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The Development of Soka Gakkai in Hong Kong

Ka Shing NG

Abstract: This paper is based on Ng's master's thesis, "Soka Gakkai in Hong Kong: localizing a Japanese New Religion in a Chinese Community" completed during his study in the Chinese University of Hong Kong from 2009 to 2011. It includes scholarly ideas and responses to the subject matter based on his presentations at the conferences by Asian Studies Association of Hong Kong (ASAHK) 2011, Asian Conference on Cultural Studies (ACCS) Osaka 2011, and Asian Studies Conference Japan (ASCJ) Tokyo 2010. This paper studies the localization of Soka Gakkai (SG) in Hong Kong in terms of its development, practices and teachings. Although SG is an extensively studied topic, its operation in Hong Kong is little-discussed. Ng attempts to answer two issues: (1) how has SG developed in Hong Kong, and (2) to what extent has SG been localized in terms of practices and teachings. He also hopes that this little piece can fill a gap in the research on SG movement. In addition, Ng owes this publication opportunity to the Special Committee of Publication, and Prof. Sakurai Yoshihide.

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1. Introduction

This paper intends to study the localization of Soka Gakkai (SG) in Hong Kong. SG is a Japanese new religion founded in the 1930s based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. It has established overseas branches in 192 countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia,

and Oceania.¹ Official record claims that it has recruited 12 million members worldwide.² The globalization of SG has drawn a lot of scholarly attention from the western academia, such as Daniel A. Metraux, Karel Dobbelaere, and Bryan Wilson, who conduct case studies of SG in the U. S., Britain, Canada, and some parts of Southeast Asia. In the Chinese academic world, while Ikeda Daisaku himself, the Honorary President of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a very popular topic (Su 1997, Cai 2003, Tan 2010, and Li et al. 2009, 2010), research on the religion itself is rare (Li 1996 and Igarashi 2006).³ Japanese writers and scholars, such as Fujiwara Hirotsu, Hirano Sadao, Yano Jyunya and Shimada Hitomi tend to focus on the relations between *Komeito* and Japan SG, and Ikeda's controversies, but not on SG movement beyond Japan. With the exception of Metraux, who attempts to include Hong Kong and other Southeast Asian countries in his studies, most research on the SG movement focuses on Japan and the Western world.⁴ Therefore, the main reason for choosing Hong Kong as a case study is to fill the gap in the current studies of SG movement. This paper attempts to answer the following two issues: (1) Why has SG successfully developed in Hong Kong, and (2) to what extent has SG been localized in terms of practices and teachings. This paper starts with a brief introduction of SG development in Hong Kong, followed by a discussion of the conceptual argument behind globalization and localization. The rest of this essay deals with the two issues I just raised. The methodology adopted in this research includes interviews, participant observation, and studies of existing sources which include scholarly works and official publications of SG.⁵

2. Overview of HKSGI

SG has expanded itself outside the island nation and established overseas branches in many regions including Hong Kong. Starting with only 15 members in 1961, the membership of Hong Kong Soka Gakkai International (HKSGI) has reached 50,000 nowadays.⁶ The steady growth in member size may be attributed to its localization policies and recruitment strategies, as well as the socio-political and religious background of the Hong Kong community. SG provides spiritual

1 According to Helen Hardacre, "new religions" (shinko shukyo 新興宗教) appeared around 1800 in Japan. They have a great variety of doctrines, but different from those of secular society and from the so-called established religions. They emphasize "this-worldly-benefits", charisma of the leader, and faith healing. See Helen Hardacre, *Kurozumikyo and the new religions of Japan* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp.3-5.

2 SGI Official Homepage, <http://www.sgi.org/about.html>

3 Various Chinese universities have established research centre to study Ikeda and his thoughts, such as Northeast Normal University and Dalian Polytechnic University.

4 Metraux conducted case studies of Hong Kong SG in his books, *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: the Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia* (2001) and *How Soka Gakkai Became a Global Buddhist Movement: the Internationalization of a Japanese Religion* (2010).

5 SG official publications include magazines (*New Century Monthly Magazine* and *SGI Monthly Photo Magazine*), newsletters (*Lai Ming Newsletter* and *Seikyo Shinbum*), and books written by Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku. However, these sources may contain bias and therefore have to be handled critically.

6 According to the latest official figure, the member size of HKSGI has reached 50,000 in 2011 though there is possibility of inflated numbers. See *Brochure of HKSGI Cultural Festival 2011* (Hong Kong: HKSGI, 2011), p.16.

Table 1. Development of HKSGI from the 1950s

Year	Events
1950s	A few SG members joined the movement in Japan and came to Hong Kong independently.
1961	On 28 January, Ikeda Daisaku visited Hong Kong for the first time and encouraged the 15 members from 8 households to establish a SG branch in Hong Kong (SG Official). The lack of financial resources, human power, and gathering places characterized the difficult times of Hong Kong SG development in the 1960s and 1970s.
1963	Register with the Hong Kong Government as Hong Kong Soka Gakkai Buddhist Society.
1966	An ethnic Japanese, Kajiura Hisashi 梶浦壽, was appointed by Ikeda to lead the organization. He later changed his name to Lee Kon Sau 李剛壽 to make himself more “Hong Kong”.
1974	Ikeda made a transit in Hong Kong to enter the border of China Ikeda because there was no direct flight from Japan to China right after the normalization of Sino-Japan relation.
1975	Soka Gakki International (SGI) was established to coordinate overseas SG movement.
1998	Membership reached 42,000
1991	Renamed as Soka Gakkai International of Hong Kong Limited (HKSGI).
2011	Membership reached 50,000

support to its members, who claim that their lives have improved gradually after they became members and started chanting *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*.⁷ Besides, the organization has also built up a very strong grass-roots network by organizing different cultural and social activities. Recently, the organization has successfully recruited more social elites, such as businessmen, lawyers, professors, and doctors; their participation further legitimizes SG development in Hong Kong. Table 1 summarizes the development of SG in Hong Kong.

3. Globalization vs. localization?

In the age of globalization, foreign cultures, such as music, movies, food, and fashion are, to different degrees, flourishing in every corner of the world. The conceptual argument behind globalization and localization is that the two concepts are regarded as highly dichotomized. Globalization emphasizes the unification of world’s order which ultimately leads to the homogenization of culture, whereas localization counteracts the trend of unification of cultural norms by upholding the indigenous cultures.⁸ However, these two concepts over-emphasize the uni-directional flow of cultural elements and underestimate the possibility of the assimilation of new cultures and local cultures. The localization of culture, including religion, is always a two-directional process as the historian of religion Kitagawa wrote in *On Understanding Japanese Religion*:

We are all aware of the dialectical relationship that exists between tradition and new conditions in all historical religions. In every situation, the meaning of a new condition is to a greater or lesser degree colored and conditioned by the weight of the given tradition,

7 In Japanese 南無妙法蓮華經, literally meaning “devotion to the mystic law of the *Lotus Sutra*”, also known as *daimoku* 題目.

8 Takis Fotopoulos, “Globalization, the Reformist Left and the Anti-Globalization ‘Movement’”, *Democracy & Nature: The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol.7, No.2, (July 2001).

whereas tradition is inevitably modified and reinterpreted by new conditions.⁹

Kitagawa also pointed out that “the adaptation of a tradition to new conditions is rationalized and authenticated by appeal to certain features of the tradition itself”.¹⁰ In other words, the localization of religion is facilitated by indigenous elements, such as mindsets, languages, and traditions of local people. Following this line of argument, I suggest that SG has been undergoing a similar process of localization in Hong Kong, affecting Hong Kong society on the one hand and being affected by Hong Kong cultures on the other hand.

4. Why has SG successfully developed in Hong Kong?

In half a century, HKSGI has evolved from a small religious group to an organization consisting of 50,000 members.¹¹ This paper suggests that five factors have facilitated the localization of SG in Hong Kong: (1) an image of an organization that promotes education, culture, and peace, (2) an image of a Buddhist organization, (3) a low-profile policy, (4) the idea of individual empowerment, and (5) cultural proximity between Japan and Hong Kong. HKSGI portrays itself as an organization that promotes cultural activities, education, and peace. Through the establishment of schools (Soka Kindergarten in HK, two primary schools on the Mainland), donations (to places affected by natural disasters, and promoting education in universities), and cultural activities (seminars, exhibitions and festivals), HKSGI has been recognized by some Hong Kong people and the government. The *Quality Review Summary Report (Pre-primary Institutions)* conducted by Hong Kong Education Bureau in 2008 recognized Soka Kindergarten as a quality educational institution.¹² Three teachers from Soka Kindergarten received the Chief Executive’s Award for Teaching Excellence in 2008.¹³ In the banquet celebrating the 50th anniversary of HKSGI, Dr. Shi Zi-qing, Vice-Chairperson of the Education Committee of National People’s Congress recognized the educational and cultural contribution of HKSGI, saying the organization is like “a spring in a cultural-desert”.¹⁴ It seems that HKSGI’s efforts in promoting

9 Kitagawa Joseph Mitsuo, *On understanding Japanese religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.203.

10 An example Kitagawa used is the localization of Buddhism in Japan. Since its arrival in Japan in the 6th century, Buddhism has solidified its roots in the Japanese society with the facilitation of Shinto-Buddhism amalgamation (神仏習合 *shinbutsu-shugo*) based on the theory of *honji-sujaku* 本地垂迹, which suggests that *kami* (gods) are local manifestations of Buddhist deities. Ibid.

11 As far as the author is aware of, the academic field of religious demography is underdeveloped in Hong Kong. A more reliable source came from the *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 on China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau)* published by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the U. S. Department of State which quotes the estimation made by a Hong Kong religious scholar: 1.5 million Buddhists and Taoists; 550,000 Protestant Christians; over 400,000 Roman Catholics; 20,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); over 100,000 Muslims; over 40,000 Hindus; 2,000 to 3,000 Sikhs; 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, and 300 to 500 Falun Gong practitioners.

12 The *Quality Review Summary Report (Pre-primary Institutions) on Hong Kong Soka Kindergarten*, can be retrieved from Hong Kong Soka Kindergarten official homepage, http://www.soka.edu.hk/download_file.php?file=pdf/report_2007.pdf

13 *Lai Ming Newsletter*. (no.2139) (Hong Kong: HKSGI, 2011).

14 Hong Kong is always criticized as a cultural-desert because public policies tend to support economic

education and cultural activities have successfully gained the recognition from some local people and the government.

Secondly, HKSGI appeals to the local people because the organization emphasizes its Buddhist nature and teachings. Being one of the most influential traditional religions in Hong Kong, Buddhist teachings have become part of Hong Kong culture, and are incorporated into the mindsets, language system and behaviors of many Hong Kong people. In everyday life, Hong Kong people speak of many Buddhist concepts, such as *karma*, the cycle of life and death, and “good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil” etc. Therefore, instead of emphasizing its specific Nichiren origin, it is more effective to promote itself as a “general Buddhist organization” to earn public acceptance. Meetings targeting new members are called “Buddhist Teaching Seminars for New Friends”, with no indication of which sect it belongs to. Members introduced SG as a “Buddhist group” and only talked about its Nichiren background if the conversation went smoothly. In the official website, magazines, and newsletters, HKSGI describes itself as a “lay Buddhist organization”, and mentions its Nichiren origin occasionally. Therefore, HKSGI tends to portray itself as a general Buddhist group because being too specific about its Japanese origin may draw unfavorable feedback from the public.

Thirdly, HKSGI has adopted a low-profile policy in recruiting members. SG leaders have realized the negative consequences brought by aggressive promulgation of new religious groups in the USA, as well as SG in Japan during the 1950s. Therefore, the practice of approaching strangers on the street and inviting them to meetings, which is known as *shakubuku*, has been abandoned by all SG branches, including Hong Kong. According to their recruitment practice, members promote SG teachings only if they have developed a close relationship with the person. They also seek for the most suitable timing and opportunity to introduce SG which is usually when the persons have difficulties in life and hope for spiritual support. Non-members are also encouraged to chant for their own benefits and experience the religion on a trial-basis. Gordon regards this as a “pray now, believe later” strategy adopted by SG.¹⁵ This approach does not lead to an exponential rise in membership size, but it ensures a slow yet steady growth of the organization.

Fourthly, the idea of individual empowerment may also explain the steady development of SG abroad. SG teaches its members to be confident, optimistic and positive toward life. Many members believe that they can achieve both spiritual and material benefits through chanting *daimoku*, and improve their own life and society through participating in SG activities. This thinking is in line with the idea of individual empowerment advocated by SG:

We can change our own lives and the world for the better. While the role of institutions or governments is important, change that starts within each person’s life is seen as the surest way to tackle the problems facing the world in the 21st century. Many people feel hopeless about

development and care less about cultural development. See Ng Yee Man, “Xiang Gang Guo Ji Chuang Jia Xue Hui Ju Xing 50 Zhou Nian Qing Zhu Jiu Hui” (the cocktail party celebrating the 50th anniversary of HKSGI), Wenweipo, 1 February 2011, <http://paper.wenweipo.com/2011/02/01/zt1102010001.htm>

¹⁵ Andrew Gordon, *A modern history of Japan: from Tokugawa times to the present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.259.

these issues, but SGI stresses that people have the power to change their circumstances, and its public education and outreach projects aim to inspire people and equip them with information that they can use to make a difference in their communities.¹⁶

The idea of individual empowerment encourages members to fulfill their potential and take responsibility for their own choices, and is therefore compatible with the never-give-up spirit and this-worldly orientedness shared by many Hong Kong people. This belief is especially attractive to some elite and ambitious Hong Kong people who want to improve their lives and society, and be contributive to the world.

Last but not least, cultural proximity between Japan and Hong Kong has facilitated the development of SG in the Chinese community. The most significant similarity is the use of *kanji* (Chinese characters) in both the Japanese and Chinese language systems. Many Japanese religious concepts and vocabulary can be directly used and pronounced in the corresponding Cantonese phonetics. The huge number of Chinese characters in SG teachings, for example, *ningen-kakumei* 人間革命 (human revolution), *shukumei-tenkan* 宿命轉換 (changing one's fate), and *itai-doshin* 異体同心 (different body, same soul), reminds Hong Kong members that they are living in the same Sinosphere (or Chinese-character cultural sphere) with the Japanese people, sharing similar cultural backgrounds, philosophies, ethics, and values. These similarities make some Hong Kong people develop a sense of intimacy towards the Japanese religion.

5. To what extent has SG been localized in terms of teachings and practices?

Some important SG concepts were localized and re-interpreted with local flavors. For example, the concept *ningen kakumei* 人間革命 (human revolution), which means that “the fundamental process of inner transformation of oneself toward a greater-self”, is considered as very similar to Confucian teachings according to a senior SG Education Committee member, who was also a Professor of History and former Pro-Vice-Chancellor of a local university. He said “Confucianism suggests that human beings can achieve the status of “Saint” or “moral person” by his own effort. This way of thinking is in line with the core value of SG which suggests that everyone has the potential to transcend one's inner-self and become Buddha”. In this way, members may find it easier to understand and accept the notion of *ningen kakumei* with the help of Confucian ideas, which is one of the important components of Hong Kong culture.

Another example is the expression *itai-doshin* 異体同心, which frequently appears in both private conversations and public speeches during SG gatherings. Literally meaning “different bodies, same soul”, it emphasizes that different individuals can work together and create the desired outcome. This idea is highly compatible with the family-centered ideology held by many Hong Kong people and is particularly appealing to those who seek a sense of community in an ever-changing and individualized society. As Metraux put it, “SG has succeeded in Asia also because it provides members with a new extended family”.¹⁷ In the time of crisis, the idea of

16 SGI Official Homepage, <http://mod.sgi.org/community-initiatives/community-faq.html>

17 Daniel Metraux, “The Expansion of SG into Southeast Asia” In *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*, eds David Machacek and Bryan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.425.

itai-doshin was even more emphasized by SG to encourage its members to unite together and overcome the challenges, such as the economic downturn in 1997, the spread of SARS in 2003, and 2009 to 2010 when financial crisis and social unrest hit the Hong Kong society.

Hong Kong member practices SG teachings differently from their Japanese counterparts in terms of language, location, and format. In HKSGI, Cantonese is the primary language, while English and Japanese are used in specific branches by foreigners. Publications, such as magazines (*New Century Magazine*), newsletter (*Lai Ming Newsletter*), and the handbook for chanting (*Daily Practice of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin*), are released in both traditional Chinese and English versions. Handbooks marked with Teochew phonetic symbols are also available in Hong Kong, indicating a certain amount of members are Teochew speakers. In Japan, *gongyo* (chanting) and meetings are mostly conducted at members' homes, while in Hong Kong most gatherings are conducted at cultural centers due to the relatively smaller living area for most Hong Kong people. Besides, gatherings (including *gongyo* and seminars) are conducted in a more relaxing atmosphere and informal settings, with babies crying, kids running around, and members talking on phones. Members also come in and get out the meeting room freely. Similar scenes hardly happen in Japan as they are more concerned about punctuality, formality (stick to procedures and rules), and are more sensitive to noise. No wonder an ethnic Japanese SG member who is now working in Hong Kong, said "SG meetings held in Japan are more *kibishii* (serious) while that in Hong Kong are *raku* (relaxing)". Besides, local elements are also incorporated into SG practices. For examples, Cantonese pop songs are used as teaching materials; meetings are held in the names of local festivals (Chinese Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival etc) to increase members' attendance; and local pop stars were invited to perform in Cultural festivals etc.

In terms of rituals, SG members can request wedding ceremony or funeral conducted in SG fashion. Intense chanting of *nam-myoho-renge-kyo* signifies the characteristics of both rituals. Wedding ceremonies are conducted in the SG cultural center, a place where they practice *gongyo* in normal days becomes the wedding hall which is decorated, sometimes with a series of pink, heart-shaped balloons; a large banner with the names of the couples is hung on the wall; a Chinese character *hei* 囍 is put on the wall, meaning "double happiness", which is always used in Chinese wedding ceremony. For funerals, in reality not all members stick to SG fashions strictly. In some cases, members chose to conduct their family members' funerals (who are also SG members) in the traditional ways (mostly Taoist or Buddhist style), or in a combination of both the traditional and SG styles in order to perverse local traditions and to maintain harmonious relations among family members and relatives. The idea of incorporating two religious elements into one single ritual may be controversial, since it challenges the exclusive nature of Nichiren Buddhism. On the other hand, it indicates that SG is highly tolerant to local cultures which may help the organization avoid conflicts with other religions.

6. Controversies of SG in Japan and Hong Kong

One of the challenges faced by SG is its ambiguous relationship with Japanese politics that has posed a negative effect on its development in Hong Kong. In Japan, SG was involved in the

controversial “freedom of the press incident” in which *Komeito* tried to obstruct Professor Fujiwara Hirotatsu (Meiji University) from publishing the book *Soka Gakkai wo Kiru 創価学会を斬る* (Critic of Soka Gakkai). SG is also criticized for violating the idea of separation of religion from politics stated in Article 20 of the Constitution of Japan.¹⁸ Ikeda is criticized as a power seeker who pursues fame and power by making donations to various educational institutions. By March 2011, he has been awarded honorary doctorates and professorships by over 300 universities.¹⁹ Among them, over 110 honors were given by universities in China.²⁰ Few Hong Kong people (including SG members) realize the connection of SG and *Komeito*, yet some of them are worried about the delicate ties between the two. In 2009, two donors decided to donate HK\$ 10 million to the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and to rename a student hostel to “Ikeda Daisaku Hostel” 池田大作宿舎 as one of the give-and-take conditions.²¹ This incident aroused a controversy among students, teachers, and alumni of CUHK, and they expressed their concerns about the incentives of the donors and the political nature of SG.²² At the end, the two donors and CUHK came to a compromise and decided to rename the hostel to “Sun Yat-sen Hall” 孫逸仙樓 in anticipation of the 100th anniversary of Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命. Besides, SG’s donation to City University of Hong Kong also drew opposition from their students and teachers because they feared SG was a “cult”.²³ These examples indicate that SG’s ties with politics and negative public perception of this organization may pose a negative effect on its development which HKSGI has yet to solve in the coming future.

7. Conclusion

In the process of localization, HKSGI has developed innovative recruitment strategies to earn the acceptance from the public, such as emphasizing its Buddhist nature, promoting education, peace, and cultural activities, and adopting a low profile, apolitical policy. Difficult concepts, such as *ningen-kakumei* and *itai-doshin*, are reinterpreted with the help of local ideas shared by most Hong Kong people. Besides, the use of *kanji* in both Chinese and Japanese language systems also facilitated the spread of SG teachings and improved members’ understanding of SG

18 Tamaru Nariyoshi, “Soka Gakkai in Historical Perspective” in *Global Citizens: the Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*, ed. David Machacek and Bryan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.39.

19 “Academic honors conferred upon SGI President Daisaku”. Ikeda Daisaku Website, <http://www0.daisaku-ikeda.org/sub/resources/records/degree/by-date-order.html>

20 *Bauhinia Magazine*, special edition vol.1, August 2010. 2nd edition (Hong Kong: Thousand Wisdom Ltd, 2010), pp.68-9.

21 In addition to donation, Dr. Lam also sponsored the publication of two books, *Ikeda Daisaku and China* (2009) and *Ikeda Daisaku and World Literature* (2010), revealing a strong relationships between the two parties.

22 Some students were worried that this donation might probably bring in more political interventions to the university and violate the idea of “political neutrality” upheld by many universities.

23 In 20 March 1995, members of *Aum Shinrikyo* released sarin to several lines of Tokyo Metro, causing 13 deaths and injuring nearly one thousand people. This terrorist attack drew worldwide attention to the potential danger posed by Japanese new religions. For this reason, some Hong Kong people became resistant (or even hostile) to these kinds of new religions and stereotyped them as dangerous “je-gaau” 邪教 (cult, in Japanese *jyakyō*).

concepts. The steady growth in membership may prove that its localization policy is on the right track. Although SG is developing steadily in Hong Kong, it still has to improve public perception on the organization by carefully clarifying its delicate ties with politics, and controversies of Ikeda, as well as improving public understanding of the organization with a more effective approach.

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