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Clash and Fusion Between East and West: Catholicism's Spread in Three East Asian Countries, from the Mid-Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century

Ken Qin

Department of Chinese History and Culture, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong 999077, China; yuhui.qin@connect.polyu.hk

Abstract

Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, Europeans entered East Asia and introduced Catholicism as new maritime routes were opened and global interconnections deepened. Through practice, missionaries gradually developed a strategy of cultural accommodation, seeking converts by integrating into East Asian cultures. Although the cultural traditions of China, Japan, and Korea were broadly similar, there were differences among them, and the process of Catholic accommodation in each country reflected both shared commonalities and distinct particularities. The accommodation strategy initially led to considerable success; however, Catholic activities later posed a challenge to the traditional cultural and social orders of the three countries, and their rulers eventually adopted policies of religious prohibition to varying degrees. By the early nineteenth century, Catholicism had been banned across all three polities. Therefore, the cultural encounter between East and West on the eve of the modern era ended in intense conflict—yet Catholicism never disappeared from East Asia. Rather, it found a foothold in popular society by merging with the "little tradition." In identifying this accommodation paradox, the article offers the wider study of religion a model of how a foreign faith interacts with an entrenched host tradition, demonstrating that the effectiveness of accommodation may itself generate the conditions of its subsequent prohibition.

Keywords: Society of Jesus; Catholicism; cultural accommodation; prohibition of Christianity; great tradition and little tradition

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, East Asia has developed an independent system of regional cultures with distinct local characteristics. While maintaining certain connections with Europe, certain cultural elements originating from China exercised a dominant influence across multiple domains over a long period, shaping the traditional cultures of the other two countries—Japan and Korea. This influence was primarily manifested in the unity and the cultural affinity at the level of the "great tradition." The cultural affinity among the three countries was chiefly expressed through the shared use of Chinese characters, as well as the common reverence for Confucianism and Buddhism. Yet this shared "great tradition" did not imply uniformity; the "little traditions" and social conditions of the three countries diverged. Following the opening of new maritime routes, an increasing number of Europeans arrived in East Asia. Western culture, represented by Catholicism, experienced varying degrees of clash and fusion with the cultural traditions of the three East

Asian nations during this period, giving the fate of Catholicism in all three countries certain common features, while also producing significant differences (Tang 2016, pp. 105, 144). Research on early modern East Asian Catholicism has primarily followed a single country as the framework and unit of study, proceeding unilaterally from the perspective of either the missionary groups or the ruling groups of the host countries. Boxer (1951), Elison (1973), and Paramore (2009) emphasise Catholicism's own accommodation to Japanese culture, as well as the contradictions that existed between the ongoing transmission of Catholicism and the process of establishing the Japanese state power. Brockey (2007), Hsia (2010), and Menegon (2009) argue that the cultural accommodation strategy of Catholicism in China achieved results in the early and middle periods of transmission, but with the political disputes arising between the Chinese court and either the external Holy See or internal missionary groups, the prohibition of Christianity began from there. Meanwhile, Baker (2013) and Rausch (2025) deeply explore how the indigenous Korean Catholic community conflicted with the local traditional culture and order, a conflict that caused the transmission of Catholicism in Korea to bear a strong popular colouring. Even where comparative studies exist, they are often limited to the contrast between China and Japan, and for the most part merely juxtapose the two rather than conducting a dedicated comparison. Most studies proceed singularly from either the missionary groups or the rejection movements of the local upper society, resulting in a failure to form an interactive perspective between the localisation efforts of the missionary groups and the local cultural autonomy of each political entity. As a result, studies examining the three East Asian mission fields under the same analytical framework are rare, and the autonomy of East Asian cultures has failed to be universally reflected.

This study aims to conduct a more in-depth discussion in this aspect. By taking the distinction between the "great tradition" and the "little tradition" as the organising principle, this study shifts the analytical focus from the missionary enterprise to the receiving societies, exploring not only how Catholicism was transmitted, but more importantly, how it was absorbed, scrutinised, and ultimately repositioned within the cultural orders of China, Japan, and Korea. This comparative study contributes to religious studies by linking translation, ritual practice, social positioning, and state power within cross-cultural conversion studies.

The history of Catholic missions in early modern East Asia, viewed in this comparative frame, constitutes one of the most consequential cross-religious encounters in the global early modern period. It was an encounter in which missionaries arriving from a distinct theological tradition were obliged to negotiate with three of the most institutionally consolidated religious-cultural systems then in existence. The Jesuit response to this encounter is most vividly registered in the project of conceptual translation, each of these acts of translation was simultaneously an act of cross-religious encounter: each required the missionary or convert to interpret the host religious tradition as a partner in The resulting conceptual exchanges were neither superficial nor unidirectional; they reshaped Catholic theology in East Asia, contributed materially to European intellectual debates about the nature of religion, and forced indigenous traditions to articulate, often for the first time, the boundaries of their own orthodoxy in confrontation with a structurally comparable rival.

This article therefore situates itself at the intersection of three scholarly conversations: the historiography of early modern Catholic missions in East Asia, the comparative study of cross-religious encounter, and the critical reassessment of categories such as "religion," "philosophy," and "ethics" that has gathered momentum in recent East Asian studies (Casanova 2018, pp. 8–11). The cross-religious encounter framework adopted here treats the meeting of Catholicism with East Asian traditions not as a confrontation between a

unified "Christianity" and a unified "East Asian religion" but as a polyvalent set of negotiations among Catholic, Buddhist, Confucian, Neo-Confucian[1], Shinto, and folk-religious actors, each pursuing distinct intellectual and practical agendas. This framework, in turn, illuminates why the trajectories of Catholicism in China, Japan, and Korea diverged significantly despite the broad cultural affinity among the three societies: the configuration of cross-religious actors and the institutional architecture of orthodoxy differed in each case, producing distinct conditions of accommodation and distinct triggers for prohibition.

The "great tradition" in the three East Asian countries was cultivated and controlled by a small number of elites who held power and knowledge; it tended to emerge from courts or academies, encompassing literature, philosophy, state rituals, and systems of moral instruction. By contrast, the "little tradition" arose spontaneously among the more numerous subordinate strata, encompassing folk beliefs, folk customs, and folk legends (Redfield 1956, pp. 41–42). However, it would be inappropriate to employ a rigid, absolute binary to differentiate the "great tradition" and the "little tradition," as the boundary between the two was blurry, and they exerted mutual influence upon each other. In this article, the "great tradition" refers more broadly to a complex, composite system representing the operation of the elite political and cultural order as a whole; the "little tradition" denotes the popular cultural system that emerged and developed under the shadow of this overarching system.

The adoption of the "great tradition" and "little tradition" as an analytical framework is not intended to divide East Asian societies into two fixed and self-contained layers of elite and popular culture. Its value lies in its capacity to explain three connected features of early modern Catholic transmission in East Asia: cultural accommodation, institutional rejection, and popular survival. When Catholicism entered China, Japan, and Korea, it first had to negotiate with authoritative cultural orders constituted by state power, learned elites, canonical interpretation, ritual institutions, and definitions of orthodoxy. These orders may be understood as forms of the "great tradition". Missionary and indigenous Christian uses of Confucian, Buddhist, Shinto, and local ritual vocabularies were therefore attempts to secure intelligibility and legitimacy within these established structures of authority. After prohibition, Catholic practices often persisted through kinship networks, local cults, clandestine ritual forms, orally transmitted prayers, and popular religious experience. This framework is suited to the comparative purpose of the article.

China, Japan, and Korea shared certain resources of Sinitic literacy, Confucian ethics, and Buddhist culture, yet they differed markedly in political structure, modes of orthodoxy-making, local social organisation, and popular religious practice. The distinction between the "great tradition" and the "little tradition" makes it possible to describe these commonalities and differences in the same analytical language.

Although Redfield developed the model to analyse the relation between literate civilization and local religious life, it can be applied here because Catholicism in East Asia was received simultaneously as doctrine, translated text, ritual practice, and social network. The model clarifies why similar Christian teachings generated different outcomes: they could be absorbed when mediated through elite textual authority and imperial patronage, but they became dangerous when they disrupted household rites, kinship obligations, and factional politics.

The application of the great and little tradition distinction to the study of religious transmission is itself well established. Redfield developed the concepts in part through the observation of religious life in peasant communities (Redfield 1956, pp. 70–104), and they have since been employed to good effect in the analysis of Chinese popular religion, where the relation between canonical and local forms of worship has long stood as a central problem. Menegon's study of Catholicism in Fujian is the most pertinent precedent for

the present inquiry: it shows how a foreign religion could embed itself within the local religious economy of a Chinese region, operating in practice as one more local cult while preserving its doctrinal distinctiveness (Menegon 2009, pp. 297–340). Research developed on the basis of the great tradition and the small tradition, which places greater emphasis on diversity and the complexities of East Asian religion and grassroots society, has also demonstrated the value of this framework (Bell 1989, pp. 32–42).

The relationship between the "great tradition" and the "little tradition" was characterised by a high degree of political dynamism, and the definition of "orthodoxy" was continually adjusted according to the needs of the ruling class (Paramore 2009, pp. 1–14). The great tradition manifested as a form of "boundary work": the coherence of this system lay not only in its exclusivity, but also in its capacity to shift in response to the political or cultural needs of different periods when confronted with external shocks such as Catholicism (Standaert 2008, pp. 184–87). In the ensuing examination of the history of Catholicism's introduction to and interaction with the three East Asian countries, numerous discussions will arise from this perspective.

In the case of Japan, the transition from missionizing to prohibition was dramatic and turbulent (Boxer 1951, pp. 1–31). From the perspective of state ideology construction, the Tokugawa Bakufu achieved the "Japanization" of its population through anti-Christian policies (Paramore 2009, pp. 40–75); once the central government had begun consolidation of its power, even if certain *Daimyō* (大名, feudal lords) had previously maintained cooperative relations with Catholicism, prohibitions within the ruling class and directed at the populace were swiftly implemented (Tang 2016, p. 144).

In earlier studies of the introduction of Catholicism to China, the "clash of civilisations" perspective (Gernet 1985, pp. 195–243) gradually gave way to the now more commonly held view emphasising mutual cultural learning and exchange between China and the West (Mungello 2013, pp. 63–132). In China, lower-class converts from the popular stratum contributed to the missionary enterprise (Brockey 2007, pp. 187–268), a process that paralleled the strategy of seeking collaborators among the social elite (Hsia 2010). Although the missionaries made every effort to integrate into Chinese indigenous culture (Han 2012, p. 79), when the political needs of the ruling class shifted, violent conflict still erupted (Swen 2021, pp. 1–28).

Korea, owing to the late introduction of Catholicism and the more distinctive character of its "great tradition," exhibited hostility toward Catholicism from the outset of its introduction. Even though moral anxiety within Confucianism provided a motive for some Korean scholars to convert to Catholicism (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 1–48), the foreign religion was gradually perceived by the Korean elite as a threat to traditional ritual propriety and the political order, and prohibition soon followed (Baker 2006). This process constitutes the principal topic of discussion in the historiography of Catholicism's transmission to Korea (Rausch 2025).

The prohibition of Catholicism by the ruling elites in Japan, China and Korea was grounded in certain political factors, yet none of these could prevent the continued development of Catholic elements within the popular "little tradition" (Ross 1994, pp. 1–17). Viewed through the lens of a three-phase framework of globalisation, the Jesuits' religious encounters in Japan and China situate the early modern missionary encounter within a broader analytical framework of the global construction of the categories of "religion" and "secularity" (Casanova 2018, pp. 1–13).

Nevertheless, there remains considerable room for further in-depth discussion in incorporating the histories of Catholicism's spread in China, Japan, and Korea into a unified comparative framework, particularly one that proceeds from the internal logic of the "great tradition" and "little tradition" within East Asian cultures for systematic analysis. After

examining the cases of each of the three East Asian countries individually, I place them within a common analytical framework to investigate the differences in the implementation of Catholic accommodation strategies across different cultural contexts, the divergent paths to prohibition in the three countries, and the diverse modes of Catholicism's survival in popular society.

It should be emphasised once again that the relationship between elite and popular culture was not one of binary opposition. Elites were "bi-cultural," participating simultaneously in both the great and little traditions, whereas ordinary people were "mono-cultural," participating only in the little tradition (Burke [1978] 2009, pp. 28–29). The concepts of "public transcript" and "hidden transcript" reveal the agency and political content embedded within the so-called "little tradition": the cultural expressions of subordinate peoples contained deep-seated critiques of the ruling order, only appearing in disguised forms (Scott 1990, pp. 1–16, 183–201). Accordingly, in discussing the survival of Catholicism in East Asian popular society, the limitations of the original "great tradition" and "little tradition" framework will also be considered.

This article is also informed by and seeks to contribute to three further bodies of theoretical work. Sanneh's framework illuminates why the Jesuit translation of deus—through Buddhist Dainichi, Confucian Shangdi, and Neo-Confucian moral vocabulary—cannot be treated as merely strategic but must be analysed as a substantive theological event (Sanneh 2009, pp. 28–37). Conrad's framework supports the argument that East Asian "great traditions" were not passive recipients but active agents that reconfigured Catholic doctrine in the very act of receiving it (Conrad 2016, pp. 90–115). Furthermore, research on early modern Catholicism in China suggests that so-called 'adaptation' was not a policy imposed by the Jesuits upon the host culture, but rather a negotiated outcome jointly shaped by foreign missionaries, local converts and the logic of the host society's institutions (Hsia 2018, pp. 1–18).

2. The Introduction of Catholicism and Cultural Accommodation

During this period, missionaries first reached Japan—the farthest of the three countries from Europe. In 1549, Francisco Xavier (沙勿略, 1506–1552), one of the founders of the Society of Jesus, reached Japan via Southeast Asia, bringing along *Nanban–shū* (南蛮宗, Southern Barbarian religion). Within barely half a century, there were over 300,000 Catholic converts in Japan, approximately 2 percent of its total population at the time—distributed across all social strata from *Daimyō* to beggars (Ōhashi 2016, p. 125). This period, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, came to be called the "Age of the Southern Barbarians" or *Kirishitan seiki* (キリシタン世紀, the Christian Century). The speed of Catholic expansion and the breadth of its influence were remarkable by any measure. From a cultural standpoint, the missionaries' success was inseparable from their efforts to adopt localised approaches to evangelisation and doctrine.

The Jesuit method of "accommodation" was a multilateral interactive practice that had emerged naturally from the intercultural encounter (Russell 2025, pp. 5–12). The missionaries represented by Xavier recognised from the outset the importance of integrating into Japanese culture. Xavier undertook a series of initiatives: learning the local language, adapting to local customs, and seeking entry into the upper echelons of local society. After Xavier, the Jesuit Visitor–General to the Far East, Alessandro Valignano (范禮安, 1539–1606), systematised these practices, compiling the *Catechismus Japonensis* (日本要理本) as a reference work for the study of Japanese religion, and commissioning the missionary Luís Fróis (1532–1597) to compile a comparative treatise on European and Japanese cultures to assist newly arriving missionaries. Valignano not only required missionaries to adapt to Japanese customs and etiquette but also insisted that they master the Japanese

language. He brought a European printing press to Japan for the production of grammars, dictionaries, and devotional works in Japanese. One of his principal concerns was the training of Japanese Jesuits and priests and breaking down the barriers between them and the Europeans (Moran 1993, pp. 55–86, 156–200). This principle gradually developed into the Jesuit "accommodation policy" and was applied equally to China and Korea (Zhao 2008, p. 94).

The strategies employed in the name of Catholicism in China were more diverse. Xavier was unable to attend to China during his lifetime. In the three decades following his death, numerous missionaries with Eurocentric orientations attempted to enter China, but all returned empty-handed. It was not until 1574, when Valignano stopped in Macau on his way to Japan, assessed local conditions, and determined the policies of "infiltrative evangelism" and "cultural accommodation," and until 1582, when he abandoned efforts to "Portugalize" local converts, that the Jesuit mission in China achieved a major breakthrough. Under Valignano's arrangements, the Italian Michele Ruggieri (羅明堅, 1543–1607) arrived in Macau in 1579 to study Chinese and succeeded in earning the trust of Chinese officials in 1581.

Subsequent missionaries to China, the most famous of whom was Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), went even further in their efforts to adapt to local customs. Ricci initially appeared in the persona of a foreign Buddhist monk, and it was not until twelve years later—after a prolonged period of trial and frustration—that he achieved the crucial transformation from *Xi seng* (西僧, western monk) to *Xi ru* (西儒, western Confucian scholar) upon his move to Nanchang in 1595 (Hsia 2010, pp. 95–133).

It is worth noting that Christianity had already entered China during the Tang and Yuan dynasties. Yet, because its translation strategies relied heavily on terminology borrowed from contemporary Daoist and Buddhist texts, it failed to produce the effects anticipated by missionary groups, whether in terms of accommodation to China's elite society or in the breadth of its dissemination across Chinese society as a whole. Matteo Ricci drew lessons from this earlier experience (Li and Gao 2025, p. 18). Thereafter, following the living habits and social etiquette of the Chinese scholarly class, he adopted the strategies of *He ru* (合儒, harmonising with Confucianism) and *Bu ru* (补儒, supplementing Confucianism) in the course of his missionary work, gradually establishing himself among the upper and middle strata of Chinese society. The Jesuits not only sought Chinese acceptance of themselves and of Catholicism by integrating into Chinese culture, but also attracted the interest of the Chinese bureaucratic and scholarly class through Western scientific knowledge (Hsia 2016, pp. 53–180).

By adopting Confucian scholarly practices and systematically studying the Chinese language, missionaries developed innovative approaches to Chinese phonetics, grammar, and lexicography—linguistic achievements that not only facilitated missionary work, but also contributed to the establishment of early Sinology (Dong and Yang 2025, p. 12). These activities enabled Catholicism to gradually gain a foothold in China (Lian 2012, p. 124). By the time Ricci died in 1610, the Church had about 2000 members; by 1636, this number had risen to 38,000. The spontaneous expansion of believer networks built by Chinese catechists and lay helpers was of critical importance in this process (Brockey 2007, pp. 187–268). In the aftermath of the Ming–Qing transition, the Qing court recognised the value of the missionaries' scientific expertise, elevating them to prominent positions and adopting a policy of tolerance towards Catholicism. As a result, the number of converts did not decline, but continued to grow, reaching some 150,000 by 1650 and surpassing 300,000 at its peak around 1701, spread across fourteen provinces throughout the country (Yang 2010, p. 71).

The path by which Catholicism entered the Korean peninsula was far more tortuous than those in China and Japan. During the Imjin War (임진왜란 壬辰倭亂, 1592–1598), the Spanish missionary Gregorio de Céspedes entered Korea as a chaplain with the invading forces, preaching to the Korean populace and prisoners of war—marking the beginning of Catholicism's entry into Korea. However, his stay was short and his influence limited. After the outbreak of the Manchu invasions of Joseon (병자호란 丙子胡亂, 1636–1637), Crown Prince Sohyeon (소현세자 昭顯世子, 1612–1645) and Yi Ho (이호 李澔, 1619–1659, the future King Hyojong 孝宗) were taken hostage by the Qing forces into Beijing, where they became acquainted with Johann Adam Schall von Bell (湯若望, 1592–1666) and studied Catholic doctrine. Sohyeon expressed his intention to publish Catholic books and propagate Catholicism upon returning to Korea, but he died suddenly of illness not long after his return, and once again a major opportunity for Catholicism to enter the peninsula was lost. Over the following century, Joseon envoys on their diplomatic missions to Beijing had frequent opportunities to meet with missionaries in China, yet they maintained a stance of detached and mildly curious observation (Ge 2011, pp. 47–63).

In the late eighteenth century, Korean Confucians were tormented by growing concern over human moral frailty; some among them came to view Catholicism as a way to overcome their moral weakness, become virtuous, and gain eternal life. This "moral anxiety" created an intellectual opening for Catholicism's entry (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 1–48). The intellectual lineage that gave rise to the Korean Catholic movement deserves particular attention, as it represents a phenomenon largely unparalleled in either China or Japan: the establishment of a Christian church through the deliberate intellectual self-conversion of a learned elite, in the absence of direct missionary mediation. The movement emerged from within the Namin (남인 南人) faction of the Joseon literati, a group long marginalised from political power and consequently more receptive to heterodox intellectual currents (Cho 2018, pp. 67–85). In 1779, Yi Byeok (이벽 李檗, 1754–1785), along with other scholars such as Gwon Cheol-sin (권철신 權哲身, 1736–1801) and Jeong Yak-jeon (정약전 丁若銓, 1758–1816), convened a study session at Cheonjin-am (천진암 天眞庵), affirming and practising Catholic doctrine in accordance with Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi.* This gathering was no ordinary scholarly meeting; participants engaged in systematic doctrinal discussion, communal prayer, and ritual observance modelled on instructions inferred from Catholic texts received from Beijing (Choi 2006, pp. 22–56).

In 1783, Yi Seung-hun (이승훈 李承薰, 1756–1801) was baptised at the North Church (北堂 Beitang) in Beijing. He became the first Korean to receive Catholic baptism on Chinese soil. Upon returning to Korea, Yi Seung-hun baptised Yi Byeok and Gwon Il-sin (권일신 權日身, 1742–1791), and together they established the Korean Catholic Church. Crucially, the early Korean Church operated for more than a decade without ordained clergy, prompting an unprecedented institutional improvisation: in 1786, Korean lay leaders established a so-called "lay priesthood" (가성직 假聖職), in which converts assumed sacerdotal functions, including the celebration of the Eucharist, in the conscientious belief that Catholic doctrine permitted such measures under conditions of clerical absence (Rausch 2014, pp. 213–35). Although this practice was later corrected upon receiving guidance from Beijing, the episode illustrates the depth of Korean lay engagement with Catholic theology and the institutional creativity that characterised the early Church. By autumn 1784, several dozen converts had been baptised, and in 1794, the Chinese priest Zhou Wenmo (周文謨 주문모, 1752–1801) was brought in to help build the ecclesiastical structure.

The intellectual sophistication of this early movement is most clearly demonstrated in the writings of Jeong Yak-jong (정약종 丁若鍾, 1760–1801), younger brother of the Catholic scholar Jeong Yak-jeon and elder brother of the renowned Confucian thinker Jeong Yak-

yong (정약용 丁若鏞, 1762–1836). Jeong Yak-jong's *Jugyo Yoji* (주교요지 主教要旨, Essentials of the Lord's Teaching), composed circa 1799 in vernacular Korean script (Hangeul), is widely regarded as the first systematic exposition of Catholic doctrine produced indigenously in East Asia (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 49–108). By deploying Hangeul rather than literary Sinitic, Jeong consciously aimed at a popular readership beyond the literate elite—a deliberate gesture toward what would later become the Church's defining demographic. In addition, Jeong addressed precisely the doctrinal questions that Confucian opponents would soon press, including the compatibility of monotheism with the Confucian cosmology of li (理) and qi (氣) and the legitimacy of refusing ancestral rites. The text thus represents not a borrowed catechism, but an original theological synthesis crafted from within the Confucian intellectual tradition, demonstrating the depth at which Korean converts engaged with Catholic thought. It was not until nearly 150 years after Japan had banned Catholicism that the religion officially entered Korea (Choi 2006, pp. 22–56).

3. Subtle Differences in Catholic Accommodation to the Cultures of the Three Countries

Because the cultural backgrounds and traditions of the three countries differed in certain respects, those engaged in spreading Catholicism to China, Japan, and Korea, though broadly adhering to the "accommodation policy", employed specific measures that diverged in subtle ways from country to country. Although all three countries were characterised by a degree of Confucian influence, there were significant differences between them.

Before the mid-sixteenth century when Catholicism was introduced to Japan, the country had long been characterised by the religious great tradition of *Shinbutsu–shūgō* (神仏習合, the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism). The standing of Confucian scholars was roughly equivalent to that of physicians, and Japan had no civil examination system as a pathway to official advancement; the Japanese political and social order had no need for Confucianism to legitimise its sacred character (Watanabe 2016, pp. 72–73). Moreover, the timing of Catholicism's arrival coincided with the *Sengoku jidai* (戦国時代, Warring States period), during which Buddhism—possessing a degree of transcendence capable of consoling the populace—exerted far greater influence than Confucianism.

The missionaries placed great emphasis on adapting their interpretations of key religious concepts to the local culture. They deliberately selected certain Buddhist vocabulary to translate or explain Catholic concepts while critiquing Buddhism at the doctrinal level, thereby helping Japanese people understand the teachings and attracting them to convert. Xavier initially used the term *Dainichi Nyorai* (大日如来, Mahāvairocana, the primordial Buddha in Shingon Esoteric Buddhism) to translate the Christian term deus (God); finding the two concepts far too divergent in meaning, he subsequently adopted translations such as *Tenshu* (天主, Lord of Heaven), *Tendi* (天帝, Heavenly Emperor), and *Tendō* (天道, Heavenly Way), before settling on the phonetic rendering *Deusu* (デウス). The 1600 edition of the *Doctrina Christiana* (ドチリナ　キリシタン) rendered Benauenturança (the Beatitudes from *Christ's Sermon on the Mount*) as the Buddhist term *kahō* (果報, karmic reward), and adapted the teaching of the high priest Rennyo (蓮如, 1415–1499) on "salvation in the next life through Amitābha" to promote the Catholic doctrines of the beatitudes and redemption in the next life (Yonei 1998, pp. 212–25). The largest church in Japan at the time was named *Tenmonji* (天門寺, Temple of the Heavenly Gate), among other such adaptations.

In China during this period, *Cheng–Zhu lixue* (程朱理學, Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism) served as the official ideology, and the civil examination system as the mechanism for selecting talent, imbuing the bureaucratic and scholarly class with Confucian culture. *Daoxue* (道學, another name for Neo-Confucianism) formed the disciplinary and integrative foun-

dation of the entire national bureaucratic organisation and the social basis of the whole literati class (Watanabe 2016, pp. 61–64). As the official ideology of the empire, and particularly as a key reference for the *Keju* (科舉, imperial examinations), it was not accepted by all Ming-era literati; yet, at the same time, it seems that the proper way to enable Ming-era literati to rapidly absorb foreign religious culture was through the language inherent within this official ideology. To achieve this objective, Ricci consulted a vast number of examination textbooks used in the Ming-era imperial examinations.

Prior to the Ming Dynasty, Christianity had entered China on two large-scale occasions: first as "Jingjiao" (景教 the church of Nestorianism) during the Tang Dynasty, and later as the religion known as "Yelikewenjiao" (也裡可溫教 Christianity among the Mongols) during the Yuan Dynasty. During the Tang China, missionary groups extensively borrowed Buddhist and Daoist terminology to translate core Christian concepts. This strategy failed to achieve the desired results, both in terms of translation methodology and the dissemination of the faith. Drawing on this experience, Matteo Ricci recognised that a Christian vocabulary pieced together from Buddhist and Daoist loanwords could not establish lasting roots within China's "great tradition" and "little tradition" (Li et al. 2024, pp. 53–57). Ricci decided to establish the name of God not on the basis of Buddhist terminology, but rather on the Confucian classics, positioning it as the "Shangdi" found in the Shijing and ritual texts. This marked a deliberate departure from the practices of his predecessors, and it was precisely this breakthrough that endowed his translation with special significance (Li and Gao 2025, p. 4).

Missionaries in China sought to integrate Catholic teachings into the Chinese "great tradition" through a dual strategy of Confucian discursive accommodation and scientific evangelism. The translation and conceptualisation of deus serves as a prime example of this evolution. In 1584, Michele Ruggieri authored the *Tianzhu shengjiao shilu* (天主聖教實錄, A True Record of the Holy Religion of the Lord of Heaven, 1584) under the direction of Alessandro Valignano. Within this foundational text, *deus* was rendered as *Tianzhu* (天主, Lord of Heaven). However, in the *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, 1603), Ricci advanced this strategy by rendering it as *Shangdi* (上帝, Supreme Ruler)—a resonant term within the Chinese classical canon (Ruggieri [1584] 1966, pp. 759–66).

This practice of *He ru* was not merely superficial cultural appeasement, but rather an intricate process of textual criticism and conceptual substitution. As Ricci stated in the book's second chapter, "Our Lord of Heaven is precisely the *Shangdi* referred to in the ancient classics." To substantiate this, he cited canonical texts such as the *Zhong Yong* (中庸, Doctrine of the Mean): "The ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth are meant for the service of *Shangdi*", and the *Shi Jing* (詩經, Classic of Poetry): "Before the Yin lost the multitudes, they were in harmony with *Shangdi*". Through these references, Ricci attempted to prove to Ming scholar-officials that the supreme sovereign revered by ancient Confucian sage-kings was, in fact, identical to the Creator in Western monotheism (Ricci 2014, pp. 100–2).

Seeking legitimacy for a foreign religion by reinterpreting the core texts of the "great tradition" served a profound epistemological function. It not only cleverly evaded the risk of Catholicism being denounced as "heterodoxy," but also provided late Ming literati with the illusion of a *Shixue* (實學, practical learning) that bypassed Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism to return to the pure origins of pre-Qin antiquity. Coupled with the allure of Western scientific knowledge, this strategy drew a group of intellectual elites into the faith (Meynard 2015, pp. 15–22), and even exerted an appeal on the scholarly class in distant Korea (Baker 2006, pp. 50–53). Although Ricci's specific translation was later abandoned by papal decree, it established a structural paradigm for cross-cultural negotiation;

centuries later, it was rediscovered by Protestant missionaries, eventually becoming a standard translation while shedding its indigenous Chinese religious connotations (Bays 2011, pp. 47–50). The distinction between religion and culture that the Jesuits had introduced in China—interpreting Confucianism as a humanist culture and natural morality, rather than an idolatrous religion—was later incorporated into European debates, where the unintended consequences were the dissolution of certain doctrinal distinctions and providing material for the Enlightenment critique of religion (Casanova 2018, pp. 8–11).

The situation in Korea differed considerably from that in China and Japan. Catholicism was, in effect, introduced into Korea by a segment of Korean intellectual elites who had brought it in from China, without any evangelisation by Western priests; thus, it was not missionaries but certain Korean intellectuals and *Yangban*[2] (양반 兩班) aristocrats who drove the process of integrating Catholicism into Korean culture. As in China, from the seventeenth century onward, the Korean state promoted Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology, and its exclusive orthodoxy was even more firmly entrenched than in China. The yangban aristocracy combined the characteristics of a hereditary privileged class and an intellectual elite; their dependence on and veneration of Zhu Xi's learning was more intense even than that of their Chinese counterparts (Feng 2001, pp. 279–81). Compared with practical learning, Korean Confucian scholars were more preoccupied with metaphysical inquiries into human nature and principle, as well as formal theories of ritual propriety.

The distinctive Korean accommodation strategy can be observed at the level of theological argument. The Korean theologian Jeong Yak-jong identified the Neo-Confucian doctrine of *Li* (理) and *Qi* (气) as inadequate to account for the moral order of the cosmos, and proposed that the Catholic doctrine of a personal Creator-God resolved precisely the perplexities that had troubled generations of Korean Confucian scholars (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 78–94). Driven by a curiosity for Western learning, these Korean intellectual elites sought to identify elements within Catholic doctrine that could compensate for the political and institutional deficiencies of contemporary Confucian thought. Consequently, they attempted to secure a place for the Catholic faith within the framework of Confucian classics (Lian 2012, p. 123).

Furthermore, the psychological mechanisms at play in the three East Asian countries when responding to foreign cultures exhibit both structural commonalities and subtle national differences. Chinese thought was shaped by traditional Confucian worldviews such as the *Huayi zhibian*[3] (華夷之辯). This was reinforced by the geopolitical and historical reality that the East Asian continent had long been the centre of a single civilisation, lacking encounters with heterogeneous civilisations of comparable stature. Thus, by the late Ming Dynasty, China's intellectual elite, when confronted with Western civilisation, were often constrained by entrenched cultural inertia and the limitations of their historical perspective. This elicited a collective psychology characterised by 'Sinocentrism'. This psychological tendency stemmed less from subjective cultural arrogance than from an epistemological path dependence arising from a vast, long-established and internally coherent civilisational system (Zhang 2015, pp. 1–22).

Within this historical context, early translations of Western arts and religious texts frequently required strategies of cultural adaptation and discursive transformation, either by cloaking them in Confucian conceptual frameworks, or by constructing their legitimacy within the theoretical framework of 'Western learning with Chinese origins', thereby mitigating the cognitive shock caused by heterogeneous cultures. Among the intellectual and social elites of China, the textual corpus reveals a shared set of interpretative paradigms, although the specific nuances of their reasoning often attest to a deep-seated intellectual alignment with the great tradition. This meant that numerous books and documents introducing *Xi Yi* (西藝, Western arts) and *Xi Jiao* (西教, Western religion) were obliged to

adopt a Confucian veneer, or first express affirmation or reverence for China, to introduce learning and religion under the rubric of *Xi Xue Zhong Yuan* (西學中源, Western learning having its origins in China). In his preface to the *Jihe yuanben* (幾何原本, Euclid's Elements), Xu Guangqi (徐光啟, 1562–1633) argued that geometry had been quite advanced in China during the era of the sage-emperors Yao and Shun, but that its transmission had been severed by Qin Shi Huang's burning of books and burying of scholars (G. Xu 1849, pp. 3–4). In his preface to a reprinted edition of the *Tianzhu shiyi*, Li Zhizao (李之藻, 1565–1630) also held that the "way of the Confucians" in the East and in the West was similar (Z. Xu 1998, p. 147). These discursive strategies of Chinese literati reveal the distinctive character of the Chinese reception of Western learning.

Japan and Korea were also characterised by concepts analogous to the "distinction between the civilised and the barbarian". Yet while they used dismissive terms such as *Yidi* (夷狄, barbarians) or *Nanman* (南蛮, Southern Barbarians) for foreign groups, they did not emphasise the cultural origins of the "great tradition." In both countries, Western learning and Catholicism were introduced by drawing on Confucian, Buddhist, or Shinto concepts, or by demonstrating their compatibility with these traditions, without tracing their origins back to the indigenous cultural traditions of either country (Eisenstadt 1996, pp. 12–14). Therefore, missionaries had no need to position Western culture and Catholicism as subordinate to Japanese or Korean indigenous culture; they needed only to find their own place within the "great tradition" and "little tradition" prevailing in those countries (Higashibaba 2001, pp. 53–70).

It should be further emphasised that the 'cultural accommodation' implemented by Catholic missionaries in East Asia cannot be simply understood as a condescending, top-down design. More often, it was an active compromise the missionaries made when confronted with the mature and dominant 'great traditions' of East Asia. Furthermore, the missionaries utilised their technological and intellectual expertise to engage in cross-cultural collaboration with local intellectual elites, forging a dynamic interaction characterised by proactive selection and appropriation from both sides. Whether it was Matteo Ricci donning Confucian scholarly robes, Xavier borrowing the concept of *Dainichi Nyorai*, or their collaborative efforts in cartography, all of these actions were negotiations of meaning undertaken by the missionaries in response to the 'great tradition' (Cams 2017, p. 198). In this process, the missionaries frequently underestimated the assimilative power of East Asian intellectual repositories; they believed they were merely borrowing indigenous vocabulary to transmit the Western Gospel, but in the eyes of some East Asian scholar-officials, these foreign doctrines had been reconstructed to mere supplements of indigenous traditions. While this mutual compromise facilitated early cooperation between Eastern and Western cultures, it ultimately could not stop the later conflicts between doctrinal purity and indigenous orthodoxy (Standaert 2008, pp. 11–15).

4. Different Paths to a Common Destination: From Tolerance to Prohibition

As a foreign culture, Catholicism was accompanied from its very introduction into East Asia by ongoing conflict with indigenous cultures, conflict that ultimately escalated into governmental rejection and prohibition in all three countries. As the country to which Catholicism was introduced first, Japan was also the first to adopt a policy of prohibition. As early as 1565, Emperor Ōgimachi issued an order for the expulsion of missionaries. In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi issued the *Bateren Tsuihō–rei* (伴天連追放令, Edict Expelling the Padres), declaring Japan a *Shinkoku* (神國, divine nation) and denouncing Christianity as a perverse cult. Citing the destruction of shrines and temples by Christian converts, he ordered missionaries to return to their home countries within twenty days, while simulta-

neously drawing a distinction between Western merchants and missionaries and allowing the *Nanban* trade to continue (Ōba 1927, p. 79). Although the edict was not strictly enforced, after the "Martyrdom of the Twenty-Six Saints" in 1596, the violent suppression of Christianity led by the warrior class began in earnest. The anti-Christian ideology of the Tokugawa Bakufu was not merely a policy instrument, but a systematic intellectual construction. In this process, Japanese indigenous intellectuals actively participated in the ideological rejection of Catholicism, constructing Christianity as a dangerous alien element fundamentally incompatible with Japanese culture (Elison 1973, pp. 185–260).

During the Tokugawa period, as the Bakufu strengthened its control over the entire nation and unified the ideological sphere, the slightly more relaxed prohibition policy that had persisted for commercial reasons gave way to intensified suppression. The temple and *Terauke seido* (寺請制度, shrine registration system) established by the Tokugawa Bakufu was far more than merely an anti-Christian measure; it was an institutionalised system of social control extending to the entire population, a system that continued to function until the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate in the late nineteenth century (Paramore 2009, p. 55). Between 1614 and 1624 alone, there were as many as 149 incidents of mass killing and coerced martyrdom (Matsuzaki 1926, pp. 186–257). All of this occurred within barely a century of Xavier's arrival.

China's official stance towards Catholicism underwent multiple fluctuations, moving progressively from early modern tolerance to systemic prohibition. Although the Nanjing Incident of 1616[4] did not alter the Ming dynasty's generally tolerant disposition, the geopolitical landscape shifted significantly after the Qing forces entered the passes. Recognising the practical utility of Western scientific knowledge, the nascent Qing court appointed foreign missionaries to prominent official positions, and under the Kangxi Emperor, the state maintained lax control over Catholic activities, formally affirming the legal status of the religion (Kangxi Emperor and Ferdinand Verbiest 2006, pp. 65–68).

This period of imperial tolerance, however, was structurally undermined by internal compromises and rejections among different missionary groups regarding their interactions with China's "great tradition" and "little tradition". While the Jesuits cultivated close relations with elite groups and adopted an accommodating policy towards traditional rites such as ancestral worship, rival orders including the Dominicans and Franciscans operated extensively among local grassroots communities. In the course of their pastoral practice in Fujian, these latter friars demonstrated fierce opposition to ancestral rites and subsequently submitted a critical report to the Roman Curia (Mungello 1994, pp. 35–60; Standaert 2001, pp. 363–93). After vacillating several times between the two opposing perspectives, the Holy See finally endorsed the Dominican anti-accommodation stance in 1704. This external theological interference directly challenged imperial sovereignty, intensifying the contradictions between the Chinese court and the papacy, and provoking a sharp counter-response from the Kangxi Emperor, who firmly refused to relinquish his jurisdiction over missionary affairs (Han 2026, p. 10).

The resulting friction culminated in a definitive policy shift under the Yongzheng Emperor, whose formal prohibition of Christianity was directly linked to the volatile inner-court succession struggles of the late Kangxi years (Swen 2021, pp. 215–68). Driven by an intricate combination of shifting political power dynamics and personal predilections, the Yongzheng administration tightened state control over the expansion of the faith. This prohibition was directed not only at court-based Jesuit missionaries but also introduced far stricter measures to regulate and suppress missionary activities at the local grassroots level. By the early nineteenth century, Emperor Jiaqing completed this trajectory of comprehensive suppression. Identifying the growing influence of missionaries as a dangerous challenge to the existing political order and traditional cultural orthodoxy, Jiaqing is-

sued numerous restrictive edicts, imposed rigid institutional and ideological controls, and meted out severe punishments to Chinese Catholics, which ultimately led to the absolute suppression of Catholicism in China (*Renzong Rui Huangdi shilu* 1986, pp. 954–55).

At the official level, the Korean state maintained a consistent posture of rejection towards both Western learning and Western religion, even if the severity of enforcement was far from uniform. Campaigns involving the arrest of converts and the confiscation of Western and religious books recurred with some frequency (Suematsu 1946, pp. 59–64). The root of the conflict, however, lay deeper than the circulation of proscribed books. It lay in Catholicism's confrontational stance towards the ancestral rites, for in a society ordered upon Confucian ritual a refusal to perform these rites amounted to a repudiation of the entire social order. Here the Korean case admitted none of the latitude that had attended the Chinese Rites Controversy[5]. There was no room to reinterpret ancestral rites as merely secular observances, and the confrontation assumed the character of an irreconcilable zero-sum contest (Seong 2024, pp. 6–10). The Jinsan Incident of 1791 crystallised this antagonism in a form that permitted no diplomatic resolution: the convert Yun Ji-chung (윤지충 尹持忠, 1759–1791), having refused to perform the ancestral rites for his deceased mother, was executed alongside his cousin Kwon Sang-yeon (권상연 權尙然, 1751–1791), and the irreconcilability of the two value systems was laid bare (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 49–108).

Yet the escalation from the relative restraint of 1791 to the comprehensive purge of 1801 cannot be explained by doctrinal antagonism alone. Under King Jeongjo, whose sympathies inclined towards the *Sipa* faction within which many converts moved, the state had been content to punish individual offenders while declining to pursue Catholicism as such. His death in 1800 removed this restraining hand and delivered the court to the Noron Byeokpa, the rival faction that had long sought the destruction of its opponents. The Sinyu Persecution of 1801 must therefore be read as much as an instrument of factional warfare as an act of doctrinal defence (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 83–100). The charge of heterodoxy furnished a pretext of unimpeachable legitimacy through which the Byeokpa could proscribe the Catholic faith and, in the same stroke, eliminate the Namin and Sipa literati among whom it had taken root. Hundreds of converts, Jeong Yak-jong among them, were executed, and the Church was driven decisively underground (Cho 2018, pp. 156–79). The fate of the early Korean church was thus bound up with the contingencies of court politics, and the language of orthodoxy served, as it so often did, to clothe a struggle for power in the dress of principle (Rausch 2012, pp. 47–53). This entanglement of doctrinal and political motive lends concrete historical substance to the contention advanced earlier in this article, namely that the boundary work of the great tradition was never a purely intellectual exercise but a politically charged act of definition, responsive to the immediate interests of those who wielded it. Thereafter the Korean Catholic Church entered a prolonged period of suppression.

Examining the paths to religious prohibition across the three countries through the theoretical framework of the boundary work of the "great tradition" reveals subtle differences in their underlying operational logic. The Tokugawa shogunate's suppression of Christianity in Japan was a violent purge instigated by the ruling elite to cultivate a political identity characterised by uniformity and exclusivity, transforming Catholicism into the defensive "Other" against which domestic boundaries were established (Paramore 2009, pp. 50–55). In China, the transition from tolerance to prohibition moved from an intense negotiation over orthopraxy and imperial sovereignty during the Rites Controversy to a rigorous apparatus of state control, a shift heavily accelerated by volatile inner-court succession struggles (Swen 2021, pp. 215–68). Meanwhile, the Korean trajectory illustrates how a heterodox movement originally introduced at the intellectual periphery escalated

into a crisis of state, transitioning from King Jeongjo's initial moderation during the 1791 Jinsan Incident[6] (진산 사건 珍山事件) to a sweeping purge during the 1801 Sinyu Persecution, wherein the dominant Noron Byeokpa faction systematically weaponised the anti-Catholic campaign as a tool of realpolitik to liquidate the rival Namin Sipa faction (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 83–120).

Ultimately, while these three polities banned Catholicism for complex and multi-faceted reasons, the common structural catalyst was the perceived threat that the foreign faith posed to the mainstream political and cultural systems already in place (Casanova 2018, p. 11). This divergence in the operational logic of state rejection necessitates a more structured, multidimensional comparative analysis of their respective historical trajectories.

5. Comparative Discussion: A Multi-Dimensional Comparison of the Three East Asian Countries

Building upon the individual historical examinations in the preceding sections, it is necessary to conduct a systematic, integrated comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in the three countries' policies toward Catholicism. Rather than employing Robert Redfield's distinction between the "great tradition" and the "little tradition" as a rigid, self-contained binary, this section conceptualises their relationship as a porous, dialectical interface characterised by high political dynamism and constant mutual interpenetration (Redfield 1956, pp. 41–42; Paramore 2009, pp. 1–14). By mapping the divergent destinies of the faith onto this fluid relational matrix, this inquiry investigates how the boundary work of elite orthodoxy interacted with popular agency across four distinct registers.

From the perspective of the logic of official tolerance, the initial acceptance in the three countries was built on markedly different foundations, each reflecting a specific configuration of how the elite great tradition managed its boundaries. Japan's tolerance was primarily instrumental, driven by the desire of both regional daimyō and centralised unifiers to secure the commercial benefits of the *Nanban* trade, allowing a foreign element temporary access to the domestic economy. China's tolerance was utilitarian and private, structured by the unique institutional architecture of the Qing court where the legitimacy of Jesuit specialists within the Imperial Household Department depended strictly on their personal utility to the emperor's scientific projects (Swen 2021, pp. 215–68). Conversely, Korea never exhibited a formal framework of positive elite tolerance; King Jeongjo's relative moderation was a defensive strategy of passive non-interference, designed to contain a heterodox intellectual current within marginalised elite circles before it could spill into wider popular society (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 1–48).

The activation of the great tradition's boundary work was triggered precisely when Catholic practice threatened to dissolve the porous boundaries separating elite orthodoxy from the popular little tradition. In Japan, prohibition was enacted when the rapid expansion of converts across all social strata, from daimyō to beggars, threatened the ideological uniformity essential to centralized state-building (Ōhashi 2016, p. 125; Paramore 2009). In China, the trigger was an external shock that disrupted the domestic equilibrium of orthopraxy. The papal decisions during the Rites Controversy directly encroached upon the imperial sovereignty of the Qing court, stripping the emperor of his absolute authority to adjudicate whether ancestral worship constituted a secular cultural ritual or an idolatrous religious practice (Casanova 2018). In Korea, the threshold of intolerance was crossed immediately because the elite great tradition was structurally dependent on Zhu Xi ritual propriety. The individual refusal to perform ancestral rites during the 1791 Jinsan Incident was not treated as an isolated theological eccentricism, but as a radical, grassroots assault upon the cosmic and patriarchal foundations of the entire social order (Seong 2024; Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 49–108).

The institutional rejection of Catholicism was never a detached, purely philosophical confrontation between Eastern and Western canonical texts. Instead, the boundary work of the great tradition operated as a highly fluid instrument of factional realpolitik, precisely because social elites were fundamentally bi-cultural actors who participated simultaneously in elite reflective structures and popular networks (Burke [1978] 2009, pp. 28–29; Paramore 2009, pp. 1–14). The Japanese trajectory illustrates an overdetermined instance where the Tokugawa shogunate systematically weaponised the anti-Christian Shinkoku ideology to enforce total political subjecthood, transforming Catholicism into a defensive "Other" to consolidate domestic hegemony (Paramore 2009, pp. 40–75).

In China and Korea, the enforcement of ideological boundaries was thoroughly entangled with inner-court power struggles and factional survival. The transition from the Kangxi Emperor's pragmatic management to the Yongzheng Emperor's formal prohibition of 1724 was heavily accelerated by the volatile succession crisis late in the Kangxi reign. Missionaries who had aligned themselves with rival princely factions were stripped of imperial patronage once the throne changed hands, forcing the Yongzheng administration to implement strict local regulations to suppress Catholic networks at the popular grassroots level (Swen 2021, pp. 215–68).

This dynamic is even more pronounced in the Joseon case, where the escalation from the localised punishments of 1791 to the state-sponsored violence of the 1801 Sinyu Persecution was driven by the structural requirements of court factionalism rather than an overnight shift in doctrinal pureness. The sudden demise of King Jeongjo dismantled the defensive shield protecting the Namin Sipa literati, allowing the conservative Noron Byeokpa faction to assume absolute control of the state apparatus. The Byeokpa elite weaponised the charge of heterodoxy as an unimpeachable tool of realpolitik, utilising the rhetoric of ideological purification to execute their political rivals and drive the indigenous Catholic community decisively underground (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 83–120; Cho 2018, pp. 156–79). The boundary work of the great tradition was thus never a monolithic exercise in intellectual consistency, but a politically charged act of definition responsive to the immediate power interests of those who wielded it (Rausch 2012, pp. 47–53).

The internal logic of the accommodation paradox reveals the fundamental instability of attempting to navigate a foreign faith through the fluid boundaries of an entrenched host tradition. The Jesuit strategy achieved remarkable early success by intentionally exploiting the porousness of the East Asian landscape, operating through a process of conceptual borrowing that mapped Catholic theology onto indigenous vocabulary. While these conversions remained numerically modest and confined to individual elite interpretation, the host societies could absorb the foreign faith without fracturing the overarching architecture of the great tradition.

However, as the convert population crossed critical demographic and institutional thresholds, the boundary between accommodation and subversion collapsed. Institutional growth allowed the Catholic community to exhibit doctrinal autonomy, establishing clandestine ritual cycles and communicating directly with Rome, thereby creating an alternative locus of authority that challenged the host state's monopoly on order. Conceptually, the vocabulary borrowed to secure early legitimacy came to function as competing claims upon contested terrain; the Confucian Shangdi or the Buddhist Dainichi could no longer simultaneously sustain both Christian monotheism and indigenous cosmic metaphysics. What began as translation became, when sustained at sufficient volume, an overt contestation over the foundational symbols of the host culture, forcing the great tradition to activate its boundary work and implement prohibition.

This probabilistic mechanism explains why the timing of prohibition tracked the attainment of institutional thresholds rather than the introduction of new, provocative doc-

trines. The Bateren Tsuihō-rei of 1587 was issued in Japan precisely when converts reached approximately 200,000 and their territorial concentration in Kyūshū had become politically conspicuous to centralised unifiers (Boxer 1951, pp. 308–61). The Yongzheng prohibition of 1724 followed the consolidation of a Catholic population exceeding 300,000 distributed across fourteen provinces, a threshold that imperial administrators conceptualised as an unacceptable domestic security risk (Mungello 2013, p. 38). The Japanese and Chinese cases thus highlight a protracted negotiation across shifting boundaries, whereas the Korean case also admitted such buffer phase. Because the early Korean Church was founded through the intellectual self-conversion of marginalised literati who immediately crossed the sensitive ritual boundary by destroying ancestral tablets, institutional growth and acute doctrinal confrontation occurred simultaneously. When the balance of power within the court faction on which Korea's Catholics had relied shifted, they were swiftly suppressed. These cases confirm the tragic paradox that the very effectiveness of cross-cultural adaptation under high demographic pressure inevitably generates the conditions for its subsequent political undoing (Casanova 2018, p. 11; Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 83–120).

The legal mechanisms and bureaucratic severity of prohibition implemented by the three polities diverged sharply in their institutional topography, reflecting how deeply each state could penetrate the popular little tradition. The Tokugawa shogunate established the most comprehensive and technologically rigorous apparatus of anti-religious surveillance in the early modern world. Through the institutionalisation of the Terauke seido and the recurring, public performance of the fumie trampling rite, the state completely closed the porous space between elite decree and popular life, forcing the little tradition of everyday peasant existence into a rigid, bureaucratised matrix of state control that persisted for over two centuries (Paramore 2009, p. 55).

By contrast, the suppression mechanisms in China and Korea were far less systematic, operating through uneven spatial and temporal registers that left the boundaries between elite prohibition and popular survival highly porous. The Qing suppression was spatially heterogeneous and dependent on the personal dispositions of provincial governors, meaning that while local communities faced severe proscription, select European scientific specialists retained their prominent elite positions within the capital, rendering the anti-Catholic apparatus porous and subject to local bureaucratic negotiation (Han 2026, p. 10; Swen 2021, pp. 215–68). In Korea, due to the absence of a permanent, nation-wide religious surveillance bureaucracy comparable to the Japanese model, suppression assumed a highly episodic and spasmodic character. The Joseon anti-Catholic campaigns erupted as intense, temporally bounded convulsions of state violence dictated by the shifting rhythms of capital politics, operating as short-term factional cleansings that periodically drove the faith underground into hidden transcripts but could never achieve the total bureaucratic saturation of the popular consciousness characteristic of the Tokugawa model (Choi 2006; Scott 1990).

6. The Survival of Catholicism Within the "Little Tradition"

The rejection by the great tradition and the prohibitions of the ruling class did not eliminate Catholicism from the three countries. Catholicism had always carried the colouring of enduring present suffering and seeking salvation in the next world, and its doctrines could partially help the lower classes explain supernatural phenomena. The fusion of Catholicism with such "little traditions" of the lower strata as animism and ancestor worship enabled it to establish different footholds among ordinary people. This survival was not a passive acceptance by the "little tradition", but rather contained within it a cultural strategy pursued by lower-class believers under conditions of intense pressure—sustaining their faith through disguise, transformation, and fusion (Scott 1990, pp. 183–201).

The case of Fujian Province in China can serve as evidence for discussion. Catholicism combined with popular spiritual beliefs, drawing parallels between local female deities such as *Mazu* (媽祖) and the Virgin Mary. Catholicism operated in local society in a manner akin to a "local religion," fusing with local lineage systems and folk beliefs, and dissolving popular resistance to a foreign religion within Fujian society (Menegon 2009, pp. 297–340). By 1840, there were still roughly 19,790 Catholics in Fujian (Yang 2010, p. 71).

In Japan, beginning in 1644 and up through the next 200 years, Japanese Catholicism took root in popular society and developed into the *Kakure Kirishitan* (かくれキリシタン, Hidden Christians) (Nakazono 2010, pp. 91–101). This "active cultural strategy" of grassroots believers was most vividly demonstrated among the *Kakure Kirishitan* in Japan. Under the Tokugawa Bakufu's persecution and the *Fumi–e* (踏み絵, picture-trampling) system which lasted over two centuries, peasants and fishermen in the Nagasaki and Hirado regions integrated their Catholic faith into the local "little tradition." They disguised the image of the Virgin Mary as the Buddhist "Merciful Kannon" (マリア観音, Maria Kannon). While superficially complying with the temple registration system, they secretly recited the *Orasho*[7] prayers, blending Latin, Portuguese, and Japanese dialects, in hidden chambers. This micro-level practice of seamlessly weaving heterogeneous religious symbols into the indigenous folk belief network was not merely a clever appropriation of the ruling class's "public transcript"; it further demonstrated the immense cultural resilience unleashed by the "little tradition" under extreme survival pressures (Miyazaki 2003, pp. 22–25).

Following the execution or flight of elite "great tradition" leaders, the faithful established secluded *Cheonju–gyo–chon* (천주교촌, Catholic villages) in the mountains of Gangwon (강원도 江原) and Gyeongsang (경상도 慶尙) (Rausch 2014, pp. 213–35). Survival necessitated the adoption of the pottery trade, specifically the production of *Onggi* (옹기 甕器) earthenware, which was a stigmatised occupation reserved for social outcasts. This marginal economic activity served as a "hidden transcript" for religious perpetuation; the inherent mobility of pottery trading facilitated a clandestine communication network. Consequently, the ecclesiastical organisation persisted without ordained clergy via the *Kongso* (공소 公所, mission station) system led by the laity. Furthermore, the use of the vernacular *Hangeul* (한글) script for catechisms and hymns transitioned Catholicism from an elite philosophical discourse into a devotional practice for women and the commonality. This trajectory, shifting from "literati Western Learning" to the "faith of potters and peasants," explains why Korean Catholicism exhibited greater resilience than its Chinese and Japanese counterparts, ultimately facilitating its rapid modern expansion. Full cooperation with popular beliefs enabled Catholicism to survive in a unique form, rather than being directly eradicated by state power (Choi 2006, pp. 150–89; Baker 2013, pp. 15–22; Kim and Kim 2014, pp. 72–88). Sustained by lower-class believers, the Catholic faith never truly became extinct in any of the three countries, even as China, Japan, and Korea all adopted rigorous prohibition measures on the eve of the modern era.

7. Conclusions

The Catholic strategy of cultural accommodation, far from constituting a uniform programme, was shaped in each instance by the specific configuration of the host society's "great tradition". In Japan, where Buddhist vocabulary furnished the primary medium of translation and the political order owed nothing to Confucian legitimation, accommodation assumed a devotional register. In China, where the Confucian canon enjoyed doctrinal authority, accommodation proceeded through the more ambitious project of textual reinterpretation, epitomised by Ricci's equation of *Shangdi* with *deus*. In Korea, accommodation was driven by indigenous intellectuals seeking to remedy perceived deficiencies within their own Confucian inheritance. These divergences confirm that accommo-

dation was less a coherent Jesuit policy than a contingent, multilateral negotiation whose terms were dictated as much by the receiving culture as by the transmitting one. Furthermore, the various factions within the ruling elite—depending on the specific political climate—would either court or exclude missionaries and believers, which was a key factor in determining whether Catholicism could spread widely in the country during a particular period.

The paths to religious prohibition across the three East Asian polities reveal a shared structural imperative, as any historical inquiry into the formulation and execution of anti-Catholic policies cannot be decoupled from the immediate dynamics of contemporary political groups and ruling factions. This shared political entanglement manifested vividly through specific commonalities across all three states. In Japan, the suppression of the faith was fundamentally driven by the ruling elite's project of national homogenisation and centralised state building to enforce absolute domestic loyalty. In China, the transition to prohibition was shaped by the Qing court's defensive counter-attack against the theological and geopolitical encroachment of the Holy See, which occurred alongside a parallel strengthening of imperial ideological control over grassroots society (Swen 2021, pp. 215–68). Meanwhile, the Joseon trajectory demonstrates that the fluctuating severity of state control, shifting dynamically between administrative laxity and rigorous persecution, was directly linked to the outcomes of volatile internal struggles within the ruling group, where anti-Catholic campaigns were systematically weaponised as an organic instrument of factional warfare to liquidate political rivals (Baker and Rausch 2017, pp. 83–120).

Yet, whilst these three polities converge in their fundamental reliance on domestic political contingencies, they diverged significantly in the concrete historical manifestations and institutional topographies of their respective prohibitions. Japan implemented the most comprehensive and technologically rigorous apparatus of anti-religious control in the early modern world through the permanent institutionalisation of the temple registration system, completely saturating popular life and enforcing ideological conformity for over two centuries (Paramore 2009, p. 55). China's approach, by contrast, remained spatially heterogeneous and highly porous, fluctuating across provincial administrations and paradoxically retaining select European scientific specialists within the inner court, which rendered the anti-Catholic apparatus subject to local bureaucratic negotiation (Han 2026, p. 10). Conversely, Korea lacked a permanent nation-wide surveillance bureaucracy, causing its prohibition to assume an episodic and spasmodic character that erupted as intense, short-term convulsions of state violence dictated strictly by the shifting rhythms of central politics (Choi 2006). What united these distinct manifestations was the mechanism of the great tradition's boundary work, which was activated precisely when accommodation crossed critical demographic or institutional thresholds, demonstrating that the very effectiveness of cross-cultural adaptation generated the conditions for its subsequent political undoing (Casanova 2018, p. 11).

The prohibition of Catholicism at the level of the "great tradition" did not entail its eradication at the level of the "little tradition". In Fujian, Catholicism persisted by assimilating into local lineage networks and folk devotional practices. In Nagasaki and Hirado, the *Kakure Kirishitan* sustained their faith through the creative disguise of Christian symbols within Buddhist and Shinto forms. In the mountains of Gangwon and Gyeongsang, Korean believers forged clandestine communities around the *Kongso* system and the pottery trade. These cases substantiate James Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts", through which heterodox beliefs can be preserved beneath the surface of outward conformity.

The cultural encounter between Catholicism and the East Asian "great tradition" was governed by an inherent structural tension between accommodation and orthodoxy. The seeds sown by early modern missionaries, far from perishing under prohibition, took root

in the interstices of popular culture, ultimately contributing to the religious and intellectual transformations that continue to shape modern East Asia (Kim and Connolly 2024).

A comparative study encompassing three East Asian polities, each possessing a distinct and complex culture, is inherently circumscribed by methodological limitations, particularly in the dual requirement to grasp macro-level structural commonalities within the early modern East Asian landscape whilst fully reflecting the intricate and contingent historical differences unique to each nation. Although this article has endeavoured to rigorously underscore national cultural distinctiveness and the pluralistic patterns of acceptance or rejection among both social elites and the populace within the dynamic interplay of the "great tradition" and the "little tradition", a certain sacrifice of micro-level detail remains unavoidable. The supplement of such detail is precisely what specialised, single-country monographs are positioned to provide. Furthermore, since this transnational inquiry relies upon synthesising a substantial body of multilingual secondary literature alongside selected primary sources, it may occasionally smooth over localised variations within popular society or obscure swift developments in intra-elite factionalism, such as the dynamic shifts in inner-court realpolitik. Crucially, whilst this study attempts to delineate a general structural paradigm of East Asian cross-cultural encounters, the empirical verification of these models through more regionalised and localised archives remains a vital imperative for future scholarship.

The argument advanced in this article contributes not only to the study of the history of Catholic missions in East Asia, but also to the wider study of religion by offering a comparative case study with broader analytical implications. The encounter between Catholicism and East Asian traditions shows that accommodation and rejection were not binary opposites, but could coexist within the same historical moment. In the early phase of Catholic transmission, the strategies of compromise and adaptation adopted by missionary groups could, once foreign elements touched the definitional core of the East Asian "great tradition", provoke particularly strong resistance. The "great tradition" did not reject Catholicism in its entirety, nor did the "little tradition" simply accept it wholesale. Yet under the general suppression imposed by ruling powers, Catholicism survived within "little traditions" marked by strong local and popular characteristics. This dynamic can be observed across three markedly different cultural settings, and provides a framework for examining other cases of cross-cultural religious transmission.

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Notes

1 The terms 'Neo-Confucianism' or 'Neo-Confucian' used in this article refer to the doctrines or principles developed by the scholar-official class in China from the Song dynasty onwards, rather than the Neo-Confucian movement of modern China.
2 The 'Yangban' were part of the traditional ruling class or gentry of the Joseon Dynasty.
3 A concept that distinguishes between the civilised Chinese centre and the surrounding nomadic or foreign peoples.
4 An incident of persecution and suppression of Catholicism that took place at Nanjing in 1616.
5 A dispute among Catholic missionaries over the religiosity of Confucianism and Chinese rituals during the 17th and 18th centuries.
6 An incident in 1791 where Catholics Yun Ji-chung and Kwon Sang-yeon refused to perform Confucian ancestral rites and burned the ancestral tablets of their mother.
7 From the Latin 'oratio'.

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