

to our contemporary age. Such endeavors no longer belong to a field known as “Japanese philosophy,” but rather, to the universal discipline of “philosophy.”

A Soga Ryōjin Reader. By Jan Van Bragt. Edited by Wamae Muriuki. Introduction by Michael Conway. Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2017. 566 pages. Paperback: ISBN 978-1-9738-1208-1.

TSUNODA YUICHI

Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971) is “arguably the most innovative thinker in the history of modern Shin Buddhism,”¹ yet his works are still unknown to non-Japanese readers interested in modern Japanese Shin Buddhist thought. *A Soga Ryōjin Reader* by Jan Van Bragt (1928–2007) is the first collection of English translations of Soga’s theses, essays, and lectures. This work finally gives English-language readers access to the creative nature of Soga’s thought.

The translator, Jan Van Bragt, was the first acting director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. Moreover, he was a Catholic priest, who belonged to the Society of the Divine Word. He had dedicated himself to interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity for many years before he passed away in 2007. According to the foreword by James W. Heisig, Van Bragt had a deep affection for Soga, and worked on translating *Soga Ryōjin senshū* 曾我量深選集 (*The Selected Works of Soga Ryōjin*)² into English between 1989 and 2003. When Van Bragt passed away, he left behind “a trove of translations” (p. 1). Subsequently, Wamae Muriuki edited Van Bragt’s notes into publishable form (p. 3), and the present volume is the result of these efforts.

Van Bragt’s translations have several features that are different from ordinary academic translations. In the introduction to the book, Michael Conway notes that the content of the book is “a collection of partial translations and

¹ Robert F. Rhodes, “Soga Ryōjin: Life and Thought,” in *Cultivating Spirituality: A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, eds. Mark L. Blum and Robert F. Rhodes (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 101.

² Soga Ryōjin, *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, 12 vols., ed. Soga Ryōjin Senshū Kankōkai 曾我量深選集刊行会 (Tokyo: Yayoi Shobō, 1970–72).

English-language summaries of essays and lectures presented by Soga over the course of most of his career, from his early days as a graduate student to the 1960s, although the majority of the works predate the end of World War II” (p. 8). Soga’s writings are very complex and not easily accessible to readers because his works are based on “a specific, intuitional grasp of the nature of salvation in Shin Buddhism which he never specifically or comprehensively articulates” (p. 8). He expressed his experience of salvation in light of Shinran’s understanding of the Pure Land scriptures, and so it is very difficult for people unfamiliar with the Shin Buddhist exegetical tradition to understand his thought.

Van Bragt took into consideration this specific problem in Soga’s work. Thus, when translating Soga’s writings into English, he truncated or skipped over many passages concerning Shin Buddhist exegesis in order to provide greater accessibility for an English-reading audience. For example, he avoided translating the content of Amida’s original vows in *The Larger Sutra on Amitāyus* and Shinran’s interpretations of these vows, which Soga quoted in his writings. Van Bragt also left out many passages from the writings of the seven patriarchs of Shin Buddhism (such as the *Discourse on the Pure Land* by Vasubandhu [fl. ca. 4th–5th c.] and the *Commentary on the Discourse on the Pure Land* by Tanluan [ca. 476–542]) in his translations, even though Soga quoted many lines from these works in order to provide evidence for his original, creative thinking in the context of Shin Buddhist traditions.

Moreover, without considering the context of Soga’s writings, Van Bragt at times chose several sentences from various paragraphs and combined them, thus creating a new passage. He often paraphrased several sentences in his translation. This type of patchwork translation prevents readers from understanding the larger system of Soga’s Shin Buddhist thought. As Michael Conway clearly notes in the introduction, readers should be aware that these translations are “far from a comprehensive picture of Soga and his ideas. They are more a rough sketch which I hope might serve to further the process of introducing this important Shin thinker to a non-Japanese audience” (p. 9).

Most of the translations are partial and, thus, only present us with some fragments of Soga’s systematic Shin Buddhist thought. The chapter “A Savior on Earth: The Meaning of Dharmākara Bodhisattva’s Advent,” however, is an almost complete translation of Soga’s famous essay *Chijō no kyūshu*

地上の救主.³ This is the best translation in the book, and it succeeds in expressing Soga's creative and complex thought in English. Although Van Bragt skipped over several passages in the final section of the essay, he did not fail to translate the content of Dharmākara's original vows into English. This translation helps English-reading scholars to understand the overall structure of the self-awareness of our subjectivity in Soga's earlier thought. Moreover, the essays "Shinran's View of Buddhist History"⁴ and "Tempest"⁵ are longer, though partial, translations that present the essence of Soga's ideas.

When we read Van Bragt's translations, we can see that he engaged in dialogue with Soga's Shin Buddhist thought from his Christian perspective. For example, he was very much interested in Soga's creative understanding of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. He found a similarity between Dharmākara Bodhisattva's birth in the samsaric world as our true subjectivity and Jesus Christ's birth in the world as a historical person. He often compared Dharmākara with Jesus in his personal notes in other translations. For example, in "The Primeval Tathāgata,"⁶ Soga states, "The Tathāgata that intimately calls me is Dharmākara, and the I that intimately calls the Tathāgata is Dharmākara" (p. 224). Before this sentence, Van Bragt makes a personal observation: "*Might we not say the same of Christ?*" (p. 224; italics in the original). He sometimes understood Dharmākara from a "Christological" perspective, and this view influenced his translations. For example, in "From Enlightenment to Primal Vow,"⁷ Soga holds that the Tathāgata immerses himself in human karmic reality and becomes an ordinary human in the form of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. In the original text Soga writes, "He (Dharmākara) shouts about himself, 'I am sinful and a common mortal of birth-and-death (*zaiaku shōji no bonpu* 罪惡生死の凡夫)."⁸ Nevertheless, Van Bragt omits the word "sinful" in his translation: "I am the com-

³ Soga Ryōjin, "Chijō no kyūshu: Hōzōbosatsu shutsugen no igi" 地上の救主：法蔵菩薩出現の意義, in vol. 2 of *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, pp. 408–21.

⁴ This is a partial translation of Soga's lecture "Shinran no bukkyōshikan" 親鸞の仏教史観, in vol. 5 of *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, pp. 385–471.

⁵ This is a partial translation of Soga's column "Bōfūshū" 暴風駛雨, in vol. 4 of *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, pp. 203–380.

⁶ This is a partial translation of Soga's short essay "Genshi no nyorai" 原始の如来, in vol. 3 of *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, pp. 25–28.

⁷ This is a partial translation of Soga's essay "Shōgaku yori hongan e" 正覚より本願へ, in vol. 3 of *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, pp. 121–43.

⁸ "Shōgaku yori hongan e," p. 124.

mon mortal of birth-and-death” (p. 237). He wanted to avoid stating that Dharmākara became a sinful man when he was completely immersed in the karmic reality of sentient beings and took their sins on himself. This view is very similar to the theological understanding of Christ’s passion and death in Christian theology. Christ took on the sins of human beings and died on the cross in order to save them, but he himself was without sin because he is the Incarnate Son of God.

In his encounter with Soga’s understanding of Dharmākara, Van Bragt also tried to find a new aspect of the Incarnation of the Son of God in Christianity. For example, in “Tempest,” there is a section that is titled “The Birth of Dharmākara is the Incarnation of the Tathāgata” (pp. 349–52)⁹ in which Soga writes: “The life of the Tathāgata is at the same time the life of the sentient beings of the ten quarters. The Primal Vow for the sake of sentient beings is, namely, for the sake of the Tathāgata who makes the life of sentient beings his own life” (p. 351). After this passage, Van Bragt added a personal note: “*Is this not like the claim that the Incarnation is not only for the sake of us humans?*” (p. 351; italics in the original). The formless Tathāgata took a human form, Dharmākara, and established the original vow for saving all sentient beings. He took this vow in order to attain true enlightenment, which is realized in the salvation of all sentient beings. The enlightenment of Dharmākara and the salvation of these beings are deeply interconnected. Dharmākara took on their lives as his own life, and thus the life of Tathāgata (Dharmākara) is indistinguishable from the lives of sentient beings. He engaged himself in salvific work as a bodhisattva and attained true enlightenment as Amida Buddha when he vowed to save all sentient beings. This Mahayana view of “active nirvana” inspired Van Bragt to ask a question about the true meaning of the Incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus Christ and led him to a new investigation into this essential doctrine of Christianity.

To sum up, *A Soga Ryōjin Reader* is a milestone English translation of Soga Ryōjin’s work. It also contains Jan Van Bragt’s self-investigation into his Christian faith through a dialogue with Soga’s Shin Buddhist thought. In particular, Soga’s creative understanding of Dharmākara enabled Van Bragt to engage in a new investigation into the meaning of the Christian Incarnation.

⁹ The original Japanese title is “Hōzō Biku no gōtan wa nyorai no ningenka nari 法藏比丘の降誕は如来の人間化也” (The Birth of Bhikṣu Dharmākara is the Incarnation of the Tathāgata). *Soga Ryōjin senshū*, vol. 3, p. 341.