Overcoming the Patronage System: Propaganda Fide and Its Portuguese Patronage Documents on China in the Early Modern Period

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Abstract: From its foundation in 1622, the Congregation de Propaganda Fide held supreme jurisdiction over all missionary activities of the Catholic Church at the global level, with authority coming directly from the pope. Its main goals were the expansion of the Catholic faith, the reaffirmation of papal spiritual primacy, and the promotion of Indigenous clergy throughout the world, which put Propaganda Fide in direct competition with secular rulers who also wanted to control missionary activities in their overseas territories. This article will examine one such conflict, namely that regarding Portugal and its royal patronage system in China. The Historical Archive of Propaganda Fide in the Vatican City holds extensive material concerning Portuguese patronage and China, which has remained relatively unknown and understudied. Through an examination of several of the most significant documents, such as the formal terms sent by the Portuguese court to the Holy See, the response of Propaganda Fide, and the final declaration of the Holy See, which would become the cornerstone for all future decisions over the patronage system, it is suggested that these negotiations about China are in fact central to a wider shift in global Catholic policy and politics in the field of missionary activity.

Keywords: Holy See; China; Portugal; Propaganda Fide; patronage system; Catholic Church; Catholicism; missionary

1. Introduction

On 14 January 1622, the cardinals and prelates of the papal Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, often known as Propaganda Fide and today referred to as the Dicastery for Evangelization), founded by Pope Gregory XV in Rome on 6 January of that year, met for the first time in the palace of Cardinal Antonio Maria Sauli, dean of the Sacred College of Cardinals. This inaugural session marked the beginning of the official and decision-making meetings of the new missionary dicastery (Metzler 1971, pp. 85–105; Belluomini 2023, p. 426). As an instrument for the affirmation of pontifical universalism, Propaganda Fide had to keep a strong Roman imprint with a counter-reformist concept of mission (Pizzorusso 2012, p. XVIII), aiming to promote, coordinate, and direct all missionary activities around the world (Ad Gentes, No. 29).²

Propaganda Fide, embodying the papacy’s ambition to be independent, sought to bypass royal patronage so as to remain above colonial politics (Menegon 2018, p. 32) and to centralize the management of missions and missionaries under the direct control of the pope and the cardinals delegated by him (Zhang 2023b). Such objectives would put Propaganda Fide in competition (if not conflict) with all the European powers who were sending missionaries around the world for the next several hundred years over questions such as jurisdiction, ecclesiastical organization, and administrative control (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 189). In this particular case, the Portuguese crown had a long-established royal patronage system, which had begun when Portugal progressively established control over the Atlantic...
Ocean and the adjacent islands, followed by expansion along the African coasts throughout the 15th century, the long-awaited passage of the Cape of Good Hope, their arrival in India, and finally the formation of the Portuguese empire in Asia (Diffie and Winius 1985; Subrahmanyam 1993; Boxer 1978; Xavier and Olival 2018, pp. 123–60; Paiva 2022, pp. 198–202).

Rome saw Portuguese patronage as a threat on multiple fronts. The struggle of Propaganda Fide with royal patronage was both a question of the universal spiritual primacy of the pontiff and of the post-Tridentine conception of mission, seen as plantatio ecclesiae (church plantation). Propaganda Fide sought to obtain a direct intervention of the pontifical authority in the missions for, in the 17th century, the geography of royal patronage no longer corresponded to that of the expansion of Catholicism (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 193). Rome denounced its inefficiency, denying that the areas under the apparent influence of Lisbon were, in fact, controlled effectively, which meant that they thought royal patronage should not apply to those territories that had never actually been conquered, those placed under a local ruler, nor to those formerly Portuguese lands and now controlled by Protestant powers (Sorge 1984, pp. 79–84). On the other hand, Propaganda Fide supported the program of plantatio ecclesiae, particularly referring to the policy of the indigenization of clergy, which was then theorized for the whole Catholic world. In the meantime, Propaganda Fide managed to send vicars apostolic who were direct envoys of the pope, most of whom had an in partibus episcopal title and therefore enjoyed spiritual powers corresponding to the office of bishop (Zhang 2023b). The position of Propaganda Fide constituted a sort of global political–religious doctrine to make the missions pass from the secular state and imperfect installations without real jurisdiction and subjected to colonial power to that of actual churches, dependent on Rome and based on a uniform structure: the diocesan one. Through an Indigenous and secular clergy, the local church had to create a complete plantatio ecclesiae by leading converts within Tridentine orthodoxy (Zhang 2023a), despite the difficult adaptation to various cultures that the missionaries had to lead in the daily practice of the apostolate (Pizzorusso 2013, p. 167).

However, the appointment of vicars apostolic in East Asia, who were initially French, fueled the conflict between Rome and Lisbon, which led to the foundation of two competing missionary networks: one was the Portuguese patronage dioceses (Paiva 2024), and the other was the apostolic vicariates which depended on Propaganda Fide (Pizzorusso 2018, p. 114; Zhang 2024a, pp. 89–90). The resulting lengthy dispute filled the Propaganda Fide Historic Archives in the Vatican City. Most of these documents are preserved in the series of Acta and Original Scriptures relating to 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). In total, there are 105 volumes, 24 and 78, respectively (with three miscellanies), for the two series, whose conventional abbreviations are Acta CP and SOCP, where the word “ludus patronatus” (the right of patronage) is frequently repeated (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 183). It is noteworthy that Demonstratio Iurispatronatus Portugalliae Regum, a Portuguese document on royal patronage, appeared exactly during this period (APF, SOCP vol. 7, ff. 1r–81r). This document was presented to Propaganda Fide in March 1678 by Luís de Sousa, ambassador of Portugal in Rome, which summarized all aspects of the controversy. On the side of Rome, Propaganda Fide always evaluated it with great importance, as the Demonstratio contained arguments and foundations on which the court of Portugal supported its claims and believed the necessity to give a substantive response. To this end, the missionary congregation commissioned a group of experts, examined this document carefully, and provided the way to respond, which paved the way for future decisions of the papacy over the patronage system (APF, SOCP vol. 6, f. 178r).

The above-mentioned sources from the Roman Curia, though interesting and valuable, have remained relatively unknown and underused (Zhang 2024b). Recently, a large portion of academic work has mainly focused on different individual missionary areas, with little, if any, reference to the contribution of Propaganda Fide (Prudhomme 2023,
of these understudied documents in detail, analyze the evolution of Propaganda Fide’s policy toward, and conflicts with, the patronage system, and suggest that, although resisted regularly and almost unequivocally by the Portuguese crown, the Holy See still attempted to promote the evangelization in the East Indies, and particularly in China, and to transform the colonial missions, which had an overtly political dimension, into purely ecclesiastical and spiritual missions, whose agents would answer exclusively to Rome.

2. The Shift of Attitudes toward Royal Patronage

The story of royal patronage began when Portugal progressively established control on a large part of the globe, over which the crown of Portugal had the responsibility for the administration of the Catholic faith by virtue of the patronal concessions, could create dioceses and parishes, and appoint bishops and other ecclesiastical officials, which the pope only had to confirm. The Portuguese king also monitored the relations between bishops and the Holy See. Finally, the crown had to build and maintain churches, as well as subsidize the sending of missionaries. In essence, royal patronage not only constituted a “donation” of the lands by the pope as a superior spiritual authority but also committed the crown to govern (and finance) the Church (Pizzorusso 2012, pp. 157–59).

In exchange for the administrative and financial burden that came with the evangelization and expansion into new territories, the crown of Portugal could collect the tithe (the tax specifically destined for the Catholic Church). Thanks to all these ecclesiastical elements that were fundamentally inserted into the colonial administration, Portugal could easily control who was to be sent overseas and how their activities should be carried out since every missionary had to depart on Portuguese ships from Portuguese ports. Although religious orders were supranational entities in theory, national members or those operating in the Portuguese provinces were considered more reliable, mainly for political reasons, and thus were decidedly privileged in terms of who was chosen (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 160).

However, as time passed, the interpretation of royal patronage gave rise to the controversy between the Papacy and the Portuguese monarchy (Muldoon 1979).

In the Bull, Inscrutabilis divinae providentiae arcano, the founding document of Propaganda Fide, it clearly shows that the new congregation had the task “to oversee all missions to preach and teach the Gospel and Catholic doctrine” (Lee 1971, p. 355). In fact, soon after its foundation, Propaganda Fide sent a circular letter, on 15 January 1622, to all apostolic nuncios, as its first official act, in order to ask them to present the new congregation 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, Lett. vol. 2, f. 2v). Moreover, the nuncios should declare that “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 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, Lett. vol. 2, f. 3r).

In this first document, we can see that, initially, Propaganda Fide intended to prevent suspicion or provoke a reaction from the civil powers. Indeed, the new congregation attempted mutual agreements between Propaganda Fide and royal patronage on missionary activities in the lands of the Indies. The Collector of the Holy See in Portugal between 1622 and 1624, Mons. Antonio Albergati (1566–1634) had advised Propaganda Fide to establish two subsidiary offices in Madrid and Lisbon that could verify the affairs of the
respective overseas dominions directly. Propaganda Fide immediately welcomed this suggestion with great enthusiasm and elaborated on a project that would then, by means of an Instruction, communicate with the two papal representatives in Madrid and Lisbon, ordering them to proceed. This attitude of Propaganda Fide shows the open approach that the congregation adopted toward the royal patronage, at least at the outset. Propaganda Fide insisted that the nuncio in Madrid make every effort to convince the Iberian king and his ministers that Rome’s initiative was intended only for spiritual good, without any temporal motivation whatsoever (Lee 1971, p. 357).

Moreover, the same was prescribed to the Collector in Portugal, urging him to communicate with the nuncio in Spain about the agreements made and that the two proceed from mutual intelligence (APF, Istruzioni diverse, ff. 66v–68r). In 1629, Mons. Antonio Albergati, at the request of the pope, suggested to Propaganda Fide the creation of two other subsidiary offices, one in Lisbon and the other in Goa, “for the benefit of the spiritual government of the Indies”. In his report, he mentioned that this was the way “to obviate many disagreements that had arisen among religious missionaries in the East Indies” (APF, SOCG vol. 189, ff. 588r–589v). However, this initiative was not successful. Propaganda Fide faced strong opposition from the Iberian courts and consequently retracted its proposal for these subsidiary offices. The Spanish Council of the Indies would have intervened so effectively and directed the activity of these subsidiary offices in a way that they would have ended up arrogating to themselves the power to establish missions and send missionaries independently from Rome. Thus, Propaganda Fide was deeply concerned in the early days with avoiding excessive dependence of the missions on the secular power of Christian princes (APF, SOCG vol. 89, f. 97v).

For the new congregation, the control of missionary activities was fundamental, and it faced a reality that was impossible to ignore: no initiative in the missionary field could be undertaken without first communicating with the Council of the Indies. This fact was bitter but true; the first Secretary of Propaganda Fide, Francesco Ingoli (1622–1649), in the “Considerations” that he prepared for the session of 9 February 1634, offered the following choice: either renounce the missions so as not to sanction the impositions of the king of Spain—at that time ruler of both Spain and Portugal—or agree to the claims of the Council of the Indies to do what was feasible for the good of souls (Marques 1972). To this dilemma, two solutions were advanced that were thought to be effective, but that by the end of the session had already proven completely impractical (APF, Acta vol. 10, ff. 172r–172v). The first would have consisted of trying, through a Propaganda Fide’s agent, accredited in the court of Madrid, to convince the royal ministers to grant the missionary congregation greater freedom of action. The cardinals immediately discarded this option because they realized that such an initiative would have had no chance of success. The second would have consisted of avoiding the route of Madrid and Lisbon and sending the missionaries to the Indies by other routes, perhaps through Basra and Persia or perhaps from North America through the fleets of the French and English Catholics. However, even assuming that was possible, doubts persisted over how to subsidize the enormous expenses for sending missionaries in sufficient numbers, who may not ever be admitted under these conditions, to exercise their ministry in the domains of the Iberian crown (Lee 1971, p. 366).

The Portuguese patronage system included a well-defined missionary monopoly by virtue of which the flow of missionaries could be sent only via the official route through Lisbon. Under this regime, envoys of Propaganda Fide were rarely permitted to sail on Portuguese vessels, so they were forced to take the more dangerous routes through the Middle East. Even if they were fortunate enough to reach their destination, they were rarely allowed to remain in or to go beyond those Portuguese ports. Nevertheless, at the time of the foundation of Propaganda Fide, the Portuguese empire was in crisis, threatened by both the English and Dutch powers. For the missionary congregation, this crisis demonstrated the weakness of the patronage system. In his work of 1631, Ingoli lamented the fact that the Portuguese intended to use the spread of Catholicism as a way to subjugate the Indigenous people: “It seems that those who govern the [East and West Indies]
for His Majesty want that there are no Christians who do not depend on their temporal power, almost as if the preaching of the Gospel is mainly intended to subjugate peoples, to acquire new subjects, and to obtain states and riches, rather than the health of souls.” In other words, one could not be Catholic without being a subject of the king. Ingoli cited the case of the Brahmins in India, who were more mistreated by the Portuguese after their conversion to Catholicism than before because they were then considered subjects of the crown (Ingoli 1999, pp. 153–54).

For Propaganda Fide, the primary objective of its jurisdictional action was the foundation of new dioceses in mission territory, with the promotion of Indigenous bishops and prelates (Zhang 2023b). The congregation attempted to promote the “Apostolic Vicariate”, led by the vicars apostolic who were not residential bishops but with episcopal titles in partibus infidelibus and thus not subjected to the patronage system. At the beginning of the 17th century, the prototype of the Apostolic Vicariate was born in the Netherlands. Due to the Protestant Reformation, Northern European Catholicism came under the influence of Protestantism (Zhang 2023a). In 1580, Mons. Federico Schenk van Toutenburg (c. 1503–1580), archbishop of Utrecht, died without having any successor. The local Catholic church was temporarily transferred under the administration of the archbishop of Cologne. In 1592, Pope Clement VIII commissioned Mons. Ottavio Mirto Frangipane (1544–1612), apostolic nuncio in Cologne, to find a vicar apostolic in order to make up for the lack of Catholic clergy in the Netherlands. In 1602, Sasboldo Vosmeer became the first vicar apostolic and received the title of Philippi in partibus infidelibus. In 1620, Pope Paul V appointed Philippus Rovenius (1573–1651) as Vosmeer’s successor with the same title. In this way, the Apostolic Vicariate, which originated in Europe, opened a new window for the future development of Catholicism (Santos 2008, p. 178; Zhang 2024a, p. 89). This model was subsequently experimented in India with the appointment of the Brahmin Mathew de Castro (Sorge 1986; Zhang 2023b), and eventually took root, in collaboration with Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), with the appointment, first in 1658, of two members of the MEP vicars apostolic for East Asia, namely François Pallu (1626–1684), titular bishop of Heliopolis, for Tonkin; Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624–1679), titular bishop of Beirut, for Cochinchina; and then in 1660, the third vicar, Ignace Cotolendi (1630–1662), titular bishop of Metellopolis, for China (Etcharren 2008).

There is no doubt that the institution of the French vicars apostolic was one of the most controversial points with the Portuguese crown. After the normalization of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Portugal in 1669, negotiations on royal patronage also began. The attitude of Lisbon was well known in Rome; since long before the recognition of Portugal’s new dynasty, the king had appealed constantly against France, which did not prevent Propaganda Fide from continuing on the path it had taken, flattered by the beneficial fruits that the new institution was beginning to yield (Lee 1971, p. 418). The exchange of ambassadors between Rome and Lisbon meant that the controversy took official channels. Luis de Sousa (1637–1690), the Portuguese ambassador in Rome, and Francesco Ravizza (1615–1675), the nuncio (officially collector) in Portugal between 1670 and 1672, were protagonists of this controversy. In 1673, Ravizza was appointed secretary of Propaganda Fide, a position in which he remained until May 1675, demonstrating the centrality of the problem of royal patronage for the Holy See (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 171). However, it was Ravizza’s successor, Urbano Cerri, secretary of Propaganda Fide from May 1675 to August 1679, who was at the center of this issue in the following years. Cerri was very keen that bishops were an instrument of affirmation of papal authority, not of weakening it. From here, the secretary arrived at the policy undertaken by Propaganda Fide of appointing the vicars apostolic. Cerri expressed the central underlying point of this policy: where there had never been bishops, the faith left no trace. Even the “schismatic” bishops from the Orthodox churches in the East kept religion alive among the “infidels”. In fact, bishops could ordain Indigenous people by drilling Indigenous clergy who, if encouraged, may solve the shortage of missionaries (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 179; Zhang 2023b).
In this document on the missionary activities, Cerri also reported in a short paragraph the conclusions of a particular congregation held in 1677 on the theme of the “Mission of the bishops” (title of the archival dossier) and composed of Cerri and the cardinals Alderano Cybo, Federico Baldeschi Colonna, Pietro Ottoboni, Francesco Albizzi, Carlo Carafa, Mario Alberici, and Girolamo Casanate. The significance of this initiative to reiterate the fundamental role of the episcopate in the formation and foundation of the missionary Church was a key element for understanding Propaganda Fide’s policy toward patronage in this decade of controversy with Portugal. In this sense, the question of patronage was included in a more general and global program of organization of the missionary Church. The spread of the faith was linked to the effective presence of its apostles, who were bishops and depended on the Roman pontiff. As the report explained, “the mission of the bishops” emanated directly from Christ: the apostles were the first bishops, made clear in the evangelical expression “just as the Father sent me, and I send you” (John 20:21). In turn, the bishops were supposed to send other pastors and exercise ecclesiastical authority. In this way, the expansion of the Church would be achieved (APF, CP vol. 21, ff. 215r–242v).

In the Propaganda Fide Historical Archive, there is a memorial from 1676 that the Portuguese ambassador, Luís de Sousa, presented to the missionary congregation. In this document, he formally stated two theses:

1. The right of patronage of the Portuguese king included the appointment not only of residential bishops but also of vicars apostolic, in such a way that the pope, without the consent of the king, could not send any missionary to East Asia without consulting the crown. (2) The papal bulls, issued in favor of the vicar apostolic, were surreptitious and of no value because it could not have been the intention of those popes to repeal the right of patronage, nor could they do so without violating natural law. The ambassador demanded, in the name of his king, that the vicar’s apostolic be revoked from their missions. (APF, SOCP vol. 7, ff. 148r–148v)

Shortly after, in the same year of 1676, the Portuguese ambassador presented another memorial in which he reiterated this point once again: that Propaganda Fide had taken advantage of the uncertain situation of Portugal during the long conflict with Spain to send the bishops in partibus infidelibus with the title of vicars apostolic, assigning them territories within the limits of the Portuguese dominions in the East, which was an obvious violation of the king’s right. The ambassador also asked why Propaganda Fide was opposed to the king making provision for the episcopal sees (APF, SOCP vol. 7, ff. 118r–119v).

In these circumstances, the Portuguese document Demonstratio iuris patronatus Portu‑
galliae Regum came into effect (APF, SOCP vol. 7, ff. 1r–81r). This document was presented to Propaganda Fide in March 1678 by Luís de Sousa, who in 1677 had been appointed arch‑bishop of Braga. It constituted the broadest defense of royal patronage, which strongly vindicated the Portuguese positions with a great wealth of argumentation that demonstrated surprising erudition with subtlety and fine dialectics and a lively and insinuating Latin style, covering all branches of knowledge (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 172). Regarding the institution of vicars apostolic, the document stated again that this was a violation of the patronage system because it was up to the king to appoint not only residential bishops but also other titular bishops, as in the case of the French vicars apostolic, who actually exercised the true administration in the territories of Portuguese patronage. If the king was deprived of this right, he would then be deprived of the only beneficial consideration in exchange for the burdens he would have to bear in the work of evangelization (APF, SOCP vol. 7, ff. 9r–15v). Again, Propaganda Fide affirmed that the sending of vicars apostolic was mainly due to the need for bishops in the East Indies. However, Portugal believed that, if there was indeed such a need, then why was Propaganda Fide always opposed to the bishops appointed by the king for the sees that had been vacant for years? Additionally, why did the congregation send bishops from another nation to the Portuguese dominions? (APF, SOCP vol. 7, f. 12r).
Lisbon knew well that Propaganda Fide had been entrusted by the Supreme Pontiff, by virtue of the bull *Inscrutabili divinae providentiae arcano*, as the ultimate organ of missions at the global level. The question arose spontaneously: was it the abrogation of Portuguese privileges that previously existed thanks to many papal bulls? Can Propaganda Fide send bishops and vicars apostolic against the will of the king of Portugal to the lands of his patronage? The *Demonstratio* answered these key questions with a display of legal niceties, in no way and for the following reasons (APF, SOCP vol. 7, ff. 75r–80v):

1. A pontifical constitution of a general nature does not abrogate privileges which have as their object the same thing (super eadem re) granted in a special way.
2. A general provision does not prejudice what is specifically provided: Portugal has been specifically entrusted with the task of propagating the faith in the East.
3. The founding bull of Propaganda Fide does not expressly mention the right of Portuguese patronage, as it should have done if the congregation wanted to change it.
4. General exceptions, such as those contained in the bull *Inscrutabili divinae providentiae arcano*, do not concern royal patronage, because the latter has a special and particular character which is governed by other principles.
5. The privileges of Portuguese patronage were not granted gratuitously, but on the basis of a contract or quasi-contract, which could not be abrogated except with a very thick clause.
6. The derogating clauses contained in the *Inscrutabili divinae providentiae arcano* refer only to the privileges of the religious missionaries and not to those of the patronage system.
7. Even when allowing for an exception, the task of Propaganda Fide must be considered as a particular concession, never a general order that can affect other specific orders.
8. The very praxis of the Roman Curia values the particular royal privileges in matters that would be the responsibility of some Roman dicasteries: this was why the Holy Office, Congregation of the Index, Apostolic Dataria did not intervene in Spain and Portugal, because these nations had, in the respective matters and by pontifical concession, their own local bodies, which also had to apply to the matter of the propagation of the faith in the dominions of Portugal.

In the last part of the *Demonstratio*, it is declared that Portugal was not opposed to the pope sending vicars apostolic, but that they should not be appointed without the consent of the king who asked that the French vicars apostolic, as persons not pleasing to the crown, withdraw from the Indies. Portugal affirmed that it was fair enough to divide the territory of the Portuguese patronage into dioceses and to give them to foreign prelates as long as the crown approved. However, it was noteworthy that the territories entrusted to the vicars apostolic in China, Tonkin and Cochinchina, belonged to the royal patronage. Even the territories occupied by the Dutch continued to belong to Portugal in this sense. Neither the missionary bulls nor the competence of the missionary congregation could derogate from the privileges of Portugal in East Asia (APF, vol. 7, f. 81r). In the meantime, the regent Don Pedro personally wanted to intervene in this conflict and, through his ambassador in Rome, presented a letter, dated in Lisbon 24 April 1678, to Pope Innocent XI. It was a synthesis of what had been carefully explained in the *Demonstratio*, in which Don Pedro added a consideration that the injustice against his crown had not been committed by the pope, who could not be thought to act with such intention, but by Propaganda Fide. The regent ended by stating that he was not opposed to the pope sending as many bishops as necessary for the propagation of the faith. He only asked that, as was his right, the candidates should be introduced first in order to avoid any danger that may threaten Portugal (APF, SOCP vol. 6, f. 179r–181r).

On the side of Rome, Propaganda Fide never ignored the value and importance of the *Demonstratio*, as it contained the arguments and foundations on which the court of Portugal supported its claims and believed it was necessary to give a substantive response. To this end, the congregation commissioned a group of experts to study and address this official treaty of Portugal (APF, SOCP vol. 6, f. 178r). On 7 July 1679, the response, pre-
pared by Cardinal Girolamo Casanate (1620–1700), was ready. In this document, Casanate responded point by point to each of the Portuguese complaints. The entire response took a pragmatic and realistic point of view, focusing on the actual situation that had been created in East Asia, where a large portion of the territories nominally controlled by Portugal were, in fact, not. For this reason, the pope could no longer recognize the king’s right to appoint bishops who were not pleasing to the local princes (APF, SOCP vol. 6, ff. 162r–162v).

For the same political reason, Propaganda Fide intended to provide Indigenous clergy or missionaries from other European states who were welcomed and allowed to have the freedom of preaching and the free exercise of the sacred ministry of souls. Moreover, it was absurd for a secular prince to attempt to

“arrogate to himself such a right in territories that either never belonged to him, or that he does not currently possess, especially if the princes or current possessors of these kingdoms refuse to receive envoys from Portugal. It is inadmissible that privileges of patronage tie the hands of the Universal Pastor and Vicar of Christ in such a way that he needs to ask the king of Portugal for authorization to send his vicars to countries where the Portuguese crown has no temporal power.” (APF, SOCP vol. 6, ff. 163r–165v)

Regarding the crucial point, according to which the Portuguese considered Propaganda Fide itself as a great competitor, cardinal Casanate did nothing more than provide a succinct recapitulation of the doctrine of the nature of the Roman Congregations:

“in the exercise of his ministry as Universal Pastor, the pope endorses the Roman Congregations as his instruments. It is a deviation from the prince to insinuate that the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide has committed an injustice against the crown of Portugal, and that the pope is obliged formally to disavow it, to deplore its way of acting and to revoke its rulings, as if the Sacred Congregations were not personal instruments of the pope, which he uses to dispatch ecclesiastical affairs. It is a manifest aberration to refuse compliance with the decisions of Propaganda Fide with the specious and false pretext that they do not reflect the mind and will of the Supreme Pontiff, as if they have been issued without his knowledge and authorization. Furthermore, it is well known that in ecclesiastical administration, the resolutions of Propaganda Fide, in matters that belong to its competence, are pontifical resolutions, since they are taken after careful examination, particularly this controversy of royal patronage.” (APF, SOCP vol. 6, ff. 170r–174v)

The draft of this response was discussed by cardinals Pietro Ottoboni, Decio Azzolini, and Federico Baldeschi Colonna, who essentially shared the same opinion of Casanate, a cardinal who had also been secretary of Propaganda Fide and councilor of the Holy Office. Finally, on 9 September 1680, the members of the Special Commission for China and the East Indies of Propaganda Fide gathered together and, without denying the Portuguese patronage, reaffirmed the policy of the vicars apostolic and their direct dependence on the pope (APF, SOCP vol. 6, ff. 174v–175v).

3. Functional Patronage in China

The foundation of Propaganda Fide in 1622 marked a moment of transition, the importance of which the papacy was well aware. The new congregation had the aim of updating the de facto situation of these acquired rights by the Iberian crown, that was, evaluating whether they were still justified. In the 17th century, missionary activities at the global level could be designed in a different way: the geography of royal patronage no longer corresponded to that of the expansion of Catholicism. The criticism of patronage was also based in part on the point that the Portuguese bishops were not able to govern their dioceses effectively since they were often imprecisely defined, too large to manage, or outside of the areas actually under Portuguese control. For Propaganda Fide, the patronage system had failed in Asia; thus, it only recognized those territories where the Portuguese had effective
control. For the remainder, Rome would assert its jurisdiction and authorize the sending of missionaries and bishops. This theory was called “functional patronage” (Zhang 2024a, p. 89).

If the principle of limited extension of the Portuguese patronage applied to all the missions in the East, Propaganda Fide applied it in a more decisive way to the missions in China, toward which there is no doubt that it showed, from the beginning, a particular predilection. In fact, the controversy over patronage between Portugal and the Holy See had barely begun. In 1670, Propaganda Fide had reached this blunt decision: “although the king is granted the appointment of the bishops for the sees of the Indies, that the ambassador of Portugal does not claim any right of patronage over China” (APF, SOCP vol. 2, f. 62v). This remained the constant attitude of Propaganda Fide until the death of Pope Innocent XI in 1689. However, under the pontificate of his successor, Alexander VIII (1610–1691), things took another direction. Shortly after his election to the papal throne on 6 October 1689, the pope urged Propaganda Fide to take into consideration the repeated requests of Portugal regarding the provision of the episcopal sees of the Indies that were still vacant and, in particular, the see of Macao where the king claimed to have temporal dominion (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 300v).

In 1576, the diocese of Macao was founded at the request of the Portuguese King Sebastian (1554–1578). The territorial definitions of these Portuguese dioceses appeared somewhat vague. The idea of a zone of influence was not understood and accepted, while the reality of limited direct action remained. Furthermore, Portuguese colonial cities were often too small to sustain the dignity of being the see of a diocese: Macao was a small settlement and, due to its “comptoir” characteristics, could not be a bishopric that represented the whole of China, and had only modest possibilities for encouraging the expansion of Catholicism (Sorge 1984, pp. 17–44). The king tried to circumvent this difficulty by declaring that he would be content with Macao being assigned only a few provinces rather than the entire territory of mainland China. At the same time, the king also proposed, in order not to lose his patronage, to establish two new dioceses in China that he would found and endow following the example of other dioceses under the royal patronage system, reserving, naturally, the right of appointment of the new bishops (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 301r–301r).

The pope at the time, Alexander VIII, had previously stated that he was inclined to accede to the king’s proposals; however, he wanted to follow the curial protocol and asked for the opinion of Propaganda Fide first. The congregation must have sensed the king’s stratagem because when giving the favorable opinion for the provision of the diocese of Macao, Propaganda Fide made a reservation: as long as the jurisdiction of the bishop of Macao was restricted to the single island of Macao and, eventually, to other territories that would be determined in the same act of the provision of the Apostolic See. In fact, Propaganda Fide wanted, at all costs, to prevent the diocese of Macao from automatically extending its jurisdiction into China, where the Portuguese could not permanently establish themselves as a secular power. The pope, faced with the pressing requests of the king of Portugal on the one hand and the restrictive opinion of Propaganda Fide on the other hand, fell back on a compromise with which he wanted to satisfy both parties: granting the king royal patronage over the two new dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing that the monarch had offered to found and endow, but as long as the king appointed two vicars apostolic that Propaganda Fide had established in China as bishops of the respective sees (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 301v).

The king would not miss this opportunity, believing that it was worth accepting the condition to secure patronage over the two new dioceses, and to ensure his patronage rights, he demanded that the pontifical letters of provision explicitly state that the appointments were made at the request of the Portuguese monarch, since he, as patron, had founded and endowed them (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 302r). The king’s letter, presented to the pope, was then transmitted to Propaganda Fide for scrutiny. Almost in the middle of the Christmas holidays, the cardinals who made up the Special Commission for China
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and the East Indies of Propaganda Fide gathered together in order to give a response as soon as possible. Despite the fact that the cardinals were conscious of the pope's personal inclinations, with absolute freedom of spirit, they made the Pontiff aware, on 2 January 1690, of their negative opinion (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 305v). The pope, as expected, did not accept the decision of Propaganda Fide and gave orders to proceed without any further ado with the erection of the two new dioceses in China, subjecting them to royal patronage of the king of Portugal (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 306r). It is not easy to guess the reasons that led the pope to give in to the requests of the king, which his predecessor had resisted so tenaciously and in a matter that was of such vital importance for the missionary congregation. Nor do we want to advance hypotheses or explanations without being able to document them. It is noteworthy that Pope Alexander VIII, from the beginning of his pontificate, had preferred to adopt a conciliatory attitude toward the crown of Portugal.

Nevertheless, the situation was not going to last. The pontificate of Alexander VIII lasted just a year and a half. He was succeeded in 1691 by Pope Innocent XII (1615–1700), whose very name carried with it the omen that the new Pontiff was going to follow in the footsteps of Innocent XI (Lee 1971, p. 398). The erection of the new dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing, granted to the Portuguese patronage, to which all the vast provinces of China had been attributed, except those that belonged to the diocese of Macao, had created a very delicate and unsustainable situation for the vicars apostolic and French missionaries in China, since they came to find themselves in an unpleasant conflict of jurisdiction (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 312r). The same could be said of other vicars apostolic who spiritually governed the kingdoms of Siam and Cochinchina, over which the diocese of Malacca advanced jurisdictional rights, for which the king had obtained the provision from the pope, without Propaganda Fide intervening in these negotiations (Lee 1971, p. 398). Given the constraints, the missionary congregation preferred to adopt the tactic of diplomatic means, trying to persuade the king to agree on a common action to promote the evangelization of the East (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 315v). To this end, cardinal Casanate was in charge of drafting an Instruction for the nuncio in Lisbon, in which he was given precise instructions regarding how to address these matters with the monarch (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 340r).

Just when it seemed that Propaganda Fide had lost the game, an event happened that was going to completely change the direction in which things were proceeding. The numerous reports arriving in Rome from the East had awakened the pope's interest and awareness of the missions, so he ordered a meeting of cardinals to be held in his presence on 14 June 1694 in the papal palace on the Quirinal hill. On this occasion, it was agreed to write to the nuncio of Lisbon to urge the king to respond to the proposals that Propaganda Fide had made to him in the hope of reaching a peaceful solution to the controversy. In the meantime, the pope proposed that the members of Propaganda Fide delve into the burning question of whether it was necessary to proceed with the constitution of vicars apostolic and missionaries under the immediate dependence of the Holy See in China outside the dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing, assuming that the decision was made to restrict their jurisdictional limits (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 337r). This issue was extremely serious and fraught with complications. To prevent news about the project from leaking, which could lead to obstructions, the pope imposed absolute secrecy on all those who, for any reason, had to intervene in this matter under severe canonical censorship. Despite these precautions, the ambassador of Portugal in Rome had grasped the decisions of the Holy See and immediately communicated them to the king. The apostolic nuncio of Lisbon, in a letter dated 14 January 1695, informed Propaganda Fide, with regret, about the violent reaction of the monarch who, consequently, had given strict orders to the viceroy of the East Indies to proceed with maximum energy against the opponents of royal patronage (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 348r–348v).

Regarding the Instruction of Propaganda Fide, the nuncio in Lisbon candidly confessed that he had not dared to notify the king of the content, well knowing that the monarch would have referred the matter to the Council of State, which, certainly, would have opposed the project of the Holy See in the most resolute manner. However, the nun-
cio added precious information that would later be very useful to Rome. He insinuated that Portugal was, above all, suspicious of the French predominance in the designation of vicars apostolic but that it would not look with a bad eye on the Italians, who had won the sympathy for the heroic and selfless work of the Italian Capuchin missionaries in the Portuguese possessions of Angola and Sao Tomé. He added that, from surveys he had taken, there was the impression that the royal ministers would not oppose Italian missionaries being sent to the Indies as long as they were papal subjects, admitting that some of them were decorated with the episcopal character and the title of vicars apostolic (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 338v).

Pope Innocent XII adopted all necessary means to promote evangelization in the East Indies, particularly in China. However, in such a delicate matter, the cardinals of Propaganda Fide proceeded with great aplomb. In the meeting held on 2 October 1695, a resolution of decisive importance was taken that would affect Portuguese patronage in the East in an unexpected way. Objectively considering that the bishops of Macao, Beijing, and Nanjing could not conveniently attend to the pastoral and missionary government of the vast provinces of China, the decision was made to remove several of those provinces from the jurisdiction of the bishops of royal patronage and entrust them to the care of vicars apostolic, some with episcopal character, prohibiting, at the same time, any other prelate from exercising acts of spiritual jurisdiction in said territories. It is noteworthy that, even in this supreme decision, Propaganda Fide did not fail to use due attention and courtesy to the king of Portugal. In favor of the monarch, the missionary congregation agreed not to publish or execute the decisions taken until the negotiations between the nuncio and the king were concluded. In this circumstance, prudence dictated calm, but it was the last extension that Propaganda Fide intended to grant (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 343v–344v).

In a letter dated 30 August 1695, the apostolic nuncio, through the Secretary of State of the Holy See, communicated to Propaganda Fide the king’s response to the project of multiplying the vicars apostolic in China. The monarch absolutely refused to accept Propaganda Fide’s proposals for the following reasons, which coincided in detail with the reasons set out in the previous memorials presented by the Portuguese ambassador in Rome. In this specific case, the king insisted that “for the purposes of the exercise of royal patronage in the Indies, it does not matter that the territories are not subject to the current dominion of the Portuguese crown, since the patronage right extends, without limitations, to all East Indies”; moreover, the vicars apostolic had been constituted in the Indies to “make up for the lack of residential bishops whose provision had been prevented because of the war between Portugal and Spain. Therefore, with the episcopal sees already provided, there were more than enough vicars apostolic”. At last, the king believed that the presence of those “vicars apostolic in the Indies is harmful because it disturbs the jurisdiction of the residential bishops and the temporal dominion of Portugal”. For this reason, the pope had to declare that the jurisdiction of the vicars apostolic had expired and force them to withdraw from the Indies (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 345v–346r).

The tone of the response allows no doubt about the definitive attitude that the king had adopted. However, the nuncio still attempted a last resort: he begged the monarch’s confessor to interpose his good offices with the king and the minister in charge of the matter. On 17 October 1695, the Council of State informed the nuncio that, on the question of the vicar apostolic in China, it was useless to enter into negotiations since, on this point, there would never be a compromise. His Majesty was willing to yield only on one point, which was to allow the Holy See to send missionaries to the Indies under two conditions: first, that the missionaries were exclusively from the Papal States or vassals of the pope; second, that the missionaries, upon arriving in the Indies, would lend vassalage to the viceroy of the Indies or, at least, to the bishops appointed by the king, from whom they would only receive the assignment to the field of their mission (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 347r–347v).

Given the immovable attitude of the king and the Council of State, the nuncio had no choice but to communicate to the monarch the definitive decision that the pope had taken to proceed as dictated by the conscience of his duties toward the missions of the East, as
Universal Pastor of the flock of Christ. Although Rome was traditionally slow in making decisions, Propaganda Fide believed that the time had finally come to intervene vigorously. On 27 July 1696, the Special Commission for China and the East Indies made the supreme decision that was going to change the course of the missions in China. It was important both in its historical and legal aspects. After a preamble, the document stated that the two dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing could not be sufficient for the spiritual government of the immense empire of China, as neither could satisfy the spiritual needs of so many souls; thus, the following was agreed on:

“Provinces beyond Beijing and Nanjing may be permanently separated and completely dismembered from the two dioceses...until their needs are provided for by the establishment of new episcopates by the Apostolic See, are to be entrusted to the care and administration of the vicars apostolic who will transmit to them.”

(APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 360r–360v)

According to this text, it is clear that Propaganda Fide had firmly decided to reduce the territory of the dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing, under the Portuguese patronage system, dismember several provinces of China, and entrust them to the care and administration of vicars apostolic who would be constituted directly by the Holy See. This decision was not just a matter of limiting the jurisdiction of the two Chinese dioceses to their respective civil provinces, which did not go beyond the limits of an act of ordinary ecclesiastical administration. There were many more: by entrusting the remaining provinces of China to the care of prelates sent directly by Propaganda Fide and under its immediate dependence, the papacy solemnly intended to reaffirm the supreme authority of Propaganda Fide in the spiritual government of the missions. It was also equivalent to declaring that the Portuguese patronage system was not so universal that it could no longer be considered valid throughout the vast territory of Asia, including those territories not subject to its temporal dominion.

However, a reservation must be made: in the mind of Propaganda Fide, the spiritual administration of those territories through the vicars apostolic did not have a character of perpetuity; it was a provisional administration by its very nature, which had to last only until new dioceses were erected by the Apostolic See in accordance with canon law. The future, therefore, was in no way prejudiced by the decision. Additionally, although it was true that Propaganda Fide was decidedly against the granting of patronage over the new dioceses, it was not absolutely excluded that they could be attributed to royal patronage as long as the necessary elements were present. As a consequence of this decision and in order to protect the mission of vicars apostolic, the Holy See underlined that “any prelate of any dignity or category is prohibited from exercising acts of jurisdiction in the provinces assigned to the vicars apostolic” (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 361r). Another extremely important decision that also affected the Portuguese patronage system was to declare that “the kingdom of Tonkin was jurisdictionally independent of the diocese of Macao, over which the bishop of Macao claimed rights, considering Tonkin as part of China” (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 361v).

A few days later, on 31 July 1696, the Special Commission for China and the East Indies met in the papal palace under the presidency of Pope Innocent XII himself. The secretary of Propaganda Fide, Mons. Carlo Agostino Fabroni (1651–1727) recapitulated the entire controversy and explained the reasons that had induced the cardinals of the congregation to take such a serious decision despite the repeated claims of the king of Portugal. It is interesting to note here that Propaganda Fide affirmed that the vicars apostolic were invented precisely to avoid the contrasts with Portugal since they were prelates sent by the Holy See to administer certain territories, and not residential bishops for which the crown of Portugal had the right of appointment (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, ff. 362v–363r). It was necessary to place oneself in the reality of the situation that had been created in the East: the dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing, as they had been delimited by the king himself, each comprised one hundred million inhabitants. Even limiting them, as projected in the new ecclesiastical territorial organization of China, that was, only to their respective
civil provinces, the bishop would have too much evangelical work to do since the civil province of Beijing included 135 towns with more than four million inhabitants, and the civil province of Nanjing included 110 towns with ten million inhabitants (according to APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 365r).

The pope, after having asked the opinion of each of the cardinals present, fully approved the decisions of Propaganda Fide and ordered that the decision be executed immediately with the issuance of the pontifical brief issued “motu proprio”, valued with all necessary derogatory clauses (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 367r). To ensure the free exercise of the jurisdiction of the vicars apostolic in the territories that Propaganda Fide reserved for their immediate care, it was decided in the following meeting on 6 August 1696 to order the archbishop of Goa and the bishops of Macao and Malacca, who had claimed their rights in those territories, not to interfere in any way in the spiritual administration of Mainland China, Siam, Cochinchina, Champa, Cambodia, and other territories entrusted to the care of the vicars apostolic (APF, Acta CP vol. 1b, f. 367v). In the history of the period we are reviewing, perhaps there has not been another meeting of Propaganda Fide in which decisions of such importance for the missions have been made. However, in the tug-of-war that followed, international politics played a fundamental role. Through observation and control, Propaganda Fide entered openly and institutionally into the global strategies of the Roman Curia, leading to the complex and sometimes contradictory situation of the ecclesiastical, missionary, and religious geopolitics of the world.

4. Conclusions

Right from the first years of its foundation in 1622, Propaganda Fide had found its fundamental raison d’être in overcoming the patronage system and in the project of renewal of the apostolate, based on pontifical universalism and the separation between the religious mission and colonialism (Metzler 1971, pp. 160–66). Portuguese royal patronage was not at the center of the discussion until the controversy arose over the subject of the effectiveness and completeness of Portuguese dominion over the nominal territories. This controversy emerged particularly at the moment when the Portuguese empire began to decline. In fact, Rome was able to act with energy and used the so-called theory of “functional patronage”, seeking to restore the primacy of the pontiff on a spiritual level over the colonial powers who, de jure and de facto, controlled the ecclesiastical and missionary organization (Pizzorusso 2022, p. 139).

The concept of the Portuguese area of influence did not correspond to the renewed Roman concept of centrally controlled religious expansion of the plantatio ecclesiae personified by Propaganda Fide, which, even in partibus infidelibus, referred to the Tridentine orthodoxy of the physical and direct presence of the episcopate and the clergy among the converted peoples (Jacques 1999, pp. 172–73). If we look at the problem of the Portuguese patronage system from the point of view of the Church of Rome, it was simply no longer the best way to organize missionary activity. Following the internal structural changes in the Church that came with the Catholic Reformation, the church leadership felt that the restoration of papal primacy throughout the world was the best way forward (Pizzorusso 2012, pp. 192–93).

Despite the uncertainties and even failures in several of the early attempts for centralized control, the concept of plantatio ecclesiae remained constant as an end goal, a process whose culmination was the transformation of the missionary Church into a Church of standardized diocesan organization, even if perhaps in a reality where the Catholics were only a minority, such as in China (Zhang 2023b). In spite of its highly juridical dimension, sometimes abstract with respect to the life of the missions, and overly self-referential character, this examination of the lively controversies involved in the overcoming of the Portuguese patronage system in China by the Holy See allows us to see Propaganda Fide’s global project of organization of the non-European Church in the long term: the construction of a spiritual “empire” that sought its own space not only in contrast to the Protestant colonial empires but also to the Catholic ones. Coming from an internal perspective of the insti-
tutional history of the missions, this project dealt with local realities, represented by the communities of “Indigenous” converts or convertibles, by the colonial secular and ecclesiastical authority, by competitors of other religions, following the path of the European presence until the decline of colonialism (Pizzorusso 2012, p. 199).

In the 18th and 19th centuries in China, the specific problem of the Portuguese royal patronage system almost disappeared because there were so few Portuguese missionaries who were candidates for the enormous dioceses that Propaganda Fide divided into smaller vicariates. In 1834, the dissolution of the monasteries at the end of the Civil War in Portugal was extended to Macao. In the meantime, the Portuguese Vincentians (Lazarists), who had taken over the three Chinese dioceses of Beijing, Nanjing, and Macao in 1800, had asked for help from their French brothers, without, however, an increase in the missionary presence in a period of imperial prohibition. In 1838, Pope Gregory XVI, simultaneously with the harsh decisions for India, decided to abolish the dioceses of Beijing and Nanjing, in whose place the apostolic vicariates were erected, which led once again, perhaps inevitably, to tensions with Portugal (Pizzorusso 2012, pp. 187–88). Nevertheless, this tortuous path shows how difficult the institutional process of defining a missionary Church was from the Roman perspective: firstly, they would be dependent on the new congregation, and secondly, the acquired rights of Portugal were questionable for their lack of efficiency and due to the changed political reality on the ground (Prudhomme 2005).

Overall, this case study is representative of a much more profound shift in Catholic missionary politics and the balance of power between the European monarchies and the Holy See. The Congregation de Propaganda Fide was created with the express goal of bringing global missionary activities under the direct control of the Roman Curia and the pope and to begin what would be a worldwide reorganization of the administration of the Catholic Church away from European missionaries and toward dioceses run by Indigenous clergy and to a separation of religious conversion from political and military conquest and colonialism. As this study has shown, right from the outset, this was a conscious, deliberate strategy adopted from the center, but one which would take several centuries to fulfill.

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Notes
1 From 5 June 2022, it becomes Dicastery for Evangelization (incorporating the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization), as established by the apostolic constitution Prædictate evangeliæm of Pope Francis.
2 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).
3 There were of course also rivalries between missionaries of different nationalities, but this paper will concentrate on those between the Holy See and the Portuguese crown. Along with the Portuguese patronage system, another important issue for the Roman Curia was the Chinese rites controversy. See (Rouleau 1967; Mungello 1994; D’Arelli 1995; Criveller 2012). In addition to this case study on China, a few others are also being conducted on Portuguese royal patronage in other regions of the world, such as Malabar, see (Ribeiro 2022).
4 To overcome the intrinsic limits that the patronage showed in the East, Propaganda Fide also supported the program of Indigenous clergy. See (Zhang 2023b). On the topic of clergy indigenization, see also (Paiva 2023; Brendan 2024).
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