Michael Boym: the Polish Marco Polo

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Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol90/iss1/6

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Ed. Note: Agnieszka Couderq, an independent scholar who resides in Poland and America, is the stepdaughter of Prof. Andrew Targowski, long-time president of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations. Her extensive linguistic knowledge, including her fluency in Chinese, has enabled her to use primary sources for her research. Her recent two-book set, the cover of the first of which is depicted below, has aroused considerable interest in the cross-civilizational adventures of Father Michael Boym, S.J., in Poland and may soon appear in serialized form on television. In English, the title is: The Last Envoy of the Ming Dynasty. An Historical Novel in Two Volumes.
The following is a selection drawn from Ms. Couderq’s written proposal for a television series based on the book she has published. It offers a summation of the life of this remarkable cross-civilizational traveler.

**The Panorama of the Chinese Mission from its Beginnings**

...And then Saint Francis Xavier was sent with some of his companions to the Oriental Indies, and there with his work he led to the baptism of a million idolaters, after which he went to Japan, where, after his preaching many natives were baptized.

But the Japanese often spoke to him thus: “Although we ourselves do not find the right answer to your rationale, in China there are many enlightened doctors and scholars who can answer your doubts. So go to China and teach there, and when you convert the Chinese, you will see that we Japanese will also quickly convert to the Catholic faith.”


From the beginning of its founding in 1540, the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, was oriented toward missionary activity. The first missionary sent by the order to Goa on the west coast of India, a city under Portuguese rule since 1512, was the closest companion of the order's founder, Ignatius Loyola. He was Francis Xavier, who, as Boym writes, stayed there for more than two years, then going to Japan in 1549.

After three years of teaching, meeting resistance to his teachings from the authorities and Shinto and Buddhist elites, who issued a ban on the propagation of Christianity, Francis went with the intention of teaching in the Middle Kingdom. His attempt to get into Chinese territory was unsuccessful, and he eventually ended up on Sanzao Island near the coast of present-day Hong Kong in August 1552, where he carried out missionary activities until his death in December of that year.

A year later his body was handed over to the Jesuits in Goa and buried there reverently in the Bom Jesus Basilica. Francis' fame and the missionary successes he achieved magnetically attracted crowds of young men to the Jesuit order, creating a human base for the development of missionary activities around the world. The methods developed by St. Francis during his stay in San Toma (now Chennai, on the east coast of India and capital of the southern province of Tamil Nadu) among the Indian Christians, who derived their roots of faith from the teachings handed down to their ancestors in the first century by St. Thomas, became the foundation for the Jesuit methodology of acculturation of rites.
The scope of the Chinese kingdom was so vast that in the end the emperors, as politicians unable to manage peoples so distant, decided to select from one hundred and fourteen subordinate kingdoms only those that could be merged into one unified Empire.

The location of the fifteen provinces that now constitute the territory of China contributes significantly to this. To the east and south, the sea protects them from all sorts of vulnerable forces. On the west side, flows a river of extraordinary length as well as width called the Huam (Huang He - Yellow River). On the north side, stretches a wall not four hundred as some maps state but six hundred German leagues long (1 league = 4828 km).

Each of them will be able to accommodate four thousand Italians. These two things provide the Chinese with extraordinary security. In addition, their monarchs have issued an edict strictly forbidding their subjects to leave the kingdom for trade purposes, and that none of them should dare to host any foreigner on their domain, under penalty of death. Whence the reason why we Europeans could not learn about their customs, wealth, and their politics.


The next attempt to penetrate Chinese territory was not made until almost thirty years later. During the reign of Emperor Ming Wan-Li (1572-1620) in China, Alexander Valignano, then visiting Jesuit missionary in Asia, selected two religious representatives of the Society for the Chinese mission: Michael Ruggiero and Matteo Ricci. The two fathers arrived in Macao, to which the Jesuit mission in China was then limited, and they took up Chinese lessons at Madre de Deus, a missionary preparation school founded by Valignano, later promoted to become the University of St. Paul's Collegium.

Between 1580 and 1582, Ruggieri made three missionary trips to Guangzhou (Canton) and one to Zhaqing, in Guandong province, but to no avail. Only after Ricci's arrival in 1582 did their joint stay in Zhaqing in 1583 result in the first invitation to the Jesuits by a Chinese official, the governor of Guangzhou province, mainly due to Ricci's fame as a mathematician and cartographer.

The two fathers developed a method of transcribing Chinese pronunciation into our alphabet using diacritical marks to indicate the key with which the character had to be pronounced.
Today, their method has proved so good that in the 1950s, after the establishment of People's China, it was adopted with some modifications by the Communist Chinese authorities under the name of *pinyin* and is now in widespread use among sinologists and in China itself.

Finding the right words to describe the most essential concepts of the Christian faith was also a problem. Initially, Ruggieri opted for a Buddhist vocabulary, but Matteo Ricci, mindful of the problems in Japan, understood that in order to legitimize the fathers' stay in China, it would be necessary to gain the support of the Confucian elite. To do that, one had to operate with concepts and vocabulary that they understood.

His strategy, therefore, was based on a thorough understanding of Chinese history and culture through learning the language of the elites and the Confucian philosophy they professed, and at a level of erudition that would allow him to debate with them. The Chinese turned out to be a nation that respected knowledge. And, at the same time, the more enlightened among them recognized the superiority of Europeans in mathematical, astronomical, and engineering knowledge, and for this reason they were willing to maintain contacts with them.

Therefore, erudition in key scientific fields was one of the most crucial factors in the selection of future missionaries to China by the Jesuit headquarters in Rome. Only the most gifted had a chance to be sent. Despite the great danger accompanying the crossing by ship from Lisbon to Goa and then to Macao, which involved a fifty percent risk of death, being among them was seen as a great honor.

...Another time a clock given to the emperor by his fathers broke down. One of them was called in to help. He was led to a room where the emperor could secretly observe it. To inspect the clock, the father took it apart. When he finished, he heard the emperor groan: “Oh, the clock has died!” The father, however, pretended not to hear anything and continued working.

When he put all the parts together and the clock began to work, the emperor was amazed and expressed great relief. He ordered his eunuchs to examine the mechanism of the clock and the principles of its repair. They, however, fearing that they were not up to the task, replied that the presence of our fathers at court was necessary for this purpose. And that's why they were finally allowed to stay.

In 1601, the clock donated by Father Ricci to the emperor and given to him by the Chinese Mandarins broke down, as Boym recounts in his *Brevis Relatio*, as the work is known in Latin. In fact, following Fr. Ricci’s repair of the clock, he and other Jesuits were allowed to establish a mission in Beijing, as well as contacts with the court and the emperor himself. Thus began their good fortune; it lasted until the early 1730s.

**How the Chinese Adopted the Teachings of the Fathers**

You may also be interested in what questions the Chinese are in the habit of asking our fathers. Do not think that they ask them primitive or simple questions, as is the case among other peoples. Their doubts are sophisticated and of a high degree of (theological) difficulty.

They ask, for example, about the nature of the Mystery of the Trinity and also the incarnation of God in the body of Christ. “How do you know,” they say, “that there is only one God in three persons? And that He has only one son and not two or three?” “And why, since the Holy Spirit is derived from the Son and the Father, is He not also the son of neither?” or “Since God is good and it was He who created the world as an expression of His goodness, why is there so much evil in this world?”. And also “If God knew that people are so wicked, why did He create them in the first place?”, “Why are some so rich and others so poor? Some live so long and others live so short?”

They also ask: “If God could in one word forgive the sin of our first parents, why was it necessary for His son to be born a man? And if He was already going to be that man, why didn't He come into the world already in the prime of life as a handsome man? Why be born as an infant from a Virgin? And for what reason was it not enough for him to simply be born, but it was necessary for him to undergo all that suffering and the humiliation of death on the Cross? And finally, why wasn't He born in China, or why didn't He send the Teachers of His Law beforehand, so that our ancestors could avoid condemnation? Why did this gracious God allow their souls to be lost merely for lack of instruction?”

These are more or less the questions they usually ask, which must be answered satisfactorily. At the same time, they should be commended for their reasonableness, because if only the right answers are presented to them, they do not look for a hole in the whole but recognize the right and convert to the Truth.

* * *

...and the pagans said to their priests: “Look at these Western masters, who go on a three-year journey at their own expense to come here just to preach their law.
For imparting to us their most sensible teaching, they want nothing in return, and yet you wouldn't even lift a finger if we didn't pay you for it.”


The Jesuits were not the first Christians in the Chinese empire. The first seeds were sown by the Syriac Nestorians during the Tang Dynasty between the 7th and 10th centuries, following their arrival in 635 during the reign of Emperor Taizong. This was followed by diplomatic contacts between the Mongol Khanate and the Vatican in the 13th century, thanks to a two-year legation by John Piano di Carpini, who was accompanied by a Polish monk, the Franciscan, Benedict Pole, after the conquest of China by the Mongol, Kubilai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan in 1271.

During the reign of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, parallel to the Nestorians, a small number of Catholic fathers were active in the empire with permission to spread Catholic teaching. However, the degree of evangelization, especially among the elite, was negligible until the arrival of the Jesuits.

Highly impressed by the Jesuits' knowledge of scientific and technical matters, their proficiency in Confucian culture and perfect command of the classical language, as well as appreciating the hardships they had to overcome on their way to China, the Chinese elite agreed to listen to their religious teachings.

The churches and Jesuit residences that were erected were built in the Chinese style. There were difficulties with the indigenous Chinese population, who, although baptized, still could not give up certain Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian practices. The force of habit was sometimes too much.

Eventually, some of their most important customs, such as paying respect to Confucius in temples specially built for him, veneration of ancestors and acculturation of their style of dress aroused the resentment of other orders competing with the Jesuits for influence in the Far East. These included the Franciscans, the Augustinians, but especially the Dominicans, among whom ill-will was combined with a misunderstanding of the essence of the matter.

As a result of their complaints to the Vatican and allegations, there was an ongoing controversy from 1630 onward known as the “Chinese Rites,” which finally ended only contemporaneously, on February 28, 1941, with the granting of the Jesuits' right and Propaganda Fide's decision “so that the laity could follow their consciences.”
The accommodationist dispute greatly impeded the process of what is known to Catholics and Orthodox Christians as “inculturation” (i.e., the adaptation of Christian teachings and practices to cultures) and the development of Christianity in China. Undoubtedly, the resentment against the Jesuits in the Vatican caused by it also contributed to the failure of Michael Boym's mission.

This led to the second grave mistake of the Catholic Church, which de facto nullified its ability to influence the development of Catholicism in this great country, an effect which is still evident today. Its echo is still heard in the division of the Chinese church into the “official” church faithful to the authorities and the “underground” church faithful to the Vatican. For it is a mistake to see this current division solely in the rift between religion and the Communist Party.

Also problematic was the sacrament of reconciliation, which the Chinese had not previously known. They were shy about confessing their sins because, in general, Easterners have a preponderance of shame over guilt, unlike Westerners, where guilt dominates over shame. Women were more willing to go to confession.

The Jesuits, rejecting Buddhism in favor of masculine Confucianism and the culture of literates, somehow preferred to establish good relations with influential people in the city, more with the fathers of the families than with women, who had no influence in the local society anyway. The Jesuits established private chapels for them, due to their natural piety, as well as the institution of separate confession for men and women.

Although men approached confession with a great deal of resistance, this sacrament helped to raise morals and especially morals in places where there were Jesuits. The Jesuits' contacts and friendships with the immediate community also led to pastoral meetings, spiritual direction, which was more frequent than confessions, and which the Jesuits, despite the fact that there were few of them, did not abandon, since every person willing to talk spiritually counted.

The Jesuits were newcomers in unfamiliar territory where Buddhism had been reigning since the first century A.D., with a strong presence and many followers. It was natural, therefore, for tensions to arise, for example, between Buddhist monks and Jesuits, and the bonzas (i.e. monks) were soon branded the main enemies of Christianity.

Therefore, the most important thing in the Jesuit Chinese mission was to win the favor of the emperor himself and make him a kind of “protective shield.”
The Conflict in China and Boym's Position in the Face of the Situation He Found There

Around the same time, news reached the court that a notorious robbery ringleader called Li, who had seized the provinces of Shanxi and Shaanxi during the famine, was coming with more than six thousand troops to lay siege to Beijing. This news was all too true: the notorious highwayman at first sent a few of his soldiers disguised as merchants to bribe those of the Mandarins and eunuchs loyal to the Emperor, who were in charge of his guards. So, they arrived on the spot without encountering any difficulties, and it was his silver rather than his troops that opened the gates to this important city.

The emperor, disgusted by such a cowardly betrayal in favor of one of his subjects, and at the same time a wicked and thieving man who had proclaimed himself the temporary ruler of Peking, after taking a few sips of wine, bit his finger, and with oozing blood wrote with a brush these few words: \textit{Let the mandarins be punished, and the people be forgiven.}

Having then let his hair down and covered his face, he pronounced: I have lost my country, so, covered with shame, I go to join my ancestors. Having uttered these words, in the same hour he moved away to hang himself in a nearby forest, from long ago his favorite place of rest and now his death.


When Jin's Manchurian king, Nurhaci, declared war on China in 1618, the Ming dynasty's power over the Chinese people was already significantly weakened. The erosion of Ming power was caused by successive periods of drought, famine and disease that afflicted the provinces in the cradle of the Chinese Empire, along the Huang He or Yellow River. Another reason was inflation caused by shortages in silver supplies from abroad, which raised the price of silver relative to copper. Meanwhile, peasants had to pay imperial tributes in silver, and received only copper coins for their crops.

Such natural disasters were always a clear sign that the monarch had lost the Mandate of Heaven. Therefore, the \textit{laobaixing}, or the people, viewed him as no longer fit to rule.

As a result of widespread complaints, peasant uprisings began to break out across the country starting in the 1620s. Two of these took on critical proportions. In the heart of China's Shaanxi province, Li Zicheng, the son of poor farmers in the 1630s, rallied support and built a sizable army.
After a series of victorious battles, in 1642 he established the Great Shun Dynasty (大順 Da Shun) in Xi’an, the former first capital of unified Qin China.

Simultaneously, but further southwest, in Sichuan, another ambitious Shaanxi peasant, Zhang Xiangzhong 張獻忠, known as the Yellow Tiger, began his struggle for the Mandate of Heaven. In 1644, he established his dynasty there, known as the Great Western Dynasty (大西 Daxi).

The Ming army, busy fighting the Manchurian invasion and disillusioned with its Ming rulers, could not effectively counter peasant revolts and defend the emperor. Finally, in April 1644, after the capture of Beijing by Li Zicheng, the last major Ming emperor, Chongzhen 崇禎, committed suicide in a very noble and traditional manner, hanging himself from a tree in front of the Forbidden Palace on a white silk scarf.

Around the same time, the ship on which the young and hopeful Michael Boym was traveling to his Chinese destination called at the port of Goa on the west coast of India.

The Beijing operation of dynastic change took another turn just a few weeks later, when Wu Sangui, the Ming Dynasty general in charge of defending the easternmost garrison of the Great Wall, decided to go over to the Manchurian side and open the gateway to China. Shortly thereafter, Manchurian forces led by Prince Dorgon, joined by Wu Sangui and his men, annihilated Li Zicheng's army. They seized Beijing and established the young Shunzhi Emperor as the first Qing ruler. The road to the Manchurian conquest of China stood open. At the end of the same year, Boym set foot on the Chinese coast for the first time.

In the wake of this historic change, Ming loyalists left without a leader fled in disarray to the south, where they attempted to re-establish the dynasty. After several years of fighting, under the onslaught of invaders who killed more pretenders, the last southern Ming emperor, Yongli, ascended to a throne that was only a shadow of its former Ming glory. He was young, inexperienced and unwilling to take on such a responsibility. However, he yielded to pressure and was crowned in 1647. Though weak and timorous, his personality served to centralize loyalists and attract new supporters.

Militarily, the original Manchurian forces technically could not compare with the Ming army in terms of weaponry. They were traditional cavalrymen wielding swords and arrows. The Ming army already relied on foot soldiers — musketeers and artillery. Thanks to exposure to Portuguese alloy techniques, the latter had developed considerably before the war. Had it not been for the discontent of many Ming generals and their men who followed Wu Sangui’s example, it would have been difficult for the aggressors to conquer China.
However, dissatisfaction with the Ming rulers proved strong enough that many former Ming commanders switched allegiance to the new power. On the other hand, most surprisingly, in the face of the Manchurian attack, those who once challenged the Ming regime now came to its aid. Military leaders drawn from the ranks of the rebellious forces of Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong, meeting the Manchurian foe, opted for a new loyalty to the embattled Yongli emperor. And strangely enough, it was not so much thanks to the wayward Ming loyalists as to the exceptional military talents of several former rebels that Ming Yongli was likely to prevail.

A Great Opportunity for a Catholic China Opens

And then Father Xavier (Andreas Koffler), having given them three instructions as to the most important matters in our religion, baptized them in the presence of Chancellor Achilles Pang as their godfather according to the rite of the Roman Church, giving the Empress Widow the name Helen, the Queen Mother, Maria, and the Queen Emperor's wife, Anna. Also at the same time, all the ladies of the company at the Princesses' residence were baptized, to their great comfort.

As soon as the Emperor arrived the following day, the Empress Widow invited him to adore the image of Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and announced to him that from now on in this palace no idol of Tuo-e is worshiped, but the true God, Jesus Christ. The emperor praised this noble decision of the new Christian women and said that he himself also wished to follow in their footsteps. And indeed, he would have been baptized, had it not been for the fact that, due to certain conditions, it was deemed more advantageous for him to remain a catechumen longer. But he did not cease his daily prayers morning and evening reciting the oration of the catechism, laying fragrances before holy images, and may have already received baptism since I left.

As fate would have it, to conclude this story for you, I will only mention that as soon as the Princesses received baptism, the five provinces returned to imperial rule, and this by assuring him of their loyalty and by asking him to send them viceroyalties and other officials, which they were pleased to send.


It was the Yongli family and court that, thanks to the ingenuity of Austrian Jesuit missionary Father Andreas Koffler, embraced the Catholic faith.
This incredible conversion opened up a unique and unparalleled opportunity for the Middle Kingdom to embrace Catholicism, especially since the little heir to the throne, Cixuan, was baptized, and as the future Chinese Emperor Constantine, he was able to lead his country down the path of Christ.

Driven by great faith and a vision of a Catholic China, in the face of constant attacks by the Qing Manchurian dynasty, which controlled the northern part of China, the two Jesuits persuaded the emperor, whose personal name was Zhu Youlang, to send Boym to Europe to gain support for the Ming court. From then on, his fate was inextricably linked to his legation.

**Boym as Emperor Yongli’s Envoy to Europe**

After leaving Macau, being the last Chinese port here, on January 1 of the year of Christ 1651 we viewed from the sea the island of San-Xeu (Sanzao), known for the fact that here the Apostle of the East St. Xavier died and was buried, to whose protection all those who undertake sailing and must sail through the southern waters called Golfo Hay-Nan pray.

Tonkin, Kochinchina and Ciampa remain on the right side. Then on the sailing route is Pedra Blanca, where the ends of the magnetic needle reverse the directions of the world. We crossed the Singapore Strait (Malacca) and happily reached Malakana (Malacca). There, two Fathers from the Society of Jesus, who arrived with the Malay Christians, were disguised as Portuguese soldiers before they could all move on due to various obstacles placed in the way of the Catholic missionaries.

The sailing route continued toward India. During the sailing we passed the island of Sumatra, which is believed to be the ancient Taprobana, as well as other islands known as the Nicobar Islands were bypassed during the sailing, not without the risk of dangers to which even monarchs who sailed there were exposed. The route also led to the Bay of Bengal and on to the island of Ceylon, where the famous cinnamon grows in the forests.

But due to a mistake, we lost an entire day and a whole night while docking off the town of Columbo, the last town where, due to opposing winds, we could not enter the harbor. Picking up later at Cape Comorin we arrived at Kollan. This is a fortified place in a kingdom known for the best pepper in India, which is harvested there in the months of February and March. Formerly in Palonettia, where the ears of St. Thomas are kept as relics, there is also a place where a cross offered by St. Thomas was placed nearby.
After leaving Kollan, also called Cochin in the literature, we arrived at the head of the Malabar fleet and were kindly received by the Fathers of Cochin and Craganor, as well as the learned and holy man of Serra Don Francisco de Garcia, Archbishop of St. Thomas Christians. With the help of a myoparonno called Armada de Goa, we finally arrived on shore in Maia.

And in this way, after nearly five months of sailing in Indian waters, counting from our departure from Macau that year, we arrived in Goa on an adventurous ship.

Excerpt from "Report on the itinerary of Fr. Michael Boym's journey from China to Europe"

As Father Boym prepared to leave China for a mission to Europe in November 1649, the southern Ming dynasty once again came under increased attack from enemy forces. Armies led by two former Ming commanders, Shang Kexi and Geng Zhongming, struck Jiangxi province from the northeast. They advanced south, successively seizing such important cities as Nanchang, Ganzhou and Shaoguan on their way to Guangdong.

Around the same time, another former Ming general, Kong Youde 孔有德, based in Changsha, attacked Guangxi. Moving south, he captured Hengyang and Yangzhou. Finally, in November, he seized Guilin, the stronghold of Qu Shisi — a Christian and one of the few Ming officials sincerely committed to the Ming cause.

A month later, when Boym's father negotiated with Macau port captain Joao Sousa Pereira for permission to board a ship bound for Goa, Shang and Geng's son Jimao laid siege to Guangzhou.

**Early November 1650**

Michael Boym, accompanied by Joseph K'o and Andrew Zheng, embarked on a mission as envoy to the Vatican and European courts.

Michael Boym's description of the preparations for the mission is described in his work *Brevis Sinarum Imperii Descriptio*. He carried with him letters to Pope Innocent X and to the General of the Jesuit Order, Francisco Piccolomini; Cardinal John de Lugo; the Venetian Doge and the King of Portugal, John IV, plus their translations into Latin along with information about conversions at the imperial court. Empress Helena's letters were written with a brush on yellow silk, and those of Chinese Chancellor Pang-Achilles, a convert to baptism, were written on red paper.
November 23, 1650

The envoy reached Macao, where he received certification before an ecclesiastical notary of the authenticity of the envoy and the letters he carries. The Visitator General of China and Japan, Sebastiao de Maya (1599-1664) entrusted Boym with open letters, confirming his identity and informing him that he was an envoy to the General of the Society of Jesus on the affairs of the Chinese vice-province.

November - December 1650

Boym's delegation encountered problems in obtaining permission from Macau's civil authorities to sail. Boym's message was controversial, due to the issue of political and commercial competition on the Manchurian question between Portugal and the Netherlands and pressure from the group favoring Portuguese agreement with the Manchus.

Historically, it is interesting to note that at about the same time, a rival mission led by the Jesuit, Martini Martini, set out from Beijing to convince the Europeans that the only legitimate option was to have a good relationship with the Qing Manchurian dynasty.

January 1, 1651

The ship with Michael Boym and Andrew Zheng (Joseph K'o stays behind) departed from the port of Macau.

May 1651

Boym and Zheng reached Goa. Here they met resistance from local Jesuit order authorities sympathetic to the Manchus and they were, therefore, banned from traveling to Europe by sea, de facto remaining trapped in Goa.

December 8, 1651

Michael Boym and Andrew Zheng, in defiance of the authorities, secretly left Goa and set off on a journey through India, Persia, and Armenia to Smyrna on the coast of Asia Minor, passing cities such as Hyderabad, Surat, Bander Abbas and Shiraz, reaching Isfahan, in Persia, from where they continued to travel through Erzerum and then Trabzon to Smyrna (now, İzmir).

End of August 1652

They finally reached Smyrna, a port on the Mediterranean Sea, today in Turkey.
September 29, 1652

Michael Boym, dressed in the garb of a Chinese mandarin, presented an account of the state of the Chinese mission and the purpose of his journey to Rome in one of the local churches on the feast of St. Michael. The text delivered at the time became the basis of the *Brevis Relatio*, cited above, and later published and translated into several languages. This text contrasted sharply with the *De Bello Tartarico Historia* written by the Jesuit of the “Manchurian” faction, Martin Martini, who, although setting out at about the same time as Boym, reached Europe more than half a year after Boym's arrival there.

Early December 1652

Michael Boym and Andrew Zheng arrived from Smyrna by ship to Venice, where the ban on Jesuits, imposed as a result of conflict between the Papacy, the Jesuits, and Venetian authorities, was still in force. In order to be able to fulfill his mission, Michael Boym asked the French ambassador, René de Voyer de Paulmy, second Marquis d'Argenson, to intercede with Doha. The ambassador took an interest in his case and eventually his intercession proved successful.

December 16, 1652

Michael Boym was granted an audience with the Grand Doge, Francisco Molino, and appeared on the Chinese question before the Senate of the Republic dressed in Chinese Mandarin garb, impressing the assembly and arousing interest. French assistance *post facto*, however, proved to be a curse, as in doing so Boym exposed himself to the Habsburgs, who were close to Pope Innocent X. Moreover, his referral of the work for publication without the permission of his superiors exposed him to their wrath.

Boym was thereupon accused by the order's authorities of publishing an account of China without the approval of the order's general, distributing to the rectors of European universities a treatise entitled *Ratio eorum*. In it Boym praised Confucius and defended the missionary methods initiated in the Middle Kingdom by Father Matteo Ricci, already recognized in Rome as “spreading pagan practices.”

December 21 and 28, 1652

The recently elected Jesuit General, Goswin Nickel, gave to Boym a written reprimand for his speeches as Ming ambassador to Venice. Michael Boym was placed in solitary confinement in Loreto. The Holy See of Innocent X was reluctant to send an envoy and questioned the authenticity of the writings Boym brought. An anonymous letter questioned the identity of the Polish Jesuit as a Ming envoy.
In March, he went to Loretto, where, among other Poles, he engaged in giving
confessions at the Basilica de la Santa Casa — the Holy House — there. In December
of the same year, he was summoned to Rome for a confrontation with his adversary, the
Italian Martino Martini.

April 1, 1653

The first of four general meetings of the Pontifical Congregation for the Propagation of
the Faith was held to discuss the case of Michael Boym and his ministry.

1654

The French version of Brevis Relatio, Referitur iter R. P. Michaelis Boym ex Sinis in
Europam was published. (In English this is the “Report on the itinerary of Fr. Michael
Boym's journey from China to Europe”). It was published in Paris.

January 7, 1655

Pope Innocent X died, resenting Boym. He had opposed the Jesuit practice of using
Chinese vestments and rituals introduced by Matteo Ricci and he called them the
“Chinese Rites” in the liturgy.

April 7, 1655

The Papal Conclave elected Cardinal Fabio Chigi as Pope Alexander VII.

Second Half of 1655

Confirmations of the identity and ministry of the Polish Jesuit arrived at the Vatican
from Macao and Goa, along with the information that one-third of China was still under
Ming Dynasty rule, while anti-Manchurian uprisings were multiplying in the remaining
area.

December 7, 1655

Michael Boym and Andreas Zheng finally were received by Pope Alexander VII, but
only after three years of waiting. However, Pope Alexander VII did not decide to give
real support to the emperor but, rather, he instructed Boym to go back to China, once
again, with letters containing only words of support and encouragement, assurances of
prayers for the imperial family and gold medals with the pope's likeness made to mark
the beginning of his pontificate.
Thereupon, Michael Boym, along with Andrew Zheng, who had managed to join the Jesuit order himself during his three-year stay in Europe, went to Lisbon to ask for help in the fight against the Manchus from King John IV of Portugal, known as the Fortunate King. The king decided to support the Ming and promised military assistance.

**Perilous Return to China, on March 30, 1656**

Boym and Zheng embarked on a return trip to China on the galleon Enxobregas. It was fraught with danger — four of the nine traveling companions died on the ship from disease and exhaustion.

Having left Lisbon, we turned our sails towards the East Indies on March 30, 1656. There were eight of us fathers — four Portuguese, one Pole, Michael Boym, (who is the superior), one Englishman and three Belgians, namely Fr. Francis Rougemont, Fr. Philip Couplet and me, the smallest of the Apostles - Ignatius Hartoghvelt.

We sailed for a full seven months. The reason for such a long voyage, the very numerous illnesses and misfortunes that many suffered, was partly due to the cruel silence of the sea, partly to the weak and generally contrary wind, through which we suffered continuously for almost 40 days from the heat between the first and second degree from the equator [I think the term "linea" refers to the equator]. The food mostly rotted, the wine soured, the bodies weakened, and the ship, with no wind, just the slight movement of the waves, as much as it moved east for one day, it turned back toward the west on the second day.

Seventy people or more on our ship died from the anguish of diseases of all kinds, but all of them happily (if Your Honor excludes two or three who died a sudden death), because they had time to confess their entire lives and, duly strengthened by all the sacraments, passed on to a better life.

*Excerpt from a letter by Fr. Ignatius Hartoghvelt, Goa, East India, May 1, 1657*

**On November 6, 1656**

Boym and Zheng reached the Portuguese port of Goa on the central west coast of India. Here Boym received information about the disastrous situation of the Yongli Emperor, whose troops already ruled only a modest part of the southwestern lands of the empire. He also received a letter from the provincial of Macao informing him that due to the trade relations established by the Portuguese with the Manchus, his return to Macao would be highly undesirable.
Early 1657

The port of Goa was surrounded by ships of the Dutch VOC trading company, making it impossible to leave by ship. Boym and Zheng, however, did not give up. They decided to travel through India on foot, following an unknown route, and having reached the east coast of India, boarded a Muslim ship bound for the Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand).

Early 1658

Boym and Zheng arrived in Ayutthaya, the capital of the Kingdom of Siam and a metropolis of over 1 million inhabitants. At that time, it was thus one of the largest cities in the world (for comparison it was bigger in population than Paris and Rome taken together). Here they received yet another letter - this time from the Macau Senate — asking them not to come to this city, where they are non-grata. Boym described his journey through the Malay Peninsula, including his encounters with tigers, elephants and rhinos, in a letter sent to Rome.

May 1658

Companions learned that the Ming court was now in Guangxi province, bordering Tonkin (today, northern Vietnam), so Boym decided to go there, and he shipped out on a Chinese pirate sailing vessel. The Polish Jesuit, although himself ready for the highest sacrifices, was aware that his mission posed a growing threat not only to himself, but also to the entire religious community and to the interests of the Portuguese Crown, which exercised patronage over the Society of Jesus in China, but loyalty and honor did not allow him to withdraw.

August 10, 1658

After two months of dramatic travel on a tiny ship around the Indochina Peninsula, Boym and his faithful Zheng arrived in Tonkin. Here, Boym sent his last letter to Europe, addressed to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, who had been his protector while waiting for a papal audience.

In this letter, dated November 20, 1658, Boym recounted with optimism the recent successes of the Ming troops and seemed to trust in the future ultimate triumph of the dynasty he served. For this reason, despite the insistence of Father Onofrio Borges, the superior of the Jesuit mission in Tonkin, to abandon further travel, Michael Boym and Andreas Zheng left Tonkin on foot.
February 16, 1659

With the permission of the local authorities, the wanderers crossed the border into China. In the course of their journey, upon hearing that more areas had passed under Manchurian rule, which cut them off from the court of the Yongli Emperor, the Polish missionary decided to return to Tonkin, and from there, via Burma, to try to reach the longed-for destination of their extensive journey. Adding to their worries was the news of the deaths of Chancellor Pang and Father Koffler, and then the ban on returning to Tonkin that Boym next encountered at the border.

On August 22, 1659

Michael Boym died of exhaustion and was buried by the only witness to his death and faithful companion, Andreas Zheng, somewhere near the royal road leading from Hanoi to Nanning, the capital of Guangxi province. A cross with an engraved Chinese inscription was placed on top of the grave. The burial site remains unknown to this day.

Boym’s Role in the History of the West, China Relations, and of the Catholic Church

Boym’s three most important works, which helped lay the foundation for relations between the West and China, are *Medicus Sinicus*, *Magni Cathay* and *Mappa Imperii Sinarum*.

*Medicus Sinicus*

*Medicus Sinicus* is Michael Boym's magnificent work on Chinese medicine and pharmacology. It was published posthumously in fragments as *Specimen Medicinae Sinicae* in 1682 and *Clavis medica ad Chinarum doctrinam de pulsibus* in 1686.

These were the first treatises in Europe on the Chinese method of diagnosing diseases by examining changes in the patient's pulse and based on the appearance of the patient's tongue. Thus, they contained the basics of the Yin and Yang concept, the principles of circulating Qi energy through channels called "meridians" in conjunction with the effects of acupuncture and Chinese natural medicines.

The first edition, however, was unlabeled with his name and was essentially a plagiarism of his work. The plagiarist was a certain Andreas Cleyer, employed as a German surgeon general by the Dutch East India Company in Batavia (now Jakarta, Indonesia, then a Dutch colony) from 1665 to 1697. Cleyer obtained Boym's original text from Boym's fellow Jesuit and Paris publisher Philippe Couplet, to whom Boym had entrusted it in 1656, while on his way to China.
Instead of delivering the text to Europe as soon as possible, as had been agreed, Philippe Couplet sent it to Batavia in 1656, where it fell into the hands of Cleyer, with whom Couplet was friendly, and who compiled, edited and published it on his return to Europe under his own name. As Boym died in 1659, he was no longer able to defend his authorship.

However, as early as 1686, Couplet himself re-edited the text and republished it in Nuremberg, but this time as Clavis medica ad Chinarum doctrinam de pulsibus autore r.p. Michael Boym e Soc. Jesu et in China missionario, that is, with Boymo's authorship correctly stated. Therefore, today the author of all the above medical treatises is unquestionably considered to be Michael Boym. In addition, some of Boym's manuscripts from Medicus Sinicus have been found in the Jagiellonian Library. There is a copy of the 1686 Nuremberg edition in the National Library.

These texts were based on materials collected by the Pole following his arrival on the island of Hainan in 1647, which in turn were created in China based on the famous, oldest (more than 2000 years old) Chinese medical book. That book was the so-called Huangdi Neijing or Canon of Internal Medicine of the Yellow Emperor, the legendary ruler of China. The canon itself dates from the period of the so-called "Warring Kingdoms," i.e., the fifth to third centuries B.C.E., and it is still the basis of Chinese traditional medicine in use today.

The Chinese therefore recognize Michael Boym as the first European translator of the Canon of Internal Medicine, although Medicus Sinicus was more than a direct translation, as it was an analysis of the original texts and an attempt to lay out the concepts contained therein in a way that Europeans could understand.

**Magni Cathay and Mappa Imperii Sinarum**

Boym the geographer compiled, on the basis of existing Chinese sources and his knowledge of the Chinese empire, the first comprehensive European atlas of China known as Magni Catay, containing detailed maps of the then fifteen provinces of the Chinese empire. It explained by plotting the main rivers and their tributaries, mountain ranges, cities previously unknown to Europeans and, importantly, the locations of major mines of strategic minerals like gold, silver, copper, iron, lead and tin.

This was therefore the first such economic atlas to be made on the European soil. The next economic atlas (this time published) appeared only over a century later.

He was the first geographer to correctly interpret the Korean Peninsula as a peninsula rather than as an island and he described the China Wall. He depicted the area of China with great detail, especially the hydrographic network and the relief of the surface. He also rendered the location of cities with relative precision.
In addition to the atlas, he also drew up a general map of the Chinese empire, which is known under the title *Mappa Imperii Sinarum*. The maps drawn by Michael Boym were a significant achievement, as at that time in Europe, knowledge of China came mainly from the colorful tales of Marco Polo. Moreover, only the coastline was well known, while the interior of the continent was unexplored.