

King Jeongjo's Political Role in the Conflicts between Confucianism and Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century Korea*

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This article explores King Jeongjo's role in coping with the religious conflicts among the intellectuals in eighteenth-century Joseon. My argument is that King Jeongjo's ruling style led Catholicism debates into political persecutions. He has been regarded, in most existing works, as generous and tolerable to Catholicism. In those works, King Jeongjo was on the defense line against Anti-Catholicism attacks during his reign, but after his sudden death, Pyokpa, the political rivals of the Namin, took retaliatory action in the name of 'Western Learning.

Of course, King Jeongjo had a great interest in "Western Learning" and protected some scholars of the Namin against political attacks. But he took measures that created distrust among his subjects in order to weaken their power. He often followed the tactic of "divide and rule," so called "like cures like." In the mean time, the relationship among his subjects grew worse. The leaders of the Noron, for example, said to those of the Namin in the public places, "I will not live with you under the sky." The Namin, to make things worse, were unexpectedly divided into two groups; pro-Catholicism and anti-Catholicism. The distrust and attacks among the Namin scholars made them irreconcilable, and such became one cause of the martyrdoms of 1801. In sum, King Jeongjo was responsible for the immense political persecution, although it was the unintended results of his actions after his death.

Keywords: King Jeongjo, Anti-Catholicism, Confucian mourning rituals (祭祀), Tangpyong 蕩平, Western Learning (西學), Expeditious Measures (權道).

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to understand the political configuration and the intellectual climate in which Catholicism encountered with Confucianism in terms of the religious debates in the reign of King Jeongjo (正祖, r. 1776-1880). Second, I will look into King Jeongjo's role in coping with the problems of the refusal of Confucian mourning rituals (祭祀) and the religious conflicts among intellectuals.

There are many works about the “Clash of Civilizations” between one specific form of European Catholicism and one particular school of Korean Neo-Confucianism.¹ Those works can be divided into two groups: 1) a Catholic standpoint which regards it as “regional persecution” and “political suppression” (Yi Manche ed. 1984; Charles Dallet 1987), 2) a Confucian viewpoint which looked upon it as a “history of Western encroachment” or an “imperialistic aggression” (Shin Bok-ryong 1997). The role of King Jeongjo who was in the critical position, however, has not come to light yet. What did he think of the new Catholic civilization? What is his reaction to the Korean Catholic literati's violating actions against Confucian traditions?

The Jinsan Incident (1791) was one in which the refusal of Confucian mourning rituals among Korean Catholic literati was highlighted as an acute dispute. It enforced Catholic literati elites to make a choice between the religious life or political compromise. In fact, the refusal of Confucian mourning rituals was shocking, like “pricking the eyes” for Confucian Koreans (Charles Dallet 1987: 330). Joseon Confucian literati who were familiar with the polytheist tradition (Kim SeukKun 1998) and the filial-centric social ethics were shocked culturally by the monotheism of Catholicism and its God-centered ethics. As a result, so many literati who accepted Catholicism from the point of coincidence with (合儒) or extension of (補儒) Confucianism cannot but renounce Catholicism. For example, while Yun Chich'ung (尹持忠, 1759-1791) and Kwon Sangyon (權尙然), who brought about the Jinsan Incident, took the path to martyrdom, Yi Seunghun (李承薰, 1756-1801) and Chong Yagyong (丁若鏞),

1. Important works are as follows: Yi Nunghwa (1928), Choe Kibok (1982), Don Baker (1983), Yi Wonsoon (1986), Cho Kwang (1988), Kang Jae-eun (1990), Kim Hongwoo (1991), Kum Changt'ae (1993), Chong Seokjong (1994), Shin Bok-ryong (1997), Ahn Woesoon (2000), Pu Namchul (2000), etc.

the leaders of the Namin faction (南人), compromised politically and became the apostates. So, what were the grounds for which the different Confucian literati elite defended? Were their choices inevitable? What was the political implication of their choices?

I will first examine the power relations and the political position of the Namin faction in the second half of the eighteenth century, the period in which Catholicism spread into the Korean scholar class, not to mention the Commoners. It was the time when King Jeongjo appointed a few literati elite of the Namin which had maintained a distance from the political core. He gave equal opportunity to all men for office during his reign. But some people of the Noron faction who opposed his 'Tangpyeong' policy prosecuted the Namin scholars for their beliefs of Catholicism. In this process, the political configuration of that time evolved.

Secondly, I will survey the four important "Western Incidents" in King Jeongjo's reign; the "Myongdong Catholic Meeting Incident" (1785), the "Sungkyunkwan Study Group Incident" (1787), the "Jinsan Yun Jichung's Incident" (1791), and the "Pyongtaek Yi Seunghun's Incident" (1792). The King's reactions revealed both the intellectual climate concerning "Western Learning" and also his ruling style when it came to the conflicts and debates between the hard-liners and the moderates regarding these Catholic incidents.

Thirdly, I will scrutinize King Jeongjo's utterances and actions to the challenges of Catholicism. As is generally known, the debates on Catholicism in the eighteenth century continued violently and the aftermath of it was quite serious, as seen in the martyrdoms of 1791 and 1801. My argument is that King Jeongjo's ruling style led Catholicism debates towards political persecutions. He has been regarded, in most existing works, as generous and tolerable to Catholicism. In those works, King Jeongjo stood in the defense line against Anti-Catholicism attacks during his reign, but after his sudden death, Pyokpa, the political rivals of the Namin, took retaliatory action in the name of "Western Learning" (Kang Jae-eun 1990: 172-174; Kum Chang'tae 1993: 44-51; Chong Seokjong 1994: 351).

Of course, King Jeongjo had a great interest in "Western Learning" and protected some scholars of the Namin against political attacks. But he took measures which created distrust among his subjects in order to weaken their power. He often followed the tactics of "divide and rule," so called "like cures like" (以熱治熱). In the mean time, the relationship among his subjects grew worse. The leaders of the Noron, for example, said to those of the Namin in public places, "I

will not live with you under the sky” (不俱戴天). The Namin, to make things worse, were unexpectedly divided into two groups; pro-Catholic and anti-Catholic. The distrust and attacks among the Namin scholars made them irreconcilable, and such became one cause of the martyrdoms of 1801.

Political Situation and Debates on Catholicism in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century

1. King Jeongjo's Tangpyeong Policy and the Political Position of Namin

King Jeongjo tried to succeed with King Yeongjo's (英祖, r. 1724-1776) good policies while escaping from his negative political legacies. One of the good policies inherited from King Yeongjo was the Tangpyeong (蕩平) policy. Tangpyeong, according to King Jeongjo, signifies the ideal in which a king's virtue and peace may prevail, and which may be used to mediate struggling parties by fair-mindedness without partisan politics (ARKJE 0/9/22 庚寅).² In reality, King Yeongjo and King Jeongjo put it into practice by a fair personnel management policy.

But King Jeongjo discriminated his own Tangpyeong policy from that of King Yeongjo. According to King Jeongjo, King Yeongjo regarded Tangpyeong as the policy of keeping balance among the factions in office, and of choosing moderates who were not factional (緩論蕩平 Wanron Tangpyeong). But King Jeongjo understood Tangpyeong in terms of “total harmonious cooperation.” He not only apportioned the key positions to able men but also stressed his subjects' righteousness in royalty” (*Uri: the raison d'etre*) (峻論蕩平, Choonron Tangpyeong). He stated: “You should not misunderstand the true meaning of Tangpyeong... The “total harmonious cooperation” (大同), the true Tangpyeong could be accomplished when the men who kept their righteousness in royalty participate in national administration. I'm saying now: Tangpyeong of righteousness, not that of confusion” (ARKJE 0/5/16 丙戌).

On the one hand, “total harmonious cooperation,” according to King

2. Abbreviated for ‘the 22nd (庚寅) September of Enthronement Year (即位年) in *An Authentic Record of the King Chongjo Era* (正祖實錄)’.

Jeongjo, was the ultimate political goal which Sage-kings in *San-Tai* (三代: the three dynasties or ages of Chinese antiquity: Hsia, Shang [Yin], and Chou) pursued. On the other hand, King Jeongjo needed to assemble the righteous and able men who gave their support to his reform policy. For this, he proclaimed that he would respect the factions' platforms and value the honor of the famous families which had impaired reputations in the whirlpool of political strife. He retrieved his subjects' honor by recovering the government offices for Yun Seonkeo (尹宣舉) and Yun Jeung (尹拯) who were the two leaders of the Soron faction (小論) in 1881 (6/12/3 乙丑), for Heo Cheok (許積) who was the leader of the Namin Faction (濁南) in 1795 (19/10/12 己丑), and for Park Seungjong (朴承宗) who was the leader of Bukin (北人) in 1799 (23/9/19 甲戌).

The reign of King Jeongjo could be divided into three periods: 1) the first period of a coalition cabinet between the Noron and the Soron (1777-1883); 2) the 2nd period of a coalition cabinet between the Namin and the Noron (1788-1793), and 3) the 3rd period of a Noron-dominated cabinet (1793-1880) (Park Hyunmo 2001, 187-188). Seo Myongson (徐命善) of the Soron, Chae Jaegong (蔡濟恭) of the Namin, and Hong Naksong (洪樂性) of the Noron led each period respectively.

The second period, headed by Chae Jaegong, is the most important in the light of Catholicism debates. Most people of the Noron and the Soron criticized Tangpyeong policy and strongly hindered King Jeongjo's choice of people of the Namin for important positions. The Noron and Soron especially opposed the appointment of Yi Gahwhan (李家煥) and Chong Yagyong (丁若鏞) who were in King Jeongjo's favor. The politicians of the Noron and Soron accused Yi Gahwhan and Chong Yagyong of being involved in Catholicism under the Chae Jaegong's patronage. King Jeongjo, nevertheless, put Chae into important positions and carried out his reform policies. Chae was a top leader of the Namin who won the confidence of King Jeongjo after the middle period of King Jeongjo. King Jeongjo, as soon as he acceded the throne, appointed Chae as the Punishment Minister (刑曹判書, 0/3/26 丁酉) and the Commissioner of Kyujanggak (奎章閣提學, archival library of the Joseon dynasty) (1/4/9 甲辰). After visiting China as an envoy to present a memorial and thanks to the emperor (謝恩兼陳奏使, 2/3/3 癸亥), Chae was promoted to Chief Director of the Office for the Deliberation of Forbidden Affairs and State Tribunal (判義禁府事 5/5#/29 辛未) and the Military Affairs Minister (兵曹判書, 5/12/28 丙申).

King Jeongjo moved Chae Jaegong to the Third State Councilor (右議政) in February 1788 in spite of the Noron's strong oppositions. It was the first time

that a Namin was appointed as a State Councilor since Sukjong's (肅宗) reign (1674-1720). Yi Hyunyeong (李顯永) of the Noron criticized him saying, "Chae, merely a base man (鄙夫) who occupied the important position with a trick, looks down on people" (5/9/29 戊辰). Seo Myongson of Soron also said that "Chae is a right-handed man of Hong Kukyoung" (洪國榮) who had conspired against the king in the early years of King Jeongjo (6/1/5 壬寅). Chae was reproached in addition to his misdeeds by Kim Munsoon (金文淳) (5/7/20 庚申). There was also Yi Gap's demand for his banishment (6/1/5 壬寅), Jung Jaesin's (鄭在信) critical memorial (7/3/25 丙辰), and Yi Nochoon's (李魯春) accusing memorial (8/6/6 己丑), as well as others.

Peoples' criticism and opposition against Chae Jaegong reached the peak when King Jeongjo appointed him as the Third State Councilor without the Personnel Ministry's recommendation (12/2/11 甲辰).

Officials of Royal Secretariat (承政院) consisting of Cho Yundae, Hong Inho, Sim Pungji, Yun Haengwon, and Nam Hakmoon rejected royal messages containing the new appointment and asked the king to hear their voices. Speaking Officials (言官) of the Special Councilors Office (弘文館) such as Shin Daeyun (申大尹), Yi Woojin (李羽晉), and Kim Heechae (金熙采) also petitioned to withdraw the royal message with joint memorials to the king. But the King ordered the memorials burned (12/2/11 甲辰) and banned talking or writing about the problem (12/2/12 乙巳). King Jeongjo put his faith in Chae Jaegong to the end saying, "I will not abandon him even though he deceived me!" (16/11/9 甲辰).

As a result, King Jeongjo, with a Chae Jaegong's devotional help, could push away the reforms such as the "Joint-sales" decree in 1791 (辛亥通共) which allowed unlicensed merchants to operate in the capital alongside the Six Shops (15/1/25), and the construction of Soowon Hwa-Castle (20/8/19). Above all, Chae worked off the King's old grudge in the winter of 1795 with the posthumous conferment of honors to The Prince of Mournful Thoughts (思悼世子, Prince Sado), the father of the King, who had been considered as a victim of political strife in King Yeongjo's reign (19/1/17 更子).

However, the debate on conferring honors posthumously to Prince Sado was so heated that the Namin violently confronted the Noron. As soon as Chae was appointed as Chief State Councilor (領議政) in 1793, he stressed that "the families and relatives of foes occupied all the official posts." He advocated that "in order to clear Prince Sado of a false charge, we should find out right now the names of the foes who falsely implicated him" (17/5/28 己未). This impeach-

ment was so strong that even King Jeongjo “had sweat running down his back and felt chills in his blood” (17/5/28 己未). In particular, the leaders of the Noron including Kim Chongsoo (金鍾秀), Second State Councilor (右議政), felt a big crisis (17/8/9 己巳).

Kim Chongsoo claimed that Chae Jaegong's impeachment, in the name of “Heaven's Punishment,” came out of a conspiracy to upset the National Consensus (國是). He said that Chae, mobilizing ten thousand people in Gyeongsang Province, “will break out in rebellion.” Therefore, Kim declared, “I will not live with him under the sky,” (不俱戴天) while he counterattacked Chae on the ground that he was implicated in Yi Deoksa (李德師) and Jo Jaehan's (趙載翰) rebellion in 1776 (17/5/30 辛酉).

The extreme distrust and alertness between the Noron and the Namin can be found in the Noron's attacks against Yi Gahwan. At that time, King Jeongjo, considering Yi Gahwan as the next top leader of the Namin, appointed him as the Chief Officer of Supreme Headquarters (都摠管) in Spring 1797 (21/4/25 乙未) and Mayor of the Capitol Hansong (漢城府判尹) in Winter 1797 (21/12/2 丁酉). And King Jeongjo increased posthumously the court rank of Yi's father and grandfather (23/4/27 乙卯) after Chae Jaegong's death in winter 1799 for singling out Yi to the core post.

Politicians of the Noron criticized Yi Gahwan, Yi Seunghun's uncle, with Catholicism as the reason. Shin Heonjo, Director of the Inspector-General Office by the name of Yi Gahwan, Kwon Cheolsin (權哲身), and Chong Yagchong (丁若鍾) as the heads of Catholicism which “is as dangerous as Yellow Bandits (黃巾賊) and the White Lotus Sect (白蓮教)” (23/5/25 壬午). Yi Byongmo of the Noron, Second State Councilor, censured that Yi is “the boss of the group who followed the perverse teachings” (23/5/5 壬戌). So, Catholicism became the target of the Noron in attacking the Namin's implication in “Western Learning.” It is interesting that the period when a few Namin, such as Chae Jaegong and Yi Gahwan, were advanced in core posts was coincident with the time when the Noron attacked with the most severe criticism the Namin's “Heterodox Learning.”

Then how could Confucian scholars accept Catholicism? What was King Jeongjo's understanding about the new Catholic order?

2. “Sungkyunkwan Study Group Incident” and the Publicizing of Catholicism

The disputes on Catholicism in the reign of King Jeongjo unfolded with momentum such as the “Myongdong Catholic Meeting Incident” (明禮坊事件; 秋曹摘發事件, 1785),³ the “Sungkyunkwan Study Group Incident” (泮會事件, 1787), the “Jinsan Yun Jichung Incident” (珍山事件; 辛亥邪獄, 1791), and the “Pyongtaek Yi Seunghun’s Incident” (平澤事件, 1792).

The “Sungkyunkwan Study Group Incident” in 1787 is very important because it shows not only the character of Catholicism debates at that time but also King Jeongjo’s attitude to them. The Incident was begun accidentally out of the discontent and grudges of a few scholars in the Namin. The Namin was disrupted when King Jeongjo raised some people in the Namin for important posts following Tangpyeong policy. The people who were the favorites of the King, Chong Yagyong for example, had ties of blood and marriage line, and also was implicated in Catholicism.⁴

According to Yi Kigyong, a student of Sungkyunkwan and from the Namin (as was Chong Yagyong), Chong Yagyong and Yi Seunghun had been meeting to read Catholic books at a house outside the Sungkyunkwan, the national university of Joseon. They were under the pretext of engaging in some friendly poetry writing competition. Rather than writing poems, however, they had been reading more Catholic books and preaching the Catholic doctrine to their fellow students (Yi Manchae ed. 1984: 113).

Yi Kigyong read a Jesuit book with Yi Seunghun at the start. He found “some good points as well as vicious points” in the book. But he stopped reading the book before finishing it when he read that “God is superior to any earthly ruler, you should not hold any memorial service except for the Lord of Heaven” (15/11/13 甲申). He tried at first to talk his colleagues out of their infatuation with Catholicism. But his colleagues such as Yi Seunghun and Chong Yagyong,

3. The ‘Myongdong Catholic Meeting Incident’ was the first ‘Incident’ of concerning Catholicism (1785) in Korea. In the spring of 1785, when the authorities “secretly” sent the agents in pursuits of Moon Yanghae (文洋海) and Yang Hyung(梁衡), who were the leaders of a mutiny (9/3/23 壬申), an agent of the Punishment Board(秋曹禁吏) passed by and accidentally heard accidentally the suspicious sounds coming from Kim Pomu’s house. According to one report, he rushed in to found a group of worshippers with “powder on their faces and dark pieces of cloth over their heads.” Startled at this strange sight, the agent arrested those present and confiscated the portraits of Jesus and their books. In this place, Yi Pyok, Yi Seunghun, Chong Yakchon, Chong Yagyong, and several others were arrested. With this as a momentum, the state stipulated Western Learning as having perverse teachings (Baker 1983, 308-309).

4. For the lineages of the Namin scholars, see Baker 1983, pp. 310-312.

so far from giving heed to his advice, “despised and slandered him with a grudge” (15/11/13 甲申). When he failed to heed his advice, Yi Kigyong turned to another student, Hong Nagan who was a member of the Namin too. After hearing of it, Hong insisted that they should memorialize the government to condemn those heretics. But Yi Kigyong, instead, circulated the letter about the “Catholic Study Group” to the students of Sungkyunkwan (Baker 1983: 313-314).

As rumors of the “Catholic Study Group” spread among students of Sungkyunkwan, Yi Kyungmyung, a junior official at the Censorate, reported that Catholicism “was flourishing and even spreading beyond the capital to distant villages.” According to Yi, “even the ignorant peasants and the stupid countrymen are copying the Catholic books in the Korean language and reading them by rotation.” Yi, therefore, insisted that the government take immediate action to block further growth of the dangerous religion before it was too late (12/8/2 辛卯).

Yi's report sparked discussion of the Catholicism problem in the council before the King. King Jeongjo asked the responsible chief officials of the Border Defense Commend (備邊司) “What is Catholicism and what are the problems?” Yi Songwon, the Second State Councilor, answered “I don't know that religion exactly, but harsh suppression is needed.”

In this place, Chae Jaegong, the Third State Councilor, informed King Jeongjo that he had read *T'ien-chu shih-i* (天主實義; “True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven,” by Matteo Ricci) and that it constituted a serious menace to Confucian morality. According to Chae, “a number of people in villages were deceived easily due to the logic of a Heaven and a Hell. It is an absurd statement that “Jesus, a descendant of the Lord of Heaven, made the blind man open his eyes and the lame man walk straight just when Yao and Shun (堯舜) did in China” (12/8/3 壬辰). Chae pointed out the Catholic doctrine of “three kinds of father”⁵ as having a disroyal and unfilial attitude [無君無父] as following:

5 “In this world a man has three kinds of father, the first is the Lord of Heaven, the second the sovereign of his state, and the third the father of his family; [...] When all men follow the Way the wills of these three kinds of fathers will not be in conflict since the father of lowest rank will command his own son to serve the senior fathers, and he who is a son will observe all three kinds of filial piety by obeying his one father. When the Way does not hold sway in the world, however, the commands of the three kinds of father will conflict with each other; the father of lowest rank will fail to obey the senior fathers, will seek to benefit his own selfish ends, and will

They contained some good points, such as their teachings that “the Sovereign on High (上帝) watches over the affairs of men, and ascends and descends on the left and the right of people.” Nevertheless, the small merits of the book should not be outweighed by the evils such as transgressing moral ethics and laws. The most vicious point is that they worship the Jade Emperor (玉皇) first, the creator of all creatures (造化翁) second, and their father third. What an unfilial attitude is this! And it is disroyal in that, I heard, they elect the man who has no sexual desire as their king calling him a noble spirit. If it is not forbidden right now, who knows what it’s evil influences will be upon this country? It is, though criticizing Buddhism, a sect of Buddhism, in that they believe the doctrine [concerning Heaven and Hell) after borrowing it from Buddhism (12/8/3 壬辰).

Chae’s statement is representative of the Korean Neo-Confucian reaction to Catholicism. He didn’t display concern for arguing the truth or falsehood of Catholic statements about the existence of God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, or the immortality of man’s soul. He was more concerned with the moral consequences of those beliefs. Catholicism, he argued, led men to sleight their responsibilities to their parents and superiors. That reason alone made it unacceptable to a Confucian moralist.⁶ Chae, however, didn’t think it wise to severely punish individual adherents. It was his opinion that harsh measures were not the most effective way to eliminate evil ideas (Baker 1983: 317).

King Jeongjo said that, “In my opinion, if we concentrate on promoting the Confucian Way and Right Learning, the heterodox doctrine will disappeared by itself after arising [自起自滅]. So burn all the Western books in the country while giving the people a sound mind (人其人火其書)!” He apparently assumed that an inadequate elucidation of the Confucian tradition had misled a few immature students into overlooking the excellence of Confucianism. King Jeongjo instructed, in accordance with Chae’s advice, that “there is no need for assuming it to be serious” (12/8/3 壬辰).

instruct his sons to serve himself and to ignore his other fathers. A son ought to obey the commands of his most senior father even if they run counter to those of his own father of lowest rank. In so doing he does no violence to his filial conduct.”(Ricci 1985 433-4)

6. Baker said that Yi Kigyong’s letter to Chong Yagyong showed well the Korean Neo-Confucian reaction to Catholicism (Baker 1983: 315).

King Jeongjo said, “There have been the various types of heresy such as the Lu Chiu-yuan School (陸學), the Wang Yangming School (王學), Buddhism (佛道), and Taoism (老道),” and also, “China did not issue a ban on heterodoxy.” “Confucianism (右道) has not been nevertheless weakened until now. But these days the abuses of Catholicism are so serious. What is the reason?” “The root causes of Catholic infiltration,” according to King Jeongjo, “was that Confucian scholars did not read the Old Classics.” “Nowadays the Literary Style (文體) of the literati is very crude because they give thought only to memorize the famous clauses and phrases for preparing for the State Examination (科擧). “Besides, so-called literati are indulging themselves in reading novels without studying the Old Classics” (12/8/3 壬辰).

King Jeongjo criticized all literati on the surface, but he particularly aimed at the Confucian scholars of the Noron who used “a crude literary style” and read “eccentric novels.” In other words, he alluded that the scholars of the Noron were unqualified to censure the scholars of the Namin on Catholicism. This shows his ruling style, so-called “like cures like (以熱治熱).” He inflicted the penalties on the convicts of all factions, while bestowing the prizes on the good conductors of all factions (17/4/16 戊寅; Park Kwangyong 1984, 318, 235). For example, he countervailed the Catholicism problem of the Namin with the “Crude Literary Style” of the Noron when the “Sungkyunkwan Study Group Incident” (1787), and the “Jinsan Yun Jichung’s Incident” (1791) occurred. On the other hand, he praised the pristine Confucianism (原始儒學) tradition of the Namin as well as Chu Hsi’s Neo-Confucianism tradition of the Noron (Park Hyunmo 1999).

“Politician” King Jeongjo’s Reaction to the Catholic Incidents in 1791 and 1792

1. The “Jinsan Incident” and the Rejection of Confucian Mourning Rituals

The problem of Catholicism, having cooled off in the court for a while owing to the tolerant policy of King Jeongjo and Chae Jaegong, was highlighted again as a serious issue in the “Jinsan Yun Jichung Incident” (1791). We could reflect, in the “Jinsan Incident,” intellectuals’ attitude towards the religion, the difference between Confucian Catholics and Catholic Confucians, and the political danger

which could be born in the political accusation against a scholar for his learning and faith.

The Jinsan Incident (1791) is the first martyrdom which the Scholar-official Catholics, Yun Jichung (尹持忠, 1759-1791) and his Catholic cousin Kwon Sangyon (權尙然, ?-1791), who lived at Jinsan county in Jeolla Province, were punished by death for their refusal to perform the proper mourning ritual. When Yun's mother died, Yun and Kwon did not make a tablet for his mother and burned all ancestral tablets in their possession and buried the ashes, following of their Catholic faith (15/10/23 甲子).

Such intransigent faith was so shocking that many scholars with interest in "Western Learning" threw Catholicism away. According to *Ta Ming lu* (大明律),⁷ the head of the heresy which deludes the world and deceives the people should be put to death by hanging. The law also said that anyone who deliberately destroys his parent's ancestral tablet with his own hands should be treated the same as someone who rebels against the throne.

The actions, more than anything else, such as the refusal to perform Confucian rituals and the demolition of ancestral tablets could not be tolerated for any reason in the Confucian atmosphere. Then, what were the motives for doing that? How could they abandon the Confucian symbols in accordance with the Catholic commandments? Let's hear Yun's utterance on the basis of historical records.⁸

It was, according to Yun, at middle man, (中人) Kim Pomu's home in Seoul, that he got *T'ien-chu shih-i* (天主實義) and *Ch'i K'e* (七克), when he dropped in at the Myongdong residence of Kim in the winter of 1784. Before Kim Pomu's arrest (1785 Spring), Yun had borrowed *T'ien-chu shih-i* and *Ch'i K'e* from him and made copies of those works for his own personal use before returning them. After reading them roughly, Yun could grasp the points; "He is the Father of all and the Creator who made the heaven, the earth, the ghosts, and men." He left Seoul and returned to his home in a village at Jinsan county in north Jeolla province. There he assiduously studied his two Jesuit books and discussed their contents with his maternal cousin, Kwon Sang'yon. At last Yun decided to make the commitment to Catholicism, after three years of meditation and reflection on

7. The Article "Deluding the world and deceiving the people." The Office of Legislation (法制處), *Ta Ming lu* (Seoul, Bupjaecheo, 1964)

8. The Yuns deposition to Chong Minsi in Chonju is in Dallet (1987), pp. 337-352 and *ARKJE* (15/11/7 戊寅).

Catholic teachings (Baker 1983: 310).

“After knowing the Lord of Heaven as my father,” Yun stated, “I could not help obeying His order.” He especially could not keep the custom of bowing to the wooden ancestral tablet any more, because it is, in his judgment, idol worship forbidden in Catholicism. It was so distressing for Yun to keep the tablet in his house that he buried it.

According to Yun, “if one’s parents were actually present in those wooden ancestral tablets, then Catholics would be obligated to show respect for the tablets. But those tablets were made of wood. They have no flesh and blood relationship with me. They did not give me life nor educate me[···] How can I dare to treat these man-made pieces of wood as though they were actually my mother and father? (15/11/7 戊寅).⁹ Yun argued further that it was foolish to place food and drink before a block of wood, even if a soul were present in it. He pointed out that the soul was not a material good, no matter how delicious the wine or nutritious the meats. Furthermore, even the most filial son did not try to serve his parents food and drink when they were asleep. If people cannot eat while they sleep, how much more foolish is it to offer food to our parents when they are dead? Kwon also said the same words.

According to interrogator Jeong Minsi, Governor of Jeolla province, Yun and Kwon did not distort their faces on pain of bleeding and torn bodies when they were examined in the government office. They just spoke the Lord of Heavens teachings with every word. Yun said, I cannot but keep the doctrine of the Lord of Heaven at the risk of my life, although violating the command of king and parent (15/11/7 戊寅).

Yun’s attitude and defense, adopted from the Western insistence on the irrational and superstitious character of Confucian rituals, clashed with the Confucian concern for the symbolic and ethical significance of the rite. Yun kept insisting that he had acted in accordance with truth. But the Governor, Jeong Minsi, kept insisting that Catholic teachings were immoral and their social consequences were so serious as Chae Jaegong as mentioned. Yun turned a deaf ear to the advice and warning of the Governor. On December 3, 1791, Yun and Kwon were beheaded for their faith. In sum, Yun and Kwon were religious men who believed that religious truth was more important than social ethics, and they converted from Confucianism to Catholicism after interpreting the Catholic doc-

9. English translation is Baker’s article 1999.

trine from a Confucian viewpoint.

Comparing the attitudes of Yun and Kwon with those of Yi Seunghun and Chong Yagyong, we may find some differences between Confucian Catholics and Catholic Confucians.¹⁰ Yi Seunghun, who brought with him Catholic books from a trip to Peking with his father in 1784 for the first time, was interrogated in the Office for the Deliberation of Forbidden Affairs and State Tribunal (義禁府) in 1791. In the interrogation, he insisted that he was not a Catholic on the grounds that, firstly, he burned or destroyed the books and things he received as gifts from a westerner. For example, *Original Geometry* (幾何原本), *Shuli chingyun* (數理精蘊), and a telescope (視遠鏡). Secondly he stated that he had “submitted the written promise to criticize the heterodox learning already.” He began to read the Catholic books, according to Yi, in order “to criticize its weak points. People don’t believe and follow its teachings unless he believes and practices faithfully ahead for himself, even though it is heterodox learning and heresy. How can I teach its doctrine after criticizing it?” (15/11/8 己卯)

Chong Yagyong, another Catholic Confucian, also adopted Catholicism from the viewpoint of learning. In the *Self-criticism Memorial* of 1797 (自明疏), Chong said that “I read the Catholic books while in my youth. In those days, it was a kind of intellectual trend [風氣] that someone who had extensive knowledge of cosmology, the western calendar, agriculture, irrigation facilities, surveying techniques, and experimental methods won the respect of all. So I longed for it.”

He was captivated, according to Chong, by “the story of life and death” and by the maxims that taught, “Do not compete against each other!” and “You should not boast of yourself!” Especially, he regarded it as “a sect of Confucianism” because its maxims were similar to Confucian moral demands. He, in other words, approached Catholicism hoping to solve curiosities such as Western advanced technology and life after death (21/6/21 庚寅).

Chong, however, threw Catholicism away because of its prohibition on Confucian mourning rituals:

The phrase, “Do not perform Confucian mourning rituals” was not in the

10. See Baker (1983), p. 288 for the meaning of a Confucian Catholic and a Catholic Confucian. According to Baker, a “Catholic Confucian reached out to the Christian God hoping to ground Confucian ethics in an external, immutable sources[...].” While a Confucian Catholic “believed that God was the personification of filial piety, the supreme ethical value, and therefore his commands superceded all human rules and regulations.”

books I read. Even though beasts such as a wolf or an otter would be surprised to hear that. This is the same as Galbek (葛伯) who had neglected the rituals. Anyone who knows filial duty cannot help deploring it and nipping the wrongdoing in the bud. The Jinsan Incident, nevertheless, took place in this country. How can I get very angry! And I had hated it like a foe and was censured like a rebel since the Jinsan Incident 1791 (21/6/21 庚寅).

In other words, Korean Catholics' refusal of Confucian mourning rituals, in Chong's opinion, is worse than a brute like Galbek (葛伯),¹¹ and so could not tolerate him. In this point, Chong is contrasted with Yun Jichung who took the path to martyrdom interpreting social convention from the viewpoint of religious doctrine when he found contradiction between Catholic doctrine and Confucian convention. Chong, who approached Catholicism in the light of "extensive knowledge" regarding it as "a sect of Confucianism," remained a Catholic Confucian: he took the Confucian convention instead of Catholic doctrine. Here we may see the difference between the Confucian Catholic and Catholic Confucian.

It is worth noticing, in Chong's Self-Criticism Memorial, the words, "the books I read" ... "while in my youth." The books read in his youth, according to Chong, such as *T'ien-chu shih-i* (天主實義) or *Sheng shih ch'u jao* (聖世芻蕘, "The Teachings of the Church in Everyday Language," by Fr. Joseph de Maille) were not so dangerous. But Chong found the dangerous contents, "forbidding mourning rituals" in the book borrowed from Yi Seunghun, such as *Chen tao tzu cheng* (眞道自證, "The true way is self-evident," by Fr. Emericus de Chavagnac) (15/11/13 甲申).

The teaching of Catholicism changed as time went by, and so there was an important difference in the contents between the former and the latter. How can we understand the gap in Catholic teaching? Let's inquire into the rites controversy in Catholicism.

The Jesuits missionaries (entry into China in 1583) paid deference to Chinese culture, appealed to the bureaucrats and literati, including the emperors, from the end of the Ming through the early Ch'ing dynasty. They adopted Chinese words

11. "Zhonghuizhigao" (仲虺之誥), Book of Documents (書經); Tengwengong (滕文公下), The Works of Mencius (孟子).

for God, virtue, human nature, and soul (Vincent Cronin 1957 ; Shin Bok-ryong 1997, 81). This is an important reason why Confucian scholars of Joseon, Chong Yagyong, Yi Seunghun, and Yun Jichung could embrace Western Learning without serious resistance.

The missionaries of the Dominicus (entry into China in 1631) and the Franciscus (entry into China in 1633), however, began to censure the Jesuits for their concessive attitude regarding traditions like Confucian mourning rituals for their ancestors and memorial rites at Confucius temple (祀孔) as superstitious beliefs. According to the Dominicus and the Franciscus, “Confucius may not be in Heaven because he didn’t know the absolute being, angels, the immortality of the soul, and reward and punishment after death.” They argued that “the ancestors of Chinese didn’t know the TRUTH and become baptized, so they are not in the Heaven.” Therefore “it is just idol worship forbidden and superstitious belief to bow, burn incense, and dedicate food to their ancestors and Confucius who are not in Heaven (M. Hay 1957: 127-130; Choe Kibok 1982: 65).

The rites controversies became much more heated when J. B. Morales, a Dominicus missionary accused the Jesuits of the problem of the Chinese rituals in the Vatican in 1642. The Pope, Clement I (r. 1700-1721) regrettably issued the edict to “forbid idol worship” such as the mourning ancestor ritual in 1704. Then, Chinese Emperor K’ang-hsi (康熙帝, 1662-1722) began to suppress and expatriate the Catholic missionaries from the China (Choe Kibok 1982: 65-75; Kang Jae-eun 1990: 85-87). So to speak, the Catholic prohibition of the Confucian rituals in Joseon was stressed after such controversy.

2. “Pyongtaek Yi Seunghun’s Incident” and King Jeongjo’s Expeditious Measures

In the “Jinsan Incident” of 1791, King Jeongjo gave the direction, “Do not touch the Incident in the Office of the Inspector-General (司憲府) and leave it in the hands of Governor¹²” (15/10/16 丁巳). King Jeongjo, instead, ordered to “punish talkative trouble-makers” noticing the words “letters going around in Sungkyunkwan” in the report of the Office of the Inspector-General (15/10/16 丁巳). He tried to stop the expanding Catholic problem in his court, and criti-

12. At that time, the Governor of Cholla province was Chong Minsi, one of the King Chongjo’ close staff members.

cized the attitude of anti-Catholic persons who censured Catholicism. The political discontent of someone who in the Namin, King Jeongjo understood, was the main motive of “Catholic Debates.” He thought that anti-Catholic persons acted under the political conspiracy to break down the Chae Jaegong-centered Cabinet in the middle of King Jeongjo’s reign.¹³

One of the “talkative trouble-makers,” King Jeongjo indicated, was Hong Nagan (洪樂安), a member of the Namin and a minor official in the Royal Secretariat. He sent a long letter (長書) to Chae Jaegong who was not only a senior official in King Jeongjo’s court but also the highest ranking member of their Namin. Hong wrote in the letter that the state should punish the Catholics with penalties, after pointing out that “most Confucian literati, including his friends in the Namin, were infected with Catholicism in the capital. Now the persons who believed it are beyond count like salt in a saltpond because the court censured only the doctrine without punishing the believers.” He insisted in his private letter that “The authorities must put them to death” before the Catholic cancer could spread further and threatened both the Namin and the entire government (15/10/23 甲子).

King Jeongjo handled the matter of the “long letter of Hong” negatively. “I can’t believe all the rumors” (15/10/23 甲子). The reason why King Jeongjo acted negatively to Hong’s letter is that he regarded it as a kind of factional strife. What is the real motive of Hong Nagan’s letter? Why didn’t he tell you directly? There must be a hidden motive behind Hong’s letter. Many people fight boldly against the political enemy in our country. I use the word, “trap” in the Royal response to Office of Censure-General. Please stop fighting!” (15/10/25 丙寅).

In King Jeongjo’s view, anti-Catholic persons in the Namin such as Hong Nagan, Mok Manjung, and Yi Kigyong attacked Chae Jaegong under the pretext of censuring Catholicism with support from the Noron. So, King Jeongjo proclaimed “Protecting Orthodox Learning and Excluding Heterodox Learning” (衛正斥邪) while responding the anti-Catholic challenges:

Enhancing “Orthodox Learning” (正學) and excluding “Heterodox

13. King Chongjo managed to lead the court without appointing any other State Councilors but Chae Jaegong from 1790 to 1793. In this period, most memorials of anti-Catholicism were inundated.

Learning (邪學) is what I desire.” [...]The incident of Hong’s letter is an extraordinary misdeed! It is as clear as the light for him to aim at the Second State Councilor, Chae Jaegong. [...] I’m waiting for something though determining to punish Hong until it comes out. What can I say to exercise my authorities in our country if I don’t punish Hong? (16/2/14 癸丑)

In proclaiming “Protecting Orthodoxy and Excluding Heterodoxy,” on the one hand, King Jeongjo emphasized enhancing “Orthodox Learning” by way of leveling scholastic ability. King Jeongjo, on the other hand, took pains to prevent the Catholic dispute from escalating into factional strife through blocking the attack of anti-Catholics and the Noron. He placed emphasis more on “Protecting Orthodoxy” than “Excluding Heterodoxy” because if the court overemphasized the latter, it could have escalated into intra-party conflict (15/10/23 甲子).

The phrase, “I’m waiting” revealed that King Jeongjo took expeditious measures (權道) when he worked his old grudge against Prince Sado (思悼世子). He counterattacked his rivals all at once after “waiting for” conspiracy evidence to come out. The opportunity to counterattack anti-Catholics and the Noron appeared in the ‘Pyongtaek Yi Seunghun Incident’ in 1792.

The ‘Pyongtaek Incident’ occurred when Kwon Wi (權瑋), a Confucian scholar who lived in Pyongtaek county in Kyongki Province, sent out a letter to a student in Sungkyunkwan censuring Yi Seunghun for his ‘misdeed.’ Yi Seunghun, according to Kwon Wi, had not worshiped at a Confucian temple since he governed Pyongtaek as Magistrate (平澤縣監). As the rumor spread among students, Sungkyungwan authorities struck Yi’s name off the list of Confucian students (青衿錄). Kwon Wi, with the tacit support and cooperation of the Noron, Kim Munsun (金文淳) for example, reproached Yi Seunghun who was a member of the Namin and for Catholicism aiming at Chae Jaegong’s resignation as the Second State Councilor. Kwon and Kim expected that the King would respond negatively to the rumor as in case of Hong Nagan’s letter or Chae’s temporal resignation on the account of his political responsibility.

But King Jeongjo, contrary to Kwon’s expectations, appointed Kim Heechea (金熙采) as Royal Emissary for Inspection and said to him: “You should start an investigation in detail without delay because it is very important. First of all, make clear, by asking anyone such as literati, Confucian students, people who saw or heard it first-hand, whether Yi Seunghun worshiped at a Confucius temple or not. And then, bring to light, by way of public opinion, what is the exact

conventional ritual of Pyongtaek in repairing the Local Confucian School (鄕校). Lastly, clarify whether it is true or not that Kwon Wi sent the letter in revenge for his dropping out of the Promotion Examination (陞補試)" (16/2/28 丁卯).

King Jeongjo grasped the sequences of the "Pyongtaek Incident" as well as the hidden motive of Kim Munsoon and Kwon Wi. So the King entrusted not an official of the Punishment Board (刑曹) which was under Noron command, but Kim Heechae, who had kinship (從弟夫) with Yi Seunghun and a member of the Namin, with power to investigate it.

After 15 days, Kim Heechae reported that the rumor of "Yi Seunghun's refusal to attend a Confucius temple" was fabricated by Kwon Wi, and distorted by complex factors as follows: 1) the conflicts between the New Confucian Scholar Group and the Old Confucian Scholar Group in Pyongtaek, 2) Kwon Wi's private grudge against Yi Seunghun, and 3) a Petty Town Official distorting the facts in the interrogation:

1) Yi Seunghun, as a new Magistrate of Pyongtaek, did not meet anybody of the New Confucian Scholar Group (新儒) who had been enemies with the Old (舊儒). Yi put the ban on The New Group's unfair suit in law, so The New Group had a grudge against Yi. 2) Kwon Wi, the man notorious for his goings-on, fabricated and spread the rumor about Yi's actions with his friends, Hong Byongwon and Cho Sangbon. Before this, Kwon had been released from the office since he was reprimanded by Yi for his levying improper taxes. [...] 3) Yi Chongkil, a Petty Town Official, distorted the contents of the letter like the phrase "did not bow (不拜禮)" in the interrogation (16/3/14 癸生, Numbers added).

The next day, King Jeongjo punished the leaders of the Noron who had attacked Chae Jaegong by reason of neglecting their judicial duties for their factional interest. Kim Munsoon, Sim Hwanji (沈煥之), Yi Myuneung (李冕膺) of the Noron, respectively the Minister, a vice-Minister, and an official of the Punishment Board were sent to exile on a remote island, Kumgapdo (金甲島) in Jeolla province (16/3/15 甲申).

King Jeongjo said: "Officials, being faithful to their duties should have impeached the Kwon Wi, [...] licking other's heels only for his private interest without his own principle. But Kim Munsoon, as the Minister of Punishment Board, was busy trying to shift his responsibility to others and kept silent, still

disregarding my indication with a clumsy excuse. How deplorable is this! [...] I cannot help trying to use my Royal Sword (太阿) on these factional groups (16/3/15 甲申).

Conclusion: Unhappy Encounter of Western-Eastern Learning and King Jeongjo's Responsibility

The peculiarity of the Catholic disputes and problems of King Jeongjo's ruling style can be summarized as follows:

First, the Catholic disputes during King Jeongjo's reign began with private letters and rumors among literati and took a new turn with scholar-officials' memorials which were presented with political motives (Kim Hongwoo 1991, 65). In other words, the Catholic disputes seem to have been started accidentally by misunderstanding and political conflict among members of the Namin. In the Namin faction, the anti-Catholic group was divorced from the pro-Catholic group not because of ideological differences but for the personal grudges between members. For example, Hong Nagan and Yi Kigyong of the anti-Catholic group said respectively that "we are utterly helpless with a deep-rooted rancor" (15/11/3 甲戌) and "I became estranged from my friends," and "I can't stand my unbearable loneliness any longer" (15/11/13 甲申).

The immense political persecution under the color of religion in 1801, about three hundred people including the Chinese priest Chou Wenmo (周文謨), was started in a "private struggle" of alienated persons such as Yi Kigyong, Hong Nagan, Mok Manjung, and others. It ended tragically by becoming the political capital of the Noron.

Second, King Jeongjo did not take the opportunity to scrutinize Catholicism carefully at the state level. He tried to stop the expanding Catholic problem in his court seeing that there was a political conspiracy behind the Catholicism disputes. For this, we can say that he had a fear of the public debates. By the way, the Catholic dispute had begun with the private letters and rumors in Sungkyunkwan and showed that public debates were vulnerable to political conspiracy and tactics. It could have, of course, degenerated in factional strife. In spite of the danger, I wonder, if King Jeongjo had fully treated the problem of Catholicism in public space and took a practical attitude, was there any possibility of avoiding the "historical error throwing away Western knowledge of science and technology?" (Yi Wonsoon 1986: 17-18).

King Jeongjo, on the contrary, shut off the opportunity to debate on Western Learning while patching the matter up at the political level. He used several tactics to set apart the anti-Catholic group from the Noron. He counter-attacked them all at once after waiting for conspiracy evidence to come out in the 1792 incident. But he, on the other hand, was afraid of changing the issues into the political struggle because he, in my opinion, had a kind of “trauma” from factional strife since the Incident of Prince Sado. As a result, Catholicism, after several immense persecutions, was admitted officially in Korea May in 1886.

Finally, let's think over the unhappy meeting of Confucianism and Catholicism quoting a message of Vatican in 8 December 1939:

Some heterodox rites of the East, as well known, are just rituals for filial piety, patriotism, and social life. [...]The memorial rite for the Confucius temple is to be regarded not as the regional purpose but as following tradition. It is proper for men to bow to the wooden ancestral tablets and the portraits of their deceased, to express their reverence humanly in the Confucian memorial temple or in the school. (Yi Sungbae 1986, 488)¹⁴

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