

# Aesop's Arrival in Japan in the 1590s

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(An article from Francis Britto's *All about Francis Xavier*)

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One of the books kept in the British Museum as a rare book, is *Heike / Nifon No Cotoba / Amacusa 1592*. This book is, to my surprise, combined with two other books published in Japan: *Esopono Fabvlas [Aesop's Fables]* in 1593 and *Doctrina Christam [Christian Doctrine]* in 1610. It is not known when or how the set of the three books as one volume was taken from Japan to the British Museum, but the fact is significant to me that these books were printed in Japan 400 years ago, and that their type is Romanized Japanese based on Portuguese accents.



1. A scene from *Heike Monogatari* ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org))

Following the arrival of the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier (1506-52), at Kagoshima in August 1549, many missionaries came from the West. In 1579 came Alexander Valignano (1539-1606), an Italian, to play an important role in Japanese civilization. He established educational institutes called *seminario*, *collegio*, and noviciates to educate priests so that they could preach Christianity to the Japanese people. He thought it indispensable to understand the

culture and history of this country if foreign priests were to contact Japanese people and tell them about Christianity and the contents of Christian doctrine. Based on these ideas, he transported a printing press from Lisbon via Macao in 1590. This was a signal moment in Japan's history. The printing press was first set up in Hizen Kazusa, and later taken to Amakusa, and then to Nagasaki in the mainland of Kyushu. Its purpose was to print manuals and textbooks for preaching, and for teaching Japanese to foreign priests so that they may understand the Japanese mentality and convert the Japanese people to Christianity. The printer's intention is explained on the title page of the *Tale of the Heike* as follows:

NIFONNO / COTOBATO / HISTORIA UO NARAIXIRAN TO / FOSSVRU FITO NO  
TAME- / NI XEVA NI YAVARAGVETA- / RV FEIQE NO MONOGATARI.

[The book is] the Tale of the Heike, adapted in colloquial language for the people to learn Japanese language and history.

Following the title page, the preface tells more plainly the purpose and role of the book:

In this volume are printed Japanese history called [the tale of the] *Heike*, *Morales Sentenças* [Moral Sentences], and European *Esopo's Fabulas* [Aesop's Fables].... it is at once for the exercise of language and for the virtue of society.... it is mainly because I [the translator] wish to serve God and pray for God's glory.... It is written in Amakusa on February 23 in the year of Christ 1593.

In addition, the translator in his foreword to the reader explains his intention and the process in making this book public through suggestions by the Jesuit missionaries who have visited this country to promulgate God's Law and to guide people to heaven. As he himself confesses, he has been an evil person in repeating deeds of wickedness without doing any deed of virtue, and he continues, he will follow his masters and wish them to have the same intention.



2. Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582)

Just as they tell him metaphorically when a carpenter wants to build a house he will sharpen his tools at first or when a fisherman wants to get fish he will knit a net beforehand, so the missionaries who came to this country to preach Christianity will have to learn this country's way of life and its language and history. For these purposes, he translated this classic into plain and simple Japanese and also put it into the form of a dialogue as if a priest and his follower were talking to each other face to face.

Judged from the view of the general reader, especially from that of modern readers, it seems very strange that the tale of the Heike was selected for a Jesuit publication, but this intention will be more easily recognized by the fact that the book is combined with two other books, *Aesop's Fables* and the *Book of Aphorisms*. The latter is composed of Chinese and Japanese aphorisms, while the former, *Aesop's Fables*, is a book written in the sixth century before Christ, dealing with animal fables to teach morals through stories of beastly foolishness. The most characteristic word of this version is 'pastor.' In the story of a Pastor and a Wolf, for example, a wolf is pursued by a hunter and comes to a pastor for shelter. When the hunter comes to the pastor and asks for the wolf, he suggests to the hunter the wrong direction but his eyes indicate the wolf's place. The hunter goes off following the pastor's words, but the wolf tells the pastor to see through his mind, in spite of expressing his thanks. The image of a pastor is double: he is a shepherd on the green and also a person exercising spiritual guidance.

However often the translator stresses the exercise of language, the contents of these books can be clearly identified as moral teaching. In the tale of Heike, the focus is on the rise and decline of the Heike clan. The main figure is Kiyomori of the Heike, who, born a warrior's son, was raised to the status of Regent and enjoyed to the full a flourishing period,

but his haughtiness led his clan to be turned out of the palace and leave the capital of Kyo [today's Kyoto] after their miserable defeat by the Genji clan.

Another significant aspect of the publication of these books is that the age of printing in Japan actually started with the arrival of *Aesop's Fables*. Compared with Japan in the late 16th century, it is in the England of the late 15th century that William Caxton imported the printing press and started printing in Westminster, which was an epoch-making event in British cultural history and for her civilization. It is due to the printing press and the texts printed by William Caxton and his successors that Greek and Latin culture came into England and flourished during the English Renaissance. New learning, as we call it, arrived in the country with these books during this period, including not only the *Recuyell of the historie of Troy* in 1474?, *Golden Legend* by Voragine of Genoa in 1483, *Speculum vitae Christi* in 1484, *Aesop's Fables* in 1484, but also *Doctrine to learn French and English* in 1480.

According to the *Short-Title Catalogue of Books printed in Britain*, there are some descriptions of the printing of *Aesop's Fables*.

175. Here begynneth the book of the subtyl historyes and fables of esope whiche were tr[anslated] out of Frensshe by W[illiam] Caxton. [With the Life (of Aesop)...]. Caxton 1484 (26 m[arch].)

176. [Another edition]. R[ichard] Pynson 1497?.

168. Aesop. Esopus cum commento optimo et morali. [Partly in verse] R[ichard] Pynson. 1502 (1 de[cember]).

169. Fabule Esopi cum commento. W[ynkyn] de Worde. 1503.

As these publication entries reveal, *Aesop's Fables* was brought in by William Caxton and published with his translation from the French text in 1484. Caxton's text was reprinted thirteen years later by his successor, Richard Pynson. Apart from these French-based versions of Caxton, another two versions were printed with the Latin title after the turn of the century by Richard Pynson in 1502 and his rival publisher, Wynkyn de Worde, in 1503. These printed documents tell us nothing more than the popularity of Aesop in England. William Caxton's version included not only the text but also a life of Aesop. It was not until a century had passed that William Shakespeare alluded to this person in one of his dramas, in the dialogue between Prince Edward and Richard of Gloucester in *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth*:



3. The lion and the mouse

Prince Edward. Let Aesop fable in a winter's night.

His currish riddles sorts not with this place.

Gloucester. By heaven, brat, I'll plague ye for that word.

(5. 5. 25ff.)

While Prince Edward mentions the name of Aesop, his pointing out the deformity of the ancient Greek fabulist intends to suggest to Richard of Gloucester the ugliness of his body as well as his wicked designs to usurp the royal crown.

It is doubtful if Shakespeare's audiences in London in the 1590s were so learned or keen as to recognize the difference between Aesop's moral fables and Richard of Gloucester's immoral activity despite the physical similarity between the two, but these lines reveal that the dramatist himself was well acquainted with the Greek fabulist. Just as in England, in the same period in Japan, a country far from England, *Aesop's Fables* and other works were introduced to the Japanese people for the first time and brought about a change in cultural consciousness in this count.

In 1614, the missionaries were expelled from Japan, and the press was also sent back to Macao. Accordingly, the period from the year of the import of the press to that of its expulsion lasted not more than 25 years. This period, however, generated many monumental books and pamphlets which are collectively called the *Kirishitan-ban* [Christian books]. These are very remarkable not only in Japan but also in the world for their quantity, quality, and variety.



The first publication of this series was 『サントスの御作業』 [*Santosu no gosagyō* 'The Acts of Apostles and Saints'] in Kazusa in 1591, followed by 『ヒデスの導師』 [*Hidesu no doushi* (translation of Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatione Christi*)] at Amakusa in 1592, 『ドチリイナ・キリシタン』 [*Dochirina Kirishitan* 'Christian Doctrine'] at Amakusa in 1592, 『ヘイケ物語』 [*Heike monogatari* 'The Tale of the Heike'] at Amakusa in 1592, 『エソポ物語』 [*Esopo monogatari* 'Aesop's Fables'] at Amakusa in 1593, and so on.

After these publications dealing mainly with Christian doctrine or manuals for preaching, the Amakusa press turned to the more fundamental language texts, grammar books or dictionaries for foreign priests' communication with Japanese people. They are the *Latin Grammar* in 1594, and the Latin-Portuguese-Japanese Dictionary in 1595.

Until these were published, the type fount was *romaji* (or romanized Japanese), and in grammar books and dictionaries Japanese script was mainly used for quotations from the Japanese.

However, at the end of the century, the art of printing had improved so much that the size of the book became larger than before and Japanese type was used. The next step was to move the printing press from Amakusa on a small island to Nagasaki on the mainland of

Kyushu. This brought about rapid progress in printing and effected closer relations between Christian books and Japanese readers.

These publications in Nagasaki, such as 『日葡辞書』 [*nippo jisho* ‘The Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary’] in 1603-04 and 『日本大文典』 [*Nippon Daibunten* ‘The Large Grammar of Japanese Language’] in 1604-08, reveal very clearly the fact that big projects for publications that had been prepared for several years were realized as substantial material for preachers and, in addition, for Japanese readers whose interests in foreign culture were aroused in general through these Christian books.

As a result, the place of publication moved from Nagasaki to Kyoto, the capital and centre of Japanese culture at that time, where the following books were published: 『こんてむつす・むん地』 [*kontemutusu munji* ‘Contemptus Mundi,’ part of *De Imitatione Christi*] in 1610 and 『伊曾保物語』 [*Isopo monogatari* ‘The Tales of Aesop’] in 1639.

I can not consider these items one by one, but the most significant fact is that the second printing of *Aesop’s Fables* was in Kyoto. The style is called *Kanasōshi* (仮名草子) in which the Japanese type based on *hiragana* (平仮名) was used for printing. That is, the type of romanized Japanese used in the first publication on Aesop in 1593 was no longer employed.

In addition to the difference of type fount, another fact must be pointed out here. The audience of the book was supposed to have changed from one closely related to Christianity or religion to non-religious people living in urban areas, not only the courtiers and warriors in Kyoto but also the merchant class who delivered these stories outside the capital when they travelled around in Japan to sell merchandise.

Above all, one difference between the two versions of Aesop relating to the text is worthy of attention. During the dark age of anti-Christianity *Aesop’s Fables*, whose style was not colloquial but literary Japanese, was printed at least nine times. The class of readers in



5. The fox and the goat

Kyoto at that time was mainly divided into two: one which preferred books of science or learning written in classical Chinese, and the other which would seek amusement in reading books written in Kana [the Japanese cursive syllabary]. Those books belonging to the latter category

called *Kanasōshi*, included novels, essays, stories of hero-worship, guidebooks for places of scenic and historical interest, and so on. *Aesop’s Fables* of Amakusa had been transformed into one of these. For this reason, the *Aesop’s Fables* of Kyoto, called “Aesop’s Fables written in national or Japanese letters,” cast aside its Christian coat, as it were, and put on a Buddhist one instead. In other words, *Aesop’s Fables* appeared to the popular reader as a moral narrative, in which the Buddhist ideas of cause and effect or retribution were heavily emphasized. Even the story of Aesop was not made an exception, the description of his life being full of false accusations, and the text did not emphasize his sharp wit and humour nor his intelligence.

However, when the dark clouds over Aesop had been cleared, people were delighted to read the fables as if Aesop were a new lamp of intelligence. This occurred in the Meiji era about 300 years after Aesop's arrival at Amakusa.

In 1873 the Japanese government declared the removal of the signboard forbidding Christian doctrine and allowed liberty of conscience. Taking this opportunity, people turned to the West and the Western culture of Europe. As one of the typical examples of this spiritual movement, a group of writers in the early 20th century may be mentioned. They are Kitahara Hakushu, Kinoshita Mokutaro, and Akutagawa Ryunosuke. One day they visited Nagasaki and Amakusa to get in touch with the culture which Christian missionaries had brought there and the people of those districts had kept secretly despite the terror of persecution. If they had been caught by the lord because of their religion, they would have been crucified.

Akutagawa Ryunosuke wrote a short story based on the historical facts of Christian persecution, whose title is「じゅりあの・吉助」 [Juliano Kichisuke]. The hero was originally named Kichisuke who served a man in a village near Urakami cathedral. He was treated as a backward boy without parents, but when he was 18 or 19 years old, he discovered an affection for his master's daughter. However Kichisuke could not tell her of his affection and ran away secretly from his master's house. After having lived as a tramp for three years, he returned to his master's house once again, but this time he did not love his daughter any more, and in the meantime she had been married to another man. He worked very hard, harder than ever, but one day his master realized that Kichisuke had converted to Christianity. The master was afraid of disloyalty to his feudal lord and handed over his servant to the magistrate. Shortly after, Kichisuke, whose Christian name was Juliano, was crucified.



6. Valignano

Akutagawa wrote some more stories based on Christianity, but the most interesting is「奉教人の死」 (*hōkyōjin no shi* literally, 'The Death of a Man devoted to religion'; that is, 'The Death of a Christian'). It was written in 1918 and deals with at least three matters concerning this subject. The first is, according to the author's explanation, an assumption of the source book supposed to have been published at the Nagasaki Jesuit Press in 1596, entitled *Legenda Aurea*, or *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine. The second is the story's main theme concerning Christian doctrine and human weakness to be completed in God's glory. Last but not least, is the fact the whole story is wrapped up in Aesop's moral teaching featuring two birds, a wild eagle and a dove. These birds are sacred animals in Christianity as well, symbolizing the power of God and the Holy Ghost.

The story begins one Christmas Eve. The place is in front of the cathedral named Santa Lucia, where a boy, exhausted and hungry, lies down. He is looked after by the people who have come to the cathedral to attend Christmas Eve mass and is allowed by the priest to stay inside the cathedral. Whenever asked, he answers that his birth-place is heaven, his father is Deus [God]. His features are pure like a white ball or crystal, and his voice is sweet like a

girl's. The boy named Lorenzo is loved by his senior, Simeon, who used to be a warrior. The relationship between these two people is compared to that of a dove and a wild eagle in the sky.

Three years after, a girl whose father is an artisan making umbrellas comes to love Lorenzo tenderly, but Lorenzo does not accept her love. After a while a rumor spreads that he has got her pregnant. Simeon is wildly irritated at this news, and, with other people, turns Lorenzo out of the cathedral. Lorenzo becomes a tramp living in a humble and uninhabited cottage outside the town. After she has given birth to a girl, the town suffers a big fire. Unfortunately, the baby is left apart from her mother and caught in the fire. Then a tramp turns up and without hesitation goes into the fire to save the baby, although the tramp himself cannot get out of the fire. Simeon saves the tramp from the fire, but shortly afterwards the tramp dies.

On the other hand, the mother of the baby confesses her past sin in telling the lie that the baby's father was Lorenzo. The true father was her neighbour and not Lorenzo. She wanted to take revenge on Lorenzo at the time because he would not accept her love. To her surprise, the tramp who saved her baby from the fire and is now dying with burns all over his body is identified as Lorenzo whom she loved, and to her the dying Lorenzo who has saved her baby from the fire of Inferno seems to be Jesus Christ in his second coming. However, to her greater surprise, Lorenzo turns out to be feminine, as she recognizes the two breasts of a woman. The story ends here.

In this story the author depicts the death of a martyr, based on the structure of a Christian story beginning with Christmas Eve to end in the infernal fire. It is combined with two other elements: one being the moral teaching of *Aesop's Fables* and his life full of false accusations especially stressed in its Kyoto versions with a Buddhist idea of retribution. And the other is the Japanese mentality or sense of self-sacrifice complemented with the situation of martyrdom in Nagasaki as well as the historical incident of a big fire there. This could be a new creation that emerged from the new learning brought in with the printing press. Thus a new dawn started in the Japanese mind with Akutagawa and his generation.



Yuichi Midzunoe, educated at the University of Tokyo, was the Dean of the Graduate School of Social Sciences & Humanities, Chiba University, when he passed away in 2000 at the age of 58. He worked extensively on Romantic and Renaissance Literature and Irish Literature. A tireless researcher both in Japan and overseas (especially in Ireland and UK), he wrote several books, including *Ireland: the Emerald Isle and Her Literature* and *Dance of Death*.

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