

**La Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo in Bièvres:  
A Shrine of Hugo's Teachings to Buttress Daisaku Ikeda's Project  
for the Betterment of Our World**

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard  
*Université Bordeaux Montaigne*  
brcellard@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** The Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo in Bièvres, France, is a unique example of a museum nationally recognized for its contribution to the study and understanding of the great French writer, yet founded by a Japanese. The article discusses the origins of the popularity of Hugo in Japan, his meaning for Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai, and how the museum successfully overcame attempts by anti-cultists to dismiss it as propaganda for a “cult,” and gained national acceptance as a legitimate cultural institution.

**KEYWORDS:** Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, Victor Hugo, Victor Hugo in Japan, Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo, Victor Hugo Museums.

The region to the West of Paris exhibits delightful landscapes along deep valleys and dense royal forests, dotted with quaint traditional towns and villages. It is particularly rich in exceptional monumental venues: if the palace of Versailles is clearly the most impressive, there are many more treasures nestled in the wooded hills. A few kilometers southeast of Versailles is the Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo, housed in the château des Roches, in the middle of a superb park on the sloping bank of the Bièvre river, in the hamlet of Vauboyen, in the commune of Bièvres, in the county of Essonne.

This museum is unique in that it miraculously perpetuates the actual presence in the grounds of the great Victor Hugo (1802–1885) through the devotion of one of his admirers from the other end of the world, Daisaku Ikeda, the president

of the famous Japanese Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai and a man of impressive artistic culture. It is this mysterious operation that I will try to unravel here.

Before presenting the Maison itself, it seems appropriate to start with an investigation into the ways in which Daisaku Ikeda came into contact with the work of Hugo, for even if the poet and novelist was an accomplished spiritualist who could communicate with beings distant in time and space, the connection between the two men is based on less elusive grounds, those of the intellectual exchanges between France and Japan in the late nineteenth century. Ikeda was exposed to Hugo's writings from an early age since Japan is well-known for its extremely favorable reception of the novelist's work. What struck a chord with him was the warm humanism, the charitable universalism, and the spirit of resilience most vibrantly at play in *Les Misérables* and *Ninety-three*.

By offering to purchase, protect, and display rare manuscripts and large collections of the works of Hugo and of some of his contemporaries, Daisaku Ikeda shared Hugo's goal to promote peace through knowledge of the past and education. Finally, we will see how this seemingly modest museum does play out also the politics of museums in general: through their engagement as agents of social betterment, they also perform a variety of subtle political missions on the local and global scales.

My personal appreciation of this precious mansion derives from my having been able to visit it just when it was reopening after the long COVID lockdown. Mr. Philippe Moine, the director, arranged for a long private visit with my family on June 19, 2021. Mr. Stéphane Mahuet was our most informative guide. Mr. Jean-Claude Gaubert, President of the Association culturelle Soka France (ACSF) and Mrs. Masako Moine, in charge of the exhibitions, accompanied us and answered more questions. I thank them all here as well as Mrs. Myriam Giroux, Director of ACSF, and Mr. Yoshiyuki Nagaoka of the Office of International Affairs in Tokyo for making my research possible.

### *1. Hugo as the Master of Resilience: The Raison d'Être of the Museum*

The major theorist of resilience, Boris Cyrulnik, built his analysis on this observation of the survivors of various major traumas. Born in 1937 in a Bordeaux Jewish family, he himself had to hide several times, and miraculously

escaped from the round up that sent neighboring Jews to the camps. He has explained that the victims had to be able to form “bonds and meaning” in order to be healed. Before the term resilience existed, the phenomenon itself had been explored at length by various thinkers and artists, in particular by several nineteenth-century novelists, and probably best by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* (1862). It so happens that this was Hugo’s novel that most fascinated readers in Japan, as we shall see below.

The novel is a long social saga, which follows the life itineraries of several powerful protagonists in a movement going from poverty, dereliction, darkness, and sin to light, wealth, and redemption. Several now stand on their own as archetypal figures of vices or virtues: the Thénardiens as nasty greedy authoritarian employers; Javert as the police inspector unrelentingly pursuing his prey; Jean Valjean, the prey and ex-convict who finally turns himself in to save an innocent and becomes very rich; Cosette as the miserable child rescued from poverty by generous Jean Valjean; Gavroche, the typical Parisian street boy...

It is not fortuitous that one of Cyrulnik’s major books, *Le Murmure des fantômes* (The Murmurs of Ghosts) (2003), devotes a long section (almost half of the volume) to young children and their relations to, or lack of, family and education. Several chapters focus on street kids, one on their resilience in the streets of Switzerland in the sixteenth century, another on their resistance to cultural aggressions today. The painting on the 2005 book cover shows “An Outraged Young Hebrew,” by Russian painter Ivan Kramskoj (1837–1887), in a pose and in looks immediately evoking Gavroche and Cosette.

Hugo’s saga is intensely didactic in its celebration of the resistance/resilience of the people of Paris. Hugo wanted his novel to be “the poem of human conscience,” and he also said that, “this book is a drama whose major protagonist is the infinite. Man is the second one.” His ambition is summarized by a critic in those terms:

Hugo invents a new object, misery, the infinite from below that unites all the margins of society—gutters, penal colonies and barriers—, of History—lost battles and suicidal barricades—, and of the individual being—interior collapses, riots of the soul—, whereby humans accomplish in the abyss their belonging to humankind (*Robert des grands écrivains* 2000, 608).

The genesis of *Les Misérables*, and of the entire project of Hugo as a man fighting for justice, can be best grasped in a letter that he penned in 1862: “In Paris

around 1818 or 19, one summer towards noon, I was walking across the square of the Palais de Justice.” A crowd was surrounding a post to which a young woman was tied. At her feet there was a brasero containing a red iron with a long handle. The woman was guilty of a “domestic theft.” Then suddenly a man climbed on the scaffolding behind her, opened her shirt to bare her back, took the red iron and pushed it into her flesh.

I can still hear, more than forty years later, and I will always hear in my soul the unbearable scream of the tortured woman. To me she was not a thief, she became a martyr. I came out of this—I was sixteen—determined to fight forever the wrong actions of the law (Letter of 1862 to a correspondent in Geneva, in Gaillard 1984, 7).

From the focus on the unjust and cruel martyrdom of one miserable individual, Hugo expanded his vision to the lower social classes and finally to society at large. In *Les Misérables* and in other works, he demonstrated how the power of resistance of the people, in a movement both psychological and social that we would now call “resilience,” led to their liberation, political, social, and finally intimate. The message was so powerfully expressed that the reputation of the novel transcended the borders of the French-speaking world.

## *2. The Reception of Hugo in Japan and Daisaku Ikeda’s Own Interpretation of Hugo’s Vision*

One of the most fascinating and transformative historical periods that I have ever studied and taught is the so-called “Opening of Japan” by Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) in 1853, which paved the way for the overall transformation of the country. Perry had been ordered by U.S. President Millard Fillmore (1800–1874) to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, and force it to open its harbors to American vessels. After long months of hesitations because of major infightings, the councilor in charge of the negotiations, Abe Masahiro (1819-1857), accepted the deal. Various treaties were signed, putting an end to the self-imposed centuries-old isolation of the islands.

The irruption of the Americans prompted the demise of the Shogunate that had been running the country, and the end of the Edo era when imperial power was restored with the accession to the throne of Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) in 1867. Those decades witnessed a powerful demonstration of national resilience since, instead of being totally destabilized by such a blatant show of military and

political might, as so many other countries would have been (and as so many were, when confronted with the expansion of the Western powers), Japan saw where its interest lay, and decided to transform itself completely both domestically and externally. Emperor Meiji understood that only by imitating the Western powers could his country stand up to them.

In 1871, he dispatched a delegation to the USA and to several countries in Europe to observe their mores, and to negotiate treaties and trading agreements: led by Foreign Affairs Minister Prince Iwakura Tomomi (1825–1883), this Iwakura Embassy proved most instrumental in modernizing Japan on a par with the West, and in the opening of reciprocal exchanges between Japan and the Western powers. As is most interestingly narrated in the Embassy's report (excerpted and published by Tsuzuki Chushichi [1926–2020] as *Japan Rising: The Iwakura Embassy to the USA and Europe 1871-1873*), if the envoys appreciated the industries and the educational and political institutions of the United States, Britain and Germany and advised that they should be duplicated, in France, it was the culture they most admired. Though far more difficult to appreciate at first sight than architecture, painting, or fashion, literature was soon also sought after, whether produced by the French or by other Westerners as well as by the Russians (Chushichi and Young 2009).

The very first translation of a French novel from the original French text was that of *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* by Jules Verne (1828-1905) done by Kawashima Tadanosuke (1853–1938) in 1878 and 1880 (published by Maruya Zenshichi Press in Tokyo). Several novels by Hugo and by Verne were later translated by Morita Shiken (1861–1897), but from their English translations from French (an enduring method, since mastering English was seen as a priority when French was only accessible to a smaller elite). In his study of those early translations, Minami Asuka wonders why the two translators chose Verne and Hugo first. He suspects it was because they were very popular in France already, and the books were thus easy to obtain. Furthermore, Japanese readers liked to follow their minute descriptions of the way people lived in the West (Minami 2004, 148).

From 1890 on, the Japanese had access to French novels, and Western novels in general, in three ways: firstly, the translators either bought the books directly in the West or had travelers bring them back for them. Then the Maruzen bookshop in Tokyo, founded in 1868, played a major role in distributing

Western books for several decades. Finally, those who could not afford to buy books, could read them in the national library in Ueno that opened in 1885 (Minami 2004, 149). In the lists we have of the published authors during the Meiji era (1868–1912), Hugo was just one out of many Western writers (Minami 2004, 150) but he would soon become the most famous French author. Interestingly, it was from Japanese translations that the first Chinese edition of a Hugo text (probably an essay) in 1903 (Luo 2004, 204) and the first Korean edition of *Les Misérables* in 1923 (Yi 2004, 215) were realized, Japan acting from 1853 to this day as the port of entry of “modernity” in East Asia.

Most of what we know of Hugo’s reception and current status in Japan comes from the numerous works published in French by Nakio Inagaki (Inagaki 2002, 2004; Inagaki and Rebollar 2005). The first notable translation of *Les Misérables* was published in 1919 by Toyoshima Yoshio (1890–1955), a novelist himself. His version was corrected in 1986; it has been retranslated seven times since 1987, again from the 1919 version. So far, at least nine Japanese films have been made following the plot (including six between 1910 and 1935), and four television dramas. Now practically all the works of Hugo have been translated including major studies on him, notably the one by André Maurois (1885–1967). *Les Misérables* is also published in a manga series started in 2013 by mangaka Takahiro Arai (born in 1982), from the translation by Toyoshima Yoshio (Arai 2015–17). It is available in French also, retranslated from the Japanese.

The most popular version of *Les Misérables* is an earlier adaptation of the book as a serial novel in the journal *Yorozu Chōhō* in 1902–1903 under the title *Aa Mujō* (Oh, the Heartless Ones). The translator was Kuro’iwa Ruikō (1862–1920), who condensed and shortened the book to the point of turning it into a sort of pulp novel that met with such astonishing success, and it is considered as the first example of “industrial literature, to use the terminology of [Charles-Augustin] Sainte-Beuve [1804–1869]” (Inagaki 2002, 94). It is easy to understand why a translator would feel the need to abridge the novel: in my 1973 Gallimard Folio edition, the first volume numbers 605 pages in tiny print, the second volume 606 pages, and the third volume 510 pages. The eight books of the 1862 edition were bound in five thick volumes.

When the Japanese version of the French musical *Les Misérables* opened in Tokyo in 1987, it was to be performed 115 times. This enduring success is explained by the fact that the novel had become such a household story that

everyone could easily identify with the plot. As Daisaku Ikeda would remark, in Japan children are often told the story of Cosette and everybody knows Jean Valjean.

Yet, Inagaki laments the twisted image the Japanese have painted of Hugo, and their lack of an authentic profound appreciation of his work. He expresses this issue most forcefully in his chapter on “Victor Hugo and the rebellious modernizers in Meiji Japan,” in which he examines the political use of the image of Hugo by the Liberal movement for civil rights (*Jiyūminken undō*) and then the influence he exerted on the program of social reforms by the group called “Friends of the Nation” (*Kokumin no tomo*).

Inagaki narrates how the first major encounter between Japan and Hugo can be traced to a visit that Taïsuke Itagaki (1837–1919), the leader of the Liberal movement, said he paid to Hugo during his stay in Paris from December 1882 to April 1883. It was only in 1884 that the episode became really known, and in 1885 the party’s newspapers testified that Hugo was aware of “the liberalism and of the political activities of his Asian visitor... and welcomed him with such friendliness that all the other visitors were very surprised.” Hugo is supposed to have told him “to move forward without ever going back,” and to “publish all sorts of political treatises and European liberal novels in Japanese newspapers in order to initiate and encourage the Japanese people.” Then, Hugo is supposed to have recommended that he read his latest novels (Inagaki 2004, 186).

Inagaki points out that this narration was made public one year after its actual occurrence to serve Itagaki who was embroiled in a corruption affair then and needed the “protection” of Hugo and the reference to *Quatre-vingt-treize* (Ninety-three: Hugo 1874) for his own sake. In Japan, in 1884, several rebellions against the Meiji government were taking place, and this is when it was decided to translate this novel which, appropriately for the Japanese situation, describes the counter-revolution of royalist peasants in Vendée, under the leadership of rebel aristocrats, victims of the Revolution. Their plight was seen to resemble those of the samurai, the members of Itagaki’s movement, rebelling against the Meiji government. The translation of the novel was then interrupted.

Another use of Hugo was made by the same party: this time, it emphasized the exile of Hugo for having fought against Napoleon III (1808–1873). Inagaki gives other examples of the recourse to a somewhat invented Hugo to serve the national

interests of those rebellious politicians. He finally explains how they in fact never understood the ambiguity of Hugo.

Inagaki goes below the surface of the seemingly easy to grasp humanism of the writer. While he was fighting for the common good, Hugo was also obsessed with and fearful of the popular masses and of their potentially irrepressible violence, which is why he discarded the idea of a republican government for many years. “It was only in the 1850s that he recognized the French Revolution as a historical necessity, inevitable for the progress of mankind.” The Hugolian specialist goes on:

The fright of Hugo facing the dark energy of the people and his craving for social reforms in favor of this same people collided constantly within him, and a kind of dialectics of those two antithetical forces finally engendered his humanitarian philosophy. It is natural that the Meiji Japanese could not understand this ambiguous attitude because they had never had the experience of a true revolution (Inagaki 2004, 200).

Inagaki further comments upon the success of the Kuro’iwa Ruikô’s translation of *Les Misérables* as a serial novel. He concludes that when the Japanese government was copying the German empire (following as we saw above the recommendation of the Iwakura Embassy), those who disapproved of the government invoked France and French thinkers to buttress their point (the same phenomenon was seen in China, where Hugo and Verne fascinated the reformers of the early twentieth century [Luo 2004, 203] as well as in Korea [Yi 2004, 209]).

But when Japan became sufficiently proud of itself, Inagaki feels that it distanced itself from Western cultures, and saw them as a matter of individual knowledge only. The same happened to the popularity of Hugo, who is now simply known as the author of one single novel (Inagaki 2004, 202). It is thus fairly reassuring in such a context to see that someone like President Ikeda has retained a profound and genuine regard for Hugo.

Daisaku Ikeda (born in 1928) expresses his admiration for the man of letters in the “Founder’s Message,” a moving text published as the introduction to the catalogue of the Maison. Ikeda explains that Hugo and the characters of *Les Misérables* in particular have accompanied him from his very childhood. When his mentor Josei Toda (1900–1958) told him about the novel *Quatre-vingt-treize*, which, as we saw just above, stages the darkest hours of the French Revolution (the war in 1793 in Vendée between the Catholic Royalists and the Republican forces, both sides being extremely violent), Ikeda saw a parallel with his own



experience of the Second World War. Like Hugo, Ikeda envisioned “the ideal revolution for humanity” that he then strove to define and make accessible through the Buddhism of Soka Gakkai (Ikeda 1991).

It is important to remember here that Josei Toda is one of the founding figures of Soka Gakkai. He was the favorite disciple of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944) who founded in 1930 Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (The Value-Creating Educational Society). When the government imposed Shinto as state religion, Makiguchi refused to receive a Shinto talisman of the sun goddess Tensho Daijin that he saw as countering Buddhism, and he did not want to offer religious support to the Japanese war effort. He was taken to prison with some twenty followers, including Toda, in 1943, and he died there from malnutrition one year later (Dobbelaere 2001, 5).

This unjust and cruel punishment, which powerfully echoed that suffered by the branded young woman Hugo beheld in his youth, oriented forever the path devised by Toda (who came out of prison in 1945) when he became the second President in 1946, and by Daisaku Ikeda, the third President of Soka Gakkai from 1960 to 1979 and then of Soka Gakkai International since 1975. Such a traumatic genesis fueled their passion for human rights and justice that is the hallmark of Soka Gakkai, registered in 1952 as a religious organization whose full name translates as “Society for the Creation of Values, movement for peace, culture and education.”

In his “Founder’s Address,” Ikeda voices his admiration for “the warrior of words” that Hugo was. In all trials and sufferings, in prison, “No chains could imprison his soul.” He fought back with words and used them to rescue other people as well:

No threat was great enough to silence this voice which cried out for justice. No wrong escaped him, be it poverty, injustice, lack of freedom of the press, inequality of political rights or the death penalty.

Hugo is a model for Ikeda in all his undertakings:

The force of will that exists in *Les Misérables*, solid as a rock, a force that the writer always directed towards good, shakes my soul still today. For this strong will that never gave in to attack encouraged me so many times, as did his determination and love for the people...

Ikeda concludes:

Hugo is my eternal companion. Hugo, with his spirit to fight until the end, and his eyes set on a far-off ideal, should be an eternal companion and source of encouragement for all people throughout the ages (Ikeda 1991, 23–5).

In the footsteps of Hugo, Ikeda intends to bring people to the Light of a better world, and the Maison littéraire has to be envisioned as one stage toward achieving this noble goal: world peace and the union of free citizens through education, culture and deep spirituality. In *A New Humanism* Ikeda quotes a Western poet and an Eastern one who voiced the very goal he pursued in founding the Maison littéraire:

East is East and West is West,  
but when the two giants meet  
boundaries and nationalities will disappear.

To which the Eastern poet replied:

East and West must marry  
on the altar of humanity.

Ikeda concludes his own poem on a celebration of Art that leads imagination:

to the noble stage of wisdom  
and leading it toward the far-off horizon  
of universal civilization (Ikeda 2010, 11).

The early history of the Maison now has to be detailed for us to grasp the intimate connection between its current collections and Hugo himself and its founder's project.

### *3. The History and Complex Mission of the Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo*

One may indeed wonder why set up a Hugo museum in the château des Roches since it is not generally known to be connected to the writer, unlike the other five museums devoted to him in which he did live for more or less long periods: the most famous one being his own house, place des Vosges in Paris, where he lived from 1832 to 1848; his house in Guernsey, where he lived in exile from 1856 to 1870; one house in Villequier (Seine-Maritime); the Maison Hugo in Vianden, Luxembourg, and his birth place, Maison Hugo in Besançon. Yet, the connection

to Victor Hugo becomes obvious when one studies the history of the château, a point my guides at the Maison emphasized in great detail.

Les Roches belonged to Bertin l'Aîné, Louis-François Bertin (1776–1841), a very famous patron of the arts in the first half of the nineteenth century. Bertin was most well-known as the director of the *Journal des Débats* (founded in 1789, it ran until 1944) that he and his brothers bought in 1799. The most important daily paper of the century, it published the minutes of the French National Assembly as well as political editorials and literary pieces. Suspected of being a royalist, Bertin was imprisoned and then exiled in 1800 by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) on the island of Elba (famous now as the place where Napoleon himself was exiled later). Thanks to François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) who then worked as “secrétaire d’ambassade” in Rome and shared Bertin’s dislike of Napoleon (crowned emperor in December 1804), Bertin obtained a fake passport that allowed him to go back to France under the promise that he would only dedicate himself to literature and real estate.

On his return, he bought the mansion in 1804, which, because it was outside Paris, allowed him to remain at a certain distance from his aggressive political opponents. From 1815 to 1841, he invited there the most prestigious thinkers and artists of the time, several of them being intensely involved in politics, notably Hugo and Chateaubriand.

Between 1831 and 1845, Hugo spent time in the chateau as often as he could, first with his wife and children, later with his mistress. There he wrote a great number of texts, novel or theater chapters, letters, and poems, dedicating many to Bertin’s daughter, Louise (1805–1877), who had become his trusted confidante. Born in the château, Louise was handicapped from having suffered poliomyelitis as a child, but she was extremely prolific as an artist, a talented poetess and composer.

Not too well known, though a most fascinating piece because its realization combined the skills of the major French artists of the century, the opera *La Esmeralda* was composed in the château. Inspired by Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Louise composed the music and Hugo the libretto. The famous painter and illustrator of several novels by Hugo and Alexandre Dumas Louis Boulanger (1806–1867) designed the costumes. Hector Berlioz (1803–1869) directed the rehearsals (Berlioz had been hired by Bertin to run the musical columns of *Le*

*Journal des Débats*). The opera was performed in 1836 in Paris but only six times as the opponents of Bertin had it withdrawn from the Opéra.

When Daisaku Ikeda came to France in 1981, he was invited to meet Alain Poher (1909–1996), the President of the Senate. In the Luxembourg palace that houses the Senate, he beheld a bust of Hugo. He immediately experienced a form of revelation: there and then he decided to patronize a museum to celebrate and perpetuate the ideal of Hugo with the goal of creating a truly humanistic culture and society, and of serving as a bridge between Japan and France.

Without being aware of his wish, the members of the Soka Gakkai Cultural Association had heard that the château des Roches was for sale and that it had been one of Hugo's favorite hideaway places, so much so that he had evoked it in his poems. They thus informed Daisaku Ikeda who suggested to turn it into a museum dedicated to him. Long negotiations were then to be held as the whole estate as it is now was then in three lots, and the three landlords had to be convinced to sell together in order to form only one property. The sale was concluded in 1989.

The Maison and the estate are owned and maintained by the Association Culturelle Soka de France, Mr. Ikeda being the founder but not the landlord. The Maison was inaugurated on June 21, 1991. The Association Culturelle Soka de France (ACSF), registered under the terms of the 1901 law on “associations,” is different from the Association culturelle Soka du Bouddhisme de Nichiren, which is the spiritual branch, registered under the terms of the 1905 law on the relations between the French state and religions.

The mansion is painted in a charming pink. The entrance hall, the four exhibition rooms and different lounges extend over 400 m<sup>2</sup>. Apart from a few transformations, notably in the large entrance hall that was expanded, the property was minutely restored to its nineteenth century state, each room decorated with epoch furniture and the hues then fashionable: one lounge is blue, the color Hugo favored, another is bright red to evoke Hugo's house in Guernsey, another room is celadon green. The library bookcases are in mahogany. The surrounding park harbors some of the trees Hugo admired and wrote about.

The lounges exhibit troves of manuscripts and first editions of Hugo's books in glass cabinets, in perfect preservation conditions. One also sees precious editions

of other writers' works, from François Rabelais (1490?–1553) to André Malraux (1901–1976), and in particular of nineteenth century authors: Chateaubriand, Alphonse Dumas père (1802–1870), George Sand (1804–1876), Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), and others, numerous nineteenth-century pamphlets, political cartoons, several by the most famous illustrator and caricaturist of the nineteenth century Honoré Daumier (1808–1879), and so on. The library is exceptionally rich, and keeps expanding.

Several extremely valuable items are registered each as “Trésor national au titre des monuments historiques” (“National treasure in the register of Historical Monuments”): the printed proofs corrected by the hand of Hugo of *Les Misérables*, *Les Contemplations*, *La Légende des Siècles*. Most precious also is the actual slip of paper on which Hugo penned his very last words on his death bed: “Aimer, c’est agir” (“To love is to act”). The paper was registered as a Historical Monument in 2000 (the most prestigious and difficult ranking to obtain from the Ministère de la Culture). The other unique manuscript contains the blueprint of the decree for the amnesty of the Communards (Diebolt 2001, 1).

The Maison is however far more than a mere conservatory of manuscripts. Its organization follows the wish of Daisaku Ikeda to promote education of all people and all age groups, since according to him, it is only through education that our ailing societies will transcend themselves and reach an ideal of brotherly love. Like Hugo, Ikeda is sincerely convinced that one can save the world through work and love, and that the inhuman and the savage brute can become human.

To advance this project, that Ikeda refuses to consider as utopian, the Maison is geared to all age groups: in fact, it is opened on weekdays only to groups, most of them being retirees associations and school groups, and to individual visitors solely on the week-end. Visitors are given tours with detailed explanations on the life of Hugo, on his work and on his humanist values. The Maison also promotes research on Hugo in partnership with academics and is held in high regard by Hugolians in France and abroad. It publishes a journal for each new exhibition to make sure visitors leave with the printed texts of Hugo and of the different writers highlighted on the occasion. The journal also publishes analyses of the collection and recapitulates various important events.

To sustain the interest of visitors, regular temporary exhibitions are organized on the works of various authors but also on works of art. The Maison has held some twenty exhibitions so far and has participated in six international projects. It

also organizes displays within larger topics: for example, two around the figure of Napoleon, plus one international collaborative exhibition. Several were held in Japan in 2001, 2004, 2005. Three in Germany, notably “Victor Hugo and the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” presented in 2001 in Bingen, Germany. As Director Philippe Moine wrote in his presentation, Germany is linked to Hugo since it was in his book *Le Rhin* (1842), from the name of the river along which he enjoyed staying, that for the first time he elaborated the concept of the United States of Europe, built “on the alliance of France and Germany, seen as the constitution of Europe” (if this can be seen as a herald of the actual construction of the European Union in our times, Hugo could never have imagined the global bloodshed that was to precede it).

The message Daisaku Ikeda sent for the occasion of this exhibit once more summarized his intent in setting up the Maison and its various educational activities:

Hugo actively worked towards creating the future. Unrelentingly, he drew in the sky of the future, the immense rainbow of his dream of all-encompassing social reforms.

He went on:

Protecting the magnificent cultural heritage created by mankind is a duty for all. Contributing to the culture of mankind is also the natural duty of all religion (Moine 2001).

The Maison is therefore the concrete realization of what Daisaku Ikeda expounded in his speeches and texts, in particular in those gathered in *A New Humanism* (2010), the first part of which is devoted to “Art, Literature and Education.” In the chapter on “Creative Life,” a most talented poet himself, the author defines art as the creative power of mankind:

Can we not see it,  
the pulsing rhythm that springs  
from the depths of the spirit,  
this profoundly deep, this unfathomable  
fountain of creation?

He continues:

Art is the irrepressible expression of human spirituality... Into each one of the myriad concrete forms of art is impressed the symbol of ultimate reality. The creation of a work

of art takes place within spatial boundaries, but through the process of creating, the soul of the artist seeks union with that ultimate reality, what might be called cosmic life.

Further:

through art we find oneness with a transcendental entity, breathe its rhythm, and absorb the energy we need for spiritual renewal. Art also functions to purify the inner being, to bring the spiritual uplift that Aristotle called catharsis. What is this quality in art that has ordained it to play such an elemental and enduring role in human life? I believe it is the power to integrate, to reveal the wholeness of things.

Ikeda quotes *Faust* as a “statement of the interconnection of all living things” and continues his definition:

then art becomes the elemental modality through which humans discover their bonds with humans, humanity with nature, and humanity with the universe.

To him Notre-Dame and Chartres cathedrals,

a summation in architecture of the worldview of medieval Christianity, embodied the awesome power of art to integrate the world’s reality and ultimate reality (Ikeda 2010, 4–5).

He then continued by reasserting his belief in the advantages of following Nichiren Buddhism: the powerful spirituality expressed in Christian cathedrals has now been erased, for with modernization those forces of integration have waned, and “people are isolated and alone.” Now Buddhism can offer “a connection, a causal relationship or a function that joins life and its environment...” as is explained in the Lotus Sutra (Ikeda 2010, 6–7). The following subchapters define the subtleties of art connected to Buddhism: “Connected with Totality,” “Sutra of this World,” the “Metaphor of Dance”: “The unfolding of creative life according to the Lotus Sutra, then, encompasses all the dimensions of human life” (Ikeda 2010, 9).

These passages allow us never to lose sight of the ultimate intent of Ikeda. He always places the work of Hugo or of any Western or universal artist or philosopher within the scope of Buddhism. They cannot be appreciated for themselves alone but must be somewhat “capped” by this spiritual system seen as the only authentic and valid one to reach universal peace.

Likewise, if President Ikeda constantly refers to authors, artists, philosophers from around the world, in the spiritual field he does not bow to any form of ecumenism unlike several founders or leaders of contemporary religions

movements who promote a form of universal combination of spiritual traditions (the Bahá'í Faith being one famous example but not the only one).

The affirmation of the superiority of Buddhism, testifying obviously to the personal conviction of Ikeda, may be viewed also as the logical reaction to what we have explained above: the aggressive opening of Japan to Westernization first in the 1850s and then of course even more forcefully after World War II, with the occupation of Japan by the USA that sought to impose a massive overhaul of its social and political organization to beget a regenerated (along Western ideals) national identity. Though the movement refuses to be trapped in any form of nationalism because such ideology can only lead to war and is anathema to universal humanism, Soka Gakkai does emphasize a specifically Japanese religious identity, that of Nichiren Buddhism. In his analysis of the structural ambivalence of the movement—both lay and religious, both traditionalist and anti-traditionalist—, Raphaël Lioger writes that Ikeda's "strategy was built in reaction to the cultural and then political Western penetration of Japan in the 1940s" (Lioger 2002, 37).

A somewhat similar appropriation of Western figures to *in fine* reassert the superiority of the national culture now subdued by colonization or occupation was operated by Caodaism (founded in 1926 in Indochina). Victor Hugo ranks as one of its major figureheads as well as Joan of Arc (ca. 1412–1431), the archetypal French national heroine and many other famous French characters (the Indochinese learnt about them directly in the French schools). Such inclusions could be meant to please and assuage the French colonial authorities but they are swallowed and subsumed in the eventually triumphant Vietnamese traditional spiritual narrative.

#### *4. The Multifaceted Functions of the Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo*

I will address two major points here: first, as a literary museum the Maison performs a specific social and cultural function perfectly in the "air du temps." Then, though definitely not a Soka Gakkai museum *per se*, it has been accused of being a cover up for suspicious activities, so that no efforts were spared to counteract such negative vision and broaden the scope of its finality as a museum.



## The Paradoxical Functions of Literary Museums

As one of the six literary museums dedicated to Hugo (listed above), all belonging to the extended European network of “Houses of Hugo,” probably the largest such grouping around one single author, the château des Roches fully participates in the musealization of literature that started in the nineteenth century, continued in the twentieth century, and seems to have accelerated since 2000 at the international level. As Marie-Clémence Régnier (2015) and others analyzed by studying “what the museum does to literature: musealization and exhibition of the literary,” these venues have carried literature to a domain different from the one it was produced for (plain reading and/or listening), thereby transforming its status radically. The power of mediation of literature in the public space is here emphasized, the author so “museified” turning more than ever into a heroic figure essential to the construction of a national heritage, of nationalist pride. Consequently, before being understood as cultural tools, literary museums like other types of museums can be seen as political tools perhaps first and foremost, as Régnier and critics such as Peggy Levitt (2015) have shown.

However, château des Roches is a case apart: the Hugo it promotes is definitely not the French heroic figure but the universalist humanist and, as has been explained above, it is definitely not a French project, not even a local project, but a Japanese project! One to promote the opposite of parochialism: the preservation of a universal heritage to abolish nationalist borders and barriers: “I hope this house of literature...will help the immortal soul of this great poet to bring all people closer to universality” (Ikeda 1991, 25).

Another point is explored by Régnier and her colleagues: far from criticizing the literary museum, the scholars wonder whether instead of despising this diversion of the original goal of literature as further proof of the demise of high culture, we should not see this new mode of consumption of the literary work as a positive adjuvant, when literature on its own has become less and less attractive to an increasing part of the population that finds reading boring:

Now that literary culture is profoundly questioned, in its mode of transmission and of valorization..., does musealization not constitute a fountain of youth at the spring of which literary culture can drink, to continue radiating in our societies?... A means to conquer new audiences? (Régnier 2015, 20)

The Maison brings a clear answer to their interrogation. The schoolchildren who are taken to the Maison by their teachers, the retirees, or the individual visitors who may have come simply to stroll around the park but have ventured into the mansion, will have their schooldays memories of Hugo and of the other writers present there revived and given flesh, and, as our guides testified, many exclaim that they are now more interested in the books themselves so that they do buy quite a few of them in the small bookshop on their way out. After the fire of Notre-Dame, Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* sold out: those buyers may not have walked into a regular bookshop in town to purchase the novel. Therefore, the Maison performs a powerful memorial function: seeing the manuscripts and pamphlets of the period entices people to view the actual novel or poems as cogs of a rich cultural chain that they now feel ready to explore for themselves.

Another level of explanation can be observed, that of the “acculturation” of marginalized citizens to high French culture. Because of its historical inscription in the French landscape (in all the senses of the term, cultural and geographical), the Maison demonstrates what Lioger concluded on Soka Gakkai in France regarding its relatively important inclusion of otherwise marginalized characters (immigrants, sexual minorities...). Instead of looking for a more permissive social and/or religious group, what these members appreciate in the movement is on the contrary its imposition of specific

rules that take their existence into account and assigns to them a place in the social order. Soka Gakkai provides them with such a place in a communal order that presents itself as much as possible in line with the global order: modern, westernized, without any visible sign of Asian or exotic culture.... Asian specificities are erased. Heroes such as Victor Hugo and Marie Curie [1867–1934] and the founding myths of French identity, such as the 1789 Revolution, are reappropriated through celebrations, feasts and exhibitions (Lioger 2002, 9).

The author mentions the Maison as the proper example of the obedience of members to President Ikeda's injunction to cultivate an international dimension and to promote the work of Hugo in correspondence with the values of orthodox Buddhism (Lioger 2002, 25).

#### The Maison as the Honorable Daughter of a Minority Religion in France

Most religions interact in a more or less intense manner with their surroundings. When they are not on a separatist path, they will often attempt to

present themselves as useful to society in a variety of ways. Soka Gakkai has opted for the promotion of education and of art, the two domains being intrinsically bound, through the foundations of various institutions for the general public: schools from kindergartens to colleges and Soka University (with various international branches), all operating according to Makiguchi's pedagogical philosophical methods—and museums.

Within this frame, the perfect restoration of château des Roches must be viewed as a most generous gift on the part of Daisaku Ikeda and the Association Culturelle Soka de France, since they protected and embellished a domain that is most important in the literary and political life of the nineteenth century at no cost to the French taxpayer.

The religious group that has systematically applied and perfected this strategy is the Church of Scientology: it does not plan new buildings (of if it does, it is extremely rare) but has specialized in the purchase of historical urban landmarks left in a derelict state that it will restore to their pristine grandeur, in which it installs its churches and various centers (for the urban renewal thus realized in Los Angeles, see Rigal-Cellard 2019). The Church is therefore considered as a major benefactor of many inner cities, and in exchange it benefits from a positive image.

The Maison in Bièvres is not an isolated realization of Daisaku Ikeda: he had displayed a similar aspiration when he founded the Fuji Art Museums, right by his Soka University, and the Min'On Concerts Association in Tokyo. Already then, he expressed his fascination for French culture since he opened the museum in November 1983 with a landmark exhibition of “Masterpieces of French Art” that had been lent by eight major French museums, including the Louvre and the Versailles Museum of the History of France. The presentation of the exhibition reads:

That a private museum without any previous achievement or contribution could organize the showing of such an impressive array of works defied convention.

We then learn that the man who negotiated such a tour-de-force was René Huyghe (1906–1997), “the acclaimed French art historian who is credited with saving the *Mona Lisa* and other national treasures from Nazi looters in World War II.” The two men had met in 1974 when Huyghe had accompanied *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre to Tokyo.

Huyghe came away impressed by Ikeda's belief that the finest works of art should be shared and appreciated by as many people as possible, and the two developed a strong friendship that would culminate in numerous collaborations that included the publishing of their dialogue, *Dawn After Dark* (Tokyo Fuji Art Museum 2021).

The friendship with René Huyghe must have opened a lot of doors to Daisaku Ikeda when he returned the art historian's visit to Japan and landed in Paris in 1981: the Maison is placed under the tutelary protection of notable political actors of the French nation, and major figures of the art and literary world. The foreword was penned by Alain Poher, whom Ikeda met in 1981 as we saw above. Poher was President of the Senate (from 1968 until 1992, the longest serving time ever), and as such was the second ranking political figure in France; he uniquely served several times as President of the nation *pro tempore*.

Visiting him was part of the well-known policy of Daisaku Ikeda, who has always insisted on organizing diplomatic encounters with international political leaders, and has judged them to be among the most instrumental in the development of education and in the positive reception of the religion in their respective countries, in a top-down strategy of efficient missions (a method perfected by the Jesuits as well as today by Scientologists).

Alain Poher sat on the Honorary Committee of the Maison along with René Huyghe, who was a member of the French Academy, fellow academician Alain Decaux (1925–2016) and famous novelist Hervé Bazin (1911–1996), the former president of the Goncourt Academy. Jack Lang the then Minister of Culture granted Daisaku Ikeda the title of “Officier du mérite des Arts et des Lettres” (Officer in the Order of Merit for Arts and Literature) in 1990, and later joined the Honorary Committee.

Baptized with such prestigious godfathers, the Maison should have been held in high esteem from the start, yet since quite a few French people are prone to view suspiciously the real estate operations of religious groups in general and of foreign groups in particular, always perceived as contriving “cults,” in a couple of cases the Maison was demeaned as the proof of the deceptive maneuvers of Daisaku Ikeda.

The 1996 Report of the French parliamentary commission on cults referred to Soka Gakkai in those terms:

The financial power of Soka Gakkai can be deduced... from the recent real estate investments of the cult (des Forges domain in Trets, château des Roches in Bièvres)... Soka Gakkai claims to teach...the doctrine of Nichiren (Assemblée nationale 1996, 57).

Belgian sociologist Karel Dobbelaere pointed out that Soka Gakkai did not “claim” to teach the doctrine of Nichiren but was a major Buddhist group teaching the doctrine most seriously; that the group should be thanked for its preservation of Hugo’s heritage; and he ironically noted that the Maison had been praised by major French governmental authorities, Alain Poher and Jack Lang in particular, so that the authors of the Report were totally ignorant of the facts. He also placed the Trets domain within the range of all the seminaries run by various religions that are always authorized (Dobbelaere 1996, 300).

Ten years later, on October 12, 2006, the French Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren published a report entitled *For a Fair Evaluation of the Religion of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in France* (translation of the French title: Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren 2006). It sets the record straight by first summarizing all the methods used in France to discredit the group, and lists the criticisms leveled against it by various public authorities since the 1980s. The third chapter answers all these accusations and in particular those contained in the 2005 French governmental anti-cult mission MIVILUDES report, published in 2006 (Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren 2006, 6). I only mention the passages dealing with the Maison. The Consistoire directly denounces the accusation according to which the real estate investments of the movement, and in particular the Maison littéraire in Bièvres, would merely be a “window display,” a front hiding some dark reality. The Consistoire details the collection of some 3,400 pieces for all to see and admire in the museum, in honor of the genius of Hugo, and his humanism, a value shared by Soka Gakkai (Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren 2006 14–5). The authors rightfully ask why the vast patrimony of the Catholic Church or of other Buddhist groups in France is not questioned.

Today, to the best of my knowledge, the Maison is no longer suspected of concealing some devious scheme. On the contrary, the château des Roches has been accepted as a valuable player that participates in the “commercial branding” of Bièvres (like literary museums in general: Régnier 2015, 14) and of the area. It is just a few kilometers away from another small but famous museum, that of Toile de Jouy developed by Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf (1738–1815) in the

eighteenth century in the adjacent city of Jouy-en-Josas. Moreover, since the Maison receives some 7,000 visitors in a regular year, the county was recently planning to include it in its touristic circuit, thus boosting its visibility and that of the region (Chevallier 2019). The park is listed as a must-see for garden lovers because of its numerous rich and exotic trees and magnificent landscaping along the river, with a lake and an island planted with cedars from the Atlas and from Lebanon. An article promoting the park first gives a short history of the museum (*Jardinez.com* 2021). The Maison itself can therefore be considered as a testimony to resilience, this time over the systematic inquisition of some members of Parliament obsessed with “cults.” The Maison has won over its critics, and is now fully at “home” in Bièvres (see the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of its richly illustrated catalog: Moine 2021).

### *Conclusion*

The creation of this literary museum in the château des Roches, a place intimately connected to the eventful life of Hugo, though this history had been forgotten in our times, was both the product of chance or the Providence (the château was fittingly for sale when Daisaku Ikeda was contemplating honoring Hugo in a didactic way), and the concretization in space and time of his spiritual quest for the breaking down of all barriers, that he sees as the one and only step to achieving the survival of mankind, what can be termed the resilient life force of man. Yet, one must go beyond this noble goal. The identity of the Maison littéraire can indeed be apprehended on two levels.

Outside of the religious movement, and obviously in France, it is a generous tribute to Victor Hugo’s visionary legacy and a tool for the redemption of humans from trauma, suffering and loneliness. It is a shrine to his talent, and consequently to the French cultural genius, fittingly encased in a lovely mansion and a superb park, the epitome of culture and class *à la française*.

When we move to the anagogical level of interpretation, the Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo has never been what for some other philanthropists could have been a mere fad, a “folie” as one says in French, to honor a man however great he might be.

It is forcefully connected to the life goal of its founder, a man with a rare command of universal artistic culture who will summon and quote an impressive roster of French and international writers, artist, or philosophers, with one clear purpose: to demonstrate the supreme power of art upon the human imagination and how art can lead to spirituality. However, Daisaku Ikeda does not contemplate any vague expression of spirituality. In the end, within his larger project, the Maison is one of the many cultural steppingstones on the path to the acceptance of the transcendent value of Nichiren Buddhist spirituality to realize *hic et nunc* the betterment of mankind.

## References

- Arai, Takahiro. 2015–17. *Les Misérables*. French transl. 8 vol. Paris: Kurokawa.
- Assemblée Nationale. 1996. *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission d'enquête sur les sectes*. Paris: Les documents de l'Assemblée nationale.
- Chevallier, Cécile. 2019. "Bièvres: le département veut aider la maison littéraire de Victor Hugo." *Le Parisien*, November 12. Accessed August 16, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3AS62bM>.
- Chushichi, Tsuzuki, and R. Jules Young, eds. 2009. *Japan Rising: The Iwakura Embassy to the USA and Europe 1871–1873*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren. 2006. *Pour une évaluation équitable du culte du bouddhisme de Nichiren Daishonin en France*. Sceaux: Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren.
- Cyrułnik, Boris. 2003. *Le Murmure des fantômes*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Diebolt, Wanda. 2001. "Cinq pièces classées 'Trésors nationaux' par le Ministère de la culture." *Journal de la Maison* 5:1.
- Dobbelaere, Karel. 1996. "La Soka Gakkai face au rapport." In *Pour en finir avec les sectes: le débat sur le rapport de la commission parlementaire*, edited by Massimo Introvigne and J. Gordon Melton, 289–303. Paris: Dervy.
- Dobbelaere, Karel. 2001. *La Soka Gakkai: un mouvement de laïcs de l'école bouddhiste de Nichiren devient une religion*. Turin: Elledici.
- Gaillard, Pol. 1984. *Les Misérables*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris: Bordas, Univers des Lettres [first edition, 1969].
- Hugo, Victor. 1862. *Les Misérables*. Brussels: A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Ce. [the Paris edition came out a few days later].

- Hugo, Victor. 1874. *Quatre-vingt-treize*. Paris: Michel Lévy frères.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 1991. “Discours du Fondateur.” In *Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo, Les Roches, Bièvre* [catalogue], 23–5. Bièvres: Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo. [English translation, “Founder’s Message,” <https://bit.ly/3D2qvMS>, accessed July 15, 2021].
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2010. *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Inagaki, Naoki. 2002. “Victor Hugo aujourd’hui au Japon.” *Revue des Deux Mondes* January:94–8.
- Inagaki, Naoki. 2004. “Victor Hugo et les modernisateurs contestataires japonais.” In *La modernité française dans l’Asie littéraire (Chine, Corée, Japon)*, edited by Haruhisa Kato, 185–202. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Inagaki, Naoki, and Patrick Rebollar. 2005. *Fortunes de Victor Hugo: Actes du colloque organisé à la maison franco-japonaise de Tokyo les 2 et 3 novembre 2002*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.
- Jardinez.com*. 2021. [last modified]. “Jardins de la Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo.” Accessed August 16, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3AUXCAw>.
- Levitt, Peggy. 2015. *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Lioger, Raphaël. 2002. “Un nouveau mouvement religieux face à la modernité politique: la Soka Gakkai.” *Rives méditerranéennes* 10:83–101. [Numbers refer to the paragraphs of the online version: <https://bit.ly/3AVAvFY>, accessed August 16, 2021].
- Luo, Peng. 2004. “La traduction et la réception de Victor Hugo en Chine (pendant les trois premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle).” In *La modernité française dans l’Asie littéraire (Chine, Corée, Japon)*, edited by Haruhisa Kato, 203–12. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Minami, Asuka. 2004.. “La littérature française vue par des écrivains du Japon moderne.” In *La modernité française dans l’Asie littéraire (Chine, Corée, Japon)*, edited by Haruhisa Kato, 147–61. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Moine, Philippe. 2001. “Exposition ‘Victor Hugo et le 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. Bingen.” Accessed August 16, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3szzccN>.
- Moine, Philippe. 2021. *Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo, Bièvres: L’acacia du château des Roches a 30 ans*. Bièvres: Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo.
- Régnier, Marie-Clémence. 2015. “Ce que le musée fait à la littérature. Muséalisation et exposition du littéraire.” *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interférenties* 16:7–20.



- Rigal-Cellard 2019. “The Visible Expansion of Scientology and its Actors.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 3(1):8–118. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2019.3.1.2.
- Robert des grands écrivains*. 2000. “Victor Hugo,” 596–616. Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert.
- Tokyo Fuji Art Museum. 2021. “Team Founder.” Accessed July 15, 2021. <https://www.fujibi.or.jp/en/about-our-museum/tfam-founder>.
- Yi, Kyu-Sik. 2004. “Une étude sur la réception des œuvres de Victor Hugo en Corée.” In *La modernité française dans l’Asie littéraire (Chine, Corée, Japon)*, edited by Haruhisa Kato, 213–32. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.