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# Glocalizing the *Gohonzon*: The Historical Experience of SGI Australia 1945–2016

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**ABSTRACT:** Soka Gakkai arrived in Australia post-World War II with Japanese war brides, during a period when Australian societal attitudes toward the Japanese were often still colored by wartime propaganda and racial prejudice. Despite these challenging beginnings, from the time when the first Soka Gakkai member Tsutomu Teitei arrived in 1962 the group quickly obtained followers during the 1960s and 1970s, before other Asian new religions began arriving in the late 1960s. Soka Gakkai attracted a variety of adherents drawn from different demographic niches and unlike later new religions has encountered little social opposition or controversy. Indeed, it has proven a success story for religious settlement, its numbers have grown steadily, and it has continued to appeal to a wide cross-section of multicultural Australia. Utilizing primary source material and demographic data, this paper analyzes the history and development of SGI Australia against the backdrop of the wider Australian societal contexts of post-World War II multiculturalism, religious pluralism, opposition to new religions, and the rapid growth of Australian Buddhism.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Australia, Buddhism in Australia, Religious Pluralism in Australia, Tsutomu Teitei.

## *Introduction*

Australian society has given a mixed reception to various forms of religion that have migrated from elsewhere over the period since European settlement in the late eighteenth century. This has been especially the case for new or alternative religions (Bouma 1995; Doherty 2020a, 2020b). Soka Gakkai is an interesting case study when viewed comparatively with other new religions and the history of what are often called "cult controversies" from the latter half of the twentieth century into the present. Rather than becoming a target for opprobrium, Soka Gakkai has consistently maintained a low profile, quietly growing without generally attracting the types of social hostility and opposition that other new religions have encountered in Australia.

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Bearing this in mind, it is worth comparing Soka Gakkai's religious settlement in Australia with that of other new religions, both from Japan but also more widely. Examining Soka Gakkai's experience from a historical perspective, what follows seeks to offer a partial explanation of why Soka Gakkai has proven comparatively more successful than most new religions in negotiating the twin processes of religious settlement and cultural diffusion in Australia.

In terms of terminology, here I adopt the distinctions drawn by the late sociologist Gary Bouma (1942–2021: 1998, 204), who wrote extensively about religion in contemporary Australia in terms of "cultural diffusion" and "religious settlement." By the former, Bouma meant "the process whereby beliefs, values, and practices that emerged in one place and time are adopted in other places and times." The latter Bouma defined as "the related process of religious settlement in which the religious group takes on features peculiar to its new host society." With reference to Soka Gakkai International Australia (henceforth SGIA), it underwent these processes in a series of waves and each of these are worth examining alongside contemporaneous social and cultural changes that were taking place in Australia at the time, and how these changes impacted on the growth and success of SGIA and other new religions.

## *The First Wave: Japanese "War Brides" 1945–1960*

The first wave of Soka Gakkai's cultural diffusion in Australia occurred between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s. This period is poorly documented for the simple reason that at the time Soka Gakkai did not have a public or organizational presence in Australia and many of its foundation members had very limited English. Soka Gakkai travelled to Australia by way of Japanese "war brides," women who were already involved with Soka Gakkai in Japan who came to Australia after marrying servicemen involved in operations in Japan following the Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945. The experience of these war brides was, more generally, often a very unpleasant one (see e.g., Easton 1995; Tamura 2002).

These women encountered racism from the very start, with no less a figure than Australia's post-war immigration minister, Arthur Calwell (1896-1973),

expressing a sentiment that became widespread among Anglo-Australians during the 1950s,

> while relatives remain of the men who suffered at the hands of the Japanese, it would be the grossest act of public indecency to permit a Japanese of either sex to pollute Australian or Australian-controlled shores (quoted in Tamura 2002, 60).

Indeed, while necessity forced some moderation of the hostile policy of non-fraternization between Australian servicemen and Japanese women, this remained an exception to the rule, granted only

> if the Australian husband was of good character and could maintain and accommodate his wife and children with the appropriate government authority and if the wife, after investigation of her general behaviour, was considered to be the type who would readily be accepted by the Australian community (Palfreeman 1967, 44).

This was a vestige of what was known as the "White Australia Policy," which from the early 1900s through to the 1970s sought to exclude migration from Asia. The government policy regarding immigration during the 1940s and 1950s was, moreover, one of assimilation, and language became a major barrier to these war brides in finding their place in Australian society. The total number of Japanese war brides during the period between 1952 and 1957 was around 650, and as such the numbers in this first wave of Soka Gakkai adherents were statistically minuscule, particularly compared to mass migration from Southern and Eastern Europe during the 1950s.

In terms of their cultural diffusion and religious settlement, the early Soka Gakkai adherents were quiet and unassuming, if not completely invisible, in the conservative and overwhelming Christian demographics of 1950s Australia. Indeed, the decade of the 1950s is in many ways seen as the high point of Christian ascendency and relative cultural homogeneity in Australian history before the impact of the 1960s and the subsequent growth in religious pluralism (see e.g., Bouma 1995; Hilliard 1991).

### *The Second Wave: Organizing Soka Gakkai in Australia 1960–1970*

The second wave of cultural diffusion and religious settlement of Soka Gakkai in Australia was associated with two developments in the 1960s. The first was the arrival in Australia of Tsutomu "Tom" Teitei in 1962, who had come to Australia to undertake doctoral studies in chemistry and eventually settled as a research

scientist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Teitei was a Japanese born migrant who received one of the first doctorates awarded to an Asian migrant in Australia—an education trend which was to grow in subsequent decades. Teitei took up a leadership role in Soka Gakkai in Australia over the ensuing decades. The second key event during the 1960s was the visit to Australia of President Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) on 13 May 1964. During his visit, Ikeda encouraged a small group of adherents in Melbourne to form the first Australian chapter of what became Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

During the remainder of 1960s, Soka Gakkai went largely unnoticed by the Australian media, or indeed the wider public, except for very occasional comments about its role in Japanese politics (see e.g., Blackall 1964; Murata 1966). However, it is important to contrast this experience with that of other new religions at the time. The 1960s was a decade in which the highly negative Australian media portrait of new religions began to take its current form, with a highly successful, acrimonious, and concerted campaign by a large sector of the Australian media directed against the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International (later known as the Church of Scientology), which led to legislative bans in three Australian state jurisdictions. This pattern was to repeat, with less dramatic official sanctions, with a number of other new religions over the 1970s—but notably not with Soka Gakkai (see Doherty 2020a).

By the 1960s, Australia's post-war hostility toward the Japanese had somewhat thawed—though it was to continue in some pockets well into the 1990s—and governments were, moreover, winding back the White Australia Policy, and taking greater cognizance of the strategic and economic importance of Australia's relationship with its regional neighbors in Asia. While there was some small growth in Soka Gakkai at this time and into the early 1970s, this was overshadowed by other events of the late 1960s and 1970s that in some ways obscured Soka Gakkai's presence in Australia.

### *The Third Wave: Migration and Multiculturalism 1970–1990*

A series of factors coalesced in the late 1960s and 1970s to create a new multicultural reality in Australia. The first was the large increase in the size of the

wider Buddhist community in Australia primarily as a result of the impact of political instability in Indochina, in particular the influx of Buddhist migrants and refugees from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and especially Vietnam. While Australia had encountered earlier waves of migration from majority Buddhist regions, including Chinese miners and prospectors during the 1840s and 1850s Gold Rushes and later Sri Lankan laborers who came in the 1870s to work in the Queensland cane fields, Buddhism had a relatively low profile in Australia before this period (see Adam and Hughes 1996; Croucher 1989). This mass migration was, moreover, boosted in the early 1970s by the removal by the Whitlam Labor government of the final vestiges of the White Australia, Policy which opened Australia to greater migration from Asia.

This led to growth within Soka Gakkai in a surprising way. As documented by Daniel Metraux in a series of detailed demographic studies of SGIA undertaken in the early 2000s (e.g., Metraux 2001, 2003, 2004, 2013), these migration patterns of the 1970s and into the 1980s created a body of migrants culturally attuned to Buddhism but not necessarily wanting to embrace a form of the religion that was bound to ethnic communities. Soka Gakkai, in Metraux's words, provided a "means of reconnecting with an Asian heritage" (Metraux 2004, 66). Moreover, as Bouma observed, during the period from roughly 1973 through to 1996 successive Australian federal governments of both political persuasions adopted a policy of multiculturalism, that "encouraged migrants to maintain aspects of the cultures they had brought with them," and where "[r]ather than insisting on assimilation, cultural difference was valued and seen as contributing to the well-being and quality of life of all Australians" (Bouma 1998, 209). This breakdown in the relative cultural homogeneity of 1950s and 1960s Australia had widespread social ramifications, not least of which was an increase in religious pluralism. In terms of growth, Buddhism's number of adherents grew exponentially and has continued to grow sizably since (see Spuler 2000).

During this period, Soka Gakkai continued to be seen as one among many Buddhist groups—Adam and Hughes (1996, 61) estimated 170 in 1996 and Spuler (2000, 31) counted nearly double this number four years later—which had been established in Australia and was viewed with some suspicion by other Buddhist organizations. While some prejudice arising from ignorance certainly occurred, these ethnic religious groups, if not necessarily the communities they served, fared much better than the wave of new religions that became controversial

in Australia during this same period. Moreover, while the early organized Soka Gakkai group in Australia was somewhat mission-oriented, in Australia their proselytizing was far less aggressive than other groups. This set it apart from more controversial new religions like the Children of God and the Unification Church, both of whom proved extremely, if episodically, controversial in the late 1970s (Doherty 2020a). While, like these groups, Soka Gakkai did encounter some youth who experimented with new religions in the wake of the 1960s counterculture, during the 1970s Soka Gakkai did not attract the same level of social hostility or the same public profile—any negativity was predominantly in the form of internecine conflict in the growing Australian Buddhist milieu.

During the early 1980s, moreover, an important legal case strengthened the legal position of all new religions in Australia. In 1983, the Church of Scientology won an appeal to the full bench of the High Court of Australia against the Victorian commissioner of pay-roll tax. This case had repercussions much wider than Scientology in casting the net of what legally qualified as a religion extremely wide, removing some of the legal impediments to institutionalization that disproportionately impacted new religions. Soka Gakkai was here an unintentional beneficiary of this legal situation, though interestingly, and poignantly, this also indicates another aspect of Soka Gakkai's experience in Australia—that it has been markedly absent from various types of legal conflicts that have plagued other new religions (see Richardson 1994/1995). Indeed, I am unaware of any legal proceedings involving Soka Gakkai in Australia. At this time, however, Soka Gakkai did attract some minor opposition and according to historian Paul Croucher they were the one group excluded from the Buddhist Council of New South Wales, which formed in 1984, on the grounds of their perceived "extremism" (Croucher 1989, 104).

### *The Fourth Wave: The Australian Turn to Asia 1990–Present*

With the accession of Paul Keating to Prime Minister in 1991 following a successful challenge of Bob Hawke's (1929–2019) Labor Party leadership, there was a marked turn in the direction of Asia in terms of Australia's foreign policy, signaled in particular by Keating's foreign policy speech "Australia and Asia: Knowing Who We Are" on April 7, 1992. Continuing the multicultural policies of his predecessors since Gough Whitlam (1916–2014), Keating's enthusiasm for

Asia, and Japan in particular, fostered a positive social climate for Asian new religions and Soka Gakkai certainly benefitted from this. During this period, Soka Gakkai became better known for its involvement in peace initiatives and engagement in various interfaith activities for the betterment of society (Bowen 2011). Here Soka Gakkai became a valued member of community networks and from this point onwards has been generally viewed as a force for the common good. This cannot be said of most other new religions, most of whom are still considered extremely suspicious when they engage in various types of community building or engagement.

To provide two examples of groups which in the period since 2000 have proven the most controversial new religions in Australia, the Church of Scientology has regularly encountered negative publicity for its various social betterment programs that are immediately surrounded with an air of suspicion. The same can be said for recent community engagement by the historically introversionist group now known as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, whose Rapid Relief Teams have become a regular presence during periods of natural disaster. Despite this, the Brethren's earlier attempts to quietly influence Australian politics has cast a shadow over their charitable activities. The Brethren's attempts to influence politics, moreover, highlights another aspect of Soka Gakkai's quiet settlement in Australia. SGIA has not engaged in active partisan politics—Australia remains extremely suspicious of any religious intervention in politics, whatever direction it comes from. Moreover, as far as I have been able to ascertain, Soka Gakkai's membership is diverse and not overly drawn from any one political persuasion. This has made it difficult to pigeonhole Soka Gakkai in the way other new religions have been viewed.

Surprisingly, given Keating's enthusiasm for Asia and for the promotion of greater cultural awareness in Australia, for instance by encouraging the learning of Asian languages, SGIA continued to appeal more broadly and among Western converts cultural factors seem to have been secondary to pragmatic concerns. As Metraux found in his survey work with Ben Dorman, "a slight majority expressed no real interest in any aspects of Japanese culture." As one Caucasian member told interviewers, "SGIA is indeed a Buddhist movement from Japan, but its message and appeal are universal. I have become a Buddhist, not a follower of Japanese Buddhism" (Metraux 2004, 66). This highlights one aspect of SGIA's religious settlement in that its members have embraced aspects of SGI but not to

the detriment of local conditions in Australia. This has not always, however, proven easy and without laboring the point some institutional tensions between Japanese cultural expectations and Australian realities have emerged (see e.g., Bowen 2011).

One area where these kinds of tensions can be viewed, and the point on which I will conclude this brief survey, is in terms of media profile. While compared with just about every other new religion in Australia in the last seventy years (see e.g., Richardson 1996; 2001; Doherty 2020a), Soka Gakkai has received enviably even-handed treatment by the Australian media, one aspect that has consistently marked coverage since the 1960s has been the group's perceived wealth and power in Japan. In the year 2002, for example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) aired a documentary about SGIA entitled "The Power of Chanting" on its religious affairs program *Compass* in which aspects of the group's wealth and influence in Japan were mentioned by one more critical academic. However, the overall portrait of SGIA was far more positive (Edmondson 2002).

This contrasts heavily with the experience of other new religions in Australia. It moreover highlights the gatekeeper function of the Australian media in terms of religious respectability. There is a sense in which how a religion appears on the national broadcaster, at least in previous generations, will influence its wider reception in Australian society. This has certainly been the case with other groups, with the program *Compass* and ABC's flagship current affairs program *Four Corners* often serving as a platform for wider public discussions, and controversy, regarding religion in Australia. That Soka Gakkai was given a positive hearing is no small thing. Moreover, while Soka Gakkai has occasionally been criticized for its perceived wealth, this is standard secularist critique of religion in Australia more broadly and SGIA has fared far better than any mainstream church or religious school in this regard.

## *Conclusion*

Despite Soka Gakkai's positive image in Australia overall, and its valuable contribution as a successful example of cultural diffusion and religious settlement, it is uncertain what the future holds. Writing in 2004, Daniel Metraux suggested that SGIA would continue to grow steadily in Australia. This does not appear to be

the case, perhaps because SGIA is subsumed under the broader category of Buddhism in census data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics I am hesitant to comment further on this. More research on the contemporary situation of SGIA is certainly worthwhile, not least on what one member described as the "active and articulate" youth cohort of the movement, which is a promising sign for its future wellbeing. What is clear is that SGIA has proven a small, but vibrant example of glocalization in Australia as this country has embraced what has been called the "Asian Century." As the celebrated Australian historian of religion Wayne Hudson opined in his recent book *Beyond Religion and the Secular: Creative Spiritual Movements and Their Relevance to Political, Social and Cultural Reform* "Soka Gakkai provides a model for how a spiritual movement which was originally narrow and ethnocentric can become universalistic and postreligious" (Hudson 2023, 50).

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