

Institution: Cardiff University
Unit of Assessment: 33 Religious Studies and Theology
Title of case study: A new translation of a sacred Buddhist text and its impact on contemporary Buddhist practice in Germany
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The Lotus-sūtra is a key Mahāyāna-Buddhist text. It states fundamental beliefs and contains advice on ritual practice and ethical conduct. Many Buddhists worldwide use it daily. Commissioned by a Buddhist community, Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) Germany, Professor Max Deeg translated this text into present-day German. His translation, being the outcome and the product of historical-philological research in Buddhism, has become the official version of the sūtra for SGI Germany. This has had an impact on this community's perception of the religious content of this text as well as its history. In addition, the authoritative canon of commentaries on the Lotus-sūtra, written by SGI's founder, Nichiren Shōnin, in Japanese, was previously translated into German following an earlier English translation of the sūtra. Now this entire canon is being revised according to Deeg's new translation. This case study therefore demonstrates how philological research, as undertaken by Deeg, impacts on the religious practice of translating sacred texts, and that translation of sacred texts informed by philological research can be acceptable and useful to faith communities.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The Lotus-sūtra (Sanskrit 'Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra', Chinese 'Miaofa-lianhua-jing', Japanese Myōhō-rence-kyō 妙法蓮華經) is a core-text of East-Asian Mahāyāna-Buddhism. It is at the heart of the religious identity, spiritual culture, veneration and ethical practice of the Japanese Buddhist communities affiliated with or branched off the Nichiren-shū. The largest of these communities, the Sōka-gakkai, is also the internationally most widespread Japanese Buddhist denomination.</p> <p>Impact has been generated by philological and historical research undertaken by Professor Max Deeg (Senior Lecturer 2006, Reader 2007, Professor 2009) at Cardiff University [3.1; 3.2], which resulted in a new state-of-the-art scholarly translation of the text into German [3.3; 3.4]. Deeg, an internationally renowned researcher in Buddhist Studies with a proven track record as translator of Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhist sources, was commissioned to undertake this translation by Sōka-gakkai International, Germany, and his translation has resulted in significant and wide-spread changes in the beliefs and practices of that community.</p> <p>Sōka-gakkai International (SGI), with its headquarters in Japan and its European centre in Paris, had originally intended to commission a German translation based on Burton Watson's English translation of 1993. However, Deeg, when commissioned as translator, recommended a researched translation directly from the Chinese original, which had first been translated by Kumārajīva in the early 5th century AD and is the authoritative version used by Sōka-gakkai in Japanese. Deeg is obviously competent in accessing these versions in the original languages. SGI Germany accepted Deeg's recommendation and in the process of his work Deeg consulted other ancient versions as well, including an earlier Chinese translation by Dharmarakṣa / Zhu Fahu 竺法護 dating from the third century AD as well as the Sanskrit and the Tibetan translations.</p> <p>Deeg had begun work on his translation in 2004/5, while holding a chair in Religious Studies at the University of Vienna. However, he could only complete the translation and prepare it for publication after moving to Cardiff at the beginning of 2006 and on the basis of research undertaken in Cardiff [3.1; 3.2]. The crucial work was done in 2006/7 while in Cardiff, including a thorough reworking of earlier drafts, repeated checking by German members of SGI, underlying philological research and research in translation technique [cf. 3.2; 3.4]. The first edition of the translation was published in 2007 [3.4]. Work on an improved second edition immediately followed. This was published in 2009 [3.3]. Deeg then also published a number of peer-reviewed journal articles detailing the history and transmission of the text and the innovative method employed for the new translation. At the core of this method lies the combination of historical-philological research (as described) with research in present-day language-use among members of the German SGI community and close collaboration with members of the community [3.1; 3.2].</p> <p>In the course of his research Deeg collaborated with a professional editor and representative of SGI Germany [5.4], with whom he repeatedly went through the text during the last stages of the</p>

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translation process and discussed the translation and its implications for the community and its beliefs and practices. This was an essential part of the research process as undertaken by Deeg and discussed in his publications [3.1; 3.2]. It enabled Deeg to communicate his concerns as a researcher regarding philological rigour and scholarly soundness of the translation with concerns held by members of SGI Germany regarding their interest in a translation which reflected their beliefs, was comprehensible in present-day German, readable, and suitable for daily religious practice.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 2012 **Deeg, M.**, "From Scholarly Object to Religious Text – the Story of the Lotus-sūtra in the West," in: *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 22 (2012) 133-153.
<http://www.iop.or.jp/1222/133-153.pdf>.
- 3.2 2010 **Deeg, M.**, "Creating Religious Terminology: A comparative approach to early Chinese Buddhist translations," in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 31.1-2 (2008 [2010]) 83-118.
<http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/jiabs/article/view/8999/2892>
- 3.3 2009 **Deeg, M.**, *Das Lotos-Sūtra*. Zweite durchgesehene Auflage (= Second Edition). ISBN: 978-3534230204
- 3.4 2007 **Deeg, M.**, *Das Lotos-Sūtra*. Darmstadt: Primus; Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. ISBN: 978-3534187539

[3.2 submitted to REF; all items available from the HEI.]

4. Details of the impact

4.1 From research to impact

As indicated in Section 2, some aspects of impact in this case study are closely connected with the research process itself, as members of the user-group were involved in the research. For example, Deeg shared drafts of his translation with Professor Seishi Karashima, the world-leading expert on the Lotus-sūtra at Sōka-University, Tokyo. Deeg and Karashima scrutinized the German translation by comparing it with existing versions, and discussed difficult passages and terms.

In the same context Deeg also had the opportunity to meet the president of SGI and members of the publication division in Tokyo and to give lectures on various aspects of the Lotus-sūtra at the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Sōka-University, Tokyo.

Above all Deeg worked closely with members of SGI Germany, especially with the chief editor of translations [5.4], to utilize his historical and philological expertise for the benefit of the community while at the same time upholding established principles of historical and philological research.

4.2 Launch of the translation and ensuing success

The translation [3.4] was launched on 25 May 2007 in Frankfurt am Main. The launch event was organised by the publisher, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, with the support of SGI Germany. The launch was attended by more than 100 invited guests and widely reported. Deeg gave a public lecture in which he discussed various aspects of his translation work. He also signed ca. 90 sold copies of the book. The first edition of the translation (3000 copies) quickly sold out and a second, improved, edition of the text was published in 2009 [3.3], now sold out as well [5.4; 5.5]. Although the book has attracted a wider non-academic audience among the German public, its main impact has been on members of Sōka-gakkai International in Germany, and to a lesser extent in Austria and Switzerland [5.1].

The success of the translation in Germany also resulted in impact beyond Germany. In 2011 Deeg was invited by SGI UK to present a paper at a public workshop on the sūtra in London, which was attended by an audience of ca. 50 people [5.2]. This paper has been published as an article on the reception and translation history of the Lotus-sūtra in the West [3.1]. It is complementary to another paper, researched in 2006/7, presented in 2008 and published in 2010 [3.2], in which Deeg argues for a comparative approach to the philological questions posed by the translation of early Chinese Buddhist texts such as the Lotus-sūtra with the purpose to inform current Buddhist practice.

4.3 *The main groups of beneficiaries and the main immediate reach of the impact*

Sōka-gakkai International (SGI) is a Japanese Buddhist lay movement. It was founded in 1975 after a dramatic schism from their priest-dominated home-denomination, the Nichiren-shōshū. It expanded and became influential in all strands of Japanese society. Under the leadership of its former (now honorary) president, Ikeda Daisaku, it became an international movement. Today it has branches in 192 countries and 1.8 million members worldwide outside Japan. It continues to grow steadily. In the UK it has more than 500 branches. Its members include celebrities such as Tina Turner (resident in Switzerland), Herbie Hancock and Orlando Bloom.

The single most central Buddhist text for SGI – as well as for all other denominations affiliated to the medieval Buddhist teacher Nichiren – is the Lotus-sūtra (Japanese: *Myōhō-renge-kyō*). Each member is expected to develop a deep knowledge of this text and its interpretation by Nichiren in his writings, i. e. the commentaries, and to act in accordance with its teachings.

SGI is engaged in worldwide activities mainly through a number of NGOs promoting world peace, interreligious dialogue, multicultural initiatives and aid programmes. Members of SGI regularly receive detailed written instructions based on the text of the sūtra. Any research therefore that influences the meaning of the text has significant impact on SGI and its impact on the wider world, both through the traditional commentarial canon (Nichiren's works) and through more recent and current SGI publications and communications. In particular, if the sūtra is newly translated into a language and this translation is published and authorised, all additional material in that language (and possibly beyond) needs to be revised and partly re-written as well. This includes the ancient commentaries as well as the more recent and current material published in that language.

SGI has three German-speaking national branches, one in Germany with ca. 5,600 members and 500 local groups/communities, followed by Switzerland with ca. 1,000 members, and Austria with ca. 750 members. Deeg's translation is sold and used in all three branches and according to Armin Jäger, SGI Germany's chief editor of translations, a copy of the book is owned by most of the members [5.4]. Indeed the way in which the sūtra is used for daily and weekly individual and communal religious practice makes it a requirement for each member to own a personal copy. Members need to turn to the text of the sūtra in particular to prepare themselves for the regular group-internal examinations.

4.4 *Impact beyond the immediate groups of beneficiaries and their use of the translation*

The translation is published by a renowned German academic publisher, the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, and its more generally operating branch publisher, Primus Verlag. As a result the book has so far had an excellent distribution, beyond a more academically oriented or religiously pre-oriented readership. Significantly, besides its impact on religious communities the translation has also sold well to a wider public. Moreover, it has received positive responses from German academia and from a wider social and cultural environment interested in Buddhism. For example, it is on the reading lists of introductory courses to Buddhism at German universities [5.3].

In addition to using the translation itself for daily practice and studies and at communal events (for public readings) SGI Germany has also revisited and reshaped its long-term project of translating and publishing all of Nichiren Shōnin's commentaries on the Lotus-sūtra in German. According to Armin Jäger, SGI Germany's chief editor of translations, this is also due to the impact of Deeg's translation [5.4]. While some volumes have already been published, most are in preparation. The aim is to publish (or re-publish) all volumes in order to make them compatible with the terminology and rendering of Deeg's new translation [5.4].

In fact, all Nichiren-affiliated groups now have to engage with the new translation and revisit their traditional understandings as expressed in the commentaries [cf. 5.1].

4.5 *An example of the significance of the achieved impact*

To give a brief example of how a comparatively small change in philological terms can lead to quite a significant change of understanding: The central Japanese term *shin* 信 is in existing versions of Nichiren's commentary translated as "faith" (following Watson's translation), thus giving the text a rather specific religious meaning. In Deeg's new German translation it reads 'confidence, trust', following a more neutral meaning of Sanskrit *śraddhā*. As a consequence the title of the relevant chapter in Nichiren Shōnin's commentary will no longer read 'belief and understanding' but 'trust

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and understanding', and the commentary on the relevant passage will change accordingly, as will its application in contemporary learning and teaching material, and in practice. The change from 'faith' to 'confidence/trust' presents the text in a more ethical, humanistic, light, which is probably how it was originally intended, rather than a religiously charged meaning, as the word 'faith' tended to imply, which was ultimately imported from a Christian context. As Armin Jäger, SGI Germany's chief editor of translations, states with regard to the importance of such changes for the practising community [5.4]: "The translation is used for daily practice and studies and at communal events, for example for public readings ... [Deeg's translation] has ... led to new understandings of specific SGI teachings, which warrants a revision of the commentarial canon as well."

4.6 Outlook and conclusion

This process (of rewriting the commentarial canon to the Lotus-sūtra) has already begun. The SGI Germany team currently engaged in translating the voluminous commentarial literature is working on the basis of Deeg's translation of the sūtra. Deeg is in regular contact with the team to answer questions regarding specific understandings of his translation and the underlying (Japanese) text. The complex relationship between translation and commentary will be explained in an extensive introduction to the commentary series, publication of the first volume of which is planned for 2014 with the German publisher Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau.

The translation therefore impacts directly on the religious life and practice of a German speaking Buddhist community. It does so not only by representing the official version of the community's religious core text but also by stimulating an engagement with cutting-edge philological research and its understanding of the development of Buddhism. Thus it encourages practice in a new way and offers opportunities to practitioners critically to assess their religious tradition in the process. Since members of the SGI are expected to develop a thorough understanding of the Lotus-sūtra through individual and communal study the translation has an ongoing impact on the understanding of the core-text and the self-understanding of this religious group; and although the impact is thus in the first instance focused on the German language area, it also transcends this area because of SGI's continuing links to Japan and its activity worldwide.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Online review of Deeg's translation for a general readership corroborating its significance for SGI and its quality compared to an earlier, less popular, German translation [in German]:
<http://www.rpi-virtuell.net/workspace/users/535/Rezensionen/Rz-Lotos-Sutra.pdf>
- 5.2 SGI bulletin on the London workshop of 2011 corroborating Deeg's presence at that workshop and the importance of Deeg's translation for SGI beyond Germany:
http://www.sgi-uk.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/sqi_e_bulletin_issue61.pdf
- 5.3 Descriptor of a module in East Asian Religions, Spring Semester 2008, University of Hamburg, exemplifying the use of Deeg's translation as a teaching resource in German HEIs [in German]:
[Saved pdf available from HEI]
- 5.4 Statement (22 July 2013) by SGI Germany's chief editor of translations corroborating the fact that Deeg's translation was commissioned by SGI Germany and that consultation took place during the research and translation process, that the translation is used by a majority of the 6,000 members of German speaking SGI and that the commentaries are revised in line with Deeg's translation; further that Deeg's translation impacts on daily practice of SGI Germany members, that the first edition sold out quickly and that the second edition is meanwhile sold out too, and that the translation has led to changes in the understanding and rendering of SGI teachings which warrant a revision of the commentarial canon.
- 5.5 Contact details of the copy editor of Deeg's translation at the publisher's, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, who can corroborate claims regarding the distribution and popularity of the translation [in English].
- 5.6 Contact details of a Japanese-born member and representative of SGI Germany, who can corroborate claims regarding the impact of Deeg's translation on SGI-Germany beliefs and practices [in English].