

The Functions of the Promotion of Art in the Globalization of Soka Gakkai

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ABSTRACT: Among Soka Gakkai's educational activities is the foundation of museums, which received great impulse from President Daisaku Ikeda. The article explores museums connected with Soka Gakkai in Japan (including Tokyo Fuji Art Museum), France (Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo), and Taiwan (TSA Mobile Art Museum, Kaohsiung Soka Art Museum). It challenges the opinion by critics that museums are tools for Soka Gakkai's proselytization. They are not, although they certainly enhance Soka Gakkai's prestige and authority. Soka Gakkai museums should also be seen as part of the movement's campaigns to foster international dialogue and better relations between countries that experienced reciprocal tensions in the past.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai Museums, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo, TSA Mobile Art Museum, Kaohsiung Soka Art Museum.

Introduction

Soka Gakkai is well-known for its deep commitment to educational pursuits that has materialized in the founding of a private comprehensive educational system from preschool to universities, of some 1,200 cultural centers across Japan, of a museum of musical instruments and concert hall, Min-on, and of visual art and literary museums which are the particular focus of this study: the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, the French Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo, and in Taiwan the Mobile Art Museum and the Soka Art Museum in Kaohsiung.

To understand the originality of President Daisaku Ikeda's (1928–2023) museal endeavors, one must look at the history and the social and political functions of museums in general. We will then see how he followed the educational project initiated by Soka Gakkai founder Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944). Both men were inspired by the progressive theories of pedagogues like John Dewey (1859–1952) and believed that cultural expressions allowed individuals to develop their potential in a way that could improve the well-being of societies. Yet, both men's vision transcended the mere social and cultural level of education

and of the appreciation of art thanks to museal institutions to aim at the implementation of the spiritual fullness of *Kōsen-rufu*, that is to say the overall revolutionary transformation of the whole world, and not just Japan, through the practice of Nichiren Buddhism.

However, Soka museums do not just offer a form of initiation to elevate the moral consciousness of visitors because they play many other functions, in particular, a subtle and powerful diplomatic one: promoting art bolsters the reputation of the institution and through the forging of international alliances, helps promote peace in endangered regions.

1. Soka Gakkai Museums

– Tokyo Fuji Art Museum (Tōkyō Fuji Bijutsukan): the celebration of East and West complementarity

Envisioning it right after he became President of the Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda founded the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum in 1983 near the Soka University campus in the district of Hachioji. It was extended in 2008. As it is not built abroad, it is not at first sight an actor of the international expansion of the religion, yet it is part and parcel of the globalization of culture Ikeda privileged, since it seeks to offer to the viewers exemplars of the creative genius of humankind. Following its definition as “A museum creating bridges around the world,” it is the first and major shrine Ikeda founded to combine the cultural wealth of the East and that of the West. The collection holds about 30,000 works of Japanese and more generally Asian art that includes paintings, prints, photography (20,000), ceramics, lacquer artefacts, swords, medallions, and of Western art from the Renaissance to our time, in particular French paintings, which are visible in the Permanent Exhibition Gallery.

The “bridges” are the numerous partnerships with international museums: the Fuji Museum prides itself in having held 49 international exchange exhibitions with works coming from 25 countries and territories, and in having organized in return 33 exhibitions of its possessions in 20 countries (Gokita 2022).

The union between East and West was given priority right in the beginning, since to consecrate its 1983 opening in a grand manner, the museum held a major exhibit of French masterpieces with loans from the Louvre and the Versailles Museum of the History of France. The operation was made possible thanks to the famous French historian of art, René Huyghe (1906–1997), a member of the French Academy and then curator of the Louvre’s Department of Paintings, who had befriended President Ikeda on a visit to Japan, when, with other conservation specialists, he had accompanied the Mona Lisa (or La Joconde) which had been exceptionally loaned to the National Museum of Tokyo from April to June 1974.

As a mark of their reciprocal admiration, René Huyghe facilitated the visit of President Ikeda in Paris later, in 1981, and introduced him to various influential people in the field of politics and of the arts. Daisaku Ikeda was granted the title of “Officier du mérite des Arts et des Lettres” (Officer in the Order of Merit for Arts and Literature) in July 1992 by Jack Lang, the then French Minister of Culture. The founding of the Victor Hugo literary museum in Bièvres in 1991 on the outskirts of Paris is the continuation of those rich encounters between President Ikeda and the French artistic and political elites.

– The Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo

The property of the Soka Cultural Association of France (L’Association Culturelle Soka de France, ACSF), the Maison is rather unique in its conception: not so much because it is a shrine dedicated to the talent of Victor Hugo (1802-1885) since there are five more museums devoted to him, but because it is the fruit of the fascination for him of one Japanese religious leader, Daisaku Ikeda. The latter explained that he discovered the work of the novelist and poet when he was very young, and that the humanism expressed in his books informed his own life vision. He saw Hugo as an eternal companion, a model for humankind:

I wish this Maison will strengthen the bonds between France and Japan, and I will be most happy if it allows the immortal soul of the great poet to lead men to universality (Ikeda 1991, 25).

The collection holds numerous manuscripts and first editions of Hugo’s books in glass cabinets, as well as rare editions of other writers’ works, pamphlets, political cartoons, and so on. Several extremely valuable items are listed as “National treasures 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 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 Maison is, however, far more than a mere conservatory of manuscripts. It obeys the demand of President Ikeda to promote the life-long education of all people and all age groups, which is the goal of all the museums founded by him. It was envisioned as paving the way towards world peace thanks to the union of free and enlightened citizens (for an in-depth analysis of the reception of Victor Hugo in Japan and of the contents and functions of the Maison, see Rigal-Cellard 2021).

– The museums in Taiwan

The Mobile Art Museum was founded in 2012 by the Taiwan Soka Association (TSA) to bring art to schools because it was easier to move art works than busing thousands of pupils to fixed exhibitions. The mobile collection promotes Taiwanese art to make it better known and to make islanders proud of their cultural roots. After being exhibited in the cultural centers of the Soka association, the pieces travel even to isolated audiences living in remote mountains and outlying islands. The Mobile Museum also reaches out to various specific institutions, such as the Taipei School for the Hearing Impaired. In 2020, it created a radio program, Treasure Island Art Museum, to educate about the power of art even without any possible mobility of the works, such as during the COVID pandemic, and it has continued to be aired with success since then (Taiwan Soka Association 2021).

The Kaohsiung Soka Art Museum is the important player TSA added to its commitment to promote art by commissioning a building designed by Da-Ju architects and completed in July 2022. Like the Mobile Museum, its focus is “searching for the roots of culture and constructing a century-old history of Taiwanese art” (*Daily News* 2022; Soka Gakkai 2022). The presence of the Director of the National Palace Museum Wu Mi-Cha at the inauguration testifies to the bonds uniting the TSA and this world-famous institution. For example, Soka holds lectures to present exhibitions of the National Palace Museum, in particular one in July 2019 to promote one exhibit of ancient ceramics (Taiwan Soka Association 2019).

2. East Meets West: The Place of Soka Gakkai Museums Within the History of International Museums

Museums are a European invention that came to be exported to the whole world. In Antiquity, the *mouseion* was an institution devoted to literature and learning, with a library and an observatory, which included rituals for the worship of the Muses. Later, aristocratic families would collect and store treasures for the beautification of their palaces and private admiration. The museums as we know them today derive from the transformations that followed the French Revolution (1789). Art came to be seen

as a public heritage by right rather than an aristocratic privilege: many Church collections were secularized, and treasures of dispossessed royal houses and aristocratic families were transferred to public ownership (Osborne 1985, 42).

Gradually museums were entrusted with a nation-building role:

The French revolutionary model of the Louvre... aimed to associate the museum with the nation and the constitution of a unified collective, if not of a universal, memory (Brown and Mairesse 2018, 528).

Public museums came to be seen as tools to complete schooling in a more experiential contemplative and pleasurable mode, as understood in the definition given by the International Council of Museums (ICM) in 2007:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, research, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment (in Brown and Mairesse 2018, 526).

In the program Ikeda entrusted to the institutions he envisioned, the preoccupation of museums in the ICM definition for education, study, and enjoyment, is compounded with the quest for the collective good. It is important to recall that Soka Gakkai was founded (in 1930) by an educator, Makiguchi, who followed the teachings of Dewey, the American philosopher who built a new theory of education based on pragmatism. Dewey stressed the need for the individual to engage in interaction, to learn from doing, a method that would train citizens to implement true democratic ideals in their societies, ideals he developed in his 1916 volume *Democracy and Education*.

Underlying all of Dewey's work, and that of most progressive educators both in the formal sector and in museums, was a deep moral sense and two intense beliefs: faith in democracy

and in the efficacy of education to produce a more democratic society (Westbrook 1991: xv).

Makiguchi likewise believed that the most efficient form of education for the progress of humankind was the one promoting creative thought and personal experience (see Ming 2017). Daisaku Ikeda voiced the same vision:

Nothing is more crucially important today than the kind of humanistic education that enables people to sense the reality of interconnectedness, to appreciate the infinite potential in each person's life, and to cultivate that dormant human potential to the fullest (Ikeda Quotations 2024).

Reiterating the journey of the Iwakura embassy of 1871 dispatched by Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) to explore Western countries, learn from them (and negotiate treaties and trading agreements) (Tsuzuki 2009), in 1960 Daisaku Ikeda undertook a trip to the USA, and in 1961 to Europe. Both times he visited many museums, “honing his vision of the institution he would go on to found” (Gokita 2022). He understood how through the active contemplation of the beauty they displayed, museums could complement, or better still, elevate to the fullest, the efforts of teachers for, as he declared in his mission statement at the opening of Fuji Museum:

Great works of art possess a timeless quality with a capacity for creativity and beauty that draws people together and inspires them to greatness (Tokyo Fuji Art Museum 2023).

His preference for collecting treasures of European art, along with Asian antiques, testifies to the conviction he often voiced that not only had art reached one climax in Europe but that only in the awareness and appreciation of universal culture could mankind reach peace and harmony. Furthermore, Ikeda knew that as a museum developer, he had to abide by the advice of Dewey who drew attention to several matters in order to implement an authentic progressive museum education:

Recognition that the goal of education is further education... applying progressive education theory universally. Museum educators need to do more than challenge their visitors; they need to constantly challenge themselves, examine their practice, and reflect on the extent to which it matches—both in process and in content—the theory they espouse... Dewey not only recognized the confusion and complexity of life, he embraced it. His philosophy of pragmatism did not attempt to describe an ideal world, distinct from the awkward and constantly changing realities of actual existence (Hein 2006, 349–50).

Once we see the impressive outreach strategy of the Soka museums towards all sorts of audiences—school children, adults, retirees, and in particular the actions

of the Mobile Museum in Taiwan for isolated villagers and islanders—, we realize that such innovations all respond to Dewey's recommendations.

Museums also play a variety of interesting functions in the public space that Soka museums fully share. Like cathedrals or temples, museums, in general, offer public proof of the wealth and power of the institution founding and managing them. This is particularly obvious with the Louvre Museum that has perpetuated its original function: it was the French royal palace in the center of Paris and now as the most visited museum in the world, it serves as a fabulous ambassador for France itself. In countries that only recently entered the fray of international museum competition, rich people or states will tend to commission famous architects to erect state-of-the-art and eye-catching buildings that often remain empty shells housing meagre collections. On the contrary, Soka museums, whether in France, Tokyo or Kaohsiung, do not display extravagant architecture but one that is sober and harmonious, and they do harbor rich collections. Another result of art possession will be to comfort members as to the good use of their own financial investment in the company, whether a secular or a religious one, and to instill pride in it. Obviously, Soka Gakkai devotees can only be elated when they visit their museums and see so many non-members laud them as well. But there is more to these Soka cultural institutions.

The Spiritual Function of Soka Gakkai Museums

At this point in our study, we must move beyond the mere acknowledgement of the complementarity of East and West we constantly find spelled in Ikeda's words for it seems clear that in his grand project, he in fact imagined the success of the East over that of the West. As a Japanese, he accepted the fact that the West had triumphed from the 19th century until the second half of the 20th century, but in his eyes the West was now running out of breath. This is an often-heard judgement that is in fact a product of post-colonialism. Regions previously colonized or "visited" and "intruded upon" by the Westerners are wont to disparage the West as being "passé," decadent, and immoral, whereas they claim that their own nations are strong and pure and will dominate politically, economically, *and* spiritually the previously domineering Christian powers.

A good example of such an approach is expressed in *A New Humanism*. First, the author, Ikeda, quotes a Western poet and an Eastern one who celebrated the very goal he himself pursued in founding the Victor Hugo museum, that “East and West must marry on the altar of humanity” (Ikeda 2010, 11). However, in the very same book he also states that the powerful spirituality expressed in Christian cathedrals has died out, for with modernization the forces of integration Christianity achieved have waned, and now “people are isolated and alone.” He pursues that it is the East, with Buddhism, which brings the solution: “a connection, it denotes a causal relationship or a function that joins life and its environment...” as is explained in the Lotus Sutra (Ikeda 2010, 6–7). He then lists the subtleties of art connected to Buddhism: “Connected with Totality,” “Sutra of this World,” “Metaphor of Dance.” In the latter section he writes:

The unfolding of creative life according to the Lotus Sutra, then, encompasses all the dimensions of human life... the religious, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. They come together to form a whole, cosmic current... (Ikeda 2010, 9).

We are thus vividly reminded of what McLaughlin termed the “twin legacies” of Soka Gakkai:

first, a tradition of self-cultivation derived from lay practice under the minority temple Buddhist sect Nichiren Shōshū, and, second, intellectual currents that flourished in late nineteenth to early twentieth century Japan that valorized standardized education and philosophical ideals aimed at the elevation of the individual, all inspired by Euro American traditions generally associated with “culture” (McLaughlin 2019, 3).

These lines imply that we must never forget the prime spirituality at the root of the concept, the “first legacy,” that of the “tradition of self-cultivation” characteristic of Nichiren Buddhist practice. The very mission statement imposed by President Ikeda to the Fuji Museum does call us back to a Buddhist understanding of the definition of human:

It is only through fusing and merging ourselves with the eternal—that which lies beyond our finitude as individuals—that we can manifest the full scale of our potential. And yet that potential is not foreign to us, but is of us, within us, and always has been (Tokyo Fuji Art Museum 2023).

This paramount spiritual preoccupation was evident in a 2015 exhibition in Taiwan when Taiwan Soka Association partnered with the Institute of Oriental Philosophy to organize an exhibition in its Fongshan Cultural Center in Kaohsiung City on “The Lotus Sutra: A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence.” Calligrapher and professor Hung Ken-Shen presented the twenty-eight chapters

of the Lotus Sutra, and Wu Lien-Shang, President of National Kaohsiung Normal University,

referred to the crisis of “The Clash of Civilizations” facing the contemporary world, and emphasized that the causes of such a crisis are rooted in the human heart. He said, “In order to harmonize people’s hearts to prevent such clashes, and to fuse the eastern and western worlds, the spirit of the Lotus Sutra is vital” (Institute of Oriental Philosophy 2015).

The exact same conviction was voiced by President Ikeda himself when he rejoiced at the realization of the spiritual fullness of *Kōsen-rufu*, the propagation of the practice of Nichiren Buddhism, which actuates the overall revolutionary transformation of the whole world, and not just Japan:

Today the expansion of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism to 128 countries and territories worldwide [192 countries and territories in 2024] attests to the realization of these golden words of the Daishonin: “The moon appears in the west and sheds its light eastward, but the sun rises in the east and casts its rays to the west. The same is true of Buddhism. It spread from west to east in the Former and Middle Days of the Law but will travel from east to west in the Latter Day” (“On the Buddha’s Prophecy,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*: Ikeda 2022, which quotes Nichiren 1999, 401).

Conclusion: Soka Gakkai Museums, Humanism, and the Art of Diplomacy

How can we delineate the real vested interests of Soka Gakkai’s promotion of art? Clearly, they are multifaceted: educational, social, cultural, and ultimately spiritual and political.

Soka Gakkai has opted for the promotion of education and art through the foundation of cultural centers and museums, which have been our specific focus. Since I ended my study on the satisfaction of President Ikeda seeing the success of *Kōsen-rufu* that can be experienced through a certain understanding of art, we need to address the question of the actual functions of those museums. Must their educative purpose be understood as exclusively geared towards the eventual adoption of Nichiren Buddhism? Or, on the contrary, as aiming at the benefit of humankind without religious strings attached?

In fact, Soka Gakkai operates like those religions that interact in a more or less intense manner with their surroundings. When they are not on a separatist path, religions will often attempt to present themselves as beneficial to society in a variety of ways. The issue touches on the intrinsically dual nature of most human actions,

whether secular or religious: is philanthropy a mark of genuine altruism and of disinterested humanism or is it on the contrary a subterfuge for self-promotion, or *pro bono* promotion, to entice the recipients of one's generosity to convert to one's political view or religion?

In this regard, are Soka Gakkai museums tools of proselytism as some critics have said? It is well known that when on May 3, 1951, Josei Toda (1900–1958) took over as the second president of Soka Gakkai, he announced the group would enforce a specific form of proselytism, the “great march of *shakubuku*.” If this could be an asset at some point to expand the following, it soon led to adverse reaction from the part of the public. The movement then opted for the other method, *shoju*, which means “to embrace and accept,” a softer method that does not force conviction but leads to acceptance through negotiation. The museums presented in this study could consequently be interpreted as tools for *shoju* on the global stage. Yet, the more I have studied them, the less I have seen them as subterranean tools of proselytism. In no way do they function as religious museums set up to promote specific faiths: such institutions will typically narrate the history of the community, of its founder(s), explain its tenets, and exhibit the achievements of the movement to impel the visitor towards admiration and potential attraction. In a class by themselves, the art and literary Soka Gakkai museums display no trace of proselytist maneuver.

The reason is that *pro bono* generosity mostly operates through immediate relief such as humanitarian aid and rescue, hospital care, financial support—that may potentially transform the beneficiaries into neophytes as a mark of gratefulness. In this equation, the return for visiting an art exhibit is far off the mark. The Soka museum that I know best, the Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo near Paris, never mentions the institution behind the project. As for the Fuji Art Museum, though it is adjacent to Soka University, it does not proclaim the superiority of Nichiren Buddhism on its cards or posters either.

It does seem then that the function that Soka Gakkai's museums play best (but constantly in partnership with the other functions) may be a political one: the gathering and the exhibiting of art collections in an international setting require far more than just scholarship, they demand considerable diplomatic skills. As we saw, the opening exhibit of the Fuji Museum could only be organized because of the political connections President Ikeda had been able to knot, and which led him to be held by French authorities as a most respectable patron of the arts. It was this

diplomatic tour de force that permitted the loan of works from one of the most important museums in the world, the Louvre, to a then totally unknown budding private Japanese museum.

The other result of the official recognition of Daisaku Ikeda himself was to allow his religion to be considered in the same light, at least for that period in time. The Fuji Museum was connected to a foreign religious group that the few people in France who knew of it probably suspected of being a “dangerous cult,” and in France, the slightest connection to a “cult” is a sufficient condition to forbid any public partnership with its members. Later, with the aging of President Ikeda’s friends in France, his own reputation was not sufficient to protect the Victor Hugo Maison littéraire from anti-cult attacks. In 1996, the Maison was denounced as the child of the “financially powerful Soka Gakkai” and it took the Soka Cultural Association of France years of legal action to obtain in 2007 the legal status of “worship association” that officially legitimated it as a *bona fide* religion in France (see Ben Hammouda 2019).

In Taiwan, Soka museums play another major diplomatic role. The fact that they essentially showcase Taiwanese art first surprised me and led me to wonder whether this was not a strategy in the pursuit of two interconnected goals. First, I see the choice of privileging Taiwanese art as a gesture of reparation for the long decades (1895–1945) of Japanese colonization of the island. The museums promote the value of local culture with no attempt to impose the contemplation of international art that could be felt as an imposition of a superior or colonial model.

Secondly, this social and cultural action of the Soka Taiwanese museums seems to me to be part of a grander function of international political range: the deep concern of Soka Gakkai members to strengthen the friendship between Japan and Taiwan by being facilitators of the political alliance the two countries have been forging these past years to maintain a united front in the face of cross-straits threats coming from China, and to maintain peace in the region. The cultural policy of the promotion of Taiwanese art demonstrates how Soka Gakkai truly acts as the micro “mimetic nation” of Japan itself, to use McLaughlin’s terminology (McLaughlin 2019, 1–34).

The Soka museums presented here must first be viewed as expressions of genuine altruism and philanthropy with a global scope whose final goal is to help their visitors grasp the ultimate value of art as an expression of transcendent spirituality. If for President Ikeda this spirituality is best expressed by

Nichiren Buddhism, in no way did he impose such an understanding on the visitors to the cultural institutions he created. The second major function of the art promoted by Soka Gakkai is to act as an efficient agent of international diplomacy: both to enhance its own standing in the world as a most valuable religion, and to help promote peace in critically endangered regions.

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