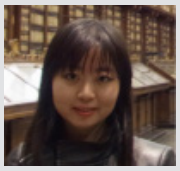
THE
BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS

NO. 134: MARCH 29, 2017



HITOMI OMATA RAPPO is a visiting researcher at the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, under a postdoctoral fellowship from the Swiss National Science Foundation. She spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** about the film *Silence*, a film that follows two seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries as they travel from Portugal to Japan.

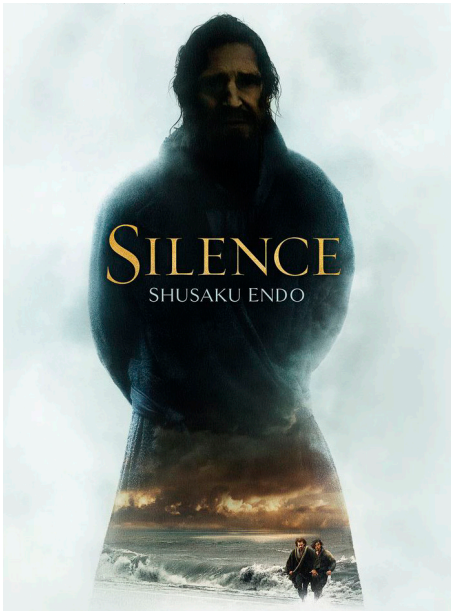
HEVELONE: I'd like to first ask you how you got interested in the topic of the Japanese "martyrs." How did they first come to your attention?

OMATA RAPPO: I went to a missionary Catholic school for twelve years, from 7-8 years old. I spent most of my youth there. My fundamental education is Catholic. People sometimes talk as if missionary activities in East Asia, especially in Japan, are only a historical thing. But really, missionary work is an ongoing process by active missionaries. I'm one of the results.

HEVELONE: So you were exposed to the martyrs as a young child, and then you came back to them in your own work?

OMATA RAPPO: Yes. I didn't set out to study Catholic history. However, it was intriguing to me because I actually experienced what is written about in the missionaries' documents on how to educate Japanese children, since they know nothing about the perception of Western culture outside the European context.

I had a somewhat parallel experience because I also saw the false assumptions of Western cultural expectations. How Christ's Last Supper is taught is a good example. Someone explained to us that Jesus drank wine and ate bread at the Last Supper, but for Japanese children this is a luxurious meal of the bourgeoisie—a French dinner in the French restaurant. We were all shocked because we were told all the time that Jesus lived alongside the poorest of the poor, but all



of the sudden the Last Supper is wine and bread.

The sister, the professor of moral ethics in the Bible class, told us it's not like bread for us, it's like rice and miso soup. In a way, this is something I could relate to in *Silence*.

HEVELONE: *Silence* is so interesting because there are so many layers to it: the historical layer, about which you are the expert, and Shusaku Endo's novel, which is historical fiction, and this new film adaptation of the novel by Martin Scorsese.

I just wondered if you would talk about these figures presented in the novel and in the film, Sebastian Rodrigues (based on Giuseppe Chiara) and Cristóvão Ferreira. Could you say a little bit about how the novel and the film are true to the historical record and where they move away from it into the more literary or artistic realm?

OMATA RAPPO: There are three Japanese documents reporting what happened to them. Endo changed the content of the historical documents a little bit and put them at the end of the novel. Those characters are based on historical figures, but what they thought and specific actions were not recorded in the historical documents. There is a space for novelists to imagine and develop the fictional stories about them. When it comes to their apostasies, martyrdoms, or their speech, insights, and realities, we cannot know for certain.

Apparently they were not allowed to write in Western languages. Our historical reconstructions come from an anti-Christian theory book, a teaching material for the official in the Nagasaki government. Many historians point out that there is not so much theological information in

this book. Based on the fact that it's not a good book from a theological point of view, the historical figures Endo adapted might have kept their faith and pretended to convert.

HEVELONE: In your presentation, you showed the tombstones that were not Christian tombstones for Ferreira and for Chiara. Were they Shinto or Buddhist?

OMATA RAPPO: Buddhist tombstones, which is interesting because it means that there were descendants. They were forced to marry Japanese women. As I discussed in my presentation, there was a torture that was not shown in the movie of putting young women with young priests—young priests because when they are old, this wasn't considered torture—they were put in a small space with young Japanese women. When they saw the priests had sexual intercourse, the torturers claimed, "You are not a priest anymore," and forced them to get married.

The Jesuit scholar, Hubert Cieslik, argues against them having children, but Ferreira fathered three children—one boy and two daughters—so at least one of them was a father. One of Ferreira's daughters married into a family who specialized in medicine.

Missionaries were known in early modern periods in Japan to have the Western knowledge of medical treatments. One of the reasons why is that Ignatius of Loyola and Francisco Xavier were eager to send marranos, Catholic priests who had converted from Judaism, to Japan from Goa. In Goa, there were inquisitions against newly converted Jewish people.

In Japan, the Westerners were already a minority, but the medical profession was the safest place for them and allowed them to use their knowledge of chemistry and Western medicine. A famous example is Luis Almeida, one of the first marrano, who was famously dedicated to saving people on the street. Such people are recognized in Japan. Ferreira is alleged to be one of those marranos.

HEVELONE: So Ferreira was one of those Jewish converts to Christianity?

OMATA RAPPO: According to the Japanese historian Kogishi Akira, this may well be the case. Ferreira shared his knowledge about astronomy and Western medicine. Through his daughter, he transmitted that information to his son-in-law. That family became specialized doctors for the shogunate family, generation after generation. It's a prestigious family, and it was actually his descendent who moved the tombstone from another temple to the temple I showed in the presentation. Endo actually met the descendent of Ferreira.

"Missionaries were known in early modern periods in Japan to have the Western knowledge of medical treatments."

HEVELONE: I'm assuming that that descendent would emphasize the transmission of the Western knowledge of medicine to the Japanese, rather than refer to any sort of Christian legacy of his ancestor.

OMATA RAPPO: Some secularized scholars insist that it's a legitimate form of integration to the local society because, contrary to the description in the film, Ferreira and Chiara became fairly wealthy. In the film, Ferreira and Rodrigues didn't seem to be rich, but in historical reality, Chiara had about ten servants living in his house.

That means that his residence was not a simple house for common people, but a residence that could hold from seven to ten servants inside with his family. At his death, Chiara left about $6 million or $7 million in his will for his widow.

HEVELONE: Do we know where the wealth came from?

OMATA RAPPO: That's from the shogunate. He became a servant officially, and was given a salary, including the servants. He and the other priests were pretty welcomed after apostasy.

HEVELONE: Western people were so eager to latch onto these European Japanese "martyrs." You've written and talked about how that's important for their European identity, and how Europeans thought of themselves in terms of a global world. You have also talked about how there's no place for Japanese martyrs, those Japanese Christians who did not apostatize. There's not a large following of them.

OMATA RAPPO: That depends on the strict definition of martyrs. It's already been the object of discussion in early church history. Tertullian condemned those who tried to kill themselves by exposing themselves to the inquisitor and Roman emperor. Tertullian criticized this quite severely, saying they are not worthy of the name of martyrs because they risked the life of "actual" Christians in the process.

There was a similar phenomenon in Japan in the period *Silence* depicts, because it was at the end of the civil war in Japan. The "beautiful death" was prized from the point of view of Japanese warrior aesthetics. How to die beautifully in the battlefields was the essential story of warrior literature at that time, even back to medieval Japan. It was extremely easy for the Japanese at that time to accept a heroic, or beautiful, death for some purpose, not necessarily for Christianity, but for their masters or for their families.

HEVELONE: Then converts to Christianity appropriated that tradition of the honorable death and looked for opportunities to die as martyrs.

OMATA RAPPO: Sometimes Christians who were executed not for their faith, but for lowly crimes not related to Christianity, were respected as martyrs by local Christians. The Jesuits were really attentive to this because it's a danger. If such criminals were respected by the local Japanese Christians, it risks Christians lives. From the point of view of local authorities, Christians seemed to admire criminals. That discourse comes back again and again in the official Japanese records: Christians were admiring the executed criminals as martyrs.

At the end of the 1630s, there was social upheaval in Japan, like the peasants in Germany, and those peasants were persecuted by the local functionaries with heavy taxes. They revolted against the local authorities, and many of the peasants were Christians. That gave an impression to the central government that Christianity was the nucleus of uprising. Today historians say that that revolt was not a Christian revolution or a Christian upheaval, but the government at that time considered it a Christian revolution.

HEVELONE: So the Japanese officials were concerned there was Christian uprising against the hierarchy, but were they also concerned about colonialism? They allude to this in the movie by talking about the four concubines. Was that a fear at the time too?

OMATA RAPPO: That logic is never used in the historical documents, but the phrase "reason of the state (razão de [e]stado)," or as we say now "national interest," comes back again and again in the missionary letters, and also in the official Japanese records. Both Japanese officials and the Jesuits were concerned about missionary activity and its association with colonial projects. While some missionaries, like Alonso Sanchez or Domingo de Salazar, were advocates of a full invasion, most of them did not go that far. For example, the Jesuit missionary Pietro Paolo Navarro wrote an official letter to explain to the Japanese authorities that missionaries' activities were not concerned with military expansion; they just wanted Nagasaki.

This is a somewhat strange logic. It seems that Navarro wanted to show that the missionaries were reasonable, and just wanted some pied-à-terre in Japan, like they had in Macao. However, what happened to Macao can also be understood as colonialism. While they did obtain official permission to rule it from the Chinese government after the fact, the Portuguese invaded and seized the town of Macao, and they partially confiscated that area as a center of their commercial port. They wanted the same in Japan in Nagasaki. So, allegedly, Navarro expressed this to local authorities, and the local authorities were against it, obviously. Similar events unfolded in the Philippines. The Philippines and Japan are so close, and the Japanese were aware of what happened in the Philippines, and what happened in the Philippines was the result of what we call colonialism today.

HEVELONE: Could you talk a bit about the role that the Japanese "martyrs," for lack of a better word, played in this construction of European identity?

OMATA RAPPO: In mission history in the early modern period, Japan was considered to be the territory of martyrs, rather than a successful mission, except in the case of Alexander Valignano and Francis Xavier, the first phase of the mission. But actually this phenomenon happened also in India, China, and Southeast Asia. Why did only Japan become this center of such topic in early modern Europe?

I think it's connected with the literary discourses on hagiographical writing about martyrs and Jesuits, which put emphasis on theater materials about Japanese martyrs. These plays were popular, especially in the German-speaking world, but they were also performed in France, Italy, Spain, and England. They appeared in Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, so it's a pan-European phenomenon about the martyrs.

But when I look through the story of these plays, it isn't necessarily different from the rest of Jesuit theater or other martyr plays. The plot, the story, is similar to the history and story of martyrs in the ancient Roman Empire or legendary Gaelic people in the lives of the saints.

HEVELONE: That's how martyrdom accounts are and hagiography is, it's a formula that's repeated over and over.

OMATA RAPPO: Yes, and in those theatrical materials, Japan was mostly an exotic geographical setting. Of course,

when the evangelization of Japan was seen as going well, or still seen as being possible, such plays were meant to be examples of the successes of the Jesuits. In fact, the Japanese mission gave the Jesuits their first officially recognized martyrs, and such figures were powerful symbols that they clearly tried to use in the European context, especially in controversies with Protestants. However, the stories, mostly based on events found in missionary letters, were modified to fit certain hagiographical archetypes, and they say very little about the actual situation in Japan at the time on a social or historical level. Certain people say that Jesuit theater worked as media, like journalism in the present day, but when it comes to the Japanese martyr stories, it seems to me they weren't necessarily Japanese heroes or heroines. The plays were a more general story of heroic martyrs designed for European audiences. It's related to the fact, after a certain point, Japanese mission work failed in the early seventeenth century.

This becomes even clearer in the 1620s, when the Jesuits themselves were forced to admit that the Japanese mission was basically failing. Missionaries tried to enter Japan clandestinely, like in the film and book, but it was very hard to enter Japan. Many ships refused to bring missionaries to Japan and risk their lives in the process.

So using Japanese stories in Europe, the Jesuits tried to get financial resources from the nobles in the German-speaking world and European society. The stories about Japan attracted attention and money, financing the Jesuit mission to China.

Secondly, the Jesuits could more or less hide the fact that Japan was not a success for them, because such plays still depicted the triumph of the true faith over pagan tyrants, through martyrs. The history and the memory of the Catholic victory over the Roman Empire against the pagan powers were transferred to the Japanese persecution discourses. For example, Japanese tyrants were compared to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king of the Old Testament who persecuted Daniel and his friends.

HEVELONE: You said in your article that the Japanese rulers were presented as tyrants rather than as savages. How did this give legitimacy to the martyrdom account of those people who were killed?

OMATA RAPPO: There were certain conditions necessary to be called tyrants. Back in Europe, the rhetoric about how to define the best Christian king was important in constructing political theories at that time. Machiavelli and many others, including Jesuits scholars, talked about political theory. The beginning of the political theory was developing back in Europe, and that theory affected how Europeans described Japanese political scenes.

"The Nagasaki martyrs were killed in 1597, before Chiara and Ferreira came to Japan, and many European historical documents consider them the first official martyrs in Japan."

Defining the authorities in Japan as tyrants made it easier to define authentic martyrs. José de Acosta wrote that the victims in the Florida mission could not be called authentic martyrs because they were not tortured and judged by inquisitors under the political system, under the rule of the tyrants. Japan, by contrast, was the perfect setting to define tortured and executed Christians as martyrs.

HEVELONE: Could you say something about how the death of the twenty-six martyrs of Nagasaki relates to these pseudo-martyrdom accounts we're talking about—with Chiara and Ferreira, who actually apostatized and became part of the Japanese society?

OMATA RAPPO: The Nagasaki martyrs were killed in 1597, before Chiara and Ferreira came to Japan, and many European historical documents consider them the first official martyrs in Japan. Other Japanese scholars say there was a case of martyrdom before them. However, the Nagasaki martyrs were the most famous because they were the first to be beatified and then, later, canonized. They were beatified in 1627, which is fast because they were killed only three decades earlier.

One reason why they became famous was that the Franciscans promoted their beatifications. There are several reasons they were beatified. First, they were crucified. Crucified like Christ, but this was a typical action taken by Japanese government officials, who were ignorant of Jesus Christ's death. It was a normal measure at that time for criminals.

HEVELONE: I assumed that it was a mocking of the Christian crucifixion narrative, but it was totally coincidental?

OMATA RAPPO: Yes, it was a total coincidence, and it was not exactly like the crucifixion that Jesus Christ allegedly experienced because the format was different, the materials were different. It was a big deal for the Catholic Christians at that time back in Europe, and even Protestants objected that it could not be true—because it's the way Jesus Christ died. That's one of the reasons the Franciscans promoted the twenty-six martyrs.

The second reason is that the Japanese authority at that time, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, was considered to be the perfect tyrant. He did reflect the definition of a tyrant at that time in Europe, but this was during the process of unification of Japan after a long civil war.

The third reason is that there was a political reason for Franciscans to promote the Nagasaki martyrs as official martyrs through beatification. When the Jesuits first arrived in Japan, they held a near-monopoly on missionary activities in Japan. Then the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustines arrived, and had totally different principles of evangelism. The most important of the twenty-six martyrs were Franciscans, and official Jesuits were not among them. Only three of the victims were connected with Jesuits, and only slightly. The ecclesial conflict back in Europe, between Franciscans and Jesuits, influenced the Franciscan promotion of these martyrs.

The fourth reason why they were officially recognized is the Japanese Hasekura embassy to Rome in 1615. This embassy was sent by a local lord in Northern Japan with the help of the Franciscans. Its object was not to promote beatifications; he wanted to have a commercial tie with Mexico and Spain. But that mission was used to promote Franciscan-victims' beatification.

The fifth reason why they were so adored, especially among the Japanese Christians, relates to Japanese promotion of the martyrs after the Meiji restoration in 1868. At that time, Japan was trying to integrate itself into international society, where colonialism was taken as a measure of having ties with the Western world. Japan succeeded in avoiding colonization in the first phase, but they tried to be equal with European and American countries at this time. They used the martyrs' image to promote their Christian country's image—not as a persecutor of Christians, but as a territory of martyrs. The same thing happened just after World War II.

HEVELONE: With Nagasaki being hit by the atomic bomb?

OMATA RAPPO: The discourse on the Nagasaki bomb victims was partnered with victims of Japanese persecution. That connection came easily for certain

Japanese intellectuals and was accepted in the Western world. Just after World War II, German-speaking Jesuits promoted the study of Japanese martyrdom. Sophia University was not destroyed by the Japanese, in spite of the fact that Christianity was persecuted during the Second World War as the face of the enemies. Many missionaries and many priests were German. They succeeded in continuing the university by saying that they could cooperate with the military government at that time. For example, by giving the latest model of their military airplane from Germany to Japan. There was a secret, unwritten, and unspoken history of cooperation between that part of the Catholic Church and the Japanese military government.

The same group continued the study of Japanese martyrdom after World War II, in part because there were more studies that concentrated on the twenty-six martyrs. Many of the studies were conducted in the 1950's or 1960's in Japan. It is connected with the Jesuits from German-speaking world who studied martyred missionaries.

HEVELONE: The Twenty-Six Martyr Museum was founded in that period.

OMATA RAPPO: Yes, exactly. That's the cooperation.

HEVELONE: What is your opinion of the film adaptation of *Silence*? We know it was not a financial success, but how do you think it will be received in the U.S. and abroad as a literary retelling of these events?

OMATA RAPPO: I am not sure. I heard that South American film critics are very harsh towards the film. According to one critic, it's monotonic. It's a stereotype of American films, but there is no sex scenes, no romantic scene, no obvious scene of victory, or triumphant excitement. It's not amusement as a film.

HEVELONE: No, it's painful as a film, I thought.

OMATA RAPPO: At the event, Fr. Blake called the film "torture porn." From an entertainment point of view, it might attract people with a certain taste. But as a whole, in general, I don't think Hollywood or Broadway would be able to understand the film without background. It's a subtle way to convey Scorsese's message. For example, certain intellectuals could decide that there is no strong protest about an anti-colonial point of view, but actually, there is. We need to concentrate on the discourses and the way they describe the history. It's a more subtle way to convey the message, com-

pared to another famous Jesuit movie, *The Mission*.

Film studies, by Jesuits here and other people teaching the history of Jesuit missions, use *The Mission* because it's kind of a Jesuit version of *The Last Samurai* or *Dances With Wolves*. It's easy to understand and accept that film as a part of the Jesuit story, where the Jesuits are relatable partners with the local culture and indigenous people. The message is contrary in *Silence*. For certain Jesuits, it might be hard to accept—for serious Japanese Christians too. Some people did not agree with the original novel's ideas. There is even a book published against Endo, not by Jesuits, but by Japanese Catholic priests.

HEVELONE: Who thought Endo was too revelatory of the difficulties in the Christian endeavor in Japan?

OMATA RAPPO: Yes, but Endo's real mission was to dismantle the fact that Christianity is sometimes used as a discourse or rhetoric of moral superiority by Western cultures when they evangelized, which is exactly what he experienced in Europe when he was a student on scholarship in France in the 1950s. He specialized in French Catholic literature of the nineteenth century.

The fact that he was able to leave Japan in the '50s was very unusual, because it was under the control of Douglas MacArthur and the American government, so Endo was not free of the movement restrictions enforced by the American occupation regime. They took his passport and visa, of course. But at the same time Douglas MacArthur was promoting the studies of students, especially Christian people studying abroad.

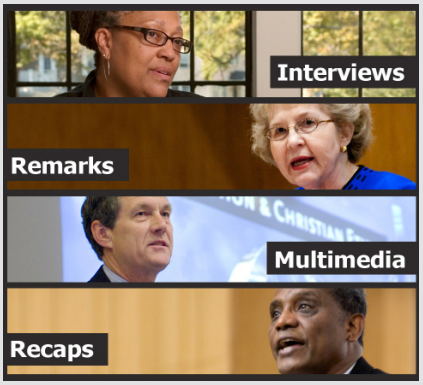
The reason Endo was allowed to do so was that he was a member of a group of five young Japanese Christians who were chosen by the French Catholic Church in order to go abroad and study. The Church's objective was to educate a new class of Christian intellectuals in the country. However, they had trouble getting passports, and the Church had to negotiate with the occupation headquarters. They agreed to let them go, mostly because they were Christians.

Endo's entire studies were financed by the Catholic Church, and he had an objective to restore post-war Japan morally and intellectually. He was conscious of himself as a representative of a Japanese Catholic intellectual in France. He said later that at that time he had difficulty understanding the Western culture based on Catholic Christianity in France, and that he felt excluded from it. That difficulty became the theme through all his novels. What he wanted to convey is not an attack on Christianity itself, but an attempt to talk about the ways that Western cultures sometimes used Christianity as the means of Western moral superiority. Certain people could not conceive that. This was very hard to accept as a Japanese Christian who was fascinated by the West, and he felt rejected after his negative experience in France. This is one of the main issues that drove him to write *Silence*.

HEVELONE: This is fascinating. Thank you for your time, both now and at the event.

OMATA RAPPO: It was a pleasure.

[END]



Visit **bc.edu/boisi-resources** for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860
fax 617-552-1863
boisi.center@bc.edu

boisicenter

@boisi_center