

Globalizing Japanese Religion: The Soka Gakkai In Australia

By Daniel A. Metraux

Today Australia is experiencing a significant Buddhist boom with nearly two percent of the population declaring some adherence to this very traditional Asian religion. A vast majority of the adherents are ethnic Asians who have been immigrating to Australia since the early 1970s, but there is a growing interest among some Caucasian Australians as well. One of the more successful Buddhist organizations is the Australian chapter of Soka Gakkai, an organization that originated in Japan.

The Soka Gakkai is one of the strongest of Japan's New Religious Movements¹ with eight to ten million members. The Soka Gakkai has also nurtured a highly successful international movement (Soka Gakkai International or SGI) which, according to Soka Gakkai estimates, has about two million followers in about two hundred foreign countries and territories. While the Soka Gakkai and SGI chapters abroad share the same religious principles, each foreign group has complete autonomy in terms of membership, organizational structure, funding and leadership. There is frequent contact between the Soka Gakkai and SGI chapters abroad, and members in every chapter I have visited share a common deep respect for Soka Gakkai leader Ikeda Daisaku, but each international unit is otherwise quite independent.

Despite its Japanese roots, many of the SGI chapters I have studied in Southeast Asia have drawn a largely ethnic Chinese but also widely multinational following because it is able to present itself as an attractive and highly relevant generalist lay Buddhist movement. Some Asian chapters including those in Korea, Thailand and the Philippines had very large native memberships as well. Chapters in North and South America and Europe have a very broad multi-ethnic membership.

The Australian chapter of SGI (SGI Australia or SGIA) had a nationwide following of about 2500 members in 2002 from an estimated 50 different ethnic groups. Today more than

¹ "New Religions" is a somewhat problematic term that originally referred to religious groups that developed outside the traditional established religious organizations of Buddhism, Shinto and Christianity. It is generally agreed that the first of the so-called new religions appeared in the mid-1850s. There have been different periods when 'waves' of new religions occurred. Before Japan's defeat in World War II, under the repressive regime that enforced religious activity through state centered Shinto, new religions were considered a threat to the national polity and many were harshly suppressed. After the surrender, the Allied Occupation introduced freedom of religion, which allowed many new religions to flourish.

two-thirds of SGIA members are ethnic Asians originating in large part from Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong and native immigrants from Japan, Korea and India.² Our research indicates that SGIA has developed strong roots in a number of communities nationwide and the prognosis for its gradual expansion and long-term survival seem excellent.

The goal of this research is to study reasons for the success of this new religious movement in Australia. Some of the questions addressed are why the Soka Gakkai with its strong Japanese roots has succeeded in establishing a solid foundation in Australia, but also why after roughly forty years it has not expanded more rapidly. We wanted to learn who joined SGIA and why. When we discovered that a very high percentage of the ethnic Asian members were not Japanese in origin, we wanted to learn why SGIA would appeal to such a broad mixture of Asians, many of whom expressed very little interest in Japanese culture and had very little contact with Japan or its people.

Methodology and Approaches to this Study

Two research scholars participated actively in this project. Daniel Metraux visited Australia for three weeks in February, 2000, and was a Visiting Fellow at the Faculty of Asian Studies at The Australian National University (ANU) in July and August, 2002. Ben Dorman was a PhD candidate in Asian Studies during this period and worked in close partnership with the author.³

During Metraux's visit in 2000 he and Dorman collected a variety of SGIA publications, developed contacts with SGIA leaders, attended several meetings and interviewed a number of members at length. Some initial comments on the movement in Australia were published in Metraux's 2001 book.⁴

Metraux and Dorman prepared a very detailed 59 question survey in April 2002 for SGIA members. The first section contains 18 questions about the member's personal experience with SGI and SGIA—how and when one had first heard of the movement, who introduced the

² Estimates concerning the size and ethnic background of SGIA members were provided by the SGIA main office in Sydney.

³ Daniel Metraux has studied the Soka Gakkai and other new religious movements in Japan since the mid-1970s. He is author of eight books on the Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyo. Ben Dorman has also conducted extensive research on the New Religions of Japan. He has been a member of SGIA since 1982.

⁴ Daniel A. Metraux, *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Lanham-New York-Oxford: University Press of America, 2001.

member to the movement, that person's religious background, etc. Section II asks questions concerning the follower's attitudes towards the practice of Nichiren's Buddhism focusing on such issues as benefits one may have incurred from this practice and whether that person had ever chanted for a particular set of goals.⁵ Sections III and IV posed queries about the member's feelings about the SGIA organization as a whole and its peace movement in particular.⁶ The fifth section requests a significant amount of demographic information from the member.

The research was carried out with the full cooperation of the SGIA leadership. The surveys were voluntary and the respondents had the option of revealing their identity or not. There were three main methods of distribution initially (1) The survey was sent to the SGIA headquarters in Sydney. SGIA Headquarters then sent it by fax to the main areas in which SGIA branches are located⁷ and also to members in outlying areas. The branches then distributed them through local channels. These branches collected the completed surveys and either sent them to SGIA headquarters, or sent them directly to the researchers. Of the surveys that were sent to SGIA headquarters, some were sent directly back to the researchers by SGIA and others were picked up in Sydney by us; (2) the survey was sent by the researchers via email to members who requested it, and around 30 responses came back via email; and (3) Dorman sent three hard

⁵ Examples of questions from Section II include:

- What would you say have been the principal benefits to you from practicing Nichiren's Buddhism?
- Have you ever chanted to realize a particular goal or goals? Yes: (If so, please give some examples) No:
- Were the goals for which you chanted realized? Yes: If so, in what way were they realized? No:
- Have you ever chanted for a goal that was not realized? If yes, what was that goal?

⁶ Examples of questions from Section III (25-29; The SGIA and World Peace) and Section IV (30-46; Attitudes Toward the SGIA organization) include:

25. How realistic is the goal of realizing world peace? (Response possibilities a>d, very realistic to not at all realistic) If you answered a,b, or c, how important do you think SGI's contribution will be toward realizing world peace?
28. Do you think that if SGIA cooperates with other organized religions such as Christianity, Judaism or Islam in promoting world peace, it would compromise its commitment to the teachings of Nichiren?
33. Do you feel your *local* SGIA organization is working to meet the needs of the broader community? Yes: (if so, in what way?) No: (if not, what could be done?)
44. Are you satisfied with the way in which information is distributed to you? Yes: No: (If no, explain how the organization could improve this)
45. Do you feel that the SGI organization in Australia reflects the values of Australian society and culture as you see them? Please Explain.
46. Do you think the four main divisions of SGI are an effective, fair and useful way of organizing the community of members in Australia. Please Explain. Yes, definitely: Yes, somewhat. Not really? Not at all.

⁷ Main branches are in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Adelaide.

copies of the survey directly to members who had not otherwise received copies or did not have email access.

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

Metraux and Dorman also conducted about 20 in-depth interviews with individual or small groups of members in Canberra and the Sydney and Melbourne regions as well as shorter conversations with about thirty other members. We also interviewed a few members from across Australia at various SGIA meetings and festivals. We deliberately chose a few older members because of their ability to give us some historical perspectives about the movement, but other interviews came from people who expressed an interest in our interviewing them in survey responses.

While as expected we received a highly favorable image of SGIA from the active members interviewed, we also solicited and received a high number of very frank criticisms about the movement, especially in areas involving leadership and communication between leaders and ordinary members.

The Soka Gakkai Legacy

One of the most interesting developments in Japanese studies has been the widespread diaspora of many of Japan's New Religions⁸ throughout the world since the 1960s. They have achieved their greatest success in Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South-east Asia, Brazil, Peru, and

⁸ Notably Tenrikyo, Sekai Kyuseikyo, PL Kyodan as well as Soka Gakkai International. Notable work on the expansion of Japanese New Religious Movements abroad includes: Susumu Shimazono, "Expansion of Japan's New Religions," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 18/2-3 (1991), 105-32; Nobutaka Inoue, *Umi o watatta Nihon shukyo* ("Japanese Religions Overseas") (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1985); Phillip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America; Accommodation and Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and David Machacek and Bryan Wilson, Eds., *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the United States, but there are scattered chapters in Canada, Europe, Africa, and Oceania. Soka Gakkai International (SGI), which has the biggest following of any new Japanese religious movement abroad,⁹ began building foreign chapters in the 1960s. Its largest chapters are in Korea, Southeast Asia, South America and in the United States.

Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871-1944), a Japanese educator and a devout lay practitioner of the Nichiren Shoshu (“True Sect of Nichiren”) sect, founded the Soka Gakkai in the early 1930s as a support group for his educational ideas. However, by the late 1930s he and his younger disciple Toda Josei (1900-1958) had transformed the organization into a lay support group for the Nichiren Shoshu sect. Makiguchi and Toda were imprisoned in 1943 because of their opposition to the government’s war policies. Makiguchi died in prison in 1944, but Toda, released in 1945, rebuilt the Soka Gakkai into a major religious movement in the 1950s. Toda’s successor Ikeda Daisaku (1928--) expanded the Soka Gakkai in Japan and played a key role in SGI’s expansion abroad.

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

The Soka Gakkai grew rapidly in the immediate postwar era because its leaders focused on Buddhist teachings that stressed the happiness of self and others in one’s immediate environment. Happiness was understood in very concrete terms for millions of dispirited and hungry Japanese: food, health, finding a mate, and securing employment. Later in the 1960s and 1970s when Japan became more affluent, happiness was redefined in more philosophical terms to include “empowerment, character formation, and socially beneficial work...”¹⁰ The fact that

⁹ Soka Gakkai membership worldwide in 1998: Japan: 8,120,000 households; Asia and Oceania: 779,000; North America, 338,000; South America: 205,000, Central America, 12,000; Europe: 19,000; Middle East/ Africa: 7,000. Individual country estimates 700,000-1 million members in Korea, 42,000 in Hong Kong, 30,000 each in Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia, 15,000 in Singapore, 10,000 in the Philippines, 4,000 in India and 2000+ in Australia. Source: “SGI Membership Abroad.” Internal memo produced by the SGI office in Tokyo and given to the author.

¹⁰ Richard Hughes Seager, “Soka Gakkai—The Next Ten Years” in *Tricycle*, Fall 2001, p. 94

the Soka Gakkai is a distinctly lay religious movement has broadened its appeal in an increasingly secular age.

My research on SGI members in Canada, the United States and throughout Southeast Asia indicates that the Soka Gakkai attracts followers because it offers a strong message of peace, happiness, success and self-empowerment. They perceive that the Buddhism espoused by the Soka Gakkai gives them some degree of empowerment over their personal environments, that through their hard work and devout practice they can overcome their suffering and find happiness here and now. They also find great satisfaction and sense of community joining with other people who follow the same faith. The practice of having small groups of members meet together very regularly to pray, discuss personal and mutual concerns and socialize as close friends is an important social reason for the success of the Soka Gakkai not only in Japan, but abroad as well.¹¹

Many of the younger SGI members in these countries are also very well educated. There seems a strong affinity between a religious dogma that emphasizes “mental work” (attitudes and individual focus) and the well-educated who have to work very hard to attain their educational credentials. This phenomenon may well explain why this form of Buddhism is attractive to this particular social stratum and also helps address why the Japanese origins of the Soka Gakkai does not seem to matter very much to these non-Japanese converts.¹²

Buddhism in Australia

Buddhism has experienced a minor boom in Australia in recent years. While Buddhists currently constitute only about two percent of the total Australian population today, their numbers are growing rapidly. Some 360,000 residents of Australia declared themselves to be

¹¹ SGI practice centers on chanting the *daimoku*, the phrase “*Namu-myoho-renge-kyo.*” This translates roughly as “I commit myself to the wonderful dharma” referring to the highest teachings of the Buddha found in the sacred *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren (1222-82), a Japanese Buddhist monk who founded the only truly Japanese school of Buddhism and who is the spiritual patron of the Soka Gakkai, said that chanting the daimoku will release the powers of Buddhism within each believer and that this chanting will bring positive benefits to the faithful. Members daily perform the *gongyo*, chanting short segments of the Lotus before a copy of Nichiren’s *Gohonzon* (mandala) on which is drawn the title of the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Gohonzon* is said to embody the teaching of the true Buddha and contains the power to bring happiness to those who worship before it.

¹² This writer wishes to thank Mary Baldwin College Professor Brian Lowe, who has studied practitioners of Zen Buddhism in Canada, for help in developing this hypothesis.

Buddhist in the 2001 census, a huge jump from the 200,000 who made the same declaration in 1996 and the 140,000 who responded in 1991.¹³

A foreign religion entering an alien society may make a significant impact on that country if there are large numbers of immigrants from the contributing culture(s), there is enough interest among the native peoples, and the religion itself has a high enough reputation. Buddhism has developed a very favorable and respected position in many Western societies including Australia in recent decades, so when Australia opened itself to Asian immigration in the early 1970s, it is not surprising that many immigrants would bring their Buddhism with them and that they would attract some attention from white Australians. What is interesting is the number of second generation Asians who were born in Australia or who came as young children who have adopted Buddhism. Their interest in Buddhism may be part of their efforts to learn about and identify with their native cultures.¹⁴

Many of the early waves of Asians came Vietnam, but there also considerable numbers of ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan and Singapore as well as immigrants from mainland China, the Philippines, India, South Korea and Cambodia.¹⁵ The largest single ethnic group is Vietnamese who comprise nearly one-third of Buddhists in Australia. Ethnic Chinese Buddhists came to Australia from many places including Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, and Singapore. There is a smaller group of Buddhists from Theravada countries like Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. A handful of Tibetan Buddhist immigrants attracted a number of Anglo-Australians who find appeal in the mystique of the Vajrayana tradition.¹⁶ The person whom most Australians would associate with “Buddhism” per se, is the Dalai Lama, widely acknowledged as the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet. He is a hugely popular figure who attracts crowds like a rock star, most recently in 2002. He received massive mainstream media coverage and he is quoted extensively.

¹³ Kelly Burke, “While Christianity declines, Buddhism grows rapidly,” in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 2002, p. 1, and Enid Adam and Philip J. Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996), p. 41. Note that according to the 2001 census, 25% of Australians declared themselves to be Roman Catholic while 20% said they were Anglican. Some 15% said they were agnostic or atheists, a decline from 16% in 1996. Source=Burke article.

¹⁴Source: Interview with Dr. Judith Snodgrass, a noted scholar on Buddhism in Australia, 1 August, 2002 in Sydney.

¹⁵ James E. Coughlan and Deborah J. McNamara, Eds., *Asians in Australia: Patterns of Migration and Settlement* (South Melbourne: MacMillan Education Australia, 1997), p. 53.

¹⁶ Adam and Hughes, p. 11.

According to the 1991 census, approximately 17 percent of these immigrants thought of themselves as being Buddhist.¹⁷ Since most immigrants arrive in Australia between the ages of 20 and 40, a huge majority of Australia's Buddhists are in their 20s, 30s and early 40s.¹⁸ Well over 80 percent of Buddhists residing in Australia in 1991 were born elsewhere in Asia and had immigrated to Australia from their native lands. Only four percent of Australia's Buddhists were Australian born and had both parents who were Australian born, a further indication that most of Australia's Buddhists are ethnic Asians.

There are about 170 different Buddhist groups in Australia representing all the major schools of Buddhism. Most of these groups are considered ethnic as their members are drawn from one of the major Asian communities. There are other generally quite small groups whose members are Anglo-Australian and are more interested in Buddhism in general.¹⁹

Unlike some Tibetan groups, the SGI has a very low public profile in Australia. Only a few Australians have ever heard of Japan's Soka Gakkai leader Ikeda Daisaku and most Australians are probably unaware of the movement's existence. Although the organization has made a few more public relations moves in the past few years – holding exhibitions, sponsoring talks, establishing connections with academics and universities, participating in public displays and events like “Clean up Australia,” and was also the subject of a recent (May 2002) documentary aired on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) – it is still a relatively minor group.

One can thus reasonably conclude that much of the startling growth in the number of people practicing Buddhism since the 1970s can be attributed to the huge influx of Asians from Southeast Asia and, as Judith Snodgrass has discovered, a strong revival in interest in Buddhism by second-generation Asians or in a few cases young Asians who, having arrived in Australia with no strong religious ties, become interested in Buddhism as a way of identifying with their Asian heritage.²⁰ The percentage of European Australians who claimed Buddhist ties before

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 308. Figure derived from the 1991 Australian census.

¹⁸ Adam and Hughes., p. 49.

¹⁹ Roderick S. Bucknell, “Engaged Buddhism in Australia,” in Christopher S. Queen, Ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 468.

²⁰ Snodgrass interview, *op. cit.*

Asian immigration began in earnest in the 1970s was quite high, but their percentage dropped to well below ten percent by 1991 because of the major influx of ethnic Asian Buddhists.²¹

The Soka Gakkai in Australia

The Soka Gakkai organization in Australia is one of several Buddhist organizations in Australia that follows one distinct school of Buddhism and has a multi-national membership.²² SGIA traces its origins to 13 May 1964 when a visit to Australia by Ikeda Daisaku encouraged a handful of Japanese resident members and white Australians to form a Melbourne chapter. The first leader, Dr. Tom Teitei, worked vigorously to organize the first chapters and to mold a national organization. By October 2002 there were between 2500-3000 members spread over the major urban areas of the country.²³ There are active chapters in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra and elsewhere and a spacious headquarters located near Olympic Park outside Sydney.

SGIA is an autonomous chapter of SGI that runs its own affairs, is responsible for its own funding, and maintains strong ties with the main Soka Gakkai movement in Japan. Australian-based members deeply respect Ikeda Daisaku as a teacher and religious guide and most of his books are on sale in the Sydney headquarters. The teachings and ideology espoused by SGI are identical to those of Tokyo, but the leadership and management of SGIA is strictly local. General Director Hans van der Bent and Vice Director Yong Foo often attend meetings in Tokyo, but they are responsible for providing organizational leadership and guidance for SGIA members. There was a major financial gift from Tokyo to facilitate the construction of the Sydney Community Center, but SGIA manages its day-to-day operations and publishes its own journals on the roughly \$US 180-190,000 it raises each year from member contributions.²⁴ There are only two employees who man the headquarters every day and both the Director and Vice-Director have their own careers.

²¹ Adams and Hughes, pp. 40-50.

²²The SGIA head office states that there are at least 50 ethnic groups among its members.

²³ Growth has always been glacial. Membership levels didn't reach 1,000 until the late 1980s, but accelerated somewhat to hit 2000 three years ago and to exceed 2500 in 2002. Figures provided upon request by the SGIA head office in Sydney.

²⁴ Interview with General Director Hans van der Bent in Sydney, 26 July 2002.

SGIA worked hard in its early years to attract members through active conversion. Members would seek out relatives, friends, work colleagues or even casual acquaintances and try to persuade them to join. This method worked at least to some extent, but may have turned off potential converts as well. Over the past ten years or so, the emphasis switched from direct conversion (*shakubuku*) to one focusing on dialogue (*shoju*).²⁵ SGIA members may talk to a relative, friend or colleague about the movement and may invite them to an SGIA meeting, but there are few, if any, instances of *shakubuku* as in the past. Our survey indicates the overall effect of this “dialogue” approach. More than half of all members indicated in our survey that they were introduced to SGIA by a family member. Most of the rest came to know SGIA through a friend’s introduction. Only two respondents in our survey indicated that they had been introduced to Soka Gakkai by a stranger.²⁶

Demographics of SGIA Membership

Our survey of SGI members reveals a highly complex membership that is nearly impossible to categorize simply. What is indeed interesting is the fact that in terms of overall demographics, the composition of the Soka Gakkai closely resembles that of the overall Buddhist profile in Australia, especially in terms of age (relative youth) and European-Asian membership distribution.

Although membership in the early years of the SGIA faithful tended to be older with a roughly even ratio between European and Asian (largely Japanese) members, today the demographic picture has changed markedly. There are still far more women than men today (60%-40%) (Insert Figure 1 here) and a definite trend towards a younger constituency with 38% in their 20s, 20% in their 30s, and 25% in their 40s. The membership is roughly three-quarters Asian (60% of Asian members are ethnic Chinese, 25% Japanese, 6% Indian and 5% Korean), but younger members (20s and 30s) are today just over 80% Asian. Younger members are

²⁵ Before the 1970s the Soka Gakkai adopted an aggressive form of proselytization known as *shakubuku*. Australian members actively sought out friends, colleagues and relatives and tried to persuade them to join. Several members said that they would even approach strangers to invite them to a SGIA meeting. Since the mid-1970s the Soka Gakkai has used a less assertive form of recruitment known as *shoju*. SGIA members are now encouraged to share the benefits of their practice with friends and family and to invite anybody showing an interest in the movement to one of their meetings.

²⁶ One of these respondents said that she had first heard of SGIA after having a conversation with a stranger at a bus stop.

better educated than older members – most of the young either hold or are pursuing university degrees while older faithful are about evenly divided among high school and university graduates. Young faithful who have completed school tend to be generally single and employed in professional or comparable white collar jobs while older members are overwhelmingly married and employed in a very wide range of vocations. Most members live in suburbs of large cities (53%), within big cities (21%), or in medium sized cities (13%). Only 13% live in small towns or rural areas(Insert figure 2 here. Roughly half the members are Australian citizens²⁷, while 80% are either citizens or permanent residents of Australia. However, while 87% of older members are permanent residents, only 60% of younger members are permanent, indicating mainly a large foreign student membership.

While SGIA's originates from a Japan-based movement, most members do not join the organization because of its Japanese roots or connections. Rather, they are attracted by the fact that it is a Buddhist movement whose members appear to be very happy and successful in their lives and whose organization exudes a sense of warmth, harmony, and a welcoming spirit to new members. Only a third of the older members and a quarter of younger members were introduced to the practice by Japanese members and a slight majority expressed no real interest in any aspect of Japanese culture per se. A young Caucasian member noted, "SGIA is indeed a Buddhist movement from Japan, but its message and appeal is universal. I have become a Buddhist, not a follower of Japanese Buddhism."

Our surveys indicate that SGIA is largely family-oriented movement. Some 64% of all members and 77% of young members have other close family members in the movement. While 57% of older members were the first members of their family to join SGIA, close to 70% of younger members had other members of their family in the organization when they joined. Just over 50% of older members were introduced to SGIA by other family members compared to 75% of younger members. Other members were introduced by close friends. Only a tiny handful was introduced by work colleagues, fellow students, or strangers.

The family-nature of SGIA, however, does not mean that most members' friends are almost exclusively other faithful. Indeed, while a good number of members say that most of their friends are SGIA members, as many if not more say that most of their friends are not members of

²⁷ Among non-Australians, about 30 % Malaysian, another 30: Japanese, 7% are British, 6% Hong Kong Chinese, 5% Indian, 8% other European, and the rest scattered.

the organization. And while about 40% of SGIA members say that they had at one time experienced opposition or criticism of their membership from friends and relatives, a vast majority in Australia said that nobody had ever criticized their membership.²⁸

Only a minority of current SGIA members (40%) had any formal religious affiliation before they became members (60% Christian, 25% Buddhist, 7% Taoist and 7% Hindu), and only about 15% were highly committed to another religion (Insert Figure 3 here). A third of those surveyed had actively practiced another form Buddhism or another East Asian faith at some point of their lives including roughly 20% of Caucasian members.

Another indication of the heavy Asian-origin of most SGIA members is that only a third of surveyed members had heard of the Soka Gakkai first in Australia and only about 45% first joined SGIA while living in Australia. The vast majority of the faithful joining outside Australia received their formal membership in Malaysia (40%) or Japan (37%).

Motivation for Membership

Our surveys and interviews of SGIA leaders and members in 2000 and 2002 indicate a stable and tightly knit organization which appears more interested in the welfare of its members and the building of a healthy Buddhist community than in wantonly signing up members whose interest or faith is only superficial. A person is considered for membership after he or she attends several meetings over a period of several months, shows genuine interest in the movement and has studied the basic teachings and philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism. The emphasis on conversion through dialogue has meant that many new members are converted by close friends and family. This development in turn has meant slow steady growth, but also less turnover of membership.

The SGIA chapter in Canberra, for example, is a cohesive community of 40-50 members who actively socialize with and care for each other. This chapter has grown slowly since the 1970s with only slight turnovers in membership. Most of the Canberra SGIA people I met had

²⁸ Many SGIA members who admit that they received criticism from family and / or friends when they joined the Soka Gakkai are Japanese members who received this criticism in Japan before they immigrated to Australia. None of these respondents reports having any criticism while living in Australia.

been members for many years. The Canberra chapter included a number of families with several generations of members as well as several individuals whose other relatives had not joined.²⁹

Based on our interviews we discovered that SGIA meetings had what could be described as a therapeutic affect to some members. A large proportion of members we contacted stated that it is the strong sense of camaraderie and community that initially attracted them to the Soka Gakkai and its form of Buddhism. SGIA has become an important base for friendship, community caring and mutual help for many members and is a critical reason for their joining the movement as well as for SGIA's long term growth.

Many surveyed members insist that SGIA provides for both their religious and social needs. It is the support group in times of need and the basis of a social outing. It is the ready-made community center for the newcomer and magnet for somebody seeking greater happiness in life. Members told us that there was something missing in their lives or that they were sad, lonely or depressed. A friend or family member suggests that they attend an SGIA meeting at a cultural center or at a member's home. The newcomer is soon attracted by the warm sense of "family" or "community" plus members' recollections of how miserable their lives were before joining and how that had found true happiness in life as Buddhists after chanting regularly and becoming a devout member. One member noted:

What appeals to me most about SGIA is the idea of Buddhism in *action* - a spiritual family chanting, studying and working for others at a local level --being there for family, friends, strangers, different cultural groups and the environment -- and globally when we deal with the wider issues that grow from our work at home such as world peace, education, and eliminating poverty.

This sense of community is very important for Australian members. The fact that many members find it to be an open, tolerant, and caring community is especially important for immigrants new to Australian life. SGIA is a ready-made community containing a diverse group

²⁹ Newer members included young Chinese student who had met SGI members in New Zealand contacted SGI members while studying in Canberra, participated in many SGIA activities over a period of many months, and formally joined the organization shortly before her return to China. A younger Japanese woman who had been a life-long Soka Gakkai participant in Japan married a Caucasian SGIA member in Canberra while he was doing research in Japan. They became actively involved in SGIA activities in Canberra for several years while both were students there. A British-based SGI member played an active role in Canberra while living there for a year. Another two women who first heard about SGIA through a television documentary on the movement earlier in 2002 began to participate in some chapter activities over a period of several months, but had not yet committed themselves to full membership.

of white Australians and Asian-Australians from virtually every region or country who can extend a welcoming hand to a newcomer from Malaysia, Korea, Hong Kong or Japan who may not have any roots in the community. Newcomers are very welcome and very often find SGIA to be their port of entry and social base while entering Australian society. I met a number of Asian exchange students whose initial contact with SGIA was active members from their city or country. It is also interesting to note that SGIA today attracts a small but growing number of openly gay members because they feel that they are accepted and treated well by fellow members.³⁰

With regard to second-generation Asian members of SGI whom we interviewed, it may be that their adherence to SGI could be seen as a way of reaching back to family roots and traditions in a country that doesn't have those traditions. Some of these members indicate that social factors are also important in their decision to join the movement. They can join in activities with other young people from their country or culture and develop a social base in a country with a very different culture. SGIA membership also provides the opportunity to become acquainted with people from other cultures including some Caucasian Australians.

It is also important to note that joining SGIA, while a major commitment of Buddhist faith, does not preclude the average member from leading a very ordinary Australian life. According to our survey, the average member attends about one meeting a week and a significant number attend two, though more active members might attend more. And, as Phillip Hammond noted about SGI-USA members, those who join the movement “had to give up very little of their former way of life. Conversion, apart from learning to chant, entailed only minor behavioral change; whatever tension converts experienced because of their decision to join Soka Gakkai was therefore minimized.”³¹ Based on our own observations, much SGIA resembles SGI-USA in this sense at least.

³⁰ Concerning gay members, an SGIA leader noted: “The Soka Gakkai in Australia has high tolerance for gays—we are very open to gays because of high respect for human values. There is a strong homophobic tendency in South East Asian culture and homophobia was once very evident in SGIA, but we are becoming more open and tolerant in eyes of more members. People of all stripes find release and peace through chanting and as Buddhists we honestly see all people as being equal.”

While this statement represents an ideal, several gay members told us that they feel at home in SGIA because of its increasingly tolerant and open atmosphere.

³¹ Phillip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 176-78.

Our demographic survey also indicated that SGIA members, especially those in their twenties and thirties, tend to be very well educated. Over a third of older members (those in their late 30s and above) hold university degrees while well over half of young adult members (20s to mid-30s) had graduated from a university or were still university students with every intention of graduating in the relatively near future. Some older and many younger members had a professional career or were studying or preparing for one.

Our surveys and interviews indicate that at least some of these members are attracted to SGIA because of the movement's doctrine that members need to take responsibility for their own lives and circumstances. They are motivated by SGI leaders and study materials that tell them that they can readily advance in life through their own hard work, strong faith and discipline.

Another factor that attracts the attention of some members is the positive approach of the Soka Gakkai's teachings to life. When Bryan Wilson studied the SGI movement in Great Britain, he found that educated members with professional careers found SGI's disowning "guilt as a mechanism by which good behavior is to be stimulated" and its abandonment of what "members see as the constraints of moral interdictions" to be very heartening. "The old moral economy of traditional religions – the moral economy of sinfulness, suffering and repentance—is disavowed to allow positive orientations to be embraced in a way that members regard as liberating the spirit."³²

I found many similar reactions in Australia from both Caucasian and ethnic Asian members, whether they had formerly belonged to an organized religion or had no prior religious ties. Many SGIA members say that their new faith has given them a positive worldview; they feel happier about their lives, their relationships with others and feel that through this Buddhism they can make positive contributions to such things as world peace.

Conclusions

The key to the Soka Gakkai's success in Australia is its ability to attract a devoted following that has wide appeal among both Asian and Caucasian communities in Australia. SGIA has strong Japanese roots, but its autonomy, local leadership, and its focus on general issues that are relevant to modern societies everywhere encourage followers to regard it as clearly international Buddhist movement without any strong national ties. SGIA has always had

³² Bryan Wilson, "The British Movement and its Members," in Machacek and Wilson, Eds., *Global Citizens*, p. 369.

a moderate following among Caucasian Australians, but it has attracted a growing following among a wide range of ethnic Asians, most of whom are comparatively recent immigrants to Australia. These Asians join SGIA for a variety of reasons including their attraction to what many of them regard as a modern and highly relevant form of Buddhism and the fact that some new Asian immigrants or temporary residents seek the company of others from their country.

Our surveys and interviews indicate that Nichiren Buddhism as espoused by the SGI has found a niche in Australian society because its members feel that the religion fills a spiritual void. They claim a higher degree of happiness, self confidence, peace-of-mind, and a sense that they are participating in a movement that has a meaningful program promoting world peace. Companionship and an active social life are added incentives, especially for Asians like the Chinese student who come to Australia without any social connections. A spirit of openness and tolerance met or heard from a number of gay members who claim greater acceptance among SGIA members.

SGIA's demographic trends closely parallel the overall profile of Buddhists in Australia in the high percentage of ethnic Asians and the high number of young to middle aged members. While the percentage of ethnic Asians in SGIA is certainly higher than what I observed while studying SGI-Canada in the mid-1990s, I noticed a strong surge in the younger ethnic Asians when I revisited the Montreal chapter of SGI Canada in May 2002. While most of the younger ethnic Asians in either Canada or Australia had little experience with any organized religion before joining SGI, there were strong indications especially among Canadian members that joining a Buddhist group helped them to identify with their Asian roots. Several ethnic Asian SGIA members readily adopted Buddhism because of the happiness and enthusiasm expressed by existing members they encountered. They felt they had nothing to lose by giving this Buddhism a try.

David Chappell in his study of the Soka Gakkai in the United States³³ suggests "that in America there are three general categories of Buddhists: ethnic, elite, and *socially inclusive*" and that Soka Gakkai is the single, most prominent example of socially inclusive Buddhism." SGI-USA has a far more ethnically diverse membership than in Australia including many white, Afro-American, Hispanic, Japanese and other members.

³³ David Chappell, "Socially Inclusive Buddhists in America" in Machacek and Wilson, Eds., *Global Citizens*, p. 324.

SGIA is also socially inclusive because of its broad-based ethnic membership that is still about one-quarter Caucasian, but its younger large ethnic Asian (especially Southeast Asian Chinese) membership could put SGIA increasingly in the ethnic category as well.

A key ingredient of SGIA success has been its ability to maximize lay participation and its ability to work as a lay religious movement. The decline in the credibility of organized religions and increased debate over the very existence of an anthropomorphic deity open the way for religious organizations such as SGIA that insist that each member has a strong responsibility not only for his destiny, but also that of his fellow members. The most important gain that many SGIA members interviewed here cite is control over their own destinies to create their own happiness. Their triumphs here match the feelings of SGI members in other states all over Asia and give a clear reason for the successes of the Soka Gakkai all over Asia. It is the Soka Gakkai's general appeal as a Buddhist movement rather than its Japaneseness that makes it a representative Buddhist sect in Australia.

Several scholars have challenged this writer's belief that SGIA is a "success story." "How can a movement that has attracted only 2,500 members in forty years be anything but a failure?" My response is that SGIA has discouraged ephemeral membership. I encountered several instances of people who were initially attracted to the organization but who then quickly lost interest and moved on. SGIA, like its counterparts in Canada and elsewhere, prefers a smaller solid membership base to a larger less committed membership. The emphasis is now on introducing the faith to people closer to a member – family and friends. Members are urged to contribute to their local communities, and dialogue is strongly encouraged to foster deeper relationships between family and friends. The fact that overall membership jumped from roughly 2000 in the year 2000 to about 2500 in 2002 and that the greatest increase is among young members mostly in their twenties is a very positive sign.

Although SGIA seems to be moving along a safe course, there are a number of people who have left the movement for a variety of reasons. There has been considerable turnover in membership over the years, especially among Caucasian members, some of whom it is said wanted quick results from chanting and quit when little or nothing happened. Long term members will readily list wishes they had chanted for and had not obtained and new members are counseled to be patient in their faith. One must combine faith (chanting) and hard work to achieve results. For example, as one member noted, "If you chant for good exam results and do

not study, you will of course fail. If you chant for good health and don't go to the doctor, you may get ill.”

We saw evidence with some members of some annoyance with both the style of leadership which is often seen as being too bureaucratic and failing to communicate with members in outlying areas. One member in a smaller city noted that there is too little communication or contact with leaders in Sydney. “In the past there were times when information on Japan-based training courses didn't come through to us - we had to fight to find out and complained when we weren't told.” The situation has improved, but not entirely. I was also told that some leaders in the past had been insensitive and arrogant. While some members complained that meetings can be very long and boring (and I participated in one or two myself), a large-scale youth weekend held in July 2002 appeared to be fully enjoyed by most participants.

We also heard from a number of members, most of them Caucasian, the organization had become “too Asian” in its style. Some criticized a rather “Japanese” hierarchy in leadership and organization as well as Asian ways of reaching decisions and holding meetings. Asian members, on the other hand, lauded the open and democratic nature of the organization. One Asian member noted ironically that a problem was that “Australians always want to do their own thing.” Overall, however, people seem pretty happy in the way that SGIA is managed, although this has not always been the case. SGIA as a whole demonstrates a high degree of growth and stability. There is some concern that a few younger members do join for social reasons—where religious belief and faith are secondary.

Although it is still a relatively small movement, SGIA has developed a strong base of committed and enthusiastic members. Although growth has been relatively slow up until this point, survival of the organization seems assured due to the strong commitment of the base.