The Intercourse Between Japan and Southeast Asia—Centering on Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*

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There was more cultural interchange between Japan and Southeast Asia before 19th century than today’s Japan would imagine. Through some literary works written in English it will be examined as well as centering on Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*.

*Keywords:* Japanese crypto-Christians, Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, international-culture, Fumi-e, Japan’s trade, the Age of Exploration

**Introduction**

In this paper, the author will discuss the contacts and intercourse between Japan and Southeast Asia, centering on Japanese writer Shusaku Endo’s renowned novel, *Silence*. The objective is to explore the encounters between Japan and the world that arose through literature.

The author’s major is American literature, and she specializes in the Nobel Prize laureate, Saul Bellow. She had been comparing this American-Jewish writer with the Japanese writer Shusaku Endo, when she hit on the idea of today’s topic.

**Japan in The Travels of Marco Polo**

Japan is an island country in the Far East, which is why it appeared so late in the books written in English. One of the first mention of Zipangu (Japan) was in *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Polo, [1300], 1993). Quote:

> Chipangu is an Island towards the east in the high seas, 1,500 miles distant from the continent; and a very great Island it is. The people are white, civilized, and well-favoured. They are Idolaters, and are dependent on nobody. And I can tell you the quantity of gold they have is endless; for they find it in their own Islands, […] few merchants visit the country because it is so far from the main land, and thus it comes to pass that their gold is abundant beyond all measure. I will tell you a wonderful thing about the Palace of the Lord of that Island. You must know that he hath a great Palace which is entirely roofed with fine gold, just as our churches are roofed with lead, insomuch that it would scarcely be possible to estimate its value. Moreover, all the pavement of the Palace, and the floors of its chambers, are entirely of gold, in plates like slabs of stone, a good two fingers thick; and the windows also are of gold, so that altogether the richness of this Palace is past all bounds and all belief (Book III, Chapter II, “The Island of Chipangu”, 1993, pp. 253-254).
Here, Japan is described as “a very great Island…their gold is abundant beyond all measure”, with “a great Palace…entirely roofed with fine gold”, and “pavement…and the floors…are entirely of gold…a good two fingers thick”, which must have amazed the readers in the world.

Marco Polo (1254-1323), an Italian merchant born in Venice, set off to Asia in 1271. While he did not reach Japan, it was he that first introduced Japan to Europe using the name of Zipangu. It is thought that from the Chinese he had heard of the Hall of Gold at the Hiraizumi Chuson-ji Temple (1124) in Iwate, along with a tip of Japan’s using gold in payment for international trade with the Song Dynasty in China.

**From Marco Polo to Columbus**

Marco Polo returned home 24 years later, and Christopher Columbus was significantly influenced by his information from *The Travels of Marco Polo* serving as a great incentive to set out on his own voyage.

As you can see in the photo below, Columbus’ copy of *The Travels of Marco Polo* has his handwritten notes in Latin written on the margins.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ColumbusNotesToMarcoPolo.jpg.

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According to the historian Edmund Morgan, Columbus was not a scholarly man, yet he studied these books, making hundreds of notations in the margins and relied on them for many of his ideas about the world, even if these were sometimes wrong.\(^2\)

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The Encyclopedia Britannica also explains

Columbus’s miscalculations, such as they were, lay in other areas. First, his estimate of the sea distance to be crossed to Cathay [= China] was wildly inaccurate. […] Columbus’s reading primarily of the 13th-14th century Venetian Marco Polo’s Travels gave him the idea that the lands of the East stretched out far around the back of the globe, with the island of Cipango [= Japan]—itself surrounded by islands—located a further 1,500 miles (2,400 km) from the mainland of Cathay. (“Christopher Columbus.” Retrieved from britannica.com/biography/Christopher-Columbus)

**The Nanban Trade Period**

To cut a long story short, in 1492, Columbus was one of the first Europeans to reach the Americas. Portuguese sailors later landed in 1543 on the island of Tanegashima (Japan), only to transmit the arquebus, and Francis Xavier arrived in Kagoshima six years later.

During the 16th century, traders and Jesuit missionaries from Portugal reached Japan, initiating direct commercial and cultural exchanges between Japan and the West. Although they found Japan by accident, they discovered that the country had vast deposits of silver and was eager to trade, and consequently the Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine remained active for almost 400 years (1526-1923). This trade allowed Oda Nobunaga to obtain European technology and firearms, which he used to conquer many other daimyōs (feudal lords).

This map shows Macau and its position in Portuguese and Spanish global trade routes, in this city’s golden age (16th-17th centuries)³. The Portuguese established trade links from Lisbon, Goa, Malacca, and Macau, to Nagasaki with the route between Macau and Nagasaki achieving a high level of return. The Portuguese bought silver from Japan and sold it to the Ming Dynasty in China and in return sold the silk and china from the Ming Dynasty to Japan.

But let us get back to literature.

**Japan as Heterotopia in Gulliver’s Travels**

*Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) is a world-renowned story, in which Gulliver travels to the Dwarfs’ country, Lilliput, and then to the Giant’s country, Brobdingnag. Surprisingly, he visits Japan too, although he wrote that,

“my stay in Japan was so short, and I was so entirely a stranger to the language, that I was not qualified to make any enquiries. But I hope the Dutch, upon this notice, will be curious and able enough to supply my defects” (Swift, 1952, p. 129).

In Edo, Gulliver had the privilege of meeting with the Emperor, but asked to be excused from performing the ceremony of trampling upon the crucifix (known as “fumi-e” in Japanese).

I answered (as I had before determined) that I was a Dutch merchant, shipwrecked in a very remote country, from whence I travelled by sea and land to Luggnagg, and then took shipping for Japan, where I knew my countrymen often traded; …To this I added another petition, that for the sake of my patron the King of Luggnagg, his Majesty would condescend to excuse my performing the ceremony imposed on my countrymen, of trampling upon the crucifix; because I had been thrown into his kingdom by my misfortunes, without any intention of trading. (Swift, 1952, p. 130)

The author, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), was an Irish Catholic clergyman with a PhD in theology, and he had to pretend to be Dutch to hide his nationality and religious identity. In Gulliver’s Travels, the Dwarfs’country, the Giants’country, and the Horses’ country appear as “heterotopia”. Although Japan was a real country, from a Western point of view, it was nothing but a strange heterotopia because it had a fumi-e ceremony. Jonathan Swift was a great satirist, so that he could not help writing about this curious test called fumi-e, or the anti-Christian policy of the Tokugawa feudalism with satire.

Japan Seen by American Writer, Herman Melville

Next, let’s jump up to the 19th century, since the author would like to refer to Herman Melville’s literary works. In 1847, in the last chapter of Omoo, Melville wrote that “So, hurrah for the coast of Japan! Thither the ship was bound” (1847/2018, p. 385), showing his interest in Japan.

In Moby-Dick; or, The Whale (1851/2001), too, he mentioned Japan several times, in one instance stating, “If that double-bolted land, Japan, is ever to become hospitable, it is the whale-ship alone to whom the credit will be due; for already she is on the threshold” (Chapter 24). Further, according to Russell Reising and Peter J. Kvidia’s “Fast Fish and Raw Fish: Moby-Dick, Japan, and Melville’s Thematics of Geography”, Ishmael provides local places with metaphoric significance: New Bedford “embodies the coldness of the Western

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civilization from which he periodically escapes”; Nantucket is “the rocky grave of the legendary Indian infant abducted by an eagle”; Tahiti has an image of calm, and his references to Japan “invariably evoke the mystery and doom” because Japan “remains largely unknown” (p. 286).

**Shusaku Endo’s Silence**

Now the author would like to focus on Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*.

![Figure 4: The book Silence.](image)

The original book was published in 1966, and after three years, it was translated into English by William Johnston, a professor at Sophia University in Tokyo. In the U.S., John Updike’s review was appeared in *The New Yorker*, where Shusaku Endo was called as “the Graham Green of Japan”. In fact, Endo became the 10th President (1985-1989) of the Japan P.E.N. Club.

The novel relates the trials of Japanese crypto-Christians and the increasing hardship suffered by the Portuguese Jesuit priest, Rodrigues. Endo’s *Silence* consists of a prologue, nine chapters, extracts from the diary of Jonassen (a clerk at the Dutch firm in Dejima, Nagasaki), as well as an appendix; the diary of a Japanese officer at the Christian Residence in Edo (today’s Tokyo).

Thus, the book is not written from a single viewpoint. The first four chapters are in the first-person, in the form of a letter by its central character, Sebastian Rodrigues, which helps to establish closeness with readers. The other half of the book is written either in the third-person or in the writings of others, such as the Dutch merchant and a Japanese clerk associated with the narrative.

Now let’s take a look at some of the main characters. Kichijiro, a weak, distressed man, is a fictional character. Magistrate Inoue, the Governor of Chikugo, is based on the historical figure Masashige Inoue, who played a role in the persecution and eradication of early Christians in Japan. He is described as “the most to be feared” (1980, p. 34) in the book. The Portuguese Jesuit priest, Father Sebastian Rodrigues, is based on the historical Italian figure Giuseppe Chiara. Father Ferreira is based on Cristóvão Ferreira while Father Valignano is based on the historical Valignano, a rector of the college at Macau. There are many more foreign names in the novel, which seem to create an aura of the exotic.

In addition, there are numerous mentions of foreign cities and countries. Macau is mentioned most often followed by Portugal and then Holland. Moreover, a number of Southeast Asian countries and cities are named, such as Goa, Manila, Tonkin, Siam, Cambodia, and Taiwan.

Rodrigues and Garupe find a Japanese man in Macau: “And yet, quite by chance we found that there was a Japanese living in the midst of the Chinese in this town” (p. 16); “As for our Japanese, Kichijiro, he mingles with the Chinese sailors, carries baggage and helps with the mending of the sail” (p. 20); “he was a fisherman
from the district of Hizen near Nagasaki. Before the famous Shimabara insurrection he had been adrift on the sea and had been picked up by a Portuguese ship” (p. 17). The missionaries suppose “he feels that if he misses this chance he will never again be able to get back to Japan” (p. 18).

Table 1

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<th>Foreign cities And Countries Mentioned in Silence</th>
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<td>Names of cities and countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Macao, China, Fuzhou, Chuan, Nanking, Sanchau</td>
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<td>2 Portugal (Lisbon, Tasco, Compolide, the island of Porto Santo, Madeira)</td>
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<td>3 Holland (Dutch)</td>
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<td>4 India (Goa, Coromandel Coast)</td>
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<td>9 Manila (the Philippines)</td>
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<td>10 Tonkin, Koushi (Vietnam)</td>
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<td>11 Siam (Thailand)</td>
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<td>12 Cambodia</td>
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<td>13 Taiwan</td>
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Although Rodrigues and Garupe arrive in Japan in 1639, there is a reference to the days of Francis Xavier’s mission (1549-1551) meaning that the book covers more than 100 years.

Table 2

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<th>Chronological Table of Silence</th>
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This is Page 15 of Silence, which includes a description of Macau written like a clip from a travel guidebook.

Macau is at the mouth of the great river Chu-Kiang. It is built on one of the many islands with which the entrance to the bay is studded, and like all the towns of the East there is no wall surrounding it, so that it is impossible to say where the city boundaries are. The Chinese houses stretch out like dust. But anyhow, no matter how many towns and cities of our country you imagine, you can never get a picture of what it is like. The population is said to be about twenty thousand, but this number is almost certainly false. The only thing here that might recall our own country are the governor’s palace, the Portuguese warehouses and the cobbled roads. A fortress with cannons stands facing out into the bay, but fortunately until
this day the cannons have never had to go into action.

The greater part of the Chinese show no interest in our teaching. On this point Japan is undoubtedly, as Saint Francis Xavier said, “the country in the Orient most suited to Christianity” (Silence, [1969], 1980, pp. 15-16).

At present, this district is called the “Historic Center of Macau”, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where Monte Forte with its cannons is located. St. Paul’s Ruins here consist of the southern stone façade, intricately carved between 1620 and 1627 by Japanese Christians in exile from their homeland and local craftsmen under the direction of an Italian Jesuit Carlo Spinola.

![Figure 5. Virgin Mary stepping on a hydra.](image)

The carvings shown here include Jesuit images with Oriental themes, such as the Virgin Mary stepping on a seven-headed hydra described in Chinese characters “聖母踏龍頭” as “Holy Mother tramples dragon’s head”. The dragon implies the Tokugawas, meaning that this is a strong criticism and indignation against Japan’s fumi-e.

At the time, the Japanese Christians lived behind the Ruins of St. Paul’s, and legend has it that this well, the oldest in Macau, was dug by them.

This neighborhood was called “茨林圍” (Pátio do Espinho). “茨” suggests the crown of thorns on the head of Jesus Christ while “茨仔” (potatoes) refers to what they would have cultivated to eat. However, before long they were driven out by the Ming Dynasty into Malacca, Vietnam, Cambodia, and so forth.

Along with Macau, Manila also played an important role. It is estimated that in 1570, about 20 Japanese people were living in Manila. In the area of Dilao, a suburb of Manila, a Japanese town was built in 1592, and the Japanese population grew from 700 to 1,500, and subsequently to 3,000. In the first half of the 17th century, intense official trade took place between the two countries through “the Red Seal Ships System”.

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By a Tokugawa edict in 1614, about 100 Japanese Christians were banished and sent to Manila. Their leader, General Takayama Ukon, considered as a pillar of the Christian faith in Japan, peacefully complied and on November 8, 1614 departed for Manila. He was greeted warmly by the Spanish Jesuits and the local Filipinos there, however, he died of illness just 40 days later. The name of Takayama Ukon is not mentioned in Silence, and Endo may have felt that his story would have overpowered others in the book.

In December 2016, a film adaptation of Silence directed by Martin Scorsese was released in the U.S. In the novel, Christians are tortured in Unzen, an area famous for its hot springs in Kyushu, yet in the film this scene was shot in the active fumaroles in Taiwan. In other words, this movie was produced with the help of a neighboring country rather than being shot in Japan.

The novel has been translated into 16 languages so far: English, French, Polish, Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Finnish, Czech, Serbian, Russian, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Indonesian. This shows that Endo’s Silence is one of the most widely-read novels in the world.

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6 http://www.macauzine.net/?action-viewnews-itemid-335#!prettyPhoto[gallery2]/0/.
The novel outlines how Japan’s trade shifted from Portugal to Holland shown through the diary written by a Dutch merchant, Jonassen. After this, Batavia (today’s Jakarta) became the center of the Dutch East India Company’s trading network in Asia, from 1610 to 1799, and Batavia is mentioned in the real diary in an entry dated August 28, 1647.

During the Age of Exploration, the Portuguese became active in Asia, gradually moving into Japan and including the country in their trade with Southeast Asia. Along with this, Catholic Jesuits used the Asian port cities as their home grounds for missionary work. In Endo’s Silence, this overlapping of cultures is used as the background for the novel, which is therefore a reflection of Japan’s special circumstances just before the closure of the country. Hence, the book is Japanese literature but with an unusually international taste. It depicts more comings and goings than many in today’s Japan would imagine.

For example, in the first part of the novel, Shusaku Endo narrates the story through Rodrigues’ eyes. There we see the names of many foreigners, cities, and countries reproducing the feeling of those days, which would attract people from around the world.

Shusaku Endo studied in France for two and a half years, and he was one of the few Catholics in Japan, which caused him to feel like a stranger in Japan. However, he could also view his country from a global perspective, which made the literary work famous throughout the world and led to its adaptation as a Hollywood film.

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