

— 事人如天 —

"Serve People As Heaven": The Silent Revolution in Joseon

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How did you choose your topic and how does it relate to the annual theme?

Being Koreans living in modern South Korea, our interest arose from a question that was very close to home: "How did the democratic society that we live in today emerge?". The level of sovereignty and equality we now enjoy significantly represents a historical shift compared with the rigid monarchy of Joseon. Our wonder drove us to Catholicism, a force which fundamentally destabilized Joseon society. Beyond challenging Confucian beliefs, the introduction of Catholicism was even more radical. It caused disarray in a system based on hierarchy, ritual, and loyalty to the state. By granting equality and moral authority, Catholicism led Joseon society to face a revolutionary frontier, where the old political and social structures were put under scrutiny. This moment of the collision of systems is exactly what the annual theme of revolution conveys.

How did you conduct your research?

We thought our topic, Catholicism in Joseon, would be best presented through a multimedia format arranged in a chronological framework. We first used Google Docs and created individual sections to effectively divide the work, then used NHD WebCentral to create a visually appealing and informative project.

How did you create your project?

Because our topic concerns Joseon, where official narratives often obscure dissenting voices, we relied heavily on primary sources to clearly see how Catholicism was perceived at the time. We examined state documents and other records to understand the government's response alongside both Catholic and Confucian scholars' writings for a balanced view.

What is your historical argument?

This year's theme is "Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in History." Revolutions are often associated with dramatic, violent uprisings that change regimes, but some of the most consequential revolutions occur through shifts in ideas. In late Joseon Korea, Catholicism did not arrive as a coerced foreign movement, yet it introduced a moral framework that fundamentally challenged Confucianist ruling order. By rejecting hereditary hierarchy and ancestor-centered ethics, it envisioned a radically different version of human worth. The Joseon state reacted with intense persecution, viewing Catholicism as a threat to governmental legitimacy, but Catholic

ideas endured and contributed to long-term reform by weakening ideological foundations and shaping later movements centered on universal moral principles. Our project examines Catholicism in Joseon Korea as a revolution of legitimacy, the state's reaction to it, and the reforms that followed.

In what ways is your topic significant in history?

The historical significance of Catholicism in Joseon should be understood in terms of the scale of the change it brought. The society of Joseon was based on a Confucian, which integrated politics, social hierarchy, and moral life into one single system. Catholicism, by introducing an alternative system, created tensions at all levels of society. The clash between these two systems challenged the relationships between the state, elites, and people, leading to discussions, resistances, and severe persecution. More importantly, the introduction of Catholicism showed that Confucian systems were neither absolute nor uncontested. In fact, the instability that Catholicism caused, changed political ideas and social awareness. Its legacy reached the later reform movements paving the way to the gradual reformation of Korean society and thus, it can be considered a revolutionary moment of structural change in Korean history.