

# Constructing the Sacred and Social Space

## An Example for the Lay Buddhists' Daily Lives of Taiwan Soka Association

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of the importance and content of the sacred space for practicing in the home territory. By focusing on Taiwan Soka members, sacred spaces are found mainly in private home altars or regional public cultural centers. The main focus of this study is on the spatiality of sacred space.

The Gohonzon, as a sacred subject of worship, is “the most sacred” space where should not be disturbed, the home altar is the “absolute” sacred space where the rite of worship held. The altar room, as the “relatively” sacred space should be well designed. Second, the “relatively” sacred space is a “social space”, must be adapted to the humanity. Third, the territory of the sacred space has been constructed by means of the perception of the senses including the vision, the sound and the smell. The visional image forms the “physical” territory, and both of the sound of the chanting or belling and the smell construct the “invisible” sacred territory. Through faith, practice and study within their daily lives, the chanter’s inherent Buddha–nature will be enlightened.

**Key words:** *sacred space, the Gohonzon, social space*

### 1. Introduction

In recent years many lay Buddhists in Taiwan have been flourishing and constructing their home altar to worship in order to enlighten the human spirit for daily life. Taiwan Soka Association, as a lay Buddhism, become one of the new religion which have great influence in the aspects of individual, family and social group of Taiwanese society. The aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of the importance and content of the sacred space for practicing in the home territory. Attention has been paid to the characteristics of the “sacred” space, its role in the social field, and the symbol of the sacred objects and rites for cultural identity. In this study, with the ethnographic field work, combining participant observation with interviews, to investigate the meaning, function and significance of a sacred space for Soka members. Experiences include participating the rite’s for daily worship, weekly chanting with small group of women, monthly meetings, and yearly congregations. By focusing on Taiwan Soka members, this paper challenges the idea that, for Sokas, sacred spaces are to be found mainly in private home altars and regional public cultural center. It emphasizes the greater centrality to some Taiwan Sokas’ lives of worship spaces in the home altar. The Gohonzon, as a sacred subject of worship, is setting in the central focus point of the home altar which is the most sacred space. The examination of the sacred atmosphere should

be sublime through the perception of the sense of the vision, the sound, and the smell, and how the sacred territory can be defined as well as a Taiwanese Soka model of sacred and social space would be constructed.

## **2. Soka Gakkai in Taiwan**

### **2.1 The essence of Taiwan Soka Association**

Taiwan Soka Association (TSA) is one of the branches Soka Gakkai International (SGI). As a world religion (Bagt, 1994), SGI has deep relationship with Nichirenshoshu, it is belonged to the Living Buddhism. Nichiren Buddhism, a dynamic philosophy grounded in the realities of daily life. The main religious ideas of Nichirenshoshu include: The Lotus Sutra so called the most important sutra which is the teaching of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni is the highest canon.

SGI members follow the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, Nichiren's teachings provide a way for anybody to readily draw out the enlightened wisdom and energy of Buddhahood from within their lives. Based on his study of the sutra Nichiren established the invocation (chant) of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as a universal practice to enable people to manifest the Buddhahood inherent in their lives. Chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo also known as "Daimoku", is the primary practice of SGI members.

### **2.2 The three great mysteries**

Macwilliams (2006, p93) pointed out that "Nichiren's keys to spiritual salvation are the three great secret laws (*sandai hihō*) that he discovered hidden in that sutra." The three mysteries are the main worship system for the Buddhists, including the "Great Gohonzon", the altar where is setting the Gohonzon to chant, and the title of the Lotus Sutra (Huang, 2006). The altar is the sacred space where is providing for spiritual meditation and faith. The "Gohonzon" is for the metaphor of the site for the enlighten life and the cosmos where is the most high and cherish, in other words the essence of the Lotus Sutra. So the "Gohonzon" is the most important subject of religious rites to be a spiritual mirror. In order to face the potential Buddha of self-inner life, "Gohonzon is in your own heart, If you have sincerely spirit, it will be experiencing the happiness through chanting" (23 DEC 2008:2000-2100:Mrs.Chou). SGI members enshrine a replica of the Gohonzon in their homes as a focal point for their daily practice.

### **2.3 Rite and Sacred Space**

Sacred space is a place embodied with unique meaning of life through the creative rites, the space becomes sanctified. So the ritual spaces are the sacred spaces. From the ritual activities, Human beings' spirits gain the renew power (Weldon, 1992; Eliade, 2003). "Faith is for everyday, it is new, I feel the hope" (21 Apr., 2007:100-2100:Mrs.Chen). For Soka lay Buddhists, by chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra and praying for lives protective forces (for morning gonayo only) in front of Gohonzon and the altar, it seems to contact with the heavenly sanctuary with the purificatory rites (Wedderburn, 2005), is the most important rite in their daily lives.

For Soka members in Taiwan, there are three types of formal rites. First, the most fundamental and important rite is chanting at home every morning and evening. Second, the memorial service for the deceased ancestors will be usually held in the cultural center once a month. Third, the members will congregate at their home for the deceased. In addition to those formal rites, they still take some informal cultural activities, including the monthly

meeting at local location or private house, the lectures about Buddhism, the festival for all the communities (include members and non-members) once a year, the regional congregation held in cultural center once a year, and some cultural and art exhibition or performance in the other places.

Soka members are lay Buddhists to face “Gohonzon” at home altar by chanting in order to experience the sacred is the fundamental rite everyday. Wedon (1992, p3) point out” This daily ritual worship is termed gongyo, and consists of three aspects: the first involves kneeling before the Gohonzon and reciting passages from the Lotus Sutra. The second aspect of gongyo is chanting the daimoku: **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo**, Daimoku is the most important form of gongyo. The third aspect involves five prayers: prayers of gratitude to (1) various deities, (2) the Gohonzon, and (3) Nichiren; (4) a prayer to fulfill one's wishes; and (5) a prayer to the dead.

## 2.4 Private home altars

In one of the case studies took in this paper, is Mrs. Chou's House. She has conversion to Soka member for thirty years, has experiencing many practice to get benefits in her family lives.

Her home's altar is a small wooden room with Japanese style attached to the original house in the apartment. There is one intermediate veranda space between them to define the eastern space where the entrance is located, its room with two small transparent glass let sunlight comes down. First, she pull the Japanese wooden door to open the altar room, the sunset is coming from the western-high window. The atmosphere of the room is bright and calm. Then she took the clean cloth from the straw to open the door of the “Gohonzon” in the altar and recited **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo** simultaneously. After that both lamps hanged on the inside altar and the high-skinny lamp on the front table were lighting. Sitting in the front of the worship table to burn the incense, nod the head and put into the incense burner with chanting **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo** three times. She picked up the Liturgy of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin and was rubbing a string of Juzu (prayer beads), started to sound the bell five times, and began to chanting the Lotus Sutra with watching the Gohonzon about three minutes. After finishing every part of Sutra, she sound the bell again. The second part is to repeat chanting **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo** about thirty minutes. Finally, she performed the silent prayers for life's protective forces, the Gohonzon, the Kosen-rufu, personal prayers, and the deceased, between each prayer she will sound the bell again. Before the rite was ending, she chanted **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo** three times and sound the bell three times.

The home's altar is the core of the sacred space to worship. Although there are several types of altars with different forms and scales, the most important objects include 5 parts, the Gohonzon, the incense burner, Bell, two lamps and two pots of evergreen trees. This home altar is constituted with two major parts which are the major altar and the worship table. The Gohonzon is inside the central point of the major altar attached to the north wall. The major altar contained with two small-vertical door, is higher than the worship table. The Gohonzon, in the inner space of the main altar, a scroll practitioners chant to, was inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin and is depicted in Chinese characters embodying the Law of **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo**, the life of Nichiren, as well as protective functions of the universe. Down the center are the characters **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo** and Nichiren's signature.

The Gohonzon is the most respectable and sacred space to each Soka member. In this case, under the Gohonzon, there are two small “protected Gohonzon”, the symbol of their own lives, and the representative of the Gohonzon. They can conveniently bring it to worship when leaving home. Beside the Gohonzon there are two cranes which can protect the Gohonzon. The outer space in the main altar, there are four levels of terraces, on the top which is the bottom of the Gohonzon, there are two bottles with five lotuses. The number of five is representative of **Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo**, on the third level they put one cup of tea (or water) to worship, on the one side of the second level was worshiped with their every generation of ancestors’ tablet which is the sacred object, and two lamps. Fresh fruits are put on the first level.

In the front of the major altar, is the worship table, on the center of this table is put one black incense burner, there are two high-skinning lamp. These two objects are important while worshipping. There is one unique notebook called “Chou’s family deceased list” by hand writing on the left side of the worship table, it was sent from Japan through some formal ritual. Inside this notebook were recorded the important life calendar of Nichiren

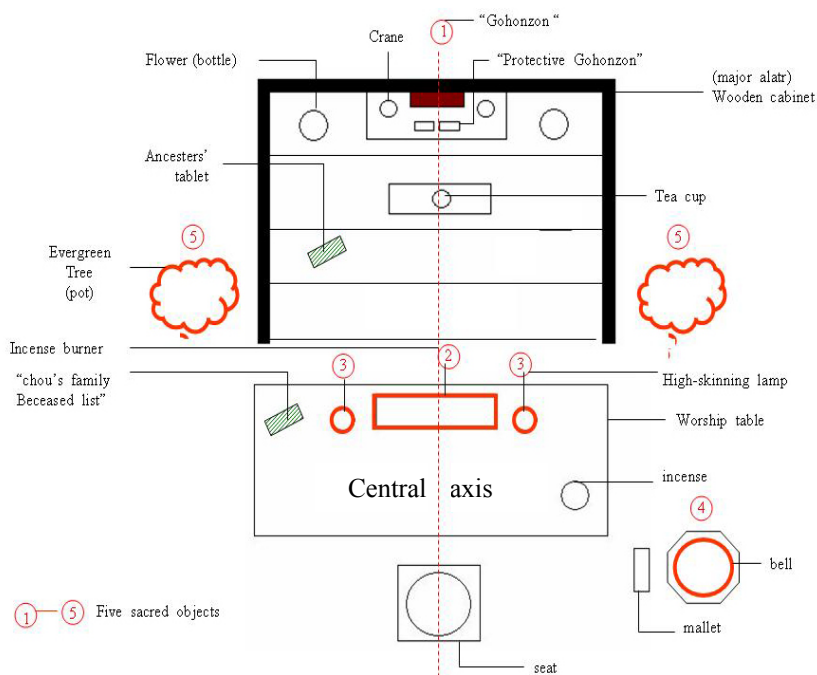


Figure. 1 the common model of the home altar

Daishonin, Nikko Shonin, Nichimoku Shonin, and the recent generation of Chou’s families’ ancestors. Before the notebook, they put one small board with kind words about the writing of Nichiren Daishonin. Except that, there is one box to store the incense. Beside the right site of the worship table is the black round bell and the mallet. The two pots of evergreen trees are located on each side of the major altar. The whole altar is almost dark-brown and decorated with gold and the form of the crane. To those three Soka’s home altar (investigated), there is some existing common model, including the high cabinet altar with the Japanese style and five sacred subject (Figure. 1). Among them, there are some differences, especially in the atmosphere of the environment. For example, Mr. Chen’s home altar on fifth floor has been designed to modern style, with pure and clean atmosphere. There is an elevator to provide the convenience for the elder and cripple. . The most special space is the round-lighting background behind the altar. Another case study in Wang’s home altar, situated in one part of living room defined by evergreen tree and furniture, and beside the home altar is the kitchen room defined by one high wall.

## 2.5 Public rites and activities for congregating

Except the family’s worship, private houses are also the setting for, devotional gatherings of (at least mainly) women, often on a weekly basis. The public rites and cultural activities for congregating are important. The ritual activity will begin and end with chanting **Nam-myoho-rence-kyo** three times. Different from the private worship, its activities are diversified by sharing the experiences who get the enlighten life and the elder will teach with his or her good experience. The membership present is expected to assume postures that encourage invites the guests and welcome them warmly (Dovlo, 1994).

The monthly meeting will gather about thirty to forty people to come. More people will play the important role, like predecessor sitting on the front facing to the public, performers at each stage sitting in the front line. In order to share the information about the recent important cultural exhibitions and performances, they add one lecture table and one set of TV to give the members better services. Especially some young girls will perform actively related the educational or culture affairs. They also share the writing of Nichiren Daishonin with each other. Finally the elder will teach and encourage the other with his or her successful experience in their faith. The whole process takes about ninety minutes. At that time, the rhythm is effective, and the atmosphere is so warm and powerful.

**3. The spatiality of sacred space**

The spatiality and environmental atmosphere will influence on peoples’ sacred feeling. In this paper, has been developed some ideas, including sacred space making, the power of the Gohonzon, the interaction between sacred and profane, social space and cultural identity, and the sacred image and territory.

**3.1 The home altars— sacred space making**

To the Soka, home altar is sacred space, the setting for sacred rites, the sacred home of the (self-inner life spirits, divine beings and ancestors are worshipped (Mazudar, and Mazudar, 1993) It is the most important and sacred space for the daily life especially in spiritual faith. By chanting, the sacredness of the home is created, and periodically renewed through rituals. It’s an important moment when chanting alone in the front of the Gohonzon, will experience the tranquility and the power to represent the inner life Buddha-nature (Figure. 2). “I directly

look at the word—”Myo” in the central of the Gohonzon, ”Myo” means Buddhahood, it will get to peace mood. Through the sound, let the true life represent” (3 May 2009: 20:00-22:00 Mrs. Chou). It is considered that the chanting is the main symbol of the rites. Chanting will entrenched on e’s deep experience to generate faith, and fuse the true daily life. The Law of Buddhahood is the practice of true life.

We found that the rite will start when the inner door of Gohonzon and the altar

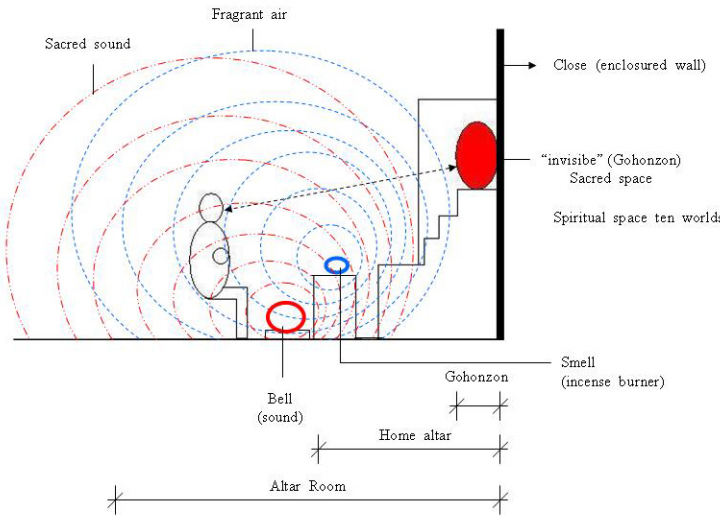


Figure. 2 The sacred territory of personal chanting

“opened” slowly, it symbolize the rite of “the treasure stupa” in the Lotus Sutra. The Gohonzon is a figurative

representation of “the atmosphere of the “ceremony in the air” is just like Shakyamuni open the treasure stupa. In the center of the Gohonzon, the vertical calligraphy of “**Nam-myoho-renge-kyo**” and Nichiren is the symbol of the treasure stupa. Once get to the mood of integrated, the chanter’s inherent Buddha-nature will be enlightened, and then the rite has constructed the sacred space.

### **3.2 The power of the most sacred space— ”Gohonzon”**

Eliade (1987, p12) proposed the idea that “the sacred is equivalent to a power”. The Gohonzon, according to the Odin (2001, pp 376-377): “The True Object of Worship, how the Gohonzon, itself embodies the structure of ichinen sanzen, or three thousand worlds in each thought-instant,” as generated from the “mutual containment of ten worlds, signifying that the whole cosmos is present in the human mind as a microcosm of the macrocosm. The ten worlds include hell, hunger, animality, anger, humanity, heaven, learning, realization, bodhisattvas, buddhas.”

The Gohonzon embodies the sacred power, sacred, and divinity, which is absolute pure power (De la Torre, M.A., 2001). The ”Gohonzon” is the core object of the worship in the home altar for each Soka member, Because “the Gohonzon symbolically represents the idea state supreme enlightenment . . . . ., but simply an object which draws out from deep within us our Buddha-nature” ( Macwilliams, 2006). “As a sacred object of worship, the Gohonzon is never publicly displayed”. Because the Gohonzon which is a representation of an enlightened state of life. Within the sacral cosmos, values of faith are secure and life has special meaning (Hamilton, 1965) It is located in the sacred center inside the inner door, the most sacred space. With strong feeling of the centrality, the inner the highest point and mystery, its location is the most important, you must open different layer of small doors, then see the Gohonzon, You can experience the sacred more doors, the space is deeper. The deepest area is the sacred space.

“The altar is opened twice a day for a morning and evening recitation of two chapters of the Lotus Sutra followed by devotional chanting of the Daimoku (known as gongyo) ”.

Unless you conducting chanting Daimoku or cleaning the altar, the altar, the door or the altar should be closed to protect the Gohonzon. So, the following conduct is prohibited: Sketching or painting the Gohonzon, Photographing the Gohonzon, videotaping the Gohonzon, and photocopying the Gohonzon. “Followers treat their replica Gohonzons with great respect, keep them clean, make offerings to them” (Frost, p244)

The Gohonzon, is a sacred space where shouldn’t be disturbed by anyone. The more sacred, the more inner space and secret feeling, you can look at in the central of the altar, but can’t touch it. The space around the Gohonzon is silent, clean, sublime and powerful, especially for chanting and praying.

Soka members emphasize the faith, practice and study, so the spaces are full of humanity and flexible by different types of worship and cultural-educational activities. In order words, there exist some relationships between the sacred and the profane.

### **3.3 The interaction between sacred and profane**

To a Soka, there are several ways to construct the sacred: First, facing the Gohonzon to pray and chant twice a day is regular rite; Second, holding the congregation to share experience and the practice. Third, by elders’ conducts to enforce one’s own faith. Fourth, through cultural performance and exhibitions, they communicate to

each other. Then, through the space, rite, congregation, and language and sound can construct the sacred (Lin, 2003). The Gohonzon is the “most sacred” space, the altar belongs to the “absolute” sacred space, they are fixed to stable place, shouldn’t be disturbed. Some spaces like the altar room around the altar are belong to “relatively” sacred space while the rites are holding, their territory are flexible when the rites are finished, they become profane spaces to return to regular common field. Jennings (2008, p162) illustrate that “music as a passage from profane to sacred space”. The sound of chanting, as music, will evoke the sacred feeling, Mrs. Chou reminds that “sound the bell will bring them who are talking back to the sacred rite” (3 May2009:2000-2100: Mrs. Chou). In order to adapt the daily life, their space can be changeable. When they hold cultural activities, in this way, Soka Gakkai’s religious practice is deeply integrated with worldly action, further blurring the line between internal spirituality and secular striving.

So some places have some interacted relationships between the sacred and the profane. Sometimes, it is found that the sacred space and the profane space will be infused together, for example when the Soka members participate of the meeting and congregation together. Some people were delay or talking to each other, and disturbed the other member. In the front area the Gohonzon or near the altar area is sacred, but the back are usually become profane atmosphere.

### **3.4 Social space and cultural identity**

Ikeda believes” that an organization of lay believers is the most modern and ideal means to carry true Buddhism into all phases of society” (Metraux, 1992, p327), for Soka, the sacred is located in Soka homes, as well as in public places of worship and performance. Focusing on the activities in the home—altar room, we illustrate the meaning and creation of sacred space through a detail analysis of the Soka house. It is found the sacred space as a social space, the creation of a social centre which is a safe space (Nesbitt, 2006), and providing the place to share and learn by each other through ritual connects people to space. “Soka Gakkai has become much more than a religious organization. It is a large system for the dissemination of culture and value creation” (Josephson, p11). The social space embodies common deep cultural identities, such as the image of the Gohonzon and the altar, the sound of chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra which is the most important canon, **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo** is their common language and rhythm. Also the incense burner, lamps, bell, evergreen trees around the Gohonzon, construct the main visual image for the altar. According to these strong cultural identities, they build their own social space where they negotiate with members and non-members. Another energetic sacred object such as prayer beads, the Liturgy of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, and “the protective of Gohonzon” also help to identify the characteristics of this religion. Facing the east to chanting and pray is also representing the worship,” the east as the altar”. This religion is the Buddhahood of the Sun, just like the sunlight rises from the east. In the design of Mr. Chain’s altar, has special form which the background of the altar is made of round shape as the image of the sun. It’s lighting around the circle to create the sublime atmosphere. Taiwan Soka Association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identities, based on the Japanese style of home altar’s form representing the original place and reciting the title of the Lotus Sutra and the Liturgy of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin with the Japanese language. The form and the sound evoke the deep relationship with Japanese Nichiren Buddhism.

It is true that the TSA structure still remains much of its Japanese roots, and also has developed our own characteristic” adapting to local customs” (Pereira, 2008, p107) being apply to Taiwanese style. On the other

hand they construct Taiwan Soka member's common cultural identity by combining our native styles of rites such as the birth, important life stages (such as sixteen birthday's festival in Tainan), and the death. Through the ritual process, ritual is culturally important because it provides "a cultural framework for self-identity" (Elsner, 1992, p27). They also worship to memorial service for the ancestors (Bragt, 1994), representing our traditional religion. Their altars are Soka social spaces with unique cultural identity, the Gohonzon, as an object of worship, become the most important common language and provide the symbolic source of one's deepest values for the fundamental human needs for attachment to a particular place (Barbour, 2007).

### **3.5 Sacred image and territory**

The atmosphere of the worship space for Soka, emphasize the sublime image and through the sense to perceive the sacred emotion. Its sacred territory is defined by the way of vision, sound, smell and touching. The altar is symbolized with "the spiritual mountain and the pure land" (Huang, 2006). Firstly, the sacred atmosphere in the altar room has been constructed with the main focus on the vision, it's the best way to look up the "Gohonzon" by seating or kneeling in the center of the home altar and devotional chanting of the Daimoku. "The Gohonzon is a three dimensional space, with calligraphy mandala, it is full of imagination" (21 Nov. 2008: 2100-2200: Won). It is a very powerful feeling, that they experience the Gohonzon as a sacred object expressing the ultimate truth of enlightenment. We've found people can experience the sublime and secret vision through the lighting of the front lamps and hanging lamps before the Gohonzon. In front of a religious object, will create" a sacred mood and atmosphere" (Dobbelaere, p106)

The evergreen trees symbolized the eternal life will enforce the sacred image. So there are three levels to define the sacred territories which are the Gohonzon (the most sacred object and secret area), and the home altar room (the absolutely sacred space) and the altar room (the relatively sacred space). We'd found both the Gohonzon and the home altar embodied the mysterious nature of a sacred centre" (Elsner, 1992, p24). Second, by chanting and the sound of the Bell, are able to form the sacred territory, both of the resonance of the sound evoke a mystical quality of sacred space. The louder of the sound vibrate, the larger sacred territory will occupy the space especially for congregating. Such an "assiduous practice" (gongyo) forms a bridge of sound and vibration fusion subject and object together (Mark Macwilliams, 2006). Third, to smell closely from the incense burner, by spreading the fragrant air, another sacred atmosphere is full of the home altar. So, the closer to the Gohonzon, the more powerful you feel the sacred energy. Finally, once touching the prayer beads, can enforce individual sacred experience around you. The visional perception forms the "physical" space, the resonance of the sound and the smell of the fragrant air occupy the "invisible" territory.

The sacred image of the Gohonzon is the symbol of the image of "the emergence of the Treasure Tower" in the Lotus Sutra, the colossal tower rose from the earth, suspended in the sky, "ceremony in the Air". This tower is higher than the earth (Kawade, 2003), the Gohonzon in the home altar is on the higher level to the chanter. The title of the Lotus Sutra, setting on the center of the Gohonzon, and Shakyamuni enters the Treasure Tower sharing the seat with Taho. The whole image of this Gohonzon is representing some symbolic meaning. It's calligraphy scroll is full of imaginative secret space.

## **4. Conclusions & Suggestions**



In this study, we have investigated the meaning and content of the sacred space for the experience of Taiwanese lay Buddhism of S.G.I. As one of new-religions in the world, Taiwan Soka association has developed their own unique cultural practice and social contributions. The home altar is the fundamental place for worship, and to extend to the regional cultural center for diversities of culture and educational activities. Different from the previous research, the emphasis is on the field of the spatiality of the sacred space. Some ideas about the sacred and social space are:

First, the **Gohonzon**, as a sacred object of worship, is “the most sacred” space where should not be disturbed, the home altar is the “absolute” sacred space where the rite of worship held, both of them are fixed spaces defined by the wall, evergreen trees and worship table. The altar room, as the “relatively” sacred space should be designed with some flexibility (Figure. 3).

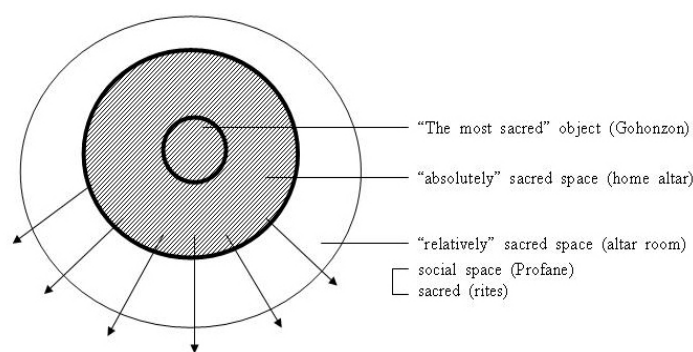


Figure. 3 The model of sacred space

Second, the main sacred spaces (include the **Gohonzon** and the home altar) must be defined with the profane spaces, but the “relatively” sacred space is a social space, must be adapted to the humanity (individual, family and group). Third, the territory of the sacred space has been constructed by means of the perception of the sense (include the vision, the sound and the smell). The visional image forms the “physical” territory, and both of the sound of the chanting or bellin g an d th e sm ell co nstru ct th e “inv isible” sacred territory . Fou rth, fo r T aiwan So Ka lay Buddhists, they have created the unique cultural identity through the five sacred objects (the **Gohonzon**, incense, lamps, bell and evergreen tree and prayer beads) fused with the Japanese style of the altar, and the language of chanting **Nam-myoho-renge-kyo**. This paper proposes that some suggestions for designing sacred space: First, it should be held in on e defined space fo r th e rite. Seco nd, sacred space should be included both sacred and flexible areas. Third, the most sacred space should not be disturbed.

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