follow them around. The main characters themselves do not have powers, but the theme of daily life encounters with the spiritual world is prevalent.

Manga was first developed shortly after World War II but has roots in the Japanese literary tradition stemming from the late 1800s. In 1874, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper came into being and today sells approximately 10 million daily newspapers, making it one of the world's best-selling newspapers (Law and Morita 109). Part of its success owes to its column dedicated to the *shimbun shosetsu*, "a short numbered and illustrated installment from an original piece of fiction that runs an average of six

months” (109). This form of serial stories was very popular to Japanese audiences and evolved into the *enpon* pamphlets after the First World War, and eventually turns into the weekly and monthly Manga magazines that are increasingly popular today (109).

Manga is divided into several categories according to the target audience, usually revolving around age and gender. The categories are *Shonen*, *Shojo*, *Seinen*, and *Josei*: there is another category, *hentai*, which is strictly for adult audiences and typically very sexually explicit (Brenner). The first two categories are aimed for younger children, while the *Seinen* and *Josei* categories are aimed towards a more adult audience, usually involving more mature topics. While the categories are designed for certain age groups, the guidelines are flexible. For example, some *Seinen* are read by young boys. Even gender distinctions are not exclusive: older men have been seen reading manga that are considered *Shojo*. The genre is used to present various materials, ranging from strictly entertaining stories to demonstrations of academic progression (MANGA Kyoto University). Manga remains one of the leading literary forms in Japan, enjoyed by all ages.

Manga has become a growing market in America as well, with sales increasing by 400% from 2003 to 2006 (“The Manga Revolution”). They have become increasingly available in public and school libraries, as well as major book stores. Western educators who have noticed the growing popularity of this Asian genre suggest “using them in classrooms to teach reading skills and generate discussion on important topics,” such as

what the Manga adaptations of Shakespearean plays, published by Wiley in Britain, are designed to do ("Revolution"). However, several Western educators critique the genre, saying "[manga] are too simplistic to be worthy of serious consideration" ("Revolution"). The tension between Western convention and non-Western traditions reappears in this contemporary genre. Manga's dependence on the visual component keeps it from being taken seriously in the Western tradition, but not so for the Eastern tradition.

DESCRIPTION

The fact that my project is targeted to a Japanese audience will present a challenge because of my strictly Western upbringing. The story will be translated into Japanese, but for the purpose of this present draft, it will remain in English. Despite the Western biases bred into me, *Rosalee* is my attempt to present Western material in a Non-Western way, hoping to bridge the gap between the two—creating a unified whole. My story is nevertheless a Western narration. Because I introduce characters associated with the Christian, and therefore Western, faith, the Japanese will instantly be able to categorize this story as “Non-Asian.” My hope is that with the literary devices of supernatural integration, relevant language, and content I will be able to connect with my audience despite my distinctly outsider point of view.

My story is Asian through the integration of the supernatural. While my main protagonist, a young woman named Rosalee, has no supernatural powers, the supernatural reveals itself in her life mysterious black lines covering her body, and her relationships with Satan, Jesus Christ, and a crow personifying the Holy Spirit. Satan and Christ are introduced and are intended to portray the literal Satan and Christ, not personifications or allegorical representations that might be necessary for a Western audience.

There is no doubt by using the name Satan, “Akuma” in Japanese, that Rosalee is dealing with a demonic character. Satan is allowed to be his true demon-self because of

the Asian acceptance of gods, demons, and various spirits within an everyday context. This blatant designation would not be tolerated in serious Western literature, where Satan may be represented by a certain character, but rarely is Satan himself a character.

Even Christ is allowed to be more Christ-like, because the climax of my story is an imitation of the crucifixion. While this Jesus does not die nailed to a cross, moving past literal details, he is slain at the hands of Satan in a very supernatural way, allowing for easy transition to the supernatural grace that becomes ours as a result of such death. If Christ had to be sent to the electric chair, for example, as a realistic modern-day execution would entail, the gap between death and eternal salvation would be wider and harder to breach.

My story is also similar to Asian literature in the content and syntax. This correlates to the concept of literature “evolve[ing] from street talk and popular gossip” (Dong Gu 312). The issues dealt with in the narration—abortion, shame, and suicide—are relevant topics in the lives of the Japanese people today. This is different from the Western tradition of “epic and Romance” (313). By basing the core conflict of my story off of issues commonly faced, and therefore talked about, by my target audience, I am able to turn my narrative into an intensely personal connection.

The dialogue also portrays this sense of connection with my audience. Within the Japanese language, there are three “levels” of language: informal, formal, and very formal. Each level has very specific uses. The informal level is reserved only for close

friends and family. Manga is typically written in informal dialogue. By ensuring that the Japanese translation of my story is written in this informal tone, I am both conforming to the characteristics of the genre, as well as giving a sense of intimacy and closeness with my readers.

Rosalee



REFLECTION

I am proud of my accomplishment, but I have to admit that the finished product falls below my desired level of quality. I had greatly underestimated what techniques, processes, and time is required to create a manga. I had organized the pre-planning, planning, drafting, re-drafting, and final editing, but because of my lack of experience with such tasks, many of the steps took longer than the time I had allotted them. To further complicate the process, I had thrown out an earlier story idea and rewrote the narrative halfway through the two year process. If I had to do this progress again, I would have limited the story to only three chapters instead of five. This would have limited the narrative possibilities, but I would have been able to invest more effort into the drawing portion, which was the most time intensive.

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