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*Intercultural Circulation and Short Circuits
in the Society of Jesus between Italy, Japan, and China
(17th–18th centuries)*

Abstract

This essay compares different channels of cultural dissemination regarding the Jesuit missions as found within the applications for the overseas territories (litterae indipetae) sent by Italians at the turn of the eighteenth century¹. Jesuits regularly read letters and treatises (by Francis Xavier and Daniello Bartoli, among others), and their importance is confirmed by applications for the missions in which the Jesuits relate their vocation to these sources. The Histories of the Society of Jesus written by Daniello Bartoli in the 17th century, for instance, remained inspirational among members of the religious order at least two hundred years. However, for these Jesuits, the lack of updated and objective information could lead to curious misunderstandings, like the “fake news” spread through Southern Italian colleges that Japan was reopening to foreigners and Christianity.

Keywords: Circulation of knowledge; Global history; Jesuit missions; *Litterae indipetae*; Cultural history.

Introduction & Litterae Indipetae

During the early modern period, thousands of Jesuits across Europe frequently paused their work in churches and classrooms and drafted individual petitions directly to the superior general of the Society of Jesus. In Rome, the general received these requests for missionary appointments in the “Indies”. The young men who wrote these private letters expressed their most personal desires, hopes and dreams in their handwritten petitions, which are known today as *litterae indipetae* because their authors were *Indias petentes*, that is applying for the missions in the Eastern and Western territories².

Today, there are preserved more than twenty-two thousand of these letters, written during an expansive timespan from the 1550s until recent times. Despite the centuries and national characteristics differentiating their authors, *indipetae* share many characteristics,

¹ The author wishes to thank the Istituto Sangalli per la storia e le culture religiose, where a first draft of this paper was discussed during the workshop for young researchers “Entangled Knowledges. Education and Culture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (XIV–XIX centuries)” (Florence, 2nd–4th October 2019). She also wishes to express her gratitude to Seth Meehan (Boston College) for his support during the revision of this article (the last one on *indipetae*).

² *Litterae indipetae* have recently raised the interest of scholars in many fields: cultural history, psychology, religious history, and the history of emotions. The bibliography is very rich and constantly increasing; for an introduction to the genre and full references see: FREI (2023) and IMBRUGLIA – FABRE – MONGINI (2022).

starting from their main aim: an assignment in the overseas missions. The variety of this *corpus* remains, however, astonishing: thanks to multiple, personal, and often very creative strategies, Jesuits tried to achieve their goal in many different ways.

The most frequently mentioned elements were of a petitioner's health, age, studies, personal skills, and practical abilities (like painting, cooking, and so on). Every word pursued the same goal thus, according to the circumstance, being too old or too young could be depicted as an advantage and not as an objective impediment. While being healthy did not guarantee success for one petitioner, while suffering from constant illnesses could become an advantage for another. In the case of personal characteristics, Jesuits tended to belittle themselves, not only to manifest humility but also because the majority of petitioners thought that the best way to be chosen was to be considered by the general as the most useless and interchangeable of men at his disposal.

Jesuits were led to compose an application for the Indies by multiple factors, most of them being involving “push” or “pull” forces. Certain circumstances provided a *positive* stimulus: besides faith and the desire to serve as an instrument of God, paintings and publications could create or reinforce a missionary vocation. This happened in the case of the promotional material produced by the Society of Jesus, and even laypersons could develop an interest in the Jesuit global endeavor because of what they read.

On the other hand, an “Indian vocation” could be influenced by *negative* factors as well. Jesuits could be on bad terms with their natural families, because they were not keen to lose their sons to the Society of Jesus in the first place, never mind the prospect of having them receive dangerous missionary assignments on the other side of the world. The same happened within spiritual families: superiors could try to dissuade the more talented young men in their community from applying. Finally, the daily life with confreres and the teaching duties were hard experiences for many members of the Society of Jesus, who petitioned for the overseas missions to radically change their condition into a more adventurous and motivating one.

The network in which these aspiring missionaries lived was as wide as the global network of the Society of Jesus itself, and every Jesuit was in relation with other subjects in his path to the missions. Among the most important figures was the superior general in Rome, the addressee for and the final authority on every application for the overseas missions, but also the so-called procurators of the missions played a very influential role. Procurators periodically traveled to Europe to defend the interests of their provinces, and during those journeys one of their primary tasks was to recruit new missionaries. The European sojourns of many procurators influenced Jesuits in their application and in the success of it³.

Written accounts on the Asian missions

Most of the members of the Society of Jesus spent a great part of their lives engaging in the activities of writing and reading. Education and documentation played fundamental roles in the order: Jesuits were both passionate and in need of writing—also to justify and celebrate their own history. They were prolific readers and writers, as it is shown by their well-structured

³ As a case study for the Chinese missions and for more bibliography: FREI (2018).

epistolary system, and many of the documents they produced had not only private but also public goals, that is publication. Jesuits from all over the world periodically reported to the general, and this essay focuses on those living in East Asia, who were more or less explicitly mentioned in the *litterae indipetae* as sources that inspired a missionary vocation.

Litterae annuae were reports that provided yearly (or at least periodically) updates to all the Jesuits on what had recently happened within their scattered order⁴. The fruition of this source was not only internal or individual, even if in a first stage it was compiled from the local superiors of every residence and then sent to the general in Rome. In a second phase, and more methodically from the 1580s, *Litterae annuae* started to be edited and rearranged within the Society of Jesus, in view of their publication. In the Jesuit residences they were read not only privately, but also read aloud during the common meals while Jesuits otherwise ate silently in the refectories. Also the lay public was keen on accessing them, once they were translated in the vernacular languages, and then sold all over Europe (reaching also Asian and American locations).

Finally, for scholars of the time and also today, the *Litterae annuae* are incomparable sources to reconstruct the history of the Society of Jesus, but more in general of all the cultural exchanges between this order and many previously unknown civilizations⁵. Throughout the centuries, the *Litterae annuae* appeared in more re-elaborated versions, and were published in France as *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus* (eighteenth century, focusing mainly on French Jesuits) and in the German territories as the *Neue Welt Bott* (eighteenth century as well, composed of translations of the French letters with the addition of other German documents).

Most of the *Litterae annuae* were anonymous or in any case their authorship was not that important, since what they depicted was a collective history of the Jesuit missions. However, single personalities also played fundamental roles in producing, developing, and nurturing a missionary vocation in many young Catholics. The first and most famous Jesuit missionary was Francis Xavier (1506-1552), also called the Apostle of the Indies and invoked as an advocate by most of the authors of *indipetae* letters⁶. Xavier had appeal among petitioners that sustained from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. «Devotion and mimesis went hand in hand» for aspiring missionaries, and each of them wanted to follow his footsteps⁷, invoking him not only when ready to leave for the East Indies, but also for the Americas.

Xavier died in 1552 on Shangchuan Island, waiting for a boat to bring him to the Ming empire, after having spent his last years in India, Japan, and many South East Asian islands, from where he constantly wrote letters and accounts⁸. He was particularly fond of Japan, where he was the first missionary to try to introduce Catholicism, and of the Japanese people. Until his very death, Xavier optimistically believed that the Jesuits could convert the Chinese and Japanese empires, and spiritually conquer the whole Asian continent.

⁴ FRIEDRICH (2008).

⁵ See for instance LAMALLE (1981-1982, 104).

⁶ COLOMBO (2022).

⁷ STRASSER (2015, 568).

⁸ Xavier's correspondence is published in SCHURHAMMER (1944).

Quite distant from Xavier's optimism was the Italian Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606)⁹. Following his appointment as a visitor of the Indies, a special office created to promptly and decisively solve difficult situations, he travelled extensively through Asia. After witnessing the situation of the Jesuit missions there, Valignano complained against the exaggerations found in many of the printed *Litterae annuae*. The reports first written by missionaries working there for internal use were later revised and published by their Jesuit superiors and in Rome, resulting in exaggerated claims that, in Valignano's eyes, were not beneficial to the advancement and thriving of the Jesuit missions. Embellishing the official accounts sent to Rome and not verifying their contents could, as Valignano pointed out, cause embarrassing and dangerous misunderstandings: for Jesuits, other religious, and their lay readers as well.

Accounts from Asia spread through Europe with their unrealistic and misleading stories, which was the reason why, as Valignano argued, «some Jesuits cool down after arriving here, when they see the situation personally»¹⁰. Valignano also noticed that «the Indies» attracted many young Europeans because of overly-enthusiastic news spread about them by his confreres. Once these missionaries reached the East Indies, the harshness of the reality of the local environment depressed and frightened them. In those first decades of the Society of Jesus and its missionary endeavors, moreover, Valignano also suspected that, for the lack of experience and also because of personal interest, many of the provincials in Italy «instead of fostering the Great Mission» by sending their most talented men were only willing to «free the Italian professed houses and colleges of the most incapable and restless elements: what a providential opportunity, in their eyes, those places!»¹¹.

Valignano was a prolific author. His most famous works were *Advertimentos e avisos acerca dos costumbres e catangues de Jappão* (ca. 1581), a handbook on the behavior recommended for Jesuits in Japan, and *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañia de Jesús en las Indias Orientales, 1542-1564* (ca. 1584), a chronicle of the first decades of the Society of Jesus in the East Indies. The visitor always insisted on the importance of reporting in a more objective and less magniloquent way the missionary situation, but he did not reject dramatic events or propaganda *in toto*.

More than with his writings, in fact, Valignano was able to enter the young Europeans' fantasies with the voyage of a small group of Japanese boys that he organized and realized (even if not personally, because he never left in Asia) during the 1580s¹². This expedition was risky (at the time, every ocean crossing could end up into tragedy), but Valignano wanted it for two reasons. On one hand, the Jesuit order could show to the Japanese boys the splendors of the Old Continent, while, on the other, Europeans could finally meet this new and extraordinary civilization that the Jesuits had been enthusiastically writing about for decades. Valignano's highest target was the pope, but also kings and princes (and their spouses), and in general

⁹ On Valignano, see VOLPI (2011), TAMBURELLO – ÜÇERLER – DI RUSSO (2008); HOEY (2010).

¹⁰ «Si raffreddano quando si veggono in queste parti», WICKI – GOMES (1948-1988, vol. XIII, 94-95), also quoted in ROSCIONI (2001, 98).

¹¹ «I provinciali d'Italia [...] Invece che a favorire la Gran Missione, avrebbero infatti badato a liberare le case professe e i collegi italiani degli incapaci e degli irrequieti: quale provvidenziale opportunità, ai loro occhi, quelle designazioni!» (ROSCIONI, 2001, 100-101).

¹² Valignano also realized and published a diary of this Japanese expedition: DI RUSSO – AIROLDI – DE SANDE (2016). On the Japanese tour see MASSARELLA (2005); BROWN (1994); BOSCARO (1965).

everybody with sufficient economic means. Realizing with their own eyes the effect of the Jesuit zeal, the secular and religious sponsors of the order would have made larger and constant donations – finally granting the Japanese mission the economic stability it always lacked.

A Jesuit related to the East and explicitly mentioned in *indipetae* is Daniello Bartoli (1608–85). The Ferrarese historian had been a petitioner himself: in 1633, he expressed a great desire to «spend all my struggles, and a thousand lives if I had them, for the propagation of the holy faith, in the places where I can find more dangers and more chances to suffer and die in hard work, or to be killed by it»¹³. He listed his favorite destinations as «Japan, England, China, or the Mughal empire». The preference of this typical early modern candidate was confirmed and institutionalized in his *magnum opus* which became the reference point for describing the Society's work to both a religious and lay public: the *Istorie della Compagnia di Gesù*. Having applied several times but never obtaining the desired license, Bartoli had in fact to transfer his passion for the missions into the “official” history of the Society of Jesus the general appointed him to write¹⁴.

The challenge of describing the first hundred years of the Society of Jesus in such crucial times can be seen, as Simon Ditchfield remarked, as «both global in scope and universal in aspiration»¹⁵. His *Istoria* was printed over several decades: *Asia* from 1653 on (consisting of eight books, with the addition of *The Mission to the Great Mogor of Father Rodolfo Acquaviva* in 1653), *Japan* in 1660 (five books), *China* in 1663 (four), *England* in 1667 (six) and *Italy* in 1673 (four).

When Bartoli described the Asian missions, focus of this essay, «his longing for adventure realizes the most compelling pages, thanks to a subject matter of extraordinary splendor»¹⁶. The *Istorie* constantly highlighted the Jesuit impulse towards the new geographical realities. Bartoli's fascinating descriptions of the journeys overseas indissolubly linked discoveries and explorations with the newborn order – as desired by its providential vision. Bartoli knew that a Jesuit had to act, in his own world and time. The journey had always been a distinguishing feature of the Society of Jesus. It was the concretization of the mobility and detachment required to all of its members, ready to move anywhere in the world, but in the same way willing to also go back to Rome, always at the general's orders and in the name of indifference.

Bartoli succeeded in his goal, and his role as an inspirator for aspiring missionaries was testified in *indipetae*. For instance, the Italian Giovanni Francesco Grungo applied for the Indies in 1717 after reading *Asia*. He was especially interested in the sections vividly describing «the struggle, imprisonment, and martyrdom» of João Baptista Machado (1580-1617) in Japan.

¹³ «Il desiderio che sempre in me è cresciuto da che dieci anni sono mi venne, non è di mutar paese, ma di spender ogni mia fatica, e mille vite se tante n'havessi, per la propagatione della Santa fede, e dove pericoli maggiori, e maggior occasione vi è di patire, e morir ne' stenti, o esser ammazzato [...] sia il Giappone, l'Inghilterra, la Cina, il Mogor», Rome, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu [henceforth ARSI], *Fondo Gesuitico* [henceforth FG] 739, fol. 239 (Parma, May 16, 1633).

¹⁴ Bartoli wrote in his twenties at least five *indipetae* (1627-1635), all preserved in ARSI, FG 739 (fols. 7, 189, 179, 239, and 363). On his frustrated missionary vocation, see also GARAVELLI (1975); BIONDI (1995).

¹⁵ DITCHFIELD (2019, 220).

¹⁶ «Aspirante missionario e la sua nostalgia di avventura depositano le pagine più avvincenti, appagate letterariamente da una materia di straordinaria suggestione» (BIONDI, 1995, 38).

After being inspired by Bartoli's words, Grungo «felt such an ardent desire for the Indies», that he had to write a petition¹⁷.

What was even more significant is that Bartoli's influence lasted through time, and nineteenth century's *indipetae* can vouch for that. In 1832 a Sicilian Jesuit wrote to the superior general Jan Roothaan (1785-1853) that, as soon as he joined the Society of Jesus (1811), he noticed that during the common meals Bartoli's *Asia* and *England* were read aloud, together with the *Lettres édifiantes & curieuses*. Salvatore Incardona's vocation was inextricably related to «those first ideas of the labors of ours», which were «so deeply engraved in my soul, that from then on I began to love and desire such a way of living»¹⁸. Similarly, Giuseppe Peretti recalled to the general that «in all the time that I spent in the Society of Jesus, not three whole days have passed when I have not seriously thought about them»¹⁹. What had particularly motivated this Genoese Jesuit was «reading all the *Histories* of Bartoli and the lives of the Missionaries». From Ferrara, Bartoli's native city, Gaetano Stevani specified to the general that «the foreign missions» were «the main reason why, after being well advised by wise people, I chose the Society and not any other religious order»²⁰. He started dreaming about the «great travails and dangers that the missionaries face there» while «reading about them in the *Histories* of Father Bartoli, or in the letters that the missionaries sent and keep sending from afar».

Born in 1819, Giuseppe Calvetti aspired to work in «Japan and China, to which I have always felt irresistibly drawn», even before entering the religious order²¹. He only applied in 1843, after the circular letter with which general Roothaan exhorted Jesuits to go to the most distant missions, and a year after the reestablishment of a Jesuit mission in China²². Yet, this desire «has lived in my heart so long that I could hardly find its origin», he wrote. What was sure was that Calvetti had felt those thoughts since the age of fourteen, because of his «reading the *Histories* of Father Bartoli». From then on, and after becoming a Jesuit, that desire «never died out, but its roots became ever firmer and deeper». Indeed, this aspiring missionary was also always sure about his destination even «although our missions did not exist in China at

¹⁷ «Le fatiche, prigionia, e martirio [...] mi si accese nel cuore talmente il desiderio delle Indie», ARSI, *FG* 750, fol. 486 (Palermo, 5 April 1717). According to FEJÉR (1985), he died in 1730 in the province of Goa, so his dream was fulfilled.

¹⁸ «Quelle prime idee delle fatiche dei nostri mi si scolpirono così altamente nell'animo, che sin d'allora cominciai ad amare, ed a desiderare una tale maniera di vivere», ARSI, *AIT* 1, fol. 44 (Palermo, 20 August 1829).

¹⁹ «In tutto questo tempo, che sono nella Compagnia, non trascorsero forse tre giorni interi, in cui io non ci ebbi seriamente pensato in particolar modo leggendo tutte le istorie del Bartoli, e le vite de' Missionarj, che si trovano nel Patrignani», ARSI, *AIT* 1, fol. 90 (Genoa, 1 November 1832).

²⁰ «Estere missioni [...]. Il principale motivo che, dietro i consigli di saggie persone, mi determinò ad entrare nella Compagnia meglio che in verun'altra Religione. Sono pur grandi i travagli ed i pericoli che hanno a correre i missionarj; con tutto ciò nel leggerli o nelle Storie del Padre Bartoli, o nelle lettere che di colà hanno inviate, e vanno tuttavia inviando i missionarj», ARSI, *AIT* 1, fol. 785 (Ferrara, 14 October 1847).

²¹ «Giappone e della Cina, alla quale mi sono sempre sentito come irresistibilmente portato [...]. Il desiderio delle Missioni, e in particolare di quelle del Giappone e della Cina vive da sì lungo tempo nel mio cuore che difficilmente ne potrei assegnare l'origine. Questo so certo, che avanti d'entrare nella Compagnia, all'età di 14 o 15 anni già aveva questi pensieri, frutto forse della lettura delle storie del Padre Bartoli, e d'allora in poi non mai s'estinsero, ma gittarono ognor più salde e più profonde le loro radici [...]. Di più è da osservarsi che sebbene in quel tempo non esistessero missioni nostre in Cina, né io sapessi probabile ragione del loro pronto ristabilimento, riguardava sempre il mio desiderio così possibile a soddisfarsi, come se vi fosse tutta comodità di entrare in quei regni», ARSI, *AIT* 1, fol. 504 (Chambery, 11 February 1843).

²² ROCHINI (2022).

that time, nor did I know the probable reason for their prompt re-establishment [1842]». He has been always sure that his dream «was possible to be satisfied, as if there was an actual chance to enter those kingdoms». Finally, indicating that the influence of Xavier was still strong for the members of the New Society, Calvetti made a vow to devote his life to the missions in China and Japan precisely to him.

In 1848 the Roman Jesuit Luigi Bolli used his petition to extensively rationalizing his vocation to the Chinese missions. His main reason for that was a living source: another Italian missionary, Renato Massa (1817-1853)²³, who had gone to China and returned to «explain to us the wretched state of that poor mission», in detail «the need for workers who are not only saints, but also well educated in the Chinese language and sciences»²⁴. The situation was promising because «the harvest is great», but «the workers» were «few: in a province of about seven thousand souls, there is only one missionary». Bolli was ready to overcome every obstacle, one of them being the fact that Europeans were easily recognizable and commonly despised – if not persecuted:

Your Paternity should not worry about the external shape of my face, nose, eyes, etc. very dissimilar from the Chinese, and which could led me to be identified as a foreigner; since, as our praised Father [Massa] attests, this is no big obstacle; all together, China is so vast, as if it were another Europe, and it has so many provinces, so different and varied among themselves in nations, customs and features; Who would notice that I am a foreigner, and not rather a Chinese from another province?

A further issue could be that a European would not have behaved like a Chinese native, and consequently would have been recognized for that. To adapt on this regard, besides this personal contact with the missionary from China, Bolli had a literary source to help him:

What I have heard for some time in the Refectory from the *History of China* written by Father Daniello Bartoli, which is read here, about the customs of those [Chinese] provinces; and from the many cases that are narrated there about our Fathers, or other missionaries, I was able to understand which habits must be adopted, and which avoided, and how, and when.

²³ DE CARO (2022, 8). Renato Massa became a missionary in China, sharing the same destiny with his brothers; on their Chinese religious experience see ROSSI (1879).

²⁴ «Ci espose lo stato miserevole di quella povera missione: il bisogno che v'ha d'operai santi non meno, che dotti nella lingua, e nelle scienze Cinesi: molta esser la messe, pochi gli operai: in una provincia fra le altre, di circa sette miglioni d'anime, non esservi, che un solo missionario [...]. Né meno si dia pensiero Vostra Paternità della mia forma esterna del viso, del naso, degli occhi, etcetera di molto dissimili dai Cinesi, e da riconoscervi entro di presente un forestiere; poichè, come ne attesta il più volte lodato Padre, questo non impedisce gran fatto; mentre, essendo tutta insieme la Cina sì vasta, da far quasi da se un'altra Europa, e contenendo in se provincie tante di numero, e sì diverse e svariate tra loro di nazioni, di costumi e di lineamenti; a chi mai può venire in capo che io mi sia un forestiero, o non piuttosto un Cinese di altra qualsiasi provincia? [...] Quello che da qualche tempo ho inteso in Refettorio dalla storia, che quivi si legge, della Cina scritta dal Padre Daniello Bartoli, quali siano i costumi di quelle provincie; e dai molti casi che quivi si narrano di nostri Padri, o di altri, ho potuto comprendere quali cose vogliono abbracciarsi, e quali schivarsi, e come, e quando», ARSI, *AIT* 1, fol. 816 (Rome, 17 January 1848).

As these petitioners confirm, Bartoli's *Histories*, which were read out aloud in the Jesuit refectories centuries after their publication, often constituted not only motivation for an Asian vocation but also a handbook on how to behave in such different civilizations because of their documentary precision. In this case, Bolli had understood the importance of non-verbal communication. One of the most complicated aspects of Chinese culture actually were gestures: although not verbal, they are a fundamental aspect of any interaction²⁵. This was true especially in the Far East, where European missionaries constantly struggled because of unsurmountable linguistic differences.

Related to that, and beyond published accounts, other media could play a role in the cultivation of missionary zeal. Petitioners for the Indies were, as Camilla Russell noticed, «far from operating in an informational vacuum [...] and in making their case for selection, they draw on a wide variety of non-textual sources to frame their vocation»²⁶. Among these sources, the Jesuit oral network often had a great importance. Word of mouth was influential within Jesuit colleges, and often involved confreres. The discussions led them to feel the ambiguous “holy envy”, that is jealousy and resentment for those among their “rivals” who were selected as missionaries. Similarly, when people like travelers or procurators visited the Jesuit residences, they addressed the novices and invited them to apply after sharing with them fascinating stories²⁷.

Moreover, the Society of Jesus widely and efficiently used paintings and sculptures²⁸. The visual representation of missionaries dying as martyrs in the most exotic and distant countries had a morbid but unparalleled charm. The persuasive power of these images was great, and they furnished the colleges with paintings of often brutal scenes perfectly suited to the early modern Baroque taste. The constant allusion to martyrs established an analogy between the twelve apostles of Jesus and the members of the Society called after him, victims of persecutions (often, but not only, in Asia). For instance, in 1597 a group of missionaries (Franciscans and Jesuits, canonized in the 19th century) were crucified in Nagasaki because they refused to apostatize their faith, at that time declared illegal. They worked as a very popular subject immediately after they were crucified, and for a long time after that²⁹. Representations of their execution were described in words and images, this way impacting also on the Jesuits who were not particularly educated. According to Aliocha Maldavsky, paintings played a fundamental role in many missionary desires: every student used to admire pictures of martyrs in the dangerous Indies. One example among many was given by the Jesuit Giuseppe Di Maio, who in 1605 remembered that he decided to apply for the mission only after seeing «two portraits, one of Our Blessed Father Ignatius and the other of Blessed Francis Xavier, whose sight penetrated my heart and set alight a desire to suffer and die for Christ»³⁰.

²⁵ Which in recent years have become the subject of fascinating and interdisciplinary research: not only in history, but anthropology, social studies, psycholinguistics, and others. On the gestures of Jesuits in Japan see FREI-MADELLA (2021).

²⁶ RUSSELL (2011, 182).

²⁷ See below.

²⁸ On this topic see O'MALLEY (1999).

²⁹ On the Japanese martyrs see RAPPO (2017a; 2017b; 2020).

³⁰ ARSI, *FG* 733, fol. 301 (n.p., 29 May 1605), letter by Giuseppe di Maio quoted in RUSSELL (2011, 188).

The Jesuit Passion for the East

During the early modern period, the Society of Jesus experienced many ephemeral successes and failures in East Asia. As for Japan, the situation became insurmountable in 1639, when the empire was closed (*sakoku*) to any foreigner, and as such remained in nearly complete isolation until 1853³¹.

Yet before that, many missionaries felt drawn there, and the Society of Jesus harbored hopes to successfully evangelize the archipelago. As soon as Xavier arrived in Kagoshima in 1549, the Jesuits nourished a consistent optimism for the possible conversion of the empire. The first Jesuits arrived during the age of “warring states” (the Sengoku period, 1467-1615) and, in the absence of military support by the Portuguese, they had to rely on the local lords who, from time to time, favored them. This collaboration took place mostly for concrete and earthly reasons: Jesuits traveled aboard European (mainly Portuguese) ships and could act as *super partes* intermediaries with European merchants, who traded all sorts of items – like firearms, of the utmost importance in such a belligerent period.

The internal clashes among the Japanese lords led to the rise of the three unifiers of the empire: Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616). As a result, the fate of Christianity in Japan changed, being subject to external circumstances as much as of the Jesuits’ own strategies and evangelizing attempts. Things worsened with the admission of other religious orders at the end of the sixteenth century and the constant civil disorders, which led the Tokugawa dynasty to issue several edicts imposing isolation, the persecution of local converts, and, eventually, the progressive but definitive exile of all the foreigners from the empire.

As for China the first steps into the Ming empire were more arduous, but once the Jesuits established some residences there, Christianity was able to enjoy – under certain circumstances and periods – the support of several distinguished mandarins, officials, and emperors. This happened also because of the perspective that the Jesuits adopted, accommodating as much as possible to the Chinese culture (after Valignano and Ricci’s recommendations) and working in the empire not only as priests, but also as professionals. During the first Qing decades, and in particular during Kangxi’s (1654-1722) reign, Jesuits were allowed to proselytize or at least live in the empire with a certain freedom.

While the Jesuit missions thus were not put in danger by external worries, difficulties raised from inside, or within the Roman Church. In 1692 the Kangxi emperor issued an edict of religious toleration, to reward the Jesuits of the help offered on many occasions: as ambassadors, cartographers, astronomers, and mathematicians. While this edict was interpreted by the Society of Jesus as an epochal result, the disputes between missionary orders – and sometimes within the Society of Jesus itself – endangered more and more the survival of Catholicism there. As it had happened in Japan before, in fact, the coexistence of different religious orders which disagreed on many principles and policies ended up annoying the local rulers and emperors.

Differently from Japan, however, the Jesuits were forced to interrupt their missionary activities not by the Chinese, but by the papal brief *Cum Deus optimum* (1704). On the one

³¹ On this topic, see DEHERGNE (1973); ROSS (1994); BROCKEY (2007); BOSCARO (2008).

hand the Jesuits in China sought to defer as much as possible the brief's adoption, on the other Rome was not accepting anymore the Jesuit "tolerance" on the rites in honor of Confucius and the ancestors that Chinese converts kept practicing. After the attempt of intrusion in domestic matters made by European authorities, the Kangxi emperor decided to allow in his empire only those missionaries following Ricci's method, putting all the Jesuits in a delicate position: who was to be obeyed? The definitive³² condemnation of the Chinese rites was issued by Pope Benedict XIV (r. 1740-1758) in 1742, just a few decades before the suppression of the Society of Jesus (1773).

The period at the turn of the eighteenth century, therefore, was a tough one for Jesuit missionaries in East Asia, and for those who followed their lives and struggles from Europe. Those who felt a calling for the Far East kept a strong desire, rooted in decades and centuries of Jesuit successes or attempts, but could not see many possibilities of its realization. As for Japan, it was practically impossible to reach it; as for China, there were missionaries there, but the situation was thorny and the future unsure.

How aware were the aspiring missionaries of the concrete situation in East Asia? *Litterae indipetae* can help to shed some light on this question, thanks to the preferences one can find expressed in them. How many Jesuit petitioners clearly stated a preference for the Far East, and what were the reasons for this choice? This section focuses on the Italian applications sent to Rome between 1687 and 1730³³.

Undoubtedly, within these petitioners, the most frequently requested destination was, simply, the "Indies". The indifference and submission required to all Jesuits took shape also in the silencing of any personal will and in entrusting to the general alone such a fundamental and life-changing decision. However, about a tenth of all letters showed a peculiar interest for the Far Eastern destinations, and, of these letters, the most mentioned locations were the Philippines (27%), China (25%), East Indies in general (24%), and Japan (13%)³⁴. The preference for the Philippines is related to the geographical proximity to China and Japan, and aspiring missionaries saw this archipelago as an ideal stopping point before moving to the empires for which they really longed.

Even if after the *sakoku* the Japanese mission was unreachable for any foreigner and, most of all, any missionary aspiring to proselytize in the empire, decades and centuries later Jesuits still kept asking to be sent there. In particular, at several Southern Italian colleges at the turn of the eighteenth century, some optimistic rumors may have spread about an imminent reopening of Japan to foreigners—and also to conversion. In any case, Japan was a real but also a symbolic horizon, and the outcome of martyrdom (as seen by the Catholic Church) or execution for breaking the law (as seen by the Japanese) was what Jesuits had in mind when applying for that destination.

³² For the early modern period, because in more recent times Pope Pius XII, with the decree *Plane Compertum* (1939), allowed Catholics to practice many civil rites related to Confucius and the ancestors.

³³ It is based on the 1.565 *litterae indipetae* written during the generalates of Thyrso González de Santalla and Michelangelo Tamburini, currently preserved in ARSI in *FG* 749, 750, and 751. Concerning Italian *indipetae* produced in those years, see also CAPOCCIA (2007).

³⁴ FREI (2023, 148). Other Asian locations sporadically mentioned were Malabar, Tibet, Madurai, Goa, and Vietnam.

Such was the context for the risky – and, in the end, suicidal – adventure of Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1668-1715), a Sicilian who reached Japan only to die there soon after³⁵. He was a secular priest, not a Jesuit, but among Jesuits his name rang out with great strength. Harboring a great desire to save the souls of the Japanese for years, in 1702 Sidotti took advantage of a ship headed from Italy to the Far East, which had onboard Charles Maillard de Tournon (1668-1710). The latter was the papal legate charged to communicate the Roman condemnation of the Chinese rites to the Jesuits living in East Asia who were, to that point, trying to ignore it. After arriving in Manila, Sidotti moved on autonomously, to the south of Japan. As soon as he landed in Yakushima (1708) his presence was noticed and, as could be expected, he was captured by the Japanese authorities and brought to Edo (current Tokyo), where he was interrogated by the scholar Arai Hakuseki (1657-1715). In the years of Sidotti's adventure, several *indipetae* mentioned his name, or more vaguely alluded to his enterprise.

Hakuseki, an open-minded Neo-Confucian, tried to discuss with this mysterious Sicilian priest and to gain from him as much information as possible about Europe. He met him at the “Kirishitan yashiki” of Koishikawa (where Christians were imprisoned) on three occasions, in 1709-1710. After a few years of detention, Sidotti died in 1715. Before, however, Hakuseki took note of their discussions – even if linguistic difficulties did not help their mutual comprehension. Before landing in his beloved archipelago, Sidotti tried to study some Japanese, and he had a Latin-Portuguese dictionary with him. Hakuseki, meanwhile, was assisted by two Dutch interpreters³⁶. Sidotti did not achieve the desired results or regain Japan's former sympathies to Christianity. Nonetheless, the Sicilian priest had the merit to «close an era of contacts and exchanges between two deeply different cultures [...] symbolically representing the conclusion of over a century of contacts, but also of clashes and misunderstandings»³⁷. His adventure was known to some of the Italian petitioners of that time: in these cases, the role of Sidotti was symbolic but nonetheless significant, because he was able to rekindle and keep alive the desire for Japan.

The “Japanese rumor”

In 1689, while Sidotti was still planning his journey, another Sicilian was doing the same, but in different and more “orthodox” ways. Antonino Finocchio felt «invited by God to sail to Japan»³⁸ but, being aware that that «vineyard» was «impenetrable», he was ready to stop in Macau before. From this Portuguese trading port, Finocchio would have been waiting, «ready for that journey [to Japan], as soon as the Supreme Monarch will break the closed doors

³⁵ On Sidotti see <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-battista-sidotti/> and TORCIVIA (2017). For the conversations between Sidotti and Hakuseki, see TOLLINI (2003).

³⁶ On the challenging cultural and linguistic exchanges of the early modern age, see BURKE (2001). On misunderstandings between Europeans and Japanese, both linguistic and cultural, see the three essays by APP (1997-1998).

³⁷ «Chiudere un'epoca di contatti e di scambi, tra due culture profondamente diverse [...]. Egli anche simbolicamente rappresenta la conclusione di oltre un secolo di contatti, ma anche di scontri e incomprensioni» (TOLLINI, 2003, 72).

³⁸ «A navigar al Giappone [...] quella vigna [...] impenetrabile [...]. Pronto al viaggio, per quando si compiacesse il Supremo Monarca rompere col sangue dell'Agnello le chiuse porte diamantine di quel vastissimo Imperio», ARSI, *FG* 750, fol. 41 (Messina, 23 January 1698). Finocchio never left for the East Indies, nor his name appears among the *defuncti* of the Society of Jesus.

of that vast Empire with the blood of the Lamb». After consulting with a superior, Finocchio acknowledged how this desire was authentic and deserved to be shared with the general, and he sent his *indipeta* to Rome. The Southern Italian environment seemed a fertile ground for the dream of a reopening of the Japanese empire.

A few years after Finocchio's letter and while Sidotti was travelling to the East, the twenty-four-year-old Jesuit Tomaso Macchia implored from Southern Italy to be sent to Japan. According to the information he had received, Japan had recently «opened its door, already long closed, to the true Faith, and the Emperor of that kingdom asked our missionaries for the conversion of those people»³⁹. Macchia yearned to share «the unfortunate fate of those happy men, destined to convert the Japanese». Macchia's request could have had something to do with Sidotti's enterprise and the eagerness with which Jesuits were looking for news about it, but also with Kangxi's edict of toleration (1692). Macchia explicitly named Japan in his petition, but he may have confused it with China, which would have made sense also because Japan had always been formally ruled by an emperor, but this figure had no political importance at the time, and Jesuits never communicated or negotiated anything with him. In any case, Macchia could not realize his dream.

In the same year and from the same city of Macchia, Salerno, part of the House of Bourbon-Two Sicilies as Sicily, Casimiro Muscento proclaimed himself ready to sail for Japan «if it is true the news we received here, about its opening»⁴⁰. It is likely that Muscento and the previous Jesuit knew each other and had the same source or understanding of it – even if it is not easy to determine which it was. Muscento had no greater fortune than his confrere, and passed away in Naples in 1725.

In 1715 Sidotti died, but his name did not disappear from *litterae indipetae*. A year later, the Sicilian Martino d'Andrea exulted because of «the news we received here, that Monsignor Sidotti entered Japan with two of our Frenchmen, and they have obtained the license to spread the gospel to those peoples»⁴¹. One of the “Frenchmen” was likely the papal legate Tournon. But d'Andrea's mention of the legate as one of “ours” was is strange since Tournon was commonly seen by the Society of Jesus as an enemy of the policies of *accommodatio* and a dangerous presence in China, in the problematic context of the Rites controversy. Sidotti, however, was mentioned by name in the petition, making it is improbable that d'Andrea had confused Japan with China. More likely, in the absence of certain information from Sidotti (who was detained in Japanese jails from 1709 to 1715), some optimistic but nonetheless false news had spread about his mission in the Jesuit residences in southern Italy.

In the same years as d'Andrea's *indipeta* and yet again from Sicily, the Jesuit Salvatore Saverio Marini compulsively communicated to the general about his vocation for the East, sending sixteen letters in just two years. In one of them Marini asked to be sent to the

³⁹ «Aperta la porta, già da tanto tempo chiusa, alla vera Fede, e l'Imperatore di quel regno ha chiesto nostri missionarii per la Conversione di quelle genti [...]. L'avventurata sorte d'essere annoverato nel numero felicissimo di quelli che dovranno passare alla Conversione di quei popoli Giapponesi», ARSI, *FG 750*, fol. 223 (Salerno, 9 October 1705).

⁴⁰ «Quando sia vera la nuova qui giunta esservi apertura», ARSI, *FG 750*, fol. 225 (Salerno, 14 October 1705). For his death, FEJÉR (1985, 350).

⁴¹ «Capitata qui notitia d'esser già entrato nel Giappone Nostro Signor Sidoti con due nostri francesi, e che habbiano ivi ottenuta licenza di spargere il seme evangelico a quelle genti», ARSI, *FG 750*, fol. 399 (Modica, 20 October 1716).

Philippines, whose procurator was then in Italy looking for new recruits. His most intimate hope, however, was Japan: if the general had wanted to send him there, Marini was ready to go «at every slightest sign [...] even swimming»⁴². Notwithstanding the impracticality of the Japanese missions, the Roman secretary took note of this preference on the *verso* of the letter. This could be a sign that, in those hard and uncertain years, even in Rome and not only in the more isolated colleges of Southern Italy, Sidotti's adventure was seen as a dangerous but promising step leading to the restoration of the Christian faith in Japan – an empire on which the Society of Jesus had invested so many resources, missionaries, and publications.

Another mention of this alleged “Japanese hope” appeared a dozen years later in the *indipetae* written by Giuseppe Saverio Alagna. Once again a Sicilian, the Jesuit felt destined «especially for Philippines and China», but «in view for Japan, to whom I feel affection as well»⁴³. He asked himself in 1729: «who knows, if it is near the time to fulfill the revelation of the holy mercy, as I heard, on those islands?».

Conclusions

This essay used the Jesuit missions in China and Japan as a case study on the dissemination and interchange of cultural knowledge between Europe and the East. The Jesuits, with the amount of documents produced for internal use that often were read well outside the members of the order, were cultural brokers with no rivals for the early modern period⁴⁴. The long path to become a Jesuit, rooted in a refined education based on humanities and sciences (besides the more obvious theological and philosophical topic) and combined with the mobility at the core of the religious order, made them inevitably great actors of intercultural relations on a wide scale.

It is not an easy operation to investigate which sources on the East Asian territories were more influential for an application for the missions. *Litterae indipetae* remain a great source to verify their importance on the vocation of many Jesuits. This happened not only in the early modern period but also later, as the main role figures and sources (Francis Xavier as a model, and Daniello Bartoli as an author) showed a remarkable *long durée* through the centuries.

The counterweight of such a constant and frenetic exchange, was that all this circulation of information was often poorly verified, and this led not only to knowledge, but also to misinterpretation. Once again, the collection of thousands of *indipetae* letters helps in shedding some light on the cultural short circuits that may happen even inside such a well-educated order whose house was the world – *nuestra casa es el mundo*, as one of their mottos read.

Comparing different channels of cultural dissemination on Jesuit missions with the applications for the overseas territories, therefore, allows to verify the duration of a certain missionary model, the level of deepening in the exchange of information, the circulation of knowledge in such a vital historic time, the misunderstandings that were – and still are –

⁴² «Minimo segno [...] a nuoto», ARSI, *FG* 750, fol. 422 (Palermo, 8 January 1717).

⁴³ «Specialmente per le Filippine e Cina, in veduta al Giappone ove mi sento pure affezionato [...]. Chi sa se è vicino il tempo da compirsi le misericordie divine rivelate, come ho udito, a sensi suoi, su quelle Isole?» ARSI, *FG* 751, fol. 371 (Palermo, 10 February 1729).

⁴⁴ As well explained for instance in ZOLI (1978); MUNGELLO (2009).

insurmountable when such different civilization clash or come into contact. On a Jesuit level, finally, sources like those analyzed in this paper testify an enduring fascination with the missionary territories of China and Japan, and also help demonstrate the depth and wideness of the petitioners' network.

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