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Propaganda Fide and the Role of Apostolic Nuncios during the Early Modern Period: A Case Study of China

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Abstract: In 1622, a counter-reformist concept of the mission led to the foundation of Propaganda Fide, a congregation to which the Supreme Pontiffs entrusted various tasks at the global level, including the reassertion of the pope's authority over missionary activities, which had previously been dominated by European secular powers using the patronage system. In carrying out its mandate, the new Congregation also charged apostolic nuncios, almost entirely Italian, with collecting information from and establishing direct contacts with the states of Catholic Christianity and of missionary territories beyond. These nuncios not only performed activities of a religious nature but also served as diplomats and representatives of the pope, endowed with particular powers and faculties. This article introduces the role of apostolic nuncios and analyzes the results of the first of these sent by the Propaganda Fide to China, Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon. It will show that, as the first papal legate to China, he was not entirely successful in his objectives, but his mission can be seen as a turning point in the history of relations between the Holy See and China and as an important episode which helps us to understand not only early Sino-papal relations but also the development of the new global vision of the Catholic Church as it was formulated by the Propaganda Fide.

Keywords: Holy See; China; Propaganda Fide; apostolic nuncios; Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon; Kangxi; missionary; Chinese Rites Controversy



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1. Introduction

The Congregation de Propaganda Fide (often known as Propaganda Fide and today referred to as the Dicastery for Evangelization) was the dicastery of the Roman Curia, which, since its foundation on 6 January 1622, held supreme jurisdiction over the Catholic Church around the world in the name of the pontiffs (von Pastor 1931, p. 102; Metzler 1971a, p. 86; Zhang 2022a, p. 24). With the bull *Inscrutabili divinae providentiae arcano*, Pope Gregory XV entrusted Propaganda Fide to promote, coordinate, and direct missionary activities among the Protestants and Orthodox in northern and eastern Europe and to deal with the “pagans” in general, from America to Africa and Asia (*Ad Gentes*, No. 29).¹

The new Congregation urged all religious orders to recognize its jurisdiction and to promote indigenous priests in order to create a diocesan hierarchy in all mission territories of the Catholic Church (Zhang 2023b). In this context, links were needed between the Roman Curia and the missionary peripheries that would allow the administrative machine to function and ensure a regular flow of information which would be useful for the development and implementation of apostolic projects. Such an important function had to be entrusted to individuals known to the Holy See and trained in its spirit, but outside of the religious orders, who could then be sent around the world in order to obtain news and to be able to intervene directly in the various areas. At the time of the foundation of Propaganda Fide, the pope sanctified the apostolic nuncios before sending them to the capitals or other important centers of Catholic Europe and also to non-Catholic and non-European territories (Pizzorusso 2022, p. 130).

The great novelty in the changes brought about by the creation of Propaganda Fide in the post-Tridentine era was that they were to combine the roles of formal envoys represent-

ing the pope with the task of responding to the specific needs of the missionary activities in each particular territory. Across the world, this meant that the specific work of each nuncio varied enormously. On the one hand, within the countries already closely linked to the Church of Rome, they had to defend the faith of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, some had to work in territories with very little Catholicism, with varying states of missionary development and activity. Meanwhile, they also had to inform Rome of the state of mission territories, including new discoveries or colonial enterprises that offered opportunities for the expansion of missionary activities (Pizzorusso 2022, p. 132). From their offices, often central nodes of European and colonial politics, the apostolic nuncios therefore had the potential to control the entire known world in the context of the universalistic project of spreading the faith. Through this direct control of missionary activity, they were to serve as the key links between the center of the Church and the non-Catholic world (Barbiche 1992, pp. 112–14).

The first Secretary of Propaganda Fide, Francesco Ingoli (1622–1649), who was considered as “the head, the body and the feet of the Congregation”, directed it with prudence and energy for twenty-seven years (see the Propaganda Fide Historical Archives in Vatican City, hereafter abbreviated as APF, CP vol. 5, f. 379). It was Ingoli who urged the nuncios to send back all documents concerning the missions: reports, letters, instructions, circulars, decrees, etc. (Metzler 1988, p. 15). These materials constituted the basis of Propaganda Fide Historical Archives and made it possible for the Roman Curia to manage global affairs centrally, which led to the formulation of its foreign policy. In theory, the activities of the nuncios were oriented according to the double inspiration principle, already expressed in the circular letter of the Congregation of 15 January 1622, which envisaged, on the one hand, the religious-pastoral task that was the collection and sending of information to Rome, which would be useful for the development of missionary policies; and on the other hand, it addressed the political-diplomatic task, which was to create and maintain a direct relationship with the states, while safeguarding Roman autonomy. In reality, the mandate of a nuncio was very broad and left the margins of initiative undefined; indeed, it was recommended that each nuncio “expands beyond the commission, because charity does not wait to be prayed for, nor does zeal require commandments in such things” (APF, Lettere vol. 2, f. 4v). The instructions to the individual nuncios, focusing on particular questions, ended up taking the general principles mentioned above for granted.

From the first days of Propaganda Fide’s activities, Ingoli recognized the need to send more apostolic nuncios or delegates to be maintained in the East and West Indies, particularly in the Portuguese East, where the Chinese Rites Controversy had been brewing for a long time (Rouleau 1967, pp. 610–17; Minamiki 1985, pp. 183–203). Primarily focused on how to translate the word *Deus* into Chinese, and whether it would be appropriate to venerate ancestors or Confucius (Mungello 1994, p. 3; Criveller 2012, p. 14), it nevertheless also included other debates surrounding, for example, whether or not the 1670 translation of the Roman missal into Chinese should be used (Standaert and Tiedemann 2001, p. 627; Zhang 2023b). Opponents had argued that “in Christian communities that are very far from Rome, one must carefully avoid anything that might give rise to schism” (Bontinck 1962, p. 82; Seah 2017, p. 101). For this reason, at the beginning of the 18th century, Propaganda Fide nominated the noble young prelate from Turin, Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon (Duo Luo 多羅, 1668–1710), as its first apostolic nuncio to China, with maximum apostolic authority, to deal with the Rites Controversy and establish a direct contact with the Qing Court (Zhang 2022a, p. 6).

The role of nuncios, though interesting and valuable, has remained relatively understudied. In the last fifty years, a large portion of academic work focused mostly on the various regions where missionary activity was taking place, with little, if any, reference to the contribution of Propaganda Fide (Prudhomme 2023, p. 29). This Congregation opened a new method of evangelization and was responsible for overseeing the expansion of Catholicism across the globe (Zhang 2023b); thus, it is always worth including the vision of Rome and the policies it elaborated, otherwise the picture would not be com-

plete (Pizzorusso 2018, p. 11). For the specialists in the field of Catholic missions to China, however, the archives of the religious orders constitute the principal sources when writing their histories; other sources, such as those from the Roman Curia and Propaganda Fide in particular, have remained relatively unknown and underused (An 2015; Li 2019, p. 300). Concerning the first papal legate to China, thus far, scholars who have studied this material concentrated primarily on cultural and doctrinal issues, such as Antonio Sisto Rosso, offered a preliminary chronological narrative study on this subject (Rosso 1948); Francis Rouleau gave a rapid outline of the legation and introduced materials preserved in the Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu (Rouleau 1962); António Vasconcelos de Saldanha presented this story from a Portuguese perspective, in particular the relationship with the royal patronage system (Saldanha 2002); the work of Eugenio Menegon focused mainly on the bureaucratic and career term which integrated an interesting point of view of the Chinese emperor (Menegon 2012, pp. 139–77; 2013); and the team of Paul Rule and Claudia von Collani translated the *Acta Pekinensia*, a Latin manuscript by the German Jesuit Kilian Stumpf, in which he had recorded in detail Maillard de Tournon's mission in China, especially his stay in Beijing (Stumpf 2015, 2019). More recently, I have drawn upon the documents relating to Maillard de Tournon, particularly the collection of manuscripts edited by Giovanni Giacomo Fatinielli (1653–1736), procurator of the legate in Rome, seeking to reveal different aspects of this first papal legation to China and present a more complete history of his mission there (Zhang 2022a, 2022b, 2023b).

The remainder of this article will begin with a general presentation of the role and function of apostolic nuncios,² followed by a case study of the first papal legate to China, including an evaluation of its effects and limitations, and suggest that the political–diplomatic task of Maillard de Tournon was far more central to the history of the Catholic Church and its missionary activity in China than it has been credited for by most scholars. Although the process was slow, fluctuating, and sometimes contradictory, the efforts of the Holy See to establish a “correspondence” between Rome and Beijing was extremely significant. It paved the way towards the future, especially when the first Procurator's Office for Propaganda Fide was set up in China, which then became the point of support for all missionaries, right up to the 20th century (D'Arelli 1995, pp. 216–31).

2. The Role of Apostolic Nuncios

To understand the circumstances that accompanied the Holy See's diplomatic–religious initiatives in China during the Early Modern period, it is necessary first to provide some contextual information regarding the role of the apostolic nuncios, the organization of Propaganda Fide, and the system of papal international relations at that time.

Precisely by virtue of their specific institutional role as representatives of Propaganda Fide, within their function as envoys of the pope and interlocutors of the bodies of the Roman Curia, the apostolic nuncios were the recipients of the first important acts of the Congregation, established from the moment of its foundation. On 15 January 1622, the day following the first meeting of the cardinals, a circular letter was addressed to all of the nuncios, constituting the first programmatic declaration of the purposes of the Congregation, in the context of the pontifical function of conservation and diffusion of the Catholic faith (APF, Lettere vol. 2, ff. 2r–4r). In fact, “there are two works necessary for the care of the Catholic faith, one judicial, or rather the inquisition of the Holy Office; the other moral, or rather apostolic, for the missions of the workers among the peoples, and therefore various seminars and colleges have been held to teach those who are to be sent, and to support new converts” (APF, Lettere vol. 2, f. 2r).

Within this basic program, there were then more concrete instructions or directives that the nuncios had to keep in mind. First of all, the nuncios had to present Propaganda Fide to the secular princes, to the republics, or to the superiors of the peoples, and to inform them of its objectives, so that they would know “the usefulness and the necessity of such a great office which is the true office of the Apostolate” (APF, Lettere vol. 2, f. 2v). In this way, the nuncios would both gain their support and remove any suspicion, by declaring,

“appropriately this holy intention, which is not to set up tribunals, or to exercise temporal jurisdiction in any place, nor to adopt violent or unusual ways, but is to wait for the gentle and charitable ways, which are proper to the Holy Spirit, to the conversion of ‘infidels’ with preaching, teaching and prayer, without making any noise and so to speak with a sweet silence, since it is more the delicate emotion of divine mercy than human work that has the effect” (APF, Lettere vol. 2, f. 3r).

On the basis of this attitude, with a strong spiritual imprint, the apostolic nuncios were thus entrusted with the task of reassuring the princes, even the Protestant ones, by explaining to them that no plots within the Congregation were woven against their states by trying to attack people, provoke popular revolts, or intervene in any way in domestic political matters. According to the directives of the circular letter, alongside this activity of diplomatic representation, the apostolic nuncios had to inform Rome accurately on everything that could be useful for the development and control of global evangelization, including what missions were in progress, which had been started and then interrupted, and how many and in what condition colleges and seminaries existed throughout the world. The nuncios had not only to communicate Propaganda Fide’s directives to the prelates, but also to collect suggestions from them regarding suitable locations for the development of new missions. Similarly, the nuncios had the task of staying in contact with the superiors of religious orders, on which almost all of the clergy involved in the mission depended (APF, Lettere vol. 2, f. 3v).

In a general report, Ingoli stated that the main purpose of the apostolic nuncios “was and will be, first of all, the expansion of the holy Catholic faith, the divine worship, and the dignity and immunity of ecclesiastical things” (APF, Istruzioni 1623–1638, ff. 124r–126v). He enumerated the activities that the nuncios should carry out in territories where there was an episcopal hierarchy, where there were missions of religious orders, and also where there was not yet any allocation of Gospels; therefore, accurate information was needed to facilitate evangelization. Ingoli believed that it was necessary for the pope to send someone who, in a superior and autonomous position, could verify the residences of the bishops, quickly inform the pope about any vacancies in the sees, illustrate the possibilities of founding new ones, supervise the missionaries and their superiors, quell disputes between ecclesiastics, and serve as an authoritative figure who “in short...does a hundred other things”. Notably, the nuncio was to intervene only in cases of necessity “without prejudice to...the ordinary authority of the bishops and superiors of the orders where they do not abuse it”. Above all, his aims should be to nip “erroneous or heretical” opinions in the bud and to prevent measures of any kind from being taken without the cooperation and approval of the pope, with whom only the nuncio could ensure rapid, effective, and decision-making communication (Ingoli 1999, p. 171).

At the foundation of Propaganda Fide, the network of nunciatures was the almost-exclusive means that the Congregation had at its disposal to begin putting its decisions into practice. For the smooth functioning of its bureaucracy, it was essential to form as extensive a network as possible towards the mission territories, made up of people whose service and information could be trusted (Pizzorusso 2022, p. 145). In his general report regarding the progress of the missions and the first decade of activities for the Congregation, Secretary Ingoli stated that this network should be expanded to include other networks and spread even in the distant Indies. Instead of apostolic visitors, Ingoli supported the need to send “some nuncios or apostolic delegates to be maintained in those Indies”, particularly in the context of the Portuguese East, where occasional controllers, often conditioned by being compatriots of the missionaries, were utilized for “the propagation of the faith, the conservation of apostolic authority, and ecclesiastical jurisdiction”. Ingoli believed that, “in imitation of the rectors and procurators that Pope Gregory the Great had kept in the provinces to control the ecclesiastical patrimony, but who were then charged with every task”, the nuncios in the Early Modern period should also be sent “among the ‘heretics’ and ‘schismatics’ because their actions and the apostolic functions that can proceed from their faithful work matter too much” (Ingoli 1999, p. 170).

The suggestion that Ingoli made, to send nuncios even outside the borders of Catholic Christianity, constituted a true revolution in the foreign policy of the Roman Curia, with the obvious intention of making missionary expansion more autonomous from the protection of Catholic crowns. Ingoli based this position on a practical consideration, as well as on historical reality (Pizzorusso 2022, p. 133). In his manuscripts, the secretary made a fundamental distinction between the two Indies, West and East. In the former, Spain enjoyed the rights of royal patronage (Lee 1971). Consequently, it was not possible to send a single nuncio to America, due to the opposition of Madrid, as happened at the time of Sixtus V (1585–1590), when the pope asked the former nuncio, Filippo Sega (1537–1596), to give a report on this subject. Sega denounced the fact that the nuncio in the Spanish capital lacked all of the necessary faculties in the particular American situation, and in his report to the pope, Sega maintained that the nuncio should be “familiar with the canons and councils, the style and practice of Rome, the priestly office and debt, and the terms of the good Christian” in order to be able to cope with the numerous “diversions” from the faith of the Spanish–American Church caused by the patronage system (Archivio Apostolica Vaticana, Segr. Stato, Nunziature Diverse vol. 286, ff. 319r–323r). In fact, Spanish opposition caused every project to fail, even later (Morán 1962, pp. 169–227; Hernán 1994, pp. 631–49; Pizzorusso 2022, p. 134).

However, the situation in the East Indies was different, as Ingoli observed: “they are owned by many Kings, and by various princes, some of whom are either already, or can become Christians, and the rest they mostly grant no less the free trade in their states, but the license to freely preach or deal with the things of the faith to the missionaries” (Ingoli 1999, p. 171). Therefore, the prospects were different with the Portuguese patronage in Asia, who, according to Ingoli, would not have had an effective counterpart in many parts of the East. Despite this, the secretary was conscious that it would not be easy to establish a wider network of full nunciatures in the non-Catholic territories, due to the reactions it would have aroused. However, in case of opposition, he believed that it would be possible to develop a less conspicuous intervention strategy, by sending simple agents or resident procurators “designed from the beginning with ordinary and moderate apparent commissions, accompanying them nevertheless with some secret instructions and faculties”, without engaging in any official negotiations with the colonial powers (Ingoli 1999, p. 172).

Moreover, Ingoli tried to conceive of a division of the East Indies into four parts, above all due to the large distances involved, and to decide at which strategic points to place “Ministers”. The first was to be in Goa and responsible for India; the second was in Malacca, responsible for Siam, Java, Sumatra, and West Borneo; the third was in Macao, in charge of China, Cochinchina, Korea, and Japan; the fourth was on the island of Celebes, with an insular jurisdiction from eastern Borneo to the Maluku and Banda islands, and also the Philippines, “because, although they belong to the Spaniards, and not to the Portuguese, nevertheless the same King is the Lord” (Ingoli 1999, p. 173), during the Iberian union that existed between 1580 and 1640 (de Oliveira Marques 1972). However, nothing was done regarding this project. In his writings, Ingoli admitted that the major problem was the choice of the personnel, whether they should be sought among the secular or regular clergy, and of what nationality (Ingoli 1999, pp. 174–76). It is noteworthy that, as time went by, Propaganda Fide preferred to create a missionary clergy of Italian origin, especially for the higher ecclesiastical dignities, as they were politically neutral and more reliable from the point of view of the papacy, due to their formation close to the Holy See (Pizzorusso 2018, p. 120). In fact, at the beginning of the 18th century, there was a project in Rome to train the Italian secular priests, who, “moved by the zeal for the health of souls, want to consecrate themselves to God for the Missions” (APF, SC Missioni vol. 1, f. 487; APF, CP vol. 143, f. 94; Metzler 1971b, pp. 506–22).

3. The First Apostolic Nuncio in China

During the Early Modern period, news and information from China were extensively processed by the Society of Jesus in the “construction” of the image of that empire, presented as a land where there was not only a rich traditional culture, morality, and good governance but also atheism, superstition, and idolatry (Ricciardolo 2001, pp. 411–19). These materials provided the basis for the first studies in the Roman Curia on the most varied aspects of Chinese civilization and served to develop a missionary policy from a unitary and centralized perspective (Metzler 1988, p. 15).³

When the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy arrived in Rome, Propaganda Fide established the Special Commission for China and the East Indies (Congregatio Particularis de rebus Sinarum et Indiarum Orientalium), which existed from 1664 onwards (Metzler 1988, p. 47), and another commission made up of theologians and cardinals specifically to examine every detail of the controversy.⁴ During the pontificates of Innocent X (1645), Alexander VII (1656), and Clement IX (1669), Rome sought to unify methods of evangelization with respect to tradition and local customs (Zhang 2022a, p. 98). Between 1666 and 1671, missionaries exiled from the rest of China to Canton also held a conference in order to dispel animosity (Meynard 2020, pp. 147–85; Meynard and Yang 2021, pp. 5–61; Canaris et al. 2022, pp. 379–418). However, all of these efforts were in vain, and failed. In many cases, the cultural differences between China and the West were further complicated by false, biased perceptions and conceptions about the other. On the one hand, some missionaries allowed neophytes to continue practicing Chinese Rites, considering them as civil and political ceremonies; on the other hand, many thought that there were religious and idolatrous cult elements (Zhang 2022a, p. 97). The Mendicants, sent by Propaganda Fide, were generally theologically orthodox and opposed to the Jesuits and, in particular, to the methods of Matteo Ricci (Andretta 2000, p. 414). In short, the decision of Propaganda Fide’s missionaries always derived from a counter-reformist concept of the mission (Metzler 1971a, p. 96; Pizzorusso 2013, p. 155).

As the last fruit of the counter-reformation, Propaganda Fide sought to excise papal jurisdiction at the global level. The theological and juridical framework of missionary jurisdiction was constituted, to a large extent, by the Tridentine canons (Prosperi 2001, pp. 152–57; Zhang 2023a, pp. 22–35). Its main purpose was, in fact, to supervise and assist missionaries in order to stabilize and introduce an ecclesiastical authority, which was meant to be permanent, and to ensure that everyone followed the directives of the Council of Trent strictly. However, the process of the “Tridentization” of missionary space and the formation of an indigenous church was often incomplete, fluctuating, and contradictory (Pizzorusso 2017, pp. 425–26). Propaganda Fide frequently took recourse to other congregations, such as the Holy Office, which insisted from the very first years on its right to examine missionary controversies related to the doctrine and Orthodoxy of the Catholic faith (Pizzorusso 2017, p. 433). The concern of the Roman Curia was always to avoid misunderstandings and confusion among the indigenous faithful, deeming it necessary to cut “every dangerous shoot of the plant of superstition” (See Biblioteca Casanatense, hereafter abbreviated as BC, ms. 1636, f. 14r).

The period between 1680 and 1720 saw the Chinese Rites Controversy reach its peak. Local literati, courtiers, and the Kangxi Emperor (康熙, 1654–1722) himself, as well as missionaries, the papal court, and various European powers, intervened in this dispute (Mene-gon 2013, p. 571). It is almost impossible to pin down an exact date for the beginning of the Chinese Rites Controversy; although many argue that it began around 1630, dating back to the first Catholic missionaries in China (Rosso 1948, pp. 87–103). Whenever it started, all of the debates centered on a single, universal problem, which is to what extent one should adapt to another culture and civilization while firmly maintaining roots in one’s own (Spence 1994, pp. 15–16). In 1700, one of the members of Propaganda Fide, Card. Giovanni Francesco Albani, ascended the papal throne and assumed the responsibility of the pontificate in those difficult times, choosing the name Clement XI (1700–1721) because

the day of his election, 23 November 1700, was the feast of Saint Clement, pope and martyr (Andretta 2000, p. 407).

Previously, Pope Clement XI had worked for various Roman congregations, including Propaganda Fide, Holy Office, Rites, Immunity, Bishops and Regulars, Fabric of Saint Peter, and Consistorial Affairs, thereby acquiring a profound knowledge of the curial mechanisms. Bringing peace and harmony in the eastern churches, especially the Chinese one, which had been agitated for some time over the Rites was among the most important pastoral tasks of his pontificate (Zhang 2022a, pp. 96–97). Having already been a member of Propaganda Fide and the Holy Office, the pope was deeply familiar with the causes of these controversies, as well as the decision-making thread of his predecessors, and therefore decided to put an end to the disputes of the distant flock, resuming negotiations with the Chinese emperor, which had been interrupted for several months due to the death of Innocent XII (BC, ms. 1636, ff. 91r–91v).

Since the foundation of Propaganda Fide, the apostolic nuncios were institutionally engaged outside the boundaries of Catholic Christianity and projected into the dimension of the universal church (Feldkamp 1998, pp. 58–62). Therefore, it was not surprising that the pope intended to appoint a “wise and reliable” man who should also be “immune from any partiality, and equipped with prudence, doctrine, and spirit” and send him through Propaganda Fide to distant China with “the jealous plenipotency of the Apostolic Authority” as the nuncio for such an important and difficult mission (BC, ms. 1636, 101r). Clement XI cast his eyes on Maillard de Tournon, a young prelate originally from Turin, “notable for the splendor of his birth and the sublime qualities of his soul”, whom he had met during the previous conclave as a noble conclavist and auditor of Card. Baldassarre Cenci, Archbishop of Fermo.⁵ How the candidacy of Maillard de Tournon emerged still remains unclear, but one fact that is certain is that he was a supporter of the party of the “zealous cardinals” within the Roman Curia,⁶ close in particular to Cards. Leandro Colloredo, Baldassarre Cenci, and the elderly Alessandro Caprara, as well as by political association, if not a personal one, to Giovanni Francesco Albani (Menegon 2013, pp. 575–76). As the pope later stated, attracted by “his talents and ecclesiastical spirit”, he decided to include Maillard de Tournon in the papal household once elected (BC, ms. 1636, f. 101v). During his life in Rome, Maillard de Tournon demonstrated his abilities not only in the “most serious sciences”, but also in the “most famous academies”, such as Propaganda Fide, Sapienza, and Academy of Arcadia. His character also contributed to making him well-liked, given that he was “dear to everyone for his affability and sweetness of character, and for the innocence of his habits, he captured everyone’s heart” (BC, ms. 1636, f. 103v). After his introduction to the papal household, Maillard de Tournon was first employed to supervise the female monasteries under the Cardinal Vicar of Rome and soon summoned by the pope to “a long and secret audience” (BC, ms. 1636, f. 104v). For Clement XI, this young man had been “shown to him by God”, and he decided to send him, as Extraordinary Nuncio, to the mission in China (BC, ms. 1636, f. 101v).

It is noteworthy that the nuncios carried out both religious activities and the functions of diplomats as representatives of the pontiff. Thus, the relationship between Propaganda Fide and the apostolic nuncios became one of the keystones in the Roman missionary jurisdiction (Pizzorusso 2022, p. 129).⁷ From the very beginning, Propaganda Fide had asserted the need to have representatives in China, as one can find in the *Instruction* for the Apostolic Vicars of Cochinchina, Tonkin, and China of 1659: “the Chinese, terrified by the distance and the difficulty of appealing to the Holy See, do not use as a pretext the inadvisability of embracing a religion whose leader can hardly make his responses reach there, with your example, show how the concern of the Roman Pontiff, even if it has not been requested, compensates for the difficulties of distance by appointing bishops with very broad powers; and make it clear that, if God allows the Christian religion to take more stable roots in China, the pontiff will also overcome the distance in a more complete way through nuncios, without taking into account expenses or difficulties, as so far happens without inconvenience in other countries, although not as distant as China”.⁸

Clement XI, eager to establish direct contact with China, in fact, sought to assume responsibility for every expense and difficulty.⁹ In the secret consistory of 5 December 1701, he formally announced the appointment of Maillard de Tournon as apostolic nuncio, with the power of *Legatus a latere* (a legate sent “from the pope’s side”) for the eastern territories of the Indies, China, and the adjacent islands ([Passionei 1761](#), p. 6). To make this legation more authoritative, the pope chose to consecrate Maillard de Tournon with Patriarchal dignity personally. On the morning of 21 December 1701, the feast of the Apostle St. Thomas and the name day of Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon, a large crowd flocked to the Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican, curious to witness a ceremony that had not been celebrated publicly for centuries (BC, ms. 1636, f. 108v). A short time later, on 30 December 1701, the prefect of Propaganda Fide, Card. Carlo Barberini, asked the members of the Congregation to determine the annual provision to be allocated to the legation,¹⁰ the gifts to the Chinese Emperor, the costs of the viaticum for the group, and the expenses for sacred furnishings. The total cost, according to subsequent calculations, amounted to a total of 20,474 Roman scudi, largely funded by the pope (APF, SOCP vol. 21, ff. 277r–277v). This fact was also mentioned by Maillard de Tournon in a letter to his family: “regarding the expenses, [the Holy Father] deigned to assure me that he will cover them all with a generous hand” (BC, ms. 1626, f. 4v). The following day, 31 December 1701, a list of ecclesiastical candidates from the secular clergy and various religious orders was submitted to Propaganda Fide (APF, SOCP vol. 21, f. 279r). Almost all of the members of the legation who actually went to China were Italians, originating in various states of the peninsula, but most often having been resident in Rome for some time, with positions in the papal bureaucracy, or in Roman convents and institutions ([Menegon 2013](#), pp. 580–81). In addition to the legate, the “family” consisted of ecclesiastical administrative personnel and servants, missionaries destined to carry out religious work in China, and several doctors, apothecaries, musicians, and painters ([Zhang 2022a](#), p. 109).

Concerning Maillard de Tournon’s legation to China, scholars have long debated his true aim; however, a document from the Vatican Apostolic Archive clearly shows that, aside from pastoral care,¹¹ the core of his mission was, at the political–diplomatic level, to create a direct “correspondence” (corrispondenza) between Rome and Beijing (Vatican Apostolic Archive, Sec. Brev., Reg. 2509, ff. 34v–38v). This was also mentioned in a letter addressed to his father on 29 September 1701 ([Passionei 1761](#), p. 1) and confirmed in the papal brief of Clement XI ([Zhang 2022a](#), p. 10; [2023b](#)). During the modern period, the Jesuits often served as Chinese imperial diplomats with western powers, including the papacy, in the context of the “Sino-centric” system of international relations ([Witek 1994; 1999](#), pp. 317–40; [Rodrigues 2013](#), pp. 341–69; [Meynard 2017, 2018](#), pp. 31–55; [von Collani 2024](#)). In 1684, China decided to open some ports to foreigners, without considering the existence of previous diplomatic tributary relations. This reality marked the beginning of a new era, which was not only an expansion of trade with Europe, but also the exponential growth of Chinese maritime trade and emigration to Southeast Asia. It was in this climate that Maillard de Tournon arrived ([Menegon 2013](#), p. 571).

However, due to language barriers and cultural differences, the mission of the first papal legate was not easy. As soon as he arrived in Canton in April 1705, the first signs of drama appeared. All of the religious missionaries revolted against the decree of Propaganda Fide, regarding the subjection of the jurisdiction of the ordinary clergy. The missionaries openly declared that they did not want to submit to the decree of Rome. Although the legate continued to urge the missionaries to obey the Roman Curia, every attempt was in vain ([Zhang 2022a](#), p. 118). After his departure from Canton for the court of Beijing, the missionaries, increasingly united among themselves, also rejected the injunctions of the Royal Council of Spain to implement the Roman decree. Five Spanish Reformed Franciscans, after having signed an appeal, censored by Fr. Bernardino delle Piaghe, their provincial commissioner (who would soon join the refractory party), presented the new Archbishop of Manila with a “pleading” or “recusal” of the brief and pontifical decrees (BC, ms. 1636, ff. 211r–211v).

On 4 December 1705, the legate finally entered Beijing, where he had the opportunity to meet with the Kangxi Emperor (BC, ms. 1637, f. 1r). A report written by his chancellor, Andrea Candela, stated that Maillard de Tournon constantly underlined the Supreme Pontiff's desire to establish a "correspondence" with Kangxi, which represented the key objective of his mission in China (BC, ms. 1637, ff. 12r–12v). This was also edited by the German Jesuit Kilian Stumpf in his *Acta Pekinensia* which recorded the daily life of the legate's visit in Beijing (Stumpf 2015, p. 64). During the audience of 31 December 1705, when Kangxi asked for an explanation of why he came to China, Maillard de Tournon replied that one reason was to give thanks, in the name of the pope, for the gracious protection of the missionaries from the side of the emperor; the other reason was to establish mutual relations ("corrispondenza") between the Holy See and China, as the Supreme Pontiff had already established with other European monarchs (Rouleau 1962, p. 317). The emperor then asked the nature of an apostolic nuncio, and the legate answered, "this minister for future relations must be of the confidential of the Supreme Pontiff (de confidential Summi Pontificis), and would have to know the practice of the courts of European princes, in particular of the Roman Curia" (Rouleau 1962, p. 318). Here Maillard de Tournon used a technical term almost amounting to modern formal diplomatic relations, revealing himself to be a curial par excellence, custodian of the mystique of "Rome, theater of the world".¹² However, the emperor could hardly understand such foreign, European notions, and probably neither did the Jesuit who translated it for them (Stumpf 2015, p. 64). In this circumstance, all of the legate's hope was pinned on a generous acceptance by the emperor of his proposals for Sino–papal relations. However, there appeared a grave misunderstanding of the central concept and, consequently, the incommensurability of the political–diplomatic positions, as well as the institutional and personnel obstacles to the objectives set by the Holy See.

For the emperor, "correspondence" was no more than the expediting and receiving of letters between Rome and Beijing, and he saw no reason why a special agent (nuncio) from abroad was needed. Any missionary in his service at the court could readily handle this epistolary task. With irony, Kangxi replied, "China has nothing in common with the West. I tolerate you for your religion, and you, for your part, should not worry about anything other than your soul and your doctrine... Every westerner here is capable of writing and receiving papal correspondence of the type that you talked about. I do not know what you mean when you talk about a man who has the pope's confidence". Obviously, to the legate, the only ones competently equipped to represent the pope in the Qing Court, were those formed in the diplomacy of the Holy See, its language, ideas, and habits of action. The Jesuits, though, were held to be worthy missionaries with rich experiences in Chinese affairs, but they were "wholly ignorant of the Roman Curia" (aulae pontificiae penitus ignari). In the report of Candela, Maillard de Tournon described that the nuncio must know the pope's intimate mind and receive his personal instructions. The candidate should have versed in the court of Rome, learned the European style, and known the "secrets" of the Supreme Pontiff. Nevertheless, for the emperor, in offering the services to the Jesuits, was referring specifically to the "correspondence" which the legate proposed, as there were not such distinctions in choosing envoys. Some were closer to his throne, some in the middle, while others further away. Kangxi stated that "who would I give a charge to if they were not loyal [to me]? Who among you would dare to deceive the pope? Your religion forbids you from lying. Whoever lies offends God" (Rouleau 1962, p. 318).

From that point onwards, the tone of the conversations changed. Kangxi demolished the very concept of a permanent nuncio and of equal relations between the two courts, underlining that, in China, loyalty to the emperor was of primary importance. Political loyalty to the pope, a natural attribute among his officials, could certainly be exercised outside of China and was necessary in a faithful nuncio. However, to remain in China, proximity and loyalty to the imperial throne mattered even more. Religious homage to the pope could be accepted, but only if this did not conflict with imperial power. From the standpoint of the history of political ideas, this is the most significant passage in the negotiations, for it outlines with striking clarity the traditional Chinese mindset regarding relations with

outside powers: China had nothing to do with Europe. Maillard de Tournon projected himself as a papal plenipotentiary and expert in the diplomatic circles of the papal court, but Kangxi closed the matter, reiterating his trust in the Jesuits and subtly suggesting how the legate and his collaborators had demonstrated ignorance of the Chinese imperial system and of the empire's conception of international relations (Menegon 2013, p. 594). In fact, the Manchus had ended the Ming dynasty in 1644 and never changed the traditional system of foreign relations. The Chinese empire at the time did not routinely send ambassadors outside its borders, nor did it establish embassies in other states. States considered "tributaries" of Beijing in various capacities, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Siam, orbited at varying political, economic, and military distances from China, and sent temporary missions to the Chinese capital on a regular basis. Those missions had both ceremonial and commercial roles, facilitating exchanges of merchandise during fairs connected to the visit (Menegon 2013, p. 569).

Unhappily, due to the cultural barriers and different visions of the international "diplomatic" system, the first "official" interaction between the Holy See and China failed. The emperor suggested that the legate depart from the capital. Maillard de Tournon first returned to Canton and stayed in the Procurator's Office that he had built for the Propaganda Fide in 1705, where the procurators who governed the missions resided while administering the territory (D'Arelli 1995, p. 219). In fact, for the papal legate, after the long peregrination from Europe, he was deeply aware of the need to create an administrative center in a strategic Asian port, due to the logistical difficulties of sending personnel and materials across the ocean. Moreover, he firmly believed that the insufficient and long-delayed funding, as well as information from Rome was one of the motives that restrained Propaganda Fide's mission. For this reason, he purchased a large house from the Missions Étrangères de Paris, and nominated his assistant, Ignazio Giampé (1658–1726), as the first procurator of Propaganda Fide in China (Menegon 2018, pp. 36–37).

Nevertheless, following another suggestion from the Kangxi Emperor, Maillard de Tournon moved to Macao in order to learn Chinese while awaiting the return of two Jesuits that the emperor had sent to Rome, after which time he would decide on the future of the papal legate's mission (Chen 1932). However, the final part of this mission turned out to be only the prelude to tragedy. Maillard de Tournon soon had to face the obstruction of the Portuguese and to be detained there as a "hostage" (the legate's own expression). In a letter sent to Rome, he stated that the Captain General of Macao, Diego Piño Teixeira, had found a way to transform his residence into "prison" and ordered him not to exercise any jurisdiction because of the long-established patronage system (BC, ms. 1638, 3r–3v; Zhang 2022a, p. 177). In response, the intrepid legate declared that he would give up a thousand lives, if he had so many, rather than suspend his functions (BC, ms. 1638, 10v; Zhang 2022a, p. 181). From the first day of his return to Macao, and in protest against the restriction imposed, Maillard de Tournon had to shut himself up in this little "hovel" (tugurio), where, as it turns out, he would remain confined until the end of his life in 1710 (Zhang 2022a, p. 200).

The story of this young legate was particularly unfortunate. His death in Macao at the age of only 41 left bitterness in the Roman Curia. Perhaps the example of his life reveals that his diplomatic mission remained, ultimately, a European, even "Roman", affair, certainly linked to his "curial" or, more broadly, ecclesiastical promotion. (Menegon 2013, p. 599). The great laboratory for cultural experimentation and religious communication in China ended in disappointment (Visceglia 2013, p. 61). In 1715, Clement XI published the Constitution *Ex illa die*, which became a turning point in the relationship with the Qing Court. When this news reached Beijing the following year, Kangxi, shocked by the intransigence of the pope and surprised by the silence that surrounded his envoys in Italy, decided that enough was enough. In fact, his envoys had not been recognized as official because they "came without any letters of credence", as noted by Alessandro Borgia, one of the (eventually unsuccessful) candidates for the position of second legate to China (APF, SOCP vol. 29, f. 201r). In Rome, the Jesuits used by Kangxi as envoys were treated merely

as subjects of the pope, doubly bound by obedience to their superiors and to the pontiff, but not, ultimately, as possible diplomats representing the Chinese emperor (Menegon 2013, p. 598). In 1720, Clement XI, in an attempt to repair relations with the emperor, sent a second diplomatic legation, led by Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba (Jia Le 嘉樂, 1685–1741), but without modifying the content of the previous Constitution (Menegon 2013, p. 572). The new legate made some ritual concessions to mollify the Chinese monarch; however, his “permissions” were later disavowed by Rome and censured by Benedict XIV, who subsequently published the bull *Ex quo singulari*, which marked the end of this first “official” contact between the Apostolic See and China (Zhang 2022a, pp. 196–200).

4. Conclusions

This case study of Maillard de Tournon’s legation shows the complexity of the position and activity of the apostolic nuncio in its new threefold function, which the papacy and Propaganda Fide had defined in their massive institutional re-organization of all Catholic missionary and diplomatic activity throughout the world: they were to gather information, to act as papal diplomatic envoys, and to bring the control of all missionaries under the direct control of the papacy, bypassing the powerful states that had controlled them up to that point. Maillard de Tournon succeeded in sending back useful information, as a nuncio was required to do, but he failed both to establish a long-term formal diplomatic relationship with China and to bring the various missionaries under the control of the Holy See, rather than their national states.

Maillard de Tournon, and several other anti-Jesuit prelates, did inform Propaganda Fide on Chinese matters; however, in spite of the ample information, institutional and doctrinal rigidities and crossed political vetoes frustrated all efforts towards an agreed solution regarding Chinese Rites. Diplomatically, in his dealings directly with the Kangxi Emperor, Maillard de Tournon defined the meaning of “corrispondenza” and the role of resident nuncio in ways that would make perfect sense in the European system, but the Kangxi Emperor, well-disposed, but with no knowledge of ecclesiastical polity, had a personal interpretation of the requested “nunciature”, which was that of a Chinese ruler governed by the political system of his age and culture. Set side by side, we can see that the two illustrious interlocutors were talking at crossed purposes, their respective Western and Oriental ideas on the subject simply poles apart. Finally, with respect to bringing the missionaries under the direct control of the papacy, Maillard de Tournon’s house arrest by the Portuguese missionaries is the most evident example of how he failed in this final objective.

In spite of these obvious failures, Maillard de Tournon’s legation did pave the way for the future activity and interaction between the Holy See and China, and can therefore be seen as a turning point in their relationship. Since it was founded, Propaganda Fide sought to establish its own missions in China, its vicars apostolic in the Qing empire continued to experience jurisdictional opposition from Iberian crowns. The solution to have financial aids and logistical support from France, remained crucial and highlighted the political weakness of the action of the missionary Congregation. In fact, the French crown ended up enjoying privileges similar to those offered by the Spanish and Portuguese patronage, even if legally they were two completely different situations (Pizzorusso 2018, p. 114). For this reason, Propaganda Fide always desired to have a high-level intervention in China in order to set its enterprise on more solid footing (Menegon 2018, p. 34). In this circumstance, Maillard de Tournon established a Procurator’s Office in Canton in 1705 on behalf of the Congregation where the procurators ensured communications between Rome and China, managed the financial administration and distribution of funds and materials from Europe, and supervised every administrative and disciplinary issue regarding the missionary activities (Menegon 2018, p. 33). During the 18th century, this office was transferred several times back and forth between Canton and Macao. Starting in 1711, two propagandists resident at the Qing Court, Matteo Ripa (Ma Guoxian 馬國賢, 1682–1746) and Teodorico Pedrini (De Lige 德理格, 1671–1746), sent suggestions to Rome regarding the preparation of a second legation and then acted as interpreters and intermediaries before and during

the visit of the second legate Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba. In 1721, a new Procurator's Office was established in Beijing, with a procurator who had only limited control over missionaries, real estate, and the interests of Propaganda Fide. However, numerous reports advanced in Rome contributed to its suppression in September 1730. It was restored by Propaganda Fide in 1787, after which time it was staffed by various missionaries, without any recognized title, who effectively carried out the work of procurator until the 20th century (D'Arelli 1995, p. 219).

Furthermore, although Propaganda Fide would succeed in its objectives in the long run, the example of Maillard de Tournon's mission to China is also a significant illustration of just how difficult and ambitious the objectives of the Holy See and Propaganda Fide were in the first instance. The nuncios were assigned a multiplicity of roles: diplomat, informer, mediator, visitor, administrator, and "a hundred other things", in the words of the first Secretary Francesco Ingoli, who, from the outset, gave the Congregation its functional and far-sighted program. This network of nunciatures constituted a fundamental, and indeed irreplaceable, instrument for the work of Propaganda Fide and, through it, the Catholic Church. Thanks to the information collected by the apostolic nuncios, this missionary Congregation developed a complex and differentiated vision of global geopolitics. In this context, the nuncios were direct protagonists of the Church's attempt to broaden its action and keep its perspective universal, a process that matured slowly in the modern age and then accelerated in the contemporary period, with the proliferation of non-European nunciatures. It helped, for example, to overcome the loss of the pope's temporal power, and it still shows results today in the widespread presence of Vatican diplomacy in states throughout the world (Feldkamp 1998, p. 59).

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Notes

- ¹ *Ad gentes* (To the Nations) is the title of the Second Vatican Council's decree on missionary activity, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_it.html (accessed on 23 April 2024).
- ² This article mainly draws upon two sources: one is from the Propaganda Fide Historical Archive in Vatican City, particularly *Relazione dele Quattro Parti del Mondo*, which is an unpublished manuscript written by Francesco Ingoli that contains letters from missionaries and reports from nuncios, during their visits conducted in various European and non-European countries; the other source is *Istoria della spedizione*, preserved in the Casatanense Library (Biblioteca Casanatense) in Rome, which is a collection of unknown manuscripts edited in the early 18th century by Giovanni Giacomo Fatinelli (1653–1722), procurator of Maillard de Tournon.
- ³ Over time, there was a notable increase in interest in the Chinese Empire. In the European courts, the passion of monarchs and aristocrats for China extended to fashion, arts and architecture. In noble residences, it was easy to find halls, buildings, and gardens in Chinese style, which were rich in decorations, porcelain, and lacquered furnishings from the Celestial Empire or European imitations. Having some objects "made in China" became synonymous with prestige or status for the aristocracies and the emerging bourgeoisie. See (Menegon 2010, pp. 315–18).
- ⁴ In the Chinese Rites Controversy, there were also voices from Chinese Christians that were often neglected. See (Standaert 2012).
- ⁵ For the biography of Card. Baldassarre Cenci, see (Morrone 1861, pp. 71–72).
- ⁶ On the theme of zealous cardinals and cardinal factions between the 17th and 18th centuries, see (Tabacchi 1998, pp. 139–65).
- ⁷ This aspect was also highlighted by Card. Federico Borromeo (1564–1631), Archbishop of Milan, in a letter addressed to Pope Gregory XV on 16 February 1622, the day after the foundation of the Propaganda Fide. See (APF, SOCG, vol. 1, ff. 251r–252v).
- ⁸ The original text is in Latin. See (Metzler 1976, p. 696).

- ⁹ In reality, by 1684, with the arrival of François Pallu MEP (1624–1684) and Bernardino della Chiesa OFM (1644–1721) in China, Propaganda Fide had begun to found its own missions and to send missionaries subsidized by Rome. See (Van den Wyngaert 1938, pp. 17–47).
- ¹⁰ This issue was discussed in the Special Commission for China and the East Indies, which was composed by the Cardinals Carpineto, Spada, Colorado, Sacripante, Paolucci, and Imperiali. See (APF, SOCP vol. 21, f. 277r).
- ¹¹ Concerning the pastoral task, the legate had to “erect churches, establish dioceses, ordain bishops and take care of the nascent Christianity”. It is noteworthy that, during his stay in China, Maillard de Tournon ordained two indigenous priests, Andrea Li (李安德) and Antonio Tang (黨懷仁); see (APF, SC vol. 9, ff. 383v–385v; Zhang 2023b).
- ¹² In those years, Rome was considered the “theatre of the world”, especially starting from the pontificates of Gregory XIII and Sixtus V, with the outcome, in many respects, grandiose in the papacy of Clement VIII; once the wars of religion in France ended with the abjuration of Henry IV, the militant church of the counter-reformation once again played a major role between France and Spain on the international scene; see (Rosa 2013).

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