CHAPTER TWO
JŌDO SHINSHŪ AND LITERATURE

One of the most striking effects of the rhetoric on Japanese culture which have been briefly illustrated in Chapter One, has been perhaps the scant attention paid to traditions other than Zen Buddhism as playing an important part in the development of Japanese cultural history. This chapter opens the main bulk of the book which is dedicated to aspects of Pure Land Buddhism in Japanese culture. This analysis, which takes into account the enduring popularity of this religious tradition in the Japanese context, is intended as a contribution from a critical perspective to counter the aforementioned biases.

The topic Shin Buddhism in Japanese literature is of vast dimensions and would require a much larger space than just one chapter to be covered comprehensively. However, the aim here is to define where the Shin Buddhist tradition is positioned within the field of literature in modern and contemporary Japan. The literary works considered in this chapter are by Japanese authors, who mostly addressed a Japanese audience. The only non-Japanese writer is Harold Stewart, who has been included here for his deep commitment within Shin Buddhism (he himself was a follower), and because he lived in Japan for about thirty years. However, several of the Japanese writings considered have been translated into English and are therefore also known in Europe and America. This chapter will show that the impact of Shin Buddhism on Japanese literature is far from being uninfluential and that some famous individual writers, such as Natsume Sōseki, had received some inspiration from this religious tradition, which has not yet received due consideration.

The number of books connected in various ways with Jōdo Shinshū (and Jōdoshū) currently available in Japan, partly but not only under the heading of “religious literature”, in the many bookshops and second-hand book fairs I have visited, is really impressive. To this should be added the publishing efforts of both the Honganji-ha and Ōtani-ha branches of Shin Buddhism, which have brought out hundreds of titles in the form of books, periodicals, manga, children’s picture books, popular booklets and so on. Needless to say, the manga industry in Japan is a
phenomenon which has reached massive proportions and Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) and Rennyo 達如 (1415–1499) have also found their place within it.1

As regards the level of interest in Shinran in present-day Japan, Gerhard Schepers provided a variety of statistical data. In particular he analysed four leading Japanese newspapers, namely the Asahi Shinbun, the Nikkei Shinbun, the Yomiuri Shinbun and the Mainichi Shinbun over a five-year period from 1985, assessing the attention given to Shinran and the number of items relating to Shin Buddhism as opposed to other denominations.2 More interesting for the present research, however, are some figures provided in Schepers’s article regarding contemporary literature, where he states that: “Almost 700 books on Shinran have been published since 1969, more than on any other personality of the Buddhist tradition in Japan, and over 3,100 on the Shinshū.”3 These numbers are taken, as is stated in a footnote, from the bibliography of Japanese books issued on CD-ROM by the National Diet Library from 1969 to 1990. There are also figures for other traditions such as: Zen Buddhism, which with over 3,200 items almost equals Shin Buddhism; Jōdoshū with about 550, and Nichirenshū with about 850. Schepers also reports that there were several thousand articles on Shinran and Shin Buddhism published in the same period, and that Shinran appeared in popular magazines, like the President (Purejidento プレジデント), which has issued four special editions on him since 1984, among which one also linked him to material on Rennyo.4

Also relevant to the role of Shinran in modern and contemporary Japanese thought is a tradition of historical studies, in which two well-known historians, Ienaga Saburō 伊能忠敬 (1913–2002) and Hattori Shisō 幕府実相 (1901–1956), stand out for their interpretation of Shinran,5 with the latter strongly influencing historical studies within the Honganji-ha as well.

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3 Ibid., p. 93.
4 Ibid., p. 93 n.
5 See also Alfred Bloom. The Life of Shinran Shonin: the Journey to Self Acceptance. Revised Edition Institute of Buddhist Studies, Monograph Series, Number One.