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"Contramodernist Buddhism" in a Global City-State: Shinnyo-en in Singapore

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Abstract: This article outlines the arrival and adaptation of Shinnyo-en as an example of contramodernist Buddhism in Singapore. Shinnyo-en's contramodernist spirituality focuses on its founding Itō family. The arrival of Shinnyo-en is situated within the larger contexts of the Singapore–Japan relationship. Social memories of the Japanese occupation lingered within the population amidst increasing Japanese Foreign Domestic Investments in Singapore. These transnational migration trends brought Shinnyo-en practitioners and Shinnyo-en itself to Singapore. Simultaneously, Singapore's government had been actively monitoring and regulating religious groups in order to maintain religious harmony, societal wellbeing, and ensure the separation of religion and politics in Singapore. This study explores the adaptations of Shinnyo-en's organisational structure, religious practices, and activities in Singapore from 1983 to 2021. It argues that Shinnyo-en has actively adapted to the Singapore context and has actively courted the state for its political survival, adjusting its activities to gain social recognition from Singapore society as a Buddhist organisation. Despite these adaptations, Shinnyo-en Singapore retains its contramodernist Buddhist spirituality, focusing on its founding Itō family. This article highlights the integration of Shinnyo-en's contramodernist beliefs within Shinnyo-en's activities and how this contramodernist spirituality mobilises support for selected social causes through its practitioners.

Keywords: Shinnyo-en; Shinjō Itō; Shinso Itō; contramodernist Buddhism; religious engineering; Singapore; Japan

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1. Introduction

Singaporeans of all ages attend service, receive broadcasted sermons in Japanese which are translated into English, all before an altar with an image of a reclining Buddha and photographs belonging to a Japanese family. They attend Shinnyo-en's (真如苑) services and partake in sessions with whom most Singaporeans will consider "mediums". Many Chinese Singaporeans who lived through the Japanese occupation would probably be surprised by the prominence of Japanese Buddhists in Singapore. The Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, and in particular the Sook Ching operation's purge of the Chinese community, had caused a deep-seated hatred toward the Japanese. This was termed the "blood debt" issue due to Chinese blood spilt by the Japanese invaders (*The Straits Times* 1963). However, today, the Shinnyo-en Singapore temple reportedly serves 1800 practitioners, most of which are Singaporean Chinese (Shinnyo-en Singapore 2021). How have Shinnyo-en's "Japanese" religious beliefs and practices attracted Singaporeans amidst this global city-state?

It is evident that the community has achieved acceptance within Singapore's multireligious society. Shinnyo-en has been featured in major Singaporean newspapers such *The Straits Times*, *Berita Harian*, and *Lianhe Zaobao* and has gained significant media attention in Singapore's mainstream news networks for its welfare and interfaith work within the state. How have Shinnyo-en's visible activities legitimised it in the government's eyes as a provider of social welfare, a promoter of religious harmony, and as a recognised Buddhist organisation? Shinnyo-en's successful integration was met with many challenges.

From its arrival in 1983 to the establishment of its temple in 1994, Shinnyo-en experienced difficulties in adapting to Singapore's context. Singapore's government had been monitoring and regulating religious groups in Singapore in order to separate religion from politics and maintain religious harmony. This created an environment of fear for unestablished religions (Kuah-Pearce 2015, pp. 156–61). On the ground, stigma against "superstitious" practices hindered Shinnyo-en's proselytisation of the local population as its religious practices were seen as "superstitious" and irrelevant. Hence, the significant bulk of Shinnyo-en's early practitioners up until the late 1990s were Japanese expatriates. Some of these expatriates were practitioners from Japan, and others joined Shinnyo-en as an avenue to meet fellow Japanese in a foreign land (Sakashita 1998, p. 211). In response to the suspicion toward religious groups, Shinnyo-en's leadership began to adapt its practices by controlling its proselytisation and regulating available information about its practices. Shinnyo-en actively pursued its political survival and social acceptance within the Buddhist community by actively adapting to policy changes in Singapore by participating in social welfare and interfaith activities (Kuah-Pearce 2015, p. 132).

This article examines the history and development of the religious practices of Shinnyo-en and its engagement with Singapore's society from 1983 to 2021. Drawing on Casey Ray Collins's concept of "Contramodernist Buddhism", this study argues that the increasingly distant social memory of the Japanese occupation coupled with the increasing relevance of Shinnyo-en's contramodernist spirituality and practices to individuals and Singapore's society have contributed to Shinnyo-en's growth in Singapore.

Coined by Collins, "Contramodernist Buddhism" refers to forms of Buddhism that exists within secular modernity while "consciously resisting, rejecting, reconfiguring or subverting certain aspects of mainstream modernities without opposing modernism altogether" (Collins 2020, pp. 51–70). Specifically, Collins cites David McMahan's belief that Buddhist modernism "emphasizes reason, meditation, and a rediscovery of classical texts, and de-emphasizes ritual, image worship, and 'folk' belief". Contrastingly, contramodernist Buddhists often "merge reason and folk, classic texts and new oral traditions" and are often highly secretive due to the stigma of being seen as "dangerous cults". This article demonstrates that groups such as Shinnyo-en tend to "publicly assert" its features that align with mainstream Buddhist modernism and "downplay or reserve for members that which is disdained or rejected by some" (p. 57). These Buddhist movements are defined by their articulation of Buddhist doctrines and ideas through the "framework of a charismatic leader's lived experiences" to become "immediately accessible, relevant, and powerful". Members are encouraged to emulate and "embody" the lives of its founders, the Itō family (pp. 52, 54). This article focuses on the "devotional nostalgia" of Shinnyo-en's spiritual teachings through the exploration of its religious lessons and its manifestation in its forms of socially engaged Buddhism.

The study of Buddhism in Singapore is extensive. According to Jack Meng-Tat Chia, the majority of works in Singapore adopt a more "overarching and extensive" examination of Buddhism in Singapore and can be divided into four categories (Chia 2009a). These are "general accounts, sociological studies, historical studies, and country-specific studies". Some of these studies include Lo (2006) essay titled "Buddhism" in *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* which summarises the arrival and general development of Buddhism through Chinese immigrants until 2006. Other landmark works include Wee's (1976) article titled "Buddhism in Singapore" which argues that "Buddhists" in Singapore do not consist of a unitary religion and must be considered in the larger context of "Chinese religious behaviour". Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng's 2015 book titled *State, Society and Religious Engineering* also provides a key conceptual framework for the analysis of Buddhism in Singapore. Her book highlights the concept of "reformist Buddhism" which argues that Singapore has caused Buddhism to adapt and change to cater to the needs of the modern believers. Utilising Kuah-Pearce's framework, scholars have continued to work on the impact of modernity and the adaptation of Buddhism to fit the modern believer. Chia and Chee's (2008) article titled "Rebranding the Buddhist Faith" (Chia and Chee 2008) studies the practices of Reformist

Buddhists in Singapore, through interviews. Chia's (2009b) article titled "Teaching Dharma, Grooming Sangha" also studied the Buddhist College of Singapore, utilising the concept of Reformist Buddhism to analyse the bureaucracy and structure of the College (Chia 2009b). Studies of contramodernist Buddhism are crucial in analysing the reasons for the success of these seemingly contrary forms of Buddhism in modern Singapore, especially so given the focus of literature emphasising the evolution of Buddhism to meet modern needs.

Other case studies of Buddhism in Singapore have focused on Buddhism originating from different countries. These include Kitiarsa's (2010) article titled "Buddha-izing a Global City-State" on Thai Buddhism which studies the role of Thai monks in spreading the Dharma in Singapore. Buddhism originating from China is also well explored. Chia's (2020) book titled *Monks in Motion* explores the role of Yen Pei in bringing Humanistic Buddhism from China to Singapore. Singapore Soka Association (SSA) is the most extensively studied Japanese Buddhist organisation in Singapore as it is the largest Japanese religion in Singapore. Clammer's (2008) article titled "The Happiness-Making Machine" explains the history and adaptation of the SSA into Singapore from its arrival in 1972 to the 1990s, focusing on the reasons for its success in growing its membership. Finucane's (2014) article titled "Proselytising and the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Asia" supplements Clammer's work by examining the integration into Singapore via its support of religious harmony, as well as its methods of proselytisation. These works outline the methods that SSA has undertaken to gain political legitimacy and social acceptance in Singapore. This study aims to contribute to the discussion on Japanese in Singapore by demonstrating the importance of migration patterns in exporting Japanese culture and religion in particular.

Scholars of Shinnyo-en including James Hubbard and Paolo Cavaliere mostly focus on the religious practices and history of Shinnyo-en in Japan without discussing the exportation of Shinnyo-en overseas (Cavaliere 2015; Hubbard 1998). Jay Sakashita's 1998 dissertation, which traces the transmission of Shinnyo-en globally, is the only work that uses Singapore as one of its case studies. He argues that Shinnyo-en faced difficulties in proselytising due to the pre-existing stigma against Japanese religions and the legacy of the Japanese occupation given that their Singaporean targets were the local Chinese (Sakashita 1998, pp. 166–67). Although Sakashita managed to interview practitioners and participate in services as an observer, he faced significant difficulties in accessing information from Shinnyo-en, who have "misled" him by providing false information about the founding family, demonstrating their secrecy (p. 19). This is also echoed by Casey Collins's 2009 master's thesis that studied Shinnyo-en's practices. He explains that Shinnyo-en is highly secretive, and it was only through his seven years as a practitioner that he was able to gain and present a deeper understanding (Collins 2009, p. 15). Additionally, Sakashita has also discovered that branch temples hold very little autonomy and often rely on guidance from their head temple, Oyasono, in Tachikawa, Japan (Sakashita 1998, p. 168). However, Sakashita's work fails to sufficiently elucidate the context of Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s. He briefly discusses the rejection of "superstitious" practices in Singapore but fails to explain the larger context of religious revivalism in Singapore and the Singapore government's attitude toward religion. This article aims to contextualise the arrival and adaptation of contramodernist Buddhism through the case study of Shinnyo-en into multicultural Singapore, demonstrating the role of the founding Itō family in mobilising Shinnyo-en practitioners to contribute to social movements.

The highly secretive nature of Shinnyo-en makes obtaining sources fairly challenging. When approached for assistance, the Singapore temple redirected me to staff working in Oyasono, the head temple in Japan, who then cited the COVID-19 situation as the reason for their inability to provide assistance and open temple archives. Thereafter, all materials that were provided were published lectures and publications, none of which were specific to the Singapore temple. Shinnyo-en's unwillingness to engage with academics has prevented me from pinpointing the level of leadership that had instituted Shinnyo-en's adaptations to Singapore's context. Acknowledging this limitation, this article assumes that the majority

of Shinnyo-en's adaptations in Singapore were instituted by the local leadership given their knowledge of the Singapore context. Therefore, this article consulted primary sources that were produced by the Shinnyo-en's headquarters and their branch in Singapore.

This article also references oral history interviews with three members of Shinnyo-en Singapore, two of whom are currently serving as committee members on the Youth Association, all of whom are above the age of legal majority. Their names have been anonymised. These interviews provided personal experiences from Shinnyo-en youths who joined the religion at different ages and stages of life. Their personal experiences aided my understanding of Shinnyo-en's appeal to Singaporeans and their interpretations of the teachings. Furthermore, they provided information on Shinnyo-en Singapore's history and its transformation through the years. Ethnographic fieldwork at the temple has also been conducted, to observe the religious activities and proselytising strategies of current members, and at a Youth Association activity at East Coast Park where volunteers helped to clean up the beach.

These published and oral history sources provide the bulk of Shinnyo-en Singapore's institutional history and organisational structure. Although they may not be fully representative due to their reluctance to support my research, my interviews with the participants provide an insight into the reasons Singaporean members become members of Shinnyo-en. The historical material and perspectives of Shinnyo-en are derived from oral history accounts by the three members and Jay Sakashita's research as the form of formal documentation of practitioners' experiences in the 1980s–1990s. This article synthesises these materials to demonstrate the evolution of Shinnyo-en's religious practices, organisational structure, its activities to fit Singapore's context, and how this has been informed by Shinnyo-en's contramodernist spirituality centred around the founding Itō family's experiences.

2. Contramodernist Shingon Buddhism

Shinnyo-en's religious beliefs centre around the leaders' personal experiences, creating the foundation for contramodernist Buddhism. Shinnyo-en is a branch of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, a form of esoteric Buddhism that was transmitted from China to Japan via the monk Kukai (Cavaliere 2015, p. 49; Hubbard 1998, p. 65). Shingon Buddhism is based on the Mikkyo system of doctrine. Mikkyo's key teachings espouse that the esoteric tradition can only be "fully understood through experience" and is transmitted orally to "prevent misuse" of rituals and to prevent the degradation of teachings (Yamasaki 1988, p. 56). Furthermore, Mikkyo believes that enlightenment can be communicated and manifested in this world and that the esoteric tradition's purpose is to "realize the Buddha-self (Buddha Nature)" within each practitioner (pp. 58, 61).

Founder Shinjo Ito originally trained as a cleric under the Daigo School of Shingon Buddhism. After achieving the requisite clerical rank to begin his own tradition, he developed his independent school of Buddhism named Shinnyo Buddhism. Shinnyo Buddhism retains key beliefs, rituals from Shingon Buddhism, but incorporates folk rituals into the teaching. Shinnyo Buddhism retains the esoteric Buddhist belief that enlightenment is achievable within one's lifetime and that everyone has a Buddha nature. Additionally, Shinnyo Buddhism also incorporates Mikkyo beliefs, retaining a focus on achieving enlightenment and understanding through practice on top of learning Buddhist teachings. However, the scriptural focus of Shinnyo Buddhism differs from Shingon Buddhism as Shinnyo-en's founder selected the Mahaparinirvana Sutra to serve as the doctrinal basis of Shinnyo-en. This Sutra emphasises the "Buddha nature" within each individual and emphasises the possibility of anyone to become a Buddha (Cavaliere 2015, p. 50). Additionally, Shinnyo Buddhism also incorporated folk practices. Originating from founder Shinjō Itō's practise of byōzeishi (病筮鈔), a form of divination and folk ritual, practitioners rely on Sesshin (接心), a form of special meditation developed by the founders that aims to provide guidance on how to align oneself with the Buddha's teachings and behaviour (International Affairs Department of Shinnyo-en 2019a, p. 78; Shuri 2019, p. 35). Sesshin is conducted

through spiritual guides or reinōsha (霊能者) who serve as conduits to the Buddhas and the Shinnyo spiritual world where the founder's prematurely deceased children and wife, Tomoji, manifest alongside the "ever present source of truth", or Shinnyo (真如) (Cavaliere 2015, p. 50). Their two prematurely deceased children, termed Ryōdōji-sama (両童子様), are considered the "manifestation of the Buddha of the Buddha's compassion" and perform the function of Bakku daiju (抜苦代受), a form of "substitutionary suffering" for the practitioners (Hubbard 1998, pp. 70–71). Similarly, Tomoji, posthumously titled Shōjuin-sama (摂受心院), is credited with opening the path of Shōju (摂受) or "reception of all beings" to the path of enlightenment (p. 72). The reclining Buddha, first sculped by Shinjō, represents the image of Sakyamuni Buddha right before he passed into Nirvana. It was sculpted as a "reminder of Buddhahood" and is placed on alters in Shinnyo-en temples, celebrated as Shinjō's signature work (Shuri 2019, p. 120). Hence, Shinnyo-en's spiritual beliefs are couched in Buddhist teachings but centre around the founder and his family.

Practitioners are taught to undertake three forms of action to realise one's Buddha nature (Cavaliere 2015, p. 51). These are termed the mittsu no ayumi (三つの歩) or three practices—Kangi (歓喜), the financial contributions to Shinnyo-en; Otasuke (お助け), the propagation of the teaching; and Gohōshi (ご奉仕), volunteer service. These practices represent the "actual practice" of the doctrines of Shinnyo-en and are supposed to collectively represent the expression of the Six Paramitas, the virtues of enlightenment (Collins 2009, p. 25). Kangi is the act of "sincere giving" to activities that support the "teaching activities" and selected charities of Shinnyo-en (International Affairs Department of Shinnyo-en 2019a, p. 42). Otasuke is the act of "sharing the Dharma" that is steeped in "genuine regard" for the people in one's life (p. 46). Lastly, Gohōshi is the act of "selfless service" that "polishes" one's "Buddha nature" by offering something to society. Gohōshi enables the practice of "service" in public spaces, transforming public spaces into religious spaces (Collins 2009, p. 24).

Prior to Shinnyo-en's official establishment in 1936, founders Shinjō Itō and Tomoji had been practising byōzeishi and other spiritual rituals in Tokyo, Japan, forming a community around them (Shuri 2019, p. 35). They aided the local Japanese community by providing "healings, divination, exorcism" and other material benefits such as wealth (Collins 2020, p. 61). These practices were reported by their neighbours and attracted police suspicion as private religious meetings and magical folk rituals were deemed a state crime due to their potential to subvert State Shinto (p. 61). This initiated the beginning of the religious movement's secrecy as the Itō family viewed their near persecution the cause of public opinion. In 1936, Shinjō quit his job to train under the Daigo School of Shingon Buddhism (p. 53). The year 1936 is celebrated by practitioners as the founding of Shinnyo-en. Shinjō named his spiritual community the Tachikawa Fellowship of Achala in 1938. Its aim was to create a "tradition rooted in the layperson's struggle to live life and be human" via adapting his teachings and practice to modernity (p. 90).

During World War II, Shinjō continued undertaking religious training at the Daigōji temple and completed his formal training in 1948. Shinjō then changed his organisation's name to the Makoto Kyodan or the Sangha of Truth, reaffirming his belief in "helping ordinary people face practical challenges of life" through a "combination of lay and monastic practices" in a period of "social turmoil" at the end of World War II (pp. 98–99). These practices blended traditionally "supernatural" rituals such as the byōzeishi with Buddhism. Shinjō believed Buddhism to be the practice of "polishing" one's innate Buddha nature to achieve Shinnyo, the innate goodness and the true nature of all things (p. 102).

The group underwent the "Dharma crisis" in 1950. Shinjō was accused of assault by his former apprentice and was jailed. The group's public image deteriorated as the Japanese public perceived it to be a "dangerous new religion" and it was "denounced as a newly risen cult" (pp. 107–8). Followers of the Sangha began to leave the group due to its negative reputation. This was perceived to be the fault of the "betrayal" of Shinjō's apprentice and was caused by the public's negative opinion of the group, reinforcing the group's need for secrecy. However, the crisis was resolved when his former apprentice admitted to falsifying

his testimony (Shuri 2019, p. 111). Shinjō's experiences of the "Dharma crisis" influenced him to adopt the Mahaparinirvana Sutra as the central doctrinal text of the then Sangha of Truth (p. 102). He selected it because it preached the "possibility of Buddhahood for all living beings", affirming his belief that his previous disciple could still be redeemed despite his rejection of Buddhism via betraying the Sangha of Truth (pp. 87–88).

3. The Japan–Singapore Relationship until the 1980s

Singapore has hosted a significant Japanese population since the late nineteenth century, up until the end of the Japanese occupation of Singapore in 1945. Before World War II, there were two large communities of Japanese—the low-wage working community of the shitamachi (下町) centred around the karayuki-san (唐行きさん), or prostitutes, that existed from the 1870s up to the 1920s, and the gudanzoku (グダン族), or middle- and upper-middle class Japanese, that began to arrive from the 1890s (Shimizu 1997, pp. 108, 117; Tsu 2006, pp. 29–30, 35–36). These communities developed parallel to one another, with the shitamachi community developing around the karayuki-san and the gudanzoku developing around the growing Japanese middle-class that arrived. Despite the different cultures that grew around each community, these communities both brought cultural and religious products to Singapore to cater to the needs of the communities.

However, the cordial relationship between Singapore and Japan ground to a halt during the Japanese occupation of Singapore and its aftermath due to the "blood debt" issue. During the Japanese occupation, at least 25,000 Chinese were killed in the Sook Ching operation, resulting in the creation of the "blood debt" issue due to the blood spilt by the Japanese occupiers (Blackburn 2000, p. 75). The Sook Ching operation was undertaken to "deal with possible Chinese resistance" as the local Chinese population previously supported the Chinese government and China Relief Fund in an effort to fend off Japanese invaders in the Second Sino-Japanese War (p. 99). The ethnic violence against the Chinese resulted in the "blood debt" issue, persisting even after Singapore's independence in 1965 (Blackburn 2000, p. 77).

From 1945 to the early 1950s, Japanese were not allowed to enter Singapore, but regulations began to relax with diplomats and Japanese professionals re-entering thereafter (Tanimura 2006, p. 27). The Japanese fully began to return to Singapore in 1959, with the newly-elected People's Action Party-led government's courtship of Japanese investments (Blackburn and Hack 2012, pp. 296–97). During self-government in 1959, the government implemented an "export-oriented industrialisation policy" highly reliant on FDI as Singapore had few natural resources and "lacked capital and advanced technologies" (Shimizu 2008, pp. 28–29). Singapore partnered with Japan, hoping to gain "technology transfer" or a "return on investment" from Japanese companies (p. 29). Japan invested heavily in Singapore throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, during this period, tensions between the Japanese and Chinese remained due to the "blood debt" issue, threatening to derail the partnership. For instance, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, including a 1963 "mass rally" consisting of 120,000 mostly Chinese participants, pressuring the government to "claim compensation" from Japan regarding the "blood debt" (Blackburn 2000, pp. 85–86). These overwhelming ground sentiments convinced the government to attempt to repress the social memory of the "blood debt" issue through seeking compensation from Japan and constructing a memorial for the victims of the Japanese occupation (pp. 87–88). Singapore's government successfully negotiated with the Japanese government for reparations, maintaining positive economic and diplomatic relationships, while allaying the domestic unhappiness in Singapore. Thereafter, Japanese investments in Singapore increased drastically from SGD 68 million in 1965 to SGD 801 million in 1978 (Shimizu 2008, p. 42).

Although the Singapore government attempted to suppress the social memory of the "blood debt" to pursue Japanese economic investments, the "blood debt" issue remained within the social consciousness of the Singaporean Chinese (Blackburn and Hack 2012, p. 298). Up to 1981, Singapore largely avoided discourse surrounding the blood debt issue to avoid antagonising Japan as a large source of foreign investment (p. 296). However,

the government reintroduced the "blood debt" issue through the education system via the 1984 history syllabus, aiming to bond Singaporeans through the narrative of solidarity and hardship during the Japanese occupation. The sudden antagonistic portrayal of the Japanese in the history syllabus created an increasingly hostile environment for cultural products that were very "Japanese" in character.

Despite this environment, the Japanese expatriate population increased drastically from approximately 1000 in the 1970s to 8000 in the 1980s and 24,000 by 1996 as Japanese investments in Singapore grew (Thang 1999, pp. 4–11). These expatriates were mostly Japanese staff seconded by Japanese companies to work in Singapore (Shiraki 2004, p. 61). This increased population created a larger market for Japanese goods in Singapore due to the Japanese community's relatively insular attitudes (Ng 2001, p. 9). Cultural products such as food, music, and Japanese television shows began to permeate Singapore's social consciousness, creating a market for Japanese products to take root, paralleling the pre-war shitamachi and gudanzoku community. However, the level of permeation and consumption by the local Singaporean population was determined by the "cultural odour" and cultural relatability (Iwabuchi 2002, p. 27). For instance, in the case of Japanese sushi, few Singaporeans were willing to eat raw fish, and even fewer were interested in eating sushi containing Uni (sea urchin) and Hamachi (yellowtail) despite its popularity in Japan (Ng 2001, p. 16). Instead, locals often ate localised sushi containing Otah (spicy fishcake) (Tanimura 2006, p. 38). Hence, products with overtly strong Japanese cultural odour deterred Singaporean consumers during the 1980s and 1990s, but conversely, limited cultural odour was welcomed as a form of "foreignness" (Chua 2012, p. 84).

The migration of Japanese expatriates also brought Japanese Buddhism into Singapore. Soka Gakkai practitioners entered Singapore in the 1960s when their employers posted them to Singapore (Clammer 2008, p. 178). What would become the SSA was formally established in 1972 as the Singapore Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Association. SSA gained a significant following in modernising Singapore through its highly rationalised "hierarchical structures and education-oriented approach" and its "ethical pragmatism" (p. 189). However, the SSA was not well received within the Buddhist community because of its doctrines and its aggressive proselytisation (Kuah-Pearce 2015). SSA's religious exclusivity has in the past required members to remove all other religious trinkets and statues (Clammer 2008, p. 189). This was against the Singaporean Chinese practitioners' religious norms of attending multiple temples and praying to multiple deities, creating tension between the SSA and the Buddhist community (Kuah-Pearce 2015, pp. 237, 252). Hence, Buddhist groups in Singapore viewed the SSA with hostility through the 2000s due to its inability to conform to Singapore's established norms.

The SSA has been denied recognition as a Buddhist organisation from the Singapore Buddhist Federation as its recognition of Nichiren as the Buddha was perceived as an "anomie" and ignorant of "true Buddhism" (Clammer 2008, p. 190). Therefore, the SSA's doctrinal clashes with Singapore's Buddhist organisations and unwillingness to conform to Singapore's established religious norms coalesced to alienate the SSA from Buddhist organisations in Singapore. SSA's arrival and the reputation it created is crucial to understanding Shinnyo-en's adaptation to Singapore as the SSA is the largest Japanese Buddhist organisation in Singapore.

4. Shinnyo-en Comes to Singapore

Mirroring the SSA, Shinnyo-en arrived in Singapore through white-collared working devotees as part of the transnational migration of Japanese businesses into Singapore (Joshua 2021). From 1983 to 2000, the large number of Japanese in Singapore contributed to the increasing strength and congregation of Shinnyo-en in Singapore. Japanese expatriates were targets of Otasuke and joined Shinnyo-en as a way to interact with other Japanese (Sakashita 1998, p. 211). The strong Japanese membership decreased the incentives for Shinnyo-en to actively proselytise the Singaporean population. The handful of Singaporean members were predominantly from the majority Chinese ethnicity and were mostly "ghost

members" who infrequently attended meetings. Hence, the early practitioners in Singapore transplanted the majority of Shinnyo-en's religious practices and social structures from Japan into the Singapore branch as there was little incentive to localise with the exception of religious exclusivity. From 1983 to the Shinnyo-en temple's opening in 1994, practitioners held gatherings in members' homes. Sermons from leader Shinjō Itō and his daughter and successor, Shinso Itō, were received via fax. Sesshin was conducted through long distance telephone calls from the reinōsha in Japan (Joshua 2021). Gohōshi practices of cleaning public spaces were imported from Japan as members swept the Clifford Pier from 1983 on a monthly basis (*The Straits Times* 2012). These practices were directly adapted from Japan where members too cleaned public spaces as forms of Gohōshi.

Shinnyo-en in Singapore retained its contramodernist spiritual qualities through the regulation of sermons and the practice of Sesshin. Sermons were almost always delivered in the name of Shinnyo-en's leaders Shinjō or Shinso, creating a strong devotion toward the leadership and temple as the source of wisdom and advice (Jessica 2021). Sesshin was also closely controlled and direct permission had to be given by Shinjō or Shinso before one was able to conduct Sesshin (Collins 2009, p. 56). In Singapore, Sesshin was delivered by Japanese reinōshas that were relocated from Taiwan and Japan until the first Singaporean practitioner was elevated to the lowest reinōsha rank in 1998 (Sakashita 1998, p. 237). Strict controls over religious information ensured that religious knowledge was successfully "internalised" by practitioners. Together, these practices centralised the Itō family in the spiritual worldview of devoted practitioners, "privileging the local, particular, and emotional" by emphasising the role of the Itō family and the spaces they occupied over the "global, universal, and rational", imbuing "particular places and figures" with universal significance (Collins 2020, p. 64). This is described by Collins as the "devotional nostalgia" in Shinnyo-en that is contramodernist in nature (p. 64).

Shinnyo-en was not initially well received by Singaporeans as it possessed a strong "Japanese" character and because its practice of Sesshin was perceived to be "superstitious". From 1980s to 2000, Singaporean Chinese had begun to move away from religious practices deemed to be "superstitious" or "antiquated" due to the emphasis of "rationality" in the modern education system (Kuo and Tong 1995, p. 22). Between 1980 and 1990, Singaporean Chinese of higher education levels had either converted to Christianity or Buddhism or renounced their religion as Christianity and Buddhism were seen as "orderly and systematic religions" with a textual orthodoxy and religious institutions (pp. 32, 38). "Traditional religions", such as Taoism, were becoming less popular as its beliefs and practices were seen as "irrational" and "mere superstition" (p. 38). Additionally, this rejection of "superstitious" practices was exacerbated by the presence of "charlatans" posing as spirit mediums in Taoist temples, furthering suspicion of "superstitious" practices that included spirit mediums (*The Straits Times* 1989). This was further supported by Sakashita's observation that the more well off and educated Singaporeans in the 1990s viewed mediums and "other diviners" as "fraudulent and out of date". This affected Shinnyo-en as Sesshin from reinōsha were perceived to be similar to mediums, creating a reluctance for Singaporeans to participate in Sesshin (Sakashita 1998, pp. 142–45).

Furthermore, Singaporeans were still not fully accepting of distinctly Japanese cultural products that did not fit local customs. Shinnyo-en was unable to garner a strong local following due to its practices' unique "Japanese" character and its association with the "blood debt" issue (p. 133). Shinnyo-en's practices of venerating the Itō family via placing photographs on the alter led to some Singaporeans perceiving Shinnyo-en as a "Japanese cult" as Buddhists in Singapore prayed primarily to Sakyamuni Buddha (p. 141). Similarly, the practice of Sesshin was seen as an "aberration" of Buddhism as most mediums were Taoist (p. 138). This was compounded by the lingering sentiments of the "blood debt" issue. Young Singaporean practitioners in the 1990s were reluctant to reveal that they were members in Shinnyo-en, as their parents still believed that Singaporeans were supposed to "hate" all Japanese (p. 141). Combining the climate of suspicion of "superstitious" practices, Shinnyo-en's unique practices, and the lingering sentiments of the "blood debt"

issue, Shinnyo-en was unable to attract many Singaporeans who viewed their practices as "fraudulent" and out of place within Singapore's society (p. 137).

Shinnyo-en Singapore adapted to shield itself from critique, hiding its "superstitious" practices and distinctly "Japanese" character from the general public by presenting a more "secular" explanation of its beliefs to non-members (Jessica 2021). Up until 2021, "Outsiders" are presented with a brief overview of Shinnyo-en's teachings that highlight the Buddhist tenets of the practice (Jessica). Sesshin is described as a form of meditation, omitting explanations of the Shinnyo spiritual world consisting of the Itō family alongside the Buddhas, thereby hiding the centrality of the Itō family (Jessica). Shinnyo-en also emphasises its lineage from the Shingon Buddhist tradition to build a form of religious legitimacy. These practices are encapsulated in an introductory booklet distributed to visitors or that selectively display the Buddhist tenets of Shinnyo-en's practices (Shinnyo-en Singapore 2011). Through the curation of its image, Shinnyo-en has been able to gain a level of social acceptance by hiding the "superstitious" nature of its practices and the contramodernist centrality of the founding Itō family.

The government's active intervention in regulating religious groups created an environment of fear for newer religious groups in Singapore. Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng describes the Singapore government's attempts to manage its multicultural and multireligious society as "religious engineering" (Kuah-Pearce 2015, p. 5). Given the diversity of ethnicities and religions in Singapore, religion is constantly monitored in Singapore. Legislatively, this is governed by the Religious Harmony Act that came into effect in 1992 that aims to ensure harmony and prevent "another eruption of ethnic violence" and separate religion from politics (pp. 144, 146). Religious activities are carefully monitored for any discourse that threatens to interfere in local politics or impede racial harmony. This diversity of ethnicities and religions creates a complex and often challenging environment for new religious groups to navigate given the state's prerogative to maintain and engineer Singapore as a multicultural society (p. 132).

Since religious groups were actively monitored, Shinnyo-en took precautions to ensure that it did not violate any laws. Before Shinnyo-en's official registration as a society under the Charities Act in 1990, members spread Shinnyo-en by word of mouth and avoided distributing any publications to ensure it did not gain a reputation as an illegal cult (Joshua 2021). Shinnyo-en also took extra caution with its proselytisation due to the Singapore government's concern about the potential of aggressive and insensitive proselytisation destabilising Singapore's multicultural society. This was due to a confluence of aggressive proselytisation by Christian groups and the revival of the Islamic and Buddhist movements in the 1980s (Singapore Parliament 1989, p. 3). Such instances include Christians attempting to proselytise to failing University classmates, doctors and medical students proselytising terminally ill patients on their deathbeds, and also proselytising to members of the Muslim and Hindu faith, creating tension between religious groups (*The Straits Times* 1989). In response, the government published the White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony which stated that although the constitution protected the "liberty to proselytise", such activities must be "exercised very sensitively" (Joshua 2021). The government's caution and attention toward the act of proselytisation incentivised Shinnyo-en to exercise caution when proselytising to ensure that it remained aligned to the government's goal of religious harmony.

Hence, Shinnyo-en proselytised mostly through oral transmission and only toward their personal contacts and those interested in learning more about Shinnyo-en. Controlled proselytisation ensured that Otasuke did not come off as insensitive and indiscriminate. Otasuke consists of official visits to the temple and personal proselytisation of contacts. Materials shared during these sessions are more "introductory", and all activities conducted are less esoteric and more "secular" in nature (Jessica 2021). These methods of proselytisation create less tension with the public because the more "superstitious" practices such as Sesshin, and the centrality of the Itō family which may be construed as cult-like, are kept within Shinnyo-en.

Additionally, Shinnyo-en relinquished its requirement for members to practise religious exclusivity, adapting to the Singaporean Chinese practice of worshipping and participating in activities in multiple temples (Sakashita 1998, p. 141; Jessica 2021). Shinnyo-en wanted to avoid antagonising the Buddhist community like the SSA as the SSA was alienated for their aggressive proselytisation and religious exclusivity (Clammer 2008, p. 189). Hence, Shinnyo-en allowed its practitioners to practise other religions. From the 1980s and 1990, Singaporean Shinnyo-en members actively participated in the activities of many different temples (Sakashita 1998, pp. 143–44). This ensured that Shinnyo-en achieved a greater chance for political survival due to their careful proselytisation, enabling it to avoid unwanted attention from the authorities. Additionally, its practices were kept relatively unknown, reducing the chances of their practice being described as cult-like by other Buddhist organisations. Lastly, Shinnyo-en ensured that it fit into the context of Buddhism in Singapore by accepting that it could not demand religious exclusivity from its members, thereby allowing itself to survive.

5. Adapting to the Decreasing Japanese Expatriate Population from the Late 1990s

The bursting of Japan's bubble economy in 1992 greatly affected Japanese companies in Singapore who began to slowly exit Singapore's economy or localise their employees to "contain costs" (Yeo, "Japanese firms slow to fill top jobs with locals", *The Business Times* (BT), 2 May 2000). This caused the Japanese expatriate population in Singapore to shrink during the late 1990s from about 30,000 in early 1998 to 21,000 by 2002. By 2002, the total number of Japanese companies fell to about 1600 firms from 1700 in 2000 (Yeo, "Japanese companies here slip to 1600", BT, 15 January 2000). This decreasing Japanese population weakened Shinnyo-en's religious strength and congregation as many of the early practitioners in Singapore were Japanese expatriates. To regain its congregation and court social acceptance in Singapore, Shinnyo-en had to compete with other local religious groups for the patronage of the local Chinese population. Thus, Shinnyo-en began to adjust its practices to fit the Singaporean Buddhist context to gain greater acceptance due to their similarity of practice.

Shinnyo-en adjusted its celebration of the Buddha's Birthday to fit the Singaporean context to appeal to the Singaporean Chinese community. Shinnyo-en Singapore had been celebrating Hanamatsuri (flower festival) on the 8th of April as the historical Buddha's Birthday while most Singaporean Buddhists celebrate Vesak Day, which falls on the 15th day of the 4th month on the Lunar calendar as the Buddha's Birthday (*The Straits Times* 1990; Sakashita 1998, p. 234). Although both festivals represent the Buddha's birthday, Shinnyo-en opted to change its celebration of the Buddha's Birthday to Vesak Day around 2013 to fit the local community. These celebrations also became key dates to engage interfaith audiences and Singaporean politicians. Shinnyo-en has been inviting their Member of Parliament, Mr Tan Chuan Jin, from 2013, to attend their celebrations, lending visibility and political legitimacy to Shinnyo-en. Shinnyo-en has also invited religious organisations such as the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) to attend their celebrations, reflecting Shinnyo-en's drive to gain social acceptance from the local population (Shinnyo-en Singapore 2015). Hence, Shinnyo-en adjusted its celebration of the Buddha's Birthday in order to garner support from the Buddhist community and local politicians. Combining these adaptations with the aforementioned curation of its image, Shinnyo-en has succeeded in attracting significant numbers of local Chinese.

Shinnyo-en had also begun adapting and implementing bureaucratised and rationalised forms of religion classes from Japan to Singapore from 2000. Structured forms of learning were highly suitable for Singaporeans as there was a clear structure and metrics for visible improvements (Clammer 2008, p. 182). This boosted Shinnyo-en's legitimacy as a "rational" religion through its organised Dharma classes (Kuo and Tong 1995, p. 38). The highly bureaucratised lessons are controlled by Oyasono, ensuring that practitioners remain devoted to the Itō family through standardised learning, retaining "devotional nostalgia" through its centralised lessons. Couching Shinnyo-en's contramodernist spirituality

within a system of rational learning has disguised and positioned it as a "rational" religion, appealing to the Singaporean population that has been bred in an education system that prioritises measurable growth, creating greater social relevance to Singaporeans.

Lastly, Shinnyo-en has taken advantage of the improvements in technology to deliver and create a stronger contramodernist spirituality by enhancing the "devotional nostalgia" to the Itōs within its congregation. Shinnyo-en has adjusted its practices of transmitting sermons via fax to transmitting sermons through video recordings and projectors since before 2008 (Jessica 2021). Compared to faxed sermons of the 1980s, today Shinnyo-en uses technology to broadcast sermons from Japan to engage members visually and auditorily, attuning them to the visage of leader Shinso and the head temple, Oyasono. The constant referral to Shinso and Oyasono creates a strong bond between the Itō family and practitioners, legitimising Shinso and Oyasono as spiritual centres within the congregation. This creates and deepens the "devotional nostalgia" within the congregation, further privileging the "local, particular, and emotional" over the "global, universal, and rational", enhancing Shinnyo-en's contramodernist spirituality.

As shown, Shinnyo-en's practices have remained contramodernist due to its continued focus of "devotional nostalgia" in its religious practices. Shinnyo-en has attracted more local practitioners in Singapore from 2001 to 2021. Sakashita reports that Shinnyo-en Singapore officially numbered around 1000 in 1995, but with an estimate of 100–150 active members who were mostly Japanese expatriates (Sakashita 1998, p. 143). Today, Shinnyo-en reports a total of 1800 members and boasts at least a community of 400 active members consisting mostly of locals according to member estimates (Jessica 2021).

Today, some Singaporeans have adopted Shinnyo-en due to its ability to provide solutions to this-worldly issues and orientate one's worldview according to Shinnyo-en beliefs, demonstrating an interesting trend that contradicts the modernisation of Singapore. The increased popularity of Sesshin highlights this peculiarity. Instead of being increasingly frowned upon, the use of spiritual mediums has become increasingly accepted. Practitioners accepted Sesshin as it was able to address their contemporary issues. Jessica mentioned that it provided advice on how to process and react to one's life circumstances (Jessica 2021). She also stated that Shinnyo-en's teachings and the Itō family's life stories were useful to understand and orientate her life by creating an understanding of suffering. This was echoed by Jessica's mother through her insistence on Jessica attending Sesshin when encountering this-worldly issues. Joshua stated that Sesshin provided various philosophies to understand how to better "sculpt" one's Buddha nature and increase his mindfulness, while Jacob stated that the sacrifices of the Itō family in creating Shinnyo-en inspired him to be selfless (Jacob 2021).

Interviewees also saw Sesshin as useful in guiding one's personal circumstances. Jessica compared Sesshin to her practice of the more mainstream Theravada Buddhism where she had to meditate on her life circumstances without any "correct" views but only guiding principles (Jessica 2021). Sesshin however delivered "spiritual words" that provided guidance to any situation. This reflects the trend of Singaporeans' becoming increasingly concerned about religions addressing "this-worldly" concerns. Hence, Jessica preferred Shinnyo-en's practices due to its ability to directly provide advice to her personal circumstances (Kuah-Pearce 2015, p. 249).

This case study demonstrates how "supernatural" and contramodernist practices may be able to retain their appeal in an increasingly modern and rational society such as Singapore. By couching its contramodernist teachings in a rational manner, Shinnyo-en has been able to garner some support in Singapore. Additionally, the relevance of these teachings in ordering Singaporeans' lives illustrate that despite being highly rational, the "supernatural" and sacred remain important within society today.

Moreover, the continued "devotional nostalgia" of practitioners creates a small section of society that, to varying degrees, continues to see the world with reference to the Itōs' life, struggles, and lessons. Although these teachings may be fairly universal, the mechanisms of transmitting and maintaining contramodernist Buddhist spirituality internationally may

potentially be seen as a form of social control as practitioners continue to heed and listen to current leader Shinso's words as the guiding principles for their lives.

6. Shinnyo-en's Expression of Socially Engaged Buddhism

Apart from adapting its religious teachings, Shinnyo-en has also adapted its engagements with society to fit the Singapore context. This is achieved through Shinnyo-en's expression of socially engaged Buddhism with the aim of securing its political and social survival within Singapore through its courting of the state and the Buddhist community. Shinnyo-en's teachings actively promote volunteering and charity through two of the mittsu no ayumi, Gohōshi and Kangi.

Gohōshi occupies a unique space as a highly visible manifestation of social welfare and volunteerism, contributing to the Buddhist community's adoption of a welfare niche. Kangi is the act of sincere giving and is executed by tithing to Shinnyo-en, which enables the organisation to donate to causes it deems worthy. According to Sallie King, socially engaged Buddhism refers to a "contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political and ecological problems of society" through applying the "values and teachings of Buddhism to the problems of society" (King 2009, pp. 1–2). These practices are "motivated by concern for the welfare of others as an expression of their own Buddhist practices" and are seen as an "expression" of Buddhist spirituality (pp. 1–2). Shinnyo-en contributes actively to society on the direction and leadership of Shinso Itō. Shinso has repeatedly emphasised her belief that "Buddhism should actively engage in serving our society", setting the context for Shinnyo-en's engagement with society (Shinnyo-en 2021). Gohōshi and Kangi are understood as expressions of Shinnyo-en's teachings that express the Six Paramitas. Hence, Shinnyo-en's practice of Gohōshi and Kangi represents a contramodernist Buddhist expression of socially engaged Buddhism. These form the Buddhist Doctrinal basis for Gohōshi and Kangi as a means to live out and achieve enlightenment by embodying the teachings of the Buddha. Members are thought to see "everyday public spaces as religious spaces" (Collins 2009, p. 24). Therefore, Shinnyo-en members practise Buddhism through Gohōshi by serving the community within and outside the organisation while members donate to Shinnyo-en through Kangi in the hopes of serving the community.

Shinnyo-en constantly express these ideas through the actions of the founding Itō family. This is reflected in the handbook for new Shinnyo-en practitioners, named *Starting Out*, that emphasises the role of Shinjō and Tomoji. The handbook emphasises the role of Shinjō by lending authority to him to define an ideal expression of Gohōshi. The handbook states that "Master Shinjō used to say" that Tomoji's effort to "clean the temple and attend to the needs of the disciples", which is articulated as the "heart of Shinnyo practice" and Gohōshi as a practice (International Affairs Department of Shinnyo-en 2019a, p. 45). The handbook centralises Shinjō and Tomoji by emphasising Shinjō's role as the main authority on Shinnyo Buddhism, while Tomoji's behaviour is glorified as the shining example of Gohōshi. This continued centralisation of the Itō family demonstrates the contramodernist underpinnings of Shinnyo-en's socially engaged Buddhism.

The evolution of Gohōshi can be traced to the 1980s where Singapore was reacting to a perceived "crisis of the welfare state". The Singaporean government had begun to emphasise the importance of being "self-reliant" in 1991, with the idea of sharing the responsibility of caring for "those who need help" with the community as mentioned by then Brigadier General Lee (*The Straits Times* 1991). These principles were expressed in the White Paper for Shared Values which gave rise to the "Many helping hands approach" that delegated various welfare roles to VWOs, including religious organisations (Singapore Parliament 1991, p. 3; Ang 2015, p. 143). Within the Buddhist Community, many Buddhist organisations began to increase their welfare activities in order to court the state and create a welfare niche in which they were socially relevant. These institutions included the Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic, founded in 1969, that offered medical treatment to

lower income Singaporeans, and the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services, registered in 1981 (Chia 2017, pp. 232–33).

Shinnyo-en, as a new, unestablished religion in Singapore, needed to support and conform to this welfare niche in order to gain social acceptance within the Buddhist community. Additionally, supporting the government enabled Shinnyo-en to court the state through their contributions to the environment and to the less fortunate. Volunteers from Shinnyo-en initially contributed to the environment by practising Gohōshi, sweeping the Clifford Pier from 1983 to 1989, and then moved to sweeping the void decks of HDB flats in 1989 on a monthly basis. After the publication of the White Paper for Shared Values, Shinnyo-en moved their monthly cleaning sessions to the more publicly visible locations of the Clementi, Ang Mo Kio, and Eunos Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations in 1994 (*The Straits Times* 2012). This subtly alerted state authorities to Shinnyo-en's activities, ingratiating them to the government. Shinnyo-en also supported the less fortunate by volunteering at Ren Ci hospital from 2000. These moves reflect Shinnyo-en's active courting of the state by contributing to the welfare niche as part of the "Many Helping Hands" approach. These activities also represented socially engaged Buddhism through their support of the less fortunate and the environment within Singapore's society.

Shinnyo-en continues contributing to the welfare niche today by practising Gohōshi to serve the sick, disabled, and less fortunate. These include partnerships with Lions Befrienders, Ren Ci hospital, PERTAPIS Children's Home, Society for the Physically Disabled, and the Yellow Ribbon Kitchen. Shinnyo-en's contribution to the community was recognised by the Singapore State in 2020, as Shinnyo-en was awarded with the Friends of Community Care Award by the Agency for Integrated Care (Agency for Integrated Care 2020). Similarly, Shinnyo-en continued its contribution to the environment through its monthly cleanings at MRT stations and their yearly participation in the International Coastal Clean Up since before 2014.

Kangi is also practised in a manner that privileges the Shinnyo-en leadership. Current leader Shinso references and explains Kangi through Shinnyo-en's donation of funds to the victims of the 2011 Fukushima disaster that was enabled by donations from the practitioner population. Her volunteerism during the aforementioned disaster was also portrayed as a form of Gohōshi (International Affairs Department of Shinnyo-en 2019b, p. 113). Additionally, Shinnyo-en has also fundraised for causes selected by its leadership. That demonstrates that the Shinnyo-en leadership evaluates and selects causes to express Kangi toward, privileging their views. Constant references to their founders' experiences demonstrate that members continue to associate Gohōshi and Kangi around the personal experiences and continue to view their own lives with reference to that of their charismatic founders This reflects the "devotional nostalgia" and contramodernist nature of these practices.

Shinnyo-en Singapore has also contributed to the general welfare in Singapore and internationally through the practice of Kangi. Singapore places emphasis on subsidies for education as a means of "social inclusion" as education is viewed as a means of preventing large disparities in educational opportunities between social classes (Ang 2015, p. 140). In 2007, Shinnyo-en Singapore donated SGD 250,000 to the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information's Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund at the National Technological University, initiating the Singapore-Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information Scholarships. Then Director of Shinnyo-en, Reverend Kawabata, stated that they hoped students would "be nurtured to share Dr Wee's passion for socially responsible journalism and become individuals who embody human goodness, graciousness, compassion and love for fellow citizens of the world" (Nanyang Technological University 2007). Director Kawabata's emphasis on nurturing "human goodness, graciousness, compassion and love" shows that Shinnyo-en's donations were Buddhist expressions of Kangi. The Shinnyo-en leadership's control of donations reflects the leadership's belief in their moral superiority and the ability to make donations that correspond to the Buddhist ideals represented by Kangi. Continued control over Shinnyo-en's funding illustrates the monopoly

that Shinnyo-en's leadership has over the "right" and appropriate charities and causes to contribute toward. This shows the inherent "devotional nostalgia" that members subscribe to by believing in Shinso's personal views on what is and is not an ideal social cause to contribute toward. Therefore, it is evident that Shinnyo-en's religious expressions of Gohōshi and Kangi are contramodernist expressions of Buddhism. Similarly, Shinnyo-en's institutional contributions to the education system and toward various disasters demonstrate their active engagement in society backed by Buddhist ideals, thus representing socially engaged Buddhism.

By couching the expression of social welfare in Buddhist terms, Shinnyo-en is able to direct its efforts toward social welfare activities that align with the government's political goals. Simultaneously, Shinnyo-en is also able to gain recognition as a Buddhist organisation through their contribution to society.

Another key turning point that affected Shinnyo-en was the September 11 attacks in the United States. Following the terror attacks, there were increased tensions and suspicion in Singapore, especially against the Muslim population within the multiethnic and multicultural State. Singaporean leaders actively attempted to disassociate the Singaporean Muslim population from the perpetrators of the terrorist attack, as the political leadership was concerned about the attack's effect on religious harmony (Channel News Asia 2001). Hence, the Singapore government set up the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) in 2002 with the aim of creating interfaith networks and promoting greater interfaith communication between religious groups. Today, the IRCC aims to foster "friendship and trust" between "religious, ethnic and community groups at the local level" (Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth 2021).

Additionally, religious leaders in Singapore met to discuss and sign a Declaration on Religious Harmony. The declaration was released in 2003 and emphasised the principles of "religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect and understanding" (Neo 2003). These actions reflected the Government's increased attention on religious harmony in Singapore. As a religious group, Shinnyo-en needed to align and portray itself as a supporter of religious harmony to attain political survival. Additionally, Shinnyo-en also took this opportunity to more firmly ingrain itself into the Buddhist community by representing the Buddhist community in interfaith activities, thereby gaining greater social acceptance within the Buddhist and local community.

Shinnyo-en actively used these interfaith activities as a means to demonstrate the relevance of their teachings by practising Gohōshi. According to Shinso Itō, it is important to learn from different faiths and to understand how "spiritual practices provide relief and motivate compassionate action" (Shinnyo-en 2021). The Singapore temple adhered to Shinso's leadership in learning from different faiths by actively participating in interfaith activities aimed to promote greater understanding between religions as a representative of Buddhism. Therefore, Shinnyo-en continues to practise Gohōshi through partnering with other religious organisations to provide social welfare and services and ensure religious harmony.

Shinnyo-en participates actively in activities organised by two government sponsored organisations: the Kembangan-Chai Chee IRCC, which was founded in 2011, and the South East Community Development Council (CDC). Shinnyo-en began its participation in government related organisations in 2013 with the IRCC and began to involve itself in the Southeast CDC from 2018 (Loh 2021). The Community Development Council is regulated by the People's Association and aims to promote "racial harmony, strengthen social cohesion" and strengthen "community bonding" (Kee et al. 2015, pp. 42, 44). The CDC is tasked with bonding the community in the face of Singapore's increasingly urban society that has "lost a sense of community" and the "kampong spirit" (p. 44).

Shinnyo-en arbitrated the IRCC's November 2013 interfaith exchange and hosted the IRCC's 2014 Vesak Day celebration as a representative of the Buddhist community. Shinnyo-en facilitated the interfaith exchange aimed to promote "racial and religious harmony in the constituency" by facilitating communications between religions in the

constituency, contributing to promoting to greater understanding of different religious groups within the constituency (Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth 2021). This directly corresponds to Shinso's goal of providing opportunities for religions to "learn from one another" (Shinnyo-en 2021). Through explaining the significance of Vesak Day within the IRCC, this positioned Shinnyo-en as a locally accepted Buddhist organisation, promoting their social legitimacy.

In the Southeast CDC, Shinnyo-en's Youth Association has partnered and volunteered with the Racial Harmony Youth Ambassador programme. The CDC first invited Shinnyo-en youths to participate in the "Celebrating our Festivals" series of activities from 2017 to 2018 that aim to represent the Chinese, Malay, and Indian community through relevant festivals (Shinnyo-en Singapore 2017). The youths aided in distributing porridge and visited the Moral Home for the Aged. In the 2018 edition of "Celebrating our Festivals", Shinnyo-en represented the Buddhist community by sharing more about the beliefs of Buddhism and the significance of Vesak Day as the Buddha's birthday. The sharing highlighted the values of "compassion" and "mindfulness", key values of the faith, promoting religious harmony by facilitating communication between different religious groups (*The Straits Times* 2018).

Shinnyo-en also independently partners with Abdul Razak Mosque. According to practitioners, Shinnyo-en has consistently participated in joint events with Abdul Razak Mosque, practising Gohōshi by volunteering their services on a regular basis. One of these partnerships was Shinnyo-en's deployment of volunteers to assist the Abdul Razak Mosque in creating a "partial road closure giving them more space to pray" during the 2019 Hari Raya Haji period (Seow 2019). Abdul Razak Mosque's increased congregation had been increasing in size and had to organise a road closure earlier in the year for Hari Raya Puasa prayers. Shinnyo-en volunteered to assist in organising the road closure to ensure that Abdul Razak Mosque's own volunteers were able to join the congregants for prayers. This brought Shinnyo-en to nationwide attention as the incident was covered by three different newspapers in Singapore's mainstream media. Coming to national attention represents Shinnyo-en's success in ensuring its political survival. Speaker of Parliament Mr Tan Chuan-Jin also recognised Shinnyo-en's contribution as a Buddhist group, showing that Shinnyo-en had successfully achieved recognition from the Singapore government through its contribution to promoting racial harmony (Tan 2019). Collectively, Shinnyo-en's active engagement in the IRCC and CDC promotes social harmony within Singapore. These actions represent socially engaged Buddhism as the Shinnyo-en volunteers' actions and justifications were explained by Shinso's active encouragement of learning from other religions and to "motivate compassionate action".

Shinnyo-en has also sought recognition from the political leadership through its participation in the government supported IRO. The IRO was formed in 1949 and claims to be one of the oldest interfaith organisations in the world (Shinnyo-en Singapore 2015). Although it is not linked to the government, the IRO has gained significant symbolic power and has been consulted by the government relating to various interfaith legislation including the government's drafting of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1989 and the Declaration of Religious Harmony in 2003 (Lai 2008, p. 624). Members of the IRO have also been called on to "participate as religious representative" during the setting up of the IRCCs and in the IRCC National Steering Committee (p. 625). Today, the IRO is officially patronised by ex-Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong, reflecting its close relationship with the existing government (Inter-Religious Organisation 2021). Hence, Shinnyo-en has sought recognition through its contribution in the IRO and has in return gained recognition as a Buddhist organisation. In 2014, Shinnyo-en donated SGD 20,000 to aid the IRO in organising a "lecture series, dialogues" and the relaunch of a book titled *The Contribution of Religion to Peace* (Shinnyo-en Singapore 2015). In return, Shinnyo-en was invited to the IRO's 66th Anniversary banquet and was recognised as a Buddhist organisation under the IRO's 10 faiths. Successfully courting recognition from the IRO represents a substantial achievement due to the IRO's symbolic importance and significant involvement in the government's policy making regarding religion. Additionally, the IRO's

direct ties through the patronage of Mr Goh further signify Shinnyo-en's success in gaining political legitimacy through its recognition by the IRO. Shinnyo-en's ability to engage with Singapore's society is couched within its contramodernist spirituality. Members' practices of Gohōshi and Kangi legitimises Shinnyo-en's active engagement with society, couched in the continued reference to the lives of the Itō family. Today, members continue to adhere to the advice given by Shinso. Through her words, Shinnyo-en practitioners endorse and actively contribute to society to mimic her behaviour. Locally, these mechanisms enable the Shinnyo-en Singapore leadership to pursue political survival by adhering to the Singapore government's expectation of Buddhist groups through couching them in the spiritual practice of Gohōshi and Kangi. Shinnyo-en also adapts its activities to integrate into the Buddhist communities by representing Buddhism in interfaith activities, following the call of Shinso to engage other faiths.

7. Contramodernist Buddhism: A Force for Social Mobilisation?

Shinnyo-en arrived through transnational migration trends based on the strong economic relationship between Singapore and Japan. Since its arrival, Shinnyo-en has worked toward its political survival and social acceptance into the Buddhist community in Singapore by actively adjusting its organisational structure, religious practices, and engagements with society. Arriving in a climate of suspicion of new and "superstitious" religious practices, Shinnyo-en had to carefully curate its image and adjust its practices amidst the Singapore government's clamping down on religions it deemed to harm societal wellbeing, racial harmony, and transgress the boundaries of the law. Within this period, the government had begun to encourage community groups to assist in social welfare as part of the "many helping hands" approach. Shinnyo-en responded by actively taking part through social welfare activities and donations as an institution.

From 2001 to 2021, Shinnyo-en continued to react and adjust to the government's political concerns and the Japanese community in Singapore. The decreasing population of Japanese expatriates during this period incentivised Shinnyo-en to localise its Buddhist practices. This was also achieved through the adjustment of its social support structures, and the bureaucratisation of its religious classes, appealing to the Singaporean preoccupation with tangible progress, and "rational" and systematic religions. Additionally, the September 11 attacks and the subsequent Declaration on Religious Harmony spurred Shinnyo-en to engage in interfaith activities and organisations to secure its political survival and social acceptance as a Buddhist organisation in Singapore.

Throughout the adaptation of Shinnyo-en to Singapore's context, Shinnyo-en's contramodern spirituality has retained its "devotional nostalgia". Shinnyo-en practitioners in Singapore continue to orientate their lives around the founding Itō family. The centralised control over religious teachings ensures that practitioners continue to align the guiding principles of their lives to the experiences of the Itō family, creating a sense of "devotional nostalgia". This bleeds into Shinnyo-en's contribution to social welfare. Members continue to take reference from Shinjō, Tomoji, and now, Shinso to understand the manifestations of Gohōshi, Kangi, and Shinnyo-en's spirituality in today's context. This reveals how contramodernist Buddhist organisations may retain some form of social control over its congregation through the propagation of its leaders' perspectives. In turn, these perspectives may enable a contramodern Buddhist organisation's ability to mobilise and control social movements in society.

Considering the significant following of Shinnyo-en in Singapore, future studies on religions in Singapore may do well to compare the importance of a religion's teachings to the manner it is presented. Shinnyo-en's evidently "superstitious" and contramodern religiosity when couched in a "rational" and systematic manner has allowed it to grow its congregation despite the highly "rational" Singaporean society. Similarly, Shinnyo-en Singapore's ability to mobilise support for social movements in Singapore shows the influence contramodernist Buddhism through its "devotional nostalgia" in mobilising support for causes deemed suitable to its leadership. Hence, it is critical to continue to

study contramodernist Buddhist organisations as its own unique category to understand their impact and adaptations to different societies.

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