

Nichiren Shōshū Academy in America : Changes during the 1970s

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Not only did the 1960s witness a rise in political dissent and urban disorder in the United States, but also a vigorous growth among unorthodox religious groups. While such groups were already in existence, up until that time they had drawn their membership from the margins of society. In the 1960s they made successful inroads into middle America. Along with their success came a positive appreciation of the varieties of religious experience and a renewed interest among anthropologists and sociologists in unorthodox groups. The new interest in religion and the supernatural was no longer described as escapism, defeatism, or failure of nerve, but was taken to be part of a general reorientation of the whole social and intellectual climate of Western society. According to Glock and Bellah (1976), however, the reaction tended to be a negative one, and failed to produce a comprehensive and constructive vision for a new society.

The 1970s turned out less favorable for unorthodox religious groups. The end of American involvement in Vietnam and the economic recession in the early 1970s seemed to have a sobering impact on the "dissident" groups on university campuses; reports of incidents of alleged kidnapping and brainwashing associated with the new religious groups began to pile up (see Robbins and Anthony 1978, 1979; Richardson 1977). The Jonestown incident of 1978 only brought to a head anti-occult feelings already present among the general public of the United States. This paper explores how one such unorthodox group, Nichiren Shoshu Academy, changed and adapted to meet this less favorable

atmosphere of the 1970s.¹

GENESIS AND GROWTH OF THE MOVEMENT

Nichiren Shōshū Academy (hereafter shortened to NSA) is a branch of Sōka Gakkai of Japan, a lay organization made up of followers of a Japanese Buddhist sect called Nichiren Shōshū, whose own roots go deep into Japanese culture. Sōka Gakkai was founded as an educational society prior to World War II and after the war experienced a period of rapid growth. In 1979, it claimed a membership of 7,880,000 households (*Japan Times Weekly*, May 12, 1979). It is not only the largest religious organization in Japan today, but the largest organization of *any* kind.

Because of Sōka Gakkai's nationalistic tendencies (Solomon 1977, pp. 11-12), a number of extensive studies predicted that it would not be successful overseas (e.g. Brannen 1968; Dator 1969; White 1970). In 1960, of less than 500 overseas members, 96% were Japanese living abroad, while the rest were husbands (ex-servicemen) of Japanese members (Williams 1972, appendix; Babbie 1966, p. 115; Dator 1969, pp. 29-58). During the late 1960s, however, NSA became one of the fastest growing religious movements in the United States, and according to one study, over 70% of the 200,000 members claimed in 1970 were non-Japanese (Williams 1972, appendix). The rate of growth slowed down considerably during the 1970s (Hashimoto and McPherson 1976), but in 1976 it could still boast a membership figure of 237,500 adherents (Sugimori 1976, appendix).

NSA was first established as the Sōka Gakkai of America

1. The research on which this paper is based was conducted from 1976 to 1979, mainly in New York and California. The researcher attended various meetings regularly as a participant observer, but never joined the movement. Questionnaires were distributed; 23 NSA top and senior leaders were interviewed without a format, and 15 members and leaders were interviewed according to the format of the questionnaire.

in 1960, and functioned primarily as an outpost for the Japanese Sōka Gakkai members who had been converted in Japan but lived abroad for reasons of marriage, business, or study. According to Oh (1973, p. 170), NSA meetings met the deeply felt social and psychological needs of many Japanese "war-brides" who were struggling to adjust themselves to life in the United States.²

The NSA tenets and rituals themselves are relatively simple, but leaders demanded that the members proselytize, taking as their measure of faith the number of people who had been successfully proselytized. This enabled the movement to grow very rapidly in a short period of time in Japan. These missionary activities were continued in the United States by the "war-brides," and were initially aimed at Japanese in similar situations.³ Changes that occurred within NSA may be best understood as successive measures taken to adapt this Japanese-born Buddhist movement to American culture.

Around the middle of the 1960s the first steps to "Americanize" the movement were taken. The meetings began to be conducted in English, and proselytizing activities were aimed at recruiting Americans. Fujiwara suggests that the parent movement, Sōka Gakkai in Japan, had by then exhausted its possibilities at home, and that its efforts to expand beyond its national boundaries were

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2. NSA meetings still play an important role among Japanese women in the United States as occasions to speak Japanese, eat Japanese food, offer mutual encouragement, and exchange information. One Japanese woman I interviewed, for example, told me: "I don't think I could have survived those years of insecurity and loneliness without my faith and the friends I met through my faith. . . . When I came to the States, we moved around from one town to another. Wherever we went, there were at least a few members - Japanese women in similar circumstances who could help one another."
 3. Members would trace down Japanese-sounding names in the telephone book (Dator 1969, p. 23; Snow 1976, p. 133), or would wait around bus stations looking for Japanese-looking faces (Nakaba and Asano 1972, p. 102).

aimed to relieve pressures at home without forfeiting its missionary zeal (1970, p. 167). The growth of Sōka Gakkai in the United States would have been severely limited if the propagation had been aimed solely at Japanese living abroad. But with the conversion of many of the husbands of Japanese members during the early 1960s, leaders became more confident of proselytizing among Americans who would not have had any experience in the Buddhist tradition. At the same time, they were not unaware of the currents of American society during the 1960s. One NSA leader (a naturalized Japanese-American) characterized this period as "a time when we could get many young people to join just because we were non-American, unorthodox, and very different." From 1965 to 1969 it was reported that the membership grew from 30,000 to 170,000, a rate of 30,000 adherents a year.

Around 1970 NSA leaders adopted a further "Americanizing" strategy by presenting the movement as a force for the revitalization of American revolutionary ideals. On the one hand, the American Revolution of 1776 was defined as an "ideal," conducted in a true "spirit of democracy" and a "pioneer spirit." But on the other, NSA contended, this tradition of a democracy at the service of the interests of every individual had collapsed in America under the weight of problems of war, drugs, racial discrimination, and a pervasive sense of anomie. NSA was presented as a movement to bring America back to the spirit of democracy, freedom, and happiness (*NSA Quarterly*, 1975 Special Summer Issue; Gotō and Takahashi 1971, pp. 187-197). In 1969 the "Spirit of 1776" was chosen as the theme of the NSA National Convention for that year. From that time, the NSA movement made itself conspicuous to the public through activities like uniformed parades, cultural festivals, and conventions. In 1976 NSA celebrated the nation's birthday with extravagant conventions in three

cities: Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.⁴

By the end of the 1970s NSA entered a third stage of "Americanization" in which young Americans began to take the initiative in reorienting the movement. This move to a new stage began with the rebellion of some members in New York, but in 1979 both the Japanese and American leaders were working together to grope for viable means to develop unity and initiative among the members and to help this Buddhist movement take root in the United States. A comparison of the survey results⁵ with other available data makes clear the changes that all of this brought about in the constitution of the movement's membership.

MEMBERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Various figures have been given, but I believe the figure of 30,000 locatable⁶ individual members comes closest as a reasonable estimate of 1979 membership. Judging from the most recent statistics published, for the year 1976 (Sugimori 1976, appendix) when NSA claimed 237,500 members, it would appear that the movement has lost over 200,000 members since that time. The membership statistics published by NSA, however, include a large number

4. NSA reports that a total of 989,300 man-hours were required to prepare for a parade in New York in which 5,000 members in various costumes participated (*NSA Bicentennial Convention Graphic* 1976, p. 48). NSA staged two such parades. In addition, four shows and five between-game performances at baseball parks were staged as part of this celebration.

5. The questionnaires were distributed in 1979 in Los Angeles, New York City, and a southern town. The researcher went to actual meetings and asked attending members to fill in the questionnaire. Altogether 547 English and 186 Japanese questionnaires were given out, of which 181 English and 19 Japanese forms were returned. The data include 15 personal interviews as well.

6. By "locatable" I mean a member who keeps in touch with the organization in some way, either by occasional attendance of the meetings, by subscribing to NSA journals, or by contributing money.

of inactive members. Using data from Oh (1973) together with my own, I estimate the number of members active to some degree at the beginning of the 1970s to have been about 1.7 times the number of those active in 1979, or about 50,000. It is possible that the number of fairly active members reached 60,000 around the middle of the 1970s. It would seem, therefore, that NSA has lost some members to peripheral inactive status during the latter half of the 1970s.

NSA has always had a large number of adherents who joined and then became inactive,⁷ but it used to recover the loss by continually recruiting large numbers of new members. Since 1976 NSA leaders have been less insistent on proselytizing activities. This is due to two interrelated factors: the fruitlessness of proselytizing among total strangers during the late 1970s, and the desire of members to spend less time in proselytizing and more in religious studies. As Table 1 shows, the organization was doing less recruiting during the latter half of the 1970s. While in 1972, 27% of the respondents had practiced NSA Buddhism for less than one year, in 1979 less than 3% had done so. More dramatically, the percentage of members who had practiced more than ten years increased from 3.6% in 1972 to 22.4% in 1979. One NSA staff member characterized the recent changes in the movement as resulting from a "maturing of the members." This indeed would seem to be the case.

By 1979 the ratio of members who have been with the movement a longer time has increased, as has the number of members who are older, better educated, in higher in-

7. Hashimoto and McPherson report that as early as 1969 there was a concern among NSA top leaders that the movement was attracting too many peripheral converts (1976, p. 87). Decisions to apply stricter criteria for granting membership were announced, but my research indicates that this policy was never carried out until the end of the 1970s.

TABLE 1
Length of Affiliation

1972 ^a		1979	
less than one year	27.0%		2.4%
1-3 years	51.6%		19.6%
4-6 years	11.0%		33.5%
7-10 years	3.0%		22.1%
more than 10 years	3.6%	11-15 years	9.1%
		16-20 years	4.8%
		more than 20 years	5.6%
missing	3.7%		2.9%
N=700		N=215	

Source: (a) Oh 1973, p. 174.

come brackets, and in more professional jobs. Table 2 shows age composition. During the early 1970s the movement attracted a large number of young people, but in 1979 the majority of the teenagers are the children of members. In terms of educational background (Table 3), more members

TABLE 2
Age Composition

	1970 ^a	1972 ^b	1979
20 or younger	17%	29.7%	3.4%
21-30	35%	38.4%	38.0%
31-40	15%	20.7%	36.4%
41-50	15%	10.7%	14.3%
51-60	6%	0.6%	5.9%
61 and older	3%		2.0%
	N=not known	N=700	N=215

Sources: (a) Williams 1972, appendix.

(b) Oh 1973, p. 172.

TABLE 3
Educational Background

	1972 ^a		
8 years or less	2.0%	3.0%	less than high-school
8-12 years	34.6%	14.5%	high-school completed
13-14 years	28.6%	41.0%	1-2 years of college
15-16 years	20.6%	24.0%	4 years of college
over 16 years	13.0%	17.0%	graduate education
missing	2.0%	0.5%	
	N=700	N=215	

Source: (a) Oh 1973, p. 173.

have had some college education, more members have finished four years of college education, and more have gone on to graduate school in 1979 than in 1972. This change is reflected in income levels and job categories as well. Table 4 shows income levels of the members. Al-

TABLE 4
Income Levels

1972 ^a		1979	
none (students)	4.6%	less than \$5,000	9.3%
under \$6,000	19.6%	\$5,000-\$10,000	13.0%
\$6,000-\$12,000	43.0%	\$10,000-\$15,000	23.7%
\$12,000-\$18,000	7.0%	\$15,000-\$20,000	12.6%
		\$20,000-\$25,000	11.2%
		\$25,000-\$30,000	6.0%
		\$30,000-\$35,000	4.2%
		\$35,000-\$40,000	3.3%
missing	24.2%	over \$40,000	16.7%
	N=700		9.8%
			N=215

Source: (a) Oh 1973, p. 173.

though the categories that Oh uses in his data and those of my own are not quite compatible, and while Oh's data have to reckon with a larger number of members who refused to answer the questions, in general we may say that respondents in 1979 were earning much higher incomes than those in 1972. Snow characterized NSA in 1975 as having drawn "the majority of its adherents from the lower half of the socio-economic structure" (1976, p. 268), but in 1979 this characterization no longer holds true. In 1978-79 I visited many members' homes for meetings and interviews, and found economic conditions to range widely. There were members who were having a hard time making a living, and who gave testimonials of hope in spite of their difficulties; there were members who were making more than a comfortable living, and who gave testimonials on their lives as actual proof of the power of their faith. In general, the description of NSA members as "economically deprived" cannot be applied to NSA members in 1979. The same can be seen in their Occupational Profiles (Table 5).

A glance at Table 5 shows the startling change that occurred among members from the early 1970s to the late 1970s in terms of occupational categories: the percent of members whose occupation fell under the categories of professional and technical jobs expanded from 18% in 1970 to 30.7% in 1979. The change from Snow's data (1970-74) is all the more remarkable, since Snow's cases come from *World Tribune* samples, and the *World Tribune* seems to feature the best of the members. NSA members in 1979 resemble those of Zen in the early 1970s, as characterized by Layman (1976, p. 131).

Although the Japanese members were far less willing to return the questionnaires, my survey contained more Japanese Americans than Oh's (Table 6). However, Oh's data contain 12.5% missing values. The movement leadership

TABLE 5
Occupational Profiles

	1970 ^a	1970-74 ^b	1979 ^a
professional	18%	16%	30.7%
managers and administrators	4%	6%	9.8%
clerical and sales	10%	15%	32.1%
blue-collar	15%	7%	7.4%
service	—	5%	3.7%
military	—	10%	0.5%
housewives	29%	16%	6.5%
students	19%	25%	9.3%
other	7%	—	—
	N=not known	N=331	N=215

Sources: (a) Williams 1972, appendix.

(b) Snow 1976, p. 267. His data are based on samples of testimonials selected randomly from the *World Tribune*, NSA's official newspaper.

TABLE 6
Ethnic Identification

	1960 ^a	1965 ^a	1970 ^a	1972 ^b	1979
Oriental	96%	77%	30%	9.3%	20.4%
Caucasian	3%	14%	41%	54.6%	52.9%
Afro-American	1%	5%	12%	9.3%	18.4%
Latin-American	—	3%	13%	—	3.9%
other	—	1%	4%	3.3%	4.4%
	N=not known			N=700	N=212

Sources: (a) Williams 1972, appendix.

(b) Oh 1973, p. 174.

8. In the questionnaire I asked the members to put down their actual job titles and responsibilities, and categorized their answers according to Lin (1976, p. 415).

was anxious to project the image of an all-American movement during the early 1970s so that many Japanese members may have left the question on ethnic identification unanswered. My field notes show that the percentage of Japanese attending meetings in New York increased between 1976 and 1979. In terms of sex composition, NSA data showed that as of 1970, 59% of the members were female and 41% male. Oh's data showed 50.7% female and 49.3% male, a result that seems to have surprised him. Among my respondents in 1979, 35% were male and 65 female, and my head-count of members at meetings attended in twelve different locations correspond approximately to these figures. This seems to be consistent with the fact more Japanese were active in 1979, since the majority (about 80%) of the Japanese members are still women.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Although the respondent profile has changed in other respects, religious practices do not seem to have changed appreciably. Respondents appear to be involved with religious activities in daily life as much in 1979 as they had been in 1972. Asked how often they do *gongyō* (reciting parts of the Lotus Sutra, and chanting the sacred phrase, *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*, in over 90% of the cases, the answer was: twice a day every day; 6% replied that they miss only once or twice a week. This accounts for 97.2% of the total respondents. In 1972, over 96% of Oh's respondents fell into one of these two categories.

Daily *gongyō* takes a minimum of fifteen minutes in the morning, and ten minutes in the evening, and members may chant the sacred phrase longer if they wish. Asked how long they spent on daily religious practices altogether, 94% answered that they spent over one hour a day, and 20% of the total respondents spent over two hours.

According to Oh, NSA evidently was a focal point not

only for the religious life of the members, but also for their social activities as well. Over 40% of his respondents indicated that they attended some kind of NSA meetings daily, and an additional 47% attended a few times a week (1973, p. 175). During the latter half of the 1970s the number of meetings held by NSA was reduced to once a week, and members were less totally involved in NSA activities. In addition they were encouraged to make friends outside of the movement. During the late 1970s, members spent less time in NSA group meetings, but they seemed to spend as much time in daily prayers as had members during the early years of the decade. In 1979, 87% of the respondents indicated that NSA membership was "extremely important" for them, and the rest stated that it was "fairly important." Interestingly enough, the degree of participation in NSA activities and the length of daily practice did not differ among categories of ethnic background, education, age, income, or length of affiliation with the movement.

Hashimoto and McPherson claimed that NSA's attempt to "Americanize" the movement was unsuccessful because of the change in the mood in the United States, and they predicted that NSA would revert back to the Sōka Gakkai "outpost" it once was at the beginning of the 1960s (1976, p. 89). My data show that at the end of the 1970s, two distinct groups were emerging within the movement. One group consists mainly of the Japanese women and their husbands, whose affiliation with the movement tends to be longer, who have less education and less prestigious occupations, although their income levels are as high as the other group's. The other group consists of Americans who tend to be younger, have a higher level of education, and are engaged in professional occupations. Although the latter group's affiliation with the movement tends to be shorter, in 1979 they were as much involved with the

movement and its religious practices as the former. Many of the members of this latter group have middle-range leadership positions,⁹ and it is they who have been giving the movement its new orientation of late.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Up until the late 1970s, NSA organization was often characterized as “authoritarian.” Snow, who was an active member in 1974–75, described NSA as having a “military, chain-of-command-like leadership structure” (1976, p. 24). Layman asserts that members were kept “under surveillance,” and “any deviation from the expected behavior” was discouraged (1976, p. 123).

By the end of the 1970s, American members were demanding that the movement be managed more “democratically,” and that their opinions be more reflected in policy decisions. More specifically, members wanted less proselytizing and fewer non-religious activities, such as conventions, parades, and singing. They also wanted Buddhist teachings to be kept separate from Japanese customs, such as sitting on the floor and using Japanese titles to refer to the leaders (*hanchō*, *fujinbushō*, etc.). NSA top leaders set up meetings called “open forums” in which regular members as well as lower- and middle-range members were free to speak out. In this way, their opinions were systematically solicited throughout the United States. Reflecting the members’ wishes, the organization has become less rigid and less hierarchical, and local groups are now given more freedom to decide on their own activities in accord with their own needs and interests. The Grand Culture Festival, planned for 1979 to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the inscription of the original object of

9. The top management positions were, however, largely occupied by Japanese and naturalized Japanese-American members.

worship (*dai gohonzon*) by Nichiren, was cancelled partly as a result of the request of some American members. These members felt that such a mass gathering of NSA/Sōka Gakkai in Los Angeles would create unnecessary publicity in the wake of the Jonestown incident of 1978.

Some Americans are demanding now that the interpretation of Nichiren's writings and doctrine should be left to them, and that the organization should supply only the materials and give general direction, so that the members can make independent judgments on the validity of particular interpretations. The celebrated system of giving annual examinations to the members to test their knowledge of the "proper interpretation" of the doctrine, and giving Nichiren Shoshu academic degrees was abolished (at least temporarily) in 1979. Perhaps the sentiment of these independent American members is best expressed in the following remark made by one such member at a leaders' meeting in Los Angeles:

All I need is the *goshō* (collection of Nichiren's writings), the *gohonzon* (the object of worship), and a small number of friends I can talk to about the doctrine . . . I would like to learn in my own way what meaning the *goshō* has in my life. I don't really care what any leader says. I don't care even what President Ikeda says. All I need is the *goshō* and some friends.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the 1970s, Sōka Gakkai in Japan expanded its activities widely into various fields of cultural, political, and social affairs, including community organization and environmental protection. Although its recruitment efforts are less in evidence, the parent organization has successfully maintained its complex vertical and horizontal structure with its corresponding system of hierarchical authority. The American branch, NSA, has apparently moved in the

opposite direction. NSA had once been highly conspicuous in terms of its tight, hierarchical organization, with activities aimed at impressing the general public (conventions and uniformed parades) and persistent proselytizing activities on the streets. But such things have receded more into the background. Members have begun to hold meetings in smaller numbers and to bring up their own interests and needs. Proselytizing activities have become more subdued, and members are now encouraged to attract friends indirectly to the movement by showing the true value of its Buddhist teachings through their spirit of happiness and dedication at home and at work. The number of meetings held has been reduced. There are no more public activities. Some members still talk about *kōsen rufu*, the propagation of the faith throughout the whole world, but the emphasis is now on private quiet study of the doctrine and the practice of Buddhism at home. In this process, the movement has narrowed its activities from a general cultural sphere to a purely religious one.

In a study of changes in social movement organization, Zald and Ash suggest that two dimensions of movement organization mediate the extent to which it is affected by public sentiment (in their terms, "the ebb and flow of sentiments" toward an organization): (1) the extent of membership requirements, both initial and continuing; and (2) the extent to which operative goals are oriented to change of member or individual behavior rather than oriented to societal change (1966, p. 330). According to them, (1) exclusive organizations that demand a greater amount of members' commitment, energy and time are affected less than inclusive organizations, and (2) movements that aim at changing individuals rather than society are affected less since they pose less of a threat to dominant values and institutions. Up until the end of the 1970s,

NSA seems to have been one of those movements that demanded exclusive and extensive commitment of its members. Furthermore, since most religious movements, including NSA, usually have the change of the individual as their operative goal, they are less affected by the ebb and flow of outside sentiment. Still, NSA seems to have been deeply affected by it.

I would suggest that the size of the movement (the actual number of committed followers) be added to the two dimensions given by Zald and Ash as a third dimension mediating the extent to which public mood affects movement organization. When a movement acquires a large number of followers, the movement organization comes to play a greater role in creating a surrounding environment and hence seems to be less directly affected by it. Several strategies are available to small movements in the face of declining support: (1) leaders may attempt to insulate members further from outside influence by making the movement more exclusive; (2) since this may not always be possible, leaders may further accommodate the tenets and injunctions of the movement to the dominant outside values; and (3) members may be encouraged to find more meaning in the psychological benefits of the movement rather than in its societal benefits.

To NSA leaders, the first strategy was not possible because of the large number of members who were not satisfied with the organization. Further accommodation to dominant values (the second strategy) did take place in the reduction of exclusively movement-oriented activities, in the development of the view of the movement's teachings as one valid interpretation rather than *the* uniquely valid one (in spite of emphasis to the contrary by the sect's priests¹⁰), and in the honoring of individual freedom. By the end of the 1970s, much of the rhetoric surrounding the vision of world-wide propagation (the creation of the

Third Civilization) was dropped in the United States, and a stress on the individual psychological benefits of Buddhist practice has become predominant (the third strategy).

The changes that occurred in NSA have resulted from three related factors: (1) a decline in the openness to new religions within American society during the 1970s, and thus a decline in the number of potential converts; (2) a resulting emphasis on the further consolidation of existing members in Buddhist doctrine and practice; and (3) a "maturing" of existing members in terms of age, longer affiliation with the movement, and above all the presence of a large number of intellectually oriented American members. These members joined mostly around the beginning and the middle of the 1970s when unorthodox religious movements were popular among students, and leaders concentrated their efforts in proselytizing students on campus. At present, the NSA organization may be best described as democratically dispersed. And it is possible that from among these independent-minded American Nichirenites, new interpretations of the Nichiren doctrine will emerge.

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10. Sōka Gakkai, as mentioned above, is a lay organization, and there exists a separate hierarchy of Nichiren Shōshū priests. As is well known, Sōka Gakkai leaders have been involved in doctrinal disputes with the priests.

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