

Strategic Leniency in State Penalties: Anti-Catholic Legal Practice during King Sunjo's Reign (1801–1834)*

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This paper reinvestigates anti-Catholic legal practice during King Sunjo's reign (r. 1800–1834) by examining how the ruling elites recalibrated their legal approach across the persecutions of 1801, 1815, and 1827. Focusing on the interaction between political considerations, legal reasoning, and penal implementation, it argues that the legal practice gradually shifted from highly politicized punitive measures toward a more standardized and institutionalized framework for dealing with Catholic converts. Drawing on both Joseon official records and church archival materials, the study highlights two major transformations. First, the court officials gradually abandoned the application of explicitly political criminal charges, such as rebellion-related crimes and moral-political transgressions, and instead relied more consistently on the “making magical inscriptions and magical incantations” (*jo yoseo yoeon* 造妖書妖言) article as a general legal basis for prosecuting Catholic converts. Second, the function of indeterminate penal exile (*jeongbae*) evolved from a broadly applied punitive measure in 1801 into a strategic legal tool that both punished converts and encouraged apostasy in later persecutions. By situating individual cases of exile, release, and delayed execution within these broader shifts in legal practice, this paper demonstrates that late Joseon anti-Catholic legal practice was not simply suppressive but also adaptive, contributing to the emergence of strategic leniency in state penalties.

Keywords: King Sunjo, anti-Catholicism, legal history, “making magical inscriptions and magical incantations,” *jeongbae* (indeterminate penal exile)

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