

Early Modern Litterae Indipetae for the East Indies

Elisa Frei

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No other religious order exemplifies Max Weber's intuition that spirituality and rationality must be studied side by side better than the Society of Jesus. The remarkable corpus of letters, *Litterae indipetae*, collected in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, in which the Jesuits sought permission from the general of the order to join missions in the Indies, has received ample scholarly attention in the last two decades. Written between 1580 and the suppression and after the restoration of the order, they are of interest for their ardent spiritual content and institutional regulatory function. Elisa Frei's monograph takes a sample of 1,565 *indipetae* letters written between 1687 and 1730 by Jesuits from Italian assistancy and addressed to two generals, Tirso González de Santalla and Michelangelo Tamburini, asking to be sent to Asian missions, preferably Japan and China. In four compact and erudite chapters, she provides a fascinating tapestry of Jesuit lives, torn between Ignatian spiritual desire for 'magis' or Xavier's triple 'magis' and the Society's focus on regulation and procedure. Frei opens the pages to individual Jesuit voices, both lowly and noble members who repeatedly (some of them up to thirty times) requested to be sent to the Indies with old and new arguments. She records a history of responses from superiors and generals who had difficulty matching Jesuit personnel resources with available missionary appointments. A blueprint or model for writing a successful *indipeta*, a missionary 'statement of purpose', was formalised from the late sixteenth century, but individual rhetorical strategies were (perceived as) crucial for achieving a personal goal—that of being sent to the Indies. The *indipetae* stimulated the desire to travel, work hard, and suffer martyrdom, but not all *Indias petentes* were allowed to leave Italian Jesuit institutions. Frei gives equal space to successful and unsuccessful petitioners because she is interested in the details of personal and institutional negotiations, with peaks and lows in recruitment.

In the first chapter (*'Litterae Indipetae'*), Frei shows how the *litterae indipetae* turned into a genre with a predetermined format, especially after Tamburini's circular in 1722, which also provoked an 'explosion' of vocations for the Indies in Italy. It also outlined an ideal missionary model and a 'typical' petitioner. These were not, however, Frei

claims, fixed and unchangeable models. For China and Japan, certain qualities, such as linguistic skills and mathematics, were required more than others. On the other hand, it was not always clear when to emphasise one's qualities or demerits. The candidates were left to guess the procurator's or general's preference at that moment. In particular, the temporal coadjutors were not considered necessary in the missions unless they had specific talents or skills, such as medical training. Writing an *indipeta* was a difficult task for any writer. One had to fit into the expected scheme and find original words supporting one's candidacy. Frei points out that there were hardly two identical letters out of some 22,000 *indipetae* written over four hundred years.

The second chapter ('Desires: Push and Pull Factors') is structured around Jesuit desires that, in a negative sense, pushed the Jesuits outside of Europe (and their family circle) and pulled them, in a positive sense, towards Asia. The pull and push may be inspired by literary and documentary/hagiographical sources presenting all the advantages of pursuing missionary, active, and spiritual careers. The push factor is discussed in the book in quite some detail. The Jesuits, especially those from noble families, faced problems from their parents, who refused to let them travel far and never return. Even the 'holy hatred' for the natural family appears as an emotion the Jesuits had to deal with. Convincing the procurator or general with prophetic dreams and the premonition of future heroic missionary acts was easier than convincing a powerful noble father or mother. Mostly, however, it was the uncertainty of the general's choice that left many petitioners distressed and inconsolable.

A large part of the third chapter, entitled 'The Petitioners Network', is about Ignazio Maria Romeo (1676–1724?), who desperately wrote letters and fought his father, Marquis delli Magnisi, and his mother, the godmother of the viceroy of Sicily, who used their local political power to stop him from leaving for Asia. Similar stories are pieced together from another important archival source, the correspondence of the generals—*epistolae generalium*. We can glimpse some of the generals' strategies and the complex decisions they had to make to appease both Jesuit candidates and their families.

Four case studies—two unsuccessful candidacies for the mission in Japan or China and two successful ones for China—are presented in chapter four ('Case Studies: China and Japan'). The case of Carlo Sarti is interesting because, after writing *indipetae* with a burning desire to go to Japan or China, this temporal coadjutor left the Society of Jesus. It proves the Jesuit insight from *Spiritual Exercises* that too much desire can leave one 'cold'. On the other hand, Giovanni Berlendis, who wrote three 'suggestive *indipetae*', finally settled into a productive Jesuit life, teaching and ministering, and died in Naples at an advanced age. The two Jesuits, Agostino Cappelli and Ludovico Gonzaga, who were sent to China with Cardinal Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon, the legate of the Propaganda Fide who stirred the Malabar and Chinese rites controversy and angered the Chinese Emperor Kangxi, are an example of how difficult it was to match Jesuits in the missions since they ended on two opposing sides of the controversy. Cappelli even sided with the Cardinal, defending

his ‘ecclesiastical freedom’ against the Jesuit policy of *accommodatio*. He settled in the Madurai mission in India, an impoverished, difficult mission, perhaps to atone for the sin of siding with the Propaganda Fide against his brethren. The appendix with two statistical tables based on petitions reveals one interesting fact: that Italian Jesuits preferred China, Japan, or some other East Asian region rather than India or Vietnam and that many petitioners asking for the Philippines preferred China or Japan. They guessed that the Philippines, a part of the Spanish empire, was easier to be assigned to but could also appear to the *petentes* as a second prize (or even a punishment) compared to China and Japan.

Although scholarship on Jesuit missions has emphasised the knowledge-making and knowledge-collecting that was part of the Jesuit mandate, the petitioners, according to Frei, showed a relatively flat understanding of the mission’s geography and anthropology. Was it because the *indipetae* format did not allow or require the display of knowledge, or were the Jesuit candidates uninterested in the details of the missionary reports? Profound scholarship brings out new research questions. Elisa Frei’s book is a successful teaser into the global world of Jesuit lives and desires, stimulated by new research tools such as the *Digital Indipetae Database* (Boston College).