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Ninja, Hidden Christians, and the Two Ferreiras: On Endō Shūsaku and Yamada Fūtarō

Thomas Pynchon's alternately fun and melancholic West Coast romance *Vineland* (1990), the fourth novel by the master of American postmodern literature, probes the essence of eighties culture from the perspective of sixties radicals. Yet we should not overlook the host of Japanese signifiers playing beneath the surface of the simple narrative. In addition to the ninja master Inoshiro-sensei and his student DL Chastain, who belongs to the Caucasian female ninja corps called "Kunoichi Attentives," over-the-top ninja signifiers are deployed one after another—from the *Fist of the North Star*-like "Vibrating Palm" that dooms its victims to eventual death one year later, to the high-tech Oriental regenerative machine called the Puncutron that can save them.¹

THE DESIRE FOR A BLACK COSTUME

The average American reader of *Vineland* will see the influence of stereotypically "Japanesque" ninja novels and Hollywood films that rose to sudden popularity in the wake of eighties-era go-go capitalism and Pax Japonica. Shimura Masao points out that Eric Van Lustbader's 1980 novel *The Ninja* was

followed by the hit films *Enter the Ninja* (1981), *Revenge of the Ninja* (1983), and *Ninja III: The Domination* (1984), starring the Japanese actor Shō Kosugi. Also riding the ninja boom were the Caucasian ninja series *American Ninja* (1985), starring Michael Dudikoff, and then, starting in the late eighties, the various *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* films and TV series, about turtles from New York raised by an Oriental rat who is accomplished in the ninja arts.²

Each of these works was popular in its own way, so it is by no means a coincidence that cyberpunk texts like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985), which triggered the boom in cyberpunk science fiction, were so keenly aware of ninja culture and so easily integrated it into the hacker's culture of jacking into cyberspace to steal information and sell it off bit by bit. While Pynchon's taste for the Japanesque dates back to the kamikaze combo in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), what is new and important here is that cyberpunk writers, whose development was tremendously impacted by Pynchon, mixed in the figure of the ninja when they created the postmodern Luddite saboteur called the "hacker" in the eighties; then at the start of the nineties, Pynchon himself took this and made it the basis of an impressively comical series of reciprocal literary-historical negotiations in *Vineland*, with its cadre of Caucasian *kunoichi* female ninja.³

Consider American films like *Ninja III: The Domination* (1984)—which establishes the potential of the white female ninja in the way it depicts a Caucasian woman possessed by the spirit of a ninja—and 1987's *American Ninja 2: The Confrontation*, which advances the preposterous idea that a ninja's genes could be reused to mass-produce killer replicants. These works insisted that not only is the ninja no longer confined to an extinct Japanese culture of the past but that, through a process of self-mastery, non-Japanese may also be initiated into what are now transhistorical and multinational traditional arts. Without a doubt, Pynchon's *Vineland* is a further extension of this way of thinking. In American postmodern culture the ninja was chosen and cultivated as the figure that could most strikingly represent humans' dual nature as both cyborg (man-machine interface) and creole (multicultural intermixing).

However, the average reader in Japan might respond very differently to the same ninja-based context of *Vineland*. Instead of running on about Pynchon's Japanesque interests, he or she would more likely point out that the book was "like something out of Yamada Fūtarō," whose *Ninpōchō* (Ninja Scrolls) series first appeared in 1958 and became a bestseller in 1963.⁴ As Kasai Kiyoshi and others have indicated, Fūtarō's novels have influenced later Japanese ninja manga like Shirato Sampei's *Ninja bugeichō* (1959–62, Ninja martial arts scroll), Yokoyama Mitsuteru's *Iga no Kagemaru* (1961–66, Kagemaru

of Iga), and Hisamatsu Fumio's *Kaze no Fujimaru* (1964–65, *Fujimaru of the wind*). Through their influence on Ishinomori Shōtarō's manga *Cyborg 009* (which started in 1964), Fūtarō's novels have also shaped the special-effects-driven television superhero shows in Japan now known as "*sentai* series." This is clear from looking at the

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television genealogy that extends from *Ninja butai gekkō* (1964–66, *Phantom Agents*) to *Ninja sentai kakurenjaa* (1994–95, *Ninja squadron hidden ranger*), and the American show that incorporated the latter, *Power Rangers* (1993).⁵ The history of Japanese television films, which began in 1953, has given rise to innumerable superheroes based on the ninja template.

With this context in mind, a Japanese reader of *Vineland* might look at the importation into English of Fūtarō's trademark term "*kunoichi*" and other elements—the blending of sexual relations with ninja killing techniques, the creation of a fantastic machine for bringing people back to life, or tricks for brainwashing minorities that make free use of feminist theology—and wrongly assume that Pynchon (resurrected by cyberpunk), had set out to write a sequel to Yamada Fūtarō's *Kunoichi ninpōchō* (1961, *Kunoichi ninja scrolls*).⁶ Of course Pynchon was unable to read Japanese. Rather, what is fascinating is that the ninja culture that proliferated through a web of cultural misreadings in Hollywood films and American paperbacks went round and round and incredibly—without anyone being aware of it—converged again with the Yamada Fūtarō narrative elements that constituted the origin and orthodoxy of the genre in Japan. If African-American author Toni Morrison once made her heroine a black girl who yearned for blue eyes, now protagonists are increasingly Japanophilic Caucasian-outlaw-technologists longing to dress in black ninja garb. In this way, those who draw near to the cyborg dimension also approach creolization at the exact same time.

THE NINJA'S SORCERY, THE HIDDEN CHRISTIAN'S TECHNOLOGY

To reexamine these issues, it is worth considering a text that has been called one of Yamada Fūtarō's biggest flops, but also numbers among his most beloved works: *Gedō ninpōchō* (1962, *Heretical doctrine of the ninja scrolls*).⁷

The extraordinarily far-fetched plot revolves around a vast treasure hoard brought back from Rome by the late sixteenth-century Japanese youth and Catholic emissary Julian Nakaura. The treasure was scattered and its location concealed, incredibly, in the very vaginas of fifteen virgins with ninja powers. Ninja from the Iga and Koga clans join forces to seek it out. Referring to *Kunoichi ninpōchō*, upon which this work is based, we see a similar group of heroines on a holy quest: the female ninja in that story carries the unborn child of the warlord Hideyori and keeps it from the evil clutches of the Tokugawa government. Among the most Fūtarō-esque ninja techniques is the “*kunoichi yadokari*” (literally “borrowed house”) described in that novel: when a pregnant female ninja finds herself in physical danger she can transfer her fetus to the body of another woman. Moreover, the woman who carries the baby as the “borrowed womb” in the story ironically turns out to be none other than Kasuga no Tsubone (Ofuku), who should be the enemy of the pregnant ninja. As the child moves from one womb to another, the irresistible story has the renowned Kasuga no Tsubone, an exceptionally loyal follower of the Tokugawa family, carrying Toyotomi Hideyori’s illegitimate child by the female ninja Omayu. While hardly as miraculous as the Virgin Mary’s immaculate conception or the technology of the surrogate mothers depicted in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), this represents a

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OF JAPAN’S HIDDEN CHRISTIANS.**

shocking form of “birth control” (ninpō). This sensibility might be easier to understand today translated into our own electronic culture, as the theft of the Holy Grail of top-secret information by cyberspace cowboys, who shift and graft the information from one file to another. Conversely, we may also say that the post-cyberpunk spate of Hollywood

films that feature zombie-like transmigration and genetically engineered mass production of ninja have always already been set in the mold of Yamada Fūtarō’s ninja stories.

In terms of the period background that enabled Fūtarō to convert the legend of the Holy Grail into a gold rush narrative, we should, of course, bear in mind his own historical context: the postwar ruins of the 1950s, with black marketeers and scrap-metal thieves hustling to survive. But Fūtarō continued to probe these themes in a work from the 1960s, *Ginga ninpōchō* (1968, Milky Way ninja scrolls), which foregrounds the structural tensions and internal contradictions between high-tech and low-tech, between a “big science”

supported by the “white arts” versus the “black arts” of outlaw technology.⁸ While it appears in that story that the ancient black arts represented by ninja techniques are overtaken by the new white arts of Western science, nevertheless the Tokugawa technocrat Ōkubo Nagayasu ironically suffers defeat at the hands of the villain Rokumonsen no Tetsu. And there is the added irony that even Nagayasu’s white arts retain a faint connection to the machinery of the Inquisition and other modes of thought originally tied to the black arts.

Precisely because of its connections to Fūtarō’s later work, and in spite of its obvious narratological shortcomings, *Gedō ninpōchō* deserves praise as an experiment that seeks to bring together the sorcery of the ninja with the concealed esotericism of Japan’s hidden Christians, who practiced their religion in secret after it was outlawed by the shogunal government in the seventeenth century. Like the ninjas, hidden Christians were a closeted group who concealed themselves stealthily in the darkness, and their isolation from Western missionaries as well as the need to disguise their religion eventually transformed their Christian practices into something like esoteric hybrid ceremonies. The Kunoichi art of womb transfer suggests that ninja techniques are black arts that seek out and protect a signifier that might be compared to gold or currency, then transfer it from one vessel to another, preserving it even as they alter its form (in this respect these arts constitute a self-referential figure for the cultural history of the ninja themselves). In this case it seems inevitable that the hidden Christians should manifest themselves as the ninja’s virtual twins, transforming, disguising, and preserving their Christianity in the same way. So the ninja’s transformation into a multi-cultural symbol actually begins much earlier than the late twentieth century: since the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century persecution of Christians in Japan, the ninja has been the mediator who secretly grafts one culture onto another, the closest analog to the hidden early Christians in the way it embodies the cyborg/creole hybrid subject.

FŪTARŌ’S FERREIRA AND ENDŌ’S FERREIRA

Let us explore the way *Gedō ninpōchō* incorporates the story of the seventeenth-century apostate priest Padre Cristóvão Ferreira. According to historical record, Ferreira was born in Portugal in 1580, entered the Jesuit order at age sixteen, and set off for the East at twenty-one. He was ordained a priest in Macao and gave his first mass there. In 1609, at the age of twenty-nine, he headed to Japan to spread the faith. But in 1614 the Tokugawa government

announced severe edicts against the Christian faith, and among the hardships visited on the Christians, many priests were expelled from the country. It was a time of difficult circumstances when only those like Ferreira, who were resolved to face martyrdom, remained secretly in Japan.

Almost twenty years later, in 1633, Ferreira was captured by Inoue, the magistrate of Chikugo. Although no one predicted Ferreira would ever turn apostate, the priest did the unthinkable and tragically renounced his faith after being tied up and suspended upside down in an offal pit for five hours. His renunciation may trace to the fact that he survived and suffered long past the point where most died, and this experience had the psychological effect of stripping from him altogether the unique heroism of a martyr. Thereafter Ferreira received the name and former wife of an executed prisoner, and henceforth was known as Sawano Chūan. He became the magistrate's right-hand man in the pursuit of missionaries, earning his infamy as the author of the anti-Christian tract *Kengiroku* (1636, *The deceit disclosed*), and the inventor of the *fumie*, a small image of Christ that suspected Christians were forced to step on to prove they were not believers.

Of course, given the circumstances of Ferreira's death from illness in 1650, there is convincing evidence that he was remartyred, and the most persuasive reading, especially in Japan, has been that for the rest of his life Ferreira cursed himself for his apostasy rather than sincerely embracing Buddhism. Particularly in the context of post-World War II discussions about the wartime collaboration or "conversion" of prewar progressives (*tenkōron*), there has been a tendency to see a Christianity that justified the weak and the betrayer—the Christianity of the compassionate mother Mary rather than of a strict father—as somehow appropriate for Japan. For example, this is the central theme of Endō Shūsaku's novel *Silence* (*Chinmoku*), which won the Tanizaki Jun'ichirō Award in 1966. The novel depicts not only Ferreira but also his disciple, Padre Sebastian Rodriguez, who journeys to Japan hunting for Ferreira and becomes the hunted: he tries to convince Ferreira of the error of his ways only to end up treading on the *fumie* himself. In Endō's novel, Ferreira's apostasy is actually premised on a deeper Christian faith, which cannot escape the paradoxical conclusion that Christ, too, would likely have trampled on the *fumie*. It is Endō's interpretation that Ferreira renounces the faith to stave off the unbearable suffering and death of countless Christian believers. It is this philosophy that Endō's Ferreira imparts to Rodriguez:

"I did not apostatize because I was suspended in the pit. . . . The reason I apostatized . . . are you ready? Listen! I was put in here and heard the voices

of those people for whom God did nothing. God did not do a single thing. . . . A priest ought to live in imitation of Christ. . . . Certainly Christ would have apostatized for them. . . . You are now going to perform the most painful act of love that has ever been performed,” said Ferreira, taking the priest gently by the shoulder.⁹

Yamada Fūtarō was virtually the same age as Endō (the former was born in 1922, the latter in 1923), and he published *Gedō ninpōchō* in 1962, just four years before *Silence*. In Fūtarō’s work, Ferreira regards those who relinquish their faith as lower than animals and plots a way to make them apostatize. Here he explains himself to Monica Okyō, one of the fifteen virgins hiding the secret treasure:

You want to know why I renounced the faith? . . . How can I put it in words? Was it the sickness of emotional perversity (*kanjō tōsakushō*)? . . . Well, in the end I convinced myself that the thing I feared the most is what would make me happiest: I began to love and delight in evil, ugliness, and suffering, and to despise honor, peace, wealth, and epicurean delights. I didn’t surrender to the pain of torture; I was converted by the pleasure of torture. . . . I know only too well what a sinner I am. I am worse than you think, believe me, a thousand times worse. That’s why every day I am happy, so happy I can scarcely bear it!¹⁰

On one hand, Endō’s Ferreira sees no contradiction between the despair of the colonizer and the morality of the apostate, and thus makes his disciple Rodriguez into a copy of himself. On the other hand, Fūtarō’s Ferreira retrieves the secret treasure from Monica Okyō’s body using a magical sexual technique to control a finger that is virtually an artificial cyborg organ. But what is most notable is the fact that Fūtarō had his own Rodriguez: in the 1950 short story that formed the model for *Gedō ninpōchō*, “Yama yashiki hizu” (Secret map to the mountain mansion), the Sicilian priest Giuseppe Chiara (Endō’s model for Rodriguez) is already connected with Ferreira.¹¹ *Gedō ninpōchō* carries this association even further, boldly merging Ferreira’s and Chiara’s apostate personalities into one. It is unclear whether Endō himself read “Yama yashiki hizu,” but regardless, what is striking about this juxtaposition is the way the cyborg-like figure of Ferreira in Fūtarō’s early popular novel and the creolized figure of Ferreira in Endō’s belles-lettres (*jun bungaku*) novel both parody and complement one another.

Both of these authors used the apostate priest as a central figure of their

narratives. Moreover, not only did they endorse the Japanese sixties discourse of conversion (*tenkōron*), but, within different literary frames of reference, each expressed the perverse logic of a period when differing cultures

WHAT THE REPRESENTATIONS OF FERREIRA IN JAPANESE LITERATURE SIGNIFY IS A CONVERSION TECHNOLOGY THAT TRANSCENDS THE NARROWLY FRAMED POLITICAL DISPUTES OF THE POSTWAR PERIOD AND INSTEAD TREATS CONVERSION IN A BROADER POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT.

were grafted together. Within the postwar discourse of conversion theory, Fujii Shōzō associates conversion less with submissiveness to power than with things premised on freedom, like “breakthrough,” “disillusionment,” “frustration,” and “change of heart” (*kaishin*).¹² Yet what the representations of Ferreira in Japanese literature signify is a conversion technology that transcends the narrowly framed political disputes of the postwar period (disputes surrounding the U.S.–Japan Joint Security Treaty and Japan’s international responsibilities)

and instead treats conversion in a broader postcolonial context. What Endō Shūsaku realized was the paradox that the Jesuit missionaries did not Christianize the Japanese; rather, the Christian faith taught by the missionaries was Japanized to conform with the Japanese mother complex or perhaps the structure of dependency called *amae no kōzō*. At the same time Yamada Futarō came up with the corresponding notion that Ferreira is reconverted by the Christian female ninja Monica Okyō, who uses her ninja powers to brand on his retinas the image of a cross written in blood.

This point brings us back to the conversionary context of Pynchon’s *Vineland*, in which the Japanese man Takeshi Fumimota is brought back to life by the Puncutron resurrection machine, then brainwashed by something like feminist theology. Of course, the Puncutron is conceived as a kind of Oriental medical technology, a Westernized version of an acupuncture technique based on yin-yang and the five elements. Piling up one form of pseudoscience on another like this may seem to be overkill. Yokoyama Kuninori points out that yin-yang philosophy did not necessarily precede and produce the superior results of Chinese acupuncture; it would be more accurate to say conversely that it was only because this supremely effective *practical* technology existed that an intellectual pretext was invented to explain it.¹³ Today Western medicine has been grafted onto these Eastern medical practices, by combining the needles with electric stimulation to produce electro-acupuncture and laser acupuncture devices. These kinds of high-tech results force us to consider the possibility that already in the age of the hidden Christians and ninja, it was

not so much that these techniques were produced from a philosophy (*shisō*) but that the products of technology led to a philosophical conversion.

JAPAN’S HEART OF DARKNESS

As suggested by narratives of colonialism from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to Francis Ford Coppola’s film adaptation *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and the 1995 movie *Congo* (based on Michael Crichton’s 1980 novel), Christian missionaries traveled from the darkness of the West to the darkness of Japan, and were lured deeper and deeper into the heart of that blackness.

All this casts new light on the almost eerie coincidences between Fūtarō’s popular novel *Gedō ninpōchō* and Endō’s literary one, *Silence*, and the way these two books that were originally from very different literary contexts bear mutual testimony to the schema of the hunter becoming the hunted (*miira tori ga miira to kasu*). These coincidences must be examined from a postcolonial position that goes beyond ideas of faith or conversion, to arrive at a horizon where cyborg and creole are no longer contradictions. What lies in store for us is a point where the strange figure of Marlon Brando’s Kurtz, the colonizer who becomes a god to the jungle natives in *Apocalypse Now*, melds not just with the images of science fiction, like H. G. Wells’s genetic engineer Dr. Moreau, but with the apostate priest Cristóvão Ferreira, or even the French missionary Bernard Petitjean, who encountered the hidden Christians after Japan was reopened in the nineteenth century: their completely distorted religious customs shocked him, but also allowed him to reconfirm his own beliefs.¹⁴

This is a colonizing journey not only in space—from West to East, from the Christian world to the Buddhist one—but a trip we take from our own late-capitalist present into the history of Japan’s seventeenth century. Slipstream literature, with its affinity for alternate history novels, may be part of this great exploration, a virtual Orientalist experience open to everyone. If so, then Yamada Fūtarō’s ninja stories are an unmatched expression of that literature, shot through with the fantasy that if you but set out, you may never return from the heart of darkness, and yet also the illusion that there is nothing greater than these forbidden pleasures.

Notes

1. Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990). Pynchon’s novel was translated by Satō Yoshiaki, and published by Shinchōsha in 1998.

2. Shimura Masao provided some insight into the negotiations between ninja fiction and ninja movies as a panelist on an “Exploring *Vineland*” panel at the Sixty-third Conference of the English Literary Society of Japan, held in May 1991 at Meiji University. The novel’s translator, Satō Yoshiaki, also appeared on the panel. Incidentally, I believe the resonance between *Vineland*’s Don Quixote-style anachronism and Yahagi Toshihiko’s *Suzuki-san no kyūsoku to henreki*, originally published the same year as Pynchon’s novel, is more than mere happenstance. Yahagi Toshihiko, *Suzuki-san no kyūsoku to henreki: Mata wa kakumo hokorakanaru dōshiibō no kikō* (Suzuki’s rest and pilgrimage) (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1994).

3. The Japanese word *kunoichi* (くノ一) is a graphic word play on the Chinese character for woman (女), which appears to be made up of two conjoined *kana* syllables—*hiragana ku* (く) and *katakana no* (ノ)—bisected by the Chinese character for one, *ichi* (一). For general information on ninja, see “Ketteiban: Ninja no subete” (The authoritative edition: All about the ninja), special issue of *Rekishi dokuhon* (December 1991). In English, see Tomiki Kenji, “Ninjutsu,” *Kōdansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1983), 6–7.

4. For information on Yamada Fūtarō, see these special magazine and journal issues devoted to the author: *Tōkyōjin* (December 1996), *Bessatsu shinhyō* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979), and *GQ* (March 1995). For a science-fictional reading of Fūtarō, see Sui Kyoshi, *Midare sappō SF hikae* (Osaka: Seishinsha, 1991). In English, see the first novel in the *Ninja Scrolls* series, *Kōga ninpōchō*, which was translated by Geoff Sant as *The Koga Ninja Scrolls* (New York: Del Rey, 2006) and was the basis for the 2005 film *Shinobi: Heart under Blade*, dir. Shimoyama Ten, subtitled DVD (Funimation, 2007).

5. Kasai Kiyoshi, *Kaisetsu* (Afterword) to *Kenki Ramabutsu* (The great Lamaist swordman), by Yamada Fūtarō (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994), 362–67. Saitō Minako points out that the lone woman in these later series is a “‘a solitary flower’ among the team members,” making her a descendant of Yamada Fūtarō’s female ninja. Saitō Minako, “Kurenai no senshi: Hiirō dorama no hirointachi” (Scarlet warriors: The heroines of heroic dramas) in *Haipaa voisu*, ed. Arimitsu Mamiko et al. (Tokyo: Just System, 1966), 94–117.

6. Yamada Fūtarō, *Kunoichi ninpōchō* (Kunoichi ninja scrolls) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1960).

7. Yamada Fūtarō, *Gedō ninpōchō* (Heretical doctrine of the ninja scrolls) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1962).

8. Yamada Fūtarō, *Ginga ninpōchō* (Milky Way ninja scrolls) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1968). The original title was *Amanogawa o kiru* (Slashing the Milky Way).

9. Endō Shūsaku, *Chinmoku* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1966); translated by William Johnston as *Silence* (Tokyo: Sophia University and Tuttle, 1969), 265–69. See also Endō’s novel *Kirishitan no sato* (Christian village) (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1964). It is worth noting in spite of the criticism Arai Sasagu leveled at Endō’s view of Jesus on historiographic grounds, later authors have conclusively sided with Endō’s vision regarding the strong emphasis on maternal love in Christian doctrine, especially since Endō’s *Iesu Kirisuto* (Jesus Christ) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1979). Arai Sasagu, *Iesu to sono jidai* (Jesus and his times) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1974); Endō Shūsaku et al., *Endō Shūsaku to Shūsaku Endo: Amerika “chinmoku to koe” Endō Shūsaku bungaku kenkyū gakkai hōkoku* (Endō Shūsaku and Shūsaku Endo: A report from the American Endō research group “Voices of silence”) (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1994).

10. Yamada, *Gedō ninpōchō*, chapter 1, section 3.

11. Yamada Fūtarō, “Yama yashiki hizu” (Secret map to the mountain mansion), in

Baishoku shito gyōden (Journey of the prostitute apostles), vol. 5 of *Yamada Fūtarō sōsaku tai-zen* (Works of Yamada Fūtarō) (Tokyo: Kōsaidō Bunko, 1996); originally published in *Omo-shiro kurabu* (November 1950). In the short story, the character's name is Joseph Chiara.

12. Fujii Shōzō, *Tenkō no shisōshiteki kenkyū* (The intellectual history of *tenkō*), vol. 2 of *Fujii Shōzō chosaku shū* (Works of Fujii Shōzō) (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 1997).

13. Yokoyama Kuninori, introduction to *Tōyō igaku o manabu hito no tame ni* (An introduction to Eastern medicine), ed. Yamashita Kumio et al. (Tokyo: Igaku Shoin, 1984).

14. See Yamada Fūtarō's 1956 short story "Himegimi doko ni orasu ka" (Where is the princess?) in *Baishoku shito gyōden*.