*Ghosts, Spirits, and Saints:*

*Ancestors and the Catholic Church in Korea*

Daniel J. Adams

There is perhaps no better place in Korea than the southwestern city of Jeonju for gaining an understanding of the importance of ancestors in Korean life. Yi Han, the progenitor of the Yi family which founded the Joseon dynasty, is buried here. The official painting of King Taejo, the first king of Joseon, is enshrined here in an elaborate complex of buildings. Memorial tablets of his family are enshrined nearby. And Yi Seok, the last remaining member of royalty in the Yi family, lives in Jeonju. In and around the city are numerous shrines, stelae and stone tablets memorializing the ancestors.

In the city of Jeonju, among the many shrines, are two important sites where ancestor veneration is carried out on a regular basis. The first is the Jeonju Confucian School, the official *Hyanggyo* for the city. Originally established in the late 1380s or early 1390s, the school was moved to its present site in 1603 and boasts a magnificent shrine complex consisting of three buildings. The main building contains the ancestor tablets of Confucius, Mencius, Hsun-tsu, Tung Chung-Shu, Chu Hsi, and members of Confucius’ family. Two other buildings on either side of the main shrine contain the ancestor tablets of lesser known Chinese philosophers and numerous Korean philosophers, including Yi T’oegye and Yi Yulgok. Although I have visited this shrine over one hundred times, only once was it open for the *chesa* ritual. The sacrifices were being prepared for the ritual which was to be held on the following day. On the occasion of all other visits it was necessary to ask the caretaker to unlock the shrine buildings so that we could view the ancestor tablets.

Within sight of the Jeonju Confucian School is a mountain known locally as Martyrs’ Mountain. On a clear day, from the courtyard in front of the main shrine building, one can see a stone cross high atop the mountain. It marks the site of the graves of seven members from the family of Yu Hang-Gom, including the virgin couple Yi Sun-I Lutgarda and Yu Chung-Chol John. Members of this Catholic family died in the 1801 persecution. Their remains were transferred here in 1920 and over the years the site has been turned into an outdoor chapel. It is now the second site where ancestor veneration takes place in the city of Jeonju. In 1987 construction was begun on an underground memorial church at the site and in 1995 the church was dedicated and opened to the public. I have also visited Martyrs’ Mountain over one hundred times, and on every occasion I have seen people there praying, singing, and meditating in front of the graves or in the nearby underground church. Quite often there were groups accompanied by a priest who offered mass at an outdoor stone altar. The area has now become an important pilgrimage site for devout Catholics.

A site in another area of the city is where a Shinto shrine was located. From 1935 until 1945 ritual bows were held there in honor of the Japanese imperial family. However, on August 15, 1945 with the end of World War II and the liberation of Korea from Japanese occupation, the Shinto shrine was completely dismantled and destroyed. By the end of the day it was gone, and today it is the site of a university building. Ancestor veneration at this site ceased and all memory of the Shinto shrine has been erased. The Jeonju Confucian School and the Martyrs’ Mountain are active sites of ancestor veneration and together they symbolize the dilemma faced by Korean Catholics concerning ancestral veneration.

For Korean Catholics, the question of what to do about one’s ancestors first arose not in Korea, but in China through the work of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and other Jesuits who were to follow. Ricci, an Italian, received a classical Jesuit education in theology, philosophy, and science in Rome. He was sent to Portugal for nine months to study Portuguese, studied theology in Goa, India for four years, and then spent five years in Macau studying Chinese. Ricci founded the Catholic mission to China in 1583 in southern China in what is now Kwangtung Province. While there he translated the four classic books—*The Analects of Confucius*, *The Book of Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*—from Chinese into Latin. He temporarily moved to Beijing in 1595, and finally established himself in the city in 1601. By this time he had mastered both spoken and written Chinese, had composed the first European-style map of the world in Chinese, and had served as a co-compiler of two Chinese-Portuguese dictionaries. His scientific abilities, especially in the prediction of solar eclipses, won him the favor of the Emperor and he remained in Beijing serving under royal patronage until his death.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Jesuits and Koreans Meet in Beijing**

Ricci’s significance for the Catholic Church in Korea is twofold. First, he published a book of theology in Chinese which became an important text for the mission efforts in Korea. Second, his mission work became the subject of a controversy—the Chinese Rites Controversy—that had profound implications for the Catholic community in Korea. The former served to introduce Koreans to the basics of Christian doctrine, while the latter served to define the position of the Catholic Church within Korean society until the 1960s.

The book was *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, first published in Beijing in two volumes in 1604.[[2]](#footnote-2) Ricci’s work was based upon an earlier work, *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven* written by another Jesuit, Michele Ruggier in 1579–1591. Ricci completely rewrote Ruggier’s work and the first draft was completed by the end of 1596. New material was added in 1601–1603 and the first edition was published using the woodblock print method. It was basically an apologetic work written in the form of an exchange between a European and a Chinese. The book was divided into five parts dealing with the proofs for the existence of God, demonstrating the existence of the human soul, criticizing Buddhism and explaining the existence of heaven and hell, clarifying the relationship between human nature and sin, and finally relating the Catholic priesthood to the process of self-cultivation. In the book Ricci “stressed self-cultivation, equated God with *Shang Ti*, and used Chinese classics to prove that some of the basic concepts of Catholicism were already to be found in the China of ancient times. The work thus provided Christian thought an entrance into Chinese culture.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Since written Chinese was the language of the Korean intelligentsia, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* also provided Christian thought an entrance into Korean culture.

Between the years 1603 and 1783, 167 Korean envoys were dispatched to China on various diplomatic missions. They brought back to Korea some thirty-seven books on various topics of Western science, geography, and religion.[[4]](#footnote-4) One of these envoys, Lee Su-Kwang (1563–1628) also known as Chi-Pong, visited Beijing in 1590, 1593, and 1611. While in China he read Ricci’s book and introduced it to Korea by way of his encyclopedic work *Jibong yuseol*, a twenty-volume introduction to China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Western world.[[5]](#footnote-5) This was the first documented introduction of Western books into Korea and Ricci’s *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* soon attracted the attention of Neo-Confucian scholars.

Among the many envoys who came into contact with the Jesuits in China were Suh Myong-Yong, Hong Yang-Ho, Hong Tae-Yong, Park Che-Ke, Lee Tok-Mu, Lee I-Myong, and Ryu Teuk-Kong. Crown Prince So-Hyeon visited Beijing in 1644 and brought back a number of books on Catholicism and other topics. These were given to him as gifts by one of the Jesuits in Beijing who had hoped to establish a closer relationship with Korea. Unfortunately, upon his return to Korea the Crown Prince fell ill and died and the books and other gifts were destroyed upon the advice of an unsympathetic shaman. In spite of this setback the ideas of Catholicism were attractive to many reform-minded scholars who “accepted monotheism as a refreshing alternative to the non-theistic concepts of Neo-Confucianism.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Two significant movements developed from this contact between Catholicism and Neo-Confucianism. The first was the emergence of the *Shilhak* or Practical Learning school of thought among Neo-Confucian scholars who wanted to reform Korean society by accepting selected Western ideas concerning philosophy, religion, and science. They studied the books brought from China, all of which were written in Chinese. A number of these books were written by the Jesuits and some were later translated into Korean. Ricci’s *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* was one such book. It was first read in Chinese and then later in the nineteenth century appeared in Korean translation.

The second movement was the *Kanghakhoe* academic seminars started in 1779. This was a smaller group within the *Shilhak* movement who tried to bring together the ideas of Neo-Confucianism, the idealism of the Chinese philosopher Wang Yang-Ming, and the teachings of Catholicism.[[7]](#footnote-7) The group met at a Buddhist temple and its associated hermitage. Many members of the group came from one family and included the brothers Chung Yak-Chon (1754–1816), Chung Yak-Yong (1762–1836) better known as Tasan, and Chung Yak-Jong (1760–1861), who was later martyred. Also included in the group were two brothers-in-law of Chung Yak-Chon, Lee Pyok and Lee Sung-Heun. A cousin of Chung Yak-Chon also joined the group.[[8]](#footnote-8)

From this small group came the first Korean book to be printed in the Korean script—*hangul*—a theology text by Chung Yak-Jong, the *Chu-gyo-yo-ji* (“The Essentials of the Lord’s Teaching”).[[9]](#footnote-9) The book appeared in two volumes in 1795 and was a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine from the Confucian and Korean perspective. Chung Yak-Jong also collaborated with Kim Kon-Sun on another book, *Song-gyo-jon-so* (“The Complete Book of the Holy Teaching”), which was published in 1801. Lee Pyok wrote *Song-gyo-yo-ji* (“Essentials of the Holy Teaching”), which was published in 1784, and in 1786 his *Chou-ju-gong-ga* (“Hymn of the Lord’s Adoration”) was published. This latter work consisted of a catechism and hymns.

By far the most prolific of these early Catholic writers was Chung Yak-Yong, whose pen name was Tasan. He was a Korean renaissance man who served the government in a number of capacities, including deputy secretary of the cabinet, associate deputy of the Ministry of Justice, and director of the Ministry of Defense. He wrote on so many subjects that his collected works number an astounding 476 volumes covering the following topics: “astronomy, geography, mathematics, medical science, military science, ship building technique, farm land system, state examination, government administration, taxation regulations, transportation, and others.”[[10]](#footnote-10) He was an essayist, philosopher, calligrapher, poet, artist, economist, political theorist, and lay theologian. His most important religious work was *Chu-kyo-yo-ji* (“The Essence of Catholicism”). It was first circulated in manuscript form in 1801 and appeared in print in 1864. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a highly creative period for Catholic theology both because of the works brought back from China and the works written in Korean by members of the *Shilhak* School and the *Kanghakhoe* academic seminar group.

**The Chinese Rites Controversy**

At first it appeared as if the Catholic faith would flourish in the late Joseon period, but events were taking place in Beijing and in Rome that radically altered the fortunes of the Catholic community in Korea. These events were centered in what has come to be known as the Chinese Rites Controversy. When Ricci and the other Jesuits established their mission in Beijing in 1601 they sought to adapt the Christian faith to Chinese cultural traditions. They wore the silk gowns of the Chinese literati, they used the vernacular Chinese in the liturgy, they refused to build huge gothic-style churches but rather worshipped in churches that blended in with the prevailing architecture, and they wrote all of their books and tracts in classical Chinese script. In addition, they were experts in various sciences, including astronomy, geography, and military science. In fact, the Jesuits were experts in gun manufacturing techniques, a point that was greatly appreciated by the Chinese emperor. They were also skilled diplomats and this worked to their advantage when they entered into negotiations with other countries on behalf of China. Most significantly, however, was that they permitted new converts to fully participate in the Confucian ancestral rites. From the Jesuit point of view, these rites were an essential part of the Chinese culture and they were nothing more than a way of venerating the ancestors. The Jesuits also displayed the *Jing Tian* (“Revere Heaven”) tablets on their churches. Although the original inscription was done with the imperial brush by the fifty-fourth Celestial Master Daoist priest Zhang Jizong, the Jesuits understood this to be the Chinese way of saying “revere God.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Central to Ricci’s missionary methodology was the Confucian concept of filial piety, which Ricci understood well through his acquaintance with the classic four books. Since he was fluent in both spoken and written Chinese and had translated these four books from Chinese into Latin, Ricci knew that there was an intimate connection between filial piety and the ancestral rites. In his discussion of filial piety, Confucius asserted “That parents when alive, should be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The sacrifices were not a form of worship of the spirits of the dead, but rather a form of veneration and respect for the ancestors. Participation in the ancestral rites was one element in following the moral virtue of filial piety.

However, there was more to the ancestral rites than filial piety alone, for all of the Confucian moral virtues were interrelated. It was not enough to simply perform the rites at the proper time; it was also important that filial piety—and by extension the ancestral rites—be carried out with a proper attitude. Confucius said that “The filial piety of now-a-days means the support of one’s parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the way of support; without reverence, what is there to distinguish one support given from another?”[[13]](#footnote-13) Here we can see the importance of another Confucian virtue, the rectification of names. The reality and what is spoken of must be the same. Rectification of names was a means whereby one’s thoughts and attitudes were given expression through social actions. The cultivation of the inner person necessarily resulted in the cultivation of society. This is why the concept of *jen* is so important in Confucian society. *Jen*, usually translated as “human heartedness” or “humaneness”, refers to the proper attitude that one should have toward others. Hence the equally important phrase “to be human is to be humane.”

Participation in the ancestral rites, therefore, was not simply a matter of ritual. It was an expression of an entire way of life, or worldview if you will. Behind the ritual was the concept of filial piety, and behind that was the practice of the rectification of names, and behind that was the understanding of “human heartedness” and the belief that a true human being was one who was humane—to one’s parents, to one’s family, to one’s society, to one’s nation, and indeed, toward the entire world. The ancestral rites were a visible sign that one was a participant in the Confucian worldview. Participation in the rites was a way of saying “I belong.” From the perspective of the Confucian intelligentsia in Beijing it was inconceivable that one would refuse to participate in the ancestral rites, for to do so would be to reject one’s parents, family, society, and nation.

Ricci and his Jesuit colleagues understood that the significance of the ancestral rites involved more than merely making offerings and bowing before the ancestral tablets. They also understood that the rites were veneration rather than worship. One worshipped in a Buddhist temple; one practiced veneration in a Confucian shrine.

Shortly after the Jesuits began their mission work among the upper class intelligentsia in Beijing, the Dominicans and the Franciscans also began mission work in China. However, these two orders worked primarily among the uneducated lower classes in the largely rural areas of the country. Within this context the majority of the people practiced a kind of folk religion which was a mixture of Confucian ethics, Buddhist doctrine, Daoist ritual, and belief in local gods coupled with shamanism. The lower classes also practiced ancestral rites. However, for them these rites were a way of insuring that the ghosts of the ancestors did not cause any harm in this present life. The sacrificial offerings made were a way of placating the ancestral spirits commonly referred to as ghosts. Thus for the Confucian intelligentsia the ancestors were passive. The rites were simply a way of remembering the ancestors. For the rural peasants the ancestors were active. The rites were a way of appeasing the ghosts of the ancestors. For the Confucians in Beijing the rites were a form of veneration; for the peasants in the countryside the rites were a form of worship. A similar disagreement arose concerning the display of the *Jing Tian* tablets on the churches. “How,” asked the Dominicans and the Franciscans, “can you Jesuits display an obviously Daoist inscription on your churches?”

It was not long until a theological debate ensued between the Jesuits on the one side and the Dominicans and Franciscans on the other. Both sides appealed to Rome for a positive verdict concerning their missionary practices. Further complicating the matter was the fact that most of the Jesuits were Portuguese or serving under the banner of the Portuguese, as in the case of Italians such as Ricci and Spaniards such as Diego de Pantoja. The Vatican was worried about the independence of the Portuguese Jesuits and soon the Vicars General in Rome decided to rein them in and put them firmly under the Church’s control. The Vicars General elicited the support of the French in this struggle. What was originally a difference of opinion concerning missionary methods developed into a theological debate and finally ended up a full-blown political conflict. Liam Matthew Brockey describes the Chinese Rites Controversy as follows:

The flashpoint for this jurisdictional battle was the Chinese Rites. The theological disputes over these practices were used as a wedge in the struggle for control of the mission church…. Innocent XII appointed a set of theologians to reconsider the issue in the 1690s…. In China the Vicars Apostolic had aligned themselves with Dominicans and some of the French Jesuits to condemn the rites, declaring the ceremonies to be superstitious and demanding that the men of the Vice-Province be censured for permitting idolatry. The Franciscans were divided on the issue, with some friars agreeing with the Jesuit position—though none too vociferously. The cardinals of the Propaganda Fide entered the lists, confirming the decision taken by the Sorbonne theologians in 1700 to prohibit the rites. After seven years of pondering the issue, the Roman Inquisition issued a negative verdict. In the face of so many condemnations, Clement XI sealed the issue on November 20, 1704, by publishing a brief that prohibited some of the Jesuits’ policies—including the tolerance of the rites and the display of the *Jing Tian* tablets on their churches.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 1705 a Papal legate was sent to the Chinese emperor to communicate the Church decision to ban the ancestral rites. This was reinforced on March 19, 1715 when Clement XI issued a papal bull which stated in part that “No Chinese Catholics are allowed to worship ancestors in their familial temples” and “Whether at home, in the cemetery, or during the time of a funeral, a Chinese Catholic is not allowed to perform the ritual of ancestor worship. He is not allowed to do so even if he is in the company with non-Christians. Such a ritual is heathen in nature regardless of the circumstances.”[[15]](#footnote-15) As if this were not enough, in 1742 Benedict XIV issued another papal bull in which he reiterated Clement XI’s decree and required that all missionaries to China take an oath promising not to even discuss the issue again. Clearly there was no place for the worship of ghosts within orthodox Catholic liturgy and practice. This also meant, however, that there was no place for the veneration of ancestors either.

The Chinese response was swift in coming. Following Clement XI’s initial decree the Emperor issued an edict in 1721 expelling the missionaries and forbidding them to engage in any further missionary efforts in China. The Emperor wrote, “I have concluded that the Westerners are petty indeed. It is impossible to reason with them because they do not understand larger issues as we understand them in China. There is not a single Westerner versed in Chinese works, and their remarks are often incredible and ridiculous.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The Jesuits’ bold missionary experiment in China had come to end.

Although the Chinese Rites Controversy did not involve Korea at that time, there were those within Korea who were opposed to the *Shilhak* School and to the study of Western books. Factionalismamong the various movements had long been a problem in Korean society and the late Joseon period was no exception. There were those such as Hong Nak-An, a conservative who opposed all Western influences, who approached the royal family and urged them to reject Catholic ideas. Hong’s influence was so strong that many in the royal household and among the upper classes began to turn against the Catholics and finally it was forbidden by official government order to read any Western books. Those who had such books were ordered to destroy them either by burning or by throwing them into the river. Hong was undoubtedly aware of what was taking place in China concerning the prohibition for Catholics to participate in the ancestral rites. Thus he wrote to the king, “This vicious doctrine teaches that there is no parent and King, thereby corrupting the serene ethics and order. These evil influences prevail rapidly and cause fanaticism among the ignorant folks. Your honor, you know those afflictions and witness the decay of humanity into dogs. It must be stopped now.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Although we may tend to judge Hong Nak-An rather harshly by today’s liberal democratic standards, in his own time he understood very well the significance of the ancestral rites in Korean society. Like Ricci and the Jesuits, he knew that to reject the ancestral rites was to reject the Confucian worldview and way of life. The veneration of ancestors was central to the entire Korean social and political system and it was reinforced through the Confucian academies. Each *hyanggyo* and *sowon* consisted of a lecture hall and associated buildings where the actual classes were held, and a shrine to the Confucian scholars where the rituals of veneration took place. Enshrined here were the ancestral tablets of Confucius, Chu Hsi, and various other Chinese and Korean scholars. Large wealthy families had ancestral halls, and smaller ancestral shrines were found throughout the countryside. The ritual veneration of ancestors served to legitimize and reinforce the social system. It was a way of saying “I belong,” “I am a member of the family,” and “I am a Korean.”

It was not until some time between November 1790 and January 1791 that the Catholics in Korea heard about the papal prohibitions against participation in the ancestral rites. Upon receiving this news there was no doubt that they would have to comply with the official Church teaching. Devout Catholics either burned or buried the ancestral tablets and they refused to participate in the ancestral rites in any way. This was, of course, a direct affront to the state cult of ancestral veneration and by implication a challenge to the authority of the state itself. Hong Nak-An felt vindicated by the behavior of the Catholics, and the official suppression and persecution of Catholics began.

**The Persecution of Catholics in Korea**

There were four major persecutions—the persecution of 1801, the persecution of 1839, the great persecution of 1846, and the great persecution of 1866.[[18]](#footnote-18) In addition, there were also smaller persecutions in 1815 and 1827, and even though the persecutions officially ended in 1866, there were isolated incidents of violence against Catholics as late as 1908.[[19]](#footnote-19) One of these on the island of Jeju in 1901 claimed the lives of some 300 Catholics. Although the number who died in these persecutions will probably never be accurately known, it is estimated that between 8,000 and 10,000 Catholics lost their lives.

The persecutions were so intense that many Catholics recanted and were either released outright, given reasonably light prison sentences, or sent into exile. For those who stood fast in their faith the final outcome was torture and death by beheading or by other means such as starvation. The first persecution of 1801 virtually decimated the *Kanghakhoe* academic seminar group. The fates of the three Chong brothers serve to illustrate this. Chong Yak-Jong, in whose house a number of Catholic books were discovered, refused to recant his Catholic faith and was beheaded. Chong Yak-Chon recanted his faith and was sent into exile on the remote island of Huksan-do where he died. Chong Yak-Yong, Tasan, also recanted his faith and was sent into exile in Kangjin, a remote area in southern Korea. His period of exile was a fruitful one, however, for it was during these nineteen years that he did much of his most important writing. He later repented for recanting his faith, and, in the words of one historian “died peacefully.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Other members of the group who recanted their faith included Lee Sung-Heun and Lee Pyok, both of whom were pillars of the early church and who even wrote theological books. That such early leaders of the Church would renounce their faith serves to illustrate the intensity of the persecutions.

The persecution of 1801 was especially severe due to two letters which were intercepted by government officials. The first by Yu Hang-Geom and others requested officials in Beijing to send Western naval forces to Korea to enforce the freedom of religion. The second by Hwang Sa-Yeong made the same request. What made the second letter unique is that it was written on silk and at the age of seventeen Hwang Sa-Yeong astonished the king by the high score he received on the government examination. That one destined for such a successful career in government service should request the intervention of foreign naval forces was unthinkable. These two letters served to reinforce the view that Catholics were not only disloyal to society in their refusal to observe the ancestral rituals, but that they were disloyal to the state itself and thus should be eliminated.

Theologically the persecutions were highly significant for the Catholic Church in Korea. The Church was robbed of its educated leadership and many of the books which they had written or which had come from China were confiscated and destroyed. This brought about an abrupt shift in the direction of the Catholic Church. Whereas the leadership of the early Church was from the upper *yangban* class, the leadership of the Church of the persecutions and in the following years was from the lower classes.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As a result of the harsh persecutions, many Catholics retreated to remote areas in the mountains to live. Since they were marginalized by society they turned to trades which were considered to be extremely low class. One such trade was the making of traditional pots for storing kimchi, pepper paste, bean paste, and other food items. This type of pottery, known as *onggi*, was considered to be rough and unfit for use by members of the upper classes. By taking up this trade the Catholics had one advantage that their persecutors had not taken into consideration—freedom of movement. The potters who made *onggi* ware were also traders and salesmen and they had to move from village to village to sell their products. In this way Catholics were able to communicate with one another and also carry forbidden literature from one village to another. Another element in this freedom of movement was the spread of the faith from place to place so that “by 1894, 20 years after the end of the persecution, the numbers of believers had reached 20,000—approximately the same levels as before the persecution.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Catholics were guaranteed religious freedom by the 1899 “Treaty with Catholic Believers” and the “Missionary Treaty” of 1904. From that time onward the Church experienced a steady but slow growth. However, the damage had been done, and the Church, which now consisted of membership drawn largely from the lower classes, retreated to the sidelines of Korean society and culture. As a marginalized group it became focused upon survival, maintenance of the institutional Church, and encouraging the devotional life of its members.

**The Shinto Shrine Controversy of the 1930s**

In 1935 the question of what to do about the ancestors arose again when the Japanese occupation authorities mandated that all Koreans must bow before the Shinto shrines. Several things were different from the earlier controversy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, the Catholics had now been joined by the Protestants, and it was now the Protestants who were in the numerical majority and were increasingly occupying significant positions in Korean society and culture. Second, the Protestants were divided on the issue: some—such as the Methodists—accepted the Japanese argument that the rituals were a state ceremony and were in no way the worship of spirits; others—such as the Presbyterians—staunchly resisted the Japanese on the issue and many suffered imprisonment and even death. Third, the spirits enshrined in the Shinto shrines—if indeed there were any spirits there at all—were foreign spirits. They were outside the familial and national bonds. Fourth, as the Catholics faced this issue from 1935 through 1939, they were still under the Vatican ban to participate in the Confucian ancestral rites, and although the persecutions had now ceased, they were marginalized within Korean society for their refusal to properly venerate their ancestors.

The Methodists were more prone to accept the Japanese position on the issue for two reasons. First, most of the theologians in the Korean Methodist Church at that time had studied in Japan and were thus familiar with Japanese culture and the distinction between religious Shinto and state Shinto. Second, they were also progressive in their interpretation of the Bible, having been influenced by theological ideas from continental Europe, especially Germany and Switzerland. They did not feel bound to a conservative literalistic interpretation of the Bible concerning the prohibition of the worship of idols. The Presbyterians, on the other hand, were influenced by the missionaries, most of whom strongly opposed bowing at the Shinto shrines. Most of the theologians in the Presbyterian churches at the time had also studied in the United States under conservative professors who took a literalistic view of the Bible on the issue. However, there was also another reason for the Presbyterian resistance: they made a clear distinction between the Confucian ancestral rites and the rites at the Shinto shrines. From the Presbyterian perspective “Shinto shrine worship is not so much a reverence for the ancestor (as in the Korean rite), but rather a reverence for the god and prayer to him. That is why Shinto shrine worship is called the reappearance of the ancient Korean gods.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus the Presbyterians interpreted the Shinto shrine rites to be a violation of the commandment concerning the worship of the Lord God. The *kami*, or spirits, of the deceased were understood to be spiritual beings who were worshipped rather than merely venerated. In terms of the original Chinese Rites Controversy, the Presbyterians were siding with the Franciscans and the Dominicans rather than with the Jesuits. In the Shinto shrine controversy, which lasted from 1935 until the end of World War II in 1945, it was not the Catholics who faced persecution, but rather the Protestants, especially the Presbyterians.

One of the Presbyterians who strongly resisted the Japanese on this issue was the Rev. Chu Ki-Chul, who served as the minister of a conservative Presbyterian church in Pyongyang. He was arrested on a number of occasions for refusing to bow at the Shinto shrines. Prior to his final arrest in 1940 he preached his famous sermon “My Five-Fold Prayer” in which he said, “Ah! The name of Jesus cast to the ground! Pyongyang! Pyongyang! Jerusalem of the cultured East! Glory has left you…. Dear Christian friends, die righteously and live righteously. To throw away righteousness, the righteousness that comes from Jesus, is to live not even up to the level of a dog or beast.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Following four years of torture and deprivation in prison, Chu Ki-Chul died as a martyr on April 21, 1944. Chu’s argument against bowing at the Shinto shrines was based upon a rejection of idolatry which in turn, in his view, was also a rejection of Jesus and Christian righteousness.

From the Japanese perspective, however, bowing at the Shinto shrines was an expression of filial piety toward the Emperor and his family, who were in effect the parents of the entire Japanese family. The Japanese reasoned that since Korea “was now part of the Japanese empire” all Koreans should show filial piety by participating in the rituals at the Shinto shrines. From the Japanese viewpoint the rituals at the Shinto shrines were similar to the veneration of ancestors which took place at the Confucian shrines. These rituals were a way of saying “I belong” and “I am a member of the family.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

While the Methodists and the Presbyterians worked out different “solutions” to the Shinto shrine problem, the Catholics in Korea took their cues from Rome. The Vatican’s Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith studied the issue and made their decision on the basis of two main points. First, Catholics in Korea had suffered terribly during the persecutions of the 1800s and the Vatican was not inclined to have an already weakened and socially marginalized Church go through another round of persecutions. Second, the Church authorities in Rome declared that the Shinto rites were a state ritual rather than a religious ritual. Therefore the Church decided that “It would permit the worship of Shinto gods as long as it was an expression of patriotic respect to the Japanese imperial family and not religious.”[[26]](#footnote-26) This decision was not made hastily, however. In 1932 the Catholic Church in Japan consulted with the Japanese government on the issue and was told that the state Shinto was purely a sign of allegiance to the nation; it was not the worship of spirits or gods. The Vatican took this statement at face value. The Vicars Apostolic then withdrew their objections to the Shinto rites and the Papal Nuncio gave his approval. Finally, in 1936 “the Japanese dispensation was extended to the Church in colonialized Joseon.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

But how was this received in Korea? To begin with, “This decision was ironic given the history of the Rites Controversy and the fact that the papal ban on the Rites was still in force.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Many understood the decision as an insult to the Korean national spirit. At least one missionary—Monsignor J. E. Morris M.M.—was forced to resign his position as Prefect Apostolic of Pyongyang and leave Korea because of his refusal to bow at the Shinto shrines.[[29]](#footnote-29) A number of sisters resigned their positions in church-operated institutions such as schools and hospitals and there were isolated instances of clergy who also resisted the Japanese order. However, most Catholics in Korea complied with the Vatican decision and were spared from persecution.

The issue was finally resolved for Catholics on December 8, 1939 when Pope Pius XII rescinded the earlier papal decisions against the ancestral rites. The key phrase in the Pope’s decree was that “The oath on the Chinese rites, which was prescribed by Benedict XIV, is not fully in accord with recent regulations and is superfluous.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Not only was the original ban on participation in the Confucian ancestral rites now lifted, but any ambiguity concerning bowing before the Shinto shrines was also removed. Korean Catholics were now free to venerate the ancestors without any fear of being accused of placating ghosts. Korean Catholics were also free to show respect to the Japanese imperial family and not be unduly concerned about any *kami* or spirits that might be lurking somewhere in the vicinity. It appeared that the issue of ancestor veneration was now settled once and for all.

**Remembering the Martyr Saints**

In East Asia, however, the issue of ancestor veneration is never settled once and for all, for the ancestors have a way of coming back. This they have done for Korean Catholics in their remembrance of the martyr saints.[[31]](#footnote-31) There are some forty major locations throughout Korea where these saints are remembered.[[32]](#footnote-32) Some, such as Choldusan and Saenamto in Seoul, are elaborate structures or complexes which include memorials, a chapel and, in the case of Choldusan, a museum. Others are less elaborate, with only a memorial stone, an outdoor altar for mass, and perhaps a small chapel. Still others, especially in the rural areas, are simple graves nestled among the trees. What they all have in common is that they are sites of intense devotional practice for Korean Catholics.

What has happened is that the Catholic Church in Korea has transferred its filial piety from both the ancestors of Confucianism and spirits of the deceased (or the imperial family as the case may be) in Japanese Shinto, to the martyrs of the Church. Contemporary Catholics in Korea are among the most devout in the world when it comes to honoring the martyrs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This devotion reached a highpoint on May 6, 1984 when approximately one million people gathered in Yoido Plaza in Seoul to celebrate the bicentennial of the Church in Korea. Pope John Paul II presided over the canonization of 103 of these martyrs.[[33]](#footnote-33) The significance of this event becomes clear when it is realized that “this canonization was the first to take place outside of St. Peter’s Basilica since the time of the Avignon Papacy.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Although largely unknown outside Korea, these saints and other martyrs are venerated as the ancestors of the Church in Korea. While the ancestral rites at the Confucian shrines are usually held only twice a year, in the spring and autumn, or on the birth dates and death dates of the deceased, masses are celebrated at these martyrs’ shrines on a weekly or even daily basis. As for the Shinto rites which ceased in 1945, one thing was certain—the ancestral spirits being worshipped or venerated were foreign ancestors; they were outside the Korean familial bonds. The ancestors who are venerated today by the Catholics of Korea are members of the family.

What does it mean to be a member of the family? The book *Lives of 103 Martyr Saints of Korea* provides a revealing answer. Following the table of contents and a second title page adorned with the Rose of Sharon, the national flower of Korea, is a two-page reproduction of a painting of “Mount Paektu and Lake Ch-onji” with the following description in italics:

*On this mountain, tradition has it that King Tan-gun founded Korea in the year 2333 B.C. He was not only a man of political acumen but also a religious leader of his people. Thus this mountain and lake have been held sacred in the eyes of the Korean people. For 5,000 years generations of Koreans have gazed steadily into the heavens to adore the Supreme Being whom they inherently believed in. This Mount was believed to be the holy intermediary place connecting earth with heaven. The name of the mountain means “white head,” derived from the ever-present snow which covers its summit. Ancient Koreans were fond of wearing white clothing and called themselves Paedalkyore, that is, ‘Sons of Light.’ They were peace-loving people and built small villages along the clear streams flowing from the mountain, where they continually worshipped the all-seeing God.*[[35]](#footnote-35)

Immediately following is another two-page photo, this one of “Mount Ch’onjin and the Ch’onjinam Valley.” It also carries a description, partially in italics and partially in regular print:

*Ch’onjin means “the heavenly truth.” In this mountain Korean scholars began to look for the eternal truth themselves. With neither missionaries nor priests, the pagan scholars studied the Christian doctrine in 1779, and they eventually founded the Catholic Church in Korea.*

This mountain is the birthplace of the Catholic Church in Korea, where the tombs of the 5 Founding Fathers are located.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The ancestors of the Catholic Church in Korea are clearly identified as being ethnically and culturally Korean through their being descendants of the mythical Tangun and through their relationship to Paektu Mountain. These ancestors are further identified through the relationship to Ch’onjin Mountain and their tombs located on the slopes of this mountain. All Korean Catholics are descended from these Five Founding Fathers of the Church. Significantly, Paektu Mountain is associated with Shamanism and Ch’onjin Mountain with Buddhism as it was the site of an unknown Buddhist hermitage named Ch’onjin-am. The strong Confucian emphasis upon ancestors firmly places the Catholic Church of Korea in that line of religious and ethical traditions which have influenced Korea—Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism in its Neo-Confucian form, with Christianity being the most recent tradition in that line.

There can be little doubt that the devotion shown at the martyrs’ shrines scattered throughout the country is an expression of filial piety to the original ancestors of the Church as well as the martyrs and saints who have so faithfully carried on the family line. To pray or to participate in a mass at one of the sites of martyrdom is, for Korean Catholics, also a way of saying “I belong” and “I am a member of the family.”

The words of Julia Ching ring true when she asserts that “Filial piety is the first of all Confucian virtues…. The ancestral cult has continued throughout the centuries, from time immemorial, to strengthen these sentiments of filial piety and familial loyalty.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The Catholic Church in Korea has moved the ancestral cult from outside the church door and brought it inside the church door and transformed it into a form of Christian practice and devotion. This would seem to imply that no matter what happens, the ancestral rites will continue.

Unlike the Chinese Rites Controversy and the later Shinto shrine controversy, this transformation has served, not to oppose the Church, but rather to strengthen it.

As Choe Suk-U states, the persecutions of Korean Catholics “meant the victory of the church.”[[38]](#footnote-38) This would seem to imply that no matter what happens, the Church will continue as well. Therefore in the present-day devotion to the martyrs and saints, the Catholic Church of Korea has, for now at least, resolved the tension between ancestor veneration and Christian faith and practice.

Protestants, in their more cynical moments, may utter criticism concerning the Catholic solution to the question of ancestor veneration, citing that the Bible nowhere sanctions such practices within the churches. Indeed, these words from Holy Writ would seem to support such a view: “Get rid of the foreign gods that you have; purify yourselves and put on clean clothes. We are going to leave here and go to Bethel” (Genesis 35:2-3). However, these words from the same chapter of Genesis suggest otherwise:

And God said to him, “I am Almighty God. Have many children. Nations will be descended from you, and you will be the ancestor of kings. I will give you the land which I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, and I will also give it to your descendants after you.” Then God left him. Jacob set up a memorial stone and consecrated it by pouring wine and olive oil on it. He named the place Bethel. (Genesis 35:11-15)

Although this incident took place in a non-Confucian society, it serves to illustrate the intertwining of prohibitions against idolatry, the importance of filial piety, and the human need to remember the ancestors through visible memorials and rituals. It also serves to demonstrate that the worship of idols and the practice of filial piety and ancestor veneration are not the same. Unfortunately, this distinction was not always obvious, with tragic consequences for Catholics during their first century in Korea.

At the very least, it seems safe to say that ancestor veneration will *always* be an issue in one way or another for Christian practice in the Confucian societies of East Asia. The experience of the Catholic Church in Korea can prove instructive in terms of what not to do (the Chinese Rites Controversy and its application to Korea), what one might possibly do (the differing Catholic and Protestant responses to the Shinto shrine question), and what one can successfully do (the memorials to the martyrs and saints).

*Daniel J. Adams is professor of theology emeritus at Hanil University in Jeonbuk, Korea and guest professor of theology at the Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary in Seoul.*

1. There are several biographies of Matteo Ricci. A popular biography is Vincent Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West* (New York: Dutton, 1955), while a more scholarly work is Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984). See also Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583–1610*, trans. Louis Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matteo Ricci, SJ, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tien-chu Shih-i*) [Varites Sinologiques—New Series 72], trans. Douglas Lancashire & Peter Hu Kuo-chen, SJ, ed. Edward J. Malatesta, SJ (Taipei/Paris/Hong Kong: Ricci Institute, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 42-44, from the “Translators’ Introduction.” *Shang Ti* means “Lord of Heaven” and Ricci used this name for God. This was the name used by the Confucian scholars in Beijing. See also Ignatius Suh, “The Confucian-Christian Dialogue: A Comparative Theology from the Yi Dynasty in Korea,” unpublished manuscript, 2007, 101-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Choi Jai-Keun, *Early Catholicism in Korea* (Seoul: Handl Publishing House, 2005), 27 and 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 27; John S. Bowman, *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James Huntley Grayson, “A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea,” in *Christianity in Korea*, eds. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Research Foundation of Korean Church History, *Inside the Catholic Church of Korea*, trans. Patrick McMullan (Seoul: Research Foundation of Korean Church History, 2010), 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia—Volume II: 1500-1900* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hector Diaz, trans., *A Korean Theology—Chu-Gyo Yo-Ji: Essentials of the Lord’s Teaching by Chong Yak-Jong Augustine (1760-1801)*, Immense, Switzerland: Neue Zeitschrift fur Missons Wissenschaft, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Min Kyoung-Bae, *A History of Christian Churches in Korea* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2005), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Analects*, 2:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Analects*, 2:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 185. See also David Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal: Stoyler Verlag, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *China in Transition, 1517-1911*, trans. and complied by Li Den-Jen (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1969), 22-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hong Nak-An in 1781 as quoted in Min Kyoung-Bae, *A History of Christian Churches in Korea*, 39. I have made slight editorial changes in the original quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. These persecutions are described in detail in Joseph Chang-mun Kim and John Tae-sun Chung, eds., *Catholic Korea: Yesterday and Today* (Seoul: Catholic Korea Publishing Co., 1964), 48-316, and in Choi Jai-Keun, *Early Catholicism in Korea.* It should be noted that there are slight differences in dates and in the Romanization of Korean names from one author to another. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Research Foundation of Korean Church History, *Inside the Catholic Church of Korea*, 201-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Min Kyoung-Bae, *A History of Christian Churches in Korea*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cho Kwang, “Human Relations Expressed in Vernacular Catholic Writings of the Late Choson Dynasty,” in *Christianity in Korea*, eds. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Timothy S. Lee, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Research Foundation of Korean Church History, *Inside the Catholic Church of Korea*, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kim Yang-Son, “Compulsory Shinto Shrine Worship and Persecution,” in *Korea and Christianity*, ed. Yu Chai-Shin (Seoul/Berkeley/Toronto: Korean Scholar Press, 1996), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Chu Ki-Chul, “‘My Five-Fold Prayer’—The Last Testament of the Rev. Chu Ki-Chul, Martyr During the Japanese Occupation of Korea,” in *Testimonies of Faith in Korea*, ed. Chang Sang, Suh Kwang-Sun, Park Keun-Won and Kim Yong-Bock (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1989), 94-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The Japanese failed to understand that Koreans did not want to belong to their family. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Yun Sung-Bum, “Korean Christianity and Ancestor Worship,” *Korea Journal*, vol. 5, no. 13 (February 1973), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Research Foundation of Korean Church History, *Inside the Catholic Church of Korea*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, “Plane Compertum,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (Romae: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1939), 32-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Not all the martyrs have been canonized. However, in this study the term “saints” includes the non-canonized martyrs as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Chang Young-Tun, *Hankuk ch’o-ki ch’on-ju-kyo-hwei-ui yeo-chong* (“Journey of the Early Korean Catholic Church”). (Wonju: Han-Kyul Press, 2000). A number of these forty locations include multiple sites in the immediate vicinity. Therefore the total number of sites is considerably higher than forty. See also Kim Chang-Seok and Lee Choong-Woo, *Holy Places of the Korean Martyrs* (Seoul: Lay Apostolate Council of Korea, 1986) and Bicentennial Episcopal Commission, *The Catholic Church in Korea* (Seoul: Bicentennial Episcopal Commission, 1984), 11, and Kim Jin-Soo and Baik Nam-Sik, *Home of Korean Catholic Martyrs: Chonju* (Jeonju: Diocese of Chonju, n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Kim Chang-Seok Thaddeus, *Lives of 103 Martyr Saints of Korea* (Seoul: Catholic Publishing House, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Research Foundation of Korean Church History, *Inside the Catholic Church of Korea*, 156-157. The Avignon Papacy lasted from 1309 to 1378. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Kim Chang-Seok Thaddeus, *Lives of 103 Martyr Saints of Korea*, ix-x. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., xi-xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Kodansha International and Institute of Oriental Religions, Sophia University, 1977), 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Choe Sok-U, “Korean Catholicism Yesterday and Today,” in *The Founding of Catholic Tradition in Korea*, ed. Yu Chai-Shin (Mississauga, ON: Korean and Related Studies Press, 1996), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)