

## Article

# Korean Buddhist International Aid Work: A Critical Comparison of the Join Together Society and the Global Community Association (Good Hands)

Cheongwan Park  and Kyungrae Kim \* 

Department of Buddhist Studies, Dongguk University, Seoul 04620, Korea

\* Correspondence: wizkyung@dongguk.edu

**Abstract:** This paper critically scrutinizes the history and activities of South Korea's two largest Buddhist international aid organizations, namely, the Join Together Society, founded in 1991 by Venerable Pomnyun, leader of Korea's independent Jungto Society order of lay Buddhists, and the Global Community Association (*Jiguchon Gongsanghoe*, Good Hands), founded by former Jogye Order president, Venerable Wolju (1935–2021). It examines the origins, organizations, and activities of both organizations, followed by a comparison of their similarities and differences, along with a discussion of their respective relationships to Korean Buddhist mainstream life and the advantages and disadvantages of each. They are significant, not only for the many benefits they have brought to their target communities abroad but also for what they represent to the Korean Buddhist community at home. As the Korean Buddhist establishment continues to grapple with a prolonged crisis of falling membership and loss of relevance within Korea's increasingly agnostic society, the long-term sustainability of Korean Buddhist international efforts remains an open question. Nevertheless, the two organizations represent new visions for the modes of meaningful Buddhist praxis and engagement with the modern world that have a strong appeal to Korea's younger, urbanized Buddhist laity. The further support and expansion of such activities by the Buddhist establishment might aid in reversing the current downward trends of belief.

**Keywords:** Joint Together Society; Global Community Association; Good Hands; Pomnyun; Wolju; Buddhist NGO



**Citation:** Park, Cheongwan, and Kyungrae Kim. 2022. Korean Buddhist International Aid Work: A Critical Comparison of the Join Together Society and the Global Community Association (Good Hands). *Religions* 13: 815. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090815>

Academic Editor: Song-Chong Lee

Received: 2 August 2022

Accepted: 29 August 2022

Published: 1 September 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Following the widespread devastation of the Korean War (1950–1953), which saw millions of civilians killed and millions more displaced, the Republic of Korea (hereafter called “South Korea”) became a major benefactor of international relief efforts, often led by Western, Christian aid organizations. Over the following half-century, South Korea's war-torn society grew from being one of the poorest on earth to become a robust and fully industrialized first-world democracy by the turn of the millennium. During these remarkable decades of growth, the country transitioned from an international aid-receiving society to one distributing aid abroad, primarily via the nation's Christian NGOs.

While comprising a fraction of South Korea's total international aid efforts, since the 1990s, South Korea's Buddhist community has also actively supported a variety of international relief organizations. Inspired by traditional Mahayana Buddhist values, such as the cultivation of “great compassion” (Sk. *Mahākaruṇā*) and the “perfection of generosity” (Sk. *Dānapāramitā*), Buddhist NGOs actively work to address poverty, hunger, disease, and refugee crises in impoverished and war-torn nations around the globe.<sup>1</sup> Such international relief work is important not only to their recipient communities but also to the Korean Buddhist community itself, as these NGOs and their work are outgrowths of Korea's “socially engaged” Buddhist movements of the 1990s (see Tedesco 2002 and P. Park 2010 for further discussion) and represent a broadening of views beyond the established

modes of traditional Buddhist praxis in Korea. As noted by Korean Buddhist studies scholar Pori Park, such Korean Buddhist NGOs share commonalities with other “socially engaged” Buddhist organizations around the globe, such as Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village and Taiwan’s Tzu-Chi Foundation, led by the Buddhist nun, Cheng-yen. Yet Park observes that “Korean movements were subject to the specific circumstances of Korea” and, thus, have had “their share of trial and error in steering toward ‘modern’ modes of thinking and acting within Buddhism”, as each organization “in its own way have sought means of both satisfying the needs for social engagement and maintaining Buddhist identity” (P. Park 2010, p. 29).

As such, this paper will critically examine the history and activities of South Korea’s two largest Buddhist international aid organizations, namely, the Join Together Society, founded in 1991 by Venerable Pomnyun (b. 1953), the leader of Korea’s independent Jungto Society order of lay Buddhists, and the Global Community Association, (K. *Jiguchon Gongsanghoe*, 지구촌공생회), also known as “Good Hands,” which was founded by the former Jogye Order president, Venerable Wolju (1935–2021). It will survey the origins, organizations, and activities of both the Join Together Society and Good Hands, followed by a comparison of their similarities and differences, along with a discussion of their respective relationships to Korea’s Buddhist mainstream and the advantages and disadvantages of each organization. The paper will close with an exploration of the organizations’ significance to contemporary Korean Buddhism. However, since these discussions should remain grounded in the “specific circumstances of Korea” (P. Park 2010, p. 29), the paper will begin with a brief review of relevant Korean Buddhist history to provide a clearer context for the subsequent sections.

## 2. Background

Introduced to the peninsula in the fourth century CE, Buddhism flourished in Korea over the period of a millennium as a state religion, often termed “nation-protecting Buddhism” (K. *hoguk bulgyo*), and was patronized by a succession of ruling dynasties. Historical records contain numerous examples of Buddhist engagement in social welfare efforts during this period. In one instance during the Three Kingdoms Period (trad. 57 BCE–668 CE), a Goguryeo monk, Hyeja, initiated public programs for digging public wells and providing for beggars. In a further example recorded in the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), the Kaeguk, Yeonbok, and Boje monasteries engaged in local poverty relief programs. Buddhist concerns for social welfare were further expressed in the practice of the special funds, in which funds raised from temple offerings were used to care for the sick and poor, award scholarships, and provide other forms of public welfare, while monasteries functioned as ad hoc relief centers following natural disasters and military invasions. (For further discussion of this practice, see Sang Duck 2019).

However, these practices ended in the fifteenth century with Buddhism’s suppression under Korea’s Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), which progressively stripped the Buddhist establishment of its wealth and power, disbanded prominent temples, and banned monastics from entering the Korean capital city. The surviving monastics retreated to remote mountain temples, where Korean Buddhism was “virtually quarantined in the countryside” for 500 years, supported by the patronage of rural peasants (Buswell 1992, pp. 22–23). Nevertheless, early Joseon-era monasteries continued providing welfare services via facilities dubbed *chinjechang*, staffed by monks charged with administering relief programs. Despite Buddhism’s low social standing, numerous additional acts of charity and relief work conducted by Buddhist temples and individuals were recorded during this period, while village temples became de facto shelters for rural orphans and the elderly poor (Sang Duck 2019, pp. 246–47).

The lifting of the official government suppression of Buddhism in 1895 led to the emergence of numerous Buddhist reform movements over the following decades. While challenged by competition from foreign missionaries and interference from Japanese colonial authorities, these reformers sought to bring Buddhism out of Korea’s mountain temples

and into “the milieu of daily life”, to meaningfully engage with the wider society (P. Park 2010, pp. 2–4). Yet, with the widespread adoption of clerical marriage during the Japanese Annexation (1910–1945), a further “purification movement” (K. *jeonghwaundong*, 정화운동) emerged within South Korea’s monastic community following the Korean War, wherein a minority of celibate monastics struggled to expel the married clergy from Korean temples. After almost a decade of conflict, including protests, marches, and occasional violence between groups, Dictator Park Chung-hee (in office 1962–1979) intervened in 1962, formally dividing the monastic community between the married monks (who later established the Taego Order in 1970) and the celibate Jogye Order (K. *Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong*, hereafter “JO”), awarding the latter almost all the nation’s major Buddhist properties.<sup>2</sup>

While the JO was victorious, the movement had reversed many modernization efforts from previous decades. Furthermore, the majority of the JO became “willing partners” of the Park regime (P. Park 2006, p. 211) as the government’s “Law for the Control of Buddhist Properties” (K. *bulgyo jaesan gwalli beop*, 불교재산관리법) granted the regime direct control over all Buddhist properties and administrative appointments. In addition to reviving “nation-protecting Buddhism” as a modern religio-nationalist ideology, Buddhist leaders were required to publicly swear their loyalty to the regime. The JO would spend the remainder of the 1960s and 1970s largely disengaged from developments in the wider Korean society, focusing inward on restoring monastic discipline and meditation practices while rebuilding its largely rural monasteries (P. Park 2006, p. 211; Sørensen 1999, pp. 138–39).

Not all JO monastics approved of the regime’s interference in Buddhist affairs, however, and in the late 1970s, a small group of dissident monastics launched the *minjung bulgyo*, or “Buddhism for the Masses”, movement in protest. Then, on 27 October 1980, under the so-called “Plan 45”, the security forces of Dictator Chun Doo-hwan (in office 1980–1988) raided hundreds of Buddhist temples around the country, harassing and beating the monastics who were in residence and confiscating the temple treasuries. Of the nearly 200 Buddhist clergy and laymen detained during the raids, many were interrogated and tortured, resulting in several deaths, subsequently being “sent away for re-education”. This and further waves of anti-Buddhist persecution over the following years radicalized the younger generations of Korean Buddhists, prompting both monastics and laity to join the burgeoning pro-democracy movement in the 1980s, under the Minjung Buddhism banner, while advocating for reform within the Korean Buddhist mainstream.

The Minjung Buddhism movement (K. *minjung bulgyo undong*) drew on a variety of Buddhist texts and traditions to support its anti-capitalist, pro-democracy agenda. Venerable Beopjeong (1932–2010), a dissident monk and elder statesman of the Minjung Buddhism movement, found inspiration for his writings on Minjung Buddhism within the doctrines of “early Buddhism”, while other Minjung Buddhism activists drew upon the anti-authoritarian aspects of the indigenous Korean Seon (J. Zen) traditions, as well as other Mahayana doctrines, such as the mutual interdependence of all beings via dependent origination (Sk. *Pratītyasamutpāda*, K. *Yeongi*) and the Pure Land ideal. Although the Minjung Buddhist movement helped to repair many negative perceptions of the Korean Sangha, the socialist and materialist biases of the Minjung Buddhism movement, along with the movement’s political involvement, alienated a large segment of Korea’s conservative Buddhist mainstream (Jorgensen 2010, pp. 277–79, 283, 297; J. Y. Park 2010, p. 128).

After the successful ousting of Chun Doo-hwan in 1988, in the “June Democracy Movement” (K. 6 Wol *minjuhangjaeng*), the Minjung Buddhism movement dissolved during the nation’s subsequent transition to democracy. While playing but a minor role in the wider pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, the Minjung Buddhism movement established an ideological foundation for contemporary Buddhist social activism and engagement in Korean society (see Jorgensen 2010 for further discussion of the Minjung Buddhism movement). Furthermore, over the following decades, many former Minjung Buddhism activists refocused their activities on a wide range of social issues, including poverty relief and pollution, launching a spectrum of “socially engaged” Buddhist NGOs and organizations committed to bettering Korean society. Among these former Minjung Buddhism

activists-turned-civil society leaders were Venerable Pomnyun, the director of the Join Together Society, and Venerable Wolju, the founder of Good Hands.

### 3. The Join Together Society

#### 3.1. Origins

The Join Together Society (hereafter, JTS) is the international service wing of the Jungto Society. Through the JTS's three decades of activity, the organization's international aid efforts have been led by Venerable Pomnyun, the charismatic leader of Korea's Jungto, or "Pure Land" Society. Ordained as a novice monastic in 1969 at the Bunhwangsa Temple in Gyeongju, Pomnyun enrolled in the Seorim Buddhist Meditation center in 1984, but he was subsequently expelled from both the center and the Jogye Order for his involvement in the Minjung Buddhism movement and then imprisoned by the Chun regime. Following the June Democracy Movement, Pomnyun launched his own independent Buddhist order, the Jungto Society, in 1988. As described by Buddhist studies scholar Frank Tedesco, Pomnyun's Jungto Society espouses a form of "Buddhist-inspired eco-idealism" that is attractive to young Koreans as it forgoes the traditional emphasis on Buddhist scriptures composed in classical Chinese and, instead, presents Buddhist teachings in simple Korean (Tedesco 2002, pp. 143–44). However, the society's numerous ecological and social activities draw inspiration from a variety of mainstream East-Asian Mahayana doctrines, including the Bodhisattva Ideal, the teachings of non-attachment, and the interconnected nature of all phenomena, via the doctrine of dependent origination. Jungto Society members thus work together to manifest a Buddhist Pure Land within the wider society that is free from hunger, disease, and physical suffering (P. Park 2010, p. 34).

Despite drawing inspiration from the Buddhist tradition, Pomnyun's ordination is not recognized by the JO or other Korean Buddhist orders. Yet, Tedesco notes that this institutional independence has allowed Pomnyun to maintain a "much more egalitarian relationship with his colleagues and followers" within the Jungto Society, almost all of whom have been recruited from the country's urbanized laity (Tedesco 2002, p. 166). With his slogan "Right Buddhism, Easy Buddhism, and Social Buddhism", Pomnyun emphasizes that the social activities in our life are no different from Buddhist enlightenment, (B. Kim 2018, pp. 135–68) and that, since its founding, the Jungto Society has been at the forefront of Buddhist social activism and urban propagation activities (Cho 2006, pp. 241–73; Kim and Park 2021, pp. 4–5).

In 1990, Pomnyun established the Jungto Training Center for educating the society's lay membership; the center continues to require trainees to complete 40 hours of mandatory volunteer service to receive their course certificate program. In April 1993, the society additionally launched the "10,000 Days of Prayer" initiative wherein for 10,000 days, roughly the duration of one generation, society members commit to spending an hour each day on prayer and meditation, donating 1000 won (approximately one USD) daily to society-based charities, and volunteering with at least one project within the Jungto Society's NGOs. Members then convene every 100 days to reevaluate their goals regarding self-discipline, charity, and voluntary service, to receive their new volunteer assignments, and renew their commitment to the society's work (P. Park 2010, p. 33; Tedesco 2002, p. 146).

Currently, the society operates about 200 domestic and 30 overseas branches, including an office outside Washington D.C., USA, for coordinating the international volunteering and fundraising efforts of the society's international branches and those of various affiliated NGOs. Notably, all Jungto Society members are lay practitioners, a reversal of the traditional monastic-centered orientation of the JO and of most other Korean Buddhist orders (Kim 2018, pp. 141–43; see also the JTS website, <https://www.jtsamerica.org/>, accessed on 24 June 2022). As described by Pori Park, functionally, the Jungto Society is "fully supported by volunteer part-time and full-time workers" who rotate positions every three years. Jungto Society volunteers "are like temporary monastics, living in a communal life, fully committed to the work and to mind cultivation for the duration of their term". In its early years, the society and its subsidiaries were run by a dedicated core group of about 1000

such volunteers, although the workload was gradually spread more evenly as the society grew in members (P. Park 2010, p. 34).

### 3.2. Organization and Structure

Founded in 1991, following Pomnyun's encounter with Dalit (also called "untouchable") beggars while on a Buddhist pilgrimage in India, the JTS became the first Korean Buddhist NGO that was active internationally and soon emerged as a "leader in overseas relief projects" sponsored by Korean Buddhists (H. Lee 2015). With the guiding belief that: "The hungry should be fed. The sick should be treated. Children should be educated", the "Prayer of the JTS" on the organization's English website states:

"We hope to make a world in which anyone who is hungry can eat, anyone who needs medical care can receive it, every child can get educated, anyone hit by natural disasters like droughts, floods, heat waves, or extreme cold can get help . . ." (Jungto Society Website, <https://jungto.org/english/jts/>, accessed on 24 June 2022).

In 1994, the JTS launched its first international relief program, the construction of the Sujata Academy, a primary school for Dalit children in the India's Bihar region. Over the subsequent three decades, the JTS relief activities have expanded to almost a dozen countries in Asia and, recently, Europe. Working closely with the Jungto Society, JTS International maintains branch offices in South Korea, the US, and Germany that are responsible for fundraising, as well as permanent field offices in India, the Philippines, and North Korea (H. Lee 2015; P. Park 2010).

Notably, as with all Jungto Society-affiliated NGOs, the JTS is entirely run "100%" by volunteers recruited from the Jungto Society's membership pool and organized into teams by departments, such as accounting, public relations, and fieldwork. According to the organization's online materials, the JTS currently engages 300 full-time and thousands of part-time volunteers to support its activities (JTS America branch website, <https://www.jtsamerica.org/>, accessed on 28 June 2022).

Another defining feature of JTS relief activities is that they are "not one-sided", but actively involve local populations in providing volunteer labor and material support, cultivating a sense of local ownership, responsibility, and self-reliance among the communities receiving aid. As stated on the organization's website:

"We believe that community development must be carried out with active contributions from the community members, with minimal outside intervention and fully volunteering their labor to do so. Our programs are based on the community ownership of the changes and all procurements and supplies, be it skilled manpower or construction materials, are obtained locally in order to bring maximum benefits to the local economy". (JTS website, <https://www.jtsint.org/index.php/about-us/who-we-are/>, accessed on 24 June 2022)

JTS volunteers are similarly expected to live together with the local population while on assignment, adopting the same standards of living and lifestyle. As a result, JTS's operating costs remain remarkably low. As reported by Secretary-General Hyeon Hee-ryun in 2015, only 3% of the JTS's KRW 6 billion annual budget (approximately USD 4.5 million) was spent on operating costs, while 95–97% of the budget went directly to their relief efforts (H. Lee 2015).

### 3.3. Activities Abroad

As its oldest initiative, the JTS's relief work in India's Dongheswari region (literally meaning the "Abandoned Land"), one of the poorest areas in the country, remains a central area of focus for the organization. Upon its founding in 1994, the Sujata Academy enrolled 120 local children; its facilities have since grown to include two school buildings, along with a warehouse, dormitory, kindergarten, and playing field. The school continues to provide an education from kindergarten through secondary level for local children,

along with literacy classes and skills training classes for adults. While the school is free for younger children, students enrolled in continuing education classes are required to volunteer in local JTS-affiliated kindergartens and medical clinics (JTS website, <https://www.jtsint.org/index.php/our-works/india/>, accessed on 24 June 2022). The academy has since opened an additional 17 satellite kindergartens that are responsible for educating and feeding 1800 students in the surrounding communities. In 2001, JTS opened the affiliated Youth Labor Technical School to provide training in engineering and construction for local young people who are responsible for supporting their families (H. Lee 2015; JTS website, <https://www.jts.or.kr/works/india.html>, accessed on 30 June 2022).

With the outbreak of a cholera epidemic in Dongheswari shortly after the Sujata Academy's opening, the school's medical clinic began providing free medical care to the local community. Renamed the Jivaka Hospital (Jivaka was a renowned physician during the time of Buddha), the clinic has gradually expanded its services to focus on providing medication and nutrition to local tuberculosis victims through regular visits and in-home follow-up care. In 2001, the clinic relocated to a custom-built two-story building, constructed with support from the International Cooperation Agency. In 2005, the clinic began providing postpartum care to mothers and infants and, as of 2015, was treating an average of 20,000 patients per year, while also operating mobile clinics in the surrounding area.

In addition to education and medical aid, the JTS has become involved in infrastructure development and improvement projects in Dongheswari and its surrounding areas. Modeled after the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, JTS promoted "step-by-step village development" for Dongheswari and its surrounding areas, promoting road and infrastructure construction, land reclamation, and self-reliance. By 2007, JTS had supported the digging of 33 hand-pumped wells and three agricultural wells to provide clean water to the community. In addition, the JTS regularly provided food, clothing, and material aid to 12,000 people among the 17 villages, distributed during home visits that were accompanied by medical staff (H. Lee 2015; P. Park 2010, p. 35; JTS website, <https://www.jts.or.kr/works/india.html>, accessed on 27 June 2022).

Following the great flood of 1995 and the subsequent famine in North Korea (also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK), the JTS began providing emergency food assistance for vulnerable populations residing in Hamgyong, the DPRK's poorest province, along with the communities of North Korean refugees in China in 1997 and 1998 who were fleeing the famine. By sponsoring the construction of a children's food factory in Raseon (or Rason) City, the JTS provided daily nutrition to an additional 10,000 people in daycare centers and kindergartens around the city. The JTS delivered additional relief supplies in the DPRK, following the Ryongcheon rail explosion in 2004, a scarlet fever epidemic in 2006, and a series of floods between 2006 and 2011. Beginning in 1997, the JTS supplied further emergency food aid to 4000 children in orphanages in Ghongji and Gilju.

The JTS's food aid to North Korea has expanded considerably since 2009; the organization agreed to provide support for all orphanages, nursing homes, and schools for the disabled in the country, except for those in the provinces of Jagang and Pyeongyang. Through this program, the JTS provides over 12,000 facilities with food, daily necessities, and educational equipment on a quarterly basis, with JTS volunteers personally visiting the sites to monitor their distribution. Beginning in 1998, the JTS has additionally supplied the North Korean regions of Raseon, Chongjin, and Onsong with agricultural materials, such as pesticides, fertilizer, seeds, and vinyl sheeting, for the purposes of raising food locally for organizations and food assistance programs in North Korea. In 2008, Pomnyun personally conducted a 70-day-long fast to raise awareness about starvation in North Korea, earning the JTS over USD 1.5 million in donations for its food assistance programs in the DPRK (H. Lee 2015; P. Park 2010, p. 36; JTS website, <https://www.jts.or.kr/works/northkorea.html>, accessed on 24 June 2022).

The JTS began its involvement in the Philippines following a conversation between Pomnyun and the Catholic Archbishop, Tony Ledesma, in 2002 regarding sectarian conflict and endemic poverty among Muslim and indigenous populations residing on Mindanao, the nation's second-largest island. The following year, the JTS launched its educational support projects for Muslim and indigenous villages and, in January 2005, the organization completed its first school in Gaghuman village, which served 120 households, additionally providing clean water and blacksmithing facilities, among other infrastructure support projects benefiting the surrounding community. With the cooperation of local governments, between 2003 and 2009, the JTS constructed a total of 62 classrooms among 40 villages on the island, providing educational supplies such as desks, textbooks, and stationery. These schools additionally focus on preserving the local communities' traditional cultures while also providing them with a connection to the outside world. The JTS has also sponsored agricultural support projects in the region by constructing grain warehouses, providing water buffalo for plowing, and establishing agricultural training centers. In addition, the organization has hosted Peace Camps in rural Mindanao for Korean and Filipino university students, engaging them in conversations surrounding conflict resolution with local indigenous leaders (H. Lee 2015; JTS website, <https://www.jts.or.kr/works/philippines.html>, accessed on 28 June 2022).

Moreover, the JTS has operated short-term and medium-term emergency relief operations in areas suffering from the effects of natural disasters and wars in almost a dozen countries, including Afghanistan, Nepal, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and, recently, Ukraine. Such projects have included providing emergency relief services to Iran following a devastating earthquake in 2003, to India and Sri Lanka, following the tsunami in 2004, to Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake, and to Java after another earthquake in 2006. For years, the JTS maintained a permanent branch office in Afghanistan and, from 2002 through 2005, they carried out educational infrastructure and medical support activities in the Kandahar, Tuptara, and Bamian regions. In 2019, the JTS supplied over 100,000 gas stoves to Rohingya refugee communities in Myanmar; the organization currently has representatives working in Ukrainian refugee camps on the country's western borders, to provide relief organizations on the ground with any supplies or materials that they might be lacking (P. Park 2010, p. 35; JTS website, [http://jts.or.kr/story/story\\_all.html](http://jts.or.kr/story/story_all.html), accessed on 24 June 2022).

#### **4. Good Hands (K. Jiguchon Gongsanghoe)**

##### *4.1. Origins*

As with Venerable Pomnyun and the JTS, the international relief work of Good Hands has largely been led by the renowned Korean Buddhist monk, Venerable Wolju. Born in 1935, Wolju was ordained in 1954 and subsequently become involved in South Korean Buddhism's post-war Purification Movement (see Section 1). By the mid-1960s, Wolju had been appointed as the abbot of Geumsan Temple (K. Geumsansa) and began serving in various administrative positions within the Jogye Order, where he was recognized by his fellow monastics for his sincerity and "selfless devotion", culminating in his election as the order's 17th president in 1980. However, during the "Plan 45" Incident the following October (see Section 1), Wolju was arrested by Chun Doo-hwan's security forces, imprisoned in a high-security facility, and interrogated for 23 days. Wolju successfully resisted repeated efforts to coerce him into pledging the order's allegiance to the Chun regime, for which resistance he was stripped of his position and banned from the leadership of the JO (Baek 2021).

Following his release, Wolju fled Korea, going into exile to a Korean Buddhist temple in the United States. Over the next three years, Wolju traveled throughout Mexico, Europe, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India, visiting a variety of Buddhist temples and facilities. As Wolju explained in 2015:

"I was deeply moved that foreign Buddhist traditions are mostly running schools and participating in welfare projects. On the other hand, Korean Buddhism was only immersed in prayer and meditation, and was only interested in protecting

cultural properties and expanding temples. The tradition of Korean Buddhism was obsessed with self-prayer, turning a blind eye to social participation and being indifferent to pain and social problems . . . ” (Interview 2015).

With Wolju’s return and the nation’s transition to democracy following the June Democracy Movement, Wolju reentered JO politics with a renewed vision for Buddhist social engagement. Wolju served as “the co-president of the Council for the National Campaign to Defuse Regional Prejudice (1988), the co-president of Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice (1989), the co-president of Citizen’s Coalition for Fair Election (1990), and the chair of the Buddhist Association for Peaceful Reunification of Korea (1992)” (Jogye Order 2021).

In 1994, Wolju was again elected as president of the Jogye Order. During his four-year tenure as the order’s 29th president, he led numerous democratic reforms within the order. Under the banner of his “Social Expansion of Enlightenment Movement” (hereafter called SEME), Wolju sought to involve the country’s Buddhist establishment in social welfare efforts within South Korea’s newly democratized society. Citing the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, Wolju emphasized that not only all human beings but also society and nature are interconnected. Thus, those who follow the Buddha’s teachings must actively intervene in the lives of others, in society, and the environment, practicing “great compassion” (S.-h. Park 2018, pp. 102–3). Furthermore, invoking Mahayana teachings on the non-duality of Samsara and Nirvana, Wolju emphasized that enlightenment does not exist apart from the world. As such, the true purpose of Mahayana Buddhism is to actively manifest the Buddha’s enlightenment within the wider society for the benefit of all sentient beings (Committee 1996, p. 704; S.-h. Park 2018, p. 103).

After completing his term as JO president in 1998, Wolju withdrew from political involvement and refocused his SEME on Buddhist social welfare efforts within Korean society. After launching several domestic NGOs, Wolju became involved in international aid work in response to the famine in North Korea in the late 1990s, with his launch of the “Working Together Foundation”. Following 2004’s Ryongcheon rail explosion in North Korea, which killed approximately 3000 people, Wolju personally visited the disaster site, delivering donations and committing to rebuild a local school that was destroyed in the blast. However, Wolju gradually became disillusioned with inter-Korean political tensions and, with the DPRK’s resumption of its nuclear missile tests, Wolju resigned from the foundation.

Wolju then shifted his attention to other countries suffering from poverty and the aftereffects of war, through his recently founded NGO “Global Community Association”, also referred to as “Good Hands” in the organization’s literature. In his autobiography, *Horned Rabbit, Hairy Turtle* (K. Tokkippul geobukiteol, 토끼뿔 거북이털), Wolju wrote: “It is time for Koreans to turn their eyes outward to the rest of the world.... We must dig deep to create a vast well, big enough to share with the whole of humanity” (Jogye Order 2021). Reflecting on the immense amount of international aid that had flowed into his own country following the Korean War, Wolju believed that this debt should be paid forward to other suffering communities, now that South Korea had achieved economic affluence. “The global village is one workplace, and human beings are one life”, Wolju commented. “Just as the pain of the global neighbors is my pain, and their happiness is my happiness”. (Jongman Kim 2015).

#### 4.2. Organization

Launched in 2003, Good Hands was officially granted NGO status by the South Korean government in 2004 and soon became an umbrella organization for coordinating humanitarian international aid and relief efforts in East Asia. Governed by an eight-member board of directors composed of high-level JO monastics, Wolju personally served as the organization’s chairman up until his passing in 2021. Organizationally, Good Hands was divided into four teams that handled the various aspects of the organization’s planning, operations support, and fundraising. Unlike the JTS, however, Good Hands relies almost

entirely on paid staff instead of volunteers; the organization's present director, Venerable Ja-o currently oversees a staff of 10. Good Hands maintains six international branch offices, each employing a single Korean staff member from the local community who jointly oversees local operations. Prior to the global Covid pandemic, JO monastics had also been dispatched to each international branch office on long-term assignments, as well as occasional groups of South Korean middle and high school students who were on short-term volunteering trips. However, both practices have temporarily been suspended since the pandemic's outbreak (Jongman Kim 2015; Private Interview with Venerable Ja-o in 2022).

Owing to its professional staff, Good Hands' operational and labor costs are larger than those of the JTS, yet they never make up more than 20% of the organization's annual budget. Of its approximately KRW 3.5 billion (approx. USD 2.6 million) budget for 2021, about KRW 500 million (382,000 USD), or over 19%, were spent on labor and operation costs. 1.13 billion won (864,119 USD), or 44% of the total budget, were spent on actual aid and relief projects, and 929 million won (710,000 USD), or 36%, were carried over to the following year. In previous years, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (K. *Hanguk gukje hyeomnyeokdan*, hereafter KOICA), had provided one-to-one matching funds for Good Hands' labor costs, but this practice was suspended in 2021 (Good Hands website, [http://www.goodhands.or.kr/main/sub\\_report.php?page\\_idx=94](http://www.goodhands.or.kr/main/sub_report.php?page_idx=94), accessed on 2 July 2022; Private Interview with Venerable Ja-o in 2022).

#### 4.3. Activities Abroad

The activities of Good Hands have centered around three general areas: education, clean drinking water, and regional development. As noted by its website, "Education is a ticket out of the vicious cycle of generational poverty"; thus, the organization strives to provide "quality education by improving an inadequate learning environment and installing suitable facilities and support programs that can foster significant changes". To date, Good Hands has sponsored 79 separate education-related projects, impacting approximately 200,000 children in Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Kenya, Myanmar, and Nepal. Good Hands also works to prevent unnecessary illness and death from water-borne illnesses by providing "a stable supply of clean and safe drinking water through the installment of drinking water facilities and continuous monitoring". The organization has installed over 2500 wells, successfully providing clean water for approx. 370,000 people in five countries. Good Hands has additionally supported 64 additional regional development projects aimed at "constructing socio-cultural foundations for local people by expanding their income level and laying a foundation for their independence through creating social enterprises, managing farms, and building the basic infrastructure". The diverse array of projects sponsored by Good Hands has included mine-sweeping, desertification prevention, and agricultural education projects, among others (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 2 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

In March 2004, Good Hands opened its first overseas branch in Kampot, Cambodia, launching its "Well of Life" project, which is committed to opening 1000 clean water sources in Kampot and the surrounding communities. Completing the project in January 2010, Good Hands relaunched the "Well of Life 2000" program for completing an additional 1000 wells. By 2015, 2167 clean water wells had been constructed, serving 160,000 residents in the provinces of Takeo, Kampong Spoo, Kampong Cham, and Siem Reap. In October 2005, Good Hands' first school, the Krangyau Symbiosis Kindergarten, was opened in Ping Pong village, providing free education and meals to 60 impoverished children. In 2006, the organization opened a second school, the Gongseng Elementary School, in Knai Village and has since constructed a further ten schools. Beginning in 2013, Good Hands began sponsoring landmine removal projects and, by 2015, had cleared an area of 300,000 square kilometers around nine villages, removing a total of 31,996 explosive items, including 54 landmines and 270 unexploded bombs. Additional relief projects sponsored by the organization in Cambodia have included a blanket distribution project in 2008, to

prevent hypothermia in the rainy season, and a road repair and expansion project in Knami Village in 2009 (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 3 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

Following the devastation suffered in Myanmar during Typhoon Nargis in 2008, Good Hands launched efforts to rebuild schools in those villages most severely affected by the storm, first by constructing a middle school in the village of Yedungong, followed by two additional elementary schools in the Namdagon township. By 2015, the organization had built 10 schools in Myanmar, mostly with funds directly provided by various Korean Buddhist temples, organizations, and individuals. In addition to education, the organization's work in Myanmar has also focused on providing clean water. With central Myanmar classified as a "dry zone", roughly 14.5 million residents suffer from water shortages each year. In 2010, Good Hands began constructing water storage tanks for villages in the Bagan region of Myanmar and, by 2015, had constructed 15 water tanks providing clean drinking water for approx. 15,000 residents (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 2 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

Providing clean drinking water has also been a focus of the organization's work in Mongolia. Beginning in 2005, Good Hands initiated drinking water support projects in the outskirts of the nation's capital, Ulaanbaatar. As of 2015, the organization had successfully completed the construction of 13 wells. In 2008, Good Hands opened the 145th Symbiosis Kindergarten in the Hangol District of Ulaanbaatar, which, as of 2013, had enrolled 113 students. An affiliated youth-centered scheme, servicing local low-income children in the neighborhood, opened in 2009. Good Hands has additionally sponsored several regional development projects in the nation to strengthen self-reliance, including the opening of an agricultural training institute within the aforementioned Symbiosis Youth Center, along with a "village greening project" in 2013 that planted 400 poplar trees in an effort to fight desertification. (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 2 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

In Laos, the operations of the Good Hands organization have focused primarily on education. In 2004, the organization opened the Dunnun Symbiosis Kindergarten in Laos, followed two years later by the refurbishing the nearby Dunnun Elementary School, so that kindergarten graduates could properly continue their education. The school now services 3000 young people in the region. A second school was completed in October 2008 with the construction of the Hwagye Elementary School in Ssambon and, as of 2015, Good Hands had constructed 13 education facilities throughout the country (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 2 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

In Nepal, Good Hands has also focused its activities on educational support. In 2009, it began construction on the Srishideshol Public School in Nalang Village, in Nepal's Dading District. Completed the following April, the school provides elementary through higher-education-level classes to approx. 800 students. In 2011, an individual donor provided KRW 200 million for the construction of the Sriadasha Songmyungrye Elementary School in Lumbini, while the Baekcheon Buddhist Cultural Foundation provided funding for the construction of a third elementary school in Lumbini's Kapilavastu District. As of 2015, Good Hands had sponsored the construction of five schools in Nepal (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 2 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

On 26 December 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami killed approximately 200,000 people who were residing in the coastal regions throughout 11 countries in South-East Asia. Following the disaster, Good Hands responded by constructing community centers and kindergartens for refugee children in Matara, Beruwala, and Kosgoda, the regions hit hardest by the tsunami in Sri Lanka. Beginning in October 2007, the organization additionally launched a series of cooperative mushroom farms to help earn income for low-income residents in the country's Godakanda region (Good Hands Website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 2 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

As a water-stressed nation with 84% of its territory averaging an annual rainfall of 500 mm or less a year, Good Hands expanded its "Well of Life" project to Kenya;

between 2007 and 2009, eight wells were constructed in the country's Kajai-do region. As of 2015, the number of wells had been expanded to 15, supplying water to 7000 local residents. Regarding education, Good Hands opened its first school in Kenya, the Anyonor Elementary School, in March 2011. Three years later, this was followed by the construction of a second school in the Masai village of Oloitokitok Olmapitet, funded by KRW 50 million in prize money Wolju had received after being awarded the Manhae Grand Prize<sup>3</sup> in 2012, and the opening of a third elementary school in Kenya's Kajiado Province in 2014. Good Hands has additionally been involved with agricultural promotion projects in Kenya in conjunction with the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), in Inkini Village, Sajiloni, Kaziado, one of the nation's poorest communities, as well as the construction and export of traditional-style bead crafts with Masai women, earning them 4.5 million won income in 2013 (Good Hands website, <http://www.goodhands.kr/>, accessed on 4 July 2022; Jongman Kim 2015).

As with JTS, the outbreak of the global Covid pandemic in 2020 prompted major adjustments in Good Hands' international operations. The branches in Laos, Mongolia, and Nepal have scaled back most of the programs and have repeatedly closed and opened their facilities according to changes in the government guidelines. All the organization's on-site inspections were changed to non-face-to-face contact, and almost all of the Good Hands' well and school construction projects have been paused. Good Hands, however, has been proactive in its response to the pandemic, with the organization's Nepal branch distributing masks and relief supplies to the surrounding schools (Han 2021). Despite Venerable Wolju's passing in 2021, Good Hands continues its core mission under the leadership of its board of directors and current chairman, Venerable Sungwoo. In April 2022, Venerable Sungwoo personally visited the Ukrainian Embassy in Seoul to donate KRW 30 million toward the government's refugee support services and to bring wishes for a swift and peaceful resolution to the conflict (Jongman Kim 2022).

## 5. Discussion

As discussed above, JTS and Good Hands share numerous similarities, as well as significant differences. The founders and long-term directors of both organizations were originally Buddhist monastics inspired to social activism through the Minjung Buddhism movement and the wider South Korean pro-democracy movement of the 1980s. Both had been arrested and imprisoned by the Chun Doo-hwan regime and both had been profoundly influenced by their travels outside of Korea. Furthermore, both Wolju and Pomnyun found justification for Buddhist social activism within a wide range of traditional East Asian Buddhist doctrines, including the interconnectedness of all beings via dependent origination, the non-duality of Samsara and Nirvana, the Bodhisattva ideal of "Great Compassion", and the Pure Land ideal.

The practical activities of both organizations share further similarities. While the JTS prioritizes educational, medical, and regional economic development projects, Good Hands concentrates on providing clean drinking water, the building of schools, and a host of other infrastructure and economic development projects. Both organizations have also concentrated their efforts on impoverished Asian countries where governments and low costs provide fewer barriers to success. Both organizations have additionally provided funds and supplies as part of their disaster relief efforts throughout Europe and Asia, the most recent being the refugee crisis prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Given their many similarities, the key differences between the JTS and Good Hands groups lie in their organizational and operational structures, as well as their relationships with Korea's Buddhist community; these differences have created advantages and disadvantages for both organizations. As highlighted in the JTS literature, the JTS organization is staffed entirely by volunteers, the majority of whom are Jungto Society members who are performing voluntary service as part of their "10,000 Days of Prayer" initiative. Functioning as an all-volunteer organization allows the JTS to spend 97% of its budget directly on development and relief projects. However, as noted by the JTS's Secretary-General, Hyeon

Hee-ryun, this reliance on volunteers leaves the JTS projects vulnerable to disruptions in terms of work continuity and relationship-building with the local community, as individual fieldworkers are regularly replaced. Hyeon hopes that, in the future, such disadvantages can be mitigated by more systemization within the organization (H. Lee 2015). Furthermore, there have been questions as to whether the JTS adequately compensates its local actors or cares for its volunteer staff, issues that were highlighted by the tragic murder of the Sujata Academy's Korean head of the construction task force in 10 January 2020 by a thief who broke into the construction zone.

In contrast, Good Hands relies primarily on professional staff for its practical operations, both in its domestic headquarters and its international branch offices, thus reducing discontinuities and disruptions in its various projects. While Good Hands spends a higher percentage of its budget on operations and labor costs, it remains committed to financial transparency and has continued its pledge of spending no more than 20% of its annual budget on operational costs; this fact is widely advertised in its literature. Nevertheless, Good Hands still faces the ongoing challenge of recruiting skilled and knowledgeable personnel; this is not a problem shared by Christian NGOs, who recruit from large pools of professional missionaries who have been educated in South Korea's numerous religious colleges.

While there are many areas of overlap between the activities of the JTS and Good Hands, their contrasting financing and organizational structures have led to practical differences in their approaches on the ground. Despite their regular turnover, the JTS's large pool of volunteer staff has thus far enabled the organization to build and maintain long-term relationships with many target communities, particularly in India, North Korea, and the Philippines. These relationships have not only contributed to the longevity of these projects but also enabled them to expand and adapt their services, as new needs have arisen in the local communities. Furthermore, by soliciting active involvement from the target communities via the donation of materials or labor, the JTS promotes local community ownership of the long-term projects that it sponsors, further ensuring their longevity and success (JTS website, <https://www.jtsint.org/index.php/about-us/who-we-are/>, accessed on 29 June 2022).

Due to its reliance on a much smaller body of professional staff, most of Good Hands' work, in contrast, has concentrated on one-off construction and infrastructure development projects, such as well digging and school construction. Such infrastructure projects not only provide immediately tangible benefits to the target communities, without requiring long-term involvement, but also cater to the tastes of Good Hands' donors, who are able to erect plaques or take commemorative photos once such projects are completed. Good Hands' "Well of Life" campaign, for example, strove to maximize donor impact by digging wells among the widest number of communities possible. However, numerous instances of groundwater contamination and the eventual need for repairs on broken pumps have prompted criticisms of this approach, leading the organization to commit to regularly monitoring and maintaining the wells that they have already dug (N. Kim 2021; J. Park 2016).

JTS and Good Hands further differ in their relationship to South Korea's Buddhist mainstream. As previously noted, several scholars have attributed the rapid development of both the JTS and the Jungto Society to the fact that Pomnyun has operated outside the Jogye Order since the mid-1980s and, thus, has remained unburdened by the order's complex hierarchies and internal political struggles. Thus, Pomnyun was able to launch the Jungto Society and its subsidiary NGOs without resistance and has been able to adapt them as necessary without interference; these factors enabled the rapid entry of the JTS into the field of international humanitarian aid work in the early 1990s, approximately a decade earlier than Wolju's Good Hands. Furthermore, by rejecting the traditional monastic-centered practices and rural isolation of traditional Buddhism in Korea, the Jungto Society has attracted thousands of young urban lay Buddhists, who regard social activism and

engagement not only as an expression of their Buddhist values but also as a core religious practice, creating an entirely new phenomenon in contemporary Korean Buddhism.

Having served twice as the president of the Jogye Order, Wolju, on the other hand, chose to embed his reformist activities firmly within the monastic culture of the JO mainstream; during his second term as president, he successfully passed lasting democratic reforms within the order while promoting various JO-affiliated social welfare organizations and activities. Following the launch of Good Hands in 2003, Wolju utilized his personal reputation and political connections, both within and outside the order, to elicit financial support from JO-affiliated temples, private organizations, celebrities, and even local and national governments. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the organization's funding efforts have relied too heavily on Wolju's prestige and personal leadership (Jongman Kim 2015). Following Wolju's passing in 2021, Good Hands' work has continued under the directorship of Venerable Sungwoo; it remains to be seen whether the organization will continue to garner the same level of support from the Korean Buddhist community as it did during Wolju's lifetime. Nevertheless, Good Hands remains the JO's flagship international relief organization and will probably continue to receive institutional and financial support from the order, so long as Wolju's disciples remain in positions of power (private interview with Venable Ja-o in 2022; M. Lee 2017, p. 37; Kim and Park 2021, p. 6).

Similar concerns have been expressed regarding the future of the Jungto Society and the JTS following Pomnyun's eventual passing. However, the Jungto Society has been reorganized as a direct democracy, wherein society members pass decisions through a simple majority vote. Pomnyun intends that the Jungto Society should continue functioning as a leaderless organization after his death, just as with the original *Sangha*, following the historical Buddha's own Parinirvana; according to Pomnyun, the society has been "putting a lot of effort into educating tactical activists" to prepare the Jungto Society and JTS for continued success after he is gone (Jungto Society website, <https://www.jungto.org/pomnyun/view/83342>, accessed on 2 July 2022).

## 6. Conclusions

Although the activities of Good Hands and JTS represent only a fraction of the international relief efforts conducted by Korea's Christian NGOs, they remain significant, not only for the many benefits they have brought to their target communities abroad but also for what they represent to Korea's Buddhist community at home. An outgrowth of the country's Minjung Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism movements of the 1980s and 1990s, the entry of Korean Buddhist organizations into the field of international aid work signals the expansion of Korean Buddhism beyond the dominant modalities of traditional praxis. These are defined by the rural isolation of "mountain Buddhism", focused on the intensive monastic practice of the Seon meditation of observing the critical phrase (K. *ganhwa seon*) and the lay practice of "good-fortune Buddhism" (K. *gibok bulgyo*, 기복불교) in hopes of procuring worldly benefits through Buddhist rituals and temple patronage. The international scope of the work of Good Hands and JTS further represent Korean Buddhism's expansion beyond the inward-focused religio-nationalist ideology of "state-protection Buddhism" (K. *hoguk bulgyo*, 호국불교), which was revived during the 1960s and 1970s under the Park regime, toward a broader awareness of Korean Buddhism's place in the global community.

As the Korean Buddhist establishment continues to grapple with a prolonged crisis of falling membership and the loss of relevance within South Korea's increasing agnostic society, the long-term sustainability of Korean Buddhist international efforts remains an open question. Nevertheless, the JTS and Good Hands organizations represent new visions for modes of meaningful Buddhist praxis and engagement with the modern world that have a strong appeal to Korea's younger, urbanized Buddhist laity. The further support expansion of such activities by the Buddhist establishment might aid in reversing the current downward trends. However, whether the JTS and Good Hands organizations will continue to receive the support necessary to continue their operations over the coming

decades remains to be seen. As Pomnyun, himself, has observed: “When the social utility value of the (Jungto) Society is exhausted, it will decline. No matter how well a building is built, it must be demolished if it is of no use” (Jungto Society website, <https://www.jungto.org/pomnyun/view/83342>, accessed on 7 July 2022).

**Author Contributions:** Investigation, C.P.; writing—original draft preparation, K.K.; writing—review and editing, C.P.; supervision, K.K.; funding acquisition, C.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea, grant number NRF-2021S1A6A3A01097807.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As with South Korea’s Catholic and Protestant communities, contemporary Korean Buddhists have well-established doctrinal motivations for engaging in social welfare activities and social activism. In East Asian Mahayana Buddhism, practitioners strive to cultivate “great compassion”; the seventh-century Korean Buddhist master Wonhyo describes this compassion as “unconditional” and “does not distinguish between self and others” (S. B. Park 1985, p. 99). Frequently paired with Great Wisdom (Sk. *Mahāprajñā*) in the Buddhist literature, together, their dual practice is often compared to wings carrying one to enlightenment. Great Compassion is also associated with Dāna paramita, the “perfection” of “generosity” or “giving”, practiced on the Bodhisattva path to Buddhahood; even today, the Korean Buddhist daily chant is: “Though the number of sentient beings is infinite, I vow to save them all”.
- <sup>2</sup> Representing the mainstream of Korean Buddhist tradition, the Jogye Order remains the largest of Korea’s Buddhist orders. The JO maintains more than 3000 temples, organized within 25 districts and staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained monastics (K. bigu), almost half of whom are female (K. biguni).
- <sup>3</sup> The Manhae Grand Prize was established in 1997 by the Manhae Thought Practice Association to commemorate the thoughts and spirit of Manhae Han Yong-woon (1879–1944), who dedicated his whole life to Korean liberation and Buddhism until he died; the award is presented by the Manhae Festival Promotion Committee.

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