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Jesuit Accommodation and Early Chosŏn Catholicism: Text-Mediated Reception Without Resident Missionaries

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Abstract

Late eighteenth-century Chosŏn Korea presents a distinctive case in the history of Christian missions: a Catholic community emerged without the sustained presence of foreign missionaries. This article examines that distinctiveness through the lens of text-mediated local reception. Since the seventeenth century, the writings of Matteo Ricci had rendered Christian doctrine intelligible within a Confucian framework through Jesuit accommodation. In late Chosŏn, these texts moved beyond scholarly curiosity and became a medium of criticism, moral reflection, and, for some readers, communal religious practice, particularly among politically marginalized Namin (Southern) circles and *Silhak* (Practical Learning)-oriented thinkers. The reception of Catholicism unfolded in stages. Sinographic texts composed by Jesuit missionaries were first understood within an existing Confucian horizon and then selectively appropriated by local readers. In some cases, this process led to baptism, early lay organization, and communal religious life. Through comparison with China, Japan, and Vietnam, this study argues that Chosŏn represents a distinctive case in which translated Christian texts, local appropriation, and community formation converged without a sustained missionary presence. It further shows that this process was shaped not by one-way transmission alone, but by the active agency of local readers and a bidirectional process of cultural translation.

Keywords: Matteo Ricci; Jesuit accommodation; cultural translation; text-mediated local reception; *Tianzhu Shiyi*; early Korean Catholicism; ancestral rites controversy

1. Introduction

The emergence of a Christian community without resident missionaries is a rare phenomenon in the history of Christian mission. In late eighteenth-century Chosŏn, however, a Catholic community began to take shape among Confucian literati who had come into contact with Catholic writings and *Sŏhak* (西學), or Western Learning, transmitted through Ming–Qing China. In Chosŏn, *Sŏhak* referred broadly to the body of knowledge through which literati engaged with Western science, technology, geography, and, for some readers, Catholic thought. The Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) was governed by Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, and its political and intellectual life was organized around Confucian scholarship, civil examinations, and ritual obligations grounded in filial piety. Although Western Learning materials had circulated in Chosŏn since the early seventeenth century, by the late eighteenth century some Sinographic Catholic texts were no longer read only as foreign scholarship; for some readers, they had become media through which Christian teaching was read and discussed and, in some cases, translated into communal religious practice.

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The writings of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Diego de Pantoja (1571–1618), composed for Chinese Confucian readers, reached Chosŏn as part of this broader circulation. In Chosŏn, they drew both sympathy and opposition. For some readers, they moved beyond intellectual curiosity and contributed to conversion, baptism, and early communal religious practice. This article examines how these Sinographic Catholic texts became consequential within particular late Chosŏn literati and lay networks, and how a primarily text-led process of reception generated both communal initiative and institutional limits in the absence of resident clergy.

The study approaches these questions through the concept of cultural translation. Cultural translation, as used here, refers to the process by which Christian claims become intelligible through the linguistic, conceptual, and symbolic resources of another culture. The term is used in a narrower sense than mere conformity or indiscriminate syncretism. It does not dissolve doctrinal difference into local custom. Rather, it describes a mode of mediation in which religious claims are expressed through categories already meaningful to their readers. Sanneh's account of translatability is especially useful for this study because it treats the receiving culture's linguistic and conceptual world as a legitimate site of reception rather than as a merely external setting (Sanneh 2009).

Scholarship on Ricci and Jesuit accommodation is extensive, especially in relation to China. Hsia (2010) remains central for Ricci's life and method, while Standaert (2001) and Brockey (2007) situate the Jesuit mission within a broader historical framework. On the Korean side, *Catholics and Anti-Catholicism in Chosŏn Korea* remains the most comprehensive English-language study of the early Catholic community (Baker and Rausch 2017). Korean-language scholarship has also produced substantial work on the formation of the early Catholic community, the reception of Western Learning, and Chosŏn engagement with *Tianzhu Shiyi* (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*), including studies by Cho Kwang, Yi Tong-hŭi, Kŭm Chang-t'ae, Kim Seonhee, and No Yong-p'il (Cho 2010; Kŭm 2012; T.-h. Yi 2013; No 2017; S. Kim 2023, 2025). Recent studies have expanded the field further. Seong (2024) analyzes the long-term historical consequences of the ancestral rites prohibition for Korean Christianity; Chŏng (2022) reconstructs the circulation of Western Learning and its place within the social and intellectual world of late Chosŏn; S. Kim (2023, 2025) demonstrates that Chosŏn engagement with Western Learning was often active and selective rather than merely derivative; and Tsai (2024) shows that early Chosŏn Catholicism was shaped by translated books as well as by Chinese Catholic historical memory and Beijing-centered mediation.

Building on these studies, this article focuses not on Catholicism as a dominant concern in late Chosŏn society as a whole, but on the more specific process by which translated Catholic texts became consequential for particular readers, networks, and forms of early community formation. Its contribution lies in bringing together three elements that are often treated separately: pre-accommodated Sinographic Catholic texts, the local social and intellectual conditions that shaped their reception, and the movement from textual study toward lay religious organization. In this more limited sense, the Chosŏn case clarifies both the productivity and the limits of text-mediated local reception.

Three questions guide the analysis. First, why did these texts prove consequential within particular *Silhak* (Practical Learning)-oriented literati circles of late Chosŏn? Second, what could a reception process led primarily by texts achieve, and where did it encounter its limits in the absence of resident clergy? Third, should the Chosŏn case be treated only as an anomaly in the history of mission, or does it illuminate a historically significant mode of Christian reception and early community formation? The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, regional context, and sources. Section 3 examines the theological foundations of Jesuit accommodation and the historical tensions in-

volved. Section 4 reconstructs the transmission of Western Learning and its text-mediated reception in late Chosŏn, with particular attention to the agency of politically marginalized intellectuals. Section 5 examines the mechanism and limits of cultural translation and situates the distinctiveness of the Chosŏn case within East Asia. Section 6 draws the main arguments together.

2. Conceptual Framework and Sources

2.1. Theoretical Framework and Regional Context

This study proceeds through historical interpretation of Christian reception in a cross-cultural setting. It examines how Christian discourse crossed cultural boundaries and took on local form within late Chosŏn society.

Cultural translation serves as the central analytical concept of this study. Building on Sanneh's account of translatability introduced above, this section applies this framework to Matteo Ricci's engagement with Confucian categories. That engagement was more than a tactical missionary adjustment; it was an effort to make Christian teaching conceivable within a non-European intellectual setting. This perspective helps explain how Ricci's writings made Christian discourse discussable within a Confucian horizon.

A second interpretive perspective comes from contextual theology, especially Bevans's account of how Christian meaning is reshaped by the historical and cultural situation of its recipients (Bevans 2002). This factor is significant because the Chosŏn case did not unfold through a unidirectional transmission of doctrine. Readers in late Chosŏn approached Catholic texts with concerns already shaped by Confucian learning, *Silhak* inquiry, and the tensions of late Chosŏn intellectual life. The reception of Ricci's writings therefore involved selection, reinterpretation, and uneven appropriation.

Text-mediated local reception refers to the specific process under consideration here. It denotes the convergence between texts that had already been adapted, the local social and intellectual conditions that shaped their reception, and the movement toward early community formation before resident clergy were available. In this convergence, the texts became consequential through local reception rather than at the moment of composition. The Chosŏn case therefore represents a distinctive configuration of reception. Walls's distinction between the indigenizing and pilgrim principles helps clarify a central tension in this pattern: the tension between local initiative and wider ecclesial authority (Walls 1996).

To clarify what was historically distinctive about this process, the study situates late Chosŏn within a broader East Asian context that includes China, Japan, and Vietnam. The comparison is selective and contrastive rather than comprehensive. Through this comparison, the study reconsiders the distinctive features of late Chosŏn Catholicism: the primacy of texts as a medium of transmission, the autonomy of lay initiatives in the absence of resident missionaries, and the tension between early community formation and institutional vulnerability under persecution and limited clerical support.

2.2. Sources, Scope, and Romanization

This study builds on the scholarship discussed above and rereads established materials through the analytical frame developed in this section. Its primary materials include modern translated editions of *Tianzhu Shiyi* (Ricci 2016) and *Qike* (Pantoja [1614] 1998), together with relevant passages from *Sŏngho sasŏl* (星湖僿說, *Miscellaneous Discussions of Sŏngho*) (I. Yi 1999). The discussion centers on the transmission and reception of Sinographic Catholic texts and their role in early community formation in late Chosŏn.

Korean names and terms follow the McCune–Reischauer system, the standard convention in Korean studies. For Korean authors who have published in English, the roman-

ization used in their publications is retained in the reference list. Chinese terms follow Pinyin, and Japanese terms follow Hepburn.

3. Jesuit Accommodation: Theological Foundations and Historical Context

3.1. Theological Foundations and Missionary Strategy

Any discussion of Jesuit accommodation in East Asia begins with Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606). Few missionary administrators of his time insisted as strongly that effective mission required close engagement with the language, customs, and social expectations of the host society (Brockey 2007). For Valignano, such engagement was a condition of credible communication. Missionaries who remained culturally external could not expect to persuade the people they addressed.

Matteo Ricci developed this orientation in China. Later scholarship has often described his strategy as the "supplementing Confucianism" (補儒論, *boyuron*) approach (S.-g. Kim 2006; H.-g. Kim 2012). When he first arrived in China, Ricci seemed to have assumed that Buddhism occupied the most visible religious position in Chinese society. He initially presented Christianity through Buddhist robes, terminology, and modes of reasoning. He soon recognized, however, that Confucianism, especially among the educated elite, carried greater intellectual and social authority. He therefore abandoned Buddhist robes, adopted the attire of a Confucian scholar (儒服, *yubok*), wrote in Classical Chinese, and presented Christian doctrine through Confucian terms and concepts. The aim was to make Christian teaching intelligible within the moral and intellectual horizon of the Confucian literati. In similar terms, Korean scholarship treats Jesuit accommodation as a missionary logic shaped by theological judgment, cultural encounter, and the broader history of East–West exchange (S.-g. Kim 2006; H.-g. Kim 2012). Accommodation also extended beyond concepts alone. Diego de Pantoja's (1571–1618) *Qike* could be read by Chosŏn literati in a form comparable to analects-style prose, which made it legible as a moral text within a familiar Confucian generic horizon (Chŏng 2022, p. 30).

Ricci's strategy also involved linking *Tianzhu* with *Shangdi*. Without collapsing the two traditions, he wrote that "Our Lord of Heaven is the Sovereign on High mentioned in the ancient [Chinese] canonical writings" (Ricci 2016, p. 97). He cited passages from the *Shujing* (Book of Documents), the *Shijing* (Book of Odes), and the *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean) in support.[1] This move rested on a theological judgment. Ricci held that classical Confucian thought preserved a genuine, though incomplete, apprehension of the transcendent reality that Christianity proclaimed in fuller form. It also responded to the conditions of reception in China, where the gospel was unlikely to gain a hearing if presented only through a wholly foreign name for God and an unfamiliar language of transcendence. Translation therefore worked at more than the linguistic level. It rendered Christian claims intelligible within Chinese categories of thought and forms of life.

This movement did not proceed in one direction alone. Ricci's accounts of his missionary work in China were transmitted to Europe through the Latin version edited by Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628); at the same time, the Jesuit priests' efforts to adapt to local conditions and the circulation of their writings helped spread knowledge of China to the West, contributing to the foundation of early Sinology (Ricci and Trigault 1953; Mungello 1989). Jesuit scholars translated Confucian texts into Latin, including works within the Four Books (四書) tradition such as the *Zhongyong* (中庸), and later turned to texts such as the *Yijing* (易經, Book of Changes). These translations widened Europe's engagement with Chinese intellectual traditions (Luo 2016; Meynard 2015; Yang 2020).

3.2. Critiques from Two Directions—Ecclesiastical Traditionalism and the Enlightenment

Jesuit accommodation drew criticism from two directions. One came from within the missionary church itself. After Ricci's death, Dominican and Franciscan missionaries rejected the Jesuits' approach to ancestral rites and Confucian ritual, considering such practices incompatible with Catholic faith, as they appeared to permit forms of ritual reverence prohibited as idolatry. Their objections were later reinforced by the Paris Foreign Missions Society. What began as disagreement over missionary method widened into a larger dispute over ritual, authority, and the limits of accommodation, culminating in Clement XI's decree *Ex illa die* in 1715[2] (Minamiki 1985).

During the Enlightenment, a new range of criticisms emerged, although attitudes toward both the Jesuits and China were far from uniform. Voltaire, drawing on Jesuit accounts of a rational Confucian moral order, presented China as evidence that ethics need not depend on Christian revelation, and viewed the Jesuits as guardians of an outdated ecclesiastical order. Herein lay the irony: materials that the Jesuits had helped introduce in support of accommodation and cross-cultural dialogue were redeployed to question the necessity of revelation and the authority of Catholic tradition (Burson and Wright 2015).

Ricci's legacy thus became difficult to defend from both sides. The Church's detractors believed that adaptation meant yielding too much to local culture. Enlightenment critics believed that the Jesuits remained too tied to religion. Consequently, this Jesuit strategy could appear insufficiently orthodox from one perspective and insufficiently secular from another. This tension resurfaces in the case of Chosŏn. There, the same translated discourse elicited divergent responses and, for some readers, crossed the boundaries of intellectual inquiry to enter the realm of lived faith.

3.3. The Political Context of the Rites Controversy

The Chinese Rites Controversy cannot be understood in theological terms alone. Questions about ritual were inseparable from the political alignments of European Catholic expansion. The Jesuits operated within the framework of the Portuguese *Padroado*, while Dominican and Franciscan activities were linked more closely to Spanish Imperial networks, and the Paris Foreign Missions Society reflected French ecclesiastical interests[3] (Standaert 2001, pp. 286–96). The dispute therefore unfolded at the intersection of theology, missionary rivalry, and papal governance.

From that perspective, the eventual weakening of the Jesuits' position was not simply the result of an unsuccessful theological argument. The practical influence of the Jesuits in China had already been demonstrated during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1662–1722), especially after the Edict of Toleration in 1692.[4] But the political climate in Europe changed. Over time, the Society of Jesus came to be viewed by several Catholic monarchies as an institution that was too autonomous, too international, and too powerful. The expulsion took place in stages: Portugal in 1759, France in 1764, and Spain in 1767. The formal suppression of the Society by Clement XIV in 1773 occurred under that broader Bourbon pressure (Burson and Wright 2015).

In 1784, eleven years after the suppression of the Society of Jesus, a Catholic community led by laypeople was shaped in Chosŏn. The temporal proximity of these two events is significant from a historical perspective, as it highlights a paradox. The institutional framework that had first produced texts translated by Ricci was weakening in Qing China, yet those texts continued to generate new momentum in Chosŏn. This sequence does not establish a direct causal relationship. Ricci's writings had already circulated in Chosŏn since the early seventeenth century, and the mission in China continued to be carried out through other missionary orders and papal agencies. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition clarifies a broader historical issue: culturally translated texts could outlive the institutional

framework that initially produced them and take on new significance through local reception. Section 5 revisits this issue through the concept of text-mediated local reception.

3.4. Modern Reassessment of Accommodation

In the twentieth century, Ricci's adaptationism was reevaluated within the historical context of a pluralistic society. However, his missionary principles were not rehabilitated in a single step. A decisive shift came in 1939, when *Propaganda Fide* issued *Plane compertum est* with papal approval and substantially relaxed the long-standing restrictions on the Chinese rites. The instruction also referred back to earlier rulings on related controversies in Manchukuo (1935) and Japan (1936). The change therefore emerged through a longer process of review (Minamiki 1985, pp. 197–219).

The Second Vatican Council returned to this issue from a different angle. In *Ad Gentes*, mission is framed through the Church's growth among peoples, the establishment of local churches, and the recognition of *semina Verbi*, or "seeds of the Word," present within particular cultures. Subsequent Catholic reflections gave this trajectory a more explicit theological formulation in the language of inculturation (Bevans 2002, pp. 50–54).

4. The Chosŏn Case: Text-Mediated Reception and the Formation of an Early Catholic Community

4.1. The Circulation and Reception of Sinographic Western Learning Texts in Chosŏn

Chibong yusŏl (芝峰類說, Topical Discourses of Chibong), composed in 1614 by Yi Sugwang (李睟光, 1563–1628), is one of the earliest Chosŏn works in which the author introduces and comments on the contents of the *Tianzhu Shiyi* (天主實義, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) (S. Kim 2025, pp. 96–98). The physical transmission of such works becomes more conspicuous in the eighteenth century: in 1720, Yi Ki-ji (李器之, 1690–1722) obtained copies of *Qike* (七克, The Seven Victories), *Tianzhu Shiyi*, and related materials from Jesuit missionaries at the Southern and Eastern Cathedrals (南堂·東堂) in Beijing (S. Kim 2025, p. 196; Shin 2013, pp. 459–60). By the 1750s, correspondence within the Sŏngho School (星湖學派) indicates that both scientific works—such as Grimaldi's *Pangsŏngdo* (方星圖)—and Catholic writings were already being actively discussed among its members (Chŏng 2022, p. 53). By the late eighteenth century, Western Learning was circulating more vigorously through embassy missions to Beijing, a process that involved both the transmission of Sinographic texts produced by Jesuits in China and direct contact with Jesuits resident in Beijing. Hong Tae-yong (洪大容, 1731–1783), for instance, visited the Southern Cathedral in the Chinese capital on several occasions in 1766, where he met Augustinus von Hallerstein (1703–1774) and Antoine Gogeisl (1701–1771) and inquired into astronomical and calendrical matters (Shin 2013, pp. 475–76). He also acquired Sinographic works on Western Learning directly from the missionaries and through visits to the Liulichang (琉璃廠) book district in Beijing (C.-u. Yi [2009] 2015, p. 120).

This movement was not driven by missionaries alone. Chosŏn intellectuals actively sought out these texts. Envoys approached Liulichang and the Beijing churches with prior familiarity with some Western works already read in Korea, and the books they received there ranged from scientific treatises to religious texts such as *Tianzhu Shiyi* and *Qike* (Chŏng 2022, pp. 28–29). They were not passive recipients waiting for evangelization.

Further evidence of active local reception appears in the Chosŏn vernacular manuscript tradition of *Tianzhu Shiyi*. The Korean manuscript did not merely translate a Chinese exemplar but reworked it through extensive vernacular annotations not found in the printed versions, indicating that readers in Chosŏn refashioned Ricci's categories within local reading and interpretive practices (No 2017, pp. 211–18). The existence of a vernacular *Qike*

manuscript suggests that this further stage of translation and local recoding was not limited to Ricci's text alone (Chŏng 2022, p. 31).

Chinese mediation was not confined to the transmission of books. Tsai (2024) shows that early Chosŏn Catholics also received a form of Catholicism already mediated through Chinese Catholic historical memory, especially through Beijing-centered narratives and the later interpretive role of Zhou Wenmo. Chinese books and Chinese clerical mediation shaped what Chosŏn readers encountered. They also shaped how the faith itself could be imagined within an East Asian horizon (Tsai 2024; Baker and Rausch 2017; Cho 2010). Policy shifts in China affected but did not halt this circulation. After the prohibition of ancestral rites and the tightening of policy under the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1722–1735), Catholic institutions in China operated under heavier restriction, and the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 further weakened the institutional side of the mission. Yet the circulation of texts did not stop. The *Yŏnhaengsa* route continued to carry Sinographic Western Learning texts into Chosŏn throughout this period.[5] Ricci's writings reached late-eighteenth-century Chosŏn readers largely through this textual channel, even as institutional missionary continuity weakened.

4.2. The Social Conditions of Reception in Chosŏn

Tianzhu Shiyi and *Qike* did not circulate in a social vacuum. Some of their earliest and most consequential readers came from circles linked, directly or indirectly, to the Namin (南人) faction. Since the *Kapsul hwan'guk* (甲戌換局) of 1694, a factional upheaval that displaced the Namin from court, the Namin had been pushed away from the center of political power, and that condition continued through the eighteenth century (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 12–14). Political exclusion narrowed the ordinary routes of literati advancement and heightened interest in books and ideas outside Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Namin marginality was thus one among several intellectual and social conditions that shaped reception.

The lives of several early readers show this clearly. Yi Pyŏk (李檗, 1754–1786), Yi Sŭng-hun (李承薰, 1756–1801), Kwŏn Ch'ŏl-sin (權哲身), and Chŏng Yak-yong (丁若鏞, 1762–1836) were educated men with real ambition, yet their political prospects were limited, and their intellectual formation had been shaped by the legacy of Sŏngho Yi Ik (李瀷, 1681–1763) and the broader *Silhak* current of late Chosŏn (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 12–14, 60–61, 65–66; Cho 2010, pp. 390–91). In such circumstances, Western Learning could be read as more than exotic information. It offered materials through which the prevailing Zhu Xi orthodoxy might be tested and reconsidered.

Chŏng's reconstruction of family-held letter collections makes this world more concrete. Hong Yu-han (洪儒漢) occupied a mediating position within the Sŏngho network: Yi Ik sent him more than fifty letters, and figures such as Yi Hyŏng-sang, Yi Pyŏng-hyu, Kwŏn Ŏm, Kwŏn Ch'ŏl-sin, and Yi Ki-yang also corresponded with his household (Chŏng 2022, pp. 51–52). Later Catholic figures were connected to this same social world through residential proximity and instruction. The martyr Hong Nak-min lived in the same village as Hong Yu-han, and Yi Chon-ch'ang reportedly grew up under Hong Yu-han's guidance at Yŏsaul (Chŏng 2022, p. 52). What later appears as a "Namin milieu" was therefore not an abstract factional category. It was a local network of correspondence, mentorship, and proximity.

This point matters because Ricci's writings entered this world in a form that made engagement possible. These writings met Confucian readers on familiar ground rather than as outside critics. They used a familiar canonical vocabulary, citing the *Shujing*, *Shijing*, and *Zhongyong* to argue that classical Chinese thought had already acknowledged a personal Lord of Heaven, while treating the impersonal metaphysics of Song Neo-Confucianism as

a departure from that older tradition (Ricci 2016, pp. 97–99). In doing so, they opened a line of reflection on new ways of seeing the world and thinking, from within the literati's own conceptual vocabulary, and this mattered for politically marginalized readers. These texts could be read within a recognizable intellectual horizon and could therefore become occasions for criticism, comparison, and moral reconsideration.

The decisive element was not Namin identity itself but the convergence of several conditions that framed how such texts could be read. Namin-linked readers had long been excluded from central office. They were tied to intellectual networks shaped by the legacy of Sŏngho Yi Ik. They also had concrete access to books through *Yŏnhaengsa* exchange and contacts in Beijing, including the Jesuit centers at Nantang and Dongtang. Meanwhile, they were asking moral and intellectual questions that the standard Neo-Confucian framework could no longer answer well. In that setting, Catholic texts could be treated as serious objects of reflection rather than left at the level of foreign curiosity.

Reception within Namin-linked circles was not uniform. An Chŏng-bok (安鼎福), a Namin scholar rooted in the same Sŏngho milieu, composed *Ch'ŏnhak mundap* (天學問答, Dialogue on Heavenly Learning) in 1785 as an explicit critique of Catholic doctrine and ritual, with the thirtieth exchange reportedly directed at Yi Sŭng-hun himself (Chŏng 2022, p. 225). His case shows that the same Sŏngho circle produced both serious readers of Catholic texts and firm critics.

4.3. Silhak as an Intellectual Condition of Reception

The receptivity of Western Learning among scholars associated with the Namin faction must also be understood within the broader intellectual context of *Silhak* in late Chosŏn (Kŭm 2012; S. Kim 2025). *Silhak* arose in part from dissatisfaction with speculative Neo-Confucian debate and turned attention toward practical, empirical, and this-worldly forms of inquiry (Kŭm 2012). Within that setting, Western Learning did not initially appear only as religion. It also appeared as a body of useful and challenging knowledge.

This helps explain why works as different as *Jihe Yuanben* (幾何原本, Elements of Geometry), *Zhifang Waiji* (職方外紀, Record of Foreign Lands), and *Tianzhu Shiyi* could initially be approached within a shared horizon of inquiry, as reflected in the twenty-two Western Learning works catalogued by Sŏngho Yi Ik (Kŭm 2012, pp. 28–40). Chosŏn readers did not always separate mathematics, geography, philosophy, and theology as sharply as later classifications might suggest (Kŭm 2012; S. Kim 2025). At first, *Tianzhu Shiyi* could be read as part of a broader search for knowledge. Yet precisely this initial mode of reading proved historically consequential. Its discussion of *Tianzhu* resonated with older Confucian categories such as *Shangdi*, while its criticism of abstract principle-centered reasoning also intersected with *Silhak* dissatisfaction toward Neo-Confucian orthodoxy (Ricci 2016, pp. 97–99; Kŭm 2012; S. Kim 2025). In this way, a translated Christian text could enter late Chosŏn not simply as a foreign doctrine, but as something that spoke to already existing intellectual concerns. The reach of Jesuit texts also extended beyond circles that moved directly toward Catholic commitment. Chŏng notes that literati such as Pak Chi-wŏn (朴趾源), Yi Tŏng-mu (李德懋), and Pak Che-ga (朴齊家) absorbed the language of Ricci's *Jiaoyoulun* (交友論, On Friendship) into their own reflections on friendship, suggesting a wider field of textual appropriation beyond explicitly confessional use (Chŏng 2022, p. 30).

This point can be seen with particular clarity in Yi Ik's commentary on Pantoja's *Qike* in the *Sŏngho sasŏl* (I. Yi 1999; Pantoja [1614] 1998). Yi did not simply reject the work as heterodox to Confucian orthodoxy, nor did he accept it in its entirety (I. Yi 1999, pp. 212–13). On the one hand, he affirmed that its moral teaching ran "parallel to the Confucian doctrine of self-mastery" (I. Yi 1999, p. 213; my translation of 即吾儒克己之說也), recognizing

in it an ethical seriousness that Confucian discussion had not always articulated with equal force. On the other hand, he explicitly set aside its theological claims concerning *Tianzhu* and spirits as extraneous, implying that once these were removed, the remaining moral teaching could stand as an extension of the Confucian tradition (I. Yi 1999, pp. 212–13). Yi Ik's response is important because it shows that the first effect of cultural translation was not immediate belief, but selective intelligibility: a Catholic text could be admitted into a Confucian moral vocabulary before its theology was accepted (I. Yi 1999; Kŭm 2012). In that sense, *Silhak* mattered not because it dissolved religious difference, but because it provided an intellectual route by which inquiry could, for some readers, move toward commitment (Kŭm 2012; S. Kim 2025).

4.4. From Kanghakhoe to a Faith Community: The Staged Process of Reception and the Paradox of the Kasŏngjik System

The gatherings later referred to as *Kanghakhoe* (講學會) began as meetings for study and discussion among late Chosŏn scholars. These gatherings show an important shift. Western Learning was no longer just an object of intellectual study; it was becoming something to be practiced as a binding religious commitment. The later *kasŏngjik* (假聖職) system, in which lay believers took on quasi-clerical roles, shows both sides of this process: the active initiative of the early community, and the incompleteness of a reception process driven mainly by texts.

The meeting at Chuŏsa (走魚寺) in the winter of 1779 is best understood in this light (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 60–62; Cho 2010, p. 105). Baker and Cho are right to caution against treating it as the straightforward founding moment of Korean Catholicism, since the recorded admonitions recited there were drawn from Neo-Confucian ethical discourse rather than from Catholic publications, and some participants never joined the later Catholic community (Baker and Rausch 2017, p. 65; Cho 2010, p. 105). Yet it would also be a mistake to treat the event as historically incidental. The gathering mattered because it intensified a form of ethical seriousness that made the inadequacy of familiar answers more sharply felt. In that respect, it functioned as a preparatory site. It did not yet constitute a Catholic community, but it helped create the moral and intellectual restlessness that led readers to return to Catholic texts with a new sense of urgency. Yi Pyŏk appears to have stood close to the center of that shift.

For analytical purposes, the process may be described as a movement from scholarly reading, to strategic appropriation, and finally to ritual commitment and communal organization, even if individuals did not pass through these moments in identical sequence. Catholic texts were first examined as bodies of knowledge that exposed limits within the existing intellectual order. They then became useful as resources for criticizing Neo-Confucian orthodoxy from within a recognizable Confucian vocabulary. Finally, in some cases, reading and discussion gave way to baptism, communal practice, and lay organization. This third stage became historically concrete when Yi Sŭng-hun traveled to Beijing in 1783 and, at Yi Pyŏk's urging, sought baptism there; after his baptism in 1784, he returned to Chosŏn and the early Catholic community began to take visible form (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 65–66; Cho 2010). What followed is crucial. The community did not suspend action until full institutional guidance arrived. It acted on what it had understood.

The *kasŏngjik* system reveals the productivity and the limit of that action at the same time (Baker and Rausch 2017; Cho 2010). The early believers acted on what they had learned from catechetical writings.

4.5. The Papal Prohibition of Ancestral Rites and the Reconfiguration of Reception

In 1791, roughly seven years after the early Catholic community had begun to take shape in Chosŏn, Yun Chi-ch'ung (尹持忠, 1759–1791) abolished the ancestral rites for his mother and burned the ancestral tablet at Chinsan (珍山) (Baker and Rausch 2017; Seong 2024). This act came after Bishop Alexander de Gouvea (1751–1808), then serving as head of the diocese of Beijing, had transmitted to the Chosŏn church in 1790 the prohibition on ancestral rites originally promulgated by Pope Benedict XIV in the 1742 bull *Ex quo singulari*. Yet the relation between this papal prohibition and Yun's action was more complex than a simple sequence of transmission and compliance. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, unease with Confucian ritual practice had already surfaced within Catholic-aligned circles before the Chinsan incident. In 1787, Yi Sŭng-hun and Chŏng Yak-yong declined to compose state examination essays that touched on Catholic matters, and in 1789 Yi Sŭng-hun, having assumed the post of magistrate of P'yŏngt'aek, pointedly avoided the customary visit to the local Confucian shrine (Chŏng 2022, pp. 224–25). Yun himself had already conducted his mother's funeral in the summer of 1790 with conspicuously attenuated mourning observances (Chŏng 2022, p. 221). Chŏng also discusses an earlier report concerning the funerary practices of the Kwŏn Ch'ŏl-sin household in 1780. If reliable, this would suggest that ritual divergence within Sŏngho-linked circles had begun a decade before the formal transmission of the papal prohibition. Chŏng explicitly notes, however, that the surviving account reaches us through channels hostile to Catholicism and that its factual status remains contested (Chŏng 2022, pp. 220–21). Once this limitation of sources is acknowledged, the Chinsan incident can be read not as an act of simple obedience to external authority, but as the convergence of a pre-existing local reconsideration of ritual with newly transmitted ecclesiastical norms.

The implication extends beyond Chinsan itself. The Chosŏn Catholic community was never a passive recipient of external ecclesiastical authority; its members had already been reworking Confucian ritual expectations in light of the Catholic teachings absorbed through texts. For this reason, the 1791 incident occupies a position structurally parallel to the *kasŏngjik* system: Both cases show how Chosŏn readers' own initiative converged with newly received ecclesiastical norms as the community moved toward institutional alignment.

This pattern of convergence clarifies the dual character of the Chinsan incident's consequences. Its immediate consequences unfolded at the social and moral level. Ancestral rites in Chosŏn were no marginal custom but stood at the very center of the Confucian moral and familial order; for many observers, the new Catholic position appeared not as a narrow ritual dispute but as a repudiation of the ethical framework through which filial devotion and familial continuity were publicly enacted. Under these conditions, Chinsan became a decisive turning point in the hardening of anti-Catholic reaction.

At a more fundamental level, however, the papal prohibition reconfigured the very textual foundation upon which the two movements of cultural translation had been able to converge. Ricci had regarded ancestral rites as acts of reverence toward departed ancestors rather than as idolatry; in his own account of the annual funeral rites observed by the literati, he insisted that the participants "do not in any respect consider their ancestors to be gods" (Ricci and Trigault 1953, p. 96; see also Minamiki 1985, pp. 18–21). This interpretation had been the textual foundation that allowed the gospel to become intelligible within the Confucian order of Chosŏn, and it was upon this very basis that the counter-translation undertaken by Chosŏn literati had first become possible. Once ecclesiastical authority foreclosed it, the result was not simply external persecution but the contraction of the very hermeneutic field in which a translated Christian discourse had first been able to resonate. The decisive significance of the Chinsan incident lies in this dual character:

at the very juncture where two movements of cultural translation finally met, the textual foundation that had sustained their mediation began to be dismantled by the force of official authority.

5. Cultural Translation and the Historical Distinctiveness of the Chosŏn Case

5.1. Cultural Translation: Mechanism and Limits

The dual character of the Chinsan incident demands further theoretical articulation. If translated texts could mediate between two movements of cultural translation until ecclesiastical authority foreclosed that mediation, the question is how such text-mediated reception operated in the first place, and where its internal limits lay. Ricci had already made Christian claims discussable in Confucian terms by identifying *Tianzhu* (天主) with *Shangdi* (上帝) and presenting Christian doctrine in a language intelligible to literati readers (Ricci 2016, pp. 97–99; Mungello 1989, pp. 59–61). In doing so, he portrayed Christianity not as something unfamiliar to its audience but as something already implicit within their own tradition. In late Chosŏn, these texts encountered a specific socio-intellectual climate characterized by political marginalization, Sŏngho-linked intellectual networks, concrete routes of textual access through exchange with Qing China, and dissatisfaction with established Neo-Confucian answers (Baker and Rausch 2017; Cho 2010; Kŭm 2012; S. Kim 2025). Under these conditions, Catholic writings were read not merely as foreign knowledge, but as credible materials for criticism, comparison, and moral reconsideration (I. Yi 1999; T.-h. Yi 2013).

The Chosŏn case therefore unfolded not as a single, unidirectional act of transmission but as a sequence of distinct moments. Translated Christian texts first became intelligible within the existing Confucian horizon and were later selectively appropriated by readers whose scholarly and social orientations had already been primed for change. Among these readers were active ones for whom such appropriation moved beyond intellectual curiosity toward baptism, communal practice, and the formation of early lay organization. This sequential unfolding explains why translated texts could carry profound significance before a stable missionary presence was secured, while simultaneously highlighting why textual mediation alone remained insufficient to furnish the full doctrinal, sacramental, and institutional form of ecclesial life.

The translated Christian discourse that reached Chosŏn had already been shaped for literati readers, yet once received, it was reworked through local concerns that had not been part of the Jesuit mission's own intent. At this point, the Chosŏn case bears out Sanneh's insight that translation can never be reduced to the simple transfer of doctrine from one language to another (Sanneh 2009, pp. 1–3, 166). The moment a translated message takes root in a receiving culture, it is refracted through local concepts, expectations, and judgments. The *Tianzhu Shiyi* had originally been composed with late-Ming Chinese literati as its interlocutors in view. In Chosŏn, it was re-read—and thereby acquired new meaning—through concerns Ricci had not anticipated: the moral insufficiency of the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* (理), the political marginalization of the Namin faction, and *Silhak*-oriented statecraft interests. It is this refraction that accounts for both the productivity and the unevenness of Chosŏn reception.

However, the Chosŏn case not only confirms Sanneh's argument but also extends it theoretically. While Sanneh's notion of translatability presupposes a unidirectional process in which an original is transferred into a receiving culture, the Chosŏn case discloses a structurally distinct mode of reciprocal hermeneutics. This difference emerges most clearly along three dimensions: the directionality of translation, the role of the text, and the position of the reader.

Ricci and his fellow Jesuit missionaries initiated a movement of cultural translation to render Christianity intelligible within the Chinese conceptual world. Upon encountering these texts, Chosŏn literati moved beyond superficial readings, undertaking a 'counter-movement of translation' aimed at approaching the essence of a Christianity hitherto unfamiliar to their own tradition. Although these parallel efforts unfolded across disparate times, spaces, and purposes without any direct face-to-face contact, they ultimately converged upon a shared medium: the accommodated texts.

Consequently, the Chosŏn case shows that the text, rather than remaining a static object simply transferred into a receiving culture as Sanneh presupposed, can function as a historical bridge where bidirectional efforts of understanding intersect. The reader, likewise, is not merely a passive consumer of translations, but an active interpretive subject who *re*appropriates pre-accommodated texts into their own intellectual repertoire. The contrast between Chŏng Yak-yong and Yi Pyŏk illustrates how this bidirectional convergence diverged into distinct trajectories among its readers. Chŏng read Ricci through the lens of his conviction that the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* (理), insofar as it was understood as an abstract principle, lacked the capacity to ground concrete moral motivation and practice; his response was at once selective, critical, and constructive (T.-h. Yi 2013). The extent to which his engagement amounts to religious commitment remains a matter of debate (T.-h. Yi 2013; Kŭm 2012, pp. 214–17; S. Kim 2025, pp. 443–48), and this study, instead of attempting to resolve this debate, approaches Chŏng as an exemplar of how cultural translation can open a discursive space for profound engagement without necessitating conversion.

In stark contrast, Yi Pyŏk represents a paradigm where cross-cultural encounter transcended mere intellectual inquiry, culminating in unambiguous religious commitment. He spearheaded scholarly gatherings that rearticulated Catholic doctrine through the idiom of Confucian learning, and, upon receiving baptism from Yi Sŭng-hun in 1784, played a pivotal role in the formation and expansion of the early community of believers (Baker and Rausch 2017; Cho 2010). Taken together, these two figures reveal that the same translated discourse could be interpreted within widely divergent parameters. For some readers, it remained within the intellectual horizon of Western Learning; for others, it served as a polemical medium for criticism; and for still others, it provided a catalyst for religious commitment and the formation of an embryonic community.

The structural limitations of this textual reception, however, became palpable once the community was established. While the contrast between Chŏng Yak-yong and Yi Pyŏk brings into view the differentiated trajectories of reception, the implementation of the pseudo-clergy system (*kasŏngjik*) and the subsequent prohibition of ancestral rites expose the inherent institutional and ritual vulnerabilities of the process. The *kasŏngjik* system, in particular, demonstrated that although translated texts and local initiative could effectively mobilize believers and generate communal life, they ultimately could not sustain the full sacramental and institutional structure of ecclesial existence (Baker and Rausch 2017; Cho 2010).

These two limitations differ fundamentally in character. The *kasŏngjik* system reveals an institutional limit internal to the text-led reception process itself: while texts can mobilize believers and sustain communal agency, they are inherently incapable of providing sacramental continuity. The prohibition of ancestral rites, by contrast, exposes a cultural and conditional limit external to that reception process—that is, the drastic contraction of the Confucian moral horizon within which translated Christian discourse had first become intelligible (Minamiki 1985).

At the same time, the Chosŏn case does not justify a model of unlimited adaptation. Yun Chi-ch'ung's response to the prohibition shows that early Chosŏn Catholics did not

regard ecclesiastical authority as an optional matter, even when such obedience intensified social conflict (Seong 2024; Minamiki 1985). As Chŏng (2022) has noted, resistance to Confucian ritual practice had already surfaced within Catholic-affiliated circles prior to the Chinsan incident. The pivotal question, therefore, was not whether local appropriation should displace central authority, but rather how pre-existing local agency and newly transmitted ecclesiastical forms might converge without eroding the very conditions that had made reception possible in the first place. The Chosŏn case thus exemplifies the enduring tension between the autonomy of local agency in reception and the normative demands of the universal Church. In Walls's terms, this configuration makes especially visible the tension between the indigenizing impulse of local reception and the pilgrim principle represented by ecclesial authority (Walls 1996).

Ultimately, the Chosŏn case demonstrates that while textual translation can open a fertile ground for cross-cultural encounter, the sustainability of such an encounter depends on the negotiation of non-textual rituals and institutional authority. When this interpretive flexibility was replaced by rigid doctrinal exclusion, the once-dynamic process of reception inevitably faced a profound structural impasse. Whether this dynamic was peculiar to Chosŏn or had parallels in other East Asian Catholic receptions can be assessed only through a wider comparative view.

5.2. The Distinctiveness of the Chosŏn Case in East Asian Context

The theoretical framework developed in the preceding section, centered on bidirectional cultural translation and its distinctive limits, raises a further question: how does the Chosŏn configuration compare with other East Asian Catholic experiences? To bring this configuration into sharper relief, it is useful to situate the Chosŏn case within its wider East Asian context.

This section uses China, Japan, and Vietnam as selective points of contrast rather than as elements of a comprehensive typology. Its narrower purpose is to sharpen the conjunction of translated discourse, local literati appropriation, and early community formation that characterized the Chosŏn case.

China offers the most direct comparison because it was the original setting of Ricci's accommodation. There, the reception of Catholicism was shaped above all by direct missionary presence. Ricci's exchanges with literati such as Xu Guangqi (徐光啓, 1562–1633) and Li Zhizao (李之藻, 1565–1630), along with the later visibility of Jesuits at court, show a distinctive pattern. Accommodation operated within an institutional framework sustained by resident missionaries, patronage networks, and recognized sites of religious and intellectual contact (Standaert 2001; Brockey 2007). In China, the translation and interpretation of Christian discourse remained closely tied to an ongoing missionary presence. Chosŏn differed at precisely this point. The same translated discourse circulated beyond the setting for which it had been composed, and in Chosŏn the earliest phase of reception was carried not by resident missionaries but by local readers. Once detached from its immediate institutional point of origin, the text itself became a primary medium of early religious formation. Paradoxically, what seemed to disadvantage Chosŏn became a foundation of durability: because the community had been lay-led from its inception, the 1801 and subsequent persecutions, though devastating, did not dismantle the structural basis of the faith. Lay catechists, local networks, and textual practice sustained Catholic life through repeated waves of persecution (Baker and Rausch 2017; Cho 2010).

Japan presents a different pattern. Catholic expansion there was rapid and dramatic (Boxer 1951), but it was also closely linked to missionary networks, trade, and the patronage of regional rulers (Elison 1973). From the perspective of Christian continuity under persecution, Japan is especially suggestive. The history of the *Kakure Kirishitan*

(隠れキリシタン, "hidden Christians" who preserved their faith underground after Christianity was prohibited in 1614) shows that faith could survive for centuries without resident priests or formal church structures (Turnbull 1998). Yet that continuity was sustained through ritual, memory, and communal inheritance practiced in secret, rather than through the early text-mediated reception by literati that characterized late Chosŏn. The Japanese case, which shows how faith could persist under persecution in the absence of clergy, is more useful as a contrast than as a parallel to Chosŏn, where translated texts played a formative role in the emergence of a Christian community before a stable missionary presence was established.

Vietnam provides a third contrast rather than a directly parallel case to late eighteenth-century Chosŏn. The long-term history of Catholicism in Vietnam became connected both to conversion and to forms of linguistic mediation later consolidated in *chữ Quốc ngữ*, even if the broader social diffusion of that script postdated the period under discussion here (Phan 1998). The decisive point in the present comparison is therefore not strict chronological simultaneity but difference in medium. Whereas the Vietnamese case points toward a broader linguistic transformation associated with Catholic mediation, the Chosŏn case remained more closely bound to the circulation and reinterpretation of already translated Catholic texts within a Confucian textual culture.

These contrasts bring the distinctiveness of the Chosŏn case into clearer view. In the other cases, Catholic transmission remained more directly connected to external missionary networks, hidden continuity under persecution, or broader linguistic mediation. Late Chosŏn unfolded differently. During its formative phase, it did not receive a comparable resident missionary initiative. Instead, culturally translated Catholic texts produced elsewhere entered Chosŏn society and were actively appropriated by politically marginalized Namin-linked readers whose *Silhak* formation made these texts especially resonant. For some, they remained within the horizon of Western Learning; for others, they became a medium of critique; and for still others, they opened the way to religious commitment and early community formation.

The distinctiveness of the Chosŏn case lies here. Translated discourse, local literati appropriation, and early community formation converged at a single historical juncture before missionaries had established a regular resident presence. In that sense, Chosŏn was not merely another East Asian case. Its distinctive theoretical and historical contribution lies in this configuration of internal mechanisms and characteristic limits. The broader implications of this configuration for our understanding of cultural translation and early Korean Catholicism are drawn together in the concluding section.

6. Conclusions

This study has approached the reception of Christianity and Western Learning in late Chosŏn Korea through the texts brought by Western Jesuit missionaries. It has traced the process by which engagement with these texts, initially driven by scholarly curiosity, gradually developed into the formation of a community of faith. A central part of this process was Jesuit accommodation, which this study has read as a form of cultural translation undertaken from the side of the missionary. Read in this light, the Chosŏn case emerges not as a one-way transfer of Christian doctrine but as a bidirectional process of cultural translation between the Jesuit mission and late Chosŏn readers. Building on Ricci's conceptual linking of *Shangdi* and *Tianzhu*, Chosŏn readers did not merely consume these texts; they engaged in a counter-movement of translation, reworking Christian discourse through concerns shaped by political marginalization, *Silhak*-oriented inquiry, and dissatisfaction with established Neo-Confucian answers. Through this refraction—a process of recontextualization and re-signification—the translated discourse was reframed as a resource for ad-

dressing the intellectual and moral tensions of these readers, and the text itself functioned as a historical bridge on which two separate efforts converged.

The distinctive contribution of this study lies precisely in articulating the limits of this reception as two analytically distinct dimensions. The *kasŏngjik* system disclosed an institutional limit internal to text-led reception—the inability of texts alone to secure sacramental continuity—while the prohibition of ancestral rites exposed an external cultural limit, contracting the very Confucian moral horizon within which Christian discourse had first become receivable. While existing scholarship has extensively discussed these two events as historical episodes, their interpretation as the internal and external limits of a text-mediated reception process, together with the framework of bidirectional cultural translation that renders them legible, represents a contribution specific to this study.

What the Chosŏn case ultimately brings into view is the self-directed initiative through which an early Catholic community began to take shape. In the absence of resident missionaries, some Chosŏn readers organized themselves into a community of faith, rereading translated texts through their own intellectual and moral concerns and developing forms of communal religious life. This process was not a passive absorption of foreign doctrine but an active engagement through which these readers opened paths for moral reflection and communal organization within particular literati and lay networks. In this limited but significant sense, the reception of Christianity in late Chosŏn revealed a distinctive capacity for self-organization, and the foundation of this process was cultural translation itself—a translation that reframed foreign discourse within a Confucian horizon and made it a resource for moral and communal self-renewal in these networks. The Chosŏn experience, therefore, stands as a telling historical instance of how cultural translation can transform reception into creation.

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Notes

[1] For the full argument, see *Tianzhu Shiyi*, chap. 2, sct. 104–108 (Ricci 2016, pp. 97–99), where Ricci draws on classical Chinese texts, including the *Shujing*, the *Shijing*, and the *Zhongyong*, to argue that early Confucian tradition preserved the idea of a supreme personal Lord of Heaven. Ricci thus distinguished early Confucianism from what he regarded as the more impersonal metaphysics of Song Neo-Confucianism (see also Mungello 1989, pp. 59–64).

[2] The bull *Ex illa die* was reaffirmed and made more categorical by Benedict XIV's 1742 bull *Ex quo singulari*, which prohibited Chinese rites and remained authoritative until it was effectively superseded by the 1939 instruction *Plane compertum est*. On the internal Catholic debates leading to these decrees, see (Minamiki 1985); on Jesuit institutional responses, see (Brockey 2007).

[3] The *Padroado* was the set of rights granted by successive popes to the Portuguese crown, including patronage over ecclesiastical appointments and missionary organization in territories claimed by Portugal. The parallel Spanish *Patronato Real* exercised similar prerogatives in the Spanish Empire. The Paris Foreign Missions Society (Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, formally established between 1658 and 1663) developed outside both royal patronage systems and was more directly linked to the *Propaganda Fide* in Rome through the apostolic vicariate structure. These overlapping jurisdictions contributed significantly to the institutional tensions that shaped the Rites Controversy.

[4] The 1692 Edict of Toleration (容教令), issued by the Kangxi Emperor, granted legal toleration to Christianity in the Qing Empire, in recognition of Jesuit services at court, particularly in astronomy, cartography, and diplomacy. That toleration was effectively reversed under the Yongzheng Emperor in 1724, after the papal condemnations of the Chinese rites and Kangxi's own earlier reaction against them.

[5] Beyond their diplomatic function, the *Yŏnhaengsa* also served as the principal conduit through which Chinese books, including texts of Western Learning, reached Chosŏn literati.

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