Introduction

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 letterae indipetae because their authors were Indias petentes (applying for the missions in the Eastern and Western territories).

The purpose of this book is to recapture the experiences of these individuals since lost to history by studying the indipetae written by Jesuits living in the Italian assistancy (the Jesuit territorial division which roughly coincides with current Italy). Italian Jesuits were the most prolific producers of indipetae for the entire history of the Society of Jesus. This monograph takes into consideration the two generalates of Thyro González de Santalla (in office 1687–1705) and Michelangelo Tamburini (in office 1706–30). During these years, the fields available to Jesuits were changing, and a further feature is geographical, as the book concentrates especially on the Jesuits applying for East Asia—China and Japan mainly. The historical situations in these Far Eastern locations were very different at the time than where the Jesuit petitioners lived and worked.

Starting in 1639, it was impossible for any foreigner to enter Japan. The policy of sakoku (the closure of the country) kept the archipelago in nearly complete isolation until 1853.1 Yet for the previous century, European Jesuits had been drawn to the Japanese empire, where they hoped to successfully evangelize the local population. As soon as Francis Xavier (1506–52) arrived in Kagoshima in 1549, the whole Society of Jesus started nourishing a consistent optimism for the possible conversion of Japan. Jesuits operated in the age of “warring states” (the Sengoku period, 1467–1615) and, in the absence of military support by the Portuguese, had to rely on the local lords who, from time to time, favored them. This collaboration took place mostly for practical reasons: Jesuits traveled aboard European (mainly Portuguese) ships and could act as super partes intermediaries with European merchants, who traded all sorts of items (for

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instance 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 (1534–82), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). As a result, the fate of Christianity in Japan constantly changed, subject of external circumstances as much as of the Jesuits’ own strategies and evangelizing attempts, until the entrance of other religious orders and the progressive civil disorders led the Tokugawa dynasty to issue several edicts imposing isolation, the persecution of local converts, and, eventually, the gradual exile of all the foreigners from the empire.

Meanwhile, as for China at the end of the seventeenth century, the circumstances were theoretically more prosperous for the Society of Jesus. Despite the first arduous steps in previous decades, Christianity then enjoyed the support of several distinguished mandarins, officials and emperors, due largely to the refined strategies of Jesuits as Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). The Ming dynasty was ousted in 1644 by the Qing; during the first Qing decades, and in particular under Kangxi’s (1654–1722) rule, Jesuits were allowed to proselytize or at least live and study with a certain freedom.\(^2\) For the Society of Jesus, the most urgent problem at the turn of the eighteenth century became the so-called Rites controversy: not the religious “tolerance” (confirmed in 1692 by Kangxi), but the dispute between missionary orders (and sometimes within the Society of Jesus itself). As it had happened in Japan before, in fact, the coexistence of different religious orders who disagreed on many issues ended up annoying the local rulers and the emperor. Differently from Japan, however, the Jesuits were forced to interrupt their missionary activities not by the Chinese emperors but by the papal brief \textit{Cum Deus optimum} (1704). Though the Jesuits sought to defer as much as possible the brief’s implementation in China, there was no way for Rome to accept the

Jesuit tolerance of the ancient rites in honor of Confucius and the ancestors that 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. The definitive (for the early modern age) condemnation of the “Chinese rites” was issued by pope Benedict XIV (r.1740–58) in 1742, just a few decades before the suppression of the Society of Jesus (1773).

The timespan studied in this book was, thus, a very tormented period for the Jesuits—especially for those who felt a vocation for the East Indies. Still, this unrest and uncertainty did not prevent a significant number of Europeans from dreaming about those remote and fascinating destinations. There was always the hope to reach, if not Japan, China—perhaps through the Philippines, recognized as the best temporary location, while waiting for the doors of those glorious empires to open again. Moreover, the circumstance that East Asia was largely unreachable for Jesuit missionaries after 1742 did not represent an insurmountable obstacle, but was seen more as a challenge by the most determined, motivated, and obstinate ones.

This volume offers a general introduction to litterae indipetae, even if its foci are specific in space and time (the Italian assistancy and East Asia, and seventeenth–eighteenth centuries). The book concentrates on the qualitative and quantitative relevance of litterae indipetae, an extraordinary collection of ego-documents whose uniqueness is even more accentuated in the case of “unknown” and “unimportant” Jesuits—which are the majority among petitioners for the Indies. The words of these people survived only because the Society of Jesus gave them the opportunity to speak for themselves, afterwards meticulously preserving their more or less polished, but always very colorful letters. People, their thoughts, and desires are the main focus of this book because, as Marc Bloch wrote, “the good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.”

3 Marc Bloch, The Historian’s Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Those Who Write It (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 26. This book is based not only on the 1500 indipetiae studied for this author’s PhD, but also on the many more thousands she worked on as a project assistant of the Digital Indipetae Database, developed by the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, Boston College. This yearlong experience on the same source allows to widen the scope and impact of this book’s conclusions, and to deal with different periods, generals and historical circumstances, encompassing the continuities and discontinuities of indipetae letters from the sixteenth until the nineteenth century.
The structure of the book is the following. It starts with a brief introduction on the “literary genre” of litterae indipetae. More than twenty-two thousand petitions for the Indies survive until today, written from the 1580s until recent times. Despite the centuries separating their authors, indipetae share many characteristics—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. They knew their destiny could depend on this very document, which they addressed directly to the highest authority of their order. The chances to obtain what they longed for could be increased by their rhetorical abilities and how they used them to convince the superior general.

The most frequently mentioned elements were health, age, studies, and personal skills; they could also include practical abilities (especially in the cases of domestic helpers, who were less educated). 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 to one petitioner, 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.

Chapter 2 focuses on the “push and pull factors” leading a Jesuit to compose an application for the Indies. One or more circumstances could provide a positive stimulus: the most important was, of course, faith and desire to serve as an instrument of God. Certain publications (such as the promotional material produced by the Society of Jesus) could instill a missionary vocation in the hearts of those who were already Jesuits. Even before their entry to the religious order, laypersons often developed an interest in the Ignatian global endeavor because of what they read. Another aim of working in the “vineyard of the Lord” was to cry, sweat and suffer—possibly to die as a martyr as well—in hostile circumstances. Finally, several Jesuits undertook the missionary path after receiving mysterious signs and having prophetic dreams.

On the other hand, negative factors influenced an application for the Indies. Jesuits had problems and quarreled with their natural families. Parents, often not keen at first to lose their sons to the Society of Jesus, opposed their possible assignments and dangerous journeys to the other side of the world. The same happened within spiritual families. Local superiors tried in every way to
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prevent the candidacies of some Jesuits (especially in the Sicilian province, as indipetae seem to indicate). Finally, the daily life with confreres and the teaching duties were a hard experience for some Jesuits, who petitioned for the Indies to radically change their condition.

The network involving petitioners for the Indies was as wide as the global network of the Society of Jesus itself. Chapter 3 situates the main personae of this book (the petitioners) in relation with other agents. The most important of these figures within the order, outside of the superior general, were the procurators of the Indies. Procurators were elected by their provincial congregations and periodically traveled to Europe to defend the interests of their provinces. One of their primary tasks was to recruit new missionaries. After a general introduction on this position within the Society of Jesus, this chapter concentrates on the procurators from the Chinese vice-province—especially Filippo Grimaldi (1638–1712) and Kaspar Kastner (1665–1709)—whose sojourns through Europe influenced many Jesuits in their applications; some of them were lucky enough to leave with them.

In the end, however, it was the superior general who had the last word on a missionary appointment. Given the numerical and geographical size of the Society of Jesus, the general still maintained surprisingly personal and often very intimate relationships with petitioners. Generals González and Tamburini replied to the men, explained their decisions, and encouraged the ones they could not appoint yet. These correspondences lasted often for years if not decades, presenting historians the opportunities to write a Jesuit story “from below” and from multiple points of view—not only the petitioner, but also the Roman curia, the local superiors, and the relatives.

The final chapter focuses on the Asian missions—both real and imagined—with a few case-studies related to this destination. It analyzes all the indipetae written during González’ and Tamburini’s generalates from quantitative and qualitative points of view, presenting answers to such questions as how many petitions for Asia were written during that period, when and why? The chapter also explores two “unsuccessful” but very motivated petitioners (Carlo Sarti, 1706–?, and Giovanni Berlendis, 1664–1745), and the reasons for their disappointments. On the other side, the final section studies two “successful” missionaries, Agostino Cappelli (1679–1715) and Ludovico Gonzaga (1673–1718). Both were appointed to the Chinese missions and left Lisbon on the same ship in 1706. Once arrived in Asia, however, they behaved in completely different ways and ended their lives as “enemies.” This is well documented in the letters they both exchanged with the general after the Indias petens-phase, and which represent a fascinating corollary to it.