

Nicolas Trigault, SJ: A Portrait by Peter Paul Rubens

ANNE-MARIE LOGAN AND LIAM M. BROCKEY

Part I. A Note on the Drawing

IN 1999 THE DEPARTMENT of Drawings and Prints of The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired a large, carefully drawn portrait study by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) of a Jesuit missionary in Chinese costume (Figure 1).¹ The portrait is drawn in black with touches of red chalk in the face and heightened with white and touches of greenish chalk. At the upper left of the drawing Rubens lightly sketched a profile of the priest's head in pen and brown ink. Rubens inscribed the study at the upper right with pen and brown ink, describing the costume and explaining the significance of some of the specific colors chosen for the garment: "nota quod color pullus non est / peculiaris Sinensium litteratis sed / Patribus S Iesù exceptis tamen fascijs / ceruleis quae [omnibus crossed out] ceteris [que] communes sunt / Sinenses porro vestis colore non uno / sed quovis promiscue utantur. / Si unum reserves flavum scilicet / qui proprius est Regis" (note that the dark color is not peculiar to Chinese scholars but to the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, except for the blue facings which are common to all. The Chinese, furthermore, do not use one color only in their clothing, but any color they like, except yellow, which is reserved for the King [or Emperor]).

At the lower left we find another inscription by Rubens that was not fully deciphered until 1999, when the drawing was readied for auction.² It reads, "Tricau . . . Soc. Jesu / delineatum / die 17 Ianuaris" (Tricau[It] [possibly Tricaucio, the Latinate version of his name], Society of Jesus, drawn on 17 January). Rubens stopped short of adding the year he drew this study, which we now know was 1617. The identification of the Jesuit missionary as Father Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628), a native of Douai (France), is rather recent.³ In 1987 Hans Vlieghe first called attention to a painting in the Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai, attributed to the workshop of Rubens. The subject of the painting, a missionary, is identified on a tablet at the

lower left as Trigault (Figure 2). The inscription further stated that he was a "Jesuit with the Chinese mission, who returned to Flanders in 1616, was painted in 1617, and died in 1627."⁴ As early as 1953 the French Jesuit Henri Bernard had tentatively identified the sitter in the Douai painting—and by implication the sitter in three related drawings, including the Metropolitan portrait study—as Trigault.⁵ Indeed there is a similarity between Rubens's drawing and the painting in Douai. In both works we see the same rather slight man with a triangular face and a pointed goatee; the Chinese robes they wear are almost identical. Rubens's faded inscription at the lower left of the present drawing, "Tricau . . .," lends further support to this identification.

The opulent silk robes depicted in the Metropolitan's portrait reflect the influence of the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who arrived in Beijing in 1601. Ricci recognized that the unassuming garb of the Jesuit missionaries was not ideally suited for the China mission. He suggested that they wear instead the robes of literati, an indication of status that would help them gain access to powerful members of Chinese society. Rubens's drawing closely records the special dress Ricci described in a letter of 1595, which "he adopted, and that was worn by the literati on their social visits . . . a dress of purple silk, and the hem of the robe and the collar and the edges are bordered with a band of blue silk a little less than a palm wide; the same decoration is on the edges of the sleeves, which hang open, rather in the style common in Venice. There is a side sash of the purple silk trimmed in blue which is fastened round the same robe and lets the robe hang comfortably open."⁶

Trigault left Europe for China in 1610; at the time of his arrival there were eighteen Jesuit missionaries there. He returned to Europe in 1614 for an extended visit in order to raise funds for the China mission and to recruit new missionaries. His travels are fairly well documented through letters, which place him in the Southern Netherlands in late 1616 to early 1617. Rubens must have met Trigault and executed the Metropolitan drawing when the priest

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Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640). *Portrait of the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault in Chinese Costume*, 1617. Black and touches of red chalk in the face and blue-green chalk in the collar facings and bands of the sleeves and along the bottom of the robe, traces of heightening with white chalk, pen, and brown ink; 44.8 x 24.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Carl Selden Trust, several members of The Chairman's Council, Gail and Parker Gilbert, and Lila Acheson Wallace Gifts, 1999 (1999.222). See also Colorplate 4

passed through Antwerp or Brussels, between November 20, 1616, and February 1617, or, more specifically, as based on the date on the drawing, on January 17, 1617.⁷

Trigault could not have appeared in the Southern Netherlands at a more opportune moment for Rubens. We learn from a receipt of July 19, 1616, that Rubens was working on full-length portraits of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier commissioned by the Jesuit college in Brussels.⁸ (Francis Xavier had himself spent time as a missionary in Asia, having been sent there in 1541 by King John [João] III of Portugal, but he had not made it into China.) The Brussels commission would have been one reason why Rubens might be eager to learn about the life of Jesuit missionaries in East Asia. Trigault's celebrated tour of Europe was almost certainly another. By late 1616 to early 1617, the Jesuits in Antwerp were beginning to negotiate with Rubens over the commission for two paintings of the order's founding fathers for the high altar of their church, now known as Saint Charles Borromeo. The two altarpieces, *The Miracles of Saint Ignatius Loyola* and *The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier*, were intended to be displayed alternately; both were completed before either man had been canonized, in 1622.⁹ Rubens no doubt heard of Trigault and his mission to China through this close association with the Antwerp Jesuits.

Four other Rubens studies of Jesuit missionaries are known. In three of them the subject is wearing Chinese robes, as in the Metropolitan drawing, and in one the missionary is portrayed in Korean costume. Of the three Chinese studies, the one most often discussed is in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Although almost identical to the Metropolitan drawing, it lacks Rubens's inscriptions and shows corrections (rather than *pentimenti*) in the hem of the missionary's robe that indicate it is more likely a copy after the present example.¹⁰ A second portrait, identified as Nicolas Trigault (?), is in a private collection (formerly in the collection of Ludwig Burchard). The Jesuit in the third drawing, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, was tentatively identified by Felice Stampfle as China missionary and scientist Johann Terrenz Schreck (or Terrentius) (1576–1630). Stampfle suggested a possible link between Schreck and Rubens through their mutual acquaintance Johann Faber, a doctor who had cured Rubens in Rome in 1606.¹¹

For Rubens these portraits were above all costume studies. As was his custom when a subject was of special interest to him, he added his observations in Latin directly on the drawing, as happened here. In at least one instance Rubens clearly consulted one of the studies—namely the portrait of the missionary wearing a



Figure 2. Workshop of Rubens. *Nicolas Trigault*, ca. 1616. Oil on canvas, 220 x 136 cm. Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai, France (photo: Musée de Douai)

formal Korean costume, in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles—for another work. An onlooker in the center foreground of his *Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier* altarpiece wears the same Korean high horsehair cap as the Jesuit in the drawing. He is the only one of the missionaries portrayed by Rubens who was Asian, and thus possibly a convert who accompanied Trigault on his travels through Europe.¹²

In the nineteenth century the drawing now in the Metropolitan was attributed to Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) rather than Rubens, as we learn from the annotation at the lower right, “A van Dyck fecit.” The inscription on the mount, “The Siamese Ambassador, an Armenian, sketched from life by Van Dyck,” was added in support of this later attribution. The ambivalence between Rubens and Van Dyck dates back at least to 1814, when the drawing was in the Van Eyl Sluyter collection in Amsterdam

(see note 3). It was sold that year as an original Rubens to Christiaan Josi for three florins. Ten years later a collector by the name of Hudson (not Thomas Hudson [1701–1779]) acquired the drawing for five florins from the De Haas collection as a study by Van Dyck.¹³ The inscriptions, however, leave no doubt that the drawing is by Rubens, and that he drew this portrait on January 17, 1617—either when the Jesuit missionary Nicolas Trigault was passing through Antwerp, or possibly when Rubens traveled to Brussels, where we know Trigault was staying from a letter he wrote on January 2, 1617.¹⁴

Anne-Marie Logan

*Guest Research Curator, Drawings and Prints,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Michiel Plomp for his valuable comments on an earlier version of the text and for granting me permission to publish this new acquisition. The drawing has been discussed at length in the Rubens literature. It belongs to a group of five portrait studies that all depict Jesuit missionaries in Asian costumes. One of these, the drawing formerly in the Ludwig Burchard collection, was engraved by William Baillie (1723–1792) in 1774, when it was in the collection of John Barnard, and inscribed “A Siamese Priest. Arrived at the Court of K. Charles the 1st as an attendant to the Ambassador of his Nation just as Rubens was preparing to leave England, however that Eminent Artist found time to make the above describ'd Drawing.” That supposed date—1629–30, the year Rubens stayed in England on a diplomatic mission—was rejected by Clare Stuart Wortley, who published the group for the first time. She dated the drawings of the Jesuit missionaries to between July 23 and 25, 1622, when festivities were being held in Antwerp in celebration of the canonization of Saint Ignatius Loyola and Saint Francis Xavier. See Clare Stuart Wortley, “Rubens's Drawings of Chinese Costumes,” *Old Master Drawings* 9 (December 1934), pp. 40–47. Hans Vlieghe, who in 1987 published the entire group except for the drawing in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (because that sitter is unidentified), was the first to identify the Jesuit missionary as Nicolas Trigault (?); see note 4 below. See also Hans Vlieghe, *Rubens Portraits of Identified Sitters Painted in Antwerp* (Brussels, 1987), no. 154b, fig. 227.
2. Sold at Christie's, New York, January 28, 1999, lot 92.
3. In the early nineteenth century a drawing of a Father “Trigautius” (not Trigantius, as quoted by Vlieghe, *Rubens Portraits*, p. 195 n. 11) was recorded in Amsterdam in the collections of Hendrik van Eyl Sluyter (1739–1814) and Abraham de Haas (1767–1824). See Michiel C. Plomp, *Collectionner, passionnément: Les collectionneurs hollandais de dessins au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 2001), pp. 235–36. I would like to thank Michiel Plomp for verifying the correct spelling of Trigautius.
4. “R.P.NICOLAVS / TRIGAULT DVA / CENSIS, SOCIETATIS / JESV SACERDOS, / E CHINENSI MIS / SIONE, IN BELGIO / REVERSVS, A° / 1616, HOC IN HA / BITV A MVLTI / A° 1617, DVACIVI / SVS. OBIIT A° / 1627 IN CHINA.” A later inscription specified “A° AETATIS 40 / 1617.” The painting came from the former Jesuit college in Douai together with a pendant, a portrait of Petrus de Spira (Pierre van Spiere, born 1584, Douai), a fellow missionary to China who joined Trigault there in 1611. W. Scheelen found documents in the Archives Générales du Royaume that indicate the paintings were actually delivered in 1616. See Vlieghe, *Rubens Portraits*, nos. 154, 155, figs. 224, 225. I would like to thank Isabelle Turpin for providing the photograph and granting permission to reproduce it. In the painting Trigault's dress shows the blue bands that Rubens indicates in the drawing and describes in his inscription.
5. Henri Bernard, “Un portrait de Nicolas Trigault dessiné par Rubens?” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 22 (1953), pp. 308–13.
6. Felice Stampfle, *Netherlandish Drawings of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries and Flemish Drawings of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries in the Pierpont Morgan Library* (New York, 1991), p. 146; Stampfle quotes from Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984), p. 115.
7. Edmond Lamalle, “La propagande du P. N. Trigault en faveur des missions de Chine (1616),” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 9 (1940), p. 62.
8. W. Scheelen, “De herkomst en de datering van Rubens' voorstellingen van de H. Ignatius van Loyola en de H. Franciscus Xaverius,” *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (Antwerp, 1986), pp. 153–72. For the paintings, see Hans Vlieghe, *Saints*, pt. 2, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard 8 (Brussels, 1972), nos. 113, 114, figs. 36, 37. The painting of Saint Ignatius Loyola is in the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena; see Michael Jaffé, *Rubens: Catalogo completo* (Milan, 1989), no. 203; the portrait of Saint Francis Xavier was formerly with Asscher and Welker, London, and, according to Jaffé (*Rubens*, no. 204), was destroyed in a fire at Warwick Castle, England, in 1940.
9. Today the altarpieces, together with Rubens's preliminary oil sketches, are in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Jaffé, *Rubens*, nos. 478, 479 (1617–18), 480, 481 (1618–19).
10. The Stockholm version has traditionally been seen as the primary version, with the drawing now at the Metropolitan believed to be a copy by Rubens based on it. See Julius S. Held, *Rubens: Selected Drawings* (Oxford, 1986), no. 131: “. . . appears to be a second version, by Rubens' own hand (?), of the one in Stockholm”; see also Vlieghe, *Rubens Portraits*, no. 154b: “A somewhat more firmly drawn repetition of the [drawing in Stockholm.]”
11. Stampfle, *Netherlandish Drawings*, pp. 145–48, no. 310.
12. George R. Goldner, with Lee Hendrix and Gloria Williams, *European Drawings: Catalogue of the Collections*, J. Paul Getty Museum, vol. 1 (Malibu, Calif., 1988), no. 93.
13. Plomp, *Collectionner, passionnément*, pp. 235–36. Stampfle preferred to identify this drawing with the example formerly in the collection of Ludwig Burchard. As shown by the 1774 print after it by Baillie, however, its attribution to Rubens was never in doubt, whereas the present drawing was at one point clearly attributed to Van Dyck. For a more recent difference of opinion regarding the attribution to Rubens or Van Dyck, see Stampfle, *Netherlandish Drawings*, p. 147.
14. Stampfle, *Netherlandish Drawings*, p. 148.

Part II. The Death and “Disappearance” of Nicolas Trigault

FATHER NICOLAS TRIGAULT’S body was found early in the morning by a servant boy who came to collect him for morning mass. According to an account written shortly after his death, Trigault had confessed himself to his superior at four in the morning and then retreated to his cubicle to meditate, kneeling in front of a crucifix, before heading to the chapel. When the priest did not turn up as expected, the boy who had prepared the altar went to Trigault’s quarters to see what was wrong. After knocking on the door he gingerly opened it, only to find “the priest face down with his face on the floor before the crucifix making no movements nor giving any signs of life.”¹ The servant raced to alert the other priests, who soon arrived to confirm that Father Trigault was indeed dead. The news spread quickly throughout the Christian community of Hangzhou, the famously beautiful city in southern China, prompting many to visit the mission to offer their condolences. These mourners, like the members of Trigault’s religious order, the Jesuits, lamented his loss and tried to console themselves with the memory of his many virtues. Thanks to the efforts of his superiors and the few witnesses, however, few would ever know the truth about the events that transpired on November 14, 1628—Nicolas Trigault’s suicide was seemingly negated by silence.

Silence can be hard to impose and even harder to preserve. Yet those who had a stake in keeping quiet in this case did a very good job; only one brief reference remains that testifies to Trigault’s “shameful” death. At the end of a letter to the superior general of the Society of Jesus addressed a year after the event Andre Palmeiro, the official missions inspector, wrote a coded message that was deciphered by its contemporary recipient: “Father Trigault hanged himself.” Palmeiro, who had only recently completed a tour of the China mission, informed the general that he had gone to great lengths to find out the cause of this “very rare event,” but that none of the other priests could explain why it had happened. The inspector ventured that the devil, “the fount of all evils,” lay behind it. Only one priest, Lazzaro Cattaneo, Trigault’s confessor, suggested to Palmeiro that *Shang-di* could have killed him.² This comment alluded to one of the most important questions facing the China Jesuits: Should they permit their converts to use this ancient Chinese term for the supreme being to represent the Christian God, or was that tantamount to promoting paganism?

What made the issue so pressing was that these missionaries had become famous for insisting on the universality of their religious message and its adaptability to any civilization. Trigault had gone far down this path, to the point of seeking to reconcile the Christian scriptures and the Chinese classics. Ultimately it was his failure to uncover the hidden links between East and West that ended in his fatal despair.

It was precisely Nicolas Trigault’s despair that made the silence surrounding the circumstances of his death necessary. A first consideration was that he was a Roman Catholic at a time when suicide was considered one of the most abhorrent sins. One need only remember the place Dante had reserved for those who took their own lives: in the seventh circle of Hell. Men and women who lived at the height of the Catholic Reformation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were constantly reminded, whether during sermons or visits to the newly popular confessional box, that despair leading to suicide was the utmost rejection of the tenets of their faith. In order to shepherd believers away from thoughts of suicide, confessors and preachers alike invoked images of divine justice. To doubt the forgiving power of God, then, necessitated the terrible punishment described in the *Divine Comedy*—spending eternity imprisoned in the gnarled trunk of a fruitless tree, bemoaning one’s fate in the rushing wind. Where contemporaries would have found the suicide of a layman detestable, they would have found the suicide of a priest scandalous.

A second reason for silence was that Trigault was a member of the Society of Jesus. Before it had even reached its centennial, in 1640, this religious order had become one of the most powerful forces within the Catholic world and one of the central agents of the widespread renewal of piety sweeping across early modern Europe. Through their unique commitment to education, urban pastoral work, and rural missionary activity, the Jesuits did much to hasten the “reform of customs” of contemporary society. They directed their energies not only at the old Christians of Europe but also at the souls yet to be claimed for Christ in the newly discovered worlds of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In doing so, they seized on some of the spiritual themes that had made older orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans so popular and so effective in the Middle Ages. In contrast to the accumulation of traditions, habits, and special responsibilities that at

times weighed down these orders, the Jesuits, beginning with their founding fathers, Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier, had been free to establish new patterns of action. To be sure, this opportunity came with peril. Treading on the territory of long-standing rivals—and implicitly claiming to supersede them in matters of piety and vigor—created an atmosphere of competition in which each order needed to be extremely vigilant of its public reputation. Furthermore, the leaders of the Roman Church during the Counter Reformation were keen to deprive their Protestant adversaries of any ammunition for their salvos of criticism. For the men and women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, novelty was the surest path to danger. The Society of Jesus, abounding with spiritual energy and, more important, attracting the attentions of many of the rich and powerful, walked a fine line between glory and scandal. In order to maintain their good name and ensure their continued ascendance, the Jesuits needed to keep a close watch for damaging public revelations lest their rivals get the better of them.

There is yet a third factor, perhaps the most important one, that helps explain the enforced silence. Father Trigault was not simply one of the thousands of weary but zealous missionaries dispatched from Europe to the far corners of the known world to expand what contemporaries called the “flock of the Lord.” He was responsible for one of the greatest publicity coups ever pulled off by the Society of Jesus. He was the man who first brought China to Europe.

Born in 1577 in Douai, a city in what is today northern France but that then was part of the Spanish Netherlands, Trigault joined the Jesuits at the age of eighteen. After completing his education in Latin, Greek, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology, making his priestly vows, and spending almost a decade in the Society’s colleges in the Southern Lowlands (modern Belgium) as a teacher of the humanities, he successfully petitioned to be sent to the “Indies” as a missionary. Trigault’s assignment was the China mission, founded in 1582 by a pair of Italian missionaries spared from the Society’s most successful project at the time, the Japan mission, which was founded by Francis Xavier himself in 1549.³ Although vastly overshadowed in Europe by the highly publicized work of their brethren across the China Sea and subordinate to superiors in Japan, who concentrated on affairs in that country, these missionaries managed to gain prestige in the Ming Empire by becoming the first Westerners to learn Mandarin and to offer new forms of knowledge to the inward-gazing Chinese elite. Yet these feats of diplomacy and erudition did little to attract the attentions of their counterparts in Japan, who had their hands

full trying to minister to thousands of new Christians and to avert a potentially disastrous conflict in the first dozen years of the seventeenth century with Japan’s new rulers, the Tokugawa shoguns.⁴ These new military overlords had won the national hegemony on the battlefield in 1600 and were drawing close to eliminating their last serious rivals for unquestioned supremacy—including any Jesuit interlopers. Finding themselves cut off from external aid and from the higher links in the Society’s hierarchy, the China Jesuits responded by sending one of their own to celebrate their pious efforts back home. This missionary, Nicolas Trigault, was to inform Europe that Japan alone did not constitute Asia, and that China was the true heart of Eastern civilization.⁵

Trigault was entrusted with this sensitive and dangerous task because he appeared best suited for the job. In the opinion of the China mission hierarchy, his age and teaching experience gave him the necessary good judgment to carry out a task that required tremendous discretion. Because he was heading back to Rome with charges of institutional neglect on the part of his superiors in Japan, his journey was in effect an act of flagrant disregard for the Society’s established overseas administration, even if it was the only way for the China enterprise to overcome the two eternal challenges to missionary work: lack of men and lack of money.⁶ Trigault was also chosen because of his generally good health, something of crucial importance considering the perilous conditions of seventeenth-century sea travel. According to the conventional wisdom of the Society, robust northerners from the Netherlands or Germany were far better suited to handle the extremes of temperature on the open ocean than their peers from Portugal, Spain, or Italy. A further reason for his election as “mission procurator” came in his skills in the Chinese language. Among the talented linguists who served in the Jesuits’ China mission, Trigault stood out as especially gifted; he would later compose a key text for teaching newly arrived missionaries Chinese grammar and vocabulary.⁷ Although he had spent barely two years in the Ming Empire before sailing west in 1613, the mission hierarchy was certain that Trigault would provide the best possible display of missionary glamour—and in this way muster the diffused resources of Catholic Europe for the support of the China enterprise.

Niccolò Longobardo, the bold mission superior who planned the procurator’s journey, made sure that Trigault would put on a sufficiently impressive show for clergy and laymen alike back in Europe. The procurator was given a considerable quantity of Chinese objets d’art to offer as gifts to princes and other



Figure 3. Detail of Figure 1,
*Portrait of the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault
in Chinese Costume*

influential patrons as well as samples of books containing the ancient wisdom of the Confucian tradition to give to the leading Catholic scholars, many of whom were Jesuits. Besides the plain black robes typically worn by the members of his order, he also carried the silk robes that mission founder Matteo Ricci had controversially insisted the China Jesuits wear to bolster their image among the intellectual elite whom they considered their peers in the Ming Empire (see Anne-Marie Logan, "A Note on the Drawing," pp. 157–60).⁸ Trigault bore all of these goods, as well as firsthand news and candid assessments of the status of the mission, with him as he sailed from the Portuguese enclave of Macau to Goa, in India, and

onward to Hormuz, on the Persian Gulf. From there he proceeded overland along the dusty, well-traveled caravan routes of the Fertile Crescent on a forty days' journey through the desert from Basra, in what is now Iraq, to Aleppo in Syria. The final leg of his yearlong voyage took him again by sea from the Levant to Otranto in southern Italy, a relatively short distance from his goal, the Eternal City.⁹

In Rome Trigault became an instant celebrity as the bearer of new curiosities to satisfy the seemingly insatiable late-Renaissance appetite for exotica.¹⁰ Among the testaments to the remarkable figure he cut among his European contemporaries is Peter Paul Rubens's drawing of Trigault bedecked in his Chinese finery,

scandalously sumptuous for a religious who had made a vow of poverty (Figure 1).¹¹ His collection of Chinese products and samples from East Asia's millennial literary traditions provided contemporary European savants with much new food for thought: How could it be that a civilization on the far side of the world had become so sophisticated on its own, without knowledge of European culture, learning, or religion? What were the origins of that distant people's scholarly traditions? And, if their civilization was so great, why had they never tried to find their way to the West? The debates seeking to answer these questions would rage well into the eighteenth century, captivating scholars and philosophes until the illusive visions of Chinese grandeur were dispelled by Western technological advances. Trigault, charged with printing the first authoritative description of Chinese society and Jesuit missionary activity there, touched off this intellectual wrangling in 1615, when he published his Latin translation of Matteo Ricci's diaries called *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas* (The Christian Expedition to China).¹²

Trigault's famous text, largely responsible for delineating the history of the Jesuits' beginnings in China for generations of scholars, was printed during one of the stops on his lengthy continental tour. For four years he traveled from Rome through the cities of northern Italy, across the Alps into southern (that is, Catholic) Germany, and on to the Netherlands, visiting potentates and interviewing potential recruits for the China mission. From the princes and princelings of the politically atomized Holy Roman Empire Trigault garnered funds to endow the mission for years to come. He found ready recruits for the mission among the fresh faces in the Society's colleges and novitiates, filled to the brim with zeal. For at least an entire generation of Jesuits and supporters of the Society Trigault was the face of the China mission, the man who gave human form to the reports of missionary glory sent year after year from the order's far-flung mission fields. More important for his purposes, by trekking across Catholic Europe—including a final triumphant tour of the Spanish and Portuguese domains of Philip III—he had not only brought China to Europe, he would be able to take a bit more of Europe back to China.

Sailing out of Lisbon harbor for Goa in April 1618, Trigault could be satisfied with the fruits of his journey. He had with him young men to assist the old in their missionary duties; considerable sums of money to further the China enterprise; relics and other devotional objects to cement the faith of the newly converted; and a library, comprising books donated by popes and kings, that would, he hoped, impress the

Chinese scholars who were certain that theirs was the only true tradition of learning. He also carried valuable gifts for sympathetic mandarins and the Ming emperor himself, part of a bid to persuade the throne to tolerate the presence of the "scholars from the West," as the Jesuits were known in China. Among his Western treasures were telescopes, prisms, clocks, and other *bizzarrissime inventiones* designed to curry favor with the powerful as well as official orders from the Jesuit general granting a great degree of institutional independence for him and his colleagues in China.¹³ His arrival at Macau in 1619 provided a crucial boost for the China mission. In many respects, it was Trigault's success as procurator that enabled the mission to survive the second decade of the seventeenth century, when persecutions in both Japan and China threatened to reverse all of the Society's advances in East Asia. His labors would not be something the China Jesuits would soon forget.

Two questions, however, remain to be answered. Did the Jesuit hierarchy who selected Trigault to promote their efforts in Europe ever imagine that he might take his own life? And how was it possible that the suicide of such a public figure, known in China, India, and throughout Europe, could be covered up so completely? To answer the first question, one can turn to a unique set of documents that gives some insight into the minds of early modern priests. To answer the second, however, one must listen for the silences in the chorus of praise for Trigault produced by the Society's early modern publicists.

Discovering what the China mission officials might have known of Trigault's dangerous mental state necessitates a search through the meticulous personnel records kept by generations of diligent Jesuit superiors. With a thoroughness that should have earned him the title of patron saint of bureaucrats, Ignatius Loyola established complex internal management systems for his followers to protect the integrity of the Society of Jesus and to channel its human resources effectively. In a fashion that would impress even today's business professionals, all of the Society's administrative divisions were held responsible for producing candid triennial assessments of each of their dependents and for forwarding them to the executive headquarters in Rome for review.¹⁴ The information relayed to the Jesuit general touched on a set of general data (name, age, health, years of study, years within the order, current occupation, level within the order) as well as on more subjective themes (intelligence, judgment, prudence, general experience, literary aptitude, disposition, talents). With this data the order's central authorities were better equipped to

select the appropriate candidates for positions of responsibility wherever the Society of Jesus was found.

Among the first such evaluations of the members of the China mission was likely carried to Rome by Trigault himself. Niccolò Longobardo penned a letter in 1612 marked *solì*, the equivalent of “for your eyes only,” to General Claudio Aquaviva indicating the strengths and weaknesses of each Jesuit under his command in China. His evaluation of Trigault, included in a postscript, is especially revealing in that it shows Longobardo was a perceptive judge of the procurator’s character. Although he labeled Trigault a “great negotiator” capable of dealing with both princes and plebeians—especially the wealthy magnates of France, Flanders, and Germany whose support was invaluable to the mission—as well as a talented writer in Chinese or European languages, Longobardo nevertheless clearly signaled his flaws. “In sum I will say,” he wrote to the general, “that he is very choleric, and has moods that are very vehement and furious.” Besides this instability, the procurator also had a “loose tongue” and a propensity for prying into others’ affairs. Offering that Trigault’s personal piety and self-confidence, necessary to be effective in his important tasks, offset these faults, Longobardo concluded his analysis with a suggestive phrase: “Later, time will tell.”¹⁵

Concern for Trigault’s mental stability can also be found in later evaluations. After his reintegration into the day-to-day routines of missionary work in China—preaching, confessing, catechizing, expelling demons, and antagonizing Buddhists and Daoists—Father Trigault’s superiors were able to keep a watch on him, just as they kept watch on the other men serving under them. In one report from 1626, just two years before the suicide, the reviewer remarked on the procurator’s “inconstant health” but insisted that he generally seemed robust. While asserting that his intelligence, judgment, academic proficiency, and general experience ranged from good to optimal, this report also called his prudence into question, labeling it “good, yet somewhat unstable.” Likewise, Trigault’s disposition was not the best; although by nature good, he was often “infirm” and frequently “choleric.” As a result of these characterizations, Trigault’s superior, Manuel Dias (the younger), informed the Jesuit general that he was best suited for ministering to others, writing books, and consulting on academic matters, such as deciphering and publicizing the inscriptions on a Christian stele dating from the Tang Dynasty that had been unearthed at Xi’an in the early 1620s.¹⁶ Dias did not recommend Trigault for any more positions of responsibility, such as superior of a mission

station.¹⁷ Judging by these remarks a careful manager might have prescribed that Trigault remain always in the company of other priests, ones who could keep more intimate track of his mental state. This was, in fact, the course that his superiors chose; at least after 1626, Trigault was stationed in Hangzhou with three other Jesuit priests, including some of the most senior missionaries in China, and within relative proximity to still other colleagues.¹⁸

Despite Trigault’s worrisome traits, ultimately his peers could do nothing to prevent his suicide. They were, however, surprisingly effective at stemming any resulting scandals, which could have ruined the good credit the procurator had earned for the Society among its powerful European benefactors. Among the several factors that facilitated the cover-up, none was more effective than the very administrative structures that the Society of Jesus had employed to promote Trigault as a valorous missionary hero. It began with the three priests left at the Hangzhou residence. Vows of obedience dictated that they report their discovery up the chain of command—first to Vice Provincial Manuel Dias and then to missions inspector Andre Palmeiro—but they were not otherwise beholden to inform anyone else outside of the mission’s consultors, a group comprising three or four of the oldest missionaries. The remoteness of the China mission also meant that news would not spread quickly back to Europe. Nevertheless, it remained necessary to stifle any possibility of word reaching Macau, whence glib Portuguese or Spanish merchants, soldiers, or crown officials might pass it on to the Jesuits’ rivals in Manila or Goa, and from there perhaps on to Lisbon, Madrid, Paris, or Rome. This meant that Dias and Palmeiro had to issue orders reminding all missionaries to use caution when speaking with outsiders and to channel their correspondence with Europe through their superiors’ hands for review and possible emendation.¹⁹ The system of censorship which ensured that stories of bad Chinese Christians or Jesuit failures did not reach Macau through annual mission reports also worked to intercept this even more damning scandal. The one written report that appears to have arrived in Portugal for the edification of young missionary hopefuls related the “official” story: that of a mysterious collapse suffered by a member of the Jesuit community who “lived with much charity and uniformity amongst themselves . . . helping and succoring the Christians with love, humility, and diligence.”²⁰

Although news of Trigault’s death did eventually find its way out of China and into the succession of celebratory chronicles of the mission that flowed from

European presses over the course of the seventeenth century, the details were carefully obscured. In contrast to the lengthy obituaries of comparatively unimportant figures in early modern Jesuit writings, Trigault's passing went unremarked. Álvaro Semedo, for example, who had lived for a time with the procurator in Hangzhou, surprisingly omits any reference to it in the chronology of the mission found in his widely translated *History of the Great Monarchy of China*.²¹ Other members of the China mission also glossed over Trigault's death in their writings, suggesting that all written records of the event had been destroyed. António de Gouvea's year-by-year history of the Jesuits' China enterprise, written fifteen years after the suicide, suggests that an archival expurgation had been carried out. His obituary for Trigault is markedly shorter than those for other missionaries and offers only vague remarks about his academic skills, his journey to Europe, his many virtues, and his death after a "brief accident." "He deserves a much longer account," wrote Gouvea, "but I can find no other notice of him at hand."²² Rumors of a scandal, however, appear to have circulated among the China Jesuits and perhaps made their way back to Europe all the same. For instance, appended to the original doctored notice of Trigault's death sent to Rome is a statement, dating from forty years later, written by China missionaries who had never known him personally. These writers—including Gouvea, who had likely seen Trigault only when he visited the Jesuit college of Évora, Portugal—again celebrated the procurator's many virtues and his dedication to saving heathen souls.²³ This final accolade, it appears, effectively silenced any rumors that could have threatened the Society's reputation on this matter.

Silence, as the story of Trigault's suicide reveals, can shroud even the most shocking of dramas. Yet to those who knew the man personally, rather than those who knew only his image, silence was not satisfactory. They wanted to know why. The answer to this, the burning question in the case of most suicides, does not emerge from the archival traces that speak of Trigault's life and death. Mulling over the facts from the perspective of pop psychology, one can see signs of torment in his unstable character that would suggest manic depression, which in some sufferers results in violent mood swings that force them to depths of despair where suicide appears the only escape. Daniello Bartoli, a Jesuit historian writing later in the seventeenth century, suggested such a diagnosis when he asserted that it was Trigault's "indefatigable application of the mind" combined with exhaustion that brought about his end. In his voluminous history of the China mission,

completed with access to the most sensitive official documents, Bartoli came as close as any member of the Society to revealing the truth. Cautiously, and somewhat evasively, he declared that in the midst of "most tiring study in defense of that term *Shang-di*, so boldly denounced at the time, [Trigault] went out of his mind, dying suddenly."²⁴ Perhaps this represents the best analysis of the events. It is indeed possible that Nicolas Trigault went "out of his mind" scouring the Confucian classics for any way to justify telling the Jesuits' new converts that *Shang-di*, the well-known figure from Chinese antiquity, translated as the "Lord on High," was the Christian God. In writing his encoded message of the suicide to the Jesuit general, inspector Andre Palmeiro remarked that the devil had paid Trigault well for his studies but offered no further comment on these "divine judgments," resting assured in his hope that there would be no more such scandals.²⁵

Liam M. Brockey

*Assistant Professor of History, Department of History,
Princeton University*

NOTES

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1. Pascoal Fernandes, *Alguns Apontamentos da Virtude e Procedimentos do Pe. Nicolao Trigautio*, Hangzhou, 1628, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome (hereafter cited as ARSI), Lusitania Collection, Codex 58-I, fol. 269r,v.
2. Andre Palmeiro to Muzio Vitelleschi, Macau, December 20, 1629, ARSI, Japonica-Sinica Collection, Codex 161-II, fol. 117r.
3. For a chronology of the Jesuit mission to China, see Liam Brockey, "The Harvest of the Vine: The Jesuit Missionary Enterprise in China, 1579–1710" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2002), pp. 19–213. Partial chronologies of the mission can be found in George Dunne, *Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1962); and Jean-Pierre Duteil, *Le mandat du ciel: Le rôle des Jésuites en Chine de la mort de François-Xavier à la dissolution de la Compagnie de Jésus (1552–1774)* (Paris, 1994).
4. For discussions of the Society of Jesus's mission to Japan, see George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); and Jurgis Elisonas, "Christianity and the Daimyo," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 4, ed. John Whitney Hall (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 301–72.
5. The information that Trigault was given to relate to the Society's hierarchy in Rome can be found in Niccolò Longobardo, *Appontamentos a cerca da Ida do nosso Pe. Procurador a Roma*, Nanxiong, May 8, 1613, ARSI, Japonica-Sinica Collection, Codex 113, fol. 301rff.
6. In his orders for Trigault, mission superior Niccolò Longobardo requested that the procurator ask the general for a shipment of six new missionaries every three years. He was also to ask for a

- stable endowment for the mission since, according to Longobardo, “[the mission] was already in extreme necessity of temporal [goods], because all of the priests were . . . at the breaking point, fasting for the most part of the year.” See *ibid.*, fol. 301r.
7. Nicolas Trigault, *Xiru ermu zi* (An aid to the ear and eye of Western scholars) (Hangzhou, 1626).
 8. For a discussion of Ricci’s decision to switch the missionaries’ dress, see Willard Peterson, “What to Wear? Observation and Participation of Jesuit Missionaries in Late Ming Society,” in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 403–21.
 9. Daniello Bartoli, *Dell’historia della Compagnia de Gesu: L’Asia*, pt. 3, *La Cina* (Rome, 1663), p. 583.
 10. For a discussion of Trigault’s time in Europe as procurator, see Edmond Lamalle, “La propagande du P. N. Trigault en faveur des missions de Chine (1616),” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 9 (1940), pp. 49–120.
 11. For an early discussion of a Rubens portrait of Trigault, see Henri Bernard, “Un portrait de Nicolas Trigault dessiné par Rubens?” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 22 (1953), pp. 308–13.
 12. Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas* (Augsburg, 1615). For a modern translation of this text, see *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583–1610*, ed. and trans. Louis Gallagher (New York, 1942).
 13. Bartoli, *La Cina*, p. 701.
 14. For a discussion of the Society’s catalogues and their use within the order’s internal bureaucracy, see Adrien Demoustier, “Les catalogues du personnel de la province de Lyon en 1587, 1606, et 1636,” *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 43 (1974), pp. 3–84.
 15. Niccolò Longobardo to Claudio Aquaviva, Nanxiong, November 21, 1612, ARSI, Japonica-Sinica Collection, Codex 15-II, fol. 196r.
 16. A brief introduction to Tang Christianity and the Xi’an Stele is found in Pénélope Riboud, “Tang [dynasty Christianity],” in *Handbook of Christianity in China*, ed. Nicolas Standaert, vol. 1, 635–1800 (Leiden, 2001), pp. 1–18.
 17. Manuel Dias (the younger), Triennial catalogue for the Vice-Province of Portugal for 1626, ARSI, Japonica-Sinica Collection, Codex 134, fols. 303r, 305r.
 18. Trigault’s colleagues at the Hangzhou residence in 1628 were priests Lazzaro Cattaneo (1560–1640), Francisco Furtado (1589–1653), Rodrigo de Figueiredo (1594–1642), and brother Pascoal Fernandes (1609–1681).
 19. Andre Palmeiro, *Ordens que o Pe. Andre Palmeiro Visitor de Japão e China deixou a Vice-Provincia da China visitando no anno de 1629 aos 15 de Agosto*, Macau, January 15, 1631, ARSI, Japonica-Sinica Collection, Codex 100, fol. 28v.
 20. Fernandes, *Apontamentos . . . do Pe. Nicolao Trigauccio*, fol. 269r.
 21. See Álvaro Semedo, *Relação da propagação da fé no reyno da China* (Madrid, 1641). Contemporary translations of this work appeared in Castilian, Italian, Dutch, French, and English, making it one of the most widely read accounts of the mission next to Trigault’s own work. For a modern edition see Luiz Gonzaga Gomes, trans., *Relação da grande monarquia da China* (Macau, 1994).
 22. António de Gouvea, *Ásia Extrema*, Fuzhou, April 10, 1644, Biblioteca da Ajuda, Lisbon, Jesuítas na Ásia Collection, Codex 49-V-2, fol. 197r. One brief entry for Trigault in a biographical note sent from China to Europe provided a list of his publications and a short description of his journey to Europe as procurator. The anonymous text ends suggestively with the phrase “This is all that I found in the Macau archive.” See *Vida em breve do Pe. Nicolao Trigauccio que estava no cartorio de Macau juntamente com as vidas dos Varões illustres que morrerão dentro da missão da China*, ARSI, Lusitania Collection, Codex 58-I, fol. 272r.
 23. Francesco Brancati, Statement of the Life and Virtues of Nicolas Trigault (in Italian), attested by António de Gouvea, Giovanni Francesco Ferrari, Pascoal Fernandes, and Mechior Ribeiro, [Hangzhou?], December 10, 1668, ARSI, Lusitania Collection, Codex 58-I, fols. 271r,v.
 24. Bartoli, *La Cina*, p. 904.
 25. Andre Palmeiro to Muzio Vitelleschi, Macau, December 20, 1629, fol. 117r.