

Buddha under Control. Buddhism's Legacy in North Korea

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Abstract: This paper explores the significance of the legacy of Buddhism in North Korea. Our primary concerns in the North Korean context are twofold: the presence of Buddhism in North Korean culture and the role of Buddhism in North Korea cultural and propaganda policy. We argue that the religious revival in North Korea seen from the 1970s onwards was part of a project created by the Workers' Party of Korea and had certain political goals. Fieldwork and analysis of sources revealed that the North Korean state has used Buddhism to repair the country's international image by creating a facade of religious freedom to promote tourism and as a part of policies towards unification. While seemingly peripheral, Buddhism still has relevance at state and social levels in North Korea.

Keywords: religion in North Korea, Buddhism, North Korean Buddhism, religion and politics, Chobulyeon, Pohyon Temple

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1. Introduction

The stance of the North Korean¹ state towards Christianity has attracted much attention from scholars (HIMMELFARB 1992; KEUM 2002; KIM 2018; RYU 2019), but the relationship between the North Korean state and Buddhism has barely been studied.² However, it deserves special attention as Buddhism,

¹ The official name of North Korea is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

² A number of scientific monographs on the subject of this research have been published in South Korea, including two books written by Shin Beob Ta entitled *Bughan bulgyo yeongu* (SHIN 2000) and *Bughan bulgyo baekseo* (SHIN 2020). This author, together with Cheong

although constrained, still has a presence in the DPRK. Buddhism clearly has much deeper roots than Christianity in North Korea, which makes it nigh impossible for the North Korean authorities to eradicate it.

Buddhism was deeply undermined by the Korean War (1950–53), and the subsequent anti-religious policy of the North Korean state. In spite of these facts, Buddhism still holds a specific place in North Korea. This study aims to fill the scholarly gap by providing some brief characteristics of Buddhism in North Korea and assessing its relevance in North Korean cultural and propaganda policy.

This research paper not only consists of a review of the available contemporary literature, it adds value by utilising North Korean sources and several field work trips to North Korea by both authors. The authors shed light on North Korean religious policy towards Buddhism as a complex and dynamic issue, in which the North Korean is still seeking a place for Buddhism in its general social framework.

The paper is divided into four substantive chapters. The first briefly introduces the reader to the place of Buddhism on the Korean Peninsula. The second is related to the religious policy of the North Korean state. The third deals with the role of Buddhism in the culture of North Korea. The final part is a typology of the Buddhist legacy in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

2. An introduction to Buddhism on the Korean Peninsula

Buddhism was introduced to the Korean Peninsula in 372 AD. The Korean Peninsula was at the time divided into three kingdoms: Gokoryo in the north, Baekje in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast part.³ Buddhism gained particular importance during the Koryo dynasty (918–1392), in cultural, social and political life. However, the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the 14th century, and a series of anti-Buddhist edicts during the Joseon Kingdom (1392–1897), led to the decline of Buddhism in Korea. The first clearly anti-Buddhist policies were inaugurated by King Taejong at the beginning of the

Thae Gyeong, also wrote *Bughan-ui jjol gwa bulgyo* (CHEONG 1999). Buddhism was briefly covered by Ha Jong Pil (HA 2003) in a monograph about North Korean religions (entitled *Bughan-ui jonggyo munhwa*). To the authors' modest knowledge, there are no other recent publications worldwide that focus exclusively on Buddhism in North Korea. We would like to thank the Reviewers for drawing our attention to some of the above books and for their valuable comments and fruitful remarks.

³ The Korean words used in this article are Latinised according to the Revised Romanisation of the Korean language dated from July 2000. Furthermore, Koreans variously spell two-syllable given names separated by a hyphen (South Korean version) or a space (North Korean version).

15th century. Meanwhile, Buddhism lost much of his wealth, the clergy was subjugated and monks lost their political influence at the expense of Confucian scholars. Nevertheless, Buddhism continued to be important for the next two-hundred years and King Sejo (1417–1468) even tried to restore some Buddhist privileges. However, from the 16th century, Buddhism found itself on the margins of social life. It survived in distant mountain communities and in the hearts of the common people, and particularly among women.

Religious dynamics on the peninsular were changed fundamentally by the arrival of Christian missionaries at the end of 19th century. Up until 1895, monks had been prohibited by law from entering most Korean cities and had little societal legitimacy. But some of the monks who did re-enter the cities started propagation (*pogyo*) of Buddhist teachings, aiming to ‘reunite’ believers. Such efforts created a foundation of socially engaged monks and lay people devoted to urbanising and popularising Buddhism. The monks copied the tactics of Christian missionaries, organising public teachings, setting up organisations and institutions and publishing translations of Buddhist classics. As a result, Buddhism stopped being considered an anti-social and isolated religion from mountain areas.⁴

The Japanese colonial period (1910–45) also turned out to be beneficial for Buddhism’s growth as it was considered useful by the new colonial power. During the colonial period, Korean Buddhism underwent a set of reforms inspired by the Japanese, who wanted to model it in accordance to the ‘correct’ Japanese Buddhism of the Sōtō and Nichiren schools. This coincided with attempts to revive Korean Buddhist practice within the tradition itself. Probably the most characteristic result of the Japanisation of Korean Buddhism was the break with celibacy by most monks. Like other religions, Buddhism did not escape politicisation, especially in the colonial-funded Buddhist press, and during the last, most oppressive period of colonisation, 1937–1945. Despite the financial and state support that had been gained, Korean Buddhists manifested a spectrum of attitudes towards the coloniser, from support to hostility. Some monks did not accept Japan resolutions and returned to the mountains, continuing Buddhist activities far from the centres of colonial life (SØRENSEN and HARRIS 1999: 128–137). Nevertheless, during the colonial period Buddhism began to thrive. According to Japanese colonial authorities’ statistics, there were 63,571 Korean Buddhists in 1916 (BAKER 2016: 8). By late 1940s that number had increased to 375,438 believers in North Korea alone (SENÉCAL 2013: 13). Furthermore, some Buddhist movements, like Won Buddhism, were created during that dynamic period (PYE 2002).

⁴ More information related to *pogyo*: NATHAN 2010.

Before the division of the Korean Peninsula, the Northern part was more religious than the South (BAKER 2013: 33). Christianity was the most active among the organised religions. Pyongyang was even called the 'Jerusalem of the East'. The Sungsil College in Pyongyang was the best seminary in the whole of Korea (TUDOR 2017: 192). Just before the liberation, Korea was an extremely religiously vibrant country where the world views of Shamanism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity intertwined and competed. The effect of these meetings of ideas was especially vivid in Korea's new religious movements, many of which emerged at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially Cheondogyo (the term may be translated as the Religion of the Heavenly Way) (YOUNG 2013: 63). This religion, which unified elements of Buddhism, Christianity and Confucianism, was especially active in both religious and political spheres during the Japanese colonial period between 1910 and 1945, and even as the Chondoist Chongu Party, which became a political party in the DPRK connected to WPK (the Workers' Party of Korea). However, after the end of the Korean War, this religion faced severe persecution, and became 'a shadow of its former self' (YOUNG 2013: 64).

3. Buddhism and religious policies in North Korea

In religion-state typologies, North Korea is often described as a 'Anti-religious State', characterised by an officially hostile attitude toward religions and state policies which oppose any important public role for religion (KURU 2007: 584). Despite the content of the North Korean Constitution of 1948, which stated that the 'Citizens of the DPRK have freedom of religious belief and of conducting religious services' (LANKOV 2014: 6), the Period of the Soviet occupation and formative years of the new political system in the Northern Part of the Korean Peninsula was disastrous for traditional religious life. The Korean communists followed Leninist doctrine, which saw religion as an 'opium of the people' (*inmin-ui apyeon*), which should be eradicated from society. The fiercest target was Christianity, which was considered an imperialist force, although other religions were not excluded from persecution.

Among the best-known victims of the repression are Francis Hong Yong Ho, a Catholic bishop of Pyongyang, imprisoned in 1949 and missing since then, as well as the Protestant Reverend Moon, arrested and tortured for the first time on 11 August 1946, and arrested for a second time in February 1948, and finally sentenced to forced labour in Hungnam camp. Buddhist temples, Confucian schools and shrines related to folk beliefs also suffered greatly (SØRENSEN and HARRIS 1999: 138). As a consequence of the 1946 Land Reform, many temples were confiscated by the North Korean state. Buddhism was attacked in communist propaganda as 'premodern' and 'superstitious'.

Monks were not provided with enough food, and many had no choice but to abandon monastic life (SENÉCAL 2013: 13–15).

However, Buddhism was still present in the minds of many North Koreans, though mostly older generations. Ho Guk Bon, the North Korean ambassador to Poland (1954–1958), noted that:

Our villages strictly profess Buddhism. However, only elderly people are sincerely religious. The Catholic population prevails among the urban population, while the war destroyed all Catholic temples. The Japanese occupation [...] introduced a third religion to the country, which was used as an instrument of their politics. The war against Japan was also a war against their religion. Our youth, however, is already completely progressive, and Buddha statues are found only in distant and less accessible mountains. (Quoted after BURZYŃSKI 1957: 3, translated by the authors).

Following the liberation, there were many Buddhist reformers and activists interested in spreading their teachings and participating in social life. According to official North Korean statistics, there were 518 temples in North Korea and 732 monks before the Korean War (SENÉCAL 2013: 13). In 1945, three Buddhist organisations were created: the North Joseon General Buddhist Federation (*bugjoseon bulgyodo jeongyeonmaeng*), the North Joseon Alliance of Buddhist Associations (*bugjoseon bulgyo yeonhabhoe*) and the North Joseon Buddhist General Federation (*bugjoseon bulgyo jeongyeonmaeng*). Only the third one survived after the establishment of the North Korean state in September 1948 and began to be subordinated to the United Democratic Patriotic Front, the major North Korean political structure (ARCHIVE OF THE ROMANIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 1954: 10).

Anti-religious policies became more ruthless with the outbreak of the Korean War. Meanwhile communist forces damaged many Buddhist temples in the Southern part of the Korean Peninsula, and targeted Buddhist monks and nuns as class enemies (SØRENSEN and HARRIS 1999: 138).

The reason for the increased persecution toward Buddhist practitioners was suspicion of anti-communism sympathies among Buddhists. Remote Buddhist temples in the mountains also provided shelter for anti-government forces and were considered a potential threat to the power of the WPK (SENÉCAL 2013: 16). Therefore, Buddhists started to come under heavy state control with the implementation in 1957 of the North Korean social stratification system called *songbun*. North Korean citizens were divided into three distinct loyalty

groups based on their background ('stable', 'neutral', and 'enemy') forces, which were divided into fifty-one *categories*. Buddhists were classified in category 37 (between Protestants and Catholics), as people who could not be trusted (COLLINS 2012: 79–82). The remaining monks were either forced to enroll in the army, or were killed in prison camps. A major anti-religious campaign was also launched in 1958, in order to eradicate North Korean believers (KEUM 2003: 206).

Kim Il Sung, although brought up a Christian, serving as an organist in his family's church, when he became leader of North Korea adopted a hostile attitude toward religion. In 1964, Kim Il Sung announced that: 'In the course of the Fatherland Liberation War (Korean War), religion disappeared from our country' (WHITE PAPER ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA 2008: 233). However, in the late 1960s, the political framework of North Korea changed, with increased interest in preserving national heritage, as a form of national pride. Abandoned and destroyed temples started to be reconstructed.

In 1972, two important elements contributed to give a new impetus to religious organisations in North Korea. Firstly, the new North Korean Constitution of 1972 elaborated a longer definition of freedom of religious belief than the previous Constitution of 1948.

Citizens have freedom of religious belief. This right is granted through the approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies. Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order (CONSTITUTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA: chapter five, article sixty-eight).

In 1972, remaining Buddhist organisations were merged under the Korea Buddhist Federation (*Joseon bulgyodo ryeonmaeng*, abbr. Chobulyeon). However, the Chobulyeon was subordinated to the North Korean Juche Ideology (an ideology promoting and defending the self-reliance policy of North Korea), but also to North Korean political organisations.

The apparent opening of the North Korean state toward religions was visible during several events. In 1986, the Chobulyeon joined the World Fellowship of Buddhists. It was also during that period that some 'catholic'⁵ and two protestant churches were built, and many Buddhist temples were restored in Pyongyang (THAE 2020b: 127). In 1989, Tripiṭaka Koreana (*Palman Daejanggyeong*) was

⁵ The North Korean church has no connection with Roman Catholic Church, and its mass looks more like a prayer meeting e.g. participants do not receive Eucharist.

translated into modern North Korean. The same year North Korean Buddhist monks also participated in the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students in Pyongyang. North Korea wanted to present itself as an open and global place for multicultural visitors (THAE 2020a). Representatives from 177 countries took part in the festival, the biggest international event North Korea has ever held. Meanwhile, the relative openness of the North Korean state toward religions may also be seen through the presence of North Korean state religious organisations at international religious conferences (FORD 2008: 106). The subordination of religion to the state was openly stated by some North Korean sources. The Great Encyclopedia of Joseon (*Joseondaebaeggwasa*) published in 1995 states that the basic mission of religious people is to promote the national interest (YU 2008: 126).

Within the framework of the 1998 South Korean policy of reconciliation (the Sunshine Policy), the Chobulyeon took part in dialogue with South Korean Buddhist organisations and was responsible for Buddhist temples in the Mount Kumgang, a region especially popular for Koreans of both sides of the Korean Peninsula. Except for promoting tourism, the Chobulyeon focuses also on receiving humanitarian aid and funds from a well-known Buddhist organisation called Good Friends, led by the Venerable Pomnyun, a South Korean Buddhist monk, who has been working inside North Korea for over 25 years. From a different perspective, it has been estimated that between 1995 and 2006, the South Korean Catholic community sent USD 38 mln in aid to North Korea (HASSIG and OH 2009: 190).

This improvement in relations between Buddhists from the Northern and Southern part of the Peninsula can also be underlined by the presence of several hundred Buddhist religious representatives from Seoul and Pyongyang, at a ceremony to celebrate the reopening of the Shingye temple in November 2016. This event was considered highly symbolic, as this temple has a historical value. It is a Buddhist temple, founded in 519 AD during the Silla Dynasty, located on territory now in North Korea that was destroyed during the Korean War. The institution is one of the most revered places of worship of Korean Buddhism.

The Chobulyeon was also involved in some architectural projects with South Korean Buddhist organisations. The South Korean Ministry of Unification and a South Korean Buddhist Order named Cheontae financed the rebuilding of the Youngtong temple, located close to the city of Kaesong in North Korea. In the same period in North Korea, the pre-revolutionary past was officially recognised through certain sites that had long been stigmatised as reactionary, such as Christian churches and Buddhist temples, including

the Kwangbop Temple that was ‘renovated’ in 1990, the Kumgang Temple in 1998, and the Chilgol Church in 1992. Such changes in North Korean policy were an effect of pressure from foreign religious groups, particularly South Korean, which were also bringing investments to the North (JOINEAU 2014: 8). On the other side, article 68 of the 1992 Constitution underlined not only the freedom of religious belief but also the right to construct buildings for religious use and ceremonies (FORD 2008: 106). Interestingly also, the first South Korean civilian invited to North Korea during the Moon Jae In era (Moon Jae In has been the president of South Korea since May 2017), was a Buddhist monk named Pomnyun, known especially for his humanitarian work towards reconciliation of the two Koreas (SHI 2018).

From a different perspective, monks from the Southern side have expressed difficulties when talking to monks from North Korea:

The religious rituals are not organized. We [= Buddhist monks from South Korea] taught them how to beat the wooden gong. The language difference in Buddhism was another difficulty; they don’t understand our terms and we don’t understand their terms (CHOI 2015).

This opinion was confirmed by the former North Korean Juche chief ideologist Hwang Jang-yop, who said that ‘the monks living in the Buddhist temples are of course fake monks’ (MARTIN 2004: 351).

4. The presence of Buddhism in North Korean culture

The marginalisation of Buddhism in North Korea can be demonstrated by the almost total absence of Buddhism in its literature and cinema. There are, however, some minor samples of Buddhism in the North Korean leisure industry. In 1966, the uncredited movie, *The 60-year-old youth* (*60 cheongchun*) has one scene where an old man is practicing meditation. He explains to another farmer that he has suffered enough and wants simply to enjoy life. He also thinks that it is his breathing technique that will give him longevity. When the real hero of the movie, a senior Seonbong, notices this he scolds the two men for playing instead of working hard. In the movie he will prove his dedication by taking part in a marathon and winning it. The message of the film is clear, even the old cannot stop their struggle. Also, there is no reference to Buddhism per se in the movie and the meditation scene might be understood in a broader sense, as a representation of practices present in Eastern traditions (so not only Buddhism, but also Taoism, and Korea’s new religious movements).



Fig. 1. Meditation as a waste of time in the movie *The 60-year-old youth*, Mokran TV (accessed 1 July 2021).

Even in historical and fantasy movies, Buddhism appears only as an ornament. Usually, a temple functions as an attractive shooting location, as in the success movie *Hong Kil Dong* (1986, Kim Kil In) or *Order 027* (1986, Jung Ki Mo, Kim Eung Suk). North Korean productions have also used – though to a lesser extent – Buddhist temples. For instance, the Pohyong Temple in Myohyang Mountains served as an oriental location in the movie *Ten Zan* directed by Ferdinando Baldi and released in 1988 (SCHÖNHERR 2012: 182–184). Buddhism has also figurative role in internal affairs. Buddhist historical temples are considered as propaganda museums rather than as active places of worship. Visitors to temples learn there about the cruelty of Americans, and the greatness of Kim Il Sung. Many temples suffered during American bombing raids, and at least nine Buddhist temples of great historical value and located around Pyongyang, were destroyed during the Korean War (ARCHIVE OF THE ROMANIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 1954: 30). It is, however, not always clear the extent to which the temples were destroyed during the war or during the anti-religious campaigns that came after. The tragedy of the Korean War is used to antagonise the enemy and to propagate the official liberation story.⁶ Buddhist temples lost their original meaning. Rather as religious places, they are considered as a form of ‘cultural heritage’ (*munhwajae*), or a sign of the greatness of Korean culture. Some defectors have seen them only as

⁶ Interview of Nicolas Levi with a monk at the Pohyon Temple. The interview was realised on 20 August 2007.

‘sightseeing spots’ (WHITE PAPER ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA 2008: 240). Furthermore, monks cannot teach Buddhism lectures to visitors, nor meditation, and there are no activities of worshipping Buddha (THAE 2020b: 126). They cannot proselytise, and unless a person belongs to a monk family, or lives near the temple, it is almost impossible to become a Buddhist (SENÉCAL 2013: 13). Also in North Korea, there are practically no statues of Buddha in public space.⁷



Fig. 2. Buddhist temple as a film location in *Order 027*, Korean Central Television (accessed 1 July 2021).

In order to become a Buddhist monk, a candidate not only has to finish a programme of Buddhist studies of the Religion Department of the Kim Il Sung University, but also to be a member of the WPK (THAE 2020b: 126). Monks usually do not live inside temple facilities and their function is more similar to museum guides than religious teachers. According to SENÉCAL (2013: 21), they are characterised by ‘administrative work’ and have families and lead a very secular life. Unless there is an official visit, they usually do not wear official clothes. The characteristic red robes they wear have been received as a gift from South Korean Buddhists, and they are reminiscent of the style of Northern monks from the colonial period (SENÉCAL 2013: 20–30). According to the North Korean senior defector Thae Yong Ho (THAE 2020b: 125–127), they perform prayers (*bulgong*) only during those visits. In some cases, this

⁷ The exceptions are Buddhist stone sculptures carved in the mountains, like the Myogilsang Buddhist statue, which is the largest Buddhist stone image in North Korea.

attitude might be changing. A person involved in the Youngtong rebuilding project mentioned that:

In the past, the monks in Youngtong temple had long hair, unlike monks from South, and they were not staying at the temple. However, these days, there are monks with tonsured heads wearing garb, and now there are two–three monks residing at the temple (cited according to CHOI 2015).

Regarding Buddhism festivities, the Buddha's birthday (*Bucheonim osin nal*) is a public holiday only in South Korea. In North Korea this event is unknown by the population (THAE 2020b: 125). Nevertheless, *Chobulyeon* organises ceremonies to mark the occasion, for instance at the Pohyon Temple in May 1988. Since then, the country has held three major Buddhist events each year. Only a limited number of practitioners selected by the regime can participate. They aim to show the world that freedom of religion is guaranteed, and are also designed to facilitate exchanges with foreign Buddhist communities.

There is also an open question of the extent to which Buddhist ideas have played a role in constructing Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jong Il's cults of personality. The religious elements in North Korean ideology have already been subject of multiple studies. Some scholars argue that through appropriation of religious symbols the North Korean system has become a religion itself (BELKE 1998; BAKER 2013; SHIN 2018; HUSARSKI 2020). Official propaganda sometimes uses the Buddhist language to describe leaders e.g. openly describing Kim Il Sung as a god – the 'Sun of Love' – 'superior to Christ in love, superior to Buddha in benevolence, superior to Confucius in virtue and superior to Mohamed in justice' (BECKER 2005: 77). A similarity between Buddhism and the Juche ideology was noted by Benjamin Joineau. According to French researcher, the location and shape of Juche Tower is reminiscent of the Buddhist semantics of enlightenment (JOINEAU 2014: 81). Moreover, Kim Jong Il was often presented as a benevolent leader chosen by some mysterious external force for his role, and that seems to be similar to the justification for power in classical Buddhist political thought (LEVI 2015: 128).

5. A typology of the Buddhist legacy in North Korea

Buddhism's legacies are considered in the list of national treasures of North Korea. A national treasure is a cultural property that has been evaluated as a cultural relic by the Cabinet of North Korea according to its historical significance and formative artistic value and registered by the Central

Cultural Relics Conservation Guidance Agency of North Korea. The list of national treasures is based on 193 monuments and includes 62 assets related to Buddhism. Other assets are mainly related to the history of the Korean Peninsula and to a lesser extent explicitly to Confucianism.

Among these 62 Buddhists assets, thirty-three elements are named as being temples. Regarding the remaining 29 religious assets, we may classify them in several categories: pagodas (eleven), hermitages (two), and other elements (sixteen), such as sculptures, guest houses, halls, sculptures, etc. Below, we provide some brief descriptions of the most important Buddhist legacies in North Korea:

On this list, number seven is the Tabo Pagoda of the Pohyon Buddhist temple, the most important Buddhist legacy in North Korea. The Pohyon Temple is located in the Myohyang Mountains in North Pyongan Province. It was designated as the number 40 National Treasure of North Korea.

Founded under the Koryo dynasty in 1024, it became one of the largest centres of Buddhism in North Korea and is an important place of pilgrimage. It is named in honour of the deity Samantabhadra, a Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism associated with practice and meditation. Like many other temples in the country, it was heavily damaged by American bombing during the Korean War. The Tabo Pagoda of the Pohyon Buddhist temple, which is also known as the ‘Pagoda of many treasures’, is two-stories in height.

The number thirteen of this list is the Pobun Hermitage of the Yongmyong Buddhist temple, located in the district of Taesong in Pyongyang. The Yongmyong Buddhist Temple was located at the foot of Moranbong hill in Pyongyang. Prior to its destruction during the Korean War, it was the largest and most important centre of Buddhist worship in the capital of North Korea. In the 1920s, the temple was renovated with funds from the Japanese government. The temple was made headquarters for the Rinzaï sect of Japanese Zen Buddhism. The Rinzaï monks were tasked with converting citizens away from traditional Korean Buddhism as part of a government programme to replace the old Korean culture with that of modern Japan. The historic temple was destroyed by the bombings of Pyongyang during the Korean War. The temple ran the Pobun Hermitage, located on Mont Ryongak in the district of Mangyongdae in Pyongyang. In 2012, the Korean Central News Agency reported the ‘reconfirmation’ of Lair of King Tongmyong’s Unicorn, 200 meters from the Yongmyong Temple. The discovery is credited to ‘Archaeologists of the History Institute of the DPRK Academy of Social Sciences’, and the report states that the ‘Unicorn Lair’ is carved on a rock at the site. The report of the

discovery also states that this 'proves that Pyongyang was the capital city of Ancient Korea' (Lair of King Tongmyong's Unicorn reconfirmed in DPRK: 2012).

The number 24 is the seven-storied hexagonal pagoda of the Hongbok Buddhist temple, located in the Moranbong Park in Pyongyang since 1933, but initially in the Pyongchon district of the city. The temple dates from the 11th century.

The number 95 is the Buddhist Singye Temple, founded in 519 AD during the Silla Dynasty in Mount Kumgang. As with many other Buddhist legacies, the temple was destroyed during the Korean War, and rebuilt through donations from South Korea collected by the Jogye Order. The Singye temple is one of the most famous places of worship of Korean Buddhism (KIM HWA-YOUNG: 2006).

Number 164 is the Kwangbop Buddhist temple, founded in the time of the kingdom of Goguryeo during the reign of Kwanggaetho (391–413) and located in the district of Taesong in Pyongyang. It was the largest of a dozen temples built on Mount Taesong. Rebuilt in 1727, destroyed during the Korean War in July 1952 by American bombardments, it was restored in 1990. The ensemble currently comprises an octagonal stone pagoda with five levels surrounded by the Taeung, Tongsung and Sosung pavilions as well as the Haethal and Chonwang gates. Its pagoda is listed in 185th position on the list of National Treasures of North Korea.

Globally speaking, ancient temples like Pohyon, Kwangbop, Singye, Youngtong or Anguk were restarted and are protected as North Korean National Treasures. These places are attractive and receive many local and international tourists. In spite of belonging to the oldest extant temples of the Korean Peninsula, visitors learn about the American aggression and the hypothetical splendour of Kim Il Sung, who effectively reconstructed the country.⁸ Paradoxically, the politicisation of Buddhist temples almost deprives them completely of anything related to traditional Buddhism.

Buddhism Legacies are also presented on a regular basis in the English-speaking North Korean press. However, this legacy is also used as a propaganda tool as North Korean journalists underline the damages to Buddhism temples that were caused by American bombing during the Korean War. The legacy is also preserved by the policy of the WPK:

⁸ Nicolas Levi visited the Pohyon (North Pyongan Province) and Anguk Temples (South Pyongan Province) in August 2007.

Though it was seriously damaged by the indiscriminate bombing by the US imperialists during the Fatherland Liberation War (June 1950 – July 1953), the temple was restored to its original state after the war and has been preserved as a valuable cultural heritage thanks to the policy of the WPK and the state on preserving cultural relics (HONG 2014: 42–43).

Anguk temple is preserved in its original state thanks to the country's policy of preserving the national cultural heritage (KIM 2020: 40).

In spite of the support of the Japanese Occupant in the preservation of the Buddhist legacy in the Northern Part of North Korea, North Korean propaganda journals suggest that the Japanese were responsible for damages related to Buddhist legacies:

Many of the cultural relics, however, were washed away by the flood in 1915 or destroyed by the Japanese policy of the destruction of Korean culture pursued during their military occupation of Korea (KIM 2012: 14).

Many Korean artefacts, such as a gold crown, personal ornaments, bronze mirrors and Buddhist images, were on display in Ueno Museum in Tokyo as the 'Japanese treasures' (CHOE 2013: 12).

Meanwhile, the role of Buddhists towards the Japanese occupant (through the Imjin War) is also underlined in the North Korean press:

On display in the area are nine stupas, including that of Saint Sosan, a Buddhist priest and patriotic commander during the Imjin Patriotic War against the Japanese aggressors (1592–1598), and relics and remains and armaments demonstrative of high levels of science and technology attained in the periods of Koryo and the last feudal state of Korea (1392–1910) (KIM 2012: 12).

6. Conclusions

Our brief analysis demonstrates that the function of Buddhism is only ornamental and is not related to religious practices or ideas. The regime does not deny the existence of Buddhism, but places it clearly as a relic of the past. The only reason why Buddhism exists is its utility for the WPK. It helps to promote tourism, soften the image of the regime, and obtain fundings, mostly through South Korean Buddhist channels.

From a general perspective, as of 2016, there are approximately 300 monks and 67 Buddhist temples in North Korea, which is drastically less than

the 26,791 temples in South Korea (BAKER 2016:14). The Korea Buddhist Federation claims to have around 10,000 lay members, but the number is very speculative, and not verifiable due to the lack of official statistics.⁹ From a non-North-Korean source, almost 70% of Buddhists in North Korea are women (HAVET 2010: 125). If true, it would fit with the Korean historical pattern that Buddhism during times of oppression is cultivated primarily by women.

Some South Korean scholars claim that Buddhism is 'the most active and the most powerful' of the North Korean religions (SENÉCAL 2013: 10). Our research shows that Buddhism, as well as other religious associations, is primarily a tool of the state, and the overall treatment of Buddhism is inseparable from the treatment of other religions. This paper demonstrates that the reappearance of Buddhism in North Korea from the 1970s had a political context, and did not change the overall situation of the persecution of Buddhist practitioners. The North Korean system does not tolerate alternative systems of meaning, and tends to either oppose or subjugate them.

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⁹ It is worth mentioning that North Korean authorities mention the same number for Protestants in the country.

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