

## Article

# Surveying Buddhist Cultural Heritage Lost During the Korean War

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**Abstract:** For the half-century following the armistice halting the Korean War (1950–1953), the immense loss of Korea’s Buddhist cultural heritage during the conflict has remained largely unexamined by scholars and historians, not only because of the topic’s immense scope and sensitivity but also the dearth of accurate and objective information. Thus, the research and resulting publications launched by Jogye Order’s Ministry of Culture in 2003 provide an invaluable and comprehensive survey of the hundreds of Buddhist temples and thousands of related cultural assets lost or damaged during the war. These efforts, however, have faced numerous difficulties. The ROK government made almost no official attempts to survey and catalog the damage sustained by the nation’s Buddhist temples during the war or its aftermath. Instead, by necessity, the Jogye Order’s surveys rely heavily on firsthand accounts of survivors, many of whom have since passed away, that were recorded often many decades after the war itself. The temple property records compiled by the Japanese Colonial Government likewise provide an important source for Jogye Order researchers in determining which temple assets were destroyed or lost during the conflict. However, in many instances, these records are incomplete or only note the names and numbers of assets that are now lost. Nor are such records insightful regarding what became of such assets but only indicate their current absence. Fortunately, over recent decades, the Jogye Order archivists have invested significant time and effort into digitizing surviving historical records and miscellanea recovered from individual temples.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; Buddhist cultural asset; Korean War; Jogye Order; Korean Buddhism



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## 1. Introduction

Near the height of the Korean War (1950–1953) in December 1951, South Korean flight commander and future Airforce General Younghwan Kim was given orders to firebomb positions occupied by North Korean guerrillas in the Gaya Mountains, west of Daegu. However, as Kim’s flight squadron made their approach, he soon realized that their intended target was Korea’s ancient Haeinsa Temple, home to the Tripitaka Koreana (K. Palman Daejanggyeong), an extensive library of thousand-year-old Buddhist scriptures carved on woodblocks. Fatefully, Kim ignored his flight plan and commanded his pilots to hold their bombs, thus sparing one of Korea’s most priceless Buddhist treasures from fiery destruction (see Section 4.1 below for further details). Over the decades since the war, many have lauded Kim’s wise judgment, and in 2024, a bust of the general was erected at the temple’s entrance, honoring his patriotism and quick thinking in the heat of battle. Yet, this well-known story belies a darker truth; Kim’s decision to spare Haeinsa was an all-too-rare

exception. Rather, hundreds of historic Buddhist temples and thousands of priceless artifacts, many quite ancient, were destroyed or damaged during the war, seemingly with little regard for their cultural value.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the Korean War on the peninsula's modern history. Over the war's three-year duration, few cities in Korea's northern and central regions escaped total annihilation because of extensive UN bombing campaigns and fierce ground combat. Meanwhile, large swaths of the countryside, including entire mountain ranges, were decimated through UN scorched-earth retreats and counterinsurgency operations frequently employing napalm. In addition to the estimated 1 to 2 million military casualties, an estimated 2 to 3 million civilians perished in the course of the conflict (Cumings 2011, p. 35). Millions more refugees were displaced, creating long-term social and economic instability, from which the South took decades to recover.

A further and often-overlooked cost of this horrific conflict was the destruction wrecked upon Korea's historical monuments, including palaces, fortresses, and tombs, as well as cultural artifacts, such as paintings, statues, texts, and other treasures. As noted by Hanyang University Professor and President of Blue Shield Rep. of Korea, Ki-dong Bae, Buddhist artifacts comprise the majority of the nation's historically valuable cultural properties because of Buddhism's long history in Korea as a state religion. Yet, it is "impossible to enumerate" how much of Korea's Buddhist heritage was lost during the war (Bae 2024, pp. 8–9).

In contrast with the allied forces' attempts to preserve valued cultural assets in the European and Asian theaters in WWII, Korea's cultural properties were treated with little consideration by the UN Allied Command and their forces on the ground. Furthermore, with a single exception (see Section 3), the Republic of Korea (hereafter "ROK" or "South Korea") government made no efforts to survey or catalog the damage suffered by the nation's Buddhist assets either during or after the war. As noted by Taegeon Cho, Head Researcher at the Buddhist Cultural Heritage Institute, in the following decades, South Korean scholars were extremely reluctant to address this immense cultural loss due to the war's traumatic and "painful" psychological "wounds" (T. Cho 2024, p. 18).

With the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Korean Armistice, the Jogye Order (K. Daehanbulgyo Jogyejong, hereafter "JO" or "the order"),<sup>1</sup> the largest of Korea's Buddhist sects, finally launched the nation's first in-depth investigation into the damage inflicted upon South Korea's Buddhist temples and cultural assets during the war. Identifying a total of 351 temples destroyed or damaged over the course of the conflict, the JO published a five-volume series organized by region between 2003 and 2007, which reported their findings in detail. With the 70th anniversary of the armistice, the JO issued two additional reports on provinces excluded from the original research. With the conclusion of the order's publication series, in coordination with the ROK's Ministry of Culture in November 2024, the JO hosted an academic conference, "The Korean War and Buddhist Cultural Heritage: Historical Records and Future Challenges", featuring key researchers and academics involved in the project.

Given the general lack of awareness of this subject among the broader international religious and cultural studies communities, the article will summarize the JO's findings regarding the destruction of South Korea's Buddhist temples and cultural assets during the Korean War. It will then survey the limited yet important institutional and individual efforts to preserve such assets during the conflict. After critically examining key issues surrounding the destruction of these assets, as well as the limitations of the JO's recent research on the matter, this paper will conclude with a discussion of the cultural preservation measures now in place as well as possible research directions in the future.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Relevant History of Korea's Buddhist Temples and Cultural Heritage

Introduced to the Korean Peninsula around the 4th Century CE, for over a millennium, Buddhism was patronized as a state religion by a succession of Korean kingdoms. Ascribing to the practice of “nation-protecting Buddhism” (K. *Hoguk bulgyo*), Korea's monarchs sponsored the construction of temples, pagodas, statues, and other Buddhist artifacts throughout their realms in hopes of securing spiritual protection. However, with the rise of the Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), Korea's Buddhist establishment was progressively stripped of its wealth and power. Hundreds of prominent temples were dissolved, their properties confiscated by the state, and their clergy banned from Korea's cities. The surviving Buddhist monastics retreated to remote mountain temples where they remained “virtually quarantined” for the next 500 years (Buswell 1992, pp. 23–24).

This “quarantine” was finally lifted in 1895 following pressure from Japan's Meiji Empire (1868–1912), thus sparking a revival of Korean Buddhism. In this historical situation, temples around the nation launched building projects. Monastic ordinations rose sharply while Buddhist leaders lectured throughout the nation's towns and cities for the first time in centuries. Yet, this revival was hampered by growing competition from Christian missionaries, both Western and Korean, as well as the increasing interference of various Japanese Buddhist organizations, which sought to absorb Korea's native Buddhists into their own sects. In response, in 1899, the administration of Joseon King Gojong (r. 1864–1907) placed all Korean temples under a centralized government administration to protect them from “attempted power grabs” by Japanese Buddhists (H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 4, 188).

Following Japan's formal annexation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910, the Japanese Governor-General Terauchi Masatake (in office 1910–1916) passed the infamous *Temple Ordinance* (K. 사찰령, J. Jisetsu Rei) and subsequent Enforcement Regulations of the Temple Ordinance (K. 사찰령시행규칙), granting his office exclusive authority over Korea's Buddhist temples and the appointment of their abbots. Despite widespread discontent, Korea's monastic community was unable to organize any effective resistance (H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 190–91; Sorensen 1993, p. 53).<sup>2</sup> Applying a Japanese-style administrative system to Korea's temples, the governor's Enforcement Regulations declared all temples “...buildings, statues, stone objects, ancient documents, ancient paintings, and other valuables” to be under the guardianship of the Japanese Governor-General (Article 5). The regulations further stipulated that all temples should submit a list of all “...valuable items such as land, forests, buildings, statues, stone objects, ancient documents, ancient paintings, bells, Buddhist paintings, and Buddhist writings” (Article 7). Thus, by the 1930s, the colonial government had compiled an extensive catalog of the cultural properties housed within Korea's Buddhist temples (T. Cho 2024, p. 24). Decades later, these records would serve as invaluable data sets for Korean historians attempting to identify precisely which cultural assets had been lost during the war.

### 2.2. The Korean War (1950–1953)

Following Japan's surrender and the end of WWII in August 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided along the 38th Parallel into the Soviet-occupied north and the US-occupied south. However, efforts to establish a unified Korean government under international trusteeship failed because of rising Cold War tensions. In 1948, this led to the formation of two separate states, the southern Republic of Korea (대한민국, hereafter “ROK”) and the northern Democratic People's Republic of Korea (조선민주주의인민공화국, hereafter “DPRK”), each claiming legitimacy over the entire peninsula. Fueled by external pressures and internal conflict, political divisions deepened between the two Koreas, re-

sulting in border clashes and guerrilla uprisings, particularly in the southern Jeju and Jeolla Provinces, costing tens of thousands of lives.<sup>3</sup>

On 25 June 1950, with the aid of the Soviet Union, DPRK forces launched a full-scale invasion of the ROK, marking the outbreak of the Korean War. Believing that swift military action could unify the peninsula under DPRK rule before successful US intervention, the well-equipped and Soviet-trained Korean People's Army (조선인민군, hereafter KPA) captured Seoul within days and swiftly overran much of the South. The Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) and United Nations (UN) forces, largely composed of US troops, retreated to Daegu and Busan in the southeast. Their desperate defense of the Busan Perimeter through that summer granted UN Commander General Douglas MacArthur time to plan the Incheon Landing (인천 상륙 작전), a bold amphibious counter-assault launched on 15 September 1950. The surprise operation recaptured Seoul within weeks, forcing KPA units to retreat northwards or flee into the mountains, where they continued guerrilla operations for the remainder of the war.

Having gained the initiative, ROKA and UN troops advanced north past the 38th Parallel, invading the DPRK with the aim of uniting the peninsula under non-communist rule. By the year's end, UN forces had taken Pyongyang and had reached the Chinese border, despite warnings by the newly founded People's Republic of China not to encroach on Chinese territory. Fresh from their victory in the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949), hundreds of thousands of troops belonging to the Chinese People's Volunteers (hereafter "CPV") entered the conflict, and an overwhelming CPV and KPA counter-offensive surged southwards, retaking Seoul on 4 January 1951.

Regrouping under General Matthew Ridgway, UN forces launched a series of counter-offensives, reclaiming Seoul yet again three months later. As the year progressed, however, the battlefield stabilized around the 38th Parallel, and the conflict settled into a prolonged stalemate involving brutal battles characterized by heavy casualties and trench warfare. By 1952, neither side had achieved a strategic breakthrough as each had dug into highly fortified defensive positions. Despite continued skirmishes, negotiations led to the signing of an armistice on 27 July 1953, halting all major troop movements and solidifying the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) near the original division along 38th Parallel.

### 3. The Impact of the Korean War on South Korea's Buddhist Temples

As with most structures on the peninsula, Korea's Buddhist temples likewise suffered widespread destruction over the course of the war. Throughout the conflict, Buddhist facilities were requisitioned by both sides as military command posts, camps, hideouts, field hospitals, and morgues. Temples located in combat zones were further subject to crossfire from bullets and shelling and, because of their primarily wooden construction, were especially vulnerable to destruction by fire. Rural temples were not spared either, as many were looted by UN soldiers and KPA guerrilla units seeking food or supplies. Such temples were also vulnerable to extensive incendiary attacks deployed by the UN forces during both their scorched earth retreats and efforts to suppress KPA guerrillas based in the remote mountains (Nam 2024, p. 90). Those temples spared from total destruction often suffered vandalism and unintentional damage from occupying soldiers, some of whom even used Buddhist artifacts for target practice and firewood (Yang 2024, p. 81).

Given this cataclysmic destruction, South Korean historians have often been reluctant to examine the war's tumultuous, chaotic, and traumatic events in detail (T. Cho 2024, p. 16). However, with the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement in 2003, the JO began publishing *The Korean War and Buddhist Cultural Heritage* (K. *Hangugjeonjaeng-gwa bulgyomunhwajae*), a five-volume series investigating the impact of the Korean War specifically on South Korea's Buddhist temples and cultural assets. The

series began with a survey of temples and cultural properties in Gangwon Province (Vol. 1, 2003), followed by Jeju Province (Vol. 2, 2004), southern and northern Jeolla Province (Vols. 3 & 4, 2005), and lastly Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi Province (Vol. 5, 2007). In 2021 and 2022, marking the war's 70th anniversary, the JO launched additional surveys of the damage to Buddhist temples in Gyeongsang and Chungcheong Provinces, the results of which have yet to be officially published.

As summarized by Taegeon Cho, the JO surveys identified a total of 351 Buddhist temples destroyed or damaged during the course of the Korean War. A total of 85 of these were located in Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi Province, 46 in the ROK's north-east Gangwon Province, 31 in Daejeon and surrounding Chungcheong Province, 91 in Gwangju and surrounding Jeolla Province in the south-west, 35 on the island province of Jeju, and 63 in Busan, Daegu, and larger Gyeongsang Province. Of these 351 temples, 240 were destroyed entirely, 61 were partially damaged, and 20 ceased functioning as Buddhist temples after the armistice. The leading cause of destruction during the conflict was incineration, intentional or otherwise, with 167 temples suffering damage or total destruction by fire. An additional 68 temples were destroyed during combat operations and 19 more by UN bombing campaigns, with the causes of damage to the remaining 95 temples largely unknown. The 61 temples identified in the JO surveys as only "partially damaged" suffered injuries to stone monuments, including ancient pagodas or statues, damaged by bullets, shells, or shrapnel during battle or their use for target practice by soldiers. Notable Buddhist monuments in Gangwon and Gyeonggi Provinces still bear such bullet marks (H. Kim 2019; T. Cho 2024, pp. 18–23).

The destruction of Korea's Buddhist properties followed the various phases of the overall conflict. Even before the outbreak of the ground war, beginning in 1947, the ROK police and military inflicted significant damage to 63 Korean temples during their scorched-earth campaigns targeting insurgents and local residents in both Jeju and Jeolla Provinces. Jeju Island experienced particularly severe destruction, exacerbated by police gunfire on civilians during the 1947 *Samiljeol* Celebration (Han 2004). Subsequent military suppression persisted through September 1954, resulting in extensive harm to the residents and damage to numerous Buddhist temples on the island province. In October 1948, soldiers of the ROKA's 14th Regiment, refusing orders to join in the suppression of Jeju citizens, defected and joined with left-wing forces active in eastern Jeolla. Although the ROKA successfully reclaimed the southern Jeolla city of Yeosu, the partisans retreated to the mountains and continued their resistance through 1949 (M. Kim 2016, pp. 250–56). On 29 December 1948, a battle between military police and insurgents at Daewonsa Temple, founded in the 6th Century CE, led to the temple's total incineration (T. Cho 2024, p. 19; Kyunghyang Sinmun 1949).

During the KPA's initial ground invasion in June 1950, the majority of the temples damaged were concentrated within Seoul and other urban areas as the KPA rapidly moved southwards along major transportation routes. However, as UN forces halted the KPA advance during the lengthy Battle of the Busan Perimeter, temples along the front lines in cities such as Pohang, Daegu, and Masan in Gyeongsang Province suffered as well. A total of 42 temples were identified as incurring damage during this initial phase of the war. In the only official assessment of the state of Buddhist cultural properties during the conflict, in 1952, the ROK government dispatched Yonsei University History Professor Yeong-gyu Min to evaluate the extent of the damage sustained by Buddhist temples and monuments in Gyeongsang Province during the fighting.<sup>4</sup>

With the Incheon Landing (or "Operation Chromite") in September 1950, KPA forces retreated northwards or fled into the mountains. As the UN and ROKA forces reclaimed the Jeolla and Chungcheong Provinces, they launched extended scorched-earth campaigns

targeting KPA partisans concentrated in mountain ranges such as Jirisan, Baegunsan, and Taebaeksan. During their operations, the ROK military and police frequently burned entire villages, temples, and mountainsides in their efforts to root out the guerrillas, continuing scorched-earth tactics deployed against leftist partisans before the war in Jeju and Jeolla Provinces. A total of 104 Buddhist temples were identified as damaged or destroyed during these UN and ROKA counterinsurgency campaigns.

The temples in the ROK's northern provinces of Gyeonggi and Gangwon, in turn, suffered the most significant damage during the UN forces' second retreat southward in December 1950 and the following January. Northern Gyeonggi Province, a key battleground for defending Seoul, experienced particularly intense fighting during this period. As UN soldiers retreated, they deliberately burned all buildings while launching large-scale airstrikes on KPA and CPV rear positions. A total of 63 temples were damaged or destroyed in Seoul as well as Gyeonggi and Gangwon Provinces during this operation, including several historic Silla Dynasty (ca. 300 to 935 CE) temples on Yongmunsan in Yangpyeong, and Bongseonsa Temple, founded in the 10th Century CE in Namyangju (T. Cho 2024, pp. 18–19). As the front stabilized around the 38th Parallel, the intensive ground fighting remained concentrated in northern Gyeonggi and Gangwon through the remainder of the war, while counterinsurgency campaigns continued in the mountains of Jeolla Province and elsewhere through 1954.

### 3.1. Seoul and Gyeonggi Province (Jogye Order 2007, pp. 349–61)

As the capital of the US-allied Republic of Korea, Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi Province became a focal point of much of the combat during the war. Yet, the region's Buddhist temples suffered the most severe damage during the UN force's scorched-earth retreat in the winter and spring of 1951, during which they burned all private buildings, including temples, to prevent their use as shelter by the enemy. Any structures that survived were further subjected to UN aerial bombardment and artillery fire in the spring of 1952 during UN efforts to rout the last major Chinese-backed North Korean offensive of the war.

According to the JO's 2007 report, at least 10 Buddhist temples were destroyed in Seoul September 1950 during the retaking of the ROK capital following MacArthur's landing at Incheon, while another four were lost during the UN's 4 January retreat. Furthermore, the northern regions of Gyeonggi Province saw nearly constant back-and-forth fighting over the remainder of the war, leading to the destruction of an additional 41 temples. As elsewhere during the conflict, the majority of the region's Buddhist temples were demolished or burned by the ROKA and UN-allied forces. Of the 60 Buddhist temples in Seoul and Gyeonggi lost during the conflict, 22 were confirmed as destroyed by US forces, and 10 by the ROKA, as well as four each by Chinese and DPRK forces, with the remainder unknown. Of these, 48 temples were eventually rebuilt completely, while the remainder were only partially restored or abandoned following the war because of their proximity to the DMZ (Jogye Order 2007, p. 357).

### 3.2. Gangwon Province (Lee and Lim 2003, pp. 212–26)

According to comparisons with colonial-era records, out of the 46 temples in Gangwon Province's northern regions, 39 were destroyed entirely during the course of the war. In August 1950, the US Airforce launched a large-scale bombing campaign to slow the advance of KPA forces south along Gangwon's coastal highways, resulting in the destruction of the historic Naksansa Temple, whose structures dated to the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries CE. Then, during the UN retreat in the winter and spring of 1951, a further 18 temples in the province's southern mountains were intentionally incinerated by UN forces to

prevent their use by the enemy. As the front stabilized around the current DMZ in the summer of 1951, an additional nine Buddhist temples in northern Gangwon Province were destroyed during their use as operational facilities in combat.

The loss of the province's historic Geonbongsa Temple, near the present-day DMZ, Naksansa Temple on the coast, and Woljeongsa Temple near Odaesan were particularly tragic because of their wealth of ancient architecture, stone monuments, paintings, bells, scrolls, and other historic treasures. Both Geonbeongsa and Naksansa were damaged repeatedly by ROKA forces and US aerial bombardment. Other major temples, such as Hwaamsa, Baekdamsa, and Heungguksa, were likewise destroyed in the course of combat between UN forces and DPRK and Chinese troops. In total, 20 Buddhist temples in southern Gangwon Province were destroyed by ROKA forces and their UN allies.

The military use of the province's surviving temples additionally resulted in extensive vandalism and looting, as many of the temple artifacts cataloged in Japanese colonial-era records went missing during the war. Furthermore, the seven-story stone pagoda at Naksansa Temple and the nine-story stone pagoda at Woljeongsa Temple were destroyed during their use for target practice by garrisoned soldiers. Numerous Buddhist paintings, statues, and smaller artifacts were also lost, including the Silla-era copper bell at Woljeongsa Temple, which melted in a fire during the conflict. Its remnants are now preserved at the National Museum of Korea and Dongguk University Museum. Over the past 70 years, 22 of the Buddhist temples in Gangwon Province damaged during the war have been fully restored, while another 15 are currently undergoing repairs.<sup>5</sup> Despite these efforts, many of the lost assets are irreplaceable, with historic temple architecture having suffered the most significant damage from UN bombings and incineration.

### 3.3. Jeolla Province (*Jogye Order 2005*, pp. 171–78)

Unlike the provinces of Gyeonggi and Gangwon to the north or Gyeongsang to the east, Korea's south-western Jeolla Province saw no major land battles during the war. Yet, the province's Buddhist temples, nonetheless, suffered extensive destruction. Following the retreat of ROKA's Fifth Infantry Division from the southern Jeolla city of Gwangju in July 1950, the KPA rapidly occupied the province's major cities and towns. However, following the Incheon Landing to the north, UN forces quickly retook Jeolla urban centers. Cut off from retreat, surviving KPA units retreated into the mountains, where they organized extensive guerrilla campaigns lasting for years. As many guerrilla operations were based in the Jiri Mountains, its forests were repeatedly targeted for incineration by UN forces and local police in their efforts to eliminate partisan activities. A total of 48 Buddhist temples located in these mountains were damaged or destroyed in the southern regions of Jeolla as a result.

Prior to the war, the monks of Jeunsimsa Temple had moved the Golden Buddha statue (K. 금동석가여래입상), National Treasure No. 211, and Gold-Copper Buddha statue (K. 금동보살입상), No. 212, to the police station for safekeeping. However, with the outbreak of hostilities, the police station was abandoned, and the statues were subsequently stolen or destroyed. Furthermore, because of UN-allied efforts to suppress the activities of KPA guerrillas, sixteen Buddhist temples were burned to the ground in the vicinity of Mudeungsan, as were five near Suinsan, and an additional eleven temples in the Jiri Mountains. KPA guerrillas, in turn, set fire to the famed Songgwangsa Temple in southern Jeolla. However, with help from local villagers, the temple's resident monks were able to save several buildings and cultural treasures. The surviving structures have been designated as National Treasure No. 56 (*Guksajeon Shrine*), and as Treasures No. 263 (*Hasadang Dormitory*), and 302 (*Yaksajeon Hall*) (*Yijoon Park 2005*, pp. 205–19).

Temples in the northern regions of Jeolla Province suffered extensive damage during the conflict as well. A total of 15 Buddhist temples in the northern Jiri and Hwamun Mountains were destroyed, with another 16 in the Deogyu, Daedun, and Unjang Mountains being severely damaged. An additional 10 temples located in Naejangsan, the Byeonsan Peninsula, and Gochang were also lost. In October 1951, the 11th Division burned down Gujeongsa Temple in an effort to suppress KPA guerrilla forces, resulting in the destruction of the temple's historic buildings and statues. Similarly, Bohyeonsa, Cheonhwangsa site, Chilsangam site, Gangcheonsa, Guamsa, and Ilhasa Temples were also reduced to ashes, along with their stone pagodas, Buddha statues, and other historically valuable structures. Although several temples were targeted by the KPA guerrillas, the large majority of the destruction in northern Jeolla was again caused by the UN forces, ROKA, and local police during their counterinsurgency operations (Jogye Order 2005, pp. 171–78).

#### 4. Efforts to Preserve Korea's Buddhist Temples and Cultural Assets During the War

In the final years of World War II, US General Eisenhower showed great concern for the preservation of European monuments and cultural artifacts, ordering his commanders to protect these assets as much as the war allowed (Yang 2024, p. 82). US President Roosevelt further convened the Second Roberts Commission<sup>6</sup> (1943–1946) to aid the US military in preserving cultural assets in allied-occupied regions in addition to repatriating cultural properties looted by the Nazis. This commission worked in conjunction with the military's Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Section Unit (MFAA), composed of approximately 400 members known as "monuments men", who served on the ground alongside allied units to protect such assets through the remainder of WWII and subsequent military occupations (Yang 2024, p. 79).

Although active in the Asian theater, including Allied-occupied post-war Japan, the activities of the Second Roberts Commission and the MFAA ended in 1946 and apparently had little impact on the preservation of Korean cultural assets post-liberation. Rather, despite the directive "to take appropriate measures to protect cultural properties", the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, September 1945–August 1948) lacked specific plans for the protection of cultural assets on the peninsula or the repatriation of Korean assets stolen during the Japanese Annexation. The USAMGIK was not interested in the preservation of Korea's cultural, religious, and historical assets rhetorically, in actual practice, and appears to have prioritized political expediency and US national interests. Furthermore, General MacArthur failed to demonstrate the same level of concern for the preservation of cultural assets in Korea as Eisenhower had in Europe. MacArthur not only opposed the repatriation of stolen Korean assets during the US occupation of Japan for fear of stoking anti-American sentiment among the Japanese, but as Commander-in-chief of the United Nations Command during the Korean War, he displayed a general disregard for the preservation of historical monuments, claiming it "inevitable" that Korea's cities would require rebuilding (Yang 2024, pp. 78–81).

Despite MacArthur's attitudes, there were, in fact, several institutional efforts to preserve Korean cultural assets at the outbreak of the Korean War. Convened in June 1950, the AD-HQ Committee for the Protection of Monuments, chaired by Harvard University professor and Asian art historian Langdon Warner, submitted to MacArthur, via the US State Department, a cultural protection plan the following month. This plan, in part, recommended the special protection of Gyeongju, the capital of Korea's ancient Silla Dynasty, resulting in the shipping of many of the city's archaeological treasures to the US for safe storage for the length of the war. These treasures were soon joined by over 400 boxes of artifacts from Seoul's National Museum of Korea and the Deoksugung Palace Art Museum

temporarily stored in Busan. In addition, the ROK government negotiated a no-strike list with the UN Allied Command, which spared major cultural properties during the bombing of Seoul in preparation for MacArthur's Incheon Landing (Yang 2024, pp. 81–82).

#### 4.1. *The Tripitaka Koreana and General Young-hwan Kim*

Tragically, however, neither the Committee for the Protection of Monuments nor the ROK government provided plans for the preservation of Korea's hundreds of historic Buddhist temples and the thousands of cultural artifacts housed therein. Instead, the burden of preserving these cultural assets fell on the few soldiers and noncombatants who possessed both an awareness of their value and the ability to act. In one aforementioned instance, flight commander and future ROK Airforce general Young-hwan Kim (1921–1954) deliberately disobeyed orders to bomb the historic Haeinsa Temple, home to the thousand-year-old woodblock library of Buddhist scriptures known as the Tripitaka, now a UNESCO world heritage monument.<sup>7</sup>

Following the Incheon Landing, the UN command relied heavily on ROK Airforce squadrons in their efforts to eliminate stranded KPA guerrillas operating in the Gaya Mountains, west of Daegu. On 18 December 1951, then-Colonel Young-hwan Kim, flight commander of the 10th Fighter Squadron, received orders to bomb coordinates in these mountains, identified by reconnaissance planes as hosting over 900 KPA soldiers. After the mission had commenced, however, Kim realized that his primary target was, in fact, Haeinsa Temple. Fatefully, Kim forbade his pilots from releasing their bombs or rockets without his explicit permission and, instead, ordered them to strafe guerrilla positions on the surrounding ridges. After halting the attack, Kim ordered his pilots to bomb a different enemy position before returning to base (Oh 2021; Boil 2023).

When chastised for his decision to spare Haeinsa by an American reconnaissance officer upon his return, Kim replied,

It's not that the temple is more important than the country, but the temple is more important than communist guerrillas. They don't form a front, so even if you drive them out of the area, they'll just come back, and killing a few hundred of them won't decide the war. Haeinsa Temple is home to the Palmandaejang-gyeong, a national treasure. Even reconnaissance officers will recognize that the closest example is the failure to bomb Paris in Europe and Kyoto in Japan in World War II. (Seo 1979 as quoted in Yang 2024, p. 84)

Later, a key figure in the establishment of the ROK Airforce, in 2023, a memorial service was held at Haeinsa honoring General Kim and attended by numerous high-ranking Buddhist monastics and officials from the Korean Air Force (Boil 2023). The following October, Most Venerable Jinwoo, the President of the Jogye Order, commissioned a bust of General Kim to be erected at the entrance to the temple (Uh and Lee 2023).

#### 4.2. *Sangwonsa Temple and Korean Seon Master Hanam*

Young-hwan Kim was not the only individual who took action during the war to safeguard Buddhist cultural treasures from destruction. The Korean Zen (K. *Seon*) Master Hanam Jungwon (1876–1951), the first Supreme Patriarch of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (초대 종정), risked his life to save Odaesan's historic Sangwonsa Temple from incineration. Located in the southern mountains of Gangwon Province, Sangwonsa was founded by the legendary Silla Dynasty monk Master Jajang (590–658), who enshrined within the temple Buddhist relics gifted by China's Tang Dynasty. The temple houses a wealth of additional historical artifacts, including the Statue of Child Manjusri (National Treasure No. 221), the nation's oldest copper bell (National Treasure No. 36), and Buddhist

Historical Scripture (National Treasure No. 292); all of which would have been reduced to ashes but for Master Hanam.

Following the entry of the CPV into the conflict in November 1950, UN and KPA forces retreated southwards, losing much of the territory gained over the previous months. Arriving at Osaesan, ROKA soldiers were ordered to evacuate all noncombatants before burning any structures that the enemy might use as shelter. Yet, at Sangwonsa Temple, Master Hanam refused to leave and was granted a one-week postponement before his temple's incineration. Upon their return, ROKA soldiers found Hanam seated in meditation in the temple's main Dharma Hall. Again, refusing orders to evacuate, the Zen master replies, "I will be cremated anyway when I die, so don't worry about me and just start the fire". When the panicked soldiers tried to drag Hanam from the hall, the monk declared, "Just as you are a soldier and must obey your superiors' orders as your duty, I too am a monk and must protect this temple. I will protect my position as a monk until the end and then die" (S. Kim 2008).

Moved by Master Hanam's determination, the commanding officer ordered that only the doors of the temple buildings be burned, except those of Hanam's chamber, thus sparing Sangwonsa Temple from the destruction wreaked upon Odaesan's other historic temples during the UN force's scorched-earth retreat. Following the UN's retaking of Odaesan on 21 March 1951, Captain Hyun-ki Kim of the ROKA's 8th Infantry Division visited Sangwonsa Temple to find that Master Hanam had passed away at the age of 76 while seated in the lotus position (So 2005).

#### 4.3. *Younghee Lee and the Carved Wooden Panels of Shinheungsa Temple*

Although less well known, another such incident involved future university professor Younghee Lee, then a 22-year-old officer and English interpreter belonging to the 9th Regiment of the 11th Division. Arriving after a battle at a temporary command post at Sinheungsa Temple in Gangwondo's scenic Seorak Mountains, members of Lee's regiments began to light campfires to warm themselves from the midwinter cold. Joining his fellow soldiers by a fire, Lee saw they had been burning engraved wooden boards taken from the temple. Lee immediately notified his commanding officer, who ordered the fires to be extinguished. Lee then gathered up all the wooden blocks, burnt and otherwise, before stacking them in a storage room in the temple's main hall (J. Lee 2019; Kang 2019).

Reflecting on his actions, Lee explained,

I was a young man who was neither a Buddhist nor religious, and I had no idea about the cultural and social value of Sinheungsa Temple, but I acted out of a sense of responsibility as a young officer about the indiscriminate destruction of places where the national army entered during the Korean War. (Younghwan Park 2002)

Unbeknownst to Lee, the wood engravings he saved were 17th Century printing blocks of Buddhist scriptures composed in Chinese, Korean, and Sanskrit. For his instinctive efforts to preserve Sinheungsa's priceless cultural treasures, Professor Lee was honored in an award ceremony at the temple in August 2002.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Discussion

In their introduction to *Heritage at War: Plan and Prepare* (2024), the scholars Dunkley, Tulliach, and Mol survey various factors surrounding the destruction of cultural monuments and assets during armed conflict. First of these is the intentional destruction of cultural properties as a form of "culturicide" targeting an enemy's "cultural, national and religious identity" or as a broader desire to punish the enemy by destroying something of value (Dunkley et al. 2024, pp. 3–4). While tragically an all-too-common tactic in mod-

ern warfare, such motivations were not a major factor in the destruction of cultural assets during the Korean War, as the primary combatants belonged to the same ethnicity with a long-shared culture and history.

Instead, the widespread devastation suffered by Korea's Buddhist temples and other cultural assets was primarily the result of collateral damage wherein, according to Dunkley et al., cultural monuments are "caught up in conflict for their proximity to a strategic objective" (Dunkley et al. 2024, p. 4). As surveyed above, Buddhist temples in Seoul, as well as Gyeonggi and Gangwon Provinces, sustained significant damage because of their proximity to ferocious battles throughout the course of the war, as were those in Gyeongsang Province during the Battle of the Busan Perimeter. Rural Buddhist temples were likewise vulnerable to collateral damage from incendiary attacks deployed during both UN counterinsurgency campaigns and the scorched-earth retreats of UN ground forces. Approximately 167 temples were damaged or destroyed by fire rather than bombing or combat, including the entirety of those lost in Jeolla Province during joint UN and ROKA counterinsurgency campaigns. Furthermore, rural temples were often explicitly targeted for destruction to deny their utility to enemy forces, with little concern for their historical value (T. Cho 2024, pp. 22–24).

Additional risk factors discussed by Dunkley et al. are negligence and vandalism during the post-combat and occupation periods, entailing the "wrongful occupation of historical sites frequently result(ing) in damage and destruction—mainly due to the change of use—but also in the looting of cultural objects still preserved there". (Dunkley et al. 2024, p. 6). This, too, played a significant role in the damage sustained by Buddhist cultural assets during the war, as with the use of temple carvings and timber for firewood at Sinheungsa and Geonbongsa Temples in Gangwon Province and the use of Buddha statues and pagodas for target practice, as noted by Professor Min-gyu Kim in 1952 (T. Cho 2024, pp. 22–24; J. Lee 2019). While located safely within the Busan Perimeter, this was also the case with the damage suffered by the Silla-era temple of Tongdosa during its use as a military hospital, which treated over 3000 wounded soldiers between July 1950 to April 1952 (S. Lee 2020).

Ironically, in the year following the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict produced the first international treaty exclusively concerning the protection of cultural and historical assets during wartime. Adopted in response to the destruction of cultural property during World War II, the convention established measures to prevent damage, theft, and the misappropriation of cultural sites, monuments, and artifacts. The treaty obliges signatory states to respect and protect cultural properties, even in occupied territories, and introduces the Blue Shield emblem to mark protected sites from assaults and air strikes. The convention also provided for enforcement mechanisms, including sanctions against violations, and has been supplemented by two protocols (1954 and 1999) to strengthen its provisions.

The international outcry that drove the creation of the 1954 Hague Convention and resulting protocols exerted some influence on the conduct of UN-allied combatants during the Korean War. As noted above in Section 4, the Committee for the Protection of Monuments successfully submitted to the UN Command a cultural protection plan resulting in the protection of ancient Silla Dynasty monuments around Gyeongju and the shipping of several hundred crates of historical artifacts abroad for protection. The ROK government was also able to negotiate a no-strike list of major cultural properties with the UN Command during their bombing of Seoul in the summer of 1950 (Yang 2024, p. 81).

Nevertheless, such measures failed to protect the majority of Korea's Buddhist temples and related Buddhist artifacts from widespread damage, if not wholesale destruction.

While an in-depth discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this article, there appear to have been several contributing factors to this failure. First, MacArthur demonstrated a very different attitude towards the preservation of cultural assets in Korea than Eisenhower had in Europe, viewing collateral damage as largely “inevitable” in wartime. Furthermore, there were neither any “monuments men” serving on the ground in the Korean War nor educational campaigns among the UN forces concerning the preservation of Korea’s historical and cultural assets. This lack of concern was not unique to the foreign combatants either, as Taegeon Cho directly attributes the destruction of Korea’s Buddhist cultural assets to the “very low” awareness of their value within the ROK military itself. (T. Cho 2024, p. 24) In addition, the rapidly changing nature of the conflict in its first year, as well as the scorched-earth tactics frequently employed by ROKA and UN forces, left historic rural temples especially vulnerable to collateral damage. Moreover, in the lead-up to the war, the USAMGIK and subsequent ROK governments failed to compile any comprehensive list of the cultural assets housed at the nation’s Buddhist temples or establish any plans for preserving such assets should conflict break out. Instead, that burden fell on the few soldiers and civilians who were able to recognize an asset’s value and take action in the midst of the conflict (see Section 4 above).

## 6. Conclusions

In contrast to the general disregard shown toward Buddhist temples and cultural assets by the ROK military and UN-allied forces during the war, both the South Korean government and the international community have since greatly increased their efforts to preserve Korea’s cultural heritage, Buddhist and otherwise. In 1961, the Park regime (1961–1979) launched the government’s Cultural Heritage Administration (now “Korea Heritage Service”). With the passing of the Cultural Heritage Protection Act (문화재보호법) the following year, the Cultural Heritage Administration was tasked with, in part, overseeing the repair, safety and maintenance (Article 6) of specially designated monuments and other “tangible cultural assets”, along with their protection and evacuation during the war or “upheaval” (Article 21). These specially designated cultural assets, tangible and otherwise, designated by Cultural Heritage became central to the Park regime’s explicit cultivation of a post-colonial Korean ethno-nationalist identity.<sup>9</sup> At present, there are a total of 1714 Buddhist-related cultural “treasures” and “monuments” registered with the Korea Heritage Service, comprising nearly a third of their total listings for which the service annually contributes USD two hundred million to various Buddhist temples for maintenance and protection of the cultural assets within their care (H. Cho 2025). Nevertheless, despite these efforts, Gi-dong Bae notes that the Korean Heritage Service’s most recent five-year plan for national heritage disaster and safety management fails to address the possibility of the outbreak of war, which, in his opinion, risks another “huge loss of cultural heritage” should conflict reoccur (Bae 2024, p. 14).

As for the international community, ironically, the ROK formally joined UNESCO on 14 June 1950, just weeks prior to the start of the Korean War. Yet, it was not until nearly half a century later that the nation’s major cultural assets began to be designated as World Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites. Currently, 10 of the country’s historic Buddhist temples have been listed as World Heritage Sites, including Haeinsa Temple (see Section 4.1). Yet, despite the ROK’s increased participation in UNESCO, as well as repeated pressure from its own National Heritage Service, the South Korean government has yet to sign the 1954 Hague Convention because of resistance from the ROK’s Ministry of Defense. Nevertheless, Yang notes that the ROK military operates its own cultural heritage preservation programs, which, in part, require all units to conduct annual training regarding the preservation of cultural assets during both peace and wartime. Furthermore, the Joint Chiefs of

Staff have prepared guidelines outlining protections, including no-strike lists, for cultural properties in North Korea should hostilities reoccur (Yang 2024, pp. 85–87). In addition, in 2017, South Korea became the first Asian country to join Blue Shield International, an independent UNESCO-affiliated NGO that works, in part, with member countries to register moveable cultural assets to facilitate their evacuation and protection against theft during conflict. Blue Shield International additionally works to geotag cultural monuments to establish no-strike lists via global satellite images marked with their trademark Blue Shield icon (Bae 2024, pp. 10–15). While not without criticism, such domestic and international work to preserve Korea's Buddhist cultural heritage during both peace and the ever-present potential for war is a major improvement compared with the sporadic efforts made during the Korean War itself.

For the half-century following the armistice, the immense loss of Korea's Buddhist cultural heritage during the war has remained largely avoided by historians, not only because of the topic's immense scope and sensitivity but also the dearth of accurate and objective information. Thus, the research and resulting publications launched by Jogye Order's Ministry of Culture in 2003 provide a comprehensive survey of the hundreds of Buddhist temples and thousands of related artifacts lost or damaged over the course of the conflict. However, as noted by Taegon Cho, these efforts have faced numerous difficulties. Aside from the invaluable field surveys conducted by Professor Yeong-gyu Min in 1952 in Gyeongsang Province, the ROK government made no official attempt to catalog the damage sustained by the nation's Buddhist temples. Instead, by necessity, the JO's surveys have relied heavily on firsthand accounts of survivors, many of whom have since passed away, often recorded many decades after the war. The temple property records compiled by the Japanese Colonial Government likewise provide an important resource for JO researchers in determining which temple assets were destroyed, damaged, or looted. However, in many instances, these records are incomplete or only note the names and numbers of now-lost artifacts. Nor are such records insightful regarding what became of the missing assets but only indicate their absence (T. Cho 2024, pp. 27–28). Fortunately, over recent decades, the JO archives have invested significant time and effort into digitizing surviving written records and miscellanea recovered from individual temples. It is hoped that in the future, more in-depth examinations of these primary sources may still provide a fuller picture of the wealth of Buddhist cultural heritage lost during the Korean War.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Representing the historical mainstream of Korean Buddhism, the JO currently maintains more than 3000 temples staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained monastics and patronized by around seven million registered lay members. The JO additionally manages nearly all of South Korea's historically important Buddhist temples and related cultural properties (Kim et al. 2019).

- <sup>2</sup> For its part, the Japanese colonial administration adopted a firm, yet benevolent, approach to their governance of Korea's Buddhist community, utilizing economic incentives to secure compliance as they attempted to employ the religion as a means of "Japanizing" Korea's Buddhists (Sorensen 1993, pp. 55–56).
- <sup>3</sup> For a summary of the events surrounding the Jeju and Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellions, see Cumings's (2011) *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, pp. 217–24.
- <sup>4</sup> Although never made publicly available, Min's reports and photographs were donated to Yonsei University's historical archives upon his death in 2005, several of which have been put on display in the university's museum. For more on this exhibit, see: <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190612041700005> (accessed on 27 January 2025).
- <sup>5</sup> The remainder are located in restricted areas in proximity to the DMZ and have been left unrestored.
- <sup>6</sup> A.k.a. "American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas"
- <sup>7</sup> For more on Haeinsa's Koreana Tripitaka, see: <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/printing-woodblocks-tripitaka-koreana-and-miscellaneous-buddhist-scriptures> (accessed on 3 February 2025).
- <sup>8</sup> One of the wood blocks saved by Lee was later taken from the temple ruins as a souvenir by an American soldier, Richard B. Rockwell. After recognizing its historical value, Rockwell successfully returned it to Sinheungsa 65 years later (J. Lee 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see scholar Hyung Il Pai's book "Constructing 'Korean' Origins" (Harvard University Press, 2000) as well as scholar Gi-wook Shin's "Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, And Legacy" (Stanford University Press, 2006).

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