

A Space of Mountain within a Forest of Buildings? Urban Buddhist Monasteries in Contemporary Korea

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A SPACE OF MOUNTAINS WITHIN A FOREST OF BUILDINGS?

URBAN BUDDHIST MONASTERIES IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA

Taking a break from the COEX, one of the largest underground shopping centers in Asia, or from its adjoining gigantic conference center, a visitor to Seoul would immediately come across the massive Buddhist monastery of Pongŭnsa. If she goes through the monumental door, she will be welcomed by a team of Buddhist volunteers in charge of tourists. She will then enjoy a guided visit of the monastery, in English or in Japanese, even perhaps in French or German. She will receive explanations about Buddhism and monastic lifestyle as well as introductions to the art of tea and to meditation. While discovering the beauty of Korean architecture and getting a glimpse of the serene atmosphere of a tea room, she may be surprised by the number of busy activities going on in the diverse monastery halls: several hundred of mothers praying for their children's success on the university entrance examination with a small photo of their child pinned to their prayer books, devotees and monks setting up a public exhibition to present the ample remodeling and development plan of the monastery, older men cheerfully talking together near soft-drink vending machines, and a group of women rushing to their sutra-study class.

What is a *sach'al*¹ today in the South Korean capital? Should we call it a monastery, a temple or a kind of Buddhist mega-church? Buddhism in twentieth century Korea has been characterized by the crossing and occasional confrontation of two major concerns: the quest for modernization and social integration on the one hand, and the overhaul and reaffirmation of its monastic legitimacy on the other. By tracing some characteristics of the recent development and transformation of Buddhism in Korea, this chapter aims at questioning aspects of the contemporary relationship between calls for greater engagement with the world and aspirations to restore and rejuvenate monastic asceticism. It, like the debate it traces, is organized in a somehow dialectic logic. The first part focuses on a movement from the mountains to the cities. It sketches how reform projects tend to reorganize a criticized “monastic tradition” in accordance with conceptions of a “modern religion,” and it describes some of the changes in the role and status of the laity. The second part deals with presenting another side of the picture. It focuses on the emphasis given to monasticism’s aspects of asceticism and world withdrawal. It makes another detour in recent history to present the movements advocating a monastic reform of Buddhism and tries to explore how withdrawal from the world is considered today.

Monasteries as Buddhism's Grave? Modernization Movements and Questioning Monasticism

After five centuries of relegation to a secondary position during the Chosŏn kingdom (1392-1896),² the status of Buddhism achieved a significant revival at the end of the

1 The Korean term *sach'al* can be translated as both Buddhist monastery and Buddhist temple. The ambiguity appearing in this translation reflects the issue that this chapter is trying to address. Here, both terms will be used in an almost interchangeable way.

2 Buddhism has played a key role in the social and cultural history of Korea, but its place is far from having been undisputed nor has it been continuously predominant. After its introduction in the peninsula at the end of the fourth century, Buddhism played the role of a state religion with a strong influence in the Silla and Koryŏ kingdoms. This status was drastically weakened, however, by the

nineteenth century (Park JY 2010).³ However, this new opportunity for Buddhist communities to increase their influence in society occurred in the midst of troubled times and in a context of growing Japanese and western influence.⁴ When the law that prohibited Buddhist monks from entering the capital was suspended in 1895, missionaries from various Japanese Buddhist schools as well as Protestant and Catholic missionaries were already actively proselytizing in Korea. Buddhist monks expected to revive Buddhism, but they also faced the necessity of redefining their identity in front of modernization efforts as well as several other competing religions. Worried by the threat of the further marginalization of Buddhism (or even its disappearance) and looking for a means to give a greater role and importance to Dharma in the “new society,” some intellectuals called for a reform of Korean Buddhism and particularly criticized the gap between monasteries and society.

In spite of significant divergences, these reformists were particularly active in denouncing the isolation of Buddhism and the distance between the monastic community and the social concerns of the laity. Emphasizing both the survival of Buddhism and its duty to engage in the realization of a better society, they advocated a process of secularization (in the sense of engagement with the world) and, for some of them, the authorization of clerical marriage. In this intellectual context, critics particularly targeted the remote location of monasteries and their tendency to valorize renunciation. One of the influential figures of the time, the monk Han Yongun,⁵ was particularly vehement in criticizing monastic withdrawal. He ironically describes monasteries as “a special world outside of the normal world . . . concerned only with their own cleanliness” and regrets that

foundation of the Chosŏn kingdom (1392-1896) on the ideological base of Confucianism. The new dynasty excluded Buddhist monks and institutions from public affairs: monks were banished from the capital and Buddhism was relegated to a more peripheral position. (On the repression of Buddhism in Korea – and for a more nuanced view, see Bruneton 2011).

3 The history of Chosŏn Buddhism has recently attracted a new attention, and excessively negative depictions of its state of weakness as well as the overemphasis put on the consequences of the Korean port opening in 1876 have been challenged (Cho 2003, Walraven 2007).

4 The Yi dynasty was overthrown in 1910 and Korea was officially annexed by Japan the same year.

5 Han Yongun or Manhae, 1879-1944.

Since ancient times how many of the accomplished and famous have entered these formal 'separate universes' – from the point of view of the spirit, these devil-inhabited black mountains – to decay there in silence, together with the grass and the trees, without sending a single message to the outside world? (Han 1913/2008: 84, 78).

In his treatise “On the Reformation of Korean Buddhism,” he pointed out that this distance from the world was a major cause of what he depicts as the social and spiritual decay of Korean Buddhism.⁶

In order to compete with other religions and to offset the monastic withdrawal from the world, modernist reformers of Buddhism have emphasized proselytization as their most crucial priority. As extensively analyzed by Mark Nathan (2010: 41-42), the concept of “Buddhist propagation (*p'ogyo*)” was “a ubiquitous feature in nearly all the writings on Korean Buddhism reform in the first two decades of colonial rule.” Tightly associated with a concern for developing religious education among both the monastics and the laity, this new task has been accompanied by a movement of Buddhist activities from the mountains to the cities. Several schools were created with the aim of giving monks an education in line with the new times – integrating, for example, geography, natural sciences and history (Taehan pulgyo Chogyejong kyoyugwŏn 2005: 104-8). In addition, Buddhist monks attempted, with more or less success, to create “propagation centers” aimed at the laity in villages and cities. In 1910, several monasteries collaborated to open the “Central Propagation Center of Korean Buddhism (*Chosŏn pulgyo chungang p'ogyodang*)” in Seoul which was followed in 1912 by the “Central Propagation Center of the Korean Sŏn Order (*Chosŏn sŏnjong chungang p'ogyodang*).” In 1913 there were 18 propagation centers in Korea. This number increased to 117 in 1930 (Park 2005: 101). The success of these newly created institutions remained limited, and many closed their doors after a few years. However, they contributed to the development of Buddhism within the cities as well as the emergence of Buddhist temples primarily directed to the laity.

The Development of a Buddhist Religious Identity for the Laity

The integration of laity was one of the most crucial challenges met by Buddhist institutions in the twentieth century, and the definition and the role of lay Buddhists has been, and to some extent remains, a critical question. In spite of several attempts to reduce the distance between the monastics and the laity, this issue is a recurrent concern in Buddhist circles. In the second half of the twentieth century, intellectual lay Buddhists have expressed particularly sharp criticisms against the monastic community, reproaching it for neglecting “common believers” and the spreading of Buddhist teachings. These criticisms were markedly voiced by the movement of *Minjung* Buddhism (Chung 1997: 91) and by engaged lay groups who more broadly reproached dominant Buddhist institutions for a lack of social investment and for a politically conservative position. In addition, alternative Buddhist schools have further challenged the dominant organization, the Chogye Order, by strongly emphasizing lay practice and adaptation to modern society. In this context, many lay Buddhists gathered in more or less independent associations where they organized classes, lectures and reflections on the reform of Buddhist institutions.

Beside this generally intellectual – and sometimes militant – form of lay Buddhism, the largest portion of the people attending temples were until recently not actively labeling themselves as “Buddhists.” Yoon Yee-Heum, analyzing the conditions of surveys about religion conducted in Korea in the 1980s, pointed out that: “[In contrast to] Christians [who] can accurately be counted by a questionnaire, Buddhism shows a very high difference between self-identified members and those who can be classified as “practical.” “Practical” Buddhists outnumber self-identified ones by a ratio of more than two to one” (Yoon 1997: 11-12). This discrepancy between the amount of persons taking part in Buddhist prayers and ceremonies and those who describe themselves as “Buddhist” has been noted in detail by anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Alexandre Guillemoz (1983) and Laurel Kendall (1985), for example, have shed light

on the “continuum” prevailing in religious life of villagers and the proximity – in this context – between prayers to a Shamanist and to a Buddhist shrine.⁶

This religious continuum as well as the believers’ rather loose affiliation to Buddhism have been major targets of Buddhist reformers, especially in a context of strong competition with Christian (especially Protestant) churches that promote strong and visible affiliation among members. However, it is only in the 1990s that Buddhist membership has massively and visibly started to be *formalized* among laity. From the mid-1990s, the number of Buddhist temples has rapidly increased in urban areas with a clear emphasis put on adaptation to the demands and needs of the laity. Among their activities, these temples give a central importance to educational programs aiming at regulating practices, targeting especially the propitiatory rites and the prayers for practical benefits derogatorily called “prayers for good fortune” (*kibok*) (Galmiche 2011). The multiplication and systematization of progressive courses for laity have been conceptualized by Buddhist institutions and intellectuals⁷ as crucial tools toward the aim of “transforming the common people who come to the temple with the vague thought that they may be Buddhist, into real Buddhists.”⁸

6 “The women of Enduring Pine Village themselves consider seasonal offerings at the mansin’s shrine and seasonal offerings at the Buddhist temple analogous practices. (...) The Christians stand outside the folk religious system, but shamanism and Buddhism blur. From the perspective of women worshipers, shrine and temple do not represent discrete religions, but rather the different traditions of separate households.” (Kendall 1985: 83-4)

7 Cf. The description of the “movement for the renovation of faith and practice” by Riw Ho Sun: “Nowadays, what is called “movement for the renovation of faith and practice (*sin sinhaeng undong* 新信行運動)” is gaining momentum. The “movement for the renovation of faith and practice” is a central mission in Chogye Order propagation centers (*pogyowŏn*): its goal is to overcome invocation practices directed toward good fortune (*kibok-chŏgin yŏmbul sinhang*) and to reform them in concordance with the system of correct faith and practice. The people in charge of proselytism in the Chogye Order administration try to bring some order to the religious life of the Buddhists. This process is as follows: ‘Introduction -> basic education -> practice of self-cultivation (*suhaeng*) -> application on a social level’” (translated from Riw Ho Sun 2008: 708).

8 Translation from an extract of *P’anjŏn* (February 2010), the monthly journal published by Pongŭnsa, a large monastery of Seoul.

This stress put on the religious education of laity and the abundance of educational programs are important characteristics of Buddhism as it is developing in South Korean cities. Movement toward a systematized religious education of the public is also closely related to the development of formal affiliation to Buddhist institutions and the strengthening of followers' associations. The emphasis put on the doctrinal formation of believers is not only related to a quest for orthodoxy, but has much to do as well with concern among Buddhists to develop a collective identity and to promote Buddhism as a form of social affiliation. When taking part in the educational curriculum offered by temples, newcomers are encouraged to join the followers' association of the temple (*sindohoe*) and to participate in its various activities. While individual attendance at Buddhist monasteries remains important, a new form of religious participation has widely developed within the last two decades. Buddhist institutions promote the model of a formally affiliated adherent, who participates in religious activities individually but also as a member of an association. Among other things, this tendency can be observed through the promotion of membership cards for the believers. These have been widely encouraged and tend to formalize adhesion to both the central organization of the Chogye Order and a *monastery of affiliation*.

Toward a New Position in Society

The definition of what it means to be a Buddhist follower has changed considerably during the last twenty years. Confronted by the negative image of being a superstitious religion or “Buddhism for good fortune (*kibok pulgyo*),” Buddhist institutions have highlighted the importance of forming “modern and religiously educated” followers who could represent and develop their religion with pride. Communalizing the believers has become a clear priority for most Buddhist temples. They are now emphasizing these relations between practitioners in religious terms, as a means to nourish their motivation and deepen their devotion, but also – in a conscious way – to increase the social status of Buddhism. Promoting the

communalization of believers is also aimed at contributing to a collective Buddhist identity, which is expected to reinforce the place of Buddhism in society.

While Buddhism appears in surveys as a majority relative to other religions, both actors and observers have observed its secondary, if not marginal, position in society.⁹ The feeling of being in a more or less fragile position *as Buddhists* is particularly present among the Buddhists of the upper-middle class in Seoul, where Protestants are the majority both in quantitative and symbolic terms. In this context of religious competition, many monastic and lay Buddhists have regarded the temples of affluent districts as strategic places for spreading Buddhism among those considered to be “leading members of society.” While this strategic view is obviously not the first reason for Buddhists to develop collective activities, it is nonetheless an explicit and very present concern in the temples of the affluent district of Kangnam. Monastics as well as the laity and the journals published by these monasteries, tend to emphasize how the development of religious education and socialization among believers is crucial for improving the image of Buddhism in society and for increasing its influence as a social force. Slogans such as “Forming high-quality Buddhists through high quality education (*myōngp’um kyoyuk ũro myōngp’um pulcha yangsōng hal kōt*)”¹⁰ have appeared in temples, with the directly correlated idea that these “high-quality Buddhists” should proudly represent Buddhism in society and contribute to its new visibility. In a competition with the neighboring, active and visible Protestant megachurches, urban temples have been particularly committed to exalting a sense of confident and extraverted belonging among their believers.

On several points, Buddhist temples are clearly reacting to the success of Protestant churches, but these relations are far from univocal. The “megachurch

9 Frank Tedesco (2003: 158), for example, has shed light on this seemingly paradoxical situation: “In general, Korean Buddhists do not view themselves as an influential or prestigious force in Korean society and they have little political clout compared to well-organized, wealthy Protestant and Catholic factions. (...) Buddhism has low status in contemporary Korea and engaged Buddhists who work in public often fell self-conscious and sometimes react with defiance or timidity when ostracized.”

10 *P’anjōn* (Pongŭnsa monthly journal), February 2010.

model” is a very ambivalent reference, both fascinating and repelling to Buddhists. When it comes to the stress put on the communalization of believers and on the praise of a conscious and more vocal Buddhist identity, the influence of the Christian techniques of believer management is significant. Adapting forms of proselytism to a modern and urban society has been a key concern for Buddhist institutions throughout the twentieth century, and this matter has been addressed in detail by both monastic and lay Buddhists. In this context, different kinds of comparative studies have been undertaken in Buddhist circles. Several temples in Seoul have even organized official “equipment study tours (*sisöl kyōnhak*)” and “benchmarking for adherent management (*sindo kwalli pench'imak'ing*)” in successful churches to determine what could be adapted to Buddhism.

From Monasteries to “Megatemples”?

Urban temples are becoming increasingly concerned about their adaptation to the needs of the urban population and have endeavored to broaden their activities to new sectors such as health, social facilities and education. Moreover, in Seoul, “Buddhist megatemples” are emulating megachurches’ social influence by developing wide and influential networks of believers. Could we then say that Buddhism in Korea is shifting its center of gravity from monastics to the laity? This would reflect significant aspects of the contemporary reorganization of Buddhism, but it would also, however, overshadow the point that together with a trend toward the secularization of monasteries, Korean Buddhism has also been marked by movements aiming at restoring and emphasizing its monastic dimensions.

The place and meaning of the monastic tradition today is ambiguous. It has been regularly put into question and criticized in the name of opening Buddhism to the needs and constraints of society. In the meantime, ascetic meditation monks and the traditional lifestyle of the monastic *sangha* enjoy increasing prestige among lay and monastic Buddhists and even outside Buddhist circles. This importance given to the monastic aspects of Buddhism in the midst of calls for a greater secularization is

neither an anecdotic phenomenon nor a mere issue of distinction, but takes roots in the complex history of contemporary Buddhism.

Significantly, in November 2007, the Chogye Order organized a large and official ceremony to commemorate the sixty years of the “Pongamsa kyōlsa” or “Pongamsa community.” This community, founded in the Pongamsa monastery in 1947, two years after the end of Japanese colonization, was aimed at reestablishing Korean monasticism by emphasizing the legacy of a tradition going back prior to both the Chosŏn Kingdom and colonization, periods regarded as times of decline for monastic Buddhism. In spite of being quickly interrupted in 1950 by the Korean War, this movement has noticeably influenced contemporary Buddhist institutions, especially though one of its leaders, the monk Sōngch’ōl, who was the supreme patriarch (*chongjōng*) of the Chogye Order from 1981 to 1993.

The Pongamsa Community aimed to break with the secularizing trend that had marked Buddhism during the first part of the century. Reform movements cannot solely be reduced to Japanese influence, but secularization of Buddhism was supported by the colonial administration, especially through the legalization of clerical marriage. As both Henrik H. Sørensen (1999: 136) and Robert E. Buswell (2004: 32) argue, these reforms have progressively been accused of serving the colonial ambition for control over Buddhist communities and became a foil for the new reformers of 1947. In this context, the renovation of Buddhism advocated by the Pongamsa Community was aimed at reinforcing Buddhism through a revival of monasticism emphasizing the practice of *fuga mundi* and the strict observance of the precepts. This association contributed to the redefinition of monastic identity by reinforcing its ascetic dimensions and elaborating a “community regulation (*kongju kyuyak*)” aimed at supporting the renovation of monastic life (Kim KS 2006: 56-57).

Through the influence of the Pongamsa Community, a dominant part of contemporary Buddhism's ideological basis has been built on a monastic project of affirming withdrawal from the world. In addition, mistrust toward secularization has been reinforced by a severe conflict on the issue of “clerical marriage,” which profoundly divided Buddhist circles from the 1950s to at least the 1970s. In 1954, for

several reasons, but in the name of the expurgation of Japanese influence, the South Korean president Yi Sŭngman (Syngman Rhee) ordered married clerics – in the majority among clerics since the Japanese colonization – to leave the Buddhist community and to hand monasteries over to celibate monks. This “purification movement (*Chŏnghwa undong*)” triggered violent conflicts over legitimacy and temple property. It led to the creation of two separate orders: the Chogye Order in 1962 and the Taego Order in 1970. These power struggles continued after the official resolution of the conflict and reinforced the emphasis put on a monastic and ascetic identity by the largest part of the Chogye Order.

Mountain Monasteries as References

Withdrawal, renunciation and remote mountain monasteries are central parts of the image claimed by Korean Buddhism. However, this ideal is today a site of confluence for very different phenomena: it brings together a historical stress on monastic traditions but also explicit strategies of communication and “branding.” Buddhism in twenty-first century South Korea has entered a conscious process of self-branding, oriented toward both the national society and other countries. One of the most visible aspects of this movement is the so-called “Temple Stay” program. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism launched this project at the occasion of the FIFA World Cup finals in 2002 with the initial aim of providing accommodation for some of the numerous foreign visitors that were expected at this occasion. As noted by Uri Kaplan, the Chogye Order first opposed this idea, but a compromise was finally reached on the base of a “package of both accommodation and a cultural/spiritual experience” (2010: 132-3). First aimed at foreigners, this program has become an important success among Koreans as well. It is now widely spread across South Korean monasteries. It is not exclusively addressed to Buddhist practitioners and offers a mix of spiritual, cultural and touristic activities. Temple Stay retreats are generally – but not exclusively – organized in traditional monasteries located in the mountains, and the Buddhism emphasized through this program is mostly monastic

with a focus on the monastic lifestyle and “emblematic” activities such as the art of tea (*tado*) and the formal monastic meal (*paru kongyang*). It is not directed toward a direct soteriological goal, but rather claims (quoting its advertisements) to offer participants a “transformative experience” and an “occasion to connect with Korean tradition, nature and one’s peace of mind.”

More broadly than this touristic program, the ideal of a temple among Buddhists remains mostly based on images of mountain and monasticism. Nonetheless, this phenomenon is not only a matter of “image.” Even if the representations of Korean Buddhism promoted by the Chogye Order and programs like Templestay are not completely congruent with its actual practices and reality, they cannot be reduced to mere strategies of promotion. Redefining Korean Buddhism is not only a concern largely shared among monks and nuns, but also by a large part of the general lay audience. Above all, this issue reflects on a significant tension existing within the current reorganization of Buddhist temples in urban area.

Most temples affirm an ambition to prove their relevancy to the “new” South Korean society. While urban monasteries tend to differentiate themselves more and more from a monastic lifestyle, mountain temples are celebrated and sometimes idealized. Likewise, the recent development of urban temples is praised by Buddhist individuals and institutions but, in some occasions, the same actors may also distance themselves from these Buddhist types of “megatemples.” As it appeared during ethnographic fieldwork, it is not rare that Buddhists express reservations toward what they suspiciously refer to as a “church-isation (*kyohoe-hwa*)” of temples. Urban monasteries are widely valued as they bring Buddhism to the world and participate in its development and visibility. Equally omnipresent idea is that the “real monasteries” that constitute the “essential foundation (*kūnbon*)” of Buddhism are located in the mountains. Hence, believers who actively engage in the lay association of a large urban temple near their home may both emphasize its conveniences and social role and criticize its “mundanity” and “noisiness,” while also expressing a stronger attachment to a more remote mountain temple (Galmiche 2010).

In spite of remarkably growing dynamism and success, and even if they

benefit in practice from a larger degree of autonomy and generally larger incomes, urban monasteries are nevertheless in a relation of relative dependence – symbolically and in terms of human resources – to the more traditional ones located in mountains. An illustration of this can be found in the multiplication of pilgrimages offered by city temples, sometimes several times a month. The rotation of monks and nuns between mountain and urban areas constitute another circulation: most of them are not steadily located in a remote monastery or in a busy one, but rather move between them. This circulation is not, however, completely symmetric, as a frequently expressed idea among monastics (and even among laity) is that monks and nuns are restoring their physical and spiritual forces in mountain monasteries in order to contribute to the propagation of Buddhism in cities.

Conclusion

Buddhism in Korea is widely seen and self-described as a monastic tradition, and a large part of its culture has been elaborated in monasteries. However, the remote – and prone to world withdrawal – position associated with monasticism has never been unanimously approved among Buddhists. Moreover, the monastic mode of organization itself has been internally and externally challenged on several occasions.

A key feature in the urban development of Buddhism has been the emphasis placed on the “Buddhicization” of lay religious practices as well as the extension of formal adhesion to Buddhism broadly beyond the members of the monastic community. In a more historical perspective, these new forms of lay participation and adhesion echo the deep transformations that Buddhism has encountered while facing and appropriating the category of religion in a context a religious plurality. When the neologism of “religion” (*chonggyo*) has been introduced in Korea, Christian churches have been widely regarded as reference points of religious organization and “modernity.” More recently, the success of megachurches has given even larger audience to the forms of adhesion and social integration that they favor.

Buddhist institutions are nonetheless in an ambivalent relationship with these new “models.” Large urban temples have more or less explicitly embarked on religious competition by emulating megachurches, but at the same time, they have also partly based their success on promoting different forms of religious involvement. The priority given by temples to social integration and visibility is far from having fully eclipsed the withdrawal sides of Buddhism. Instead, this aspect of monastic Buddhism has been given new meanings in line with the needs and concerns of urban society, and its current promotion is playing a significant role in the ongoing outreach of Buddhism.

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