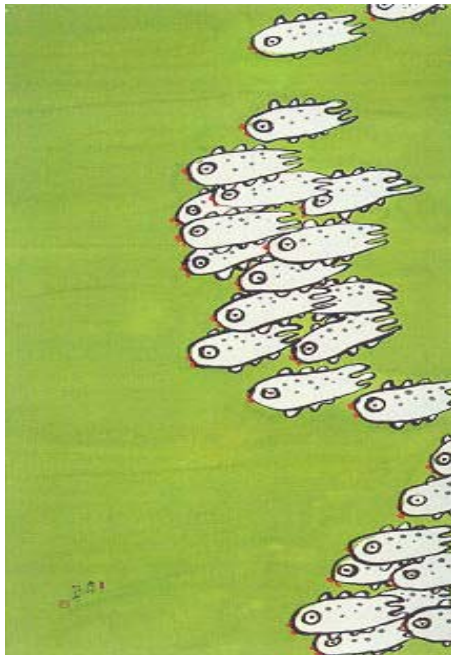


Research Article

Journal of Global Buddhism 4 (2003): 108 - 143



The Soka Gakkai in Australia: Globalization of a new Japanese Religion

By

Daniel A. Metraux([1](#))

Department of Asian Studies

Mary Baldwin College

Email: dmetraux@mbc.edu

Copyright Notes: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge 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. All enquiries to: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

ISSN 1527-6457

Research Article

The Soka Gakkai in Australia: Globalization of a new Japanese Religion

by

Daniel A. Metraux(1)

Department of Asian Studies

Mary Baldwin College

Email: dmetraux@mbc.edu

The concept of "globalization" has become a hot topic throughout academia over the past few years and many of my colleagues and I have spent hours debating about its inherent nature, extent, and even its existence. The phenomenon of certain ideas, fashions or material goods transcending national boundaries is as old as recorded history, but what is new is the extent to which this phenomenon is being conceived and organized on such a global scale. Many commentators today describe globalization as a primarily Western phenomenon, the expansion of American or Western culture(s) to the rest of the world. While there is much truth to this speculation, one must also realize the contributions of other cultures to this emerging global culture. Japanese culture and technology continue to have considerable impact on the world, especially in East and Southeast Asia. Today people on every continent feel the impact of Japan, in the cars they drive, the music they listen to and, in some cases, the religions they practice.

The goal of this paper is to study the phenomenon of the globalization of Japanese religion through an analysis of the growth of the Soka Gakkai in Australia. One may call the Soka Gakkai a global Buddhist movement because of the fact that it has built chapters in over two hundred countries and has, according to Soka Gakkai International (SGI)(2) estimates, slightly more than two million foreign members. I have visited SGI chapters in over a dozen countries and have rarely seen a Japanese face present at many meetings. At the same time, however, members worldwide are practicing the same religion and are following the same ritual practices as the estimated eight million Soka Gakkai followers in Japan.

Sanda Ionescu, who has studied the SGI in Germany, raises some interesting questions about the globalization of ideologies and cultures:

"To what extent can a religion, which has arisen under specific historical and cultural circumstances, become relevant to people in entirely different social, cultural and temporal contexts. What is the exact proportion of universality to cultural specificity that a religion should have in order to gain a following beyond its national borders? And how much does a religion entering a foreign culture with proselytizing intentions have to take into account the characteristics of the host culture?"(3)

One of the most interesting characteristics of the new Japanese religions distinguishing them from more traditional religions in Japan is their "universalistic orientation and international missionary zeal."(4) Japanese immigrants a century or more ago took their more traditional religions with them to the United States and elsewhere, but these religions attracted very little interest outside the Japanese communities and faded when later generations of ethnic Japanese assimilated into the

local culture. Japanese new religions like Soka Gakkai, however, are often introduced abroad by a Japanese member, but quite often later develop a largely non-Japanese following.

To succeed outside of its host culture, a religion should have certain universalistic orientations and be flexible enough to adapt certain culture-specific aspects of its ideology to the host culture. The Soka Gakkai's success⁽⁵⁾ stems partly from the fact that its ideology is based on "this-worldly or vitalistic, and therefore universally relevant conceptions of salvation in terms of health, harmony, happiness, wealth, etc., and have made the means of salvation accessible to all."⁽⁶⁾ Soka Gakkai members I have interviewed in foreign chapters virtually all agree that the essential ideology of the Soka Gakkai, revealed in its interpretation of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and in its patron Nichiren,⁽⁷⁾ are of lasting value and are as relevant to their lives as they are to followers in Japan.

Japan's Soka Gakkai has created a rapidly growing global community of like-minded members and independent chapters with Japan as its center. Soka Gakkai members outside Japan have altered certain uniquely Japanese practices and customs⁽⁸⁾ while agreeing on the universal value and applicability of the major teachings of Soka Gakkai Buddhism. The result is a rapidly growing international Soka Gakkai community with many local variations. The Soka Gakkai is thus a religious movement which matured under specific historical, geographical, and social conditions, but which today is relevant to more than two million people worldwide who do not share the same language, history, or cultural assumptions.⁽⁹⁾ The Soka Gakkai in Melbourne may have cultural differences with the chapter in Manila or Montreal, but they are both instantly recognizable as Soka Gakkai.⁽¹⁰⁾

The goal of this research is to demonstrate how the Australian branch of the Soka Gakkai (Soka Gakkai International Australia or SGIA) represents an aspect of the center-periphery process of Japan's globalization. The spread of SGI to Australia from Japan has led to the "deterritorializing and relativizing"[\(11\)](#) of the movement from an inherently Japanese faith practiced mainly by Japanese, to a much more universal movement whose followers abroad are rarely Japanese and who in many cases have no particular affinity for Japan or Japanese culture.

Research Goals and Methodology

This research is part of a broader project of this writer to examine SGI in a variety of countries. I conducted research on SGI chapters in Canada and Quebec in 1995-97 and again in 2002 and in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines in 1998-99 and, very briefly, New Zealand in 2003.

I did research on SGI in Australia briefly in 2000 and 2003 and for a longer period in 2002 with an Australian scholar, Ben Dorman.[\(12\)](#) We conducted a nationwide survey of SGIA members and conducted a number of in-depth interviews.

We prepared a very detailed, fifty-nine question survey in April 2002 for SGIA members. Section I contained eighteen questions about the member's personal experience with SGI and SGIA — how and when one had first heard of the movement, who introduced the member to the movement, that person's religious background, etc. Section II asked questions concerning the follower's attitudes toward the practice of Nichiren's Buddhism, focusing on such issues as benefits one may have incurred from this practice and whether that person had ever chanted for a particular set of goals. Sections III and IV posed queries about the

member's feelings about the SGIA organization as a whole and its peace movement in particular. The fifth section requested a significant amount of demographic information from the member.

This research was carried out with the full cooperation of the SGIA leadership. The surveys were voluntary and the respondents had the option of revealing their identity or not. There were three main methods of distribution initially. (1) The survey was sent to the SGIA headquarters in Sydney. SGIA Headquarters then sent it by fax to the main areas in which SGIA branches are located and also to members in outlying areas. The branches then distributed them through local channels. These branches collected the completed surveys and either sent them to SGIA headquarters, or sent them directly to the researchers. Of the surveys that were sent to SGIA headquarters, some were sent directly back to the researchers by SGIA and others were picked up in Sydney by us; (2) the survey was sent by the researchers via email to members who requested it, and around thirty responses came back via email; and (3) Dorman sent three hard copies of the survey directly to members who had not otherwise received copies or did not have email access.

This initial campaign brought about 160 responses, mainly from middle-aged members in their thirties, forties and early fifties. Since it is clear that SGIA has a large and rapidly growing youth membership, we attended a weekend SGIA Nationwide Youth Conference in Sydney in late July 2002 where we successfully encouraged nearly a hundred younger members, most of whom were in their twenties, from all over Australia to fill out the survey. By August we had about 265 completed surveys representing perhaps 12 percent of the membership. SGIA leaders assured us that demographic patterns developed from our survey closely fit their perceived national patterns for age and ethnic

distribution.

We also conducted about twenty in-depth interviews with individual or small groups of members in Canberra and the Sydney and Melbourne regions as well as shorter conversations with about thirty other members. We also interviewed a few members from across Australia at various SGIA meetings and festivals. We deliberately chose a few older members because of their ability to give us some historical perspectives about the movement, but other interviews came from people who expressed an interest in our interviewing them in their survey responses.

As expected, we received a highly favorable image of SGIA from the active members interviewed; however, we also solicited and received a high number of very frank criticisms of the movement, especially on such topics as leadership and communication between leaders and ordinary members.

It is important to note, however, that while our survey did provide very detailed information concerning just over 10 percent of SGI members, the sampling procedure itself was far from random and the results consequently are not necessarily fully representative of the whole membership. Rather, our findings probably reflect the thinking of the most committed members. A more random sample might have yielded more statistically valid results, but limits on time and resources placed certain constraints on our research.

Some of the questions addressed are why the Soka Gakkai, with its strong Japanese roots, has succeeded in establishing a solid foundation in Australia, but also why after roughly forty years it has not expanded more rapidly. We wanted to learn who joined SGIA and why. When we discovered that a very high percentage of the ethnic Asian members were not Japanese in origin, we wanted to learn why SGIA would appeal

to such a broad mixture of Asians, many of whom expressed very little interest in Japanese culture and had very little contact with Japan or its people. In other words, we were searching for evidence that the SGI had become a global movement with applicability beyond its Japanese roots and cultural ties.

The Soka Gakkai Legacy

Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871-1944), a Japanese educator and a devout lay practitioner of the Nichiren Shoshu ("True Sect of Nichiren") sect, founded the Soka Gakkai in the early 1930s as a support group for his educational ideas. However, by the late 1930s he and his younger disciple Toda Josei (1900-1958) had transformed the organization into a lay support group for the Nichiren Shoshu sect of Japanese Buddhism. Makiguchi and Toda were imprisoned in 1943 because of their refusal to accede to the government's request that they incorporate various nationalistic Shinto practices into their group's religious observances. Makiguchi died in prison in 1944, but Toda, released in 1945, rebuilt the Soka Gakkai into a major religious movement in the 1950s. Toda's successor Ikeda Daisaku (1928--)([13](#)) expanded the Soka Gakkai in Japan and played a key role in SGI's expansion abroad.

The realization that the Soka Gakkai had become a highly successful lay Buddhist movement with its own strong leadership and own its social and political programs independent of the sect did not sit well with Nichiren Shoshu, a conservative and very traditional Buddhist sect. The fact that the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and the Soka Gakkai were going in different directions caused a growing schism by the late 1970s that led to the formal separation of the two organizations in the early 1990s. Today the Soka Gakkai is an independent lay religious movement dedicated to the propagation of its version of Nichiren

Buddhism. The Soka Gakkai grew rapidly in the immediate postwar era because its leaders focused on Buddhist teachings that stressed the happiness of self and others in one's immediate environment. Happiness was understood in very concrete terms for millions of dispirited and hungry Japanese: food, health, finding a mate, and securing employment. Later in the 1960s and 1970s when Japan became more affluent, happiness was redefined in more philosophical terms to include "empowerment, character formation, and socially beneficial work. . ."(14) The fact that the Soka Gakkai is a distinctly lay religious movement has broadened its appeal in an increasingly secular age.

The Soka Gakkai grew as a highly exclusivist movement which in its early days attracted considerable criticism for its strong method of proselytization (*shakubuku*), its attacks on and harsh criticism of other sects and religions, and for its vigorous political activities and its highly partisan political party, the Komeito. Today this once highly negative image has mellowed somewhat because the Soka Gakkai has softened its methods of conversion, has quieted its criticism of others while opening dialogues with some other sects, and because the Komeito has become a highly visible political partner of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. (15) Today's more moderate and mellow Soka Gakkai, while still subject to attacks by some elements of the Japanese media, is gradually becoming part of the Japanese media.

The Growth of Soka Gakkai International

When tens of thousands of Japanese immigrated to North and South America a century ago, they built their own temples and invited Buddhist priests from Japan to tend to the needs of these entirely Japanese congregations. These older, largely Buddhist congregations have declined in recent decades as later generations became assimilated

into the native population. Japan's contemporary NRMs (New Religious Movements), however, have become genuinely global or universal movements because their teachings have attracted non-ethnic Japanese faithful abroad and today survive as autonomous units. Today a number of Japanese NRMs such as SGIA, Mahikari, Zen, and Tenrikyo are growing in Australia because they have successfully adapted rituals, languages, customs and leadership to non-Japanese contexts.(16)

SGI in particular has succeeded in developing a strong following in many countries(17) because, as Peter Clarke notes, "though a very Japanese form of Buddhism, it appears capable of universal application: no one is obliged to abandon their native culture or nationality in order to fully participate in the spiritual and cultural life of the movement."(18) Soka Gakkai leaders, while maintaining the essential elements of their faith, have released their form of Buddhism from its inherently Japanese faith by skillfully adapting their religious practices to each culture that they seek to penetrate. They recruit local leaders who direct the foreign chapter free of any direct control from Tokyo, conduct all religious exercises and publish all documents in the native languages, and emphasize those traits that are important to the host culture. Clarke, for example, notes that SGI practices in the United States that appeal to many American members are "the absence of moralizing, the stress on individual choice and the need to take responsibility for one's own actions."(19)

My research on SGI members in Canada, the United States and throughout Southeast Asia indicates that the Soka Gakkai attracts followers because of what they perceive to be its strong message of peace, happiness, success, and self-empowerment. Many adherents interviewed or surveyed by this writer believe that the Buddhism espoused by the Soka Gakkai gives them some degree of empowerment

over their personal environments, that through their hard work and devout practice they can overcome their suffering and find happiness here and now. They also find great satisfaction and a sense of community joining with other people who follow the same faith. The practice of having small groups of members meet together regularly to pray, discuss personal and mutual concerns, and socialize as close friends is an important social reason for the success of the Soka Gakkai not only in Japan, but abroad as well.(20)

Many of the younger SGI members in these countries are also very well educated. I was especially impressed by the large number of well-educated, upwardly mobile, ethnic Chinese members I met in Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, and Australia. There seems to exist a strong affinity between a religious dogma that emphasizes "mental work" (attitudes and individual focus) and the well educated who have to work very hard to attain their educational credentials. This phenomenon may well explain why this form of Buddhism is attractive to this particular social stratum and also helps address why the Japanese origin of the Soka Gakkai does not seem to matter very much to these non-Japanese converts.(21)

The Soka Gakkai in Australia

The Soka Gakkai organization in Australia is one of several Buddhist organizations in Australia that follows one distinct school of Buddhism and has a multi-ethnic membership.(22) SGIA traces its origins to May 13, 1964 when a visit to Australia by Ikeda Daisaku encouraged a handful of Japanese resident members and white Australians to form a Melbourne chapter. The first leader, Dr. Tom Teitei, worked vigorously to organize the first chapters and to mold a national organization. By May 2003 there were between 2500 and 3000 members from an

estimated fifty different ethnic groups spread over the major urban areas of the country.⁽²³⁾ The movement grew slowly in the mid-1960s and through the late 1970s its largely white and ethnic Japanese membership remained small, but it grew more rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s and early 2000s when many younger ethnic Chinese immigrants and smaller numbers of Indians and Koreans joined the movement. SGIA has won and lost many members over the years, but overall membership continues to grow.

SGIA, like most other SGI chapters outside of Japan, is fairly autonomous in the management of its own day-to-day affairs, but it maintains strong links with the Soka Gakkai in Japan and is fairly responsive to requests from the Tokyo office for changes in ritual practices and the like. SGIA is fully responsible for selecting its own leaders and raising its own funds for day-to-day operations. While there were two paid employees who managed the head SGIA office in Sydney, all other leaders worked on a voluntary basis while pursuing their own careers outside of the movement. A major financial gift from Tokyo facilitated the construction of the Sydney Community Center a few years ago, but SGIA administers its activities and facilities and publishes its own journals on the roughly \$US 180-190,000 it raises each year from member contributions.⁽²⁴⁾

There is considerable communication between SGIA and the SGI Tokyo office. SGI sends study materials for foreign chapters to include in their various local publications, and once in a while an SGI leader from Japan will make a brief courtesy visit. SGIA General Director Hans van der Bent and Vice Director Yong Foo often attend meetings and SGI festivals and workshops in Japan and elsewhere in Tokyo, but they are responsible for providing organizational leadership and guidance for SGIA members.

Today more than two-thirds of SGIA members and well over 80 percent of younger faithful are ethnic Asians originating from Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong, as well as native immigrants from Japan, Korea, and India.⁽²⁵⁾ Our research indicates that SGIA has developed strong roots in a number of communities nationwide and the prognosis for its gradual expansion and long-term survival seems good.

Through our research we determined that the appeal of SGIA and its particular demographic makeup appear to result from its combination of an individualistic ethic and its emphasis on a family-like community. Other factors helping SGIA grow include its ability to offer its growing Asian membership an opportunity to be together with other Asians and the chance for members, through conversion to Buddhism, to reestablish a viable connection with their Asian heritage.

The results of our surveys and interviews often paralleled findings of other recent research done on SGI in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada.⁽²⁶⁾ The major difference between SGI in Australia and New Zealand was the fact that the membership there has become largely Asian while chapters in the United States, Britain, and Canada have a much broader ethnic mix that include many Blacks and people from Central and South America and the Caribbean as well as Asian and Caucasian members.

SGIA as a Representative Buddhist Group in Australia

Australia offers a rich diversity of Buddhist sects and temples. There are now more than ninety Buddhist temples and organizations in New South Wales, sixty-five of them in Sydney. There are numerous Zen, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and other Buddhist denominations throughout Australia. A

rapidly growing Taiwanese-based sect, Fokuangshan, has temples in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Perth, as well as a huge temple-complex near Wollongong.⁽²⁷⁾

While SGIA represents only a small segment of Australia's overall Buddhist population, the composition of the Soka Gakkai closely resembles that of the overall Buddhist profile in Australia, especially in terms of age (relative youth) and European-Asian membership distribution.

There were very few Buddhists in the 1960s and early 1970s and the proportion of active white Australian Buddhists to the whole Buddhist population reflects the small size of SGI and its general membership profile of the same period. SGIA's growth in the late 1970s and during the 1980s paralleled the modest increase in the number of Buddhists in Australia overall. The numbers of Buddhists and SGIA members accelerated in the early and mid-1990s and moved up even faster in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁽²⁸⁾

While Buddhists currently constitute only about two percent of the total Australian population today, their numbers are growing rapidly. From the 1980s until the present, immigration from Southeast Asia has been a key factor in the growth of Buddhism in Australia. By 2001, Buddhists had reached 360 000 or 1.91 percent of the population. This represents an increase in number of 158 000 in the five years since the 1996 Census, and an increase of 0.78 percent as a proportion of the total population. Thus, despite fluctuation in the early years, Buddhism is now the fastest growing religion in Australia. Many people of an Anglo-Celtic origin have shown interest in Buddhism. A survey in 1998 found that 11.5 percent of the Australian adult population had practiced a form of Eastern meditation in the last twelve months. However,

comparatively few convert to Buddhism, adopting it as their religion and identifying themselves as Buddhist, according to the Census. In the 2001 Census, just under 28 000 of the total 358 000 Buddhists were Australians born of Australian parents.(29)

Buddhism has developed a very favorable and respected position in many Western countries, including Australia, in recent decades. Thus, when Australia opened itself to Asian immigration in the early 1970s, it is not surprising that many immigrants would bring their Buddhism with them and that they would attract some attention from white Australians. Particularly interesting is the number of second generation Asians who were born in Australia or who immigrated there as young children, who have adopted Buddhism. Their interest in Buddhism may be a part of their efforts to learn about and identify with their native cultures.(30)

We found a parallel phenomenon in SGIA, wherein many younger members came from a family background that was largely Buddhist, but where the members themselves had expressed very little interest in organized religion before joining SGIA.

Recent censuses in Australia indicate that more than 70 percent of Australian Buddhists were born outside Asia, the majority in Vietnam. Less than 20 percent of Australian Buddhists were born in Australia, and even here a quarter belongs to the second generation of Asian immigrants. Many of the early waves of Asian Australians came from Vietnam, but there were also considerable numbers of ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore as well as immigrants from main land China, the Philippines, India, South Korea, and Cambodia.(31)

The largest single ethnic group was Vietnamese, who comprise nearly one-third of Buddhists in Australia. Ethnic Chinese Buddhists came to Australia from many places including Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, main land China, and Singapore. There was a

smaller group of Buddhists from Theravada countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. A handful of Tibetan Buddhist immigrants attracted a number of Anglo-Australians who found appeal in the mystique of the Vajrayana tradition.⁽³²⁾ Throughout the 1990s approximately 17 percent of Asian immigrants to Australia thought of themselves as Buddhist.⁽³³⁾ Since most immigrants arrived in Australia between the ages of twenty and forty, a huge majority of Australia's Buddhists were in their twenties, thirties, and early forties (Adam and Hughes, 49). Well over 80 percent of Buddhists residing in Australia in 1991 were born elsewhere in Asia and had immigrated to Australia from their native lands. Only four percent of Australia's Buddhists were Australian-born and had both parents Australian-born, a further indication that most of Australia's Buddhists were ethnic Asians.

There are about 170 different Buddhist groups in Australia, representing all the major schools of Buddhism. Most of these groups are considered "ethnic" as their members are drawn from one of the major Asian communities. There are other generally quite small groups whose members are Anglo-Australian and are more interested in a general form of Buddhism rather than in any specific sect.⁽³⁴⁾

One can thus reasonably conclude that much of the startling growth in the number of people practicing Buddhism since the 1970s can be attributed to the huge influx of Asians from Southeast Asia and, as Judith Snodgrass has discovered, a strong revival of interest in Buddhism by second-generation Asians or in a few cases young Asians who, having arrived in Australia with no strong religious ties, became interested in Buddhism as a way of identifying with their Asian heritage.⁽³⁵⁾ The percentage of European Australians who claimed Buddhist ties before Asian immigration began in earnest in the 1970s was quite high, but their percentage dropped to well below 10 percent by 1991 because

of the major influx of ethnic Asian Buddhists.(36)

SGIA in some respects fits the pattern of at least some of the other Buddhist groups in Australia. Its increasingly Asian membership parallels the profile of other Australian Buddhists as does its general age range. Most Soka Gakkai members are in their twenties, thirties, and forties and an increasing number were born in other Asian countries and immigrated to Australia either as temporary residents — in many cases as students — or to establish long-term or permanent residency. Very few of SGIA's younger followers were born in Australia and have two parents who are also Australian-born. Some younger SGIA faithful were already members in their native lands — often Malaysia, Singapore, or Hong Kong — while others came with no particular faith and adopted SGI Buddhism after their arrival.

There are, however, some factors that make SGIA rather distinct. SGIA is a very broad, multi-ethnic movement. There is an important though proportionally declining white Australian membership and a growing ethnic Chinese component from Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but other ethnic groups also have healthy representation, including a fair number of ethnic Japanese (about 20 percent), Koreans (about 5 percent), and Indian members (about 5 percent).

Demographics of SGIA Membership

Our surveys and interviews of SGIA leaders and members in 2000, 2002, and 2003 indicated a stable and tightly knit organization which appeared more interested in the welfare of its members and the building of a healthy Buddhist community than in indiscriminately signing up members whose interest or faith was only superficial. A person is considered for membership after he or she regularly attends several meetings over a period of several months, shows genuine interest in the

movement, and has studied the basic teachings and philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism. The emphasis on conversion through dialogue has meant that many new members were converted by family members and, to a lesser extent, by close friends. This development in turn has meant slow steady growth, but also less turnover of membership.

Our surveys indicated that SGIA is a largely family-oriented movement. Two-thirds of all members and three-quarters of young members had other close family members in the movement. While just over half of older members were the first members of their family to join SGIA, close to three-quarters of younger members had other members of their family in the organization when they joined. Just over half of older members were introduced to SGIA by other family members, compared to about three-quarters of younger members. Other members were introduced by close friends. Only a tiny handful were introduced by work colleagues, fellow students, or strangers.

Overall, there are three female members to every two males in SGI. The female-male ratio is slightly higher among older members (those in their thirties and above) than among younger faithful (twenties and very early thirties). Surveyed SGIA members were also overwhelmingly urban. More than half of those surveyed lived in suburbs of large cities while another quarter lived within big cities. Slightly more than 10 percent lived in or near medium sized cities while another ten percent resided in small towns or rural areas.

Although SGIA members who joined in the 1960s and 1970s recounted that during the early years of the SGIA, members tended to be older with a roughly even ratio between European and Asian (largely Japanese) members, today the demographic picture has changed markedly. While ethnic Japanese dominated the Asian membership in the early days of

SGIA, today they constitute less than one-quarter of the Asian group. Slightly less than two-thirds of Asians are ethnic Chinese with much smaller groupings of Korean, Indian, and other Southeast Asian members. This trend toward larger proportions of Asian members is in contrast to patterns in Soka Gakkai chapters in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, where Asian members are decreasing as a proportion of the membership, and younger members tend more to resemble the population as a whole in terms of ethnic diversity.⁽³⁷⁾

Another important factor is that SGIA members tended to be very well educated. Older members in their thirties and forties were evenly divided between high school and university graduates, but younger members in their twenties or very early thirties were in general better educated. Well over half of the younger group said that they were university graduates, and another quarter said that they were pursuing a university degree. About 10 percent of the younger members said that they had or intended to receive some form of graduate degree.

SGIA members are employed in a very diverse range of jobs and professions. A vast majority of older members were employed or self-employed, but there were also a few who had gone back to school or who were retired on a pension. There were large groups of nurses and other health care professionals, public servants, people involved in business and the financial sector, teachers at all levels, artists and musicians, secretaries, pharmacists, as well as self-employed business owners, computer specialists, and journalists. A number of the older members were back in school to complete either their undergraduate or graduate degree. Younger members included about a third still attending a university. Younger members no longer in school worked in a wide variety of jobs, but a higher percentage were involved in white-collar professions or the arts than older members. About ten percent of older

members were full-time homemakers, but there were virtually none among younger members.

Roughly two-thirds of the older members were married or living with a full-time partner, while a quarter were single. Only a tiny handful had been divorced, widowed, or separated. On the other hand, about two-thirds of younger members in their twenties and early thirties were still single, with the rest either married or living with a partner. Less than ten percent were divorced or separated.

Only a minority of current SGIA members (40 percent) had any formal religious affiliation before they became members (60 percent Christian, 25 percent Buddhist, 7 percent Taoist and 7 percent Hindu), and only about 15 percent were highly committed to another religion. A third of those surveyed — including roughly a quarter of Caucasian members — had actively practiced another form of Buddhism or another East Asian faith at some point of their lives prior to joining SGI.

Another interesting find is the affiliation with and concerns about Japan by most members. Only about a third of members surveyed said that they had been persuaded to join or sponsored by an ethnic Japanese member — and most of these were themselves Japanese. The rest had been converted or sponsored by a non-ethnic Japanese member.

When asked if they had any particular interest in any aspect of Japanese culture, only about half replied in the affirmative. Clearly, most SGIA members were not practicing this religion because of its particular affiliation with Japan.

Explanations for Patterns of Membership

While SGIA originated from a Japan-based movement, most members

were attracted by the fact that it was a Buddhist movement whose members appeared to be very happy and successful in their lives and whose organization exuded a sense of warmth, harmony, and a welcoming spirit to new members. A young Caucasian member noted, "SGIA is indeed a Buddhist movement from Japan, but its message and appeal is universal. I have become a Buddhist, not a follower of Japanese Buddhism."

Another probable source of SGIA's appeal, especially to the movement's increasingly Asian younger membership, is the fact that SGIA offered a place to socialize with other Asians, even if from different countries. They could join in activities with other young people from their country or culture and develop a social base in a nation with a very different culture. SGIA membership also provided the opportunity to become acquainted with people from other cultures, including some Caucasian Australians. SGIA has demonstrated a general pattern of outsiders — immigrants, minorities, gays and lesbians — finding welcome, acceptance, and community.

Conversations with several ethnic Chinese SGI members from Malaysia and Singapore members in May 2003 revealed that while Soka Gakkai Buddhism was an important reason for joining, the social factor was critically important as well. Coming to Australia for school or a job offered a real opportunity for them to advance in life, but they had to sacrifice ties back home with friends and family. If they had Malaysian or Singaporean friends or heard of a place where they could meet fellow countrymen, they would certainly take advantage of these opportunities.

Since a number of now middle-aged ethnic Chinese SGI members from these and other Southeast Asian countries had joined SGIA, thus forming a solid group of members in SGIA, it is not surprising that other

immigrants from these countries would become familiar not only with these SGIA members, but also with the organization itself. Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese membership thus began to mushroom at a rapidly accelerating rate.

Conversion to Buddhism, for some, appeared to be a means of reconnecting with an Asian heritage. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that less than half of current membership had any formal religious affiliation before they became members, and only a third of those surveyed had actively practiced another form of Buddhism or another East Asian faith prior to joining SGI. I found a very similar phenomenon in New Zealand and in Canada (Quebec), which are also countries with rapidly growing Asian immigrant populations.⁽³⁸⁾

Based on our interviews we discovered that SGIA meetings had what could be described as a therapeutic effect on some members.⁽³⁹⁾ Many surveyed members insisted that SGIA provided for both their religious and social needs, functioning as a support group in times of need and as the basis for a social outing. It offered a ready-made community center for the newcomer and a magnet for somebody seeking greater happiness in life. Members told us that there was something missing in their lives or that they were sad, lonely or depressed. A friend or family member suggested that they attend an SGIA meeting at a cultural center or at a member's home. The newcomer was soon attracted by the warm sense of "family" or "community" along with other members' recollections of how miserable their lives were before joining, and testimonies of how they had found true happiness in life as Buddhists, after chanting regularly, and becoming a devout member. One member noted:

"What appeals to me most about SGIA is the idea of Buddhism in action — a spiritual family chanting, studying and working for others at a local

level — being there for family, friends, strangers, different cultural groups and the environment — and globally when we deal with the wider issues that grow from our work at home such as world peace, education, and eliminating poverty."

This sense of community was very important for Australian members. The fact that many members found SGIA to be an open, tolerant, and caring community was especially important for immigrants new to Australian life. SGIA provided a ready-made community containing a diverse group of white Australians and Asian Australians from virtually every region or country who could extend a welcoming hand to a newcomer from Malaysia, Korea, Hong Kong, or Japan who may not have had any roots in the community. Newcomers are very welcome and very often find SGIA to be their port of entry into and social base in Australian society. I met a number of Asian exchange students whose initial contact with SGIA was with active members from their city or country. It is also interesting to note that SGIA today attracts a small but growing number of openly gay members because they feel that they are accepted and treated well by fellow members.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Our surveys and interviews indicated that at least some of these members were attracted to SGIA because of the movement's doctrine that members need to take responsibility for their own lives and circumstances. They felt that the movement gave them control over their own destinies so that they could create their own happiness in life. They felt motivated by SGI leaders and study materials that told them that they can readily advance in life through their own hard work, strong faith, and discipline. I found this factor to be an important part of SGIA's appeal to white-collar professionals not only in Australia, but also in other areas where I have researched SGI chapters.

A key ingredient of SGIA success has been its ability to maximize lay participation and its ability to work as a lay religious movement. The decline in the credibility of organized religions and increased debate over the very existence of an anthropomorphic deity have opened the way for religious organizations such as SGIA, organizations that insist that each member has a strong responsibility not only for his destiny, but also that of his fellow members.

Members were virtually unanimous in expressing that the quality of their lives had greatly improved after joining SGIA. Most said that they had become calmer, more self-confident, and happier in their work and in relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. Significant numbers related that they had become more optimistic and were better able to make clear and informed decisions about their lives. Virtually everybody surveyed said that they had they had chanted to realize a particular goal or set of goals and that they had achieved many desired results.⁽⁴¹⁾

It is also important to note that joining SGIA, while a major commitment of Buddhist faith, does not preclude the average member from leading a very ordinary Australian life. Membership does require some degree of commitment and service to the organization, but in most cases not enough to significantly affect one's social and professional life outside the movement. Indeed, the general proportion of a member's life devoted to SGIA does not seem that much different from that of members of my own church in Virginia. According to our survey, the average SGIA member attends about one meeting a week and a significant number attend two, though more active members might attend more. And, as Hammond and Machacek noted about SGI-USA members, those who joined the movement "had to give up very little of their former way of life. Conversion, apart from learning to chant, entailed only minor behavioral change; whatever tension converts

experienced because of their decision to join Soka Gakkai was therefore minimized."⁽⁴²⁾ Based on our own observations, much about SGIA resembled SGI-USA in this sense at least. SGIA membership was also not very disruptive in terms of members' everyday activities. Most maintained some close friendships with non-members and had jobs and careers not at all related to SGIA.

Another factor that enhanced a stable membership is that most SGIA members simply did not have to endure the social criticism from family, friends, and colleagues that their counterparts in Japan often experience. The Soka Gakkai in Japan is a high profile multi-million member movement that is deeply involved in politics and a variety of other social programs. By contrast, many Japanese have regarded the Soka Gakkai as an extreme movement, and many members have told me that they have suffered from the criticism of family or peers. Since SGIA is quite small and not well known in Australian society, very few members have experienced any criticism at all.

Conclusion

Soka Gakkai is able to overcome its Japanese-based cultural baggage because its members in Australia believe that its core teachings are highly relevant to the world they live in today. They find that this religion helps them fulfill their spiritual needs and that they can "maximize their potential" through this practice. Many SGIA members state emphatically that this practice helps them increase their "creative energy" and allows them to contribute to the realization of such ideals as world peace.

Their greatest achievement, however, is the discovery of what they feel is the Buddha-nature inside themselves. They feel that this find is a common element they share with all citizens of the world and that this is

what makes SGI a truly global movement without any particular ties to any culture. Many SGIA members relate how their religion helps them to remove the "shackles" which they believe restricted their worldview in the past. They feel that they have moved away from a very parochial way of life to a perception that they are global citizens on a quest to realize world peace. They see their Buddhism as the key to the creation of a cleaner, greener, safer, and more peaceful planet.

SGIA members also find solace in the fact that their religion gives them the opportunity to partake in activities in a highly conducive community of like-minded people. Younger Asian members in both countries, mainly in their twenties and thirties, find comfort in the company of other compatriots and in the practice of a religion (Buddhism) that was important to their parents and grandparents, but which many of them were not active in prior to joining SGIA.

Soka Gakkai Buddhism has succeeded in shedding enough of its purely Japanese elements and has enhanced enough universalistic qualities to develop at least a small following in countries like Australia and Canada and tens of thousands of members in places like South Korea and the United States. Members appreciate the universalistic message of the Soka Gakkai and have accepted those aspects they consider to be essential to Soka Gakkai Buddhism, including basic teachings, language of prayer, and its organizational structure. SGI has made enough adaptations to local cultures, such as the creation of separate French and English-language meeting groups in Quebec, to reduce complaints that the movement is "too Japanese" or "too Asian" in its orientation. This flexibility will probably allow SGI to continue its growth on a global scale in years to come.

One scholar familiar with my research on Soka Gakkai in Australia has

raised an interesting question: It seems that Soka Gakkai (in Australia) attracts mainly non-Japanese Asians, and while it manages to get rid of (some of) its Japanese characteristics, it does not get rid of its Asian ones. The group transcends its national boundaries, but not the regional ones (Asia). Can we argue that it is a 'pure' Global Religion?

One may answer this question from several perspectives. In the case of Australia, the fact that so many younger members are non-Japanese Asians may well stem from the fact that the SGI has large chapters (20-40,000+ members) in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan, Korea, and Hong Kong. Most members there are also young, middle-class, well educated, and quite cosmopolitan in their outlook. Many of them are eager to study or work abroad or just visit another culture; Australia and New Zealand are attractive destinations for all of these purposes. They have gone to these countries in great numbers and quite naturally join SGIA. Other Asians seeking contacts with their countrymen also attend SGIA meetings and may also join the movement.

I have corresponded with Professor David Machacek concerning his research on SGI in the United States and my work in Australia, New Zealand (43), and Canada. We both find the preponderance of Asian members in Australia and New Zealand to be at variance with our findings in North America and other researchers' findings in Britain and Germany. Ethnic Asian membership represents a considerable minority in the United States and Canada and a small minority in Quebec (and none at all in Quebec City). Similar results are to be found in Europe.

One can probably conclude that the large Asian SGI membership in Australia and New Zealand is probably unique to these countries, and that SGI membership elsewhere includes a wide range of ethnic

backgrounds, with the host culture providing a large share of the membership — as is the case in Quebec. This finding can lead one to the general conclusion that SGI is becoming a religion on a global scale with broad appeal.

Bibliography

Adam, Enid and Philip J. Hughes. 1996. *The Buddhists in Australia*. Canberra: Australia Government Publishing Service.

Befu, Harumi. 2002. "Preface" and "The Global Context of Japan Outside Japan," in *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe and America*, eds. Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis. London and New York: Routledge, xix-xxi and 3-21.

Bouma, Gary D. 1992. *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community in Australia*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Bouma, Gary D., Wendy Smith and Shiva Vasi. 2000. "Japanese Religion in Australia: Mahikari and Zen in a Multicultural Society," in *Japanese New Religions in Global Perspective*, ed. Peter Clarke. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 74-112.

Bucknell, Roderick S. 2000. "Engaged Buddhism in Australia," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 468-484.

Burke, Kelly. 2002. "While Christianity Declines, Buddhism Grows Rapidly" in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 2002, 1.

Clarke, Peter B. 2002. "Success and 'Failure': Japanese New Religions Abroad," in *Japanese New Religions in Global Perspective*, ed. Peter

Clarke. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 272-311.

Cornille, Catherine. 2000. "New Japanese Religions in the West: Between Nationalism and Universalism," in *Japanese New Religions in Global Perspective*, ed. Peter Clark. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 10-33.

Coughlan, James E. and Deborah J. McNamara, eds. 1997. *Asians in Australia: Patterns of Migration and Settlement*. South Melbourne: MacMillan Education Australia.

Croucher, Paul. 1989. *A History of Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*. Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press.

Hammond, Phillip and David Machacek. 1998. *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ionescu, Sandra. 2000. "Adapt or Perish: The Story of Soka Gakkai in Germany," in *Japanese New Religions in Global Perspective*, ed. Peter Clarke. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 182-197.

Machacek, David and Bryan Wilson, eds. 2000. *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mettraux, Daniel. 2001 *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia*. New York: University Press of America.

_____. 1996. *The Lotus and the Maple Leaf: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in Canada*. New York: University Press of America.

_____. 1997. *The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in Quebec: The Lotus and the Fleur de Lys*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

"Religion in Australia, 1996 Census." Available at:

http://www.adherents.com/loc/loc_australia.html

Seager, Richard Hughes. 2001. "Soka Gakkai — The Next Ten Years," in *Tricycle*, 11,3, 94-97.

Spuler, Michelle. 2003. *Developments in Australian Buddhism: Facets of the Diamond*. London: Routledge Curzon.

Notes

(1) Daniel Metraux is Professor of Asian Studies at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, VA. He has written six books and numerous articles on the Soka Gakkai movement in Japan and other countries. He was a Visiting Scholar at the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University during the summer of 2002. [Return to Text](#)

(2) Soka Gakkai International administers the worldwide Soka Gakkai movement from the organization's headquarters in Tokyo. [Return to Text](#)

(3) Ionescu, "Adapt or Perish," p. 183. [Return to Text](#)

(4) Cornille, "New Japanese Religions in the West: Between Nationalism and Universalism," p. 10. [Return to Text](#)

(5) The term "success" is, of course, a highly debatable topic. One can say that the Soka Gakkai is "successful" because it has spread very rapidly abroad since the late 1960s, but the fact that it has only a few thousand members in such countries as Canada or Australia does not as

yet make it a major force abroad.[Return to Text](#)

(6)Cornille, p. 28.[Return to Text](#)

(7)The Soka Gakkai bases its teachings on its interpretation of the teachings of Nichiren (1222-1282), the founder of Japan's only native school of Buddhism. Soka Gakkai members, like other followers of Nichiren Buddhism, base their practice on chanting the *daimoku*, the phrase "*Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*." This translates roughly as "I commit myself to the wonderful dharma," referring to the highest teachings of the Buddha found in the sacred *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren (1222-82), a Japanese Buddhist monk who founded the only truly Japanese school of Buddhism and who is the spiritual patron of the Soka Gakkai, said that chanting the *daimoku* will release the powers of Buddhism within each believer and that this chanting will bring positive benefits to the faithful. Members daily perform the *gongyo*, chanting short segments of the *Lotus Sutra* before a copy of Nichiren's Gohonzon (mandala) on which is drawn the title of the *Lotus Sutra*. The Gohonzon is said to embody the teaching of the true Buddha and contains the power to bring happiness to those who worship before it. [Return to Text](#)

Soka Gakkai in Japan is also a major socio-political movement. It created a political party, the Komeito, in the 1960s. The Komeito, which on average has held about 10 percent of the seats in both houses of Japan's Diet, was briefly absorbed into a coalition of opposition parties in the mid-1990s. When the coalition collapsed in the late 1990s, former-Komeito Diet members established the New Komeito (NK). At present NK is a coalition partner of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Soka Gakkai and NK are technically independent organizations, but virtually all NK members and leaders are Soka Gakkai members as well.

Soka Gakkai chapters outside of Japan do not engage in any political

activities.

(8)Sandra Ionescu notes, for example, in her study of SGI in Germany that while German members were in full agreement with the aims and meaning of Japanese Buddhism, they adapted their own views on such peripheral matters as language, clothes worn at meetings, and the sex division of labor. See Sandra Ionescu, p. 98.[Return to Text](#)

(9)Ionescu, p. 104.[Return to Text](#)

(10)All Soka Gakkai members worldwide chant the same passages from the *Lotus Sutra* every day and perform identical rituals at home or in community centers. One finds fairly uniform organizational structures in most every chapter as well as small group meetings in members' homes. Members worldwide also share an apparent deep reverence for Soka Gakkai leader Ikeda Daisaku.[Return to Text](#)

(11)Befu, *The Global Context*, p. 19-20.[Return to Text](#)

(12)Ben Dorman, who received a doctorate from the Faculty of Asian Studies at The Australian National University in May 2003, has conducted extensive research on the New Religions of Japan. He has been a member of SGIA since 1982. This writer, while not a member, has conducted extensive research on Soka Gakkai since the late 1960s and was a Visiting Fellow at Soka University in Tokyo in 1992.[Return to Text](#)

(13)Ikeda was president of the Soka Gakkai from 1960 to 1979 when he left the day-to-day administration of the movement to other Soka Gakkai leaders. Today he is the spiritual leader and mentor for members worldwide.[Return to Text](#)

(14)Seager, "Soka Gakkai — The Next Ten Years," p. 94.[Return to Text](#)

(15)Most SGI chapters abroad have avoided a similar negative image because they have avoided any political involvement, have kept a very low profile, and have on occasion cooperated with local and even national bodies on a variety of projects. The mayor of Rotorua, New Zealand, Grahame Hall in an April 2003 interview told me that he highly respects SGI because of its many meaningful contributions to his community, including a small peace garden.[Return to Text](#)

(16)Bouma et al., p. 74-76.[Return to Text](#)

(17)According to figures provided by the SGI office in Tokyo in 2002, there are over two million members in over 200 foreign chapters including 700,000 to one million in Korea, and many thousands in many Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia and Hong Kong (40,000+ in each), Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. There are perhaps 150-200,000 members in both the United States and Brazil and 5,000+ in Canada.[Return to Text](#)

It is difficult to determine the accuracy of these SGI-generated estimates. Various surveys of SGI USA by independent scholars suggest an American-based membership of 50,000-100,000 members; and when I questioned an SGI leader in Quebec about membership figures for Canada, he said that national membership was closer to 3,000 than 5,000.

(18)Clarke, p. 281.[Return to Text](#)

(19)Clarke, p. 285.[Return to Text](#)

(20)This interpretation is bolstered by the work of Hammond and Machacek in the United States, and Wilson and Dobbelaere in Great Britain. Their studies related the growth of SGI in these countries to

value shifts associated with growing economic well-being. In short, the idea, drawn from other cross-national studies of value change in advanced industrial societies, is that as economic security rises, so does the population's desire for intangible rewards such as happiness, self-fulfillment, and aesthetic pleasure.[Return to Text](#)

(21) This writer wishes to thank Mary Baldwin College Professor Brian Lowe, who has studied practitioners of Zen Buddhism in Canada, for help in developing this hypothesis.[Return to Text](#)

(22) The SGIA head office states that there are at least fifty ethnic groups among its members.[Return to Text](#)

(23) Growth has always been glacial. Membership levels did not reach 1,000 until the late 1980s, but accelerated somewhat to hit 2000 in 1999 and to exceed 2500 in 2002. These figures were provided upon request by the SGIA head office in Sydney.[Return to Text](#)

(24) Interview with General Director Hans van der Bent in Sydney, 26 July 2002.[Return to Text](#)

(25) Interview with Yong Foo, SGIA leader, in Sydney, 2 May 2003.[Return to Text](#)

(26) See Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere. 1994. *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Phillip Hammond and David Machacek. 1994. *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; David Machacek and Bryan Wilson, (eds.). 2000. *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Daniel Metraux. 1996. *The Lotus and the Maple Leaf: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in Canada*. New York: University

Press of America, and Daniel Metraux. 1997. *The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in Quebec*. New York and London: The Edwin Mellen Press, and Daniel Metraux. 2001. *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia*. New York: University Press of America.[Return to Text](#)

(27)Also Darren Nelson, "Why is Buddhism the fastest growing religion in Australia?" Available at: <http://www.buddhanet.net/whybudoz.htm>
[Return to Text](#)

(28)For a broad overview of Buddhism in Australia, see Paul Croucher. 1989. *A History of Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*. Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press. For more recent developments, see Michelle Spuler. 2003. *Developments in Australian Buddhism: Facets of the Diamond*. London: Routledge Curzon.[Return to Text](#)

(29)Source: Christian Research Association of Australia. 2003. "Buddhism: Change Over Time." Available at:
<http://www.cra.org.au/pages/00000227.cgi> [Return to Text](#)

(30)Source: Interview with Dr. Judith Snodgrass, a noted scholar on Buddhism in Australia, in Sydney 1 August, 2002. [Return to Text](#)

(31)Coughland and McNamara, p. 53. Also Darren Nelson, "Why is Buddhism the fastest growing religion in Australia?" Available at: <http://www.buddhanet.net/whybudoz.htm> [Return to Text](#)

(32)Adams and Hughes, p. 11.[Return to Text](#)

(33)Coughlan and McNamara, p. 308.[Return to Text](#)

(34)Bucknell, p. 468.[Return to Text](#)

(35)Snodgrass interview, *op. cit.*[Return to Text](#)

(36)Adams and Hughes, p. 40-50.[Return to Text](#)

(37)Another indication of the Asian origin of most SGIA members is that only a third of surveyed members had heard of the Soka Gakkai for the first time in Australia and only about 45 percent first joined SGIA while living in Australia. The vast majority of the faithful joining outside Australia received their formal membership in Malaysia (40 percent) or Japan (37 percent).[Return to Text](#)

(38)SGI in New Zealand, like Australia, started with a small white and ethnic Japanese membership, but today has a rapidly growing and youthful ethnic Asian (mainly Chinese) membership. While SGI has a rapidly growing ethnic Asian membership, its overall membership is far more diverse and less Asian than its counterparts in Australia and New Zealand.[Return to Text](#)

(39)A large proportion of members we contacted stated that a strong sense of camaraderie and community initially attracted them to the Soka Gakkai and its form of Buddhism. SGIA became an important base for friendship, community caring, and mutual help for many members, a critical reason for their joining the movement as well as for SGIA's long term growth.[Return to Text](#)

(40)Concerning gay members, an SGIA leader noted: "The Soka Gakkai in Australia has high tolerance for gays — we are very open to gays because of high respect for human values. There is a strong homophobic tendency in Southeast Asian culture and homophobia was once very evident in SGIA, but we are becoming more open and tolerant in the eyes of more members. People of all stripes find release and peace through chanting and as Buddhists we honestly see all people as being

equal."

While this statement represents an ideal, several gay members told us that they feel at home in SGIA because of its increasingly tolerant and open atmosphere. A middle-aged ethnic Chinese Malaysian member noted in 2003:

"I left Malaysia nearly 20 years ago because there is a lack of tolerance for gays. Since I was already an SGI member, I joined SGIA and have stayed with the movement because I am accepted for who and what I am. I also enjoy the fact that I can practice my religion with my compatriots." [Return to Text](#)

(41) A vast majority of members also reported that they had also at least once chanted for a goal that had not been realized. Their explanations for these failures included the notion that the goals were unrealistic (like winning the lottery or saving a clearly doomed relationship), the timing was poor, or that they had not chanted with enough enthusiasm or sincerity. [Return to Text](#)

(42) Hammond and Machacek, p. 176-78. [Return to Text](#)

(43) I did some preliminary research on SGI in New Zealand in the spring of 2003. The movement there is quite small, perhaps 600-750 members. There were many demographic parallels between SGIA and SGI New Zealand. I met a few Caucasian members and at least one Maori, but most of the younger members were ethnic Asians including a preponderance of ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia. [Return to Text](#)