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# Migrant Buddhists and Korean “Multiculturalism”—A Brief Survey of the Issues Surrounding Support for South Korea’s Immigrant Buddhist Communities

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**Abstract:** The three largest Korean religious organizations have worked to provide material, educational, medical, and social support to the various growing migrant communities. Among them, the Catholic community has been the most organized, sustained, and effective in its support of migrants by systematically providing for the legal, material, educational, and medical needs of various immigrant communities while advocating for their rights. Although lacking the centralized authority and organization of the Catholics, since the 1990s, Korea’s Protestants have also been active in supporting their country’s growing immigrant communities, which Evangelical churches also view as fertile grounds for proselytizing. The Korean Buddhist community, in comparison, has been slower to engage with Korea’s immigrants and has provided considerably fewer support services. In 2008, the Jogye Order organized the Maha Association for Supporting Immigrants to coordinate individual and localized Buddhist migrant support services at a national level. This article examines the Buddhist reactions to the increase in South Korean immigration over recent decades, with a focus on immigrant-support efforts supported by the Jogye Order for migrant Buddhist communities.

**Keywords:** the Jogye Order; the Maha Association; multiculturalism; immigrant Buddhist communities; the Catholic community; Korea’s protestants

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## 1. Introduction

Capitalizing on the month-long visa-free entry for tourists, in 2018, the sudden influx of over 500 Yemeni refugees to the South Korean resort island of Jeju ignited a contentious national debate over the country’s immigration policies. Fleeing the civil war in Yemen, the refugees were welcomed by many individuals and aid organizations on the island. However, rumors soon spread through Korean social media alleging anti-social and criminal behavior by the Yemenis, which, in turn, prompted a wave of public opposition from Korean conservatives, nationalists, and vocally Islamophobic Protestant groups. Decrying the Yemenis as “fake refugees” and potential terrorists or rapists, these groups feared facing a repeat of Europe’s refugee crisis in their own shores.

While 49% of South Koreans polled opposed the Yemenis’ presence on Jeju, 39% of them were, in fact, sympathetic to the refugees. Recalling Korea’s own traumatic civil war, leading Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist migrant-support organizations called for compassion and for granting the Yemenis’ requests for asylum (Haas 2018; Lee 2018). The Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (K. *Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong*, hereafter “JO”), the largest of Korea’s over 250 Buddhist sects, joined the calls for support for the refugees, issuing a statement titled “Please Warmly Welcome the Wounded Travelers”

(K. *Sangcheo ib-eun nageuneleul ttatteuhage hwandaehae jusibsio*).<sup>1</sup> Authored, in part, by the order's Maha Association for Supporting Immigrants (K. *Maha ijumin jiwondanche hyeobuihoe*), the statement condemned the “unfounded hatred and fear” of the refugees. Recalling Jesus's flight to Egypt as a refugee, as well as the Buddha's life as wandering medicant dependent on the generosity of others, the statement further implored Korea's Buddhist and Christian communities to “welcome and embrace” the Yemenis, to “accept them as neighbors and seek a path for mutual prosperity” (Lee 2018). Despite these demonstrations of support, the South Korean government eventually bowed to negative public pressure by canceling visa-free entrance for Yemeni citizens to Jeju and granting only two of the 480 Yemeni applicants official refugee status (Choe 2018).<sup>2</sup>

The controversy over the plight of Yemenis has exposed many of the tensions underlining the rapid increase in immigration to South Korea over recent decades and the government's subsequent campaign to transition the nation into becoming a more “multicultural” society. Historically a predominantly mono-cultural nation, over the decades following the Korean War (1950–1953), a series of South Korean military dictatorships promoted ideologies of national unity and racial purity (K. *danil minjok*, also known as “blood purity”). However, with its emergence as an industrialized, first-world economy in the 1990s, South Korea began importing migrant workers through temporary visa programs to fill growing labor shortages. Steady declines in the country's birth rate and a rapidly aging population have left South Korea's economy increasingly dependent on migrant laborers. Coupled with the growing practice of bride-importing, these trends have caused the percentage of South Korea's foreign residents to rise from just 0.1% in 1990 to 2.3% in 2019 (United Nations 2019), disrupting long-held notions of Korean racial and cultural homogeneity in the process.

Although the South Korean government has launched numerous legislative initiatives in an effort to better integrate immigrants into Korean society, along with campaigns to promote “multiculturalism” (K. *damunhwa*),<sup>3</sup> many foreigners residing in South Korea continue to face sustained discrimination (Berndt 2017, p. 56). Denied the practical possibility of permanent residency, labor migrants continue to be excluded from Korean social services while remaining vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace (Berndt 2017, p. 57). Lacking adequate government support, over 1200 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civic organizations have become active in providing legal, material, and social support for various migrant communities living in South Korea, of which 152 are affiliated with religious organizations (Beopbo 2019).

South Korea's Catholic and Protestant communities, who make up approximately 8% and 20% of the country's population, respectively, have worked to provide systematic support for the migrant communities in their midst. However, South Korea's Buddhists, who make up approximately 15% of the population, have been more reluctant to do so,<sup>4</sup> which is surprising given the competition between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism for religious market share in Korea and the fact that many labor and marriage migrants originate from Buddhist-majority countries like Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. Given this reluctance, this article will investigate the Buddhist reactions to the increase in South Korean immigration over recent decades. In particular, it will focus the immigrant-support services sponsored by the Jogye Order as well as the self-organizing efforts of various migrant Buddhist communities. This paper will begin by reviewing the modern history of immigration in South Korea along with associated government policies and discourse over “multiculturalism.” Section 3 will then survey immigrant support activities provided by Korea's Catholics and Protestants, with whom the

<sup>1</sup> Representing the historical mainstream of Korean Buddhism, the Jogye Order maintains over 3000 Buddhist temples staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained male and female monastics and claims to have approximately nine million lay followers.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of the remaining Yemenis were permitted granted temporary humanitarian visas, which permitted them to stay until conditions had improved in Yemen, but denied them access to Korean social services or the ability to work legally.

<sup>3</sup> Citing H.J. Kim's 2009 doctoral dissertation *Immigration Challenges and 'Multicultural' Responses: The State, the Dominant Elite, and Immigrants in South Korea*, scholar Rory Berndt notes that the concept of *damunhwa* “can mean anything from multiculturalism, multicultural society, cultural diversity, international understanding, to foreigners or marriage migrants.

<sup>4</sup> [http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_1PM1502&conn\\_path=I2](http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1PM1502&conn_path=I2).

Buddhists have a more than century-long relationship of creative competition. Section 4 will do the same with immigrant-support services offered by the Jogye Order, followed in Section 5 with a survey of the religious activities and organization efforts within various immigrant communities themselves. Section 6 will conclude with a discussion of the limitations and problems surrounding the Jogye Order's efforts to support the growing communities of Buddhist migrants residing in South Korea.

## 2. The Recent History of Immigration and Multiculturalism in South Korea

As noted by scholar Gi-Wook Shin, South Koreans have a strong tendency to conflate race, ethnicity, and nationhood within a unified ethno-national Korean identity (Shin 2006, p. 4). While much of this ethno-national identity is undoubtedly a modern construction, it is not without a strong historical basis. Shin observes that Korea "... has long maintained a coherent political community within a stable territorial boundary" as well as "a fairly homogenous ethnic protonation" for hundreds of years (Shin 2006, p. 18), further noting that the nation's collective history, including the trauma of the Japanese Annexation (1910–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953), "... have been largely responsible for the rise and continued dominance of an ethnic, organic conception of nation" (Shin 2006, p. 8). From the end of the Korean War through the 1980s, the succession of dictatorships governing the South actively promoted this Korean ethno-nationalist identity, emphasizing the shared historical and cultural heritage, as well as the racial "blood purity" (K. *danil minjok*), of the Korean people in a concerted effort to promote national unity and rebuild the South's shattered economy. During these decades of post-war nation-building, South Korea remained a net migrant-sending nation and, in addition to refugees and war-orphaned adoptees, the country also deployed many temporary migrant laborers abroad, who returned much-needed foreign currency to aid the nation's economic recovery. Aside from the masses of North Korean refugees who were assimilated into South Korean society after the war, the relatively few foreigners residing in the South during this period were primarily foreign businessmen, military personal, missionaries, or aid workers from the West (Berndt 2017, p. 11; Kim 2013, pp. 227–49; Shim 2013, pp. 8–9).

With South Korea's emergence as an industrialized, first-world economy, and its coinciding transition to democracy in the late 1980s, the nation's net flow of migration began to reverse. With the rising standard of living and decreasing birth rate, in 1991, the South Korean government instituted the "Overseas Investment Business Training System" to import guest workers needed to fill a growing shortage of labor in the country's burgeoning manufacturing sector. In 1993, this system was expanded into the "Industrial Trainee System", permitting foreign migrants to legally work in South Korea for fixed periods of time. The program recruited predominantly men from south and central Asian nations, with whom South Korea had established a Memorandum of Understanding (hereafter "MOU") to work in the so-called "3D" ("dirty, dangerous, and difficult") professions, which the increasingly educated and affluent Korean youth were reticent to join. However, by defining migrant workers as "trainees", they were exempted from protections under South Korea's national labor laws, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by their employers, which, in turn, led many to leave employment and work illegally elsewhere. The program was reorganized in 2004 as the "Employment Permit System" in an attempt to rectify these issues. Under South Korea's guest worker programs, the number of migrant laborers grew from just under 500 in 1980 to almost 500,000 by 2011. However, human rights activists have continued to charge that these programs have failed to provide sufficient material support and legal protection for migrant workers. Furthermore, the increasingly visible populations of migrants living in their midst began to challenge South Koreans' sense of ethno-national unity, leaving migrant workers vulnerable to what scholar Rory Berndt describes as "sustained forms of discrimination" (Berndt 2017, pp. 11, 57; Shim 2013, pp. 8–9; Statistics Korea 2019a).

South Korean racial and cultural homogeneity has been further challenged since the turn of the millennium by the rapid increase of foreign marriage migrants through the burgeoning practice of bride-importing. Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of young Korean women have left the countryside for the more affluent cities, with many choosing to delay marriage in pursuit of

professional careers—a demographic shift that has left many lower-income men predominantly in rural areas of the country without eligible marriage partners. In the early 2000s, international marriage brokers began to fill this need by providing Korean clients with a selection of suitable brides from China and Southeast Asia. This industry has proved so successful that the number of these predominantly female marriage migrants rose from 23,414 in 2002 to 144,214 in 2012. However, the children of these mixed-race families, known as *kosian* or *onnurian* in Korean, directly challenge the ideology of Korean “blood purity”, and the government has struggled to integrate these children from predominantly lower-income families into the Korean education system and wider society (Berndt 2017, pp. 47–48; Shim 2013, pp. 9–8).

In direct response to these trends, in 2007, the South Korean government introduced the “The First Basic Plan for Immigration Policy (2008–2012)” (hereafter “First Basic Plan”), marking the nation’s historic shift to becoming a net immigrant-receiving nation that year. The same year, the government additionally passed the “Act on the Treatment of Foreigners in Korea”, followed in 2008 by the “Support for Multicultural Families Act.” The goal of this series of legislation was to establish standing government policy committees and programs that would work to integrate immigrants into South Korean society, protect multicultural families from discrimination, and improve their overall quality of life (Shim 2013, pp. 8–9). With the First Basic Plan, the government removed any mention of Korean “blood purity” from materials used in the schools and military while campaigning to shift the national identity towards becoming a more “multicultural” nation. Critics have noted, however, that the focus of this campaign was primarily on the assimilation of marriage migrants and their families, while non-ethnic-Korean labor migrants were largely ignored (Berndt 2017, pp. 54–55, 57; Shim 2013, p. 30). As South Korea recognizes *jus sanguinis* citizenship, immigrants without Korean parentage lack any practical possibility for naturalization, removing much of the motivation for either the government or the labor migrants themselves to work towards their integration into Korean society (Berndt 2017, p. 57).

The increased media discourse surrounding “multiculturalism” following the passage of the First Basic Plan in South Korea has also prompted a backlash among nationalists and conservatives. Anti-multiculturalism organizations, like the “Citizen Alliance against Foreign Migrants”, “Citizens’ Alliance against Foreign Workers”, and the “International Marriage Damage and Prevention Center”, lobby conservative politicians and government officials to rescind the First Basic Plan (Shim 2013, p. 12). Since 2009, conservatives have also successfully blocked repeated efforts in South Korea’s national legislature to pass universal anti-discrimination and anti-racism legislation, which opponents fear would place an undue burden on Korean businesses to defend themselves against legal accusations of racial discrimination (Shim 2013, p. 16).

Despite this opposition, however, the current trends surrounding immigration in South Korea show no indication of reversing. According to the South Korean government’s own *Preliminary Results of Birth and Death Statistics in 2019*, the nation’s fertility dropped below 1 for the first time in 2018 (Statistics Korea 2019b). This falling fertility rate coupled with a rapidly increasing elderly population indicates that South Korea’s demand for imported brides and reliance on migrant labor will only increase over the coming decades (Berndt 2017, pp. 37–38). As noted by International Relations Scholar Robert Kelly, a “dramatic population contraction will halt Korea’s otherwise successful rise up the G-20 ranks . . . Korea will either have to become a multicultural society with sustained immigration . . . or content itself to stagnation and perhaps even decline” (Kelly 2010). With the number of foreign residents surpassing two million in 2018, quadruple the number from just 12 years prior, the influx of immigrants into South Korea continues to increase each year (Song 2020). However, the government and society at large have yet to provide the support necessary to effectively integrate both long- and short-term migrants into this society.

### 3. Christian Support for Migrants in South Korea

#### 3.1. Catholic Support

Given the discrimination and accompanying financial and social disadvantages faced by both multicultural families and more temporary labor migrants in South Korea, religious aid organizations have provided valuable support for various migrant communities living in their midst. However, the support provided by South Korea's three largest religious communities, namely the Catholics, Protestant Christians, and Buddhists, has varied. Since the late 1980s, the Korean Catholic community has worked to minister to the needs of migrants through various Catholic organizations, which have provided regular material, medical, and legal aid, as well as social support. In 1992, the Catholic Diocese of Seoul opened a counseling center and support group for foreign workers, which was gradually expanded through the establishment of branches in local dioceses throughout the country. In 2003, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea created the Committee for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Foreign Residents Living in Korea (K. *Gungnae iju samok wiwonhoe*, hereafter "Committee for Pastoral Care") formed an organic partnership with the pre-existing Catholic immigrant support groups (Park 2010b). Korean Catholic organizations have also provided medical assistance to migrant workers, many of whom are ineligible for coverage by the country's national health insurance system, through Catholic-run clinics and hospitals. Since the 2000s, the Korean Catholic Church has also expanded its support facilities for immigrants to address the needs not only of economic migrants, but also of marriage migrants and children from multicultural families.

Korean Catholic support for migrants has been directly mandated and guided by Vatican policy. In responses to the millions of refugees displaced by WWII, in 1952, Pope Pius XII issued an apostolic constitution titled *Exsul Familia*. Presenting the Holy Family's flight to Egypt to escape persecution as the archetype for refugees and economic migrants, Pius XII directed local dioceses to maintain an open-door policy for all migrants and displaced persons. This policy was reaffirmed in 2004 when the Vatican presented the *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, or "Love of Christ for Migrants", a Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People that provides further basis for church support for migrants around the globe. The document further mandates that the Catholic church should work to rectify human rights violations and alienation in the migration process as well as to create social systems and laws that guarantee the labor and human rights of migrants. Following these Vatican mandates, the Korean Catholic Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Care has further decreed that Korean Catholics should give material assistance and shelter to migrants in their midst whom they should treat the same as local believers (Ju 2008). By stipulating that each diocese is responsible for the migrants residing within their boundaries, Korean Catholics are actively following Vatican mandates by advocating for and ministering to the needs of the immigrants in their communities.

#### 3.2. Protestant Support

While Korean Protestants lack the centralized organization and ecclesiastical authority of the Catholics, many in the nation's Protestant community have also been mobilized in support of Korea's foreign migrant communities. Of the 152 religious aid groups working with immigrants in South Korea, approximately 70 percent are affiliated with Protestant Christian organizations (Beopbo 2019). Despite the vocal Islamophobia of some conservative Protestant groups, since the early 1990s, many in the South Korean Protestant community have worked to support the human rights of migrant laborers. In November 1992, the Korean Council of Christian Churches established the Korean Council of Foreign Workers' Missionaries, a nationwide organization backed by a coalition of 34 Protestant groups that advocates for the labor rights and human rights of migrants.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by the formation of the Protestant-backed Foreign Immigrant Labor Association (K. *Woegugin ijunodongundong hyeobuihoe*)

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<sup>5</sup> <https://jcmkoffice01.tistory.com>.

in 1995, which has provided legal advocacy and social services for immigrants and migrant workers. As the number of Korea's Protestants has been in decline since the turn of the millennium, while the number of immigrants has been steadily rising, Protestant churches have identified the immigrant communities in Korea as an emerging field for mission work, an issue openly discussed by Protestant ministers and seminarians. Thus, while Protestant aid organizations provide valued services for migrants residing in Korea, they frequently engage in proselytizing and promoting religious education alongside other support services (Park 2010a, p. 2).

#### 4. Buddhist Support for Migrants in Korea

As with the nation's Catholics and Protestants, Korean Buddhists have well-established religious motivations for aiding their nation's growing migrant communities. On the Bodhisattva path to Buddhahood, Mahayana Buddhists must strive to cultivate "great compassion" (Sk. *Mahā-karunā*, K. *Daebi*), which, as described by the seventh-century Korean Buddhist master Wonhyo, is "unconditional" and "does not distinguish between self and others" (Park 1985, p. 99).<sup>6</sup> This "great compassion" has inspired the creation of contemporary Korean "engaged" Buddhist organizations like the Jungto Society (K. *Jeongto hoe*, or "Society for a Pure Land") founded by Ven. Beomnyun (b. 1953) in 1988, which has sponsored numerous international aid projects and environmental campaigns, as well as Indra's Net Life Community (K. *Indramang saengmyong gondongche*, founded by Ven. Dobeop (b. 1949) in 1999, which has been involved in environmentalism, organic farming, cooperative living, and alternative schooling (Park 2010c).<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, unlike the country's Catholics and Protestants, Korean Buddhists have been comparatively slow to engage with South Korea's immigrant populations. Beginning in 1994, Korean Buddhists established the "Commission for the Protection of Human Rights of Foreign Workers" (K. *Woegugin nodongja ingwonbohoreul wihan bulgyo daechaegwiwonhoe*). However, the initial support services provided for migrants by Korean Buddhists were sporadic and largely led by individual activists and temples. As immigration and the corresponding discourse around "multiculturalism" increased over the 2000s, the Jogye Order sought to provide support for migrants at a national level and, in 2006, founded the Maha Migrant Assistance Group Council (K. *Maha ijumin jiwondanche hyeobuihoe*) with the aim of promoting equality and protecting migrants from discrimination and human rights violations. Initially begun as a voluntary gathering to share information and promote friendship among localized Buddhist migrant-support organizations, the need for more active support from the Jogye Order for migrants, especially those from Buddhist countries, soon became apparent.

In 2008, the Jogye Order reorganized the council as the Maha Association for Supporting Immigrants (K. *Maha ijumin jiwondanche hyeobuihoe*, hereafter "the Maha Association" or "the Association") with funding directly provided by the order. Tasked with protecting the rights of migrants, giving "a unified voice to migrant support", working for government policy improvements, developing education programs, and providing religious services for Buddhist migrants, the Maha Association functioned as an umbrella organization, coordinating local initiatives and temple programs (Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism 2018). Over the following decade, the association sponsored a variety of programs and activities, including Korean language classes and job-skills training for migrants, the creation of shelters for migrant workers, social and cultural activities for immigrants, and overseas volunteer programs in countries like Vietnam, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism 2018). The Association has been at the forefront of protecting human rights and interests of female marriage migrants and foreign workers while participating in symposiums on immigration and working to empower immigrant-rights activists.

<sup>6</sup> Sung Bae Park cites Wonhyo's *Commentary on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith* (K. *Haedongso*).

<sup>7</sup> See (Park 2010c) for more details on the Jungto Society and Indra's Net.

Unlike many Protestant immigrant-support organizations, the religious conversion of non-Buddhists has not been a goal of the Maha Association. However, as the large majority of migrant workers arriving in South Korea originate from Buddhist-majority countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar, the Association has been instrumental in providing religious support for immigrant Buddhist communities by organizing spaces in Korean temples where foreign Buddhist Sanghas could meet, conduct ceremonies, and hold Dharma talks in their native languages.<sup>8</sup> In the early 2000s, the Maha Association helped organize temples for sailors from Myanmar in Seoul and Bupyeong, along with the opening of the Mahabodhi Temple for Sri Lankan migrants, which was opened in 2005. By 2008, additional temples for the Thai, Cambodian, Mongolian, and Nepalese Buddhists had been organized as well (Song 2020). By the 2010s, many of these migrant Sanghas had grown large enough to establish their own independently run temples, yet they continue to maintain positive relationships with the Maha Association and other Korean Buddhist organizations (Kim 2020; Song 2020).

Despite the Maha Association's many successes, however, in 2015, the JO eliminated all of the Association's operating budget as part of the order's effort to reduce its expenses in response to overall declines in membership.<sup>9</sup> With the number of annual monastic recruits declining steadily for decades, from 510 postulants in 1993 to only 151 in 2017, and the number of lay practitioners dropping from 22.8% of the population in 2005 to 15.5% just ten years later, the Jogye Order is facing an internal crisis.<sup>10</sup> While the order has maintained the Maha Association without considerable support, association supporters such as Jungang Sanha University sociology professor Seung-moo Yoo claim that the cut in funding has left the Maha Association unable to fulfill its mandates and has reduced its activities to a minimum.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the association has remained an active participant in various immigration symposiums and national migrant-rights discussions, while the various local programs organized under the umbrella of the association have continued their work. Furthermore, many of the migrant Sanghas initially sponsored by the Maha Association have continued to grow and thrive independently without need of the association's support. In 2019, various foreign-run Buddhist temples in South Korea joined together with the Jogye Order to form the Korean Multicultural Buddhism Association (K. *Damunhwa bulgyo yeonhab*) to provide inter-Buddhist cross-cultural exchanges while continuing to work together in mutual support (Kim 2020; Song 2020).

## 5. The Activities of the Immigrant Buddhist Communities in Korea

In 2016, the Maha Association conducted a survey on the status of various migrant Buddhist communities in South Korea. Titled "A Study on Migrant Buddhist Communities: Focusing on Migrant Temples" (K. 이주민 불교공동체 조사연구: 이주민 법당을 중심으로, hereafter 'Jogye Order 2016' or 'the survey'), the survey provided insight into the establishment and evolution of foreign Buddhist communities in South Korea since the early 1970s. The survey identified seven foreign Buddhist national communities that currently operate temples and religious centers in South Korea, namely the Myanmar (also known as Burmese) community, which, in 2015, had 18,123 registered residents in South Korea, the Sri Lankan community, with 25,171 residents, the Thai community, with 27,927 residents, the Cambodian community, with 41,991 residents, the Nepalese community, with 29,189 residents, the Vietnamese community, with 128,042 residents, and the Mongolian community, with 18,493 residents (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 8–11).

<sup>8</sup> Half of the 16 countries South Korea has signed an MOU with regarding temporary employment are Buddhist countries. Of these, as of 2017, Thailand and Vietnam provided for the largest numbers of migrant workers following those from China.

<sup>9</sup> <http://cafe.daum.net/43sudawon/5sXX/706?q=%EB%A7%88%ED%95%98%EC%9D%B4%EC%A3%BC%EB%AF%BC%EC%A7%80%EC%9B%90%EB%8B%A8%EC%B2%B4%ED%98%91%EC%9D%98%ED%9A%8C>.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion, see (Kim et al. 2019).

<sup>11</sup> <http://cafe.daum.net/43sudawon/5sXX/706?q=%EB%A7%88%ED%95%98%EC%9D%B4%EC%A3%BC%EB%AF%BC%EC%A7%80%EC%9B%90%EB%8B%A8%EC%B2%B4%ED%98%91%EC%9D%98%ED%9A%8C>.

While the number of Burmese residents in South Korea is comparatively small, the fact that Burmese Buddhism is the oldest foreign Buddhist community in Korea is due to a significant amount of initial involvement from Korean Buddhists themselves. Since the late 1980s, Burmese-style Vipassana meditation became popularized by books written by both Western and Korean authors, inspiring many Korean Buddhists to travel to Myanmar for extended meditation retreats under Burmese masters. Returning home, these Koreans founded a variety of Vipassana centers and Burmese-style temples in the 1990s and began inviting Burmese monks to Korea as meditation teachers.<sup>12</sup> As the number of Burmese migrant workers began to increase over the same decade, the migrants were naturally welcomed by these temples and monks. The “Myanmar Community” (K. 미얀마 공동체) was formed in 1996 and has since worked for the welfare of Myanmar migrants throughout the country as well as organizing Burmese Buddhist festivals and events. As of 2016, over 14 Burmese temples associated with the Myanmar Community organization had been established in South Korea, providing Burmese migrants with family rituals and social activities (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 16–42).

Forming perhaps the second oldest foreign Buddhist community in the country, Sri Lankan migrant workers began entering South Korea in the late 1980s. Many settled near Ansan, an industrial suburb of Incheon, where the first Sri Lankan Temple was soon established. Since then, Sri Lankan migrants living in various parts of the country have created the “Sri Lankan Buddhist Culture Association” (K. 스리랑카 불교문화 협회), which has worked in conjunction with support from the Jogye Order to establish religious centers for Sri Lankan migrants. Since then, the Sri Lankan Buddhist Culture Association has assisted in building seven Sri Lankan temples across the country, which provide cultural education and religious activities as well as social and material support for Sri Lankan migrants (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 43–65).

The Buddhist gatherings of Nepalese immigrants in South Korea began in 1996 with the founding of the “Nepalese Buddhists Group” (K. 네팔불자모임) to provide social and religious activities for Nepalese migrant workers during their stay in Korea. Although the organization suffered from internal conflicts regarding the organization’s function, Nepalese Buddhist monks have held meetings intermittently at the request of immigrants along with religious events on Buddha’s Birthday and various holidays. While the number of Nepalese immigrants in South Korea is increasing, as of 2016, the Nepalese Buddhist Group has showed few signs of growth or expanding its involvement with more recently arriving Nepalese migrants (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 91–100).

Although introduced comparatively recently, Cambodian Buddhism has been growing quickly in South Korea, as many Cambodian migrants have shown strong interest in maintaining their native religious practices. In 2006, the “Cambodia Buddhist Center” (K. 캄보디아 불교센터) was established in Gunpo, south of Seoul, and has since provided religious activities, counseling, and medical support funded by active support from Cambodian migrant workers. The Cambodia Buddhist center has continued to expand, maintaining close ties with Buddhists in Cambodia. The center additionally appears to have taken on an important role in international relations between the governments of South Korea and Cambodia (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 81–90).

The first Thai Buddhist community in Korea began informally in 2008 through social gatherings of migrant wives from Thailand, which soon grew into regular religious events hosted at a local Korean Buddhist temple, *Bulgwangsa*, in Seokchon-dong. Outgrowing its relationship with the Korean host temple, the community constructed its own independent Thai temple near Ansan in 2011. However, this temple has subsequently suffered from financial problems. Since 2011, there have been attempts to build several additional Thai temples around the country independently of involvement from Korean Buddhists. However, they have also suffered from financial difficulties, possibly owing to the fact

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of the Vipassana movement in South Korea, see [Joo’s \(2011\)](#) article “Countercurrents from the West: ‘Blue-Eyed’ Zen Masters, Vipassana Meditation, and Buddhist Psychotherapy in Contemporary Korea.”

that the large majority of their patrons are housewives—a situation that is not the case in Thailand itself (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 66–80).

While maintaining similar numbers of residents in South Korea to those of the Burmese, the religious activities of Mongolian migrants have been far less prominent, perhaps owing to the effects of decades of religious suppression in Mongolia under Communist rule. The first Buddhist services for Mongolians were held in Daegu in 2008. However, participation was limited, at best, and the services were discontinued after the monk involved returned to Mongolia. Mongolian Buddhist migrants have since requested subsidies from the Jogye Order for supporting Mongolian Buddhist religious and cultural activities. However, the order's decision regarding financial support remains pending (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 110–116).

While the Vietnamese community in Korea is the largest in the Maha Association's survey, it is also the most recent to become active as a Buddhist community. As with the Thai Buddhists in Korea, religious activities for the Vietnamese community were initially organized by immigrant wives who, in 2013, established the "Vietnamese Buddhist Community in Korea" (재한베트남불교공동체). Since 2014, the organization has been chaired by a bilingual Vietnamese woman under whom its activities have flourished. The Vietnamese Buddhist Community in Korea has brought educated Vietnamese monks to Korea to lead regular Dharma services and form partnerships with Korean temples. In addition to providing religious activities for Vietnamese Buddhists, these monks are also trying to build a Vietnamese temple that can also play various roles as a cultural center. This organization was also active in advocating for the rights of Vietnamese migrants in Korea and petitioning the Korean government for active support for marriage migrants and their children (Jogye Order 2016, pp. 101–9).

It is clear from the Maha Association's "A Study on Migrant Buddhist Communities: Focusing on Migrant Temples" that many Buddhist immigrants in South Korea are actively seeking to establish temples and centers to continue their native religious communities. Not only does the establishment of such centers provide for the migrants' spiritual needs, but they also offer valued social and educational activities and other forms of support, along with means for maintaining a connection with their native traditions and cultural identities while living in a foreign country. However, while requiring further study, the survey also shows that the success and long-term viability of these immigrant temples have varied widely, depending on a variety of factors. Most, at least in their early stages, were supported by individual leaders or localized communities, with some declining as a result of internal strife or the removal of their leadership. In addition, the size of the immigrant communities appears less relevant to the success of their corresponding temples than the extent to which these temples have been adequately funded. Furthermore, partnerships with Korean Buddhists also appear to be an important factor in the success and continued growth of foreign Buddhist communities in Korea (Jogye Order 2013).

## 6. Conclusions

As surveyed above, South Korea's declining birth rate coupled with its aging population indicate that the nation's economic dependence on migrant labor and imported brides will only increase over the coming decades. Despite legislative initiatives and media campaigns promoting "multiculturalism", many migrants and their families continue to face discrimination, economic disadvantages, and social barriers preventing their successful integration into South Korean society. Given the government's failure to provide adequate support for these migrants, Korean NGOs and religious organizations have worked to provide material, educational, medical, and social support to the various growing migrant communities. Of South Korea's three largest religions, the Catholic community has been the most organized, sustained, and effective in its support of migrants by systematically providing for the legal, material, educational, and medical needs of various immigrant communities while advocating for their rights. Although lacking the centralized authority and organization of the Catholics, since the 1990s, Korea's Protestants have also been active in supporting their country's growing immigrant communities, which Evangelical churches also view as fertile grounds for proselytizing.

The Korean Buddhist community, in comparison, has been much slower to engage with Korea's immigrants and has provided considerably fewer support services. In 2008, the Jogye Order organized the Maha Association for Supporting Immigrants to coordinate individual and localized Buddhist migrant support services at a national level. While the Maha Association saw many successes, particularly in aiding the establishment of temples servicing migrant Buddhist communities, the association's funding was cut in 2015, leaving the local initiatives and temple programs to continue without centralized support from the order. Nevertheless, it is clear from the Maha Association's own 2016 study that many migrants from Buddhist countries do desire to continue their native Buddhist traditions and practices while living in Korea. Although several foreign Buddhist communities, such as the Burmese and Vietnamese, have been successful in establishing a network of temples in Korea, other migrant Buddhist communities have struggled to do so due to organizational difficulties, inadequate funding, or a failure to partner effectively with Korean Buddhists.

Korean Buddhism places a high value on compassionate action, and many foreign and domestic aid projects already operate under the aegis of the Jogye Order, so it remains unclear why providing support for migrant communities in Korea has not been a higher priority for the order, especially considering that the majority of these migrants are Buddhists themselves. It is possible that Korean Buddhists are less oriented towards international aid work and proselytizing than Catholics and Protestants, or perhaps the Jogye Order has been more preoccupied over recent decades with its own internal scandals and the on-going crisis over declining membership. However, in addition to humanitarian and religious motivations for the Jogye Order to prioritize their involvement with migrants, many of the Buddhist immigrants themselves are actively seeking support for continuing their religious practices. Yet, as noted in the Beopbo Sinmun Newspaper, many migrants arrive thinking that South Korea is a predominantly Christian nation, unaware that the country even has an active Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, when foreign Buddhists do visit Korean temples, they often fail to feel welcome, as the majority of the Korean lay practitioners are elderly (Lee 2017). Many Buddhist migrants thus cease their religious practices after arriving in Korea and become susceptible to conversion by many of the Christian organizations actively offering them assistance. It is the author's opinion that the Jogye Order has a duty to support the growing communities of migrants in South Korea by revitalizing, reorganizing, and expanding the Maha Association to better support the migrant Buddhist communities in Korea. Not only would this put the Buddha's "great compassion" into action and aid fellow Buddhists, it would be an investment in Korea's own future and help maintain the Jogye Order's social involvement as the nation continues on the path to becoming a truly multicultural nation.

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