
SCIENCE, POLITICS AND RELIGION:
DEBATES ABOUT VERBIEST'S INVOLVEMENT
AT THE ASTRONOMICAL BUREAU

科学、政治与宗教：
关于南怀仁在钦天监任职的争论

THIERRY MEYNARD 梅谦立

ABSTRACT

As we celebrate the 400th anniversary of Ferdinand Verbiest's birth, it is quite meaningful to remember the most tragic event in his own life and in the history of the Catholic mission in China, the Calendar Case instigated by Yang Guangxian which led to the nationwide prohibition of Christianity and the arrest of almost all of the missionaries. Recent studies, based on Manchu, Chinese and Western writings, have helped us to better understand how Kangxi seized the opportunity of the Calendar Case to get rid of the regents and to assume personal rule. In this short essay, we shall look at how the missionaries who were exiled in Canton evaluated the involvement of Verbiest at the Imperial Astronomical Bureau. Their discussions shed a new light on the fragility of a synthesis between science, politics and religion which overlooks their mutual boundaries.

Introduction

Ferdinand Verbiest was a man of science who spent considerable time and energy in understanding the physical world. At the political level, he was a foreigner at the personal service of the emperor Kangxi. He was also a Jesuit missionary promoting Christianity in China. He attempted to harmonize as best he could those three dimensions of science, politics and religion. In this, he was following the policy pursued by Jesuits in Europe who combined scientific work, engagement with European courts, and renewal of Christian life. This combination of science, politics and religion was never taken for granted in Europe, but it resulted from continuing adjustments between the Jesuit order, the political powers and the academic world. In China, with the Calendar Case starting in 1664 and ending in 1671, the subtle harmony of science, politics and religion seemed to have been destroyed. This led to the arrest of Adam Schall, Verbiest and the Chinese Christians working at the Astronomical Bureau, and to the expulsion of 25 missionaries to Canton. Verbiest's successes in 1668 and 1669 re-establishing the credit of Western Europeans by defeating his rival Yang Guangxian, was only possible because Kangxi used the Calendar Case to assert his political power against the four regents.¹ Once again, science, politics and religion could be harmonized. During the Calendar Case, Verbiest kept close contact with the Jesuits in Canton, and seven letters of his are still preserved, one to the French Jesuit Adrien Grelon dated 18

1 When Kangxi started his reign at the age of six, he was assisted by four ministers. One of them was Oboi who came to monopolize the power against the others. In 1665, Schall was condemned and replaced by Yang Guangxian. By the end of 1668, Yang Guangxian was proven incompetent in astronomy. In 1669, Kangxi removed Yang Guangxian and replaced him with Verbiest. Two months later, he ordered the arrest of Oboi and assumed personal rule.

April 1668, two to the Flemish Jesuit Philippe Couplet dated 23 January 1670 and 20 August 1670, two to the other Flemish Jesuit François de Rougemont dated 23 January 1670 and 20 August 1670, one to the French Jesuit Jacques Le Faure dated 20 August 1670, and one to the Portuguese Jesuit António de Gouvea dated 1 January 1671 (Golvers, 2017, pp. 166-209).

In the first part of this essay, we shall examine the debates among the missionaries at the beginning of their Cantonese exile in 1666-1669. Once past the shock of their arrest and expulsion to Canton, the missionaries attempted to analyze the reasons for the persecution, and handily identified the problem with what they regarded as an unsound combination of science, politics and religion. At the time of this major crisis which threatened the survival of the young China mission established 80 years before, they questioned the legitimacy of the Christian alignment with the Manchus since 1644. They also questioned the legitimacy of the involvement of some missionaries in the Astronomical Bureau.

However, the situation in Beijing in 1669 developed to the advantage of the Jesuits, with Verbiest regaining his status at the Astronomical Bureau, and many missionaries in Canton swept aside their previous concerns about the alignment of Christianity with astronomy and Manchu politics. They enthusiastically welcomed the rehabilitation of Verbiest which, they hoped, would allow them to return quickly to their churches. Yet it would be wrong to suppose a return to the situation before the Calendar Case. As we shall examine in this second part, though most missionaries finally accepted that Verbiest and other Jesuits could work officially at the Imperial Astronomical Bureau, illustrating their willingness to find a new synthesis between science, politics and religion, yet voices also were

heard opposing Verbiest accepting an official position at the Astronomical Bureau, stressing the need to respect boundaries between science, politics and religion.

result of the problematic relationship between the Qing dynasty and Christianity established twenty years earlier, in 1644, by the Manchu Prince Dorgun and Schall. During their exile in Canton,

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Debunking a problematic combination of science, politics and religion

The Calendar Case felt upon Schall and the Jesuit mission as a shock. Surely, starting from 1648, Gabriel de Magalhães and Lodovico Buglio had already expressed through letters to Rome their concerns about the involvement of Schall at the Manchu court on three accounts: first, Schall's work necessarily would get tainted with the superstitious practices of omens; second, Schall's official position at the court goes against the rules of the Jesuits not to accept such positions; third, Schall's exercise of such an office would make him lose the Christian virtue of humility. However, the Jesuit Superior General Giovanni Paolo Oliva and the pope Alexander VII put those concerns aside and confirmed the work of the Jesuits at the Astronomical Bureau (Dunne, 1962).

In their exile in Canton, the missionaries were searching for the root causes of the persecution. Who was responsible for it? Yang Guangxian was the most immediate answer, but the missionaries felt the need to place the Calendar Case in a larger context. For some, the persecution launched in 1664 should be interpreted as the

three Jesuits wrote extensive and complementary reports about the Calendar Case which they reframed within a long historical narrative: Adrien Grelon's *History of China under the Tartars* (1671) in French, Giandomenico Gabiani's *Opposition of the Tartars to the Growth of the Chinese Church* (1673) in Latin, and François de Rougemont's *New Tartar-Chinese History* (1673) also in Latin. All three were aware of continuing the historical work of Martino Martini's *History of the Tartar War* (1654) in discussing the future of Christianity under the new dynasty.

Indeed, the relationship between the Manchus and Christianity can be traced back to the very beginning of the Qing when Schall had offered his services to Dorgun to establish the calendar for the new dynasty. Despite the shift of allegiance from Ming to Qing, Schall's decision was in continuity with the involvement of the Jesuits during the last fifteen years of the Ming dynasty towards the reform of the Chinese calendar. But the Chongzhen calendar, which was the result of the reform, was never officially promulgated due to the slackness of the emperor, and Schall never obtained an official position at the Astronomical Bureau under the Ming. Only in 1644 did Schall secure an official position within the imperial

administration, and from 1644 onwards, the status of Christianity was closely connected to Schall's position at the Astronomical Bureau. Though Christianity was not officially allowed to be preached, yet Schall's position granted to the missionaries all over China prestige and protection to engage in missionary work.

By 1664, missionaries were facing the risk of the destruction of the Christian mission, and they started to raise sensitive issues. Was Schall correct in collaborating so closely with the Qing dynasty which had conquered China with great brutality some twenty years before, while other Jesuits like Francesco Sambiasi and Michał Boym had instead supported the Southern Ming? Besides the issue of political allegiance, there was also the cultural issue since the missionaries had largely embraced Chinese culture, and they were quite unfamiliar with Manchu culture. Finally, was it correct for Schall to accept an official position at the Astronomical Bureau, which implied condoning superstitious practices of divination? This last point raises the important question of the legitimacy of astronomical work for the conversion of China.

On a more theological level it was asked whether God allowed the current persecution only to prepare a more resounding victory of Christianity over its enemies in China. Some missionaries thought that Satan was working through Yang Guangxian to prohibit Christianity, but God was already manifesting His will to the pagans through earthquakes, floods and astronomical signs. The clearest manifestation was the earthquake of April 1665 in Beijing, which was even recognized as an omen by the Manchus, deciding them to free Schall, Verbiest and the two other Jesuits from jail. In 1668, the missionaries in Canton were avidly reading the local gazettes about natural disasters which happened in the

summer that year in North China, convincing them that God was sending signs and preparing the final victory of faith. For example, Rougemont mentions a list of omens or signs of great changes to come, including twenty mysterious Chinese characters written on a stone which appeared on the surface after an earthquake (Rougemont, 1673, pp. 320-323). The missionaries associated this series of natural disasters with the dramatic events of the Calendar Case, and they read them as signs of a cosmic fight between God and Evil which would determine the history of China.

The historical accounts of Grelon, Gabiani and Rougemont all displayed the same theological interpretation: the persecuted Church in China was about to be saved through divine intervention as so many omens attested. Their reports stress the necessity of founding the Church in China, not so much on astronomical science, neither on an overt reliance on the Manchus, but on the highest testimony of faith. Since the 1590s, the Japanese church had their own martyrs, and the China missionaries considered that the Church in China needed also to establish itself through the blood of martyrs. For the Jesuits in Canton, Schall who passed away on 15 August 1666, was not so much a model of evangelization through science, as a model of martyrdom.

While Verbiest attempted to convince the Manchus in Beijing, anti-Manchu feelings were revived among the missionaries in Canton. An illustration can be found in the writings of the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Francesco de Ferrariis where he discusses the question of the use of a Chinese hat during the Catholic mass. As he explains in his report of 1688, Jesuits before 1644 had allowed Chinese Christians to wear a hat during mass to show respect for the Eucharist because wearing a hat is the usual way to show respect in Chinese culture, but in 1644 Schall

made a serious mistake of appreciation according to Ferrariis: he thought too hastily that the Manchus had abolished the custom of the hat and requested the faithful in Beijing and Northern China not to wear a hat during Mass anymore (Ferrariis, 1668).

When the Jesuits discussed the issue of the Chinese hat during the Canton conference in December 1667 and January 1668, Schall had been dead for more than a year. As mentioned above, the Jesuits portrayed Schall as a martyr of the faith, but they criticized his closeness to the Manchus. In other words, Ferrariis suggested that responsibility for the persecution falls partially upon Schall who had exposed all the mission to the political attack of Yang Guangxian. Besides the tactical mistake of Schall, Ferrariis asserted a fundamental cultural incompatibility between the Manchus and Christianity. He described the Tartars as a barbarian, vulgar, arrogant and insolent people, and this again seems to require a complete rejection of the Manchu-Christian alliance established by Dorgon and Schall in 1644. Ferrariis suggested that Schall was unwise in collaborating so closely with the Manchu court which lacked the sophistication of the Ming and was unable to appreciate Christianity.

Debates about the resumption of Verbiest's role at the Astronomical Bureau

Ferrariis completed his report on the Chinese hat on 10 October 1668, but probably his anti-Manchu feelings softened when in the middle of 1669 he learnt with the other missionaries in Canton about Verbiest's victory over Yang Guangxian. Indeed, from December 1668 to March 1669, Verbiest was able to show the superiority of Western astronomy. Based on the letters received from Verbiest, Magalhães and

Buglio, the Jesuits in Canton were enthusiastically transmitting the felicitous news in their own reports to Europe. In his work, Grelon has one chapter "European astronomy reestablished in China with honor," narrating the victory of Verbiest over Yang Guangxian on the solar computation, and another chapter "Extreme favors and signs of benevolence from the emperor towards the Fathers," with Kangxi receiving the Beijing missionaries on 4 April 1669 (Grelon, 1672). Gabiani also narrates how Verbiest won over his enemies on solar computations during the time of Christmas (Gabiani, 1669). Christianity was vindicated from the accusations of being a seditious teaching, and there was hope that the Christian faith would be allowed to be practiced again in China.

For many missionaries, a tacit authorization to resume missionary work in their churches without any involvement in the Astronomical Bureau would be good enough. But when Verbiest was offered a position at the Astronomical Bureau, the missionaries were divided, as we learn from the Spanish Dominican Domingo Navarrete. According to him, when Verbiest expressed to the emperor his wish not to accept the position, Verbiest would have argued that Schall had also wished not to hold the position, but after being forced by Shunzhi to accept, Schall always felt "sad and displeased" (*triste y disgustado*; Navarrete, 1676, p. 350). The reluctance of Schall to accept official appointment at the Astronomical Bureau matches what the Spanish Franciscan Antonio Caballero had written, alleging that Schall was aware of superstitions attached to the calendar and had tried a few times to resign from his position, but Shunzhi would not allow it (Caballero, 1915). However, according to Navarrete, when Gouvea and Le Faure heard about the recent discussion

Astronomical Bureau, which can be very unstable as the persecution against Schall showed. Despite the recent political change, as long as Christianity relied on foreign missionaries, the situation would remain very fragile, and for Rougemont, the only way for Christianity to take root in China in the long term would be the development of a Chinese clergy (Meynard, 2020, p. 151). The crisis of the Calendar Case had shown the possibility of a new relationship with science and politics where the fate of Christianity would not depend on their work at the Astronomical Bureau, but would depend on a new equilibrium between the scientific apostolate among literati and popular missions led by Chinese clergy. However, with the renewed possibility of introducing new foreign priests after 1671, the missionaries considered they could continue by themselves as before and there was no real push to train local clergy. Later when Yongzheng prohibited Christianity, the church cruelly lacked local clergy to sustain itself.



THIERRY MEYNARD, Sun Yat-sen University

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