

Fr. Andreas Kim Taegŏn (1821–1846) and the fate of the Korean Catholic Church

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It is beyond question that Christianity played a prominent role not only in Korea's modern religious culture, but also in political and social events of Korea in the last two centuries. However the history of Korean Christianity is still mainly written by Christians and for Christians. And when it comes to Catholic saints, the readership consists of, and only of devout faithful. These Korean saints are indeed usually associated with hagiography, and it is difficult to find a biography of these saints that may be of interest for a non-Catholic. My paper attempts to reverse this tendency through the study of the first Korean-born Catholic priest, Andreas Kim Taegŏn (1821–1846).

Born in a Catholic family from the Ch'ungch'ŏng province, Kim Taegŏn was baptized at age 15 and studied theology in Macao with two other young Koreans. He was then ordained a priest near Shanghai in 1845 and returned to Korea to preach and evangelize. His first task consisted, however, to facilitate and secure the introduction of foreign missionaries. Unfortunately he was soon arrested with several converts in the Hwanghae province, sent on trial and beheaded in 1846 as a traitor to his country.

Kim Taegŏn's life is documented through contemporary government sources, his own letters, written in Latin and vernacular Korean, and those of French missionaries. They allow us to rewrite the history of Korean Catholicism through local voices and the intellectual history of a go-betweener who was the product of three centuries of Catholic missions in East Asia. This paper, however, is not aimed at presenting the Catholic history of a Korean man, but the Korean history of a Catholic man. What does the life of Kim Taegŏn bring to our understanding of the late Chosŏn and modern periods? In other words, I will use this special case of Kim Taegŏn to belie the simple narrative of a religious martyr common in the historiography and to roll up general issues of Korean Catholicism from the nineteenth century to the present.

The clandestine life of a go-betweener

The early life of Kim Taegŏn

Catholic communities outside of Europe before the twentieth century usually remained localized and only flourished in specific places. It was even more the case in Chosŏn Korea where the local Church became an underground movement even before it was officially proscribed in 1801, and remained so until the late nineteenth century. It also explains why Kim Taegŏn was born in Solmoe (literally, "hill with pine trees"), an isolated village in Myŏnch'ŏn county. Solmoe belonged to the region of Naep'o, in the western part of the Ch'ungch'ŏng province. Although the first conversions to Catholicism occurred in the vicinity of Seoul during

the 1780s, Naep'ŏ soon became the second birthplace of this religion in Chosŏn. This remote area attracted a number of Catholic converts and, later, French missionaries who chose to settle there during the nineteenth century.

The early Korean Church, just as the Chosŏn society in general, was embedded in various social and geographical networks, and developed through relational and marital ties (Choi 2006). Kim Taegŏn's family was closely linked to the oldest Korean Catholic lineages and harshly suffered from the state repression in the first half of the nineteenth century. A dozen of his relatives, beginning with his great-grandfather, his grandfather, and his father all ended as martyrs, even though the circumstances of their death remain sometimes unclear.

The early life of Catholics in Chosŏn times is usually not well documented since they lived in isolated regions and faced great hardship. Not much is known about Kim Taegŏn except that an important anti-Christian incident compelled many Catholic households to leave their home and flee to other regions in 1827. Kim's family moved successively to two different places before settling in a small village near Yongin, Kyŏnggi province. What happened during the following decade remains largely unknown. Kim Taegŏn was baptized in 1836, at age 15, and received the name of Andreas. Such late baptism was not uncommon in Korean Catholic families throughout the nineteenth century. For security purposes, local converts usually abstained from giving religious instruction to their children until they reached the age of reason.

Misunderstandings and the beginnings of a Korean clergy

Kim Taegŏn was one of the three young Korean Catholics that Fr. Pierre Maubant (the first French missionary in Korea) decided to send to China in 1836 to study theology. One, however, died in 1837, and only the two others were to become priests in the 1840s. Thereafter, no more seminarians would be raised to priesthood until the 1880s. Training indigenous priests was central to Western missionaries and their policy of indigenization in East Asia. It was also easier for autochthonous priests to face and avoid governmental oppression. So why did the Korean situation evolved in a so different way than other countries in East Asia? In other words, why did Kim Taegŏn become the first Korean priest, more than sixty years after the birth of Korean Catholic Church?

The first Korean converts actually established on their own what modern historians define as a "pseudo ecclesiastical hierarchy," but it only lasted for a few years and came to an end in 1790 when its members realized they were violating Church doctrine and practice. In the following decades, Korean converts saw a need for a missionary in order to promote the propagation of their faith, and they sent a number of letters to the pope and the bishop of Beijing until the 1830s, requesting the introduction of scientific missionaries while refusing the entry of simple missionaries and the ordination of Koreans to the priesthood.

There was however a misunderstanding between Korean converts and European clerics on this matter. Since their religion was proscribed in the Chosŏn kingdom, Korean converts expected missionaries with scientific and artistic talents, in the same vein as the prominent Jesuits serving the imperial court in China: these missionaries would come to Seoul and offer to serve the king with magnificent gifts. On the contrary, the Vatican and the Western missionaries in China wanted to dispatch clandestine priests and raise a local clergy (Yun 2007). They were unaware that religious specialists did not benefit from a privileged status in late Chosŏn times. Buddhist monks and shamans interacted with literati and commoners but they were marginalized and stood at the bottom, if not outside of the social hierarchy. It was thus unwelcome to raise a local Catholic clergy in this inauspicious context. The first vicar apostolic of Korea, Bishop Barthélemy Bruguière (1792–1835), even had to compel by the threat of

excommunication the Koreans who refused to introduce him secretly into the peninsula. Only this threat enabled missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (Missions étrangères de Paris, hereafter MEP) to administrate local Christian communities and train indigenous priests.

A smuggler and cartographer on the road to priesthood (1836–1845)

Kim Taegön spent nine years abroad as a seminarian, but it was a very curious and particular “journey to priesthood” (Han’guk kyohoesa yön’guso 1996). Unlike his pairs trained by the MEP during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kim was sent to Macao where he certainly received the shortest training an East Asian seminarian ever received in Latin and theology. Social unrest compelled him to flee temporarily to Manila in 1837 and 1839. He also travelled in North China and the Yellow Sea for three years, from 1842 to 1845, scouting out safer routes for bringing French clerics in Korea. It is my contention that Kim became one of the numerous illegal travellers who frequently crossed the Sino-Korean border, with the particularity that he engaged in “religious smuggling.” So doing, he unwillingly contributed to the myth that Korea was a secluded country.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Kim became the first interpreter in Korean history to master Western languages and travel by sea with Western – more precisely French – naval officers. Beyond the language skills possessed by any Korean learned man (Korean and Classical Chinese), Kim studied several European languages, beginning with Latin, French, and Portuguese, and he probably had a good knowledge in Cantonese. But his greatest achievement – although overlooked by previous scholarship – remains the map of the Korean peninsula he drew in 1845. Based on both Korean and Western cartographical traditions, this map was also the first one ever produced in a Western language by a Korean man, and it remained a reference work for Western cartographers and naval officers during several decades. As such, it demonstrates an interesting circulation of geographical knowledge between the two edges of Eurasia.

Kim was finally ordained a priest near Shanghai in 1845. Then he spent several months preaching to the clandestine faithful in the vicinity of Seoul. But his main activities remained those of a “religious broker”. It was under Kim’s guidance that French missionaries sneaked into the country again in 1845, beginning with Bishop Jean Ferréol and Fr. Antoine Daveluy. Kim was also surveying the coast of the Hwanghae province – nowadays in North Korea – when he was arrested by local authorities in the 5th month of 1846.

A curious trial?

Church historians usually depict the martyrdom of Kim Taegön and other converts as a contribution to the establishment of the Catholic Church in the Korean society and their first step towards sainthood (Han’guk kyohoesa yön’guso 1997). This kind of narrative however provides a biased view of what the Chosön state designated as “incidents” or “heresy cases.” It overlooks the complexity of the legal approach, except for acknowledging the supposed anarchy of the Chosön state at that time. Kim’s judgment duly followed the general scheme and procedure of criminal cases. His case was tried first at the local level and then reexamined at successive administrative levels, starting with the province and continuing upward to the central government.

Interestingly, Kim presented himself under different identities during his trials, so as to dissimulate his personal history and avoid harsh punishments. He first appeared as a Chinese man practicing the “Western teaching” (*yanggyo* 洋教), since the Chosön government had, at least in theory, no right to punish Chinese nationals who benefited from a kind of

extraterritoriality. After his transfer to the Seoul Police Bureau, Kim declared that he went to the “Small Western Ocean” (i.e. South East Asia) to study “Nestorianism” (*kyōnggyo* 景教) and the local language to serve as an interpreter. So doing, he followed a number of missionaries and converts in China and Korea who disguised Catholicism with mysterious Nestorian clothing – an old branch of Christianity introduced in China in the seventh century – to convince officials and literati that this religion belonged to the orthodox Chinese tradition. But the ploy failed once again. Kim was finally compelled to reveal his identity and his activities after the discovery of compromising documents and the confessions of several converts under torture. But he was not sentenced to death. There was even no official verdict after the last hearing of the intercalary 5th month, and he was just maintained in prison for two months.

The situation evolved in the 6th month when the French rear-admiral Cécille arrived off the coast of the Ch’ungch’ōng province with a letter decrying the execution of three French missionaries in 1839. It thus became clear to the central authorities that Korean Catholics had communicated with the Western powers and leaked information regarding previous anti-Christian campaigns. Historians usually consider that Cécille’s letter caused a panic in Seoul and resulted in the immediate martyrdom of Kim Taegōn. There was indeed a new hearing, but Kim was not tortured and stayed in prison. The decision to execute him only came a month later, on the 25th of the 7th month (September 15): he was now accused of “high treason” which was one of the gravest crimes in the penal code, and beheaded the next day with his head displayed in public to warn the people.

The reason why the authorities waited so long before the final judgment still deserves further research. Kim’s case however shows that Catholic “persecutions” were not a particular feature of the Chosōn period and cannot be understood independently of the legal and political context. Catholicism was a serious ideological challenge to the Chosōn society, but it is also true that Catholics were rarely sentenced to death, except during wide-scale anti-Christian campaigns that occurred in 1801, 1839, and 1866 (Roux 2012). This point leads us back to the Chosōn legal system. The state’s goal was to end litigation by resolving each individual case without procrastination. However, in practice, many difficult cases remained unresolved and were reviewed again after a lapse of several months or several years. This means that criminals like Kim Taegōn stayed in prison during that time.

The border issue also played a role in the final judgment. The defense system proved to be rather ineffective during the nineteenth century and it became an important concern of the state when smuggling activities and the presence of Western vessels increased along the coast. It is thus not surprising that Kim Taegōn was executed more as a “traitor” to his country than a Catholic “heretic.”

Afterlife: the making of a Catholic hero

The making of a Catholic saint

The second part of this paper will now replace the “afterlife” of Kim Taegōn in the general process of hero making in modern Korea, the progressive indigenization of the Korean Church, and the recent development of Korean religious tourism in which local Catholic “holy places” play a central role. Kim Taegōn came to be venerated in the twentieth century as the most prominent figure in the history of Korean Catholicism. As seen from a religious perspective, it proved to be a long sainthood process that lasted one-and-a-half century: Kim was first declared “venerable” in 1857, then beatified in 1925, and finally canonized in 1984. In 1949 the Holy

See also named him the patron of the Roman Catholic clergy in Korea. Even more noteworthy is the rank occupied by Kim in the list of the 103 martyrs canonized by Pope John Paul II on May 6, 1984. At that time, lists of new saints usually followed the top-bottom ecclesiastical hierarchy, but it was not the case in 1984. The Korean Catholic Church pressured the Holy See, so that Kim came to occupy the first rank, followed by a number of lay people, while French bishops and priests only appeared in the middle of the list.

Kim Taegŏn was probably given so much importance because there were only two indigenous priests in Korea before the late nineteenth century, and Kim was the only one to meet a martyr's death. The second priest, Thomas Ch'oe Yangŏp (1821-1861), was ordained in 1849 and diligently served the Church for twelve years. But his natural death resulted in a belated recognition compared to his predecessor, since he was only declared venerable in 2016.

Historiography and hero making in modern Korea

It is however short-sighted to consider the posthumous fate of Kim Taegŏn through a simplistic religious perspective. The issue of national sovereignty in twentieth century Korea profoundly shaped the work of Korean historians and their representations of Korea's past (Em 2013). "Glorification" and "victimization" thus emerged as two major characteristics of Korean historiography. Korean scholars largely presented their country as a victim, being a tributary state of China, then a colony of Japan, and finally an unfortunate victim of the Cold War. But in the meantime they also underlined that Korea had a rich and glorious past. This historiographical tendency unwillingly paved the way for a hagiographical approach of Korean Catholic history: the numerous Catholics martyrs of the nineteenth century indeed were victims of the Chosŏn state but they obtained glory through martyrdom.

The glorification of Korean history also gave rise to a particular historical genre based on prominent figures (*inmul*). A number of icons and heroes from the past thus emerged during the twentieth century such as the famous King Sejong (*r.* 1418-1450) who invented the Korean alphabet, the great admiral Yi Sunsin (1545-1598) famed for his victories against the Japanese navy during the Imjin war, and the renowned scholar Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836), also known under his penname Tasan. The Tan'gun myth was also revived in this period through the Daejonggyo religion founded in 1909. Something similar occurred for Kim Taegŏn, first within Catholic circles, and later outside of the religious sphere.

It was under the pressures of life during the Japanese occupation (1905-1945) that Catholics turned increasingly to the cult of martyrs. This was further encouraged by the beatification in 1925 of seventy-nine martyrs (Kim and Kim 2015). The Korean Catholic Church particularly underlined the significant role of its first priest in various ways. Kim Taegŏn was a commoner during his life, but his family members and coreligionists made him a *yangban*, that is a literatus and member of the traditional elite, after his death. It was not something peculiar to Kim, since a great number of commoners also became *yangban* during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through deliberate falsification of family records and genealogies. Furthermore, several theatre plays were written during the 1920s and focused on the story of Kim Taegŏn. Several biographies of the latter were also published from the 1940s onwards.

A Catholic saint and cultural icon

Kim Taegŏn became a prominent figure of the Catholic Church during the colonial period, but he remained largely unknown outside of this religious circle before the mid twentieth century. Non-Catholic publications like the works of Yi Nŭnghwa (1869-1943), an intellectual and major historian of Korean religions, are a case in point. Next to his famous *History of Korean*

Buddhism (Chosŏn pulgyo t'ongsa), Yi wrote a history of Korean shamanism and another of Korean Taoism. He also authored a long and detailed *History of Korean Christianity and Diplomacy (Chosŏn kidokkyo kŭp oegyosa)* in 1928 in which Kim Taegŏn is an individual of no prominence, since he is only mentioned once in an appendix.

Kim Taegŏn began to appear as the main Korean Catholic figure in non-Catholic publications and history textbooks in the 1960s, since this decade marked a turning point in the indigenization of the Korean Church. The clerical hierarchy in South Korea indeed came to be predominantly Korean rather than Western. The council of Vatican II (1962–1965) also resulted in worship services held in Korean rather than in Latin. In the meantime, some Catholics took a leading role in the struggle for a more democratic and just society (Baker 2016). The recognition of Kim Taegŏn as a Catholic hero is also probably linked to the figure of Stephen Kim Sou-Hwan (1922–2009) who, aside from being a pro-democracy activist, became the first Asian Cardinal of the Catholic Church in 1969. It thus comes as no surprise that the number of Korean Catholics began to grow rapidly during this period: from less than 200,000 in the 1950s, it increased to 700,000 in the 1960s, and then two millions in 1980s, and five millions (i.e. 10% of the South Korean population) in the 2000s.

It is in this context that Kim Taegŏn became not just a Catholic saint, but also the most venerated saint of Korean Catholicism in 1984. The canonization ceremony marked the bicentenary of the founding of the first Catholic lay community, and it was an even more special event because Pope John Paul II departed from tradition when instead of holding the ceremony in Rome he chose to come to Korea for the occasion. The first visit of a pontiff to the country attracted a million people to Seoul. Nowadays, the first name that comes to mind when evoking the Korean Catholic Church is usually Kim Taegŏn.

Religious tourism and “holy places”

The South Korean government started to develop a modern cultural policy in the 1970s through a growing interest in national history and cultural heritage promotion. Some Catholic places were designated as “cultural assets” (*munhwajae*), beginning with the Myŏngdong Cathedral, Seoul, in 1977. This was important since it marked an official recognition of the Catholic Church as part of both Korean history and cultural heritage. This trend continues even to this day with the development of religious tourism and “holy places.”

In Korea, the term *sŏngji* 聖地 was used until the 1950s for the “Holy land” (i.e. Israel). But a shift in its meaning occurred in the late 20th century, since it came to designate local Buddhist, Catholic, Confucian, Protestant, and even non-religious “holy places” (or “sacred sites”) such as shrines dedicated to heroes like Yi Sunsin and figures of the independence movement. With a few exceptions, it is usually through a concertation between religious authorities, local authorities and the Korea Tourism Organization that these sites are designated as “holy places”.

The Catholic Church holds the most numerous sacred sites in South Korea. All of them are related to the persecution period of the nineteenth century, and a number of them are obviously linked to Kim Taegŏn. Every site where the latter sojourned or passed through is now considered a “holy place.” The Korean Catholic Church also financed or obtained funding for the erection of statues of Kim Taegŏn all across the country and even in China (Macao, Shanghai, and Xiaobajiazi in the Northeast) and the Philippines where a shrine was established in Lolomboy. In the last three decades, a number of parishes around the world were also named after Kim Taegŏn. Most of them are Korean parishes situated in the United States and Canada.

Conclusion

Kim Taegŏn is usually remembered as the first Korean-born Catholic priest and a glorious martyr. This paper however aspired to reach a new understanding through social history in a long-term perspective. Kim Taegŏn had a very unusual fate for a Korean man of the late Chosŏn dynasty. Very few Korean people had the opportunity to leave abroad for a long period. Even fewer were those who dared risking their lives as religious specialists of a prohibited doctrine. In this sense, Kim Taegŏn spent his life as a clandestine go-between and religious smuggler. The legal approach also provides an efficient means of analysing Kim's martyrdom through a non-hagiographical view. Kim's trial precisely highlights the complexity of the judicial process and suggests that the Catholic "heretics" of the late Chosŏn period were not systematically condemned to death because of supposedly unjust and speedy trials.

However, Kim Taegŏn's particular fate – an indigenous priest who met a martyr's death – explains why he came to be venerated in the twentieth century as the patron saint of the Korean clergy and the greatest hero of Korean Catholicism. Kim unwillingly became the symbol of the indigenization and the success of the Korean Church. In other words, he is more celebrated for what he represents than for what he actually did. It is not exaggerated to say that his posthumous destiny encapsulates the whole history of Korean Catholicism and explains why this religious figure finally became more a cultural icon than just a Catholic saint in Korean history.

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Note: To the best of my knowledge, there is no in-depth study of Kim Taegŏn in English-language scholarship. The following bibliography includes a few titles that provide an approach to the subject.

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