ARTICULATING THE NEOLIBERAL MOTHERHOOD DISCOURSE

Visions of gender in Japanese new religions

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Introduction

Analysis of motherhood in new religions is complicated not only due its multifaceted and complex social, historical, and discursive contexts (Kawash 2011), but also for the highly varied origins, characteristics, and dynamics that new religious movements present it with (Bromley 2016). The term ‘new religion’ may refer to the dating of the movement, as it is often the case with the Japanese new religions (Inoue 1991). However, it is the degree of tension with the social context where these religious movements emerge—often formed around a charismatic leader, as a schism movement breaking away from an established religion, and/or when a religion is imported that is radically different in its new cultural setting—that may better define them (Bromley and Melton 2012). Characteristics of new religions may change over time, as well as the way they are “constitutive of the dominant institutional structures” (Bromley and Melton 2012: 6, emphasis original), which may shift their definitions of appropriate gender roles and, as a component of it, motherhood.

Whether as a subjective experience or as an institution, motherhood is structured inside regulative discourses determined by social norms, cultural practices, and the political and economic agenda of the context where mothers live (Rich 1976). According to Miura (2015), in today’s Japan motherhood exists within social, cultural, political, and economic milieus that prioritize neoliberal and individualistic ideals, while simultaneously maintaining the expectations of intensive mothering. As it happens, in order to generate economic growth amid a trend of falling childbirth and a hyper-ageing society, Japanese women are now facing the mutually contradictory pressure to take active roles in the labour market while also being subjected to the urgent demand to fulfil their role as mothers. This idealized narrative often produces a conundrum about how to balance family life with career choices and social life: it creates a gap between idealized depictions of blissful maternity and the more complicated and exhausting reality of the neoliberal femininities that demand of motherhood and self-realization in an authentic, autonomous relation to one’s mothering practice.

With Japanese women trapped in what I label the ‘neoliberal motherhood’ discourse, Japanese new religions become places where moral conversations on how to achieve both goals can take place. The following section discusses how most doctrinal understandings of gender
in contemporary Japanese new religions consist of a tolerant approach that sacralizes motherhood and family while acknowledging the need for a women-friendly society where women can become more involved in the economy. Next, I will illustrate how this is not unrelated to government discourses blending neoliberal ideals of work-life balance with a rooted family ideology that still assigns women to the home and men to the workplace. The remainder is anthropological engagement with the lives of women living in Japan, as understood through their voices and narratives. The analysis will look at the contextual dynamics and discourses about motherhood as they are articulated within the three selected religious organizations: Risshō Kōseikai, Sōka Gakkai, and God Light Association (GLA). In the concluding section, I will examine how women members can find in religion a space where they can discuss their vision of neoliberal motherhood that conflates prescriptive traditional roles of good mother with mounting neoliberal ideas of self-responsibilization and self-determination.

This study draws upon two sets of qualitative data collected in 2010–2012 (87 female respondents) and 2016–2019 (38 female respondents), whose participants represent a diverse cross-section of new religions’ affiliates in Japan. Based on the Lotus Sutra and inspired by Nichiren Buddhist tradition, Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai are lay movements founded in the 1930s and both headed by a male leader. Niwano Nichiko (b. 1938), the eldest son of founder Niwano Nikkyo, is the current leader of Risshō Kōseikai;1 Ikeda Daisaku (b. 1928) is the third president of Sōka Gakkai (1960–) and the founder of Sōka Gakkai International (founded in 1975). Both movements similarly define their ethos by seeing the solution of personal and societal problems through the practice and faith in the Lotus Sutra. The third selected group, God Light Association, was founded by Takahashi Shinji (1927–1976) in 1969 and shows a much less religious character as compared to older new religions such as Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai. Although occasionally drawing upon Buddhist vocabulary and key concepts for its teachings, GLA does not relate to any specific doctrinal or institutional tradition. Since the transition in leadership from GLA’s founder, Takahashi Shinji, to his eldest daughter, Takahashi Keiko (b. 1955), the movement has become an increasingly rational and psychologically oriented organization focusing on the leader’s reinterpretation of positive psychology.

**Studying motherhood in Japanese new religions**

Japan can be regarded as a very religious country where major traditions, such as Buddhism and Shintō, coexist with numerous shinshūkyō (Japanese new religions) that were founded in the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century (Cavaliere 2018a). However, the large majority of Japanese today claim to be without religion because they do not identify themselves as members of one particular religious group and have dissociated from traditional forms of religious belonging.2 This secular aspect of Japanese society was engendered by a process of both distancing from the ideological semi-religious phenomenon of State Shintō during Imperial Japan (1868–1947) and as a response to the dreadful consequences of the Tokyo subway attack by the cult Aum Shinrikyō in 1995, which has generated profound distrust toward religion in general (Cavaliere 2019: 4–6; Baffelli and Reader 2012). Even so, most Japanese people participate in several Shintō and Buddhist religious-related cultural practices, annual events, and festivals. This diffused cultural–religious framework anchored to traditional Buddhist doctrines and Shintō collective rituals socializes the population into a wide range of collective behaviours, practices, beliefs, expressive lexicons, and customs connected to household, community, and multiple religious traditions and institutions. It does it with little to no requirement that people invest in their cosmologies or understand the mechanics of rituals (Cavaliere 2019: 5–6). In this context, Shintō and Buddhist institutions preserve their role as main providers of an ontological
interpretation of the everyday life occurrences of the majority of the Japanese population, without the need to formally belong to organized religions. Japanese new religions, on the other hand, offer settings for individuals who seek the sort of committed faith and spiritual training expressed through religious affiliation from which established religions have disassociated themselves because of the post-Aum socio-cultural legacy. Given the circumstances, the slow but steady expansion of some new religious movements, such as the three cases presented in this chapter, is of distinctive importance: it indicates a type of trust toward religious institutions where members expect to find a more refined ethical and practical guidance for individual everyday worldly activity and the sense of belonging that established religions do not provide.

The gender orientation of Japanese new religious movements is also noteworthy, with women constituting the majority of members (Cavaliere 2015: 2), such as in the cases of Risshō Kōseikai, Sōka Gakkai, and God Light Association presented in this study. That occurs even when groups are based on a male-dominated organizational structure that limits women to mid- and low-level organizational ranks, despite their constituting the majority of adherents in the group. This happens in two of the selected groups, Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai, while GLA shows a different characterization. I will discuss such dissimilarities further in the chapter.

Based on narrative analysis, the following discussion will examine the lived experiences of Japanese women adherents and the ways their voices are both challenging and, in some ways, reinforcing institutional constructs. However, the understanding of the role of religion in articulating neoliberal views of motherhood and how women use such gender-related moralities in their everyday life is difficult to determine, especially if we adopt an empowerment approach to measure the impact of women’s agency. Drawing upon my ongoing research results, I argue that Japanese women may be agentive in ways that do not align with feminist expectations. In a previous study on the Roman Catholic Church in Japan, I found that female respondents support conservative views of women’s roles as mothers and wives and the idea of family as articulated by the Catholic Church, while also campaigning for more education on women’s right over their body, reproductive rights, and an opposition to unequal socio-political arrangements that lead to the infringement of basic human rights (Cavaliere 2018b). As suggested earlier by Bromley and Melton (2012), their agency is constitutive of the prevailing social structures, but they are also ‘using’ religious capital to accomplish their goals. In this regard, recent studies on Muslim women have similarly shown that they may be agentive in ways that differ from conventional Western notions of agency (Abu-Lughod 2002; Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005). In her study of the piety movement, Saba Mahmood (2005) suggests moving beyond the focus on norm-resisting acts or on behaviours undermining the reproduction of structures of subordination as measures for women’s agentive capacity. The scholar urges to look at the potential for ethical self-transformation that religious women might go through while complying with gender normativity of patriarchal religions (ibid., 25–29). This approach potentially downplays religious devotion and contextual constraints and casts religion as a means to achieve something else (Avishai 2008; Smilde 2012; Burke 2012). I argue that my respondents’ agency should be similarly understood from the standpoint of their capacity for action that is “contextually contingent, located within structures of power rather than outside them” (Mahmood 2005: 34). Drawing upon such conceptual framework, Di Febo’s chapter in this book similarly argues that while adhering to cultural expectations of caring and nurturing, the conservative pedagogy of the Buddhist vocational college sponsored by Risshō Kōseikai offers women opportunities for self-transformation and social participation. From this perspective, religion is a powerful cultural asset that shapes how individuals understand themselves, while simultaneously providing a range of resources that allow people to take action in different ways and transform their condition.
Womenomics and the construction of the Japanese neoliberal motherhood

In order to examine the role of religious organizations as ethical spaces where women can discuss such projected neoliberal motherhood and their influence on their life, we should first discuss what the expected roles for women are in contemporary Japan.

In 2021, Japan dropped to 120 out of 156 countries in the global gender gap, thus showing that former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s administration (2012–2020) failed to achieve an improvement in women’s status and competitiveness. Abe was renowned for governmental discourses advocating the promotion of women’s labour as part of his growth strategy known as ‘Abenomics.’ In 2014 Abe introduced a policy program that located increased women’s economic participation, called ‘Womenomics,’ as a central goal. The driving idea behind such a policy program was that a greater participation of women in the labour market, especially in leadership roles in politics, the economy, education, and health, could improve Japan’s GDP (Takeda 2018: 50). Abe’s commitment to put more women in leadership roles was condensed in his much-hyped slogan of “realizing a society where women could shine” (Cabinet Office 2014). The central idea was that by enabling women to work while having a family would potentially boost the economy and curb the declining fertility rate amid an ageing population. To this end, Abe worked to fix day-care shortages and urged workplaces to be more accommodating—also by encouraging fathers to take parental leave—so that mothers would feel more inclined to rejoin the workforce (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2012). The participation of women in the Japanese labour force has been characterized by its M-shaped curve, which reflects decreased employment rates during child-rearing years. Although this M-shaped curve is now somewhat smoothing over the edges (Cabinet Office Gender Equality Bureau 2020: 9), the majority of women in employment are likely to fall into the category of non-regular workers. Abe was criticized for not going far enough (Miura 2017; Takeda 2018: 60–64; Steel 2019: 8–12), and he showed little indication of a course correction: in his last government reshuffle on 2 October 2019, he reduced the number of female ministers just to one, which cast doubts on the actual commitment of Abe’s ‘Womenomics’ policy.

To be precise, although popularized under the Abenomics operation, the Womenomics policy was by no means unique to the Abe government. In Japan, the discussion of gender equality was appropriated between the 1990s and the early 2000s to advance neoliberal labour deregulation through structural reform. In this respect, the trajectory of family policy reforms as well as gender equality politics since the 1990s demonstrates that the policymaking process has always been closely linked with the framework of economic growth (Takeda 2018: 58–59). On the one hand, women have been increasingly drawn into the labour market in order to respond to neoliberalism that seeks economic efficiency and maximum profits. On the other hand, Japan’s acute demographic crisis incurred by rapid fertility decline and ageing has pushed the government to more directly intervene in women’s life choices and reproductive decisions by reinstating the traditional idea that, as a matter of principle, bearing and rearing children and eldercare should be an obligation of families. In this parlance, mothers’ self-sacrifice to the family, or family bonding, is indispensable for the family to assume its role. Such familist ideology (Miura 2015: 12–13) implies that family members are obligated to support each other so that they do not become burdensome to the state, while the family also assumes the role of substituting the state’s role of providing welfare.

The most obvious way to support such an idyllic and untroubled socio-economic project has gone through government discourses reinstating a gender complementary pattern
Articulating the motherhood discourse

where men and women are equal but possess distinctive qualities and play different roles to complement each other. As such, motherhood and family blend both neoliberal values of self-determination, respect, and cooperation between men and women in family and work life (Cabinet Office 2016) and the 1980s values of the idealized, traditional family composed of a married woman full-time housewife and her full-time employee husband. In comparing demographic and gender changes in Japan and Western Europe and North America, Ochiai (2013) discusses how countries in those geographical areas saw a process of ‘housewifization’ (2013: 536) until the 1960s, characterized by a gender division of labour in the modern family with men serving as breadwinners and women as housewives. Since the 1970s, women’s participation in the labour force sharply increased in Western countries where women were also influenced, directly or indirectly, by feminist ideals of control over one’s body and lifestyle. This overlapped with neoliberal economic privatization, deregulation, and its ideals and values, which transited Western countries into a ‘de-housewifization’ process where family has become a lifestyle choice, bringing along a rising age of marriage and an increased number of divorces, cohabitations, and births out of wedlock. In Japan, however, where social mores are still heavily influenced by neo-Confucian values, legal norms regarding the family include heterosexuality, legal marriage, legitimate children, and eternity of marriage (Ninomiya 2012). This renders the institution of marriage the only socially acceptable way for people to have children. Japan’s odd combination of extremely low fertility and a solid marriage system is an indication of a socio-cultural context where the traditional ideal of ‘good wife and wise mother’ has not developed into a more flexible attitude toward family and marriage to meet the economic conditions and socio-demographic trends that Japan has been facing over the past three decades (Ochiai 2011). In this parlance, while family seems to have transitioned into a social unit made of intimate relationships where individuals should find protection and help itself without relying on the state, the state works through the family for addressing demographic and financial challenges and, in so doing, sustaining economic growth. Miura (2015) contends that the combination of the strong familist ideology held by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s dominant conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and recent Womenomics policy development surrounding women in Japan encourages the utilization of women as well as mothers for the sake of economic efficiency and social welfare purposes (2015: 65–66). In this context, motherhood—which re-establishes women as primary carers of children and the elderly in the family—is promoted in order to meet the pressing economic demand, combat a declining population, and contain the steady erasure of the welfare state, a process inextricably linked to the entrenchment of neoliberalism.

Views of motherhood in the three case studies

If the Abe government pushes for women’s economic participation as one of their most important national policy agendas and the core of the government’s growth strategy without altering reproductive and family expectations toward women, the result is that women in contemporary Japan are on the forefront of providing both family security and economic prosperity. Most modern Japanese new religions seem to comply with such design and the gender complementarity pattern promoted by government discourses and policies (Inose 2017: 18). Religious structures tend to be male-centred supporting traditional societal value systems, grounded on the order of the family, an institution where women should provide housework, childcare, and nursing (Cavaliere 2015: 33). In this parlance, even though the structure of religious organizations may be headed by a male figure and reiterate the hierarchical patriarchal order (such as in the case of Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai in this study), it does
not contradict the ideal of gender equality because both men and women should capitalize on their qualities and mutually collaborate from the standpoint of equality. If the structure is headed by a woman, such as in the case of God Light Association in this work, we notice that women are encouraged to engage in leadership positions and religious activities and are also provided with opportunities, social positions, and a significance that would be otherwise hard to obtain.

However, it is difficult to assess how much the complementarity pattern promoted by these organizations cultivates a mentality of power redistribution to women and how, in turn, this might foster a meaningful experience of motherhood and life. To begin with, the exact number of women in each of the organizations is already an issue, since there is an overall lack of empirical data. The Shūkyō nenkan [Religion Yearbook] published every year by the Bunkachō (Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology—MEXT) reports the number of specialized members and the total membership of each registered religious organization. While the number of specialized members—namely, those holding the level of teacher or higher in the religious organizations—is divided by gender, membership is given as a total without the provision of a gender ratio. For the year 2020, Risshō Kōseikai counts 17,702 male teachers and 59,457 female teachers and 2,283,023 members (Bunkachō 2020: 79). These items of data help to produce estimates for the gender ratio in the membership, suggesting that the religious organization may be similarly characterized by a higher proportion of women. Assessing the GLA and Sōka Gakkai membership and gender ratio is more difficult. Both GLA and Sōka Gakkai do not report their membership to the national government, and membership statistics do not appear in the Shūkyō nenkan. According to the GLA official website, as of April 2020, the organization counted 48,566 active members.9 Fieldwork observation and interviews with staff of GLA conducted in 2016–2018 confirm an estimated majority of women in the group. As for Sōka Gakkai, the most detailed sources for membership numbers are the group’s website and its published public relations materials.10 The website states that 8,270,000 households are registered, which does not tell us about the exact number of family members in the household or the total gender ratio. To produce a better estimate of Sōka Gakkai gender ratio, we can look at Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party), the political party now technically separate from Sōka Gakkai but that remains integrated into the devotional lives of Sōka Gakkai members (McLaughlin 2014). In his study of the party, Ehrhardt (2014) claims that Sōka Gakkai has relied primarily on the larger number of women adherents for its expansion and their dedication. Moreover, the majority of Kōmeitō’s voters are women who are mobilized primarily through the Women’s Division (Ehrhardt 2014: 187–211). Based on this, we can predict with some confidence that Sōka Gakkai is also characterized by a large number of women members.

Looking at their organizational structure may help understand how religious organizations articulate ideas of gender. Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai have the same Women’s Division [fujinbu] for married women.11 However, any member aged 40 or above moves to the Women’s Division regardless of their marriage status. In my interviews, Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai respondents (including members in a position of a certain degree of leadership) see the Women’s Division as an example of their gender-equal attitude, as they are both giving formal recognition and initiative to the large number of women in their group, also in conformity with latest Womenomics government discourse and policy. However, women usually do not go beyond the post of director of Women’s Division [fujin buchō] in the organization, suggesting that such divisions comply with a male-dominated organizational structure by emphasizing the complementarity of female roles, primarily that of wife and mother. Therefore, the very function of the Women’s Division is to reinforce the image of gendered dynamics underpinning a male-female
relationship in religious organizations and society at large. In this parlance, their view of gender perpetuates the existing structure of gender roles of society at large and supports the idea that women should contribute to society in their complementary, albeit subordinate role. As Inose puts it, “women can be given a place to carry out activities without destroying modern power structures and the existing order” (Inose 2017: 30).

Unsurprisingly, GLA, founded in 1969 and grown largely in the 1980s, does not have a Women’s Division, which both Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai have. GLA developed around the time when Japan signed and ratified the United Nation’s Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1981), which brought about domestic debates among academics and politics around gender equality in the workplace and society at large. Under such international and domestic pressure, in 1986 Japan implemented the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. While eschewing legal sanctions to eliminate discrimination in employment, the intense debate around it questioned the equation that ‘womanhood = motherhood,’ thus casting doubts over the model of the ‘self-sacrificing mother,’ although not neglecting it entirely. Motherhood shifted from a socially prescribed model into which women were passively socialized to a self-discovery journey where women should acquire awareness of their role and become capable to act as mothers upon careful consideration and introspection of their mothering role (Ueno 1986). For GLA members of that time, acting as mothers would require women to become ‘mothers with the capacity of introspection,’ haha no hansei (Kumata 1997: 43–46), through which women should become self-aware mothers who genuinely believe in their mothering role.

Although the intra-group language and vocabulary has been largely updated under the influence of Takahashi Keiko, the sort of morality for women that the current GLA leader has been cultivating among members shows similarity to what her father suggested in the 1970s and 1980s. GLA emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation through a philosophy of life in the form of individual and collective reflexive practices, rather than relying on doctrinal precepts and collective rituals. It also emphasizes scientific knowledge and technological advancement in order to face the challenges of the contemporary world and sees confidence in individuals’ inner power to produce the best solutions for such challenges. By prioritizing the goal of uncovering one’s true soul and finding one’s life purpose, the organization does not make a distinction between men and women in its structure. When discussing her father’s legacy, Takahashi Keiko asserts that she has never considered her relationship with her father as a parent-child one, but she saw her father as a partner working together with her to realize their mission. With this, the current leader emphasizes how both men and women are asked to live and work together for the sake of a higher goal. In my fieldwork I had the opportunity to observe training sessions where gendered roles were irrelevant, since introspection requires both men and women to address deeper questions regarding their incidents in life. In such context both male and female respondents see their practice as a means to go beyond socially expected roles, temporarily endowing them with a sort of a new equal identity. In her talks and lectures, Takahashi Keiko often addresses this issue, encouraging members to see each other as gender-equal individuals in the organization.

In summary, GLA puts more emphasis on finding one’s mission in life by self-reflection and introspection without using the leverage of acting according to womanly qualities, values, and expectations that older new religious movements such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai would deem as essential. Still, these organizations similarly offer seminars and courses for working women, families, and children where discussions about social issues (primarily birth-rate decline, ageing population and natural disasters) are discussed along with the need for more socially involved members’ activities.
Articulating the ‘neoliberal motherhood’: women’s voices

Building on the aforementioned premises, I will offer in this section some examples of how women can find a moral place in religious organizations, where conversations can occur on how to achieve a balance between expected family and work roles and ideals of self-actualization.

Risshō Kōseikai: M-san’s story

M-san (41), a second-generation member of Risshō Kōseikai Toyonaka Church in Osaka, stayed on in her work after getting married and continued working even after having two children (4 and 6 years old; interview held on 21 July 2017). She didn’t want to spoil her career at an insurance company, nor did she want to place a burden on her workplace, so she returned to her job four months after each child was born. Her husband, an early-career university professor, supported her choice and helped to manage the work-life routine with the children.

When M-san attended the Katei kyōiku (Parenting Classes) sponsored by Risshō Kōseikai, she was told of the importance of motherhood, but also that women in contemporary Japan had to play a more active role in the workforce and that both partners should help each other with childrearing and family tasks. She said, “I thought I was making the right choice of going back to work after my children were born. The Parenting Class teacher addressed me as a good example of a contemporary mother. I was able to balance family commitments and my career plan.” However, once back to work she later felt caught up in being busy with work and not having enough time to spend with the children. As M-san expressed it, this harmed her motherhood kowareta bosei. At the same time, she felt the pressure in her work environment where she was silently blamed for continuing to work while handling childcare, thus treating work as a sideline. Finally, she ended up quitting her job. She is now a full-time mother and an active volunteer member of the school PTA. She regularly engages in volunteer activities for children at both her children’s schools and in the local neighbourhood association, and twice a week at the Risshō Kōseikai Toyonaka Church.

Many respondents expressed that they felt pressured by the widely accepted maternal myth that requires their unconditional caring role for children and the family and a selfless dedication to local community well-being whilst their children were of school age. Although accommodating to government discourses that require more women to enter the labour force, the articulation of motherhood in the Risshō Kōseikai movement is based primarily on its re-evaluation of the importance of the mother, family, and community. Risshō Kōseikai President Designate Niwano Kōshō, granddaughter of Risshō Kōseikai founder Niwano Nikkyō and eldest daughter of the current president, Niwano Nichiko, often refers in her speeches to the “mothers’ heart” as a framework for contributing to peace building. Ms Niwano, herself a mother of four children, often refers to the model of the mother as the basis for her view on peace building and interfaith talks. As part of their practice, regular women adherents are admonished to preserve their marriage and family above all else. On the May 2018 ‘Life tips’ ikiru hinto online board, where members ask for advice about their family and everyday life issues, three women members address questions of domestic conflict. The solution to their problems is interpreted through the teachings offered in the Lotus Sutra and translated into an implicit demand for women’s increased commitment to the family and the local community for the sake of the family and children’s well-being. In the numerous Niwano Kōshō’s speeches, the most consistent theme is the emphasis on peace that is grounded on the importance of ethics, especially family ethics. The president designate utilizes the model of the mother as the basis for women’s social action, therefore transforming the stereotypical passive image of womanhood into a socially
engaged one through an extension of women’s motherhood role. In founder Niwano Nikkyō’s granddaughter’s understanding, womanhood is the particular nature and religiosity that only women possess.

By transforming the patriarchal image of passive and subordinate womanhood into an active and compassionate mother, Risshō Kōseikai has successfully created a model for women’s social engagement that encourages them to take on the role of mother for society as a whole. In this parlance, mothers and wives are indispensable to a good family as much as to the society at large. Being a good mother implies a private and public role that is performed through childcare and eldercare, which is considered an effort to express one’s enterprising self as well as responding to pressing demographic and related social welfare problems. This model of motherhood encourages women to address social issues (mostly family-centred issues such as eldercare and childcare) through their activities where women become dynamic actors in their communities and neighbourhoods. In this regard, women adherents who are caught in a double bind between two sets of ideals (one of which draws them toward work outside the home and away from their families, and the other that tells them that the most important thing is to stay at home and create a happy family) are given a chance to articulate them in the religious organization. As it happens, though, the organization finally situates individuals within the conventional framework of the traditional family model. When a working mother, like M-san, cannot accomplish both paid work and childrearing and feels oppressed and unable to unburden herself of her distress, the religious organization steers her toward the model of the mother so that she can find the needed moral and emotional stability to optimize her everyday life.

**Sōka Gakkai: T-san’s story**

In my interviews, all Sōka Gakkai women members said they met their husband in the organization or converted into the religion in order to marry their Sōka Gakkai partner. T-san, a married 36-year-old woman with a 7-year-old daughter, was born in Tokyo to a well-off family and attended a prestigious private high school and university. Both T-san and her husband were born into the religion, although her husband’s family was an atypical Sōka Gakkai household: while her mother was born in the religion, his father was very much against it and reluctantly accepted becoming a member for the sake of his marriage. T-san says that for some reason her father-in-law changed her attitude toward Sōka Gakkai after she entered the family: he is now a Kōmeito supporter and voter who attends the cultural activities organized by the local Sōka Gakkai cultural centre. He also participates in seminars and events for families with children with his grandchildren. T-san’s husband is her elder brother’s close friend and she has known him most of her life, so “I found it natural to get married to him at one point” (interview held on 5 June 2017). After graduating from university, T-san became a high school teacher and worked until she got pregnant. At that point she took maternity leave and then childcare leave. When her daughter was 1 year old, she resumed work, so she found a private day-care for her daughter and organized her daily life with the help of her parents and her parents-in-law. T-san’s husband is an employee at a large company and is regularly absent from home because of being placed in branch offices in other cities, a typical practice in the Japanese corporate system. Therefore, T-san had to take decisions about her daughter and make arrangements on her own, as part of her expected role as a mother. Her parents and her husband’s family insisted that she should leave her job and become a full-time mother, at least until her daughter entered elementary school. Her husband, though, was not as pressing and left T-san free to decide on the matter. A few months after resuming work, T-san joined one of the regular Sōka Gakkai meetings for married women, most of them full-time housewives married to company employees or
self-employed men. There she overheard her group members making disapproving comments about working mothers who put their children in day-care centres from the age of 1.

They were complaining that children raised in a day-care centre don’t have the manners. They strongly believe that children should be raised by their mother at least until the age of three, this is what the majority of people think in Japan. When they realized that I overheard them, and knowing that I resumed work and my daughter went there, they quickly added that as a Sōka Gakkai member I was aware of my responsibilities as a mother and surely my decisions were taken with my husband and my family’s approval.

It was at that point that T-san realized that her lifestyle choices were under scrutiny and started thinking about what it meant to her living a ‘value-creation life,’ as encouraged in Sōka Gakkai. Beyond the doctrinal connotation, T-san’s group members’ comments reflect the state’s vision on how women should play a central role in ensuring that children are protected and nurtured by concerned adults. Their emphasis on the need for responsible mothers in educating their children with the values of interaction and social ties mirrors one of the recurrent messages in education, media, and government. As it happens, the increased participation of women in the labour market and the reduced time women spend in the family to look after their children because of that have been a recurrent topic in the Women’s Division, and T-san was well aware of that. When T-san looked at her life choices she recognized how, for the most part, family and social pressure had affected her and her husband’s decisions. She asked herself why she opted to go back to work after ending the childcare leave of absence, rather than becoming a full-time mother. “Most husbands in Japan think that their wives should be at home looking after them and the children. They find it difficult to understand why women should be busy doing things outside the home. My husband has never complained about the house or my decisions.” When I asked T-san to elaborate on this point, she argued that the mainstream view of society as relatively homogeneous, with women supporting the family, both socially and culturally, and men the economy, is a myopic way of looking at the society. T-san does not like the media, politics, or academics who speak in clichés or generalizations like “Japanese are hard workers,” “women are the pillar of the family,” and other similar expressions. She believes that her husband agrees with her in that, although they have never openly discussed this issue. When questioned about the status of gender equality in Japanese society, T-san comments that much is still to come in order to realize it. Individuals should do their best to achieve a value-creation society, as taught by Sōka Gakkai, not caring about whether they are men or women [hitotachi hittingakari, joseito dansei wa kankei naku]. T-san is still a member of the married Women’s Division because, she says, this is one duty as a Sōka Gakkai member. However, after going through her group members’ criticism about her approach to motherhood, she found herself not fully conforming with the general expectations toward women the Women’s Division promotes, so she silently withdrew from the group’s activities. Although being dissatisfied with the view about women that members of the Women’s Division support, T-san still finds the organization a source of cohesion for her own and extended family, and she would not question her religious belonging to the point of putting such stability at risk. In her narrative, T-san performs a neoliberal motherhood that places her at the crossroads of two worldviews: the traditional full-time mother who believes in a life devoted to children and the dynamic mother who promotes independence and democratic participation in family and in the labour market. By presenting her decision to withdraw from many activities organized by Sōka Gakkai, T-san shows a high level of self-awareness that allows her to grow apart from narratives articulated within the religious organization. Her story conveys the idea of a transformative capacity, which allows her a certain
degree of control over her life: her membership in a religious organization is the moral source providing her with the ability to make skilful use of such value in her everyday life. Nevertheless, her religious identity is secondary to her social role as a mother and working woman, which signifies that she has developed the ability to act as a knowledgeable individual who is capable of transforming roles and adjusting them to meet both social expectations and individual purposes in life. Her case shows that membership of a conservative religious organization should not be associated with a lack of agency of individuals in it. The example of T-san shows that the validity of religious belief and related practices rests on the increased consciousness of the individual and on the rejection of uncritical acceptance of expectations and external social values.

GLA: K-san’s story

Cultivating and training individuals to become autonomous and active members of society according to one’s own purpose and mission in life is GLA’s fundamental tenet. At the centre of GLA’s belief and philosophy of life are the idea of *tamashi no manabi* [study of soul] and the practice of *ju-hatsu-shiki* [perception-response-result] through which individuals learn how to think and respond to external stimuli in order to ameliorate oneself and find one’s purpose in life. According to GLA leader Takahashi Keiko’s theorizing, individuals react to every day’s events instantaneously and, most of the time, unconsciously, based on what Takahashi calls the three streams of influence: family, place, and era (Takahashi 2005 [2011]: 86–92). In the GLA doctrine, individuals’ everyday life is based on such prescriptive reactions that reflect their socialization process and render the agent almost deprived of intentional control over them. Mastering the *ju-hatsu-shiki*, therefore, becomes the way to break away from such socio-cultural conditioning: it trains individuals to consider alternatives, it offers a method to alter established modes of reactions, it improves individuals’ self-reflexivity and autonomy, and helps in ‘creating new realities’ (Takahashi 2005 [2011]: 59). Such practice should take the individual to discover their ‘Good Self’ and later their ‘Real Self’ (Takahashi 2005 [2011]: 66). Alternatives and amelioration, however, can only happen when individuals intentionally engage in a self-reflection process: the *atojie* [post-event reflection]. This practice is almost unique to GLA, and the majority of Takahashi’s sessions and talks centre on this key concept: training individuals in the practice of post-event reflection so that they can develop the needed awareness about their very purpose in life and become able to be dynamic agents in society. While the intra-group language and semantics are vaguely grounded in Buddhist cosmology, the urge to nurture efficiently functioning human beings to positively inform social institutions can be better gauged by the perspective of positive psychology. The mission and practices that Takahashi designs and articulates are very much like the purpose and techniques suggested by the discipline of positive psychology, with its goal of enabling individuals to thrive by reflecting and “[disclosing] their capacities, motives and potentials” (Compton and Hoffman 2019: 1–2). One can also see how this goal overlaps with the neoliberal idea of cultivating the capability to optimize one’s life by ‘autonomously’ following the societal demands discussed earlier.

Among the variety of courses and seminars that GLA offers are those for young members (e.g. the *Seinenjuku*, training for the under-35 members); the professionalizing Frontier College for working adults; the emotional care training of *Kokoro kango gakkō* for women aged 30 to 59; and courses for working women (e.g. the seasonal seminars) and families (e.g. the Gate Seminar, the *Oyako kafe* [the Parent-Child Café], and the *Kirakira Kazoku* [the Shining Family]).20 One of my respondents, 34-year-old K-san, has been a member of GLA for four years and has been attending most of those courses and seminars. She was eight months pregnant at the time of the interview (23 November 2018) and agreed to talk about her experience as a mother-to-be.

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K-san graduated in Russian literature and got married at the age of 28. She entered a small publishing company after graduation to work as a co-editor and quit the job six months after marriage. K-san and her husband wanted to have a baby right after getting married, as they were a little concerned about K-san’s advanced maternal age. However, they were unsuccessful for almost two years, and after consulting a specialist K-san started fertility treatment. “Facing the failure every month had become unbearable,” so after two years the specialist suggested moving on to the latest assisted reproductive therapy. At that point K-san felt “I was ‘buying’ my child, rather than having one.” It was around this time that she came across Takahashi’s book *Anataga umaretekita wake* (The Reason Why You Were Born as You) and decided to attend a GLA meeting as a non-member. While she was waiting for Takahashi’s lecture to begin, she was invited to join a group of women of her age for a chat. There she started a conversation with another woman, and K-san’s problem was soon part of it. The woman told K-san that she had had the same problem and mentioned how she solved it when she understood that a baby wouldn’t be part of her life if that were not how her life should be.

You are not keeping the promises with your soul, you are actually working against it. It doesn’t matter whether you can or cannot have a baby. The question should be who you are or you should be. You keep thinking that you must have a baby as soon as possible. Is that what your soul really wants? How are you actually living your life?

K-san was initially annoyed by the woman’s words and attitude, and left soon after the lecture ended with no intention to visit GLA again. But the message stayed in K-san’s head for some time. A year later she became a GLA member and started attending the seminars and workshops. The results of her *shikan shīto* [reflection and insight sheet] were telling repeatedly that she should go back to work as an editor because that was what her *tamashii* [soul] had been heading for. Two years ago, she took the decision to stop the assisted reproductive therapy and resume work, to which her husband reluctantly agreed. Her former employer was happy to have her back and even hired her for a higher position. One year into the job she got pregnant. “I will not quit my job after my child is born, I’ll just take the maternity leave and then go back to work.” When asked what informed her decision, K-san comments that she now understands that if she does not perform her *misshon wāku* ([mission work]: one’s mission in life), she would not accomplish her goal as a human being and would act against what her soul has envisaged for her. She feels that being a working mother would make her a much better mother because she will act and be according to her real self. She will need to adjust and make arrangements for her child and the family, but will never leave her job, which she likes very much.

Through their marginal—although public—role and by valuing their members’ individual experience, religious organizations such as GLA offer women opportunities to examine their life choices and provide them views as to how to live more affirmatively and autonomously. The practice of developing an enterprising self (one’s “mission in life”) is not taught by large-scale institutions such as schools, universities, or occupational centres that tend to provide knowledge and skills. In this parlance, the main role of GLA is to train, encourage, and enable self-aware women to make autonomous decisions while acting within prevalent socio-economic expectations. As it happens, however, such successful ideas of femininities comply with government neoliberal discourses that have embedded womanhood and motherhood within socio-economic interests. K-san was pressed by the mainstream idea that women should quit their job and bear a child around their thirties to become a full-time mother, so she acted accordingly. Retrospectively, K-san blames herself for taking such important decisions without even considering what her wishes and aspirations were.
The neoliberal motherhood discourse in Japanese new religions

Over the past three decades, government-driven neoliberal values of self-sufficiency and individualism have infused social relations in Japan, which has engendered new roles and demands for women to contribute to the neoliberal economy. While policies promoting women’s access to the market have expanded, meanings of womanhood and motherhood in the neoliberal context have been kept largely unchanged. Results of this study show that the ‘good mother’ idea of motherhood remains a dominant narrative for Japanese women because the state protects it in the form of marriage and family as the basis of its welfare state. Indeed, what the state protects is the ideology of motherhood, not actual mothers, as self-sacrifice is still the essence of motherhood in the general thinking. With the government and media undecided on whether child rearing during a trend of falling childbirth and ageing society should be prioritized against labour shortage that delays economic revival, Japanese new religions become places where actual conversations on how to achieve both goals can take place. Regardless of their doctrinal differences, the three new religious movements discussed in this chapter show a shared goal of providing affiliates with skills and tools to become neoliberal subjects “who can lead responsibilized and self-managed lives through self-application and self-transformation” (Scharff 2016: 217). This effort overlaps with developing a higher spiritual level expressed through a meaningful social role, whereas self-reflective and self-aware individuals are capable of moral actions directed toward an interpersonal and social end. Affiliates are taught how to observe their own behaviours, thoughts, and feelings and how to evaluate their ongoing expectations and actions based on how well these help accomplish their ethical goal in society. They are trained on how to exercise such critical ability in everyday life, so that such a process of critically explaining the daily occurrences nurtures a capacity to control them. These self-monitoring and self-managing capacities help produce knowledgeable women who are capable to design achievable goals for themselves in their ongoing situations; create incentives that motivate and guide toward such goals; evaluate their behaviours and actions against those goals; and make strategic choices based on the capacity they have to control such circumstances. Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai source from newly interpreted teachings and doctrines of the established religions for their critical self and social reflection. GLA relies on a more secular approach that helps affiliates undertake a self-discovery process nurturing an understanding of what purpose in life they have and how to achieve it. In this context, narratives articulated within new religious organizations are gradually given more fluid—somehow progressive—interpretations, although alternatives are ingrained in a pre-existing socio-economic context and ideology-driven prescriptive narratives. As observed in this study, this is particularly true even in more conservative environments such as Sōka Gakkai, where women can actually learn how to act as self-monitoring and self-determining subjects to transform their living conditions. One of the key elements in the success of organizations such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai seems to lie precisely in their ability to position themselves as moral alternatives to society while, at the same time, sharing mainstream society’s goals and structures. Similarly, while GLA pushes members in their introspective search in order to find their true self and a fulfilling way of living so that they can become positive agents in society, the discussion is not unrelated to government discourses blending ideals of work-life balance with a rooted familist view that still assigns women to the home and men to the workplace, as discussed earlier. As it happens, women members of the religious organizations presented here should possess the neoliberal capability and aspirations to optimize one’s life by ‘autonomously’ following economic rationality of advanced liberal capitalism and halting declining birth rates. In this respect, women participating in the social life of their religious organizations seem to benefit from their activities, as they train them to carefully
and as objectively as possible analyse the content of their thoughts, memories, and conflicting feelings against the socio-cultural and economic context. However, they do not guarantee that everyone will behave autonomously and competently as expected. Still, they exercise a strong constructive type of power that stirs individual’s wills and volition for achieving a certain degree of perceived empowerment, self-realization, and happiness.

Overall, respondents confirmed that the experiences provided by their organization allow them to achieve a state of higher attention over their social role in the course of the events, which helps them to be more in control of the situation rather than being passively driven by the flow of expected behaviours and roles. The understanding gained from such introspective training leaves women with a new attitude that may later be transferred in their daily life, within family or in the workplace, therefore influencing their approach when facing choices upon conflicting expectations and gendered situations outside their religious organization. In doing so, they feel that difficulties and incongruences related to interrelationships and social embeddedness are cleared. Compared to large-scale institutions or established religions, these religious movements offer an environment where affiliates attempt to explain and test how to respond cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally, and creatively to the circumstances they are embedded in. Established religions such as Buddhism and Shintō are not exempted from maintaining their role as providers of collectively shared cultural understanding, moral consensus, and a sense of transcendence through Buddhist family-related rituals and commemorations, along with Shintō-based collective events and practices. However, socio-political and historical circumstances have induced them to eschew direct responsibility in the moral function that can address individual’s critical examinations of mundane concerns. The shift away from established religions as moral authorities has generated a flourishing of lay movements—as the ones presented in this study—that have filled in such roles by offering affiliates opportunities of exploring everyday life occurrences through a critical examination of ethical dimensions and meanings of life. The respondents’ experiences, however, are not altogether independent of the socially constructed models and context they are embedded in, but rather the latter is the cultural model of reference for those undertaking such self-discovery itinerary. Still, the acquired self-evaluative capacity endows affiliates with powerful capabilities to monitor the way they respond to social expectations and norms, thus allowing them to exercise some control over their life. Ultimately, they feel rewarded for the achieved balance between the unrewarding cultural obligation shaping their prescriptive narrative as ‘good mothers’ and the demand for their economic contribution by selectively embracing the construct of motherhood on their own terms, according to neoliberal ideas of autonomy, self-reliance, and individual choice.

As such, although socio-political and historical circumstances make Japanese new religions exist in tension with the context where they emerge, they do not articulate alternatives that reject or are polemically against mainstream social models. Still, they play an important role in legitimating and/or challenging ideas about motherhood by offering individuals opportunities to explore and express their concerns regarding prescribed and socially expected roles. This makes new religions interesting sites to explore in order to grasp what beliefs and practices around motherhood women discuss, acknowledge, or contest. Women’s narratives in this study have told us how and to what extent religious belonging helps them negotiate neoliberal values of autonomy, self-reliance, and individual choice fostered by socio-economic-driven discourses, along with prescriptive roles and expectations regarding motherhood. They provide information on how a critical assessment and a redefinition of their social place is engendered. Their stories inform us about how, for the most part, the religious movements they belong to still act as strongholds of family values in spite of and to different degrees, also urging them to gauge neoliberal ideas of self-awareness, self-exploration, and self-monitoring. Results from
the selected groups show that while being constitutive of dominant cultural mainstream ideas of motherhood, religious organizations may mainstream themselves and become powerful enough to proscribe moralities on members that require them to reassess their place in society and the significance of mainstream societal values. We can appreciate women’s effort to discuss options for new alternatives and the way they test them; how they slowly acquire confidence and performatively adjust themselves into a new identity that helps them live a more meaningful life. Although criteria for analysis may be similarly used when testing the empowerment thesis, the agentive and transformative emphasis in this study helps understand women’s reflective process urging them to recognize how unjust dominant ideologies are uncritically accepted and embedded in everyday situations and practices, including the religious organization they belong to.

**Conclusion**

Japanese women’s voices in this study tell that the mainstream prescriptive ideas of womanhood and motherhood are blended with neoliberal values of individual spontaneity, self-realization, and self-development resulting in more attuned alternatives to the traditional ones requiring self-sacrifice and limitless dedication. Although societal pressure on women’s expected maternal and caring role is not relieved, Japanese women who rely on their religious organization for their critical self-reflection process seem to achieve a level of self-awareness regarding womanhood and motherhood. This, in turns, provides them a certain level of emotional reward and a sense of self-realization. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge that the potentially transforming mechanism inherent in the relationship between motherhood and religion in Japan seems to lie in the very ability of women to transcend their circumstances and move across religious and non-religious contexts and gendered spaces that influence the degree to which they can be transformative and mobile social agents.

The three Japanese new religions examined here (Risshō Kōseikai, Sōka Gakkai, and God Light Association) are in no way exhaustive of new religions in general, nor would it be possible to generalize the discussion of motherhood in new religions based on these cases. Instead, these movements provide diverse and interesting cases via which to examine motherhood in new religions in Japan, which may serve as reference for further studies on new religions and motherhood beyond the area case. The discussion of the relationship between religion and its socio-economic context has shown how even progressive new religious movements are locked in a view of motherhood and home-life for women while also enabling them to sift through cultural ideals that privilege neoliberal values regarding femininity. Readers could make parallels with other geographically located societies, finding interesting similarities in the construction of a neoliberal motherhood that goes beyond the context-specific diversity and the historically situational variability of such constructs.

**Notes**

1. President Niwano Nichiko’s eldest daughter, Niwano Kōshō (b. 1968), has already been designated as successor in the leadership of the organization. After graduating with a degree in law from Gakushuin University, she studied at Gakurin Seminary, the training institution for Risshō Kōseikai leaders. Presently she acts as president designate, making speeches for participants in the main ceremonies of Risshō Kōseikai and handling activities for interfaith cooperation at home and abroad. She is married to Niwano Munehiro and is the mother of three daughters and one son.

2. According to the 2013 survey conducted by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, 72% of the population assert that they do not believe in any religion (Institute of Statistical Mathematics 2013: 71).
individual and societal well-being—or happiness—is discovered through a transformational process of

In 2014, Abe's government proposed to take action in the following three policy areas: to increase women's labour force participation rates (for ages 25–44) from 68% in 2012 to 73% in 2020; to increase the number of nursery places by 400,000 by 2017; and to introduce a series of initiatives to promote the "utilization" [katsuyō] of the female workforce, including a policy goal to increase the proportion of women occupying leadership positions to 30% (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2014). Data show that such goals are still to be achieved. See https://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/whitepaper/pdf/ewp2020.pdf (accessed 27 September 2021).

Non-regular workers include part-time, contract, fixed-term workers, and other precarious employment groups such as dispatched workers and temporary employees. While the labour force participation rate among 25–54-year-old women is around 70% and thus would seem to resolve the M-shaped curve, the majority of these women worked as non-regular workers in 2019 (Statistics Bureau 2019).

According to Ōsawa (2013), family relationships can be transformed into a risk when the individual faces the probability of being pressed to aid their family members and relatives rather than being aided by them. For a discussion see also Yamada (2001).

The main goal of GLA members’ practice is to find an answer to two key questions: “For what purpose are we born?” and “What should be the proper way of living?” Current leader Takahashi Keiko outlines her concepts and methods in her book, *Study of the Soul*. Based upon the key idea of uncovering what Takahashi called ‘Total Life (TL) Human Principles,’ the leader offers regular lectures and seminars, TL study group, the TL medical research group, the TL education research group and other professional groups in various fields. Her lecture series, carried out regularly since 1992, have already been attended by about 600,000 individuals. Information on lecturers and seminars have been collected through participant observation and interviews.

The outline of Parenting Classes displayed on the organization’s website www.kosei-kai.or.jp/030 katsudo/0308/030809/ (accessed 23 November 2019) gives information on the rationale for these courses: mainly the deteriorating social environment where several factors, including a trend toward a low birth rate and an increased number of divorces, are to the detriment of children. The educational goal of this course is, therefore, to emphasize the responsibility of families in redressing the problems by promoting the childrearing and educational role of women. The goal of those classes is to support mothers by teaching them how to rear and educate their children and face the daily problems of life by drawing upon the group’s doctrine.


‘Sōka gakkai’ literally means ‘Value Creation Study Association.’ Founder Makiguchi believed that individual and societal well-being—or happiness—is discovered through a transformational process of

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9 See www.gla.or.jp/about/kyogi/ (accessed 27 September 2021).
11 An overview of religious organizations that expanded around the 1960s–1970s shows a common tendency in relation to women, as nearly all of them have a *fujinbū* (Women’s Division) in their structure (see Inoue et al. 1994: 132–152). The development of *fujinbū* within religious organizations parallels the spreading of *josei sentā* (women’s centre) established with the support of prefectural and municipal governments in the 1980s as part of the project based on the Women’s Action Plan adopted by the government in 1977 (Tsunematsu 2004: 98). Although the activities in the *fujinbū* should be related to doctrine and proselytism, they have also tended to be focused on family-centred issues in order to give support to women followers by counselling them in a mutual-help endeavour, thereby overlapping the institutionalized activities of the *josei sentā*.
12 The main goal of GLA members’ practice is to find an answer to two key questions: “For what purpose are we born?” and “What should be the proper way of living?” Current leader Takahashi Keiko outlines her concepts and methods in her book, *Study of the Soul*. Based upon the key idea of uncovering what Takahashi called ‘Total Life (TL) Human Principles,’ the leader offers regular lectures and seminars, TL study group, the TL medical research group, the TL education research group and other professional groups in various fields. Her lecture series, carried out regularly since 1992, have already been attended by about 600,000 individuals. Information on lecturers and seminars have been collected through participant observation and interviews.
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18 www.kosei-kai.or.jp/%e7%94%9f%e3%81%8d%e3%82%8b%e3%83%92%e3%83%b3%e3%83%88/ (accessed 23 November 2019).
19 ‘Sōka gakkai’ literally means ‘Value Creation Study Association.’ Founder Makiguchi believed that individual and societal well-being—or happiness—is discovered through a transformational process of
creating value in one’s personal life and in one’s interactions with the environment. Through the practice and faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, a progression of socio-personal transformation, referred to as ‘human revolution,’ transpires in the life of the individual. By virtue of the interconnectivity of individuals with their surroundings, this process is believed to contribute to societal transformation. See www.sokanet.jp/info/constitution.html (accessed 24 November 2019).

20 Information on the various courses, seminars, and workshops has been collected during fieldwork in 2017–2019.

References


