

## Maria Kwannon

When the Christianity introduced in Japan in the middle of the sixteenth century extensively spread and jeopardised the domestic political situation, the Tokugawa Shogunate government finally issued a Christianity Prohibition Edict in 1614 to wipe out Christians from the country. Many devotees who could not abandon their religion chose the way to be gracefully executed, as in the story of “Martyrdom at Hokusanshima, Yonezawa” appended in my last year’s season’s greetings. Many others, on the other hand, determined their mind to pretend to be Buddhists and tried to keep their faith to the Lord. In fact, it was a surprising event that, after the county was reopened to the world in 1850s, a group of Kakure Kirishitans (lit. clandestine Christians) who had secretly inherited their ancestors’ religion for more than ten generations showed up at a church newly erected by a foreign mission in Nagasaki, being called “the discovery of Christians”.

Maria Kwannon, or Kosodate Kwannon (lit. child-raising Kwannon, Kwannon = Skt. Avalokitesvara, Goddess of Mercy), was an object which those Kirishitans worshipped, and various kinds made of wood, stone, bronze and ceramic, survive in Japan. On a winter day in 2004 during my stay in Yonezawa, I visited Ryūsenji, an austere Zen temple, located in a rural town, Higashine, with my friend, and we were received by a young priest, Rev. Kenyā Takahashi, who had kindly cleared snow for my car. He guided us into a small hall, next to the temple’s main hall, where the statue of the front-page photograph was placed, and told the legend.

“On one evening in the early seventeenth century, a traveller carrying a large luggage on his back came to the temple and requested accommodation for the night. Next morning he said he was going to Sendai, the principal city in the North-East District, Japan, and asked the chief priest to keep the luggage for a while until he would return, as carrying it over the mountainous road for some 40 miles would be pretty hard. However, the traveller never came back for some reason. When the priest uncovered the linen-wrapped luggage, a statue of the Mother holding the Infant appeared.

Afraid of falling under the suspicion of the authority, he wrapped it again and hid it in the space underneath the floor of the main hall, but a man of religion, he was in agony for his own conduct to have deposited the holy article for people of a different faith in such a dirty place. Eventually, the priest provided an aureole and a pedestal of both Buddhism styles and respectfully installed the statue in a miniature shrine.” No document was left and the story was orally passed down from generation to generation.

The wooden statue, measuring some 40 cm height, was well preserved and the colour and the gilt were still vivid. When I looked close at it, both the merciful face of the mother and the ingenuous face of the baby depicted the feature of the Caucasian. The baby’s dress with a frilled collar was clearly of European design. The sitting style of the mother itself was that which was uncommon in Japan. Presumably, the statue was a work of a contemporary domestic artist who saw some European pictures, if it were not an imported one. Indeed such a realistic Maria Kwannon is very rare, whereas most others are cleverly disguised not only into true Kwannon but also Jizō (= Skt. Kṣitigarbha, Saviour from the torments of hell) or some other figures, sometimes a sign of cross being hidden somewhere in it.

A unique example I saw was a piece which looked to me more like a doll, enshrined in the unknown past in another Zen temple, Sōsenji, in Ōsato town, near Sendai, and now cared by Rev. Dōyū Mitamura.



Ryusenji Temple  
Higashine, Yamagata Pref. (20/1/2004)



Maria Kwannon,  
Sōsenji Temple, Ōsato,  
Near Sendai (18/2/ 2004)

(裏面邦譯)

## マリア観音

16世紀中葉に日本に傳來した基督教が遍く普及して國內の政治状況を脅かした時、徳川政府は、遂に1614年、基督教徒を國から一掃する爲に切支丹禁止令を公布しました。信仰を捨切れぬ數多の信者は、昨年の私の季節の挨拶に附した「米澤北山原の殉教」の話のやうに、潔く處刑を受ける道を選びましたが、他の多くの信者は佛教徒を装ひ、主への信仰を保とうと決心しました。事實、1850年代にこの國が世界に再び開かれた後、十世代以上にも互って先祖の宗教を繼承した隠れ切支丹のグループが、長崎に新たに異國宣教團に依って建立された教會に姿を現したのは驚くべき出來事で、「基督教徒の發見」と呼ばれました。

マリア観音(別名子育観音、観音=(梵)アヴァローキテーシュヴァラ、慈悲の女神)は切支丹が信仰の對象としたもので、木製、石製、青銅製、陶製の様々な種類のもが現存してあります。米澤滞在中の2004年の冬の或る日、私は友人を誘って田舎町東根の質素な龍泉禪寺を訪ね、私の車のために親切に雪除けをしておいて呉れた若い方丈、高橋賢雄師に迎へられました。彼は私達を本堂脇の、表面の写真の像のある部屋に案内し、傳承を語って呉れました。

「17世紀初めの或る夕方、大きな荷を背負った旅人がこの寺に來て一夜の宿を乞ひました。翌朝、彼は日本の東北地方の大都である仙臺に赴くと言ひ、その荷を担ひで十數里の山道を行くのは難儀ゆへ、歸つて來るまで暫く預かつて呉れるやうに頼みました。然し彼は何の理由でか、終ぞ戻つて來ませんでした。方丈が麻布包みの荷を解くと、聖母が幼子を抱いた御像が現れました。お上に嫌疑を掛けられるのを怖れた彼は、御像を再び包んで本堂の床下に隠しました。然し、一宗教家である彼は、異教徒にとっては神聖な物を左やうな粗末な場所に置いた自分自身の行爲に苛まれました。結局、方丈は佛教様式の光背と臺座を設へ、御像を厨子の中に丁寧に安置しました。」文書は残されず、この話は代々口頭で傳へられました。

高さ約40cmの此の木彫の御像は状態良く保存され、彩色と塗金は今も鮮かでした。近寄つて見ると、慈愛に満ちた聖母の顔と無邪氣な幼子の顔は西洋人の容貌を寫してみました。フリルのある襟付のベビー服は歐風デザインのものでした。母親の座法自體、日本では普通でない型のものでした。恐らくは、この御像は、若し渡來品でないならば、歐州の繪畫を見た同時代の本邦の藝術家の作品でありませう。實際、斯やうに迫眞的なマリア観音は大變に稀で、他の殆どは正眞の觀音様又は地藏様(=梵)クシティガルバ、地獄での苦惱からの救濟者)等の姿に巧妙に似せて作られ、時には何處かに十字架の印が隠されてあります。

私の見た中でユニークな例は、仙臺近郊大郷町の禪宗糟川寺に何時の時にか祀られ、現在三田村道雄師によって庇保されてある御像で、私には寧ろお人形様のやうに見へました。