Evangelizing Korean Women and Gender in the Early Modern World

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Vicente’s more passive account of his introduction to Christianity may have been a strategic response to interrogation by Japanese authorities, although in the same text Vicente did not shy away from his later activities and commitment to the Christian faith.

Jesuit opportunities for contact with the Korean people in Japan came almost exclusively through events mired in violence, but we cannot rule out that for some individuals, perhaps especially women, Christian evangelization also offered protection from violence. These were encounters made through long-held practices of enslavement of Korean peoples operating in the region, through the invasions of the Joseon kingdom, and by the forced removal to Japan of captive Korean people. If there were reasons why some Korean people, who were isolated from the local population and their own networks in Japan, might have been attracted to the network of practical and emotional support that the Christian missions may have offered, missionary authors did not foreground them, although they were embedded in their descriptions of evangelized experiences. Instead, as noted above, Fróis wrote to Acquaviva in 1596 celebrating the opportunity that presented this population to Christian influence. He looked forward to the role of Korean people in furthering the mission through East Asia, assuring his reader that “the common talk” was that if “the law of the Gospel is preached in Korea (which does not seem difficult by the way of Japan), they will receive the faith readily and it will spread greatly in those kingdoms.”

**Gender and Mission Strategy**

The different experiences and activities of Korean women and men, as well as people of different status, shaped how they could encounter Christian teachings. Fróis’s account of the Church in Nagasaki in 1593 documented that women’s access to hearing the mass was limited, because the local authorities “still do not allow them to come to the church.” Thus, at Christmas the missionaries had “divided into different houses where the women gathered” to provide services, at which time they “also baptized one hundred gentiles who were already catechized, of whom the majority were Korean captives, because a large number of them came to Japan; and by which all those women were very consoled.”

Jesuit authors recounted how, during the invasion, Korean men had been integrated (willingly or otherwise) into the military personnel of *Kirishitan* lords, as

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64 December 3, 1596, ARSI, JapSin 52, fol. 203v: “la comun platica,” “la predicacão de la ley Euanglica en Coray (loqueparece no sera dificultoso por via de Japõ) que recibira la fee com facilidad y se poder mucho dilatar em aquelles Reinos.”

65 Fróis, *Historia de Japan*, 5: 457: “poes ainda não lhes permitem os ministros de Terazava que possão vir á igreja, se repartirão os Padres por diversas cazas onde as mulheres se ajuntavão; […] e bautizarão-se tambem 100 gentios que estavão já cathequizados, dos quaes a mayor parte erão dos cativos de Corai, dos quaes vierão grande soma a Japão: com que ficurão todas aquellas mulheres muy consoladas.”
had the evangelized Korean man baptized as Miguel. Jesuit accounts also documented the displacement and circulation of Korean children within the Kirishitan network. In his account of the war, Fróis recorded that Itō Sukekatsu, baptized Dom Jerónimo, "brought with him many Koreans whom he had captured in war, men and women," giving the men to the Jesuits "to do as they wished, and the women given to his wife." Fróis insisted that the latter were not to be held as captives but to have them in her home, until they knew how to communicate and talk, and could have means of living in Japan and then she would give them freedom; but not let them go too soon, because as foreign people who could not speak, they would be soon lost and [held] captive.

The use of passive constructions in relation to the description of these individuals' gender-segregated fate highlighted Fróis's intention to foreground the actions of elite Kirishitans. This act of paternalism separated women and men into distinct environments that created different kinds of exposure to Christian teachings.

The Jesuits could have generated new mission strategies to cope with the arrival of a very large mass of people of varied social status, which included educated courtiers and skilled workers, agricultural labourers and household attendants, who were now operating between what remained of their homeland networks and the necessary forging of new ones among the Korean community and with the Japanese. However, consistent with their mission approaches elsewhere in the region, the Society’s men retained the methods that had formed the foundations of their endeavours in Japan, exploiting the high literacy among higher status Korean men. Both Gayo and Vicente were men of status and learning, able to engage with the Jesuits through the shared tradition of Chinese scripts that both Korean and Japanese communication systems employed. Of Vicente, Morejón described how he “learned the language of Japan, which is totally different, though the letters are the same as in China.” This immediately and implicitly focused attention within the Korean mission strategy on adolescent and adult male converts who could readily integrate into the Society’s existing institutional structures in Japan, of seminaries and residencies, and into an institutional, racialized hierarchy of Asian men under the direction of European fathers.
How other cohorts of Koreans, by contrast, could access the Christian message in Japan was more complicated, requiring intermediaries. In 1594, Francesco Pasio reported to Acquaviva a plan devised by the Vice-Provincial that

they look for some skilled Koreans who know how to read and write their own handwriting, which is the same as the Chinese use, and also in Japan; who, after learning the Japanese language, were very well instructed in the catechism, making a good summary of it in their language, and they are also translating the prayers into the language of Korea so as to more easily catechise their fellow countryfolk.  

Lucena praised the decision of Gómez to send to Ōmura as an assistant “a Korean dōjuku” to work with Koreans there. By late 1595, a letter from Fróis to the General observed the very large number of captured Koreans in Arima, Ōmura and Nagasaki. He too spoke of Gómez’s plans for a seminary to prepare Korean men as dōjukus. Jesuit biographies of Korean men who converted as adolescents emphasized the role of such training as an important pathway for evangelizing the captive Korean community in Japan. Morejón recognized the value to the mission of men such as Vicente who had “turned out a good teacher of catechism [...] and in this way he greatly helped fellow natives, who later said that their becoming Christians and persevering in the faith was thanks to Vicente.” In 1596, Fróis rejoiced in his letter to Acquaviva that “many captives from Korea, men as well as women and children,” had been baptized in the past two years at Nagasaki. He noted positively that most were accessing the Christian message through Japanese: “most of them pick up the language of Japan so easily that almost none need to confess through an interpreter.”

However, Korean households also appeared to act as important sites of evangelization, as Fróis’s letter describing the conversions of Christmas 1593 suggested. From Portugal,

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70 ARSI, JapSin 45, fol. 196r: “que se buscasen algunos corais habiles y que supiesen leer y escriuir su propia letra que es la misma que los chinos usan, y tambien corre en Japon: los quales despues de aprender la lengua japonica fueron instruidos muy bien en el cathecismo haciendo un buen Sumario del en su lengua, y letra trasladando tambien las oraciones en la lengua de corai para desta manera poder mas facilmente catequezar sus naturales.” Also found October 20, 1594, ARSI, JapSin 31, fol. 157v, as noted in Sousa, The Portuguese Slave Trade, 117n110.

71 Ōmura, 1593, ARSI, JapSin 12–I, fol. 1v: “hum dojucu coraj.” The word dōshuku 同宿, meaning “fellow resident,” was adopted from Buddhist practice for use by the Christian orders as “dogico” or “dojucu.” In the Christian context discussed in this work, it is spelled as dōjuku. See Boxer, The Christian Century in Japan, 88–89, Cieslik, “Laienarbeit in der alten Japan-Mission.” 186–89; Brockey, “Jesuits and Unfree Labour in Early Modern East Asia,” 83.

72 Nagasaki, October 20, 1595, ARSI, JapSin 52, fol. 94v.

73 Macao, March 31, 1627, BRAH, MS Jesuitas 9/2666, fol. 462v: “salio buen predicador del Cathecismo,” “y assi ayudo grandemente a sus naturales, que despues dezian que ser cristianos y perseverar en la fe era beneficio de Vicente.”

74 December 3, 1596, ARSI, JapSin 52, fol. 203v: “muchos cautivos de Coray assi hombres como mugeres y ninos.”

75 ARSI, JapSin 52, fol. 203v: “la mayor parte dellos toma la lengua de Japão con tanta facilidad que quasi ninguns tiene necessidad de fe confessar per interprete.”
the Jesuit historian Fernão Guerreiro made available to the wide readership of his work the global Jesuit activities based on the letters of missionaries in the field. Foregrounding the work of Paulo over that of his wife Ana, he nonetheless recorded the key role of one Korean Christian couple who lived in the Gotō islands. Paulo, he wrote,

> had such good understanding, with his wife, of the things of God, that it is astonishing to see the fervour and zeal and devotion that both have; and it is so much that all other men who know him, given his reputation, will visit him: if they are Christians, they become devout with his advice, and if pagans, they are ordinarily baptized, he being the godfather of the men, and his wife, Ana, of the women.\(^\text{76}\)

Later, Guerreiro recounted the experiences of another Korean women, Ursula, whom he noted “became a Christian, by persuasion, of this Paulo.”\(^\text{77}\) Other accounts by Jesuit authors suggested that Korean women’s language skills enabled them to mediate across cultures in their proselytizing. João Rodrigues Giram, whose series of annual letters from Japan in Europe’s early seventeenth century offered Guerreiro and his readers many valuable insights into the conversion of Koreans, described to Acquaviva a growing group of converts supported by a Korean woman married to a Japanese man in Bitchu. She was “a Korean by birth, who had a marvellous grasp of the things of God because she knew very well the language of Japan, and with her a daughter of hers and six or seven other maids were baptized.”\(^\text{78}\)

Even if, in reaching out to Korean populations in Japan, Jesuit men primarily looked to Korean men and adolescents as a conduits and mediators who could be easily trained and accommodated within their existing structures, or in ways that conformed to their existing assumptions about patriarchal family and household dynamics, they did not ignore the potential of Korean women as converts. Jesuit sources speak to the relationships of Society men with very different cohorts of Korean women—powerful and influential women, as well as lower-status women. The writings of Jesuit men suggest that these distinct cohorts offered different possibilities for mission strategy, and opportunities for access to wider audiences for their messages than those created by evangelized Korean men.

\(^{76}\) Guerreiro, *Relação anual*, 3:156–57: “Entre muitos Coreas cristãos, que por aquelas ilhas lá cativos dos japões, está um, chamado Paulo, com sua mulher por nome Ana, cativo do Tono e seu hortelão. Êste, pôsto-que há pouco, que se fêz cristão, fêz todavia tão bom entendimento, come sua mulher, das coisas de Deus, que é espanto, ver o fervor e zêlo e devoção que ambos têm; e tanto é isto, que todos os demais homens que o conhecem, out endo fama déle o vão visitor: se são cristãos, se fazem devotos como seus conselhos; e se gentios, de ordinário se baptizam, sendo êle padrinho dos homens, e a mulher, Ana, das mulheres.”

\(^{77}\) Guerreiro, *Relação anual*, 3:157: “Uma mulher, de casta Corea, que servia ao Tono, se fêz cristã, por persuasão dêste Paulo, Corea, acima dito.”

\(^{78}\) Nagasaki, March 14, 1609, ARSI, JapSin 56, fols. 55v–56r: “sua mulher que com ser Corea de naçam pormou marauilhoso concerto das cousas de Deus por saber muito bem alingoa de Japam, e com elle se bautizarão huma filha sua e outras seis ou sete criadas.” Giram’s name is sometimes written in modern scholarship as Girão.
The Jesuit archive celebrated the presence of Korean women who rose to positions of power in Japan. One was Pak Marina who converted in 1606 “as the faith and the love of Jesus Christ had taken deep root in her soul,” wrote the Italian Jesuit Francisco Colín. He encountered Marina in Manila where she had later been exiled and was then living as a nun. Marina appeared to have accrued considerable wealth since her arrival in Japan, enough that when she determined to “consecrate herself to the divine Majesty with the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience,” she “handed over her estate to be used for the support of the community.” Colín’s account did not document Marina’s life in Joseon or how she had achieved such wealth, events long before the period when he was writing his account. Indeed, that Marina was Korean did not appear particularly relevant to Colín’s objectives. He was writing a history showcasing the Society’s activities in the Philippines, a religious and political project that responded to a request from Philip IV of Spain, and in which Marina featured because of her presence among the community of exiles from Japan who were supported in Manila. What was important for this aspect of Colín’s biography of Marina was her personal repudiation of her fortune, and the benefits that this had accrued for the community of religious women in Miyako (present-day Kyoto) whom she had joined. This group of women were led by a Japanese woman, baptized Julia, a member of the well-known Kirishitan family, Naitō (a member of whom had served alongside Konishi in the Joseon invasion). This group of women enjoyed a close relationship with the Jesuits then in Japan. Marina served as an exemplar of the power of Christianity, perhaps via the work of the Jesuits, to inspire not only lower-status Korean women and men to Christian conversion, but also influential women who appeared, on the surface at least, to have had the means to prosper in Japan.

Similarly, Jesuit texts foregrounded the potential of a series of Korean women converts who were present within elite courtly environment. One was Máxima who had become embedded at the heart of power at the court of Arima. Her situation was described by the Portuguese Jesuit Sebastián Vieira in a letter to the General in March 1614. In the early years of Europe’s seventeenth century, however, another Korean woman known as Julia, seemed to provoke particular interest for the Society’s men, as attested by the large array of letters and texts reporting upon her activities. As

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80 Colín, Labor evangélica, 3:503–4: “se consagró a la Diuina Magestad con los tres votos do pobreza, castidad, y obediencia [...] y entregó su hazienda para que se gastasse en el sustento de la Comunidad.”


82 For an analysis of the Kirishitan Naitō Julia’s activities, see Ward, Women Religious Leaders, chap. 3.

83 Nagasaki, March 16, 1614, ARSI, JapSin 57, fols. 268v–269r.
had so many others, Julia arrived in Japan as a result of the invasion of her homeland, where she had converted and been baptized by Pedro Morejón. Later, she had been taken into service in the residence of Tokugawa Ieyasu, where missionaries hoped she might influence Japan’s most powerful political figure, although he was not, as the Jesuits’ terminology often suggested, Japan’s monarch. Thus, in 1609, Giram claimed to the General of the Order: “Julia is now higher than before and serves His Highness directly.”

A transcribed letter purportly composed by Julia to Morejón in 1613 was accompanied by textual annotations in the hand of Morejón and of an unknown colleague, which identified particular qualities that implied what was seen as of interest to their readers. Prefacing his transcription and translation, Morejón explained that it was a “letter from Julia, from the palace of the emperor.” This drew out a key feature of her biography that was seen to be significant: that she had been in proximity to the height of power—that of the “emperor.” Ieyasu was of course not the emperor, but these authors regularly used this term to refer to Ieyasu whom they perceived, rightly, as the most powerful figure in Japan. The letter text was subsequently annotated in another anonymous hand, adding: “She later went to the emperor’s palace serving his wife.”

Jesuit writers also reported descriptions of Julia’s identity claimed to be made by Ieyasu himself, who had observed the many favours and benefits she had received from him [...] a poor foreigner, taken captive in the Korean war, risen so high as to be a lady of the palace of the lord [Ieyasu]. And more than others, one of those he trusted the most, always taking her with him wherever he went.

Despite her lowly origins, authors repeatedly described not only that Julia had become a lady-in-waiting in Ieyasu’s residence but also foregrounded the emotional proximity that she had established there, where she might serve as a conduit to Ieyasu’s wife, the female household, and even to Ieyasu himself. It would perhaps be a Korean woman who could bring the Society’s men and message closest to the most powerful man in Japan. Moreover, Morejón’s archive of documentation directly from Julia and its inclusion in the Jesuit archive also helped to highlight his own proximity to this potentially influential woman, to whom he might serve as a key spiritual advisor.
While in Ieyasu's household, Jesuits considered how Julia might play an active and important spiritual role among the court ladies. Giram reported that she had a hidden oratory where she encouraged other ladies to uphold their faith.\textsuperscript{88}

There, she counsels her fellow Christian to keep and persevere in the faith, for which she has already suffered some troubles, with great courage and constancy, and she does not let the opportunity to conciliate pagans pass and if she cannot persuade them to become Christians, she strives that at least they do not feel or speak ill of our holy law.\textsuperscript{89}

Four years later, he still held broadly similar views about Julia's value as a conduit to further female converts in Ieyasu's entourage:

\begin{quote}
 to see how well these ladies of the palace are doing, and with what edification to the pagans and principal ladies of the Kubō [Ieyasu], among whom they live and whom they serve, I baptized a lady of the palace whom they had converted.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

In a later account of 1613, Mateo de Couros also praised Julia's leading role among the ladies in Ieyasu's household: "The names of the chief among them were Julia, Lucia, and Clara and there were others of lesser rank."\textsuperscript{91} Julia, he noted, was "zealous at bringing other nobles to hear the preaching of the catechism."\textsuperscript{92}

Individual women as well as men could be perceived by Jesuit writers to hold valuable potential for their mission strategy: men such as Vicente, the courtly, educated adolescent, Gayo, the former monk, and Julia, a potential communicator of Christian beliefs and practices to Ieyasu himself. The qualities that made Korean men particularly worthy of note in the Jesuit archive were found in forms of cultural capital that they carried from the Joseon kingdom and which could translate into power and access for themselves and for the Society, in Japan. By contrast, women such as Máxima and Julia accrued status through their experiences as captured Koreans and its consequences as they found themselves residents of elite households in Japan. The story of women's lives in Joseon and the skills and knowledge that they had developed there, did not appear to form part of Jesuit narratives of their conversion or to be of their particular interest for the Society.

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88 March 10, 1605, ARSI, JapSin 55, fol. 283v.
89 ARSI, JapSin 55, fol. 283v: "ali aque a conselha as companheiras Christãos que tenhão não e perseuere na fé, polha qual tambem padecce ja alguns trabalhos com grande animo e constancia, e não deixar passar occasião de abrandar as gentias, e ja que não pode persuader lhes que se faça christãos procura pello menos que não sintam nem fallem mal de nossa santa ley."
90 Nagasaki, March 14, 1609, ARSI, JapSin 56, fol. 13v: "pera dargracas a N. Senhor verquam bem procedem a quellas molheres do paço, e com quanta edificaçam daquellas gentias e molheres principaes de Cubo entra quem estam et aquem seruem: bautizei huma molher do paço que esas tinhão conuertido."
91 ARSI, JapSin 57, fol. 243v: "As principais se chamavum Julia, Luzia, e Clara, com outras de menos calidade."
92 ARSI, JapSin 57, fol. 243v: "zelosa de trazer outras pessoas nobres a ouvir as pregações do cathecismo."
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