

Thirty-Six Years a Korean Jesuit in Japan: Relational Incorporation, Lived Religion, and Aging across Borders*

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This article examines how a foreign religious migrant becomes socially incorporated in contemporary Japan, where Korean identity remains historically charged, Christianity is a small minority religion, and religious significance is not easily measured by citizenship, assimilation, or institutional growth. Drawing on life-history interviews and sustained qualitative engagement with Father Mark Jeong Mo Koo, the longest-serving Korean Jesuit in Japan, this study analyzes his thirty-six years of ministry from 1990 to 2026 as a case of relational incorporation. Recent migration scholarship has emphasized that migrant belonging is not shaped only through citizenship, assimilation, labor-market participation, or ethnic community formation but also processes of embedding, anchoring, emplacement, and everyday relational practice. Building on this work, the article suggests that Father Koo's long-term presence in Japan is best understood through the gradual accumulation of trust, moral responsibility, affective attachment, and repeated practices of care. Rather than restating each phase of his life course, the article traces a broader trajectory from early minority negotiation to ethical reorientation and aesthetic pedagogy and later-life forms of prayer, memory, and continued attachment. By foregrounding relational incorporation, the article contributes to migration and belonging studies by showing how migrant embeddedness can develop outside citizenship, assimilation, or ethnic community formation. It also draws on lived religion

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scholarship to show how minority religious presence becomes meaningful through pedagogy, ritual, accompaniment, and care in contemporary Japan.

Keywords: Migration and belonging, relational incorporation, lived religion, Korean Catholicism, Jesuits in Japan

Introduction

Migration is often studied through movement: departure, arrival, settlement, and incorporation into a receiving society. Yet some migrant lives are defined less by movement itself than the difficult and sustained practice of remaining. For long-term migrants, especially those who do not naturalize, assimilate fully, or build belonging primarily through ethnic community formation, the question is not only how they move but how staying, immobility, and non-migration become socially and morally meaningful over time. This article examines this question through the life of Father Mark Jeong Mo Koo, a Korean Jesuit priest who arrived in Japan in June 1990 and remained there for thirty-six years.

Recent scholarship has paid close attention to the relational and temporal dimensions of migrant incorporation. Work on differentiated embedding, social anchoring, emplacement, and migrant belonging has shown that migrants become attached to places through relationships, routines, institutions, affective ties, and everyday practices of participation (Ryan 2018; Grzymała-Kazłowska 2016; Wessendorf 2019; Grzymała-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022). Scholarship on staying, immobility, and non-migration has similarly challenged the tendency to treat movement as the primary object of migration studies. Remaining in place may express aspiration, obligation, attachment, constraint, or moral commitment (Schewel 2020; de Haas 2021). Taken together, these approaches make it possible to ask not only why people move but how long-term presence generates forms of trust, responsibility, and attachment not captured by citizenship, assimilation, or ethnic community formation.

This article asks these questions regarding the case of Father Mark Jeong Mo Koo, a Korean Jesuit priest who arrived in Japan in June 1990 and remained there for thirty-six years. Father Koo was sent to Japan as part of his Jesuit formation and later became a professor at Sophia University, where he taught liturgy, sacramental theology, and Christian art. He also mentored international Jesuit students, guided them and colleagues through ordinary institutional life and moments of crisis, and developed a form of ministry grounded less in public evangelization than relational presence, aesthetic pedagogy, and pastoral trust.