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Jesuit Conspirators and Russia's East Asian Fur Trade, 1791–1807

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Abstract

In 1791, amidst growing anxiety about British encroachment on its fur trade with the Qing Empire, the Russian government discovered that Britain was sending a large and important embassy to Beijing, led by Lord Macartney. In an attempt to derail the negotiations, Russia enrolled the Polotsk Jesuits in a plot to convince the Qing of the nefariousness of British designs. The conspiracy was not a success, despite Macartney's failure. The Jesuits both in Belarus and Beijing continued to play a central role in Russia's geopolitical plans in the region for the next decade and a half, although ultimately the project to establish a Russian Jesuit college in the Qing capital failed. Using Russian as well as Jesuit archival sources, the article reconstructs the secret plans, mishaps, and miscalculations that shaped this unusual relationship.

Keywords

Jesuits in China – Jesuits in Russia – maritime fur trade – Russo-Chinese relations – Jesuit survival – Jesuit restoration – Pacific history – Catherine II – Alexander I – Russo-British relations

Northeast Asia in the Eighteenth Century

Jesuits have often been accused of being puppet masters. In the eighteenth century, they were held responsible for everything from religious obscurantism in France to enlightened sedition in Spain; in the nineteenth, they would join the Freemasons at the heart of the most fashionable conspiracy theories of their day. Here I will tell a different story. On the cusp of the two centuries,

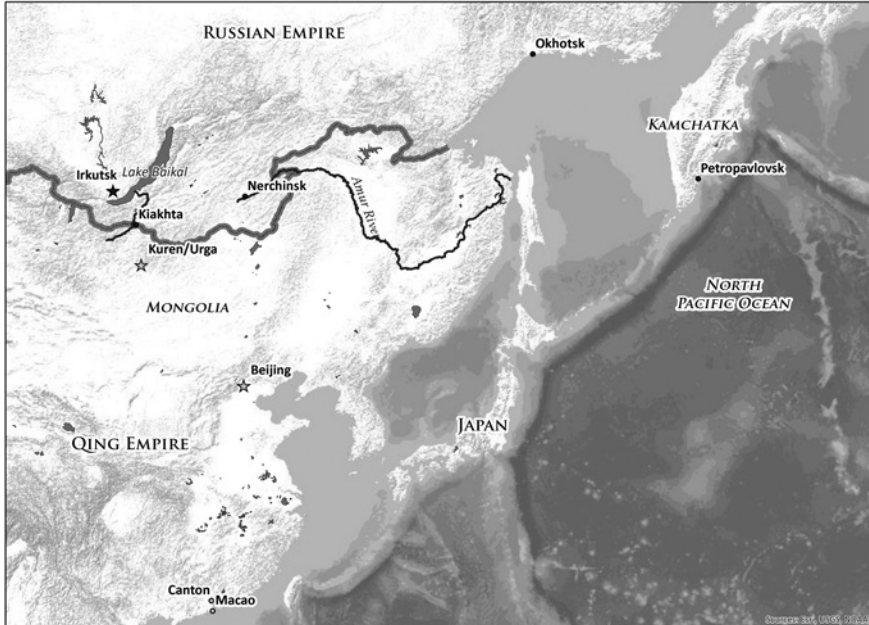


FIGURE 1 *Northeast Asia in the eighteenth century.*

when the Society was still officially banned around the world, the Jesuits really were involved in a conspiracy—but they were the willing pawns, not the master manipulators. The plot was put into action by an empire indifferent to their religious aims, Russia, and aimed against Britain, a state actively suspicious of their existence. It was meant to have taken months, but stretched out over decades, and received its quietus only at the hands of a supposedly friendly papacy. Most incongruously of all, its central prize was control over the North Pacific fur trade with China, but its consequences redounded all the way to the Potomac River.

All of these features run against the grain of contemporary scholarship on the Jesuits. Even though they have largely cast off “apology and polemic,” as John W. O’Malley pointed out in 1999, in favor of a polyvalent approach to the Jesuit role in a wide range of fields and geographical locations, studies of the Jesuits understandably continue to place the Society and its religious or scientific mission at the center of the narrative.¹ Such an approach has meant that this story, too, has been told (most recently, in an article by Marek Inglot,

1 John W. O’Malley et al., eds., *The Jesuits. Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3.

following suggestions in his earlier book) on the basis of scanty and incomplete Jesuit sources.² The scattered but wide-ranging, often formerly secret, materials in Russian archives dealing with Jesuit involvement in East Asian affairs, by contrast, reveal the Jesuits as marginal but deeply engaged actors in the complex geopolitics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This strange conspiracy, in other words, can demonstrate the value of a less Jesuit-centric perspective on a topic which seems so deeply in the purview of Jesuit historians.

The Russian fur trade with the Qing Empire, and its vulnerability to British takeover, was rooted in the unique circumstances of the Russo-Qing encounter. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Manchu armies defeated would-be Russian colonizers when the two empires met along the Amur River. The 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, in which Jesuits in the service of the Kangxi emperor played a major role as translators and go-betweens, rolled back Russian expansion in the region but legalized Russo-Chinese trade both by caravans and along the border.³ The Qing realm rapidly became one of the foremost destinations for Siberian and North Pacific furs, even after the 1727 Treaty of Kiakhta restricted border trade to the entrepôts of Kiakhta and Tsurukhaitu (the latter was largely moribund) and after the caravans terminated in 1755. In the eighteenth century Kiakhta, located on the Mongolian border southeast of Lake Baikal, may have accounted for a tenth of Russia's total foreign trade, despite the underdeveloped infrastructure and minuscule population of eastern Siberia.⁴ But Qing foreign policy generally regarded trade as a boon to be granted to foreigners on the condition of their good behavior. When Russians were perceived to be acting "stubborn" or disagreed with Qing officials in Mongolia about the resolution of border disputes, smuggling incidents, or criminal cases, the trade was often halted completely.⁵

2 Marek Inglot, "Le missioni della Compagnia di Gesù di Russia Bianca (1772–1820)," *Studia Missionalia* 60 (2011): 329–31; Marek Inglot, *La Compagnia di Gesù nell'Impero Russo (1772–1820) e la sua parte nella restaurazione generale della Compagnia* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997), 185n64; Stanislaw Załęski, *Les Jésuites de la Russie-Blanche* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1886), I:226–27.

3 Peter C. Perdue, "Boundaries and Trade in the Early Modern World: Negotiations at Nerchinsk and Beijing," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 3 (2010): 341–56, doi:10.1353/ecs.0.0187; Thomas Pereira and Joseph Sebes, *The Jesuits and the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689). The Diary of Thomas Pereira* (Rome: Institutum Historicum S.I., 1962).

4 Clifford Foust, *Muscovite and Mandarin: Russia's Trade with China and Its Setting, 1727–1805* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 340 and passim.

5 E.g., Foust, *Muscovite and Mandarin*, 236–80.

One such interruption took place in 1785. Russia refused to execute a bandit named Uladzai who had plundered and killed a Chinese merchant, arguing that the death penalty had been abolished in the Russian Empire. Qing officials found this reasoning specious and marked the end of the trade with a symbolic cannon shot, which led Catherine the Great to make hasty preparations for war.⁶ Though no hostilities took place, the trade remained firmly closed until a new treaty addendum was signed in 1792. Meanwhile, a small British East India Company ship called the *Lark* arrived in Kamchatka and offered the local commander its services in transporting and selling Russian furs in Canton (Guangzhou) while the trade was closed. East India Company archives mention nothing about this ship, which suggests it not explicitly authorized by the London headquarters. The Siberian governor was enthusiastic, but it seems clear that the prospect of British penetration into the North Pacific inspired terror in Russian officials, who began to see a future in which Great Britain would use the trade interruption to supplant Russia in furs just as it had gradually overmatched its European competitors in the Canton trade after the 1750s.⁷ Given sufficient investment, naval trade was capable of far out-matching Kiakhta in volume, since the latter was remote from the Russian as well as the Chinese economic heartlands. The Russian fear of the British was ultimately based on a misapprehension. Although the East India Company did send a few exploratory voyages to the northwestern coast of North America in the mid-1780s, it would largely be American traders who would eventually dominate the fur trade in Canton.⁸

Yet events only seemed to reinforce Russian suspicions. The British presence in the Canton trade had been growing steadily since the mid-eighteenth century, but the East India Company was unhappy with the trading disadvantages imposed on its Canton merchants, who also had no permission to trade at any other Qing port. An embassy led by Lord Cathcart (1760–1788) was prepared starting in 1787 and equipped with instructions to seek a “new establishment”

6 Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Moscow (RGADA) f. 1261, op. 1, d. 1406.

7 British Library, India Office Records (IOR), R/10/33; RGADA, f. 24, n. 62, ch. 3, l. 1–46. For the division of Qing commercial activities between Kiakhta, Canton, and other outposts, see Matthew W. Mosca, “The Qing State and Its Awareness of Eurasian Interconnections, 1789–1806,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 103–16, doi: 10.1353/ecs.2014.0004.

8 Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident: le commerce à Canton au XVIII^e siècle, 1719–1833* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1964), 1161–98. See also John R. Bockstoe, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North. The Contest Among Native and Foreign Nations for the Bering Strait Fur Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Ryan Tucker Jones, *Empire of Extinction. Russians and the North Pacific's Strange Beasts of the Sea, 1741–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

between 27 and 30° N (roughly Zhejiang province), but was aborted due to Cathcart's premature death.⁹ Lord Macartney (1737–1806), who had been the ambassador to Russia in the 1760s, was appointed to replace him in 1791. His brief was even more expansive. In addition to remedying the complaints of Canton merchants and seeking for a new trading port north of Canton, he was to promote British manufactures, find a profitable way of abolishing the Cohong (gonghang) merchant guild, and obtain a permanent residence for a British agent and students in Beijing. Above all, the directors instructed him, “We apprehend that it will be a most desirable circumstance to impress the minds of the Chinese with a favorable opinion of the Embassy, this Country and its commerce, which must produce the happiest effects at Canton or wherever else we may obtain a settlement,” yet “the first and most important object is, neither to impair nor injure our present situation, thereby checking those prospects which are decidedly in view.”¹⁰ Among the documents assembled by Macartney during his preparations was a copy of a diplomatic letter sent to Russia by the Qing court in 1789, containing bitter recriminations about the Uladzai affair.¹¹

The Macartney embassy appeared to represent a formidable threat to Russia, not only because a more northerly port would support a better market for furs but also because it would allow the Qing to use the British competition as leverage in future disputes. (In fact, there is no evidence Macartney was even aware of his mission's potential threat to Kiakhta.) On October 5, 1792 (OS), the Russian ambassador to the Court of St. James's, Semën Vorontsov (1744–1832), wrote to his brother Aleksandr (1741–1805), who was the head of the College of Commerce and was thus responsible for formulating trade policy: “I would also very much like to [know] what you would tell me about what has been done in relation to this country's embassy to China. I would be very angry if it this matter were to be regarded with indifference. If the English succeed, we will see, but too late, what sort of harm this will do to our commerce.”¹² Already aware of the expanding British ambitions in the Pacific, Catherine II

9 British Library, IOR/G/12/90; Saxe Bannister, ed., *A Journal of the First French Embassy to China 1698–1700* (London: T. C. Newby, 1859), 209–26.

10 Earl H. Pritchard, “The Instructions of the East India Company to Lord Macartney on His Embassy to China and His Reports to the Company, 1792–4. Part I: Instructions from the Company,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 70, no. 02 (1938): 201–30, doi:10.1017/S0035869X00087906.

11 British Library, IOR, G/12/91, 12–13.

12 Petr Bartenev, ed., *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova* (Moscow: Tip. A.I. Mamontova, 1870), IX:261–64.

(r. 1762–1796) had begun to plan for contingencies. A Russian expedition with the objective of opening trade with Japan, led by Adam Laksman (1766–1806), was organized starting in 1791. The original concept involved capturing the mouth of the Amur River by force, which would substantially ease any effort at trade with the Pacific at the cost of likely war and permanent rupture with the Qing. At the same time, Russia began expanding its colonization of Alaska, chartering the Russian-American Company during the last years of the century.¹³ But these were merely side projects. At the heart of Catherine's effort to counter the perceived British threat was a direct response, and this was where the Jesuits came in.

Though unusual, it was not a wholly arbitrary choice of allies. Russians had often had recourse to the Jesuits as informants in the context of relations with the Qing. This began as early as the 1670s, when the Russian ambassador Nikolai Spafarii (1636–1708) obtained apparently privileged information from the famed Jesuit astronomer Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) during negotiations in Beijing. At any rate, he claimed as much in his official report; historians have since raised substantial doubts that Verbiest was even capable of providing secret intelligence.¹⁴ Over the ensuing decades, these relations grew frostier: in 1699, the papal envoy Christoph Ignaz de Guarient attributed suspicions against the Jesuits in Russia to fears that they were intending to steal information about potential routes to China.¹⁵ In the 1730s, however, the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg began to correspond with the Beijing Jesuits, both sides being fully aware that such letters had the potential to cast official suspicion on the missionaries. Their exchanges remained for the most part apolitical, though they did involve the exchange of maps.¹⁶

Russia mounted its first real attempt to leverage Jesuit connections for diplomatic purposes in 1755–57, when the envoy Vasilii Bratishchev went to Beijing. Conceived as part of a convoluted and largely secret strategy for expanding

13 John L. Cranmer-Byng, "Russian and British Interests in the Far East 1791–1793," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 10, no. 3 (October 1, 1968): 357–75.

14 Mark Mancall, *Russia and China: Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 65–110; Michel N. Pavlovsky, *Chinese-Russian Relations* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 99–126.

15 "Soobrazheniia kasatel'no moskovskoi missii/Cogitationes circa missionem Moscoviticam," in *Pis'ma i doneseniiia iezuitov o Rossii: kontsa XVII i nachala XVIII veka*, ed. Mikhail Iosifovich Koialovich (Saint Petersburg: Senarskaia tipografiia, 1904), 196–202; 370–74.

16 Tatiana Pan and Oleg Shatalov, *Arkhivnye materialy po istorii zapadnoevropeiskogo i rossiiskogo kitaevedeniia* (Saint Petersburg: Sankt-Peterburgskii filial Instituta vostokovedeniia, 2004).

Russia's presence in the Pacific, his mission's goal was primarily to obtain the right of navigation on the Amur River, which was mostly in Qing territory and which Russian ships had hitherto not had the right to enter.¹⁷ The president of the Academy of Sciences, Count Kirill Razumovskii (1728–1803), provided Bratishchev with recommendation letters to each of the three Jesuit colleges in Beijing, which he was to visit in order to deliver correspondence, books, and botanical materials from the Academy. The hope was that the Beijing Jesuits, whose supposed high standing at court was known throughout Europe from publications such as Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's *Description générale de la Chine*, would use their clout to advance the Russian cause.¹⁸ Yet there is no evidence that they were asked for their opinion by the Qing court or, indeed, had much voice in foreign policy at all, especially in such a sensitive matter. Predictably, Bratishchev's mission was not a success, and the Jesuits' involvement, which was limited to informing him through indirect means of the emperor's attitude, was not of much practical use. Instead, he found a valuable source in the Propaganda Fide missionary Sigismondo di San Nicola (1713–1767), to whom he brought a letter from his home town of Turin. San Nicola provided important information about the emperor's reception of the Russian proposals, which was not an eager one.¹⁹

Cooperation with Russia seemed to offer something to the Jesuits as well, despite the failure of several past attempts to establish a land route to China through Russia. Before his death, the well-known Beijing astronomer and historian Antoine Gabil (1689–1759) wrote to Superior General Ignazio Visconti to express the hope that cultivating Russian goodwill in the Qing context could finally lead to the Society's restoration in the Russian Empire.²⁰ The next twenty years, however, brought much more serious problems for the Jesuits, pushing any such projects into the background. After being expelled from Spain and dissolved in France, the Society of Jesus was abolished worldwide by the 1773 breve *Dominus ac Redemptor*, setting off a vicious internecine rivalry among the Catholic missionaries in Beijing.

For Russia, the breve created an opportunity. Catherine II instantly became protectress of the Jesuits by refusing to allow the dissolution to take effect in Russian territory, including the Livonian and Belarusian lands acquired in the first partition of Poland (where the Jesuits had a well-established presence).

17 See Foust, *Muscovite and Mandarin*, 245–55.

18 Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg Branch (ARAN), R. III, op. 1, d. 187a, l. 140–46.

19 Vladimir Miasnikov et al., eds., *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XVIII veke: Materialy i dokumenty* (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2011), VI:197–98.

20 Gabil to Visconti, 30 Apr. 1755, ARAN, R. III, op. 1, d. 187a, l. 122.

Though the ex-Jesuits in Beijing still remained outside the Society, it was not long before they discovered what Catherine had done. In 1777, the French former Jesuit and naturalist Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727–1780) wrote to the Academy to register his profound gratitude to the empress:

If I have abandoned all my literary connections and apply myself more than ever to cultivate the ones I have with you and with the Academy, it is because I owe it to the joy I've had of being a Jesuit, and [...] I will do the impossible in order to be able to offer your Triumphant and Generous Empress some sort of work which may be an eternal Monument of my recognition of the kindnesses with which she honors the Jesuits of her lands.²¹

A number of the Jesuits in Qing territory accepted reenrollment into the Society through Belarus, including (allegedly) Bishop Laimbeckhoven of Nanjing himself.²² If nothing else, the surviving province could have been a powerful source of external support. In 1782, the ex-Jesuit missionary François Bourgeois wrote a lengthy missive addressed to “the Fathers of the Society in White Russia,” summarizing the post-dissolution controversy and accompanied by a pile of extracts from documents. This highly biased document represented a clear attempt to persuade the ex-Jesuits' new allies to take the French college's side in the struggle.²³ The strategy worked: in 1785, the Jesuit superior wrote back, encouraging Bourgeois to keep firm and equating his opponents in Beijing with those who had abandoned the Society in its darkest days.²⁴

Russia now had Jesuits both among its subjects and as potential debtors in Beijing. When the Macartney threat appeared, it did not take long for Russian high officials to realize the potential value of this strategic resource. A scheme to counter the British embassy with the aid of the Jesuits seems to have been formulated by either Semën or Aleksandr Vorontsov as early as November or December 1791, when Macartney's embassy was still in the planning stage. According to a secret memorandum written in the early nineteenth century

21 Cibot to Euler, 10 Oct 1777, ARAN, f. 1, op. 3, d. 61, l. 87–88.

22 Załęski, *Les Jésuites de la Russie-Blanche*, I:417; Joseph Krahl, *China Missions in Crisis: Bishop Laimbeckhoven and His Times, 1738–1787* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1964), 301.

23 ARSI Jap-Sin, 185. See also Inglot, *La Compagnia di Gesù*, 245–46; Aloys Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine: 1552–1773* (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la mission catholique, 1932), II:926–53; Krahl, *China Missions in Crisis*; Camille de Rochemonteix, *Joseph Amiot et les derniers survivants de la Mission française à Pékin* (Paris: Picard et fils, 1915).

24 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Russ. 1015, 39–40.

and now held in the manuscript collections of the State Historical Museum in Moscow, the plan consisted of two options, of which the second was confirmed by the empress:

1. To send to Beijing, under the pretext of border disputes, a smart, humble, and resourceful man; to send with him some scholars, to disabuse the Chinese of the idea that we are all Kropotovs, who unfortunately gave them a very poor sense of our degree of enlightenment.²⁵ Beyond this, a few Jesuits, in their ordinary civil capacity [*у обыкновенном гражданском звании*], who by means of their brethren located in Beijing, may be quite useful. Through them, he must secretly persuade the Chinese Government of the danger to which it will be subject if it once allows the English into their ports, by depicting their behavior in India, the destruction of the most beautiful domains of the Great Mogul, and that they have equal aims in mind for China, and so on.

The 2nd means consisted in this, that before dispatching the minister, two Jesuits should be sent with news of this enterprise, who can meanwhile preemptively discover who in the Chinese ministry supports the English, and can underhandedly give them to know of the hostile plans of the English against their state as a matter known full well in Europe.²⁶

This meant that, as Semën Vorontsov wrote from London in January of 1792, the plan for a Japanese expedition needed to be scuttled, as the border conquest it required risked “making us lose all hope of reestablishing that commerce which we can conduct with them to the great advantage of our country.” (In the event the expedition simply proceeded from Okhotsk instead.)²⁷

“As far as the Jesuits are concerned,” Vorontsov wrote, “it is necessary first of all to send a trusted person [*homme de confiance*] to the provincial in White Russia, to tell them that there is need of three subjects of his society, capable and healthy, to send them to China, so that he can send them immediately to Petersburg, of whom two would be sent right away as couriers to Beijing so as not to lose time, while the third would go with the ambassador.” They were to receive the same compensation as academicians, which amounted to a handsome sum.²⁸ In the

25 Ivan Kropotov was an envoy in Beijing in 1763 and negotiated the Addendum to the Treaty of Kiakhta in 1768. See Yanagisawa Akira, “Some Remarks on the ‘Addendum to the Treaty of Kiakhta’ in 1768,” *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 63 (2005): 65–88.

26 State Historical Museum, Department of Written Sources, Moscow (OPI GIM), f. 450, d. 206, l. 35ff.

27 Bartenev, *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova*, IX:229.

28 *Ibid.*, IX:229–31.

spring of 1792 two, not three, Jesuits were sent to St. Petersburg from the Jesuit college at Polotsk: Gabriel Gruber (an Austrian engineer who would soon become superior general of the Society) (1740–1805), and Manswet Skokowski (1751–1798).²⁹ According to the nineteenth-century historian Stanislaw Załęski, the Jesuits brought with them an epic poem dedicated to Catherine the Great and were duly rewarded for it. After their audience at court, they were shuttled to Tsarskoe Selo, where Grand Chancellor Aleksandr Bezborodko (1747–1799) explained to them the nature of the secret task that awaited them. Gruber declared that he could not go to Beijing without the permission of the pope, because the Society of Jesus had been formally suppressed in China; it was also necessary first to achieve some sort of understanding with the former Beijing Jesuits from a distance, so as not to provoke suspicion at the Qing court. Bezborodko—Załęski claims—accepted this reasoning and promised that papal permission would be granted.³⁰

A detailed note about the nature of this understanding was composed by Aleksandr Vorontsov on June 3, 1792; it may be found in draft form (though portions, judging by the content, may be missing) in the Vorontsov papers at the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, mislabeled as dating to 1778 and filed together with two irrelevant documents about Jesuit history.³¹ It does not mention Gruber's invocation of the pope, but it does depart from the assumption that the Jesuits should write a letter before going to China. Vorontsov reports that he has met with Jesuits for the first time and they seem like capable people. Yet they do not know whom to write to in Beijing, and not having heard about the nature of the mission before leaving home for St. Petersburg, have failed to bring materials relevant to China with them. They therefore request to be allowed to return to Polotsk and consult their materials, which Vorontsov sees no problem with, as long as they set off for Irkutsk immediately afterwards. In a reply written on June 8, Catherine (via Bezborodko) approved Vorontsov's proposal, as long as the Jesuits composed a project for a Latin letter before leaving the capital.³²

Although no letter in Latin can be found in Russian archives, Vorontsov's note contains extensive plans for its contents, which reflect the perceptions of Russian officialdom about what the Jesuits valued most. Gruber and Skokowski were to begin with an invocation of their loyalty to Catherine, "making here a greeting [*sic*] to the Chinese, that despite the various persecutions in other

29 OPI GIM, f. 450, d. 206, l. 37; see Joseph Dehergne, *Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1973), 254; 392.

30 Załęski, *Les Jésuites de la Russie-Blanche*, I:226–27.

31 RGADA, f. 1261, op. 1, d. 968, l. 11.

32 Bartenev, *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova*, XIII:259.

countries, they at least have the consolation of living in peace and prosperity in the two greatest empires [...] and that this protection [*pokrov*] gives their order a means to obtain its pleasure and consolation through its love of science." The emphasis on science was to be the linchpin of the missive, for the next stage was to ask "if their colleagues need any sort of physical or astronomical instruments, which they could easily deliver to them in Beijing." This in turn would open an opportunity to ask about the British embassy and the devices it would be bringing. Now they could finally introduce the damning evidence about the British role in India: "This nation, being so quick in its commercial and political enterprises, has, in the same part of the world as the Chinese state, begun by opening commerce and trading posts in the East Indies and finally has ended by capturing the best Indian possessions, so that many provinces have abandoned the lawful rule of the Indian Sovereign and are already ruled by Englishmen." Having laid this groundwork, the way lay open for an inquiry, "purely out of curiosity," about the embassy's likely future prospects. At the end, Vorontsov made sure to provide for some flexibility:

To this they might add in their letter, something about their order, and of its present condition, as well as about the sciences, whatever they themselves find appropriate, and it seems to be not a bad idea to expand this, so that the material about the English does not seem to be the main topic of the letter but rather to be mentioned in passing.³³

This supposedly fraternal letter from one college of Jesuits to another, in other words, was an entirely constructed document in which every phrase and sentence was dictated by Russian geopolitical ends and shaped by Russian stereotypes about Jesuit values and beliefs. Not a word of Vorontsov's note mentioned missionary activity or made reference to the Catholic church at all.

Finding a way to deliver the letter, once written, was not high on Vorontsov's list of priorities. His plan suggested vaguely that "it will be easy to send it from here to the acting governor of Irkutsk, instructing him to transfer it, without using his name, to the border commissioner, and for the latter to give it to the Chinese one, telling him that it was addressed to him from the Jesuits in Polotsk with a request to send it along to Beijing."³⁴ Much more pressing was the need to come up with the appropriate gifts with which to equip the future ambassador, once the Jesuits had succeeded in their mission, as he had no doubt they would. His brother wrote from London, also on June 3, that "there should be no

33 RGADA, f. 1261, op. 1, d. 968, l. 13–24.

34 Ibid., 24.

more consideration of [scientific] instruments, because they will be contemptible [*méprisables*] compared to those which are being sent from here. For four months the most celebrated artists have done nothing else but work for my lord Macartney."³⁵ Yet in fact at that point there was not even any guarantee that a Russian embassy would be accepted, still less one equal in grandeur to Macartney's. Catherine and her ministers had built a precarious house of cards: the ambassador was to be preceded by Gruber and Skokowski, who first needed to receive a response from Beijing to a letter that itself had yet to be written and delivered (in addition to a writ of permission from the pontiff). Meanwhile, by September 11, Macartney—whose preliminaries had already been taken care of—was already sailing to Canton, and time to undermine him was running short.

One of the problems with Vorontsov's postal scenario—as he would have discovered had he consulted anyone familiar with the Jesuit correspondence—was that the missionaries had always specifically instructed their correspondents to avoid Qing-subject middlemen, because of the risk of exposure to charges of espionage. A letter was written and sent by express courier to Irkutsk, where it was successfully received on August 13. Ivan Pil', the governor-general of Eastern Siberia, reported secretly that he had ordered the letter to be sent on to Kiakhtha and given into the hands of Vasilii Igumnov (1730?–1804), a longtime local intelligence agent who maintained extensive friendships and contacts in Mongolia.³⁶ Igumnov himself was to tell the Qing officials at Kuren (Urga, modern Ulaanbaatar), the Mongolian capital, that the British were sending an embassy and that their plans for the Qing were as nefarious as their history in India. For some reason, however, when another decree from Catherine reached Pil's desk on November 28, the letter was still in Kiakhtha, and the local officials there were ordered to send it through the Qing outpost on the other side of the border as soon as possible.³⁷ There, the project hit a decisive snag. As it turned out, it was not just the Jesuits who were suspicious of receiving correspondence through middlemen: the middlemen themselves were wary of getting involved. "To my regret," Pil' reported on January 30, 1793, "the border officer Lieutenant Tiutrin [...] could not persuade the jargūci [the border secretary] to give anything except a refusal." Tiutrin noted the jargūci's "embarrassed expression," his "politic smile," and his announcement that this request was "novel and unprecedented, with which he does not dare to importune the ambans [here, Qing Mongolian officials] [...] and that his, the jargūci's, request

35 Bartenev, *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova*, IX:238–39.

36 RGADA, f. 24, d. 64, l. 132–333.

37 *Ibid.*, 180.

would seem strange to the ambans, and it is unknown how they could receive it, unless he sends to Beijing individually, which his government would know about and from which he would not escape the most dangerous consequences.”³⁸ Attached to Pil’s report in the archives of the imperial cabinet is a letter from Gruber in Polotsk, dated 14 July 1792 and addressed to “Your Excellency” (likely either Bezborodko or one of the Vorontsovs). In it, Gruber appears to be making active and detailed plans to purchase a substantial quantity of scientific devices in London, even though arranging anything with the Jesuits in time to frustrate the British was now out of the question. The purpose of the letter is entirely unclear from the text.³⁹

Igumnov’s trip to Urga in the fall of 1792 may have had a little more success. According to the nineteenth-century memorandum, the reference to the British in India “made such a strong impression on the ambans that the next day after their conversation they sent a clerk with the protocol and asked him to correct the names of the lands conquered by the English and the name of their ambassador.”⁴⁰ In 1802, Igumnov was given a promotion on the basis of his alleged role in undermining Macartney.⁴¹ Yet the Qing court learned of Igumnov’s visit only on March 1, 1793, and the official record says only that “Captain Wasili” came out of courtesy to inform the ambans that England was sending an embassy—with no overtones of danger or alarm.⁴² Of course, from the British point of view the Macartney embassy was a spectacular failure, its only tangible result being the Qianlong emperor’s famously condescending edict dismissing European goods. Matthew Mosca has pointed to Macartney’s sense that he was being treated with suspicion due to British activities in India—indeed, he felt this was the main reason for the embassy’s lack of success—and perhaps the Russian conspiracy was one of the sources of Qing distrust.⁴³ In 1805, the Russian ambassador Count Golovkin (1762–1846) seems to have been under the impression that the attempt to use India to discredit the British had achieved its goal. “Because this expedient was already resorted to successfully by our court in 1793,” Golovkin wrote, “it should now be used with

38 Ibid., 182.

39 Ibid., 184.

40 GIM, f. 450, d. 206, l. 37^v–38.

41 RGIA, f. 1643, op. 1, d. 27.

42 Lo-shu Fu, *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations, 1644–1820* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1966), I:331.

43 Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 147–56.

moderation, so as not to let the Chinese suspect that we blacken [the reputation] of others out of envy or greed.⁴⁴

Yet there appears to be no evidence in Qing sources that either Igumnov or any correspondence with the Jesuits (if it had taken place) had influenced the outcome one way or the other. Actually, from the Qing perspective the embassy seems to have been a qualified success. An envoy had come from foreign lands to present tribute, he was received hospitably and rewarded richly, and his departure took place without incident, though court ceremonial had been violated in a few important respects.⁴⁵ Whether the conspiracy was successful may thus be a fundamentally unanswerable question. Having only an incomplete sense of what lay on the other side of the Himalayas, it was hard for the Qianlong emperor to imagine that a country of which he had barely heard could ever threaten his sovereignty. Whether a new and untested tributary should be granted trade concessions was an entirely different question.⁴⁶

Gruber's letter was, in the end, delivered personally by Igumnov, who was assigned to escort a group of Orthodox missionaries and students, part of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, to Beijing in 1794–95. As he did throughout his four-decade intelligence career, Igumnov kept a secret journal of his encounters and conversations, including numerous meetings with the Beijing ex-Jesuits and other Catholic missionaries (whom he seems to have known from prior visits to the capital). The entry for January 12 records that "I gave two sables of second quality in the name of the [Russian] archimandrite to the Jesuit [José] Bernard[o de Almeida (1728–1805)] of the Southern Church, who was the translator for the English envoys and is familiar with all of the circumstances relating to them, in hopes of receiving a response to the secret letter that was sent."⁴⁷ The journal does not mention the receipt of any response.

Nonetheless, Igumnov's three-hour-long conversations with Almeida and the French ex-Jesuit Louis de Poirot (1735–1813) (conducted through translators in Manchu and Latin), as well as his local Mongol informants (with whom he spoke Mongol directly) left nothing to the imagination with respect to the conduct, goals, and the eventual fate of the Macartney embassy. Over "tea and snacks," Almeida provided him with a four-point list of Macartney's requests,

44 Sergei Tikhvinskii et al, eds., *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XIX v.* (Moscow: Institut Dal'nego vostoka, 1995), 372.

45 See James Louis Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

46 See, e.g., the memorials and edicts collected in Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (OR IVR), A 66 Mss.

47 RGADA, f. 15, d. 237, l. 9.

an account of the gifts he presented, and some sense of the surveillance to which the embassy was subjected in Beijing. Further, he also promised that “out of friendship with the captain” he would report on the upcoming Dutch embassy as well. Poirot (along with the Lazarist Nicholas Raux [1754–1801]) remarked on the Dutch embassy, offered the lack of a proper kowtow as an explanation for Macartney’s failure and appeared to agree with Igumnov that the Russian trade was more advantageous for the Qing than the British, because Russians imported cloth and other goods while the British exchanged their exports for gold and silver. Later, both Almeida and Raux provided Igumnov with inside information on the course of the Dutch embassy, which left Beijing while the Russian agent was still there. (A merchant in Igumnov’s party was also allowed to spy on the Dutch while disguised as a Chinese man, though without much success.) All in all, Igumnov recorded six meetings with the ex-Jesuits over the course of five months.⁴⁸ In the ensuing years, the members of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing maintained an extensive friendship with them, which included the sharing of intelligence, until the Qing court warned them to cease all contacts with the Russians and mutual visits within the city were halted.⁴⁹

The grand conspiracy thought up in by the Vorontsovs and the empress, then, did not succeed in any of its details despite the ultimate accomplishment of its (highly overdetermined) main objective, Lord Macartney’s decisive diplomatic reversal. Igumnov’s trip to Urga, whether or not it had actually resulted in a growing Qing consciousness of threat, evinced no request or permit for a full embassy to Beijing. Gruber and Skokowski’s voyage from Polotsk to St. Petersburg produced no functioning sustained correspondence, still less a physical mission to China. Yet the project was not completely abandoned when Macartney returned in defeat. (Vorontsov wrote of the failure from London in July 1794, with Macartney not even in England yet).⁵⁰ In various forms, it continued to shape Russian policies toward the Qing for the next decade. After all, Russia’s perception of the British commercial threat had not abated despite the embassy’s setback—quite the opposite—and the geopolitical crisis produced by the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon was raising the stakes even higher.

In 1803, Emperor Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) decided finally to send the major embassy that had been in the works for so long and which had been so key to the Vorontsov project. Not only would it be the first Russian diplomatic mission

48 Ibid., 17ff.

49 RGIA, f. 1374, op. 2, d. 1596.

50 Bartenev, *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova*, IX:327–28.

to Beijing in forty years, it would be the first since the 1720s to be headed by a major aristocrat endowed with the full authority to negotiate on behalf of the Russian Empire: Count Iurii Golovkin. Golovkin's instructions were intended to be a real answer to Macartney. He was to secure the opening of trade on the northwest borders of the Qing Empire, obtain permission (hitherto refused) for Russia to trade at Canton, and most importantly, finally persuade the emperor to open the Amur to Russian ships. The result would be to shore up Russia's commercial presence in the Qing lands as well as to provide a much cheaper supply route to the increasingly significant settlements of Russian America, all key ingredients for resisting British competition in the Pacific. Golovkin's suite consisted of hundreds of people, including translators in Mongol, Manchu, Chinese, and Latin as well as a number of scholars and natural scientists. The embassy proved to be even more of a humiliating disaster for Russia than Macartney's had been for Britain. Due to a dispute over kowtow protocol and the size of his entourage—exasperated by an overanxious Qing administrator in Mongolia—Golovkin was forced to return to Irkutsk in 1805 rather than compromise the honor of the empire. He had not even succeeded in entering China proper.⁵¹

In the wake of this debacle, Russian intelligence authorities tried to make use of the next rotating shift of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission to make contact with the former Beijing Jesuits. The instructions given to the mission's escorting agent, Semën Pervushin—though oddly misinformed about the success of Macartney's embassy—in 1807 specified that he was to

Get to know and live in friendly interaction with the Jesuits, who were known by the late collegiate assessor Igumnov in his repeated visits to Beijing. But do not take them into your confidence, following the prudence that must be the guide of all conduct, in the obtaining of information needed by the government. They can be useful in doing so. It is desirable that you list the entire Jesuit society by name, their type of activity, their influence on government affairs, inclination towards one or the other European state, and finally, attempt to determine whether they respect the superior (general) of this order in Russia.⁵²

Further, the instructions gave Pervushin detailed guidance for conversations. Beyond being merely cautious of possible British influence and bribery, in

⁵¹ See, e.g., Foust, *Muscovite and Mandarin*, 323ff.

⁵² *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XIX v.*, 710. (See also a slightly different version in Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St. Petersburg, Archive of Orientalists, f. 7, op. 1, d. 38, l. 22–38).

conversations with ex-Jesuits the agent would “observing exterior calm, subtly extract needed information, and not immediately or suddenly so that they may not guess at what you need.” He was provided with a few sample conversational scenarios as illustration.⁵³ Though it is likely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not know this, a register of all the Beijing ex-Jesuits would be brief indeed: by this point only Frs. Poirot, de Grammont (1736–1812?), and Panzi (1768–1812?) remained among the living, and were unlikely to be of much use or influence. By the time the mission made its return journey in 1819, all of them were long dead.⁵⁴

As part of the embassy preparations, Alexander revived another element of the Vorontsov project: the Russian Jesuit mission to China. In June 1799 (and again in 1800), Gabriel Gruber had sent a letter to Emperor Paul in which he begged for his support in obtaining a papal breve granting permission for the Jesuits to operate outside the boundaries of the Russian Empire. He pointed out that such a breve had already been asked for in the context of the China project, “attempted twice,” “because for the complete success of the Embassy, it was necessary for me to appear and act as a Jesuit, which could not take place without a breve.” But Pope Pius VI (r. 1775–1799) had died before the final breve could be obtained, so Paul’s involvement was necessary in order to restart the effort.⁵⁵ In 1801, as a direct result of Gruber’s petition—and hence of the China project—Pius VII (r. 1800–1823) issued the breve *Catholicae fidei*, which would eventually become the foundation for the Jesuit restoration worldwide.

Gruber continued his support for the China project under the new emperor Alexander I. In 1803, the Polotsk Jesuits received a letter from Louis de Poirot, who described the dire state of the Beijing mission and asked to be readmitted into the Society.⁵⁶ The Golovkin embassy offered the chance to rebuild the Jesuit community in Beijing while doing the Russian government a major service. According to the memoirs of a participant in the Golovkin embassy, Gruber had enthusiastically offered Jesuit assistance to the court during the embassy’s preparations, though his death at the end of 1805 prevented much further progress. The memoirist claims that “the general of the order, through his missionaries, who then had significant influence in Beijing, prepared the Chinese government for our cordial reception.” Ironically, this support now made the embassy itself suspect. “No,” he observes, “Russia should not have

53 *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XIX v.*, 711.

54 See Pfister, *Notices biographiques*, II:958ff.

55 RGIA, f. 1329, op. 2, d. 159.

56 ARSI, Russ. 1016, 120–21; Edward Devitt, “Voyage of the Very Rev. Father John Anthony Grassi, S. J. from Russia to America,” *Woodstock Letters* 4 (1875): 115–36.

expected a satisfactory conclusion to a matter begun under the oversight of a Pole [Adam Czartoryski (1770–1861), then the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] and some Roman Catholic monks.”⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Czartoryski himself argued that “the cooperation of the Jesuits in Beijing, who are respected and have connections with highly-placed people there” was “the chief means” of securing the embassy’s goals.⁵⁸

Gruber’s assistance took the form of recommending the Jesuit scientists Giovanni Grassi (1775–1849), Norbert Korsak (1773–1846), and Jan Stürmer (the latter a lay brother) to be sent as missionaries to Beijing. In order not to violate precedent—Jesuits had always traveled via Canton—the three of them had to make their way to Macau by sea rather than joining the embassy on land.⁵⁹ Once they arrived in Beijing, they were to focus on gathering intelligence and spreading their influence to aid Golovkin in his work, among other things:

Because it is important that the Ambassador be aware of the Chinese Ministry’s disposition towards him, of the way he is regarded by various people, and of the degree of success on which he can count, it is necessary that the Jesuits advise him of the means to keep apprised of everything which takes place in the Chinese bureaus relative to his mission, so that he may be well-informed about this. Also, they must find ways of using indirect approaches to deliver to highly-placed men all sorts of insinuations and news which they believe are suited to Russia’s interests and which may contribute to the Ambassador’s success in the negotiations.⁶⁰

The letter to Korsak and his party Gruber had drafted before he died sketched out these requirements and framed them as justified both by loyalty to Russia and to “harmony” between the two empires, though later versions omitted this (it is unclear why).⁶¹

In 1806, the new Jesuit superior general Tadeusz Brzozowski (1749–1820) composed a letter to Poirot and Luigi Cipolla (1736–1805?), to be sent with the Orthodox missionaries through Irkutsk. Brzozowski related the news of Gruber’s death, reassured Poirot and Cipolla that some 330 Jesuits survived under Alexander I’s protection, and promised that Korsak, Grassi, and Stürmer

57 *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XIX v.*, 766.

58 *Ibid.*, 93–94.

59 Andrei Maslennikov, “Osnovanie struktur rimsko-katolicheskoi tserkvi v Sibiri,” in Marek Inglot, ed., *Rossia i iezuity, 1772–1820* (Moscow: Nauka, 2006), 237–59.

60 ARSI, Sin. 1001-III, 50–59.

61 ARSI, Russ. 1016, 259–262; Sin. 1001-III, 72.

were on their way to Beijing. The Jesuits in Russia were certain that papal support would be obtained with the help of Cardinal Tommaso Arezzo (1756–1833). As the St. Petersburg college's *Diarium* for 1806 puts it, since this would be "a great boon to the Russian Emperor," "who would not think that the deal was to be concluded? Certainly the Father General was of this opinion."⁶²

Grassi's autobiographical account tells the long story of their travails.⁶³ First, the three Jesuits were summoned to St. Petersburg, like Gruber and Skokowski before them, without knowing where they were going. After a voyage overland to Copenhagen, they traveled to London. Here they found their first setback: not a single ship was willing to carry them as passengers to Macau. In a moment of supreme irony, they were forced to turn to Lord Macartney for help, but even his intervention failed to secure them a vessel. Moreover, they were beginning to be beset by much more prosaic doubts. Death by shipwreck was a common fate for seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries to East Asia; Grassi and his colleagues were evidently reluctant to accept this sort of martyrdom. In July 1805, Brzozowski chided Korsak for his faint-heartedness: "if you return from London to Russia," he wrote, "and follow the embassy after two or three months, when you were supposed to precede it, this would of course be a shame the blemish of which would never be removed from our name at court."⁶⁴ The next year, when Golovkin's prospects had dimmed, Brzozowski encouraged Korsak to continue his mission, follow in the footsteps of his illustrious Beijing Jesuit predecessors, and "prudently assist not the current Embassy but the future interests of the State: this was done by our Foreign fathers, not Russians such as Father Gerbillon, Father Parnnin, Father Pereyra [Jesuits who had been involved in Russo-Qing negotiations at Nerchinsk and after]: what will the subjects of a gracious Monarch, who maintains us genially and under whose wings we are calmly living, not do?"⁶⁵

Undaunted by their failure in London, then, they traveled onward to Lisbon. In the meantime, the prospects for new missionaries in Beijing had darkened: Qing authorities caught an Italian missionary named Adeodato di San Agostino with an illicit map on his way from Beijing to Macau, triggering a widespread persecution.⁶⁶ But the more decisive blow came in 1807 from the papal office of

62 Archives jésuites de la province de France, Vanves, fonds Brotier, cahier 131, 11–14.

63 Devitt, "Voyage." The original archival version of this document has been translated and published by Inglot, "Le missioni," 338–54.

64 ARSI, Russ. 1016, 304–5.

65 *Ibid.*, 374–76. I am grateful to Maria Blackwood for assistance with the Polish in this letter.

66 Lars Peter Laamann, *Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China. Christian Inculturation and State Control, 1720–1850* (New York-London: Routledge, 2013), 68–69. For a detailed

Propaganda Fide. In deciding on the credentials to be issued to the missionaries, the Propaganda needed to reconcile the opposition of Catholic states like Portugal to the project with the fact that its backer was a schismatic state, albeit one friendly to the papacy.⁶⁷ When the missionaries' credential letters were finally issued, they authorized the new China missionaries to travel only as secular priests, not Jesuits, and placed them under the authority of the vicars apostolic, the Propaganda's missionary bishops. This was unacceptable both to the Jesuits and to the Russian government. The Society of Jesus had struggled against the vicars' authority for as long as the Propaganda Fide had had a presence in China, while the Russian government saw no point to supporting a mission it could not oversee directly. Brzozowski wrote in desperation to seek the help of José Pignatelli and Giovanni Avogadro, but to no avail.⁶⁸ Arguing that the orders in fact entitled the Propaganda Fide to redirect the Jesuits anywhere it wished, as it was likely to do, in 1810 he wrote to Alexander to formally cancel the mission.⁶⁹ The three Jesuits were sent back to England, whence in 1810 Grassi departed for a long and illustrious career in the United States. There, he proved crucial for the survival and flourishing of Georgetown College.⁷⁰ In a letter to his future successors, Brzozowski described the disheartening circumstances of the mission's failure and encouraged future superiors general to avoid any mention of the 9,000 rubles the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had wasted on the project in their discussions with the court.⁷¹

For the former Jesuits in China, the failure of the Russian project sounded the death knell, although Poirot and his remaining comrades were reenrolled in 1806.⁷² In fact, even then may have already been too late. In 1808, Poirot wrote that the new arrivals would have been well accommodated "if only they had come five or six years earlier." Now the anti-Christian persecution and the inroads of the French Lazarists had taken their toll. To carry this final letter to Europe, Poirot relied on the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, to whose departing

contemporary account, see *Nouvelles lettres édifiantes* (Paris: Adrien Le Clerk, 1818), IV:135–62. According to a Russian missionary in Beijing, he and other Orthodox missionaries had protected the Jesuits from the brunt of the persecution by altering translations they were asked to do by the Qing court. See Russian National Library, St. Petersburg, Manuscript Department, f. 550, F-XVIII-24/1, l. 62ff.

67 Thomas Hughes, *History of the Society of Jesus in North America* (London: Longmans, 1910), I:2:19–23.

68 Archives jésuites de la province de France, Vanves, fonds Brotier, cahier 131, 15–20.

69 ARSI, Sin. 1001-III, p. 84–85.

70 Hughes, *History of the Society of Jesus*, II:1006.

71 ARSI, Sin. 1001-III, 84–85; 88–90.

72 Inglot, "Le missioni," 331.

members he gave several copies for further security.⁷³ In 1813, Poirot died, ending two and a half centuries of Jesuit presence in China. Only in 1841 would they return to Qing lands in force.

The story of the Russian conspiracy against the British in China offers a powerful demonstration of the value of a non-Jesuit perspective for Jesuit historians and a Jesuit point of view for those working outside of Jesuit history. Without the latter, the complicated ecclesiastical politics surrounding the fate of the former and hoped-for future Beijing Jesuits would be entirely opaque. But without the former, it is impossible to understand the extraordinary lengths to which Russian officials went in promoting the establishment of a new mission by a foreign faith in a country where their influence was so weak. In the absence of Russian administrative sources, the lacunae in Jesuit accounts of these events become unfillable. Together, the two perspectives reveal a long-concealed story of espionage and conspiracy at the margins of European empire.

73 ARSI, Sin. 1001-II, 28–39.