

An Universal Genius

'I know not of the two which to blame most, him that publishes hasty indigested relations of his Travels, or the Reader that runs 'em over slightly and heedlessly. The Business of writing Voyages is not altogether so light a Task as most are apt to Fancy, it requires not only Wit and Judgement, to manage it successfully, but likewise Sincerity, Exactness, and a simple Insinuating Stile, and Learning besides; for as a Painter, to be a Master in his Art, ought to know the propriety and force of all sorts of Colours, so whoever undertakes a Description of the People, Arts and Sciences, and the Religions of the New World, must also have a large Stock of Knowledge, and in a manner an Universal Genius.'

(Louis Le Comte, 1697)¹

On the 19th of December, 1720, in Peking, the Scottish physician and traveller John Bell noted: *'Lange and I went to the French convent, but not one of the ecclesiastics were at home, having all gone to attend Signor Mezzabarba² at an audience of the Emperor; except an old gentleman Monsieur Bouvett, who had formerly written a small treatise "Le Portrait de l'Empereur de la Chine"; which he had printed in Europe.'*³

This old gentleman was the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet, who was 64 in 1720 and lived on for another ten years, dying in Peking in 1730. Bell (1691-1780) was a senior member of a mission headed by Lev Ismailov (1719-1721), sent by Peter the Great to the Chinese Kangxi Emperor in 1719, and his account was not published until much later, in 1763, when he was back living in Scotland.

Bouvet was one of the last survivors of six Jesuit priests that sailed from France in 1685 in response to a request to Louis XIV from the head of the Jesuit Peking mission, the Jesuit father and astronomer, Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688). Between 1550 and 1800, more than 900 Jesuits⁴ mostly French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian, lived and worked within China and the Catholic Church achieved what traders and trading companies such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and later the British East India Company, failed to do, establish residence and bases in the hinterland, including direct contact with successive Emperors. The European states, and the Papacy, kept a constant eye on proceedings in Peking, knowing that the volume and value of imports from the East were making increasingly substantial contributions to their economies, and the latter additionally through its missionary interests. There was competition, and the request from Verbiest, particularly asking for missionaries with mathematical and astronomy skills, since European mathematics and astronomy was greatly valued by the Kangxi emperor, was also driven by concern at the increasing influence of Portuguese Jesuits within the imperial court.

¹ **Le Comte, L.**, Memoirs and Observations, Topographical, Physical, Mathematical, Mechanical, Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical, made in a late Journey through the Empire of China, and published in several letters. Particularly on the Chinese Pottery and Varnishing;..... London, Benj. Tooke & Sam. Buckley. [1697]

² Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba (1685-1741) was sent to China by Pope Clement X in 1720-1721 to negotiate acceptance of the Church's stand on rejecting the practise of Confucian rites for converted Chinese Christians, He was unsuccessful.

³ **Bell, J.**, Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia to Diverse Parts of Asia. Glasgow, for the Author by Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1763.

⁴ **Mungello, D.E.**, The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800. Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.

Verbiest's request and reports describing the current state of the missionary enterprise were sent back in 1681 in person in the hands of Phillipe Couplet⁵, the procurator of the vice-province of China for the Jesuits, an old China hand (also known as Bai Yingli). Louis XIV was particularly receptive at the time, in the midst of expelling the protestant Huguenots and looking to expand the global Catholic mission.⁶

And so six missionaries sailed from Brest on March 3, 1685 on the ship *Oyseau*, led by Jean de Fontaney (1643–1710), and including Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), Jean-François Gerbillon (1654–1707), Louis Le Comte (1655–1728), Claude de Visdelou (1656–1737) and Guy Tachard (1648–1712). They stayed in Siam for some 2 years before five of them sailed on to Ningbo in what is now Zhejiang Province, arriving on 23 July 1687, where a sufficiently alarmed the Governor notified the Emperor, uncertain whether to retain them or allow their continuing passage. In the end, Verbiest in Peking interceded and the Emperor gladly gave permission for the five to proceed. They spent three weeks in Hangzhou then travelled by barge on the grand canal to Peking, arriving on 7 February, 1688. Tachard had stayed on in Siam as part of a French embassy to the King of Siam, led by Alexandre, Chevalier de Chaumont and the Abbé François-Timoléon de Choisy.

The five who arrived in China published a small number of books, but sent many letters and manuscripts back to France during their lifetime. Perhaps, however, we should start with a seventh Jesuit priest and mathematician, Philippe Avril, who was also recruited to travel to Peking through the same request from Verbiest, but in this case, to find an inland route. He never got to China, though he tried very hard.

The Jesuits and other gadding Orders of the Roman religion, have for several years had a longing desire to settle themselves in China

Philippe Avril (1654-1698) was a professor of philosophy and mathematics at Paris when he was recruited along with the six other Jesuit priests, but his mission was to find an overland route through Persia and Grand Tartary which would enter China from north of the Great Wall. He departed in October 1684, accompanied as far as Lyon by Philippe Couplet. He sailed across the Mediterranean, his ship foundering off Cyprus on the way, and eventually ended up in Armenia, staying there for about a year to learn Turkish and lie low to avoid arrest by the Ottoman authorities.⁵ He started off again in April 1686, crossing the Caspian Sea to Astrakhan, linking up with traders who followed routes through Bukhara to Peking. However, their travels came to nought because of war among the Kalmycks and Uzbeks in the intervening region, and in the winter of 1687, Avril eventually turned up in Moscow, having joined a group of traders returning from China. There is a long tale of interrogation, suspicion, application for passports in Moscow, and the eventual refusal by the Russian authorities, who wanted to keep overland routes secret in the interests of both trade and the politics of central Asia.⁶ He eventually returned to France via Constantinople,

⁵ Philippe Couplet (1623-1693) was a Jesuit priest who travelled to China in a group with Michael Boym and Ferdinand Verbiest in 1656. He returned to Europe in 1681, visiting Rome and Paris, with one outcome being the despatch of the six Jesuits by Louis XIV in 1685. Over this time he published two notable works, one being the first translation of the works of Confucius in 1686, and the other in 1688, a life of Candida Xu, the Chinese noblewoman with whom he worked closely in China,.

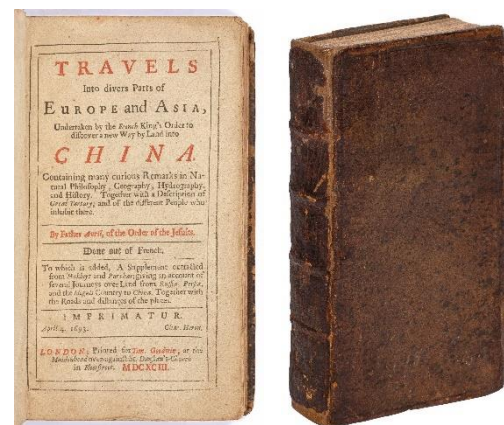
⁶ Carhart, M.C., Leibniz discovers Asia. Social networking in the republic of letters. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. pp. 62-81.

Moldavia and Poland. His book was first published in Paris in 1692, and he subsequently tried a last time to get to China, but was lost at sea in 1698.

Avril, Philippe *Voyage en divers etats d'Europe et d'Asie, entrepris pour découvrir un nouveau chemin à la Chine. Contenant plusieurs remarques curieuses de physique, de geographie, d'hydrographie & d'histoire. Avec une description de la grande Tartarie, & les differens peuples qui l'habitent. Paris, Claude Barbin, Jean Boudot, George & Louis Josse, 1692. 4to. pp. (xx), 406, (ii), (24) table. With engraved portrait of Gen. Stanislas Jablonowski, one folding engraved map, 3 engraved plates and 5 large engraved vignettes. Cordier 2088, Lust 312, Lowendahl 206.*

There was a further edition from Paris in 1693, this English translation in 1693, and a Dutch one in 1694.

Avril, Philippe *Travels Into divers Parts of Europe and Asia, undertaken by the French King's Order to discover a new Way by Land into China. To which is added, A Supplement extracted from Hakluyt and Purchas; giving an account of several Journeys over Land from Russia, Persia, and the Moguls country to China. Published by Printed for Tim. Goodwin, at the Maidenhead over-against St. Dunstan's-Church in Fleetstreet, London, M DC XC III [1693]. 12mo. pp. [12] 1-191 [192 (blank)]; 1-178 [2]. Cordier 2088, Lust 311, Lowendahl 207.*



This copy is in contemporary full speckled calf, expertly rebacked, with the bookplate of James Erskine of Alva, Esq. Erskine was Lord Barjarg and Alva (1722-1796), a Scottish lawyer living in Edinburgh. The translator in his Preface makes clear that his objective was not to 'teach men the way to heaven, but to instruct 'em in the several new found roads to China.' The work, designed originally as a guide for missionaries travelling overland, is presented as '...of great importance for the advantages of Foreign Commerce and Traffick..' Avril in his Introduction gives the background to Verbiest's request. The work is arranged in five books, the first covering the journey to Armenia, and the second in some part of Tartary. The third gives an account of the several roads into China, which he never accomplished, and the fourth and fifth on Muscovy and Moldavia on his way back to Poland then France. Then there is a short supplement based on Hakluyt and Purchase on roads and journeys overland to China.

Despite his failure, Avril's travels and publication had a considerable influence on European perception of China and the Russian and Central Asian geography and politics. In particular, Leibniz read him and studied his map of Kitay (Cathay) and Grand Tartary, and though not contributing to Leibniz's imperatives on the origins and development of languages, the map and account was important in the development of his understanding of the geography of Russia, Central Asia and China.

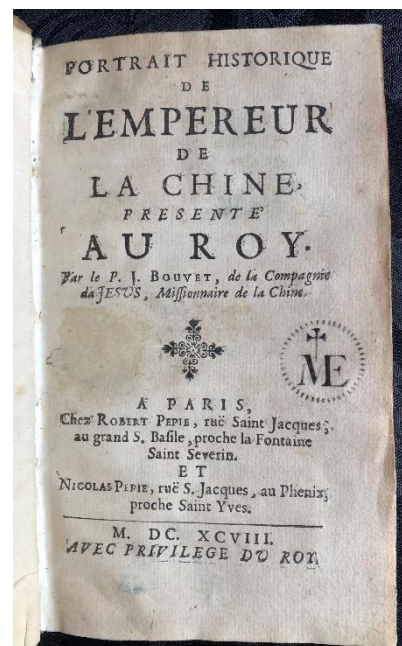
The Rarest Thing

What then of the five Jesuit fathers who reached Peking? It was Bouvet and Gerbillon who appeared to attract the attention of the Kangxi Emperor particularly, and so were allowed to stay at the court. They taught mathematics and astronomy, achieving the remarkable feat of writing works on mathematics in the Manchu language, which were subsequently translated into Han Chinese. The Kangxi Emperor was easily the greatest and most understanding of modern Chinese emperors, tolerating Christianity and appreciating the learning of the Jesuits, particularly in the sciences. He was a thinker and whether or not he came close to converting to Christianity, as has been claimed, he did understand the interplay between Confucianism and Christianity, something the Jesuits were also alert to, and which caused continuing conflict with the hierarchy in Rome. This imperial tolerance was evident in the Emperor reversing the early ban on missionaries, which had confined them to Macao in 1675, when he published the Edict of Tolerance in 1692.

The Kangxi Emperor sent Bouvet back to France, departing from Canton in October, 1693, with a request for more missionaries, and sending Louis XIV a gift of some 40 volumes of Chinese books. Bouvet arrived back in 1675, and over the next year published his sympathetic, indeed enthusiastic, portrait of the Emperor.

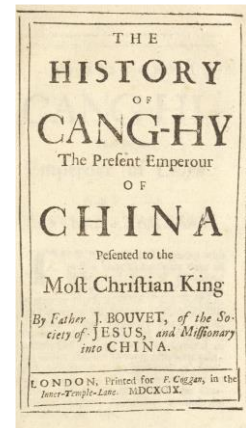
Bouvet, Joachim *Portrait historique de l'Empereur de la Chine, présenté au Roy. Par le P J Bouvet, de la Compagne de JESUS, Missionnaire de la Chine. A Paris: Chez Robert Pepie, rue Saint Jacques; au Grand S Basile, proche la Fontaine Saint Severin, et Nicolas Pepie, rue Saint Jacques, au Phenix, proche Saint Yves. M. DC. XCVIII. Avec Privilege Du Roy. [1698] First edition, reissue, Cordier 634; Lowendahl 218 (describing the Michallet issue); Lust 467.*

The book was first issued by the Paris publisher Estienne Michallet (1630-1699), then reissued by Robert and Nicolas Pepie in the Rue Saint Jacques, prominent Paris printers of religious and other works at the end of the 17th C. The contents are unchanged across the two issues with various pagination errors uncorrected: the title page alone is altered to allow for the change in publishers. Michallet, who arrived in Paris from Lyon in 1673, eventually became printer to the King in 1687. All printers were licensed by the state, and their publications carry the 'Avec Privilege du Roi', here on the title page, and on the last pages there is an 'Extract du Privilege du Roy' from the first Michallet issue, given on 16 August 1697, and an added last line stating that the book was printed for the first time on 15 September 1697. Another French language edition was published in the Hague in 1699, with the title: *Histoire de l'Empereur de la Chine*, and there is a portrait of the Kangxi Emperor as a frontispiece. This was published 'a la Haye, chez Meyndert Uytwerf, Marchand Libraire, dans le Hostraet, près la Cour.' Meyndert Uytwerf (1658-1708) was a prominent bookseller and publisher in The Hague. The Portrait of the Kangxi Emperor is the same used as a frontispiece in Le Comte's book of 1697, described below.



The only English translation appears to have been in a publication of 1699 where it forms a third part along with accounts of Russia and Grand Tartary.

[Bouvet, Joachim] *The Present Condition of the Muscovite Empire, till the year 1699. In two letters: the first from a gentleman, who was conversant with the Muscovite Ambassadour in Holland: the second from a person of quality at Vienna, concerning the late Muscovite embassy, his present Czarish Majesty; the Russian Empire; and Great-Tartary. With the life of the present Emperour of China. By Father J. Bouvet ... [The whole edited] by the author of the Antient and Present State of Muscovy [J. Crull]. by Joachim Bouvet; Jodocus Crull; Publisher: London: F. Coggan, 1699. Cordier 634.*⁷



An Italian translation appeared in 1710 and there are contemporary Latin, Dutch translations. A modern Chinese translation appeared in 1981.⁸

A further publication involving Bouvet in 1697 is a folio of beautiful Chinese figures in full costume, hand-coloured, and engraved by the Paris engraver and printer Pierre Giffart (1643-123). The Introduction is by Bouvet, as is presumably a 4-page piece '*Idee au Gouvernement de la Chine*'.⁹



Emperor Chinois; Colao Chinois ou Ministre de l'Empire; Prince Tartare. From: L'Etat present de la Chine en figures, 1697.

⁷ <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=bc.ark:/13960/t03z1vt4s&view=1up&seq=7>

⁸ Kangxi-huangdi Heilongjiang Renmin Chubanshe, Harbin, 1981.

⁹ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8608275f/f13.item>

[Bouvet, Joachim] L'Etat present de la Chine en figures. Dedie a Monseigneur le Duc e a Madame La Duchesse de Bourgogne. A Paris. Chez Pierre Giffart, Graveur de Roi et Marchand Libraire; Rue Saint Jacques, a l'Image Saint Therese. M DC XCVII [not in Cordier nor any other bibliography to date]

You can hold the little Bouvet book in the hand like a small breviary or book of poems. The cream vellum cover is smoothed with time, and the slight, hand-written title on the spine is a whisp of antiquity. The pages are like dried leaves, and someone has underlined in old pen a few lines of text in different places, who knows why. 'Sire', Bouvet says, addressing the King in his preface, *'The portrait that today I take the liberty of presenting to your majesty is surely the rarest thing that we have brought here from the orient.'* By the time Bouvet ends, there is little left to praise, even to his appearance: *'His whole deportment is very majestic, being well proportioned in his limbs, and pretty tall, the feature of his face very exact, with a large and brisk eye, beyond what is observable among others of his nation; he is a little crooked nosed, and pitted with the small-pox, but not so as to be the last disfigur'd by them....But the rare accomplishments of his mind surpass infinitely those of his body'*.



The emperor has the usual impeccable skills of the horseman, hunter and soldier, but Bouvet particularly notes his interests in the arts and science, so important to his relationships and understanding of the Jesuits. By the first few pages, Louis might have been feeling a little inadequate. Bouvet continues to describe at length his methods of conducting business, governing and administering justice, and the detail and examples bear witness to Bouvet's closeness to the Court and the Emperor himself. There is resonance too in the account of the Muscovites travelling to the Chinese borders in modern Mongolia, who wished to deal with the Emperors, but who refused to follow the ceremonial rites of the court; and a hundred years later the tissues were at the centre of the failures of the English embassies and the Russian Golovkin embassy in 1805. In discussing the Russian interactions, Bouvet notes the sending of his colleague Gerbillon, along with another Jesuit father, Thomas Pereira¹⁰, as negotiators at a peace conference between the two nations, resulting in the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. It won't have escaped the notice of the French Court that Bouvet shows how the emperor also dealt generously with Dutch and Portuguese missions, along with the Russians, all centred on trade.

Bouvet continues with extensive accounts of the Chinese dealings with other nations and tribes, rebellions and the wisdom and generosity of the Emperor in these matters. This, along with the description of the court, the ceremonies, the Emperor's passage through his lands and dealings with food calamities, descriptions of his palaces, all account for the great popularity of the work in France, and the subsequent translations. Perhaps Louis (if he read the work) might have passed over some passages quickly: *'Though it is beyond all dispute, that the Emperour of China is the most potent Prince in the World, both in respect of his vast Revenues, and the great extent and Goodness of his Territories; nevertheless he is a great Enemy to Luxury, in respect of his own person; being in this point an exact Observer of one of the Fundamental Laws of the Chinese Monarchy, which forbids all excessive expense in the Great ones, and the Prince himself, unless it be with relation to the publick Good.'*

¹⁰ Father Thomas Pereira (1645-1708) was a Portuguese Jesuit who arrived in China in 1672, living first in Macao and then in Peking, remaining there until his death in 1708.

Rarely had such an intimate first-hand account appeared in Europe. Towards the end, the Jesuit's driving truth emerges: *'To put the last hand, as I may say, the finishing stroke, to the portraiture of this great Prince, I will make bold to say, that in so many respects he resembles your majesty, that like you, he would be one of the most accomplished monarchs who ever wore a crown; if he could likewise attain to that happiness to resemble you in one point more, which makes your illustrious reign appear with greater lustre in the Christian world, I mean in that point which relates to our religion.'* In other words, the only thing missing to match Louis is the Emperor's conversion.

Behind this account was the fact that the enlightened Kangxi emperor very much welcomed the five Jesuits, with Bouvet, as mentioned, one of two (with Gerbillon) who were requested to stay at the Imperial Court, and became especially close to him. Their language skills were exceptional. Bouvet: *'He did the Honour to us four Jesuits, Missionaries then at Peking, to receive our instructions sometimes in Chinese, sometimes in the Tartarian language; but as the Tartarian is not so difficult as the Chinese, the Emperour, being informed that Father Gerbillon and I, in about eight months' time, had made so much advancement in it as to be understood tolerably well; he was pleased to make use of us, to explain to him the principles of these sciences in the Tartarian language.....We did translate all the most necessary Propositions of Euclid and their Demonstrations into the Tartarian Language for his use, as well as the most choicest of Archimedes Propositions.'*

Later Bouvet was made a language tutor to the Emperor's second son, at the time his designated successor. Bouvet says much about this son (Yunreng), called Hoang-Tai-tse in his account. Despite the positive, almost affectionate account of the relationship with the heir, this second son, twice designated heir, was eventually deposed from the role, proving scandalously unworthy.

On his return to France, Bouvet had an audience with Louis at Versailles on 3 April, 1697. Louis responded to the Emperor's gifts of books with a collection of engravings, and Bouvet left France again on 7 March 1698, arriving back in China on 4 November 1698. He had chartered a ship, the *Amphitrite*, bringing with him 10 more missionaries.

The Emperor's tolerance now allowed the building of churches, Bouvet completing a church in 1702. The Emperor for some years allowed conversion of his people, indeed there was always talk of how close he may have come to converting, but it seems unlikely that he would have abandoned the deeply inured Confucian precepts of his line. There was however a discord in this harmony, with the Chinese Rites Controversy, and after years of teaching and travelling, and a memorial from Bouvet and fellow missionaries in 1700 to the Emperor to resolve the issue, the Emperor responded signalling that this was a civil usage and the memorial and reply was published in Peking. He even contemplated sending Bouvet back to France again in 1706 to take up the issue with the church in Rome, although this didn't eventuate. The Controversy was as much about the clash between the conservative Catholic orders such as the Dominicans, regarding themselves as guardians of the faith, and the more worldly, intellectually aggressive Jesuits in the field, as it was about the conditions of conversion. Confucian teaching involved intense reverence for parents and ancestors, and this was seen



Cang-Hy, Empereur de la Chine et de la Tartarie Orientale. Agé de 44. Frontispiece of Histoire de l'Empereur de la Chine, Bouvet, 1699.

by many as a barrier to Christian conversion. This so-called ancestor worship had to be abandoned for someone to take up the true Christian faith. The Jesuits in China, rarely shifting their eyes from the objectives, soon saw that accommodation was needed if they were to be successful missionaries, and, simply put, argued that this reverence was just that, not worship. They were helped in the aims by the lack of a competing deity in Confucian thought. The controversy raged for some hundred years; in 1645 Rome sided with the Dominicans, then reversed this decision in 1656, but then held to the ban through to its reaffirmation by Benedict XIV in 1742. These decisions, for and against, were fuelled by tracts written, appeals made, and in China itself, were somewhat voided by the Emperor in 1715 when he eventually banned Christian conversions.

Bouvet had an additional, profound, interest. Just before he left France again for China in 1697, he sent a letter to the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. His exploration of Confucianism, along with his colleagues, was based on attempts to show that the two belief systems had basic similarities. Apart from the intrinsic philosophical and theological attraction of this, elicitation of such complementary or contingent thinking would help in Christian conversion. In this search for connections between the Catholic and ancient Chinese thinking and literature, he particularly sort evidence in what is known as Figurism, for the equivalence of Christian teaching and dogma. The accompanying outstanding feature of what was to become a 10-year exchange of some 15 letters (1697-1707) was Leibniz's conviction that there was similarity between his invention of binary calculus with the 64 hexagrams of the I Ching (Yi Jing) particularly as shown by Bouvet, in the Book of Changes, with the diagrams being able to be reduced to the whole line (yang) and broken line (yin).¹¹ Bouvet spent much of his time trying to establish an Academy where Chinese and European scholars would research Chinese classics, and while he attracted some disciples, his writings and thinking on Figurism, outside of his letters, were not published in his time, and largely lay undiscovered until recent years.

It was always the western knowledge of mathematics and astronomy that attracted the Kangxi Emperor, and Bouvet worked with his colleagues, particularly Gerbillon, De Foutenay and Visdelou, who appear frequently in his account, in writing mathematical and astronomical texts, and in surveying and mapping parts of China, including showing that the Great Wall was not a continuous whole. Bouvet's burial stele can still be seen in the Five-Pagoda temple in Beijing.

A short harangue

'I received a letter from Father Gerbillon, in which he assured me, that in one of the late progresses of the Emperor into Tartary, in which he attended, as he was always used to do, the young Prince had heaped upon him all of the marks of a particular esteem and affection that could be imagined. That so, being desirous to see some tables of calculations composed by Father de Fontenay and Father Visdelou, for the Emperour, he had instructed him in the use of them; the Emperour had been so much taken by the usefulness of them, that he had been the first who had shown them to Hoang-Tai-Tse, who ever since carried them in a case, fastened to his girdle. That one day, this young Prince asked him concerning the god of Heaven; upon which occasion Father Gerbillon, having made a short harangue upon this subject in his presence, he heard him with a great deal of satisfaction and

¹¹ Mungello, D.E., op. cit.

attention; and at another time engaged him to explain him half a page out of the Holy Scripture.”
Joachim Bouvet¹²

The original French is: ‘à faire une courte predication’, and a more generous translation would be a short sermon or explanation. However, if ‘harangue’ provides some feeling of fervour, then its use is perhaps not too misleading. Bouvet’s account frequently mentions his fellow missionaries. However, none of them published independent accounts of their life in China in the way that Bouvet and Le Comte did, although numerous letters, manuscripts and documents from them do exist.

A number of works by Jean-François Gerbillon are recorded, although places and dates of publication are obscure. They include:

Eléments de Géométrie (1689),

Géométrie pratique et théoretique (1690),

Eléments de philosophie,

Relations du huit Voyages dans la Grande Tartarie (also known as ‘Relations de huit voyages en Tartarie faits par ordre de l’Empereur de Chine, 1688–98’),

Observations historiques sur la grande Tartarie, and

Elementa Linguæ Tartaricæ ca 1696.

The *Relations du Huit Voyages* is included in Du Halde’s 18th Century work on China¹³, and there is a chapter on his Gerbillon’s travels in Thomas Astley’s famous collection of voyages and travels, Volume IV, published in 1747¹⁴.

Gerbillon was much favoured by the Emperor, travelling with him on several occasions, particularly into the areas of Tartary (Manchuria and Mongolia), and over the years undertaking a number of remarkable diplomatic missions, presumably not intended in the original Jesuit mission. He was present at the court when Ysbrand Ides¹⁵ arrived and had an audience with the emperor. Ides led a Russian mission sent by Peter the Great, and on being asked by the emperor what languages he spoke and on mentioning Italian, the Emperor summoned Gerbillon into the presence, where he talked with Ides. Perhaps most notably, in 1689 he was sent by the Emperor as a translator (along with Father Thomas Pereira) in the Chinese mission to negotiate a border treaty with the Russians. The resulting Treaty of Nerchinsk was written in Latin, then translated into Russian and Manchu. He later became Superior-General of the Jesuit mission on Peking, and died there in 1707. Bouvet says: ‘Father Gerbillon, of all the Jesuits, attends him [the Emperor] most frequently in his Progresses,’.

Equally, Claude de Visdelou’s writings were mainly in the form of letters and manuscripts, particularly his work sourcing Chinese literature on the history of the Tartars. He appears to be the only one amongst his colleagues who supported a ban on the Chinese rites (i.e., not accepting the use of them in Christian converts) and eventually because of this departed first to Macau in 1709 where he was secretly consecrated a bishop in opposition to his Jesuit confreres, eventually dying many years later in Pondicherry in 1737. His historical work on the Tartars appears to have been published in Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque*

¹² **Bouvet, Joachim**, The Present Condition of the Muscovite Empire, till the year 1699....., Crull, 1699, p. 96

¹³ **du Halde, Jean-Baptiste** Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise. Paris: P.G. le Mercier, 1735. 4 vols.

¹⁴ **Astley, Thomas** A New Collection of Voyages and Travels..... London, Thomas Astley, 1745-1747. 4 vols.

¹⁵ Evert Ysbrants Ides (1657–1708), a trader and diplomat from Holstein, led a Russian mission to Peking in 1692, returning in 1694. He wrote an account of his travels: *Three Years Travels from Moscow over-land to China...* London, 1706, first published in Dutch in 1704, as did his secretary and fellow merchant Adam Brand: *Relation du voyage de Mr. Evert Isbrand...* Amsterdam, 1699, first published in German in 1698.

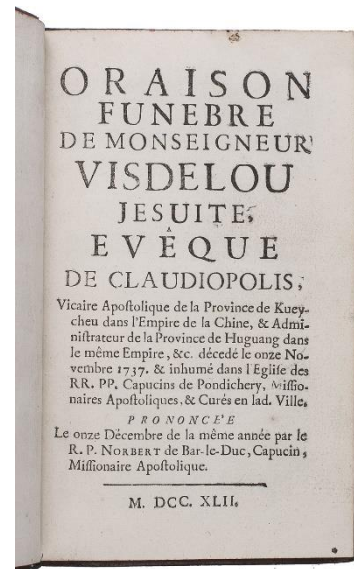
Orientale in the 1770s¹⁶. The geographer and mapmaker D'Anville¹⁷ handled Visdelou's manuscripts, and perhaps others from the Jesuits at the court who were engaged in surveying and mapping. D'Anville was also the mapmaker who prepared the atlas for Du Halde's 1745 work on China, and this atlas was published separately in 1737, becoming in its day the principal source for maps on China.

One book associated with Visdelou which is available, is a funeral oration.

Norbert de Bar-le-Duc. *Oraison funebre de Monseigneur Visdelou Jesuite, Evêque de Claudiopolis, vicaire apostolique de la province de Kuey-cheu dans l'empire de la Chine, & administrateur de la province de Huguang dans le même empire, &c. décède le onze Novembre 1737. & inhumé dans l'eglise des RR. PP. Capucins de Pondichery, missionnaires apostoliques, & curés en lad. ville. Prononcée le onze Décembre de la même année par le R.P. Norbert de Bar Le Duc, Capucin missionnaire apostolique.* [Avignon?], [no publisher], 1742. 8vo. Cordier 1100.

This is really about the Rites controversy, written by a Capuchin monk, Norbert, who became the procurator for the French mission in Pondicherry in 1736. He held the anti-Jesuit stance for banning the rites and so was sympathetic to Visdelou (who died a year later), and the oration became an important, late entry into the literature of the controversy.

The mission's leader, Jean de Fontaney, returned to France in 1702, taking up a position as Rector of the College Royal Henri-le-Grand in La Fleche, where he died in 1710. His letters have been published in various places (see Cordier), but one particular publication appeared before his return:



De Fontaney, Jean *Relation de ce qui s'est passé à la Chine en 1697-1698 & 1699 à l'occasion d'un établissement que m. l'Abbé de Lyonne a fait à Nien-Tcheou, ville de la province de Tche-Kiang.* Liège, D. Moumal, 1700. 44 pp, 12mo.

This refers to the travels de Fontaney made in Nien-Tcheou (possibly Nanching, though not in what is now Zhejiang Province) in Tche-Kiang, now called Zhejiang Province, and is held in institutional libraries. There is also an account recorded (in French and English): *The journey of Jean de Fontaney, from Pe-king to Kyang-chew, in the province of Shan si; and thence to Nan King*, in 1688. This was also published in Du Halde and by Thomas Astley as part of his new collection of voyages and travels Volume 3. In Du Halde volume 1 and Astley there is also: *An Account of the journey on the Peres Boures [Bouvet], Fontenay, Gerbuillon, Le Comte, and Visdelou, from the port of Ning Po to Peking*, written either by Fontaney or Le Comte¹⁸. Cordier (1442) also records publication in 1704 in France of

¹⁶ *Bibliothèque orientale, ou dictionnaire universel contenant tout ce qui regarde la connoissance des peuples de l'Orient*, was the great work of Herbelot's life, first published after Herbelot's death in 1695, the first completed by his fellow orientalist Antoine Galland in 1697.

¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (1697-1782) was the leading French mapmaker of the mid 18th C, and published his *Nouvel Atlas de la Chine* in 1737.

¹⁸ See Lust 359-361.

comments from de Fontaney of the comet appearing in China in 1699. De Fontaney travelled much further south and inland than the Peking-based priests.

It is clear that all five Jesuits worked together. Fontaney, Le Comte and Visdelou were in constant contact with their colleagues at the Court, and in Peking worked with Bouvet and Gerbillon, particularly in instructing the Emperor in astronomy and mathematics, demonstrating astronomical and scientific (for example, the pendulum) instruments.. Bouvet: ‘...we sent to our brothers Fontenay, Le Comte and Visdelou to desire them to furnish us with such instruments [mathematical and astronomical] as we judged as most proper for the Emperour’s use.’

The business of writing voyages

But what of Louis Le Comte? He returned to France in 1691, having the shortest stay of any of the five who reached Peking. Le Comte was appointed Procurator of the Jesuits, the role meaning that he was to report on the state of the mission in China, and charged with recruiting more missionaries. Le Comte is only mentioned once in passing in Bouvet’s account, but for Europeans, he provided one of the seminal accounts of China.

Le Comte, Louis *Nouveaux Memoires sur l’etat present de la Chine. Paris, Chez Jean Anisson, 1696. Cordier 39; Lowendahl 214.*

The first 1696 edition was published in 2 volumes in French. Further editions were issued from 1697 onwards through to 1702, in 2 and 3 volume publications, from Amsterdam, Paris and elsewhere. The original French publication includes the famous portrait of the Emperor (by Ertinger¹⁹, as in the English edition, and also published in Bouvet’s *Histoire*, described above), a folding table of Chinese words, 20 plates including some of astronomical instruments from the observatory set up by Verbiest in Peking, and some of costumes. His account includes descriptions of agricultural and geographical details of China, mostly unknown in Europe at the time. This French edition was used for the single volume English translation of 1697.

Le Comte, Louis *Memoirs and Observations, Topographical, Physical, Mathematical, Mechanical, Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical, made in a late Journey through the Empire of China, and published in several letters. Particularly on the Chinese Pottery and Varnishing; the Silk.... London, Benj. Tooke & Sam. Buckley. [1697] Cordier 40; Lust 51; Lowendahl 225.*



¹⁹ Franz Ertinger (1648-1710) a prominent German engraver, who lived and worked in Paris from 1685 until his death.

This arrived poorly rebound but now sits comfortably in the best New Zealand buffalo. Many editions of this work in various formations and collections were published during the next century. The publisher, Benjamin Tooke (1671-1723), was the son of a Benjamin Tooke (1642-1716) who was granted a Royal Charter by Charles II and was the king's printer in Ireland from 1669 to 1685. The son set up an independent press at Middle Temple gate, which is the imprint



of the book, with joint publication with Samuel Buckley in Dublin. The younger Tooke was famously the publisher of Jonathon Swift. The translator's name is not given. There is also an anonymous Introduction addressed to Sir G.M Baronet and W. M Esquire, ending: *"It is time to close up this tedious Preface, which I thought necessary to spin out....not out of any Vanity or Inclination for Scribbling, or being styl'd an Author, nor out of expectation for Applause or Reward, (my Station in the World being below Envy but above Contempt) but purely out of good Will and Compliance to the Booksellers (to whom I wish a prosperous Sale..."* He mentions that he also wrote an introduction for The Voyages of Sir John Narbrorough, Wood, Tasman and Marten. This was published in 1694 with an Introduction by Sir Tancred Robinson. We can assume that Robinson, a physician to King George I, friend of John Ray, taxonomist and naturalist, was the author of Le Comte's introduction. The book also has the book stamp of Henry Constable-Maxwell (1809-1890), a cousin of the Stuarts of Traquir House in Scotland, on the front end paper and title page.

The book is written in 14 letters, in two parts, addressed to notables such as the Comte de Ponchartrain, Chancellor for Louis from 1699 to 1714; the Duchess of Nemours; the Cardinal of Furstemburg; the Comte de Crecy; etc. It famously includes the folding plan of Verbiest's Observatory and a plan of the Emperor's palace. Le Comte describes the famous observatory: *'Indeed if China insults us with the sumptuousness of her Observatory, she is in the right to do it thus, at 600 leagues distance, for were she nearer, she durst not, for shame, make any comparison.'* He goes on to say: *'This Observatory, of little worth, as to its ancient Machines, and less as to its situation and buiding, is now enriched with several Brazen Instruments which Father Verbiest has set up in it.'*

The letters cover: the travel from Siam to Peking; reception by the Emperor and *'what they found remarkable in the City of Peking'*; cities, building, works; climate, soil, canals, rivers and the fruits; character of the nation; economy and magnificence; language, books and morals; *'Character of their Wit and Genius; Policy and Government; Religion; Establishment and progress of Christianity; methods used by the missionaries to propagate the gospels and zeal of the converts; tolerance of the Christian religion through the Emperor's edict; philosophical and mathematical observations made by the missionaries.*

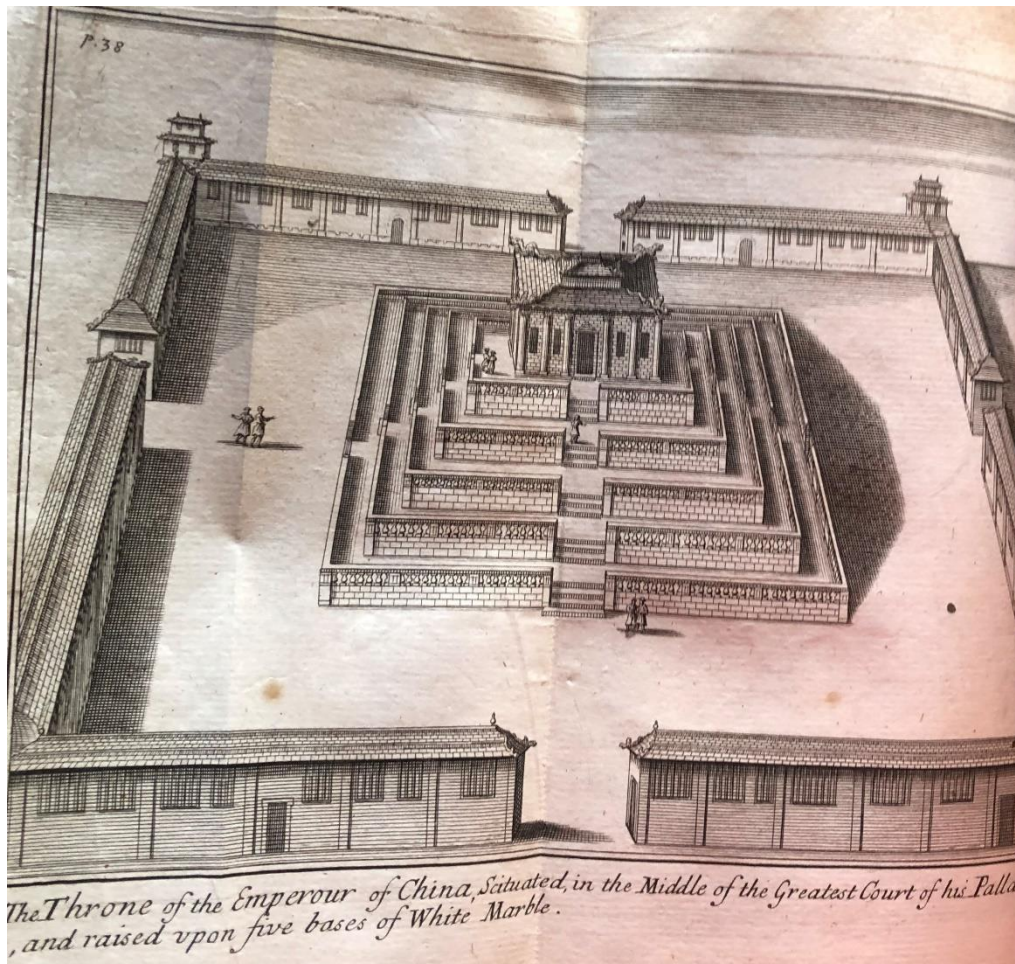


The observatory at Peking. Le Comte 1697, p. 67

Le Comte records how the six Fathers arrived in Siam and the King requested that remain. The four set sail for Macao but were wrecked not far off near the Cape of “Camboja”, presumably Cambodia. They survived and after many troubles, walking barefoot through flooded fields, fearful of tigers, buffalos, serpents and elephants, returned to Siam. It was then agreed that Le Comte should accompany the four in their second attempt and they sailed for Ningbo on the 17 June, 1687. It took them 36 days at sea on a small open Chinese craft (rice 3 times a day and much alarm when they thought they were going to be attacked by pirates, but the hostile ship eventually turned out to be a tree afloat). In Ningbo there were no Christians, and the officials turned to their Viceroy who want to return them to the “Indies”, but in the end, communication was made with Verbiest in Peking who wrote to the Emperor (away hunting), who gladly granted them approval to travel on. They went on to “Hamt-Cheou”, modern Hangzhou, where there was a Christian settlement headed by the Italian Jesuit Father Intorcetta, their Superior. Hangzhou had long had converts and a church (still standing) built earlier in the century by Martino Martini. They travelled on by barge on the Grand Canal and arrived in Peking on 8 February 1688, after leaving Ningbo on 27 November the previous year.

Le Comte describes their audience with the Kangxi Emperor, and like Bouvet, is taken with admiration for his presence, that of the court and palace and his nature and welcome. The Emperor was in mourning for the death of his mother the Dowager Empress who died a

day before the death of Father Verbiest which occurred on 28 January, only a week before the arrival of Le Comte and his colleagues in Peking. Verbiest's funeral was delayed by the Emperor until the end of the official mourning.



The Throne of the Emperour of China, Situated, in the Middle of the Greatest Court of his Pallace, and raised upon five bases of White Marble. Le Comte, 1697, p. 39.

His letters contain a great detail on, amongst other things, the cities, geography, customs, crops, language, books, morality and economy. In Letter IV he records their fruit, and like many other visitors is beguiled by the litchi, green-rinded orange, and in Letter VI (and amidst some confused pagination) the tallow tree, and for some reason, the outom-chu tree: *'Among other trees they may dispose of in Gardens, there is one called Outom-Chu, resembling the Sycomore.....This Tree, being fruitful, and the manner of bearing its Fruit being something extraordinary, I was apt to believe, Madam [The Duchess of Bouillon] you may be desirous to see the description of it, which I have caused to be engraven.'*

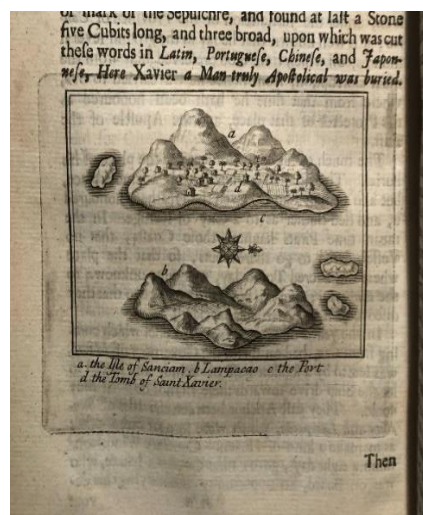
. The letters provide extraordinary detail, illustrated with anecdotes and stories, and rarely had something so comprehensive and first-hand been available in Europe. He says little about himself once he records his arrival in Peking and meeting the emperor. In the 11th letter he provides a detailed history of Christianity in China, including Xavier and his grave, Ricci, Schall and Verbiest²⁰. Then he gets into the meat of the Christian mission to

²⁰ Father Francis Xavier (1506-1562) was the pioneer Spanish Jesuit missionary in the East, later canonised, dying on Sangchuan island before he was able to penetrate further into China. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was

convert and spread the gospel. *'When we came to China, we found it in the Condition I have been relating, the Harvest was plentiful everywhere, but it was almost destitute of Workmen; or....drowned in those Tears, which the sorrow of seeing her self abandoned forced continually from her.'* In the 12th, he confirms that Bouvet and Gerbillon were retained by the Emperor at Peking, and records Gerbillon's services in the signing of the Treaty of Nerchinsk. Fontenay goes to Nankin, and Visdelou and Le Comte to Chansi (now Shanxi), later moving on to Chensi (now Shaanxi). He speaks of his teaching, prayers, confession, worries about over-zealous Marian idolatory, and travels through the vast province: *'I had some Christians and Churches established an hundred leagues of one another, whether I must go by roads so Toilsom, that even horses are of no use.....I spent a great part of the year in travelling from Village to Village, Catechizing, Preaching, and administering the Sacraments to Believers that assembled upon my passage in all the places I appointed.'*



Le Comte's Outom-Chu tree is the Chinese parasol tree, Firmiana simplex, known in China as wutong.



Le Comte visited the Island of Sancian (Sangchuan, the main island of the Chuanshan archipelago off the coast of Guangdong (Canton), the site of the death of Saint Francis Xavier, missionary and co-founder of the Jesuit order.

He counts three obstacles to conversion. One is an objection to the mysteries by *'Persons of quality and those who would be thought wise.'*, *"their hearts rose chiefly against the Trinity and Incarnation....'*. The second *'proceeded from the multitude of Wives which the Laws of that Country permit them;.'* He somehow forgets to tell us the third, but writes next extensively on miracles and superstition, and the need for conversion of the Emperor and powerful men in the court.

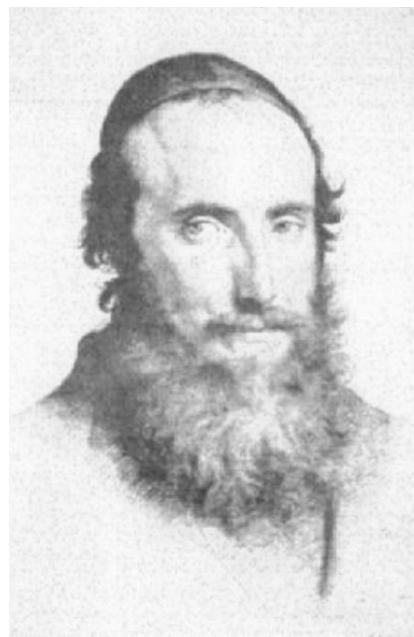
the greatest of the early Jesuits in China, Adam Schall van Bell (1591-1666) a leading Jesuit in Peking, and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) his successor.

The next letter covers in great detail the trials and tribulations of the missionaries, particularly those of Father Intorcetta²¹ in Hangzhou, which resulted in the Emperor issuing an edict protecting the missionaries and allowing their churches to be built and their work to be tolerated. The Kangxi Emperor, throughout, as with Bouvet, gets a good press.

The book subsequently had a controversial history. In 1700, the faculty of the Sorbonne, after heated deliberations, impeached and condemned it, leading in the long run to victory for the anti-Jesuit cause in China and Papal Bulls in 1715 and much later in 1742, ruling against the Jesuit interpretations of the Rites. Le Comte also travelled to Rome to discuss the issue with his Jesuit superiors. He later consolidated his position in France, being appointed mathematician to the King in 1696, and became confessor to the Duchess of Burgundy, dying in Bordeaux in 1728. Le Comte is cited by Johan Christian Hüttner in his account of the Macartney embassy published in 1697.

A note on Father Guy Tachard

Father Guy Tachard's embassy was led by Chevalier de Chaumont and François-Timoléon de Choisy, and accompanied by the naval commander Claude de Forbin, the mission requested by Constantine Phaulcon (who was later executed), a Greek adventurer who became a powerful counsellor to the Siamese King Narai. The purpose of the mission was both to introduce European culture and Christianity into Siam, and provide some sort of counterweight to the considerable Dutch influence in the region. Tachard returned to France with the embassy and a Siamese ambassador in 1686, to strengthen further an alliance between France and Siam. He then went back to Siam again in 1687, returning again to France as Ambassadeur Extraordinaire. He tried to return to Siam in 1690, but only got as far as Pondicherry, Siam then under a new King after the death of King Narai.



He returned to France, then sailed again to Siam, for the last time and successfully, in 1699. He died in Bengal in 1712. He published an account of his first voyage in 1686.

Tachard, Guy *Voyage de Siam, des pères jésuites, envoyés par le Roy aux Indes & à la Chine. Avec leurs observations astronomiques, et leurs remarques de physiques, de géographie, d'hydrographie, & d'histoire. À Paris, chez Arnould Seneuze et Daniel Horthemels, 1686 20 plates of copper engravings. 4to.*

There was a second edition published in Amsterdam with 30 plates in 1687, and another in 1688. This book, with 30 plates, includes detailed descriptions of the geography, plants and animals, and features of the local people and of the Portuguese and Dutch colonists of Siam, Java and Sumatra. There is also an account of his second voyage out in 1687, published in 1689.

²¹ Prospero Intorcetta (1625-1692) arrived in China, along with Philippe Couplet, in 1659, returned once to Rome then back to China in 1664, establishing and running a mission in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province from 1678 until his death.

[Tachard, Guy] *Second Voyage du Pierre Tachard et des Jesuites envoyez par ler Roy au Royaume de Siam, contenant diverse remarques d' Histoire, de Physique, de Geographie, & d'Astronomie. A Paris, Chez Daniel Horthemels, rue Saint Jacques, au Mecenas. M. DC.XXXIX. [1689]*

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