

Reading Shiina in the U.K.

Mark Williams

For five weeks this past summer, I was fortunate enough to be invited to further my research on Shiina Rinzo at the Christian Studies Institute at Meiji Gakuin University. I am particularly grateful to Professors Hashimoto and Mullins, who helped me with the necessary arrangements, but I also wish to thank all those whom I met during my stay: many were able to offer me invaluable insights into the significance of the literary contribution of this all-too-neglected author, and all were extremely gracious in their welcome and hospitality.

My interest in Shiina dates back to the years I spent at the University of California, Berkeley, preparing my PhD dissertation on what is loosely described as 'Japanese Christian literature' of the 20th century. Admittedly, there may be other names -- most notably that of Endo Shusaku -- that spring to mind before that of Shiina in this regard. There is, however, a profundity to the literary portrayals of his journey -- from tenuous affiliation to various communist interests in the early 1930s, his subsequent (inevitable) arrest and *tenko* and his eventual encounter with Christianity following the miserable years spent enduring the trials of wartime and Occupation Japan -- that is virtually unparalleled. Shiina's depictions of the ruins, both physical and spiritual, of the immediate postwar period are as evocative as any of those offered by his peers in the *sengoha* literary grouping -- and it is for these that he is best remembered (if indeed he is remembered at all!) Hindsight is not without its rewards, however, and neither his maiden novella, *Shinya no shuen*, nor his early attempts at full-length narratives (such as *Eien naru joshu*) can be fully appreciated without an appreciation of the significance of his gradual encounter with the living Christ of the gospel accounts that was taking place at the time of composition of these works. Little was made of this connection until publication of his award-winning *Utsukushii onna*, several years after his formal baptism into the Protestant tradition, but in retrospect, there is clear evidence, even in these earliest works of fiction, of an author engaged in far more than a struggle for physical survival. These works, too, are characterised by a plethora of protagonists, increasingly obliged to acknowledge a greater complexity to their inner being than they are initially able or willing to countenance -- and can be seen, as such, as moving the confessional trend evidenced in the prewar *shishosetsu* tradition to a more personal and profound level.

The Christian Studies Institute contains several resources, not readily available to scholars elsewhere, that can only enhance our understanding of

this depth. Most relevant in this regard are the various volumes of hand-written 'soosaku-note', Shiina's literary diary, written with amazing regularity and in a remarkably self-critical manner, during the course of the period in question. *O-kage-sama de*, I was able to spend several rewarding sessions -- with the 'air-con' there to keep me invaluable company! -- Trying to decipher Shiina's intricate handwriting, but with a growing sense of the struggle, conducted both with his body and his spirit, in which Shiina was embroiled as he wrote these early works. Five weeks is all too short, and I was able to do little more than scrape away at the surface. But I have returned to the UK with a pile of documents for further reading -- and, with these and what I hope will be further visits to your illustrious institution, I look forward to making my contribution, however small and modest, to a greater understanding, both in Japan and the outside world, of this most perceptive chronicler of postwar life in Japan.

My renewed thanks go to all who helped to make this such a rewarding summer.

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