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“Let’s Propagate the Dharma”: A Critical Survey of the Activities of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism’s Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau

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Abstract: The Jogye Order has been facing a deepening crisis since the turn of the millennium. The rapid decline in membership had been compounded by a growing loss of confidence in the order’s monastic leadership following a succession of scandals in the 1990s and 2010s involving sectarian infighting and high-level corruption. While the practice of “Dharma propagation” (*pogyo*) has been critical to Korean Buddhism’s revival over the twentieth century, the Jogye Order’s steadily worsening membership crisis has revitalized institutional interest in Dharma propagation. With the independent establishment of its “Dharma Propagation Bureau” (*Pogyowon*) in 1994, the order has steadily increased its financial and practical support of a diversity of propagation efforts as, over recent decades, the order knows that its long-term survival might very well depend on these efforts’ success. Given the crucial nature of the Jogye Order’s current propagation efforts, this article will conduct a critical examination of the recent history of the JO’s Dharma Propagation Bureau, with a particular focus on the Bureau’s activities under its seventh director, Ven. Jihong (in office 2016 through 2021).

Keywords: propagation; Jogye Order; Dharma Propagation Bureau; Korean Buddhism



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1. Introduction

In a Dharma talk given in Seoul’s Jogyesa Temple in March 2023 upon his completion of a walking pilgrimage through the Buddha’s homeland, Ven. Jaseung declared, “We have said, ‘Let’s attain Buddhahood’ (*Seongbul Hapsida*) when greeting one another, but from now on, let’s make our greeting ‘Let’s propagate the Dharma’ (*Jeonbeop Hapsida*). Like Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, let us postpone our attainment of Buddhahood to the next life and spread the Dharma in this one” (Kim 2023a, 2023b). A standard greeting among Korean Buddhists through the modern era, “Let’s become a Buddha” has indeed been more frequently exchanged with “Let’s propagate the Dharma” over recent years. This growing trend mirrors shifts in the orientation of Korean Buddhist praxis away from individual spiritual attainment and the accumulation of merit towards the collective preservation and dissemination of Buddhist teachings, the Dharma. In fact, “Let’s propagate the Dharma” has a rallying slogan among Korean Buddhists, underscoring the urgency of adopting innovative Dharma propagation strategies to ensure their religion’s survival in the face of a steadily declining Buddhist population. It also represents a radical shift in traditional lay Buddhist identity and practice as prescribed by Korea’s monastic establishment.

Introduced to Korea in the fourth century C.E., Buddhism flourished on the peninsula for over a millennium as a state-sponsored religion patronized by a succession of ruling dynasties. However, with the rise of the neo-Confucian Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), Korea’s Buddhist establishment was progressively stripped of its wealth, prestige, and power. Barred from entering the nation’s cities, Korea’s surviving monastics retreated to remote mountain temples where their religion was “virtually quarantined in the countryside” for the next 500 years (Buswell 1992, pp. 22–23). With the lifting of official government

suppression in 1895, Korean Buddhism experienced a revival over the twentieth century, despite the nation's tumultuous modern history, emerging as the nation's largest religion by the turn of the millennium.

Claiming to represent the historical mainstream of Korea's Buddhist traditions, the Jogye Order (*K. Daehanbulgyo Jogyejong*, hereafter "JO" or "the order") overcame decades of sectarian conflict and geographical isolation following the Korean War (1950–1953) to become the largest of Korea's Buddhist orders by the 1980s. Established as a "monastic monk-oriented order" (Yoon 2012, p. 36), the JO currently maintain more than 3000 temples staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained monastics (*bigu*), almost half of whom are female (*biguni*). Beginning with various reform movements in the 1980s, the JO has effectively increased its social activism, media presence, and engagement with wider society. As of the 2005 census, approximately 28% of South Koreans identified themselves as Buddhists, with the order claiming around seven million registered lay members (Kim et al. 2019).

Despite the JO's remarkable growth and reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, the order has been facing a deepening membership crisis since the turn of the millennium. As discussed in previous articles, the annual number of monastic recruits has been steadily declining, from 510 postulants in 1993 to 151 in 2017, 99 in 2021, and only 61 in 2022. Furthermore, according to South Korea's 2015 census, only 15.5% of the nation described themselves as Buddhist, while 56% of all South Koreans and 65% of young adults claim no religious affiliation. While much of this trend reflects South Korea's ageing demographics and declining birth rate, which plummeted from a peak of 44 per thousand in 1958 to just 6.9 in 2022,¹ it is clear that Buddhism is struggling to maintain its relevance in an increasingly secular society, especially among the younger generations. This rapid decline in membership had been compounded by a growing loss of confidence in the order's monastic leadership following a succession of scandals in the 1990s and 2010s involving sectarian infighting and high-level corruption (Kim et al. 2019). While the practice of "Dharma propagation" (*pogyo*, hereafter "propagation") has been critical to Korean Buddhism's revival over the twentieth century, the JO's worsening membership crisis has revitalized institutional interest in Dharma propagation. With the independent establishment of its "Dharma Propagation Bureau" (*Pogyowon*, here after 'the Bureau') in 1994, the order has steadily increased its financial and practical support of a diversity of propagation efforts as, over recent decades, the order knows that its long-term survival might very well depend on these efforts' success (Kim et al. 2019).

Given the importance of the JO's current propagation efforts, this article will survey the recent history of the JO's Dharma Propagation Bureau, with a particular focus on the Bureau's activities under its seventh director, Ven. Jihong (in office 2016 through 2021). The article will begin with a review of the central role which Dharma propagation has played in the revival of Buddhism in Korea's modern era. Section 3 will review the recent history of the order's Dharma Propagation Bureau, before conducting a more thorough examination of its goals and accomplishments under Jihong's five-year tenure as director as presented in the order's publications and Buddhist media. Section 4 will then scrutinize several controversies that arose during Jihong's directorship. The article will close with a critical discussion of the accomplishments and controversies surrounding the Seventh Bureau's activities with particular attention to the ongoing tensions between the order's monastic establishment and lay supporters.

2. Background: The Role of Dharma Propagation (*Pogyo*) in Modern Korean Buddhism

While Korean Buddhism's revival over the twentieth century has paralleled the remarkable ascent of Protestant Christianity within Korean society, Buddhist studies scholar Mark A. Nathan notes that the former has received far less attention from religious studies scholars. In his monograph *From the Mountains to the Cities: A History of Buddhist Propagation*, Nathan argues that the key to Korean Buddhism's modern revival lies in the efforts of a diversity of Buddhist organizations, institutions, and individuals to systematically propagate

their religion throughout Korean society. Furthermore, this modern practice of Dharma propagation played a crucial role in transforming Korean Buddhism from strictly the provenance of marginalized monastic communities into a more socially engaged religion supported by an institutionally diverse network of religious organizations. Through their active participation in society, these Buddhist organizations have successfully attracted millions of urban lay followers, enabling Buddhism to compete with Christianity's rapid growth while maintaining Buddhism's relevance in the nation's religiously plural society (Nathan 2018, pp. 1–2).

Just as Jesus's "Great Commission" (Matthew 28:16–20) establishes the doctrinal impetus behind contemporary evangelical mission work, modern Korean Buddhists similarly trace the roots of Dharma propagation to Buddha's "declaration of propagation" within Pali Vinaya's Mahavagga.² While Korean Buddhists view Shakyamuni Buddha as the "paradigmatic *pogyosa*", or "Dharma propagator", Nathan argues that the contemporary theory and praxis of propagation in Korea are a modern development which arose in response to specific events and trends within the nation's tumultuous modern history. Nathan attributes the birth of Korean Dharma propagation to the lifting of Joseon-era legal restrictions barring Buddhist monastics from Korea's cities, an event to which Nathan ascribes "tremendous symbolic meaning" for the country's Buddhists (Nathan 2018, p. 26). The following decades saw the rise of numerous Buddhist reform movements within Korea, led by both lay leaders and monastics, which faced increasing competition from western Christian missionaries and Buddhist missionaries from Japan. Within this turn-of-the-century milieu, urban propagation temples (*pogyodang*) catering to Buddhist laity began proliferating throughout Korean metropolises, laying the groundwork for the legal recognition of Dharma propagation as a legitimate, and even essential, Buddhist practice during the Japanese annexation (1910–1945). Over decades following the Korean War, however, Korean Buddhism was characterized by the acrimonious sectarian conflicts of the "Purification Movement" and competition from the rapid expansion of evangelical Protestantism, which corresponded to a sharp decline in Buddhist propagation-related activities. Nevertheless, as South Korea entered a period of intense economic development, political democratization, and radical societal shifts in the final decades of the twentieth century, so too did Buddhism reengage with society via various Buddhist social movements and the re-proliferation of urban Dharma propagation centers. This produced a diversity of often unprecedented propagation activities undertaken by a variety of individuals and organizations, resulting in the religion's rapid expansion by the turn of the millennium (Nathan 2018).

While a notably Korean phenomenon, Nathan and others had observed that these modern forms of Dharma propagation are "unquestionably influenced" by the activities of foreign missionaries, a process which invariably lead to Korean Buddhism's internalization of Western definitions and practical norms regarding "religion" (Nathan 2018, p. 4). Yet, not only did the adoption of such external norms serve as a successful adaptive strategy enabling Korean Buddhism's survival through periods of great social upheaval, such norms presented propagation as a legitimizing activity for Korea's long-suppressed Buddhist community. Furthermore, the methods of these foreign missionaries served as practical models which Korean Dharma propagators could copy, adapt, or reject as they saw fit (Nathan 2018, p. 17).

While the methods of Buddhist Dharma propagation in Korea often resemble those of Christian missionaries, their purposes remain notably different. Modern Christian evangelism has focused primarily on transforming the religious identities of target populations, with the ultimate goal of converting and baptizing non-Christians, acts which the missionaries will believe save their souls from eternal damnation. However, Nathan observes that Buddhist propagation, in contrast, has "historically been concerned first and foremost with the preservation and extension of the so-called Three Jewels". Thus, in practice, Buddhist propagation activities have been less focused on "bring(ing) about a change of religious

belief, affiliation, or identity” and more on “simply trying to increase people’s awareness or deepen their knowledge of Buddhism” (Nathan 2018, p. 21).

Given these broader and potentially more ambiguous goals, contemporary Korean Buddhist manuals on Dharma propagation have attempted to articulate various typologies’ propagation in practice. Within his 1999 essay “Introduction to propagation methodologies” (*Pogyo bangbonnon*), Ven. Hongson defines propagation as including “all of the media and activities that transmit the Buddha’s teachings; bring about understanding of them and convince people [of their validity]; and cause [people] to accept them and put them into practice (*silchon*) together”.³ Within the same textbook, Professor Seungmu Lew further elaborates on the colonial-era Korean distinction between “direct propagation” (*jikjob pogyo*) and “indirect propagation” (*ganjob pogyo*), defining the former as all activities by monastics and Dharma teachers (*beopsa*) “designed to transmit the Buddha’s teachings to the laity”, while the latter involves engagement in social and political activities addressing broader social problems, which benefit society as a whole by putting “Buddhist teachings and doctrines into practice” (Nathan 2018, pp. 24–25). Lew’s colleague, Professor Eungchul Kim, elaborates a more detailed typology of propagation differentiated according to functional criteria, such as the demographics of target populations, the programs through which propagation activities are conducted (cultural, educational, medical, etc.), the geographical location of the propagation activities, the methods of contact, and the social level being targeted (individual, group, national). Kim concludes by advocating a multifaceted and varied approach to Dharma propagation which provides the potential for multiple forms of contact, engagement, and participation. Yet, Kim notes that the utilization of such diverse methods presents major obstacles in assessing how well the target populations have actually understood and internalized Buddhist teachings (Nathan 2018, p. 25).⁴

3. Activities of Jogye Order’s Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau (2016–2021)

3.1. History of the Jogye Order’s Dharma Propagation Bureau

With the modern formation of the Jogye Order in 1962 following the schism of the Purification Movement, the order passed the Propagation Act, establishing propagation as one of the order’s “Three Great Works”.⁵ In 1963, the order issued the first cohort of 23 Dharma propagators and, in 1966, it began preparing for a large-scale propagation work using the slogan “Korean Buddhist Restoration”. However, these early propagation efforts were hampered by on-going sectarian conflicts within the order (Lew 2008). Yet, recognizing the critical need to revitalize its urban presence during South Korea’s economic expansion, in 1977, the Jogye Order formally established a Dharma Propagation Bureau under the aegis of its Central Affairs Office. In his inaugural address, the Bureau’s first director, Ven. Seokju, declared the Bureau’s aims were “to modernize, popularize, and socialize Buddhism” (Oh 2022, p. 12). Nevertheless, in its early decades, the Bureau suffered from inadequate funding, chronic staffing shortages, and a lack of organizational autonomy, which prevented it from appointing its own propagators. Thus, as Nathan observes, in the 1970s and 1980s, the JO “failed to take the lead” in “establishing a Buddhist presence” within in the country’s rapidly expanding cities. Instead, this role was filled by the nation’s pioneering “urban propagation temples” (*dosim pogyodang*), which were often founded and funded by independent lay-oriented Buddhist associations. Providing regular worship services, Dharma talks, child care, and religious education for the Buddhist laity, many of these urban “mega temples” only later chose to become affiliated with established Buddhist orders (Nathan 2018, pp. 95–96).

As part of a much wider wave of organizational reforms in 1994, the Dharma Propagation Bureau was formally divided from the JO’s Central Affairs Office (*Chongmuwon*) and established as an independent department. This reform “elevated” the Bureau within the order, resulting in higher levels of funding which allowed for the professionalization of Dharma propagation via the training and certification of Bureau-affiliated lay propagators (Nathan 2018, p. 103). During Ven. Jeongrak’s (in office 1994–1995) brief, yet foundational, tenure as the Bureau’s first independent director, he presented his “Propagation Blueprint

for the Revival of Korean Buddhism” (*Hanguk bulgyo jungheungeul wihan pogyocheongsajin*) aimed at systematizing propagation efforts and laity education. Under Ven. Jeongrak, the First Bureau additionally established a propagation administration system, published booklets of sermons and Buddhist ceremonies for use with the laity, and launched the monthly magazine “Buddhist Ceremony and Sermon” (*Beophoe wa Seolbeop*), which remains in publication three decades later.

The Bureau’s second director, Ven. Seongta (in office 1995–1999), focused on revitalizing propagation among the youth by founding the Buddhist youth organization Paramita. The Second Bureau further expanded its general propagation efforts via the systemization of lay Buddhist education and the publication of related textbooks while encouraging the order’s lay supporters to formally register with their home temples as card-carrying members in hopes of utilizing lay membership dues as resources for funding the order’s propagation efforts. During his two-year appointment, the Bureau’s third head, Ven. Jeongryeon (in office 1999–2001), continued his predecessor’s focus on lay education programs, which were instituted as mandatory for the order’s registered lay membership, as well as systemized training for professional lay educators. The Third Bureau further established the Propagation Group (*Jeonbeopsadan*) to train and oversee the Bureau’s Dharma propagators.

As the Bureau’s fourth director, Ven. Doyoung (in office 2001–2006) spearheaded the implementation of the Buddhist chaplain system within the South Korean armed forces,⁶ provided financial support for international propagation efforts affiliated with the order,⁷ and introduced a Ganhwaseon meditation training program for lay Buddhists. Doyoung additionally published the Bureau’s “Propagation Vision” (*Pogyobijeon*) in 2005 outlining a 10-year plan for educating the order’s laity, revitalizing the Bureau’s propagation administration, training the order’s Dharma propagators, and expanding propagation through mass media and the Internet (Doyoung 2005; Oh 2022, p. 19). Doyoung additionally launched the order’s “Templestay” program, wherein various temples host foreign and domestic visitors for overnight retreats, introducing them to the fundamentals of Korean Buddhist culture and practice. The Templestay program has proven highly successful, growing from approximately 36,000 participants in 2004 to around 400,000 by 2015. (For further discussion, see Nathan 2018, pp. 121–23).

The Bureau’s fifth director, Ven. Hyechong (in office 2006–2011), reprioritized propagation among the younger generations through the establishment of the Bureau’s Children and Youth Committee while additionally conducting an overhaul of the order’s existing propagation by-laws. The tenure of the Bureau’s sixth director, Ven. Jiwon (in office 2011–2016), was characterized in turn by a focus on fostering propagation efforts on a local level by identifying and nurturing local propagation initiatives while facilitating propagation activities at temple level through the establishment of parish laity associations.

3.2. The Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau’s Five Objectives and Nine Tasks

As the Bureau’s seventh director, Ven. Jihong (in office 2016–2021) continued earlier directors’ efforts to systematically support the Bureau’s direct and indirect propagation efforts. Ordained in 1970, Jihong developed an interest in Dharma propagation, soon joining Bulgwangsa Temple, one of the nation’s earliest and most successful postwar urban propagation temples. Constructed in Seoul’s famously wealthy Gangnam District in 1982, Bulgwangsa has grown to have a registered membership of over 12,000 laypersons, with an average of 600 attending on Sundays, making it one of the largest “mega temples” in Korea. Appointed as Bulgwangsa’s abbot in 2004, as Jihong’s monastic career progressed, he served in pivotal roles within the JO’s administrative hierarchy, notably serving as the Director of Planning and Propagation Manager within the General Affairs Office in addition to five consecutive terms as a member of the order’s Central Council.

Shortly after his inauguration as the Bureau’s seventh director in 2016, Jihong outlined five principal objectives defining his leadership agenda. 1. To inspire faith in Buddhism (*Sinhaenghyuksin*) and establish a new, contemporary paradigm for Buddhist lay practitioners (*buljasang*). 2. To create a central hub for the order’s Dharma propagation activities,

better facilitating the discovery and utilization of resources. 3. To develop horizontal support networks between Buddhist temples and lay propagation organizations that are reflective of their needs. 4. To foster communities that provide contemporary lay Buddhists with a sense of social connection and meaning. 5. To promote a Buddhist cultural ethos that exerts a positive influence on wider society by addressing common social issues and offering a beacon of hope to the broader populace ([Dharma Propagation Bureau of the Jogye Order 2016](#), p. 5).

At a subsequent press conference, Jihong elaborated on these objectives by presenting a set of nine tasks for the Bureau, each outlined with clear purposes, major projects, and goals. According to Jihong, the Bureau's first task was to cultivate a paradigm of Buddhist faith that resonates with the sensibilities of contemporary laity, while concurrently fostering a new ideal for Buddhist lay practitioners in hopes of bringing renewal to Korean Buddhism. To fulfill this two-fold task, the Bureau would reformulate the order's guidelines for the laity, facilitate collaborations between Buddhist monastic establishments and lay cohorts, and refine its lay rituals.

The second task was to develop an interconnected network for generating and disseminating resources available to aid propagation initiatives via a digital platform connecting the Jogye Order administration with affiliated propagation programs. The third task was to enhance lay education concomitant with an overhaul of lay educational resources to cultivate a qualitative enrichment of the order's educational programs. The primary initiatives put in place for this task were the comprehensive restructuring of foundational and specialized educational materials, the provisioning of pedagogical curricula tailored to distinct temple contexts, and the establishment of educational institutions within disparate regions.

The fourth task was to strengthen the independence and autonomy within order-affiliated Dharma propagation and lay organizations through the deployment of certified propagation experts trained by the Bureau. After conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the current state of these organizations, the Bureau would provide comprehensive in-service capacity-building initiatives, financial resources, and training programs for certified professional propagators. Jihong's fifth task involved the strategic reorganization of Buddhist temples to assume a more central role in Dharma propagation. As such, the Bureau would identify temples already operating exemplary community-oriented propagation initiatives. The Bureau would then designate over 130 such temples as models, whose efforts it would support and review annually to help formulate strategies for their future enhancement.

Considering Korean Buddhism's ageing demographics, the Bureau's sixth task would be to innovate propagation strategies addressing the needs of future generations of lay Buddhists in hopes of ensuring the order's long-term sustainability. With this aim, the Bureau would support localized children's leadership training programs via temple stay experiences, the development of propagation initiatives through contests, collaborative programs with educational institutions, and Buddhist meditation and character development programs for students.

As a substantial proportion of the order's temples are situated in rural locations with declining membership, the seventh task concerned the reinvigoration of rural Buddhist temples as attractive retreat destinations for the nation's predominantly urban laity. The eighth task, in turn, was to conduct a comprehensive assessment of propagation dynamics within each of the order's administrative regions, with plans to utilize the resulting data to inform the Bureau's future propagation initiatives and policies. Lastly, the ninth task was to undertake a comprehensive review of the order's propagation-related by-laws, evaluate their effectiveness, and propose suitable alterations in hopes of closing the gap between the order's propagation by-laws and the Bureau's operational architecture ([Dharma Propagation Bureau of the Jogye Order 2016](#), pp. 9–17).

3.3. Achievements of Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau

In January 2021, the Dharma Propagation Bureau published the book *Faith-based Innovation is the Future of Buddhism*, detailing the Seventh Bureau's accomplishments and achievements under Jihong's directorship from 2016 through 2020. The text underscores the center's multifaceted efforts to adapt traditional Buddhist practices to contemporary contexts, in fulfillment of Jihong's Five Objectives and Nine Tasks.

3.3.1. Movement of Faith Innovation

As part of its "Movement of Faith Innovation" (*Sinhaenghyuksin*), the Seventh Bureau has worked to promote lay religious engagement via the publication of its *Manual for Faith Innovation* in 2017 and a *Guidebook for Faith Innovation* in 2018. In 2020, the Bureau additionally published a *Checklist for Buddhist Practice* via various online platforms in addition to a prayer book for overcoming the challenges posed by COVID-19 the same year.

After several years of research and translation, in February 2021, the Bureau issued a new, single-volume anthology of selections from Buddhist scriptures intended to convey essential Buddhist teachings in an accessible manner. Departing from prior conventions, the anthology was organized according to thematic content and, for the first time, translations from the Pali *Nikayas* were included alongside selections from the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist canon.

Regarding the revitalization of lay Buddhist rituals, the Bureau issued two further texts, *Buddhist Rituals in Life* and a *Buddhist Ritual Collection*, in December of 2020 to provide the order's laity with daily rituals to be performed in their own homes during extended temple closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional Bureau publications aimed at the laity include 2018's *Guidelines for the Laity Disciplinary and Research Report on Programs for the Life of Mahayana Bodhisattva*, followed by *Meditation Developing the Mind and Understanding Buddhist Meditation and Contemporary Applications* in 2019, and *Five Buddhist Practice Manual* in 2020.

3.3.2. New Media and Innovative Pathways of Propagation

Acknowledging the importance of digital and social media, the Seventh Bureau engaged in collaborations with Buddhism-related digital content creators. These efforts resulted in the publication of the webzine *Weekly Propagation News* (2018–2020), the support of the SNS operations of the Jogyejong Propagation Center, the creation and distribution of Buddhist-related Kakao Talk emoticons, among other projects. The Seventh Bureau additionally funded the development and distribution of a mobile application guiding users in the practice of the 108 Bows of Repentance (*Baekpaldaechamhoeumun*) along with various forms of Buddhist meditation. The Bureau also continued the digital publication of its monthly magazine "Buddhist Ceremonies and Sermons" (*Beophoe wa Seolbeop*), which provides monastics with references and materials for Dharma Talks at their temples.

The Seventh Bureau additionally supported the development of novel propagation programs, such as the Authors' Temple Stay Retreat Program, which offered authors, journalists, and other online content creators the opportunity to immerse themselves in Buddhist Temple culture. Two such retreats were held in 2018 hosting a total of twenty-nine participants, followed by two more with fifty participants in 2019, and one more with sixteen participants in 2020. The Bureau also expanded its annual propagation awards contest to include grand prizes in five separate categories including hierarchical propagation work, vocational propagation work, cultural propagation work, social propagation work, and propagation efforts in mass media.

3.3.3. The Enhancement of Lay Education

The Seventh Bureau's efforts to enhance lay education culminated in 2017's updated publication of *Buddhist Introduction* (*Bulgyo Ipmun*), and, after a three-year period of research and development, the 2019 publication of *An Introduction to Buddhism* (*Bulgyo Gaeseol*). The Bureau further continued its support for over 160 educational institutions nationwide

dedicated to the instruction of lay Buddhist adherents. After years of development, in early 2020, the Bureau launched a dedicated computer system uniting the administration of all Bureau-sponsored education institutions.⁸ After its adoption by all 160 Bureau-affiliated educational institutions, the system now tracks the entirety of the education program's admissions and certifications.

3.3.4. The Support and Revitalization of Propagation Organizations

During Jihong's tenure, the Bureau continued its partnerships with JO-affiliated lay Dharma propagation organizations, such as Propagation Corps (*Pogyosadan*), International Propagation Corps (*Kukjepogyosadan*), Buddhist Counseling Development Institute (*Bulgysangdamgaebalwon*), and Buddhist Women's Development Institute (*Bulgyoyeoseonggaebalwon*), to which the Bureau contributed financially and materially. The Bureau additionally funded capacity-building initiatives within additional propagation organizations, sponsoring an average of nine organizations per year from 2016 to 2020. The Bureau also appointed a total of 126 propagation leaders and six supporters to organizations without temple affiliation over the same period. In total, 2431 candidates successfully passed the Bureau's qualification exams for "General Missionary", 575 for "Professional Missionary", and 126 for "International Missionary" from 2016 to 2020.

3.3.5. Temple Propagation Work

The Seventh Bureau continued promoting pioneering propagation efforts among specially designated temples via the provision of financial support and production of online ritual content. In 2016, the Bureau provided support to 18 distinguished Buddhist temples. In 2017, it designated an additional 82 special propagation temples, followed by an additional 61 in 2018, which witnessed a continual commitment to supporting propagation efforts at these specially designated temples, including the production of online Buddhist ritual content and surveys in 2020.

3.3.6. Youth-Oriented Propagation Work

Under Jihong's leadership, the Bureau continued its focus on propagation activities targeting young people via its Children and Youth Committee, which met annually, seeking diverse propagation strategies targeting the interests and concerns of Korean students. These strategies included the provision of annual scholarships for exceptional Buddhist students, totaling 75 beneficiaries, along with initiatives such as the 2018 UGC Contest, a 2019 Video Contest, and a 2020 project to enhance spaces conducive to Buddhist gatherings at four universities. The Bureau additionally launched programs for instilling Buddhist values and meditation instruction among lay youth, publishing program materials and certification guidelines. It continued its search for systematic youth propagation strategies via its 2019 Regional Expert Meeting followed by the publication of a JO youth propagation guidebook in 2020.

3.3.7. Propagation Development and Roadmap

Recognizing the need for expanding its indirect propagation work throughout a diversity of spheres, the Bureau worked to pilot strategies targeting education, transportation, welfare, medical care, environment, politics, and economics. In 2020, this effort resulted in the publication of research reports, a leaflet outlining propagation measures related to social participation, as well as the publication of two volumes of case studies. After systematically gathering and analyzing nationwide social indicators, as well as identifying missionary conditions and capacities throughout various regions, the Bureau released a comprehensive "National Propagation Roadmap" in 2020.

3.3.8. Improvement of JO Propagation Systems and Bylaws

In response to evolving propagation dynamics, the Bureau undertook revisions to its internal by-laws, including the 2019 revision of the Propagation Act, the 2020 amendment

of the Act governing missionary operations and support, as well as the enactment of regulations pertaining to the discipline of believers in the same year.

4. Controversies Surrounding the Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau

4.1. The Bulgwangsa Kindergarten Embezzlement Trial

While the JO has largely celebrated the Bureau's accomplishments under Jihong's leadership, his tenure was marked by several controversies ultimately stemming from embezzlement accusations made against Jihong during his tenure as abbot of Bulgwangsa Temple. In the summer of 2018, the lay leadership committee (*myeongdeung*) governing the Bulgwang Dharma Association (*bulgwangbeophoe*), which founded and owns Bulgwangsa Temple, filed formal embezzlement charges against Jihong for having received a monthly salary of KRW 2 million (approx. USD 1500) from the Bulgwangsa's Temple Kindergarten from 2013 to 2018, totaling KRW 180 million (USD 136,000) (Chu and Lee 2020). Citing a lack of transparency in the operation of temple finances, the lay leadership committee further demanded Jihong's immediate resignation and threatened to suspend all lay donations and volunteer activities until Jihong acquiesced (Seo 2019).

Although Jihong stepped down as abbot and renounced all connections with Bulgwangsa, he denied any wrongdoing and insisted that the payments constituted a legitimate salary for his role as the kindergarten's part-time director, commenting that the distance between the temple and the kindergarten "is only 70 m". Jihong further dismissed all accusations against him as "slander" and, despite a series of protests demanding his ouster from the JO leadership, he refused to relinquish his positions within the order, including that of Bureau director. In an electronic message to Bulgwangsa's membership, Jihong described his accusers as "evil doers" whom he would hold accountable for "break(ing) the harmony of the Bulgwang community" (Lee 2019; Seo 2019). However, in October 2019, in an unprecedented decision, the South Korean courts found Jihong guilty of embezzlement of public funds and sentenced him to 10 months in prison and two years' probation, a decision which Jihong's legal team immediately appealed, citing a "misrecognition of facts and misunderstanding of the law" (Seo 2021). Following Jihong's resignation as Bulgwangsa's abbot, the temple suffered an extended power struggle between the temple's remaining monastic leadership and the lay heads of the Bulgwang Dharma Association. Notably, the JO has remained silent over the controversy at Bulgwangsa Temple, allowing Jihong to continue carrying out his roles and duties within the order's administration.

4.2. The Propagation Bureau's "Laity Discipline Ordinance"

Although the Bulgwangsa embezzlement scandal did not directly involve Jihong's administrative roles within the order, there did arise two secondary controversies involving Jihong's role as Bureau director. The first controversy concerned Jihong's ninth task, the revision of JO by-laws concerning Dharma propagation. As part of this process, in September 2020, the Bureau proposed the "Laity Discipline Ordinance" (*Sindojinggyee gwanhan ryeong*), which established rules of conduct for the order's lay membership, especially those involved in propagation organizations. The ordinance's articles further establish procedures for investigating laity when suspected of violating such rules and prescribe disciplinary measures, ranging from public penitence to suspension of public authority and excommunication, should they be found guilty (Chu and Lee 2020; Jung 2020; Seo 2020).

Proponents of the ordinance contended that its implementation was imperative to ensure moral conduct among the laity and prevent the abuse of authority by the order's lay leaders. However, as the ordinance also enforces prohibitions against criticizing the order's monastics or undermining the order's monastic community, many have interpreted it as an effort to silence lay critics and reinforce monastic supremacy within the order. The Buddhist NGO Buddhist Solidarity for Reform (*Chamyeobulgyojaegayeondae*, hereafter "BSR"), which, since the 1990s, has advocated for transparency, accountability, and democratic governance within the order, charged that, "There is no way to interpret [the ordinance] other than as intended to exclude lay believers who are critical of temple and order operations" (Chu

([and Lee 2020](#)). The BSR and other critics perceive a direct connection between the Laity Discipline Ordinance and the Bulgwangsa embezzlement scandal as, under the ordinance, Jihong could have silenced or excommunicated the heads of the laity associations who had demanded his resignation. Others have noted the irony of the JO establishing ordinances for disciplining the laity when, in fact, it was a high-ranking monastic who was accused, tried, and convicted of embezzlement. While the Laity Discipline Ordinance was adopted by the JO, to date, none of the order's laity have been subject to the disciplinary procedures outlined therein ([Chu and Lee 2020; Jung 2020; Seo 2020](#)).

4.3. Buddhist Women's Development Institute

The second controversy involved the Bureau's relationship with the lay propagation organization, the Buddhist Women's Development Institute (*Bulgyoyeoseonggaebalwon*, hereafter BWDI). Established in 2000, the BWDI represents an assembly of over a thousand Buddhist lay women from a diversity of professions working to cultivate Buddhist identities and nurture female Buddhist leaders within South Korean society. The BWDI was, until recently, accredited and funded in part by the Bureau as a Dharma propagation organization and, thus, nominally overseen by the JO Propagation Bureau's directors, who held an ex officio role as the organization's chairman.

The BWDI experienced a leadership crisis in the winter of 2019 following the membership's election of professor Oe-sook Kim (Korea National Open University, Department of Life Sciences) as the organization's tenth director the previous fall. Despite Jihong's failure to approve the membership's election of Kim due to his absence at an October 2018 board meeting, the BWDI nevertheless proceeded with Kim's inauguration the following month. Yet, despite repeated requests to Jihong's office to certify Kim's election, the Bureau did not approve Kim and temporarily dispatched Venerable Jung Hyeon as an interim president. The position officially sat vacant until February 27th when Jihong appointed a Buddhist nun, Ven. Jung Hyeon, as BWDI interim president, creating considerable conflict and confusion within the organization. Upon arriving at the BWDI offices, Jung Hyeon conducted a financial audit and, in a press conference the following week, accused the BWDI leadership, including Kim, of "financial mismanagement" due to the cumulative transfer of KRW 783.56 million (approx. USD 591,000) from the BWDI to an affiliated organization between 2012 and 2018 for a specific construction project to benefit the BWDI. Jung Hyeon alleged that the transfers were made without the approval of the board of directors. Yet, the BWDI countered that all the funds were accounted for and that there was no financial wrongdoing as both organizations "have almost the same members, and share staff and space", warranting an integrated operation of their finances. Since 2007, both organizations "reviewed and approved the integrated finances at the two boards of directors", which, as ex officio chairman, the Propagation Bureau's directors had been made aware of ([Seo 2019](#)).

In a nearly immediate rebuttal, the BWDI challenged Jihong's authority to appoint an interim president and questioned Jung Hyeon's qualifications to lead, claiming that Jung Hyeon's appointment was "illegal and invalid". After amending the BWDI's articles of association to remove the Bureau director as ex officio chairman, Kim officially assumed the presidency of the organization. Then, after repeated requests by the Bureau to reverse the changes, the Bureau suspended all relations with the BWDI. In December 2021, the JO severed all connections with the BWDI, which has since continued its operations independently. In June of 2022, the JO launched the National Women's Buddhist Association (*Jeongukyeoseongbuljahwe*, hereafter NWBA) as an order-sanctioned alternative to the BWDI ([Jin 2022; Ro 2022; Seo 2019](#)).

Media reports at the time of the BWDI controversy raised serious concerns over the motivations behind Jihong's actions and the veracity of the Bureau's accusations of financial impropriety. Not only did the Bureau's attempt to assume control over the BWDI contravene Jihong's stated task of granting Bureau-affiliated propagation organizations greater autonomy, his utilization of a Buddhist nun to gain control of a lay organization was

criticized as highly inappropriate. Still, other articles noted that Oe-sook Kim's husband, Hong-woo Park, was head of the Bulgwangsa Temple Dharma Association which had accused Jihong of embezzlement, with Kim, herself, having attended demonstrations demanding Jihong's resignation, raising the possibility that Jihong's opposition to Kim's leadership and the Bureau's accusations of financial mismanagement were retaliatory (Jin 2022; Lee 2019; Seo 2019). Regardless of Jihong's motivations, with its expulsion of the BWDI, the JO lost a considerable wealth of accumulated experience, practical knowledge, and community networking, and it remains to be seen how the BWDI and the new, order-affiliated NWBA navigate their propagation efforts given the alignment of their respective missions. Such an alignment may result in productive collaborations between the two organizations, though a period of competition is just as likely.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As surveyed in Section 3, the diversity of programs sponsored by the Seventh Bureau effectively embodied the multipronged approach to Dharma propagation advocated by Professor Eungchul Kim by providing target populations with multiple opportunities for engagement with Buddhist teachings, practices, and culture via both direct and indirect propagation methods. A significant number of the Bureau's programs relied on the production of guidebooks, textbooks, and ritual guides for the laity (Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.3) along with webzines and digital media (Section 3.3.2), following Buddhism's long history of utilizing the production of texts within the practice of Dharma propagation (See Nathan 2018, pp. 11–13). The Bureau further employed the order's temples as propagation spaces through programs including its support of model propagation programs (Section 3.3.5), the Author's Temple Stay Retreat Program (Section 3.3.2), and the utilization of JO-affiliated temples for lay education programs (Section 3.3.3). The Seventh Bureau continued the partnership between monastics and lay Buddhists in Dharma propagation by sponsoring affiliated lay propagation organizations via financial support, professional training, and the deployment of order-certified personnel (Section 3.3.4). The Bureau additionally extended its focus to updating and systemizing the education of the order's laity (Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.3), while piloting innovative propagation efforts utilizing digital media (Section 3.3.2) and sponsoring programs targeting younger generations (Section 3.3.6). It also strategized future indirect propagation programs for engaging with Korean society within a variety spheres (Section 3.3.7) while adjusting its own by-laws and bureaucratic structures to better accommodate these future endeavors.

While the vast majority of the order's publicly available information celebrates the Seventh Bureau's accomplishments, and there has been little criticism of the efficacy of its efforts within Korea's Buddhist media, its activities still raise several key questions. Presumably, the JO leadership expects to see a return on its increased investment in propagation through the Bureau, with indirect propagation producing a heightened or more favorable awareness of the order within the nation's religious market place, and direct propagation leading to an increase in formal conversion and lay membership. Yet, the former is difficult to measure and the latter often requires sustained relationship building. How then exactly is the Bureau tracking the efficacy of its own propagation efforts and by what criteria are these efforts being evaluated? Furthermore, Eungchul Kim has also noted the difficulty in determining the degree to which Buddhist teachings have been internalized by target audiences, particularly in the case of indirect forms of propagation. The Seventh Bureau has made strides in updating its systemic lay education programs and Dharma propagator training programs, enhancing both the quality of training and accountability of lay Dharma propagators. Still, questions regarding the efficacy of the Bureau's programs cannot be accurately answered without the order's disclosure of internal discussion and related data, and the Bureau is unlikely to release information that could be construed as undermining its own claims to success. Yet, such evaluations could prove useful to other Buddhist organizations facing a similar drop in lay participation and looking for potential models for reinvigorating their Dharma propagation efforts. Regardless of the Seventh Bu-

reau's accomplishments, it will likely require years of sustained effort to reverse the current downward trends in the order's lay membership due to the nation's decreasing birth rate and negative population growth. Still, as over half the nation identified as non-religious in the 2015 census, there clearly remains room for growth.

The controversies surrounding Jihong's leadership of the Seventh Bureau raise additional questions concerning the ongoing discourse within the order regarding the roles of Buddhist laity and the negotiation of power between the order's monastic establishment and their lay supporters. Although the JO's Dharma Propagation Bureau was differentiated from JO's wide administrative apparatus in 1994 in hopes of insulating the Bureau from internal power struggles, Jihong's involvement in the Bulgwangsa Temple embezzlement scandal (Section 4.1) and secondary scandals involving the Seventh Bureau (Sections 4.2 and 4.3) demonstrate that the Bureau is not immune to the after effects of political conflict. While the accusations directed at Jihong in his role at Bulgwangsa had no direct relation to the propagation activities of the Seventh Bureau, the scandal brought negative attention to the Bureau and, in the cases of the Laity Discipline Ordinance and the expulsion of the BWDI, raise questions regarding Jihong's motivations and the appropriacy of his actions as director.

It is also notable that Jihong was, in part, selected as Bureau director for his experience as the abbot of Bulgwangsa Temple, one of the oldest and largest postwar urban Dharma propagation centers in Korea. Yet, during his tenure as director, Jihong faced embezzlement accusations from the lay leadership committee of Bulgwang Dharma Association, which owned the temple. Whatever the truth of the accusations and counteraccusations, the scandal resulted in a very public power struggle between the temple's monastic and lay leadership. The ensuing media spectacle, which included public protests and courtroom appearances, exposed long-standing tensions between the order's monastic establishment and lay leadership even as the order increasingly relies on its lay membership to conduct its propagation efforts.

Nathan observes the practice of Buddhist propagation in Korea's modern history has "brought the monastic and lay Buddhist communities together in novel ways", in the process redefining their symbiotic relationship and occasionally exchanging traditional responsibilities and roles (Nathan 2018, p. 140); thus, conflict arising from the reversal of these traditional roles should not be surprising. As previously noted, many of the post-war propagation efforts by South Korean Buddhists were pioneered by laity associations, individual monks, and independent urban "mega temples". Yet, as the JO has expanded its institutional support for such propagation efforts, since the 1990s, it has sought greater accountability and control over these efforts as well. Furthermore, while the order's leadership has increasingly sought to enlist the laity in its propagation efforts by defining it as a duty of "sincere members", the JO nevertheless remains, by definition, a "monastic monk-oriented order" (Yoon 2012, p. 36). The lay ideal currently promoted by the order emphasizing their role as educated and devoted Dharma propagators represents a radical shift away from the fluid religious identity of most lay temple patrons through much of the twentieth century who practiced "good luck Buddhism" (*gibuk bulgyo*), seeking material blessing for their families. However, it is a shift that critics would charge still prioritizes the needs and concerns of the order's monastic establishment over those of their lay supporters (see (Park and Kim 2019) for further discussion).

Clearly, the JO's Seventh Dharma Propagation Bureau has made advances in supporting a wide array of direct and indirect Dharma propagation efforts in South Korea, catering to the needs and concerns of their target populations. These efforts have not only focused on increasing opportunities for more casual contact with target audiences but improving the quality of Buddhist education materials for those seeking more in-depth involvement and knowledge. The Bureau had additionally made strides in decentralizing the order's propagation efforts, funding efforts at a local temple level as well as supporting partnerships with local lay Buddhist organizations. Yet, as lay propagators and religious educators are being guided by the order to assume greater roles within the order's prop-

agation efforts, many expect increased accountability of the order's monastic leadership as well as greater involvement of the laity within the order's decision-making processes. Thus far, the order's monastic establishment has shown little willingness to surrender its monopoly on institutional power, potentially undermining its own efforts to secure its future survival.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/KOR/south-korea/birth-rate> (accessed on 3 November 2023).
- 2 Whitin this passage the Buddha declares "Walk, monks, on tour for the blessing of the manyfolk, for the happiness of the manyfolk out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of devas and men" ([Horner 1982](#), p. 28; [Nathan 2018](#), p. 4).
- 3 Included in the first of the JO's three volume textbook "Propagation Methodologies" (1999).
- 4 Nathan cites Yu's 2003 essay "A study concerning the changes in the paradigm of urban propagation" (Dosim pogyo ui paerodaim jonhwan e gwanhan il yongu).
- 5 The other two being religious education and scriptural translation.
- 6 For further discussion, see [Kim and Park \(2020\)](#) article "Married Monastics and Military Life: Contradictions and Conflicted Identities within South Korea's Buddhist Chaplaincy System".
- 7 For further discussion, see [Kim and Park \(2021\)](#) article "A Critical Examination of Research on the Legacy of Daehaeng" and [Park and Kim \(2022\)](#) article "Korean Buddhism Abroad: A Critical Examination of Overseas Propagation Strategies of Jogye Order's Hanmaum Seon Center".
- 8 sindoedu.buddhism.or.kr (accessed on 3 November 2023).

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