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A Window of Opportunity: Jesuit Missionary Strategy, China, and European Power Politics, 1685–1704¹

Okno możliwości: strategia misyjna jezuitów, Chiny a europejska polityka mocarstw, 1685–1704

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between international power politics and the strategy of the Jesuit Order in both local and global contexts, focusing on the period from 1685 to 1704. It argues that during these years a distinct window of opportunity emerged in which the Jesuit Order, operating amid limited and often fragmented coordination with the Holy See, and benefiting from short-term and asymmetrical support from major European powers – notably France, the Habsburg Monarchy, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Russia – sought to develop a missionary strategy centred on the establishment of a land route linking Europe

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with China. While only some of these powers were formally associated through the Holy League, their overlapping geopolitical interests temporarily converged with Jesuit ambitions. Central to this strategy were Russia's increasing openness to the West and the favourable disposition of the Kangxi Emperor towards Christianity, which together appeared to create unprecedented conditions for sustained transcontinental engagement between China and Europe.

Keywords: Jesuit Order, Holy See, missionary strategy, international power politics, land route to China, Kangxi Emperor, Philippe Avril SJ, Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ.

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje relacje między międzynarodową polityką mocarstw a strategią zakonu jezuitów w ujęciu lokalnym i globalnym, koncentrując się na latach 1685–1704. Autor dowodzi, że w tym okresie wykształciło się wyraźne „okno możliwości”, w ramach którego Towarzystwo Jezusowe, działając w warunkach ograniczonej i często fragmentarycznej koordynacji ze Stolicą Apostolską oraz korzystając z krótkotrwałego i asymetrycznego wsparcia ze strony głównych potęg europejskich – przede wszystkim Francji, Monarchii Habsburskiej, Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów oraz Rosji – dążyło do wypracowania strategii misyjnej opartej na ustanowieniu lądowego szlaku łączącego Europę z Chinami. Choć większość tych państw była formalnie powiązana sojuszem w ramach Ligi Świętej, ich częściowo zbieżne interesy geopolityczne czasowo splotły się z dążeniami jezuickimi. Kluczowe znaczenie dla tej strategii miały rosnąca otwartość Rosji na Zachód oraz przychylne nastawienie cesarza Kangxi wobec chrześcijaństwa, które łącznie zdawały się stwarzać bezprecedensowe warunki dla trwałych kontaktów transkontynentalnych między Chinami i Europą.

Słowa kluczowe: Towarzystwo Jezusowe, Stolica Apostolska, strategia misyjna, polityka mocarstw, droga lądowa do Chin, cesarz Kangxi, Philippe Avril SJ, Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ.

The Jesuit Order exercised global influence and constructed an extensive web of transcontinental connections in the seventeenth century. Its missionary and diplomatic activities are often compared to the global infrastructures that facilitated what is commonly described as the first phase of early modern globalisation. In terms of geographical reach, the Jesuits maintained a particularly wide spatial presence – dispatching their members to such distant regions as Tibet, Siam, Vietnam, and Korea – which differed in scope and character from the overseas expansion of contemporary maritime empires. By comparison, the Dutch colonial

empire, operating primarily through the Dutch East India Company, focused on selected overseas regions and commercial networks and – like other European powers, such as Portugal, Spain, France, and England – pursued its interests within a competitive imperial environment.²

Since the pioneering successes of Matteo Ricci, China came to be seen as a singularly demanding yet unusually promising arena of Jesuit engagement.³ Its deeply entrenched traditions of scholarship, bureaucratic governance, and moral philosophy confronted missionaries with a civilisation whose intellectual authority resisted easy assimilation into European conceptual frameworks. Meaningful engagement with the educated mandarinat required not merely theological flexibility, but a sustained command of classical learning and a carefully crafted rhetorical self-presentation, while access to the imperial court depended upon the delicate negotiation of knowledge, service, and cultural credibility.⁴

In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, Jesuit missions in China were shaped by a number of interrelated factors. The years 1685–1704 proved particularly significant, as five key conditions converged: the decline of the Portuguese *Padroado* system; the growing prominence of France; the war against the Ottoman Empire waged by the Holy League; the policies of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth under the reign of John III Sobieski, together with the Holy See's expectations regarding

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- 2 Conference report on the meeting held at the University of Warsaw, 2–3 December 2022: Elisa Frei, “Two Early Modern Global Networks in Asia: The Society of Jesus and the Dutch East India Company,” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* (2022): 873–876; Hélène Vu Thanh, “The Jesuits in Asia under the Portuguese *Padroado*: India, China and Japan,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Jesuits*, ed. Ines G. Županov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 400–426.
 - 3 It should be noted that the earliest Jesuit to identify China as a particularly promising missionary field was Francis Xavier, who regarded it as a strategic centre for the conversion of elites and, potentially, of vast populations. While fully aware of the risks involved and personally prepared for martyrdom, Xavier's assessment of China was primarily shaped by its perceived civilizational and evangelizing significance – a vision that later informed Jesuit engagement, including that of Matteo Ricci, see: Georg Schurhammer SJ, *Francis Xavier: His life, his Times*, t. 4. *Japan and China. 1549–1552*, transl. M. Joseph Costelloe SJ (Rome: The Jesuit Historical Institute, 1982), 560.
 - 4 John W. Witek, “Catholic missionaries, 1644–1800,” in *The Cambridge History of China*. Volume 9, Part Two: *The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, ed. Willard J. Peterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 329–371. The Jesuits in China learned from the mistakes made in Japan, where insufficient knowledge of local culture and language, alongside political and strategic factors, contributed to the missionary collapse. Jurgis Elisonas also emphasizes that Francis Xavier's command of the Japanese language was so poor that it provoked indignation among the native courtly elites. Jurgis Elisonas, “Christianity and the daimyo,” *The Cambridge History of Japan* Volume IV: *Early Modern Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 307–315.

the conversion of Saxony following the accession of Augustus II; and, finally, the rising importance of Russia as a member of the Holy League and its gradual opening to the West, symbolically confirmed by Tsar Peter I's visit to Vienna in 1698. For the Jesuits working in China, the years 1687–1692 constituted a watershed period, marking their involvement in facilitating the first formal treaty between Qing China and Russia – a European power – concluded on the basis of the emerging political principle of equal sovereignty. This diplomatic breakthrough coincided with the favourable stance of the Kangxi Emperor, expressed in the edict of toleration of 1692, which granted the Jesuits the right to teach and propagate Christian doctrine in China.⁵

The edict presented a systematic and pragmatic assessment of European missionaries by the administrative apparatus of the Qing dynasty, portraying them primarily as useful and loyal collaborators rather than as a religious or political threat. The emperor emphasised the services rendered by Europeans in the fields of mathematics, military technology, and diplomacy – particularly in relations with Muscovy – while at the same time explicitly affirming the absence of any criminal behaviour, seditious activity, or “false doctrines” among Christians. Against this background, the restrictions imposed on European religious practices are deemed irrational and contrary to the principles of good governance, especially since other religious groups, such as Buddhists, Lamaists and Daoists were permitted to conduct worship and offer sacrifices. The edict therefore advocated the preservation of existing Christian churches and the restoration of freedom of worship, not on the grounds of theological toleration, but within a logic of state order, utility, and social stability. In this way, the document reflected the characteristic policy of selective toleration pursued during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, in which Christianity was accepted as a harmless and functional religion so long as it remained subordinated to the interests of the empire.⁶

The Kangxi edict of 1692 constituted a more consequential achievement than the baptism of members of the Southern Ming imperial family performed by Michał Boym, an episode frequently likened in Jesuit literature to the Edict of Milan. The adoption of the baptismal names Constantine and Helena on that occasion deliberately evoked the Constantinian

5 Alfred W. McCoy, *To Govern the Globe* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 29–83. See also: Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge–London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

6 Latin version of the edict is preserved as: *Khamhi Imperatoris Tartaro Sinici Decretum*: Archivio Storico “de Propaganda Fide” (APF). S.C. Indie Orientali e Cina, vol. 6, 1691–1697, f. 209.

paradigm of imperial conversion. Kangxi's edict, by contrast, did not involve dynastic baptism, but provided something which seemed to be more enduring: explicit imperial recognition of Christianity as a licit religion within the legal and administrative framework of the Qing state. In this respect, it functioned as a form of state-sanctioned toleration comparable – at the level of political effect rather than theological meaning – to Constantine's decree, creating a protected space for Christian practice without implying imperial conversion.⁷ Tomasz Dunin Szpot presented the imperial edict of 1692 as a chronological and narrative turning point in the history of the China missions. He treated the decree primarily as an administrative fact that granted freedom to preach the Divine Law throughout the Chinese Empire, and used it to structure the final part of his account. At the same time, he explicitly acknowledged the limitations of his sources, especially the uneven and fragmentary nature of the annual letters, noting that information from Peking was more abundant than that from other Chinese provinces.⁸

This development encouraged the Jesuits to intensify their diplomatic efforts and to seek alternative routes of communication with the Middle Kingdom. One of the best examples of this were Philippe Avril's *Description of the Road to China* and Tomasz Dunin Szpot's *Historia Sinarum Imperii* and *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis*. They both focused on promoting a land route through Russia to Peking. Father Philippe Avril emerged in the 1680s as one of the most persistent explorers of a long-imagined overland road to China. In 1684 he was sent by the Order with the support of King Louis XIV to trace a practicable passage across the vast spaces that Europeans loosely called Great Tartary, with Russian Siberia as its critical hinge. His journey carried him through the Levant, Persia, the shores of the Caspian Sea, and along the Volga to Moscow, where he hoped to secure permission to proceed eastward to the Chinese frontier. That permission was never granted. The tsar's officials, suspicious of foreign scrutiny and jealous of their expanding Asian dominions, closed the Siberian route to him. Yet Avril's mission did not end in fiasco. From merchants, officials, and archives – Russian and Polish alike – he patiently assembled a body of geographical and logistical knowledge that allowed him, on his return to France in 1689, to offer European readers their first coherent account of Siberia and of the overland routes that might lead, at last, toward China. Although he never reached Peking, he argued in writing that a land passage to China

7 ARSI. Jap. Sin. 103, ff. 79v–80r.

8 ARSI. Jap. Sin. 105 II, f. 228r.

was neither myth nor fantasy, but a project whose success depended less on geography than on the shifting calculations of imperial power.⁹

The French effort to establish an overland route to China coincided with initiatives undertaken by Jesuits in Peking, as reflected, among other things, in the maps of Tomasz Dunin Szpot preserved in ARSI, Jap. Sin. 105. In these, the Polish Jesuit outlined three routes leading to China: a northern route, extending from Moscow through Tobolsk and along the major river systems of Siberia, including the Amur basin, towards the Qing capital; a southern route, broadly corresponding to the itinerary envisaged by Philippe Avril; and a route running from Agra via Benares and Tibet into China.¹⁰

The route *ex Moscovia in Chinam* shown on the map represented a northern overland passage following the river systems of Siberia rather than continuous land roads. From Moscow it proceeded eastward through the Volga basin and across the steppe regions commonly labelled as Great Tartary, before entering southern Siberia. There the route followed major rivers, which functioned as the primary highways of movement in sparsely populated areas. The itinerary passed south of Lake Baikal, avoiding its northern shore and continuing through the Transbaikal region, where river valleys provided more practicable routes. From this corridor the route advanced toward the Mongolian frontier and the northern boundary of the Qing Empire, approaching China

9 Philippe Avril's account was disseminated beyond France, appearing in 1693 in English and 1791 in Polish version, attesting to the broad European interest in overland routes to China. Philippe Avril S.J., *Voyage en divers états d'Europe et d'Asie, entrepris pour découvrir un nouveau chemin à la Chine* (Paris: Claude Barbin, Jean Boudot, George & Louis Josse, Jacques le Febvre, 1692); Philippe Avril, *Travels into divers parts of Europe and Asia, undertaken by the French King's order to discover a new way by land into China: containing many curious remarks in natural philosophy, geography, hydrography, and history; together with a description of Great Tartary, and of the different people who inhabit there, translated out of French, with a supplement extracted from Hakluyt and Purchas* (London: printed for Tim. Goodwin, at the Maidenhead over-against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleet Street, 1693); *Podróż do różnych krajów Europy i Azji przez misyonarzów S.J. w roku 1690 odprowadzona, końcem odkrycia nowej drogi do Chin, zamykająca w sobie wiele ciekawych uwag fizycznych, geograficznych i historycznych, z opisaniem Tartarii W., przypisana Stanisławowi Jabłonowskiemu, hetmanowi W. Kor., tłumaczona z francuskiego przez ks. Remigiusza Ładowskiego, S.J.* (Warszawa: u P. Dufour, konsyliarza nadwornego J.K. Mości, dyrektora Drukarni Korpusu Kadetów, 1791); Ronald S. Love, "A Passage to China: A French Jesuit's Perceptions of Siberia in the 1680s," *French Colonial History* 3 (2003): 85–100.

10 *Tabula Itineris ex Moschovia in Chinam, a Moschis facta*: ARSI. Jap. Sin. 105 I, f. 98r; *Duplex Iter Terrestre in Chinam ex Persia et ex Mogor iuxta descriptionem P. Antonii Thomae missa 1690 ex Sina*: ARSI. Jap. Sin 105 I, f. 227r. About Jesuit travellers in Asia: Cornelius Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia 1603–1721* (New Delhi–Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1997).

through an extended frontier zone rather than a single entry point. Overall, the route reflected patterns of movement typical of early modern Siberia, shaped by river navigation, seasonal constraints, and imperial administration.¹¹

The Persian route depicted by Antoine Thomas followed the line of the ancient Silk Road, proceeding from Isfahan and Tabriz through the established caravan cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, which for centuries had served as key hubs of transcontinental exchange. From there, it continued across eastern Turkestan via the oasis centres of Kashgar and Yarkand, before entering China through its north-western frontier. Rather than representing a newly conceived passage, this route reflected a long-standing Eurasian communication corridor shaped by commerce, diplomacy, and cultural contact, well known to merchants and travelers long before the early modern period and reinterpreted here within a Jesuit geographical framework.

The third route from Agra to China was copied from Antoine Thomas's map and followed a demanding but well-known path linking the Mughal world with China's south-western frontier. From Agra, it ran east along the Ganges toward Bengal, then turned north through the Himalayan and Tibetan regions, with Lhasa marked as an important stopping point. Instead of using sea routes or crossing the Central Asian steppes, the road led to Sechuan Province and relied on mountain passages long used by traders, pilgrims, and envoys. It entered China not at the imperial centre but through the south-west, where access to the interior was gradual. By including this route, Dunin Szpot pointed out that the Jesuits understood China to be reachable by more than one land route and that they preferred to work through established Asian corridors rather than imagining and designing entirely new paths.¹²

One of the reasons why the land route to the Middle Kingdom was so desperately sought was the gradual collapse of the system of *Padroado*. It became ineffective due to the collapse of the joint Iberian Empire. Its key manifestation was the Portuguese Restoration War between Spain and Portugal (1640–1668), which brought an end to the period of personal union between the two monarchies and led to the destabilization of Portuguese imperial structures. The letter of King Pedro II of Portugal,

11 More about *Iter Moschoviae*, see: Janusz Smółucha, "«Iter Moschoviae» – wczesne kontakty dyplomatyczne między Wielkim Księstwem Moskiewskim a Chinami w dziełach Tomasza Szpota Dunina," in *Jezuici. Nauka i nauczanie, sztuka, kultura, duchowość XVI–XX w.*, ed. Waldemar Graczyk, Jolanta M. Marszałska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo De Republica, 2023) [in print].

12 ARSI. Jap. Sin. 105 I, f. 98r, ARSI. Jap. Sin 105 I, f. 227r.

dated 19 October 1689 and addressed to Father Filippo Grimaldi is an important source for the study of alternative communication routes to China at the close of the seventeenth century.¹³ The document attested to the direct awareness and involvement of the Portuguese Crown in plans to reach the Qing state by an overland route via Moscow and Tartary. In the letter, Pedro II explicitly granted his *beneplacito* to Grimaldi's intention to return to China by land (*facendo il camino per la Moscovia, e Tartaria*) and framed the journey primarily in terms of its missionary purpose, closely linking the success of the Catholic mission to the goodwill of the Chinese emperor. While the king did not articulate a broader geopolitical strategy, his remarks reflected a clear concern for both the propagation of the faith and the interests of the Portuguese Crown at the Qing court. At the same time, the document highlighted the role of Jesuit actors as key intermediaries of information and initiative, and might be read as indirectly illustrating the flexibility of Jesuit networks operating alongside, and at times beyond, the formal structures of the *Padroado*.¹⁴

The decline of the *Carreira da Índia* in the first half of the seventeenth century stemmed from structural weaknesses compounded by growing English and Dutch maritime competition. From the late sixteenth century the Portuguese monopoly on the Cape route steadily eroded, and by the 1620s it had lost its effective dominance. Unable to match the joint-stock organisation, convoy systems, and military capacity of the English East India Company and the Dutch VOC, Portuguese shipping suffered heavy losses and increasing financial strain, exacerbated by the conflicts of the Iberian Union. Although English support proved decisive for Portuguese independence after 1640, the resulting concessions – most notably the transfer of Bombay – further weakened Portugal's position in Asian trade. In this context, Jesuit missionaries, long reliant on Portuguese maritime routes, increasingly sought alternative overland routes to China.¹⁵

Whereas earlier China missions had been dominated by Italian and Portuguese Jesuits, by the late seventeenth century French missionaries occupied a leading position at the Qing court, particularly in the sciences. This shift reflected a broader reconfiguration of Jesuit strategy,

13 APF. S.C. Indie Orientali e Cina vol. 5, 1688–1690, f. 397r; Charles R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 228–248.

14 APF. S.C. Indie Orientali e Cina vol. 5, 1688–1690, f. 397r.

15 Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, 381–382; Roger Crowley, *Conquerors: How Portugal Forged the First Global Empire* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (Oxford–Malden: John Wiley, 2012), 153–189.

in which scientific expertise, courtly service, and geopolitical change became central to the European presence in China. The year 1685 marked an important moment of convergence between French ambitions and Qing openness, shaping a new phase of Jesuit activity in China. Following the audience granted by Louis XIV in 1684 to Philippe Couplet and the Chinese convert Shen Fuzong, and the dispatch in 1685 of six mathematically trained Jesuits, French involvement in China assumed a distinct court-oriented and scientific character. Rather than relying on maritime expansion, this model was grounded in royal patronage, learned service, and direct engagement with the Qing court.¹⁶ Arriving in Peking in 1688, the French missionaries established regular contact with the Kangxi Emperor, contributing to astronomy, mathematics, and cartography. Their presence did not replace earlier Portuguese missions nor directly shape imperial policy, but coincided with a period of relative openness. The edict of toleration of 1692 should therefore be understood as part of Kangxi's broader strategy of governance, within which Jesuits were valued as useful and politically non-threatening experts and scholars.

At the same time, French interest in alternative routes to China intensified. The idea of an *Iter Moscoviae*, promoted by Ferdinand Verbiest and discussed at Versailles, reflected the desire to bypass the long and hazardous maritime route controlled by Portuguese shipping. Supported by the Royal Academy of Sciences, Louis XIV sought to free French Jesuits from the constraints of the *Padroado* by exploring an overland passage through Muscovy. This project was entrusted to Philippe Avril, as noted above, whose later writings systematised information on the Siberian route. Parallel initiatives, such as the French embassy to Siam and the publication of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687), illustrated the integration of missionary, scientific, and diplomatic objectives within a coherent French global strategy.

Also, the correspondence of Jean-François Foucquet, edited by Isabelle Landry-Deron, revealed that the so-called French phase of the China missions functioned as a project closely aligned with the policies of Louis XIV's court, and increasingly independent of Portuguese patronage. These letters documented both heightened expectations associated with Kangxi's favourable attitude and the growing tensions generated by

16 Philip Mansel, *King of the World. The Life of Louis XIV* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 289–290.

the Chinese rites controversy,¹⁷ which ultimately undermined the project in the early eighteenth century. Although French political ambitions in China later diminished under more restrictive Qing policies, the Jesuit presence at the Peking court persisted for decades, with figures such as Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot symbolising its long-term legacy.¹⁸

It is worth noting that the heritage of this long-standing Jesuit presence persisted well beyond the decline of the court missions. In 1784, Father Jean-Joseph de Grammont, a French Jesuit residing in Peking, baptised the Korean scholar Yi Sŭng-hun. This event is regarded as the founding moment of the Catholic Church in Korea, and it also illustrates the continued role of French Jesuits as intermediaries linking East Asian Christian communities. A few years later, in 1801, another French missionary in Peking, most likely sent to Rome a translation of a letter from the king of Korea to the Chinese emperor, reporting the persecution of Christians in the kingdom. Taken together, these episodes indicate that, even at the turn of the nineteenth century, Peking remained a significant communication hub for information concerning Christianity in East Asia, long after the formal end of the era of Jesuit court missions.¹⁹

Maritime travel to Asia via the Cape of Good Hope was long, dangerous, and costly in terms of both time and human lives. Contemporary accounts repeatedly emphasised the high mortality among missionaries assigned to East Asia, and these losses strengthened the conviction that alternative routes were urgently needed. This concern was reflected institutionally in a papal brief of December 1673, which permitted missionaries to travel overland to India without passing through Lisbon. Such concerns were not unfounded. Part of the miscommunication between the pope and the Chinese emperor stemmed precisely from the hazards of maritime travel. In 1704, when the Kangxi Emperor sent envoys to the Pope by sea, he never received a response, as both envoys perished on their journey.²⁰

17 The most informative source in this respect: Kilian Stumpf SJ, *The Acta Pekinensia or Historical Records of the Maillard de Tournon Legation*, vol. 1–3, eds. Paul Rule, Claudia von Collani (Rome–Leiden: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu – Brill, 2015–2025). Among secondary studies: *Handbook of Christianity in China. Volume One: 635–1800*, ed. Nicolas Standaert (Leiden–Boston–Köln: Brill, 2001).

18 See: *L'Europe missionnaire en Chine sous l'empereur Kangxi. Lettres du père jésuite Jean-François Foucquet écrites de Chine à sa famille (1698–1721)*, ed. Isabelle Landry-Deron (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, coll. «Bibliothèque de l'Institut des hautes études chinoises», 2022).

19 APF. S.C Cina e Regni Adiacenti, vol. 1A, ff. 448r–455v.

20 Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages. vol. XXIII. Clement XI (1700–1721)* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Treubner and Co., 1941), 448.

One indication of Jesuit determination is found in the negotiations surrounding the Treaty of Grzymułtowski (1686) between the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russia. At the request of the Jesuits, Marcján Ogiński, Grand Chancellor of Lithuania and one of the principal negotiators, sought to insert a clause explicitly guaranteeing free passage for “messengers of the Gospel” travelling through Muscovite territory to China. Although the Russian side refused to include such a provision, arguing that existing passport regulations sufficed, the episode demonstrates the extent to which Jesuit interests shaped diplomatic expectations, even if they did not ultimately prevail.²¹

A similar tension characterised Jesuit hopes connected with the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689). While Jesuits in Peking initially expected the negotiations to secure Russian support for the *Iter Moschoviae*, their involvement ultimately worked against this objective. There is no doubt that Nerchinsk represented a major diplomatic success for Russia, and that Jesuits such as Thomas Pereira and Jean-François Gerbillon played an essential mediating role. By grounding the treaty in principles of *ius gentium*, it marked a significant departure from traditional Chinese diplomatic practice and reflected broader transformations in the early modern international order.²² Yet for the Russian court, Jesuit participation aroused suspicion. Russian accounts, including those attributed to Golovin, accused the Jesuits of obstruction, thereby weakening their position in Moscow. By contrast, the Kangxi Emperor viewed Jesuit service favourably, a disposition that coincided with the promulgation of the edict of toleration in 1692, which granted limited religious freedoms to Catholics in China.²³

The Grand Embassy of Peter I to Europe in 1697–1698 revived hopes in certain Catholic circles of closer contacts between Russia and the Holy See. Contemporary diplomatic and Jesuit reports, particularly those circulating in Vienna, noted the tsar’s critical attitude toward ecclesiastical authority and his openness to religious discussion, though not a rejection of Orthodoxy. These perceptions encouraged speculation about a possible rapprochement, rather than realistic expectations of conversion.

21 Monika Miazek-Męczyńska, “Przez Moskwę do Chin? Polski wkład w jezuickie poszukiwania drogi lądowej na Daleki Wschód,” in *Itinera clericorum: kulturotwórcze i religijne aspekty podróży duchownych*, eds. Danuta Quirini-Popławska, Łukasz Burkiewicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Ignatianum, 2014), 517.

22 Marc Mancall, *Russia and China. Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728* (Cambridge — Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 266–276.

23 Joseph Sebes S. J., *The Jesuits and the Sino Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689): The Diary of Thomas Pereira, S.J.* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Jesu, 1961), 108–109.

In Vienna, such hopes found expression above all in the figure of Father Johann Friedrich Wolff, an influential Jesuit preacher and confessor at the imperial court of Leopold I. Wolff, who had some knowledge of Slavic languages, delivered a sermon on 29 June 1698, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, at a Jesuit church attended by the tsar. According to contemporary accounts, the sermon employed symbolic imagery of a “new Peter” receiving the keys once more – a metaphor commonly interpreted in connection with Russia’s war against the Ottoman Empire and broader expectations surrounding the liberation of Christian holy sites. The tsar’s favourable reaction to the sermon was widely noted, and reports circulated that he ordered it to be translated into Slavic languages. Although these Viennese episodes did not lead to any concrete ecclesiastical realignment, they illustrate the persistence of Catholic interest in Russia as a potential partner within the broader anti-Ottoman context. Later commentators occasionally projected similar hopes onto subsequent Russo-Turkish conflicts, but such interpretations should be understood as retrospective constructions rather than direct continuations of late seventeenth-century expectations.²⁴

Although the *Iter Moschoviae* project ultimately failed, one significant outcome of the Russo-Jesuit encounter was a renewed interest in Eastern Christianity cultivated within Central European institutions such as the Collegium in Olomouc, where Jesuits drew inspiration from the legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the apostles of the Slavs. While remaining firmly anchored in the Latin Church, these Jesuits regarded the Greek-Slavonic tradition as an important historical precedent for engagement with the Christian East. This intellectual orientation directed missionary initiatives both towards Russia and China. In the eighteenth century, the most prominent Bohemian representative of this tradition, Father Karel Slaviček, educated in Olomouc, was active in China from 1715 until his death in 1735, serving at the Qing court as a scientist and cultural intermediary.²⁵

24 М. М. Богословский, *Пётр I: Материалы к биографии*, т. 3: *Первое заграничное путешествие* (Москва–Ленинград: Государственное социально-экономическое издательство, 1941), 520–526; Gościwił Malinowski, “Fryderyk Kazimierz Wolff SJ (1643–1708) i Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ (1644–1713) – polscy jezuici jako pośrednicy kulturowi w czasach poselstwa cara Piotra I do Europy (1697–1698),” *Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum* 29/4 (2023): 101–109; Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great. His Life and Work* (London: Head of Zeus, 2016), 218–231.

25 Joseph Dehergne, *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine, de 1542 à 1800* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1973), 255. These Bohemian Jesuits helped forge an intellectual and religious bridge between Europe and China, making substantial contributions to the cultural and scientific exchanges between East and West. And despite the

The work of Tomasz Dunin Szpot belonged to the final phase of these initiatives, preceding the decisive escalation of the Chinese rites controversy. By 1711, when Szpot was completing *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis*, the papal legate Charles-Thomas Maillard de Tournon had already died the previous year in Macau, following a failed and deeply contested mission. The final pages of his *opus magnum* are marked by profound bitterness with which the Polish Jesuit assessed the consequences of Rome's intervention in the rites controversy. He presented Maillard de Tournon's legation not as a pastoral success, but as a sequence of misunderstandings, coercive measures, and administrative rigidity that culminated in the paralysis of the China mission. Szpot repeatedly stressed the legate's lack of linguistic and cultural competence, arguing that decisions of far-reaching consequence were taken on the basis of incomplete and distorted information. Consequences of this negligence were particularly grave in his view and led to the abandonment of missions, the surrender of churches to local authorities, and the widespread demoralisation of Christian communities. At the same time, he highlighted the pragmatic resilience of those missionaries who remained, invoking Portuguese jurisdictional rights and earlier papal decrees to justify continued activity in China. The text thus combined historical narration with implicit indictment: the Holy See – Szpot suggested – listened too readily to a single voice and too little to the collective experience of missionaries on the ground. His conclusion stands as a sober testimony to a lost opportunity, written by a witness who, at the end of his life, recorded not triumph, but the enduring cost of doctrinal absolutism imposed without adequate understanding of local realities.²⁶

Equally harsh words were directed at Charles Maigrot, a French Catholic missionary and Vicar Apostolic of Fujian. His formal denunciation of the Chinese rites, submitted to Propaganda Fide, triggered a judicial process on the matter in Rome. Maigrot's refusal to comply with the Qing court's conditions for missionary activity led to his expulsion

expulsion of the Jesuits from Moscow in 1689, the Jesuits continued to reside incognito in Moscow as members of the imperial embassy, all from the Jesuit province of Bohemia. Father Milan remained until 1719, father Berula, Bayer, Hitrecius, Broggio were with him at various times. These Jesuits visited many cities in Russia, including St. Petersburg, Narva, Kazan, Astrakhan and Azov. Peter tolerated the presence of the Jesuits in St. Petersburg, but his benevolence soured in consequence of the reception and protection given to his son Alexis at the court of Charles VI. Peter expelled the Jesuits again in April 1719. Jan Joseph Santich, O.S.B., *Missio Moscovitica. The Role of the Jesuits in the Westernization of Russia, 1582–1689* (New York – Washington – San Francisco: 1995), 190.

26 ARSI. Jap. Sin 105 II, f. 477v.

from China in 1706, following the Kangxi Emperor's decree against missionaries who rejected accommodation. After returning to Europe, he continued to advise Roman authorities, thereby contributing to decisions that ultimately curtailed Jesuit missionary methods and undermined the long-term viability of the China mission. Szpot concluded with a note of bitter irony that Maigrot had "won the battle" against the Jesuits.²⁷

Although the Jesuits' accommodative approach was neither immediately nor definitively overturned, subsequent papal decisions – culminating in *Ex illa die* (1715) –together with the reaction of the Kangxi Emperor, led to the gradual restriction of Catholic activity in China. In this context, projects such as the *Iter Moschoviae* steadily lost their strategic relevance, as the political and religious conditions that had made them conceivable in the late seventeenth century no longer prevailed. The failure of the *Iter Moschoviae* thus illustrates how global missionary projects depended not on theological ambition alone, but on fragile and rapidly shifting geopolitical constellations. Yet, while the *Iter Moschoviae* was ultimately undermined by external constraints arising from rivalry among the European powers, the hopes raised by the edict of 1692 were effectively nullified by decisions taken by the Holy See in 1704.

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Podróż do różnych krajów Europy i Azji przez misyonarzy S.J. w roku 1690 odprawiona, końcem odkrycia nowej drogi do Chin, zamykająca w sobie wiele ciekawych uwag fizycznych, geograficznych i historycznych, z opisaniem Tartaryi W., przypisana Stanisławowi Jabłonowskiemu, hetmanowi W. Kor., tłumaczona z francuskiego przez ks. Remigiusza Ładowskiego, S.J. (Warszawa: u P. Dufour, konsyliarza nadwornego J.K. Mości, dyrektora Drukarni Korpusu Kadetów, 1791).

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