International Research Forum : Religious Cultures in Asia : Mutual Transformations through Multiple Modernities

When Japanese Buddhism and Chinese Folk Religion Meet in Hong Kong: Representation and Interpretation of Soka Gakkai in the Chinese Settings

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Abstract

Soka Gakkai (SG) is a New Religious Movement (NRM) founded in Japan in 1937 based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. Along with globalization, SG has expanded to the global religious market including Hong Kong. Established in 1963, Hong Kong Soka Gakkai International (HKSGI) has nowadays extended its memberships beyond the community of ethnic Japanese in Hong Kong and successfully built a strong grass-roots network among ethnic Chinese (approximately 50,000 members in total). This paper discusses the development and localization of HKSGI, with a focus on the interactions between SGI and local folk religion when they meet in Hong Kong. For instance, how has SG represented itself in Hong Kong, where most people practice a fusion of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism? On the other hand, how have the local Chinese people interpreted the practices and teachings of SGI, which are so different from the form of Buddhism they have been practicing? Based on a short case study of a HKSGI member's funeral, I also explore how local religiosities may be incorporated into SGI practices and how such fusion is made possible considering the localization strategies of SGI. In short, this paper argues that the principle of *zuiho-bini* (local application of Buddhist doctrines) has allowed SGI to adapt to local Hong Kong cultures and provides room for cultural diversity to flourish during the localization process.

Introduction

In a globalized world, the flow of economic and cultural influences has become more rapid. In the dimension of religious exchanges, we can find religions breaking through geographical and cultural boundaries and being practiced by people of different backgrounds. The spread of religions from its origin to other cultural soils, which took several decades in the past, is now facilitated by the rapidly changing technologies of transportation and communications which allows massive transfer of religious information and mobilization of human resources. In other words, globalization has not only brought closer the economic markets, but also the religious markets; consumers now have more choices in the ''marketplace of religions'' than before.

The increasing flow of cultures (including religion) across national boundaries has furthered the debate over "globalization vs localization". Globalization emphasizes the unification of world's order, which, many people argue, will ultimately lead to the homogenization of culture, whereas localization is a force counteracting or resisting such trends by upholding local characteristics (Fotopoulos, 2001). We might be tempted by such notion of "global vs local" to view cultural encounters as a fight between "foreign cultures" and "local cultures", in which each side is trying to eliminate the other. In fact, cultural encounters are, in most of the cases, a process of interactions and communications between foreign cultures and indigenous cultures, rather than the imposition of cultural hegemony from the producers on the receivers. More interestingly, new forms of "hybrid" cultures are often created during such encounters. For instance, try to google "McDonald's in Thailand" and you will see pictures of Ronald McDonalds with Thai greeting. Whenever a new form of culture arrives, it affects the local community and at the same time is adopted, modified, and nurtured by the local soil with indigenous elements.

The "hybridization" of culture also occurs during the encounters between different religious traditions. Foreign religions are often adopted in the new cultural settings with local colors, as shown in the case of Maria Kannon in 17th century Japan when Christianity was prohibited and the popular hybrid image of Guanyin (the Bodhisattva) and the Virgin Mary in 14th China (Song, 2008).

Following this line of argument, this paper explores what happens when a Japanese religion, namely Soka Gakkai International, encounters folk religions in Hong Kong. How has SG represented itself in Hong Kong, where most people practice a fusion of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism? On the other hand, how have the local Chinese people interpreted the practices and teachings of SGI, which are so different from the form of Buddhism they have been practicing? In particular, based on a short case study of a HKSGI member's funeral, I explore how local religiosities and traditional values may be incorporated into SGI practices and how such fusion is made possible considering the localization strategies of SGI.

HKSGI: An overview

Founded in 1937, Soka Gakkai (SG) is a New Religious Movement (NRM) originated in Japan based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. Along with globalization, which is defined as the

increasing flow of people, information, goods, services, and other resources across the national and cultural boundary (Wuthnow and Offutt, 2008), SG has expanded to the global religious market. Nowadays, SG has established its branches in 192 countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, with a membership of 12 million worldwide ("About us", SGI official homepage).

The history of SG in Hong Kong can be traced back to the 1950s when there were around 15 SG members who joined the movement in Japan and came to Hong Kong independently. Since there was no formal SG organization at that time, these members maintained their faith through practicing *gongyō* (chanting) on their own. In January 1961, Ikeda Daisaku, the president of SG at that time, made his first visit to Hong Kong and initiated the formal establishment of a SG branch in this small city. In September 1963, Hong Kong Soka Gakkai Buddhist Society was officially established. A young Japanese college graduate, Kajiura Hisashi (who later adopted a Chinese name Lee Kon Sau) was appointed by Ikeda to lead the organization who still occupied that post until 2009 (Lee, 2009).

The organization was renamed Soka Gakkai International of Hong Kong (HKSGI) in 1991 due to the separation of Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu in Japan. Under Lee's leadership, HKSGI expanded steadily and the membership reached 42,000 in 1998. The figure further increased to 50,000 in 2011 (Metraux, 2001: 28). The current president of the organization is Mr. Ng Cho Yuk, and Lee became the Honorary President of HKSGI and the vice-president of SGI. The transition of leadership from ethnic Japanese to a Hong Kong person also indicates the gradual localization of HKSGI.

Representation of SGI in Hong Kong

My previous paper (Ng, 2012) argues the localization of SGI in Hong Kong is quite successful (as seen from the steady increase of membership) because of the five strategies adopted by the organization, which are (1) building an image of an organization that promotes education, culture, and peace, (2) emphasizing its Buddhist origin,(3) adopting a low-profile policy, (4) promoting the idea of individual empowerment, and (5) emphasizing the cultural proximity between Japan and Hong Kong. In this paper, I focus and further elaborate on the second point, arguing how SGI has strategically represented itself in Hong Kong as a "general/lay Buddhist organization" to adapt to the Buddhist religiosity widely embraced by ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong.

Buddhism is one of the most influential religions in Hong Kong. While not necessarily calling themselves Buddhists, many Hong Kong people are, to different extent, committed to the teachings and practices of Buddhism in their everyday life in the form of "folk Buddhism" (Overmyer 1972), which can be understood as a combination of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist doctrines, ritual traditions, and ancestor worship. According to the Hong Kong Government (2016), there are more than one million followers of Buddhism in Hong Kong (total population is around seven million), similar to the results 11.4% suggested by the World Vale Survey (2013).

Also, thanks to the media adaptation of Buddhism-related works of literature (such as *Journey to the West*, or Xiyou Ji), Buddhist teachings, which have already taken root in Chinese societies, became further popularized in Hong Kong culture and language system. For instance, phrases and vocabulary with Buddhist origin are widely used in everyday life, such as Karma and "good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil". Buddhist monks and nuns are often highly respected, and Buddhist teachings and values well-received by the general public.

While the positive perception of Buddhism in Hong Kong may be advantageous to SGI development, the kind of Buddhism Hong Kong people are familiar with is a form of Chinese folk Buddhism but not a specific sect of Japanese Buddhism known as Nichiren. Throughout my research, less than 10% of the people I talked to have ever heard of the term "Nichiren". Strategically speaking, therefore, instead of over-emphasizing the Nichiren background, identifying itself as a ''general'' Buddhist organization seems to be more effective when it comes to earning public acceptance.

Throughout my research, I found that HKSGI, whether intended or unintended, has adopted a similar strategy of highlighting its status as a "lay" and "general Buddhist" group. For example, an event held to recruit new members are called "Buddhist Teaching Seminars for New Friends". As the name suggests, there is little indication of which sect it belongs to. The speaker introduced SG as a ''Buddhist group'' at first and mentioned its Nichiren background after a while. It serves to send a clear and strong message to the audiences that SGI is, *first and foremost*, a Buddhist organization in nature. The notion of Nichiren Buddhism is introduced when it comes to the question of which Buddhism is most suitable in the age of *mappo*[1].

Similarly, on HKSGI official website, magazines (e.g. *New Century Magazine*), and newsletter (e.g. *Lai Ming Newsletter*), HKSGI tends to describe itself as a "lay Buddhist organization" at the very beginning, and that fact that it is based on the Buddhist teachings of Nichiren often comes next. Creating a first impression of HKSGI as a "lay Buddhist organization" seems to be of higher priority than explaining its origin. For example, the original Chinese text found on HKSGI official homepage is as follows:

> Soka Gakkai International of Hong Kong (HKSGI) is a lay Buddhist association (in Chinese: 民間佛教團體) that promotes peace, culture, and education based on Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. (translated by the author) ("About HKSGI", HKSGI Official Homepage)

Calling itself a "lay Buddhist association" makes it sound closer to the ordinary people and less hierarchical in terms of organizational management. In fact, it is important for the group to emphasize its grassroots nature because its separation from Nichiren Shoshu in 1991 means the group

[1] According to Buddhist teachings, human history can be divided into three stages: *shobo* 正法, *zobo* 像法 and *mappo* 末法. In the period of *shobo* (the Age of Right Dharma), Buddhism prospers and leads people to enlightenment. While in *zobo* (the Age of Semblance Dharma), Buddhism becomes established firmly in society but has signs of decline. Finally, when it comes to *mappo* (the age of degeneration of the Dharma), Buddhism completely loses its power to help people (Kirimura, 1980).

is no longer under the control of clergies and is managed only by lay people.

Cultural Festival 2011 is one of the biggest highlights in recent HKSGI history. On the pamphlet disturbed to all participants (including non-members), there is a short introduction about the organization, which writes "SGI is a lay Buddhist association with more than 12 million members in 192 countries and territories worldwide". The rest of the passage then covers the education, cultural, peace activities of SGI. Information about its Nichiren background seems to be omitted. As the pamphlet is a promotional material to be read by non-members as well, I am tempted to believe that the organization might be trying to portray itself as a "lay Buddhist group" and dilute its Nichiren background in their "first encounter" with potential recruits.

Identifying itself as a member of the larger Buddhist community also helps the organization cut ties with the so-called "evil cults". This is important because Hong Kong people have a negative impression of Japanese religion, as they still remember the tragedy of "sarin gas incident' happened on 20 March 1995, when members of the notorious Aum Shinrikyo released sarin to several lines of Tokyo Metro, causing 13 deaths and injuring nearly one thousand people. For this reason, many Hong Kong people became resistant (or even hostile) to Japanese new religions, and such public sentiment is an obstacle to SGI's development. Therefore, it is preferable for HKSGI to represent itself as a member of the Buddhist family at the very beginning and makes clear of its Nichiren lineage in the second step.

When SG and Local Religious Cultures Meet/Clash

Gohonzon vs Buddha Statues

The most commonly practiced religion in Hong Kong is a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, or sometimes known as *Sanjiao* ("three-religion"). Many people set up altars at home to worship ancestors, Buddha, Bodhisattva, and/or some kinds of Taoist deities like Tu Di (earth god), Zao Jun (kitchen god), and Guan Gong (Lord Guan). Also, visiting Buddhist temples and Taoist shrines is a regular activity for some, and a seasonal activity for many. Especially, due to a practical approach to religion, people in Hong Kong often visit temples and shrines on special occasions to pray for earthly benefits, such as business prosperity, good luck, and recovery from disease. In addition to temple/ shrine visits, in Chinese religious cultures, the object of worship is often in the form of a physical and human-like image, such as Buddhist and Bodhisattva statues. These characteristics of Chinese religiosities and practices have presented some daunting challenges to SGI.

In SG teachings, chanting the mantra *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, or daimoku, in front of a mandala known as *Gohonzon* can "unfailingly transport one across the sea of life's inevitable sufferings to the distant shore of enlightenment" (SGI Nichiren Buddhism Library). While the organization applies the Buddhist idea *zuiho-bini*, or "the adaptation of Buddhism to the unique traditions of any particular culture" (Metraux, 1996: 44), chanting *daimoku* in front of *gohonzon* is an important notion that should be strictly followed by all members as it is the core of SG teaching and practice.

The worship of religious symbols other than *Gohonzon* is strongly prohibited.

In Hong Kong, this has become a big issue. As many members had been folk Buddhism practitioners before they joined SG, they strongly felt that worshipping Buddha or Bodhisattva statues, as well as ancestors and other deities, and/or visiting Buddhist temples and/or Taoist shrines are "normal practices" for being a Buddhist. Therefore, many members feel odd to worship *gohonzon* because it is "a scroll containing Chinese and Sanskrit characters" (*The Gohonzon*, SGI official homepage) without any images of Buddha or Bodhisattva. Some members wonder if SG considers itself as a member of the Buddhist traditions and community, why they are not allowed to do what they have been practicing "as a Buddhist". In fact, a similar problem has occurred in Japan in the 1950s when SG was under the leadership of Toda Josei. In response to the popular practice of ancestor worship in Japan, which is against the teachings of SG, he developed an aggressive way to attack other religions and encouraged the practice of smashing household ancestral altars (Tamaru, 2000).

To deal with member's doubts about the worship of *gohonzon* and clashes between SG practices and folk religious practices, HKSGI has never gone so far as to smash members' altars. Instead of ordering members to strictly follow SG teachings in an aggressive way, the organization has taken a gradual and tolerant approach. First of all, HKSGI encourages members to "gradually" give up worshiping objects other than *gohonzon* because it understands that it takes time for members, especially the elderly, to completely get rid of their reliance on Buddha and Bodhisattva images. Most senior members I have interviewed believed that having a transition period is more practical as it is difficult for some members to adapt to a sudden change of religious beliefs and practices.

To promote current and potential members' understanding of *gohonzon* is also an important step. An item about *gohonzon* is specially created in the "frequently asked question" session of HKSGI homepage. Here is part of the answer.

> Why is there no Buddhist idols? What is the Gohonzon?
> […] Based on the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, Nichiren Daishonin taught that one could not attain enlightenment or open the path to true happiness by worshiping an external Buddha figure […] The Gohonzon (object of worship) which Nichiren Daishonin had inscribed is the mandala that is fully endowed with the mutual possession of the ten worlds, which is the manifestation of the entity of life. ("Gohonzon", HKSGI homepage)

During SG meetings, *gohonzon* is a topic frequently used in lectures and discussions. Senior members from the education division visit different branches occasionally and give lectures on SG teachings, explaining the meaning and power of *gohonzon* to junior members. The first and foremost important idea they want to emphasize is that *gohonzon* embodies all divine deities. Chanting *daimoku* in front of *gohonzon* basically means praying to the universe and to all the divine deities, including Buddha and Bodhisattva. In a sense, members do not necessarily have to entirely abandon their belief in Buddha or other deities since they are substantially part of what *gohonzon* represents:

the entity of life and the ten worlds ("Gohonzon", HKSGI homepage).

Another important belief that is repeatedly highlighted during SG meetings is that *gohonzon* is not "a representation of something we lack or must acquire from a source outside ourselves," but something that "mirrors the qualities of our inherent Buddha nature, such as wisdom, courage, compassion and life force." ("Gohonzon", SGI homepage). Therefore, the main purpose of chanting in front of *gohonzon* is not to worship the Buddha or Law as externals, but rather to reveal one's Buddha nature:

> […] reciting portions of the Lotus Sutra while facing the Gohonzon, is an act of reaffirming and revering the dignity of their lives as well as the dignity of all life. By revering the Buddha nature inherent within their own lives and depicted in the Gohonzon, practitioners are able to manifest the qualities of Buddhahood. ("Gohonzon", SGI homepage)

At the end of each chant, members are required to make four prayers, namely "appreciation for life's protective forces", "appreciation for the *Gohonzon*", "for the attainment of *kosen-rufu* (spread of Buddhism)", and "personal prayers and prayer for the deceased" (HKSGI, 2010). The whole religious practice is known as *gongyo*. Since prayers are directed to "protective forces", which may refer to all divine deities, and also to the deceased, the concerns of folk Buddhist practitioners, like the worship of Buddha and ancestors, are indeed taken care of, in a subtle way, within SG's practices and belief system.

One Funeral Two Styles

Like any other religious traditions, SG has its own style of funeral services, which is characterized by the continuous chanting of *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. In Hong Kong, family members usually respect the final wishes of the deceased and conduct the funeral according to his/her religious beliefs. However, conflicts may still occur when family members of different religions insist to arrange the funeral in the religious style they prefer. The following is a story of a SG member who I interviewed in 2011.

Mrs. M's mother passed away in 2007. Even though both Mrs. M and her mother are members of SG, some of her family members are not. Because her mother passed away without leaving a word about the style of her funeral, her family members had an intensive argument over the arrangement of the funeral service. While Mrs. M preferred to respect her mother's religion and organize a SG-style funeral, non-SG family members felt uncomfortable with this idea because they believed the funeral was supposed to be a private and family matter rather than an event that would be attended by so many "strangers" (SG members). They preferred the funeral to be conducted in the Taoist style, as it was more common and familiar to other relatives. After some intensive discussions, Mrs. M and her family members finally reached a consensus. They decided that the funeral would be conducted in two styles: *first*, the Taoist, *and then*, SG.

The first half of the funeral was held in the Taoist way. Taoist priests were hired to chant scriptures and play Taoist music with drums and woodwind instruments at the funeral hall. The climax of the Taoist funeral service is a ritual known as *po-dei-juk* (破地獄) or hell-breaking, in which a priest waves a sword to turn away evil ghosts and saves the deceased from hell. Funeral participants and guests also burned joss paper during the ritual; it is believed that the ghost money is used as "crossing fee" for the deceased to leave the underworld. The ritual ends by symbolizing the deceased enters the karmic cycle and receives a new life.

When the Taoist part of the funeral ended, the priests left the hall with their instruments; family members, relatives, and friends who are not SG members also excused themselves from the room. After a while, around twenty SG members started to enter the hall. Someone approached the stage and placed a large wooden cabinet there. When everyone was seated, a senior member opened the cover the door of the cabinet and revealed the *gohonzon* hidden inside. After beating the bell a few times, all members began to chant simultaneously. The hall was filled with the echo of *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, which was then followed by the chant of Lotus Sutra in Sanskrit. Everyone was absorbed in the environment. Mrs. M believed that her mother could finally rest in peace with the power of *gohonzon* and *daimoku*. Eventually, everyone seemed to be satisfied with the funeral arrangement.

In the above case study, it is interesting that even though Mrs. M's mother was a SG member, the funeral was not conducted entirely in the SG style. The combination of Taoist and SG funeral in Mrs. M's mother's case is a "compromise" to respect the religious sentiments of both her mother, Mrs. M, and other family members, as well as to maintain their family relationships. At first, I was inclined to believe that the organization itself might not view very positively the idea of incorporating two religious elements into one single ritual since it seemed to challenge the exclusive nature of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Nevertheless, as the case study shows, as long as there is no violation of the core of SG teachings (such as Taoist and SG elements co-existing in the same place and at the same time), HKSGI is willing to respect and countenance, if not accept or support, elements of other religions. This can be considered as an example of *zuiho-bini*, the strategical adaptations to local cultures without changing the core of SG teachings. This principle provides room for cultural diversity to flourish during the localization process of SG. More importantly, it helps the organization to avoid conflicts with other religions and allow its members to be more flexible in dealing with non-members.

Local Interpretation of SG Teachings

Some important religious concepts were localized and re-interpreted with local flavors. For example, *ningen kakumei*, or human revolution, is an important idea in SG teachings, which means that "the fundamental process of inner transformation whereby we break through the shackles of our 'lesser self', bound by self-concern and the ego, growing in altruism toward a 'greater self'" capable of caring and taking action for the sake of others, ultimately all humanity". ("A Great Human

Revolution", SGI Official Homepage). As this concept does not exist in Chinese Buddhism and the word "revolution" has a strong political meaning, many members found it difficult to understand its connotation in a religious sense. To solve this problem, some members borrow Confucian ideas to help them interpret this concept. A member said "As the famous confusion saying goes, 'cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, maintaining the state rightly and making all peaceful' is the ideal virtues of all human being. This means that Confucianism suggests that human beings can achieve the status of 'Saint' or 'moral person' through our own effort. This way of thinking resonates with the core value of SG that everyone can become Buddha" (Interview with Mr. S, 60 years old, dated 10 December 2010). Confucian ideas have taken roots in Chinese cultures and can, therefore, serve as rich references for members to interpret difficult SG concepts in a local way.

Another example is *itai-doshin,* or "different bodies, same soul". It means that different individuals could work together and create the desired outcome. Many members prefer to use the analogy ''big family'' when asked to explain the meaning of this Japanese concept. They often said SG is like a family and members are linked together spiritually. In fact, in Chinese cultures, a family is the basic social unit and primary provider of support and welfare for individuals. Belonging to a big SG family implies kin relationships between all members, which is very similar to the original meaning of *itai-doshin*. In this way, Hong Kong members have a better understanding of *itaio-doshin* by considering themselves as members of a big family. Such reinterpretation is also considered a reason for SG's success in Asia as Metraux (2000: 425) argues ''it provides members with a new extended family'', which has declined with rapid urbanization and modernization.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the interactions between Soka Gakkai and folk religiosity in Hong Kong. I argue that the organization has represented itself as a lay Buddhist organization highly tolerant of local cultures, in order to earn the support and acceptance of local people, who are more familiar with folk Buddhism. Following the principle of *zuiho-bini*, the organization also applies a more tolerant approach towards local religious cultures. While worshiping anything other than *gohonzon* is strictly prohibited in SG teachings, instead of forcing members to immediately abandon their past beliefs, it allows some time for them to understand and adapt to the new practice. The case study of a SG member's funeral in both the Taoist and SG styles (though separately) suggests the organization respects the preferences of non-SG members and tolerates elements of other religion. On the other hand, Hong Kong members have interpreted SG teachings with local favors. The concepts of *ningen-kakumei* and *itai-doshin*, which are foreign to Hong Kong members, are understood with the help of Chinese Confucian and family ideas. In the localization process, both representation (images building of SG in Hong Kong) and reinterpretation (understanding SG teachings with local colors) have served as important forces shaping SGI development in the Hong Kong settings, allowing a Japanese new religion to develop some characteristics different from its place of origin.

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