The Late Chosŏn Korean Catholic Archives: Documenting this World and the Next

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Abstract

Archives typically consist of documents created for this-worldly purposes, such as government census records. In contrast, the Korean Catholic archives consist of documents created primarily for the purposes of salvation (documents such as prayer books and lives of the saints) or for sainthood (documents showing that a particular person died a martyr). Moreover, many of these documents were international collaborations produced by Korean Catholics and foreign missionaries, who at times even utilized sources created by the government that persecuted them. Many documents were sent to Europe, enabling them to survive anti-Catholic persecution and making Europe the center of Korean Catholic archives. However, beginning in the 1960s, institutions based on the peninsula, such as the Research Foundation of Korean Church History, worked to make Korea itself a center of archives and knowledge production. In so doing, Korean Catholics sought to make these materials available to non-Catholic audiences and follow secular standards of the historical profession while trying to develop an authentically Catholic way of understanding their history. This paper will trace this history and also act as introduction to these archives for scholars interested in utilizing them.

Keywords: Chosŏn, Archives, Catholic Church, Catholicism, Christianity