

The Account of How Nichiren Miraculously Escaped Beheading and Its Modern Critics: History and Hagiography in a Japanese Buddhist Tradition

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Abstract: Stories of saints and heroes must speak to their auditors to be effective. Over time, as circumstances change, episodes in sacred biography may be reinterpreted, even deleted, or their historicity may be disputed. This paper examines this process by tracing the reception history of an episode in the life story of the Japanese Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222–1282). By his own account, Nichiren dramatically escaped beheading at the hands of hostile officials when a luminous object streaked across the night sky, terrifying his would-be executioners. For centuries, this scene has featured prominently in biographies, plays, woodblock prints, historical fiction, movies, and graphic novels about Nichiren. Since the modern period, however, its historicity has been debated by scholars both inside and outside Nichiren Buddhist circles. Those eager to strip Nichiren’s biography of legendary elements question his authorship of those among his writings referring to the incident. Defenders of the traditional account maintain that the terrifying ‘luminous object’ was a natural phenomenon. This paper argues for treating Nichiren’s escape from beheading and similar ‘miraculous’ episodes in hagiography as belonging to a realm where distinctions between myth and history cannot be clearly drawn; what ‘really happened’ may less significant

than what the story has meant for the traditions involved.

Keywords: Asai Yōrin, hagiography, *hosshaku kenpon*, Nichiren, *Lotus Sūtra*, Shigeno Yasutsugu, Tanaka Chigaku, Tatsunokuchi Persecution

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Stories of saints and heroes are compelling only so long as they speak in some way to their audience. Events that once inspired awe may come to be seen as implausible, even embarrassing. Thus over time, as circumstances change, episodes in sacred biography may be reinterpreted, as when a miracle is read in metaphorical terms, or even deleted; at times, their historicity is disputed. This paper highlights this process by examining the modern reception of an incident in the life story of the Japanese Buddhist teacher Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282), revered as the founder of the tradition that now bears his name. In Japan today, ‘Nichiren Buddhism’ encompasses roughly forty incorporated religious bodies, including traditional temple-based sects and a variety of lay organizations.¹ Nichiren is known for his doctrine of exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* (Ch. *Miaofa lianhua jing*/Jp. *Myōhō-rengē-kyō* 妙法蓮華經), a scripture widely revered for its promise that all shall become buddhas. He had trained in the Tendai school 天台宗, which takes the *Lotus* as its foundational scripture. Nichiren held the *Lotus Sūtra* to represent the Buddha’s ultimate teaching and the sole vehicle of liberation in the present,

¹ Bunkachō, *Shūkyō nenkan*, 74–78, 116–18. The name ‘Nichirenshū’ 日蓮宗 or Nichiren sect is sometimes used to designate the Nichiren Buddhist tradition as a whole; in this article, however, I use it only in its narrower sense to refer to the specific sect of Nichiren Buddhism having its head temple at Mount Minobu 身延山 in Yamanashi prefecture. Nichirenshū represents the largest of the traditional temple-based denominations of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan today.

Final Dharma age (Jp. *mappō* 末法). His harsh criticism of other Buddhist forms as no longer efficacious in this degenerate era drew the anger of both leading prelates and government officials. At one point he was arrested and taken to the execution grounds. According to tradition, he was saved by the sudden appearance of a luminous object that streaked across the night sky, terrifying his would-be executioners. Nichiren's miraculous escape from beheading represents the most dramatic event of his tumultuous career. Over the centuries, it has been depicted in hagiographies, *kabuki* plays, woodblocks, and paintings, and more recently, in novels, movies, and *manga*. But since the beginning of Japan's modern period (1868–1945), among scholars both inside and outside Nichiren sectarian circles, its historicity has been disputed. My aim in this paper is not to take sides in that debate and argue whether this extraordinary event did or did not occur as the Nichiren Buddhist tradition relates it. Rather, I focus on what is at stake in the controversy and approach it as a case study in how modern standards of evidence-based research, rationality, and scientific credibility have reshaped the life story of an influential religious figure.

This paper first introduces the traditional account, its hagiographical elaborations, and the initial doubts voiced about them in the late medieval and early modern periods. It then traces three successive iterations in the debate over the historicity of this episode in Nichiren's life from the late nineteenth century down to the present, as well as efforts to account for the mysterious shining object in scientific terms. In concluding, I address the limits of scholarly attempts to separate historical facts from mythic elements and argue the value of approaching the story as belonging to a realm where the distinction between myth and history blurs, as a narrative that, whatever its factual basis, reveals something vital about the tradition that has preserved it.

The Traditional Account, Hagiographical Elaborations, and Early Objections

At the time of his attempted execution, Nichiren was proselytizing in Japan's eastern provinces, based in the town of Kamakura, headquarters of the Bakufu 幕府 (shogunate) or military government. For years, he had preached that the disasters then afflicting the country—famine, earthquakes, and epidemics—had resulted from the Japanese abandoning the *Lotus Sūtra* in favour of incomplete, provisional teachings. Based on descriptions in the sūtras of the calamities that will overtake a land whose ruler permits neglect of the true dharma, Nichiren predicted that still worse sufferings, including foreign invasion, were to come unless people placed their faith in the *Lotus*. His censure of clerics promoting other teachings, and of government officials for supporting them, had already led to one arrest and sentence of exile, to the Izu peninsula (1261–1263), but, undaunted, he had returned to Kamakura and continued to preach. The arrival in 1268 of emissaries from Kublai Khan, demanding that Japan submit to Mongol overlordship or face attack, seemed to bear out Nichiren's predictions, and he renewed his remonstrances. On the twelfth day of the ninth month, 1271, he was arrested a second time, probably in connection with a Bakufu directive to quell unruly elements at home as part of the defense effort in preparing for attack from abroad.²

No independent record exists of Nichiren's arrest and sentencing. The Bakufu chronicle *Azuma kagami* 東鑑 [Mirror of the East], where one might expect to find relevant entries, does not go beyond the year 1266. Indeed, Nichiren is scarcely mentioned in any external documents of his time;³ thus one must rely on his own

² Takagi, *Nichiren to sono montei*, 189.

³ An exception is the name 'Nichiren' listed in the record of an esoteric transmission of the Rishōin branch 理性院流 belonging to both Daigoji 醍醐寺流 and Ono 小野流 lineages of Tōmitsu Shingon 東密真言 (*Rishōin kechimyaku* 理性院血脈; see Bibliography 2d: Other Primary Sources). Scholarly opinion divides as to whether this notice refers to the same or a different Nichiren as the one under discussion here. See Takagi, 'Futari no Nichiren', and Dolce, 'Esoteric

surviving writings. By his own account, he was officially sentenced to be banished to Sado Island in the Sea of Japan, but the Bakufu functionary in charge of his arrest—one Hei (Taira) no Yoritsuna 平頼綱 (d. 1293), deputy head of the Board of Retainers (*samurai dokoro* 侍所) for the Hōjō shogunal regents—privately decided to do away with this troublesome priest.⁴ The chief source for Nichiren’s attempted execution and extraordinary escape is his own gripping autobiographical account known as the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* 種種御振舞御書 [On Various Deeds], of which more will be said below.

Nichiren’s Account

In this work—which takes the form of a long letter to a follower—Nichiren describes how he was escorted by night from Kamakura under armed guard. Exiting the town along Wakamiya Avenue, the main north-south road, they passed the Tsurugaoka shrine 鶴が丘神社 dedicated to the god Hachiman 八幡. Said to be an apotheosis of Emperor Ōjin 應神天皇 (r. ca. 270–310), Hachiman was both *kami* and Buddhist deity, having been granted bodhisattva status by the court in 781, an early instance of the identification of *kami* or local deities with Buddhist divinities. Later Hachiman was adopted by the Minamoto 源 house, founders of the Kamakura shogunate, as their tutelary god and thus acquired military associations.⁵ His shrine in Kamakura—actually administered by Buddhist priests—was Kamakura’s most prominent religious institution. Here Nichiren halted his horse and addressed the warriors surrounding him, saying, ‘Don’t make a fuss. I won’t cause any trouble. I merely wish to say my last words to Great Bodhisattva Hachiman’ 日蓮云々各々さわがせ給フな。べち(別)の事はなし。八幡大菩薩に最後に申すべき事あり。 Dismount-

Patterns’, 68–69. Dolce’s research into Nichiren’s early esoteric training strongly suggests connections with Tōmitsu priests.

⁴ For example, *Shimoyama goshōsoku*, *Teihon* 2: 1332, and *Myōhō Bikuni gohenji*, *Teihon* 2: 1562.

⁵ On the early history of Hachiman, see Bender, ‘The Hachiman Cult’.

ing, he cried out in a loud voice: ‘Is Great Bodhisattva Hachiman truly a god?’ and proceeded to rebuke the deity, reminding him that all gods had vowed to Śākyamuni Buddha at the assembly where the *Lotus Sūtra* was preached to protect its devotees. ‘If I am beheaded tonight and go to the Pure Land of Eagle Peak, I will first report to Lord Śākyamuni that the gods Hachiman and Amaterasu Ōmikami [天照大神, the sun goddess] failed to honour their oaths. If you think that will go hard with you, you had better do something about it right away!’ いかにか八幡大菩薩はまことの神か。……日蓮今夜頸切^{ラレ}て靈山淨土へまいりてあらん時は、まづ天照太神・正八幡こそ起請を用^ヒぬかみにて候けれと、さしきりて教主釋尊に申^シ上候はんずるぞ。いた(痛)しとおぼさば、いそぎいそぎ御計^{ラヒ}あるべし。⁶ Further along, the party reached the beach at Yuigahama 由井が浜, where criminals were executed. Nichiren again asked his guards to halt again while he sent a messenger to his follower, the warrior Shijō Yorimoto 四條頼基, also known as Shijō Kingo 四條金吾 (d. 1296), who came rushing together with his three brothers. Yorimoto seized the bridle of Nichiren’s horse, determined to die by his side.⁷ Soon they reached the execution grounds at a place called Tatsunokuchi 龍口.

Finally we came to a place that I knew must be the site of my beheading. Indeed, the soldiers stopped and began to mill around in excitement. Shijō Kingo, in tears, said, ‘These are your last moments’. I replied, ‘Why are you all so disconcerted? What greater joy could there be [than to give one’s life for the *Lotus Sūtra*]? Don’t you remember what you’ve promised?’ No sooner had I said this than a brilliant orb as bright as the moon burst forth from the direction of

⁶ *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 965–66; Watson, *Selected Writings*, 325, modified. ‘Eagle Peak’ (Skt. Gṛdhrakūṭa; Jp. Ryōjusen 靈鷲山) near Rājagṛha in the ancient Indian state of Magadha is said to have been where Śākyamuni preached the *Lotus Sūtra*. The ‘pure land of Eagle Peak’ is its apotheosis as a transcendent buddha realm or postmortem destination.

⁷ Another of Nichiren’s writings says that his disciple Sanmi-bō 三位房 was among the party (*Yorimoto chinjō*, *Teihon* 2: 1351). Hanano suggests that his disciple Byakuren Ajari Nikkō 白蓮阿闍梨日興 (1246–1333), who accompanied him to Sado, may also have been present (*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*, 20).

[the offshore island of] Enoshima, shooting across the sky from southeast to northwest. It was shortly before dawn and still too dark to see anyone's face, but the radiant object clearly illumined everyone like bright moonlight. Blinded, the executioner fell, prostrate. The soldiers panicked. Some ran off into the distance; some dismounted and huddled on the ground; and others crouched in their saddles. I called out, 'Here, why do you shrink from this vile prisoner? Come closer! Come closer!' But no one would approach me. 'What if the dawn breaks? You should hurry up and behead me before daybreak, or it will be a gruesome sight.' 此にてぞ有らんずらんとをもうところに、案にたがはず兵士どもうちまはりさわぎしかば、左衛門尉申すやう。只今なりとな(泣)く。日蓮申すやう。不かくのとのぼらかな。これほどの悦とをばわらへかし。いかにやくそく(約束)をばたがへらるるぞ、と申せし時、江のしま(島)のかたより月のごとくひかりたる物、まり(鞠)のやうにて辰巳のかたより戌亥のかたへひかりわたる。十二日の夜のあけぐれ(昧爽)、人の面もみへざりしが、物のひかり月よ(夜)のやうにて、人々の面もみなみゆ。太刀取目くらみたふれ臥し、兵共おど怖れ、けうさめ(興醒)て一町計りはせのき、或は馬よりをりてかしこまり、或は馬'上にてうづくまれるもあり。日蓮申すやう。いかにとのぼら、かゝる大に禍なる召人にはとを(遠)のくぞ。近打チよれや、打チよれや、とたかだかとよばわれども、いそぎよる人もなし。さてよ(夜)あけばいかにいかに。頸切ルべくわいそぎ切ルべし。夜明なばみぐるし(身苦)かりなん、とすゝめ(勸)しかども、とかくのへんじもなし。⁸

The execution thus foiled, Nichiren, still under guard, was taken to the chief residence at nearby Echi of Honma Rokurōzaemon no jō Shigetsura 本間六郎左衛門尉重連, the deputy constable of the island province of Sado, there to await further instructions from the Bakufu. The next day brought another mysterious event. According to a later passage in the same autobiographical work, on that evening, the thirteenth, around the hour of the Dog (7:00–9:00 p.m.),

⁸ *Shuju onfurumai gosho, Teihon* 2: 967; Watson, *Selected Writings*, 326, slightly modified.

Nichiren went into the main garden, where scores of warriors were stationed. The moon was radiant and full. Facing it, Nichiren recited portions of the *Lotus Sūtra* and then discoursed to the moon deity on the meaning of the *Lotus* and its superiority over other teachings. In the same manner that he had rebuked the bodhisattva Hachiman the night before, he now upbraided the moon for failing to uphold the promise made by all gods in the Buddha's presence to protect *Lotus* devotees:

‘Now that you see me in these straits, you should gladly hurry to fulfill the Buddha's command [to receive the sufferings] of the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* in his place and give some sign of fulfilling your vow.... How can you go on shining with such a complacent face?’ ...Then as though in reply, a large star, bright as the morning star, fell from the sky and hung in the branches of the plum tree before me....Immediately the sky clouded over and a fierce wind arose, raging so violently that the whole island of Enoshima seemed to roar. The sky shook, echoing with a sound like pounding drums. 今かゝる事出来せば、いそぎ悦^びをなして法華經の行者にもかほり、佛勅をもはたして、誓言のしるし(験)をばとげさせ給^らべし.....うれしがをにて澄^み渡らせ給^らはいかに。.....其しるしにや、天より明星の如^くなる大星下^りて前の梅の木の枝にかかりてありしかば.....やがて即^ち天^{そら}かきくもりて大風吹^き来^りて、江の島のなるとて空のひびく事、大なるつつみを打^つがごとし。⁹

Nichiren remained at Echi for some twenty days while Bakufu officials debated what to do with him. In the end, in accordance with the original sentence, he was sent into exile on Sado Island in the Sea of Japan, where he would remain until the spring of 1274.

The luminous object whose sudden appearance saved Nichiren's life is explicitly mentioned in two other writings in the Nichiren collection. One is a brief letter to Shijō Kingo dated the twenty-first day of the ninth month, a little more than a week after the event, which states, ‘Of the three luminary deities, the moon deity appeared

⁹ *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 969–70; Watson, *Selected Writings*, 327–28, slightly modified.

as a shining object and saved my life at Tatsunokuchi, and four or five days ago, the star deity descended to visit me [at Echi]’ 三光天子の中に、月天子は光物とあらはれ、龍口の頸をたすけ、明星天子は四五日已前に下て日蓮に見参し給ふ。¹⁰ The other is a longer, 1278 letter, containing autobiographical recollections, to a woman identified as ‘the nun Myōhō’ 妙法比丘尼. It reads in part,

On the twelfth day of the ninth month at the hour of the Ox [1:00–3:00 a.m.], I was taken to the execution grounds at a place called Tatsunokuchi near Kamakura. Strangely, an object like the moon flew from the direction of Enoshima and passed over the executioner’s head. Terrified, he was unable to behead me. 鎌倉龍口と申^ス處に、九月十二日の丑の時に頸の座に引^キすへられて候き。いかがして候けん、月の如くにをはせし物江島より飛^ト出^ツてて使の頭へかか^リ候しかば、使おそれてきらず。¹¹

Nichiren clearly believed that, with the failure of the execution attempt, he had in some sense undergone a death and rebirth. In the letter to Shijō Kingo just quoted, he wrote, ‘In this life, as the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*, I have been sentenced to exile and to death—exile, to Itō [on the Izu peninsula], and death, at Tatsunokuchi. Because Tatsunokuchi in Sagami province is the very place where I gave up my life [for the *Lotus Sūtra*], how could it be less than the buddha land?’ 今度法華經の行者として流罪死罪に及ぶ。流罪は伊東、死罪はたつのくち。相州たつのくちこそ日蓮が命を捨たる處なれ。佛土におとる(劣)べしや。¹² And a few months later, he wrote to his followers from Sado: ‘On the twelfth day of the ninth month of last year, between the hours of the Rat and the Ox [11:00 p.m.–3:00 a.m.]...a person called Nichiren was beheaded. This is his spirit that has come to the province of Sado and, in the second month of the following year, is writing this amid the snow as a memento to his close disciples’ 日蓮といるし者は去年九月十二日子丑の時に頸はねられぬ。此は魂魄佐土の國にいたりて、返年

¹⁰ *Shijō Kingo-dono goshōsoku, Teihon* 1: 505.

¹¹ *Myōhō Bikuni gobenji, Teihon* 2: 1562.

¹² *Shijō Kingo-dono goshōsoku, Teihon* 1: 504.

の二月雪中にしるして、有縁の弟子へをくれば.....¹³ And in fact, the incident at Tatsunokuchi marked a profound turning point in his life and thought. On Sado, suffering from cold, hunger, and the hostility of the locals, Nichiren wrote some of his most important works and developed his mature teachings.

Nor did Nichiren ever forget his gratitude to Shijō Kingo for his actions on that night. In the above-cited letter written shortly after the incident, Nichiren wrote to him: ‘At the time of my arrest on the twelfth last, you not only accompanied me to Tatsunokuchi but vowed you would commit *seppuku* [to accompany me in death]. I can only call it extraordinary...When I go to Eagle Peak, I will report first of all how Shijō Kingo was resolved just as I was to give his life for the *Lotus Sūtra*’s sake’ 去 十二日の難のとき、貴邊たつのくち（龍口）までつれさせ給^と、しかのみならず腹を切らんと仰^せられし事こそ、不思議とも申^すばかりなけれ.....日蓮靈山にまいりてまづ四條金吾こそ、法華經の御故に日蓮とをなじく腹切んと申候なり。¹⁴ And years later, he wrote,

Over and over I recall the moment, unforgettable even now, when I was about to be beheaded and you accompanied me, holding the reins of my horse and weeping tears of grief. Nor could I ever forget it in any lifetime to come. If you should fall into hell for some grave offense, no matter how Lord Śākyamuni might urge me to become a buddha, I would refuse; I would rather go to hell with you. If you and I should enter hell together, we would find Śākyamuni Buddha and the *Lotus Sūtra* there. 返^す返^す今に忘れぬ事は首切れんとせし時、殿はとも（供）して馬の口に付^きて、なきかなし（泣悲）み給^はしをば、いかなる世にか忘^れなん。設^ど殿の罪ふかくして地獄に入^り給^はば、日蓮をいかに佛になれと釋迦佛こしら（誘）へさせ給^はすにも、用ひまいらせ候べからず。同^じク地獄なるべし。日蓮と殿と共に地獄に入^らば、釋迦佛・法華經も地獄にこそをはしまさずらめ。¹⁵

¹³ *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1: 590.

¹⁴ *Shijō Kingo-dono gosbōsoku*, *Teihon* 1: 504, 505.

¹⁵ *Sushun Tennō gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 1394–95; Watson, *Letters of Nichiren*, 334–35, slightly modified. Nichiren again expresses his gratitude to Shijō Kingo in the *Shijō Kingo-dono gobenji*, *Teihon* 2: 1800.

The attempted execution is known in Nichiren Buddhist circles as the Tatsunokuchi Persecution (*Tatsunokuchi hōnan* or *Ryūkō hōnan* 龍口法難). It is cited in the first accounts of Nichiren's life written by his disciples, dating to the early fourteenth century. Nichiren's miraculous escape would be celebrated thereafter in hagiographies, reenacted on the stage, and depicted in artwork; it represents an iconic moment, famous not only among Nichiren Buddhist practitioners but also among educated Japanese who know Nichiren, not only as a religious figure, but as a cultural hero. Since early modern times, it has also been the subject of controversy, which continues to this day.

Hagiographic Elaborations and Early Critics

The earliest retellings after Nichiren's death of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution are bareboned. The 1325 *Nichiren Shōnin gogutsū shidai* 日蓮聖人御弘通次第 [An Account of Nichiren Shōnin's Propagation] says only, 'On the twelfth day of the ninth month in the eighth year of the Bun'ei era [1271], the metal-sheep year, [Nichiren] was taken to the place of execution at Tatsunokuchi in Sagami....That night there was an extraordinary event in the sky. A luminous object appeared from Enoshima and passed over the head of [Nichiren's] horse' 文永八年癸九月十二日臨_二御首座_一觀_二給_一.....此夜天變江之島' 光物出来_ニ超_三御馬_一頭_ニ行_一'.¹⁶ *Sanshi goden dodai* 三師御傳土代 [Lives of the Three Teachers, hereafter, *Goden dodai*], an early biographical account by Nichidō 日道 (1283–1341) traditionally dated to around 1333, quotes briefly from Nichiren's own description in the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*.¹⁷ Soon, however, hagiographical embellishments begin to appear, as in the apocryphal *Hokke honmonshū yōshō* 法華本門宗要鈔 [Essential Teachings of the Lotus *Honmon* Sect], attributed to Nichiren but probably composed about forty to fifty years after his death.¹⁸ Here, in an effort to create verisimilitude,

¹⁶ Risshō Daigaku, *Nichirensbū shūgaku zensho* 1: 340.

¹⁷ Risshō Daigaku, *Nichirensbū shūgaku zensho* 2: 241.

¹⁸ Risshō Daigaku, *Nichiren Shōnin ibun jiten*, s.v., 'Hokke honmonshū yōshō', 1042d–43c.

the executioner is given a name (Echi no Saburōzaemon 越智の三郎左衛門, who does not seem to have been historical person).¹⁹ Also, a new detail is added: Just as this man was about to behead Nichiren, the sword shattered and fell from his hand. This element was probably intended to evoke the promise in the ‘Universal Gate of Bodhisattva Kanzeon’ chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* that, if anyone about to be murdered should call upon this bodhisattva, his attackers’ swords and staves will be broken in pieces.²⁰ Still further elaboration occurs in *Nichiren Daishōnin chūgasan* 日蓮大聖人註畫讚 [Illustrated Biography of Nichiren Shōnin] (hereafter, *Chūgasan*) of Enmyōin Nichō 圓明院日澄 (1440–1510), the most famous of the medieval Nichiren biographies and the first to be illustrated. Here, in addition to the element of the sword shattering, the luminous object is identified as a manifestation of the moon deity or a transformation of Great Bodhisattva Hachiman. As it passes overhead, the earth moves, thunder resounds and lightning flashes, and a voice from the sky declares, ‘If you lose the votary of the true dharma, your descendants will come to ruin and the country will be destroyed!’ 失^レ正法^ノ行者^ヲ滅^ス子孫^ニ亡^ニ國土^ヲ.²¹ In fact, it was not Nichiren’s own account but these later elaborations that first drew criticism.

The first on record, a rather mild expression of doubt, was an internal one, expressed by Nissei 日精 (1600–1683), seventeenth chief abbot of Taiseikiji 大石寺, a major temple of the Fuji lineage of Nichiren Buddhism. In a detailed chronology of Nichiren’s life,

¹⁹ *Teibon* 3: 2161.

²⁰ The sūtra passage is at *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T no. 262, 9: 7.56c16–17. Nichiren himself cites this *Lotus Sūtra* passage and a similar one (9: 5.39b17) in connection with the Tatsunokuchi Persecution: ‘The “Peaceful Practices” chapter says, “Swords will not touch him”. The “Universal Gate” chapter says, “The sword will break in pieces”. These sūtra passages are in no way false’ 安樂行品云^ク刀杖不加。普門品云^ク刀尋段段壞。此等の經文よも虚事にては候はじ (*Shijō Kingo-dono goshōsoku*, *Teibon* 1: 505).

²¹ Nichirensu Zenshū, *Nichiren Shōnin denkishū*, 141. Nichō evidently derived the element of the voice in the sky from the *Hokke honmonsbū yōshō* (*Teibon* 3: 2162).

Nissei questioned some of the elements found in medieval hagiographies. It was hard to believe, he said, that the sword had broken in the executioner's hand, or that a voice had declaimed from the sky.²² More vociferous criticism came from persons hostile to the Nichiren sect. One was Shinchō 真超 (1596–1659), a former Nichiren Buddhist priest who had converted to the Tendai school and nurtured a deep rancor toward his former affiliation. Shinchō asserted that, although his followers represent the attempted beheading as a persecution inflicted on Nichiren by enemies of the true dharma, the whole affair had resulted from Nichiren's own false teaching and maligning of other schools; it was not due to the executioner's ill intent. The element of the sword breaking was a 'great lie', a baseless fiction concocted in Nitchō's *Chūgasan* and the writings of later disciples. Shinchō noted that none of Nichiren's own works referring to the episode says that the sword broke. He asked: 'Had such a marvel truly occurred, why would Nichiren, who loved self-praise, have omitted to mention it in his writings?' 若シ實にサヤウノ奇異アラハ何ソ自賛ヲコノム日蓮が右ノ諸書ニノセザランヤ. The real reason that Nichiren's sentence was commuted from execution to exile, Shinchō concluded, was because the wife of the shogunal regent, Hōjō Tokimune 北條時宗 (1251–1284), was pregnant, and an amnesty had been declared to ensure her safe delivery.²³

A similar criticism came from a later, much more famous figure: Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843), a leading Nativist scholar and Shinto theorist. Atsutane was generally antagonistic toward Buddhism and particularly disliked the Shin and Nichiren sects for their clear subordination of the Japanese *kami* to the Buddha dharma.

Nichiren Buddhist believers say in all sincerity that when their founder Nichiren was taken to the execution grounds at Tatsunokuchi in

²² *Nichiren Shōnin nenpu*, in Hori, *Fuji shūgaku yōshū* 5: 98.

²³ *Kindan Nichirengi*, 102–03. Nichiren himself mentions the pregnancy of Tokimune's wife as an explanation being circulated for his stay of execution (*Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 973; Watson, *Selected Writings*, 331). Granting amnesty to ensure the safe delivery of a ruler's child was an established practice.

Sagami province and was about to be beheaded, he was saved when the executioner's sword suddenly broke. How pitiable! They have been made by their priests to swallow this whole, when in fact it never happened.... Buddhist priests these days all tell bare-assed lies, and when exposed, they show no shame but brazen it out with impudence. The Nichiren priests are among the worst. 日蓮宗の人などはいや此方の祖師日蓮は相模國の籠の口に於て土壇に据られ、既に首を討れんと為たる時に太刀取の持た太刀が、ぼきぼきと折て助かったなど、まじめに成て云ひますが、それは氣の毒なる哉、僧に一坏食されたので嘗てなきことでござる.....都て佛者と云者は今に尻の兀る偽を云て、夫を引むくられても恥とも思はずしやあしやあまじまじとして居る。中にも日蓮宗の僧が甚だしいでござる。²⁴

Atsutane's criticism was more substantial than Shinchō's, in that he offered a seemingly plausible explanation for the story of the sword breaking. Nichiren priests, he claimed, had stolen it from *Genpei seisuiki* 源平盛衰記 [The Rise and Fall of the Minamoto and Taira Clans], a version of the medieval epic *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 [Tale of the Heike]. Atsutane referred to an episode concerning one Taira no Morihisa 平盛久, who is saved from beheading by the power of the bodhisattva Kanzeon 觀世音 or commonly Kannon 觀音 (Skt. Avalokiteśvara), which causes the executioner's sword to shatter. The Morihisa story, Atsutane said, had in turn been based on an account—which he did not identify—taken from the *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 [Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs] (*T* no. 2035) by Zhipan 志磐 (ca. 1220–1275).²⁵ However, the Morihisa story makes no mention of a luminous object but says only that the executioner's sword broke just as he attempted to strike. Since Morihisa was a devotee of Kannon, this element in the narrative was doubtless intended to evoke the promise in the *Lotus Sūtra*, mentioned above, that if anyone about to be murdered should call upon that bodhisattva, his

²⁴ *Shutsujō shōgo furoku* 1: 202–03.

²⁵ The Morihisa episode occurs in the Nagata-bon 長田品 version of the *Heike*. See Yang, 'A Miracle at Morihisa's Execution'.

attackers' swords and staves will be broken in pieces.²⁶ Interestingly, the correct source of the element of the sword breaking was identified by a less widely known contemporary of Atsutane, the merchant and economic thinker Shōji Kōki 正司考祺 (1793–1858), who wrote,

The 'Universal Gate' chapter [of the *Lotus Sūtra*] says, 'If one is about to be killed and thinks on the power of Bodhisattva Kannon, then the swords and staves of those attacking him shall be broken.' It is said that when the founder Nichiren was in Kamakura and about to be executed, the sword raised against him suddenly broke. But neither the priests nor lay persons accompanying him were fighting. How could the sword have broken spontaneously? At that time, the wife of Hōjō [Tokimune] was pregnant, so a special amnesty was declared [and Nichiren was not beheaded]. Because Nichiren was a virtuous priest, he obtained this divine favour. 普門品ニ、臨刑欲壽終、念彼觀音力、刀尋段段壞トミユルユヘ、祖師日蓮鎌倉に於て、已ニ死刑ニ遇ハントスルトキ、其執ル所ノ刀刃段々ニ折ルルト、僧徒トモ、衆俗ニ示セトモ、合戰接刃モ致サス、何ヲ以テ、自折ルヘケンヤ、此時北條ノ夫人、安産ニ由テ、非常ノ赦ニ逢ヘリ、是則日蓮ハ修徳ノ僧ユヘ、天幸ヲ得ル所也。²⁷

One should note that, at this point, even vociferous critics of Nichiren such as Shinchō and Atsutane focused only on the hagiographic element of the sword breaking in the executioner's hand. Not until the modern period did the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution itself come into question.

Critics and Defenders

Modern debates over whether the Tatsunokuchi Persecution really happened began in the late nineteenth century and continue down

²⁶ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T no. 262, 9: 7.56c16–17. See note 20 above.

²⁷ *Keizai mondō hiroku* 18: 34–35; also quoted in Tsuji, *Nihon bukkuyōshi*, *Chūsei* 2: 24–25.

to the present. One can identify three successive iterations of this controversy. This section addresses the first two, which took the form of exchanges between external critics and defenders within Nichiren Buddhist circles. They centred on the reliability of sources and largely set the terms by which this issue is still debated.

The Shigeno Affair

The first to deny that Nichiren had ever been sentenced to death was the historian Shigeno Yasutsugu 重野安繹 (1827–1910), a scholar of Chinese studies and one of Japan's first professional historians. In 1875 Shigeno had been appointed deputy director of the Meiji government's Bureau of Historiography (Shūshikyoku 修史局; later, Shūshikan 修史館), the precursor to the present Historiographical Institute at the University of Tokyo. There, Shigeno and his colleagues devoted themselves to assembling primary documents in order to compile the *Dai Nihon hennenshi* 大日本編年史 [Chronology of Great Japan] as the basis for a new national history. Instrumental in the adoption of modern evidence-based historiographical methods, Shigeno was determined to rely solely on unimpeachable sources and to strip away legendary accretions. He had, for example, denied the historical existence of Kojima Takanori 兎島高德, a samurai hero in the medieval epic *Taiheiki* 太平記 [Tale of the Great Pacification] who was celebrated as a model of loyalty to the imperial cause; Shigeno had also questioned traditional accounts of the battles of Kawanakajima 川中島合戦 (1553–1564) waged between the great warlords Takeda Shingen 武田信玄 (1521–1573) and Uesugi Kenshin 上杉謙信 (1530–1578) that figured among the country's most popular war tales. This positivist stance had earned him the epithet *massatsu bakushi* 抹殺博士 ('Dr. Erasure', or perhaps, in today's parlance, 'Dr. Cancel').²⁸ Shigeno had no particular animus toward Nichiren Buddhism, but he was committed to the method of relying solely on verifiable documents. While searching for historical sources, he investigated the archives of Honmanji 本満寺, a prominent

²⁸ Ōtani, *Kindai Nihon no Nichirensbugi undo*, 61.

Nichiren Buddhist temple in Kyoto, where he found a brief letter in Nichiren's hand dated the fourteenth day of the ninth month, 1271, just two days after his arrest, and addressed to his follower Toki Jōnin 富木常忍 (1216–1299). It reads in part:

At the hour of the Rooster [5:00–7:00 p.m.] on the twelfth, I received an official sentence. Having been remanded to the custody of the governor of Musashi province [Hōjō Nobutoki 北條宣時 (1238–1323), also the constable of Sado province], I left Kamakura at the hour of the Ox [1:00–3:00 a.m.] on the thirteenth and am to be exiled to Sado...Your grief [at my exile] is understandable but, having known this to be inevitable from the outset, there is no reason to lament. It is against my own wishes that up until now I have not yet been beheaded. Had I been beheaded in the past for the *Lotus Sūtra's* sake, I would surely not have been born as such a lowly person. But by meeting successive persecutions, as expressed in the [*Lotus Sūtra's*] words, 'We shall be banished repeatedly', I can erase my past grave offenses and realize buddhahood. Thus I have undertaken this harsh practice [i.e., rebuking enemies of the *Lotus Sūtra*] of my own volition. 此十二日酉'時御勘氣。武蔵守殿御あづかりにて、十三日丑'時にかまくらをいで、佐土の國へながされ候が、.....御歎^キはさる事に候へども、これには一定と本よりご(期)して候へばなげかず候。いままで頸の切^レぬこそ本意なく候へ。法華經の御ゆへに過去に頸をうしないたらば、か^トる少身のみ(身)にて候べきか。又數見擯出ととかれて、度々失にあたりて重罪をけてこそ佛にもなり候はんずれば、我と苦行をいたす事は心ゆへなり。²⁹

Shigeno noted that this letter made no reference to an attempted execution. He concluded, based on this single text, that a death sentence had never been issued and the Tatsunokuchi Persecution had simply not occurred. Because that persecution is related in detail in the medieval biography *Chūgasan*, Shigeno argued that it must have been fabricated by Nichiren's later followers. Shigeno published his

²⁹ Toki-dono gobenji, *Teibon* 1: 503. The *Lotus Sūtra* passage is at *T* no. 262, 9: 4.36c22.

argument in 1889, and the following year, lectured on the topic to leading academic historical societies.³⁰

Because of Shigeno's high professional standing, his assertion caused consternation among the leadership of the various Nichiren Buddhist sects. Several individuals wrote to him in protest and even enclosed copies of Nichiren's writings referring to the Tatsunokuchi incident, seeking a retraction. Among them was Tanaka Chigaku 田中智學 (1861–1939), founder of the Risshō Ankokukai 立正安國會 (later Kokuchūkai 國柱會, Pillar of the Nation Society), who was not quite thirty at the time. Tanaka, who had abandoned his training for the Nichirenshū priesthood to become a lay evangelist, is known for his role in promoting Nichirenshugi 日蓮主義 ('Nichirenism'), a lay Nichirenist movement independent of temple organizations espousing a reading of Nichiren's teachings geared to practical issues of modernization and nation-building. For Tanaka, Shigeno's public erasure of an event of crucial significance to Nichiren Buddhism carried an impact far greater than any one scholar's personal opinion; as the lead figure in the Bureau of Historiography, Shigeno in effect spoke for the state and thus had to be countered. Perhaps, Tanaka reflected, the situation could even serve as 'an excellent means by which the light of Nichirenism will truly come to fill the world'.³¹ On June 6, 1890, having arranged a meeting by letter, Tanaka called on Shigeno, accompanied by one Ishikawa Seiryō 石川惺亮, who recorded their conversation.³²

³⁰ Shigeno's arguments appear in his 'Nichiren Shōnin Tatsunokuchi no gonan' and 'Nichiren Shōnin Tatsunokuchi no gonan: Zoku'; see also Shigeno's comments on the above-mentioned *Toki-dono gobenji* in his *Shichō bokuhō kōshō shō*, 127–28.

³¹ *Tanaka Chigaku jiden*, 2: 127.

³² The transcript is reproduced in Tanaka's autobiography, *Tanaka Chigaku jiden*, 2: 128–36, and as an appendix to his *Ryūko hōnan ron*, the book version of his public rebuttal of Shigeno, mentioned below. Shigeno recorded his own recollections of their conversation more briefly in 'Nichiren Shōnin Tatsunokuchi no gonan: Zoku', 575–77. The following summary of their points of disagreement follows the account in *Tanaka Chigaku jiden*, supplemented by the more

Shigeno's denial of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution rested chiefly on two points. One was that, historically, Japan's rulers had not imposed the death penalty on priests; exile was the usual sentence for offending clerics. He suggested that Nichiren's two sentences of exile—first to Izu and then to Sado—were in line with prior examples, such as the controversial priest Mongaku 文覺 (fl. late twelfth century), who had also been exiled, first to Sado Island and later to the island of Tsushima.³³ Tanaka pointed out that executing priests was not entirely unheard of: Anraku 安樂 and Jūren 住蓮, disciples of the Pure Land teacher Hōnen (1133–1212) had been beheaded by order of the retired Emperor Gotoba 後鳥羽上皇 in 1207.³⁴ He also noted that, by Nichiren's own account, his official sentence had indeed been exile; the decision to behead him was made privately by the official in charge.³⁵ A second, more complex issue involved the letter to Toki Jōnin. Here was a missive in Nichiren's own hand, written from Echi to a devout lay follower two days after Nichiren's arrest. For Shigeno, the absence of any mention in this document of the aborted execution attempt could only mean that it had never happened. Tanaka countered that because no word had arrived from Kamakura about the disposition of his case, Nichiren wrote only the bare essentials of his situation, waiting until later to give a full account.³⁶ He pointed out that several of Nichiren's later writings, including holographs, refer to the attempted beheading; Shigeno had only to consult the archives of those Nichiren Buddhist temples where they were stored. More broadly, however, he took issue with Shigeno's categorical denial of the evidentiary value of works that

detailed treatment in Tanaka's *Ryūkō hōnan ron*. See also the discussion in Kawasaki, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu', 120–29.

³³ Tanaka *Chigaku jiden* 2: 131.

³⁴ Tanaka, *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 122–23. This incident took place as part of the Jōgen-era persecution (*Jōgen no hōnan* 承元の法難), an attempt to suppress Hōnen's exclusive nenbutsu (*senju nenbutsu* 専修念佛) teaching (see Dobbins, *Jōdo shinshū*, 14–18).

³⁵ See note 4 above.

³⁶ Tanaka, *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 23–25.

did not survive in Nichiren's holograph. He noted that several of Nichiren's originals, although known to have existed, had been destroyed in a fire at the Nichirenshū head temple at Mount Minobu 身延山 in 1875—including, unfortunately, the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* itself, which contained Nichiren's own detailed account of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. Others had been lost over the centuries due to fires, flooding, and the general vulnerability of material objects. But Shigeno remained obdurate: Unless and until he saw an authenticatable text in Nichiren's hand that spoke of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, he would not alter his opinion.³⁷ This aspect of their disagreement—over the evidentiary weight of writings that survive only as copies by later disciples—would have enormous consequences for the modern scholarly study of Nichiren and remains contentious to this day.

Tanaka also took issue with Shigeno's reading of texts. First, Shigeno had read Atsutane as denying the historicity of the entire execution attempt, when in fact he had only criticized the later hagiographical element of the executioner's sword breaking in his hand.³⁸ Shigeno also misunderstood a key passage in the brief letter to Toki on which he had based his argument. For Shigeno, the words 'up until now' in the phrase 'up until now I have not yet been beheaded' meant that thus far the Bakufu had not pronounced a death sentence against Nichiren and that no execution attempt had been made. Tanaka pointed out that Shigeno had overlooked the context: The next sentence—'Had I been beheaded in the past for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s sake, I would surely not have been born as such a lowly person'—clearly shows that 'up until now' encompassed not only recent events but also Nichiren's past lifetimes. It was 'against his own wishes' that 'up until now' Nichiren had been unable to offer up his life for the *Lotus Sūtra* and did not imply that no execution had been attempted.³⁹

Unsurprisingly, the two also held different attitudes about the

³⁷ *Tanaka Chigaku jiden* 2: 120, 129–31, 132–33; *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 38–39.

³⁸ *Tanaka Chigaku jiden* 2: 118, 134; *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 63–64.

³⁹ *Tanaka Chigaku jiden* 2: 118–19, 132; *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 50–53.

consequences of Shigeno's assertion. Shigeno saw himself as merely following the dictates of evidentiary scholarship; he did not see how his position could substantially affect Nichiren Buddhists, who were free to believe whatever they wished. From Tanaka's perspective, however, because of Shigeno's role in the government Bureau of Historiography, his denial of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution amounted to its erasure by state authority. This was far worse in his eyes than the carping of someone like Atsutane, who was known for his anti-Buddhist prejudices; Shigeno, in contrast, carried the imprimatur of modern objective scholarship.⁴⁰ For Tanaka, Nichiren's wondrous escape from death at Tatsunokuchi was the key episode in his life, comparable to Christ's crucifixion, and confirmed his identity as the teacher of the *Lotus Sūtra* for the present, *mappō* era. And because Nichiren had set forth the teaching that would protect Japan and assure its spiritual leadership on the world stage, the erasure of this critical event would entail the gravest consequences for the nation and could not be allowed to stand.⁴¹

Unable to persuade Shigeno in direct dialogue, Tanaka decided to pursue the matter in an open forum and hastily arranged to rent the Kōseikan in Kōbikichō 木挽町の厚生館, at the time, Tokyo's largest public hall, seating between two to three thousand. A date little more than a week later was available, and in the brief time remaining Tanaka hastily assembled lecture materials while his followers worked round the clock to make and distribute advertisements. On June 15, 1890, he delivered a scathing rebuttal to Shigeno in a public lecture before a full house, including noted scholars, clerics, and government officials. Mounting the podium, Tanaka was struck by what initially appeared to him to be a sea of butterflies—the handheld fans of the audience moving in the humid summer heat—and was heartened.⁴² By all accounts a compelling speaker, Tanaka spoke for about five hours. He was driven to oppose Shigeno, he insisted, not

⁴⁰ *Tanaka Chigaku jiden* 2: 129, 134–35.

⁴¹ This theme runs throughout Tanaka's lecture. See for example *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 14–15, 32–34, 69, and 80. The crucifixion reference is at 32.

⁴² *Tanaka Chigaku jiden* 2: 137–38, 142.

as an aggrieved Nichiren Buddhist devotee, but out of dismay that this prominent historian had dismissed a matter of such importance to religion and to the nation without adequately considering the available evidence.⁴³ Tanaka adduced no fewer than thirty-four passages from Nichiren's writings that bore directly or indirectly on his rebuttal of Shigeno's assertions, twenty-three of which, he said, had been transmitted in Nichiren's holograph.⁴⁴ Tanaka spoke eloquently of the need to consider all relevant documents, whether or not they survived in Nichiren's hand. If all works whose originals had been lost to the ravages of time were excluded from consideration and dropped from catalogues, he said, then no matter who the author, they would in effect eventually cease to exist.⁴⁵ Repeatedly he drove home that Shigeno had leapt to a premature conclusion without adequately considering the evidence. Tanaka also took the opportunity to discourse more broadly on the background of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution and its significance in light of Nichiren's teachings. In 1890, he published his lecture in book form.

Shigeno never amended his view and declined to further engage publicly with Tanaka or to answer his criticisms.⁴⁶ Tanaka, for his part, would not let the matter drop. In 1905, he published a list of questions to Shigeno in his organization's journal *Myōshū* 妙宗 (Sect of the Wonderful Dharma) and also sent them to Shigeno personally but received no response. In 1915, at the Ōeshiki ceremony お會式 commemorating the date of Nichiren's death at the temple Ikegami Honmonji 池上本門寺 in the suburbs of Tokyo, Tanaka gave a lecture accompanied by magic lantern slides and went so far as to show one that depicted Shigeno bowing before Nichiren in apology. When

⁴³ Tanaka, *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 19.

⁴⁴ Tanaka, *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 37. Several of these passages do not touch on the execution attempt itself but describe Nichiren's arrest, the surrounding circumstances, and other related matters.

⁴⁵ Tanaka, *Ryūkō hōnan ron*, 39.

⁴⁶ However, some further written communication seems to have taken place between them (Kawasaki, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu', 122–24).

Shigeno heard about it, he remarked, ‘This Chigaku fellow certainly does entertaining things!’⁴⁷

The clash between Shigeno and Tanaka had both immediate and long-term consequences. At the time of Tanaka’s lecture, a majority of the Nichirenshū leadership was downplaying Nichiren’s exclusivist stance and criticism of other Buddhist teachings in an effort to support transsectarian cooperation, believing that to be the best course for ensuring the future of Buddhism in the modern era. Tanaka, in contrast, parlayed the Shigeno incident into a revival of the aggressive proselytizing (*shakubuku* 折伏) that Nichiren had urged, insisting on the unique truth of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The incident played a formative role in Tanaka’s Nichirenshugi movement and won him support within the Nichiren temple denominations.⁴⁸ Leading figures within Nichirenshū admired Tanaka’s principled stance. Writing years later, in 1932, Asai Yōrin 浅井要麟 (1883–1942), a leading Nichirenshū scholar who pioneered the modern text critical study of Nichiren’s works, praised Tanaka for his spirited response:

I think it was around 1890 when the lay devotee Tanaka Chigaku and Dr. Shigeno Yasutsugu debated whether the Tatsunokuchi Persecution really happened, but it is still fresh in people’s memory. One must acknowledge Tanaka’s substantial contributions in silencing the prominent Dr. Shigeno by his youthful enthusiasm, his passionate arguments, and his bold display of historical proofs that

⁴⁷ ‘Nichiren Shōnin Tatsunokuchi no gonan: Zoku’, 577. The incident of the lantern slides is related by Tanaka’s disciple Yamakawa Chiō 山川智應 in an essay accompanying a 1915 reprint of Tanaka’s *Ryūkō hōnan ron* as vol. 4 in the series *Nichirenshugi kenkyū sōsho* 日蓮主義研究叢書 (Shinchōsha 新潮社), quoted in Ryūmonji, *Fukashigi taiken*, 172–75. Yamakawa represents the episode as an expression of Tanaka’s frustration at Shigeno’s refusal to respond and criticizes Shigeno for scholarly irresponsibility in not acknowledging the flaws in his own argument. Yamakawa’s comments are also quoted in part in Kawasaki, ‘*Shuju on-furumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*’, 121–22.

⁴⁸ Ōtani, *Kindai Nihon no Nichirenshugi undo*, 61–66.

confirmed for the general public the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.⁴⁹

What the general public may have thought is hard to assess. But in the Buddhist academic world, it was a different story. After the Pacific War, the famous historian of Japanese Buddhism Tsuji Zenosuke 辻善之助 (1877–1955) noted three major flaws in Shigeno's argument: He had conflated the hagiographical account of the sword breaking with the execution attempt itself; he had not consulted other relevant writings in the Nichiren collection; and he misread the one that he had examined.⁵⁰ However, as Tanaka had feared, Shigeno's opinion proved influential and has long outlived him. In the postwar era, the prominent historian Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄 (1926–1993) would state concerning the sudden appearance of the luminous object said to have foiled Nichiren's beheading: 'Not a single piece of reliable evidence exists that would support the occurrence of this marvelous event.'⁵¹

The Second Round: A Question of Textual Authenticity

A second attack on the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution took place in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was launched by two scholars affiliated with the Jōdo Shin or True Pure Land school 浄土真宗: Washio Junkyō 鷲尾順敬 (1868–1941) and Sakaino Kōyō 境野黄洋 (1871–1933), who together with their colleague Murakami Senshō 村上专精 (1851–1929) had founded the journal *Bukkyō shirin* 佛教史林 [Buddhist History], one of the earliest scholarly journals in Japan for the humanistic study of Buddhism. Significantly, both Washio and Sakaino addressed—not traditional hagiographies such as the *Chūgasan*, whose account of the sword shattering in the executioner's hand had provoked Atsutane and Shigeno—but Nichiren's own account of the affair

⁴⁹ Asai, 'Tatsunokuchi no kubi no za', 561.

⁵⁰ Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, *Chūsei* 2: 31.

⁵¹ Kuroda, *Mōko shūrai*, 80.

in his autobiographical *Shuju onfurumai gosho*. This shift in focus probably had to do with increased availability of modern printed versions of Nichiren's writings.⁵² 'From our standpoint, this writing is a later forgery', Washio wrote. The Bakufu, he said, had never deemed Nichiren a threat sufficient to warrant his execution: His sentence had been exile from the beginning, and the Tatsunokuchi Persecution had never happened.⁵³ Sakaino similarly wrote, 'Within the Nichiren sect, [the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*] is regarded as a reliable work that almost no one questions, but from our standpoint, it is a blatant forgery, a laughable production of later persons intent on convincing others of [Nichiren] Shōnin's dignity and marvels'.⁵⁴ Sakaino's objections to the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* were threefold: It did not sound like Nichiren. Its sentences were weak, not powerful, like those of Nichiren's famous *Kaimoku shō* 開目抄 [Opening of the Eyes]. Second, it was full of exaggerated descriptions and its tone was boastful, inconsistent with Nichiren's personality. And third, the narrative was excessively dramatic and contained implausible miraculous happenings. The depiction of Nichiren's remonstrance with Hachiman in particular struck him as absurd.

This time, it was not Tanaka who stepped up to respond but his disciple, Yamakawa Chiō 山川智應 (1879–1956). Like Tanaka, Yamakawa was an ardent Nichiren devotee, but he also had academic credentials, having received a doctorate in Religious Studies from Tokyo Imperial University in 1934. Yamakawa played a leading role in the doctrinal studies and publishing activities of Tanaka's Kokuchūkai and edited some of Tanaka's major doctrinal works. Prompted chiefly by the criticisms of Sakaino, Yamakawa wrote two essays defending the authenticity of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* and the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi incident.⁵⁵ Yamakawa, who

⁵² In particular, the *Nichiren Shōnin goibun* 日蓮聖人御遺文 [Writings of Nichiren Shōnin] edited by Inada Kaiso 稲田海素 (1869–1956), a compact edition of Nichiren's writings (*sbukusatsu ibun* 縮刷遺文) first published in 1904, made Nichiren's work more readily accessible than it had been before.

⁵³ Washio, 'Tatsunokuchi hōnan ni kansuru gimon', 793.

⁵⁴ Sakaino, 'Nichiren Shōnin', 157–58.

belonged to a later generation than Tanaka, recognized that, in the absence of an original, the mere fact of early notices and importance to the subsequent tradition were not sufficient to establish the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*'s legitimacy. He analysed the work from text-critical, historical, and stylistic perspectives and also examined its intellectual content. It was, he asserted, fully consistent with Nichiren's thought and with the style of his authenticated writings; he also found it to be remarkably detailed and accurate in its references to contemporaneous events and its use of the language of Nichiren's time. Sakaino's stylistic criticism of the *Shuju ofurumai gosho* he deemed overly subjective. Not everyone agreed that its sentences were 'weak'. Yamakawa noted that the literary figure Takayama Chōgyū 高山樗牛 (1871–1902), a fervent admirer of Nichiren, had found it compelling and powerful and often read aloud from it to his visitors.⁵⁶ Yamakawa also asserted that the scene in which Nichiren rebukes Hachiman was not inconsistent with his conduct or statements in others of his writings in which he reproves the deities for their failure to protect the *Lotus Sūtra* and himself as its devotee.⁵⁷

Yamakawa also traced the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*'s history of transmission and compared its extant versions—its passages cited in Nichidō's fourteenth-century *Goden dodai*; the earliest extant transcription, by the scholar-priest Gyōgakuin Nitchō 行學院日朝 (1422–1500), eleventh chief abbot of Mount Minobu; and the

⁵⁵ Yamakawa, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho wa gisho ni arazu' and 'Ryūkō hōnan jiseki kōshō'.

⁵⁶ Yamakawa, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho wa gisho ni arazu', 315.

⁵⁷ For example, in the *Kōnichi-bō gosho* 光日房御書 [Letter to Kōnichi-bō], Nichiren describes himself as climbing a mountain on Sado Island and calling out his remonstrations to the gods (*Teibon* 2: 1154; see also the *Kangyō Hachiman shō*, *Teibon* 2: 1831–50, in which Nichiren upbraids Hachiman for failing to protect the *Lotus Sūtra*). Whether the episode of Nichiren rebuking Hachiman in the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* represents his authentic account or a later interpolation has been argued extensively. For additional references on both sides of the debate, see Kawasaki, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu', 142–46, and Hanano, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi', 34–36.

modern version edited and published by the lay scholar Ogawa Taidō 小川泰堂 (1814–1878). Yamakawa found numerous small differences among these versions at the level of individual words and phrases and in their use of the phonetic *kana* syllabary versus Chinese characters. The quotations in *Goden dodai*, for example, employed simpler, shorter expressions and made heavier use of *kana*.⁵⁸ Overall, however, Yamakawa found the weight of the evidence to support the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*'s authenticity. His arguments are by no means flawless, as we shall see, but he initiated the serious modern textual study of this work, and some issues that he raised are still being debated. Yamakawa also succeeded in persuading his colleague and mentor, the Religious Studies scholar Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949), that the work was genuine, although its present form might contain some later interpolations.⁵⁹

A second line of attack on the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi incident to appear during this period focused, not on whether the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* was actually Nichiren's writing, but on the reliability of its account. To my knowledge, the first such criticism was leveled by Saki Akio 佐木秋夫 (1906–1988), a leftist-leaning scholar of Japanese Buddhism, in a 1938 study of Nichiren. Saki pre-

⁵⁸ Scholarship divides over whether the *Goden dodai* abbreviates the passages it quotes from the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* or Nitchō's transcription expands them. Yamakawa rejected the idea that the *Goden dodai* was more trustworthy because it was composed roughly a century earlier. He found that it shortened its quotations from others of Nichiren's writings as well, rather than reproducing their precise wording. (This characteristic of the *Goden dodai* has been noted more recently by Takahashi, *Nichiren Shōshū shi no kenkyū*, 381, 383). Yamakawa also held that the *Goden dodai*'s greater use of *kana* represented Nichidō's style and did not necessarily reflect Nichiren's original ('*Shuju onfurumai gosho wa gisho ni arazu*', 301–14). His argument for the superior reliability of Nitchō's transcription has been upheld by Asai (*Nichiren Shōnin goibun kōgi* 10: 34) and Hanano ('*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 62–71). In contrast, Kawasaki deems the *Goden dodai* to be closer to the original ('*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*', 160).

⁵⁹ Kawasaki, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*', 139–40.

sented himself as an objective scholar intent on liberating Nichiren from the confines of sectarian hagiography and placing him in his proper historical context. At present, he said, because of the efforts of Nichiren's followers, the Tatsunokuchi Persecution was accepted as historical fact, but there was ample reason to question it. Saki claimed, as had Shigeno, that there had been no death sentence, and he reiterated Shigeno's argument about the lack of mention of an execution attempt in the letter to Toki Jōnin written just two days after the supposed event. The most detailed descriptions of the attempted beheading, Saki said, appear not in Nichiren's letters dated shortly after it purportedly occurred but in letters he wrote some years later. He suggested that the entire event was an illusion or autosuggestion that took root in Nichiren's mind and that he gradually reconstructed in memory to accord with his self-image as the teacher of the *Lotus Sūtra* for the present age; the incident was then reified by his followers as a matter of historical fact.⁶⁰ Saki repeated this argument in an article in a 1938 issue of the newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun* 読売新聞, where he wrote: 'The Tatsunokuchi Persecution cannot be confirmed as historical fact....[In this account] we can glimpse [either] the workings of autosuggestion by a mind driven to extremity, or the traces of a process of subsequent legend-making.'⁶¹ The *Yomiuri* solicited and published a response from Yamakawa Chiō, who wrote that, while claiming to place Nichiren in his historical context, Saki perpetuated a materialist view of history that did not correctly grasp its object but simply dismissed the Tatsunokuchi Persecution by treating Nichiren as a case of mental aberration.⁶²

Nonetheless, the suggestion has persisted that, for whatever reason, Nichiren was—to use a more recent expression—an 'unreliable narrator' of his own experience.⁶³ Variations on this theme would

⁶⁰ Saki, *Nichiren*, 305–07.

⁶¹ Saki, 'Nichiren zō o hagu'.

⁶² Yamakawa, 'Seitō naru Nichiren den'. The exchange continued for another round in the *Yomiuri*'s June 12 and 19 issues. See also Ryūmonji's discussion of this episode (*Fukashigi taiken*, 188–91).

⁶³ The term was first used by Wayne C. Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*.

recur decades later, in the 1970s and 80s. Koike Nagayuki 小池長之, a scholar of Japanese religion, wrote that, in delivering Nichiren to the custody of the Sado deputy constable Honma Shigetsura, his escort paused to rest at the execution grounds at Tatsunokuchi, which was on the way. Nichiren, Koike suggested, arbitrarily assumed that he was about to be beheaded.⁶⁴ In a similar vein, Momose Moji 百瀬明治 proposed that the official in charge, Heino Yoritsuna, so detested Nichiren that he resented the thought of simply turning over his prisoner to the Sado deputy constable's custody. Instead, he deliberately stopped at Tatsunokuchi and feigned preparations for a beheading in order to torment him, and Nichiren presumably took the deception at face value.⁶⁵ Such theories, however, are entirely speculative, with no supporting evidence, and can be neither verified nor disproven. Significantly, they are often presented as one of two alternative possibilities: Either the account of Nichiren's escape from beheading as set forth in the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* is the creation of later followers, or, whether made consciously or otherwise, it is Nichiren's misrepresentation. This binary, I would argue, points to a deep-rooted and distinctively modern rationalist discomfort with the idea of a supernatural event and an inability to grasp it as anything other than a fabrication—if not by later followers, then by Nichiren himself.

The Internal Debate

A third phase in the controversy over the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi persecution emerged shortly before and developed after the Pacific War and continues to the present. Like the second phase, it focused on the reliability of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*. This time, however, the debate was no longer between Nichiren Buddhists and external critics but among scholars within the Nichiren sect. Ironically,

⁶⁴ Koike, 'Ichigyō senchaku', 88–89. Ryūmonji quips that the 'arbitrary assumption' (*hitorigime* 一人ぎめ) was on Koike's part (*Fukashigi taiken*, 117).

⁶⁵ Momose, *Nichiren no nazo*, 166.

it arose through the importation into Nichiren Buddhist sectarian studies of the same modern text critical approach that Shigeno had espoused. Before considering how this development has unfolded, it is appropriate that we say something further about the context that informed it, namely, the vexed issue of authenticity in Nichiren's writings, and the place of *Shuju onmfurumai gosho* within that controversy.

Nichiren wrote voluminously. More than four hundred personal letters, essays, and other works are attributed to him.⁶⁶ Scholars both inside and outside Nichiren Buddhist circles now generally acknowledge that some among them may be not Nichiren's own work but rather that of later disciples, produced and attributed to him after his death. In an overview discussion of this issue, Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士 has grouped the writings in the Nichiren collection into three categories that he terms Nichiren A, Nichiren B, and Nichiren C. Nichiren A comprises (1) writings that exist or are known to have once existed in Nichiren's holograph or in transcriptions by early disciples and are thus considered authentic, and (2) writings that, while not surviving in Nichiren's hand, do not contradict his authenticated writings, have aroused no controversy, and are therefore treated as genuine. Nichiren B consists of works that do not exist in holograph or early transcription and whose authenticity is disputed. And Nichiren C consists of obvious misattributions and apocrypha. The Nichiren B category has emerged largely in the wake of text critical studies beginning in the twentieth century, and in consequence, a clearcut line between Nichiren A and B categories has in some cases become difficult to draw.⁶⁷ The *Shuju onmfurumai gosho* is just such an instance.

⁶⁶ The *seihen* 正編 (Main Division, vols. 1 and 2) of the 1988 revised edition of *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun (Teihon)*, the critical edition of Nichiren's writings used for scholarly reference, contains 434 writings, of which 113 complete works and 87 fragments survive in Nichiren's holograph (Risshō Daigaku, *Nichiren Shōnin ibun jiten*, s.v., 'Ibun', 72a); an additional nine, recently discovered *seihen* works also appear in vol. 4, bringing the count to 443. This does not include Nichiren's charts and diagrams or numerous holographic fragments (vols. 3 and 4).

The goal of weeding out apocryphal works, transcription errors, interpolations, and other problems in the Nichiren canon goes back to the early modern period. It prompted the work of the nineteenth-century lay scholar Ogawa Taidō, mentioned above, who devoted his life to the task of compiling and editing a critical edition of Nichiren's work.⁶⁷ But the name most closely associated with the adoption of text-critical methods in the study of the Nichiren corpus is Asai Yōrin, also mentioned above, who espoused the goal of producing a purified collection of Nichiren's writings based solely upon authenticated texts. This project has been carried on by Asai's successors and today represents the mainstream within the academic wing of Nichirenshū, which among the various Nichiren Buddhist organizations has dominated the modern scholarly study of Nichiren. Their work forms the context for the present debate about the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*. To better understand the controversy, it will be helpful to give a brief overview of how this writing has come down to us.

A Checkered Transmission History

The *Shuju onfurumai gosho* is Nichiren's autobiographical account of his arrest, escape from beheading, activities in exile on Sado Island, eventual pardon, and return to Kamakura. He wrote it at his retreat on Mount Minobu in 1275 or 1276 and sent it to a follower, traditionally said to have been the lay nun Kōnichi-bō 光日房 or Kōnichi-ama 光日尼, who lived in Nichiren's home province of Awa. The honorific *on* 御 indicates that this title was added by a later disciple and not provided by Nichiren himself. Notices of this work appear quite early: As noted above, it is quoted in the earliest Nichiren biography, the fourteenth-century *Goden dodai*

⁶⁷ Sueki, 'Nichiren's Problematic Works', 263–64. Works in Sueki's Nichiren A and B categories together form the *seiben* division of the critical edition of Nichiren's writings (see preceding note), while Nichiren C works are included in the *zokuben* 続編 (Supplementary Division).

⁶⁸ On Ogawa, see Ishikawa, 'Ogawa Taidō'.

of Nichidō. However, Nichiren wrote his letters on multiple sheets of paper that sometimes became separated and were transmitted independently. This one, an unusually long work, became separated early on into three writings that were given individual titles: 1) *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, detailing Nichiren's arrest and the foiled beheading; 2) *Sado gokanki sbō* 佐渡御勘氣抄, which includes the star descending at Echi, the journey to Sado Island, and Nichiren's activities while in exile there;⁶⁹ and 3) *Amidadō Hōin kiu no koto* 阿彌陀堂法印祈雨事, which relates Nichiren's return from Sado and his final interview with the Bakufu official Hei no Yoritsuna, during which he predicted—accurately, as it turned out—that the Mongols would attack within the year. This portion of the text is named for its account of rain-making prayers performed by the Shingon adept Kaga no Hōin 加賀法印 (1185–1280), which resulted in a violent storm. In addition, 4) the work's concluding paragraph was later determined to have been inadvertently switched with the conclusion of a different letter to Kōnichi-bō.⁷⁰ All three portions with their individual titles are attested in the second earliest index of Nichiren's writings, compiled in 1344 by Jōgyō-in Nichiyū 淨行院日祐 (1298–1374) of the Nakayama lineage, indicating that they had already become separated by this time.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Not to be confused with another of Nichiren's writings titled *Sado gokanki sbō* (*Teihon* 1: 510–11), dated the tenth month, tenth day, of 1271.

⁷⁰ On the transmission history of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, see Suzuki, *Nichiren Shōnin ibun no bunkengaku-teki kenkyū*, 325–35; Kawasaki, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu', 103–15; and Hanano, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi', 3–12. Yamanaka suggests that Nichiren wrote this work over time and may himself have sent separate portions of it to different followers from the outset (*Nichiren jiden kō*, 36); however, this theory awaits corroborating evidence.

⁷¹ *Honzon shōgyō roku*, *Teihon* 3: 2738, 2741. Nichiyū's catalogue does not list these works under the category of 'holographs' (*goshinpitsu* 御眞筆), so they were probably copies. Nichiyū made pilgrimages nearly every year to Mount Minobu in Kai province, where Nichiren had spent his last years, and which also housed his gravesite. Yamakawa suggested that that Nichiyū could have copied

The originals were kept at Mount Minobu and are listed in a catalogue compiled by the eleventh chief abbot of Minobu, Gyōga-kuin Nitchō, mentioned above.⁷² The continued presence of the three works in the Minobu archive is attested by several catalogues compiled between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. During that period, scholar-priests began to suspect that the three separately titled writings were in fact parts of a single work. In 1605, Minobu's twenty-second chief abbot Shinshōin Nichion 心性院日遠 (1572–1642) suggested that the writing titled *Sado gokanki shō* (2) was actually a continuation of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* (1).⁷³ In 1731, one Nichimyō 日妙, the twenty-seventh abbot of Chōonji 長遠寺 in Kai province, further claimed that the *Amidadō Hōin kiu no koto* (3) was a continuation of the same, single work, which had become separated into three; this conclusion was affirmed in 1814 by the scholar-priest Chiei-in Nichimyō 智英院日明 (1747–1816), who also noted that the ending had been switched with that of another letter to Kōnichi-bō.⁷⁴ Chiei-in Nichimyō had undertaken to compile and edit a complete collection of Nichiren's writings but died before finishing the task. It was the lay scholar Ogawa Taidō who fulfilled that goal, completing the first modern critical edition of Nichiren's writings, the *Kōso ibunroku* 高祖遺文錄 [Collection of the Founder's

these texts while at Minobu ('*Shuju onfurumai gosho wa gisho ni arazu*', 284).

⁷² *Minobu Chōshi-bon gosho mokuroku*, *Teihon* 3: 2770, 2771. The switching of the concluding portion of the *Amidadō Hōin kiu no koto* with that of a different letter had already occurred by the time of Nitchō's successor Enkyōin Nichii 圓教院日意 (1444–1519) (Hanano, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 9).

⁷³ *Minobusan Kuonji Renso goshinkan nyūkan no shidai*, 546. According to Suzuki, this may have been asserted earlier by Myōkōin Nichii 妙光院日意 (1421–1473) of Hiraga (*Nichiren Shōnin ibun no bunkengaku-teki kenkyū*, 328). The relevant source is an editorial comment in Nichii's catalogue *Hiraga-bon gosho mokuroku*, *Teihon* 3: 2774.

⁷⁴ Chōonji Nichimyō attributes the opinion that the three works were originally one to someone he identifies simply as Kō 廣 (Nichikō?), who in 1687 had perused the originals at Minobu (*Gosho shin mokuroku*, *Teihon* 3: 2805). Chiei-in Nichimyō's comments appear in his *Shinsen kōsei sosho mokuji*, *Teihon* 3: 2829.

Writings], published in 1876. The task consumed more than four decades, during which time Ogawa travelled throughout Japan to temples holding Nichiren's writings, comparing variant transcriptions and, where possible, reading them against the originals. He eliminated obvious apocrypha, rejoined portions of writings that had become separated, and separated others that had mistakenly been joined together. Examining the originals in the archives at Mount Minobu, Ogawa affirmed the earlier opinion that the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* properly comprised three writings that had become separated and an ending inadvertently switched with that of another letter. Ogawa was the one who reassembled this work in its present form, writing in his editorial notes that he had thereby 'removed the cause for a thousand years' regret'.⁷⁵

Then, disaster. Early in the morning of January 10, 1875, during the New Year's ceremonies at Mount Minobu, a fire broke out and raged uncontrollably, destroying ancient temple structures. Many temple treasures were lost, including twenty-five of Nichiren's holographic writings, the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* among them. For some later scholars, that loss has relegated this work to an ambiguous category: An original certainly once existed but can no longer be consulted. Whether there were later interpolations or other changes, and how extensive they might have been, is all but impossible to assess.

Asai Yōrin's Project and Its Problematic Aftermath

Let us turn now to the work of Asai Yōrin 浅井要麟 (1883–1942), professor at Nichirenshū's Risshō University 立正大學 in Tokyo, whose work was instrumental in establishing the hermeneutical framework within which the *Onfurumai gosho* is considered today. Asai called for Nichiren doctrinal studies to adopt the objective stance of inductive reasoning, following the logic of the physical and

⁷⁵ Ogawa, *Ibunroku sakkī*, 175. This composite version is the form in which the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* appears in the *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* 昭和定本日蓮聖人遺文 [Shōwa-Era Critical Edition of the Works of Nichiren Shōnin] used by scholars today.

social sciences. For him, this translated into distinguishing between true and apocryphal writings in the Nichiren canon. It had long been noted that some of Nichiren's works contained inconsistencies and contradictions. No longer, Asai argued, could such matters be resolved by sectarian dogma; the objective, scientific method of text criticism was needed. Only by clearly determining which writings were genuine and which were false could the study of Nichiren's teaching proceed on a sound basis.⁷⁶

Asai's scholarly reflections on the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* appear in his 1933 commentary on selected works of Nichiren.⁷⁷ Here he reviewed both the arguments against and in support of its authenticity, represented respectively by Sakaino and Yamakawa. Asai's evaluation was even-handed: Sakaino's criticism he saw as fragmentary, and, while expressing deep admiration for Yamakawa's scholarship, he also noted flaws. Some of Yamakawa's arguments simply did not hold. The close resemblance of expressions in the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* to those of other, authenticated writings by Nichiren, as well as its accuracy of historical detail and faithfulness to the written language of the period, could argue just as well for a clever forgery as for the work's authenticity.⁷⁸ What most concerned Asai, however, was Yamakawa's readiness to accept that the three writings comprising the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* and once held at Minobu were originals. Assuming that Kōnichi-bō was the recipient, it was logical to assume, as Yamakawa had suggested, that Nichiren's disciple Minbu Nikō Ajari 民部日向阿闍梨 (1253–1314), who was said to have been Kōnichi-bō's nephew, had taken the originals to Mount Minobu, where he became doctrinal instructor (*gakutō* 學頭) and eventually second chief abbot after Nichiren's death.⁷⁹ However, Asai noted, not until the catalogue compiled by the scholar-priest and twelfth Minobu chief abbot Enkyōin Nichii 圓教院日意 (1444–1519), some two centuries after Nichiren's death, were they explicitly labeled

⁷⁶ Asai, *Nichiren Shōnin kyōgaku no kenkyū*, 124–28 *passim*.

⁷⁷ Asai, *Nichiren Shōnin goibun kōgi* 10: 1–38.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁹ Yamakawa, 'Shuju onfurumai gosho wa gisho ni arazu', 277.

as Nichiren's holographs (*onfude gosho* 御筆御書).⁸⁰ Asai also had doubts about other writings identified in Nichii's catalogue as originals. It was his bitter experience, he said, that writings and maṇḍalas held in Nichiren Buddhist temple archives that were said to be Nichiren's holographs often proved otherwise on examination.⁸¹ In short, there was no way to prove definitively that the three writings Ogawa Taidō examined on Mount Minobu had actually been in Nichiren's hand.

Asai had other reservations as well, which were shared, he said, by other colleagues. He repeatedly stressed their tentative nature; research was still in progress, and thus no definitive conclusion could be reached. Nonetheless, he felt the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* read, not like Nichiren's own statement, but rather like a third person reverently depicting Nichiren's sublime conviction in his mission as the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Asai acknowledged that highly confident, almost boastful statements appear in several of Nichiren's other writings, for example, where he terms himself the 'pillar of Japan' 日本の柱 or 'father and mother to the reigning emperor' 當帝の父母.⁸² But for Asai the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* seems to have crossed some unspecified line in terms of degree. He also saw it as stylistically inconsistent; the 'power' of the initial portion did not carry through to the end, and its descriptions of events were exaggerated, yielding an excessively dramatic, staged effect.⁸³ Although more respectfully stated, these comments differ little from the objections raised earlier by Washio and Sakaino, suggesting that Asai and his colleagues had begun to adopt the same modernist perspective held by those earlier critics.

Asai's approach would prevail within the academic wing of Nichirenshū. Since his time, what began as a reasonable attempt to

⁸⁰ *Daisshōnin onfude mokuroku*, *Teihon* 3: 2742.

⁸¹ Asai, *Nichiren Shōnin goibun kōgi* 10: 24–26, 29–32. Asai also objected to Ogawa's editing style, which he thought too modern, and based the version of *Shuju onfurumai gosho* appearing in his commentary series chiefly on Nitchō's transcription (10: 34).

⁸² *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1: 601; *Senji shō*, *Teihon* 2: 1018.

⁸³ Asai, *Nichiren Shōnin goibun kōgi* 10: 21–23, 26.

sort out apocrypha from genuine writings has steadily reified into a near obsession with authentic texts, a progressive narrowing of the number of works considered reliable, and a paralyzing hermeneutics of suspicion that considers only thoroughly unimpeachable writings as a reliable window onto Nichiren's life and thought. Accordingly, many contemporary scholars of Nichiren—inside and outside Nichiren Buddhist circles—base their studies solely on his holographic works. Ironically, such an approach is possible only because of the historical accident that so many of Nichiren's writings—well over a hundred complete letters and essays, along with many dozens of fragments—survive in his own hand.⁸⁴ While a detailed critique would exceed the scope of this article, certain problems with this approach should be noted here. First, reliance solely on writings that exist in holograph is not the hermeneutically 'safe' option that it appears to be, as genuine writings might thereby be excluded, thus potentially narrowing the scope of Nichiren's thought and closing off interpretive possibilities. As Suguro Shinjō 勝呂信静 has noted, where authenticity has not yet been determined, there exists on average a fifty-fifty chance that any given work might be authentic.⁸⁵ Second, this approach is not, in practice, the scientifically objective undertaking that it claims to be. In most cases, where individual works have been flagged as possible forgeries or as containing later interpolations, those criticisms have arisen based, not on self-evident textual problems, but on content judged subjectively to be problematic. For example, the *Sandaibihō honjōji* 三大秘法稟承事 [On the Transmission of the Three Great Secret Dharmas] has been questioned because it mandates the future establishment of a court-sponsored precept platform (*kaidan* 戒壇), a concept that postwar Nichiren sectarian scholars, eager to disavow wartime state-centred readings of Nichiren, deemed awkward.⁸⁶ Several letters to one of Nichiren's converts on Sado, the Tendai scholar-priest Sairen-bō 最蓮房, have come under suspicion as possibly apocryphal

⁸⁴ See note 66 above.

⁸⁵ Suguro, 'Goibun no shingi mondai', 90.

⁸⁶ Sueki, 'Nichiren's Problematic Works', 264–69.

because they adopt terminology from the medieval Tendai discourse of original enlightenment (*hongaku hōmon* 本覺法門), which Asai and his successors saw as inconsistent with or at least peripheral to Nichiren's main thought.⁸⁷ In such cases, the argument becomes circular: Some particular element is predefined as marginal, extraneous, or contradictory to Nichiren's teaching and then used as grounds to question the authenticity of those works in which it appears.⁸⁸

Arguments from style or tone prove especially slippery in this regard. As Yamakawa Chiō noted, such judgments are personal and subjective: Where Sakaino found the sentences of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* to be lacking in power, Takayama Chōgyū saw them as imbued with Nichiren's lifeblood. Asai's observation that the work reads like a third-person account intent on magnifying Nichiren's personal courage and dignity does not necessarily mean that someone else authored the text. Suguro suggests that this impression may arise from the fact that the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* was composed retrospectively, some years after the fact, and that in writing it, Nichiren represented his prior self in light of his subsequent understanding.⁸⁹ It may also be heightened by Nichiren's references to himself in the third person, by no means unusual in that period but frequent in Nichiren's writings.⁹⁰ The exaggerated expressions, which Sakaino and others saw as boastful and excessively dramatized, can be found in other, fully authenticated writings: for example, where Nichiren describes his narrow escapes from 'thousands' of *nenbutsu* followers who descended in a night attack on his dwelling at Matsubagayatsu in 1260 and from 'hundreds of men' attacking him and his small party of followers at Komatsubara in Tōjō in 1264.⁹¹ But such in-

⁸⁷ Stone, 'Some Disputed Writings', especially chapter 1, and *Original Enlightenment*, 67–72.

⁸⁸ Stone, 'Some Disputed Writings', 227, 252, 338. See also Hanano's related argument in '*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 41–61 *passim*.

⁸⁹ Suguro, 'Goibun no shingi mondai', 98.

⁹⁰ Yamanaka, *Nichiren jiden kō*, 26–27.

⁹¹ *Shimoyama goshōsoku*, *Teihon* 2: 1330; *Nanjo Hyōe Shichirō-dono gosho*, *Teihon* 1: 326; noted by Yamanaka, *Nichiren jiden kō*, 31–32.

flated expressions were far from uncommon in the literature of his day. Nichiren seems often to have appropriated phrasing, cadence, style, and other elements from early medieval war narratives (*gunki monogatari* 軍記物語), which were recited aloud.⁹² He may in fact have intended the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* and others of his writings to be read aloud among his followers. During the years of his reclusion on Mount Minobu (1274–1282), many among Nichiren’s following were unable to meet with him directly but communicated by letters carried by his closest clerical disciples, who traveled back and forth between Minobu in Kai province and their own local congregations. Some disciples had never even met Nichiren personally. Suguro suggests the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* would have served to convey to such persons an understanding of who he was and what he stood for as their teacher.⁹³

Whatever the case, Nichiren was a master storyteller. His versions of narrative episodes from the sūtras and Buddhist didactic tales (*setsuwa* 説話), recounted in letters to his followers, are often more compelling than their original versions, and he recasts them so as to underscore the unique power of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the only teaching efficacious in the Final Dharma age.⁹⁴ The same may well apply to his accounts of his own experience, which he shaped to communicate

⁹² Sueki, *Nichiren nyūmon*, 56–57; Yamanaka, *Nichiren jiden kō*, 32–35. Several of Nichiren’s writings contain passages, expressions, and episodes also found in *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 [Tale of the Heike]. At one time, scholars assumed that Nichiren had read the *Heike* and took him as a benchmark in dating its formation. However, Imanari has argued that Nichiren read, not *Heike monogatari* itself, but shorter, precursor accounts and other lore that were eventually compiled into this medieval epic (*Heike monogatari ruden kō*, especially 143–48).

⁹³ Suguro, ‘Goibun no shingi mondai’, 99.

⁹⁴ On Nichiren’s extensive use of Buddhist didactic tales, see Takagi, *Nichiren to sono montei*, 105–50, and Okada, ‘Nichiren to setsuwa’. Rodd draws on Takagi in her discussion of Nichiren’s refiguring of the story of the father and son calligraphers, Wulong 烏龍 and Weilong 遺龍, from the Tang-period collection *Fabua zhuanji* 法華傳記 [Biographical Accounts Related to the *Lotus Sūtra*] (Rodd, *Nichiren*, 47–52).

to his followers his self-understanding as the teacher of the *Lotus Sūtra* for the present era and their shared mission to spread faith in it. Especially during the Minobu years, Nichiren wrote several works, such as the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, containing passages of vivid autobiographical recollection, with precise references to the dates and times of particular events. In them, Nichiren depicted his experiences ‘not as mere chance, but based on his conviction of their historical necessity to make manifest in Japan, in the Final Dharma age, the truth taught by the Buddha’.⁹⁵ Several modern interpreters, as we have seen, have found the grandiloquent tone of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* distasteful. Yet to say that its language is boastful, its narrative dramatically contrived, or its description of miraculous events beyond credibility are subjective opinions; they are not, in and of themselves, evidence against Nichiren’s authorship. Thus Hanano Jūdō 花野充道, probably the most vocal critic of Asai’s approach to date, argues that designations of any particular Nichiren-attributed work as ‘suspicious’ (*gisbo* 疑書) or ‘apocryphal’ (*gisbo* 偽書) should not rest on matters of style or presuppositions about Nichiren’s thought but on obvious textual problems. They should also, he urges, be accompanied by some reasonable hypothesis about who specifically, if not Nichiren, could have written the work in question—or at least, what lineage within his following might have produced it—and for what reason.⁹⁶

None of this is to deny the real textual problems surrounding the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*. Among experts within the Nichiren sect, its date of composition and recipient are in dispute; so are the issues of whether its third section, dealing with the adept Kaga no Hōin’s prayers for rain, is really part of the same writing, and whether the texts that Ogawa examined at Minobu and combined into a single work were in fact Nichiren’s originals or copies containing later interpolations. These questions are argued even among those specialists who hold that the execution attempt actually happened.⁹⁷ None of

⁹⁵ Sueki, *Nichiren nyūmon*, 45–46.

⁹⁶ Hanano, ‘*Shuju onfurumai gosho* no shingi’, 35–36, 57.

⁹⁷ These disputes are interrelated and complex. Yamanaka says that the third

them necessarily calls into question either Nichiren's authorship or the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution itself.

Asai himself did not take a firm stance on the *Shuju onfurumai*

section of the work dealing with Kaga no Hōin 'connects smoothly in content' with what precedes it, thus indicating that he regards it as part of the same, single writing (Yamanaka, *Nichiren jiden kō*, 339). In contrast, Kawasaki argues that this third section is an independent writing (Kawasaki, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*', 106). In this he follows Asai, who disagreed with Ogawa on this point (Asai, *Nichiren Shōnin goibun kōgi* 10: 7–8). Suzuki suggested a composition date for the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* of 1276 (Suzuki, *Nichiren Shōnin ibun no bunkengaku-teki kenkyū*, 333). Kawasaki holds that either 1275 or 1276 is possible for the first two sections but that 1276 is more likely for the third (Kawasaki, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*', 108–09). Hanano, who upholds the integrity of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* as a single work, suggests the first month of 1277 (Hanano, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 70, 80–84). Kawasaki sees Kōnichi-bō as the likely recipient for the third section but suggests that the recipient of the preceding portions of the text needs to be reconsidered (Kawasaki, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*', 115, 161). Asai thought that the recipient could not be determined independently of the questions of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*'s authenticity and whether or not it was originally a single work (Asai, *Nichiren Shōnin goibun kōgi*, 10: 35). Suzuki questioned Kōnichi-bō as the recipient and suggested that the work may have been sent to Nichiren's disciples at Kiyosumidera 清澄寺 (also pronounced Seichōji), the temple in Awa province where he had been ordained as a youth (Suzuki, *Nichiren Shōnin ibun no bunkengaku-teki kenkyū*, 333). Hanano regards Kōnichi-bō as the likely recipient (Hanano, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 75, 78). Kawasaki holds that the writings held at Minobu and assembled by Ogawa into today's single, *Shuju onfurumai gosho* text were probably copies that contained later interpolations (Kawasaki, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*', 160). Hanano in contrast accepts the testimony of Chiei-in Nichimyo, Ogawa, and other scholars before them who examined the texts in the Minobu archives and identified them as Nichiren's holographs (Hanano, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 31). Another issue of dispute surrounding the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* is whether the passages quoted from it in Nichidō's *Goden dodai*, or Nitchō's transcription, are closer to the form of the original (see note 58 above).

gosho's authenticity, nor did he comment on the historicity of Nichiren's escape from beheading, an issue on which he seems to have remained silent. But as one commentator has observed, the doubts that Asai raised about the text, and that his successors repeated, generated a 'mood' in which it has gradually come to be treated within the scholarly world as though apocryphal.⁹⁸

Impact on Nichiren Biography

That 'mood' of suspicion has affected depictions of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution in postwar and contemporary Nichiren biography. Some authors reject the miraculous element of the shining orb but accept the historicity of the execution attempt itself. The historian Ono Tatsunosuke 大野達之助 (1910–1984), for example, writes, 'Even if there was in fact no luminous object, the attempt to behead Nichiren at Tatsunokuchi and its sudden commutation to exile were probably fact.'⁹⁹ Others, such as Koike and Momose, cited above, dismiss the likelihood of an execution attempt altogether. Many simply repeat earlier suspicions about the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* without personally reviewing the evidence.¹⁰⁰

Several biographies written by scholars within Nichiren Buddhist circles or otherwise specializing in Nichiren also reflect the doubts raised by modern text critical studies. The historian Kawazoe Shōji 川添昭二 writes as follows:

It cannot be said that [the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*] in its present form is entirely Nichiren's authentic writing. Here and there are passages that appear to be a later person's interpolations, and one must be cautious in their use. Both writings [*Shuju onfurumai gosho* and *Myōhō Bikuni gohenji*] record the [Tatsunokuchi] episode, so either Nichiren wrote as he did because it really happened in that way; or because, even if it wasn't factual, he perceived it in that way;

⁹⁸ Yamanaka, *Nichiren jiden kō*, 39.

⁹⁹ Ono, *Nichiren*, 125.

¹⁰⁰ See for example Shimada Hiromi's *Hontō no Nichiren*, 160–62.

or it is the addition of a later hand. One cannot judge immediately. Whatever the case, neither work survives in its original, so one simply cannot say for sure.¹⁰¹

Tamura Yoshirō 田村芳朗 (1921–1989), who specialized in the Japanese reception of the *Lotus Sūtra*, wrote in a similar vein:

The *Shuju onfurumai gosho* has been deemed a superbly crafted, eloquent autobiographical account. But it is a composite of three, originally independent works that were later combined, and that, along with its contrived dramatic effects and its grandiloquent recounting of miraculous happenings, has given rise to the theory that it is in part apocryphal.... For each of these three writings [referring to the luminous object], the question of authenticity needs to be investigated, and it may be said that the miracle at Tatsunokuchi that they relate does not go beyond the realm of legend.¹⁰²

Other biographies by Nichiren specialists do not even mention the tradition of Nichiren's miraculous escape. Historian Takagi Yutaka 高木豊 (1928–1999), describing how Shijō Kingo and other followers accompanied Nichiren to the execution grounds, says only, 'Fortunately, the beheading did not take place', citing Nichiren's statement in another writing, 'For some reason, that night the execution was postponed, and I was taken to a place called Echi' いかにしてやありけん、其夜はのびて依智^{えち}というところへつきぬ。¹⁰³ Takagi attributes Nichiren's reprieve to the Hōjō regent Tokimune's wife's pregnancy and to the efforts of one of Nichiren's influential followers, Daigaku no Saburō 大学三郎, who lobbied Bakufu officials for his pardon.¹⁰⁴ Another biography, by historian Nakao Takashi 中尾

¹⁰¹ Kawazoe, *Nichiren to Mōko shūrai*, 117–18. See note 4 for the *Myōhō Bikuni gobenji*.

¹⁰² Tamura, *Nichiren*, 72, 90. Tamura refers to the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Myōhō Bikuni gobenji*, and *Shijō Kingo-dono goshōsoku* (note 10).

¹⁰³ *Hōon shō*, *Tetbon* 2: 1238.

¹⁰⁴ Takagi, *Nichiren*, 107–08.

堯, similarly evades the question. It describes the eerie night march to place Nichiren in the custody of Honma Shigetsura, deputy constable of Sado:

Relying on the moonlight and feeling the cold along the sea road, they advanced west, arriving at the execution grounds at Tatsunokuchi. There they stayed for a considerable time; they placed Nichiren in position to behead him and made as though to carry out the sentence. In the end, however, nothing happened, and with dawn, they departed...and arrived at Honma's residence in Echi.¹⁰⁵

Given the importance to Nichiren's later tradition of the account of his extraordinary escape from death, it might seem astonishing that a biography would not even mention it. But if the luminous object is prejudged to be a legendary accretion, then one has to question either the authenticity of those writings that describe it or Nichiren's own reliability as a narrator of events. Faced with that choice, it is perhaps not strange that silence would seem a reasonable option.

The dilemma arises from the methodological limits of attempts to weed out legend from historical fact. Sueki Fumihiko, a leading scholar of Japanese Buddhism and one who is open to the possibility of some factual basis for the Tatsumokuchi Persecution, writes in his own biography of Nichiren:

The term 'hagiography' is used in contrast to 'biography', but whether the two can neatly be separated has recently been disputed. This point is especially evident in the case of Nichiren. Nichiren refutes modern, rationalistic attempts to divide the two. The reason is that myths and legends about Nichiren originate with none other than Nichiren himself.¹⁰⁶

Sueki's observation here is less than wholly precise, in that the

¹⁰⁵ Nakao, *Nichiren*, 135.

¹⁰⁶ Sueki, *Nichiren nyūmon*, 53.

Shuju onfurumai gosho is neither hagiography nor biography but autobiography—a different genre, not bound by the constraints of factual accuracy expected of modern biography but differing from hagiography in that the subject, rather than a third person, has shaped the narrative. Still, Sueki's point holds: autobiography is not a mere chronicling of events but crafted to convey a story or message. In addition, we must consider that some version of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* is attested early on, and that a number of Nichiren's writings—including some surviving holographs—refer to his near beheading and escape.¹⁰⁷ Thus it would strain the bounds of credibility to maintain that the entire incident was invented after his death. To ignore or gloss over the tradition of the mysterious shining object that foiled Nichiren's beheading because it violates modern sensibilities represents a failure of the historical imagination, a refusal to enter into the cognitive world of medieval Japan and of Nichiren in particular, who saw himself and his followers as living out the words of the *Lotus Sūtra* and shouldering a task entrusted to them by the Buddha himself. Above we noted two problems with the approach of relying solely on Nichiren's indisputably authentic writings: first, that potentially genuine writings are thereby excluded, thus narrowing and possibly misrepresenting his thought, and second, that suspicions raised about the authenticity of writings deemed questionable often rest not on textual evidence but on circular arguments that pre-judge a particular element as incompatible with Nichiren's thought, personality, or writing style. Here we see yet a third problem, that dismissing works such as the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* erases the significance they have held in the history of the Nichiren tradition.

¹⁰⁷ Passages not otherwise cited in this chapter that refer to the attempted beheading include *Shingon shoshū imoku*, *Teihon* 1: 641; *Shijō Kingo-dono gobenji*, *Teihon* 1: 664; *Nyosetsu shugyō shō*, *Teihon* 1: 736; *Ichinosawa Nyūdo gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 989; *Hōon shō*, *Teihon* 2: 1222; *Shimoyama goshōsoku*, *Teihon* 2: 1324, 1334; *Shōnin gonanji*, *Teihon* 2: 1673; *Nakaoki Nyūdō goshōsoku*, *Teihon* 2: 1715; and *Hakii-dono gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 1928. All of these works are generally accepted as authentic, except the *Hakii-dono gosho*, which is in dispute. There may be other references that I have missed.

I will return to this point below. First, however, let us consider another, different strand of argument about the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

From ‘Miracle’ to ‘Coincidence’: The Limitation of Naturalistic Accounts

Critical studies of the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* have on the whole worked to undermine confidence in its account of the luminous object that saved Nichiren from beheading. In contrast, astronomical and meteorological data gathered since the postwar period seem to offer some support. Multiple explanations have been advanced for the mysterious object, for example, that it was a lightning flash or thunderbolt, a meteor, a falling star, a fireball, ball lightning, an aurora, or even a UFO.¹⁰⁸ Bracketing the question of UFOs, some of the naturalistic explanations proposed for the shining object make it difficult to dismiss the Tatsunokuchi story out of hand. This section will introduce the chief suggestions put forth thus far and also point out their limitations.

On the night of November 11, 1953, persons in the Tokyo-Yokohama area observed what appeared to be a large shooting star, bright as the full moon, that passed overhead and then vanished with loud report, having either exploded or fallen to earth. It was reported in the next day’s newspapers along with eye-witness accounts. On November 14, the *Yomiuri shinbun* published comments from Dr. Hirose Hideo 広瀬秀雄 (1909–1981), an astronomer at the Tokyo Astronomical Observatory and also Professor of Astronomy at the University of Tokyo, who suggested it had been an unusually large meteor.¹⁰⁹ One reader, Hoshino Takeo 星野武男, a resident of Tokyo with a long-standing interest in the Tatsunokuchi story, was struck by the seeming resemblance in the newspaper accounts to the description of the luminous object in the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*. Hoshino sent Hirose

¹⁰⁸ Kawasaki, ‘*Shuju onfurumai gosho ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu*’, 147.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Bakuhatsu shite sanpun shita dairyūsei’.

copies of that work along with other relevant passages from Nichiren's writings. Intrigued, Hirose investigated the matter and published his findings the next year. He concluded that the bright object observed over Tokyo had been a meteor originating in the Taurid meteor shower associated with Encke's Comet that can be observed in the latter part of October (the date of Nichiren's attempted execution would have occurred in October by the present calendar). According to Hirose, a meteor from this group, falling from the parent comet's orbit, had fortuitously saved Nichiren's life at Tatsunokuchi.¹¹⁰

Hirose further opined that the *Shuju onfurumai*'s account of the star that descended at Echi must refer to the planet Venus, appearing around sunset and discerned through the branches of a plum tree. This suggestion was further investigated by another astronomer, Saitō Kuniji 齊藤国治 (1913–2003), who calculated that sunset on the thirteenth would have occurred at 5:14 p.m., when Venus, at a magnitude of minus 3.5, would have been at its brightest. At that time, Saitō said, the position of Venus would have been 36.5 degrees east of the sun. By the hour of the Dog (about 7:00 p.m.), the time mentioned in *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, it would have appeared quite low in the sky and might well have seemed to be suspended in a plum tree.¹¹¹ An alternative naturalistic explanation for both the luminous object at Tatsunokuchi and the star at Echi has been offered by Ryūmonji Bunzō 龍門寺文蔵, an independent researcher, who asserts that both were instances of ball lightning.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Hirose, 'Nichiren Shōnin "Tatsunokuchi hōnan" no toki no tenpen ni tsuite'. The above account is based on Ryūmonji, *Fukashigi taiken*, 58–65; substantial sections of Hirose's article are quoted on 62–65. Ryūmonji (53) indicates that the 'ninth month, twelfth day' converted to the Western calendar would be October 24. Saitō, mentioned below, gives it as October 17 (*Hoshi no kokiroku*, 109).

¹¹¹ Saitō, *Hoshi no kokiroku*, 111–12.

¹¹² Ryūmonji offers an intriguing argument against Venus as an explanation for the star descending to greet Nichiren at Echi. The exact site where this event purportedly happened cannot be identified; no fewer than three temples in Kamakura each claim to be built on the site of Honma's residence and say that a particular plum tree on their grounds is the one referred to in the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*

The suggestion that these two extraordinary manifestations were natural phenomena had preceded Hirose's postwar investigations. In defending the *Shuju onfurumai gosho's* authenticity against Sakaino and other critics, Yamakawa Chiō had been prompted to address the concept of 'miracles' (*kiseki* 奇蹟). In a 1915 article, he wrote:

People often say that the luminous object appearing at the time of the Tatsunokuchi persecution and the miracle of the star descending at Echi were invented by later persons, or, even more egregiously, that the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, because it relates such episodes, is itself apocryphal. But truly, what is uncanny about these events? There are all sorts of celestial occurrences. The luminous object at Tatsunokuchi and the star descending at Echi may well have been among them. These are not utter impossibilities, like [accounts of the tantric master Kūkai 空海 (774–835)] flinging a *vajra* from Tang China [to Japan] or making the sun come out at night [in response to his prayers]. They have the character of possibility.... Whether by chance or by necessity, they occurred just when Nichiren Shōnin was about to be beheaded and when he was preaching the dharma to the moon.¹¹³

The modern attributing of seemingly miraculous occurrences to

account. Whatever the case, Ryūmonji notes that if Honma's residence followed the usual pattern of a high-ranking samurai official's dwelling, the garden would have faced south, where Venus in the early evening sky would not have been directly visible; hence his argument for ball lightning as a more likely explanation (*Fukashigi taiken*, 71–73).

¹¹³ Yamakawa, 'Kiseki ni taisuru shinkō' (2), 70. Nichiren himself accepted the existence of miraculous powers such as those attributed to Kūkai but argued that they have no necessary connection to one's mastery of Buddhism: 'The truth or falsity [of particular teachers] should be judged solely on the basis of their doctrines and not by their superior abilities or supernatural powers' 但法門をもて邪正をたゞすべし。利根と通力とはよるべからず (*Shō Hokke daimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1: 208). See also *Daimoku Mida myōgō shōretsu ji*, *Teihon* 1: 298, and *Shōgu mondō shō*, *Teihon* 1: 367.

natural causes is not of course limited to the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. Natural causes have been posited for miracles in the Bible, for example, that the parting of the Red Sea, which allowed the Israelites to escape Pharaoh's army, was due to unusual geological activity following the eruption of Thera (now Santorini) in the Aegean Sea, or to unusual storm-force winds funneled down the Gulf of Aqaba or the Gulf of Suez, causing the water to retreat. As the Biblical scholar Mark Harris has observed, some such arguments seem almost as implausible as the events they purport to explain.¹¹⁴ Conditions under which storm winds could part the Red Sea are said to occur only once in one to three thousand years. By contrast, the luminous object at Tatsunokuchi seems almost routine: Ryūmonji, perusing the Bakufu record *Azuma kagami*, discovered no fewer than thirteen references to 'luminous objects' (*hikarimono* 光物) observed in the Kamakura area between 1184 and 1256, along with a few additional mentions in other sources of the period, suggesting that the region was particularly prone to such occurrences.¹¹⁵

However, my concern here is not the plausibility of naturalistic accounts for the shining object that appeared at Tatsunokuchi but the hermeneutic shift that occurs when they are invoked. As Harris observes, once a natural cause is assumed, the miracle is no longer the event itself but its timing.¹¹⁶ This shift is already evident in Yamakawa's explanation: The miraculous happening was not the luminous object itself, which he argues was an astronomical phenomenon, but rather, the fact of its appearing just at the moment when Nichiren was about to be beheaded.

'Miracles' in the West have often been understood as divine interventions in the normal order of things, following David Hume's classic definition of a miracle as a transgression of natural law.¹¹⁷ Some

¹¹⁴ Harris, 'Apocalypses Now', 1042–43.

¹¹⁵ Ryūmonji, *Fukashigi taiken*, 16–18. Ryūmonji adduces these examples to support his argument for ball lightning as the 'luminous object' that appeared at Tatsunokuchi.

¹¹⁶ Harris, 'Apocalypses Now', 1042.

¹¹⁷ Hume, 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', 83; McGrew,

scholars have argued that Buddhism, strictly speaking, does not have ‘miracles’ in this sense. Buddhism has no all-powerful god who might intervene to suspend natural laws; rather, mysterious events have been explained as especially vivid expressions of principles thought to be continuously at work in the world, such as karmic causality or ‘stimulus and response’ (*kannō dōkō* 感應道交)—the idea that buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and the cosmos itself respond to human moral and ritual behaviour.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, these explanations share with traditional Western understandings of ‘miracles’ the assumption of an underlying ontological and moral order that does not figure into modern secular or materialist understandings. By shifting the ‘miracle’ from the event itself to its timing, naturalistic explanations bring it into the realm of coincidence, which can be understood—depending upon one’s hermeneutical orientation—as occupying a position anywhere along a spectrum from ‘chance’ to ‘necessity’, to use Yamakawa’s terms. To say that the appearance of a meteor saved Nichiren from beheading in itself expresses no particular ontological commitment; it could have been a cosmic response manifested to save the life of a religious hero, or purely a chance occurrence.

Harris suggests that naturalistic explanations offer ‘a uniquely modern purchase on the transcendent quality of these [Biblical] stories...creative and imaginative retellings ... in the language of our scientific world.’¹¹⁹ But this may not necessarily be the case. One imagines that scientists proposing naturalistic explanations for the parting of the Red Sea may have found their conclusions to offer less a modern expression of the transcendent than the purely intellectual

‘Miracles’.

¹¹⁸ See for example LaFleur, *Karma of Words*, 33–34, and Teiser and Stone, *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, 34–35. While acknowledging this point, Campamy argues persuasively that events related in Buddhist tales of the strange and wondrous nonetheless function as ‘miracles’ in an epistemological sense, in that they bring home the workings of karmic causality with a dramatic, shocking, or awe-inspiring force seldom evident in the everyday course of events (Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 15, note 58).

¹¹⁹ Harris, ‘Apocalypses Now’, 1048.

satisfaction of accounting for a Biblical miracle in the terms of their own discipline. To my knowledge, Hirose and Saitō had no personal stake in legitimizing the Tatsunokuchi story; their interest lay rather in the domain of *kotenmongaku* 古天文学, the study of premodern accounts of celestial phenomena in light of contemporary scientific knowledge. What is intriguing, however, is how their conclusions have been appropriated.

An investigation of how Nichiren Buddhist practitioners have received these explanations lies beyond the scope of this essay, and I can offer only two fragmentary pieces of evidence, serendipitously discovered. Both are taken from the literature of the Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, the largest of the postwar Nichiren-based lay movements. An early instance appears in the *Shakubuku kyōten* 折伏教典 [Handbook of Conversion], first published in 1958, during the Sōka Gakkai's early phase of aggressive expansion, as a reference for members engaged in proselytizing. 'When Nichiren Daishōnin 大聖人 [the "great saint"] was led to the place of execution, and he loudly urged the executioner to hurry up and behead him as the hour was growing late, the gods inherent in the outer world (*kokudo seken no shoten* 國土世間の諸天) fully extended their powers of protection so that a great meteor manifested, destroying the demons.'¹²⁰ Here the appeal to a naturalistic explanation—the 'great meteor'—does not displace the traditional idea that Nichiren was in the end protected by Buddhist tutelary deities but simply adds an extra, scientific-sounding layer of legitimation. Another reference appears in a dialogue between the Gakkai's then president, Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作 (1928–), Kimura Masayoshi 木口勝義, a lecturer in astronomy at Kinki University, and Shimura Eiichi 志村栄一, editor of the magazine *Ushio* 潮 (Tide). Ikeda relates Hirose's findings in considerable detail but concludes that the meaning of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution can only be understood 'on the basis of one's consistent faith and

¹²⁰ Kodaira, *Shakubuku kyōten*, 351. Emphasis added. *Kokudo seken* is a Buddhist term for the insentient environment, as distinct from *shujō seken* 衆生世間, the sentient beings who inhabit it; the two are nondual and thus inextricably interrelated.

practice', and that 'whatever the case [concerning the star at Echi], we should bear in mind that the occurrence of this phenomenon at that particular moment [just when Nichiren had finished addressing the moon] has a significance that goes beyond astronomy and enters the dimension of Buddhism'.¹²¹ Here we see an implicit assertion that scientific explanation can help substantiate, but cannot fully explain, such extraordinary events.

But what about scholarly treatments, the main focus of our discussion here? For some, open to the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi incident, naturalistic explanations bolster its plausibility and argue a need to take it seriously. Satō Hiroo 佐藤弘夫, for example, writes in a recent biography of Nichiren:

The shining object is mentioned by Nichiren himself in *Shuju onfurumai gosho* and other writings that are reliable to some extent... and it seems to have been widely known among Nichiren's followers during his lifetime. Despite the dramatic legend-like [execution] scene, one cannot deny the possibility that some unusual astronomical phenomenon was involved.¹²²

Similarly, Hanano Jūdō, who upholds the historicity of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, cites the existence of 'detailed, scientific investigation of the "luminous object" as objective fact'.¹²³ Yet at the same time, even those most skeptical of the traditional account sometimes acknowledge the possibility of a naturalistic basis. Momose Meiji, mentioned above, who deemed the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* unreliable and the 'luminous object' a later invention, qualified his doubts with the statement, 'Alternatively, one cannot completely deny the possibility that some strange natural phenomenon actually occurred.'¹²⁴

Naturalistic explanations for the 'luminous object' at Tatsunoku-

¹²¹ Ikeda, *Buddhism and the Cosmos*, 165, 197–98.

¹²² Satō, *Nichiren*, 196–97.

¹²³ Hanano, 'Nichiren no shōgai', 40. Hanano specifically cites Ryūmonji's research.

¹²⁴ Momose, *Nichiren no nazo*, 164.

chi speak both to the role of science as today's preeminent legitimating discourse and to the modern fragmentation of knowledge in which religion has been split off from other branches of human activity. (The opposition of 'miracles' and 'natural events' is itself an artifact of that fragmentation). Naturalistic explanations can be and are invoked by persons representing any point along an interpretive spectrum from literal faith to diehard skepticism; this is possible because they open a space within which traditional accounts can be accommodated without sacrifice of commitment to modern norms of rationality or critical thinking. It would likely be difficult for contemporary readers, whatever their interpretive stance, to hear the 'luminous object' at Tatsunokuchi explained in scientific terms as an astronomical or meteorological phenomenon and *not* concede that perhaps it could have some factual basis. We should be aware, however, that in that very response, we make a hermeneutical move quite foreign to how such an event would have been understood in Nichiren's time. Whatever their intent, naturalistic explanations are independent of religious meaning. Thus they seem inevitably to attenuate the power that the mysterious events they seek to explain would have held for the people who recorded them.

Tatsunokuchi between Myth and History

Sueki Fumihiko has addressed the need to acknowledge a mythic dimension in the lives of founders of religious movements. He asks: 'Can there be a purely human founder utterly divorced from myth? No matter how one might try to separate the myth from the life story, the founder will never be a mere ordinary person.'¹²⁵ Connecting this observation to the tradition of Nichiren's miraculous escape from beheading, he continues:

It is not appropriate to reject this account categorically. One cannot know whether something like a meteor appeared or not, but to

¹²⁵ Sueki, *Nichiren nyūmon*, 53.

dismiss the entire matter from the standpoint of modern rationalism is excessively simplistic. One must acknowledge that something occurred that people of the time would have considered miraculous, or at least, that would have appeared that way to Nichiren.¹²⁶

Sueki's observations raise important hermeneutical questions. How would people of the time have understood the appearance of the luminous object that Nichiren describes? What did it mean for him, and for his later tradition? How would one read the Tatsunokuchi episode as myth? Myth, that is, in the sense, not of a falsehood or fabrication, but a narrative that organizes meaning in the world and makes sense of one's place—and that of one's community—within it.

It is difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible, to re-imagine human perceptions of the world before the advent of modern scientific paradigms. It is probably safe to say that, for people of Nichiren's time, there were few 'mere coincidences'. Religion in medieval Japan was a semiotically overdetermined realm in which virtually anything—the flight patterns of birds, the colour of clouds, celestial movements, animal behaviour, outbreaks of illness—could be freighted with significance. Of that world, James Dobbins writes:

Although it is difficult to pinpoint any one feature that epitomizes medieval [Japanese] religion, suffice to say that it abounded in revelatory dreams, with human relationships considered karmically [*sic*] linked, with unseen spirits inhabiting the landscape....Everywhere one might turn, there was the possibility of an encounter with the unseen and the mysterious.¹²⁷

It is unlikely that a meteor suddenly streaking across the night sky would *not* have excited anxieties and cried out for interpretation, even if it had not forestalled the surreptitious beheading of a controversial religious leader. Indeed, the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* relates that, following the failed execution, Bakufu officials summoned a

¹²⁶ Ibid., 61–62.

¹²⁷ Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Esbinni*, 123.

yinyang master (*onmyōji* 陰陽師), who reportedly performed divination and announced: ‘The country will erupt in turmoil because you punished that priest. If you don’t hurry and recall him, there is no telling what misfortune may strike’ 大に國みだれ候べし。此御房御勘氣のゆへなり。いそぎいそぎ召シかえさずんば世中いかが候べかるらん.¹²⁸ For Nichiren, and for his followers both in his own time and after his death, there were other layers of meaning as well. Here let us consider three interrelated aspects of Nichiren’s teaching that the traditional account of his miraculous escape brings vividly to life, independent of the question of its status as historical fact.

First, the story exemplifies how *Lotus* devotees should comport themselves in the face of persecution. The *Lotus Sūtra* itself speaks of ordeals to be encountered by those who propagate it in an evil latter age and of the required readiness to give even one’s life, if need be, to uphold its teachings. In the thirteenth chapter, ‘Fortitude’, bodhisattvas in a great throng vow to endure harsh trials in order to spread the sūtra. ‘There will be many ignorant men...who will attack us with swords and staves... we will be banished repeatedly’ 有諸無智人.....及加刀杖者.....數數見擯出.¹²⁹ Although slandered to kings and ministers, they declare, ‘We will endure all these evils. We do not begrudge bodily life; we value only the unsurpassed Way..... We are the messengers of the World-Honoured One, dwelling amid the multitude without fear’ 忍此諸難事 我不愛身命 但惜無上道..... 我是世尊使 處衆無所畏.¹³⁰ The heroic posture of a *Lotus* devotee defying enemies of the true dharma does not originate with Nichiren but already appears in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. Nichiren saw the trials he encountered as foretold in the sūtra text and, at the same time, as bearing out its prophecies. He termed this a ‘bodily reading’ (*shikidoku* 色読) of the sūtra: not merely reciting its words or mentally

¹²⁸ *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 970; Watson, *Selected Writings*, 328, modified.

¹²⁹ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, *T* no. 262, 9: 4.36b23, 24, c22; Hurvitz, *Fine Dharma*, 188, 190, modified.

¹³⁰ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, *T* no. 262, 9: 4.36c17–18, 27; Hurvitz, *Fine Dharma*, 190, modified.

assenting to its teachings but living out its predictions by meeting the very ordeals that it predicts. Ruben Habito has insightfully termed this a circular or mirror hermeneutic, in which sūtra and practitioner simultaneously reflect, validate, and bear witness to one another.¹³¹ In Nichiren's view, the gravest of persecutions to be incurred for the dharma's sake was opposition from the ruler. The *Shuju onfurumai gosho*'s narrative of his arrest and near execution at Tatsunokuchi both confirms his identity as a 'messenger of the World-Honoured One', in the sūtra's words, and exemplifies the proper attitude by which a true practitioner of the *Lotus* confronts hostility, especially from government officials. At the point in the narrative where Shijō Kingo arrives, Nichiren declares:

Tonight I go to be beheaded. This is what I have desired for many years. In this Sahā world, I have been born as a pheasant only to be caught by hawks or born as a mouse only to be devoured by cats. Or [I have been born human], only to die on account of my wife or children or at the hand of enemies, more times than there are dust particles on earth. But not once have I given my life for the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus I was born to become a poor priest, unable to serve my parents as I would wish and without power to repay my debt to the country. This time I will present my severed head to the *Lotus Sūtra* and transfer the resulting merit to my parents, dividing the remainder among my disciples and lay followers. I have said this [before], and now it is happening. 今夜頸切られへまかるなり。この數年が間願ひつる事これなり。此娑婆世界にしてきじ(雉)となりし時はたか(鷹)につかまれ、ねずみとなりし時はねこにくらわれき。或はめ(妻)に、こ(子)に、かたきに身を失し事大地微塵より多し。法華經の御ためには一度失ふことなし。されば日蓮貧道の身と生れて、父母の孝養心にたらず、國の恩を報すべき力なし。今度頸を法華經に奉りて其功德を父母に回向せん。其あまりは弟子檀那等にはぶく(配當)べしと申せし事これなり。¹³²

¹³¹ Habito, 'Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*', 198–99.

¹³² *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 966–67; Watson, *Selected Writings*, 326, modified.

Over the centuries, many of Nichiren's later followers would repeatedly face persecution from the authorities and draw courage and inspiration from this account.

Second, the *Shuju onfurumai gosho*'s narrative of the failed execution attempt at Tatsunokuchi confirms Nichiren's identity as the teacher for the Final Dharma age. Following his arrest and exile to Sado, Nichiren began increasingly to identify his activities with the work of the bodhisattva Jōgyō 上行 (Superior Conduct, Skt. Viśiṣṭacāritra), the leader of a vast throng of bodhisattvas who, in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s fifteenth chapter, emerge from beneath the earth; in the twenty-first chapter, they receive Śākyamuni Buddha's mandate to propagate the *Lotus* in an evil age after his nirvāṇa. Although Nichiren himself usually spoke with some reserve, referring to himself merely as a 'forerunner' or 'messenger' of Jōgyō, his later tradition explicitly identifies him with this bodhisattva. In the narrative of that tradition, Nichiren's miraculous escape from beheading was a decisive event that divided his life into before and after, awakening him to a new sense of his religious mission. Hanano Jūdō writes that, seen from the perspective of sectarian doctrinal studies (*shūgaku* 宗学), it amounted to nothing less than a religious conversion experience. He asserts, 'That Nichiren did not end his life as a mere Tendai priest but became the founder of the Nichiren Buddhist institution was because of his religious conversion at Tatsunokuchi.'¹³³

This amounts to a theological claim; as Hanano acknowledges, secular historical scholarship would not go that far. Nonetheless, Nichiren spoke in retrospect of the event as something like a death and rebirth ('On the twelfth day of the ninth month of last year, ...a person called Nichiren was beheaded. This is his spirit that has come to the province of Sado....'). And there is no denying that his arrest and exile to Sado Island marked a significant turning point in his teaching. As he himself wrote:

Think of my teachings before I was exiled to Sado as the sūtras that the Buddha preached before revealing the *Lotus Sūtra*....On the night

¹³³ Hanano, '*Shuju onfurumai gosho no shingi*', 21.

of the twelfth day of the ninth month of the eighth year of the Bun'ei era [1271], I was nearly beheaded at Tatsunokuchi. From that time I felt pity for my followers as I had not yet told them the full truth. So thinking, I secretly conveyed my teaching from Sado province. さど(佐渡)の國へながされ候し已前の法門は、ただ佛の爾前の經とをぼしめせ。.....去^レ文永八年九月十二日の夜、たつの口にて頸をはねられんとせし時よりのち(後)、ふびんなり、我につきたりし者どもにまことの事をいわ(言)ざりける、とをも(思)てさどの國より弟子どもに内々申^ス法門あり。¹³⁴

That turning point in his teaching represents a third element powerfully underscored by the narrative of the attempted beheading and extraordinary escape. Nichiren's doctrine reaches its maturity from that time. Specifically, he reoriented his teaching on the basis of the latter half of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Tiantai/Tendai commentators famously divide the *Lotus Sūtra*'s twenty-eight chapters into two parts according to their differing representations of the Buddha. The first fourteen chapters, the *shakumon* 迹門 or 'trace' section, presents Śākyamuni as a 'trace' or historically manifested buddha who first achieved awakening in India in this lifetime under the bodhi tree. In contrast, the latter fourteen chapters, the *honmon* 本門 or 'origin' section—and specifically chapter sixteen, 'Fathoming the Lifespan of the Tathāgata'—reveals him to be the primordial or eternal buddha, awakened since the inconceivably distant past and constantly active in this world for the sake of living beings. To discuss in full the doctrinal ramifications of Nichiren's embrace of the *honmon* section of the *Lotus Sūtra* would exceed the scope of this essay. Here, however, we may note that it represents his unique appropriation of a reading of the 'trace'/'origin' distinction then influential in Japanese Tendai circles, in which the *shakumon* section of the *Lotus Sūtra* was associated with views of enlightenment as a future goal attained via a long a process of cultivation over time, and the *honmon* section, with the more profound understanding that

¹³⁴ *Misawa shō, Teihon 2: 1446–47.*

enlightenment is accessed in the very act of practice.¹³⁵ From the time of the Sado exile Nichiren began to explain the chief practice he advocated—chanting the *daimoku* 題目 or title of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the mantric formula *Namu Myōhō-enge-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經, not as a practice of merit accumulation or gradual cultivation leading to buddhahood as a distant goal, but as perfectly encompassing ‘all of Śākyamuni Buddha’s causal practices and resulting merits’ 釋尊の因行果徳 and offering direct access to the whole of the primordial buddha’s enlightenment in the very act of chanting.¹³⁶ It was also after Tatsunokuchi that Nichiren first devised his ‘great maṇḍala’ (*daimandara* 大曼荼羅) as an object of worship (*bonzon* 本尊) for his followers, depicting that Buddha’s ever-present realm that the devotee can enter by faith.¹³⁷

The story of Nichiren’s escape from death at Tatsunokuchi thus invokes his turn to the *honmon* section of the *Lotus Sūtra*; his shift in presenting the *daimoku*, not merely as a simple practice for the ignorant but as the vehicle for the direct realization of buddhahood; and his revelation of the *daimandara* as the object of veneration for the *mappō* era. These developments are in turn tied to his identification with the bodhisattva Jōgyō. According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, Jōgyō and the other bodhisattvas who sprang up from beneath the earth in response to Śākyamuni’s call are disciples, not of the historical Śākyamuni, but of the primordial or original buddha. In identifying his efforts with those of Jōgyō, Nichiren was in effect claiming a direct connection with this original buddha. His later interpreters have carried this farther. In the language of Tendai *Lotus* interpretation, Śākyamuni’s act of casting off his provisional guise as a historical

¹³⁵ Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 170–72, 259–60.

¹³⁶ *Kanjin bonzon sbō*, *Teihon* 1: 711. See also Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 268–72.

¹³⁷ Nichiren first inscribed his maṇḍala in abbreviated form while being held at Echi, before being taken to Sado. On Sado, he inscribed the *daimandara* for the first time in its full form. On Nichiren’s maṇḍala, see Dolce, ‘Esoteric Patterns’, 103–83, and Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 274–88, and ‘Joining the Eagle Peak Assembly’.

manifestation and revealing himself as the primordially awakened, ever-present buddha is termed *hosshaku kenpon* 發迹顯本, or ‘casting off the traces to reveal the origin’.¹³⁸ According to Nichiren Buddhist exegetes, at the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, Nichiren too underwent *hosshaku kenpon*, throwing off the guise of an ordinary person (*bonbu* 凡夫) and revealing his true identity as the bodhisattva Jōgyō.¹³⁹ Those who follow him also number among the bodhisattvas who emerged from beneath the earth and share the same mission. From that perspective, the Nichiren tradition’s very identity is rooted in the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. Here, and not in its status as historical fact, lies the significance that is missed when that event is written out of Nichiren’s life story.

Whatever ‘really happened’—or not—on the twelfth night of the ninth month, 1271, Nichiren’s account of his escape from death at Tatsunokuchi exemplifies in the form of a mythic narrative a crucial turning point in his life and teachings, which would become foundational to his tradition. At the same time, however, it cannot be wholly myth in the sense of a fabrication; the references in Nichiren’s own writings to his near beheading are simply too numerous to argue otherwise. Ultimately the Tatsunokuchi Persecution belongs to a liminal realm where the division between history and myth blur. Only by attending to that dimension can we begin to understand the full significance that such accounts hold for the traditions that embrace them.

¹³⁸ The term derives from the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597). It occurs several times in both his *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi*, T no. 1716 (for example, at 33: 7b.769a9 and b24), and in his *Miaofa lianhua jing wenju*, T no. 1718 (for example, 34: 9b.128b11).

¹³⁹ Yamanaka, *Nichiren jiden kō*, 172–74; Hanano, ‘Nichiren no shōgai’, 41. As Yamanaka notes (174), interpretations of *hosshaku kenpon* as applied to Nichiren have in some cases fostered the idiosyncratic doctrine of Nichiren as the original buddha (*Nichiren honbutsu ron* 日蓮本佛論). This doctrinal position is particularly characteristic of the Fuji lineage, represented by today’s Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗 (Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 340–42).

Summation

This paper has traced the modern reception of the most famous episode in Nichiren's life story and shown how, since the late nineteenth century, attempts to strip his biography of legendary accretions and arrive at a purely factual account have called its historicity into question. When the historian Shigeno Yasutsugu in 1889 pronounced it the fabrication of Nichiren's later disciples, scholars within the Nichiren sect hailed the lay leader Tanaka Chigaku for publicly challenging Shigeno and defending the traditional account. By the postwar decades, however, members of the intellectual wing of that very same community, having grown uncomfortable with the 'miraculous' element of the luminous object appearing just at the crucial moment, distanced themselves from the story of the attempted beheading, even to the extent of writing it out of Nichiren biographies. The *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, which contains Nichiren's firsthand account, exemplifies several of the problems involved in efforts over the last several decades to establish a 'pure' Nichiren canon, free of later accretions. Depending upon which side one takes in the controversy, that very same text is either invoked as Nichiren's authentic writing known to have once existed or marginalized as a work flawed by the possible interpolations of later persons. Astronomical evidence suggesting the 'luminous object' to have been a meteor or ball lightning is sometimes cited, either as support for the traditional account or at least as grounds not to dismiss it out of hand. But naturalistic explanations shift the character of the event from the wondrous and awe-inspiring to a mere coincidence of timing and thus cannot adequately address what the Tatsunokuchi Persecution has meant for Nichiren's followers.

Arguments on both sides of the binary of 'it happened'/'it didn't happen' ultimately come up against the methodological limitation of attempts to separate historical fact from putative legendary accretions. To acknowledge this is neither to reject critical inquiry nor to accept the received account at face value; questions of textual authenticity and historicity must be investigated. Ultimately, however, the goal of separating the 'real facts' of Nichiren's life from mythic depictions—like the related aim of establishing a fully authenticated

Nichiren canon purified of apocrypha and later interpolations—proves a chimera. Following a suggestion from Sueki Fumihiko, I have argued here that Nichiren’s miraculous escape occupies a liminal space where authentic and problematic texts cannot be clearly distinguished and the lines between myth and history blur. The story of Nichiren’s triumph over death at Tatsunokuchi has arguably exerted a far greater impact on his subsequent tradition than the bare facts of that event, which, barring future discoveries, are not recoverable. Narratives of this kind, whatever their historical truth status, have their own significance for those who transmit them, which the historian of religion is responsible to address.

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Abbreviations

- T* *Taishō shinsū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku.
Teihon *Shōwa teihon Nichiren shōnin ibun* 昭和定本日蓮聖人遺文. Edited by Rissō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo.

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