

**Among the Wild Geese:
The Canadian Wing of Soka Gakkai International**

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ABSTRACT: The “Wild Geese” of diverse Buddhist communities is a crucial part of Canada’s multicultural mosaic, but the study of Buddhism in the West is still in its nascent stages. Moreover, since the publication of *The Lotus and the Maple Leaf*, there has been a surprising lacuna of academic studies of Soka Gakkai in Canada. This study is an attempt to construct an up-to-date profile of SGI in Canada, established in this country since 1976. It is based on fieldwork that includes interviews with two SGI leaders and one long-term member. Besides presenting basic (statistical and historical) data, this study addresses the question: “Is there a quintessentially *Canadian* Soka Gakkai?”

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Canada, Buddhism in Canada, Religious Pluralism in Canada, Globalization of Soka Gakkai.

Introduction: Japanese Immigration in Canada

Soka Gakkai arrived in Canada in 1960, a time when the Canadian government was more hospitable towards Japanese immigrants than it had been in the past. As Mark Mullins explains in *Religious Minorities in Canada*, between 1870–1908 many Japanese immigrated to British Columbia to work in the lumber, fishing, railroad, and mining industries. But they found it impossible to assimilate into Canadian society, due to Anglo-American racial and cultural prejudice. For this reason, until 1942, 96 % of Japanese Canadians lived in the “Little Tokyo” district of Vancouver, where they maintained their language and culture (Mullins 1989). After the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the government banned immigration from China and forced Chinese settlers to move eastward, bringing their Buddhist faith with them. But it was the Japanese who built the first Buddhist

temple in Vancouver in 1905, as well as the first Buddhist temples in Alberta, in the late 1920s (Hori 2010).

In 1942, following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour, the Canadian government, under the *War Measures Act*, detained and dispossessed over 90 percent of Japanese Canadians (around 21,000 people) who were living in British Columbia. They were placed in internment camps until 1945, when the war ended. When they were released, they found their homes and businesses had been seized and sold by the government to pay for their detention. This history forms the backdrop to *Snow Falling on Cedars*, a 1994 mystery novel by David Guterson (Guterson 1994). In 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1939-2024) apologized on behalf of the Canadian government for the wrongs it committed against Japanese Canadians.

Two great social changes occurred in Canada in the 1960s, which helped provide a favorable ecology for Buddhism (Hori 2010; Harding 2010; Harding, Hori, and Souci 2010; Souci 2010). In 1967, Canada revised its immigration laws to be race-neutral, with points based on education, skills, and language. The second was the proliferation of new “oriental import” forms of spirituality during the “hippy” counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Victor Hori writes, “since then, Buddhism in many forms has grown exponentially among Westerners” (Hori, 2010, 4–5).

SGI in Canada: The Leadership

Since Soka Gakkai was known outside Japan as “Nichiren Shoshu,” at least in North America in the 1970s and 1980s, it is important to explain the relationship between the two movements. Soka Gakkai is a lay Nichiren Buddhist organization that was founded in Japan in 1930. It was associated with and supported the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood in the spirit of upholding and spreading the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282). Until 1991, Nichiren Shoshu priests conferred the *Gohonzon* on new members in Japan and around the world. The Soka Gakkai organizations outside Japan often used the name “Nichiren Shoshu” to denote their school of Buddhism.

The change of names for the constituent organizations came about in 1991, after the chief priest Nikken (1922–2019) of Nichiren Shoshu, as a consequence of a

conflict with the lay leaders, announced that all 12 million lay Soka Gakkai members around the world were hereby to be excommunicated. Soka Gakkai named this day “Spiritual Independence Day,” and its leaders report that after the separation it has grown and flourished more than ever (Email from Tony Meers, March 5, 2024).

After November 28, 1991, all the constituent organizations around the world renamed themselves as Soka Gakkai or Soka Gakkai International (SGI). In 2017, the Constitution of the Soka Gakkai was established, which defines the Soka Gakkai as a worldwide religious organization.

Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023), the President of Soka Gakkai, visited Canada in 1960. It was his very first trip abroad (Metraux 1996, 43). Ikeda’s aim was to purchase building materials at his flight’s stopover in Toronto for the new main temple at Taiseki-ji in Japan, and to continue on to the U.S. to establish the first American chapter there. Unexpectedly, he was greeted at the airport by Akiko (Elizabeth) Izumi (1936–2021), a pregnant housewife, whose mother was a Soka Gakkai member in Japan. This turned out to be a fateful meeting. Akiko Izumi describes her meeting with President Ikeda in her memoir, as follows:

It was about six months after I married my husband, Hugh Izumi [1928–2024]... and was living in Toronto that I received a letter from my mother saying: “President Ikeda will be visiting Toronto... As there are no... members in Canada, please go and meet him at the airport.” Though it was my mother’s request, I wasn’t eager to comply. I was pregnant and not feeling very well, and I also didn’t want to be pressed into practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Nevertheless, to please my mother, I went to the airport (on October 11, 1960). I saw a group of Japanese people who looked like they had just arrived. It was President Ikeda and his party. I went up to greet him saying: “My mother asked me to come and welcome you.” Smiling, President Ikeda said: “I see. Thank you so much for taking the trouble to come here. I’m Daisaku Ikeda. How kind of your mother to worry about us and ask you to come to the airport to welcome us!” During our conversation he didn’t press me to join the Soka Gakkai, but simply talked about the value to be found in practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism and suggested that if I was ever having trouble, I could try chanting daimoku... I was deeply moved by the thoughtfulness and sincerity he had shown me. I waved to him until his car was no longer in sight. This encounter with President Ikeda completely changed my previous, somewhat negative image of the Nichiren organization (Izumi 2010).

Akiko Elizabeth Izumi, SGI Chairperson, 1977–2000

Akiko Nakagawa (later Izumi) was born in Tokyo, Japan, one of nine children. She grew up training to be a ballet dancer, but after meeting Hugh Hiroo Izumi, a second-generation Japanese Canadian who was studying at a Japanese university,

her plans changed. They married on March 16, 1960, and moved permanently to Toronto, Canada. They had three children and six grandchildren.

In May 1962, Akiko, unaccustomed to life in a new country, felt ill. She decided to receive the *Gohonzon* and performed *gongyo*, following her mother's instructions in her letters. She began to attend the meetings in Buffalo, NY, traveling by Greyhound bus.

Izumi was the very first person to join Soka Gakkai in Canada, and she would become Canada's first Chairperson. She was one of the few women to be appointed to top SGI leadership in the world at the time. Over the years, she would build a solid core of SGI membership throughout Canada, and as SGI Canada's Executive Advisor, she traveled to Hawaii, Guam, Tokyo, USA, France, and the U.K., networking for the movement.

In June 1981, President Ikeda visited Toronto after an interval of 21 years. Akiko Izumi writes about her experience accompanying him and Mrs. Ikeda on a visit to Niagara Falls:

Most people who see the huge waterfalls, with their thunderous, earth-shaking roar and the mist of spray... cry out in awe. But President and Mrs. Ikeda simply stood there in silence, gazing at them intently. I'll never forget this scene and how, when President Ikeda asked her, "Are you glad we came?" Mrs. Ikeda nodded her approval... and warmly replied, "Yes." The mighty Niagara Falls flows unceasingly with a powerful intensity and a vibrant rainbow often appears above them. I couldn't help but feel that for President Ikeda, the waterfalls mirrored his own unceasing efforts to take on all manner of hardships and obstacles and create a rainbow of hope in the hearts of members around the world. In 1987, recalling his visit to Canada, he composed a long poem entitled "A Rainbow over Niagara." It was a great source of courage and inspiration for members throughout Canada (Izumi 2010).

The story of Akiko's relationship with her non-believer husband appears to be a cautionary tale among Canada's SGI community that warns practitioners not to pressure or try to convert their relatives, but to strive to be a shining example in the hope to inspire them ("Hiroo Hugh Izumi Obituary" 2024).

Hugh Hiroo Izumi

Hugh worked for the Japanese Trading Company Marubeni that had opened an office in Toronto. His wife was responsible for the *Kōsen-rufu* movement in the Toronto area, so many visitors came to their home for meetings. Hugh did not attend the meetings, but he would chat amiably with the members afterwards, and he

frequently drove his wife to these meetings, waiting patiently in the car to drive her home (Metraux 1996, 51).

Four years after her first meeting with President Ikeda, Akiko Izumi traveled to Tokyo and met with him again, and Ikeda gave her advice about her husband, who had shown no interest in joining her Buddhist practice. Ikeda advised her not to pressure him: “Start by being an excellent wife and mother. It is your example that will enable your husband to understand and appreciate the Daishonin’s Buddhism” (“Akiko Izumi Obituary” 2021).

Hugh did eventually joined SGI, in April 1980, eighteen years after his wife’s conversion, following the deaths of his two sisters and mother. Writing his memoirs for a SGI newsletter, on the anniversary of the 7 December 1951 attack on Pearl Harbour, Hugh Izumi stated:

I feel as though I have two homelands. Japanese Canadians were forced into internment camps during the war, and when it ended found their homes and belongings had been confiscated and their only choice was to move to eastern Canada or return to Japan (Metraux 1996, 52).

Hugh’s family chose the second option but found chaos and poverty when they arrived in Japan. Hugh wrote:

When war is declared, enemy nations are compelled to hate and destroy each other. Having personally experienced this suffering, my desire for lasting peace may be much deeper (Metraux 1996, 52).

The Izumi family’s war experience mirrors Canada’s shameful history regarding the Japanese in Canada.

Tony Meers, General Director, 2000–2022

I interviewed Tony Meers via Zoom on February 7, 2024. His first contact with SGI was in 1972 at the age of 18, when two Japanese women missionaries approached him on the Yonge Street in Toronto and invited him to a meeting. He was on his way to the hospital to visit a sick friend, but he took down the address and went later. He described his conversion experience as follows:

After attending a few times, I tried practicing at home and found it was like meditating with your eyes open. I got this feeling of meditating, but with an added sense of being connected to the world. I decided to practice, no one pressured me. When I began to work as a volunteer, I was inexperienced and working with people older than me, but what struck me was an equality, a respect for people of all ages, backgrounds, some educated,

others not much, it didn't matter. I had come across elite attitudes, intellectualism in some of the readings on Buddhism, but in SGI everyone was down-to-earth and yet profound. The values were human values, to be able to transform one's own inner state to activate an inner reservoir of positive energy, the life force of the universe itself. This philosophy in practice elevates one's spiritual state and at the same time expands one's ability to care for others. There was a sustainability in our efforts of giving and receiving (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

Tony was a volunteer for SGI for decades, working closely with Akiko Izumi. In 1985, he served as National Youth Leader. In 1998, he retired from his profession as a commercial artist and became a full-time staff member, paid as an administrator. He worked with Akiko as Vice Chairperson. She stepped down as Chairperson in 2000 and Tony Meers became the General Director of SGI for the next 22 years. She worked with him as the Executive Advisory until she passed away at the age of 85 in 2021 (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

Glenn Turner, General Director, 2022 to 2024

In my interview with Glenn Turner, he described a classic conversion experience where he initially joined because of the social life, and then later discovered the religious dimensions of his involvement (Cox 1977). He gives a succinct account of his conversion in the SGI Canada newsletter:

As a young man, I had no clue where I was going. I had dropped out of university twice... In 1983, I was working for a moving company in Ottawa. A colleague at work had been trying to introduce me to Buddhism for a year, but I was not interested. Finally, he invited me to a party one weekend. What he didn't tell me was that we had to go to a Buddhist meeting first, in order to get to the party. It was a surprise to me, but I liked the sound of the chanting, and the people were all very nice... I began to attend district meetings regularly in the following weeks. I was learning about SGI and Buddhist philosophy—and I liked what I heard—but I still wasn't practicing on my own. After a few weeks, a district leader said to me, "Glenn, you can come to as many meetings as you like, but if you don't try practicing for yourself, you'll never really understand." That made a lot of sense, and so I started to chant and do *gongyo* at home, on my own. The difference was remarkable. Almost at once I realized that I had the power to change my life, and that it was possible for me to become absolutely happy—something I had never even thought was important before (Turner 2020).

Cathy Watt, Long-term SGI Practitioner

Cathy Watt happens to be an old friend of mine. We have sung in the same Balkan Choir, Dragana Montreal, for twenty years. I knew she was a Buddhist because she occasionally invited me to meetings at her house, but I didn't realize until recently that she was an SGI member. Cathy described how she joined SGI in 1974, through a classic encounter with street missionaries like the Hare Krishna or the Children of God, a practice that was common in North America during the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. The Japanese word for this practice is *Shakubuku* ("Break and subdue"), and in contemporary usage the term often refers to the old system of proselytization and conversion of new adherents in Nichiren Buddhism and Soka Gakkai.

In 1974 on a beautiful day in May, two women, Akiko Masida and Muriel Gordon crossed McKay Street to ask me if I'd like to discover my Buddha nature. They invited me to my first Buddhist meeting. I loved the sound of the chanting, which was like singing in rhythm with the universe.

Cathy explained how she lived *la vie d'artiste* at the time, and had been singing in the Broadway musical, *Hair* and touring with the rock group April Wine, singing backup vocals and playing piano. During her roller coaster lifestyle as a rock musician, Cathy found, "the profound concepts in Buddhism gave my life a stronger foundation, helping me stay grounded in reality" ("Cathy Watt: A Life of Treasures" 2016).

SGI Membership in Canada

By the late 1960s, there were only a few NSA members scattered across Canada. They tended to be linked vertically with the chapters in U.S. cities south of the Canadian border. Not until 1976 were there enough members to create an independent Canadian branch of SGI, which was officially established in June 1976 (Shiu 2010, 91). The next challenge was to unite the western and eastern chapters. Izumi noted that there was very little communication between the fledgling chapters of the far-flung regions in eastern and western Canada in the 1970s. Today Canada has nine SGI centers: Toronto, Markham, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec City, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary.

Metraux points out that, although Buddhist movements began in North America as Asian-dominated groups, they quickly attracted non-Asian members and by the time of his writing, SGI was already dominated by non-Asians (Metraux 1996, 3).

Glenn Turner confirmed in our interview that in the early years, SGI's membership was composed mainly of Japanese women, most of them married to Canadian servicemen who were in occupied Japan after the war (Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). It was also Japanese women who were the early leaders in SGI Canada. Besides Akiko Izumi in Toronto, Hiroko Wanner in Calgary was working since 1964 with other Japanese women to build a movement.

Metraux noted in 1996 that SGI Canada had “around 50% of white Canadians,” but that “immigrants play a major role,” and that Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver had a “huge immigrant population.” As far as the Quebec Separatism/Sovereignty issue is concerned, Glenn Turner said SGI recognizes and supports Quebec's distinct culture (Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). Out of 15 SGI Canada districts in Quebec in the late 1990s there were 9 that were French-speaking (Metraux 1996, 1997).

President Ikeda's visit in 1981 undoubtedly brought together Canada's scattered divisions, when 600 members attended the national meeting in Toronto. Further unifying events were the completion of the 1985 SGI Canada Culture Centre in Toronto, and the 1990 30th anniversary General Meeting. In 1993, President Ikeda made his third visit to Canada. Glenn Turner reports there are around 10,000 members in Canada today (2024: Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). There are around 300,000 in the U.S.

Typologies of Buddhism in the West

If one attempts to fit Canada's SGI membership into Jan Nattier's “Asian/Ethnic or Western Convert” typology (Nattier 1998), it does not fit neatly because SGI originated in Japan but is widely recognized to be the only Buddhist organization in the West to attract members from a range of economic and racial groups. Victor Hori examines a typology of three types of Buddhists in North America:

1. Elite Buddhists with an artistic, intellectual, or upper-class background that allows them to “import” Buddhism to the West through writing projects or within their elite social circles.

2. Evangelical Buddhists who “export” Buddhism through proselytization projects.

3. Ethnic Buddhists who immigrate to the West, bringing in Buddhism as part of their cultural baggage (Hori 2010, 17).

SGI Canada’s Buddhists most closely fit the second type of “Evangelical Buddhists”—except that their missionary methods no longer conform to earlier methods. From *shakubuku* proselytization they went to invite friends and colleagues to attend *Kōsen-rufu* meetings in members’ homes. Metraux comments, “the Canadian chapter’s modest growth reflects a ‘very Canadian attitude.’” He quotes a statement by Tony Meers (SGI’s second General Director) to prove his point:

We move slowly in a deliberate manner, making sure that each new member is committed to Buddhism and the movement and is satisfied with its practice. It is better to have a firm base than a myriad of dissatisfied and disaffected followers (Metraux 1996, 9).

In the 1960s and 1970s, SGI Canada appeared to fit the “Ethnic Buddhists” type, except that its Japanese women missionaries were determined to convert non-Asian Canadians, and succeeded very well until the Japanese Canadians were outnumbered.

Certainly, SGI Canada does not fit the “Elite Buddhists” category, given its democratic quality and openness to first generation immigrants. Tony Meers observed this quality when he first attended SGI meetings:

What struck me was an equality, a respect for people of all ages, backgrounds, some educated, others not much, it didn’t matter. I had come across elite attitudes, intellectual snobbism in some of the readings on Buddhism, but in SGI everyone was down-to-earth and yet profound (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

The Canadian Versus the American SGI Movement

One of our first tasks in studying Canada’s SGI movement is to try to extricate it from the much larger, more dynamic, American SGI movement with which it was initially intertwined. There are some important differences, cultural and historical.

First, the SGI movement in Canada is significantly smaller than in the U.S. In 1996 there were “under 5,000 members” in Canada (Metraux 1996, 79). Jane Hurst wrote, “as of 2016 Soka Gakkai International claims... over 300,000 members in the U.S” (Hurst 2018).

One other difference is that SGI-Canada is more neutral, politically speaking. It has always had a less patriotic orientation than SGI-USA. Metraux quotes a Canadian who attended the SGI Bicentennial celebration in New York City in 1976 during the Gerald Ford (1913–2006) administration:

What the American Soka Gakkai is doing was fine for Americans, but Canadians are culturally different. For example, during the Bicentennial, we found ourselves in an auditorium where the speakers were lauding the American Revolution against the British. It was only then that we from Canada realized we were the redcoats! (Metraux 2010, 53).

Another Canadian member witnessed SGI members at a New York meeting saluting the American flag. “I can’t imagine us paying attention to the Canadian flag at our meetings!” she observed. In 1989, Nichiren Shoshu of America was criticized by a journalist as “cloaking itself in super-patriotism” (Golden 1989).

SGI Canada seems more “laid back” than its U.S. counterpart. Metraux quotes an unnamed SGI leader saying, “Canadians are very reasonable people who discuss their differences in a calm, collected manner. Canada is a very civil society and so is SGI Canada” (Metraux 1996, 53).

Metraux argues that SGI caught on in Canada because of its concept of community; that it presents a haven of peace in the midst of a rootless population of immigrants, and fast-paced Canadians constantly on the move in their jobs and locations. Of course, the same argument could be applied to “rootless populations” and “fast-paced” lifestyles in other countries where SGI has flourished. It might also explain the appeal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or China’s House Churches whose members also meet at each other’s homes.

How to Categorize SGI as a New Religious Movement?

In *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, Roy Wallis (1945–1990) offers a tripartite typology of new religious movements (NRMs): the “world-rejecting,” “world-affirming,” and “world-accommodating” types (Wallis 1984). *World-rejecting NRMs* are hostile toward society and tend to view the secular world

as inherently evil or corrupt. They tend to be sectarian in their social organization and are often communal. They view their charismatic leader as a messiah or a divine figure, and they tend to have millenarian beliefs and evangelistic goals. *World-affirming NRMs* embrace secular society and its materialistic goals. Their aim is to help individuals achieve success within mainstream society by tapping into their hidden spiritual powers. They offer training in magical techniques that help individuals to achieve their goals. Their leaders are perceived as wise teachers or shamans. *World-accommodating NRMs* offer their members spiritual paths to enlightenment. They exhibit a neutral orientation towards society and generally make few demands on their members. They offer instruction and spaces for meditation and spiritual growth. Their leaders are examples of ordinary men or women; “gurus” or “masters” who have achieved spiritual advancement, even enlightenment, through following a *sadhana* or spiritual path and can show others the way.

Within the framework of Wallis’ typology, I would argue that SGI fits the “world-accommodating” type of NRM, with some of the characteristics of the “world-affirming” type. Some SGI members report using chanting as a magical technique that can cure illness or help get their son into medical school. (For example, I once met a taxi driver who told me that whenever he had trouble finding a parking space, he would chant the *Daimoku, Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*—and it always worked).

As mentioned earlier, Soka Gakkai (which means “Value Creation Society”) originated as a lay movement closely affiliated with the Buddhist school of Nichiren Shoshu in Japan. Later it developed an international SGI, which defines itself as an NGO concerned with world peace, humanitarian relief, education, human rights, cultural exchanges, and ecumenical dialogue.

Although Nichiren Shoshu was criticized by journalists in the past for its aggressive proselytization and close political affiliations, SGI today maintains a neutral stance towards society and politics. As Glenn Turner noted, “We are a charity, a non-profit organization” (Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). While SGI has worked with the United Nations on peace projects and exhibitions on the nuclear threat, it does not support political parties or specific political agendas. When asked how SGI leadership functioned, Tony Meers explained the purpose of leadership, from beginning to end, is to help each person

achieve the life state of absolute happiness, called Buddhahood (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

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