INTRODUCTION:
IBERIAN AND FRENCH JESUITS FROM
AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

If interpreted in a broader international framework beyond North America rather than just within the regional history of New France, will the existing historical paradigms of the Jesuit missionary activity to Amerindians remain intact? This is the thematic issue that underlies this cross-cultural study. The Jesuit mission in seventeenth-century New France will be analysed as a series of incidents that developed, not simply as a domestic occurrence of North America, but out of the earlier mission of Father Francisco de Xavier in Japan. In this analysis, the Christian mission in Japan will be used as a tool to revise the currently accepted historical interpretations of the French Jesuit mission. Through a diachronic global comparison encompassing the period from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, this investigation attempts to add a new revisionist perspective to the conventional understanding of the New France mission.

More than half a century before French missionaries landed in North America in the early seventeenth century, another Jesuit group had already arrived in Japan. In 1549, the party of Father Xavier arrived at Kagoshima, on the southern tip of Japan. Among his accomplishments, French-educated Xavier had helped to establish the Society of Jesus [SJ] in Paris in 1534. Father Xavier’s contact with Japan was but the first of many such visits. Iberian Jesuits from Portugal, Spain and Italy, under the patronage of the king of Portugal, followed. Although the Jesuit mission to Japan experienced some success during the second half of the sixteenth century, strict legislation promulgated by the Japanese central authorities eliminated the Christian missions in the early seventeenth century. Meanwhile, as the Iberian mission was ending in Japan, the French Jesuits were beginning their own mission to New France.

To understand the mission in New France, it must be discussed within both colonial North American and international contexts. Similarly the mission in Japan must be considered within the context of Iberian colonialism in this Asian country as well as within an international framework. Yet this international context has rarely, until now, been thoroughly

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investigated by a single historian, either in Japan or in the West.\(^1\) Apparently those researching the history of Japan and those studying that of New France have been unaware of each other’s research. General histories of the Society of Jesus often deal with both missions in separate chapters, but the chapters do not draw comparisons.\(^2\) There is admittedly one historian whose work addressed both missions. Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, a French Jesuit Father of the eighteenth century, was the first and last individual to do so, but even he dealt with the respective missions in separate volumes with no attempt at synthesis.

It is clear that Japan was no longer an unknown country for French Jesuit authors in the eighteenth century. In 1715, almost thirty years before his own history of New France was published in 1744, Charlevoix completed a series of volumes on the Japanese mission.\(^3\) In this work, he described Jesuit activity there as if he himself had been a missionary in this archipelago. Because eighteenth-century Japan maintained no regular connections with Europeans, except via Dutch merchants, the only way that Charlevoix could have become acquainted with the ecclesiastical history of this oriental country was by reading Jesuit missionary reports on Japan. Joseph-François Lafitau, his French-Jesuit contemporary of the eighteenth century, was also familiar with Japan, though he too had never visited it. In his anthropological monograph on native North Americans, Lafitau refers to Yezo, or today’s Hokkaido, as a possible land of origin for indigenous North Americans.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) The only possible exception may be Shenwen Li’s *Stratégies missionnaires des jésuites français en Nouvelle-France et en Chine au XVIIe siècle* (Saint-Nicolas, Québec: les Presses de l’Université Laval; Paris: Harmattan, 2001), which is based on a synchronic comparison of simultaneous events in the seventeenth century rather than a diachronic comparison based on historical cause and effect. Although Li’s treatise presents the Jesuit contribution to the establishment of cultural ties between the Occident and the Orient, it does not present a revisionist interpretation that would affect existing perspectives on the Christian mission to New France.


\(^4\) Joseph-François Lafitau, SJ, *Moeurs des savage amériquains comparés aux mœurs des premiers temps* (2 tomes, Paris: Suagrain l’aîné & Charles-Estienne Hocherau,