Reimagining the 'Missionary': Gender, Purpose, and Faith-Driven Migration in Transnational Japanese Buddhist Movements

By

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Vienna, 10 June 2025

Mako Kitamura

Abstract

This thesis critically engages with the conventional concept of the "missionary," arguing its inadequacy for understanding contemporary faith-driven migration, especially outside traditional Christian frameworks. The term is often male-centric and focused on conversion, thereby obscuring the nuanced purposes and lived experiences of diverse religious migrants. Focusing on Soka Gakkai, a global Buddhist movement propelled by *Kosen-rufu* (the widespread propagation of its teachings), this study reconceptualises "mission" as profoundly intertwined with individuals' life purpose (*Shimei*), personal growth, and everyday embodied practice.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, encompassing seven months of intensive participant observation and semi-structured interviews with thirteen Soka Gakkai members in Austria and Poland, the research first demonstrates how migration paths frequently emerge from "contingent mobilities." These paths are subsequently reframed through faith, aligning with the concept of "being acted upon" (Mittermaier, 2012) rather than solely active self-cultivation. Secondly, the study examines the gendered formation of "mission," illustrating how women's agency is cultivated through disciplined self-cultivation (Mahmood, 2005) amidst contradictory gendered discourses within Soka Gakkai.

This thesis offers a sociological and anthropological expansion of religious migration scholarship, revealing how faith is lived, enacted, and reimagined beyond conventional boundaries through the complex interplay of gender, mission, and contingency in transnational contexts.

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Introduction

In April 2025, I was conducting an interview with a 50-year-old Japanese woman, Akari-san[2], a member of the Buddhist Soka Gakkai. She has been in Krakow, Poland for more than twenty years, and she was such a nice person that helped me to get used to my study abroad in Poland in 2022. She experienced study abroad in Poland like me and shared a particular memory of praying with other members at the Auschwitz concentration camp, which became her turning point to stay in Poland ever after. "That's when I thought, maybe what's truly important is to come back here and spread this practice of faith so that people can become happy. I couldn't stop crying at Birkenau. […] I think a big part of why I came to Poland was that 'past promise of a mission.'" Referring to Nichiren's writing The Opening of the Eyes (*Kaimoku-sho*) (Soka Gakkai, n.d., p. 234), she explained that, as a disciple, she might have made a vow to her mentor in a past life to come to Poland, even if she does not remember it now. As I listened, the word "missionary" immediately came to mind, a simple descriptor for someone whose religious faith intersects with migration for the purpose of spreading their beliefs.

However, immediately after this thought, and without me even mentioning the term, she directly addressed it: "I'm not really a missionary though. Missionaries, like Christians, they come only for that mission. For us, you need to be happy as well. I came to Poland because I wanted to grow myself." Certainly, when we hear "missionary," we typically imagine individuals dispatched by a church to a foreign country, primarily for conversion or social service, often as a professional role (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

[2] To protect personal information, pseudonyms are used for all interviewees. For Japanese interviewees, the honorific "-san" is added to their names as a sign of respect in Japanese culture.

In contrast, she perceives her migration as an inherent part of embodying her faith, emphasizing her own happiness and personal growth over external conversion, which is an aspect not typically associated with conventional missionary work. Yet, her rejection of the term, despite her profound sense of religious purpose, triggered me a dilemma to think more deeply and persistently: If someone whose life and migration is so clearly driven by a religious purpose cannot be called a missionary, what term does fit?

While the term "missionary" often carries a historically burdened image, I hesitate to abandon it entirely. What truly draws me to the word is not the traditional role it implies, but the underlying sense of purpose. A fundamental commonality exists between what we conventionally label a "missionary" and individuals like Akari-san is that their actions are profoundly driven by a mission. Whether this mission is guided by a divine will or by a personal commitment rooted in a past spiritual promise with a mentor, the impetus to act for a higher purpose remains. This shared commitment to a faith-driven trajectory, a life lived as an embodiment of spiritual ideals, transcends the rigid definitions. "Missionary" is the core concept of a life directed by a compelling spiritual purpose, which is worth re-examining, rather than discarding. The challenge, then, lies not in finding an entirely new word, but in expanding our understanding of this familiar term to encompass the rich diversity of contemporary faith-driven lives.

Considering that the current concept just does not accommodate the way her choices and migrations are lived as direct expressions of her faith, my central research question is: Why is the concept of "missionary" inadequate, and how can it be rethought to expand our understanding of contemporary faith-driven migration?

Anchored to this central question of redefining "missionary," I further aim to tackle the intersectionality of missionary identity and gender subjectivity. The term "missionary" is

inherently gendered and was largely conceived as a masculine endeavour, as Cunningham (1993) points out that the term itself was a male-gendered noun in the 19th century. While seminal literature on missionary studies has since engaged with the "feminization of missions," showing how women's roles expanded from unpaid domestic support to salaried vocations from the late 19th century, fostering a form of "missionary feminism" (Midgley, 2006, p 341), this scholarship often focuses on the roles of women within established, institutionally-backed Christian missions.

My research will extend this discussion by examining how gender shapes the lived experience of faith-driven migration outside these traditional frameworks, particularly within a non-Western religious movement like Soka Gakkai. Ultimately, by focusing on female faith-driven migrants, this research seeks to uncover how their mission becomes gendered or ungendered throughout their migratory experiences, thereby providing a nuanced image of missionaries when intersecting with gender.

The selection of Soka Gakkai as the focus of this research is advantageous due to its notable international expansion and the prominent role women play within its movements. Founded on the teachings of Nichiren, a 13th-century Japanese Buddhist monk, and centered on the Lotus Sutra—one of Buddha's core teachings—Soka Gakkai's mission is fundamentally driven by *Kosen-rufu* (広宣流布), which means the widespread propagation of its religious teachings. As of 2018, Soka Gakkai reported approximately 8.3 million member households in Japan and an additional 3 million practitioners worldwide (Soka Gakkai, 2018). Although precise statistical data on Japanese Soka Gakkai practitioners who migrated abroad is unavailable, existing scholarly literature consistently highlights their crucial and pioneering role in the global dissemination of the faith. A notable example is the missionary activity of Japanese women married to American soldiers. When Yasu Kashiwabara, a founding member

of Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (the predecessor organization of Soka Gakkai), accompanied the third president Ikeda Daisaku on his first overseas propagation trip to the United States in 1960, she encouraged these women to become leading figures, or "top ladies," within American society by establishing Soka Gakkai-centered households abroad, framing their efforts as part of a broader "family revolution" (McLaughlin, 2018, p. 150). Japanese female practitioners have often existed in a state of tension, being recognized as "religious professionals," yet their legitimate authority within the organization remained largely limited to domestic roles. While Soka Gakkai's notions of gender has been evolved over time, such tension continues to shape female practitioners' experiences. By focusing on how Soka Gakkai women embody their faith through migration, this study aims to expand the concept of "missionary" beyond its historical, Western, and male-centric biases to include the more nuanced kind of "missionary" in the intersection of gender and faith-driven mobility.

To examine missionary and gender subjectivity within Soka Gakkai's transnational context, I conducted ethnography and in-depth interviews with nine Japanese women, six of whom live in Vienna, Austria, and three of whom live in Krakow, Poland, one French migrant woman and two Austrian women in Austria.

My methodology combines participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation, an ethnographic method involving sustained immersion in a natural setting, enables the researcher to observe, experience, and document social dynamics over time (Emerson et al., 2001). Attending religious activities at least twice a month, I aim to understand how Soka Gakkai in Austria and Poland shapes gendered religious experiences for both men and women through direct engagement with their practices and community life.

Semi-structured interviews, a qualitative method that balances focused inquiry with open-ended dialogue (Mason, 2002, p. 62), are particularly well-suited to exploring how

Japanese migrant women in Austria and Poland experience and understand their "mission" in relation to migration, and to interpret gender roles and canonical texts. This format allows for flexibility in addressing core research themes while also accommodating unexpected insights.

Austria and Poland were selected as field sites due to their underrepresentation in existing literature compared to countries like Italy, which has the largest number of Soka Gakkai practitioners in Europe (Barone, 2019). Poland, described by one participant as being "at the beginning stage of *Kosen-rufu*" (Sakurako-san, personal communication, April 27th), offers a context in which the presence of Japanese migrants remains particularly vital to the movement's growth. Austria, on the other hand, holds symbolic significance of "mission" within Soka Gakkai's global vision, as Ikeda once referred to it as "a future 'grand stage for *Kosen-rufu*'" (Pokorny, 2014, p. 28). These contrasting settings provide fertile ground for exploring the roles of Japanese migrants and their missionary engagements within Soka Gakkai's transnational expansion.

Chapter 1: Re-evaluating "missionary" migration: An intersectional gendered lens

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework central to this thesis. It begins by dismantling the concept of "missionary," examining its etymological and scholarly treatment across both Christian and Buddhist contexts. Subsequently, I introduce Mahmood's (2005) lens of agency to explore and understand the intersection of missionary and gender subjectivity.

1.1 Migration as the driver of spreading religious beliefs

Religion profoundly shapes the experiences and decisions of migrants globally. Ahsan Ullah et al. (2022) aptly emphasize, "religion is undeniably both a push and a pull factor in migration" (p. 75). However, the role of religion extends beyond this straightforward push and pull dynamics, as Thomas Csordas (2009) expresses, "religious impulses are decentered and float like dandelion seeds in the breeze of the cultural imaginary" (p. 4). This metaphor highlights that religious ideas and practices are not simply imposed in a unidirectional manner; rather, they unfold in unexpected, multidirectional, and highly complex ways within globalization and migratory process.

We can think of migration as the key driver in spreading religious beliefs across globe involving "missionary migration," where people migrate to promote its faith or provides services to others based on their beliefs, such as seen in the missionary migratory practices conducted by Mormon and Pentecostal churches (Nordin & Otterbeck, 2023, p.93). "Missionary" have been historically played significant role, originating with the Jesuits Christian traditions, who began proselytizing in other geographies, such as their early missions in China (Fouraker, 2008). By the 18th century, such missionary efforts became increasingly tied to Western colonial agendas. Missionary work became closely aligned with imperialist

goals, often legitimizing colonization through narratives of spiritual salvation and moral progress (Porter, 2004).

Conversely, the figure of the missionary is no longer predominantly white or Western in the contemporary globalized world. Instead, it is becoming increasingly racially and geographically diverse with significant flows of religious actors moving from the Global South to the Global North. Research on the African Christian diaspora indicates this growing diversity and highlights the significant migration of missionaries from Africa and other southern regions to Europe and North America (Adogame, 2013). This rise in South-to-North missionary movements complicates traditional colonial expansions, as communities that were once the subject of missionaries now actively assert religious agency. In doing so, they also expand and diversify the contemporary meanings associated with the term "missionary."

What remains conceptually unclear to me is the distinction between who is considered a missionary and who is not. While the term "missionary" is often used in a straightforward or self-evident way, typically referring to individuals who are officially sent by religious institutions to engage in proselytization, I believe that missionary migration is a far more nuanced phenomenon, as I presented in my vignette. Does the designation of "missionary" apply only to those formally sent by religious organizations as vocations, or does it also encompass individuals who engage in religious outreach informally, or even those who embody and transmit their faith through everyday practices? The term "missionary" itself often appears underexamined in existing scholarship, despite its frequent use. We need to critically clarify what constitutes "missionary" and to explore the diverse motivations, practices, and identities involved in such movements.

1.2 Rethinking "missionary" Buddhism

Etymologically, the term "mission" stems from the Latin word *mittere*, meaning "the act of sending, dispatching; release, setting at liberty; dismissal from duty," which is a noun of action derived from the past-participle stem of *mittere* ("to release, let go; send, throw") (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The use of the term to mean "an organized effort for the spread of religion or for the enlightenment of a community" appeared in the 1640s. A more general sense referring to "the purpose for which one is sent or commissioned" has been attested since the 1670s, while the meaning of "a mission or duty that a person or thing is to fulfill" (e.g., a man on a mission, one's mission in life) became established around 1805. These etymological changes show its various evolving usage of "mission" in a contemporary era.

Even for Christianity, the usage of "mission" is highly ambiguous. As Stalnaker (2017) notes, only nine out of fifty-two English Bible translations examined actually use the word "missionary" (p. 167). Some translations insert the term without a corresponding Greek original, while others translate the Greek words for apostle (*apostolos*) or evangelist (*euangelistes*) as "missionary" (p. 170). This inconsistency reveals the remarkable diversity and ambiguity in how "missionary" is defined even within Christian contexts.

The term "missionary" is a broad and general category used to describe proselytizing activities, applying not only to Christian missionaries but also to those of other religions. Walters (1997) points out that the concept of mission was first applied to Buddhism by Max Müller, who sought to compare Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as examples of "missionary religions." Müller has contrasted these with what he referred to as "non-missionary religions," such as Judaism, Brahmanism, and Zoroastrianism (Walters 1997, pp. 100-105). Müller's classification established what would later become a widely accepted academic distinction: on the one hand, "missionary" or "world" religions, like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which

spread beyond their regions of origin; and on the other hand, "national" or "indigenous" religions, which tended to remain confined within traditional geographic boundaries.

Challenging such categorizations, Walters (1997) argues that labelling Buddhism as a "missionary religion" is problematic. He contends that Max Müller applied the term "missionary" to Buddhism without critically examining whether this concept appropriately fits the Buddhist context or merely reflects a Christian-centric framework of religious outreach. Walters (1997) describes Müller's conceptualization as "an Anglo-American construct" (p. 100) and problematizes it as a framework sustained by overlooking or silencing the voices of premodern Buddhists, who are nevertheless portrayed as missionaries. Setting aside the debate over whether Buddhism qualifies as a missionary religion, Walters' critique is valuable in encouraging more cautious and precise use of the term "missionary" when applied to other religious traditions.

For instance, in the Buddhist context, Kemper (2005) argues that "Buddhist missionizing" did not adopt the Protestant emphasis on conversion, particularly in his analysis of Sri Lankan Buddhist missions led by Dharmapala, a prominent monk active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (p. 27). Rather than focusing on conversion, these missions emphasized "bringing knowledge" of the Dhamma—the Buddhist law. This "bringing knowledge" aimed not necessarily to convert but to spread awareness and understanding of the Dhamma across different regions. Such missionaries might be better understood as agents of "transmission" rather than conversion, as Learman (2005) also suggests. In the case of Soka Gakkai, the focus of this thesis, a central concept related to this form of missionary activity is *Kosen-rufu* (広宣流布), which will be examined in detail in Chapter 2. Similar to the Theravada Buddhist approach to missionizing described by Kemper (2005), *Kosen-rufu* emphasizes spreading knowledge of the Dharma rather than conversion.

Nonetheless, this form of Buddhist missionizing should not be generalized across all Buddhist traditions, which vary significantly. For example, some traditions lack monastic clergy who typically occupy clerical and missionary roles. Kemper's (2005) argument highlights the diverse meanings the concept of "missionary" can take in different religious and cultural contexts. In other words, rather than referring solely to religious proselytization or institutional efforts to send missionaries abroad, the term should be understood as a more nuanced and context-dependent concept.

The use of the term "missionary," which is deeply rooted in Christian traditions, poses potential problems when applied to non-Christian religions. It risks narrowing our understanding of those traditions and reinforcing Eurocentric frameworks. However, while Christian and Buddhist missions differ in form, both involve a spiritual purpose and can be understood as types of "mission." If someone carries out a mission with spiritual intent, they may be seen as a "missionary" in that broader sense. This thesis therefore adopts the framework of missionary activity not to equate Buddhist missions with Christian ones, but to deconstruct and subvert the term itself. The aim is to challenge Western-centric definitions and explore how the notion of the missionary might be reimagined within the worldview of a Buddhist tradition.

1.3 Agency of embodying faith within structures of power

In re-examining the concept of the "missionary" to better capture contemporary faith-driven migration, I would like to explore the intersectionality of gender alongside. The conventional understanding of "missionaries" often evokes an image of deeply religious and docile individuals, subjugated to doctrines and religious authority. This perception is particularly pronounced when considering women within religious contexts, where traditional

scholarship has frequently viewed them as "subjugated," their experiences reduced to a simplistic binary of agency as either liberation or resistance.

However, as Saba Mahmood (2005) argues, such a narrow view that frames religion as an inherently repressive force, especially for women, is insufficient. We must move beyond this by acknowledging forms of agency that arise not from outright resistance, but from compliance and disciplined self-formation (Mahmood, 2005, p. 8).

For this thesis, Mahmood's perspective is invaluable in re-conceptualizing the "missionary." By portraying "pious" women, such as the Soka Gakkai women who are my interlocutors, as agentic actors in missionary endeavours, this framework challenges the conventional notion of religious women as mere "subjugators." Their lives are profoundly shaped by a religious purpose that manifests in their daily disciplined practice and their efforts to embody their faith in everyday choices and interactions. Thus, Mahmood's framework enables me to analyse how Soka Gakkai women migrate and live their faith as active missionary agents.

As a note, as Grenz (2021) cautions us within both the conceptualization of religious agency, as there might lead to a tendency to treat all forms of religious agency as inherently emancipatory or politically neutral. Grenz calls for a more critical feminist methodology that acknowledges the complex and sometimes conflicting political and ideological contexts in which women's religious knowledge and practices are embedded. This approach challenges us to take seriously both the empowering dimensions of religious life and how these same practices may simultaneously reinforce exclusionary, gendered, racialized, or political structures.

Indeed, in my field, Ikeda Daisaku, who is founding figure of Soka Gakkai Japan and International, has played a central role in its development, and his writings are treated as quasi-

canonical, which shows his enduring authority within the organization. This is not to suggest that all religious movements are inherently patriarchal, nor is it to offer a critique from a secularistic approach. Nevertheless, it is still crucial to critically examine how male authority continues to shape the ethical formation of pious women, regardless of whether women actively embrace or contest the religious norms. Attending to these dynamics allows for a more nuanced understanding of how gendered power operates within specific religious traditions and transnational contexts.

By acknowledging Saba Mahmood's understanding of agency as a capacity cultivated through submission to discipline rather than solely through resistance, we uncover how individuals, particularly Soka Gakkai women, enact their faith in daily life and migration. It allows for an exploration of how their "missionary" experience is cultivated through self-discipline, ethical practice, and the persistent embodiment of faith in their daily lives and transnational movements. This theoretical approach It expands the scope of "missionary" to include non-normative, lived expressions of faith, thereby revealing the multifaceted ways in which religious purpose shapes lives, choices, and migrations in the 21st century, ultimately providing a more nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between belief, identity, gender, and contemporary global mobility.

Chapter 2 – Reconceptualization of "mission"

This chapter will begin by contextualizing Soka Gakkai's presence and practices, both within Japan and across its international communities. Following this foundational overview, I delve into ethnographic data and interview insights. My aim is to illustrate how missionary subjectivity is forged through self-cultivation and how this unique form of subjectivity either explicitly emerges or is subtly understood within the lived experiences of Japanese migrants.

2.1 Expansion of Soka Gakkai in Japan and abroad

After World War II in Japan, many religious organizations, including Soka Gakkai, emerged prominently (Melton, 2009). During this period, various religious movements, often referred to as "new religions" or "new religious movements (NRMs)," appeared and have been widely discussed in both Japanese and sociological contexts. NRMs are primarily defined in relation to dominant religions, ethnic religions, or established sects, and are often regarded as entities not fully accepted by these existing religions (Melton, 2009).

Soka Gakkai began as the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creation Education Study Association) on November 18, 1930, founded by Makiguchi Tsunesaburo, a schoolteacher and educational theorist (McLaughlen, 2019, p. 4). Although there was little religious elements at the start, Makiguchi had converted to Nichiren Buddhism in 1928. The group resisted against state-imporsed religion, Shintoism, which led to the arrest of Makiguchi and other leaders in 1943 under the Peace Preservation Law. Makiguchi died in prison in 1944, but Toda Josei, who survived prison, rebuilt the organization. Under his leadership, the group was renamed Soka Gakkai (Value-Creation Study Association) in 1946. The organization grew rapidly among the urban poor, employing rigorous doctrinal training and encouraging members to purge items from other religions.

Ikeda Daisaku became president in 1960 and expanded Soka Gakkai internationally, founding Soka Gakkai International (SGI) (McLaughlen, 2019, p. 5). The production of independent *Gohonzon* (the object of worship), liturgical changes, and Ikeda's challenge to clerical authority led to growing tensions with Nichiren Shoshu, ending up with Soka Gakkai's excommunication in 1991. In response, the organization institutionalized its own religious practices and became an independent lay religious organization.

Ikeda's influence is very strong that Soka Gakkai members tend to prioritize reading his writings, especially his serialized novels *The Human Revolution* and *The New Human Revolution*, over traditional Buddhist scriptures like Nichiren's writings or the Lotus Sutra (McLaughlen, 2019, p. 34). Even when they do engage with traditional texts, they usually do so through Ikeda's interpretations. Study material often pair Nichiren's words with Ikeda's commentary, which elevates Ikeda's words to a scripture-like status. Ikeda's biography, especially his hardships known as "dharma persecutions," is presented as a model of perseverance and discipleship, equating him with Nichiren in spiritual stature (McLaughlen, 2019, p. 79). Key events from his life are framed as righteous struggles affirming his role as the legitimate successor to previous leaders.

Despite Soka Gakkai's global expansion and local adaptations, its doctrines, practices of worship, and Ikeda's central presence remain largely consistent across countries, with core teachings and guidance centralized in Tokyo (Métraux, 2013). Following Ikeda's passing in November 2023, SGI's constituent organizations approved an amendment to the Soka Gakkai Constitution, affirming President Ikeda as the "eternal president and spiritual leader of SGI" (Soka Gakkai, n.d.-d), which means that, even after he passed away, Ikeda continues to shape the movement's vision and direction.

2.2 Everyday practices of self-cultivation through personal and communal rituals in Soka Gakkai Vienna, Austria

Conducting ethnographic research within a Buddhist organization I am affiliated with has given me chances to reflect on my positionality. I was born and grew up in Soka Gakkai community in Japan throughout my life, so I am familiar with the teachings and how it feels like to chant. At the same time, while many of my interlocutors told me that they chant twice a day for at least an hour, I typically chant only during monthly communal meetings, in moments of personal hardship, or occasionally for a few seconds before leaving the house. This difference complicates my role: I am both participant and observer, believer and outsider, yet not fully being able to experience in the same way as those I study. Still, when I chant with others or listen to their experiences in these meetings, I feel a deep sense of motivation and emotional resonance.

This tension requires ongoing self-reflection. As Behar (1996) argues, "the exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake" (p. 14). My partial insider status is not simply about proximity, but it significantly shapes the lens through which I conduct and interpret this research. If academic work can never be entirely objective, then it is precisely through sustained reflexivity that knowledge gains depth and integrity. Acknowledging my position on the edge of the faith community allows me to recognize both the privileges of access and the limitations of my perspective. Rather than striving for an impossible neutrality, I understand my subjectivity as an analytical tool, that can generate insights that would otherwise remain inaccessible. My responsibility, then, is not to erase my involvement, but to make it work productively in service of the ethnographic account I am constructing.

During my eight-month stay in Vienna, Austria from September 2024 to May 2025, I regularly attended Soka Gakkai religious meetings. These have included smaller monthly gatherings in Simmering, i.e., the 11th district (Bezirk) and five larger meetings held at the Soka Gakkai Cultural Center in Penzing, i.e., the 14th district. These meetings are generally referred to as *Zadankai* (座談会, discussion meetings), as a form of community-based conventicles, in Japanese. In Vienna, the smaller, district-level meetings are called Bezirksversammlung (district meetings). All of the meetings I attended in the 11th district took place in home of three local members.

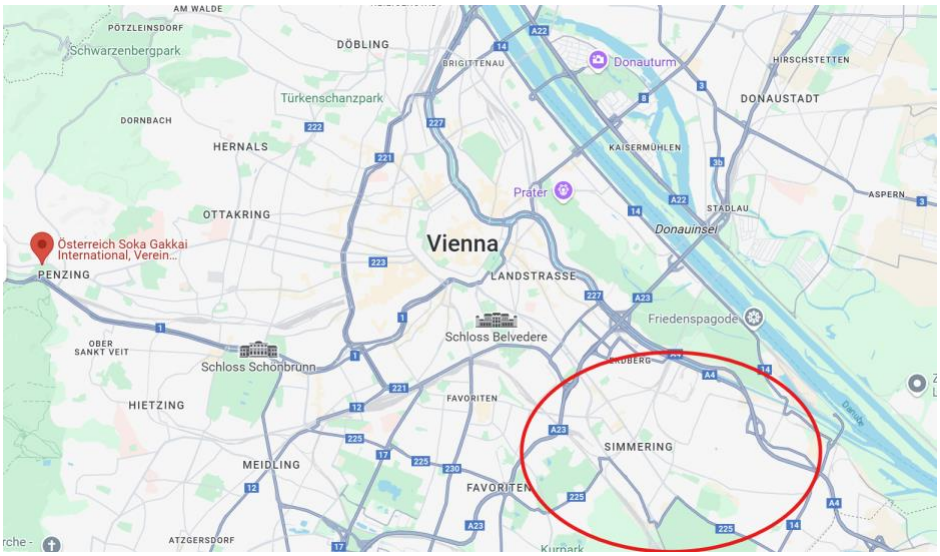

Figure 1. Map of the Field Site in Vienna

In a cozy, homey living room, the *Gohonzon* (ご本尊)[3] was enshrined on the wall, with chairs arranged in a semi-circle facing it. As the meeting time approached, people who had been casually chatting began to take their seats, and the gathering typically began with *Gongyo* (勤行),[4] a chanting ritual. One person always sits in front of the *Gohonzon* to lead the ritual;

[3] An object of worship. It is a scroll containing a calligraphic inscription. In the very center of the *Gohonzon*, the phrase 南無妙法蓮華経 (*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*) is written. This is the core mantra chanted by practitioners.
[4] Translated as "liturgy."

this role is called *Doshi* (導師)[5] and can be performed by anyone, and I myself led once at a meeting in the 11th district. Participants gaze at the *Gohonzon*, holding their *Ojuju* (prayer beads) and placing their palms together, chanting a fixed mantra from beginning to end. Many hold the sutra text and read along as they chant.

At the start, facing the *Gohonzon*, a bell is rung, and to express reverence for the protective deities (*Shoten*), the mantra *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* (南無妙法蓮華経)[6] is chanted three times. Next, a section of the Lotus Sutra called the *Hoben* (Convenient Means) chapter is recited. After completing the *Hoben* reading, the bell is rung again. Then, the *Jigage* (the self-dedication verse) is recited, followed by another ringing of the bell. After that, the chanting of the *Daimoku* (the mantra *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*) begins, where members only repeat "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo"* for how long they want, which typically last around ten or fifteen minutes in the 11th district meeting. At the conclusion of this chanting, the bell is rung again, and the *Daimoku* is chanted three more times. The leader (*Doshi*) only say three times of *Daimoku*, and members give the four silent prayers. After reading, the leader rings the bell, and chants the *Daimoku* three times together in unison to conclude the ceremony.

There is a distinct rhythm in the chanting. As a general rule, each Chinese character corresponds to one beat. Alongside maintaining the correct pronunciation and steady rhythm, people keep a stable tone in pitch. In fact, Soka Gakkai publishes a karaoke-style guide that

[5] Translated as "instructor."

[6]According to Soka Gakkai (n.d.-a), the term "Nam" in *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is a transliteration of the ancient Indian Sanskrit word namas or namo, meaning "devotion" or "dedication." It signifies entrusting oneself to the Law and living with it as the foundation of one's life, embodying it in one's very being. "Myoho-renge-kyo" is originally the full title of the Lotus Sutra, which represents the essential Law expressed in the Lotus Sutra. Thus, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* expresses the act of living based on the Buddha's life force, which permeates the universe and all living beings, and manifesting this enlightened life condition in the midst of one's daily life and personal existence.

illustrates the precise pronunciation and rhythm for chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* (Soka Gakkai International, 2020).

After the chanting, everyone would say "Danke schön" and move their chairs into a circle. One person, the organizer, would then say, "Okay, let's start with studying." The study materials, usually written by Ikeda Daisaku, were shared beforehand in digital form. I often received either the Japanese or English version, while others read in German. Since I do not speak German, participants would often switch between languages, and sometimes someone would translate for me.

Following the reading, participants would begin to share their reflections, connecting the text to personal experiences, daily life, and recent events. These exchanges were open and heartfelt. Had the time run out, everyone would return to face the *Gohonzon* and chant the mantra three more times, bringing the meeting to a close. This general structure was typical of all district-level meetings I attended. *Gongyo* (the ritual of reciting *Daimoku*), the chanting that opens and closes meetings, is one of the most widely shared practices among Soka Gakkai members, both in Japan and abroad. It typically takes place during communal gatherings, structuring the meeting with *Gongyo* at the beginning and three recitations of the mantra *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* at the end.

Gongyo appears to be the most important aspect of practice, even on an individual level, as all of my interviewees told me that they aim to chant twice a day, once in the morning and once at night. As Akari-san explained, "When I chant in the morning, I feel motivated to spend the day with more energy, determined to do what I want to achieve. At night, when I chant, I give thanks for the day, reflecting on what I was able to do, and what I want to do tomorrow." This sentiment was expressed by many other interviewees. Five practitioners

shared that they ideally chant for thirty minutes each session, totalling one hour daily. Notably, Sakurako-san reported chanting for up to ten hours a day.

Daily chanting seems to create a rhythm for practitioners, framing their day: it begins and ends with *Gongyo*. Chanting can be physically demanding, as one must sit in front of the *Gohonzon*, gaze at it, and vocalize the mantra. It is an embodied, vocal, and rhythmic action to integrate spiritual discipline into the fabric of everyday life. Hence, it can be seen a form of training that disciplines both body and soul within a cosmological rhythm grounded in Nichiren Buddhist belief.

This embodied practice reflects what might be called the lived aspect of religion. It is not merely about doctrine, scripture, or teachings, but rather the embeddedness of practice in daily life, what could be described as a process of spiritual habituation. Saba Mahmood (2005) emphasizes that piety is actively cultivated through intentional bodily acts. Her framework is particularly useful for understanding *Gongyo* as a form of self-cultivation and a conscious, embodied act that shapes the practitioner's ethical and spiritual self in everyday life. As Saki-san shared with me, "Practicing *Gongyo* is like polishing a mirror of your soul" (Saki-san, personal communication, March 30th). The rhythmic lived-ness of this practice, which actively cultivates both body and self, can be understood as a form of agency.

2.3 *Kosen-rufu*: A core concept of Soka Gakkai's propagative ethos

I would now like to turn to the question of how this process of self-cultivation leads to formation of Buddhist mission within their cosmology. What I find most relevant as "mission" in the narratives of Soka Gakkai members is *Kosen-rufu* (広宣流布), a central concept frequently emphasized by Ikeda and the Soka Gakkai. The term originates from the Lotus Sutra, one of the foundational scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism and the central text upon

which Nichiren Buddhism is based. The sutra that was translated into Chinese by the monk Kumarajiva has a reference to *Kosen-rufu* appears in Chapter 23 of the Lotus Sutra (Hokekyo Fukyukai, 1996). In this context, *Kosen-rufu* is not merely an act of dissemination, but a spiritual duty to preserve and spread the teachings of the Buddha for the sake of all sentient beings, particularly during the turbulent latter age of the Dharma.

This injunction is interpreted within Soka Gakkai as an imperative to protect and spread the *Myoho* (Wonderful Law) against all forms of spiritual distortion (Soka Gakkai, n.d.-c). The task is symbolically entrusted to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth (disciples of the Buddha) who, according to the Lotus Sutra, emerge from the earth and vow to spread the Law in a future age of great difficulty. Among them, Bodhisattva Superior Practices (*Jogyo Bosatsu*) leads the charge to uphold and communicate the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha's passing, offering light to the darkness of human suffering.

Soka Gakkai further interprets *Kosen-rufu* as a multidimensional and ongoing process that transcends mere numbers. While it includes the spread of the Law "from one person to another" or "from ten thousand to fifty thousand," it is described as "a process, an eternal flow" (Ikeda, 2023, p. 8). This metaphor is extended in Soka Gakkai literature: *Kosen-rufu* is likened to a fabric woven from both vertical and horizontal threads. The vertical represents the transmission of faith, from mentor to disciple, parent to child, senior to junior, while the horizontal signifies the egalitarian and borderless spread of Nichiren Buddhism across all of humanity (Ikeda, 2023, pp. 262–264). It is described as a movement to "communicate the highest principle of peace" and the "ultimate way to happiness" through the correct teaching. As such, *Kosen-rufu* is not reducible to evangelism or institutional growth, but it is deeply tied to the individual's inner transformation of one's and others' life condition through

communication. The progress of *Kosen-rufu*, according to this view, corresponds with the "transmission" of such inner transformations across individuals and communities.

2.4 Formation of mission through direct vows and self-cultivation

In my fieldwork, I began by exploring what *Kosen-rufu* means to Japanese Soka Gakkai practitioners, and how this concept is understood and practiced as a form of "mission." Alongside with *Kosen-rufu*, interivewees frequently used the term *Shimei* (使命), which literally means "to use one's life" and can be translated as "mission" or "life's purpose."

Takashi-san, a male interviewee who migrated to Vienna in 1970s, shared that he has been a Soka Gakkai member due to the influence of his mother, and recounted the formative moment of his decision to migrate: "When I was eighteen years old, in front of three thousand people, (Ikeda) *Sensei* said to us, 'Young men, go abroad.' Right in front of our eyes, he shared that vision with us. And at that moment, I thought, I have to go abroad. Everyone took that as their goal, and they all acted to make it a reality. Since I was studying music, my big goal became to go to Europe for my musical training. I made *Sensei*'s words into my own vow, and *Kosen-rufu* kept moving my life. And now, when I look back just a little, I can see how far I've come." (Takashi-san, personal communication, May 4th, 2025).

With a sense of respect and admiration, Takashi-san shared a pivotal moment of spiritual transformation from his youth, referring to Ikeda as *Sensei* (先生), a Japanese term meaning "teacher" or "mentor," commonly used by Soka Gakkai members to express their deep reverence for his guidance. Takashi-san's journey to Austria was rooted in a personal vow, directly inspired by a broader vision of global expansion cultivated through Ikeda's encouragements. However, his purpose was not primarily proselytization, but rather, it centred on pursuing musical training. Yet, this pursuit was deeply intertwined with a long-term

commitment to embodying Ikeda's vision across decades and national borders. This case highlights how religious conviction can shape migratory decisions not as a direct drive for proselytization, but as part of a broader sense of life purpose and personal aspiration.

Accordingly, defining *Kosen-rufu*, he continued: "When we talk about *Kosen-rufu,* one-third of the world practices faith, one-third do not but support and sympathize with the ideology. If these two-thirds exist, then even if it rains, there will be no flooding. We can build a peaceful and calm world. This is what the teachings say, but of course, it is not always so ideal. However, the true battle for us is how many people become happy, how many enjoy joy, and how many feel happiness. Carrying out this battle as our mission is our role, and this is what it means to be a Bodhisattva of freedom with a mission."

His account shows the blurredness of the boundaries between personal growth and creating happiness and religious commitment, presenting *Kosen-rufu* as a deeply personal and ethical orientation toward living with purpose.

Similarly, Akari-san articulated a life trajectory shaped by a transnational religious vision rooted in Soka Gakkai's teachings. She recalled: "President Ikeda always said, 'Spread your wings to the world.' He kept saying that, so ever since I was very young, I always had the feeling that I would one day go out into the world." She described her time at Kansai Soka High School, cultivating her vision within Soka Gakkai's ethos.

While at university, Akari-san decided to study abroad in Kraków, Poland. Initially, she did not envision herself living abroad. "At the time, I didn't really imagine that I would end up living abroad, but I just thought I might be of help to the international communication efforts of Soka Gakkai from Japan," she explained. However, a pivotal moment occurred during her visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, as described in the introduction of this thesis. With a small group of fellow practitioners, we brought *Gohonzon* into a deserted barracks and chanted together for

about an hour. She described it as "a powerful experience, something beyond words… something of the world of faith, something in the inner world of the heart."

In that moment, she felt a profound spiritual calling: "I need to come back to this place, to this country of Poland, which carries such destiny." For her, this was not a decision based on career or economy, but a faith-infused response to suffering, transformed into a mission. "That's when I thought, maybe what's truly important is to come back here and spread this practice of faith so that people can become happy." Akari-san's narrative offers insight into how faith entangled with affective experience and emotional resonance becomes a motivation for transnational movement.

Hana-san's (a Japanese woman, 50s) story further illustrates the affective dimension of these faith-driven decisions. Facing health issues in Japan, she made the choice to move to Vienna in 2001, where her sister resided. Her initial plan was simple: "Initially, it was a year of rest, to learn German and to restore my health." However, this period of rest started to become a turning point. She recounts how many people encouraged her: "Many people told me that '*Kosen-rufu* is a lifelong struggle, so it's better to completely heal any temporary physical or mental ailments and become healthy enough to fight for *Kosen-rufu* vigorously for your whole life'" (personal communication, May 11th, 2025).

This encouragement profoundly influenced her perspective. "I was truly persuaded by many people, and I finally understood that there is no such thing as self-sacrifice." The year of quiet study and Soka Gakkai activities was challenging for her, as she was accustomed to being active. Yet, this time allowed for a shift in motivation. Eventually, out of gratitude for the help she received in Austria, a new aspiration developed: "I wanted to work hard for *Kosen-rufu* here with everyone, so I decided to find a visa and a job here." Hana-san's move became about contributing to *Kosen-rufu* without "sacrificing herself."

She continued: “What I strive for is to live a truly happy life. My ideal is for that happiness to naturally inspire others, making them observe, ‘she looks so content,’ and feel motivated by how I live, whether they embrace my beliefs or not.”

This perspective, echoed in the accounts of Takashi-san and Akari-san, reveals a subtle yet powerful form of mission: “transmission” through embodied everyday practice. It is not about overt proselytization, but about sharing the Dharma by living it. When individuals genuinely cultivate their own happiness, grounded in their faith, this happiness extends outward, influencing others. The personal pursuit of happiness, therefore, becomes an act of quietly spreading positive influence and encouraging others to seek their own contentment in a form of mission.

These cases reveal that these individuals are not simply “sent.” Instead, their sense of mission is deeply intertwined with their life’s purpose, finding a mission by themselves. This is expressed by embodying their faith in everyday life, a process that takes the form of “transmission.” This redefines “mission” as an organic, lived process rather than a top-down directive, being linked to individual well-being and its ripple effect on the wider world.

2.5 Contingent beginnings and retrospective mission-making: The “being acted upon” subjectivity

While Takashi-san, Akari-san, and Hana-san’s narratives highlight the motivations for migration rooted in explicit directives or spiritual callings, other practitioners’ stories reveal a more subtle emergence of purpose. Natsuko-san (a Japanese woman, 60s) shared that her initial reason for moving abroad was personal: “I’m a bit embarrassed because it wasn’t for some grand reason,” she said, “but I came for love. I followed my romantic partner, a Christian man” (personal communication, April 17th, 2025). However, over time, their differing religious beliefs led to tension. Natsuko-san recalled that whenever she spoke about her Buddhist faith,

her partner would make comments like, “Is that what Buddha says?”, which left her feeling hurt and frustrated, and eventually led the relationship to end. After the breakup, she faced a critical decision, “should I return to Japan or remain here?” In this moment of uncertainty, she turned to prayer. It was then, she said, that she received what she interpreted as an inner calling: that she was meant to stay. “When I prayed, a life force emerged telling me to stay here. I realized then that he had played a role to bring me here. It was a mission.”

What initially seemed like a romantic failure becomes spiritually meaningful. The ex-partner became someone who had a karmic role in guiding her to her current path. She adds, with some irony, that if she had known from the beginning it was a “mission,” she probably would not have come at all. It was precisely because it began as love, not duty, that she undertook the move: “If someone had told me it was a mission from the start, I would never have come. But for love, I did. That’s probably the role he played.”

Natsuko-san’s narrative shows a kind of migration that is not initially religious labor, but later becomes meaningful through reflection and prayer. Her sense of mission emerges from the inner work of reframing loss and uncertainty into purpose. While this can be interpreted as a realization of mission through bodily self-cultivation (Mahmood, 2005), there is an added dimension: her interpretation of coming to Vienna is not solely a product of her own cultivation, but rather a consequence of coincidence and external forces that “acted upon” her. The “being acted upon” is a concept Mittermaier (2012) introduces to complement Mahmood’s focus on self-cultivation (Mittermaier, 2012, p. 260). Mittenmeier suggests that dreams, for instance, “come to the dreamer as opposed to being produced by her or him” (Mittermaier, 2012, p. 248), implying a realm of alterity and contingency that influences human action beyond conscious intentionality. The “life force” that emerged and the partner who “played a role” illustrate Mittenmeier’s (2012) concept of being acted upon, where, in this case,

a life path, come unexpectedly, highlighting the contingency of life itself and unpredictable events.

Another woman's narrative is even more subtle, emphasizing the blend of everyday life and emerging purpose. Mikiko-san recounted: "I didn't come with some grand purpose. I came for my dream to study music. At that time, about half the people (in ÖSGI) were Japanese. I thought, 'These Japanese people are so passionate, trying hard for *Kosen-rufu* in Austria.' It was an impression for me."

Mikiko-san (a Japanese woman, 60s) initially positioned herself as not having a "grand purpose," seemingly comparing herself with more religious-purposed members who arrived with obvious missionary purpose (personal communication, May 3rd, 2025). However, as the interview evolved, her narrative revealed a deeper, faith-driven rationale for her continued presence: "Although I was a Soka Gakkai member in Japan, my faith became stronger after I came here. Searching for a house to stay, it was all just *Daimoku*. In Japan, they told me to chant *Daimoku* whenever something happened. I was still a beginner, chanting *Daimoku* diligently by myself. That was significant. I didn't intend to stay this long myself in Vienna, but Soka Gakkai is there for me. I thought it would be meaningful if I could contribute as a Soka Gakkai member and have some role. If I hadn't been a Soka Gakkai member, I think I would have returned to Japan. Life is tough here; it's easier to go back to Japan, but I decided I wanted to pursue it. […] I wanted to do my best as a Soka Gakkai member abroad. My parents (who are not Soka Gakkai members) wouldn't have understood if I told them that way, so I didn't tell them that I wanted to stay in Austria because I was a Soka Gakkai member."

Mikiko-san's initial move abroad, which was rooted in secular reasons, ultimately transformed into a "mission-ful" experience. The uncertainties of her migration, such as securing housing, created a ground for her to chant more frequently. This increased practice

slowly developed her aspiration to remain in Vienna and dedicate herself to Soka Gakkai. This journey highlights how the challenges and anxieties of migration can "act upon" an individual, fostering agency not merely through active self-cultivation but also through a religious interpretation of life's contingencies. Her conscious choice to embrace a more demanding life abroad, finding fulfilment amidst difficulties, further emphasizes her deep ethical orientation. The decision not to disclose her true motivations to her parents, illustrated by "I didn't tell my parents that I wanted to stay in Austria because I was a Soka Gakkai member," shows the private and unarticulated aspects of faith-driven transnational mobility, particularly when secular and religious motives diverge.

While Mai-san's (a Japanese woman, 50s) reasons for migrating were more deeply intertwined with religion, her narrative explicitly engages with both "miracles" and the practical challenges of life through the lens of her faith: "It was truly a miracle; at that time, it was already difficult to get a visa, but I was able to get it without any problems. For that, I really relied on the help of various people, and of course, *Daimoku*, which helped me overcome it. […] About 25 years ago here, I met my current husband, and I also wanted to marry him. For that too, I chanted, 'I want to marry this kind of person'. I wanted my partner to also practice faith and chant *Daimoku* with me, so I chanted *Daimoku* for him to be able to practice. Fortunately, my husband also became a member, and we live together and engage in activities together now. […] I think I ended up here and my husband is practicing, so in a way, I can say that everything has somehow become a kind of mission" (personal communication, May 6th, 2025).

Mai-san's experience of navigating visa difficulties, career seeking, and finding a partner through prayer and *Daimoku* illustrates a profound sense of the entanglements of factors that come through self-cultivation and "being acted upon." Each obstacle overcome and each

desire fulfilled is framed as a result of her continuous, receptive engagement with her religious practice. She frames her life contingency as something her mission led to,

The core limitation of this conventional concept is its failure to account for the profound interplay of personal faith, unpredictable life events, and an internal sense of purpose that drives their transnational movement. My interlocutors' "mission" frequently emerges from their own life contingencies and serendipitous encounters, which they then interpret through their specific faith cosmology.

Within this framework, "mission" is not an isolated religious task but rather an inherent aspect of life itself. As Ikeda (2010) states that no individual is born without a mission, then the act of discovering and pursuing one's path, whether abroad or even within Japan, inherently constitutes a form of missionary endeavour. Consequently, regardless of their initial motivation for moving, when migrants imbue their life abroad with this profound sense of mission, they are, in effect, embodying a distinct form of missionary practice.

This perspective reveals the intricate entanglement of the secular and the religious, making rigid differentiation in the context of migration problematic. When individuals express their religious values through daily life rather than solely through explicit conversion efforts, it becomes impossible to externally discern whether their intentions are purely secular or religious.

Therefore, if individuals can embody a missionary identity regardless of their geographical location, even within their home country, then the term "missionary" itself does not connote transnational migration. My interlocutors do not necessarily move overseas purely for a "conversion" mission; their transnational movement is deeply intertwined with their broader life purpose, which they understand as "transmission" through their personal embodiment. This leads me to suggest that the experiences of my interlocutors can only be

fully described as "missionary migrants," to captures its mission-infused form of transnational mobility when describing these individuals. I am not asserting that all religious people are missionaries, but rather that those who consciously believe they live with a distinct mission should be understood as "missionary" individuals.

The crucial point is not when someone becomes a missionary, but rather to acknowledge a subtle yet valid form of missionary migration. For instance, in Natsuko-san's case, we might overlook how her move, initially for love (a seemingly non-religious motivation), became deeply infused with religious purpose if we only understand missionaries as those who go abroad solely for religious reasons from the outset. We need a more nuanced understanding of "missionary" that goes beyond the simply understood framework of missionary that we commonly imagine.

This process highlights a divergent missionary subjectivity, moving beyond a singular focus on external directives and conversion goals. To truly complement this conventional understanding, we must embrace a broader, more flexible framework that accommodates individuals whose transnational engagement is driven by their mission, expressed through their very presence, their daily contributions, their ongoing self-cultivation, and their receptive engagement with life's unpredictable moments in the form of "transmission." Ultimately, these cases suggest for recognizing a form of missionary migration that is subtle, deeply affective, and highly context-dependent, yet profoundly valid within their faith cosmology. It is a mission woven into the fabric of life itself, blurring the lines between the secular and the religious motivation.

Chapter 3: Gendered subjectivities in motion: negotiating 'mission' among Soka Gakkai migrants

Chapter 2 has established a foundational understanding of "mission" within Soka Gakkai cosmology, exploring its conceptualization, its communal actualization, and its members' varied interpretations. Now I would like to turn to an intersection: how gender shapes and is shaped by missionary migrant experiences. While traditional notions of the "missionary" often conjure images of male, institutionally sanctioned figures engaged in overt proselytization, my research posits that the experiences of Soka Gakkai women migrants offer a different perspective that expands the definition of missionary work by foregrounding gendered forms of agency and faith embodiments. These women's experiences illustrate how missionary activity can include compliance and re-interpretation of religious teachings, all situated in the complex realities of migration. Rather than reducing missionaries to figures of unwavering piety, this lens allows us to see missionary subjectivities as more diverse, flexible, and responsive to context.

3.1 Contradictory gender norms within Soka Gakkai

In principle, Buddhism is characterized by the equality and non-discrimination of all humans, regardless of birth, class, gender, or social status, as expressed in the Suttanipata, which states that one's worth is determined by actions, not birth (Nakamura, 1984, p.35). This egalitarian view proposed by Budda was revolutionary in a society structured by the caste system and Brahmanism at his time, and it was central to the Buddhist community's principles. During the Buddha's lifetime, gender equality was theoretically taught, and although Budda taught that enlightenment (成仏=directly meaning becoming a Buddha) was achievable for both genders, the central figures in the monastic community were male monks, and it was them who edited and expanded the scriptures after the Buddha's death, gradually distorting his

teachings, eventually leading to the formation of misogynistic and discriminatory ideologies that were far removed from the Buddha's original thoughts (Kurihara, 2015). Mahayana Buddhism is a Buddhist group that made efforts to overcome it, in contrast to Theravada Buddhism (Uemuki, 2004). As a result, the views on gender equality varied greatly across different sects, and it is important to carefully examine the differences between them. Soka Gakkai belongs to Nichiren Buddhism, which is categorized in Mahayana Buddhism that teaches all human beings' enlightenment. Soka Gakkai's principles, thus, follow such all-human's enlightenment.

What makes Soka Gakkai's gender dynamics so intricate is the deep connection between its historical and cultural background and the strategies that fueled its expansion in Japan. This included the deliberate creation of gendered divisions and the promotion of more conventional gender roles, practices that largely persist today. Until 2022, Soka Gakkai members in Japan have been assigned to one of the divisions of Soka Gakkai based on gender and age, "*Sonenbu*" (men), "*Fujinbu*" (married women's division), "*Danshibu*" (young men's division), "*Joshibu*" (young women's division), "*Gakuseibu*" (students), and "*Miraibu*" (future group) (Inose, 2023).[7] The existence of a division specifically for married women (*Fujinbu*), while men's divisions were not similarly segmented by marital status, strongly suggests gendered biases inherent in Soka Gakkai's structure in Japan. These divisions were not exclusive to Japan, but they were also implemented in Soka Gakkai International (SGI) communities, notably in Austria and Poland (Saki-san & Sakurako-san, personal communication).

In its culminating time from 1960s, Soka Gakkai promoted a traditional feminine ideal, represented by Ikeda Kaneko, Daisaku Ikeda's wife, which aligns with Japan's mid-20th-

[7] Since 2022, "Fujinbu" and "Joshibu" have been merged into "Joseibu" (women's division) (Inose, 2023).

century state-supported concept of the "good wife, good mother," focusing on women's roles in supporting their husbands and raising children (McLaughlin, 2018, p. 138). Under Ikeda's leadership, Soka Gakkai shifted from a narrow focus on Nichiren Buddhism to greater cultural and societal engagement, offering more opportunities for women, such as participation in choirs in Soka Gakkai activities. During the 1970s, Soka Gakkai emphasized women as the "sun of the home" while also encouraging them to involve in politics with the Komeito Party (McLaughlin, 2018, p. 153). While it looks conventional, it still pushed women's participation by allocating roles to them that reflect the Japanese cultural background at that time.

Ikeda's writings, taken as quasi-canonical, reveal Soka Gakkai's conventional stance at theological and institutional levels. Sugiyama (2009) mentions that Ikeda's writings reveal a noticeable tension about gender dynamics. On one hand, he affirms traditional gender roles, particularly in the context of family life. In texts such as "Josei Myo" (女性妙, The Wonderous Womenhood) and "Choose Life: A Dialogue Between Arnold Toynbee & Daisaku Ikeda," he emphasizes the mother's role as central to early childhood education: "In the home, the primary figure in early childhood education is, needless to say, the mother […] I want to strongly emphasize to all mothers that they occupy the most important role as life's first teacher, shaping the foundation of their children's entire lives (Ikeda, 1971/2005, pp. 124–125, translated using AI [ChatGPT] by the author). "Today, in material production activities, it may be inevitable that men tend to take the lead in whatever is being made. However, when it comes to producing—not material goods but human beings, especially delicate and highly sensitive young children—the nurturing of a person is a kind of production where women are more suited than men. This is because women possess qualities such as a keen sensitivity to subtle emotional changes and the capacity to offer devoted affection" (Ikeda & Toynbee, 2007, p. 219, translated using AI [ChatGPT] by the author). Ikeda emphasizes women's natural aptitude for motherhood and caregiving, portraying them as inherently better suited than men for

nurturing children, which is an idea that aligns with conventional notions of femininity. While his statements do not portray women as inferior to men, they nonetheless reflect an essentialist view of gender that does not accommodate broader, more inclusive understandings of gender roles and identities.

Yet at the same time, Ikeda also makes statements in favor of gender equality. He writes, “Before being women or mothers, it is as human beings, unbound by convention, that they must build a truly happy state of life. That is the ultimate goal of women’s liberation” (Ikeda, 1971/2005, p. 80, translated using AI [ChatGPT] by the author). He further asserts that the question of how to live as a human being transcends any specific social role: “While there may be women who are not wives or not mothers, there are no women who are not human beings” (Ikeda, 1971/2005, pp. 195–196, translated using AI [ChatGPT] by the author). From this perspective, human dignity is prioritized over prescribed gender roles.

This emphasis on individual happiness and human dignity is further articulated in The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra (法華経の智慧), “Happiness is the goal; everything else is a means. Even if something appears perfectly reasonable, if it makes you unhappy when put into practice, then it means nothing” (Ikeda, 1997, p. 143-144, translated using AI [ChatGPT] by the author). This idea underscores a flexible, experience-based ethic that can contradict rigid prescriptions found in his writings.

The coexistence of these two discourses, one that is essentialist and prescriptive, and another that is humanistic and liberal, remarks a contradictory gender ideology within Soka Gakkai. Rather than viewing these tensions as inconsistencies to be resolved, it is crucial to examine how practitioners navigate and embody these contradictions in their everyday lives. While “doing gender” and “doing religion” are analytically distinct (Avishai, 2008), paying attention to how women themselves interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist these competing

messages provides a more practical understanding of religious agency and the lived realities of faith in practice.

3.2 Performing and reshaping gender

On a Sunday, in April in 2025, I was invited to a *Zadankai* (座談会; discussion meeting in Japanese, especially in the form of sitting and talking) by Sakurako-san, an 80-year-old Japanese woman from Soka Gakkai who helped me while I was studying in Kraków, Poland. The meeting was held in her apartment on the fourth floor. When I got to the open door, Sakurako-san greeted me right away and, referring to a non-binary person, quietly said, "Today is a girls' meeting, but there's a boy here. They're actually a girl, so just keep that in mind.[8]"

As I walked in, I heard the steady chanting of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* coming from a room where four people were sitting in front of the *Gohonzon*. I only joined the last part of the chant, called *Daimoku sansho* (題目三唱; three repetitions of the chant), which I have already illustrated in the beginning of this chapter. After it ended, everyone softly said, "Thank you so much," and the atmosphere became more relaxed and friendly.

Everyone then introduced themselves to me. There was a Japanese woman in her twenties, an Indian-Polish woman, and two white Polish members. I later found out that the Japanese woman, Kurumi-san, had come from Katowice and the Indian-Polish woman, Maria, from Warsaw, and both had traveled a few hours just to join, just like I did from Vienna. Because many local members had moved to *Fujinbu* (women's division) after getting married or having children, this was the first meeting of the young women's division (*Joshibu*) in Kraków, which had become very small.

[8] Later, it became clear that they identify as non-binary.

As we drank tea and ate snacks, we started a study session about a basic idea in Soka Gakkai called "value creation (Soka, 創価)." Each person received a paper with a short text. It was a writing from Daisaku Ikeda, the third president of Soka Gakkai. We took turns reading one paragraph each in English and then shared our thoughts or questions. Maria, the Indian-Polish woman, spoke first. She shared how her job at a reception desk had become a way for her to practice kindness and care: "I always try to make people feel good. I pay attention to how I stand, smile, and treat each person kindly. One time, someone asked for my name and later wrote a very nice review on Google. It made me really happy. I felt like this small moment was a way of value creation. This job also helped me prepare for the role as "Byakuren," so I'm so happy with my current job."

Hanna, one of the Polish members, asked, "What is Byakuren?" Maria answered cheerfully: "It's a role for women at big Soka Gakkai meetings. We carry water, help organize things, and support the event." Hanna replied, "Then I guess I can't do that. I'm nonbinary." Maria quickly said: "Why not? That doesn't matter. If you want to join, of course you can."

On July 8, 1966, Ikeda officially announced the name "Byakuren Group" for the young women who took on the responsibility of greeting members and helping to maintain the cleanliness of the head temple grounds. The name Byakuren (白蓮), meaning "white lotus flower," was intended to symbolize the spirit of these members who, while living in "the corrupt and polluted world of the Latter Day of the Law," strive to "remain pure and unsullied by their surroundings" (Ikeda, 1999, pp. 89–90). I was surprised to find that the Byakuren group exists not only in Japan but also in Poland, and later discovered its presence in Austria as well. I had previously met Byakuren in Japan, and I perceived them as more "conservative" gender roles for women within Soka Gakkai in Japan, that I did not expect to find in the more "liberal" context of Europe. My image of Byakuren in Japan, as the quote represents, involved

women cheerfully welcoming guests, pouring water for speakers, and wearing white or pastel-colored suits, embodying a highly conventional and idealized feminine demeanor.

3.2.1 Auto-ethnography of Byakuren

I had two opportunities to serve as Byakuren in Austria: the first was in December, 2024, and the second in May, 2025. I had never worked as Byakuren in Japan, so this was my first time. The first event was the ÖSGI *Kosen-rufu Gongyo* Hybrid Kick-off Meeting, and the second was the ÖSGI Women's Meeting. Both were large national-level gatherings held at the ÖSGI Cultural Center in Vienna's 14th district.[9]

On my Byakuren duty in May 2025, because of a plan I had before the meeting, I ended up being thirty minutes late, even though I was expected to join at 3:00 p.m. When I arrived, an Austrian man I knew saw me and said, "Laura is waiting for you. She's in the room at the end of the hallway." I had not known someone was waiting for me, so I quickly rushed down the corridor. As I entered the room, I saw a *Gohonzon*, and a woman chanting alone. Her name is Laura, an Austrian woman in her 30s who lives in Linz. I apologized for being late, but she smiled and said, "It's fine! Let's chant together." I was surprised. Since I was late, I thought I needed to start working right away. Anyway, I accepted her invitation and began chanting from the beginning. The sound echoed beautifully in the room, which felt like a small prayer chapel. After about 10 minutes of chanting, I asked her, "Is it normal to chant before starting Byakuren duties?" She replied, "Of course! This is part of the practice. We need to chant for the success of the meeting. Have you never done Byakuren before?" I told her I had only done it once, also in Vienna the previous December. Thinking back, I remembered we had also started with chanting that time, but I had not expected it to be so important, especially if you are late.

[9] ÖSGI is an abbreviation for Österreich SGI (Austria SGI).

After chanting, Laura took me upstairs to the main hall, where the meeting was still in progress. Around 80 chairs had been set up, and most of them were already filled. Next to the big *Gohonzon* in front of everyone, there were also a TV screen which showed online attendees on Zoom. The majority of attendees looked like women over 40, though a few appeared younger. Two other Byakuren on duty came to us and were just about to leave. Before they did, one of them took off a sunflower decoration from herself and pinned it onto my clothes so that people would know I was working as a Byakuren, since this flower brooch seemed to serve as a symbol of Byakuren members who were on duty.

Toward the end of the meeting, Laura, wearing white gloves, went to open the *Gohonzon* for the final chanting (題目三唱, *Daimoku sansho*). Since I remembered that when I did Byakuren last time, it was the Soka Han (Soka Group) (the men's version of Byakuren) who opened the *Gohonzon*, while I, as a Byakuren, had served water to the speakers, I asked Laura how they divide roles between Byakuren and Soka Han. She answered, "We try to divide the tasks equally, regardless of gender. Byakuren can do technical roles like opening the *Gohonzon* and arranging Zoom, and Soka Han can serve water, either way is fine. We are trying to break the traditions for equality."

After the meeting, we moved to the reception area where food and snacks were served. Many people came in right away and started eating, as usual. I helped arrange the food and gradually took on more tasks, cleaning water glasses, bringing them to the kitchen, washing and putting them away, and tidying up the tables. Although there were some pies with potatoes that I wanted to try, I could not do that as I was on duty. After about an hour and a half of work, after I started to feel exhaustion, my Byakuren duty was done.

After working, I was left with some complex feelings. Although I had worked hard, there was not much in the way of a reward. I could not really listen to the meeting, and I could

not eat freely either unlike when I attend as an invitee. At the same time, I felt a quiet satisfaction in using my body, as I had not worked using my body like that in a while. Besides, everyone who attended the event and passed by me said "thank you," which was satisfying.

The physical exhaustion I experienced as a Byakuren member was a new kind of religious engagement for me. Unlike previous religious experiences, where I never felt physically worn out from participating in meetings, serving as a Byakuren involved tasks such as washing glasses and maintaining a welcoming smile. While these activities were tiring, they also made me feel that I was playing a meaningful supporting role, especially when attendees expressed their appreciation, which made the effort feel worthwhile.

3.2.2 Manifested gender equality and persistent gendered dynamics

Put simply, Laura's explanation of mixing the duties of Soka Han and Byakuren in the name of equality appears quite progressive, especially when viewed against the traditional gender-based role assignments. In fact, Emma (an Austrian woman, 20s), a youth division leader in Austria, also emphasized the importance of gender equality during our interview (Emma, personal communication, May 14th, 2025). Although I was not able to conduct long-term ethnographic research that would allow a deeper observation of the gendered dynamics between Byakuren and Soka Han, it seems clear that ÖSGI members are highly attentive to these issues. At the Krakow meeting as well, for instance, Hanna expressed subtle discomfort with the binary gender division, to which Maria immediately responded, "Why not? That doesn't matter. If you want to join, of course you can." Kurumi-san, a Japanese woman who attended the meeting, also shared her reflections on binary gender divisions and Soka Gakkai's ongoing development:

"Soka Gakkai is grounded in humanism, so if someone expresses a need for change, the organization will respond. I think it's simply a question of how quickly that change occurs.

In today's meeting in Poland, we saw more people openly identifying as nonbinary, which prompts us to reconsider how Byakuren might evolve. In Japan, fewer people actively identify as nonbinary, but even there, I believe change will come if the need is voiced" (Kurumi-san, personal communication, April 27th).

The contrast between Poland, Austria, and Japan underscores how cultural and social norms shape the transnational formation and institutional adaptation. While Soka Gakkai's humanist foundation allows for flexibility, the actual realization of inclusivity depends on cultural and social contexts. This suggests that "undoing gendered practices" within the movement is an ongoing, uneven process, and both enabled and limited by its embeddedness in diverse national and cultural contexts.

At the same time, symbolic expressions of gendered expectations remain embedded in organizational practice as we can see in ÖSGI. During both of my participatory observations as a Byakuren, I wore a flower brooch, which had been a communicative symbol that marked me as being "on duty." In contrast, Soka Han members wore neckties and suits, signaling their roles in a different way. While ÖSGI is making conscious efforts to revise and equalize such practices, these subtle symbols continue to communicate gendered expectations in ways that are often unconscious and culturally inherited. In this sense, gendered practices are not only reproduced through organizational roles but also through material and symbolic signifiers.

The gendered dynamics embedded in the division of roles between Byakuren and the Soka Han influence members' experiences and can generate feelings of rejection or discomfort. On Reddit, there is a community called "SGI whistleblowers," where anonymous posts often express criticism toward SGI. While the anonymity of these posts limits their credibility, one particular account from a former member who experienced Byakuren before is worth giving attention:"I was pressured by being reminded of the fortune that I had accumulated through my

practice and the personal struggles that members knew I was facing. If I was dealing with a specific situation, a leader would directly reference that and state that I could 'challenge' this issue through Byakuren service" (BlondeRandom, personal account, October 27th, 2021). Furthermore, she notes, "Ikeda's language about the Byakuren made me uncomfortable - I thought it was worse than the gendered language directed towards YWD (Young Women's Division). I also did not want to stand all day during the weekends (who would). I did not want to wait on members, clean bathrooms, etc" (BlondeRandom, personal account, October 27th, 2021).

Although this testimony comes from the United States, it reveals a tension between the ideal of self-cultivation promoted by SGI leadership and the embodied, gendered, unpaid labor expected of Byakuren members, which is a tension that is also observable in Austrian Byakuren groups. Unlike the gender-neutral name Soka Han ("Soka Group") used for male members, the name Byakuren, meaning "white lotus," carries strong symbolic associations with femininity and reinforces gendered ideals of womanhood. The fact that this name was chosen by Ikeda, the male authority figure of Soka Gakkai, and continues to be used, highlights the gender dynamics embedded in the organization's institutional structures.

Although this looks like something too conventional, but one person post their experience in the official SGI-USA website: "When I joined the Byakuren in 2017, I didn't understand the spirit, so it felt like a chore. […] But during the pandemic, it became clear how much everyone needed the Buddhist center. I started to think about why Ikeda *Sensei* created the Byakuren Group, and I realized that, as a youth, it was time for me to stand up and take action for others. […] The Buddhist center is a place for everyone to rejoice, talk to each other and connect with *Sensei*. No matter what we are going through, we smile and shine brightly everywhere like the sun" (World Tribune, n.d.). This testimony reveals how the notion of

"duty" within the Byakuren group is framed not merely as an obligation but as a sacred mission for service to others, which underscores a performative cultivation of the self, where gendered expectations are embedded in the embodied role of a supportive, cheerful female presence, one who consistently offers "bright smiles" to fellow members.

Despite appearing to reinforce conventional gender roles, these roles are presented as spiritual missions. Ikeda's teachings emphasize that "Youth have a mission to take the initiative to protect others" and that "Working wholeheartedly behind the scenes to support *Kosen-rufu* and protect the Soka Gakkai is a most noble form of Buddhist practice" (Ikeda, 2012, p. 101). This perspective aligns with Saba Mahmood's (2005) argument that agency can be expressed not only through resistance but also through compliance. For Byakuren members, their spiritual labor becomes a means of self-cultivation within Soka Gakkai's Buddhist framework, effectively transforming their duties into a spiritual "mission."

However, the very fact that such moral labor, infused with gendered ideals of femininity, is legitimized and organized under male leadership points to the ongoing entanglement of gender and power. In fact, some members, as illustrated by the discomfort expressed in the testimony, find this dynamic troubling, particularly the moral and spiritual authority that male figures exercise over women's cultivation. This observation is not intended as a critique of the women themselves as subjugators or of Soka Gakkai as a whole, but rather as an effort to draw attention to how gendered hierarchies shape the lived experience of religious "mission" of women.

By positioning women's participation as a form of spiritual empowerment, the testimonies highlight how gender and religious mission are co-constituted. The process of undoing gendered practices is crucial and incentivizes changes in the gender dynamics anchored in the imported cultural products such as the gendered institutional structures.

However, the gendered power relations between male authority and religious women continue to be subtly perpetuated as tradition. This suggests both the flexibility and adaptability of transnational Buddhist movements to create changes, as well as the limitations of undoing gendered practices as it implies.

3.3 Converging Missionary and Gender Subjectivities in Transnational Mobility

In the previous section, I explored how missionary subjectivity intersect with gender subjectivity within Soka Gakkai cosmology. Now, I would like to explore, how migrant women experience the intersection of missionary and gender subjectivities in their transnational mobility.

I would like to note that Japanese migrants I focus on are very diverse in notions about gender. My thesis references scholars such as Saba Mahmood, who examined conservative pious women, and when referencing Mahmood, we might imagine a homogenous group of highly conservative people. However, in my fieldwork, many of the women I interviewed expressed varying degrees of discomfort, disinterest, or acceptance toward gendered discourse and practices in Soka Gakkai in Japan. The majority of my interviewees acknowledged that Soka Gakkai contains gendered expressions and modes of practice, and they expressed discomfort or disinterest in these aspects like Saki-san, while a smaller number (who did not express discomfort or critique) also mentioned that she was a housewife and focused on Soka Gakkai activities while raising her children. Some hold “liberal” views on gender and religion, while others tend to be more “conservative,” so their perspectives are diverse, making it difficult to categorize them under a single label. In my fieldwork, the women who have more “liberal” notions and their discomfort or disinterest shows a tension between gendered discourse in Soka Gakkai that is interesting to explore, that intersects their missionary and gender subjectivity.

Saki-san, a 50-year-old Japanese migrant woman in Vienna who had practiced in Soka Gakkai in Japan and migrating in her twenties, told me that she never liked the gendered expectations embedded in the organization's practices:"In Japan, when it comes to clothing or how people appear at meetings, maybe it's different now, but back then, women were expected to wear pastel colors if they were Byakuren. I didn't like that at all. It just didn't work for me. […] I ended up going to Soka Women's College.[10] And of course, it was part of Soka Gakkai, with the idea that 'women should be feminine.' Every day, all I heard was 'women, women, women.' I really felt like I couldn't keep up with it. Those two years were pretty tough for me" (personal communication, March 30th, 2025).

She shared the difficulties she faced in Japan due to the gendered discourse and practices of Soka Gakkai. On the other hand, she shared her strong faith in her motivation to go abroad: "I really struggled with the way gender roles were structured within Soka Gakkai. I only felt resistance to it. At the same time, I had a strong desire to stay in Soka Gakkai and to continue as a disciple of the founder. I really wanted to walk the path of *Kosen-rufu*. So, in order to do that, I felt like going abroad was the only option left for me. It was almost desperate—like, if I didn't go overseas, my life wouldn't even begin. That's how strongly I felt. […] When I first met *Sensei* [Ikeda] at the entrance ceremony at the age of 18, he told us, 'Study hard, learn languages, and then go out into the world to build peace globally.' That was the turning point, and it became my biggest motivation to go abroad, and I did my best in learning German" (Saki, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

What is intriguing in her case is that, indeed, Ikeda is one of them who promote such gendered teachings, and it actually caused issues to Saki-san, but she looks empowered by his words, admiring him as her mentor recognizing herself as a disciple. Furthermore, Saki-san's

[10] A two-year junior college founded by Ikeda in 1985.

account show that gendered practices actually become one of her decisions to go abroad, but still in the purpose of mission. Although Saki-san is one of the extreme cases, the discomfort toward femininity norms back in Japan and comfort toward more free-style practices in Europe was also frequently shared by my interviewees. Hana-san shared, "I did't like to behave like 'Joshibu' (represented by femininity), so when I came to Austria, I really like that more free atmosphere."

What consistently emerged from the interlocutors was their tendency to attribute discomfort with gendered practices to the Soka Gakkai organization itself, rather than to Daisaku Ikeda personally. For instance, Miki-san recounted, "When I heard Ikeda-sensei say something [about femininity], I felt like he was talking to my mother, not to me." She emphasized this point by adding, "Ikeda-sensei's humanism isn't something that's gendered." This ultimate admiration for Ikeda appears to subvert other gendered aspects of Soka Gakkai's practices.

Viewing their actions through the lens of agency (Mahmood, 2005), the embodied practice of being a missionary appears to be a deeply pious act. However, this piety is not a passive adherence to all teachings or directives from Ikeda. Instead, these women actively negotiate and even refuse certain gendered discourses and practices within Soka Gakkai, such as expectations around clothing.

Crucially, this refusal does not signify a rejection of their faith. This is precisely where gender subjectivity intersects with missionary subjectivity. The mission that emerges through migration for *Kosen-rufu* (world peace through Buddhist practice), and their commitment to it, can be understood as a productive and agentive act. This act, rooted in a profound commitment to their religious beliefs, provides the foundation for a more flexible approach to accepting and rejecting certain gendered norms. The experiences of these women suggest that religious texts,

even Ikeda's quasi-canonical writings, do not exert totalizing power. Instead, Japanese missionary women engage with them selectively and adaptively, allowing faith and critique to coexist. Their agency, then, is not found in outright opposition or blind acceptance of the religious structure, but in negotiating space within it to fulfill their religious goals.

This agentic interpretation extends beyond personal practice to active textual engagement. Saki-san involves in translating official videos of Ikeda's speeches. She shared the following: "In Austria, some people feel uncomfortable, so when I translate *Sensei*'s speech videos, I try to rephrase certain (gendered) expressions. For example, if there's a term like *Daikokubashira* (main pillar), I look for a different way to convey it. The same goes for anything related to 'femininity' as well. […] Expression that emphasize more individuality regardless of gender."

This act of "undoing gender" in translation shows the active role of Japanese missionary women in shaping and evolving religious discourse, rather than merely receiving and reproducing it. The enduring admiration for Ikeda, despite his gendered teachings, can be understood through this lens of selective engagement. These women are not simply passively consuming doctrine, but rather, they are actively negotiating space within the existing religious framework. This agency in interpretation allows these women to remain true to their spiritual path, demonstrating how their gender subjectivity is actively reshaped through their missionary purpose.

When we consider agency in the context of the gendered spiritual "mission" as exemplified by Byakuren, it becomes clear that female practitioners' "gendered missions" can manifest in subtle ways, even within highly attentive environments like Soka Gakkai in Austria. This means that, by engaging with these spiritual missions and Soka Gakkai's structures,

practicing women continue to operate within gendered frameworks in their spiritual endeavours.

However, even within such complex gendered environments, the fertile ground these women cultivate for their ultimate "mission" of *Kosen-rufu* is neither easily undermined nor fragile. When faced with uncomfortable experiences, their deep respect and admiration for Ikeda as their mentor provide them with a flexible space to interpret his teachings more freely. Therefore, while their spiritual "mission" is inherently gendered, their agentic acts of interpretation simultaneously allow for compliance and "ungendering," continually shaping the lived experiences of missionary women.

Conclusion

This thesis highlights the inadequacy of the conventional concept of "missionary" for understanding contemporary faith-driven migration, particularly outside traditional Christian frameworks. The term, often male-centric and conversion-focused, struggles to capture the nuanced purposes and lived experiences of diverse religious migrants. This research explores why the conventional concept of "missionary" is insufficient and proposes how it can be rethought to expand our understanding of contemporary faith-driven migration, specifically through an intersectional gendered lens within the context of the Soka Gakkai movement.

The study reconceptualizes "mission" as profoundly intertwined with individuals' life purpose (*Shimei*), personal growth, and everyday embodied practice. Alongside, key findings emerged from this research, offering a richer understanding of contemporary faith-driven mobility. Firstly, migration paths often originate from "accidental beginnings" or "contingent mobilities," which are subsequently reframed and imbued with spiritual meaning through the individual's faith. This process aligns with the concept of "being acted upon" rather than solely active self-cultivation, thereby challenging the notion of a "missionary" as solely a pre-ordained or institutionally directed trajectory.

It suggests that the distinction between secular and religious motivations in migration is often blurred and problematic. The study suggests that while "missionary" should not inherently denote a migration aspect, the experiences of the interlocutors can only be fully described as "missionary migrants," a term acknowledging both their mission-driven purpose in life and their transnational mobility. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of "missionary" that goes beyond the common imagination of someone solely going abroad for religious reasons from the outset.

Additionally, the thesis demonstrates how women's agency is cultivated through disciplined self-formation (Mahmood, 2005) amidst contradictory gendered discourses within Soka Gakkai. This involves actively "doing and undoing gendered practices" through everyday religious life through the selective engagement with perceived gendered norms, prioritizing their ultimate admiration for Ikeda and their core mission.

On the other hand, this study has several limitations concerning its scope, which should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research is focused exclusively on Soka Gakkai. While this allowed for in-depth exploration, the findings may not be directly generalizable to all non-Western religious movements or other forms of faith-driven migration. Secondly, the fieldwork was conducted solely in Austria and Poland. Although these sites provided valuable contrasting contexts within Soka Gakkai's transnational expansion, the insights are geographically bounded and may not fully reflect Soka Gakkai experiences in other regions or the broader global religious landscape. Also, the primary focus on Japanese women migrants means that the experiences of other Soka Gakkai members (e.g., non-Japanese members, men, or non-migrant members) were explored to a lesser extent, or for specific aspects such as the exploration of gendered dynamics. Also, the researcher's "partial insider status" of Soka Gakkai necessitates continuous reflexivity to manage potential biases or limitations in perspective. Last but not least, while participant observation was intensive for seven months, deeper, longitudinal ethnographic engagement and more interviews would allow for an even more nuanced observation of subtle, evolving gendered dynamics.

Ultimately, based on these findings and limitations, several avenues for future research emerge to build upon this study. For instance, future research could explore similar reconceptualisations of "mission" in other diverse, non-Western religious movements with significant transnational migrant populations, to assess the broader applicability of the findings.

Also, a more focused ethnographic exploration of male Soka Gakkai migrants' experiences and their understandings of *Shimei* and *Kosen-rufu* would provide a fuller, comparative picture of gendered subjectivities in motion within the movement. Moreover, deeper ethnographic research on the experiences of families "left behind" by Soka Gakkai missionary migrants could further illuminate the affective dimensions of transnational religious kinship from their perspective. Also, further research into how Soka Gakkai institutions globally respond to and integrate non-binary identities and expressions of gender could provide insights into the boundaries and potential for continued "undoing gendered practices". Lastly, exploring Soka Gakkai communities in other European or global regions could reveal further variations in the manifestation of "missionary" identity and gender subjectivity, enriching the transnational understanding of the movement.

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Appendices

Consent form

- ***This guideline is a basis on and for the interviews we do. While providing a valuable framework for finding common threads and analytical insights, it needs flexibility. Keep in mind that every story unfolds differently. Also, every interview is a dance, not a drill. If their steps take them down unexpected paths, we can embrace the detour! Our attentiveness to their flow will unlock a richer picture than any rigid script.***

Presentation of the interview/ Script before the interview:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am pursuing my master's degrees in sociology and social anthropology at Central European University. My research explores the intersection of migration, religion, and gender, this thesis explores how religious aspirations navigate missionary Japanese women in the contemporary Japanese Buddhist organization, Soka Gakkai, negotiating their gender roles imposed by their religious teachings. During our approximately one-hour conversation, I aspire to explore many aspects concerning your experiences. This includes personal histories, motivations, beliefs, and community experiences.

Feel free to ask any questions or express any concerns you may have during our discussion.

Review aspects of the consent form:

Upon signing the consent form, I would like to emphasize a few key points: Your participation is greatly appreciated, and I assure you that your responses will remain confidential. You will

be assigned a pseudonym, and any identifiable information will be anonymized to protect your privacy. You have the freedom to withdraw from the interview at any point without providing a reason. If you have any questions or concerns during our conversation, please feel free to bring them up.

Detailed version:

1. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Your responses will remain anonymous, and our discussion will be strictly confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure that your information remains unidentifiable when the research findings are published.

2. **Right to Withdraw:** You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason.

3. **Privacy Concerns:** Any identifiable information, such as specific details that could reveal your identity (e.g., only Lebanese academics can mention the region), will be excluded to address privacy concerns.

4. **Anonymization of Data:** Any information linked to you that could be used for retrospective identification will be anonymized from the initial stages of the research. If any personal information not needed for the analysis is mentioned, it will be anonymized in the transcribed material.

5. **Data Storage:** The informed consent forms and records of consent will be securely stored by us and our instructors.

6. **Purpose of Data:** The data collected will be exclusively used for research purposes.