Conclusions

This book is based on the analysis of over 1500 litterae indipetae written from the Italian assistancy, now preserved in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu (ARSJ). The “Italians” of the Society of Jesus resided in the provinces of Milan, Rome, Naples and Sicily and, like every Jesuit elsewhere, obeyed the Roman superior general—but they lived under different political authorities. This research concentrates mainly on the forty years of the generalates of González de Santalla (in office 1687–1705) and Tamburini (in office 1706–1730). During this period, the situations in both Japan and China were increasingly very challenging for the Society of Jesus. The circulation of information from the overseas territories to Europe and back was wider and more constant than decades before, at the beginning of the Jesuit endeavor, but those years were particularly delicate for the Ignatian order.

Meanwhile, within the Catholic Church beginning in 1622, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (also known as Propaganda Fide) started supervising all the Catholic missionary activity around the globe. Not only the souls of European Christians passed to reformed religions had to be regained, but all the peoples who were encountering in the global scenario from the fifteenth century on had to be converted ex novo. The Congregation also sought to reduce the Iberian power in religious decisions, as the Spanish and Portuguese crowns grew even stronger between 1580 and 1640 because of the dynastic union. The members of Propaganda Fide aimed at guaranteeing the uniformity of the missionary policies all over the world—a very hard, if not impossible, goal because of all the different “nationalities” involved in this spiritual, but also very material activities related to missions.

Another institution founded in the seventeenth century was the Société des missions étrangères (MEP), approved in Paris by the king in 1663 and by the pope a year later. The French Catholic crown had this way provided Propaganda Fide with political and economic support to counterbalance the overwhelming power of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in Asia. The MEP was an organization of secular priests and lay people, whose goal was the spread of the evangelical message in the missionary territories, promoting the formation of indigenous clergy, and the knowledge of local languages and cultures by the missionaries. The Parisian seminary became a fundamental center for recruiting and educating new missionaries before sending them overseas.

Propaganda Fide and the MEP were tightly connected with the French crown. Starting from the 1680s, King Louis XIV (r.1643–1715) began to favor his subjects when it came to approving missionary assignments. Also answering
to the appeal for new missionaries made by the Jesuits who worked at the Chinese imperial court, Louis XIV sent a first group of French “Royal mathematicians” to the East. After these missionaries arrived in Beijing (1688), they created a sort of enclave of Jesuits depending primarily on the King of France, and not on the Roman general of the Society of Jesus. These “French” Jesuits had their own superiors and lived in separate residences, showing a relevant autonomy and independence from their “Portuguese” brothers. The latter were sent by the Portuguese crown, but came from different Jesuit assistancies and therefore belonged to different “nationalities.”

The missionary scenario in China was quite crowded, and the Rites controversy between Catholic orders only added further friction. It was in this context that Italian petitioners applied to be sent to the Qing empire, unconcerned about the logistical obstacles—or even more motivated by them. There were different kinds of indipetae letters, as chapter 1 showed: some of them seemed rather detached and did not contain many personal details. This happened especially after the superior generals exhorted Jesuits to apply by following certain rules—in the case of this book, after Tamburini’s letter dated 1722 which listed all the elements an application should contain: age, health condition, studies, and motivations. From then on and for a few months, most of the indipetae just stated the basic data the general invited to report, and were “one-off.” All the Jesuits were aware of the Roman invitation, and many felt an inner obligation to write a petition. External obligations existed as well, as their superiors expected them to do so.

The most fascinating and revealing (from a historical-emotional perspective) indipetae are the ones written by the most persistent Jesuits. These men repeatedly disclosed to the general the most intimate secrets of their heart. They continued applying for the Indies with the clear aim to stand out among their many competitors before, during and after the general’s appeal of 1722, even more galvanized by it. It is quite easy to spot these letters among the hundreds of documents produced in just forty years. Not the names or the length, but the content stands out after reading thousands of indipetae in preparation of this book.

While all of the indipetae letters were, as their name states, ad Indias petentes, their authors’ motivations, however, could be different. Many petitioners became fascinated by the Jesuit missionary enterprise even before entering the order: for instance, by reading books on the subject during their childhood. Many chose—as they explicitly admitted later—this particular religious order precisely because it gave a bigger opportunity in this regard. Some petitioners, more generally, desired to redeem the sinner’s life they conducted as lay persons, before joining the Society of Jesus. Crying, sweating, bleeding—and
even better, dying as martyrs—would save their souls and contextually spare from hell all the people they might convert. Men also wrote *indipetae* after experiencing prophetic dreams, unexpected healings or miraculous accidents, all preternatural events manifesting the Lord’s will. These phenomena were the reasons for such an insistence by the petitioners: God wanted them there, and not answering to his call was a tragic mistake.

Every one of the thousands of applications to the superior general started from the bottom, with the humble petitioner, an “anonymous” Jesuit among many. Chapter 2 investigated on the next filter: local superiors, who could support or oppose his vocation. Before applying for the Indies, usually, Jesuits waited for their superiors’ authorization. Some superiors attached their own letters to their pupils’ *indipetae*, this way heartily recommending them to the general. On the other hand, Jesuits were more frequently afraid of their superiors’ intervention against them. Superiors could, first of all, simply not forward the plea to Rome, which many petitioners were positive was happening in their case. Some Jesuits, to avoid further boycotts, wrote to the general directly, bypassing any authority in between and begging him to address the reply not to them personally in the community but rather secretly and only to a person they knew was “on their side.” Some petitioners explicitly stated that they were “forced” to act in the darkness because their provincials (especially in the case of Sicily) allowed too few Jesuits to leave. Further, because local superiors maintained with the general a regular correspondence, some families directed their complaints to them about their sons’ missionary vocation before appealing to the ultimate authority of the Society of Jesus.

Chapter 3 focused on another element of the missionary selection, the procurators. Their role could be decisive, because one of their tasks during their periodic tours from their missionary lands to Europe was to recruit new missionaries. Their passage never went unnoticed. After meeting them, many Jesuits applied for the first time while many others renewed already submitted requests. Procurators had the rare advantage of moving through multiple places for months, being able to meet *vis-à-vis* many Jesuits. Every time they found someone who seemed particularly well suited for their mission, they invited him to write the official request to the general and offered to intercede for them.

It was the general who had the last word on the missionary appointment. The second part of chapter 3 put *litterae indipetae* in dialogue with *Epistulae Generalium*. These Roman registers summarized the generals’ answers to any letter they received. Analyzing these two sources together, the “monologue” of petitioners for the Indies finally becomes a “dialogue” with the highest Jesuit authority—often, a very vivid one. This “conversation” could also include a
third subject: the family of the petitioner. This chapter focused on the Epistulae Generalium sent from Rome to members of the Sicilian Province, revealing how the intervention of the petitioners’ parents was not unusual, and the Roman authorities did not leave their protests ignored.

The long-term correspondence available in the Epistulae Generalium, also shows how sometimes the missionary vocation was, paradoxically, what led a Jesuit to leave his order, if that vocation went / was not unfulfilled. Some petitioners for the Indies, indeed could not accept the fact that their calls remained unheard. Once again, the generals’ replies document the petitioners’ bitterness and discontent. Some Jesuits felt the need to entertain with the general a close relation for all their life, sharing with him their daily sorrows and confiding in his understanding—especially when no one around seemed to appreciate them. They usually contacted the general for the first time as soon as they entered the order, with a petition for the Indies. The general had always given them attention: even when they wrote full of doubts and wanting to exit the Society, as the case-study of Ignazio Mario Romeo showed.

In addition to providing valuable and unique information to answer many scholarly questions, the Epistulae Generalium also confirm that, among many daily tasks, the Roman curia considered replying to many (if not to most of) indipetae a matter of the utmost importance. The letters were signed by the general, but were most probably conceived and written down by his secretaries. For example, at least in the Sicilian Province at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the majority of petitioners for the Indies expected an answer from Rome—and an answer from someone aware of his own characteristics and history.

Undoubtedly, most of the Roman replies were standardized and generic, especially when answering to first-time indipetae. The generals gave suggestions valid for any occasion, while exhorting the candidates to be patient, show submission to their superiors, and not offend parents and relatives. After a few years of unsuccessful petitioning, the general could invite them to transfer their missionary desire for the “real” Indies to “our” Indies—that is staying in their native countries, preaching and teaching to their compatriots. Many Roman replies testify an updated knowledge on the addressee, whether it was one person or several designated ad hoc to evaluate and record the stories of the petitioners. In this regard, this book focused on a dozen Sicilian petitioners for the Indies, checking their statements with what the generals’ answers report. Ardent and motivated, all received a tailored response and in a short or very short time. The extraordinary accuracy in handling these indipetae suggests that even the general (and not only the author of this book) may have been struck by their tenor. Was such care in managing the Indias petens
correspondence exceptional or ordinary? Were all the indipetae answered with the same frequency and precision? It was not possible to verify it for this publication, but further research (with the help of the DID and the selection of another period and time) can confirm the percentage of indipetae answered by the Roman curia, the average reply-time, and finally their content.

Among the thousands of early modern indipetae, this research identified those aimed at the Far Eastern destination, which often were the most passionate and iterated ones. The final chapter shows how, statistically, it is however difficult to find an explicit and generic preference for the East Indies. What dominated the majority of letters was, on the contrary, an omnipresent proclamation of indifference—as was expected from every member of the Ignatian order.

From a statistical point of view, only a tenth of the 1595 indipetae letters written by Italian Jesuits during the generalates of Santalla and Tamburini explicitly requested an assignment in the East Indies. The most frequently mentioned destinations were the Philippines (twenty-seven percent), China (twenty-five percent), and generic “corners of Asia” (twenty-four percent). The allure of China and of the East in general was persistent and well impressed in the minds of the petitioners, also thanks to the best-selling publications of the Society of Jesus. The candidates saw the Philippines more as a temporary destination, until the times were ready to move forward to the Chinese or Japanese Empire. Many petitioners also asked for the Philippines because, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, expeditions were frequently destined there. Finally, the Philippines were under Spanish dominion as were, for many years, the Jesuit provinces of Sicily and Naples. The Jesuits there had thus more chances to be welcomed in Spanish ships than their confreres in the Northern Italian peninsula.

The Japanese destination was explicitly listed in about twenty indipetae (thirteen percent). The number is not high, but this empire had not been accessible for several decades at the time. Japan always had a special place in the Jesuits’ publications and collective memory, and was still able to influence the candidates’ preferences. The areas of Malabar, Madurai (India), and Tibet were named by about five Jesuits each (three percent each), and almost always because they have been informed of expeditions of missionaries ready for that direction. Finally, a few Jesuits expressed the desire to leave for Goa and Vietnam (one percent each).

To reach their aim, many petitioners were willing to modify their preference at the last minute. If there were more chances to leave for the West Indies, those proclaiming themselves interested only in the East before easily changed their mind. Some petitioners desiring Asia, however, declined the general’s
invitation to redirect their expectations to the Americas and remained resolute in their goal to be sent only to China and/or Japan. This happened in the four case-studies analyzed in this final chapter. On the one hand, Sarti and Berlendis always wanted to go to Japan but never reached this empire, nor left for any missionary country. On the other, Cappelli and Gonzaga applied for the East and were sent there together, on the same ship. Even if they ended up becoming “enemies” in the Rites controversy, they both kept with the general a long and rich correspondence, updating him long after the *Indias petens*-phase, as did many other petitioners, until the end of their lives.

This chapter also showed how the concrete information provided by the petitioners for the Indies about the object of their desire was very scarce. This does not mean they were all naive and unprepared. At least some authors had read (by themselves) or heard (during common meals or in class) the accounts produced by the Society of Jesus on the new and exotic missionary territories. Some of them had become familiar with these scenarios of suffering and adventures even *before* entering the order, as children. Some of them had missionary uncles or brothers, who had described the Indies via letters to them. *Indipetae*, however, remain in most cases vague on geography: they simply did not represent the appropriate place to fantasize about missionary life.

Similarly, the situation in the Qing empire was not a subject to be treated in *indipetae*. In the forty years considered in this book, just a bunch of Jesuits tried to imagine what life in China would have been. This silence was also related to the difficulties plaguing the Society of Jesus at the time. The Rites controversy was heavily affecting the outcomes of an order that had been until then so successful in familiarizing and adapting to such a different civilization. Especially “minimal” members of the Society like petitioners for the Indies were not supposed to approach such a sensitive matter.

Petitioners were vague not only in defining their destination but also in planning how to proceed to reach their goal, once their request was accepted. Most Jesuits declared themselves ready to leave the day after receiving the “license,” without greeting any relative or superior or bringing anything useful (clothes, money, books) with them. Only a small percentage of petitioners tried to manage the time before a possible departure, asking the general to continue their studies either in Rome or Lisbon or on board during the long oceanic journey. Aspiring missionaries seldom took into consideration problems like the learning of a new language, or the adaptation to new climates and food. Most of them were not touched by these worries: they simply wanted to leave as soon as possible. In this regard, *indipetae* stand out not for the information they carry, but for the absence of it.
This book demonstrated how the precious source of *indipetae* can be fruitfully used, in many academic fields and with different perspectives. As a source, *indipetae* are remarkable for the interdisciplinary approach they allow, and also because of their *longue-durée*. After the restoration of the Society of Jesus (1814), *indipetae* immediately started to be addressed to the generals again. This book showed how, when put into dialogue with other sources, *indipetae* reveal their unique potential. This book made a large use of the generals' copy-letters, which highlight the internal and external mechanisms of communication of the Society of Jesus. The spiritual family of a petitioner (his local superiors) provided comments in favor or against him, a procurator significantly influenced his cause, and the general had the last word on it. Copy-letters however also testify that many missionary vocations did not come to a successful end because of the natural families’ protests. The superior general received requests and complaints not only from a petitioner, but also from his superiors and his relatives. Some Jesuits, frustrated for the very reason for which they had joined the Society, decided to leave the order. The last words exchanged with the generals can be found once again in the *Epistulae Generalium*, which bring this way an important contribution to the studies on the thorny theme of resignation from religious orders.

Finally, one of the most important projects promoting *indipetae* is the already mentioned *Digital Indipetae Database*, developed by the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College. Once it will be completed, scholars from any field will have a long-lasting and monumental repository to turn to. Missions were a substantial task of the Ignatian order, and many Jesuits expressed at least once a written vocation for the Indies. The *DID* is an open access database, available to users from any part of the world, but it is also a work in progress to which hundreds of people are contributing. This public history project allows to reach out to people who would have otherwise never come in contact with Jesuit sources—nor archival sources in general. Students of high schools are transcribing letters written by boys of their age, noticing the different use of linguistic conventions, words, language, rhetorical tools, and revising each other’s work in an integrated and collaborative way. University students are immersing themselves in an unusually large series of *ego-documents*, digitized by ARSI and available for home-working, giving a solid contribution to a project which will last even if they decide (or are forced) to divert from an academic path. None of this work gets lost, and while they write a dissertation on subjects related to their transcriptions, they familiarize at the same time with archival work. In the third place and more predictably, scholars who had already worked on the topic are contributing
with their transcriptions to a database which, once completed, will allow all kinds of research.

It is not easy to find Digital Humanities projects able to harmonize a thick analysis of documents (from an archival, historic, and linguistic point of view), an open access outcome, and collaborative learning between its contributors. The involvement of different people from all over the world, at different stages of their life and career, is one of the most “Jesuitic” aspect of the database, and of indipetae in general, because it is consistent with the Society of Jesus’ motto: *Nuestra casa es el mundo.*