

Foreign Affairs: No Oriental Elks

By C. L. SULZBERGER

New York Times (1857-Current file); May 7, 1969; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times
pg. 46

Foreign Affairs: No Oriental Elks

By C. L. SULZBERGER

TOKYO—One cannot even dimly understand the psychological forces motivating the gifted and dynamic Japanese people without appreciating the political role intermittently played by Buddhism in this fascinating nation.

The third largest party in today's Diet is Komeito, representing the Soka Gakkai religious movement. Komeito hopes to gain as many as 10 per cent of the seats in the next parliamentary elections, thus attaining a position of holding the balance of administrative power.

Soka Gakkai was founded almost forty years ago as a lay movement to promote Nichiren Buddhism but never gained much esteem until prewar and wartime nationalism were discredited and the U.S. occupation ended. When it formed Komeito and began to zoom in influence many American experts on Japan dismissed it.

They variously called it an old-fashioned nationalist sect, a local version of Poujadism appealing to the lower middle class, and an assemblage of militant crackpots inculcating the atmosphere of Oriental Elks or Lions clubs. "Don't give it another thought," one famous diplomat assured me.

Yet Buddhism as a philosophical influence and Buddhism's

political reflections have frequently been misunderstood by Westerners. They prefer to regard the former as invariably nonviolent and peaceful and the latter as rare aberrations. Buddhism, however, with a half billion adherents, has spawned murder in Ceylon and Burma and nationalism in Vietnam and Japan.

Japan particularly has used Buddhist metaphysical doctrines for authoritarian political purposes at different epochs: the mid-sixth century, the seventh to ninth centuries, the thirteenth century, the militaristic period of 1931-1945. The Japanese habit of employing Buddhism for political purposes never sought to destroy its religious dogmas but to pervert them to nationalistic goals.

Appeal to Youth

Against this background the still modest influence of Soka Gakkai seems possibly more traditional than aberrational. Although it ultimately aims at making the Nichiren sect Japan's state religion, its precise aspirations have hitherto been expressed in Boy Scout terms to attract voters to its Komeito ("clean government") party.

The movement has special contemporary appeal by emphasizing youth in a land where age is still venerated and most

parliamentarians in the large Liberal Democrat and Socialist parties are around sixty. Komeito deputies are nearly a generation younger and their party offers a chance to those who feel held up in other channels. The postwar generation hasn't yet come into its own.

Platform and Slogans

Soka Gakkai solicits support with neo-Socialist slogans, attacks on corruption, opposition to extreme wealth, a kind of neutralism, and specific condemnation of the Liberal Democrats for being pro-American, of the Socialists for being pro-Russian or pro-Chinese. It cleverly advertises itself as being exclusively pro-Japanese, assuming Buddhism's old local cloak of nationalism.

To this simplified fare it adds excellent organization, direct appeal to farmers and small workers, plus an exciting revivalist atmosphere. Combining kindergarten doctrine, a modernistic temple below holy Mount Fuji, and strong-arm squads, it has established considerable influence.

Meanwhile a new era is approaching in Japan's history. The old Liberal Democrat leadership is slowly fraying. Its hold on farmers, maintained by supporting artificially high rice prices, becomes ragged as the

Japanese turn to new eating habits. While the Liberal Democrats extol the American security treaty and are prepared to continue unpopular bases if Washington will only yield sovereignty over Okinawa, the Socialists (depending on which faction) proclaim total faith in Soviet or Chinese benevolence.

Soka Gakkai has pragmatically sought a middle position, drawing up a list of 53 of the 148 U.S. military installations which it believes can be shut down or reduced—without denouncing the security treaty. And Soka Gakkai missionaries convert recruits while Komeito ward-healers expound messianic schemes for a brave new Japan.

This combination of Holy Roller faith with nationalistic neutralism continues to accumulate support. Frustrated young *petit bourgeois* who have received an education but entertain scant hopes for successful careers, like the idea of being asked to work for a "third civilization" higher than either capitalism or Marxism.

This odd movement hasn't attained the preponderant position predicted for it by its proselytizers; nor has it faded away. It remains on the upgrade, however, and if Japan ever is faced with crisis or economic depression it could become a dominating force.