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**JESUIT MISSIONARIES
AS TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS
IN 17TH-CENTURY CHINA**

Although Christian missionaries were handicapped by the bad reputation their trader countrymen had acquired in China, the Jesuits, owing to their tactic of accommodating to local customs, eventually got admitted to the mainland. In the 17th century, three outstanding Jesuit missionaries - an Italian, a German and a Belgian - not only became court mathematicians and astronomers but, thanks to their profound knowledge of the language and culture of the country, also worked as successful translators of theological and scientific works and as high-level diplomatic interpreters.

The Italian **Matteo Ricci** (1552 - 1610) was a successful pioneer in the attempt at mutual comprehension between China and the West. Following classical and legal studies, he entered the Society of Jesus in 1571 and was sent to the Indies as a missionary in 1578. He worked at Goa and Cochin until 1582, when he was called to Macao to enter China. In 1583 he settled in Kwangtung province wearing the simple garb of a Buddhist monk, studying Chinese language and culture. As the Chinese took an intense interest in his possessions, such as clocks and Western paintings, he found ready acceptance among some officials. His aptitude for languages and his respect for the Chinese classics increased his standing. By 1598, **Father Ricci** had adopted the dress of the literati (Chinese scholars) and was known as Li Matou or Dr. Li. In 1597 he moved to Manking. After having been turned away from Peking twice, he was allowed entrance to the capital in 1601. There he became a court mathematician and astronomer.

Even though **Father Ricci** made few converts, he brought Christianity into good repute. He helped translate many Western works on mathematics and the sciences. Through his maps the Chinese got their first notion of modern Europe. In return, **Ricci** sent the first modern detailed report on

China back to Europe. He composed a number of treatises in Chinese, the principal being a catechism, "True Doctrine of God", which was widely printed in China, and made a careful study of the translation of Christian teachings into Chinese. By the time of **Ricci's** death in 1610, despite hostility in some quarters, Jesuit communities were established in many parts of South and Central China.

Adam Schall von Bell (1591 -1666), a German Jesuit missionary and astronomer, who had been trained in the astronomical system of Galileo in Rome, arrived in China in 1622. He impressed the Chinese with the superiority of Western astronomy and was given an important post translating Western astronomical books and reforming the old Chinese calendar, which was out of kilter. When the Ming dynasty fell (1644) and the Manchu tribes of Manchuria established the Ch'ing dynasty, Schall was appointed Director of the Imperial Board of Astronomy and advisor on the manufacture of artillery. One of his tasks was to predict heavenly phenomena in order to make an accurate calendar.

When **Schall** reached his declining years, the young Flemish priest-scientist **Ferdinand Verbiest** (1623 -1688) was dispatched from Europe as his successor. **Verbiest** was born in the West Flanders village of Pittem and educated at Jesuit schools and at the famous university of Leuven, where he studied Greek, Latin, philosophy, and mathematics. (Mathematics at that time embraced virtually all scientific knowledge, from astronomy and clockmaking to engineering and mathematics). By the age of 24 **Verbiest** was a teacher at the Jesuit college in Brussels. He wanted to go to South America as a missionary, but his superiors had other plans for him. He was summoned to Rome to continue his theological studies, and after he had won his doctorate of divinity, he was sent to China.

In 1664, as a result of the machinations of the envious court mathematician **Yang Guang-xian**, **Schall** was charged with plotting against the state. At his trial, the aging **Schall**, having suffered a stroke, was unable to

speak. He was defended by his young assistant, **Verbiest**, whose Chinese - according to one source - was inadequate for the occasion.

Schall and several of his Chinese Christian colleagues were sentenced to death. But then, an eclipse of the moon occurred exactly on the date forecast by **Verbiest**. An earthquake occurring on the day after the trial was taken as further proof of the power of Western science, and the Jesuits were promptly freed. After that **Verbiest's** authority was firmly established.

On **Schall's** death in 1666, **Verbiest** succeeded his Jesuit predecessor as Imperial Astronomer and advised the **Emperor Kang-Xi**, who at that time was still a boy, in many matters. **Verbiest** was the ideal teacher and became the young emperor's mentor and friend. He implemented an astonishing range of projects including the design of new instruments for the Imperial Observatory, the construction of more than 300 cannons, the production of a corrected calendar, the construction of a self-propelled vehicle, and the introduction of the thermometer. Among his many languages **Verbiest** spoke Manchu, and since **Emperor Kang-Xi** was a Manchurian, this was the language they spoke together. **Verbiest** published the first Manchu grammar, written in Latin.

In 1678, **Verbiest** played a vital rôle as interpreter in historic negotiations with Russia - the first time China concluded a treaty with another country. Russian seems to have been one of few languages **Verbiest** did not speak, but he was able to communicate in Latin with one of the members of the Russian delegation. Through the treaty negotiations **Verbiest** obtained knowledge of an overland route through Siberia that could be used by Jesuits coming to China from Europe.

The cultural and technological contributions by **Verbiest** and the other Jesuits to 17th century China endeared Catholicism to **Emperor Kang-Xi**, who gave official permission for its propagation in 1692 and later gave French missionaries a residence within the Imperial City and built a church for them in Peking in gratitude for curing him of malaria.

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