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## The best intentions of Nicolaus Fiva Two letters 1635, 1637

I would like to present Nicolaus Fiva, a Jesuit who went to China in 1638 and died there two years later. Although his time in China was very short, Fiva is recorded in the general historical reference works because he is the first Swiss to have stayed in China<sup>1</sup>. The Jesuits records also mention his name because he was the first missionary in Jiashan, next to Hangzhou.

There is little information about him. I will use a letter dated 1637 already published in French in 1906 and in German in 1941 as well as a report about his activities in China, mentioned in the 1941 article. Furthermore, I will present here an unpublished letter dated 1635, transcribed and translated from Latin to French by F. Mottas<sup>2</sup>.

Reading through these rare documents, I will try to imagine the context in which Fiva lived and worked, what being a Jesuit could have meant at the time, how Fiva conceived his mission to China and finally what he had to say about China and the Chinese.

We may hereafter consider the following questions: Was he successful in China? Was his success in China a good thing in general or

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse. DHS.* <http://www.sn1.ch/dhs/externe/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Fiva Nicolaus, letter, Coimbra, January 21, 1635 (F. Mottas, transcription, 14.6.2001), *Ex literis carisimii Nicolai Societ(at)is Jesu*, (manuscript). Fiva Nicolaus (F. Mottas, translation, 14.6.2001), *Copie d'une lettre du très cher Nicolas Fiva de la Societe de Jésus*, (manuscript). Fivaz Nicolas, "Lettres du Père Nicolas Fivaz, fribourgeois, datées en la Chine" (trad. Max de Techtermann), *Nouvelles Etrennes fribourgeoises*, Fribourg, Fragnière, 1906, pp. 23-26; also translated in Beckmann J., « P. Niklaus Fiva (1609-1640). Ein Freiburger Missionar auf dem chinesischen Missionsfeld", pp. 70-75, *Bethleem* 46, Feb. 1941 (Immensee).

only for the Jesuits? Was his success related to the fact that he “understood” China? Was he merely a European missionary imposing his view on the credulous Chinese people or did he achieve something that we can admire today? Is there any lesson in terms of intercultural encounter to draw from his experience in China?

What I will try to show is that the question of assessing whether Fiva “understood” the Chinese or not is secondary. What is most important to consider is why and how an intercultural encounter took place at all. Encountering was a very dangerous business. Any reasonable person would have wanted to avoid the danger of what that could mean in the seventeenth century. We will see with Fiva’s experience that the encounter took place because he was staunchly committed to a religious order driven toward proselytism for particular historical reasons and not because he was a humanist, a man of the modern world of the Renaissance, or a European who had understood China.

### **The first China bound missionary from the Swiss Cantons**

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, there was only a handful of Swiss overseas missionaries (Strobel, 1976: 463). Yet, during the first third of the seventeenth century, apart from Nicolaus Fiva, we have a few other Swiss bound for China or Swiss in China to consider. There is a second Swiss Jesuit in China, Walter von Sonnenberg, later called Father Ignacio de Monte (1678-1680)<sup>3</sup>. Fiva and de Monte both had brothers in Switzerland who were also Jesuits and were also active in

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<sup>3</sup> According to Dehergne 1973 and Strobel 1986, Ignazio (Ignacio) de Monte, born in Lucerne on July 20, 1612, was originally called Walter von Sonnenberg. He changed his name while in the Philippines. He joined the novitiate in Landsberg at 16, on September 7, 1628 where he met Fiva. He studied for his magisterium in Dillingen and Burghausen between 1634 and 1637 and was ordained priest “ad Indias” in Eichstätt in 1641. Dehergne describes his subsequent missionary activities as follows: at 31, Sonnenberg sailed for the Philippines via Mexico where he was in transit on February 28, 1643. The same year, on August 4, he arrived in Manila. The Philippines were to remain his base for the next 36 years. From 1643 until 1653, de Monte was said (Strobel 1986) to be in charge of the Chinese in the Philippines. According to a note dated 1651, in the Jesuits’ archives of Rome, Dehergne found that, around this time, de Monte stayed in China. In 1648, he took his four vows in Manila. His activities in the Philippines are further described in Strobel (1986) as follows: After being active among the Chinese of Manila, he went to Santa Cruz among the natives, another time on Marinduque Island (where there is also a Santa Cruz) and also among the “Tagalen”. In between, he was rector in Silang, south of Manila (1653-1659, 1664-1668, 1668-1672, 1674-1678). He was always requesting to go to Japan but never got the necessary approval. On June 24, 1678, after more than 33 years in the Philippines, he left Manila for Xiamen (Amoy) in China. Dehergne has found mention of de Monte in relation to a church in Lienkong near Fuzhou (October 1678) and in November he was said to have been in Fuzhou (Fujian province). Two years later, in July 1680, he died in Fuzhou (Jiangxi province).

the Jesuit colleges, and from whom we may gather some information<sup>4</sup>. We can also consider the cases of Johann Albrecht (1618)<sup>5</sup>, Beat Amrhyn (1673)<sup>6</sup> and Jean-Baptiste Charandy (1692)<sup>7</sup> who all intended to go to China but never managed. Several of these Jesuits were mathematicians.

For our purposes, as far as the first Swiss to stay in China is concerned, the most interesting person to consider is Father Nikolaus Fiva<sup>8</sup>, born in Fribourg on August 15, 1609<sup>9</sup>. According to Dehergne (Dehergne, 1973), he joined the same novitiate as Walter von Sonnenberg (in Landsberg am Lech), on March 20, 1628 and became a priest in 1635, just prior to his departure for the Indies. We will see that this was probably not the case. He spent a year in Goa where he became a priest and pronounced his vows. He arrived in Macau in 1637 where he stayed for almost one year prior to sailing to Nanjing. He died in Hangzhou only two years later, in 1640.

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<sup>4</sup> There was a Jacques Fiva SJ, 1605-1650, also from Fribourg, also at the novitiate of Landsberg in 1622 and also a mathematician. But Strobel (1986) does not mention his kinship ties with Nicolas. Jacques Fiva taught mathematics at the university of Ingolstadt between 1638 and 1646 where he published his *Elementa Arithmeticae*. He also taught mathematics in Rome. Emmanuel von Sonnenberg SJ (1614-1668) was a younger brother of Walter. He was a rector in Fribourg (1656-1662) and then in Brig (1662-1664).

<sup>5</sup> Johann (Albericus, Albéric) Albrecht SJ (1586-1618) was born close to the northern border of the Swiss cantons, in Dornbirn (Dorenbüren). He attended the novitiate of Landsberg as from 1605 and was ordained priest in Coimbra, in 1617. He was a talented mathematician and set out for China on April 16, 1618 together with colleagues who were to become famous China Jesuits such as Nicolas Trigault, Johann Terrenz/Schreck and Adam Schall von Bell.

<sup>6</sup> Father Beat Amrhyn from Lucerne was born into an aristocratic family on October 31, 1632. He joined the novitiate in Landsberg on January 28, 1649, was ordained priest in 1661, and took his four vows in Ingolstadt on February 2, 1666. Amrhyn is listed (June 30, 1671) as an "Indipetae", i.e. a priest having requested to be sent on mission to China. This can be related to the fact that Amrhyn was a major scholar. According to Strobel (1986), Amrhyn was first a high school teacher in Konstanz and Dillingen. He became a doctor in mathematics at the University of Ingolstadt in 1661-2 where he taught philosophy and theology between 1663 and 1671 (Koch (1934) mentions that he was « Kanzelredner »). Being a talented mathematician, he applied for the Beijing mission. He therefore traveled to Portugal. While waiting for his ship, he taught in Evora and at Coimbra University in 1672-1673. According to Dehergne, he died while travelling to China, on April 15, 1673, not far from the Cape of Good Hope (just off the Guinea coast, says Strobel (1986)) while helping plague stricken passengers<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Father Jean-Baptiste Charandy from Soleure/Solothurn, born on December 11, 1659. He entered the novitiate in Landsberg at 21, and departed for China, aged 33, together with Father Francesco Maria Spinola from Genoa (Spinola seems to be an important character. From Rome, his superiors entrusted him with prestigious missions such as presenting a letter from the pope to the emperor Kangxi. Peter II of Portugal thought of him for major positions in Nanjing and Beijing. He was in fact nominated as apostolic prefect for Nanjing; he also died before arriving in China, in 1694). Strobel mentions Charandy as a teacher in Ingolstadt, Freiburg in Brisgau and Porrentruy. He was destined to the Beijing mission on account of his talent as a mathematician. He died while travelling to China, shortly after his departure, on April 1692. According to Dehergne, Charandy sailed to China whereas Strobel (1976 and 1986) mentions a land journey through Russia and Siberia. This later information seems incompatible with another detail given by Strobel: Charandy was made priest in Coimbra in 1691.

<sup>8</sup> Nikolas Fiva (Nikolaus Fiva, Nicolas Fivaz).

<sup>9</sup> According to *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS)*, in a note signed Urban Fink, his parents were called Petrus and Barbara Reiff. His name can be spelled Nikolas Fiva, Nikolaus Fiva or Nicolas Fivaz. Fiva is the spelling on the copy of the manuscript letter of 1635.

The main documents I have found about Fiva are two letters which he wrote in Latin, one from Portugal just before leaving for the East and one from Macau, just after his arrival there. We have also a report about his missionary activities in Jiashan (near Hangzhou) written by a Jesuit historian thirty years later. The first letter is dated January 21, 1635 from Coimbra, the second January 1, 1637 from Macau. Both are addressed to the rector of the Jesuit College in Fribourg<sup>10</sup>. In the letter from Coimbra, Fiva describes his itinerary through Europe and gives information about the Society of Jesus. We can use it to understand what being a Jesuit and going to the mission meant at the time. In the second letter, he gives information about the conditions of travel and about the route he expected to take in order to reach Beijing; he reflects on his intellectual training prior to entering China and on his state of mind concerning his vocation for the China mission. Finally, with the report about his activities when in Hangzhou, we can try to understand his situation and action in China as well as his successes.

My purpose will be primarily to stress some aspects of the context, which should show us what kind of world-view Fiva was sharing. His three letters propagate three aspects of the order: its established power in Mediterranean Europe and its rising influence in Asia, the format of a perfect Jesuit, and finally, the characteristics of the policy of accommodation in China

### **From Fribourg to Coimbra: The power of the Jesuits<sup>11</sup>.**

Although Fiva's family seal figures a solitary pine tree<sup>12</sup>, the Fivas do not originate from the first "forest cantons" (Waldstaetten) at the origin of what will later become Switzerland.

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<sup>10</sup> Between 1629 and 1637, the rector of the College in Fribourg was Johann Wagner (1592-1654). He was at the novitiate in Landsberg as from 1615.

<sup>11</sup> What follows is based on Fiva's 1635 letter, completed by information in Beckmann 1941 and Dehergne 1973.

<sup>12</sup> *Annales fribourgeoises*, XXIe année, No 6, nov.-déc. 1933, p. 226.



Seal of Fiva's family

Source: *Annales fribourgeoises*, XXIe année, No 6, nov.-déc. 1933, p. 226.

Yet Fribourg has special interests in common with these cantons through its attachment to Catholicism. In 1524, when other Swiss cities were embarking on the Reformation, Fribourg was granted by Pope Jules II the title of “defender of the liberty of the Churches”. From that date, Fribourg imposed Catholicism in the city and in the surrounding countryside, and thus remained a pioneer and a champion of the Counter-Reformation in the Swiss cantons and in Europe<sup>13</sup>. Since 1582, Fribourg hosted one of the three earliest Jesuit Colleges, next to Lucerne (1574) and Porrentruy (1591). In Fribourg, Peter Canisius was a “national” hero. He was the founder of the Jesuit College and also of the Upper German Province whose novitiate served all the Jesuits originating from the Swiss cantons. Even today, he is one of the rare historical figures to be honored in the city with a statue.

Fiva is a product of that environment, a product of the Trent system, that is, a Church with religious orders. That Church itself played a role in the expansion of Europe which opened the way to missionary activities abroad (Chaunu 1981: 421). After one hundred years of Catholic missionary activity throughout the Indies, Rome decided to open a special department, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation

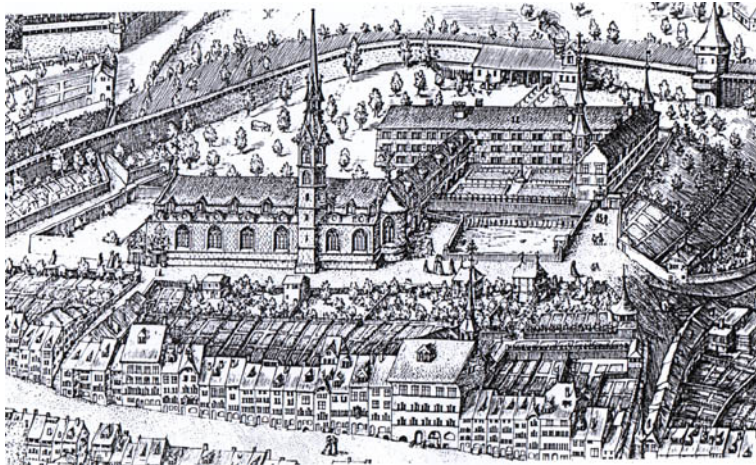
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<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopedie du Pays de Fribourg*, vol. 1, p. 62.

of the Faith (Propaganda Fide), in order to monitor missionary activities. This took place in 1622, when Fiva was thirteen years old, about the time when he entered the Jesuit College in Fribourg.

I would like to emphasize the significance, for Nicolaus Fiva, of being part of the Jesuit order at the beginning of the seventeenth century. I think I can show this idea with the following prints.

On the first print, dated 1606, we can have a first impression of the importance of the college in the small town of Fribourg.



Fribourg Jesuit College (Saint Michel College) seen from the south. Part of a graven Fribourg panorama by Martin Martini in 1606<sup>14</sup>.

This impression can be increased if we consider later views of the city, showing the enormous Jesuit grammar school dominating the city. On the left you can see the original college that Fiva attended in 1622-1628 and on the right, a new building erected in the nineteenth century.

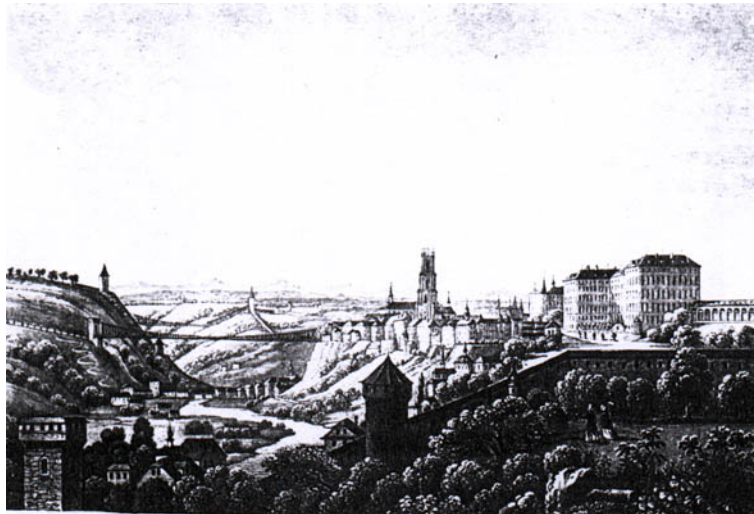
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<sup>14</sup> Strub Marcel, *Les Monuments d'art et d'histoire du Canton de Fribourg*, Bâle: Ed. Birkhäuser, 1959, p. 98.



View of Fribourg grammar school<sup>15</sup>.

I can complete this visual argument with a print of the nineteenth century stressing even more the majesty of the college over the whole city.



Aquatint entitled "Fribourg/Switzerland". Fribourg seen from the north-west. No dates. Musée d'art et d'histoire, Fribourg

Although the last two examples are anachronistic, they demonstrate something that was true in Fiva's time: To be part of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Notice sur le pensionnat dirigé par les RR.PP. de la Compagnie de Jésus*, Fribourg: L.J. Schmid, 1839.

Jesuit community was to belong to the most visible and influential community in town.

What can we understand by reading carefully the two letters we have from Nicolaus Fiva? We can see how totally he is impregnated by the Jesuit world-view. Let us consider two themes addressed in the 1635 letter: architecture and people.

After his studies in Fribourg and his seminary years in Landsberg, Fiva spent some months traveling from Bavaria to Coimbra in the kingdom of Portugal<sup>16</sup>. From the itinerary mentioned in his letter, we can see that he traveled from one Jesuit College to the other, all the way across Mediterranean Europe.

His comments on buildings throughout the two letters are evocative. In the *Histoire de l'expédition* by Nicolas Trigault<sup>17</sup>, Ricci argued that the Chinese did not construct buildings with the same perspective on time as Europeans did. Europeans were constructing buildings designed to last for centuries, whereas the Chinese seemed to aspire to a much shorter period. Fiva reserves a great deal of space in his letters to making comments on buildings. In Europe, he mentions one Jesuit college, residence or novitiate after the other (Milan, Pavie, Genoa, Marseilles, Barcelona, Lerida, Saragosse, Complutum<sup>18</sup>, Madrid, Lisbon, Coimbra) and we have seen that these residences could be very impressive, as they were in Fribourg. He then mentions churches in Europe (the “metropolitan temple” of Milan, Genoa, Rome, Coimbra) as he does in Asia (Macau). Castles come next (Milan, Genoa, Coimbra) as well as constructions like bridges (Ratisbonne<sup>19</sup>, Saragosse, Mérida and Coimbra) and harbors (Genoa, Marseilles, Barcelona and Lisbon). Churches, government buildings, bridges and city walls, will all be

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<sup>16</sup> In January 1637, Fiva writes about having left his homeland two years before. He arrived in Lisbon on December 24, 1634 and settled in Coimbra on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1634 (Fiva, 21.1.1635). For most of 1635 he was on sea journey between Coimbra and Goa ; he spent 1636 in Goa and at the end of the year traveled to Macau. There is no clear indication about the duration of the journey in Europe.

<sup>17</sup> Book 1, chap. 4, p. 85, Trigault Nicolas, *Histoire de l'expédition chrétienne au royaume de la Chine, 1582-1610*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1978.

<sup>18</sup> According to the translator of the letter, F. Mottas, Complutum is near Alcala de Henares (Madrid region).

<sup>19</sup> Where there has also been a Jesuit college since 1589.



mentioned again in the China context. So architecture is chosen as major device to link Europe with China in one particular perspective.

The importance of Jesuit buildings in Fiva's descriptions points to the European (i.e. the Roman Christian) way of propagating cultural ideas through buildings. Renaissance Europe and in particular Counter-Reform in which Jesuit architecture plays such a significant role is a very important way of understanding Fiva's world view. Fiva emphasizes these ideas by acknowledging the majesty of the buildings visited. This pattern of architectural domination is visible as far east as Macau, which, according to Fiva possesses a church "with as magnificent a facade as I have seen, either in Rome, Genoa nor elsewhere in Europe". Most of what will be reported about his dealings in Jiashan, relates to the attempted establishment of a place for prayer and adoration.

What Fiva chooses to mention from his trip through Mediterranean Europe allows him to spell out the Jesuit presence and to marvel at it. The comparison with Macau proves that he is considering only Jesuit buildings. Rhetoric even helps him to stress how this Jesuit world was already starting to spill over into Asia.

This impression is reinforced when it comes to the mention of the people he met. His letters mention scholars, his fellow Jesuits, the one met in Lisbon and in Coimbra, their kindness, their humility, their intellectual prowess. These fellow scholars are presented in order of ever-increasing importance. Fiva left an extraordinary college in Fribourg, passed through many Jesuit residences in Mediterranean Europe to finish in Coimbra where the professors and doctors were more prodigiously competent than anywhere else. They were training gifted Jesuits for their journey to the Indies. So, when he arrived in China, Fiva met outstanding Jesuits in Nanjing and Hangzhou (Sambiasi and Lazzaro Cattaneo<sup>20</sup>), then outstanding Chinese scholars with whom he had his first major evangelical success in Jiashan. Here again we can admire the homogeneity created between Europe and China through one particular Jesuit preoccupation.

Students in these colleges and seminars in Coimbra and Macau as well as in the "school" in Jiashan were equally eager to learn. In

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<sup>20</sup> See note page 14.

Coimbra and Macau, the students attending Jesuit schools and novitiates are depicted with their sober, black dress in Portugal, with their purple robes in Macau. In Jiashan, students play the leading role in the story told, since they are the ones accepting and believing Christian teaching.

A third group of people is mentioned, the political figures met in Portugal, in Malacca and in Hangzhou. They include a king<sup>21</sup>, ambassadors, members of the royal court, governors, generals and finally, in Hangzhou, a retired “kolo” which must be a kind of “viceroy” in Hangzhou. The Jesuits are said to have had excellent relationships with them.

These letters are very neatly constructed, with the parallel between Europe and China stressing a continuum. They illustrate precisely the classical themes about Jesuits missionaries in Asia: intellectual performances especially in the domain of memory, mathematics and cartography, educational activities, the good relations with political figures and finally the success of the policy of accommodation in China. In this first letter, Fiva writes about Europe. But even when writing about Europe, he does not present any comprehensive pieces of ethnography or any geographical description. Most of the content of this letter is dedicated to exposing the European Jesuit itinerary, the Jesuit conception of architecture and a gallery of Jesuit personalities and their partners. In fact, this first letter gives little information about his trip and a lot of elements about the particular Jesuit value system and organization.

In the second letter, the one dated Macau in 1637, Fiva describes his intellectual and spiritual training prior to entering China. We are informed about his studies in mathematics and theology, his studying languages and his activities of preaching and teaching. He also informs us about the state of the missions in Asia.

## **II. From Europe to the Indies: The perfect Jesuit<sup>22</sup>.**

For ten years, from 1628 until 1638, Fiva was trained for the mission, which meant studying mathematics and theology, learning

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<sup>21</sup> « It goes without saying that I saw the king...he was standing as close as six feet away from me » (Fiva 21.1.1635).

<sup>22</sup> What follows is based on Fiva's 1637 letter, completed by information in Beckmann 1941 and Dehergne 1973.

languages, traveling and at the same time, preaching and teaching. We have already considered the European part of his journey. Let us now see the overseas part of it.

The trip between Europe and China was more than often mortal. Half the Jesuit missionaries bound for China between 1581 and 1712 died during the trip (Beckmann, 1941: 71). If we look only at five of the few Swiss missionaries we are considering, three died before reaching China (Johann Albrecht (1618), Beat Amrhyn (1673) and Jean-Baptiste Charandy (1692). The journey could take up to ten years. For Fiva, the trip to Goa seems to have gone smoothly. The one to Macau, however, wasn't so smooth, but it was still very short. In all cases, going to China implied an unparalleled and unconditional commitment.

All his comments about sea journeys tell frightening stories. He recalls having been shaken by waves to the point of fearing death; almost submerged by waves, almost captured by Turks, almost blown out by pirates canon. The trip between Goa and Macau was very tiring<sup>23</sup> and dangerous. He lived through the thunder of heavy firearms resulting from skirmishes between Portuguese and Dutch vessels. He was almost kidnapped, as was his German companion, Father Michael Walta<sup>24</sup>. According to Fiva, Walta, together with another Polish priest, were taken prisoner by the Dutch. Both managed to escape, and eventually Walta arrived in China at the same time as Fiva. Sea-going vessels are described by Fiva as extraordinary engines, not less spectacular than some of the buildings he described. His descriptions remind us of the space ships mentioned in XXth century science fiction novels. This may help us to grasp the temerity of his enterprise. Embarking for the Indies on a sea-going vessel of the period was not less daring an exploit than a journey towards a newly discovered planet. This sense of danger, of daring and consequently of absolute commitment is essential to help us understand his missionary achievements.

He waited almost four months in Coimbra. From there, he left for the Far East on April 13, 1635 along with thirty-two other

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<sup>23</sup> He tells his former director that he would like to have a little rest after such a trip.

<sup>24</sup> Walta was born in 1606 (three years before Fiva). Like Fiva, he attended the novitiate in Landsberg, left Lisbon on April 13, 1635 and eventually arrived in Hangzhou and Nanjing in 1638. Walta had not pronounced his final vows when he died in February 1644.

colleagues<sup>25</sup>, among them Father Michael Walta. The trip between Lisbon and Goa lasted less than a year. He arrived in Goa at the end of 1635. During the whole of the year 1636 — as Ricci had done fifty year earlier — Fiva stayed in Goa where he studied theology, became a priest and celebrated his first mass.

During 1636 he also traveled to Macau where he arrived in November.

### *His vocation for the China mission*

Fiva was primarily a mathematician. That is what he studied and what he was good at in Fribourg. This we can deduce from the fact that, when writing to his former director, the first thing he mentions is mathematics. He announces that he has stopped studying this field. He must have been quite proficient in this subject because he prides himself as being a satisfactory teacher in arithmetic and cartography.

According to Beckmann, he was sent to the mission as a theologian<sup>26</sup>. In fact, Fiva only started learning theology in 1636 while in Goa. This was not enough to be sent to the mission. In January 1637, while thinking about requesting the China mission, he regrets that “the study of theology still holds me back”.

During his training, Fiva learned three languages: Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. He only started to learn Chinese when in Nanjing, at the beginning of 1638.

These languages were vital for him while enduring the long months of travel on galleys and smaller coastal ships. During this long period of time he was supposed to preach and to hear the passengers’ confessions. When in Macau, Fiva studied and worked as a priest in one of the schools of the town.

It was not sure from the outset if he would be sent to China or to Japan. When in Macau, he himself applied for the privilege of being sent to China on several accounts, firstly because China was “among all kingdoms, the most open to Christianity”. According to Fiva, all the

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<sup>25</sup> According to Dehergne, Rome authorizes missionaries bound for the East to travel there directly, without having to transit via Lisbon. Fiva did not use this brand-new possibility.

<sup>26</sup> Strobel says « as a mathematician ».

missions in the Far East were thriving and could each have used ten times more missionaries than were available.

Fiva saw his mission as the most important goal in his life. None of the distractions he encounters in the bustling cities he discovered could distract him from his purpose (“I think about my mission”). Even his health is secondary. After two years of exhausting and dangerous travel around the globe, he believed that taking a rest would jeopardize the salvation of “so many souls”. In China, he was to declare himself in good health, yet his superior did not consider that to be the case<sup>27</sup>. In fact, less than two years after his arrival, he died.

In this letter dedicated to the journey overseas, he takes up some of the themes introduced earlier (the magnificence of Jesuit architecture, the impression left on him by the cities he stays in, schools, important people he met like archbishops and governors). But he speaks more and more about his mission. And despite all the hardship already endured, he shows himself ready to go on to further, more dangerous and unknown destinations.

Reporting on his trip through Europe, Fiva gives us a picture of the magnificent Jesuit presence there. Reporting on his trip to China, he offers us a blueprint of the perfect Jesuit.

When writing about himself, Fiva gives an exact profile of a Jesuit who was principally a theologian, then a preacher and finally a teacher. Furthermore, by studying various languages including Chinese, which he did in China, he fits the profile of the Riccean Jesuit. Here again, we can see that there is very little in this letter about India or Macau. Most of the information refers to the Jesuit presence in these countries far from home.

There is a third piece of evidence, the report of Fiva’s activities while he was in China, from 1638 to 1640. This brief report, written by a Jesuit historian a few decades later, describes the city and it presents the literati there, stressing the good relations the Jesuits were enjoying with them. The academy and the school system are integrated into the picture. The relations between prominent politicians and the Jesuits are also

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<sup>27</sup> Beckmann cites the Province report from 1639.

presented. Finally the “successes” of Fiva are numbered as well the opposition of a Buddhist monk to the Christian undertaking. In other words, with this report we have an exact picture of what the Accommodation Policy probably looked like. There is no trace in this report of special consideration for Chinese customs or philosophies, nothing about the “understanding” of China. The report merely mirrors the actions of the Jesuits in China.

### **III. In China: The Accommodation Policy<sup>28</sup>**

After his one-year stay in Macau, Fiva was sent to Nanjing together with Michael Walta where they arrived in early 1638. They were meant to assist Father Francesco Sambiasi, who had been active in Nanjing since 1631<sup>29</sup>. Sambiasi was proficient in Chinese and it is with him that Fiva started to learn Chinese. At the end of the year (1638), Fiva was sent to Hangzhou to help another Italian missionary who had arrived in China almost fifty years earlier with Matteo Ricci, Father Lazzaro Cattaneo<sup>30</sup>. So the two missionaries that Fiva was asked to assist were two outstanding personalities connected with the Ricci’s Policy of Accommodation<sup>31</sup>. It is there that Fiva started to do proper missionary work.

The activities of Fiva in China have left little trace. These activities were very short: part of 1638, 1639 and part of 1640. Beckman cites a report by the Portuguese priest Antonio de Gouvea (1592-1677), a historian who, it seems, was present in Hangzhou as from 1636 and then

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<sup>28</sup> This section is based on the original report and the commentaries provided by Beckmann, 1941, 72-75.

<sup>29</sup> He was to stay there until 1643. Sambiasi, an Italian Jesuit born in 1582, left Lisbon in March 1609, arrived in Macau in 1610 where he stayed three years. He spent three years in Beijing. Following the persecution of 1616, and until 1631, he was secretly active in Jiading, Shanghai, Kaifeng, Henan, Shanxi, Shandong. After 1643, he continued a major career, was nominated mandarin in 1647 and finally was distinguished by the emperor for his contribution to the reform of the Chinese calendar. He died in Guangzhou in 1649 (Dehergne, 1973). The distinction could have been granted by the last Ming emperor, the Chongzhen Emperor (r. 1628-1643) or by the first Qing Emperor.

<sup>30</sup> Lazzaro Cattaneo (1560-1640). Novitiate in Rome. Left Lisbon in 1588. Was in Goa in 1589 and in Macau in 1593. In 1594 he was in Shaozhou, in the north of Guangdong province, and, with Matteo Ricci, he took up the literati robe. He was the founder of the residence in Hangzhou in 1611 where he stayed until his death in 1640. Of the “Three Pillars of the early Christian church” in China – Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), Li Zhizao (1565 – 1630), and Yang Tingyun (1557 – 1627), two are closely linked with Hangzhou and with L. Cattaneo.

<sup>31</sup> « Jesuit accommodation was developed to meet the unique demands of the mission field in China. Although Jesuit missionary policy as a whole stressed the accommodation of Christianity to indigenous elements of a foreign culture, nowhere had European missionaries encountered such an advanced culture as in China. This forced them to make difficult choices about what to accept and what to reject... (p. 13). The Jesuits choose to concentrate on converting the Chinese literati as the first step toward converting the entire society (p. 20) (Mungello, 1999).

again in 1669-77. Fiva deserved attention because he was the first missionary in Jiashan near Hangzhou in 1639<sup>32</sup>. The exact circumstances of Fiva's death are not known.

This report is constructed like a novel, and has a miraculous flavor, exactly fitting the lines of a testimony about missionary activities in China during the Accommodation period, while emphasizing the links with the literati and the opposition to Buddhism.

The story takes place in Jiashan, a walled city surrounded by water, reachable from Hangzhou by approximate ten kilometers of canals<sup>33</sup>. The city is described, its waterways, its stone bridges and the academy system flourishing there. We are then introduced to the main character of the story, a Chinese man of letters, said by Antonio de Gouvea to be famous in his community for his moral standards. This scholar became Christian with the help of God as did many of his students:

“He has read our books (those edited in Chinese by the first missionaries), found them good and welcomed the holy baptism with the name Julius<sup>34</sup>. Enflamed by the eagerness of his soul, he shared his happiness with his students. They found that what such a wise man had found to be good, must also be worth pursuing by them.”

Fiva was invited by him to Jiashan in the Spring of 1639, in order to deliver baptism to those neophytes. Fiva came with brother Gomes<sup>35</sup>. They were accommodated in the houses that the government had built for the written exams of the candidate scholars. In these official buildings, a larger room was transformed into a prayer hall exhibiting a

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<sup>32</sup> « Kia chan city in the Kia hin district, 20 li away from the capital Hangtschau » (Beckmann, 1941, p. 72). Which means : Jiashan, Jiaying district, about 100 km north of Hangzhou city.

<sup>33</sup> See previous note.

<sup>34</sup> According to Gernet (*Chine et Christianisme*, p. 62), Jesuits received a lot of interest in society and among the literati around 1630, yet there was no more conversion of mandarins after 1620. The events mentioned about Fiva took place in 1639.

<sup>35</sup> Beckmann indicates that Gomes was of Malay father and Chinese mother. He was born in 1602 in Macau, entered the Jesuit order in 1628 and died in 1644 during the overthrow of the Ming dynasty by the Manchous. Dehergne mentions a brother, Gomes, born in Macau in 1608 (not in 1602), entered the Jesuit order in 1628 (as above), whose father was a Malay and whose mother was a Chinese (as above). He is mentioned as being in Jiangxi province between 1631 and 1647 (so that he could have been in Hangzhou in 1639).

picture of Jesus. It was probably one of these pictures that were regarded by the Chinese as “too full of life”<sup>36</sup>. This picture attracted many visitors and as many as 153 of them, mostly students, came forward to be taught in Christian matters and to receive baptism<sup>37</sup>. For most of them, Julius, their teacher, became their godfather.

According to the report, Fiva also met a retired magistrate, a scholar from the imperial college and several other educated personalities of Jiashan, all of whom were eager to hear about European customs and Christian teaching. Such success attracted the hostility of Buddhists priests, one of whom planned to destroy the image displayed in the “church”. He was prevented from doing so and was even wounded twice by stones thrown by one of the new converts. A conference between Christians and Buddhists was thereafter planned but it never took place. Peace was maintained, thanks to the picture of Jesus, says the report.

Although the report is written by a third person, the type of content is strikingly similar to what Fiva writes. There is almost nothing about China in this report except the indispensable description of the city, that of the Academy system reminiscent of charity organizations in Europe and that of the literati and the examination system. Defeated Buddhists are also mentioned. All these points illustrate the policy of accommodation of the time.

Can these letters and report tell us anything about China? Did their author, Fiva, understand anything about China? Was there a real encounter? Very little, it seems. On the contrary, the letters write almost exclusively about Jesuits, their policy and their work in China. This is evident if we consider that these reports are primarily meant to inform the Jesuit hierarchy. At this point of the research, it seems we are close to what has been very well documented by those who have questioned the

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<sup>36</sup> As Mungello notes, these pictures/paintings portrayed “the theme *Salvator Mundi* (Savior of the World), which typically shows the upper body of Christ, who is holding an orb and cross in one hand and blessing it with the other hand” (Mungello, 1999: 28).

<sup>37</sup> 153, this number has a special resonance in the history of Jesuit Christianity in China. The most famous illustrated version of the Gospel available in China in the early seventeenth century was the work *Image of the History of the Gospel (Evangelicae Historiae Imagines)* (1593) by Geronimo Nadal, SJ (1507 – 1580). Nadal’s book combined 153 large engravings with written meditations in a manner influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (see Mungello, 1999 : 29-30).



quality of the philosophical and sociological approach of the Jesuits in China.

### **The critique of understanding<sup>38</sup>**

In his various writings, Gernet (1975, 1976, and 1982/1991) and also Voiret<sup>39</sup> have abundantly dissected the “understanding” of the Jesuits: Jesuits were neither philosophers nor social scientists. They were neither scientists nor intellectuals in the sense that they were not allowed to write freely on any subject. Their writings were furthermore subject to censorship and submitted to the company imprimatur. They naturally lacked the necessary knowledge for grasping all the aspects of the Chinese world of thought and Chinese society. By quite excusable ignorance, although sometimes also purposely, they transformed the ideas they managed to grasp about China. Their own mind set, as displayed in the religious, ethical and scientific “package” they were hoping to introduce in China, was profoundly incompatible with the expectations of the Chinese. Gernet shows that Ricci and his followers transmitted to Europe an erroneous or over-simplified version of the Chinese philosophical and ethical ideas of the time. These ideas were used by Enlightenment philosophers to produce statements about China, that in turn the Jesuits accepted as authoritative. (e.g. Letter of Leibnitz to Father Bouvet, November 1702).

Reassessing the idealized image of Ricci’s attitude in China, Voiret (1982) reminds us that this great humanist of the Renaissance rejoiced in writing about how an entire library of precious Chinese books, declared “prohibited” by the missionaries, had been burned for three days. Jesuits also bought Chinese books criticizing Christianity in order to destroy them. The idea of Renaissance modernity entering China

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<sup>38</sup> Gernet Jacques, “La politique de conversion de Matteo Ricci et l’évolution de la vie politique et intellectuelle en Chine aux environs de 1600”, pp. 104-144 in Lanciotti Lionello, *Sviluppi scientifici prospettive religiose movimenti rivoluzionari in Cina*, Florence: Leo S. Olschki editore, 1975. Gernet Jacques, *Chine et christianisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1991 (1982).

<sup>39</sup> In his comments on Gernet’s *Chine et Christianisme*, book review of 1982 published in *Orientierung*, a Jesuit publication in Zurich. Also, Voiret Jean-Pierre, “Himmel der Chinesen – Gott der Christen”, pp. 257-261, *Orientierung*, No 23/24, 46<sup>th</sup> year, Zurich, 15-31 December 1982.

through the Jesuits is also a myth: The knowledge and science transmitted by the Jesuits into China e.g. the mathematics that Fiva could have taught there were quite medieval. At the time when Fiva was heading for the mission in the Indies in 1633, Rome was condemning Galileo theories as philosophically absurd<sup>40</sup>.

Since Fiva failed in what today we would regard as “understanding China”, can we nevertheless still look at his experience in a positive light? Let me argue that his triple commitment, firstly to the very disciplined Catholic belief of the Counter Reformation, secondly to the Jesuit microcosm, and thirdly to his mission, a commitment that we have seen as being so obviously important in these three letters and report, is in fact the real motive for the encounter. Fiva’s enthusiasm about his Jesuit position, his stubborn obsession with Jesuit matters, his constant reformulation of Jesuit truths, and underneath all that, his probable naivete, perhaps even his hypocrisy, did, in fact, make the encounter possible. What was important is that an encounter took place at all. It was the ideological drive of the Jesuits which made that encounter possible, and that is probably the only possibility that could have been envisaged at that time. Even if the quality of the encounter can be criticized, its reality is what counts. It is important because, regardless of if it was optimal or not, we are still benefiting from it today

Lausanne, October 8, 2001

### **Nicolas Fiva, two letters, draft, not for citation**

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<sup>40</sup> The story of the decree of 1616 and the formal condemnation of 1633 is described in detail in *Santillana’s The Crime of Galilea* (Mungello, 1985: 26)

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