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Resumo

As missões jesuítas na Ásia facultaram as primeiras interpretações e as primeiras reações críticas ao Budismo pelos ocidentais. Este artigo propõe-se analisar a abordagem do jesuíta Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733), a partir do seu primeiro texto em tibetano, «O sinal do amanhecer que limpa a escuridão» (*Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar ba'i brda*), à luz das perspectivas sobre o Budismo que prevaleceram nas missões na Ásia, nomeadamente a de Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), na China do período Ming. A forma inédita como Desideri entende o Budismo constitui um valioso contraponto a Ricci, uma vez que a má compreensão deste último sobre algumas das principais doutrinas budistas — como as do nada e do renascimento — foi acompanhada de duras acusações contra o que Ricci considerava uma «seita idólatra».

Palavras-chave: Budismo, Tibete, China, Desideri, Ricci, idolatria.

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Abstract

The missions the Jesuits established in Asia provided the first interpretations of Buddhism and the first reactions against it by Westerners. This article proposes to analyse Jesuit Ippolito Desideri's (1684-1733) approach to Buddhism in his first writing in Tibetan, "The Sign of the Dawn that clears away Darkness" (*Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar ba'i brda*), in the light of previous views of Buddhism that prevailed in the missions in Asia, especially Matteo Ricci's (1552-1610) in Ming China. Desideri's unprecedented insight into Buddhist philosophy serves as a rich counterpoint to Ricci's views of Buddhism, as the latter's poor understanding of some of the main Buddhist doctrines – like those of emptiness and rebirth – went alongside harsh accusations against what Ricci regarded as an "idolatrous sect."

Keywords: Buddhism, Tibet, China, Desideri, Ricci, idolatry.

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The Jesuit presence in Tibet against the backdrop of the China mission: different approaches to Buddhism (16th-18th centuries)

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The missions the Jesuits established in Asia provided the first interpretations of Buddhism by Westerners and the first reactions against it. This did not exclude borrowing terms from Buddhism to translate Christianity.¹ Apologetic writings became the first step for missionaries to transmit Christian doctrine in the local language, quite often when they were still familiarizing themselves with native religions. The Jesuit mission to Japan offers one of the first examples of doctrinal texts refuting Buddhism. Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), appointed visitor by General Everard Mercurian (1514–1580) in 1573, became a very influential figure in the missions to the East, regularly travelling between India and Japan from 1579 onward. Valignano composed a catechism, usually known by the abbreviated form of its name in Latin, *Catechismus Christiana Fidei*. It was composed in Japan and published in Lisbon in 1586 without the author's knowledge. A Portuguese Jesuit in the Japan mission, Luís Fróis (1532-1597), came to master the Japanese language and collaborated closely with Japanese converts. According to Urs App, it was Luís Fróis, together with other Japanese informants, who provided the knowledge for this catechism in the 1580s in order to prepare the ground for a solid basis for Valignano's presentation and critique of Japanese doctrines. App defines it as “the record of the West's earlier encounter with Buddhist philosophy.”² This catechism would serve as a model for Matteo Ricci's (1552-1610) *Tianzhu Shiyi* 天主實義, usually translated as True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (1603). Previously, his confrere and co-founder of the China mission, Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), had composed a catechism, the *Tianzhu shilu* 天主實錄 (TZSL), usually translated as the True Record

¹ Among recent interpretations of Jesuit encounters with Buddhism, Urs App places “Europe's discovery of Buddhism” at the origin of what he defines as the “Western invention of Oriental Philosophy.” See Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness. The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy*, Rorschach/Kyoto, University Media, 2012.

² According to App, Valignano's informants relied heavily on a number of Chinese sources written in classical Chinese that can be considered representative of eighth- and ninth-century Chan (Chinese Zen) literature. See Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, *op. cit.* 60-61.

of the Lord of Heaven (1584), as a first attempt to present the Christian faith in the Chinese context, in the first residence that Ruggieri and Ricci established in Zhaoqing, Canton province.

Both Ruggieri's and Ricci's catechisms aimed to prove the universality of the doctrine of the Lord of Heaven, sole creator of all things and accessible to all men through natural reason.³ However, Ruggieri's catechism would be later replaced by Ricci's. At the end of 1593 the Superior of the China mission, Duarte De Sande (1531-1600), wrote to General Claudio Acquaviva (1543-1615) stating that even though Ruggieri's TZSL had been well received and had a broad readership, Visitor Valignano wanted another catechism to replace it which was more apologetic and severe in refuting idolatry – meaning Buddhist “idolatry” – than Ruggieri's TZSL, a desire that Ricci would fulfil under Valignano's command with his TZSY.

In the time he spent in China, Ricci learned about the examination system that gave access to posts in the imperial administration and which required the candidates to master the Four Books and the Chinese Classics.⁴ On Valignano's request, Ricci also translated the Confucian Four Books into Latin, establishing analogies with the European world he came from:

During all this year we devoted ourselves to studying, and I finished reading the Four Books by good philosophers and the good moral documents that the literati study here in China [...] In moral aspects [here Ricci refers to Confucius] he is another Seneca, or any other among our most famous gentile authors [...].⁵

³ In China, catechisms for catechumens more familiar with Christian doctrine were usually called ‘doctrines’ and were positive and systematic doctrinal expositions including prayers like the Creed, Hail Mary, Pater Noster and the Ten Commandments. According to Gianni Criveller, Ruggieri's TZSL could be both a catechism and a doctrine, which may indicate that a clear distinction of genres had not yet been established. See Gianni CRIVELLER, *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China: The Jesuits' Presentation of Christ from Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni*, Taipei, Taipei Ricci Institute, 1997, 91.

⁴ The Four Books are the Analects (*Lun yu*), the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhong Yong*) – both attributed to Confucius, the Great Learning (*Da xue*) – attributed to Confucius' disciple Zeng Zi (505-436 B.C.?), and the Mencius (*Meng zi*), which is composed of the dialogues by Mencius, a follower of Confucius. The Four Books were so grouped by thinker Zhu Xi during the Song dynasty. These are followed by the Five Classics: the Book of Odes, the Book of Documents, the Book of Rites (originally one text to which two others were eventually added), the Book of Changes, and the Spring and Autumn Annals. Tradition speaks of a Music classic, but if it ever existed it has been lost or incorporated into one of the three Rites classics. See Michael NYLAN, *The Five Confucian Classics*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 8.

⁵ Pietro TACCHI VENTURI SJ, *Opere Storiche del Padre Matteo Ricci SI. Comitato per le onoranze nazionali con prolegomena*, Macerata, Giorgetti, 1911-1913, 2 Vols.; II, pp. 117-118. Translation by the author.

As the Jesuit explained in his account, *Storia dell'Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*, the Chinese literati grounded their knowledge on Confucian doctrine, which Ricci defined as a “good moral doctrine.”⁶ But Ricci took his interpretation of Confucianism further and ascribed to it a non-idolatrous gentility – opposing it to the “idolatrous” Buddhism and Daoism – corresponding to his idea of Confucianism as a moral system serving to govern the Empire sagely but lacking in metaphysical or supernatural foundations. Ricci shaped what he presented as the three “sects” in China as clear-cut watertight categories: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, and this is how they travelled to and circulated throughout Europe. This happened when the Belgian Jesuit Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628) took the unfinished manuscript of Ricci’s account with him, arriving in Europe in 1614 after he had completed it in Latin. With some differences, we find Ricci’s tight notions of Chinese “sects” echoed in Athanasius Kircher’s (1602-1680) *China monumentis*, in a chapter on “Chinese idolatry” (*De Sinensium Idolatria*) where the author mentions the “three sects”: that of the literati (*Literatorum*), meaning the Confucian literati, that of the Buddhists (*Sciequia*, in Chinese *she jia*) and that of the Daoists (*Lançu*, meaning thinker *Lao zi*, usually acknowledged as one of the founders of Daoism).⁷

It is in his TZSY that Ricci addresses the Chinese literati, whom he regarded as exclusively adherents of Confucianism, to which he opposed an “idolatrous” Buddhism.⁸ But these attacks were not based on a thorough understanding of Buddhist doctrines; this is evident in his catechism, which aroused Buddhist reactions against the Jesuit and all those who continued his line of reasoning and argumentation in further writings in the mission, as I shall show below. He probably did not need to do what Valignano did,

⁶ Matteo RICCI, *Storia dell'introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*, in Pasquale D'Elia (ed.) *Fonti Ricciane. Documento originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l'Europa e la Cina (1579-1615)*, Roma, La Libreria dello Stato, 1942-1949, 3 Vols., I, p. 44. Between 1942 and 1949, Pasquale D'Elia SJ entitled this account *Storia dell' Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina* and edited it under the general title of *Fonti Ricciane*.

⁷ Athanasius KIRCHER, *op. cit.*, [Accessed 11 January 2016] Available at https://books.google.com.ar/books?id=VKNZ4SAXqYC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, p. 131.

⁸ The term “literati” can be applied to the large group of scholars who participated in the imperial examinations, although they were not always successful in passing the final grades. A considerable number among them were also officials, i.e. they occupied an official position in the local, provincial or central government. However, even those who had failed the imperial examinations were well-learned citizens and shared a familiarity with the Confucian books. See Nicolas STANDAERT, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1: 635-1800, Leiden, Brill, 2001, 474.

i.e. gather his confrere Fróis and other Japanese collaborators to help him refute Buddhism. Ricci chose his interlocutors, the Confucian literati, and – we may assume – this may have contributed to his lack of a thorough understanding of Buddhist doctrines. In Ricci's eyes, the "sect of the idolatrous" was not "the sect of the literati."

It is the aim of this article to analyse a different Jesuit approach to Buddhism, after considering these early views and reactions towards it in the missions to East Asia. For this purpose, the conflictive mission to Tibet, and the Italian Jesuit who tried to reopen it after many political conflicts, Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733), is a case in point, for various reasons. Desideri was trained in different Tibetan monasteries to argue with the lamas and Tibetan Buddhist monks regarding certain Buddhist precepts. He learned Tibetan and composed various works in that language during his stay in Tibet from 1715 to 1721. Unlike many of his predecessors, Desideri defended his position relying on Tibetan sources, with a remarkable insight into Buddhist philosophy, taking an important step in the Western appreciation of non-Western philosophy.⁹ In turn, this led to a much milder tone when associating Buddhism with idolatry in Tibet, a stand that Desideri progressively abandoned as a main point of contention for a stronger rebuttal of Buddhist tenets. Desideri supported his arguments more and more with his knowledge of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. Thus, what became a concern of the missionaries from the so-called West – that of local expressions of idolatry – here lost significance in argumentations in Tibetan regarding Buddhist doctrine. Unlike the experience in the China mission, which was strongly marked by Ricci's imprint, Desideri did not detach the figures of the 'literati' from those of the Buddhist lamas and monks, and considered the latter to be erudite men of letters and "doctors" in Tibet.

A first section of this article focuses on the historical entanglements between the two missions, China and Tibet, as well as their major advocates, Matteo Ricci and Ippolito Desideri. The second section focuses on Desideri's first writings in Tibetan, and one of the main sources analysed in this article, that can be translated into English as the "The Sign of the Dawn that clears away Darkness" (*Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar*

⁹ Trent POMPLUN, "Natural Reason and Buddhist Philosophy: the Tibetan Studies of Ippolito Desideri SJ (1684-1733)", *History of Religions*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Jesuit Missionaries in China and Tibet (May 2011): 384-419, p. 406.

ba'i brda).¹⁰ Desideri finished this piece of apologetic writing in December 1716 and on 6 January 1717 presented it to Lhazang Khan, who had served as the military protector of Tibet. Desideri's *Tho rangs* materializes his first approach to Tibetan Buddhism, enabling interesting points of comparison with Ricci's TZSY and his views of Buddhism on Chinese soil. Desideri's insight into Tibetan Buddhism also entailed his training in Buddhist argumentation techniques in certain monasteries, as will be shown here. The third and last section focuses on Jesuit understandings and interpretations of Buddhism in the two missions examined here, i.e. Tibet and China, and on the Buddhist reactions and objections the Jesuits Desideri – and Ricci before him – faced in their respective local contexts.

Historical entanglements between the two Jesuit missions, Tibet and China, and their advocates

Before Desideri's arrival in Tibet, a first and brief mission had been established there by the Portuguese Jesuit António de Andrade (1580-1634) in late August 1625. Andrade gave relatively detailed accounts of Tibetan religion and culture in his *Novo descobrimento do Gram Cathayo*. In a chapter entitled "On the quality of the lands of Tibet and their people," he describes the Tibetan people as "brave, warlike, and very pious – *muito pia* –, inclined to things of God, they pray certain prayers, especially very early in the day, men, women and children." Searching for similarities with his own religion, Andrade describes religious life in Tibet:

The lamas, their priests, are many and live in communities, just like religious men like us, or in their houses. Like our clerics, they all profess poverty and live off alms...praying most of the day, in the morning and afternoons...And they have houses for prayers, like our churches. They are clean, the images are made of gold, and one we saw in Chaparangue [Tsaparang] was sitting with the hands up, representing a woman, who they say is the Mother of God, and so they recognize the mystery of the Incarnation, saying that the Son of God became a man... and say that God is three in one; they make use of confession, but in certain cases only with a major lama. They have clean glasses with holy water...and regard the law of the Moors as abominable...¹¹

¹⁰ This apologetic writing was translated into Italian by Giuseppe Toscano, under the title "L'Aurora". The manuscript by Desideri belongs in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), in the collection *Lusitaniae*, Goa 76. Trent Pomplun translated its title as "Daybreak: The Sign of the Dawn that Disperses Darkness", see Trent POMPLUN, *Natural Reason and Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 385.

¹¹ Antonio de ANDRADE, *Novo descobrimento do Gram Cathayo*, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal [BNP], 14-14v; 15. Translation by the author.

There were strong political motivations for Tibetan monarchs and their courts to support missionary enterprises. At the time Andrade reached Tsaparang, the king of Guge was confronting increasingly rebellious monastic communities in his domain. During the fifteenth century, Tsong Khapa, a Tibetan religious reformer, founded the Gelugpa sect, also known as the Yellow Hats. The Gelugpa became the most important sect of Tibetan Buddhism and extended its influence over central Tibet. As the various factions contended for political control of the country, Tibet became embroiled in civil war.¹² By the early 1620s, the Yellow Hat reformists had the upper hand, not only in Guge but also widely in the whole of Tibet. The king of Guge eagerly accepted Christianity as an offsetting religious influence to dilute the thriving Gelugpa and to counterbalance his potential rivals to consolidate his position. In the 1630s the Jesuit mission in Tsaparang was in danger from the political turmoil, and Andrade's leaving to take up new duties as Provincial in Goa did not help the precarious mission. In 1634 Andrade was relieved of his duties as superior in Goa and determined to return to Tibet, but apparently was poisoned on 19 March 1634.¹³ After his death, many other attempts were made to establish a mission in Tsaparang, but they were unsuccessful. More than seventy years later, through Jesuit correspondence, Ippolito Desideri learned about the Society's desire to reopen its mission in Tibet, and in July 1709 he requested a patent from the General Superior ordering him to reopen the Tibetan mission. Desideri left Goa on 16 November 1713. He then travelled to Delhi, where he met the Jesuit Manoel Freyre, who would become his superior. On 18 March 1716, they arrived in Lhasa, the capital of the new Tibetan government under the fifth Dalai Lama. In October that same year, three Capuchin fathers – Domenico de Fano, Francesco Orazio della Penna and Giovanni Francesco da Fossombrone – also arrived in Lhasa. Despite the rivalry between the two religious orders, Desideri greeted them on their arrival. Eventually, these rivalries in Lhasa would soon be overshadowed by the Mongolian invasion of Tibet in 1717. The Mongols on the northern steppe conspired with the Tibetan Yellow Hat lamas to overthrow Lhazang Khan's leadership. In the face of the

¹² Diane WOLFF, *Tibet Unconquered: An Epic Struggle for Freedom*, New York, Palgrave, 2010, pp. 76-77.

¹³ Trent POMPLUN, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World. Ippolito Desideri's mission to Tibet*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 48-50. See also Hsiao-ting LIN, "When Christianity and Lamaism met: The Changing Fortunes of Early Western Missionaries in Tibet", *Pacific Rim Report*, The Occasional Paper Series of the USE, Center for the Pacific Rim, No 36 (2004), pp. 1-7; 3.

Mongolian intrusion, the surprised king of Tibet was only half-heartedly supported by his Tibetan auxiliaries. Lhazang Khan was killed later, in 1717, as the Mongols sacked Lhasa. This conflictive scenario came to a halt after the Qing troops entered Tibet in 1720-21, marking the beginning of the Qing patronage.

Tibet had strategic importance as the link between China, one of the most important missions in eastern Asia, and those in southern Asia, especially India. Even though the missionaries of the Society of Jesus mainly tried to enter Tibet from India, they also attempted to use Tibet as a “bridge” between China and India, and this was the purpose of the journey made by the Jesuit missionaries Johann Grueber (1623-1680) and Albert d’Orville (1621-1662).¹⁴ Johann Grueber left China in 1661 and returned to Rome in 1664 after a remarkable journey overland through Asia. His conversations with Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) provided much of the material found in parts two and three of Kircher’s *China monumentis* and contain a great deal of information on Tibet, India and Mongolia.¹⁵

The major exponents of the respective missions to China and Tibet, Matteo Ricci and Ippolito Desideri, have been connected by scholars in the field of Jesuit studies for various reasons. First, because of the apologetic works they both wrote in the respective local languages distinguishing the true religion from its “false copies”, which was conceived as a first

¹⁴ Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet. The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J.*, Translated by Michael J Sweet. Edited by Leonard Zwilling, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2010, p. 21. For a detailed description of Grueber’s routes in Tibet, see “Grueber and Dorville’s Journey Across Tibet”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (Dec., 1904), pp. 663-670.

¹⁵ The full name of the book is *China monumentis qua sacris profanes, nec non variis naturae & artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium arguments illustrata* (China elucidated through its sacred profane [literary] monuments, natural elements, arts and other arguments). This work first appeared in Amsterdam in 1667 in a Latin edition, followed in 1668 by a Dutch edition, in 1669 by an abridged English edition and, in 1670, by an expanded French edition. See David MUNGELLO, *Curious Land: Jesuit accommodation and the origins of Sinology*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1989, pp. 134-142. For specific references to the Tibet mission in Kircher’s work, see Athanasius KIRCHER, *China monumentis; qua Sacris quâ Profanis, Nec non variis NATURAE & ARTIS spectaculis, Aliarumque rerum memorabilium Argumentis ILLUSTRATA, Auspiciis LEOPOLDI PRIMI, ROMAN. IMPER. SEMPER AUGUSTI, Munificentissimi Mecenatis. Amstelodami, Apud Jacobum à Meurs, in fossa vulgo de Keyfersgracht, Anno M.DC.LXVII* https://books.google.com.ar/books?id=VKNZ4SAXqY-C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, pp. 48-49; 64 [Accessed 11 January 2016].

step in propagating the Christian faith.¹⁶ However, it is worth noting that such works, usually written as dialogues, were commonly composed by missionaries as a way of beginning to transmit Christian doctrine. In this regard, it was Michele Ruggieri who first composed an apologetic writing in the China mission: the TZSL. However, like Ricci, Desideri also wrote a detailed account in Italian for a European readership. His *Notizie Istoriche del Tibet e memorie de'viaggi e missione ivi fatta dal P. Ippolito Desideri della Compagnia de Gesù dal medesimo scritte e dedicate*, usually translated into English as *Historical Notices of Tibet (HNT)*,¹⁷ provided thorough information about Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Both Ricci and Desideri addressed the well-learned literati circles in their respective mission spaces: the literati and scholar officials with a Confucian education in the case of Ricci, and the erudite lamas and monks in the monasteries, especially those offering scholastic training, in that of Desideri.¹⁸ Last but not least, like his predecessors in China Desideri also claimed the right to be heard by the king – Lhazang Khan, who had served as the military protector of Tibet – on things concerning the “highest truths of their holy faith,” and to be allowed to speak of these matters in the kingdom without impediment:

The king, as a relative of the emperor in China, and you, as well-informed members of the court, know quite well that for many years European religious men have been employed in that great empire in the same ministry that I came to exercise. Such men...do not seek any worldly interest

¹⁶ See Trent POMPLUN, “Natural Reason and Buddhist Philosophy: the Tibetan Studies of Ippolito Desideri SJ (1684-1733),” *History of Religions*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Jesuit Missionaries in China and Tibet (May 2011): 384-419, 390; Ippolito DESIDERI, *Il T'o-Rans (L' Aurora)*, in *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S. J.*, a cura di Giuseppe TOSCANO S.X, Roma, ISMEO, Vol. I, 1981, p. 8; In a bibliographical essay, Joan-Pau RUBIÉS compares the figures of Ricci and Desideri, marking two differences between them: first, the Confucian element in Chinese culture, which could be interpreted as very different from Buddhism, second, that Desideri lived at a different time, reaching Tibet when the Society of Jesus was about to be forced into full retreat. See Joan-Pau RUBIÉS (Review): “Missionary Encounters in China and Tibet: From Matteo Ricci to Ippolito Desideri,” Reviewed Work(s): *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci, 1552–1610* by Hsia; *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to 18th-Century Tibet* by Pomplun, *History of Religions*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (February 2013): 267-282, p. 282.

¹⁷ See Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet. The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J.*, Translated by Michael J Sweet. Edited by Leonard Zwilling, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2010.

¹⁸ Luciano PETECH, ed, *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, Vol. II “Il nuovo Ramusio,” Raccolta di viaggio, testi e documenti relative ai rapporti fra l'Europa e l'Oriente. A cura dell'Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Roma, La Libreria dello Stato, 1952-1953, Vol. V, p. xxvi.

or profit for themselves in making such long and difficult pilgrimages and in exposing themselves to extreme hardships. On the contrary, they have abandoned all that they had or could hope to have in their homelands so that they might go to foreign lands for the sole purpose of teaching the truth of Christ's holy Law...I too am one of them, although inferior in merit, and have come here for the same purpose.¹⁹

In sum, all these connections help shape a historical background that enables an analysis of the Jesuit approach to Buddhism in Tibet as a backdrop to the China mission – and its precedent in Japan – in the late Ming period.

Let us now move on to one of the main sources analysed in this article, Desideri's first work, the *Tho rangs*, which is translated into English here as the "The Sign of the Dawn that clears away Darkness." It is written in verse and, as mentioned above, it is a piece of apologetic writing. Having completed it in December 1716, Desideri presented it to Lhazang Khan on January 6, 1717.

Desideri's *Tho rangs*. The Jesuit's first approach to Tibetan Buddhism

In the *Tho rangs* Desideri took his first steps in the Tibetan style of argumentation, an ability he would master throughout his years in Tibet and in subsequent writings. It took him ten months to study the Tibetan language, "studying it night and day."²⁰ Desideri was no exception among the missionaries in the missions overseas when dealing with the difficult task of choosing local religious terms for the *Tho rangs*. He borrowed terms from Tibetan Buddhism as the language for catechesis.²¹ Scholars in the field offer different views regarding his rebuttal of Tibetan Buddhism. Giuseppe Toscano claims that it is not Tibetan Buddhism that Desideri is refuting in the *Tho rangs* but a mixture of the popular religion, *bön*, with Tantric Buddhism, and thus it did not engage the 'elite' religion in Tibet.²² However, Trent Pomplun disagrees with this position regarding the first work by Desideri in Tibetan. As Pomplun describes and dates each of

¹⁹ Ippolito Desideri, *Mission to Tibet*, p. 183.

²⁰ Luciano PETECH, ed, *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, p. 180.

²¹ To solve this problem, Toscano states that it was of great help to have found the first seven chapters of the Italian text of the *Tho rangs* (L'Aurora), which provided the key to understanding the Tibetan terminology used by Desideri to translate Christian terminology or exclusively Western texts.

²² Ippolito DESIDERI SJ, *Opere Tibetane, Il T'o-Rans (L'Aurora)*, Introduzione, traduzione e note di Giuseppe Toscano S.X., Vol. I, 20-22.

the Jesuit's manuscripts, he challenges the idea articulated by Giuseppe Toscano that Desideri contrasted the “more elevated” religious notions found in Madhyamaka – one of the schools of Mahayana Buddhism – with the “popular” religion of Tibet, *bön*, thus changing his conceptions about Tibetan religion between his first work, the *Daybreak*, and his later more conventionally “philosophical” works.²³ In sum, according to Pomplun, a comprehensive approach shows that Desideri's views on Tibetan religion remain remarkably consistent throughout.²⁴

The *Tho rangs* contains eighteen chapters, the first of which deal with the existence of the Supreme Being who saves all men with one single – and “true” – religion. They provide help for observance of his law, the path to salvation. As stated in the introduction, the main focus of this article is on Jesuit approaches to Buddhism, especially when shaped as an ‘idolatrour’ sect, as we follow the imprint of the Jesuit missions to the East. It is in the fifteenth chapter of the *Tho rangs* that Desideri grapples with the – in the missionaries’ eyes – problem of “idolatry,” as opposed to the true religion that leads to salvation. For this purpose, Desideri relies on the Prophet Daniel, and tells the story of King Balthasar. In the centre of the city was the temple of Bal. Every day both the people and the king would make offerings to the statue of Bal after their prayers. King Balthasar asks Daniel to go to the temple with them, worship Bal and make offerings to his statue. Daniel answers:

Bal is a statue made by the hand of a man without a mind, without cognition. There is no wisdom in him, not the sense of sight, without soul, without life. Because of this I do not have faith in him and do not worship him. The Supreme Being, lord of all things, the perfect creator of everything, omniscient – to him I devote my prayers, to him I offer my devotion.

The king replies, “Every day our Bal accepts food, and you say he is not the Supreme Being and that he is lifeless?” So the prophet says: “Oh, king, do not be mistaken... This Bal is a statue (ལྷ་མཚན *sku tshab*), he has gold on the outside, clay on the inside; he has no intellect, cannot eat.”²⁵

If we compare the different approaches to the problem of idolatry, in Ricci's TZSY, and in Valignano's *Catechismus Christianae Fidei* previously, Buddhism and idolatry are assimilated, but we do not find this mental

²³ Trent POMPLUN, *Natural Reason and Buddhist Philosophy*, pp. 325-328.

²⁴ Trent POMPLUN, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World*, p. 93.

²⁵ This term, *sku tshab*, refers to holy statues or images. ARSI, *Lusitaniae*, Goa 76, f. 100. Translation by the author.

operation in Desideri's *Tho rangs*, which uses the prophet Daniel and his dialogue with King Balthasar regarding the temple and the statue of Bal to illustrate it. In Ricci's TZSY, one of the key terms constantly present is the Chinese concept of 'orthodoxy' – *zheng* 正, which is of a different order to that of Christianity in its Roman Catholic post-Tridentine form. *Zheng* is, first and foremost, a moral and political orthodoxy. However, its scope reaches far beyond social ethics. Confucian values also reflect the qualities of the cosmos itself; the conception of a morally positive universe directed by the Mandate of Heaven had a ritual dimension. Finally, the concept of *zheng* comprises an individual aspect: the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation, related to virtue. By relating Christianity to Confucianism, Ricci presents it on the side of orthodoxy. In fact, its claim that it had come to purify Confucianism – over-impregnated with Buddhism in the late Ming period – and to restore an original monotheism had never been made by any other alien religion in China. And, in its opposition to "heresy," Christianity was much more radical than Confucianism, which generally made a distinction between the respectably organized Buddhism and Daoism and the heterodox teachings of uncontrolled sectarian movements.²⁶ In sum, Ricci's TZSY is the first piece of writing by a Jesuit in China that clearly proclaims that its Christian teachings are 'on the orthodox side,' in a Confucian register, inaugurating a strict and exclusive division between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In turn, the orthodoxy Ricci is forging, grounded on the Confucian *zheng*, has an aggressive tone against Buddhism as its dark side, to which Buddhists would react. If the nucleus of – broadly put – right, correct, legitimate thought and action is embodied in the concept of *zheng*, its counterpart is the "heterodox" *xie* 邪, which encompasses the subversion of that moral and ritual order. Ricci placed Buddhism and Daoism on the side of "heterodoxy," when on Chinese soil the concept of *xie* applies to any sectarian cults and rituals seen as a potential subversion of order.²⁷ The omnipresence of Buddhist "idols" was one of the most important factors leading Ricci to harshly reject Buddhism, which he saw as nothing other than the incarnation of idolatry in China, as he states in the seventh chapter of his TZSY. In the dialogue between the Western scholar – Ricci himself – and the Chinese scholar, the latter asks Ricci about the benefit

²⁶ Erik ZÜRCHER, "Confucian and Christian Religiosity in Late Ming China", *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (1997): 614-53; 616-622.

²⁷ Erik ZÜRCHER, "Confucian and Christian Religiosity in Late Ming China," *The Catholic Historical Review* 83, no. 4 (1997): 615-21; Ana Carolina Hosne, *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru, 1570-1610: Appraisals and Expectations of Expansionism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 89.

of worshipping images of the Buddha – *bai fo xiang* – and reciting Buddhist scriptures – *nian qi jing*. Ricci – apparently – had no other choice than to answer that this, far from bringing any benefit, would undoubtedly harm orthodoxy – *zheng dao*.²⁸ Moreover, Ricci expresses disappointment by saying that although Confucians – *ru zhe* – wanted to get rid of Buddhism and Daoism they were still erecting temples and worshipping “idols,” literally images – *xiang*, which the Jesuits interpreted and used for “idols.”²⁹ However, the question of “idolatrous” images – a familiar controversial issue for the Jesuits – was unknown to the Buddhists.

Going back to Desideri’s *Tho rangs*, it is in the seventh chapter that Desideri refutes two Buddhist precepts that Ricci – among other Jesuits – had also refuted in the missions in Asia: the transmigration of souls and the cycle of rebirth, both “enemies” of an omnipotent Supreme Being, ruining human souls and leading them to hell. As Desideri explains in his account, when the king learned about some of the precepts in the *Tho rangs*, he distinguished principles that contradicted his “sect” but still seemed just and worthy of further discussion from two other points that seemed difficult to accept: that of a Supreme Being whose nature is single, uncreated, and incorporeal, and metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls.³⁰

Desideri relates that the king had read his book and also wanted several lamas and doctors of religion to read and examine it. But he also had to delve into the principles and books of ‘that sect’ to read their most exemplary authors and to familiarize himself with their methods of dialect and argumentation.³¹ Encouraged by the king, he continued his studies in monasteries. Only certain monasteries offered such training, and not all the monks in a given monastery were actively engaged in philosophical training and the study of a philosophy-based curriculum. Successful completion of the entire curriculum at the three major *Gelug* school monasteries – Drepung, Sera, and Ganden – could take twenty years of study.³² Desideri’s first choice was the monastery of Ramoché, where he studied the books of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, comprising the *Kangyur* – the Words of the Buddha – and the *Tengyur* – the commentaries. However,

²⁸ Matteo RICCI, *Tianzhu Shiyi* 天主實義, in LI Zhizao 李之藻, *Tianzhu chuhan* 天主 初函, Taipei, 臺北, Taiwan xuesheng shuju 臺灣學生書局, 1965, VII: 592, IV-V. Hereafter cited as TZSY.

²⁹ TZSY, VII: 592, V-IX.

³⁰ Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, 187.

³¹ Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, 188.

³² Donald LOPEZ, *Prisoners of Shangri-La. Tibetan Buddhism in the West*, III, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 166-168.

Desideri quickly found the library at Ramoché insufficient, and in August 1717 moved to the Sera monastery, where he was given a good house and permission to construct a chapel. Once there, in his account aimed at a European readership, Desideri tells how he devoted himself to reading, annotating and internalizing the subjects found in the book of Tengyur, studying dialectics and holding discussions on different religious tenets with the monks – “especially the doctors and professors” – and also attending their debates and public examinations.³³ He claims that the Tibetans

have their own dialectics, terms, definitions, divisions of the argument, all in the form of simple enthymemes, a way of propounding theses, of convincing by implication, of denying or conceding, of denying the hypothesis, recasting the argument, and so forth.³⁴

In a search for the familiar, and features similar to his Jesuit education, Desideri continues by saying that...

...they [the Tibetans] have a way of raising and resolving problems that is the same as ours, their procedure being to propose the point at issue, state the opinions of others upon it, refute them, state one's own solution adducing the arguments in its favour, and finally to answer the objections of one's opponents.³⁵

Since the fifteenth century, logic has been considered as a *de facto* Buddhist activity proper to monastic education and specifically the process of developing or gaining insight into the nature of reality, and thus has been differentiated from arts and crafts, medicine, the language arts, and astrology and divination.³⁶ This, indeed, caught Desideri's attention.

Desideri soon discovered that certain Christian precepts were not convincing to his interlocutors. Lhazang Khan expressed doubt about Christians' belief in a Supreme Being. As Desideri more or less explicitly explains in the *Tho rangs*, “false” dogmas – like those of the Tibetans – positively, directly and expressly deny the existence of a being in itself which is uncreated and independent, and the first and universal cause of all things. It was after composing the *Tho rangs* that Desideri turned

³³ Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, 188-191.

³⁴ Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, 189.

³⁵ Ippolito DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, 189-190.

³⁶ Kurtis R. SCHAEFFER, “New Scholarship in Tibet, 1650-1700”, in Sheldon POLLOCK (ed), *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia. Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500-1800*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 293.

to a deeper study of the canonical texts, aiming to gain insight into the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, convinced that it leads to denial of the uncreated independent inherently-existing being, absolutely excluding any knowledge of God.³⁷

Through his studies, Desideri accepted one of the aspects of this doctrine, i.e. that all things are contingent and strictly produced by causes and therefore without their own nature. However, he then focuses on proving its lack of coherence if no primary cause is introduced to start the whole process, as an absolute independent entity.³⁸

The Tibetan writings that immediately followed Desideri's period of study at Sera such as *The Origin of Sentient Beings and Other Phenomena* show how the Jesuit became familiar with about forty different works at the core of philosophical training in Tibet.³⁹ In this work, Desideri not only argues to prove the existence of a Supreme Being who is creator of all things, but also refutes the Buddhist doctrines of emptiness and the cycle of rebirth.⁴⁰ His last work in Tibetan, usually translated as The Heart of Christian doctrine (*Snying po*), is a series of arguments again refuting the Buddhist concept of emptiness (*stong ba nyd*).

In China, Ricci also defended one of the points of contention with the Buddhists, an attribute of the Lord of Heaven, i.e. creation *ex nihilo*, but by resorting to Aristotelian metaphysics. Indeed, in his TZSY, following Aristotle's Metaphysics Ricci introduced the four causes, i.e. active (*zuo zhe*), formal (*mo zhe*), material (*zhi zhe*) and final (*wei zhe*), defining the Lord of Heaven as an active and final cause, not formal or material.⁴¹ However, creation *ex nihilo* was a notion alien to Chinese thought, according to which the world as an organic order is not perceived outside men, and the man who finds his place in it cannot perceive himself outside the world.⁴² This particular idea soon became an almost unbridgeable gap from the creationist standpoint of the Jesuits.⁴³ Moreover, in China,

³⁷ I. DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, pp. 190-191.

³⁸ ENZO BARGIACCHI, Desideri's Understanding of Emptiness, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 29 (2009): 101-116, pp. 102-107.

³⁹ T. POMPLUN, op. cit., pp. 92-93; for a detailed list of the texts that Desideri managed to master, see p. 92 note 48.

⁴⁰ ARSI, *Lusitaniae*, Goa 74. See, for instance, f. 17v.

⁴¹ TZSY I:390, III-IV. Translation by the author.

⁴² ANNE CHENG, *El Pensamiento chino*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2002, p. 50.

⁴³ ERIK ZÜRCHER, "In the Beginning: 17th Century Chinese Reactions to Christian Creationism", in Chun-Chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds), *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, Leiden, Brill, 1995, 132-166; pp. 140-144.

the Lord of Heaven rapidly found a ‘local competitor’ in the Great Ultimate, the *Taiji*, which was highly predominant in Neo-Confucian thought from Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) onward, and Ricci tried his best to dismiss any similarity.⁴⁴ In this regard, it is relevant to mention Trent Pomplun’s claims regarding Desideri’s use – or not – of an Aristotelian background in order to refute Buddhist tenets. In engaging Tibetan interlocutors in his writings, Ippolito Desideri did not attempt to correct the principles of Buddhist philosophy or translate them into an Aristotelian language. He freely adopted Tibetan sources as authorities and engaged his contemporary Tibetan thinkers in disputations using their own philosophical canon instead of Aristotle’s works.⁴⁵

However, Desideri did not have time to convince the monks of Sera of their philosophical errors in their own terms, for he was forced to hide in the monastery when Lhazang Khan lost the country he had conquered twelve years earlier.

Jesuit understandings and interpretations of Buddhism

It was mentioned at the beginning of this article that – according to Urs App – the Jesuit mission to Japan offered one of “the West’s earliest encounters with Buddhist philosophy.” However, as shown in these pages, that encounter immediately associated Buddhism with – we might say – “the Asian face of idolatry”, both in the Japan and China missions. One of the catechisms that widely circulated in and outside Ming China as soon as it was published, Ricci’s TZSY, addressed the Confucian literati while refuting the “idolatrous” Buddhists, detaching Buddhism from a world of letters that – in Ricci’s eyes – exclusively belonged to the Confucian scholar-officials and literati. Going back to another point raised in the introduction, it was mentioned that Confucianism as a local anchorage for the Jesuits to transmit the Christian doctrine on Chinese soil may have obstructed their thorough comprehension of Buddhist doctrines, which

⁴⁴ The term Neo-Confucianism does not exist in Chinese, but is expressed in this language as *Daoxue*, i.e. the study of the Way. By and large, there are two ‘Neo-Confucian branches’: one is the Cheng-Zhu tradition, after its leading exponents Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200), which is often described as ‘rationalistic’ since it stresses the notion of *li* (principle). This is why it is also called the School of Principle. The second tradition or school is ‘Lu-Wang Neo-Confucianism’, named after its two leading representatives: Lu Xiang Shan (1139-1193) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529), also called *Xin Xue* or School of Mind. The particular variety of Neo-Confucianism as systematized by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) enjoyed official status from the early fourteenth century.

⁴⁵ Trent POMPLUN, *Natural Reason and Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 414.

they harshly condemned as “idolatrous.” In this regard, as shown in this article, Desideri seems to have chosen a completely different path. This can be exemplified with the two Jesuits’ different attitudes towards one of the main Buddhist doctrines, that of emptiness. While Ricci’s TZSY reflects a poor understanding of it – a downside that the Buddhists in China would notice –, Desideri devoted himself to acquiring a sound knowledge of this concept. Such thorough understanding implied neither agreement with it nor mere rejection.

Nevertheless, although these two Jesuits, Ricci and Desideri, took a different tack in their approach to and interpretation of Buddhism in their respective local contexts, this did not prevent Buddhist responses against certain tenets displayed in their apologetic writings, especially that of (Christian) creationism. In China, seeking to refute the Jesuits’ claim that *Tianzhu*, the Lord of Heaven, has no substance or form, *Ouyi Zhixu* (in 1643) made his disagreement clear in the Collected Refutations of Heterodoxy (*Pixie ji*), which were mainly grounded on its similarities with the Supreme Ultimate (*Taiji*). Indeed, in its introductory section, *Tianxue chuzheng*, one of its leading voices, Master Zhong – who is no other than Ouyi himself – refutes the notion of *Tianzhu* as the creator (*zhu zai*) of all things, also referring to the fact that if it is without form and matter or substance, then it would be what the Confucians call *Taiji*.⁴⁶ In Tibet, Ippolito Desideri, who had trained himself in various monasteries to argue with the lamas and Tibetan Buddhist monks regarding certain Buddhist precepts, soon discovered that certain tenets of Christianity were not convincing to his interlocutors. Lhazang Khan expressed his doubt about Christians’ belief in a Supreme Being. The Seventh Dalai Lama (1708-1757), who started ruling Tibet in 1720, responded to an apologetic writing of the Capuchins, claiming that:

If everything has being created by the Three Jewels [*dkön mchok*, understood as the Supreme Being], if all the unhappiness and the tragedies that

⁴⁶ *Pixie Ji* 關邪集, in XU Guanqi 徐光啟, 天主教東傳文獻續編, Taipei 臺北, Taiwan xue-sheng shuju 臺灣學生書局, 1965, pp. 914-915. As analysed by Beverley Foulks, one of the most interesting features of *Ouyi’s Collected Refutations of Heterodoxy* is the significance of the various figures that appear in the introduction, for all the names actually refer to *Ouyi* himself. Although Chinese writers could choose between their various names and often invent an interlocutor, here *Ouyi* not only creates an anonymous interlocutor but also includes multiple self-personae. See Beverly Foulks, “Duplicious Thieves: Ouyi Zhixu’s Criticism of Jesuit Missionaries”, *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* (2008, 21:55-75), Taipei, Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, 中華佛學學報第二十一期, 頁55–75 (民國九十七年), 臺北: 中華佛學研究所, pp. 62-63.

occur to the human body, like blindness, deafness, disability, not having food to eat, the many maladies, kings fighting against each other, etc... If all this pain has been created by the Supreme Being, he has no compassion. As he is partial, making some men happy and others unhappy, he is not worthy of all men's worship.⁴⁷

Going back to the thorny issue that the Jesuits in Asia would deal with, i.e. the veneration of images and other physical objects, it has been mentioned how the omnipresence of Buddhist "idols" was one of the factors that encouraged Ricci to harshly reject this "sect." He saw it as nothing other than the incarnation of idolatry in China, harming orthodoxy – *zheng dao*. In Tibet many years later, Desideri would raise this issue in the *Thorangs*, although using a much milder tone, resorting to the prophet Daniel to illustrate it. And, once he gained expertise in Tibetan argumentation techniques, he mainly focused on discussing certain Buddhist doctrines, especially those of rebirth and emptiness, with the lamas. Therefore, the issue in question is whether the Jesuit approach to Buddhism would necessarily entail its rejection as an 'idolatrous' sect or, as the case of Desideri aims to prove, a 'sect' whose main tenets could be objected through insight into Buddhist doctrines, the latter being the result of years of study and training in local argumentation techniques.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, unlike Ricci, Desideri characterized the Buddhist lamas and monks as "literati" – well-learned men and doctors on Tibetan soil. Likewise, as Ricci had been characterized as a 'scholar from the West' – *xi ru* 西儒 –, in his account in Italian Desideri mentions that the missionaries were acknowledged as lamas in Tibet, and called *gokargyi lama*, i.e. European lamas. The reason, he explains, is because "we are recognized as spiritual directors and masters of our Holy Law and are celibate monks."⁴⁸ Back in Rome, with his years in Tibet still marking his existence, Desideri composed a booklet giving advice for those willing to establish a mission in Tibet:

...that the missionaries sent to Tibet be endowed with great intelligence, mainly because, apart from their [Tibetans'] daily use of dialectic, argumentation, and training in their universities, their books (and they do have many) are very subtle, metaphysical and sophisticated, and the whole sys-

⁴⁷ Luciano PETECH, ed, *I Missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, pp. 145-147.

⁴⁸ I. DESIDERI, *Mission to Tibet*, p.323.

tem of their false religion is very broad, abstruse, metaphysical, and their understanding requires more than the standard capacity.⁴⁹

These words of advice reflect Desideri's acknowledgement of the intellectual endeavour involved in achieving insight into Buddhist philosophy, and the techniques engaged in argumentation and debates in the Tibetan monasteries, which he came to master during his stay in Tibet and allowed him to discuss and refute Buddhist doctrines on their own terms.

⁴⁹ Luigi F. BENEDETTO, *Di uno scritto poco noto del p. Ippolito Desideri da Pistoia*, In occasione delle nozze della signorina Fulvia Casella col signor Gualtiero Pastorini, Tip. M. Ricci, Fiorenzuola d'Arda, 6 ottobre 1928, p. 23. Translation by the author.

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