

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 12, 2017

## Like Children Lost in Limbo: Reflections on Dr. Jessica Main's Talk at UBC

Casey Collins

University of British Columbia

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.



# Like Children Lost in Limbo:

## Reflections on Dr. Jessica Main's Talk at UBC

Casey Collins  
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

On March 28, Dr. Jessica Main gave the final talk at UBC's Colloquium on Religion, Literature, and the Arts, an interdisciplinary lunchtime lecture series planned by Dr. Anne Murphy and hosted by the Department of Asian Studies. The series included lectures by professors and undergraduate students whose research interests intersect with the study of religion.

Dr. Main's talk, "Old Stories in New Forms: Mapping a Medieval Japanese Buddhist Purgatory onto a Modern Urban Ghetto," introduced the life and work of SAIKŌ Mankichi 西光万吉 (1895–1970, b. KIYOHARA Kazutaka), the son of *burakumin*<sup>1</sup> Shin Buddhist parents who became well-known as an activist, artist, writer, and co-founder of The Levelers' Society (Suiheisha 水平社). Focusing on Saikō's personal experience of discrimination and his activism, Dr. Main analyzed Saikō's social realist

---

<sup>1</sup> The burakumin (部落民, lit. "village people") are regarded as the lowest members of Japanese society due to their traditional occupations as having to do with death (e.g. butchery, animal slaughter, execution, leather tanning). Discrimination against them has led to their marginalization, and to their social and economic disadvantage.

play *Jōka* 浄火 ('Purifying Fire,' 1923) and how the Buddhist children's limbo underlies Saikō's depiction of the oppressive, gritty reality of *burakumin* life.

Saikō was never officially recognized as a priest—a family vocation he rejected as a young man—nor did he become a professional academic. Instead, Saikō's worked in a variety of artistic media and as an activist. Dr. Main sees Saikō's main question as having been: *How do we create a society free from discrimination?* Saikō's activism was grounded in his parents' and grandparents' efforts to protest against the oppression of *burakumin*. In the 1890s, they protested against discrimination in their Nara Prefecture village community, leveraging discourses of race, human rights, and education. Saikō grew up with an awareness of the battles his community fought and mostly lost. He saw that many of his forbears' efforts came to naught, and himself experienced discrimination and oppression from elementary school onward.

Dr. Main narrated a biography of Saikō that was sensitive to the discrimination that Saikō faced and depicted in *Jōka*. School was a painful experience for Saikō. He was bullied and gradually became aware that his teachers and classmates regarded him as inferior. He also rejected the possibility of becoming a Shin Buddhist priest in his father's footsteps. Saikō felt conflicted by the bigotry he saw inherent in institutionalized religions that promise rewards in the afterlife to society's most oppressed and marginalized. Facing depression and dissociated from both school and his parents' faith, Saikō escaped into books. Even as he battled what would today likely be diagnosed as severe depression, Saikō read religious, political, literary, and philosophical works from a wide range of traditions.

Saikō's play *Jōka* was written to be printed and read, although there is evidence that the play was performed after WWII. Saikō wrote the play at a time when he was nearly broke and wanted to raise money

to start an agricultural commune. Nevertheless, *Jōka* came to be regarded as one of the most well-known works of prewar *burakumin* writing. Dr. Main pointed out that the *burakumin* did not have a cultural movement akin to Négritude or the Harlem Renaissance, but Saikō's work stands out in the 1920s as representative of *burakumin* literature.

*Jōka* was inspired by the content and format of the social realist Russian play *The Lower Depths* (1902) by Maxim Gorky. Social realism focused on portraying the life of the downtrodden as it really is, and must have been an inspiration for Saikō. In *Jōka* as in *The Lower Depths*, everything in the play is set in one, small, cramped space—obviously impoverished, hot, and gritty. The play is set outside a storefront and house in August, before *bon*.

Dr. Main highlighted three narratives in the play: a men's narrative (primarily political), a women's narrative (primarily personal), and an interlude that focuses on a deformed character who is explicitly compared to Jizō bodhisattva. Some of the characters work in a slaughterhouse, elders are playing chess, comments are bawdy, some people are dancing.

In describing the play, Dr. Main took us into the cramped scene and into the world of the *buraku* men and women. Their lives are portrayed as an endless cyclical struggle based in the harsh social and economic realities of the *burakumin*. For the men, it is a cycle of unemployment, oppression, protest, and prison. For the women, it is a cycle of poverty, violence, and loss.

Amidst it all is the allegory of Jizō and the image of the children's limbo (*sai no kawara* 賽の河原) which is mapped onto the *buraku* ghetto. In the children's limbo, the spirits of deceased children pile up stones as mock *tōba* 塔婆 (stupas or funerary markers) in an attempt to fulfill their duty to perform funerary rites for their own parents. But every night,

demons come along and smash the children's futile efforts. The children's limbo, therefore, is a place of uselessness, helplessness, and futility, which are paralleled the village depicted in Saikō's *Jōka*.

The bodhisattva Jizō appears in the children's limbo to protect the children there, and play with them, but the cycle repeats every day, much like the cycles of oppression and loss faced by the *burakumin*. In *Jōka* there are two Jizōs: a wooden statue in the village temple, and the deformed character. The wooden statue (which stands for the institutions that oppress the *burakumin*), is destroyed in the end when one of the men from the village burns down the temple in frustration. Through the deformed character, then, Saikō may imply a compassion and humanity that is not seen in the wooden statue, associated as it is with institutionalized religion.

Dr. Main's ongoing work on Saikō's life, activism, and artistic expression brings Saikō's own struggles to the fore. Her research illuminates Saikō's appropriation and mobilization of traditional Buddhist motifs in order to articulate the suffering of *burakumin* communities and construct a humanist and socialist counter-narrative based on the reality of their marginalization and oppression. This talk is part of Dr. Main's larger research into *burakumin* activism, which will appear in her upcoming monograph: *No Hatred in the Pure Land: Burakumin Activism and the Shin Buddhist Response in Interwar Japan*.