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Navigating inclusion: ‘home-making’ in the UK Shin Buddhist community

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ABSTRACT
This contribution focuses on narratives and experiences of belonging and exclusion among convert members of Three Wheels, a Japanese Shin Buddhist temple in London, to investigate how difference is incorporated into transnational Buddhism. Three Wheels, whose members include both diasporic Japanese and convert Buddhist Europeans, occupies a marginal position within both transnational Shin Buddhism and the UK’s Buddhist (and broader religious) landscape. By embracing individual and collective marginality, I argue, priests and members foster affective connections that allow for a shared minority space to emerge where its diverse members can feel at home. To explore the dynamics of this ‘home-making’, I focus specifically on how convert members negotiate their own space in the community and the processes of inclusion and exclusion through which they navigate the linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers they encounter as convert members of a Japanese Buddhist tradition. This discussion of home-making within Three Wheels as a shared minority space highlights the complex dynamics of minority status and marginality in transnational Buddhism. It also shows how, in this case, convert Buddhists have worked with Asian migrants to build what appears to be a successful mixed local Buddhist sangha that accommodates the diverse needs of its members.

Introduction

On 13 October 2019 I attended my first London Eza service and dharma talk1 at Three Wheels, a Japanese Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land, often called Shin) Buddhist temple tucked away in a residential area of London suburbia in Acton Town. A gathering of roughly 40 people filled the double reception room of a semi-detached Victorian house that had been converted into the temple’s main hall, housing a statue of Amida Buddha. Reverend Satō Kenmyō, the temple’s head priest and his deputy, Reverend Ishii Kenshin, led the service.2 They were joined by audience members of varied backgrounds and religious affiliations. This was a mixed minority community that included Japanese migrants living in the UK, not all of whom were Buddhist, as

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well as Shin Buddhist converts of various nationalities. Although small, it was successful in having created a space where members from disparate cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds all seemed to feel at home. This success is rooted in the community’s capacity for accommodating the diverse needs of each group as they navigate and negotiate their minority identities: the converts as a religious minority and the Japanese migrants as an ethnic minority.

This contribution focuses primarily on the experiences of converts to explore how difference is incorporated into Shin Buddhism when transplanted into a European context. Existing studies of transnational Buddhist ventures demonstrate the importance of unpacking the minority status and marginality of diaspora groups or BIPOC converts (Gleig 2019, 139–75; Han 2021), and convert women belonging to the ‘white’ ethnic mainstream (Starkey 2020). Drawing on Thomas Tweed’s theorisation of religion as a spatial and relational process (2006, 77), I join this conversation to consider what constitutes minority in Three Wheels, an organisation that did not set out to form a ‘convert’ group but developed organically to include convert members who are now dominant, at least numerically.

By focusing on the issue of minority understood on religious grounds, I highlight how marginality is formed and negotiated at institutional level and through practitioners’ lived experiences in transnational Buddhism. A journey through the way convert members of Three Wheels participate in ‘finding a space and making a place’ (Tweed 2006, 105) for their religious belonging, I seek to understand transnational Buddhism as a practice of home-making where meaningful boundaries are mapped out to construct collective identity and, equally, allow people to imagine and experience various degrees of social distance and closeness. Tweed’s approach to spatially and affectively mapping religion in Crossing and Dwelling (2006, 69, 73) provides a springboard for encountering how convert Buddhists cross into and dwell within the minority Buddhist communities in Britain. At the same time, I highlight the presence of Shin Buddhists in British Buddhism and how, in the case of Three Wheels, convert Buddhists have worked in tandem with Asian migrants to build a sustainable local sangha as a safe shared space for its diverse membership.

To capture their experiences, I use the etic term ‘convert Buddhists’ to convey a metaphor of movement of how individuals came to cross and dwell within Buddhism in Britain in their adult life, rather than by inheriting Buddhist practice from their parents. Although ‘convert’ is not a term they use to define their own identities, I label them as first-generation Buddhists converts who, more often than not, describe their Shin Buddhist identities in relation to what they do and how they feel, rather than who they are. Scholarship on Buddhism in Europe often uses the term ‘convert Buddhist’ as a proxy for ‘white’. My etic use of the term ‘convert’, while not without issues, serves to avoid white/Asian Buddhist binary (Bluck 2006, 16) and to acknowledge the multifaceted identities of members within transnational Buddhist communities. While the majority of Three Wheels’ convert members are white, other ethnicities are also represented.

While I conducted research with convert Buddhists and Japanese members, I decided to focus my discussion of minority on the former to understand the journeys they make to Buddhism in their adulthood and how they come to navigate their minority convert identities within a transnational Shin Buddhist community. Through their experiences of Shin Buddhism in Britain, I began to question whether a notion of minority could be explored productively through the lived experiences of people whose often white convert
identities and middle-class socioeconomic standing do not lend themselves to being seen as a minority. It also led me to consider what tensions emerge when my interlocutors are faced with navigating the conditions of dual minority as Buddhists in Britain and as members of a religious minority.

Three Wheels is the only Shin Buddhist community in the UK with permanent premises and local Japanese diaspora membership. Yet, to a passer-by, the only indication of the temple’s Japanese or Buddhist identity is a stone placed in the house’s front garden into which the temple’s name has been carved in graceful calligraphy. Although Three Wheels belongs to the biggest of eight major ‘mainstream’ Buddhist denominations in contemporary Japan, its unassuming presence in English suburbia stands as a metaphor for the marginal space Shin Buddhism occupies in British Buddhism. In February 2020, Rev. Satō estimated the number of ‘dharma friends’ – the core group supporting the temple activities – to be around 30 people, with approximately two thirds of them European and one third Japanese. Based on the numbers reported by Matsunaga (2022, 13), the cohort of dharma friends in the mid-2000s was of a similar size; it had grown since the temple’s establishment in 1994 but remained consistently flat over the next fifteen years.

There are practical reasons for this lack of growth. As the UK branch of Shōgyōji, an independent Shin Buddhist temple with only loose ties to one of the two dominant Shin sects in Japan, Three Wheels lacks the institutional resources of the more expansive official Shin Buddhist missions in the Americas. Also, compared to other Japanese Buddhist groups such as Sōka Gakkai,3 Shin Buddhists are not avid proselytisers. Three Wheels’ priests de-emphasise conversion and expansion in favour of building a small but eclectic community under the temple’s leading principle of nurturing ‘harmony within diversity’ (ishitsu no naka chōwa). They focus on personal connections and the individual needs of their members to foster the internal strength of the community. Membership is not formalised and anyone wishing to stay connected must either visit in person or sign up for email updates. As much as it is welcoming to newcomers and engages in intercultural exchange events, the mailing list is not widely advertised and the community relies more readily on personal connections, recommendations, and invitations. Having developed in a culture not attuned to Buddhism, and to Shin Buddhism in particular, the community’s strength is rooted in cultivating members’ identification with and belonging to Shin Buddhism and Three Wheels more specifically. As this contribution shows, belonging is not fostered through efforts to erase differences among members but rather through the interplay of flexibility, inclusion, and exclusion.

I start by contextualising Three Wheels within the broader Shin Buddhist landscape in the UK and beyond to outline the various levels at which it occupies a position of marginality. Drawing on ‘patchwork’ ethnographic fieldwork (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020) involving offline and online participant observations and interviews conducted at Three Wheels between October 2019 and February 2020, and in early 2021,4 I then go on to show how the group’s minority status is integral to fostering personal and affective connections within the community. These connections empower convert members to navigate linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers that they encounter within a Japanese Buddhist tradition. I argue that, by embracing their individual and collective marginality, non-Japanese members invest in Three Wheels’ internal strength and allow for a shared minority space to emerge where diverse groups of members can feel at home. To explore these processes of home-making, I draw on experiences of 12
convert members, 11 of white European (predominantly British) and one of British Asian background, who grew up in (mostly religiously diverse) households with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic, and/or atheist members. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late fifties and they were mostly working professionals with higher education degrees and relatively stable economic circumstances.

I conducted my research as a white non-Buddhist and declared atheist but I was expected to reflect on the Buddhist teachings and my affective connections with the community regardless. I was also allowed to hang out at the temple to help with cooking and garden work, and to join the communal meals. Those moments allowed me to build rapport and have many informal conversations which led to more formal interviews later on. My interviewees include engaged community leaders, entrenched and committed members, as well as loosely affiliated members just at the start of their Shin Buddhist journeys.

Three Wheels as a minority sangha

Three Wheels is one of several Buddhist groups and traditions in the UK, which span Theravada, Tibetan, and Mahayana lineages and include Japanese Buddhist groups among which Zen Buddhism is best known. According to the 2011 census in England and Wales, Buddhists represented 0.5% of the religious landscape with a third of British Buddhists reported to reside in London (Tomalin and Starkey 2016). Since denominational breakdown is not included, the number of Shin Buddhists in the UK is difficult to estimate. There is no formal membership system in any of the four known Shin communities, which have been developed and sustained mainly by geographically dispersed convert followers and a handful of convert part-time priests. Matsunaga (2022) hazards an estimate of 60 people, including six convert and two Japanese priests. The North and South American Shin Buddhist presence is well-established and has been historically sustained by a sizeable settled Japanese migrant population and the institutional support of the sectarian headquarters in Japan facilitated through para-organisations such as the Buddhist Churches of America and Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii that provide affiliated temples with resources (Bloom [1998] 2020; Mitchell 2010; Matsue 2014; Williams 2019; Moriya 2019). While such support is rarely, if ever, financial in nature, it comes with the prestige of an institutional lineage, and other forms of socio-religious and human capital which the temples have been able to mobilise. In contrast, Shin Buddhism remains little known in Europe (Borup 2021, 124; Bluck 2006, 19). By default, Three Wheels remains a minority within a minority both in the UK and Europe more broadly.

In Europe, including the UK, convert followers dominate Shin Buddhism (Borup 2021, 124–125, Matsunaga 2022). Three Wheels is somewhat of an exception as it is located in an area with a considerable number of Japanese residents who are supported by the two salaried Japanese priests, Rev. Satō and Rev. Ishii. Its convert community is certainly an important pillar of Three Wheels but the temple was originally conceived as an institution to support the London-based Japanese diaspora. As such, it constitutes a shared minority space, especially given that some of the convert members live locally, have Japanese partners, and have children who attend the local Japanese school. Three Wheels is a transnational outreach project of Shōgyōji, an independent temple in Fukuoka Prefecture with only loose ties to one of Japan’s major Shin sects, Shinshū Ōtani-ha.
Shōgyōji provides spiritual and limited financial support to Three Wheels, including exchange training programmes for members. Three Wheels therefore has strong institutional links with Japan. But with only a loose connection to the major Shin sects, it is a minority within the Shin Buddhist transnational community as well as a (Shin) minority within a (Buddhist) minority in the UK.9

Shin Buddhist teachings and practice mark Three Wheels out as ‘different’ from most Buddhist groups in the UK, often carrying with them the stigma of ‘inauthenticity’ and ‘unorthodoxy’ especially in Europe where Theravada Buddhism and meditation-focused practice dominate the Buddhist imaginary (Amstutz 1997, 68–70; Porcu 2008; Matsunaga 2022, 8). Shin Buddhist teachings emphasise salvation through faith (shinjin) alone. Enlightenment is ensured through rebirth in the Pure Land created by the Amida Buddha, which is assured to all who say Amida’s name. Therefore, the primary form of devotional practice is nembutsu, chanting of the Buddha’s name in the form of ‘namu amida butsu’ (‘I take refuge in the Amida Buddha’), which in Shin Buddhism is an expression of gratitude for the Buddha’s benevolence in granting liberation from suffering.10 As such the form of Buddhism practised at Three Wheels is often referred to as ‘other power’ (tariki) Buddhism as opposed to ‘self power’ (jiriki), which involves striving for enlightenment through one’s own strength as practised, for example, in Zen meditation.

Many of the non-Japanese members of Three Wheels whom I interviewed admitted that they were attracted to the other power teachings and found them liberating. The appeal of other power among the convert members challenges a rational convert Buddhist imaginary underpinning the ‘two Buddhisms’ typology (Wilson 2019, 839–840), which, contrary to Prebish’s (1993, 189) original intention, began to be seen as a demarcation of value that situates rational white convert Buddhists in opposition to devotional and ritualistic heritage Buddhists. Western stereotypical expectations of Buddhism, including the initial impressions held by my interviewees, are based on meditation and monasticism (Amstutz 2014, 143). These imaginaries are in stark contrast to the Shin Buddhist path and the teachings of other power. As Andy, one of my interviewees observed, a Shin follower ‘can lean on the compassion of Amida’ supported by a married priest with a full head of hair. Another convert member explained that other power helped them understand that their own ego is ‘the biggest obstacle to pursuing the Buddhist path’. They found reassurance and encouragement in knowing that Amida’s vow embraces them ‘just as you are’. Others described how it brought them closer to practising compassion in however limited a form (a point to which I will return). Experiences of other power by the Three Wheels convert members point to reconfiguring the map of convert Buddhism in Britain and more broadly to including the devotional and faith aspects into its rational imaginary. But, as Matsunaga (2022, 21) points out, this reliance on other power is one of the reasons why Shin Buddhism is often misunderstood and considered inauthentic.

For a long time, Shin Buddhist groups across Europe struggled to gain acceptance among various Buddhist networks. As a result, knowledge about Shin Buddhism and its teachings and practice was limited. In 1996 the Buddhist Society in London finally included Pure Land Buddhism on their curriculum, opening the door for increased knowledge about Shin Buddhism in the UK. Rev. Satō, the head priest of Three Wheels and a former university professor, is actively involved in the Buddhist Society programme,
especially since he became a member of its board of directors. He has also published several translations of and commentaries on Shin Buddhist texts in English to support his members’ spiritual journeying and to spread Shin Buddhist teachings beyond Japan. He is therefore actively working to counter prejudice against Shin Buddhism. Convert members of Three Wheels value Rev. Satō’s spiritual and scholarly efforts as they facilitate their learning. His scholarly prestige also spreads an aura of exclusivity around their own practice and the relationship with their teacher. In our conversation in March 2021, Marcus explained that being led by a knowledgeable teacher versed in the original texts has deepened his understanding of and strengthened his commitment to this specific form of Buddhist practice. He also felt ‘pride on the verge of shameful arrogance’ in his discipleship lineage connection to ‘this small but unique and influential London community’. He felt privileged and empowered by it.

Three Wheels’ minority is therefore experienced on many levels. The temple belongs to a contextually marginalised Buddhist tradition which still has only a small and fragmented following in the UK. It is also affiliated to a minor independent temple in regional Japan and therefore has a relatively marginal position within Shin Buddhism both in Japan and as a transnational movement. Since it lacks the access to shared resources and social connections that accrue from being part of larger transnational lineage networks, including Dharma school materials and hymnals produced collectively through para-organisations such as the Buddhist Churches of America, Three Wheels stays locally invested, small, and close-knit, focused on accommodating its members’ diverse needs. Members are therefore often forced to rely on their own labour and develop knowledge pools to sustain their community materially and spiritually. As such, Three Wheels represents a complex shared minority space within which non-Japanese members strive to map, build, and inhabit their own space.

Encounters: ‘harmony within diversity’

The physical space of Three Wheels and the events and activities that are hosted there lie at the foundation of the interviewed convert members’ sense of belonging – the temple is a place where they can feel at home. ‘We wanted to create a space that would make people realise that Buddhist faith can be practised everywhere, across borders and across cultures’, Rev. Satō announced during our first encounter in October 2019. As of 15 May 2021, Three Wheels presented itself on its website as ‘the hub of a lively multi-cultural Shin Buddhist Sangha’, driven by the vision of an inclusive community under ‘the principle of “Harmony within Diversity”’. To avoid what Amstutz (2014) terms ‘ethno-chauvinism’, Rev. Satō insists on remaining flexible in how he supports members’ diverse needs.

The temple space is spread across three different Victorian houses on the same residential street in Acton. One houses the main Buddhist altars, while the other two serve as ‘Taya Houses’ (meaning ‘the house of many’) for hosting events and providing long- and short-term accommodation for community members, including visitors from Japan. For Rev. Satō, these spaces are important for creating ‘meaningful encounters with the teaching of Shin Buddhism and with one another in the Light of the Buddha’. This language of meaningful encounters and cross-cultural dharma friendships is part of Three Wheels’ community building. A range of religious and cultural activities enable these
encounters. They include lifecycle rituals (funeral and wedding ceremonies), daily morning and evening prayer services, London Eza meetings, bi-annual Shokai retreats, weekly meditation classes, monthly Japanese dharma talks, annual Zen garden open days, and several religious and cultural events for specific groups such as women or children.

Some people are brought to the temple through their need for ritual services such as memorial services for the dead. Lifecycle events are often the first point of connection for Japanese members, who need a priest to conduct the relevant rituals (whether they self-identify as Buddhists or not). Some non-Japanese members also turn to Three Wheels for wedding and funeral services. Introduced to the group by her son, Kate started attending regularly in early 2019. At the London Eza meeting in February 2020 she approached Rev. Ishii about the possibility of arranging a Buddhist funeral. Rev. Ishii stressed the importance of making prior arrangements and informing her family of her wishes, noting that ‘very often families of our non-Japanese members don’t know that they wish for a Buddhist ceremony’. Something that is instinctively understood as a Buddhist practice in a Japanese context requires careful planning by convert members, especially when their Buddhist identities remain private and culturally unfamiliar to their loved ones. Rev. Ishii admitted that their convert members are most commonly buried in accordance with Christian or Humanist customs chosen by their families. Then, as a community, Three Wheels usually holds memorial services for them as a reminder of the dharma friendships that tied them to the community.

Beyond lifecycle rituals, the variety in the activities run by the temple attests to the thought given to the socio-religious needs, linguistic capacities, and intensities of spiritual closeness among members. One event that unites them is the bi-monthly London Eza gathering, the main event at the temple when Japanese and non-Japanese members gather to listen to dharma talks and share a communal meal. Thomas sees Eza as a reminder of the community’s diversity: ‘This is the only real time when all dharma friends come together, regardless of our ethnicity, language, and reasons for being there’. For Thomas, this is a moment for celebrating his community’s Japanese roots and its local identity. During Eza, chanting is led in Japanese while preaching is delivered in English with advanced printed copies available for all attendees. It is also a moment when new members are welcomed, everyone is updated on the latest news, and long-term members share their reflections on preaching and encourage newer attendees to share their thoughts after the dharma talks. While Eza gatherings are open to anyone who is even vaguely curious or interested in Buddhism, they can be intimidating for newcomers. For Kate, the experience of sharing at her first Eza made her feel uneasy: ‘I felt like a fraud. What did I know about Buddhism?! I’d only just got here’. But hearing others share their thoughts, including Rev. Ishii’s emotional personal reflections on taking refuge in Amida Buddha ‘just as you are’ (sonomama), encouraged her to attend regularly. With time she ‘eased into sharing’ and became more vocal in ‘acknowledging Buddhist teachings in my own life’.

Sharing recollections of encounters with and within Three Wheels engenders mutual recognition of members’ Shin Buddhist identities and fosters emotional connections among them. Eza is not a normative practice in Jōdo Shinshū tradition, and as a practice of breakaway lineage, it contributed to Shōgyōji’s independence from its prior affiliation with Tsukiji Honganji, Hongwanji-ha. Regardless of its very marginal practice in mainstream Japanese Shin Buddhism, it constitutes an important marker of
what Tweed (2006) would call religious home-making that maps out social space of Three Wheels as an affectively charged environment. And if we follow Tweed’s reasoning that religion is a spatial practice of home-making that helps us map out where we are from and how we move across spaces and their boundaries (2006, 79), the marginal practice of Eza that shapes Three Wheels’ religious identity constitutes an affective experience of minority that enables such home-making.

Many convert interviewees ascribed significance to witnessing others’ spiritual and emotional vulnerability, talking about how this had inspired and affirmed their own sense of Shin Buddhist belonging. The emotional underpinnings of their stories mirrored those of the accounts given by Rev. Ishii and Rev. Satō of finding their path to Shin Buddhism and the priesthood. All of them focused on their first meaningful encounters with their dharma teachers and friends and were precise in recalling feelings of warmth radiating from Rev. Satō and Rev. Ishii’s bodies as well as the priests’ words of affirmation that they were welcome in this community just as they were. These encounters and recollections marked moments of (relived) acknowledgement of their own sense of home experienced at Three Wheels. As scholars of Buddhism and affect have shown (Baffelli et al. 2021; Williams-Oerberg 2021), such affective connections and moments of recognition are important mechanisms for building shared spaces of belonging.16

While Eza can facilitate such spiritual encounters, others find them in the temple’s Zen garden or weekly meditation classes. Adam, a local resident in his forties who joined the community a few years ago after attending a Zen garden open day, explained that this event had provided a perfect opportunity to approach Three Wheels: ‘I was already interested in Buddhism, reading extensively and meditating, but I didn’t know where to place it all’. His wife told him about the temple and after his initial visit he started attending meditation classes: ‘Finally, I had somewhere to take this pursuit and people to talk to’. His initiation into Shin Buddhist teachings and nembutsu practice followed later. Rev. Satō who leads the meditation classes often combines Zen and Shin Buddhist teachings to connect with attendees. Some, like Adam, move towards further inclusion while others remain connected mainly through meditation.

Again, neither the Zen garden nor the meditation classes are normative Shin Buddhist practices. Although both attract only a small following, they are important spaces for non-Japanese members. Incorporating these elements and fusing them with the nembutsu practice of gratitude is designed to make the experience of Shin Buddhist teachings more familiar and facilitate encounters, while making the temple an inviting space for Buddhist practice that is more intelligible for European audiences. This move is not unusual. Although it remains a contested practice in transnational Shin Buddhist communities, many Shin Buddhist temples in North America have started to offer meditation classes in the past few decades (Dessi 2013, 70–76); in Brazil they have also been opening up to the idea of silent Zen and chanting meditation (Matsue 2014). Scholars of Buddhism in the west have shown that communal chanting meditation can help build community feeling and foster inclusion in transnational Buddhist communities (Gleig 2019; Starkey 2020). Three Wheels is riding this wave of opportunity and adaptability by incorporating elements into its Shin practice that not only appeal to their members but also represent complex socio-religious connections of their leaders. Rev. Satō developed his appreciation and understanding of meditation practice through his personal connection to D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), a Japanese-American Buddhist monk and scholar who was instrumental in
spreading Shin and Zen Buddhism outside of Japan. Rev. Satō worked with D.T. Suzuki to catalogue his extensive library and considered him his spiritual teacher. D.T. Suzuki’s writings influenced his own understanding and propagation of Shin Buddhism at Three Wheels. While some of Three Wheels teachings and practices mark it out as not wholly representative of Japanese Shin Buddhist tradition, they make the community more accommodating and diverse for those involved.

For Adam and others like him meditation classes were a safe point of entry to explore the community and become familiar with its socio-religious grammar. Anna, who also regularly attended the classes, explained that she had always felt ‘out of place’ in the other Buddhist communities she had visited, but at Three Wheels the meditation route had allowed her to become familiar with the priests and to try out practices that resonated with her own spiritual needs. She was attracted by the community’s dharma friendship structures expressed through teacher-disciple and peer-to-peer relations. At Three Wheels, religious belonging is a relational endeavour that requires emotional labour and vulnerability. In her words, ‘here we create and realise interconnectedness by sharing stories and learning from others’. Such labour of affective connectivity, what Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg terms ‘connection work’ (Williams-Oerberg 2021), not only wills religious spaces into existence, but equally enables people to feel at home with this process of personal crossing of boundaries. Meditation classes provided Anna an opportunity to ask questions and begin formulating her own dharma friendships. Anna and Adam both spoke of Rev. Ishii’s ability to provide very personal explanations of complex Buddhist concepts, which allowed them to build confidence and increase their participation.

Emir was attracted by the Zen garden as ‘an open meditative space’. By working in the garden every Saturday as part of his meditative practice, Emir felt that he belonged to ‘an intimate compassionate community’. He spent most of his Saturday mornings alone tidying the Zen Garden, removing the fallen leaves and weeds. For him, this kind of work was teaching him Shin Buddhist values through embodied practice.

Everyone is living out their compassion here. . . . I explored Sri Lankan Buddhism before, but it is about preaching and your own power. It does not help you find compassion. It tells you to do it – be compassionate! – rather than guide[s] you to compassion by example.

The garden work and caring for that space made Emir feel welcomed into the community and allowed him to ‘live out’ and inhabit the shared values he was attempting to understand.

In short, the Three Wheel convert members whom I interviewed, hailing from diverse backgrounds, felt encouraged and empowered to process their journeys into this shared minority space through a wide range of meaningful encounters. These encounters were central to the creation of religious community, since they occurred within particular spaces and between distinct and linguistically diverse members. As such, these encounters – and the community’s diversification of its teachings and practices to facilitate them – reflected an iterative dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that allowed diverse groups at Three Wheels to feel at home.
Inclusion of exclusive spaces as ‘home-making’

Shared minority spaces like Three Wheels are complex. Three Wheels’ survival and success is intrinsically tied to its Japanese and non-Japanese members’ sense of self and the ongoing creation of a space that they can both collectively and separately identify as theirs. Chatani (2021, 590) argues that ‘home is saturated with meanings which are continuously (re)produced and contested through mundane and intimate interactions, personalisation and self-identification with the space, and segregation from the outside world’. In Three Wheels, practices of personalisation and segregation within the community play out as members negotiate their inclusion and rootedness by finding or creating exclusive spaces where they feel at home. Inclusion and exclusion, or ‘harmony within diversity’ as Rev. Satô would put it, are therefore equally important and co-dependent dynamics of home-making that can occur along various lines, including language, class, gender, ethnicity, or spiritual need.

While Three Wheels follows a traditional Japanese Temple Buddhism model of community-building with strong hierarchical leadership, it draws on nembutsu practice and Shin Buddhist teachings to establish a ‘new’ model of empowered lay Buddhist community that can accommodate diversity, while still working to cultivate a sense of belonging to Shin Buddhism. Rev. Satô and Rev. Ishii see nembutsu as ‘a moment of encounter’ that brings people together to realise their interdependence, ‘to forget oneself and truly recognise another person’. They intentionally avoid the language of temple-parishioner dependencies and instead use terms such as ‘sangha’ and ‘dharma friends’ to evoke a more universal sense of belonging to a broader Buddhist community and to emphasise the collective nature of Shin Buddhist practice. As noted earlier, this concurrently local and trans-local notion of Buddhist belonging firmly rooted in the nembutsu practice and faith in other power has proven successful in attracting Buddhist converts, who constitute the devotional core at Three Wheels.

When I first met Adam, he invited me to join him in the Zen garden at the back of the temple. As we picked up leaves littering the neatly combed stones, I asked him about nembutsu. He burst out without hesitation: ‘This is the only way I know how to be Buddhist’. What he meant by ‘the only way’ was what he perceived to be the unifying nature of nembutsu. In its simplicity, Adam explained, this practice brings people together regardless of their ‘language skills, education, gender, and ethnicity’, so they can find peace of mind and ‘work harder at becoming a better person’. All can find home within Buddhist teachings because all, without exception, can take refuge in Amida’s benevolence. Afterwards, he listed the various services at the temple, explaining the make-up of the different ‘mini-communities’ involved, as well as the importance of finding your place in the Three Wheels community ‘to be able to accommodate and to find a way to be accommodated’. Adam regularly attended London Eza and valued its social aspect as it reminded him of his community’s diversity. However, the most rewarding part of his participation was attending the daily morning and evening services. These services gather an intimate group of convert members who live locally (sometimes as few as one or two), the Buddhist priests, and their families residing at the temple. These daily services are an example of what Adam called ‘mini-communities’ that allow inclusion of different members through small supportive groups.
Adam sees value in the intimacy of daily prayer sessions. Each opens with communal chanting of Shin Buddhist verses such as Shōshinge (commonly translated as the Verses on or the Hymn of True Faith) and readings from the Ofumi, a collection of letters written by the Shin Buddhist teacher Rennyō (1415–1499), and from the Tannishō, a collection gathering teachings of the Shin Buddhist founder Shinran (1173–1262). This is followed by what community members referred to as ‘sharing’. Each participant is encouraged to say something about their life and way of thinking or acting, and to reflect on it through Buddhist teachings with the help of others. Rev. Satō and Rev. Ishii often support with impromptu short dharma talks and share episodes from their own lives to guide members. For Adam, these services accommodate his need for a more guided and individual-focused encounter with Buddhist teachings and practice where, at times, difficult and sensitive personal struggles can be processed. Mark, who lives locally and also regularly attends the morning services, refers to them as an opportunity ‘to create a safe space where people really listen’ and where you can appreciate the meaning of nembutsu and be ‘guided to compassion’.

Before his wife introduced him to Three Wheels, Mark had been actively studying Buddhism and meditating. Having navigated his way to Buddhist teachings after experiencing a personal loss, meditating became part of his daily routine to help him cope with that loss and the pressures of family and professional life. He appreciates that he is able to continue silent Zen meditation at Three Wheels but encountering nembutsu was a moment of transformation:

It’s not like I found faith or anything like that. But I found my niche, my home. . . . When you really, truly hear nembutsu for the first time you just get it, it all connects, and there is this relief that you’ve arrived. It’s powerful. . . . And you know you can be better and you can do life better, but it is okay to be imperfect. You learn compassion for others but you also really find compassion for yourself.

For Mark, discovering nembutsu and Pure Land teachings defined his belonging as a Buddhist, and more specifically his ‘niche’ and sense of ‘home’ as a Shin Buddhist. He told me that he did not always ‘understand Buddhism’ and the complexities of Shinran’s or D.T. Suzuki’s writings. ‘Compared to others’, he said, he often felt that he had ‘limited capacity for knowing Buddhism philosophically’, but he felt ‘moved by Buddhism’ when he processed things with his fellow dharma friends. Akin to Adam, he favoured the intimate set-up of daily morning services where language and conceptual barriers could be more easily overcome, and where complex doctrinal discourses could be left out. Developing his thinking and practice in intimate settings also helped Mark gain confidence in using the dharma teachings to support others. ‘I am more likely to offer reflections during Eza’, he explained, ‘because I get to explore connections between my life and the dharma’. This allowed him to feel more rooted in the wider community at Three Wheels.

Rev. Ishii repeatedly remarked that stripped down and grounded Buddhist encounters such as the daily prayer meetings empower convert members who see this way of doing Buddhism as genuine and true to the path, but he appreciated that they unavoidably create a divide between different cohorts of the Three Wheels community. Except for chanting, the language of communication during prayer meetings was English. This automatically excludes non-English speakers. The prayer sessions were also more
accessible to members living locally, thus excluding those commuting from other places in and outside London, like Ruth. Until the meetings were moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was never able to attend. Even in the online environment, she struggled to share in what she saw as a male-dominated convert environment. She admitted that she had learnt a lot from other people’s reflections but rarely had the confidence to contribute, especially as she hardly ever saw female members of the temple families offering their interpretations of the Buddhist teachings. Similar boundaries often emerged in the bi-monthly London Eza meetings attended by convert and Japanese members alike. All are encouraged to offer personal reflections on teachings delivered in English. In the three meetings I attended, convert members – most of whom tended to be male – were the only ones to offer responses apart from the Buddhist priests. Japanese female members have developed their own gendered spaces for more active participation and sharing such as ‘Buddhist Women’s Group’ and ‘Children’s Group’ meetings. But female convert members like Ruth are not always able to navigate these spaces successfully since the dominant language is Japanese.

Members’ diverse engagements with Three Wheels reveal how people nurture intimate connections and build supplementary, smaller supportive communities where they can feel empowered in their practice. The efforts of both priests and members to build these sub-communities highlight the iterative dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Creating a space for a specific cohort with particular needs so that they are not excluded from the community inevitably means creating a space where other members will feel out of place. Yet, crossing and re-enforcing boundaries in the process of religious home-making enables encounters that render the shared space malleable (Tweed 2006, 110) and open to emerge from the material realities of actively making the place (Massey 1995, 189). Thus, the inclusivity of Three Wheels as a mixed minority community is made possible through the creation of these exclusive spaces where particular cohorts can feel at home and cultivate their identities as Shin Buddhists.19

**Overcoming linguistic exclusion as ‘home-making’**

There are different ways for convert Buddhists to feel at home in a community that has not intentionally set out to be a ‘convert’ community. Within Three Wheels, convert members’ sense of belonging and empowerment seems to deepen as they become immersed in practice and begin to negotiate their minority status within a Japanese Buddhist tradition through active efforts to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to inclusion. Those efforts create connections between members, giving them a sense of investment in and belonging to the Three Wheels community as its co-producers. In this respect, difference can become a productive force empowering members to actively make Three Wheels their ‘home’ by overcoming exclusion.20

The set-up of London Eza meetings not only prioritises proficient English-language users, partially reinforcing the linguistic privilege of convert Buddhist members, but also reinforces boundaries between distinct groups who participate in specific activities aligned with their age, gender, spiritual needs, and linguistic capacities. Monthly dharma talks delivered in Japanese, for example, provide Japanese members with linguistic inclusion, which is not always possible at the London Eza meetings where English is the language of instruction and discussion. Their sense of home is further evoked through
activities and spaces that openly play on the tropes of recognisable Japanese culture such as calligraphy lessons, Japanese tea ceremonies, visits to the temple’s Zen garden, and even chanting in Japanese language, thus reinforcing the image of Three Wheels as the centre of an ethno-religious minority community. Emiko, a Japanese female member in her forties, explained that Three Wheels is not only a space for spiritual encounters, but also ‘for cultural and human connections to help people feel at home and reconnect with Japanese language’.  

The orientation of particular activities towards the inclusion and needs of some members (Anglophone converts, diasporic Japanese) inevitably leads to socio-linguistic exclusion among others. This can create a sense of internal marginalisation. During the pandemic, Ruth, a relatively new member, was looking for ways of connecting with the community and decided to join the meetings of the Buddhist women’s group. She was unaware of the structural characteristics that the group borrowed from the Japanese temple management system, which were now being deployed to create a social and community space for Japanese women living in the UK. She attended a couple of meetings online but soon realised that, as a foreigner, she was the odd one out. In her words, she ‘made other women feel uncomfortable but it was me who didn’t belong there’. Although the Japanese women gathered to read Buddhist texts, chant sutras, and gossip, the vernacular language of the meetings was Japanese. As her fellow Japanese community members attempted to accommodate her and provide partial translations of their conversations, Ruth understood that that space was not for her and stopped attending.

Although language can be a marker of categorical exclusion for members like Ruth, as an area of friction between non-Japanese and Japanese members it has been extremely empowering for others. Rather than diversifying activities to suit Anglophone members by introducing Anglophone chanting sessions, Andy and others worked to integrate themselves into the Japanese chanting sessions. As one of Three Wheels’ first convert members, Andy joined the community at a time when all ritual materials and texts were in Japanese without Romanised transliterations. ‘It was all in Japanese and even if we learned kana, it [the chanting] was really fast-paced”, he explained. He and his fellow convert members were ‘too slow, inept, and lacking in confidence’ to fully participate and to feel included. As a first step towards inclusion, Andy and James worked together with the priests to create a hand-annotated version of the existing prayer books accessible to non-Japanese speakers. The next step was to create a Romanised version of all the prayers and sutras in the prayer books. Hence the ‘Green Sutra Book’ was born and is now freely available to all convert members unable to read or follow Japanese script. Their development of this book encouraged members to study the meaning of the teachings and develop spiritual friendships and networks of support.

There was, however, a third step towards full participation: repetitive and independent practice to be able to keep up with the speed of chanting. That practice, Andy said, is what brought the convert members ‘closer to the community’. ‘We started to chant out loud’, Andy told me. ‘We were still bad, but getting better and tuning in with others’. Developing that embodied literacy to chant and overcoming conditions of exclusion on the basis of no or limited Japanese language proficiency created an emotional connection among convert members and between non-Japanese and Japanese members, thus enabling a productive space for them to nurture their individual and collective senses
of belonging. Andy’s and others’ active embodied presence in ritual worship allowed them to feel that their involvement mattered. With the support of the priests, they exercised some control over the process of rooting their practice in their London suburban environment and created a sense of home by overcoming linguistic exclusion.

Conclusion

Drawing on an example of one London-based Shin Buddhist community, this contribution has shown how transnational minority religious communities can be built through members’ navigation of inclusion and exclusion within Buddhist practice. It also points to the malleability and translatability of minority religious practices and structures as they travel across national borders and take root in local contexts. At Three Wheels, Buddhist priests and the convert members I interviewed embrace their minority and focus on strengthening internal community ties. While fully harmonious co-existence is not always achievable, the non-Japanese members I interviewed find value in their engagement in this minority Buddhist community because it allows them to belong through creation of exclusive spaces to address their individualised spiritual and emotional needs. While some worry about the temple’s future survival, many non-Japanese and Japanese members I interviewed during the pandemic made it clear that their priority is the preservation of the existing close-knit community, not growth. The experiences and priorities of Three Wheels members compel us to recognise that minority status and marginality in shared ethno-religious communities are complex dynamics, which force members to both overcome and create exclusion within the community as well as in their relations to the external world.

Collective belonging and growth are not always measures of success in such communities, neither are they always possible, and growth is not always a marker of empowerment and representation. Empowerment can often be found internally, especially when members work around linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers within the community. Narratives and experiences of inclusion and exclusion can thus serve as internal mechanisms for collective home-making that leave space for members’ diverse needs to be attended to.

Notes

1. Eza literally means ‘to meet and sit’. In Buddhist contexts it refers to a place where attendees gather for dharma talks. Dharma talks are sermons and discussions that draw on doctrinal and practice-based teachings and commentaries on the lives of Buddhas and Buddhist masters.
2. At the request of Rev. Satō and Rev. Ishii, I anonymised neither their nor the temple’s name, but I use pseudonyms for other community members who requested it. For Japanese names I follow the Japanese convention and list the surname first.
3. As of 20 December 2021, the Soka Gakkai International UK website (https://sgi-uk.org) self-reported having 14,000 members across 620 local groups. While these numbers are impossible to verify, the groups activities are often geared towards outreach.
4. The research received approval from the Manchester Metropolitan University’s Ethics Committee. Fieldwork I conducted at Shōgyōji in Japan in August 2019 has also contributed
to my general understanding of Three Wheels and its relationship to the broader Shin Buddhist tradition.

5. Until 2019 there were only two ordained UK convert priests, who were associated through ordination lineage with the Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii (Matsunaga 2022, 3).


7. On Japanese Buddhism in Europe, see the two-part special issue in the Journal of Religion in Japan edited by and with an Introduction by Jørn Borup (2021), which includes an article by Louella Matsunaga (2022) on Shin Buddhism in the UK.

8. The European equivalent to Three Wheels is the largest Pure Land temple in Europe called Ekō-Haus der Japanischen Kultur (Ekō Centre of Japanese Culture) in Düsseldorf, Germany. Since its establishment in 1988, it has been a Honganji temple and a Japanese culture centre aimed primarily at Japanese expats in Germany. See Nottelmann-Feil (2022).

9. Shōgyōji, as an independent Shin temple, is also very much a minority temple in Japan despite the fact that Jōdo Shinshū is by far the largest single Buddhist denomination in Japan.

10. Shin Buddhism differs in this regard from the more common understanding of devotional lay Buddhist practices as being primarily oriented towards the accumulation of merit.

11. See, for example, Sato (2010, 2018).

12. I draw here from Tweed (2006) for whom religion as a process of dwelling involves overlapping processes of mapping, building, and inhabiting practices of home-making.


14. The word ‘shokai’ constitutes of two Chinese characters meaning ‘to flow’ and ‘to open’, implying the cleaning of one’s heart and allowing Amida’s teachings to flow freely through it. It is used in the community to refer to a spiritual retreat that emphasises frank and thoughtful sharing of thoughts and feelings with fellow participants and listening to others as a way of overcoming egocentricity. It usually involves communal work and meals, as well as dharma talks, meditation, roundtable discussions, and chanting practice.

15. Tsukiji Honganji is a Shin Buddhist temple located in Asakusa district in Tokyo. It belongs to the Hongwanji-ha lineage with headquarters at Nishi Honganji in Kyoto. In Jōdo Shinshū, there are two main lineages: Nishi Honganji (Hongwanji-ha) and Higashi Honganji (Ōtani-ha). While Three Wheels trace their lineage to Shōgyōji which is loosely affiliated with Ōtani-ha, it has also been previously maintaining connections with Tsukiji Honganji due to the shared focus on the veneration of Prince Shotoku (574–622), a semi-legendary figure who was an ardent supporter of Buddhism and was venerated after his death as an incarnation of the historical Buddha.

16. Ann Gleig (2019) identifies similar practices of telling and sharing stories as a way of developing sangha or ‘the spiritual fellowship’ in the Triratna Buddhist Community, and sharing ‘experiences’ to show improvement in Soka Gakkai International.

17. The use of the term hymn to refer to Shōshinge is common in Shin Buddhist communities outside Japan. Shinran’s Shōshinge is a long hymn, which was adopted by his successor, Rennō, as a devotional text and became the most popular chant in Shin Buddhism.

18. The Ōfumi is a title favoured by Shinshū Ōtani-ha (Higashi Honganji), while Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha (Nishi Honganji) use the title Gobunsho to refer to the same collection.

19. While the focus in this contribution is on convert members, Japanese members are equally active in creating their own spaces of belonging. This is particularly visible in the Buddhist Women’s Association, Young People’s Association, and Children’s Association (which mirror traditional Japanese Buddhist temple community structures) as well as monthly Japanese-language preaching sessions and ritual services, attended predominantly by Japanese members.

20. Here I have been inspired by Anna Tsing’s (2005) work on the productivity of ‘friction’ in global interconnections across difference; see also Schedneck (2021, 4–5).

21. Caroline Starkey (2023) observes similar linguistic needs and expectations among diasporic Chinese Buddhists at Fo Guan Shan in London.
22. For a discussion on similar processes of inclusion and exclusion centred on food literacy among Buddhist women in contemporary Japan, see Kolata and Gillson (2021).

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