

# **The Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide In Rome as a Necessary Historical Resource For the Historiography of the Catholic Church In China<sup>1</sup>**

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[Abstract] Historians often encounter problems of lacking historical source material in writing history. The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (CEP, previously called *de Propaganda Fide*) has been diligently collecting information worldwide in the past four centuries in order to know accurately the situation in the mission lands for making decisions on its missionary strategy. Its Archives contain precious resources left behind for consultation. Initially for internal use of the Congregation for its meetings, the documents up to 1939 are now open for the access of scholars. This article discusses the important use of the Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome as a necessary resource for the writing of local Church history, demonstrating with the case of Hong Kong Catholic Mission in the 19th century.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presented in the roundtable conference is based on the author's previous article written in 1994.

The lack of historical source is always claimed by scholars as the most serious problem to be solved in writing history. In the last 400 years, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (CEP, previously called *de Propaganda Fide*) has been diligently collecting information worldwide in order to know accurately the situation in the mission lands for making decisions on its missionary strategy. Its Archives contain precious resources left behind for consultation. Initially for internal use of the Congregation for its meetings, the documents up to 1939 are now open for the access of scholars.

Since China has been one of the foci of Catholic missionary effort from the 17th century, documents collected in the Archives concerning China are many. A rough calculation gives an estimation of about 200 volumes. The quantity does not express all the importance inherent in these documents kept in the Archives. The official understanding of the situation in Rome about China, followed by decisions made on appointment of personnel and distribution of resources forms part of the Church history in China. And the viewpoint formed by considering different sources represents a more comprehensive understanding of the local situation. Even biases might exist because of cultural differences they give us the chance to be in touch with the reasons of these biases.

In Father Patrick Taveirne's presentation, he mentioned that the Propaganda Fide entrusted the propagation of the Catholic faith in Mongolia to his Belgian Congregation, the CICM, in 1864. Some of his citations also came from the Archives of Propaganda Fide for the Evangelization of Peoples. It is perhaps a good opportunity to continue our co-presentation about the important use of the Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome as a necessary resource for the writing of local Church history.

I intend to present my part with the case of Hong Kong Catholic Mission in the 19th century.

## **The Historical Archives**

The Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome are currently situated in Pontifical Urbanian University Campus (Via Urbano VIII, 16). It is the official Archives of Propaganda Fide for the Evangelization of Peoples which is established in 1622 with the name "de Propaganda Fide" as the central and supreme body responsible for the spread of the Catholic faith among the pagans as well as for the fostering of the union with the Protestant and Orthodox Churches.

The Congregation directs and coordinates the work of evangelization of peoples and missionary cooperation. It has jurisdiction over its territories in almost all of Africa, the Far East, some regions of South East Europe and America, and Oceania with the exception of Australia and most of the Philippines. The Congregation presides over the government of the missions; examines reports sent by the Ordinary, and Nuncios and by the Episcopal Conferences; monitors the Christian life of the faithful, the discipline of the clergy, charities and Catholic Action; as well as supervises the Catholic schools and seminaries.

The Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide was first stored at the Vatican Palace in 1627. It was later transferred to the Congregation's Palace in Piazza di Spagna until 2002, when it was moved to the present place. The Archives store 12,500 volumes of historical documents dating from 1622 until 1959.

In order to collect the necessary information regarding the ecclesial and missionary situation in the different mission territories, the Congregation's first Secretary (1622-1649) contacted Apostolic Nuncios, General Superiors of different Religious orders and individual missionaries for information. These sources of information continuously supply the Congregation with up-to-date materials. The documents collected are carefully kept in Rome. However, during the French occupation, Napoleon (reigned 1804–1814, 1815) had the entire Archives transferred to France. Some precious volumes were therefore lost when the archives were brought back to Rome.

Around 12 million documents are now kept in the Archives on the people of Africa, Asia, Oceania and others in a period of almost 400 years. In fact, it contains not only mission and church information, but also cultural, ethnographic and geographic information.

Started in 1883, scholars could access partially these documents. Today, documents up until the end of the papacy of Pius XI (February 1939) are open for consultation. They can be searched using the finding tool of the general inventory in 136 volumes of about three inches thick each.

## **Summary Presentation**

The large quantities of the Archives require a summary presentation of their content in order to understand the importance and diversity of these documents. For the documents before 1893, they are arranged by the following system:

1. Acta (Acta Sacrae Congregationis):

The minutes of the monthly general meetings of the Congregation in 311 volumes. These documents include reports and resolutions taken by the members. Thus, the Acta reflect the main Congregation's activities and decisions regarding its various duties and competences.

2. SOCG (Scritture Originali riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali):

The original documents referred to in the general meetings in 1,044 volumes.

These documents include letters and notes from bishops, missionaries and princes, dispatches from nuncios and Apostolic Delegates, the Synods Acta, apostolic visitations, the consultor's opinion, etc.

3. CP (Congregazioni Particolari):

Papers of special commissions with suggested solutions in 161 volumes.

These documents include also the special commission on questions of *China and the East Indies* (Acta CP in 24 volumes) and the original documents from the special commission on the *Indies and China* (SOCP in 78 volumes).

4. SC (Scritture riferite nei Congressi):

Documents referred to in the weekly meetings in 1,558 volumes.

This collection contains letters that reached the Congregation from the mission lands. These documents reflect the daily life of the missions from those letters and correspondence from all the continents. Among the documents of special interest to the Chinese Mission are the 35 volumes from the *China and the East Indies*, and the 40 volumes from the *Indies and China*.

This collection also contains materials which refer directly to the internal organization of the Congregation or the institutes dependent on it. They include the foundation and regulations of the Congregation, the appointment decree of Cardinals, Secretaries and other Congregation's Superiors and officials. Other documents consist of the requests for admission, approval and appointment of missionaries, the register of the missionary examiners and examinees with the examination results, the register of personal outfit objects and sacred furnishings and vestments sent to missionaries, documents concerning goods and buildings in the possession of the Congregation, the history of the Polyglot Printing Press, the foundation, history, students, regulations, oaths of the Urbanian College, the material on the different colleges and missionary societies dependent on the Congregation, documents concerning hospices in Rome for pilgrims and Oriental Rites ecclesiastical students, the reports on visits in various missions, and colleges dependent on the Congregation.

The most related documents to the Chinese Mission in this collection are the Missionaries' oath taken between 1844 and 1892 promising to observe the papal decision on the Chinese rites, signed by all the missionaries in the Far East.

There are five other collections in addition to the above. They are related to records of audiences with the Pope, briefs and bulls, instructions, decrees and letters from the Pope and the Congregation.

### Lesser Collections

Other than the above nine major collections, there are ten lesser collections in smaller quantity, including volumes transported to Vienna by the Napoleon government, documents related to synods held in the Congregation's territories, the revision of Rules of institutes dependent on the Propaganda, the temporal state of the Propaganda, faculties granted to missionaries, Instructions, Circular Letters and Decrees from the Congregation, even volumes from the Archives of the Jesuits. Among these lesser collections, the one specially related to China is the "*Archives of the Procure of the Congregation in the Far East*" in 47 volumes.

The Procure was established in Canton in 1705 by the Papal Legate Charles Thomas Maillard de Tournon (鐸羅, 1668-1710) for the missions in China after he was expelled by Emperor Kangxi (康熙, 1654-1722) over the controversy on the Chinese Rites.

Documents of this collection include matters concerning the duties of the procurator who administered the properties of the congregation in China and the nearby countries and made subsidies available to the missions. Later on, the procurator became the trusted representative of the Congregation for all the missions of the Far East and occupied a central position in missionary strategies. So, he kept very important correspondence to Rome and instructions from Rome. The procure was moved to Macao soon after its establishment. It was moved to Hong Kong in 1842 until 1922, when the Apostolic Delegation in China was established, and the duties of the Procurator were assumed by him who transferred all the documents to Rome. Although most of the documents are in deplorable condition due to an incident in the transportation, fortunately the staff of the Archives worked very hard to make part of them available for consultation.

### The New Series after 1893

The archival documents after 1893 are arranged in a new system called NS (New Series) consisting the Protocol numbers and Code numbers. The Protocol numbers indicate the order in which the documents are received while the Code numbers 1 to 62 stand for the subjects, and numbers 101 to 162 are geographical divisions. China being assigned the Code number 130.

Later in 1923, subtitles are introduced in the New Series, providing an additional element of identification of archival material.

### **The Case of Hong Kong**

The Congregation as the body overseeing the governance of local missions under its jurisdiction, possesses all information necessary for discharging this responsibility. In the case of Hong Kong, the Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide keep over 1,000 records concerning Hong Kong up to 1900. Although they are mainly related to persons in charge of the mission during that time: Joset, Feliciani, Forcade, Ambrosi and Raimondi, these records are indispensable for scholars to form a comprehensive view of this local mission.

Theodore Joset (若瑟神父, 1841-42) was the pioneer to establish the Catholic mission in Hong Kong, who experienced the expulsion from Macao by the Portuguese authorities. Documents not available from other sources, are found in the Archives of Propaganda Fide, presenting a whole picture of this incident.

Documents related to Anthony Feliciani (裴神父, 1842-47, 50-55), who was in charge of the mission on a temporary basis for 10

years, show the deliberation and hesitation of the Congregation on the choice of a missionary group to take charge of Hong Kong. This point of view can only be discovered through the reading of the documents in the Archives of Propaganda Fide. Further documents show Feliciani also re-established a working relationship with Macao and started to petition Papal decorations for persons deserving recognition. One document shows that Feliciani encountered the problem of taking the oath of loyalty to the British Government (1852) and asked for advice from Rome. Although these are minor issues, the process of corresponding with the Congregation exposes the character of Feliciani and the quality of his administrative decisions.

Augustine Forcade (科主教, 1847-50), a French missionary for Japan, was put in charge of the mission in Hong Kong. He brought in help from the French missionary society—the Paris Foreign Missions, and the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres. Mysteriously no correspondence was found related to him. Only four documents concerning his appointment and resignation were indicated in the index.

A lot of the documents in the Archives of Propaganda Fide related to Italian diocesan priest Louis Ambrosi (盎神父, 1855-67) are about the dealing with the conflict between the St. Paul Sisters and the Italian missionary. Ambrosi also invited the Canossian Sisters to Hong Kong and made proposals to Rome for the choice of missionary group which would take charge of the Hong Kong mission. These were all done under the watchful eye of the Congregation which means somehow endorsement was given to him to act.

During the period of Timoleon Raimondi (高主教, 1867-1894), the documents show that main consolidation work was done and development of the mission was in full swing. So much so that in 1874 the Hong Kong Catholic mission was erected by Rome as a Vicariate

Apostolic with more autonomy from the procure of the Congregation. This also signifies that the Congregation had made its definite decision on choosing the Italian missionaries of Milan to be in charge of the Hong Kong mission. The subsequent problem was whether to maintain the procure of Propaganda Fide in Hong Kong. The Congregation resolved to keep the procure in Hong Kong but assign another person as the procurator starting from 1874.

The documents from the Archives of Propaganda Fide also testify to the dispute with the colonial Government on wedding registration (1875) and on religious teaching in Catholic schools (1877). Documents kept in the local site are not as comprehensive in comparison with those kept in the Archives of Propaganda Fide. Some details on events in Hong Kong can be discovered only through the documents in the Archives of Propaganda Fide, such as the synod of missionary bishops held in 1880, the selling of procure properties without prior authorization in 1881.

Some letters in Latin from Chinese priests are preserved in the Archives of Propaganda Fide, so are some letters to the Congregation in Chinese by the Catholics. These are precious documents containing complaints of the local community against the local Church authority. Although communications from the mission to Rome took some three to four months, sometimes questions were asked on very minute details of the Church life, such as whether the colour of the vestment of the deacon and subdeacon should be the same with the celebrating priest for high Mass or whether Catholics from Macao residing in Hong Kong should observe the fast and abstinence according to the custom in Macao. These all show how much local practices depended on the directive of the Congregation and how close was the link between Rome and the mission.

## **Conclusion**

Certainly, it is imperative for scholars of local Church history to collect various historical materials kept in local sites and to initiate oral history for the continuation of memories. But the documents kept in the Archives of Propaganda Fide are crucial for the writing of local Church history as I was trying to show in the case of Hong Kong.

However, the hard reality is that the difficulties in consulting the Archives of Propaganda Fide are many. First of all, the expense involved is enormous in travelling to Rome and staying there to work within limited hours on the five working week days.

Secondly, the languages normally used are Italian, Latin, French and very few documents are in Chinese although they are dealing with matters in China.

Thirdly, the documents from the collection of the Procure of the Congregation in the Far East are not yet completely consultable, although this collection keeps very meaningful records concerning individual missions in China.

Despite advancement in modern technology, with microfilmed or digitized copies of documents available for order, the cost and the time in getting them done are often out of consideration for individual scholars working on a topic under the pressure of time and budget.

The example of the Korean Bishops' Conference is worth our admiration. They made a concerted effort to have all documents concerning the Korean Catholic Church in the Archives of Propaganda Fide scanned and brought back to Korea for the use of local scholars some 20 years ago. But when will scholars in writing Chinese Church history enjoy the same convenience as the Koreans is something that

deserves to think about, and perhaps, even take initial action after this roundtable conference's occasion.

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〔摘要〕缺乏一手史料一直是歷史學家在書寫歷史時最感頭痛的難題。在過去的四個世紀，教廷宗座萬民福音傳播部（前稱傳信部）一直在全球各地努力收集信息，以便準確地了解傳教地區的狀況，制定宣教策略。其檔案中包含寶貴的資源可供查閱。最初這些檔案只供該聖部內部會議使用，直至 1939 年才開放供學者研究。本文討論使用羅馬傳信部的歷史檔案作為書寫本地教會歷史的必要資料，並以十九世紀香港天主教傳教區作為說明例子。

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