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CHANGING CHINA THROUGH A DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
SCIENCE AND FAITH:  
FERDINAND VERBIEST (1623-1688) AND  
THE “COLD PLUM STANDING ALONE IN THE SNOW”

通过科学与信仰的对话改变中国：  
南怀仁（1623-1688 年）与“雪中独寒梅”

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On 9 October 2023 in Beijing we celebrated the 400th birthday of Ferdinand Verbiest who is considered one of the most outstanding missionaries in China following in the footsteps of Matteo Ricci and Johann Adam Schall von Bell. The Symposium on “Exploring the Mysteries of Heaven with Ferdinand Verbiest: Dialogue between Science and Faith” provided an opportunity for the Macau Ricci Institute at the University of St. Joseph to cooperate with the Embassy of Belgium in China, the Yale Center Beijing, the Korean Center for Innovation and the Swiss Chamber of Commerce. This overview of the extremely rich encounter limits itself to briefly highlighting three core dimensions of our combined effort which was in line with the last fourth centenary celebration in 2010 recalling the death of Matteo Ricci 400 years ago. From a Western point of view, it may not easily be understandable how much the memory of friends is greatly valued and appreciated in China over the span of several centuries. While it was encouraging to see how many people on different levels of society in Belgium did enthusiastically join this event on a stunningly beautiful autumn day in Beijing—which included a visit to the six Astronomical instruments at the Ancient Observatory in downtown Beijing—should not let us ignore the fact that Ferdinand Verbiest like other luminaries did a long time ago fall into oblivion in Europe.

Here are the three core dimensions of the exceptional importance the memory of Verbiest holds for the dialogue between science and faith, in China and the West:

1) Memory of a beloved friend and the quest for truth

It is a core mission of the Macau Ricci Institute to keep the various aspects of cultural exchange alive between China and the West which the missionaries cultivated, and which resonate

with Jonathan Spence’s remarks on Ferdinand Verbiest in his notable study of “Changing China” when he tried to cultivate a genuine memory of key actors over the centuries involved in these cultural exchanges. In the context of distorted and highly manipulated views of history the papers of this symposium document how mutually beneficial it is to take a broad look at the amazing achievements of Ferdinand Verbiest from a macro- and micro-history perspective: This enables us to appreciate how much the Chinese context had shaped his “*Weltanschauung*” and convictions as well as the lay and religious companions who preceded and accompanied him along the way. We have savored the amazing complexity of a genuine history involving fierce conflicts, disagreements, and widely different views on a host of issues. For Verbiest and his companions, the way was never easy but always remained a bumpy road with pitfalls, difficulties, and apparent failures. It is inspiring to realize how deeply the Chinese cherish the memory of these friends coming from distant countries who became their true friends while in their countries of origin their memory seems to have faded away a long time ago.

As a most recognized student of the friendship between China and Europe, Prof. Dr. Jeroom Heyndrickx relates various ups and downs in the dialogue with China with a symbolic reference to the bronze astronomical instruments that stand till today on top of the Ancient Observatory in Beijing. The most remarkable of them is the Celestial Sphere which was created at the peak of the friendly exchange between the Jesuits and China initiated by Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall von Bell, Ferdinand Verbiest and many others during the 17th and 18th centuries which Heyndrickx considers the golden period of the relations between China with the West while he

argues that the Opium Wars during the 19th century and the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 destroyed the fruits of that friendship. The astronomical instruments thus testify to a historical drama which makes them witnesses of the good and bad times of East-West relations. That fact inspired the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation of Leuven University (Belgium) to order a perfect bronze copy of the Celestial Sphere, manufactured in Beijing. In fact, some Chinese participants in the Symposium were deeply touched by the strong appeal from Heyndrickx who used the copy of the Celestial Sphere shining through the different seasons of the year to request the world today to restore the old relationship of equality, mutual respect, and friendship between East and West.

## 2) Innovation based on mutual Dialogue

What could often be dismissed as failures emerged in the life of Ferdinand Verbiest as amazing learning opportunities for social innovation. His achievements as a man of science are evident across a broad field, from the Calendar reform, the drawing of a universal map of the world, and a first design for what would become self-driven automobiles. Clearly was he closely following in the footsteps of his Master and Predecessor Johann Adam Schall von Bell SJ, also in supervising the production of accurate cannons for China's military defense, as the painful memory of foreign aggression on the Korean-Japanese borders was probably still fresh in Verbiest's day. His innovative contributions at the Court in a sig-

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This may require us to reconnect to the rich meaning of Matteo Ricci's treatise on friendship as a paradigm for such fruitful encounters on equal terms and, as Dennis McCann hints, these insights of Ricci on friendship are also significant for the issues that they pass over in silence, most notably, a topic of great interest among late Ming literati, namely, the significance of friendship among the five cardinal relationships. The so called "wǔlún" was a summary of the basic Confucian understanding of filial piety (Chinese: 孝; pinyin: *xiao*) extending it comprehensively to all human relationships: ruler and subject (君臣; pinyin: *jūnchén*), father and son (父子 *fùzǐ*), elder and younger brother (兄弟 *xiōngdì*), husband and wife (夫婦 *fūfù*), and between friends (朋友 *péngyǒu*).

nificant way not only allowed his fellow Christian missionaries to continue to do their work but also improved the situation of ordinary Chinese people interested only in peace and prosperity.

Over the past forty years, research in China on the scientific image of Verbiest has had four basic characteristics, as Lei Huanjie points out: Firstly, it affirms his contribution to cultural exchange between China and the West, and regards science and religion as two fundamental points; The second is that the published results of translation, textual research, and organizational work are constantly emerging, relying on the continuously enriched literature and materials related to Verbiest to provide support for further research; The third is that the exploration of the scientific knowledge and the activities he spread is becom-

ing more in-depth, and the understanding is more comprehensive and systematic; The fourth is that there are more and more fields and hotspots involved, prompting a trend favoring multiple perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. In short, contemporary research in this field can be described as grand, constructing a more diverse and three-dimensional scientific image of Verbiest and the Jesuits. The four characteristics underscore how much science and religion operating in partnership have contributed significantly to social innovation including through periods when China seemed to be cut off from the rest of the world.

Verbiest and other Jesuits could work officially at the Bureau, illustrating their willingness to find a new synthesis between science, politics and religion, yet voices also were heard opposing Verbiest's accepting an official position at the Bureau, stressing the need to respect boundaries between science, politics and religion along the same lines expressed by people who fiercely criticized his predecessor Johann Adam Schall von Bell.

Within the point of view of contemporary Chinese TV dramas, it may not be surprising that Verbiest's role as a missionary is deliberately or unconsciously weakened. As a matter of fact, the dramas give no pictures of direct preaching



In terms of the status and protection of missionaries in China, Thierry Meynard points out that the situation in Beijing in 1669 developed to the advantage of the Jesuits, with Verbiest regaining his status at the Imperial Astronomical Bureau. Most missionaries finally accepted that

by Verbiest. In the drama “The Long River,” as Li Bingquan documents, one of Verbiest's fellow missionaries makes an impassioned plea to Kangxi in the imperial court to accept Catholicism as the state religion. The proposal of course is rejected by the emperor and Verbiest remains



silent in the meantime. It transpires that while Verbiest was always cautious about his mission to the emperor he did try to discuss matters of faith and doctrine with him. From a Chinese perspective it seems evident that his primary identity was that of a missionary not a scientist and thus all other identities were secondary in comparison. According to Li Bingquan, Verbiest single-handedly influenced Kangxi's attitude towards Catholicism and religious policy. Verbiest's stewardship of the Astronomy Bureau in Beijing enabled it to become a center for cultural communication and for the spread of Christianity during a period described as the "last golden years of Christianity" in China.

of *Astronomiae Europaeae Mechanica* (1676) he surprisingly enough remarks how few illustrations Chinese technical books contain.

3) Wisdom traditions and religions as partners in the process of "Enlightenment", not as enemies

With our focus on dialogue with China in science and innovation, we realise that Verbiest and his companions and lay partners stood for a type of Wisdom tradition and religion which, even at the dawn of the philosophical movement of Western enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), remained faithful to the classical Christian axiom, "*fides quaerens intellectum*", or "faith seeking rational understanding". Therefore, far from perpetuating questionable divination practices and

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Noel Golvers who is considered as one of the foremost authorities among Verbiest scholars argues that Verbiest's Chinese reading was broad, and consisted of professional, if not 'technical' books relating to Chinese calendar affairs and their interpretation as well as of Jesuit publications in Chinese on the Western calendar and its functioning and Confucian classics, including the Book of Rites, administrative documents and Christian texts. Very rarely does Verbiest give his personal assessment of these Chinese books. A first surprising remark he makes concerns a general lack of logical structure and reasoning in Chinese mathematical books, probably continuing a traditional opinion among Jesuits on Chinese mathematics. Elsewhere, in the manuscript

other superstitions, Verbiest stands for a Wisdom tradition, in which religious faith and mutual dialogue become crucial partners in the search for enlightenment, which will benefit not only some privileged social circles but ultimately the larger society. The contributions to the Symposium on the Fourth Centenary of Ferdinand Verbiest offer a rich platform of arguments of mutual enrichment between science and faith.

The last contribution, a poem by Chen Dongfeng who has been doing research on the tombs of missionaries over the last decades, challenges us to take a step back as he recalls his visit to the famous cemetery of French Jesuits in the Haidian district of Beijing at *Zhengfusi* along with a Jesuit friend during the Lunar New Year

2023. While the New Year of the Rabbit was just opening, the iron gate on the wall of the Zhengfusi Church was locked up. Just recently the run-down church which was transformed into a textile factory during the Cultural Revolution was replaced by an immense modern Church building with a big cross as a window. The reflection of Chen recalls the brutal destruction of sacred buildings. While some may have nostalgic feelings towards the supposedly “Golden Years of Christianity in China,” Chen and his Jesuit friend facing the locked iron door prayed silently with the conviction that no matter at which Golden or Iron period of time of Christianity we may find ourselves, the sunshine of spring will for sure come out in one way or another. “Rest in peace” is thus not just a sad sigh but a cry which reconnects us in a meaningful and peaceful way with our ancestors in faith who give us a lasting example of forging ahead despite so many setbacks: “A cold plum stands proudly in the snow and stands alone in the frosty spring”.



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