Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan

Levi McLaughlin
Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution
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The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan

Levi McLaughlin
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Series Editor’s Preface

IN APPROACHING SOKA GAKKAI BOTH HISTORICALLY AND ethnographically, Levi McLaughlin offers us a master class in understanding the “mimetic nation” that is Japan’s largest lay-centric religious organization. He adroitly places the Gakkai faithful center stage, providing hauntingly complex and textured ethnographic cases of members’ lives. A classically trained violinist, McLaughlin played with the group’s symphony orchestra, which allowed him to bypass the usual need for top-down introductions and directly access hundreds of local members. McLaughlin’s sense of music pervades the narrative and prose, revealing an appreciation not only for the main notes and major chords, but also for the silences and pauses that provide tension and meaning to these stories. There is drama here on both a broad historical and an intensely personal scale. Thus the grand narrative of Soka Gakkai’s rise that appears in what McLaughlin calls the “participatory canon” of the serial novel The Human Revolution stands in stark contrast to the intimate struggle of a second-generation Gakkai daughter who turns back to the teachings as a way to recover from years of abuse by her devout father. McLaughlin’s remarkably balanced approach and exhaustive research allows us to see the group as it functions in its power centers, cultural activities, outreach programs, and members’ most private spaces.
Preface

This book provides a historical and ethnographic account of Soka Gakkai in Japan. Literally the Value Creation Study Association, Soka Gakkai began in the 1930s as a society of educators and developed after World War II into Japan’s largest modern religion. It now claims 8.27 million households in Japan and close to two million members in 192 other countries under Soka Gakkai International (SGI). Soka Gakkai is a lay Buddhist organization that emerged from Nichiren Shōshū, a denomination that grew out of a minority lineage that follows the medieval reformer Nichiren (1222–1282). However, as the name Value Creation Study Association indicates, Soka Gakkai comprises a great deal more than Buddhism and is instead best conceived as the product of what I term “twin legacies”: lay Nichiren Buddhism and modern Euro American humanist imports.

In this book, I situate Soka Gakkai’s rise as a Buddhist and humanist enterprise within Japan’s transformation from an expansionist empire to a postwar democratic polity. My analysis suggests that Soka Gakkai can best be characterized as mimetic of the nation-state in which it took shape. Conceiving of Soka Gakkai as a mimetic nation-state makes sense of the full range of its component elements, which include its affiliated political party Komeito (Clean Government Party), a bureaucracy overseen by powerful presidents, a media empire, a private school system, massive cultural enterprises, de facto sovereign territory controlled by organized cadres, and many other nation-state-like appurtenances. The mimetic nation-state metaphor also does justice to the fact that Soka Gakkai remains a gakkai, a study association, because Soka Gakkai cultivates loyalty in its participants within legitimacy-granting educational structures that emulate those that undergird the modern nation from which it emerged.

Despite Soka Gakkai’s scale and the ubiquity of its adherents, comparatively little sustained work has been done on its local Japanese communities. This dearth of research can be attributed in part to Soka Gakkai’s largely negative public image. Soka Gakkai grew notorious in Japan for reacting strongly to its critics, gained infamy for targeting its religious rivals in aggres-
sive proselytizing campaigns, attracted controversy by engaging in electoral politics through Komeito, and became known for its adherents’ reverence for its charismatic leader, Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku. Publications on Soka Gakkai to date have tended to fall into two camps: harsh critiques, mostly in the form of tabloid exposés, and hagiographies published by Soka Gakkai itself or by writers who recapitulate messages provided to them by Gakkai representatives. Both camps have tended to focus on the Gakkai’s leadership at the expense of attention to the lives of its non-elite adherents. This book, by contrast, is the product of close to two decades of nonmember research I carried out mostly within local Gakkai communities. I set out neither to expose nor to celebrate Soka Gakkai. Instead, I use a twofold approach that combines ethnographic methods with text-based investigations to provide an account that privileges a grassroots-level perspective. My study proposes ways to understand why Soka Gakkai proved compelling to converts and why a group that is labeled a Buddhist lay association reproduces state-like enterprises within its constituent institutions.

The fieldwork episodes I present here should be viewed as core samples from a crucial time span. My ethnography spans from 2000 to 2017, a period between Soka Gakkai’s 1991 schism with Nichiren Shōshū and the final years of Ikeda Daisaku’s life. Over the course of my ethnography, I interviewed more than two hundred members across Japan, in small towns and huge cities between Iwate Prefecture in the north and rural Kyushu in the south. I lived with Gakkai families for weeks at a time, studied for and passed Soka Gakkai’s introductory doctrinal examination (the nin’yō shiken), accompanied adherents on pilgrimages to key Gakkai sites, and spent years playing violin with a symphony orchestra organized by Soka Gakkai’s Young Men’s Division. Only a percentage of this fieldwork appears in this volume. A considerable portion of the ethnography in this book comes from 2007, right in the middle of my core samples. A decade of follow-up research has afforded me critical distance necessary to assess my findings and situate them within a theoretical framework. I supplemented my fieldwork with extensive use of primary and secondary sources, some of which I acquired through ethnographic work.

The members who appear in this book are my friends. I reject the term “informant” as a disingenuous attempt to project impartiality. Some members I met who were school children in 2000 are now parents who are raising their own Gakkai families. Some have come to repudiate Soka Gakkai and some have died. With only a few exceptions, the people who appear in this book I met via local contacts and not through introductions from Gakkai administrators. However, throughout my years of research I have been aided by helpful representatives from Soka Gakkai’s administration, particularly staff from its Office of Public Relations (Kōhōshitsu) and its International
Division (Kokusaiibu), who kindly organized opportunities for me to access key sites and interview veteran adherents. These administrators are also my friends. As is so often the case with friends, we do not see the world the same way. I am not a member of Soka Gakkai, nor have I ever been. None of my research received financial assistance from Soka Gakkai, and at no point has any of my work been vetted by the organization. My analysis is inevitably inflected by the personal connections I have forged with members, yet I consistently seek to retain an empathetic yet critical perspective on Soka Gakkai.

My fieldwork was limited by the Gakkai divisions I could access by virtue of my age and gender, and by restricting my research to Japan. I devote attention to the Gakkai’s Married Women’s Division—the organization’s most active suborganization, and one I could spend time with without difficulty as a (relatively) young, married man—but it was not appropriate for me to forge close ties with the Young Women’s Division. The largest absence here is, of course, Soka Gakkai International. SGI is such a massive entity and so varied across the world that a proper study would require a level of commitment that lies beyond the scope of this project.

Because the organization is now seeking to perpetuate itself past the lifetime of its honorary president, right now is an ideal time to reflect on Soka Gakkai’s remarkable rise. As attention turns to how the group will transform in the future, we must look to Soka Gakkai’s past to consider reasons why it attracted millions of converts and what accounts for its institutional development.

**Conventions and Abbreviations**

Japanese names follow the Japanese convention of family name, given name order. All names of Soka Gakkai members are pseudonyms, save those of published Gakkai leaders. I refer to members by given name or family name, depending on how I interacted with them. I render Sōka Gakkai as Soka Gakkai, the organization’s official name in English, and I render Kōmeitō as Komeito for the same reason. Other Japanese words use a macron for long vowels, save for Tokyo, Osaka, and others that are well known to English-language readers. At times, I refer to Soka Gakkai as the Gakkai, an abbreviation that members use. Dates from January 1, 1873, follow the Gregorian calendar and those before then use a day-month-year format. I only include Chinese characters (kanji 漢字) when specific characters are germane to the discussion.

I refer to Soka Gakkai’s edition of Nichiren’s writings, the *Nichiren Daishōnin gosho zenshū* (New Edition of the Complete Works of the Great Sage Nichiren, or *Gosho*), first published on April 28, 1952. Scholarship on Nichiren Buddhism conventionally relies on the four-volume *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* (Shōwa Standard Edition of the Sage Nichiren’s Writ-
ings); to accurately reflect Gakkai engagement with Nichiren’s teachings, I cite the Gosho.

Acknowledgments

This book began life as a significantly revised dissertation I completed at Princeton University in 2009. None of this work would have been possible without Jacqueline Stone’s guidance. Jackie supported my application for a fellowship from the Japanese Ministry of Education (then known as the Monbushō Fellowship) that enabled my studies at the University of Tokyo from 2000 to 2002, and her instruction at Princeton from 2004 taught me to read Nichiren’s writings, to situate my fieldwork within a Japanese Buddhist framework, and to cultivate the rigor and the compassion necessary to pursue this discipline. At the University of Tokyo, I was fortunate to have taken part in Shimazono Susumu’s seminar on modern Japanese religion between 2000 and 2002, and to have benefited from his advice since then. Between 2002 and 2004, Inoue Nobutaka invited me to work as a researcher and translator at the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics at Kokugakuin University. I am indebted to Nishiyama Shigeru at Toyo University, who allowed me to audit his seminar in 2001, and to Nakao Takashi, emeritus professor at Ritsubo University, who provided invaluable advice on Nichiren Buddhist history. Faculty and staff at Nanzan University, including Clark Chilson, Ben Dorman, James Heisig, and Paul Swanson offered hospitality at crucial times. My work in Japan, from this period and after I began at Princeton, was also enabled by friends inside and outside academic life. My thanks go to Kate Dunlop, Erik Abbott, Alison Krause, Furuko Masahito, Kondō Mitsuhiro, Ōyama Yūichi, Ōtsuka Shigeki, Norman Havens, Mizobe Mutsuko, Rick Berger, and others who made Japan home.

At Princeton, I intersected with a combination of faculty and fellow students who served as exemplary models of scholarship and friendship. I thank Sheldon Garon, Buzzy Teiser, James Boon, Amy Borovoy, David Howell, Jeffrey Stout, Keiko Ono, and other professors for their instruction and for providing opportunities to learn through teaching. Invaluable support from Pat Bogdiewicz, Lorraine Furhmann, and other Department of Religion staff made my work possible. The 1879 basement crew—Susan Gunasti, Mairaj Syed, Lance Jenott, Rachel Lindsey, Geoff Smith, Joel Blecher, and others who joined our troglodytic redoubt—deserve special praise for fostering a perfect balance of conviviality and productivity during the dissertation writing phase. April Hughes, Anthony Petro, Kevin Wolfe, Joseph Winters, Erin Brightwell, Yulia Frumer, Maren Ehlers, Ian Chong, Steve Bush, Eduard Iricinschi, Amy Sitar, Jason Ånanda Josephson-Storm, Ethan Lindsay, Emily Mace, Bryan Lowe, Moulie Vidas, and numerous others who joined me in Princeton semi-
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This book is the product of a long post-dissertation gestation that was enabled by support from numerous institutions and a large number of friends across the world. Colleagues at Wofford College, particularly Trina Jones and Dan Mathewson, welcomed me to my first teaching post and encouraged my research. I benefited greatly from several months in 2011 as a visiting researcher at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore. During this fellowship period and in collaborations with ARI affiliates since then I have received feedback on my work from Prasenjit Duara, Michael Feener, Philip Fountain, and others. I am grateful for friendships with Morten Schlütter, Katina Lillios, Melissa Curley, Sonia Ryang, Fred Smith, and others that began during my 2011–2012 year as a research fellow at the University of Iowa. Since 2012, I have taught at North Carolina State University, where Anna Bigelow, Jason Bivins, Bill Adler, Karey Harwood, Jason Sturdevant, and Mary Katherine Cunningham, along with department chair extraordinaire Michael Pendlebury and administrator extraordinaire Ann Rives, create a wonderfully collegial environment for religious studies. David Ambaras, Nathaniel Isaacson, John Mertz, and others in East Asian studies, along with Eric Carter, Shay Logan, and a long list of other Philosophy and Religious Studies Department friends make my working life in Raleigh a true pleasure. I also benefit immensely from working with my UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke University colleagues Barbara Ambros, Richard Jaffe, Hwansoo Kim, Kristina Troost, and numerous others. Life in Raleigh is inconceivable without Melody Moezzi and Matthew Lenard. Melody clarified my prose, and Matt created the figures that appear in chapter one.

None of the ideas that appear here would have taken shape had I not had the chance to explain them to a wide range of experts. The mimetic nation-state metaphor only really began to make sense to me through collaboration with political scientists. They have forced me to strive toward expertise in a new area and, through this, to deepen my insights into religion. I’m grateful to Steve Reed, Axel Klein, and Dan Smith, who are co-authors and co-editors par excellence. I am especially grateful for opportunities afforded me through the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation’s U.S.-Japan Network for the Future. My thanks go out to all of my fellow Network participants, and to Ben Self, whose work on this program has generated incalculable benefits.
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Of course, none of the ideas that appear here would have developed had I not been able to interact with members of Soka Gakkai in Japan. Over the last two decades, literally hundreds of Gakkai members have invited me into their homes, spent hours talking bravely about their most intimate moments, provided me with places to stay, given me access to Gakkai experiences and texts, and otherwise made my research possible. They have demanded nothing in return. Protocol prevents me from thanking them by name, but I must emphasize my love and respect for the members who have taken me into their lives.

My family in Toronto—mother Danielle, father Hooley, brother Reuben, sister Gabrielle, nieces Na’ama, Chavva-Tal, and Delphi, and everyone else—has unfailingly supported me. As this work developed, we lost my grandmother Leya Ludwig and my grandfather Jack Ludwig. Casting back over memories preserved in this research, particularly the recollections of veteran adherents, has made me think constantly about my grandparents. They were, like the members who appear in this book, treasure troves whose loss leaves a hole that cannot be filled.

This book is dedicated to my wife Lauren Markley. I cannot do justice to the extent to which I depend on her fierce independence and her deep empathy for the world around her. Our more than twenty years together has made me a better person. For all its faults and all its costs, this book is for you, Lauren, with all my love.
Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution
Soka Gakkai as Mimetic Nation

“A social formation only reproduces itself as a nation to the extent that, through a network of apparatuses and daily practices, the individual is instituted as _homo nationalis_ from cradle to grave, at the same time as he or she is instituted as _homo oeconomicus, politicus, religiosus_ …”

MR. IIZUKA FIRST APPROACHED ME IN HIS capacity as a representative of the _kanbu_ (executive or administration), as one of thousands of salaried employees who dedicate their lives to service within Soka Gakkai’s massive bureaucracy. An intelligent and compassionate man in his mid-forties who listens to others carefully and chooses his own words with equal care, Iizuka seems perpetually conscious of his responsibility to represent Soka Gakkai’s professional face to the world. Dark suit, shiny black shoes, crisp white shirt no matter the weather, sharply parted hair, and never a hair out of place, he is a bit of an anachronism, a throwback to Japan in the immediate postwar years when Gakkai representatives were eager to overcome the group’s image as a religion of the poor. At every encounter with fellow adherents, Iizuka provides them with a behavioral and sartorial model that implicitly urges conformity to a rigidly disciplined ideal. I have seen a member of the Young Men’s Division jerk to attention and run to put on a tie when he saw Iizuka coming, and an older Gakkai man apologize reflexively to him for his “slovenly appearance” when he was just wearing casual clothes.

Every weekday morning, Iizuka wakes before dawn at his home in western Tokyo to make the first train to the center of the city. He travels for well over an hour to arrive at the Gakkai’s headquarters in Shinanomachi,
central Tokyo. At precisely 7:00 a.m., he joins thousands of his fellow Soka Gakkai employees and ordinary adherents in morning *gongyō*, the devotional chant that comprises the Gakkai’s Nichiren Buddhist practice: chapter 2, “Expedient Means,” and sections of chapter 16, “Life Span” of the *Lotus Sutra*, the putative final teaching of the historical Buddha. He and his fellow chanters follow this approximately twenty-minute liturgy with repeated incantations of *namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*, the title of the *Lotus* known as the *daimoku*. Iizuka spends at least an additional hour every morning chanting *daimoku*, a practice that members typically treat as an opportunity to direct the power of the chant toward specific aims. His concerns include the continued academic success of his eldest son, a talented biology student; care for his elderly mother, who is descending into dementia; and the happiness of the two young children of his younger sister, who died suddenly of cancer several years ago.

Like that of all members, Iizuka’s *gongyō* session includes prayers for the health and well-being of Ikeda and Kaneko Daisaku, Soka Gakkai’s honorary president and his wife. For decades, Ikeda Daisaku has towered within Soka Gakkai as its unquestioned authority in all matters, and since Soka Gakkai split from its parent temple Buddhist sect Nichiren Shōshū in 1991, everything associated with Ikeda has taken on an ever-deepening significance for the group’s devotees. Shinanomachi began as an administrative hub but today functions as a sacred space. Every year, millions of Gakkai adherents make pilgrimages from all over the globe to Shinanomachi to connect directly with Ikeda by engaging in devotional activities at the site associated with his person. Iizuka, like other headquarter employees, treats his daily commute as part of this pilgrimage ritual.

Born in Sasebo, a working-class port city in Nagasaki Prefecture dominated by a US military base, and raised in poverty by parents who converted to Soka Gakkai, Iizuka committed himself to two stark choices as he finished high school: drop out of school and work in menial jobs to support his mother, who was teetering on the brink of divorce from his father, or seek to study at Soka University. Iizuka did not apply to any other universities because he only considered study at the school founded by Honorary President Ikeda as a meaningful alternative to no postsecondary education. When Soka University accepted him, he was overcome with gratitude, and when he made it through the competitive hiring process to gain a position in Soka Gakkai’s salaried administration, his commitment to the organization hardened into an indestructible core.

For Iizuka, the entire world, even nature, makes sense to him in Gakkai terms. During a long car trip through Fukushima Prefecture I took with him in June 2013, Iizuka talked about how he had spent the previous ten years learning to identify the types of flowers, trees, insects, and animals
that thrive on Soka University’s capacious grounds. He reflected on how he deepened his bonds with the university and its founder by memorizing seasonal changes at the campus. “If it’s a plant that grows at Soka University, I know it,” he declared to me and our driver, Mr. Akabashi, who was, like Iizuka, a salaried Gakkai administrator. For members of the kanbu, the dedicated inner circle within Soka Gakkai’s already rarefied sphere, all things in the world, down to the minutiae of nature, reveal their meaning when they are regarded as constitutive of their religion. From mundane phenomena up to life-altering undertakings, all acquire heightened significance as they are woven into Soka Gakkai’s narrative. Each one provides the organization’s employees with another opportunity for self-sacrifice through service, another chance to demonstrate dedication to Ikeda Daisaku and the institutions he cultivated.

A Tale of Twin Legacies and the Rise of Ikeda

Soka Gakkai has exceeded the capacity of other modern Japanese religious organizations to build institutions and attract adherents. Today, the group claims 8.27 million households in Japan and close to two million adherents in 192 countries under its overseas umbrella organization Soka Gakkai International, or SGI. These self-declared figures are exaggerated. Survey data point instead to a figure in the neighborhood of between 2 and 3 percent of the Japanese population, fewer than four million people, who most likely self-identify as committed Gakkai adherents. But even the most conservative estimates allow us to surmise that virtually everyone in Japan is acquainted with a member, related to a member, or is a member of Soka Gakkai.

Soka Gakkai presents itself as a paradox. It began as a humanistic organization that came to embrace the teachings of Nichiren, a famously intolerant Buddhist cleric, and it grew into Japan’s fastest-growing religion in the decades after World War II, the very period when self-identification as being religious began to wane among people in Japan. More important than confirming Soka Gakkai’s membership numbers is making sense of these paradoxes. Doing so means investigating its wide range of institutions and making sense of why they proved compelling. Though most scholarly sources categorize the group as a lay Buddhist organization, Iizuka’s life story, and the accounts of other members who appear in this book, demand that Soka Gakkai be understood as heir to twin legacies: first, a tradition of self-cultivation derived from lay practice under the minority temple Buddhist sect Nichiren Shōshū, and, second, intellectual currents that flourished in late nineteenth to early twentieth century Japan that valorized standardized education and philosophical ideals aimed at the elevation of the individual, all inspired by Euro American traditions generally associated with “culture.”
Soka Gakkai’s development attests to the formative impact of these twin legacies. The organization marks its founding as November 18, 1930, when Makiguchi Tsunesaburō (1871–1944), first president of the prewar incarnation Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai, or Value Creation Education Study Association, published the first volume of his four-volume Sōka kyōikugaku taikai (System of Value-Creating Educational Study). The group originated as a modest-sized association of petty bourgeois educators and intellectuals, one of many such gatherings in the imperial Japanese capital. Born in a small fishing village in northern Japan and trained as a pedagogue, Makiguchi worked as a schoolteacher and elementary school principal and wrote on geography, education, and ethics early in the twentieth century. The character of Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai began to transform after Makiguchi, along with his disciple and fellow teacher Toda Jōsei (1900–1958), became lay adherents of Nichiren Shōshū in 1928 and turned thereafter to Buddhist activism. It was not until the late 1930s that Makiguchi and Toda’s group adopted a clearly religious character, and later still that their Nichiren Buddhist views hardened into absolute commitments.

Soka Gakkai is categorized as a shinshūkyō, or New Religion, a term applied in Japan primarily to lay-focused religious groups founded after 1800. Soka Gakkai falls into the Nichiren-kei (Nichiren-type) category by virtue of Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai’s early transformation into a Nichiren Shōshū lay association. Nichiren Shōshū (Nichiren True Sect) is a temple-based Buddhist denomination that emerged from a minority lineage that follows the teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), a medieval Buddhist reformer. Trained primarily in the Tendai Buddhist tradition, Nichiren abandoned established temples early in his life to preach exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra, understood commonly within East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism to be the historical Buddha Śākyamuni’s final teaching. Nichiren urged the rejection of all other teachings and taught that the practice of chanting the title of the Lotus in the seven-syllable formula namu-myōhō-renge-kyō, known as the daimoku, was the only effective way of achieving salvation in the age of mappō, the degraded “latter days of the Buddha’s Dharma.” He castigated the “false teachings” and “evil monks” of other sects; he petitioned the military government in Kamakura, the power center during his lifetime, to abandon support of Tendai and all other temples save his own; and he otherwise challenged the established order of the day, leading authorities to exile him twice and attempt to execute him once. In willingly undergoing persecution, Nichiren established a model for lay and monastic followers of upholding an ideal of self-sacrifice in a struggle against corrupt worldly authority in defense of a transcendent truth. He also established a concern among his followers for conceiving of their practice as engagement with government—one that inspired political activism by modern Nichiren-based organizations.
Nichiren Buddhist commitments clashed with civic responsibilities imposed in wartime Japan. During the Pacific War, government policy required all Japanese subjects to pay allegiance to the Grand Shrine at Ise, but Makiguchi and Toda unrepentantly defended their exclusive commitment to Nichiren’s teachings and repudiated the government’s mandate that they enshrine Ise kamifuda (deity talismans). As a result, they endured severe state suppression. Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai dispersed after their arrest in July 1943, and Makiguchi died of malnutrition at Tokyo’s Sugamo Prison on November 18, 1944. Released shortly before Japan announced its defeat to the Allied forces on August 15, 1945, Toda reformed the organization in May 1946, renaming it Soka Gakkai, the Value Creation Study Association.

The new Gakkai was more broadly defined than its education reform-minded predecessor. Under Toda, Soka Gakkai attracted converts with a combination of results-oriented pragmatism and the promise of contributing to Nichiren Buddhism’s eschatological ideals. Beginning with a few dozen families in urban Tokyo, Soka Gakkai grew quickly in the immediate postwar years, appealing primarily to the working poor who flooded into Japan’s cities seeking material security, social infrastructure, and spiritual certainty. New members assembled at convivial gatherings at neighborhood homes where local leaders expounded on Nichiren’s writings, the Lotus Sutra, and a life-affirming philosophy of value that drew on Kant, Bergson, and other Western thinkers. From the 1950s, Soka Gakkai under Toda organized local-level converts into a sophisticated, centrally controlled hierarchy that grouped adherents collectively by household and individually by age, gender, geography, vocation, and other demographic data. The group’s organizational structure was reshaped by the leadership’s decision to run candidates for election from 1955, shifting to a vertical hierarchy that bonded members in local areas and facilitated rapid mobilization. Success in electoral politics galvanized the organization as it contributed to the legitimacy of the group in the eyes of converts. Soka Gakkai claimed no more than five thousand families in 1951; driven by a well-organized conversion campaign and growing political relevance, its membership surpassed one million households by the time of Toda’s death in 1958.

Soka Gakkai’s membership continued to expand dramatically under the leadership of Ikeda Daisaku (1928—) who took the post of third Soka Gakkai president on May 3, 1960. Armed with Gakkai publications filled with techniques to persuade people to abandon other religions, encouraged by their group’s burgeoning political power, and otherwise inspired by Gakkai leaders to expand the organization into all aspects of Japanese life, members promoted a massive conversion campaign with the aim of ultimately realizing the Nichiren Buddhist goal of kōsen rufu. For centuries, kōsen rufu—to “declare [the Lotus] far and wide” and realize the mission of converting all people to
Nichiren’s Buddhism—had persisted as a far-off ideal within Nichiren-based organizations. However, as Soka Gakkai began to attract significant numbers of enthusiastic adherents, *kōsen rufu* solidified within the Gakkai as an achievable objective. Driven by ingenious organization that balanced central administrative control with local initiatives, centered on uncompromising teachings that rejected Japan’s conventional religious pluralism, and roused by a clarion call for institutional expansion, Soka Gakkai spread, in the words of one Osaka-based veteran member I interviewed, “as if it were an epidemic” (*densen mitai*).

Rapid growth incurred notoriety. Fierce conflict with religious and political rivals escalated as the Gakkai gained both converts and enemies through its hard-sell conversion practices and in particular because of its electioneering—a practice critics regarded as a dangerous transgression of the 1947 Constitution, which guarantees the separation of religion and government. Under Ikeda, the Gakkai’s electoral forays expanded into the founding of the political party Komeito (Clean Government Party) in 1964, which by the end of that decade became the third-largest party in the National Diet. Ikeda Daisaku also expanded Soka Gakkai overseas: he established chapters in North and South America, Europe, elsewhere in Asia, and eventually across the entire world under an umbrella organization that in 1975 took the name Soka Gakkai International. Soka Gakkai claimed more than seven million adherent households in Japan by 1970.

Ikeda also led Soka Gakkai to expand dramatically beyond Nichiren Buddhism. He oversaw the Gakkai’s increasing engagement with issues of global concern, such as nuclear disarmament and world peace, and he guided the organization’s increasing emphasis on a culture mission that valorized literature, classical music, and high art. Members were trained to regard *The Human Revolution*, a serial novel that narrates the history of the Gakkai’s founding and subsequent growth, as an authoritative history and the core of a new de facto Soka Gakkai canon. Ikeda’s writings became the central focus of a massive publishing and media enterprise centered on the Gakkai’s newspaper, *Seikyō shinbun*. And, from the late 1960s, Soka Gakkai began building a private educational system that would eventually allow adherents to educate their children from kindergarten through university exclusively within accredited Gakkai schools.

By the early 1970s, rapid membership growth leveled off after a series of scandals forced the official separation of Soka Gakkai and Komeito. The Gakkai’s widening purview under Ikeda also contributed to friction with the Gakkai’s parent temple Buddhist denomination. The small, tradition-oriented Nichiren Shōshū was not well matched with the expansive vision and charismatic leadership developed by Toda and radically amplified by Ikeda. The reverence Ikeda Daisaku commanded among Gakkai adherents and the
direct challenges he leveled at Nichiren Shōshū’s claim on doctrinal authority led to heightened conflict by the mid-1970s. Ikeda was effectively forced from the presidency in 1979, when he took the title honorary president and remained president of Soka Gakkai International. Rather than marginalizing him, this administrative shift had the effect of apotheosizing Ikeda in the eyes of his followers. Ikeda’s elevation to the post of honorary president intensified affective connections between him and local-level adherents, who increasingly came to regard him as a righteous truth-teller who persevered against hidebound clerics, in keeping with the biographical model set by Nichiren.

In April 1981, Soka Gakkai registered as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, part of Soka Gakkai’s intensifying shift toward peace, culture, and education—three principles that are now officially the group’s pillars. From January 1983, Ikeda began to issue annual “peace proposals,” long published essays that call for mutual understanding across cultural divides, and his practice of engaging in dialogues (taiwa) with international luminaries intensified. Members who came of age during these years reflect nostalgically on their participation in massive sekai heiwa bunkasai (world peace culture festivals) where thousands danced and sang in choreographed, casts-of-thousands spectacles. This period saw a turning away from expanding Soka Gakkai through conversion toward cultivating generations born into Gakkai households within culture- and education-oriented discipleship under Honorary President Ikeda.

Ikeda’s ever-intensifying role as Soka Gakkai’s absolute leader contributed to a schism between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū. On November 28, 1991, Nichiren Shōshū Chief Abbot Abe Nikken decreed that only those who would affirm noninvolvement with Soka Gakkai would be permitted to enter the sect’s temples or enter the head temple Taisekiji, where Nichiren Shōshū’s, and then Soka Gakkai’s, principal object of worship is enshrined. This measure effectively expelled every member of Soka Gakkai from Nichiren Shōshū; the sect, in effect, excommunicated the vast majority of its parishioners in a single day. The 1991 split divided Soka Gakkai communities, and reverberations from the rift still ripple through both organizations.

Since the schism, the Gakkai administration has focused ever more intensely on cultivating members as Ikeda Daisaku disciples. Perpetuating a tendency that can be traced to the 1960s, Soka Gakkai has transformed from an organization headed by Ikeda to a group dedicated to him. Children raised in Soka Gakkai families are encouraged to fuse their personal objectives with those promoted by Ikeda and to regard meeting the Gakkai’s (mostly Ikeda-centric) institutional goals as ways to satisfy personal aspirations. At present, Soka Gakkai sits at a crucial juncture: the end of Ikeda Daisaku’s life and a future without a living charismatic leader. It faces a daunting task of routinizing Ikeda discipleship in a new generation of adherents, ones whose
aspirations and anxieties differ from those of the first- and second-generation members who built the massive enterprise that is Soka Gakkai.

**Lay Nichiren Buddhism as Soka Gakkai’s Daily Practice**

Soka Gakkai’s composition today reflects its twin Nichiren Buddhist and modern humanist legacies. Its Nichiren Buddhist elements include the following:

*Chanting.* Adherents intone morning and evening prayers in front of their home altars in a chanting performance called *gongyō* (to exert oneself in practice). Soka Gakkai’s twice-daily chant now includes chapter 2, “Expedient Means” (Hōben), and sections of chapter 16, “Life Span” (Juryō) of the *Lotus Sutra*, shortened in 2002 from a more demanding practice that included more recitation of the *Lotus* text. The sutra sections are followed by repeated incantations of the sacred title of the *Lotus* known as the *daimoku* (great title), which consists of the seven syllables *namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*. Members routinely engage in *shōdai*, long sessions of repeated invocations of the *daimoku*. They also cooperate in assemblies called *shōdaikai* that combine their tallies of *daimoku* repetitions. Targets of one million *daimoku* aimed at a specific goal frequently serve as individual or group objectives.

*Reverence for the gohonzon.* The *daigohonzon* (great object of worship) is a calligraphic mandala with the syllables *namu-myōhō-renge-kyō* running down its center. It is said to have been inscribed by Nichiren on the twelfth day of the tenth month of 1279 for the sake of all humanity. For decades, membership in Soka Gakkai was confirmed by receiving a *gohonzon*, a replica of the *daigohonzon*, which is enshrined at Nichiren Shōshū’s head temple Taisekiji, near Mount Fuji in Shizuoka Prefecture. Because Gakkai members have been barred from access to the *daigohonzon* since the 1991 schism, the Soka Gakkai administration found other ways of producing *gohonzon* replicas, basing them instead on a 1720 copy made by Nichikan, the twenty-sixth Shōshū abbot. Policies changed again after the installation of the *kōsen rufu no gohonzon* on November 5, 2013, at the Hall of the Great Vow, Soka Gakkai’s new general headquarters. Controversies over the legitimacy of the post-1991 objects of worship rage between Soka Gakkai and rival Nichiren groups.

*Shakubuku.* Translated literally, the Nichiren Buddhist term *shakubuku* can be rendered “break and subdue,” the strong implication being that harsh tactics were to be exercised on those who maintained attachments to inferior teachings, meaning anything other than exclusive embrace of the *Lotus*. *Shakubuku* was promoted by Nichiren as the only appropriate propagation method for lands in which people slandered the Dharma, a violation Nichiren regarded as most egregiously evident in Japan. Recent decades have
seen Soka Gakkai leaders encourage a move away from hard-sell shakubuku proselytizing in favor of shōju (accommodation). Shōju is frequently glossed in English by practitioners as “gentle persuasion through reasoned argument.” Despite this official shift, members in Japan tend to speak of converting others to Soka Gakkai as shakubuku, although interpretations of the term have transformed over time. Members have also come to refer to proselytizing in terms of taiwa (dialogue).

Kōsen rufu. The call—kōsen rufu—to “widely declare and spread [the truth of the Lotus Sutra]” is used within Soka Gakkai to describe any activities that promote the organization. It is typically equated either with conversion or with expanding Soka Gakkai’s institutional reach.

Mappō. East Asian Buddhist tradition divides history into the three stages of shōbō, or true dharma (the millennium after the lifetime of the historical Buddha); the age of zōhō, or semblance dharma (the millennium after shōbō); and the final age of mappō (the latter age of the dharma), understood to have begun in the year 1052. Gakkai members uphold Nichiren’s injunction that release from suffering through rebirth can only be achieved in mappō through universal embrace of the Lotus and the rejection of all other teachings.

Nichiren. Follows in the Nichiren Shōshū tradition, including Soka Gakkai members, regard Nichiren as the earthly avatar of the eternal Buddha and the manifestation in Japan of the Buddha of the age of mappō. Nichiren’s writings, collectively called the Gosho, are thus considered by Gakkai followers to bear scriptural authority surpassing even that of the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni. His biography is taken as an exemplary model, and objectives attributed to Nichiren left incomplete at the end of his life were adopted as Soka Gakkai institutional goals.

Conversion. Conversion to Soka Gakkai is formalized by the ritual bestowal of a gohonzon replica. Before the 1991 schism, this ritual was carried out as a gojukai ceremony, literally to “receive the precepts,” performed by priests at Nichiren Shōshū temples. Today, conferral takes place at Gakkai culture centers, where converts join a nyūbututsushi (Buddha entrance ceremony) at gatherings called nyūkai kinen gongyōkai (memorial gongyō assemblies for entering the Gakkai). During the heady years of the Gakkai’s rapid growth from the 1950s into the 1970s, people sometimes received a gohonzon after attending a single Gakkai meeting. Today, membership is ordinarily bestowed after a would-be convert fills out a kibō kādo (wish card), an application form that includes the person’s photograph and formalizes her or his desire to gain membership. This paperwork is meant to be completed only after the prospective convert attends local meetings for three months, demonstrates an ability to chant the Gakkai’s twice-daily liturgy, and maintains three months of a subscription to the daily newspaper Seikyō shinbun,
though prospective converts are at times urged to join before this. Conversion in Japan also requires hōbōbarai (cleaning out slander to the dharma), which entails ridding the new member’s home of all religious material deemed heterodox from a Gakkai perspective. Comprehensive hōbōbarai persisted until fairly recently, though Soka Gakkai has relaxed this requirement in recent years.6

Mobilizing Human Resources

Soka Gakkai leaders, and some scholars, attribute the Gakkai’s capacity for institutional expansion to the Nichiren Buddhist principle of zuihō bini, a term Nichiren used to mean the precept of adapting to local customs. Zuïhō is a redaction of the term zuihō zuiji (adapting to follow the times) and bini is a Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit vinaya (the regulations for the Buddhist order). In a missive from 1264 titled “Recitation of the hōben and juryō Chapters,” Nichiren justified adapting teachings to the locale: “If one does not go against the heart of the precepts, even if one departs ever so slightly from the teachings of the Buddha, one should avoid going against the customs of the country.”7 Zuïhō bini enabled Gakkai adherents to introduce suppleness into rigidity as it allowed members to fit exclusive Lotus adherence into local customs and to adapt shakubuku conversion techniques to suit situational mores.8

Yet zuihō bini does not explain why Soka Gakkai adopted its particular institutional framework, or why this framework proved compelling to its members.8 It also does not explain why Soka Gakkai attracted more adherents than other Nichiren Buddhism–based organizations. An analysis of Soka Gakkai’s distinctive appeal must explain how the Gakkai’s twin legacies, not just its Nichiren Buddhism, shaped its development. The group is not structured as a temple-focused lay confraternity but is instead run by an administration formulated along modern bureaucratic lines. Soka Gakkai is headed by Honorary President Ikeda, who is attended by an elite circle of male and female functionaries called the Daiichi Shōmu, the First General Affairs Division. The Daiichi Shōmu mediates between the office of the honorary president and the Gakkai’s regular administration, which most closely resembles a modern government’s civil service, peopled by employees such as Mr. Iizuka, who are enjoined to treat their job as a vocational calling. The Gakkai’s massive pyramidal bureaucracy is topped by a president (the sixth, Harada Minoru, since November 2006) who oversees approximately three hundred vice presidents, a board of regents, and several thousand lower-ranked salaried administrators who manage working equivalents of education, executive and judicial organs, taxation, personnel and facilities management, security, the control and distribution of information, and other functions akin to those of a nation-state. This structure creates a specific Soka Gakkai administrative culture,
FIG. 1  Soka Gakkai’s national administration (Soka Gakkai website, https://www.sokanet.jp, August 2017)
one that allows *kanbu* (administration) members to overcome regional or personal differences. Mr. Iizuka and Mr. Akabashi, the members we met in the opening of this chapter, had never met before, but they quickly adopted an attitude of easy familiarity thanks to their shared *kanbu* culture. Much of Soka Gakkai’s institutional expansion can be attributed to the efficiency of its carefully cultivated administrators.

All Gakkai members, salaried employees and volunteers alike, are grouped according to age, gender, marital status, geographic location, vocation, and other demographic categories. The primary suborganizations are the Future Division, which includes both girls and boys up to the age of eighteen; the Young Men’s Division, whose members range in age from eighteen to forty; the Young Women’s Division, whose members join at eighteen and “gradu-
ate” (sotsugyō) to the Married Women’s Division either when they marry or around the age of forty; the Men’s Division (from age forty); and the Married Women’s Division. Married women under forty join a Married Women’s Division subdivision called Young Mrs. (Yangu Misesu). These basic divisions are sometimes reduced in Gakkai parlance to the yonsha (four folks): Men’s, Married Women’s, Young Men’s, and Young Women’s Divisions, the four key components of what members refer to as their jinzai (human resources). Veteran O.B.s and O.G.s (Old Boys and Old Girls) from the Men’s and Women’s Divisions will at times take part in Young Men’s and Young Women’s Division events in ways that emulate the participation of school graduates in special events for their alma mater.

Soka Gakkai’s human resources conserve a gendered division of labor that perpetuates social norms that were in place during the organization’s formative decades. As they take on roles dictated by their gender and marital status, members also shoulder responsibilities distributed by a Gakkai administration that relies on the setai (or shōtai), the household, as its basic unit. The setai—the same unit used in Japan’s national census—is predicated on a nuclear family that consists of a married heterosexual couple and their children. Gakkai households are integrated upward into bureaucratic levels of increasing size, expanding outward in geographic range, from block (burokku) to district (chiku), chapter (shibu), regional headquarters (honbu), ward (ku or ken), and prefecture (ken). This multistage vertical structure is replicated in thirteen national zones. Leadership from the block upward is restricted to men, though local Gakkai levels include a Married Women’s Division leader (block Married Women’s Division leader, district Married Women’s Division leader, and so on) who wields considerable regional influence. Members also take up responsibilities in a wide range of other subdivisions, such as the Students’ Division and Culture Division. Many also belong to vocationally specific subgroups, such as the Doctors’ Group, the Education Division (for teachers), or the Artists’ Group. Beyond the top administrative levels, subdivision posts are filled by unpaid volunteers. Adherents frequently take on multiple administrative roles and as a result attend a large number of subdivision meetings. A particularly committed member might attend at least one Gakkai meeting every day, or even more. Local-level meetings always include at least one member with yakushoku (official duties), thereby reinforcing the imperative that reports on local activities make their way up the chain to the Gakkai’s administrative center.

Soka Gakkai maintains practices that cohere strongly with civic functions. These include the following elements:

Study meetings. Gakkai members meet in their local areas at zadankai (monthly discussion meetings or study roundtables). Zadankai
usually describes an academic gathering. Under Makiguchi’s leadership, Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai convened *jissen shōmei zadankai* (study roundtables for practical evidence).10

**Culture centers.** Soka Gakkai maintains in excess of 1,200 culture centers of various sizes across Japan that are used for in-person assemblies and satellite broadcasts that feature speeches by Honorary President Ikeda (delivered in absentia after May 2010). Study-oriented meetings also take place at Gakkai facilities called *kinen kaikan* (memorial meeting halls) dedicated to Ikeda and the first two founding Gakkai presidents. Some of Soka Gakkai’s largest facilities are called *kōdō* (lecture halls), further confirming the group’s school orientation.

**Examinations and ranks based on modern standardized education.** Members are encouraged to study for and take doctrinal tests, beginning with the *nin’yō shiken*. Literally an appointment examination, the name *nin’yō shiken* would otherwise be used for civil service placement. Those who pass are awarded the rank of *joshi* (instructor). Examinees who pass higher-level tests become assistant professor, associate professor, and finally professor, confirming thereby the equation of doctrinal mastery with school-based study and the appeal of this system to educational aspiration.

**Electioneering.** No matter the level of the election, from a seat in a small municipal council up to the National Diet, members of Soka Gakkai mobilize votes for Komeito. Gakkai members have also electioneered on behalf of candidates for Komeito’s government coalition partner, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and other political allies. Since 1999, Komeito has operated as the junior partner with the LDP in the national government. Although Soka Gakkai and Komeito severed official institutional ties in 1970, Gakkai adherents treat electioneering for Komeito, and now for the LDP, as an integral component of their practice, on par with chanting the *Lotus* or carrying out *shakubuku*. Soka Gakkai’s administration carefully records vote solicitation by keeping a tally of *f-tori* (friend-getting). Each nonmember vote for Komeito garnered by a Gakkai member qualifies as one *f-tori*, and each district sets a target *f-tori* number for each election.11

**Soliciting subscriptions for Gakkai publications.** Members regularly gather subscriptions to periodicals produced by Gakkai-affiliated media outlets. Primary among these is the daily newspaper *Seikyō shinbun*. Soka Gakkai calls this practice *shinbun keimō* (newspaper enlightenment), which uses *keimō*, the European term for enlightenment or civilization, and not a Buddhist term, such as *satori*, to celebrate the awakening of readers to Soka Gakkai. The paper is available only via delivery by a Gakkai adherent, is not for sale at newsstands, and has no evening edition. This imposed limitation places responsibility for information distribution squarely on local-level practitioners, and *shinbun keimō* is treated as a principal way of facilitating
shakubuku. Like the Gakkai’s vote-gathering, newspaper enlightenment is measured by a point system. Members gain one pointo (point) for each month of each Seikyō shinbun subscription. Newspaper enlightenment yields tremendous results: Seikyō shinbun claims a daily circulation of 5.5 million copies, the third-highest newspaper subscription rate in Japan.

A media empire. Soka Gakkai’s publishing and audiovisual companies produce a comprehensive library of texts that shape members’ lives as they bring in vast amounts of capital. Media production is grounded in the Seikyō shinbun and includes the publication of hundreds of books that bear Ikeda Daisaku’s name. Gakkai publishing companies also produce numerous magazines, including the study guide Daibyaku renge (Great White Lotus), the woman’s magazine Pumpkin, and the cerebral monthly Ushio (The Tide). The Gakkai’s enormous print media output is supplemented by videos, audio recordings, and online content. Shinano Kikaku produces most of the videos members screen at zadankai and other meetings and also makes anime and feature films. Maximally devoted members can receive most or even all of their information via Soka Gakkai as they deliver and read Gakkai newspapers, study Ikeda’s writings, watch Gakkai-produced videos, and otherwise fill their homes with Gakkai texts, images, and sounds.

A comprehensive school system. Soka Gakkai has built a comparatively small yet respected private educational system that begins at preschool and culminates in Soka University (founded 1971) in Hachioji (western Tokyo) and Soka University of America (founded 2001) in California. Since the 1970s, the organization has relied increasingly on its private school system to staff the ranks of its bureaucracy and select Komeito candidates. Most younger Gakkai administrators have attended at least one Gakkai school, and not a few have spent their entire lives within Gakkai institutions. Soka University is comparatively young by Japanese standards, yet its graduates have already earned respect, and Gakkai school alums tend to do well in job searches and graduate education, inside and outside Soka Gakkai’s institutions.

Cultural activities. For decades, Gakkai members participated in massive bunkasai, or culture festivals. Like many other Gakkai practices, bunkasai originated in school events. They started under Second President Toda Jōsei as an annual Gakkai undōkai (athletics meet)—a staple event at Japanese schools—and transformed under Ikeda’s leadership into elaborate spectulars. Soka Gakkai’s vocational groups in fact originated as kurabu (clubs) modeled on extracurricular organizations, which are an important part of Japanese school life.12 Soka Gakkai bunkasai performances in Japan dropped off after the turn of the millennium, yet culture has continued as a Gakkai mainstay. Members enjoy performances sponsored by the Gakkai’s Minshū Ongaku Kyōkai (People’s Music Association), or Min-on, which stages thousands of music and dance performances across Japan each year.
and maintains the Min-on Music Museum at the Shinanomachi headquarters. At local zadankai, members are encouraged to purchase tickets to exhibitions of art and photography that travel between culture centers, and every year thousands of adherents visit the Gakkai’s Tokyo Fuji Art Museum in Hachioji. Members are otherwise introduced to culture through musical performances, mostly Western classical music and concert band, by musicians from the Young Men’s Division Ongakutai (Music Corps) and Young Women’s Division Kotekitai (Fife and Drum Corps).

Culture is reinforced at culture centers, most of which share a near-identical look and feel: light-colored tiled exterior with salmon and sandy yellow hues within and without, lined on the interior by halls hushed with carpet and decorated with framed copies of photographs taken by Ikeda Daisaku that hang beside charming clocks and paintings of bucolic scenes, mostly of landscapes outside Japan. Gakkai interiors evoke the aesthetic of a well-to-do family home in mid-twentieth-century Japan, a welcoming space that expresses refined gentility of a type celebrated in Ikeda Daisaku’s speeches and writings. With the exception of a prayer hall with a tatami-mat floor that houses an altar with the gohonzon, the average Gakkai facility exhibits no obvious Buddhist, or even traditionally Japanese, elements, and instead corresponds more closely to the modern, aspirational aesthetic Ikeda promoted throughout his leadership.

Soka Gakkai’s Nation-Like Features

Taken together, Soka Gakkai’s appurtenances resemble, most of all, features of a modern nation-state. The most obvious of these is the Gakkai’s influence on government through electioneering and its affiliated political party Komeito. However, we must look beyond Komeito to understand the comprehensive extent to which Soka Gakkai replicates nation-like institutions and practices. These include the following:

A Soka Gakkai flag. Since 1988, a red, yellow, and blue tricolor Soka Gakkai flag has been the Gakkai’s main symbol. The flag appears to reproduce the first three vertical stripes of the five-color 1885 International Buddhist Flag, extracted to isolate a three-bar pattern reminiscent of European national flags. Members refer to the Gakkai symbol as the sanshoku or sanshokki (tricolor or tricolor flag), the Japanese term for the French tricolours. Some sanshokki versions bear a stylized eight-petaled lotus blossom in the middle, a Gakkai symbol since 1977, which symbolizes the traditional eight scrolls of the Lotus Sutra, but many leave out this Buddhist referent.

Anthems. Members learn Soka Gakkai songs and sing them regularly
at meetings. Gakkai songs, such as the member favorite “Ifu dōdō no uta” (Song of Indomitable Dignity), tend to reinforce the group’s perennial themes: a righteous minority that perseveres to victory and the transcendent glory of personal transformation through self-sacrifice in the name of a mission that is greater than the self. These songs are typically military marches written for optimal performance by singing in unison over brass band accompaniment.

**Soka Gakkai territory.** This includes more than 1,200 culture centers, along with memorial lecture halls and numerous other facilities. The buildings that make up the Shinanomachi headquarters in Shinjuku Ward in central Tokyo cover more than a square kilometer of some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Gakkai buildings are patrolled by trained special cadres from the Young Men’s Division: the Gajōkai (Fortress Protection) on the outside and Sōkahan (Value Creation Team) inside, supplemented by trained staff from other divisions. Particularly sensitive sites, notably those associated directly with Honorary President Ikeda, are guarded by salaried security forces.

**Calendar.** Gakkai administrators frequently set quantified goals for newspaper enlightenment and other objectives to be met by the end of a shihanki (quarter), a calendar period generally used by businesses and governments for tax purposes. Soka Gakkai otherwise structures the calendar year around key dates in its history. Some dates correspond with the nenchū gyōji (annual cycle of activities) of temple-based Nichiren Buddhism, such as Nichiren’s declaration of the daimoku in 1253 (April 28) and his promotion of his treatise Risshō ankokuron (On Bringing Peace to the Land [by Establishing the True Dharma]) in 1260 (July 16). Members today gather in their largest numbers to commemorate important dates in Ikeda Daisaku’s biography, such as his birthday (January 2), his appointment as third Gakkai president (May 3), and his conversion to Soka Gakkai (August 24). February is dedicated to kōsen rufu (institutional expansion) to celebrate Ikeda’s conversion of households in Tokyo’s Urata Ward in 1952 while he was still a young leader. In effect, Soka Gakkai has formulated a new nenchū gyōji, one that employs a quarterly calendar period adopted from finance and government that encourages members to plan their lives around annual commemorations of events in Ikeda’s life story.

**Economy.** Soka Gakkai maintains a thriving internal economy that depends on a practice the organization labels zaimu (finances), a term used for monetary donations from members. Gakkai representatives promote Soka Gakkai as a religion that does not cost money, in that members are not required to pay to convert and their income is not tithed. However, members do regularly donate money and material goods to the organization. Members call direct cash donations gokuyō (honored memorial), which they perform on pilgrimages to Shinanomachi and other Gakkai sites. Culture centers are
filled with clocks, paintings, and other member gifts that cohere with Soka Gakkai’s aesthetic. To fulfill zaimu expectations, members are encouraged to donate money via bank transfer, ordinarily in December, a month in the Gakkai calendar designated for a yearly fundraising campaign. They report to me that the administration will not issue a receipt for income tax purposes unless the donation exceeds ¥10,000 (approximately $100), a practice that encourages sizable donations. In exchange for zaimu, the Gakkai administration sends small gifts to generous donors, mostly of comparatively low monetary value, always characterized as heartfelt thanks sent directly by Ikeda Daisaku. In the eyes of their most devoted recipients, these return gifts are the equivalent of contact relics to be displayed to fellow members. The zaimu practice relies on the model of government taxation, yet it transcends associations with paying taxes because it inspires a cycle of exchange that binds adherents with the honorary president, affectively and materially.

Currency. Soka Gakkai’s economic reach extends to the rough equivalent of a currency called chiketto (tickets). Chiketto were vouchers issued by the headquarters that were honored by shops and restaurants in the Shinanomachi area in lieu of Japanese yen, to be used in businesses that displayed a tricolor-emblazoned sign that declared membership in the Shinanomachi Shop Owner’s Promotion Society (Shinanomachi Shōten Shinkōkai). Although chiketto were not the precise equivalent of money in the mainstream economy, they were a visual symbol of the expansion of Soka Gakkai’s sphere of influence, and the image of its sovereignty, from the religious into the monetary.

Finances. Registered a religious juridical person (shūkyō hōjin) since May 1952, Soka Gakkai is not subject to taxation. Soka Gakkai’s finances remain opaque, given that it is politically influential and registered not with the national government but the Tokyo Metropolitan government, which maintains only a few staff members responsible for keeping tabs on numerous shūkyō hōjin. Soka Gakkai’s finances remain an object of endless speculation by the popular press; a conservative estimate published in the magazine Shūkan daiyamondo in June 2016 posited the Gakkai’s corporate assets, which include fourteen Gakkai-owned corporations and investments in 331 other companies, at just under $18 billion, and the value of its buildings and real estate holdings of its Shinanomachi headquarters at approximately $1.64 billion. Estimates about Soka Gakkai’s financial assets remain unsatisfactory because they cannot accurately assess the full value of the Gakkai’s thousands of facilities, its stocks and other investments, its holdings overseas, or Ikeda Daisaku’s personal wealth. Most relevant to the analysis here is that even imprecise measurements of Soka Gakkai’s financial assets reveal that the group maintains the capacity to build institutions and carry out activities that equal, or even eclipse, state enterprises.
Cemeteries. Soka Gakkai maintains thirteen massive memorial parks, a number that corresponds to its thirteen national administrative zones. These gravesites vary in size, and each contains thousands of identical marble headstones. Loudspeakers broadcast daimoku and gongyō chants over the remains of deceased members, which are interred in long lines behind family graves for Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda at all thirteen parks. The parks are tremendous financial and engineering undertakings. Staff at one facility north of Tokyo in October 2007 told me that Soka Gakkai spent the equivalent of $400 million to flatten a mountain, fill surrounding valleys, and build an access road to construct a gravesite filled with thousands of family graves and a large eternal memorial (eitai kuyō) collective ossuary. In a quest for design inspirations, staff members toured Arlington Cemetery outside Washington, DC; they told me they regarded Arlington’s graves as miserly (kechi) compared with the uniform marble headstones they created for their members. Soka Gakkai thus seeks to improve on national models as it draws on its deep resources to bind its adherents to its institutions in death as it does in life.

Textual canon. Soka Gakkai narrates its history through an oeuvre inspired by modern Romantic literature. Though adherents still study Nichiren—whose teachings are routinely presented within Ikeda Daisaku’s writings—Soka Gakkai has focused with increasing intensity on creating the working equivalent of its own canon, a vast corpus that operates as the equivalent of a national literature. At the heart of the Gakkai’s canon lies the serial novel The Human Revolution (Ningen kakumei) and its sequel The New Human Revolution (Shin ningen kakumei), novelized treatments of the lives of Toda Jōsei and Ikeda Daisaku and how they constructed the organization in Japan and abroad. Members are cultivated to treat The Human Revolution as the Gakkai’s “correct history” (tadashii rekishi) and to regard it as de facto scripture that transmits butsui bucchaku (the true intent and true teachings of the Buddha).

The Mimetic Nation-State Metaphor

I propose that Soka Gakkai can be conceived as a mimetic nation-state. That is, Soka Gakkai makes itself intelligible and attractive by emulating the institutions, activities, and ideologies perpetuated by nation-state enterprises. Its mimesis of the nation-state’s authority-bearing institutions and practices—particularly those rooted in modern standardized education—proved compelling to converts who flock to Soka Gakkai, especially those who joined in the decades following World War II. The Gakkai’s mimesis of the nation-state suggests an extension of what Emilio Gentile refers to as the “sacralization of politics,” wherein modern democracies borrow from religious referents to
confer a sacred quality on political institutions. Soka Gakkai reverses the polarity of Gentile’s observation: it is a religion that models itself on an idealized vision of the nation-state. A key reason for Soka Gakkai’s development along these lines was its founding as a gakkai (study association). Even as Soka Gakkai transformed into a lay Nichiren Buddhist organization under Makiguchi and Toda and then grew beyond these parameters into a broad-based network of institutions under Ikeda, school-based pedagogy continued to inform core Soka Gakkai practices, and the organization as a whole depends on members who uphold the conventions of modern standardized education, much in the same way that the modern state depends on educational structures to cultivate its subjects and staff its bureaucracies.

In previous publications, I describe Soka Gakkai as an adjunct nation: that is, neither a state within a state nor a separatist institution, but an adjunct network of schools, bureaucracy, economy, and myriad other legitimate forms that make up modern Japan. Positing Soka Gakkai as mimetic of rather than adjunct to the modern nation-state avoids the mistaken impression that Gakkai members regard their organization as secondary in any way. Focusing on mimesis recognizes that Soka Gakkai’s institution-building does not recapitulate every formal aspect of a modern nation, or a state. It also liberates the analysis from the need to constantly differentiate between nation and state. Indeed, because the nation-state serves here as a guiding metaphor, and because definitions of the two terms necessitate a degree of ambiguity, nation and state necessarily blur in this investigation.

Most basically, the mimetic nation-state metaphor explains why Soka Gakkai looks and acts the way it does and why it has proven compelling to so many converts. From its tricolor-draped territories and reverence for founding presidents who oversee a massive bureaucracy modeled on a civil service, to its cadres who bond in shared memory through anthem-like songs and a novelized canonization of their past, down to paths taken by individual members, membership in Soka Gakkai is conceived as participation in a mission of world-historical significance, one that resonates with the mission of the modern nation-state.

This is an appropriate point at which to dip into debates that churn around nation and state to determine implications of a mimetic nation-state. First, I take my cue from Max Weber’s definition of a nation as being self-justified as a “specific ‘culture’ mission” anchored in the irreplaceable values that are to be preserved and developed only through “the cultivation of the peculiarity of the group.” An aporia hangs over the terms at the center of this metaphor. Eric Hobsbawm emphasizes uncertainty that surrounds the concept of the nation, given that it persists as a social entity in flux, a fluid phenomenon that manifests at the intersection of politics, technology, and social transformation that may be constructed from above but cannot be understood
unless it is also analyzed from below. The nation’s ambiguity can be productive: Prasenjit Duara notes interpretive flexibility inherent within modern national identities and points out that “nationalism is rarely the nationalism of the nation, but rather marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other.” This allows a range of actors to treat “the nation-state and nationalism as the means whereby a state or social formation seeks not only to become competitive, but to leverage its way out of the periphery of the world system into the core” (emphasis added). Soka Gakkai can be viewed productively as a social formation that seeks mainstream recognition by emulating what Étienne Balibar calls the “nation form,” the most persuasive means by which social formations seek legitimacy.

Conceptually speaking, nation precedes state formation, and in fact inspires a range of articulations not limited to the nation-state. As Craig Calhoun explains, nationalism is “a discursive formation that gives shape to the modern world.” Before nations exist as objective entities they exist discursively, as articulations that evoke passions in defenders who are willing to die for their communities. And nation-states, once formed, exist, as Timothy Mitchell points out, simultaneously as material force and ideological construct, as they seem both real and illusory. Mitchell draws on (and simultaneously critiques) Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power to describe a two-dimensional effect cultivated within schools, armies, the civil service, and technological institutions: on the one hand are individuals and their activities, and on the other is a “state effect” created by seemingly inert state structures that somehow give the appearance of preceding individuals and providing a framework for their lives. “In fact,” Mitchell concludes, “the nation state is arguably the paramount structural effect of the modern technological era.”

Since it coalesced as a cohesive entity from the end of the eighteenth century, the nation-state has risen to the point that its authority appears beyond compare. In _Imagined Communities_, Benedict Anderson begins his exploration of modern modes of social solidarity by stating that “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.” In his interpretation, religion remains relevant as a cultural system that provides a taken-for-granted frame of reference for revolutionaries. Nationalism replaces religion as sacred language gives way to the vernacular of “print-capitalism,” led by the proliferation of newspapers and the modern novel—both formats at the heart of Soka Gakkai’s self-narration. This useful neologism “nation-ness” helps us understand nationalism’s discursive dimensions: the nation not exclusively as an administrative framework but as a quality that can be expressed. Focusing on the -ness of nation-ness suggests that modern religions may be expressions of nationalism. One can regard Soka Gakkai as a particularly successful exponent of nation-ness, a producer of mimetic equivalents to national structures that project authority and inspire loyalty.
The mimetic nation-state metaphor, of course, has limits. An analysis of Soka Gakkai as either a nation or a state performed by political scientists keen to check off each nation or state feature will reveal shortcomings. Perhaps most obviously, there is no evidence that Soka Gakkai seeks formal statehood. The ideal-type nation set out by Craig Calhoun calls for a clear establishment of sovereignty, “or at least the aspiration to sovereignty, and thus formal equality with other nations, usually as an autonomous and putative self-sufficient state.” Early in its postwar history, Soka Gakkai maintained eschatological Nichiren Buddhist objectives that required governmental affirmation of its goal to convert the populace, yet after 1970 the group abandoned the “national ordination platform” objective that would have required state support (see chapter 2). And, despite accusations that Soka Gakkai sought to replace Japanese democracy with theocracy, it has never been clear that Soka Gakkai sought a status independent from the Japanese nation, or to usurp it. Komeito’s operation as a normal political party in government coalition refutes accusations of crypto-theocracy, and consistent efforts on the part of Gakkai members to contribute to civic and governmental functions indicates that adherents seek to populate and perpetuate existing systems, not replace them.

Positing a religion as a mimetic nation also risks collapsing national and religious formations into an undifferentiated whole. Talal Asad’s research demonstrates that modern states have policed religion through ideological and legal processes that disaggregated religion from the modern secular state. In the chapters that follow, I remain attentive to the fact that nation-states and religions are indeed different entities as I propose the mimetic nation as an explanation for Soka Gakkai’s morphological similarity to national institutions. Finally, a key aspect about the mimetic nation-state framework is that Soka Gakkai leaders do not themselves claim to follow national models. The mimetic nation metaphor functions as a useful etic way to explain the full range of Soka Gakkai’s structural features; it is not an emic framework. Although it is a scholarly and not a native category, its analytical utility is confirmed by observing that Soka Gakkai maintains working equivalents of most nation-state components, such as those that Calhoun set out. These include territorial boundaries, delineated by Gakkai property; a notion of indivisibility, observable in the Gakkai emphasis on shitei funi (indivisible bond of mentor and disciple); culture (including some combination of language, shared beliefs and values, habitual practices); temporal depth (a notion of the nation as such existing through time, including past and future generations, and having a history, preserved in Soka Gakkai’s canonization of its past); and, finally, special historical or even sacred relations to a certain territory evident in adherents’ pilgrimages to Shinanomachi and to other locations they connect with Ikeda Daisaku.

It must also be pointed out that Soka Gakkai, like a state, exerts
Coercion is often equated with violence, and violence brings to mind Charles Tilly’s conception of a national state as a relatively centralized, differentiated organization that successfully claims control over legitimate violence. Tilly hearkens back to Max Weber’s definition, in his 1918 lecture “Politics as a Vocation,” of the modern state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” But violence, as Raymond Geuss notes, is to be distinguished from coercion and power. One can act violently without coercing anyone, while power, as Bertrand Russell defined it, is best understood as the “the production of intended effects,” a process in which physical threats may be absent.

Physical conflicts have flared up at times since Soka Gakkai’s post-war revival, yet threats more potent than physical violence tend to emerge in members’ accounts as principal coercive measures. Following Louis Althusser, we might best understand compliance with Gakkai authority in terms of *interpellation*—“answering the hail” of a hegemonic authority that intercedes through a combination of explicit and implicit power mechanisms to shape people’s subjectivity and perpetuate its institutions. According to Althusser, modern states assert their authority on the one hand through repressive state apparatuses (RSAs), which include the government, police, courts, and other explicit implementers of coercive power, and on the other by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which appear as numerous forces that shape subjects’ loyalties and dispositions: religion, education, communication, the family, and others. ISAs are far more persuasive than RSAs; that is, the latent and actual violence demonstrated by RSAs proves less effective than the work ISAs perform to solidify lifelong commitment to the state. By complying with ideology promoted via a comprehensive range of ISAs, individuals are interpellated: they are recruited via ideology and transformed into national subjects who, in turn, perpetuate the systems that created their self-understanding as subjects.

When we examine Soka Gakkai for its mimetic reproduction of both ISAs and RSAs, we find that it represents a remarkably complete iteration of the state’s apparatuses. Gakkai members answer the hail of the Gakkai’s system—which includes a great deal more than just religious ISAs—as they convert or grow up within a Gakkai family. Its Buddhist and modern pedagogical practices, maintained within a bureaucratic structure that stresses institutional expansion and uses the family home as its basic unit, mirror multiple ISAs, even as its emphasis on security for its leaders and territory suggests that Gakkai members may be simultaneously hailed by RSAs. This is not to say that Gakkai members do not resist interpellation; ethnographic episodes in the following chapters introduce members who complicate Gakkai ideology through their participation or outright refusal to answer Soka Gakkai’s
hail. However, immersion in Soka Gakkai predisposes members to recognize themselves in terms of their Gakkai identities and to perpetuate the Gakkai’s institutions, which in turn create more Gakkai-defined subjectivities. Soka Gakkai may in fact represent something of a perfection of historical processes Althusser describes. Althusser argues that, in the precapitalist period, states were dominated by the religious ISA, but have since been replaced by the school ISA. Education, rather than politics, is key to the perpetuation of the modern state, and “the School-Family couple has replaced the Church-Family couple.” Soka Gakkai may represent a compelling merger of school-and church-family dyads. It implicitly repudiates the notion that modernity necessitates the demise of religion because it eliminates the need to choose between school and religion as the recognized method of social belonging.

Members typically comply with Gakkai authority because they fear exclusion from the group rather than consequences of persisting within it. They fear exile from the practices, people, and institutions that define their subjectivity. Though there is violence in Soka Gakkai’s history—as discussed in chapter 2—power in Soka Gakkai tends to be exerted rhetorically and enacted through social practices. Resistance to authority can result in the exclusion of a vulnerable person from her or his place within the Gakkai’s mutually supportive community. For example, from 2015, a number of Gakkai members organized to protest publicly against Komeito’s support of new security legislation. These members reported being ostracized by their fellow adherents; they were expelled from the institutions that shaped their self-understandings and in fact provided the ideological impetus for their protest activities. This book includes other examples of members who have been ejected, either formally or in effect, for threatening Soka Gakkai’s authority or reputation through their actions. Real fear accompanies this threat of expulsion—a fear as real as exile from one’s country.

Mr. Akabashi, the Young Men’s Division administrator who drove Mr. Iizuka and me through Fukushima in 2013, exemplifies the interpellative power Soka Gakkai exerts on its adherents. Akabashi graduated from Soka Gakuen, the organization’s high school in Tokyo. As we made our way through an abandoned town toward barricades that barred entry to the radioactive zone less than ten kilometers from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plants, Akabashi told us that he, like Iizuka, was recruited right after university into the Gakkai administration, in his case to the Systems Bureau, the Shinanomachi headquarters office that operates as the Gakkai’s IT department. In April 2012, a decade into his career, the administration transferred Akabashi to Iwaki City, Fukushima, to assist Gakkai communities blighted by fallout from the March 2011 nuclear disaster. Before he left Tokyo, friends and family held emotional farewell gatherings “as if I was going off to war,” he chuckled quietly. He also received a personalized written message of encouragement
from Ikeda on the morning of his departure to Fukushima, urging him to take care of his health. I asked Akabashi how he felt about being an unmarried thirty-two-year-old living in an area notorious for its dangerously high radiation levels. “This transfer was my destiny,” he stated immediately, obviously accustomed to answering questions along these lines. “It is my mission during this human lifetime to contribute to the recovery, even in a small way.” Akabashi’s Buddhist sentiment folded into his declaration of self-sacrifice to his vocational mission as a Gakkai administrator, a martyrdom drive that Gakkai institutions cultivate and rely on for their perpetuation.

The Costly Allure of Mimesis

Social scientists have defined the seemingly inexorable tendency for institutions to look and act like one another as “institutional isomorphism.” The prime model for institutional isomorphism is the nation-state. So endemic is the tendency for emergent polities to mimic national patterns that “it is easy to predict the organization of a newly emerging nation’s administration without knowing anything about the nation itself.”36 Sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell present the Meiji-era (1868–1912) Japanese state as the leading global example of what they term “mimetic isomorphism,” a type of organizational behavior driven by ambition and characterized by ambiguity.37 Religious groups contribute disproportionately to this isomorphic tendency: in confirming the nation-state as the dominant model for legitimacy, leading political scientists surmise that “nationalist and religious movements intensify isomorphism more than they resist it.”38 It is notable that DiMaggio and Powell choose the modern Japanese state as the paradigmatic model of mimetic isomorphism. I suggest that Soka Gakkai presents a utopian vision of the modern Japanese state, which had distinguished itself on the international stage for its capacity to conform to the rules for international conduct.39

A detailed comparison between Soka Gakkai and similar organizations that are isomorphic of nation-states exceeds the capacity of this book, but it is important that Soka Gakkai is not a unique case but can instead serve as a model for future inquiry. A few examples should suffice to indicate the ubiquity of mimetic isomorphism on the part of religions—and, more broadly, groups that depend on religion for their self-identity. The most widely publicized recent example must be the brutal self-proclaimed caliphate known variously as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or by the Arabic abbreviation Daesh, which seized territory across the Middle East through savage implementation of Salafi-jihadist doctrine. Part of the group’s alarming success can be attributed to its takeover and perpetuation of state infrastructures, including salaried military and civil servants, carefully managed school curricula, aggressive media control, judi-
cial functions, policing, tax collection, and even garbage disposal. Providing
millions of people with government services, even in a rudimentary and vio-
ently oppressive fashion, enhanced the ability of a relatively small number
of ISIS operatives to retain control of areas where government had otherwise
collapsed. Meanwhile, in Western Sahara, the less publicized Sahrawi Mus-
lim minority has also taken its cue from the nation-state model, albeit in ways
that contrast starkly with ISIS brutality. Sahrawi refugees have formulated
their Muslim identities to comport with secular education-focused and wom-
an-empowering ideals and government-like structures that attract aid from
Western donors. Humanitarian agencies provide aid the Sahrawi community
requires to persist in their decades-long quest for independent state recogni-
tion. Visitors must receive visas to enter Sahrawi territory, which maintains
the working equivalent of government ministries and a presence at the United
Nations.

Numerous New Religions structure themselves along lines set by
nation-state precedent. In the United States, for example, the Church of
Latter-Day Saints, better known as the Mormon Church, is led by a presi-
dent who oversees a complex bureaucracy that divides adherents by age, sex,
geographical location (broken into wards, stakes, districts, and other divi-
sions), and other demographic data, and relies to a large extent on nonsal-
aried administrators. Tithing supports key church endeavors, such as young
members’ missionary service, its Church Education System (which includes
Brigham Young University), broadcast and print media outlets, and training
mechanisms that replicate the emphasis on standardized education that lies
at the heart of state operations. The Church of Scientology, a controversial
group that resisted the religion label early in its tumultuous history, is headed
by a president who administers “orgs” and ranked offices whose names derive
from military nomenclature, such as Sea Org and Command Base. Scientol-
ogy relies on a modern course curriculum model for adherent training, and
its operations have focused to a notorious extent on intelligence-gathering,
following practices imitative of national spy agencies. The Nation of Islam,
a black nationalist group founded at nearly the same time as Soka Gakkai,
expresses a clear appeal to legitimacy through nation status, as does its
small spin-off organization the Nation of Gods and Earths. Nation of Islam
mosques house a school called the University of Islam and the group main-
tains a male-only uniformed paramilitary division called the Fruit of Islam
that guards mosque territories in marked patrol cars—institutions that con-
firm schooling, military regimentation, and gendered vocations as staple New
Religions features.

Asia of the twentieth century saw the rise of New Religions that have
replicated core nation-state structures. For example, Caodai, established
in Vietnam in the mid-1920s, was promoted by its founders as the spiritual
basis for achieving independent national sovereignty. The religion draws on a dynamic range of influences that include Catholicism, Daoism, Chinese redemptive societies, and the Spiritism of French figures such as Victor Hugo, who is upheld as a Caodai saint. Its leaders have distinguished themselves as charismatic spirit mediums, and one of these, named Phạm Công Tắc (1890–1959), used modern statecraft to establish Caodai as a state within a state, complete with its own schools, industries, and military. Between 1946 and 1954, the French colonial power granted Caodai authority under Phạm to collect taxes and maintain its own troops within the province of Tây Ninh. In 1954, Phạm, known as the Hộ Pháp—literally “protector of the dharma and justice” and frequently referred to as the Caodai Pope—joined a Vietnamese delegation to the Geneva Conference to appeal against plans for national partition.

Post-1949 Taiwan has seen the rise of new religious movements that have replicated and even come to constitute state services. The most prominent of these are monastic Buddhist orders that center on a type of modern education that channels efforts toward Buddhist salvation into cutting-edge medicine and social welfare. Fo Guang Shan, a monastic order founded in 1967, supports free medical care, environmental conservation, and education through its Fo Guang University (founded 2000) and Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum (opened 2011). Tzu Chi (compassionate relief) was founded by the female monastic Master Cheng Yen in 1966. It has distinguished itself most notably as a provider of international disaster relief and of medical services within Taiwan. Tzu Chi hospitals associated with the religion’s university are incorporated into the Taiwanese healthcare system, and Tzu Chi otherwise operates under the auspices of a head, chair, CEO, and vice CEOS who oversee the group’s Buddhist education and scientific enterprises.

Japanese New Religions other than Soka Gakkai also exhibit nation-state-like dimensions. Soka Gakkai falls into a lineage of Nichiren-type New Religions that have, to greater and lesser degrees, taken shape around a modern bureaucratic core. This lineage begins with Honmon Butsuryūshū (originally Honmon Butsuryūkō), a group founded in 1868 by a clerical reformer named Nagamatsu Nissen, and includes Reiyūkai, Kokuchūkai, Risshō Kōseikai, Soka Gakkai, and the Nichiren Shōshū–derived lay organization Fuji Taisekiji Kenshōkai—all religions that have, in different periods, mobilized adherents through mechanisms modeled on modern civic rather than temple-based administrations. Nichiren-derived New Religions structure themselves along a honbu (headquarters) and shibu (branch) model within a pyramidal hierarchy that oversees complex bureaucracies. This type of nation-state modeling is not limited to Buddhism-based Japanese New Religions. In the prewar decades, the Shinto-affiliated Ōmotokyō was among the most successful of these to model itself on the Japanese state. It attracted converts through skillful use of modern media—including its own newspaper and
film studio, as well as art, music, and other cultural forms—and emulation of wartime Japanese education, bureaucracy, and military training. Ōmotokyō’s iconoclastic leader Deguchi Ōnisaburō sparked outrage when he reviewed his religion’s cadres from atop a white horse, an act regarded as a shocking appropriation of the emperor’s privilege. Though Ōmotokyō under Ōnisaburō consistently urged reverence for the Japanese imperial house, it was regarded as a threat by the Japanese government. Ōmotokyō was first targeted for government suppression in 1921, and in 1935 it was devastated when its headquarters were destroyed by the police after Deguchi was jailed on charges of lèse-majesté. The police were ordered to not let any portion of the headquarters remain unbroken.49

This violent reprisal was incommensurate with any threat Ōmotokyō could have posed. A state tendency to obliterate perceived religious rivals in disproportionately violent ways is, at least, an East Asian constant. Duara describes excessively harsh persecution by Republican-era Chinese and Manchukuo state authorities of redemptive societies, and the ongoing governmental persecution of Falun Gong in the People’s Republic suggests that China, like Japan, is a place where emergent groups that provide transcendent and this-worldly alternatives to state authority persist as a menace to be put down by the harshest possible means.50 Japan witnessed a comparable reaction in the wake of the Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subways in March 1995. Aum Shinrikyō regarded the attack as a way of ushering in a new world order overseen by a shadow government it had prepared in advance, one complete with ministries and ministers and headed by its guru, Asahara Shōkō. Arrests of Aum members inspired new legislation referred to as the Aum laws that sought to extend government oversight far beyond what was necessary to control the group.51 The anti-Aum legislation was in fact promoted by a wide consortium of Soka Gakkai’s political and religious opponents that used Aum Shinrikyō as a way to unify anti–Soka Gakkai activists in common cause against a phenomenon they regarded as an existential threat.52

René Girard observes that the human tendency toward mimicry leads to rivalry, as we tend to imitate one another’s desires for the same object. Subjects reaching for the same object generate violence, a “process through which two or more partners try to prevent one another from acquiring the desired object through physical or other means.”53 Mimicry extends to the replication of institutions, and mimetic desire can account for why so many of Soka Gakkai’s component institutions resemble modern nation-state entities. The desire to move from the social periphery to the center led Gakkai leaders to model their organization on state enterprises that claim themselves as sole arbiters of legitimacy. Mimesis explains why state authorities would regard Soka Gakkai as a dangerous rival, as a potential alternative to hegemonic state power to be combated with maximum intensity.
Soka Gakkai has consistently served as a target within what Girard identifies as the “scapegoat mechanism,” in which mimetic rivalry is suspended when a scapegoat is selected for sacrifice to restore social order. Ultimately, to engage in mimesis is to court danger. Mimicry of powerful institutions invites scapegoating, of becoming the object of unified derision for coming perilously close to a sanctified original. Homi Bhabha describes tensions that emerge when aspirants mimic powerholders. In discussions of strategies used by colonial subjects who reshaped themselves following conventions adopted from the colonizer, Bhabha notes that mimetic practices and institutions exist simultaneously as legitimate as they are perceived as illegitimate appropriations of sanctioned forms. The mimicker perpetually teeters on the brink of an uncanny valley, risking the peril of appearing “almost the same, but not quite,” and therefore more intimately threatening than an oppositional force that comes across as wholly alien.

Repelling the similar manifests as a refrain in modern Japanese religious history. In his discussion of how notions of orthodoxy took shape as the category religion coalesced in nineteenth-century Japan, Jason Ananda Josephson-Storm categorizes opposition to phenomena that appear threateningly close to a perceived orthodox original as “exclusive similarity”: the almost-but-not-quite is to be rejected due to its likeness, not its difference. As Josephson-Storm explains, before religion was established as a legal and conceptual category, newly arrived Christianity was labeled a deviant heresy by defensive Japanese nativists who regarded the oddly recognizable yet undeniably foreign faith as a twisted version of Buddhism, one that called for a unified Japanese effort for expulsion.

A comparable process of exclusive similarity unfolded as Soka Gakkai grew ever more reminiscent of the nation-state during its rapid postwar growth. This negativity is evident in public reactions to Soka Gakkai’s perceived encroachment on state prerogative. The newspaper Asahi shinbun declared that “the unthinkable has come true” (masa ka’ ga jitsugen) on the election of a Gakkai candidate to the House of Councilors in 1956. A pronounced tendency has persisted in Japanese reportage to describe Soka Gakkai as an upstart imitation of state power. Representative examples of Soka Gakkai journalistic characterizations as a Soka kingdom appear most obviously in journalist Mizoguchi Atsushi’s 1983 book Ikeda Daisaku “Sōka ōkoku” no yabō (Ikeda Daisaku’s “Soka Kingdom” Ambition), which posits kōsen rufu as the first stage in a plan for a Gakkai takeover of Japan’s government, economy, and media. Soka kingdom language also dominates in two series’ run by the monthly magazine Shūkan daiyamondō in 2004 and 2016, and Ikeda kingdom appears as an epithet for Soka Gakkai in other popular periodicals. Sneering descrip-
tions of Ikeda as Japan’s would-be monarch also dominate internet commentary, as revealed in a discourse analysis of frequently used terms in discussion of Soka Gakkai on the popular site 2chan (Nichāneru). This survey, taken in the mid-2000s, ranked the term “king” (ōja) in fourth place, behind “Japan,” “cult,” and “Soka Gakkai member” and ahead of “religion” and “believer.”

The particular language of anti-Gakkai sentiments suggests that the group triggers fears that are specific to its success in building institutions that hew closely to nation-state referents. But Soka Gakkai has also earned bad press through decades of hard-sell proselytizing, its history of castigating rival religions and targeting their adherents for conversion, its controversial electioneering, and members’ singular dedication to Ikeda Daisaku. Through these practices, Soka Gakkai has differentiated itself into a discrete Japanese minority, an identity that invites insights from analysis of minorities in the contemporary world. Negative reactions to Soka Gakkai reveal what Arjun Appadurai describes as “fear of small numbers”—the persistent reminder a minority population presents to a hegemonic national majority that the modern nation-state’s totalizing ambitions remain incomplete. Appadurai invokes Freud’s “narcissism of minor differences” to account for a paradoxical capacity even tiny minorities possess to trigger excessive violence in national majorities. Simply by existing, minorities impede nationalism’s implicit goal of hegemonic purity. Their existence mobilizes existential fears in the majority that they may one day slip into minority status, and that the minority may one day exercise nationalism’s incipient genocidal impetus and wipe out the present-day majority. Following Appadurai’s analysis, a convoluted irony is evident in Soka Gakkai’s mimesis of the modern nation-state: this organization, and others like it that take their cue from the modern nation, in fact constitute the fundamental failure of their source of inspiration. They are the reasons why the modern nation-state perpetually fails to realize an unrivaled whole.

Like the never-complete Japanese state project it emulates, Soka Gakkai continually seeks ubiquity in the lives of its subjects by co-opting their initiatives into its institutional objectives. Because it mimics nationalism’s absorptive function, Soka Gakkai challenges the possibility of a civil society independent of the state: it replicates the state’s administrative omnipresence. Overall, Soka Gakkai emulates the “dual civil society” model Robert Pekkanen proposes to explain the Japanese case: a plethora of small, local groups, such as neighborhood associations (chōnaikai), and few large, professionalized independent organizations. Pekkanen points to ways the modern Japanese state fostered civic attention to small-scale enterprises and hindered the development of large independent organizations that could sway policymaking. This resulted in many neighborhood associations and other small-scale, nonprofessional voluntary associations and comparatively few large-scale Japanese NGOs. After the immediate postwar era, Japanese civil society experi-
enced what he summarizes as an “ice age,” a retreat from civic engagement from the 1970s as the country as a whole turned toward economic development. It is only from the late 1990s that Japan saw a resurgence through the expansion of NGOs, nonprofit organizations, and other voluntary groups.

Soka Gakkai’s development mirrors this civic pattern. The ethnography in this book confirms the primacy of local ties in that the Gakkai’s strength lies at the local level and the majority of the Gakkai’s administration consists of unpaid, nonprofessional volunteers. Gakkai members resemble, to use Robin LeBlanc’s term, “bicycle citizens.” Most members live in a world that is largely invisible to the elite and their social capital and political clout depend on everyday, person-to-person relationships. Members map out ways of social belonging, and ways of understanding Soka Gakkai, through their quotidian activities. Just as Japan turned inward from the 1970s, so too did Soka Gakkai turn toward cultivating generations born into the group, only to rouse its members outward toward volunteerism in the wake of the January 1995 earthquake that devastated Kobe and again after the March 2011 disasters in northeast Japan. Concern for the local that life within Soka Gakkai generates fosters a complementary propensity for civic engagement. Many of the members who appear in this book devote their limited time outside work and Gakkai activities to neighborhood associations and other forms of volunteerism, and a large number are civil servants. Work for a neighborhood association resembles, to a remarkable degree, official duties within Soka Gakkai. The dispositions members cultivate within Soka Gakkai feed into civic engagement—in part as a means of generating goodwill about the Gakkai, but perhaps also because Gakkai life models Japanese civic life.

It is important to note that the civic life and the nation-state that serve as Soka Gakkai’s inspirations for mimesis are not the Japan of today. The group draws inspiration from an idealized past, a selective and optimistic imagining of the early decades of Japan’s emergence as a world power. Remaining loyal to this vision entails the preservation of social obligations promoted during Japan’s rise as a modern nation. Women are relegated to posts in the Young Women’s and Married Women’s Divisions and are celebrated as wives and mothers who protect the home front, the base from which bold men stride forth to fight for the Gakkai. A Gakkai meeting, particularly a large formal gathering, can feel like a time warp back to the mid-twentieth century, where men sit in neat rows in shirtsleeves and dark ties separated from women clothed in pastel-colored skirt suits, their hair perfectly coiffed. Their behavior and appearance speak to an ethos kept alive through loyalty to ideals promoted by the Gakkai’s Three Great Mentors—an inescapable loyalty, as representatives of the Gakkai administration maintain a presence in every Gakkai activity.

Soka Gakkai’s founders seized the repressive system that martyred
their mentor Makiguchi Tsunesaburō. They claimed the expansionist Japanese nation-state of the early twentieth century that jailed Toda Jōsei, that robbed Ikeda Daisaku of his formal education, that sent their loved ones to their deaths in war. They eliminated parochial concerns with emperor-centered Japanese nationalism as they retained the imperial system’s capacities to acquire and exercise power. Soka Gakkai’s mimetic nation-state is a utopian version of the very entity that victimized them.

What This Book Covers

To date, research on Soka Gakkai in Japan has been mostly balkanized between harsh critiques by political and religious opponents and hagiographies produced or heavily informed by the Gakkai’s administration. The comparatively small amount of balanced scholarship on the group itemizes Soka Gakkai’s salient features and details changes over time to its doctrine and administrative structures. Throughout this book I rely on the best of this work. I am not alone in observing ways Soka Gakkai exhibits morphological similarities to historically significant social forms. In 2008, Shimada Hiromi released a popular book with the provocative title Minzokuka suru Sōka gakkai: Yudayajin no kita michi o tadoru hitobito (Ethnicizing Soka Gakkai: The People Who Follow the Path of the Jews). Shimada does little to elucidate how Soka Gakkai compares with Judaism, and he himself suggests that “a more appropriate word probably exists” in lieu of minzoku (ethnicity). He offers similar provocations in Sōka gakkai: Mō hitotsu no Nippon (Soka Gakkai: Another Japan), which he co-authored with Yano Jun’ya, a disgruntled former Komeito politician and influential Gakkai member. Some leading scholars have focused on utopian qualities of New Religions to explain why they arose within the modern nation-state. Nishiyama Shigeru identifies New Religions’ utopian visions of doing away with worldly corruption and ushering in an ideal order—a feature of Soka Gakkai that contributed to its postwar appeal. Tsukada Hotaka built on Nishiyama’s research to explore Soka Gakkai’s utopian qualities as part of an extensive inquiry into how religions active in postwar Japan manifest a national consciousness (kokka ishiki) that motivates political activity. Tsukada suggests that consciousness of nation, society, and solidarity connects to religious, political, and social mobilization, and that attention to utopianism, a quality that stands out in religious movements, works as an effective index for assessing nationalism, including a national consciousness that drove Soka Gakkai’s early postwar development.

One of the best recent analyses of Soka Gakkai comes from Asayama Taichi, a Gakkai adherent who puts to work his Soka University training in sociology in a strikingly dispassionate explanation of his religion’s postwar success. Asayama proposes that a key reason why Soka Gakkai attracted enormous numbers of converts between the end of World War II and the begin-
ning of the 1970s was its development along the lines of a corporation. He goes so far as to summarize the organization as Japan’s most successful company (kaisha) to take the form of a newly arisen religion (shinkō shūkyō). Soka Gakkai grew from a few thousand adherents in 1950 to millions of followers twenty years later by expanding in the same way as the Japanese corporations that powered the country’s economic miracle: that is, by adopting an expansionist headquarter / branch administration that saw to all of their employees’ needs. Asayama convincingly aligns Soka Gakkai’s rise with Japan’s economic boom and notes that, just as the Japanese economy stagnated after the 1973 oil shock, so did the flow of rural migrants which fed Soka Gakkai’s explosive postwar growth.71

These studies, with some exceptions, rely almost entirely on textual analysis and involve little to no fieldwork. Because of this they leave open questions as to why the organization created the particular institutions that make up Soka Gakkai, why people convert and remain within the group, and what everyday life is like for its members. I suggest that, thanks to its twin Buddhist and modern educational legacies, Soka Gakkai was able to construct religious institutions based in the conventions of modern standardized education that promise social legitimacy to their participants. It grew mimetic of education-focused structures and built upon them to provide its members with an array of educational, political, economic, and religious institutions no other religious organization in postwar Japan managed to rival. The Gakkai’s study association identity combined with the appeal of its uncompromising lay Nichiren Buddhist mission and inspiring charismatic leadership to attract converts who expanded its institutional presence far beyond conventional religion parameters. They did this by modeling their religion on the nation-state itself.

Indeed, Soka Gakkai invites us to consider what the label religion may include. I anticipate that this study will serve as a resource for future work on comparable organizations, and that details about Soka Gakkai’s historical development and the lives of its ordinary adherents will shed light on similar institution-building processes at work across the world. However, in advance of comparative work, we require a study of how Soka Gakkai actually operates. I suggest that explanations for how and why Soka Gakkai developed in the ways it did emerge most vividly in the details of members’ everyday lives. Attention to the quotidian interactions of local-level adherents troubles the image of Soka Gakkai as a unitary entity. As Veena Das and Deborah Poole confirm, the contemporary state is best captured at its margins, and we must appreciate that many administrative functions find their most complete realization in small-scale interactions between state functionaries and subjects.72 What Didier Fassin describes as the raison d’état (the reason for the state’s existence) emerges most effectively from observation of micropolitical interactions, by letting accounts of the people who make up an organization tell the
story of the organization. Following Lauren Berlant’s emphasis on the “intimate public sphere” as a cohesive core “whose survival depends on personal acts and identities performed in the intimate domains of the quotidian,” so too is Soka Gakkai idealized by its participants as a cohesive framework that relies on commitments to its twinned Buddhist and humanist aspirations enacted in everyday life. Soka Gakkai confirms the equation of the intimate with the institutional in *The Human Revolution*, the novel that members are urged to regard as canonical. The introduction of the book contains what might be Soka Gakkai’s most-quoted sentence, a phrase that encapsulates the urgent necessity to study this nation-modeled group from the ground up: “A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation, and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind.”

To explore ways the quotidian informs Soka Gakkai’s overall structure, each chapter of this book begins with an ethnographic vignette, and ethnographic episodes throughout direct attention to how affective bonds constitute Gakkai institutions. Chapter 2, “From Intellectual Collective to Religious Mass Movement,” follows the Gakkai’s mimetic development in an overview of its origins as a small educational reform society that burgeoned into a massive religion. Chapter 3, “Soka Gakkai’s Dramatic Narrative,” investigates ways Gakkai media and their attendant practices conflate Nichiren Buddhist martyrdom and modern Romantic heroism in a dramatic narrative that relies on tropes from the Japanese educational curriculum. Chapter 4, “Participating in Canon,” continues discussion of the Gakkai’s dramatic narrative as it suggests one response to a perennial question—what is new about a New Religion?—by describing distinctive features of Soka Gakkai’s equivalent of a new canon. The promise of appearing personally in a still-developing canon is one reason a New Religion may prove more alluring to converts than an older organization. Chapter 5, “Cultivating Youth,” presents a historical and ethnographic study of the Gakkai’s youth training systems and considers how generational changes in instruction mirror educational shifts within the Japanese modern nation-state. Finally, chapter 6, “Good Wives, Wise Mothers, and Foot Soldiers of Conversion,” investigates ways Soka Gakkai replicates Japanese state support for the *sengyō shufu*, the professional housewife at the center of the family unit that constructs the modern nation. The chapter emphasizes tensions that emerge between the Soka Gakkai ideal of woman as wife, mother, and cultivator of the home and Gakkai administration’s demands on its Married Women’s Division to be active outside the home, and it explains what happens when a Soka Gakkai household collapses. The brief afterword discusses dilemmas that confront Soka Gakkai as it seeks to appeal to a new generation of members who are driven by aspirations that are not necessarily accommodated by the organization’s now-traditional mass participation focus and suggests ways Soka Gakkai may develop in the future.
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