

REVIEW ARTICLE

Biographical Studies of Nichiren

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TAKAGI Yutaka 高木 豊. *Nichiren: Sono kōdō to shisō* 日蓮—その行動と思想 [Nichiren: His actions and thought]. *Nihonjin no kōdō to shisō* 日本人の行動と思想 4. Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1970. 280 pp., including bibliography, chronology, and index.

TAMURA Yoshirō 田村芳朗. *Nichiren: Junkyō no nyoraishi* 日蓮—殉教の如来使 [Nichiren: Martyr and envoy of the Tathāgata]. NHK Bukkusu 240. Tokyo: Nippon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai, 1975. 221 pp., including chronology and bibliography.

KAWAZOE Shōji 川添昭二. *Nichiren to Mōko shūrai* 日蓮と蒙古襲来 [Nichiren and the Mongol invasion]. Kiyomizu Shinsho 清水新書 002. Tokyo: Kiyomizu Shoin, 1984. 226 pp., including chronology and bibliography.

ACCOUNTS OF NICHIREN'S LIFE go back to the early fourteenth century. Perhaps the earliest, the *Goden dodai* 御伝土代, was written by Nichidō 日道 (1283–1341), a third-generation disciple. What purports to be an autobiographical account contained within the apocryphal *Hokke honmonshū yōshō* 法華本門宗要鈔 (*STN* 3: 2158–68) probably dates from around the same time. Hagiographies of Nichiren continued to appear throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Over the centuries, the dramatic events of his life have been represented not only in written accounts but also in painting, sculpture, plays, novels, poetry, and, more recently, films and *manga*.¹ Critical scholarly biography

¹ Several influential medieval and early modern accounts are contained in *Nichiren Shōnin denkishū* (NICHIRENSHŪ ZENSHO KANKOKAI 1974). For an index of Nichiren biographical literature from the medieval period through 1981, see NICHIREN SHŌSHŪ 1982. For an overview of modern literary treatments of Nichiren, see ISHIKAWA 1980.

is another recent development. Especially since World War II, there has been a growing trend in scholarly Nichiren biography to explicitly reject the one-sided, stereotypical images of Nichiren found in sectarian hagiographies and popular representations and to present more nuanced, historically grounded treatments. Postwar Nichiren biographical studies also reflect the findings of modern bibliographic and critical textual work on the Nichiren collection. This review introduces three of the most important of these postwar Nichiren biographies.

The most outstanding overall modern biography of Nichiren is the late Takagi Yutaka's *Nichiren: Sono kōdō to shisō*. It presents a clearly written and comprehensive overview of Nichiren's life and thought, and Takagi's references direct the reader to other valuable sources for further study. His treatment is especially helpful in locating Nichiren within the early medieval *bushi* 武士 (warrior) society of the Kantō provinces, from which Nichiren drew most of his following.

In his introduction, Takagi summarizes the major difficulties encountered in an attempt to place Nichiren in historical context. First, there are no extant, external sources of the time that refer to him. This leaves Nichiren's own writings as the biographer's major primary source. Here, a second difficulty arises in that critical textual studies of this corpus are not yet complete or definitive, and the authenticity of some texts remains to be determined. Third is the issue of Nichiren's own retrospective editing in his autobiographical reflections, which in some cases appear to reconstruct his earlier thought and actions in light of his later conclusions. And fourth, data for Nichiren's early years, a formative period, are extremely limited.

A particular strength of this study, relative to the fourth point above, is Takagi's thoughtful reconstructions of the events of Nichiren's youth. While he modestly notes that these are no more than surmises based on a few fragmentary data and Nichiren's later reflections, they are plausible and thought-provoking. An example concerns Nichiren's hostility toward Pure Land practices, which appears in his earliest writings. It is virtually certain that, as a novice at Kiyosumidera 清澄寺 in Awa Province, Nichiren was taught to chant the *nenbutsu* 念仏 and also studied Pure Land teachings—probably Tendai Pure Land thought rather than the exclusive *nenbutsu*, which he would not have encountered until later. His teacher at Kiyosumidera, Dōzen-bō 道善房, was a *nenbutsu* practitioner, and Kiyosumidera itself is thought to have had ties with the Yokawa precinct of Mt. Hiei, which transmitted the Pure Land teachings of Genshin 源信 (942–1017). Why, then, should Nichiren so early on have developed an aversion to this extremely widespread practice? Takagi notes that Nichiren came to

have doubts about Pure Land practice even before arriving at his ultimate conviction in the exclusive truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* and suggests that these doubts may have had their basis less in doctrinal issues than in the experience of witnessing the painful death of some Pure Land practitioner close to him. The manner of one's death was widely understood at the time to be an index of that person's post-mortem fate, and a peaceful death was deemed a sign of attaining having reached the Pure Land. Jōdo teachings stressed that a good death and subsequent birth in the Pure Land were possible through chanting the *nenbutsu*, which was frequently employed as a deathbed practice. According to the medieval hagiography *Nichiren Shōnin chūgasan* 日蓮上人註画讃, Nichiren rejected the *nenbutsu* teachings during the period of his youthful studies in Kamakura when he learned that, contrary to the promise of such teachings, the Pure Land master Dai'a 大阿 had died in agony (*Nichiren Shōnin denkishū*, p. 87). While no evidence exists to suggest any historical connection between Nichiren and Dai'a, Takagi argues that witnessing something of this sort in his early years might well have engendered Nichiren's original doubts, doubts that would have then gained intellectual reinforcement as his doctrinal studies progressed. In support of this hypothesis, Tagaki notes that Nichiren's later writings make several references to agonizing deaths suffered by Pure Land devotees and, by contrast, to calm and dignified deaths that occurred among his own followers.

Takagi also offers an intriguing thesis about Nichiren's years on Mt. Hiei, where he studied for an extended period sometime between 1239 and 1252. Exactly what he studied or with whom is not known. Tradition holds that he became a disciple of Shunpan 俊範, who was then the *sōgakuto* 総学頭 or chief of doctrinal instruction for the mountain, a formidable Tendai scholar and current patriarch of the influential Eshin Sugiu 恵心栴生 lineage. However, Takagi argues that while Nichiren may have heard Shunpan's public lectures, he would not have been welcomed into the intimate circle of disciples surrounding this aristocratic master. First, his provincial dialect would have instantly identified him as a native of the Kantō, regarded by inhabitants of the imperial capital as a cultural backwater. Years later, in 1269, Nichiren wrote a letter in which he rebuked a disciple then studying in Kyoto for his slavish admiration of the court nobility: "No doubt you have also adopted the speech and accent of the capital.... Just use your own provincial speech" (*Hōmon mōsarubekiyo no koto* 法門可被申様之事, *STN* 1: 448–49). Takagi finds in this admonition Nichiren's recollection of the difficulties he himself must have suffered during his student days on account of his Kantō accent, whose hindrance he had eventually surmounted and in which he had even

come to take pride. Nichiren's low social status would also have presented an obstacle on Mt. Hiei, where aristocratic factions dominated the higher ranks of the clergy. Isolated and thrown back on his own resources, he might well have turned on his own to the sutras and commentaries, taking advantage of Hiei's extensive libraries. Though Nichiren would eventually trace his Dharma lineage from Śākyamuni through Zhiyi 智顛 (538-597) and Saichō 最澄 (767-822), he never did form a close personal relationship with any living person whom he revered throughout life as his teacher, as Dōgen did Ruzhing 如淨 or Shinran did Hōnen. It was during his early years on Hiei, Takagi suggests, that Nichiren developed his lifelong habit of turning to texts, rather than human teachers, for instruction and the resolution of doubts, an approach that he later equated with the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra's* admonition to "rely on the Dharma and not upon persons."

Equally suggestive is Takagi's reading of the events leading to Nichiren's ousting from Kiyosumi-dera, to which he returned around 1252, at about the age of thirty-one, following his studies in the region of the capital (see also TAKAGI 1966). Nichiren gave his first public sermon at Kiyosumi-dera on 4/28/1253, a date traditionally observed as marking the founding of the Nichiren sect. Nichiren himself certainly had no intention at the time of founding a new sect, and the content of his lecture is not known, but it presumably included some criticism of Pure Land practices. Traditional hagiographies say that he was forced to flee the temple that very day to escape the wrath of Tōjō Kagenobu 東条景信, the local *jitō* 地頭 or Bakufu steward and a *nenbutsu* devotee. Takagi, however, suggests that Nichiren probably did not leave until the winter of 1254. In the meantime, his presence polarized the Kiyosumi-dera community into two factions struggling for its leadership, those who opted for what had become a traditional mode of Tendai practice combining Lotus and Pure Land elements, and those who, following Nichiren, chose a more exclusively Lotus-based form of practice. This conflict, Takagi suggests, was inseparably intertwined with a parallel struggle over rights concerning the *shōen* 莊園 or estate on which the temple stood, between the *jitō* Kagenobu and the hereditary *shōen* proprietor, a woman referred to in Nichiren's writings as Nagoe-no-ama 名越の尼 or "the nun of the overlord's house" (*ryōke no ama* 領家の尼). This was no isolated case, Takagi notes, but part of a larger shift in which Bakufu-appointed *jitō* were gaining power at the expense of resident *shōen* overlords. In this case, the Pure Land practitioners of Kiyosumi-dera, including the temple's abbot, Enchi-bō 円智房, sought Kagenobu's support against Nichiren's Lotus-only faction, while Nichiren's side supported the nun—to whom, he wrote in later life, his parents had been indebted. (Takagi

supports the theory that Nichiren's father may have been employed by her as a *shōen* functionary.) Nichiren undertook a lawsuit on her behalf and also offered ritual prayers. His efforts were successful, further provoking the Enchi-bō–Kagenobu faction and eventually forcing him to leave Kiyosumi-dera for his own safety. From there he set out, probably by boat, for Kamakura, where he would launch his career of teaching and proselytizing. This sort of detailed reconstruction of Nichiren's pre-Kamakura years, pieced together from clues in Nichiren's writings and Takagi's historical knowledge, is an outstanding feature of this biography.

A second strength of the volume is Takagi's detailed picture of Nichiren's community—monks, laity, and lay people who had taken religious vows (*nyūdō* 入道 and *ama* 尼)—as it developed over the course of his life. This volume summarizes the findings of TAKAGI's earlier research into the composition of Nichiren's following (1965). Most of Nichiren's lay followers were middle- and lower-ranking samurai and local landholders (*myōshu* 名主). Some were *gokenin* 御家人 or direct vassals of the Hōjō who met Nichiren and embraced his teaching while on tour of duty in Kamakura. On returning to their outlying estates, they converted their households, which became the nuclei of communities in Kai, Suruga, Shimōsa, and other Kantō provinces. These communities gave economic support to Nichiren's clerical disciples, who in turn provided religious leadership. Takagi identifies three patterns of activity among the monks or clerical disciples. These were: (1) monks who maintained their own cloisters at local Tendai temples, which they used for preaching and instruction and as residences between travels. These disciples journeyed to the homes of lay followers in the surrounding areas to preach and relay Nichiren's teachings, often reading aloud and elaborating on letters he had written. (The fact that such monks maintained residences at Tendai temples raises questions about how Nichiren's disciples understood their relationship to Tendai lineages. Though Takagi does not address this here, elsewhere he suggests that these monks did not yet have sufficient lay support to enable them to live independently; at the same time, such arrangements may have reflected a consciousness on the part of Nichiren and his disciples that they themselves were the most orthodox representatives of the Tendai tradition, which they desired to purify and reform. See TAKAGI 1965, pp. 53–54.) They served as the religious leaders of Nichiren's following in specific geographical areas and won a substantial number of converts among both laity and other clergy, converts who in effect became the “second generation” of the community; (2) monks who enjoyed the support of a particular lay patron and shared his religious life, providing the patron's family with

religious services and living in a chapel provided on his estate; and (3) monks who trained and studied directly with Nichiren during his years of reclusion on Mt. Minobu (1274–1282). Solidarity among the far-flung community was maintained through Nichiren's tireless communication by letter with followers on Sado and throughout the Kantō, by the visits made to him at Minobu by both clergy and laity, and by the instruction provided by clerical disciples to lay followers. Takagi suggests that the calligraphic mandala depicting the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra* that Nichiren inscribed as a personal *honzon* or object of devotion for his followers may also have played a role in unifying the community. Of 114 extant mandalas inscribed by Nichiren during his Minobu years, 49 were inscribed for individual lay followers and may have served to reinforce the bond between teacher and disciple. Takagi also notes the existence of a few extremely large mandalas apparently intended for enshrinement in a place where several followers gathered, perhaps the chapel of a monk or the home of an influential lay patron, thus hinting at the existence of early *kō* 講 or congregations.

Takagi notes that Nichiren referred to his followers collectively as a "house" (*ichimon* 一門), the basic unit of medieval warrior society, and encouraged their sense of unity to help them withstand persecution from local and Bakufu authorities. He also explores how Nichiren's teachings were related to the religious concerns of warriors, addressing their consciousness of being "evil men" (*akunin* 悪人), relieving their consequent fears of hell, and affirming the loyalty of child to parent, wife to husband, and vassal to lord, central to the values of warrior society. Takagi considers in particular the cases of two samurai lay followers: Ikegami Munenaka 池上宗仲, whose father twice disowned him because of his faith in Nichiren, and Shijō Yorimoto 四条頼基, whose lord confiscated his lands and threatened to expel him from his clan for the same reason. In time, both situations resolved happily—Munenaka's father converted and Yorimoto was restored to his lord's favor—but in the interval, these men and their families endured many months of extreme uncertainty and, in Yorimoto's case, danger. Takagi analyzes Nichiren's letters of encouragement to these followers during their troubles to show how he viewed the relationship between devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* and one's conventional social obligations. In Nichiren's view, faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* was a matter transcending past, present, and future lifetimes; where a conflict of loyalties occurred, faith should take precedence over worldly allegiances, even in the face of a father's or a lord's opposition. However, Takagi notes, Nichiren did not describe such resistance as a denial of loyalty or filial piety but rather as their highest expression: by maintaining faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, even if disowned or cast out, one

would eventually be able to lead the person hostile to the *Lotus Sūtra* to attain buddhahood, the supreme repayment of filial obligations.

If one had to produce a complaint against this otherwise excellent biography, it would only be that it is perhaps a bit too sanitized. Takagi's treatment reflects a very recent concern in Nichiren studies to purge Nichiren's collected writings of apocryphal texts and his biography of legendary accretions. He makes virtually no mention of the miraculous legends that have grown up around the events of Nichiren's life, not even to note that they are legendary. For example, in detailing the events surrounding Nichiren's arrest on 9/12/1271 and the sentence of exile to Sado Island issued immediately thereafter, Takagi mentions Nichiren's conviction that the Bakufu really intended to have him beheaded that night (the so-called Ryūkō or Tatsunokuchi Persecution 竜口法難). But he makes no reference whatsoever to the tradition that Nichiren was spared when a luminous object, streaking across the sky, suddenly lit up the darkness and terrified his would-be executioners. Of course the historicity of this incident is open to question. Three writings in the Nichiren collection describe or refer to it (*STN* 1: 505, 2: 967, 1562), though some scholars believe the passages in question to be later interpolations. However, no less unimpeachable a text than the *Kaimoku shō* 開目鈔 (1272), traditionally regarded as one of Nichiren's two most important writings, clearly shows that Nichiren believed he had in some sense undergone death and a new birth on that night: "On the twelfth night of the ninth month of last year, . . . a man called Nichiren was beheaded. This is his spirit (*konpaku* 魂魄) that has come to Sado" (*STN* 1: 590). Whatever did or did not happen at the execution grounds at Tatsunokuchi, the story of the "luminous object" had a profound effect on the subsequent Nichiren tradition, being taken as a proof of Nichiren's religious mission and of the *Lotus Sūtra's* promise of protection ("Neither sword nor staff shall touch him [the practitioner]/ nor poison harm him." T. no. 262, 9.39b). Even today, apologetics continue to be published from time to time asserting that this event "really happened," thus testifying to its ongoing importance for some groups of Nichiren followers. While the task may properly belong to the realm of Nichirensū historiography rather than Nichiren biography *per se*, it seems desirable that, while distinguishing insofar as possible between fact and legend, future studies should at the same time acknowledge the immense influence that such legends have had in shaping the tradition.²

² This issue is, however, addressed in the biography by Kawazoe Shōji, discussed below. Kawazoe cites some of the major modern disputes over the historicity of the "luminous object." He also notes that it cannot readily be determined whether this event happened as

The second biography under review here, the late Tamura Yoshirō's *Nichiren: Junkyō no nyōraishi*, is shorter and less historically detailed than Takagi's study. A specialist in the intellectual history of Buddhist traditions based on the *Lotus Sūtra*, Tamura's concern is to locate Nichiren, not so much in the social realities of thirteenth-century Japan, as among the world's great religious teachers. He focuses—as his title suggests—on Nichiren's sense of mission as the Buddha's messenger and his readiness to give his life for the *Lotus Sūtra*. For Tamura, Nichiren is one of those prophets whose significance lies, not in the accuracy of his predictions nor in having gained wide popularity and recognition, but in "his fearlessness in the face of worldly power; his entrusting of his person to a transcendent, holy authority; and his warnings about the course of the world, delivered from a lofty, broad perspective without regard for his life" (p. 150). Tamura finds Nichiren's Buddhism to be broadly comparable with Christianity "as a religion of prophecy, in its spirit of martyrdom, in its apostolic consciousness, and additionally, in its emphasis upon history" (pp. 67–68). While most of the volume is devoted to an account of Nichiren, its final chapter, "Nichiren's successors," summarizes some of the later developments in the tradition, including the process by which Nichiren's writings were collected, the rise of Nichiren Buddhism among the townspeople (*machishū* 町衆) of late medieval and early modern Japan, and modern Nichirenist thinkers. Tamura is anxious to dispel the nationalistic images of Nichiren that predominated during the modern imperial period, and in addition to mentioning influential ultranationalists such as the Nichirenist lay leader Tanaka Chigaku 田中智学 (1861–1939), Tamura calls attention to others who rejected nationalistic readings. These include the literary figure Takayama Chogyū 高山樗牛 (1871–1902), who saw Nichiren as a teacher of universal truth, and Christians such as Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 (1861–1930), who found in Nichiren a model of an individual who cared about Japan and yet gave his ultimate allegiance to a truth beyond nation. The last six pages summarize Tamura's comparison of Nichiren with other teachers of the "new" Kamakura Buddhism—Hōnen, Shinran, and Dōgen—with respect to their position vis-à-vis the Tendai doctrine of original enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覚), a synopsis of TAMURA's extensive earlier research on this subject (1965).

Tamura divides Nichiren's intellectual and spiritual development into three successive stages. First, the period up until his submission of the *Risshō ankoku ron* to Hōjō Tokiyori (1260) was that of "affirming

Nichiren reports; whether he apprehended it as having happened; or whether it is the invention of later hagiographers (pp. 117–18).

reality.” During this period, Tamura says, Nichiren was influenced by the “absolute monism” of Tendai original enlightenment thought, which regards all phenomena, just as they are, as the expressions of true reality. He criticized Hōnen’s teaching of an otherworldly pure land from this nondual perspective and placed his expectations in this world. This is indicated in his famous statement in the *Risshō ankoku ron* that, in the moment when one embraces faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, “the threefold world will all become the Buddha land” and “the ten directions will all become a jeweled realm” (*STN* 1: 226). However, when his admonitions went ignored and his criticism of the Pure Land sect drew hostility, leading to his first exile, to the Izu Peninsula, Nichiren in Tamura’s view emerged from the absolute nonduality of *hongaku* thought to engage the relative distinctions of history and the phenomenal world, asserting, for example, that the present era was the Final Dharma age (*mappō*), that Japan was an evil land on the periphery of the Buddhist cosmos, that its people were of inferior capacity, etc. It was during the Izu exile that Nichiren first set forth his “five guides” (*gokō* 五綱), arguing the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* in terms of the categories of the teaching, human capacity, the time, the country, and the sequence of propagation. This began the second period, that of “confronting reality,” which lasted through the Sado exile (1271–1273). During this time, Nichiren came to identify himself as the Buddha’s messenger, the *gyōja* 行者 or votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*, who fulfills its predictions and spreads its teaching even at the risk of his life. Lastly, having failed in his repeated remonstrations, Nichiren went into reclusion on Mt. Minobu, where he remained from 1274 until just before his death in 1282. Entrusting the future establishment of the Buddha land to his disciples, he now entered a third period, that of “transcending reality,” in which he increasingly stressed the impermanence of human affairs and the absolute standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*. These three phases, Tamura says, can be correlated respectively with three views of the pure land found in Nichiren’s writings: the “existing pure land” (*aru jōdo* [在る] 浄土), immanent in the present world; the “pure land that becomes” (*naru jōdo* [成る] 浄土), which is to be established in this world through the bodhisattva practice of spreading faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*; and the “pure land to which one goes” (*yuku jōdo* [往く] 浄土), or the Pure Land of Sacred Eagle [or Vulture] Peak (*ryōzen jōdo* 靈山浄土), the site of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s preaching, apotheosized as a pure land to which practitioners go after death.

Tamura must be credited for drawing attention early on to the process of Nichiren’s intellectual development, going beyond the rather static division of his teachings into “pre-Sado” and “post-Sado” found in traditional sectarian studies. He was one of the first scholars

to note the period of the Izu exile (1261–1263) as representing a significant phase in Nichiren’s intellectual development. His analysis of the “three kinds of pure land” is also useful, though these three views do not correspond quite as neatly to sequential stages in Nichiren’s thought as Tamura’s schema might seem to suggest. However, there are definite problems with his characterization of the three periods in Nichiren’s thought. First is Tamura’s claim that Nichiren retreated from original enlightenment thought from the time of the Izu exile. This claim rests on his assumption that the writings from the Sado and Minobu periods drawing on *hongaku*-related ideas are all apocryphal, which is by no means certain (TAMURA 1965, pp. 611–23; see also the articles by Sueki and myself in this issue). Second, apart from the complex issue of Nichiren’s relation to original enlightenment thought, sufficient continuity exists between Tamura’s three periods, especially the second and third, to call into question their value as a way of periodicizing Nichiren’s thought. Nichiren of the second period already firmly embraced a “reality transcending” perspective: “Don’t grieve too hard over my exile.... Life has an end, so one should not begrudge it. What we should aspire to, ultimately, is the Buddha land” (*Toki Nyūdō-dono gohenji* 富木入道殿御返事, STN 1: 517). “My exile is a minor suffering of the present life and thus not worth lamenting. In my next life I shall receive the supreme happiness, and so I rejoice greatly” (*Kaimoku shō*, STN 1: 609). It was precisely this transcendent perspective that enabled him to endure and make sense of the hardships of exile and persecution. By the same token, Nichiren of the third period—while technically living in reclusion and no longer actively proselytizing or memorializing government officials—was very much engaged in “confronting reality.” He directly oversaw the training of the younger monks practicing with him on Minobu, who numbered, by his own account, between forty and sixty in 1278 and more than a hundred by 1279. At the same time, he maintained close contact with his lay followers, writing them letters of encouragement when they faced illness, the death of family members, or opposition to their faith; he drafted statements of defense on behalf of those who incurred the wrath of local or Bakufu authorities and prepared for the possibility of a public debate with scholar-monks representing other Buddhist sects. Thus it is not altogether clear, at least to this reader, in what sense the Izu-Sado period should be seen as one of “confronting reality,” over and against a Minobu period of “transcending reality.”³ There are more convincing ways of describing the devel-

³ In a more recent biography, SASAKI KAORU divides Nichiren’s life into four, somewhat similar, periods: “affirming reality,” “confronting reality,” “separating from reality,” and

opment of Nichiren's thought. One such approach might be to trace how, through his growing emphasis on the exclusive truth of the *Lotus Sūtra*—leading to his heightened criticism of other teachings, which in turn multiplied experiences of rejection and persecution—Nichiren came increasingly to distinguish his teaching from the Tendai of his day and, eventually, to see himself as the bearer of a new Dharma, received directly from Śākyamuni Buddha on Eagle Peak and intended specifically for the Final Dharma age.

Despite this fundamental criticism, Tamura's biography has notable strengths. One lies in drawing attention to the situational nature of much of Nichiren's writings. For example, in considering the possible motives for Nichiren's decision at age sixteen to take the tonsure as a Buddhist monk, Tamura notes that in different writings Nichiren himself gives at least four different explanations for his action: (1) to escape impermanence and resolve the problem of birth and death; (2) to determine which among the many sutras represents the Buddha's true teaching; (3) to resolve doubts about recent political events (for example, when emperors should supposedly enjoy divine protection, why did Antoku perish in the war between the Taira and the Minamoto, and why was Go-Toba defeated in his confrontation with Hōjō Yoshitoki and exiled?); and (4) to master the essentials of the teachings of all Buddhist sects, in order to determine their truth or falsehood. However, as Tamura points out, all these statements are retrospective, occurring in writings from Nichiren's last years, and may represent his reconstruction of events in response to situations at hand, rather than a literally faithful account of his motives several decades earlier. For example, the passage about having entered the Buddhist path out of a wish to solve the problem of birth and death occurs in a letter of consolation to a woman who had recently lost her husband (*Myōhō-ama gozen gohenji* 妙法尼御前御返事, *STN* 2: 1535), and the explanation that he was motivated by questions about political events appears in an essay attacking the efficacy of *mikkyō* ritual, on which both the Taira leadership and Go-Toba had relied in their respective doomed confrontations (*Shinkokuō goshō* 神国王御書, *STN* 1:

"surmounting reality" (1979). However, where Tamura used "reality" (*genjitsu* 現実) to indicate the phenomenal world, Sasaki employs the term in a more concrete and politicized sense as the system of rule and the religious institutions and ideology that supported it. Thus he defines Nichiren's final stage, that of "surmounting reality," as the time when Nichiren fully conceptualized a transcendent "world of the *Lotus Sūtra*," independent of all worldly authority. Contra both Tamura and Sasaki, Satō Hiroo rejects the "transcendent" characterization of Nichiren's last years. To the very end, he says, Nichiren entertained hopes of finding some form of political support for his exclusive *Lotus Sūtra* faith and continued to value the *Risshō ankoku ron* (SATŌ 1998, p. 304, n. 41; see also 1977).

882–85). However, Tamura points out, this sort of criticism of the esoteric teachings—in particular, Nichiren’s interpretation of the deleterious role of *mikkyō* ritual in Go-Toba’s defeat—does not appear clearly in Nichiren’s writings until the Sado period. Similarly, Tamura finds (2) and (4) to be retrospective readings by Nichiren of his own actions in light of his ultimate conclusions about the *Lotus Sūtra* as the one true teaching that unifies all others within itself. Nichiren was first motivated to become a monk, Tamura concludes, by a largely intellectual desire for general Buddhist knowledge.⁴ “In any event,” he says, “Nichiren’s discourse is fluid, and it is necessary always to pay attention to what period and under what circumstances he wrote” (p. 26), a vital caveat for anyone who studies Nichiren’s writings.

A second strength of Tamura’s biography is his success in conveying in a short study the “human” or emotional side of Nichiren as seen through his personal letters. Tamura’s well-thought-out choice of quotations reveals Nichiren as a man who cared deeply for his followers and spared no efforts to instruct them in practice, to answer their questions about Buddhism, and to inspire and console them in the face of adversity. Particularly moving is Tamura’s emphasis on Nichiren’s unfailing gratitude to those who had helped him, sometimes even years after the fact, as expressed in correspondence from the Sado and Minobu periods. Six years later, he wrote to the warrior who had accompanied him at the time of his arrest to the execution grounds, resolved to die at his side: “Even now I can never forget how, when I was to be beheaded, you accompanied me, holding my horse by the bridle and weeping with grief. Nor will I forget it in any life to come. Were you to fall into hell for grave sins, no matter how Śākyamuni Buddha might invite me to become a buddha, I would not heed; I would go into hell with you” (*Sushun Tennō gosho* 崇峻天皇御書, *STN* 2: 1394). To lay followers in Kamakura who sent supplies to Nichiren on Sado and to his companions in exile: “Were it not for your aid, I do not know how any of us would be provided for. I believe this is solely because the characters of the *Lotus Sūtra* have entered your bodies and assumed your forms to help us” (*Kashaku hōbō metsuzai shō* 呵責謗法滅罪鈔, *STN* 1: 790). To a lay nun of Sado, who, with her hus-

⁴ In support of his argument that Nichiren’s initial motivation was primarily intellectual, Tamura points out that, unlike Hōnen, who lost his father at an early age, Nichiren had to our knowledge suffered no early loss that would awake in him a sense of life’s impermanence; moreover, a strong sense of impermanence would have been incompatible with his early emphasis on “world-affirming” *hongaku* ideas (pp. 21–23). In contrast, Takagi accepts Nichiren’s later statement that he was prompted by a desire to solve the problem of impermanence, arguing that young people can be very sensitive to the issue of death, whether they have personally suffered loss or not (pp. 18–19).

band, had risked the wrath of the local authorities to help Nichiren: “In what lifetime could I forget how you together with [your husband] Abutsu-bō, carrying provisions on his back, came repeatedly by night [to visit me]? It was just as though my mother had been reborn on Sado!” (*Sennichi-ama gozen gohenji* 千日尼御前御返事, *STN* 2:1545). To a childless couple who had also aided him on Sado, he urged that they should think of Śākyamuni as their father and of himself as their son: “Since you have no son, when your life nears its end, you should come here [to be with me at Minobu]” (*Kō Nyūdō-dono gohenji* こう人道殿御返事, *STN* 1: 914). Tamura notes the close relationships between Nichiren and several of his female followers, a subject that would merit further study. He calls attention to Nichiren’s awareness— notable in view of his lifelong celibacy—of the depths of marital affection and the power of a wife to influence her husband in matters of religion. He also quotes several letters to women who had lost husbands or children: “The blossoms, once fallen, have bloomed again; the fruit that had fallen forms again on the trees. The spring breezes are unaltered, the autumn scenery is no different from last year. How can this one thing alone have changed utterly, never to be as it was before?... Rely on the *Lotus Sūtra* as provision for your journey and hurry to meet him in the Pure Land of Eagle Peak!” (*Sennichi-ama gohenji* 千日尼御返事, *STN* 2: 1762). Tamura retains Nichiren’s original language in the quotations to preserve their flavor but restates or explains them for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with classical Japanese.

A third biography, by Kawazoe Shōji, differs from both Takagi’s and Tamura’s in that it does not attempt to present a comprehensive overview of Nichiren’s life and thought but rather examines Nichiren through a specific lens: that of the Mongol invasion attempts of 1274 and 1281 and the defense effort mounted by the Kamakura Bakufu. It was in the context of the Mongol threat, Kawazoe argues, the worst crisis of premodern Japanese history, that Nichiren developed the social relevance of his teaching and explained how the power of the *Lotus Sūtra* was manifested in historical and political events. He also points out that Nichiren’s writings yield more insight than those of any other person of the times into the psychological impact of the Mongol attacks. Like the work of Takagi Yūta, to whom he acknowledges a debt, Kawazoe’s study contains a wealth of historical detail, and he brings to this biographical study his particular expertise as a specialist in, among other subjects, the history and historiography of the Mongol invasion.

In 1268, envoys from Kublai Khan arrived in Kyushu bearing a letter from the Mongol empire. Forwarded first to the Bakufu and then

to the court, it demanded that Japan either submit to Mongol hegemony and enter a tributary relationship, or prepare for armed attack. This development appeared to bear out earlier predictions in Nichiren's famous admonitory treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安国論 (1260). As is well known, this memorial to the Bakufu attributes a recent series of calamities, including earthquakes, epidemics, and famine to the fact that the people at large had abandoned the *Lotus Sūtra* in favor of the *nenbutsu*. Citing scriptural accounts of the disasters that befall a country where the true Dharma is not upheld, Nichiren asserted on the basis of the same sutra passages that, were matters to continue in this way, two further disasters—internal strife and foreign invasion—would break out. The arrival of the letter from the Mongol empire suddenly invested Nichiren's assertion with all the force of prophecy fulfilled. It confirmed the legitimacy of his message in his own eyes and in those of his followers, and also, Kawazoe suggests, won him attention and respect, as well as numerous converts, among those persuaded by his explanation for the country's troubles. With renewed urgency, he asserted the need to abandon all other teachings and embrace the *Lotus Sūtra* alone, firing off letters to this effect to persons in authority.⁵ Zen and the new *vinaya* revival movement (*risshū* 律宗) now joined the *nenbutsu* as targets of his criticism. Both had gained increased influence in Kamakura since his writing of the *Risshō ankoku ron* and thus appeared in his eyes as new hindrances to the spread of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Kawazoe identifies three interrelated concepts that develop markedly in Nichiren's teaching in the context of the Mongol threat. One is his cosmological vision of the threefold world as the domain of Lord Śākyamuni Buddha. Brahmā, Indra, and the four deva kings are Śākyamuni's vassals; all worldly rulers hold their lands in fief from him. In this way, Nichiren subordinated worldly to religious authority; government was for him legitimate only insofar as it accorded with the will of Śākyamuni in promoting the true Dharma (i.e., the *Lotus Sūtra*). A second is his assertion, already seen in the *Risshō ankoku ron*, that the protective deities had abandoned the country because the people had abandoned the *Lotus Sūtra*, leaving the country vulnerable to evil influences. From about 1269, Nichiren began to refer to the Mongol empire as the "sage of a neighboring country," divinely appointed to punish the Japanese for their slander of the Dharma. Hence the urgency of his perceived mission to rebuke attachment to other teachings and

⁵ Following Asai Yōrin and others, Kawazoe takes the so-called "eleven letters" now included in the *STN* (1: 426–36) to be apocryphal but believes that Nichiren did in fact write letters to influential persons, based on a statement to this effect in *Kingo-dono gohenji* 金吾殿御返事 (*STN* 1: 458).

declare the exclusive truth of the *Lotus Sūtra*, whatever the personal cost. Letters to his followers at this time indicate that he was fully expecting to incur persecution, even death, for his efforts. This led in turn, Kawazoe says, to the development of a third element, belief in the Pure Land of Eagle Peak. This pure land had the connotation not only of a timeless realm, accessible through faith, where Śākyamuni eternally preaches the *Lotus Sūtra*, but also an ideal post-mortem destination for Lotus practitioners, postulated over and against the probability of devastation and death implicit in the Mongol threat. It also represented a transcendent perspective that enabled Nichiren and his followers to defy worldly authority and withstand persecution. Kawazoe succeeds admirably in conveying the mounting sense of public fear and tension as Mongol envoys arrived in succession, and the extent to which Nichiren's thinking during this time can be understood as a response.

Kawazoe also insightfully analyzes how conflict arose from the disjuncture between Nichiren's religious vision and Bakufu practical concerns about meeting the Mongol threat. At this time, as a defense measure, the Bakufu was solidifying its administration by strengthening the central authority of the *tokusō* 得宗, or head of the Hōjō regental house. In this atmosphere, Nichiren's attacks on Zen, Ritsu, and Pure Land—which to his view formed a necessary part asserting the supremacy of the *Lotus Sūtra*—were inevitably seen as personal criticism of the late retired regent Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼 and his grand uncle Shigetoki 重時, powerful Hōjō patriarchs whose patronage had been instrumental in establishing these traditions in Kamakura. In 1271, a complaint filed against Nichiren with the Bakufu by clerical opponents charged, among other things, that he kept arms at his hermitage and was also harboring "ruffians" (*kyōto* 凶徒). *Kyōto*, Kawazoe informs us, was not an uncommon term for designating one's opponent in a lawsuit; here it probably referred to *bushi* who were members of Nichiren's lay following and who may have deemed him in need of protection. Nichiren countered by loftily citing the *Dong-chun* 東春, a Tang-period Tiantai text, to the effect that "a place of renunciation should embrace all evildoers" and also noting that the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* permits one to bear arms in defense of the Dharma (*Gyōbin sojō goetsū* 行敏訴狀御会通, *STN* 1: 499–500). Such a response, Kawazoe notes, would hardly have allayed Bakufu concerns about internal dissidents who could potentially threaten the unity needed to mount a defense against the Mongols, especially since Nichiren may by this point have attracted a sizeable following.⁶ Under the heightened tension

⁶ Nichiren's *Shuju onfurumai goshō* 種種御振舞御書, written in 1275, says that after his arrest, Bakufu officials drew up a list of more than 260 of his followers whom they intended to banish from Kamakura (*STN* 2: 970).

brought about by the threat of invasion, Nichiren's statements about Japan being destined for destruction may also have been understood as curses. The day after his arrest, the Bakufu issued orders to its immediate vassals holding estates in Kyushu to proceed there and subdue unruly elements within their territory. While Takagi had suggested it earlier, Kawazoe further develops the argument that Nichiren's arrest and exile occurred in the context of a larger Bakufu effort to put down potentially disruptive elements at home, as part of its defense preparations.

If the Mongol invasion provides an illuminating perspective from which to study Nichiren, then so, Kawazoe notes, is Nichiren an instructive lens through which to better understand the Mongol invasion. The first Mongol invasion fleet, consisting of some twenty-eight thousand men in about nine hundred ships, arrived in the tenth month of 1274, striking the southern islands of Iki and Tsushima and proceeding on 10/19 to Hakata Bay. A furious battle occurred on the 20th, and on the 21st, the invading fleet vanished—driven off, it has long been thought, by a typhoon. Nichiren's first reference to these events occurs in a letter dated 11/11, reflecting the speed with which he was kept informed, probably by lay samurai followers in service to the Hōjō who were involved in the defense. A letter from Nichiren dated 5/8/1275 to a follower on Sado contains the earliest extant account of the suffering in the wake of attacks on Iki and Tsushima. "Of the peasants, the men were either killed or taken alive, while the women were herded together and bound through their hands to the ships... no one escaped" (*Ichinosawa Nyūdō gosho* 一谷入道御書, *STN* 2: 995). Kawazoe notes that Nichiren's account agrees in most particulars with the later and more famous *Hachiman gudō kun* 八幡愚童訓, but is especially valuable in being a contemporaneous account. Nichiren's letters also offer almost the only extant descriptions from the time of the feelings of those eastern warriors mobilized to go south and mount a defense:

They had to leave behind their aged parents, little children, young wives, and cherished homes to go out and defend a strange and foreboding sea. If they saw clouds on the horizon, they imagined them to be the enemy's banners. If they saw ordinary fishing boats, they thought them Mongol warships and were paralyzed with fear. Once or twice a day they climbed the hills to look out over the sea. Three or four times in the middle of the night they saddled and unsaddled their horses. They must have felt the stark reality of the Asura existence in their own lives. (*Kyōdai shō* 兄弟鈔, *STN* 1: 925-26; trans. from Yampolsky 1996, p. 232)

Kawazoe notes that, among Nichiren's letters to his lay *bushi* followers, one finds not a single statement encouraging a martial spirit in defense of the country. Rather, he focuses on the fear and misery engendered by the Mongol threat, all ultimately traceable, in his view, to the rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the failure of the authorities to heed his warnings.

Like Takagi, Tamura, and other postwar biographers, Kawazoe is concerned to dispel wartime images of Nichiren as a fervent nationalist. Such images are indeed difficult to square with words such as these: "The destruction of our country would be pitiable. But if it [the invasion] does not come about, the people of Japan will slander the *Lotus Sūtra* more and more, and they will all fall into the Hell without Respite. As the opponent is powerful, the country may be destroyed, but slander of the Dharma will be greatly lessened" (*Itai dōshin no koto* 異体同心事, *STN* 1: 830). Kawazoe sees considerable validity in the interpretations put forth by the Meiji literary figure Takayama Chogyū and others who have seen Nichiren as willing to countenance even the sacrifice of the country, if need be, to preserve the ultimate truth of Buddhism. Nevertheless, Kawazoe concludes, it would be one-sided to see Nichiren only as teacher of transcendent truth. Rather, Nichiren also envisioned and hoped passionately for the regeneration of Japan as a country purified by faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The gap between Nichiren's religious vision and historical realities, Kawazoe suggests, caused him much personal anguish in this regard.

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