



Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften

*MMG Working Paper 13-17* • ISSN 2192-2357

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The nationalization of religion:  
Cultural performances and the youth of  
Soka Singapore<sup>1</sup>



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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*  
Göttingen

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ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

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## Abstract

Soka is known in Singapore for its cultural performances in events such as the National Day Parade and Chingay. This is part of Soka's attempts to present itself as a cultural organization working for peace and progress in Singapore. Participating in these performances is common among the youth of Soka. In this paper I focus on young people's participation as a form of religious patriotism. For them, it is about sending a message that individual and collective struggles can be overcome and that peace and harmony can be fostered. I then analyze these nuances in terms of the nationalization of religion, which is defined here as the process in which the secularist interests of the state are articulated and enacted by religious entities participating in cultural performances. Put differently, such cultural performances by religious entities are shrouded in a nationalistic character that renders the religious significantly invisible and the prevailing political order unquestioned.

**Keywords:** nationalization of religion, religious patriotism, religious nationalism, engaged Buddhism, Reformist Buddhism, youth volunteerism, Soka Gakkai, Singapore, youth and religion, cultural performance, carnival

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## Introduction

As the lights dim, images of turmoil are projected onto the wide backdrop cast in the shape of the island of Singapore. Accompanied by orchestral music that evokes imminent danger, the turbulent waters fade into black-and-white images of the great fire that broke out in the squatters' community of Bukit Ho Swee in 1961. People are seen fleeing and salvaging what they can. Although brief, the clips are powerful enough to remind the audience at the 2012 National Day Parade (NDP) of the social and economic conditions of the island 50 years ago. Indeed, the Bukit Ho Swee fire was to be a turning point for Singapore. In its wake, residents of these communities were transferred to high-rise government flats, which characterize much of the landscape of Singapore today.

The images fade out and more than 500 performers, clad in red and raising their torches, march toward the center of the stage. As spectacular fireworks abound, the performers gracefully move around to look for their respective positions. The torches they carry release their sparks as the music crescendos to a powerful culmination. And when the music and lights all fade out, the audience is left to behold the bright and lingering image of a lion's head – the iconic symbol of Singapore.

The fact that the National Day Parade is being held at Marina Bay for the fifth year is not an accident. Its backdrop of Singapore's skyscrapers offers an unmistakable and towering view of the heights and accomplishments of the country. The symbolic prowess of the fiery lion demonstrates for the nation that catastrophes like the 1961 fire can be overcome.

Making the message more compelling is the fact that the performers – the majority of whom are young people – belong to the Singapore Soka Association (SSA). The SSA is a Nichiren Buddhist organization that teaches "Human Revolution", the idea that the "solution to society's problems" begins by cultivating one's "inherent Buddha nature" (SGI 2011a, 9). According to this approach, overcoming the problems of the world – be they natural, economic, or social in nature – first necessi-

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1 An initial draft of this paper was presented at the 2013 conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) at the University of Turku. I am thankful to my fellow panelists there, Jonathan Ong (Leicester), Lin Weirong (Nanyang Technological University), and Peter van der Veer and Junjia Ye (both at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity) for their very helpful comments.

tates the discovery of the wisdom, courage, and eternal happiness that already reside within an individual (Machacek and Wilson 2003).

The performance at the NDP 2012 is just one of many that the SSA has been involved in through the years. Although the state does not officially privilege any religion in politics, the youth of Soka Singapore have been a staple in NDP performances since the 1980s. In its performances, Soka presents itself to the public not as a religious organization, but as a charity that works to improve society. In a way, it can be seen as an attempt by the state to co-opt religion as a shining example of how religious organizations can be a force for social good (Mettreaux 2003). For example, simultaneous media commentary during Soka's synchronized flag performance at the NDP 2008 described the organization as promoting "peace, self-empowerment, and value creation" without any reference at all to Buddhism (Mediacorp 2008). At that event, more than 600 young people performed a well-executed display of red and green banners on the theme "Creators of Possibilities" (Mediacorp 2008). Members of Soka also participate on an annual basis in the Chingay Parade, held every Chinese New Year. They have been doing so since the 1980s. In 2011, Soka's segment paraded life-sized animal characters to depict the "harmony between humans and nature" (SGI 2011b).

Their performances at the NDP, Chingay, and other events are a source of pride for many of the members of SSA (Lai 2010). Such events are time-consuming and demand physical and emotional commitment since preparations start months before the performances themselves. As a result, these are avenues encouraging communal bravado and a sense of belonging for its participants – especially young people (Neo 2005). Admittedly, to be able to synchronize movements and formations is an achievement that demands discipline, attention, and the organizational charisma to rally its youth behind a cause.

## Argument and methods

The spectacles described above, seemingly devoid of any blatant religious message, are important for the SSA in that they make the organization's presence consistently felt in the public's consciousness. As such, Soka Singapore is not immediately perceived as a religious organization. Lai (2010, 315) is right in observing that the SSA is "well known" for its "high level of organization of activities which it mostly



labels as ‘social’ and ‘cultural’. ” Especially given the way Singapore manages diversity (Clammer 2011), these performances are politically safe modes in line with how the SSA wants to influence the world through peace workshops, cultural exhibits, and educational outreaches. Devoid of any obvious attempt at proselytization, these activities appeal to such universal values as religious harmony, tolerance, environmental protection, and social justice. This is why Machacek and Wilson (2003) consider the members of Soka as “global citizens”.

But what does the participation of youth in Soka’s cultural performances mean for them? In the succeeding sections, what unfolds is the idea that for these young people, participating in performances is their own way of giving back to society. Through these performances, the message conveyed is two-fold: They can tell the world that problems can be overcome and that harmony and peace are attainable. These are seemingly universal values that go back to the principles of “Human Revolution” espoused by Soka Gakkai (Machacek and Wilson 2003). Out of concern for Singaporean society and by drawing on their understanding of Nichiren Buddhism, the youth engage in volunteerism effectively as a form of religious patriotism.

Towards the end, I will argue that such religious patriotism in effect demonstrates the nationalization of religion. It is defined here as the process in which the participation of a religious organization in cultural performances is rendered in a form that is in line with the interests of the state of Singapore, one whereby religious content is concealed and the prevailing political order remains unquestioned.

This article draws mainly from the interviews I conducted with different youth members (mostly in their early 20s) of Soka Singapore. The interviewees are diverse according to gender, their educational background, professional experience, and position in the SSA. I have interviewed, for example, a female Soka leader who studies at a local university and a male youth who just finished his polytechnic education and is currently engaged in National Service. I have also interviewed an engineering graduate who now works for the government but at the same time oversees a big group of undergraduate students, and a male student in management who has just entered university and is very new to Soka.

While these and my other interviewees vary in terms of their educational background and current status, their common denominator is that they have all participated in one way or another in various cultural performances like the NDP, the Chingay Parade, photo exhibits, stage plays, and even choral shows. Supporting these interviews are participant observations I have made of various activities of the SSA like a peace exhibit, a meeting of university students, and an entire division’s gather-

ing in one of Soka's centers in Singapore. Accounts of these activities punctuate the ensuing sections. Pseudonyms have been used in this article to protect the identity of my informants.

## Review of literature

While there are not many studies dealing with the youth of Soka, those that do mainly tackle conversion (Neo 2005; Tong 2007), their religious socialization (McLaughlin 2009), and their political participation for which they are known in Japan (Fisker-Nielsen 2012). In this article I draw attention to the participation of young people in the cultural performances of Soka Singapore.

It is worth noting that many of the cultural performances of the SSA are planned, rehearsed, and carried out mainly by young people. To participate in the NDP in 2001, for example, Soka sent as many as 2,001 youths, a symbolic number which constitutes perhaps their biggest to date (SSA n.d.). In 2010, as part of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games hosted by Singapore, 500 youth members participated in the grand opening ceremony while 234 volunteered in various capacities. During the Games, SSA youth also took the opportunity to stage an exhibit on environmental sustainability called "Seeds of Hope" (SSA 2010). And in 2012, SSA gathered 1,000 members from the Student Division (tertiary) and Future Division (secondary school) to perform for the Chingay Parade during Chinese New Year (SSA 2011). Held at Marina Bay, the Soka segment showcased massive boats sailing through rough waters. The choreography, costumes, props and lighting all blended well to narrate a story of "triumph over challenges".<sup>2</sup>

In particular, I will deal with the nature of young people's participation in cultural performances. This is in contrast to Goh's (2011; 2013) important works on carni-

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2 In a way, young people are fairly easy to mobilize for cultural performances. They have, after all, the time, energy, and creativity to commit to the rehearsals. But the youthfulness of these cultural performances also speaks of the very youthfulness of Soka Singapore itself. Tong (2007) argues that one group that Soka mainly attracts, apart from older Chinese housewives, includes young Chinese Singaporeans. Indeed, 30% of its estimated active membership of 35,600 in 2010 were youth (13 to 40 years old), who belong to various organizational units such as Young Men, Young Women, and the Student Division (SSA 2010). This is in contrast to other Buddhist groups and temples in Singapore that are predominantly attended by the older generation (Kuah-Pearce 2008b).

vals like the Chingay Parade, which he approaches from the point of view of history and cultural studies. To him, these are clear state projects meant to portray the multicultural character of Singaporean society as a spectacle to be viewed by a global audience. My approach is more interpretivist in that these cultural performances are voluntary activities for the members in the service of both Soka as a religious organization and Singapore as their society. Moreover, the cultural performances that Soka youth stage are not just state events. Some, like the June Project and the Seeds of Hope exhibit that will be described below, are internal efforts.

### *Reformist Buddhism*

The socially engaged character of Soka resonates with Kuah-Pearce's (2009) compelling account of Reformist Buddhism, based on her research of the religious landscape in Singapore today. In contrast to ritualistic forms of Buddhism that have been integral to syncretic Chinese piety, Reformist Buddhism tends to be more scripturally (Tong 2007) and at the same time socially engaged (Chia and Chee 2008; Kuah-Pearce 2008b). In particular, Reformist Buddhism is known for its social engagement as part of the "bodhisattva ideal" and the "pursuit of spiritualism" or enlightenment (Kuah-Pearce 2008b, 203). Interestingly, social engagement has been for the most part about charity and welfare activities. Buddhist temples, for example, have increasingly become welfare spaces to address the needs of the marginalized such as the elderly, drug addicts, and individuals requiring medical care (Kuah-Pearce 2008a).

It is precisely this attention to welfare activities that is one limitation of current discussions on Reformist Buddhism. It tends to neglect other forms of volunteerism especially among young people. Soka, for example, while it has charitable activities catering for the marginalized, is also known for its cultural performances. Like the ones described above, these performances have statements to make concerning contemporary Singaporean society. In this sense, they are engaging society albeit at the cultural level.

### *Religion and nationalism*

To me though, the wider dimension that discussions of contemporary Buddhism in Singapore have not fully explored is the relationship between religion and the idea of nationalism. This is particularly important because as far as the relatively young Sin-

gaporean state is concerned, it is involved in an on-going project of nation-building (Ban 2004; Chong 2010a).<sup>3</sup>

Religion and nationalism, as Juergensmeyer (2006, 182) puts it, have an “ambivalent relationship”. This is because nationalism, following modernist discourse, considers religion as a primitive phenomenon. This thinking, of course, has been called into question given historical understanding of the relationship between religion and politics and also the rise of ideologies and collectives that lobby for religiously inspired forms of nationalism (van der Veer 1994; van der Veer and Lehmann 1999).

Indeed, Brubaker (2012), drawing from various studies, suggests the different ways in which the relationship between religion and nationalism can be approached: nationalism as a religion in itself; religion as offering historical explanations for the emergence of nationalism; religion as providing its symbols for nationalistic sentiments; and religious nationalism as a challenge to secular nationalism. What particularly makes religious nationalism distinct from its secular alternative is that it has religious programs for the “ordering and regulating of public and private life” (Brubaker 2012, 13). This leads to the rejection not just of secularism but also of other religions. For van der Veer then, religious nationalism can be taken to mean the ideology of “the nation as the community of co-religionists” (1994, 22).

The emphasis of these aforementioned discussions is largely on the presence of religion in nationalist sentiments or articulations. Studies have focused on the religious content in the form of symbols, metaphors, and explanations within expressions of nationalism. But as the scenes described above and the succeeding narratives below show, the religious elements are considerably downplayed in the cultural performances of Soka Singapore, a religious organization. Offering a corrective to the literature, I then ask: What is the role of nationalism in the expressions – especially staged performances – of the religious in this context?

I take nationalism here to broadly mean the project of the state in the subjective formation of its citizens (Turner 2006). For example, because Buddhist temples and other welfare organizations are tapped by the government to provide charity work and services to the marginalized in Singapore, they are often characterized as co-opted. Indeed, as will be explained below, the way the Singaporean state manages religious diversity is pragmatic, taking advantage of existing religious organizations as strategic partners in nation-building or community work (Kuah-Pearce 2008a; Tan 2008). Kuah-Pearce (2009, 4) describes this as the process of religious engineer-

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3 For the Taiwanese case, see Madsen (2008).

ing. Towards the end, I will revisit these ideas in discussing the “nationalization of religion” (Brubaker 2012, 11).

My study is an attempt to inquire into the relationship between religion and nationalism through the experience of young people participating in the various cultural performances of Soka Singapore. To me, the participation of youth in these performances presents an opportunity for novel research. Whereas the youth of Soka in Japan have actively participated in politics, their counterparts in Singapore have not done so. This is intriguing given the political implications of Nichiren’s thinking that “national morality was dependent on the ruler’s morality” (Tong 2007, 140; see also Aruga 2003). Fisker-Nielsen’s (2012) ethnographic work among Soka students in Japan shows that while they are often perceived to be fully supportive of Komeito, a political party associated with Soka Gakkai, they have in fact done so with different motivations. While some people have cast their votes for the party as their assumed religious duty, others have emphasized their responsibility to place a check on Komeito by questioning its policies.

This absence of political activism among my Singaporean informants is to be expected in a society that has been dominated by a one-party government and an educational system influenced by the values of “economic discipline and social conformity” (Ho, Sim, and Alviar-Martin 2011, 267). The implications of this context will be revisited in the later section dealing with the nationalization of religion.

## Participating in cultural performances

In my interviews, my informants have generally expressed what their participation means in two ways. In essence, it is an attempt to send a message that *individual and collective struggles can be overcome* and that *lasting harmony and peace can be built*, two ideas that are reflected in the messages of their NDP and Chingay performances. Reflecting what could be read as their own version of engaged or Reformist Buddhism, my informants’ nuances can thus be seen as their aspirations for Singaporean society as well. The view of Chin Pin, a youth leader, suggests precisely this desire: “Society doesn’t belong only to the government or a group of people with position... We have the potential...to be able to change the society and make an impact in it, be it in a small or big way.”

### *Overcoming struggles*

Every year, the Youth Division of Soka Singapore stages the June Project, an opportunity for young people to showcase their talents through cultural performances during school holidays. The event in 2012 showcased an exhibit and a major skit. My contact, Cherry, agreed to meet me at Tampines MRT so we could take the bus together to the SSA's headquarters. Wearing a black dress, Cherry rushes toward me while holding a phone to her ear. We are supposed to meet another friend who has just informed her that she would be coming late. Cherry, a bubbly and endearing girl in her early 20s, is a student at the National University of Singapore.

Not wanting to be late, we then decided to go ahead to the headquarters where a long line of Soka youth, in blue t-shirts, unceasingly cheer and applaud the arrival of visitors at that day's June Project. After going through an exhibit at the lobby, Cherry and I enter the main hall where a seat has been reserved for me in the very front row. In fact, I am only a few seats away from the event's guest of honor, a Member of Parliament.

The lights dim and the curtains are drawn, revealing characters all played by actors from the Student Division. The story introduces Brandon, a very successful man in Japan whose career has just taken off. Talking about himself and his busy schedule, Brandon embodies the highly accomplished yet selfish individual. This sense of achievement thus leaves Brandon shocked and resentful when he is unexpectedly retrenched from work. At this point in time, I tell myself that the storyline is no longer mysterious; this is going to be about the transformation of this individual.

Indeed it is. Complicating Brandon's situation is a major earthquake and its ensuing tsunami and nuclear catastrophe, clearly reminiscent of recent events in Japan. His sudden economic failure and the natural catastrophe become an occasion for Brandon to rethink his selfishness. Encouraged by his wife and friends, he then volunteers for relief efforts. Seeing the faces of suffering individuals and the homeless, Brandon finds renewed hope and meaning in what he now does. The story ends with Brandon reuniting with his family. As the program booklet puts it, he is convinced that "in striving to help oneself and others while remaining positive, darkness will be dispelled, and winter will definitely turn into spring." The skit receives a standing ovation from the audience.

In my interview with Cherry later on, she explains that, "through Soka, I believe that everybody has a good side and that we can just focus on people...and help each other in many ways." Cultural performances, according to her, are opportunities for the youth to influence society to bring out the "good side" in them. For the most part,

what this means is not only about being morally upright. It is in many ways about challenging individuals to be positive about life and realize that their struggles and limitations can be overcome. Indeed, consistent with the message of the play, to overcome is a recurrent theme among the youth of the SSA to explain their participation in its cultural performances.

At one level, young people participate in these performances because they feel that they can make an impact on Singaporean society in this way. This I learned directly from Paul, a 22-year-old recent polytechnic graduate who has participated in various NDP and Chingay performances. In fact, his excitement becomes most evident when we talk about the fire performances during the Youth Olympic Games. To allow him to explain his motivations, I ask Paul whether his participation was about accumulating merits. After a moment of silence, Paul explains that, “it will be wrong to say if you are just doing it all to accumulate fortune. It’s about actually going there to repay our debts of gratitude. Gaining fortune is a secondary thing...What’s more important is to repay debts of gratitude to Singapore itself...”

Here a sense of responsibility for Singapore as a nation is evident, a point that will be revisited later in a discussion of religious patriotism. A 25-year-old management student at a local university, Kang Sheng points out that performances intend to show that “our belief is for the betterment of society...and that our principle is to be responsible citizens.” Part of this discourse of responsible citizenship is the state of Singaporeans today. According to Paul, Singapore’s “biggest problem” is that young people are “quite spoiled”. Cherry, my informant above, in fact thinks that Singaporeans are “selfish” because the society is “fast-paced”, by which she means that people may not have the time to think about others and the problems facing their society itself.

For Kang Sheng, Paul, Cherry, and my other informants, cultural performances allow them to spread this message that there are other problems that have been overcome before and that future problems can be handled successfully as well. The images of the great fire at Bukit Ho Swee, the big ship that wades through rough waters, and Brandon’s story of finding meaning in helping others, all point to this message. Indeed, reflecting this same message is the title of the June Project in 2012: “Realize beyond Self, Time to Act”.

At another level, participating in cultural performances is in itself an opportunity for young people to show that they can overcome the very challenge of organizing themselves. This appears to be a rallying call for young people to manifest their own “courage and determination”, a phrase I repeatedly heard from my informants.

Admittedly, it takes time, patience, and a lot of effort to plan, choreograph, and rehearse their complicated movements. So the months the members spend leading to the events in themselves constitute an arduous journey.

In her work on the social engagements of Soka Gakkai in Italy, Maciotti (2003) has observed the same sense of achievement that somehow the organization has been able to make human rights an important issue at least in the consciousness of its exhibit visitors. Her study documents the process and challenges volunteers had to deal with. In her work on Soka Singapore, Finucane (2009) observes the same sense of accomplishment among the youth who volunteered for the victims of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. She reads these activities though as forms of “service as a way of working to achieve human revolution” (Finucane 2009, 91).

While service, with its connotation of subservience, is indeed part of the Buddhist ethos, I would suggest that the emphasis on the Human Revolution in Soka also informs this drive to overcome. In fact, to me, this explains the importance of having “actual proofs” (Neo 2005, 107) in both the philosophy and everyday discourse of Soka believers in Singapore. The ability to perform in a well-executed and intricately choreographed fashion in various cultural performances is in itself an achievement and actual proof of these young people’s devotion. This explains why many of the actors in the skit above were teary-eyed when the audience gave them a standing ovation. I see Cherry leave her seat to embrace her friends on stage. She gives the bouquet she had been carrying all this time to one of the lead actresses who cries profusely on her shoulder.

I end this section by noting that inasmuch as this overcoming ethos is present in their cultural performance, it is also very evident in these young people’s discourses about their personal lives. Even though he is only 22, Paul’s clarity of thought amazes me. He is one of my first respondents and even if his English sometimes falters during the interview, he is nevertheless able to explain himself. During the interview, he offers me a clear narrative about the struggles his own family had to deal with, such as bankruptcy and his failures at school. Given this background, having finished a polytechnic degree and the ability to express himself well are in themselves his “actual proof” that he has overcome his own limitations.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Arguably, this clarity of thought concerning Soka’s beliefs does not seem to be unique to Paul. Neo (2005) has also observed that young people, compared to their older counterparts in the SSA, are more aware of the philosophical distinctions of Nichiren Buddhism. Much of this is owed to their level of education and the intensive religious classes in the SSA (Tong 2007).



### *Fostering harmony*

While the skit's message above appeals to individual responsibility, it also speaks of the importance of collective action. The June Project is in fact tied to the launch of the 2012 Peace Proposal written by President Ikeda (2012), copies of which have been distributed to visitors. In the wake of the recent nuclear catastrophes in Japan, the proposal calls for concerted efforts for disaster risk reduction, sustainable development, and nuclear abolition.

The importance of fostering collective action is also evident in the exhibit that coincides with the June Project. Cherry explains to me that "Seeds of Hope", which has been staged in other settings like the Youth Olympic Games in Singapore, features different panels on pressing matters concerning climate change and how these can be addressed through community development. She then leaves me with the other youth volunteers at the headquarters to go through the exhibit.

Interestingly, while "Seeds of Hope" is an international collaboration between Soka Gakkai International and Earth Charter International (SGI n.d.), the volunteers try to make it relevant to Singapore. At the end of the exhibit, for example, the audience is invited to participate in a game involving garbage segregation using the different receptacles one can see in Singapore. Here I learn that segregation is not as straightforward as it sounds. Milk cartons, I realize, are not easy to segregate since they may have layers of plastic and other materials that first need to be dismantled. But the idea is that segregation only works if everyone "comes together" to play his or her part.

To my mind, though, the attempts to make the exhibit locally relevant seem somehow artificial given Singapore's standards concerning public health, sanitation, and the eradication of absolute poverty (Chua 2011). Having lived in Singapore for some time, I know that the instruments of the state regarding public hygiene and the maintenance of its environment are simply efficient. To a great extent then, they render almost unnecessary residents' responsibility to, say, sweep their flats' common corridors. Be that as it may, the exhibit appeals to this idea of harmony or coming together as Soka calls on its members and audience to become "global citizens" (Wilson and Machacek 2003, 12).

Indeed, this idea of fostering harmony is another recurring theme in my interviews. Qing Song, a 24-year-old student in electrical engineering and part of the musical group Soka Chorus, tells me that, "we want to spread this message that for mankind to continue in the future...people must be able to coexist with each

other.” What is noteworthy, however, is that while the skit, exhibits, and talks Soka has staged speak of global issues like environmental sustainability, my interviewees do not immediately articulate them. In fact, Cherry merely laughs when I ask her if she really does garbage segregation. Instead, when speaking of harmony and peace, my interlocutors mainly refer to local contexts involving religious diversity.

This comes to light when I ask Qing Song to explain what exactly he means. Still fresh on his mind is Soka Chorus’s performance at the mid-autumn festival in Esplanade, Singapore’s most prominent theatre and concert hall: “We wanted to spread this message of peace through our songs.” According to Qing Song, “We want to make people realize that practicing this Buddhism is the path to happiness through our very own actions. But you don’t do it forcefully.” He then also recounts to me the various interreligious dialogues that SSA young people have organized with Muslim groups, for example.

The immediate context for this is Singapore’s religious diversity, which is carefully managed by the state. Racial conflicts did define Singapore’s history, especially in its early years, and episodes involving politically sensitive action and statements by religious entities still crop up intermittently. Such experiences then explain why through laws like the Religious Harmony Act, the state is prepared to exercise its control over religious efforts that threaten social and political order (Tan 2008; Thio 2009). In this light, the desire to foster peace, inasmuch as it is a value embraced by Buddhism, is articulated by my informants in terms of interreligious dialogue and not forcing Nichiren Buddhism on other people. Indeed, Finucane (2009) has observed that members of the SSA have to achieve a delicate balance between asserting theirs as the true form of Buddhism and promoting “a set of global values” through dialogues and cultural performances.

The idea of fostering peace and harmony in Singapore also takes on other discursive forms. Markus (23 years old) is one of the performers and trainers in the NDP performance described at the onset. Having trained and facilitated 40 volunteers in his group makes Markus really proud of his participation in the NDP. Indeed, for him the experience was about “contributing back to Soka” by giving his “time and effort”. For him, though, it was all worth it because he gained “the friendship that I made, the experience that I learned and the realizations from having dealt with different kinds of people.” When I ask him to elaborate, Markus pauses for a while and then carefully explains that, “Singaporeans today, I think...are selfish, caring only about themselves.” Markus then draws from his experience: “Let’s say in studies, I just want to study in my room and move all the way to the top. I just want to be the

best and don't care about others, the society, or the people around... Sometimes it is very sad.”

For Markus, participating in cultural performances then is about influencing society to consider peace and harmony not just in terms of the absence of religious or cultural conflict that pervades the discourse on religious harmony in Singapore (Tan 2008). While the message of peace and harmony arguably appears to be a mere rhetorical tool in a society where religious diversity is intensely managed by the state, its relevance for Markus and his peers lies in challenging what they have observed as the “selfishness” of Singaporeans: “It’s about people helping one another or contributing back to society. It’s something a normal Singaporean would not want to care about. Like, ‘Why would I care about others? I should care about myself.’ ”

This critical take on what they perceive as the malaise of the mainstream demonstrates that religious groups and activities among young people can serve as “sites for identity work”, especially at a time when to remain in a religion is treated as an individual choice (Shepherd 2010, 149; Cornelio 2010).

## Youth volunteerism as religious patriotism

The nuances in the cases above show that as far as my informants are concerned, their volunteerism is at once religious and patriotic. This is possible because they see their participation in cultural performances as opportunities to convey a clear message of solidarity with their society while at the same time drawing the message from Buddhism. This combination, after all, is what constitutes Reformist Buddhism in the literature (Kuah-Pearce 2008b; Tong 2007). This explains why Paul, who is currently in the National Service, can talk about his participation as “giving back” to Singapore and to Soka in the same sentence. Paul has participated in four Chingay and three NDP performances. Put differently, although the performances SSA members stage during the NDP, Chingay, June Project, and other platforms are primarily cultural in terms of the message and the exhibition of the talents of young people, they are inseparable from the members’ religious identity as Soka Buddhists. Their volunteerism can hence be characterized as a form of religious patriotism.<sup>5</sup> This idea needs to be teased out one aspect at a time.

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5 To be sure, the degree to which one is religiously patriotic may vary according to such factors as religious socialization within Soka. Sometimes, cultural performances are the

On one hand, the discourses around these events are clearly patriotic in that the motivations described above are primarily in relation to Singapore as a country or society and its challenges. Fostering peace and harmony, for example, is tied to the fact of religious diversity in the country (Lai 2010), while overcoming trials is related to the social and economic upheavals the country has weathered. Interestingly, the discourse also includes a critical posture towards what my informants perceive to be the selfishness of many Singaporeans today. They are very much aware that the problem is with the way of life itself, which encourages Singaporeans to “only think of themselves and not care for others”. William (25 years old), who currently works for a government agency, told me that the problem is “so bad that people stay in their own bubble...People don’t even know their neighbors around...and all they see is just themselves and fail to see the fact that we all make up society.”

These are all, I would argue, patriotic discourses insofar as they are concerned with the condition of Singaporean society and its betterment. In other words, the young people of Soka have volunteered for these cultural performances based on a concern for Singapore as a society or country (and not the state).<sup>6</sup> Patriotism, as Turner (2002, 49) shows, is distinct from nationalism in that the former is “love of country” and the latter “respect for the state”. Also, patriotism is a more appropriate term here given the ideological baggage of the concept of nationalism involving superiority over other countries (Mummendey, Klink, and Brown 2001), or the state project of defining the discourse, representation, and identity of a territorially bound collective (Friedland 2002).

On the other hand, the discourses can also be considered religious in character. Admittedly, this aspect is subtle as far as the public performances are concerned. But when one turns to the members’ motivations or what their participation means, this becomes evident. For Kang Sheng, for example, the performances at the NDP, during which the SSA is introduced as a cultural organization, are actually meant “to show society that our Buddhism is doing good for society.” This, indeed, is a religious motivation driving and sustaining the members’ participation. But this, too, is

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SSA’s way of integrating newcomers into its organizational life. My informants have recounted not a few stories about gaining new friends, learning from others, and mentoring younger ones, for example. The time it takes to plan, practice, and carry out the activities definitely demands energy and emotional investment. With these investments and the ecstatic recognition they receive from the audience, cultural performances are time-tested projects of community building.

6 This is an important finding in view of the fact that being “patriotic” is not one of the “prioritized values” among Singaporean youth today (Chang 2010, 162).

a very important consideration in view of Soka Gakkai's placement relative to other Buddhist groups in Singapore, including temples and even another Nichiren Shoshu organization. Finucane (2009) documents how critical SSA members are, for example, of the rituals and beliefs of other Buddhists and followers of Chinese religion in Singapore. This I have certainly encountered among my informants as well. The limelight that the SSA enjoys is a vindication of its strategic move in making Soka not simply a Japanese religion, but also a legitimate form of Buddhism (Tong 2007).

In addition, having been an NDP facilitator himself for three years, Kang Sheng recounts to me that trainers are expected to "always practice, chant, and study" so that "anytime we meet any struggle in NDP, we overcome them." The experience itself for my informants is very religious. It is an opportunity for them, as mentioned above, to demonstrate that the difficulties of organizing, disciplining, and choreographing themselves can be overcome with "courage and determination". Finally, their performances draw from their understanding of Nichiren Buddhism in terms of the concept of the Human Revolution, or the belief that social transformation begins with the individual (Wilson and Machacek 2003). For Kang Sheng, participating allows him to show that "when a person becomes happy, generally society will also be happy." He ends our interview by reflecting on his involvement in these performances and Soka as a whole: "Most of the people who want to do this have actually overcome their problems...that makes them want to contribute to society... If everyone is happy, then we all can live as a community together and really contribute to the entire nation or even the entire world."

## The nationalization of religion

In contrast to the literature on religion and nationalism discussed above, within the SSA there is no desire to establish "a political order based on religious law" as far as my informants are concerned (Juergensmeyer 2006, 184). It is for this reason that religious patriotism is a more appropriate terminology for the SSA's activities than religious nationalism, which also refers to the desire of a group to claim a nation in the name of religious purity (Friedland 2002). This case is particularly intriguing given the historical and contemporary political activism of Soka Gakkai in Japan (Fisker-Nielsen 2012; Lee 1975). Soka youth, for example, have been active in campaigning for Komeito, a welfare-oriented political party affiliated with Soka Gakkai

(Fisker-Nielsen 2012). Very telling are the nuances my informants have articulated – overcoming struggles and fostering peace and harmony. These are politically safe themes not only in terms of their content but also in the sense that they do not question or contest the political order in Singapore.

Indeed, as I will argue in this section, the nuances of religious patriotism are effectively the values cherished by the state. As will be spelt out, the *nationalization of religion* is key here. This is particularly important because the Singaporean state, given its small size, is eternally haunted by the “need for survival” (Ban 2004, 5). It is therefore perennially compelled to assert political order through, *inter alia*, the management of religious diversity and the constant re-imagining of Singapore’s success story (Tan 2008; Chong 2010a).

In the contemporary setting, the idea of the “global city” effectively captures Singapore’s drive to be an economic, technological, and research hub (Ban 2004, 4). For instance, Singapore’s developmentalism and national projects cascaded through education have consequences for individual aspirations (Chua 1995). Chong (2010a, 5) therefore makes the case that values such as “hard work, sacrifice, delayed gratification, [and] vision” constitute the state’s story of success as “national culture” and that this has been effectively internalized by Singaporeans. If nationalism is the state’s attempt at forming a coherent and singular representation of a collective through various sanctioned institutions such as the bureaucracy and education and collective carnivals like the National Day Parade and Chingay, then the values and aspirations that permeate and are articulated through these structures effectively all contribute to a compelling national imaginary (Friedland 2002). Nation-building, in other words, is inseparable from projects of citizenship (Turner 2006). This explains why all my informants are proud of having participated in these cultural performances as their own way of “contributing to Singapore”.

What surfaces here then is that inasmuch as the participation of my informants in cultural performances is religiously informed by their understanding of Nichiren Buddhism, the nuances of their motivations have been effectively arrogated in favor of the interests of the state for its population. In contrast to the potential of the carnival form as space for political critique (Janack 2006; Goh 2011) and of devotional performances and public rituals for the assertion of religious nationalism (van der Veer 1994; Schultz 2013), cultural performances and the participation of my informants bear in them the very imprint of state interests and the glaring de-emphasis of religion.

In effect, the religious patriotism of my youth informants demonstrates the *nationalization of religion*. I offer a working definition: the process through which the secular interests and values of the state are articulated and enacted by religious organizations or individuals participating in public life through performances. Consequently, the nationalization of religion means that the performances of religion (in this case cultural) are cloaked in a nationalistic character that *renders the religious significantly invisible* and the *prevailing political order unquestioned*.<sup>7</sup> To my mind, these two dimensions of the concept of the nationalization of religion enrich Kuah-Pearce's (2009, 4) assessment of state projects in Singapore as "religious engineering" in terms of categorizing its population according to religio-ethnic lines and compelling religious institutions to be functionally productive in welfare distribution. The concept of the nationalization of religion, however, sees how else this process of religious engineering takes shape, especially in other forms of participation by religious organizations like Soka in performative projects of citizenship. Clearly then, the nationalization of religion stands in contrast to the militant motivations of religious nationalism in taking over politics and governance (van der Veer and Lehmann 1999).

Indeed, what happens is that the very nuances of their religious patriotism – overcoming struggles and fostering peace and harmony – parallel very well the success story of the Singaporean state, and these elements are articulated in terms of the *material affluence* and *ideological harmony* of a racially diverse citizenry. Additionally, the invisibility of religion in this process of nationalization stands in contrast to the deliberate partnerships that the state enters into with religious organizations to provide welfare services in which the Buddhist identity of volunteers, for example, is not necessarily downplayed (Kuah-Pearce 2008a).<sup>8</sup>

Here, the de-emphasis of the religious in the cultural performances and the nuances of my informants is not due to Buddhism or religion as a whole being challenged by the state, as Mock (2013) depicts in regard to nationalism, but because religion has been nationalized. What makes this nationalization thoroughly possible in Singapore, I would suggest, are both Soka's attempts to territorialize itself in Singaporean society and the state's manner of managing religious diversity. On one hand, Soka has successfully presented itself as an organization in line with Reformist Buddhism

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7 I am appropriating this phrase from Brubaker (2012, 11), who explains its meaning especially in the Christian context in terms of how the state takes over the control of "church affairs, appointments and property".

8 The phrase "nationalization of religion" has sometimes been used to refer to the phenomenon of religious nationalism (see Kunovich and Hodson 1999; Falina 2007).

involved in cultural and charitable activities (Tong 2007). Hence it is not immediately perceived as a new religion from Japan. On the other hand, the Singaporean state has a secularist character, but one that does not aim to thoroughly eradicate religion from the public sphere. Laws like the Religious Harmony Act, which allows the state to intervene if individuals or organizations are stirring up potential conflicts through heightened proselytization or politicized rhetoric in the name of religion, have been passed in view of Singapore's history or still existent racial tensions. Tan (2008), however, suggests that the kind of secularism in Singapore is pragmatic as it recognizes the contribution of religious organizations to nation-building. Hence, the nationalization of religion in Singapore, even if it is about preventing potential religious conflicts, is not simply an extension of the modernization paradigm that aims to eradicate religion completely if political and economic development is to be achieved by the state (van der Veer and Lehmann 1999).<sup>9</sup>

The result is that inasmuch as the organization has strategized its image as a legitimate Buddhist organization with noble intentions for society, the state returns the favor by recognizing the organization – through cultural performances, among others – as an example of how religion can be a force to perform and articulate the interests of the state. Indeed, in 2005, the Youth Division received the Singapore Youth Award (SYA), an important national recognition for the SSA. According to the chairman of the SYA committee:

It did not come as a surprise to me when SSA was nominated. Though you are a Buddhist organization, I understand that your activities know no discrimination when it comes to extending your helping hand to others. Not only have you extended your reach to society and interfaith groups, you have also distinguished yourselves as well as a community [that] serves with a heart (SGI 2005).

To put it differently, both the state and the SSA, institutionally speaking, have interests to uphold, and working with one another will sustain their objectives – those of political and economic stability for the former and of public recognition for the latter, a critical view I take from Sebastian (2010).

Apart from de-emphasizing the religious, another compelling aspect of the nationalization of religion as a process is its ability to downplay criticisms of the existing political order. Indeed, my informants themselves said they are not interested in politics in Singapore. I asked Qing Song, an engineering student, whether his disinterest

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9 A similar pattern could also be seen in Taiwan where the state has mandated Buddhist and Daoist organizations to pursue charity and peace-building efforts (Madsen 2008).



in politics is because he was not concerned about Singapore at all. He told me, “it’s not about being unconcerned about Singapore. But I really never thought of how Buddhism can help me view politics.”

What reinforces this absence of political consciousness perhaps is the very aspirational ethos among my informants. Having the drive to overcome individual and collective struggles focuses the attention on the problems themselves and not the surrounding structures of power and political control, for example. Through their participation in cultural performances, the SSA members are trained or disciplined to see that hardships may be surpassed. This is why, as I have recounted above, many of my informants are proud to testify about the “actual proofs” in terms of their improved grades and better situations in the family. A few of my informants have also carried on from polytechnic schools to obtain degrees from local universities, a major hurdle in itself given the stratifications of post-secondary education in Singapore (Ng 2013).

Hence, even if they may call into question the stereotypical ideal of success through money and career as dangerously synonymous with “selfishness”, SSA members will not necessarily reject these achievements on their part, for these are indeed “actual proofs” that they have overcome their previous limitations. This ethos explains why Soka has been attracting “younger upwardly mobile members” in Singapore and even in other parts of developing Southeast Asia (Metreaux 2003, 429; Kuah-Pearce 2008b). In this sense, religious patriotism supports not just individual aspirations but the desire of the state to produce an achieving population, as national narratives of success show (Ban 2004; Chong 2010b).

## Conclusion

In this article I have highlighted how the participation of young people in cultural performances can be regarded as a form of religious patriotism and how ultimately these performances are expressions of the nationalization of religion. The unique angle I have taken is through the articulations that the young people of Soka Singapore have about their participation. The SSA, after all, is well known for its public performances.

Two key nuances emerged from the stories of my interlocutors in the SSA. For them, participating in performances like the NDP and the Chingay Parade give them

opportunities to demonstrate that struggles – individual and collective – can be overcome. The message of their performances has reflected this, as in the case of the National Day Parade described at the beginning. But at the same time, participating in the performances themselves have allowed young people to see that through discipline and collective effort, massive choreographies, which are undeniably difficult to orchestrate, are possible to execute. This gives them the visible proof that even in their own lives, struggles can be overcome indeed. Also, participating in cultural performances allows my youth informants to show that peace and harmony may be fostered in Singapore. I have illustrated above that this aspiration for peace and harmony is linked to the religious diversity in Singaporean society and to what the members perceive as the social malaise brought about by selfishness.

Collectively, these ideas may be described as expressions of religious patriotism insofar as the members' participation is about their concern for Singapore as their society, which is ultimately informed by their understanding of Nichiren Buddhism. Apart from community, cultural performances also afford them a sense of purpose as young people, which explains why the experience is cherished. As suggested above, the members are “giving back to society” through these performances.

Under closer analysis, however, I have shown two rather intriguing dimensions of the nuances of the members' stories: The religious aspect is downplayed and the prevailing political order remains unchallenged. In the literature review above, I have sought to ask what role nationalism has in the expressions of the religious, especially when it is involved in performative projects of citizenship. Discussions on the relationship between religion and nationalism are too often preoccupied with the presence of religion in nationalist ideologies, discourses, and movements.

The findings in this paper have shown that in the case of my youth informants and their participation in cultural performances, the articulation and enactment of religious patriotism keep religion at bay. At the same time, the nuances of overcoming struggles and fostering peace parallel the aspirations of the Singaporean state concerning material affluence and ideological racial harmony. The political order is thereby left unquestioned.

The nationalization of religion, therefore, can be seen as a process in which the interests of the state are internalized, articulated, and even performed by religious entities as they participate in projects of citizenship like the NDP and Chingay or even their own local cultural events like the June Project. Therein lies the power of the nationalization of religion. It takes shape not only in official performative pro-

jects of citizenship, but in the internal projects of groups that work together with the government as well.

The propositions offered here concerning the nationalization of religion open up new questions about the relationship between religion and the idea of nationalism. At one level, how and where else does the nationalization of religion take shape? And is it also discernible in the activities of other religious organizations in Singapore? Or is it simply a function of being staged and televised for the public to consume? This article has solely focused on cultural performances and young people's nuances concerning participation in them.

At another level, of interest for further research might be the internal negotiations or contestations within a religious organization. Surely, there are social contexts in consideration like the governance of religious diversity in Singapore. Within an organization, however, other considerations have to draw from possibly divergent religious worldviews and different organizational visions among members and leaders. The possibility of divergences becomes more acute given the transnational character of Soka Gakkai and other contemporary religious movements whose social and historical trajectories vary from country to country.

Finally, one can also interrogate how individuals make sense of the moral implications of the nationalization of religion. More or less this is already discernible in how my youth informants consider "selfish" the stereotypical ambitions of other Singaporeans in terms of career, for example. In a way, this achieving ethos simply echoes the state's narratives of success described above. And even my youth informants have internalized such an ethos in terms of fostering an overcoming spirit. But where do individuals draw the line between "overcoming" and being "selfish" if they are both ultimately resonant with the state's aspirations for success?

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