PROJECT MUSE®

Luciano Petech and Desideri

Elena De Rossi Filibeck

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 38, 2018, pp. 61-68 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2018.0005>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/709171>

Luciano Petech and Desideri

Elena De Rossi Filibeck

(*English version revised by Francis Tiso*)

ABSTRACT

My essay deals with a short outline of the contents of the part dedicated to Ippolito Desideri, SJ (1664–1733) in *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, Il Nuovo Ramusio (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1952–1956, 7 vols.), the *opus magnum* by Luciano Petech (1914–2010). The second volume of this work is composed of three parts in which Petech published a critical edition of the *Relatio, id est Notizie Istoriche del Thibet e memorie de' viaggi e missione ivi fatta dal P.Ippolito Desideri della Compagnia di Gesù dal medesimo scritte e dedicate*. Petech also published Letters and excerpts of the Defences, three Appendixes concerning a Missiological Manual, and the Report by the Portuguese Jesuit Manoel Freyre.

First I point out the characteristic qualities of the extraordinary work of the Jesuit, highlighted by Luciano Petech (vol. 2, part V, Introduction). First of all, he was a missionary but also an actual scholar, “the first European Tibetologist,” as his writings communicate an extraordinary understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, important historical information of the period of his stay in Tibet, and a general overview of the Tibetan civilization at the time. Then I draw attention to the use of Desideri’s writings by Petech in his historical publications such as *China and Tibet in the early 18th century* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

KEYWORDS: Luciano Petech, Ippolito Desideri, Tibet, Tibetan history, Missionary history.

After long hours of research on the documents housed in the Historical Archives of the Society of Jesus, at the Propaganda Fidei, and in other archives and libraries, Prof. Luciano Petech (1914–2010) was able to publish his monumental seven-volume work, *I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* in the magnificent edition of the *Nuovo Ramusio*.¹ This work was and still is fundamental for anyone undertaking research on the documents left behind by our missionaries and in particular for the person and the writings of Padre Ippolito Desideri, SJ of Pistoia (1664–1733) who was in Tibet from 1716 to 1721.

In this article I will limit myself to those key points that allowed Professor Petech

to reestablish in its entirety the history of the human, religious, and intellectual experiences of this great son of Pistoia. I will also look at how Professor Petech made use of the writings of, as he termed him, this first European Tibetologist, in order to reconstruct the events that occurred during the years of his sojourn in the land of the snows.

In 1984 upon the initiative of the then Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO) for the celebration of the third centenary of the birth of Desideri, the city of Pistoia organized a photo exhibition together with the Società Pistoiese di Storia Patria, afterwards publishing a catalogue that included a paper by Luciano Petech entitled "Ippolito Desideri e il Tibet."² On that occasion, Professor Petech wrote, without mentioning himself as a protagonist with regard to the works of Desideri rediscovered in 1875: "it was necessary to wait until 1954–56 to obtain a complete critical edition accompanied by a Tibetological commentary." It is in fact correct to emphasize the importance of Petech's Tibetological commentary that allowed others access to a comprehensible and correct reading of the works of Desideri. Petech also wrote on that occasion: "The *Report* is a masterpiece of geographical, historical, and religious descriptions of Tibet, in which the lively narrative of the adventurous journey to Lhasa is united with clear ethnographic observations along with an accurate and balanced presentation of the principal aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, nor should we neglect to mention the historical facts that it provides."

Desideri's sojourn of several years in Tibet took place at a decisive moment for the destiny of the country: The events that occurred then led to the establishment of Manchu sovereignty in 1720 and thereafter (1751) to the stable political structure that lasted until 1912 with the restoration of the temporal power of the Dalai Lama who acted through a council of four ministers supervised by two *ambans* (imperial officials in residence) who were always Manchus and never Chinese.³

When Desideri reached Lhasa in March of 1716, governing authority was in the hands of the prince Lha bzang khan (1705–1717), heir of the by now merely nominal power over Tibet of the Qoshot Mongols, who had removed the powerful ex-regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, deposed the Sixth Dalai Lama Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1683–1725)—the only love poet remembered in ancient Tibet—and replaced him with a pseudo-Dalai Lama, Ye shes rgya mtsho, who is said to have been the son of Lha bzang khan.

The actors in the drama that was about to unfold in the country include as protagonists the emperor Khang hsi (1661–1722), a small child, the future Seventh Dalai Lama, incarnation of the sixth, born at Li Tang in eastern Tibet (1708–1757), and the Mongol Dzungar tribe, continuously in conflict with the Chinese Manchu Empire, and of course the Tibetans.⁴ The Dzungars, fervent Buddhist followers of the Yellow Hat (dGe lugs pa) school, wishing to place the legitimate incarnation of the Sixth Dalai Lama on the throne, entered Tibet and on December 1, 1717, invaded and devastated the city of Lhasa. The Dzungar occupation lasted only a few years: By 1720 the army of the Chinese emperor occupied Lhasa, liberating it from the Mongols. This is only a brief sketch of the historical context applicable to the sojourn of Desideri.

The Jesuit father, unlike the poor Capuchin missionaries, escaped from the Dzungar devastation of Lhasa by living in the monastery of Se ra, where he pursued his

research, but he was soon constrained to take flight, seeking refuge in the hospice of the Capuchin Fathers in Dvags po, a region southeast of Lhasa.

The portion of the work *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (cited as *MITN*) dedicated to Ippolito Desideri consists of the second volume, divided into parts V, VI, and VII. It will be useful to recall the structure of this work articulated in its table of contents in order to have an idea not only of the extreme care with which Professor Petech carried out the work, but also to disclose the wide breadth of this scholar's vision. The works of Desideri, as we shall see, are presented in their entirety, going beyond the edition of the *Report* (the *Relatio*).⁵

Contents of Volume Two are as follows:

Part V: Introduction; Letters; Selected portions of the Defense;
Book I of the *Report*.

Part VI: Books II and III of the *Report*.

Part VII: Book IV of the *Report*; Appendix I (Brief Exposition and Additions by way of recapitulations); Appendix II (Missiologial Manual); Appendix III (Freyre's *Report*); Addenda; General Index of the Seven Parts.

In the Introduction we find the following topics: Jesuit attempts at the beginning of the seventeenth century; Ippolito Desideri, his life and his journey; Tibetan studies by Desideri; Desideri's Tibetan writings; Desideri and Tibet.

In the Introduction, we learn of a project for a Jesuit Catholic mission in Tibet, thanks to a donation made to Padre Antonio de Andrade (1580–1634)⁶ by an Armenian nobleman at the Moghul court, Mirza Zu'l-Qarnain. With the closing of the mission of rTsa brang, the funds were applied to the mission at Agra, and after various attempts that did not succeed, at the insistence of the Provincial at Goa, Padre Manoel Sarayva, SJ, the reopening of the Tibetan mission came to fruition: Desideri received his orders to depart for this mission on August 15, 1712.

Here Petech introduces some brief notices that will be the topics of Parts A and B in which he went into detail about the conflict with the Capuchin Fathers:⁷

Here emerges the problem that no one of the Society [of Jesus] had foreseen—the difficulties with the Capuchins. In 1719, the General [of the Jesuits] declared that he was entirely unaware of the various decrees of the Congregation for the Propaganda Fidei with regard to the Tibet mission (DL13). However, he was aware of their arrival in Lhasa, for it is also true that it was he who communicated this fact to the Provincial in Goa; and the Provincial was also directly informed via letters from Fathers Durão and Abreu sent from Mogor. However it may be, both the General and the Provincial, secure in their right of precedence and conscious perhaps that western Tibet (scene of the old Jesuit mission) was quite far from Lhasa (where the Capuchins resided), did not even consider the possibility of a conflict of jurisdiction. And in fact, this arose only when Desideri and Freyre crossed the border of the territory of the rTsa brang mission to go to Lhasa.⁸

We are to remember that Pope Clement XI instituted the mission to the Kingdom of Tibet in 1703, assigning it to the Capuchins of their Province of Picena. As we know, the case [against the Capuchins] went unfavorably for Desideri who, while waiting to return to Italy during his stay in Nepal, had formally appealed to the Pope to be allowed to continue his mission in Tibet.

In one of the chapters of the Introduction titled "Desideri and Tibet," Petech discloses his own thoughts with regard to the work of the Jesuit that he had studied for so long. Here he briefly notes his observations on the personality of Desideri, as well as on his method of entering into a lively and authentic knowledge of Tibetan civilization: "He was first of all a missionary; one of the most pious, fervent and enthusiastic missionaries that the Society of Jesus had ever sent to Asia."⁹

It would be enough to read the passionate words that Desideri wrote to the Father General of the Society to understand how true this is: "It pleased the Divine Majesty to call me and send me to the new mission in Tibet by means of the Father Provincial. With all my heart, I embrace and follow the voice and will of God, and this shall be the purpose and end to which I entirely consecrate myself, all my thoughts, works, strength and life to my last breath."¹⁰

And in order that his evangelizing work might have success, he followed the method of the Jesuits Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) who sought in China and in Japan first of all the support of the Court to assist and help their mission. The proof of this is found in recalling the episode, when the king offered to provide everything that he desired, Desideri responded that he wanted nothing else except freely to spread the religion of Christ.¹¹ As did his predecessors, he studied the language and the religion of the place in order to be able to accept that which would be compatible particularly with Christian morality but also to polemicize and refute the assertions of the other side.¹² Petech writes: "He was well accepted at Court, simply with the force of his personality, and of his tact and inborn ability as a man of the world, to share that exquisite courtesy that distinguished the upper classes among the Tibetans and Mongols, an aristocrat among aristocrats—Desideri himself affirms his own belonging to the nobility of Pistoia—but not for this reason unable to take note of the customs and manners of the people."¹³

He was a missionary, but also a scholar: "We owe to him a stupendous description of the Lamaist religion understood from within and deeply comprehended in its essential elements as few European scholars and travelers were able to do."¹⁴ Desideri writes:

In this place my continuous occupation was to read, annotate and digest the other contents of the books of the Tanjur; to study their dialectics; to exchange many consultations on points of religion with these monks, especially the scholars and masters [. . .] and above all seek to know and to penetrate in depth those abstruse and intriguing tractates that refer to Tongba gnyi [*stong pa nyid*], i.e. Voidness, not to be taken in a material or philosophical sense, but in an allegorical sense, the goal of which is to completely exclude the existence of any Entity that has its being of itself and which might be uncreated and independent, and in that way to close the door to the knowledge of God.¹⁵

Desideri composed a tractate written in the classical Tibetan language in which he demonstrated the errors and falsities of Buddhist doctrine on the void and on the theory of rebirths, but which the Tibetans at that time never read. Professor Lopez states, in his extremely important volume in which he translates and studies Desideri's text: "Desideri carried this manuscript with him back to Rome, where it languished in the Jesuit archives, read neither by the Tibetan audience for whom it was intended, nor by anyone else."¹⁶

Moreover, nearly two hundred years before Giuseppe Tucci (a scholar who was finally able to understand Tibetan art as liturgical in nature), Desideri¹⁷ describes and comments upon the wall paintings of the temples such as those that he saw in the famous Naga temple constructed on a small island behind the Potala and attributed to the Sixth Dalai Lama, called the Lu Khang (Klu khang),¹⁸ and was the first European to furnish serious information on Tibetan architecture, distinguishing between the religious and the lay.¹⁹

As a geographer, writes Petech, Desideri occupies a first rank position: He discovered Mount Kailash (or Ti se), the sacred mountain of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bon, and Lake Manasarowar. He also described correctly the course of the River gTsang po. Petech adds a comment: "Desideri had a clear and exact concept of the great river. The problem of the gTsang po, i.e. the question of whether its lower course might be the Brahmaputra or the Irawadi, arose only later through the work of the geographers of the twentieth century, on which rivers of useless ink were spilled."²⁰ Petech notes that two completely different styles of prose coexist in his writings: "On the one hand he is a lucid and original author, a man of action and a careful voyager, on the other hand he is still the student at the Roman College who learned sacred eloquence in the manner of the seventeenth century even though one senses that this is a genre that is no longer his."²¹

As an historian, he did not occupy himself with the past history of Tibet: "He was a man of the present and of the future and observed the terrible events of his time that would determine the history of Tibet to come, and whose distant consequences are with us even today."²² With regard to the reign of Lha bzang khan, the Dzungar invasion, and the Chinese-Manchu conquest his work is a first-class source for which the Tibetan and Chinese sources are not sufficient to give us a living and pulsating feeling of the tragic events through which he lived.²³ Professor Petech uses Padre Desideri's historical writings on a number of occasions. The most numerous citations are found in his *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century*, in which he reconstructs the history of Tibet in detail during this period, as well as Tibet-China relations. The use of citations from Desideri also marks his *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet 1728–1959*, as well as the notes to this volume by Alfonsa Ferrari²⁴ and in other articles.²⁵ In the monograph *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century*, Petech cites the *Report* of Desideri at least twenty-three times (volume II, parts V and VI), since the information furnished by Desideri in general is corroborated by other primary sources such as the documents in Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chinese, but the style of his accounts gives the reader the impression of being, like their author, contemporary with the facts.

Here we might wish to give an example of the way in which Petech avails himself of the writings of Desideri as an historical source, but also to take note of how he draws upon Desideri's prose for inspiration in reconstructing those very events, so much so as to give the impression of having before one an attractive novel rather than an historical text. In the paragraph that recounts the death of Lha bzang khan:

The old Khan stoically decided on a course of self-sacrifice. In order to avoid the extermination of all his family and attendants, he decided to sally out of the Potala and to die fighting, keeping the enemies as much and as long occupied as he could. [. . .] The flight was soon discovered and the Dzungars hastened in pursuit. The fugitives reached a deep ditch with a double palisade at which the Khan's horse took fright, and instead of jumping the ditch it fell down with its rider. The Dzungars attacked the small party, which held them at bay with matchlock fire, till the ammunition gave out. [. . .] The Dzungars then crowded in on the exhausted Khan without recognizing him. He defended himself valiantly, wounding and killing several of his attackers: with a stroke he cut off the right arm of the nearest man, then he fell dead.²⁶

It has been noted in a recent article that the writings of Desideri might seem to be a sort of antiquarian curiosity²⁷ for a modern reader with access to the by now extremely vast literature on Tibet. In reality, however, Desideri's work continues to offer new stimuli to research as testified by the recent important publications we have cited, thanks also to the interest particularly promoted by Enzo Gualtierio Bargiacchi²⁸ in the academic world and beyond,²⁹ as well as the various papers presented in the first international conference of interdisciplinary studies on Ippolito Desideri,³⁰ for which the starting point remains and will always remain that of the *opus magnum* of Luciano Petech.

NOTES

1. L. Petech, *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* (MITN), Il Nuovo Ramusio, 7 vols. (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1952–1956).

2. See N. Rauty, ed., *Ippolito Desideri e il Tibet, Catalogo della mostra in occasione del terzo centenario della nascita di Ippolito Desideri S.J. (1684–1733)*, Pistoia, 1–31 dicembre 1984.

3. For the administrative structure of the Tibetan government, see L. Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet 1728–1959* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Serie Orientale Roma XL, 1973), 1–19.

4. For the relations between China and Tibet in this period, see L. Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

5. For which see the valuable work of M. Sweet and L. Zwillling, *Mission to Tibet, the Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), in which there is an accurate translation and reconstruction of the text of the Report along with a biography and an ample, updated bibliography on Ippolito Desideri. The work includes some but not all of the Letters and the Defense, published in MITN.

6. See G. M. Toscano, *Alla scoperta del Tibet: Relazioni dei Missionari del Sec. XVII* (Bologna: E.M.I., 1977), 75–80.

7. MITN, vol. II, parte V, xiv.

8. Si presenta qui il problema come mai nessuno nella Compagnia prevedesse difficoltà

coi cappuccini Nel 1719 il Generale dichiarava di aver sempre ignorato i vari decreti della Congregazione de Propaganda Fide riguardanti la missione del Tibet (DL.13. Tuttavia egli non ignorava il loro arrivo a Lhasa tanto è vero che fu proprio lui a comunicarlo al provinciale di Goa quest'ultimo poi ne era stato informato anche direttamente da lettere dei PP. Durão e Abreu dal Mogor. Comunque sia, ambedue il Generale e il Provinciale, sicuri del loro diritto di precedenza e consci forse che il Tibet occidentale, teatro dell'antica missione gesuita, era ben lontano da Lhasa residenza dei cappuccini, non pensarono neppure alla possibilità di un conflitto di giurisdizione. Ed infatti questo sorse solo quando il Desideri ed il Freyre sconfinarono dal territorio della missione di rTsa-brang recandosi a Lhasa.

9. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, xxv. "Egli fu prima di tutto un missionario; uno dei più pii, ferventi ed entusiastici missionari che la Compagnia di Gesù abbia inviato in Asia."

10. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, 3. Si compiace S.D.M. "per mezzo del P. Provinciale di chiamarmi e destinarmi alla nuova missione del Tibet Con tutto il mio cuore abbraccio e seguò la voce e volontà di Dio, e questo sarà lo scopo ed il fine, a cui consacro tutto me, tutti i miei pensieri, opere, forze e vita sino all'ultimo respiro."

11. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, 191.

12. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, 3.

13. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, xxvi. "Ben accetto a corte, con la semplice forza della sua personalità, del suo tatto ed abilità innata di uomo di mondo, condivide quella squisita cortesia che distinguono le alte classi tibetane e mongole, aristocratico tra aristocratici—la sua appartenenza al patriziato pistoiese è affermata dal Desideri stesso—ma non per questo meno attento ad osservare la gente ed il suo modo di vivere."

14. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, xxvi. "Da lui uscì quella stupenda descrizione della religione lamaista intimamente e profondamente compresa nei suoi tratti essenziali come pochi studiosi e viaggiatori europei seppero fare."

15. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, 199. "In questo luogo la mia continua occupazione, fu leggere, annotare e digerir l'altre materie de' libri del Ten-ghiur; studiar la loro dialettica; far molte conferenze di punti di religione con que' monaci, specialmente dottori e maestri. e sopra tutto procurar di saper e penetrar a fondo i trattati più astrusi e più intrigati che chiamano del Tongbà gnyì [*stong pa nyid*], cioè del Vacuo non già preso in senso materiale e filosofico, ma in senso allegorico il di cui scopo è di escluder finalmente l'esistenza d' alcun Ente che da se stesso abbia il suo essere e che sia increato e indipendente e con ciò chiuder affatto la porta alla cognizione di Dio."

16. Donald S. Lopez Jr. and Thupten Jinpa, *Dispelling the Darkness: A Jesuit's Quest for the Soul of Tibet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1.

17. G. Tucci, *Il Paese delle donne dai molti mariti* (Venezia: Neri Pozza, 2005), 180.

18. *MITN*, vol. II, parte VI, 29.

19. *MITN*, vol. II, parte VI, 24, 27, 317 n. 35; parte VII, 244. See also E. Lo Bue, "Ippolito Desideri's Remarks on Tibetan Architecture," in *Arte dal Mediterraneo al Mar della Cina*, ed. P. Fedi and M. Paolillo, 299–310 (Palermo: Osmolab, 2015).

20. *MITN*, vol. II, parte VI, 315 n. 20. "Il Desideri aveva un'idea chiara ed esatta del grande fiume. Il problema dello gTsang po e cioè la questione se il suo corso inferiore fosse il Brahmaputra o lo Irawadi sorse solo più tardi ad opera dei geografi del XX secolo e fece scorrere ruscilli di inutile inchiostro."

21. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, xxviii.

22. Ibid. "Egli era uomo del presente e dell'avvenire e osservò invece bene gli avvenimenti terribili a lui contemporanei che influirono in modo determinante sulla storia del Tibet e le cui lontane conseguenze si fanno sentire tuttora."

23. *MITN*, vol. II, parte V, xxvii.

24. A. Ferrari, *Mk'yen brtse's Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Serie Orientale Roma XVI, 1958).

25. See, for example, L. Petech, "Notes on Tibetan History of the 18th Century," in *Selected*

Papers on Asian History (Roma: Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), 201–230 (reprinted in T'oung Pao LII, 965/66, 262–292).

26. L. Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century*, 48–49; cf. MITN, parte VI, 53–56.

27. See M. Passavanti, “La religione dei gentili sul tetto del mondo: il cammino della liberazione sul tetto del mondo negli scritti di Ippolito Desideri,” *Quaderni Asiatici* n. 115 (settembre 2016): 91–114.

28. See one of the most important works on Desideri: E. G. Bargiacchi, *Ippolito Desideri S.I. Opera e Bibliografia* (Roma: Institutum Historicum, S.I., 2007), and above all, T. Pomplun, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

29. See, for example, M. Passavanti, *Un gesuita fra i lama del Tibet* (Milano: Il sole 24ore Cultura, 2014), and A. Vezzosi, “Ippolito Desideri e Pistoia, Un missionario gesuita pistoiese del Settecento, la sua importanza e la sua notorietà,” *Storia Locale* 12 (2008): 34–68.

30. Convegno Internazionale di Studi su Ippolito Desideri S.J. (1684–1733), Valore umano, religioso e scientifico della grande impresa del missionario pistoiese a tre secoli di distanza, Pistoia 13–14 ottobre 2017.