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“Upgrading” Buddhism? Methods from the Business World in South Korean Buddhism

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Looking at religious plurality through the lenses of market paradigms has become a widespread although disputed method for sociologists¹. Using economic and business concepts in order to analyze religious activities is, however, not limited to social sciences. Religious leaders and organizations as well have appropriated these paradigms, sometimes in a very explicit way, in order to increase their influence on society. Regardless of their affiliation, a growing number of such leaders consciously refer to “services” offered by their religious organizations in terms of “competitive market,” “benchmarking,” “brand,” or “supply and demand.” This expansion of the commodity logic to almost all sectors of life, culture, or society involves disturbing and destructive effects. In particular, when it comes to religion—and here Buddhist temples—commodification can particularly appear as out of place. In this paper, however, I would like to place prescriptive views of religion or Buddhism to the side, in order to look at the use of business methods in temples with a goal of understanding their practice. With an ethnographic methodology, this research focuses on the reasons and meanings that prevail in the current reorganization of urban temples. In a similar way, as Pattana Kitiarsa (2008) defines the collective project of *Religious Commodifications in Asia*, I am here regarding religious commodification as an object of investigation and relate to the argument that, beyond issues of commercialization, it constitutes a major feature of the globalized religious landscape.

In South Korea, Protestantism has seen spectacular growth during the industrialization process, and its churches (as well as its theology) have exerted profound influence on society and politics (Park 2003). Mega-churches are a symbol of this powerful position and several of them have largely drawn on strategies arising from market theories (Lee 2014). Until the late 1990s Buddhism seemed to be in the shadow of this spectacular Protestant visibility, but for over a decade, several urban temples have also engaged in large-scale projects. Market and communication schemes have taken a noticeable place in temples and some of them can be regarded as types of “mega-temples.”² This article describes the development of methods from the business world within Korean Buddhism and, more particularly, it aims at examining the context of their implementation. The argument defended here is that the use of communication and management techniques from the business world is not an epiphenomenon. Instead, it echoes a deeper transformation of Buddhism, especially in the role and place of the laity. Comparisons of the temple’s public to customers and ubiquitous concerns about “service” and “satisfaction” echo the emphasis put by urban temples on lay believers and social outreach.³ Obviously, the integration of market strategies in temples is inspired by the pervasive influence of such strategies in South Korea as a whole. However, this paper aims at showing that this phenomenon derives also from the interaction of

¹ This paper originated in the workshop « Religious Markets in Korea in Comparative Perspective » organized at the University of Oslo by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke in September 2014.

² On the organizational models of “mega-churches,” see Ellingson 2007; Fath 2008.

³ See Park 2005; Nathan 2010, on the development of urban temples and the concept of propagation in the early twentieth century.

Buddhism with an understanding of religion (and of its social role) that developed in the historical context of modernity. Since the late nineteenth century, lay activities and engagement with society have become central concerns in Buddhism, as illustrated by the contemporary success in Taiwan of the concept of *Renjian fojiao* (Buddhism for the Human World).⁴ Active temples and associations in South Korea significantly echo this wider trend.⁵ But they also have their own local characteristics: in particular, their relation with Christianity is a recurrent and sensitive topic. Protestant churches have been central references of “religious institutions for modern society” and they played a crucial role in molding the place of religion in Korean society.⁶ For the urban temples engaged in ambitious development projects, the use of market related techniques is not only a way to engage in a market-like competition: it also contributes to redefine their organizational structure as well as their division of religious work, in affinity with a dominant concept of religion.

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2006 and 2015. It relies in particular on two pieces of field work done in 2007 (6 months) and 2009 (8 months).⁷ While doing observations and participant observations in different types of urban and mountain temples, I chose to focus on Bongeunsa, a large and active temple of the Jogye Order located in the district of Gangnam. There, in order to understand the everyday activities and social relations going on, I enrolled in the education curricula and the lay followers association. I complemented these observations with formal and informal interviews and also with the study of different kinds of public or internal documents produced by temples and Buddhist institutions. For the topic of this article I also analyze records related to the different “renovation and development” projects launched by the temple.

Bongeunsa is a temple accustomed to magnitude. Located between the emblematic Gyeonggi high-school (relocated here in 1976) and the COEX, one of the largest shopping malls in Asia, it is situated in a wealthy neighborhood that was synonymous with luxury in the 1990s. It occupies about 6.6 hectares, with a dozen of buildings, and claims about 150,000 members. With its long history, the large number of followers and its wealth, this temple has a notable influence within contemporary South Korean Buddhism. It is also familiar with controversy and big headlines: several conflicts and power struggles have punctuated the choice of its abbots in the last two decades and, as an attempt of counteraction, it was also one of the first temples to make public reports about its accounts. So, Bongeunsa is closer to a special case than to the average temple. With its characteristics, it offers nonetheless a lens for observing phenomena that can be seen as well in most urban temples. The place of market related techniques and strategies in this temple is an example of its particular position. This temple has been very committed to integrating them in a reflexive manner and on a large scale. Several practices—brand system, development project, management of customers’ satisfaction, or external consultants—developed in the business world have been imported into the temple. This visible integration of management and communication tools has triggered contrasting reactions. It has contributed to increasing the visibility and influence of this temple but also raised skepticism and even open criticism among Buddhists.

In what follows, the use of management and communication tools in temples will be located within a larger issue: the ambition of Buddhism, since the early twentieth century, to

⁴ Cf. Pacey 2005.

⁵ The concern for worldly engagement and the place of laity has also given rise to new religious groups, in particular to the Won-Buddhism (Wonbulgyo) whose doctrine was established in the early twentieth century. Don Baker analyses the conscious efforts of this school to elaborate a “new religion” for a “new age.” Cf. Baker 2012.

⁶ See Luca 2000, on Protestant churches as references for religious modernity in Korea. See Harkness 2014, for an analysis of the “Christian aesthetic of progress.”

⁷ This paper is based on a part of the Ph.D dissertation of the author. For further details, see Galmiche 2011.

prove its modernity and to develop into urban society. Hence, in the first part, I will address a recurring concern in contemporary Korean Buddhism to improve its image and counter accusations of backwardness. I will describe the ambivalent status of laywomen, and more particularly housewives, who constitute the majority of temple-goers. They are frequently deprecated as “superstitious” believers and they have been the targets of modernization and education programs in contemporary Buddhism. In the meanwhile, they have also played an active and crucial role in supporting Buddhist organizations and taking part in its growing influence in society. In the second part, I will analyze how temples, and Bongeunsa in particular, have committed into a systematized and rationalized effort to change its place in society through the use of commercial and management techniques. The third and last part explores further the comparison made by temples between lay Buddhists and customers. It describes programs aiming at establishing the public as satisfied and regular adherents and it presents the ambition of Buddhist institutions to formalize the religious and social affiliation of its lay members.

Forming “High Quality Buddhists” to Change the Status of Buddhism in Society

Women, particularly “housewives” (*chubu*), constitute the majority of the everyday public of the temples. Their status, however, is ambivalent. This mainstream audience is frequently pointed at as the symbol of the so-called superstitious tendencies Buddhism should get rid of. At the same time, as this paper will show, these lay devotees constitute a driving and powerful force that plays an important role in the endeavors of Buddhist institutions to renovate and strengthen their place in society.

In texts from the early twentieth century as in contemporary discourses, it would be euphemistic to note that the religious legitimacy of female devotees is frequently denied. This low level of consideration is largely based on the argument that these women have only a limited knowledge of Buddhist teaching. This position frequently goes with the disqualification of “practical religiosity” regarded as a corruption of what is described as authentic Buddhism. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reformers tended to describe the main devotional practices in temples as signs of ignorance and superstition, accusing them to have weakened Buddhism (Walraven 2007, 20). In his call for reforms published in 1913, Han Yongun paints a bleak picture of the state of Buddhism and, after having pointed out the weakness of the monastic community, he regrets that, on the side of the laity, are only “a minority of Korean women, with men being as rare among the lay followers as phoenix feathers or unicorn horns.”⁸ Until today, the majority of women in temples is frequently designated as a sign of the shamanistic or mundane tendencies in Korean Buddhism pejoratively described as “Buddhism for good fortune” (*Kibok Pulgyo*).

In a climate of modernization, reform movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have emphasized the education of laity as a priority. Reformist figures have endeavored to educate the main public of the temple to the doctrinal basis of Buddhism and, in particular, they targeted the continuum between Buddhism and popular religions.⁹ This ambition to “purify” Buddhism from so-called external elements echoes the broader tendency of “Buddhist modernism” which has been observable in various forms in Asia since the nineteenth century. Against representations of Buddhism as an outdated or obscurantist belief, reformers have stressed its modernity, rationality, and compatibility with modern society (Sharf 1995). Educating the public and reforming their main forms of practices constitute key ambitions of contemporary Buddhism in Korea and these priorities have deeply permeated

⁸ For the English translation and analysis of Han Yongun’s *Joseon bulgyo yusillon (On the Reformation of Korean Buddhism)*, see Tikhonov and Miller 2008.

⁹ On this continuum, see Guillemoz 1983, 113; 1983, 212; Kendall 1985, 83-84.

temples (Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong Gyoyugweon 2005, 278-88). Nowadays, most of them offer a multiplicity of educational programs: from introductory general courses to advanced sutra reading classes as well as more cultural trainings like classes on tea or Buddhist dance. Moreover, learning about doctrines and practices is now a fundamental aspect of the religious involvement of almost any lay Buddhist.

This priority to develop education is not limited to institutional spheres and it is instead matching the concern of the laity for a larger access to religious knowledge. Today, most Buddhists, monastics, and laity stand together on the idea that being Buddhist requires a foundational learning and the development of some specific skills. In discourses, “blind faith” (*maengsin*) as well as the so-called superstitious (*misinjeok*) approaches to religion are rejected as inauthentic. At the same time, emphasis is put on education and on the formation of “higher-level” Buddhists. During a personal interview, a lay follower of Bongeunsa summarized this educational goal in the following terms: “We Buddhist lay followers have to ‘upgrade’” (*uri bulgyo sindo-neun eopgeureideu haeya dwaenda*).¹⁰ This concern is illustrated by the omnipresent stress put by laity on the importance of learning. Lay followers are frequently taking initiative to create new educational programs or may ask monastics and institutional leaders for more courses and curricula. In temples, many of the laity—women and men—are constantly looking for new occasions to study Buddhism and generally praise enthusiastically the books, classes, or lectures which they regard as helpful to make deep aspects of Buddhism accessible. During their conversations over tea, coffee, and snacks, the lay Buddhists involved in Bongeunsa or other urban temples were regularly exchanging advice on the best way to study their religion. For those interested by the deepening of their Buddhist knowledge, the classes offered in temples are generally only one resource among many. Many rely also on books and Buddhist media such as the Internet, television, and radio.

Lay followers involved in active temples are eager to be “authentic Buddhists” and to claim educated practices of their religion. They give a great importance to the building and affirmation of their identity as “Buddhist” (*bulja*). This issue of identification and the public affirmation of one’s religious belonging is a crucial dynamic in contemporary Korean Buddhism. The prevailing educational movement observable in every temple aims at training and forming lay followers and at encouraging their spiritual progress. However, in an equally explicit manner, it also aims at transforming the place and image of Buddhism in society. For the monastics who are urging the audience to study, as for the lay participants to these courses and programs, broader propagation of Buddhism (*pogyo*) is a central and explicit goal. Temples have widened and systematized their educational offer in this dual objective. Bongeunsa is an outstanding illustration of this trend. This temple has set up a gradual educational program and it has also designed it as a crucial tool in the aim of transforming ordinary people into “real Buddhists” (*cham bulja*), proud and conscious of their adherence to Buddhism. This ambition is clearly worded and set out as illustrated in the articles published by its monthly journal:

“The educational curriculum for the laity, starts with the “introductory course for new believers” and goes on with the “basic school” and then the “Buddhist University.” It takes place as a well-organized and systematic curriculum able to transform the people who come to Bongeunsa as tourists¹¹ or with the vague thought that they may be Buddhist into real Buddhists and one of the four components of the Buddhist community. Particularly, such an educational curriculum is designed as an important

¹⁰ Interview conducted in November 2008 with a member of the Bongeunsa’s followers association.

¹¹ The expression “tourist” in Korean refers here to the people who attend the temple without necessary being committed to the practice of Buddhism.

process to foster Buddhists (*bulja yangseong*), while also exalting a feeling of pride and membership as “Bongeunsa adherents” and intensifying the idea of social responsibility among Buddhists¹².

It is with a similar perspective that Bongunsa has formulated as one of its slogans for 2010: “Through the highest-quality education, we will foster the highest-quality Buddhists” (*myeongpum gyoyug-euro myeongpum bulja yangseong hal keot*).¹³ In February 2010, one of the monks in charge of the educational programs explained this aspiration to the temple’s monthly journal:

“The aim of lay followers education at Bongeunsa is to develop a spirit of service (*bongsa*) among Buddhists. The role of education is to foster Buddhists who understand and practice Buddhism correctly, through a varied educational program....The Buddhists who will receive such training will be able to participate actively to social activities and to the management of the temple and hence to benefit their neighbors and the whole society. This will quickly become the type of practice of the sincere Buddhists, of the highest-quality Buddhist (*myeongpum bulja*).”¹⁴

Later in the article, the slogan “fostering the highest-quality Buddhists” is presented as “the educational goal for the year.” Here, the motto “fostering the highest-quality Buddhists” carries two important goals. It aims at producing followers who will be educated and socialized in conformity with the values of this Buddhist organization. It also aims at making this new Buddhist identity visible in the whole society. This type of view and project is not limited to Bongeunsa but can be found in most of urban temples. For example, during the “Forum for the Invigoration of the New Followers Management” organized at Jogyesa in December 2010,¹⁵ the abbot of this temple emphasized several times the eminent role and responsibility of educated lay followers in the vitality, outreach, and general influence of Buddhism. His conclusion was a call for the educated laity to play a central role in the development of South-Korean Buddhism.

Among the goals of the Buddhist education programs aimed at laity, renovating the status of Buddhism in society occupies a central place. In the Gangnam temple of Bongeunsa, this concern appears constantly. During sermons, it is not rare to hear about the responsibility of devotees to contribute to the modern and well-educated image of their religion:

“If someone you know or a Christian friend asks you why you are attending a temple, you have to be able to explain correctly what is Buddhism! You need to know correctly what is a Buddhist service (*yebul*) and what it means to do prayers!”¹⁶

¹² Nam Suyeon, *Panjeon*, February 2010, *Teukjip icheonsim-nyeon Bongeunsa: Sindo gyoyug-eul jumok handa (Bongunsa in 2010 Special Edition: Focus on the believers education)*, p. 9.

¹³ The expression *myeongpum*, “highest-quality” or “luxury good,” has become popular for referring to famous luxury products. Gangnam, with its concentration of national and international designers’ shops, is regarded as a symbol of “*myeongpum*” in Korea.

¹⁴ “Inteobyu Bongeunsa gyoyuk gukjang Gwangmyeong seunim (Interview with Venerable Gwangmyeong, director for education at Bongeunsa)”, *Panjeon*, February 2010, p. 10.

¹⁵ This forum was held on December 8, 2010.

¹⁶ Excerpt from a teaching given in the first stage of the Buddhist education program (*gicho haktang*) of Bongeunsa in September 2008 (translated).

This kind of call for learning the basis of doctrine in order to faithfully represent Buddhism in society and, quoting one of the temple's abbots "in order not to be a shy Buddhist" has become a trope in the active temples of Seoul. This ambition to give believers a central role in the diffusion of Buddhism and to encourage the proud affirmation of their religious affiliation is frequently expressed by Buddhist leaders at every level: in the Jogye Order official discourses as in temples. In addition, it is also an important aspiration among lay followers themselves. In the talks with the laity who had been involved in a temple for a few years or more, a recurring point was to regard as the duty of a Buddhist to know one's religion in order to honor it when interacting with people from no or other religious background. In particular, in Bongeunsa that is heavily visited by foreign tourists, "being able to correctly present Buddhism to the visitors" was a very widespread motivation among the members who were willing to deepen their education:

Already, when I started to volunteer at Bongeunsa,¹⁷ many foreigners were coming. I could see that foreigners had a lot of interest for Buddhist temples and I told myself: "Really? So I need to study a lot! I need to study Buddhism so I can give correct explanations to foreigners." That's how I thought....And as the education that I had received was not enough to transmit Korean Buddhism and Buddha's doctrine to foreigners, I realized that I had to study further. So I studied the art of tea (*dado*), sutras, and I also practiced cultivation (*suhaeng*). As a priority I had to become a real authentic Buddhist and I had to practice cultivation. Without preparation, it seemed to me that I would not be able to [present Buddhism] to foreigners. (Interview with a female lay adherent of Bongeunsa, November 2008)

The tight association between religious education and ability to propagate Buddhism is particularly explicit in the case of this member who is involved in a "Temple Stay" team and who is also a member of the Association for the International Propagation of Buddhism (*gukje pogyodan*). More generally as well, many of the middle-class or upper middle-class Buddhists from Gangnam temples express a similar concern with the image they may give of Buddhism—especially with their Protestant friends—and care to show that Buddhists are cultivated, sincere, and knowledgeable about their religion. Importance of communication was for example presented by a lay member of Neungin-seonweon as one of the reasons for developing religion education among laity.

"If one wonders why this monk is teaching about that [the basis of Buddhist doctrines] to the people...In our country there are a lot of temples. And people, since the Silla kingdom, are going to temples in order to pray for something. But if we face it, this doesn't exactly mean knowing about the law of the Buddha. 'Give me this! Give me that!'...If one knows Buddhism in an exact manner, when one speaks with someone—even with a Christian—one can answer directly, in a competent way, identically [to the teaching]... This is really good and that's why one needs to study!" (Interview with a female lay adherent of Neungin-seonweon, September 2008)

¹⁷ She is here referring to the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

Active lay followers tend to assume as a personal responsibility to improve the image and reputation of Buddhism around them and, if necessary, to correct the “distorted visions” of this religion that may circulate in society.

Propagation is an essential component in the various modernization projects of Buddhism in Korea and it is not limited to the monastic leaders or the reformers’ designs. It echoes a visible aspiration among lay followers—and here especially the mainstream public comprised of women—to transform their religious identity and image. Contesting the sometimes condescending portrayal of women in temples as superstitious and turned toward practical benefits, these lay followers care about showing that attending a temple is a well-educated and modern engagement that they can be proud of. Here, urban monastics and Buddhist housewives come together around a shared concern: affirming their congruence with the latest trends of modernity. Both are willing to get rid of the negative image that tended to depict Buddhism and its popular practices as an obscurantist and outdated religiosity. In 1988, Henrik H. Sørensen was noting how Christianity was associated to modernity while Buddhism was frequently seen as backward-looking and “unfit to grasp with the problems of a modern industrialized society.”¹⁸ Facing what they regard as a setback to be overcome, monastic and laity are determined to promote a self-conscious Buddhist identity. This takes place in a wider aspiration to make Buddhism a religion as modern – if not more – than others and, on this basis, to contribute to its “legitimate” position in contemporary society.

To conclude this section, it is important to note that this question of modernity and “legitimate position in contemporary society” goes beyond religious issues. The anthropologists and sociologists doing research on the housewives’ culture have noted how “pursuit of status”¹⁹ and distinction strategies associated with claims of modernity play an important role in the life of the South Korean upper middle class. While they are taking responsibilities seen as conventional, housewives tend to be particularly concerned to differentiate themselves from the previous generation of “traditional women” and to anchor themselves, as well as their family, in an urban, “modern” and “socially distinctive” lifestyle. Cho Haejoang especially, emphasized the crucial importance of “modernity projects” in the life of these self-conscious “Gangnam” housewives.²⁰ More generally, the Gangnam upper middle-class tends to claim and to be granted a referential role in the definition of an up-to-date urban lifestyle. The promotion of Bongeunsa in terms of “avant-garde of Korean Buddhism” and its self-presentation as a temple actively engaged in “modernity projects” is to be understood also in the context of this broader phenomenon.

The Business World as an Explicit and Valued Inspiration for the Temple

Descriptions of the religious situation in Korea and in the world in terms of competition have become common in Buddhist discourses. Even if “aggressive” forms of proselytism are

¹⁸ For further details, see Sorensen 1988, 28: “Whether such a view is naive or not, a large number of Koreans consciously or unconsciously consider Christianity to equal modern civilization. As part of this same view, Buddhism with its so-called ‘superstitious’ beliefs and practices is seen as a remnant of Yi Dynasty civilization, and therefore conservative and unfit to grasp with the problems of a modern industrialized society.”

¹⁹ “In Pursuit of Status” is the title of Denise Potrzeba Lett’s book on South Korean new middle-class. Her *In Pursuit of Status* (1998) offers in-depth analysis of the role of housewives.

²⁰ For further details, see Cho 2002, 168-69: “I look primarily at the women of the middle class who define themselves as ‘housewives’ (*chubu*) or, in the case of the ‘new generation,’ who see themselves as prospective housewives. Given the extreme emphasis on uniformity and class mobility in South Korean society, these are women who have established cultural distinctions in Bourdieu’s sense by being actively engaged in ‘modernity projects,’ shedding their countrified ways and creating new lifestyles to match new class identities. While media idealization of a modern, urban lifestyle accord closely with the lived reality of the middle and upper-middle-classes, they have also constituted cultural models and ideologies that are pervasive throughout the whole of Korean society.”

unanimously criticized and consciously avoided, Buddhist institutions tend to explicitly call for an active and more outspoken policy of propagation. In the agenda for development, explicit references to the market have become significantly present and visible. These allusions are far from being only individual or desultory initiatives. They are part of a strong sensitivity of contemporary Korean Buddhism to its image in society. This concern has given rise to a wide range of “development” and “renaissance” programs—generally highly rationalized and organized—aiming at tackling and improving Buddhism’s image and status.

The emphasis put by Bongeuinsa on modernization and renovation fully takes place in this wider movement. The leaders of this temple have been particularly active in rationalizing its development. The “middle and long-term growth project” (*jungjanggi baljeon peureojekteu*)—named “Bongeuin Vision 2015”—that they released to the public at the end of 2008 illustrates this serious approach to renovation. The program “Bongeuin Vision” explicitly aims at implementing management and communication methods from the business world as a way to propagate the Dharma. This program was subsequently extended until 2020 with the new name “Bongeuin Vision 2020.”²¹ Designed as a “modernization program for the monastery” (*sachal hyeondaehwa saeop*), this program brings together and formalizes several activities that were generally already going on in the temple and complement them with additional projects. Rather than creating something completely new, it is systematizing and reinforcing the efforts going on in the temple and furthering them in a sophisticated plan explicitly modeled on business practices. The team behind this program conception has been gathering several monks, including the head of the temple (*juji*), various members from the lay followers association, as well as lay Buddhists whose area of professional expertise matches the needs of the program. The association with trained professional consultants is explicit and has even been highlighted. When the former CEO of Incheon International Airport, Lee Jaehee, brought his expertise as consultant for multinational companies to the project, the temple communication team saluted this collaboration and the temple’s monthly journal enthusiastically reported on this support.

Both the 2015 and the 2020 versions of this development program share a similar structure organized around sections such as “Brand image system” (*brand image chegye*), central values (*haeksim gachi*), promotion system (*chujin chegye*), and strategic tasks (*jeollyak gwaje*). The parallel between the management of the temple and the business world is fully conscious and even emphasized, for example through diagrams and charts with elements coming from the communication style of the corporate world. The visual mediums displayed in the program help to summarize its main points or strategic directions, but some of them also appear as means to inscribe the project in globalized trends of communication, for example by connecting together, both in Korean and in English, words like “*Doryang/Space*,” “*Saram/Human*,” or “*Peurogeuraem/Program*.”²² The semantic field is also significant of this ambition with corporate specialized expressions in Korean and English like slogan, brand, sub-brand, network, strategies, master plan, etc.; or with the explicit use of “CEO” to refer to the head monk: “CEO (*juji seunim*)*ui hakgo-hago jisokjeogin Leadership*” (continuous and firm *leadership* of the *CEO*-abbot).²³

“Bongeuin Vision 2015” program has played an important role in the manner this temple has developed its thoroughly considered and highly sophisticated communication. The various slogans and watchwords Bongeuinsa has been filling its speech, teaching, and media appearances with (on Internet, newspaper, etc.) are far from being improvised: they result

²¹ In June 2015, it is accessible on the temple’s website <<http://www.bongeuinsa.org/>> which offers a section entitled “Bongeuin Vision.”

²² Excerpt from the Program “Bongeuin Vision 2015” publicly presented at Bongeuinsa and on the temple website.

²³ Program “Bongeuin Vision 2020” is accessible on Bongeuinsa’s website in June 2015.

from coherent and standardized design work done further upstream. In 2008, the temple called on communication consultants' services in order to create and promote a "Bongeunsa brand image," designed to be a knowingly built and visual-friendly ID. This collaboration established a well-organized system of slogans, names, and references put together in a visually sophisticated manner. The promoted brand is therefore "Bongeunsa" itself. "Sub-brands," "main slogans," and "brand keys", which the system explicitly refers to, have become generic names to speak of the different branches in the temple general expansion ambitions. For instance, the words "Area of Korean Buddhism renewal" have been chosen to mention the recently implemented monumental construction work program. Since 2007, a slogan frequently presents Bongeunsa as "a thousand-year-old temple, in the heart of the city," making tradition and history the sources the temple derives its legitimacy from. In a similar way, the persistent references to "Grand Master (*daesa*) Bou" have been frequently used to assert, through historic reasons, Bongeunsa's leadership in the various processes aiming at revitalizing Buddhism. However, all the watchwords this "brand image system" has been promoting do not necessarily refer to specific plans of action. Instead, the use of words as "sub-brands," "slogans," or "brand keys" is far from being strict and does not always convey obvious differences between the concepts. These terms nonetheless reinforce the coherence among the various aspects of this expansion program. All slogans form a consistent apparatus abundantly used in every public communication the temple addresses when it comes to presenting its orientation, activities, and further projects.

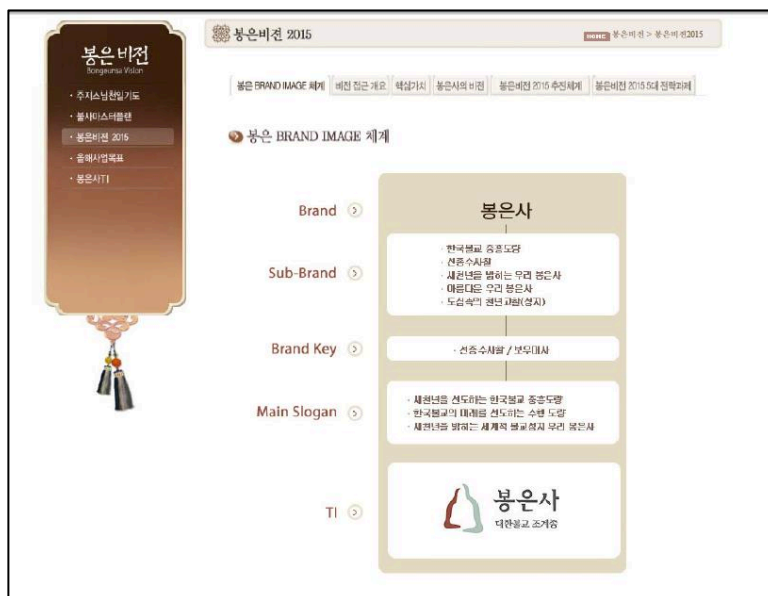


Figure 1. Excerpt from a presentation of the project "Bongeun Vision 2015" (presented on the website of the temple in 2010)



Figure 2. The new logo and examples of the graphic charter and signature established in Bongeunsa in 2008 (published on Bongeunsa’s website in 2008)

In addition to this rather systematized core of discourse, Bongeunsa used the services of a design studio (Studio BAF) outside the Buddhist world in order to establish graphics standards. As for many organizations and companies, this chart was aiming at creating a thoughtful and systematized visual identity that would be rolled out to various documents and objects used or produced by the temple. This graphic system, named (directly in English) “T.I.” (Temple Identity) entails a new logo as well as a specific font and three colors listed in the international system CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Key Black). As stated by the artistic director of the BAF Studio, Rhee Nami, the realization of the logo and the particular attention to shapes and colors have been conducted consistently with the values and perspectives of Bongeunsa, “by combining the western language of shapes named ‘design’ with Buddhism.” The intent was to facilitate communication with both a Korean and international audience:

“The logo of Bongeunsa new T.I. (Temple Identity) [English in a Korean context] is a *design* [English] that gives a new and modern interpretation to the font “Myeongjo” based on tradition. This gives a non-authoritarian, natural, and raw feeling to the writing style of Chusa (*chusache*).²⁴ We used English together with *hangeul*, so that foreigners could pronounce the temple’s name.”²⁵

According to the analysis of this graphic chart publicly presented on the temple’s website and in its journal *Panjeon*, the central part of the logo depicts at the same time the figure of the Buddha, the shape of a mountain, and the outlines of the skyscrapers that surround the temple. The choice of depicting two colors facing each other was made purposely, in order to evoke the “harmonious combination of tradition and modernity, city and nature, Korea and the world, etc.”

²⁴ The expression “style of Chusa” refers to the writing style of Gim Jeong-hui 金正喜 (1786-1857). At Bongeunsa, the door to the hall where sutras are stored is topped with calligraphy of this famous Joseon literatus.

²⁵ Excerpt from a presentation of the graphic chart published on Bongeunsa’s website (accessed in 2009). A very similar document is also accessible in the temple’s monthly journal: *Panjeon*. 2009. “Bongeunsa saeroun T.I. (Temple Identity)” [The New T.I. (Temple Identity) of Bongeunsa]. January. 50-51.

The “Bongeun Vision 2015” program claims to be a large-scale-enterprise not only aiming at expanding and updating Bongeunsa, but also wants to make it the vanguard of the general revival trend Korean Buddhism is currently experiencing. In such a vision, the object is to renew Buddhism so that it emerges “modernized” and “globalized” for “a new era of a thousand years.” The program is presented as a “Renaissance”. In this perspective, Monk Bou’s legacy 普雨 (1509-1565), and the officially proclaimed status of Bongeunsa as being a “temple of the Seon school” (*Seon-jong sachal*) are being greatly valued and displayed among the public, thus becoming the touchstone of a branding strategy (they are presented as “brand key”) to bring the temple back to its former glory.

Establishing Religious Adherents as “Satisfied and Loyal Customers”

The business inspiration goes beyond the way to present the temple’s projects or its communication strategies for the website. One of its most predominant aspects is related to the role and place of the laity and their likening to customers receiving a service from the temple. The persons who attend the temple receive a growing attention from the Buddhist organizations and this goes in particular through their comparison to “customers.” This analogy is widely used in order to claim more attention given to the “experience” of the people visiting temples as well as the development of services aimed at the laity. Building a larger, satisfied and loyal audience is widely presented as a necessary condition for strengthening the development and influence of the temple and, thereby, of Buddhism. Contenting the adherents regarded as customers who should get a “satisfying experience” appears as one of the priorities set up by Bongeunsa’s “renaissance and modernization” program: “Bongeun Vision 2015” as emphasized by one of its significant counselor, Lee Jaehee, himself from the business world:

“...[W]e need to constitute a space [that would be adequate] for praying. In the field of management sciences, there is the expression “customer emotion management” (*gogaek gamdong gyeongyeong*)²⁶: we need to build closer relations to the followers and to set up a space that meets their desires.”²⁷

Here, referring to “customers” takes place in a design to position the temple as a place intended first and foremost for the needs of lay devotees. In a similar perspective, the monks and the lay association’s drive for a more efficient and systematized management of the services offered by the temple has given rise to a specific board: the “new followers management” (*sae sindo gwalli*) team. The establishment of this specific service in 2009 has been a key element in the way this temple positions itself as a provider of service and subsequently endeavors to take the public wishes into a careful account. A conscious reflection on the needs of devotees was obviously not something new in the temple. However, this purposely dedicated board has taken the concern about satisfaction to a higher level of rationalization and systematization. A member of this group explains how it was launched in order “to offer a good service” to the visitors:

“Every year, there are about 4,000 new persons who come to Bongeunsa. So, if no measures are taken, it cannot work properly: we have to manage these visitors. When these persons pay for a membership card, it means that

²⁶ The Korean expression used in the interview is a translation from the English “customer emotion management,” which refers to a business strategy aimed at strengthening customers’ loyalty through specific and memorable experiences.

²⁷ Interview with Lee Jaehee published in the temple’s monthly journal, *Panjeon*, July 2009, p. 42.

they plan to seriously attend the temple. So we want to offer them something worthy. The monks of the temple said that we have to offer a good service (*seobiseu*) [English word in a Korean sentence] and they suggested that we start this new management activity. So first, the temple did not have this specialized office, nor this method, and not even this idea.” (Interview with a member of the “new followers management” team of Bongeunsa, November 2009)

This “new followers management” team aims at developing the followers’ loyalty as well as their satisfaction and commitment with the temple’s activities. With this team comprised of volunteers, Bongeunsa has launched an organized collect and analysis of the needs and desires of its public—in a fashion similar to market analysis—in order to provide adequate replies and to adapt to some extent its activities and services. One of the tasks attributed to this team is to contact by phone the persons who come only occasionally to the temple in order to entice them to engage more actively in its activities. The purpose of this group is not only directed toward convincing potential active members. Moreover, the temple’s ambition is to set up a real “telephone counseling” (*jeonhwa sangdam*) service, intended for adapting its programs to the public’s demands and constraints. In an interview, a member of this team describes her counseling activities:

“With the persons who are not engaged in any of the activities offered by the temple, I am doing a new consultation. Phone counseling (*jeonhwa sangdam*)...For now, we are ten volunteers (*bongsaja*) but next year we will be about thirty. So, when calling someone, I am asking: ‘Why is it difficult for you to come here?’ ‘Did you experience any inconvenience at the temple?’ We try to understand the reasons preventing these persons from attending the temple and then we attempt to figure out what could allow them to come more regularly to the temple.”

By means of this new team, Bongeunsa tends to willingly implement a “supply and demand” approach in its management. Most of the ritual forms are not modified according to the public’s preferences, but the schedule of some ceremonies, the type of educational programs, or the pilgrimages’ length and destination can be open to changes in order to meet frequent demands.²⁸

In the same perspective, and even before the establishment of this specialized service, the temple has launched several monitoring surveys, aiming at rating the audience’s satisfaction. At the end of every series of classes or after lectures or pilgrimages, questionnaires are administered to the audience and a time for their completion is arranged in the activity’s schedule. Open questions and checkboxes allow participants to indicate their satisfaction on many aspects of the program, from the quality of organization to the choice of the addressed topics. They also request suggestions and ideas for improvement. The collected data are then read and synthesized by staff members of the lay followers association or by the monastery’s office employees and the results are analyzed by the leaders of the associations or the monks who are working on improving the temple’s activities. The several processes of monitoring used in the temple illustrate the importance explicitly given to the notions of “service” and “quality.” Bongeunsa, as many religious places in Seoul, shows a conscious and proud ambition to “improve” and to adapt its services to the public’s demands. This deliberate adaptation is notably reflected in the transformation of the temple’s facilities. In order to

²⁸ The “reflexive” goals of this “new followers management team” echo Wade Clark Roof’s description of market logics and “demand and supply processes” in the religious field (Roof 1999).

improve visitors' convenience, Bongeunsa has deeply renovated its space organization (car park, classrooms, dining hall, and bathrooms) and installed several automatic machines within its walls (cash dispenser, vending machines). Just after the entrance gate, the temple entails also several shops and a tearoom, and it provides punctual market events on the car-park space. The leaders of the temple's renovation and development project planned to widen and diversify its services and intended to build a kindergarten, study rooms for teenagers, and a three-story underground car park, as well as several additional spaces for the followers association's meetings and activities. These para-religious services are created (or planned) in addition to the constant augmentation of more specifically Buddhist offerings like for example educational programs. The versatility and practicality of the temple are largely acknowledged and emphasized by the public and play a noticeable role in its affluence. When interviewed, the adherents frequently present Bongeunsa as a multifunctional religious place where their needs and demands are taken into consideration. Adaptation to the audience is widely emphasized in a positive sense by the temple's managers: moreover, a part of their mission is to look for new ideas and services that could strengthen even more the temple's assets and position on the religious market.

Improvement is positively regarded in urban temples and has become a recurring motto. In this perspective, looking at neighboring temples and churches or finding inspiration in various institutions (outside of the religious field as well) is valued as an effective way to "upgrade." In spite of a large offering, the services offered by Buddhist temples are generally more limited than the facilities to be found in protestant megachurches. In Buddhist circles, successful churches, with their intense proselytism and the wide range of benefits to their members, inspire both feelings of rejection and strong interest. In July 2010, the educational program "Buddhist academy" (Bulgyo academi), whose purpose was to train the followers association's managers, organized a "facility study visit" (*siseol gyeonhak*) at Cheongun gyohoe, a gigantic Presbyterian church close to the American model of a megachurch. About twenty Buddhist members, together with their temple's abbot (*juji*), went to this church where a minister presented them the different parts of the building, the two dining halls, the main offices, the prayer room and its 1800 seats, and the fitness room, as well as the ways visitors and potential adherents are welcomed and assisted by several teams made of volunteers. This visit report, publicly published on the temple's website, described the visit in glowing terms:

"By observing the way, in another religion, the Presbyterian Cheongun church succeeds in its local evangelization activities (*seon-gyo*), we spent time thinking how Bongeunsa should engage in urban propagation (*dosim pogyo*) as well as in local social proselytism. Moreover, while observing the moving and kind way this church informs and educates new followers, we spent time thinking how Bongeunsa should organize its new followers' management and how it should conduct interviews with new believers."

Temple reformers look for ideas wherever they appear efficient and adaptable. For example, in the case of Bogeunsa, the development projects are analyzing the features of successful Christian megachurches and Buddhist temples in Korea but also in other countries like Japan or Taiwan.²⁹

On the other side of this quest for improvement, "imitation" is a very sensitive issue when it comes to contemporary transformations of Korean Buddhism. Accusing temples of mimicking Christian churches is a very common way to criticize Buddhism within Protestant

²⁹ In November 2008, Bongeunsa has published a document of about one hundred pages in order to present its renovation project: *Bongeunsa: Garam-jeongbi mit jeontong-munhwa jaechangjo* (*Bongeunsa, Reorganization of the Temple Buildings and Restoration of Traditional Culture*).

circles. Among Buddhist sympathizers as well, features like the use of a piano during Buddhist service (*yebul*) or the generalization of Sunday morning meetings in temples get frequently described in a regretful or ironic way as symbols of an excessive imitation of Christians by Korean Buddhists. In spite of controversies, seeking inspiration in other places is highly valued among the monastic or lay Buddhists who are engaged in “renovation projects.” As mentioned earlier, the publication on Bongeunsa’s website of its members’ study visit in a prosperous church illustrates how such an activity is asserted. It is indeed presented as a diligent concern for the sake of the temple’s public and ultimately the development of Buddhism. “Offering a better quality of service in order to meet with the public demands” tends to be presented within many active religious groups as a legitimate and valuable responsibility.³⁰ Those advocating for “customers satisfaction” as an explicit objective in urban temples support their cause with arguments ranging from the open competition between religious institutions to the Buddhist traditional acceptance given to the skillful adaptation of practices and beliefs (*bangpyeon*, *upaya* in Sanskrit). Bongeunsa has been particularly active in implementing this kind of approach, but this is far from being unique to this temple. Using market related references has become a common practice among urban temples and their followers associations, as illustrated in the meeting organized at the head temple Jogyesa in December 2010. This conference entitled “Boosting the Followers Management” was aimed at organizing a “benchmarking [English in a Korean sentence] of the adherent management (*sindo gwalli*) methods” used in several temples of the Jogye Order. It stressed the need to “improve the service to the public” and presented the temple’s followers as central actors for the development of Buddhism. During this meeting, a leader of the Bongeunsa’s follower association described the temple as “a provider” (*gonggeupja*) concerned about the “satisfaction” of its audience:

“Followers are the owners (*juin*) of Buddhism. While correctly perceiving the reality, we need to increase each follower’s satisfaction. In the position of a provider (*gonggeupja*), the temple should encourage followers to become ardent pillars [of Buddhism].”

The Buddhist members who are engaged in such enterprises are generally not directly claiming the use of market inspired techniques. They rather phrase their projects in terms of quality of the service provided and development. While parts of the Buddhist milieu may regard these movements with suspicion, those who drive these activities tend to present them proudly, as signs of commitment for the satisfaction of the public and the propagation of the Dharma.

A Larger Issue: Forms of Buddhist Belonging and Position of Religion in Society

Use of corporate techniques and processes of commodification within religious institutions are now a generalized reality regardless of the denomination or country (Einstein 2008). More generally, this tendency is also noticeable in public institutions or non-governmental organizations. Buddhist temples in South Korea are obviously part of this prevailing movement. The phenomena described in this article result from the influence of market in most sectors of society. However, this article aims at showing that other types of logic and processes are also playing an important role. In a nutshell, the use of corporate techniques in the temple is not only a matter of market. Confronted to the success of other religions, especially Protestantism, Buddhism has engaged in a deep transformation of its social

³⁰ This echoes the more general attention given to the services aimed at improving customers’ comfort and satisfaction in South Korea.

structure. “Catching up” with the new roles of religious institutions in society has been established as a priority and this particularly translated into a major emphasis put on the laity.

Buddhist reformers of the twentieth century have aimed at establishing new relations between the monastic community and laity. Doctrinal supervision and propagation (*pogyo*) play a central role in the aim to strengthen the affiliation of lay practitioners to Buddhist institutions and temples. In the late 1990s, forms of belongings and affiliations to Buddhism have changed tremendously. While, in the 1980s, the sociologist Yoon Yee-Heum (1997, 10-12) was pointing at the difficulty for census and surveys to define “the Buddhists,” religious institutions have successfully promoted more formalized and visible forms of membership. Blurred borders between different religious belongings still exist in various contexts but a new form of identification to Buddhism has massively emerged. Education and lay followers associations (*sindohoe*) are playing a crucial role in the doctrinal and social integration of laity (Galmiche 2014, 231-32). However, in some ambitious temples, corporate techniques for the management of customers have been also adopted to complement and strengthen the project to build a community of firmly self-identified believers. The case of Bongeunsa does not account for the totality of Buddhism today in South Korea. Nonetheless, it illustrates a type of relations between a temple and its followers that exist in most urban temples and even, to a lesser extent, in those located in mountain areas. In addition, logistics of “upgrade,” “growth,” and “adaptation to the public’s desires” are present to various extents in most of Buddhist circles where they tend to be regarded as contemporary declinations of *upaya*, salvific means.

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Abstract

Far from being limited to social scientists, the market approach to religions has been widely adopted by religious actors as well, sometimes in a very explicit way. With an ethnographic methodology, this research analyzes how Buddhist organizations in South Korea are implementing business concepts and methods in temples with the aim of increasing their influence in society. It addresses how managerial models and advertising techniques have been appropriated in a religious context and how they interact with redefinitions of Buddhist

propagation. This paper argues that the use of communication and management techniques from the business world is not an epiphenomenon. Instead, it echoes a deeper transformation of Buddhism within South Korean society, especially in the role and place of the laity. For the urban temples engaged in ambitious development projects, the use of market related techniques is not merely a way to engage in a market-like competition. It also contributes to redefine their organizational structure as well as their division of religious work, in affinity with a dominant concept of religion.

Keywords: Buddhism, modernization, social definitions of religion, urban religion, religious affiliation