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FERDINAND VERBIEST IN THE TV SERIES OF  
CHINESE COURT DRAMAS  
—THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE OF  
VERBIEST IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

从清宫戏看当代流行文化  
对南怀仁形象的建构

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, due to its frequent appearance in “Chinese court dramas”, especially in those focused on the Kangxi emperor, the image of Verbiest has moved from historical documents to the proscenium and gradually entered the sight of the contemporary public. Compared with the “historical Verbiest,” the image of Verbiest in popular culture is without doubt scattered, incomplete, or even distorted. This article first intends to raise the question of “who is Verbiest” from the viewpoint of popular culture, and then examines the main characteristics of the image of Verbiest presented in the dramas and the identity constructed based on contemporary experience. Finally, the paper attempts to reflect by way of analogy on how the image of Verbiest relates to contemporary Chinese cultural context.

## Who is Ferdinand Verbiest?

It seems a bit absurd to raise this question on the occasion of the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Ferdinand Verbiest's birth, but it is not a stunt to raise such a shocking question. Verbiest had a legendary life far beyond the ordinary, and even in the eyes of professional researchers, his identities and roles were diverse. It is not easy to frame this remarkable man with a single label. As a Jesuit missionary, scientist, engineer, and diplomat,<sup>1</sup> his contributions to the development of science and technology in China and his knowledge of astronomy not only influenced the Kangxi Emperor's attitude towards Western science, but also had a profound impact on the Jesuit mission in China through the Emperor's patronage. As scholars continue to dig deeper and deeper into the historical data, Verbiest's image has been fleshed out more fully. But he remains an "object" of study rather than a "who", especially for the non-academic Chinese world.

If one types the Chinese name of Verbiest, "*Nan Huai-ren*", in the most common Chinese search engine, the results associated with it are not only the frequently asked questions about Verbiest's biography, nationality, and mother tongue, but also some ludicrous questions such as "What is the relationship between *Nan Huai-ren* and *Nan Huai-jin*?" "Are *Nan Huai-ren* and *Nan Ren-dong* the same person?" "Is *Nan Huai-ren* the father of Sky Eye?" These questions are possible only if they are raised in Chinese.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly,

1 The description is from title of the book published by Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation commemorating the 300th anniversary of Verbiest's death.

2 *Nan Huai-jin* (1918-2012) is a contemporary Chinese scholar enthused about the spread of traditional Chinese culture, whose name is only with one character different with that of *Nan Huai-ren*. *Nan Ren-dong* (1945-2017), a Chinese astronomer, is called the "father of Chinese Sky Eye" for his contribution to developing the radio telescope.

the Western webpages devoted to "Ferdinand Verbiest" in English, Dutch, German, French and Italian are more detailed than the Chinese ones, and the focus of the descriptions are different.

It is conceivable that in the Chinese-speaking world of non-specialized studies, the public's knowledge of Verbiest is relatively scanty. It is reasonable to believe that the public's vague and fragmented impression of Verbiest comes neither from reading, as there are very few leisure reading materials of this kind, nor from any officially certified textbooks, but from certain TV series. In recent years, a Chinese-speaking foreigner dressed in Qing official garments, called "Lord Nan," has often appeared in the TV series of Chinese court dramas. It is this "Lord Nan" that has triggered questions such as "Is Lord Nan a real person?" and all those irrelevant associations. Therefore, the question "Who is *Nan Huai-ren*?" belongs specifically to the Chinese context and cannot be simply equated with "Who is Ferdinand Verbiest?" For "*Nan Huai-ren*" as a name is already a product of Sinitization or cultural accommodation, saturated with imagination and construction from the Chinese world.

Verbiest in Jocular Narrative:  
the Vassal reconstructed

Perhaps because of the availability of more historical information about the Qing Dynasty, or because of the hidden connection between the Qing Dynasty and China's modernization, and even contemporary life, dramas with Qing Dynasty themes dominate Chinese TV screens for a considerable amount of time. The number of Chinese Court Dramas even exceeds the total number of historical dramas of other periods. In the TV series with Kangxi as the protagonist, Verbiest, who has a unique identity, is an eye-catching "foreign face." To the best of the author's

a comprehensive understanding of him. The playwright and director did not even explain the history of this character. By watching any or all of these dramas, the viewer cannot get a whole picture of Verbiest. If a fan of Chinese court dramas happens to have watched all of these over three hundred episodes, and if he happens to notice the presence of Verbiest in each of them, he may be able to draw a near-complete picture of Verbiest. However, given the fact that these dramas were filmed in years spanning more than two decades, it is hardly possible to recreate a full-fledged Verbiest through them.

Another noteworthy feature is that Verbiest's role as a missionary is deliberately or unconsciously weakened. As a matter of fact, there are no pictures of direct preaching by Verbiest. In *The Long River*, 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 is true that Verbiest was always cautious about his mission to the emperor, but he did try to discuss matters of faith and doctrine with him (Lin, 2001, pp. 412-415). Although there is not much Chinese historical information about Verbiest's public missionary work, his primary identity was that of a missionary, and all other identities were secondary in comparison. He almost single-handedly influenced Kangxi's attitude towards Catholicism and religious policy, and the Directorate of Astronomy led by him was a center for cultural communication and for the spread of Christianity at that time, sustaining the last golden years of the Jesuit mission in China. As the Vice-provincial of the Jesuits in China, he maintained close ties with Rome. In addition to his scientific and technical writings, he still authored eight religious works, which had a long-lasting influence on the Catholic community

in China (Shih, 2001, pp. 480-499). But in the Chinese court dramas, his image as a missionary was downplayed and he was portrayed as a "vassal."

The inclusion of missionaries in the category of "vassal" had existed since the time of Matteo Ricci and Johann Adam Schall von Bell (Han, 2018, pp. 6-7). The difference between "vassals" and "Western advisers" reveals the cultural position of each side when the East meets the West. Behind the missionaries' aim to "change China" was a condescending presumption, while "vassals" implied making a "discrimination between Chinese and Barbarians," showing the superiority of Chinese culture over Western culture. Kangxi's belief in the priority of Chinese culture was never shaken. Clear evidence of this is his claim that the science of calendars "basically followed the principle elaborated in *The Book of Changes*," thus supporting the idea that "Western learning originated from China" (Han, 2018, pp. 111-115).

Therefore it is reasonable that Verbiest's role in Sino-Russian diplomacy is rarely mentioned in Chinese court dramas, for in this case his identity as a missionary would necessarily be involved. Ultimately, the purpose of his contact with the Tsar was to open up a Catholic missionary route to China via Russia. Moreover, in the course of his contact with the Russian envoys, he seemed to have been suspected of disloyalty (Heyndrickx, 2001, pp.342-353). Interestingly enough, both Chinese-language websites and Chinese court dramas treat the manufacture of artillery as Verbiest's main achievement; on the contrary, Western-language web descriptions make little mention of it. If we consider the role that artillery played in Kangxi's counter-insurgency efforts and in opening up new territories, this is arguably Verbiest's greatest contribution to the court in his capacity as a "subject," even more so

than his work in reforming the calendar. For the Western reader, artillery after all is a weapon to kill, and it is better not to talk about it too much compared with the missionary work. In this way, Chinese court dramas play down his missionary background by means of a jocular narrative, and recast Verbiest as a “vassal” in an offhand way.

which, as an historical detail, is never shown in the dramas. The construction of Kangxi as a guardian of Chinese culture not only eliminates the contradiction between Manchu and Han during the Kangxi period, but also reflects today’s popular conception of a unified Chinese culture.

In the popular culture represented by Chinese court dramas, Verbiest is portrayed as a domesticated vassal. He is a disseminator of science and technology, bringing interesting new scientific knowledge and engineering technology, but he has no decisive influence on the soul and spiritual world of Chinese people.

#### Identity and Construction in Dramas

The stories, of course, are in themselves fictional, but there are some interesting details in these dramas reflecting the imagination of Verbiest’s cultural identity by contemporary popular culture. First of all, as today’s online encyclopedias and even many professional researchers do, he’s called a Belgian missionary, which is in a sense certainly right. But when Verbiest came to China, Belgium as an independent country did not exist. Verbiest the Belgian is already a construction based on today’s international order. Similarly, Verbiest teaches English, instead of Latin, to the Kangxi emperor in one of the dramas, which is clearly a construction derived from contemporary experience. The world order of the Kangxi era was quite different from that of today and English was not yet the international language as it is nowadays. There is also no evidence that Verbiest has any knowledge of English. However, the teaching language to the emperor was not in Chinese as one may expect. According to Spence (2017, pp. 92-93) and Qigong (2005, p.156), Verbiest’s teaching activities with Kangxi were conducted in Manchu,

The most negligent aspect in such a jocular narrative is Verbiest’s age. Born in 1654, Kangxi was 21 years younger than Verbiest. In *Kangxi’s Incognito Travel*, Kangxi appeared as a mature middle-aged man over forty, while Verbiest was a slightly naive youth. This setting may not be intentional, but it does reflect the corresponding relationship between age, wisdom, and the order of supremacy in China. This is not consistent with the facts, but it is a most suitable accommodation to the Chinese people’s psychological structure. This cultural accommodation to contemporary Chinese sensibilities, thus admits the “discrimination between Chinese and Barbarians” by absorbing it into a consistent hierarchy.

Interestingly, Verbiest’s real appearance was not referenced in the choice of actors in the Chinese court dramas, and his foreign face was more like a symbol. People can freely imagine Verbiest’s look, but they hesitate to deal with his braid as much as they do with his relationship with Chinese culture. In different dramas, he sometimes wears official garments with a fake braid that can be removed; sometimes he has a real braid but dresses as a priest; sometimes he

has his brown hair loose without wearing court clothes. Like his uncertain braid, his identity is also vacillating between “Lord Nan,” “priest,” and “grassroots man.”

Finally, it is worth mentioning the ending story of Kangxi’s *Incognito Travel, The Rocket*, which is about two Ming dynasty loyalists making a rocket and eventually dying for it. Verbiest is portrayed as an admirer of Chinese culture and no longer as an expert on science and technology. It is now the two Ming-loyalists who teach Verbiest how to make a rocket and improve gunpowder manufacturing technology. This reversion seems to imply that China also has her own tradition of science and Verbiest’s knowledge of artillery production has its Chinese origin. This indeed coincides with the idea of “Western learning originated from China” advocated by Kangxi. Although the screenwriter may not have any knowledge of this idea, it is this unintentional coincidence that is meaningful.

#### Analogy and Projection:

##### Verbiest and Contemporary Cultural Context

To sum up, in the popular culture represented by Chinese court dramas, Verbiest is portrayed as a domesticated vassal. He is a disseminator of science and technology, bringing interesting new scientific knowledge and engineering technology, but he has no decisive influence on the soul and spiritual world of Chinese people. This foreign face in dramas is more to highlight an atmosphere that all countries come to China as pilgrims, or to use cultural differences to make some laughing stock, and thus embellish the memory of a flourishing age. The question is why do we shape such a Verbiest?

The Italian philosopher Croce once said that all history is contemporary history, which means that people’s interest in history always

starts from their concerns in reality. Not only can the present be understood through history, but history can be better understood through the present. It can be seen that the conception of Verbiest’s nationality, language, identity, and world order is based on contemporary experience, within which one can find certain analogies and projections of the contemporary cultural context.

It is not difficult to find that there is an analogy of a “golden age” between the Kangxi era and contemporary Chinese society. After the Opium War, the Chinese people’s dream of rejuvenation merged with the desire for prosperity. Kangxi’s achievements in subduing the three seigniors, conquering the Western regions, recovering Taiwan, and expanding the territory perfectly matches the popular imagination of a prosperous age. Combined with the expectation of a “sage king,” the comic portrayal of Kangxi’s prosperous age is in line with the group psychology of contemporary society. The image of Verbiest in popular culture also reflects contemporary people’s understanding of Western learning and their attitude towards Christianity. Since the Westernization Movement in the Qing Dynasty, the Chinese people’s understanding of Western learning is limited to modern Western science after the Enlightenment, and there is a lack of interest in exploring the philosophical and religious spirit behind the sciences. Christianity has always been a foreign culture and, due to the influence of the Opium War, even a tool for imperialist cultural invasion. Therefore, the idea of “Chinese learning for the foundation, Western learning for practical use” came into being, showing a belief in the superiority of Chinese culture and a nationalistic sentiment. This also explains why those dramas are keen on constructing a narrative of cultural domestication. Western missionaries proficient in Chinese and Manchu were molded into admirers of Chinese culture, indicating a kind of “reverse Orientalism” in the post-colonial context.

Although Verbiest's image in contemporary popular culture exhibits some "deviation" from the "historical Verbiest," at least the stories of Verbiest and the missionaries have begun to enter the popular imagination, no longer just as historical materials of interest only to scholars. In fact, the case of Verbiest also prompts us to reflect on the missionary strategies of Christianity in China and the issue of Sinicization of religion. How can Christianity integrate into Chinese culture and play an active role in Chinese society in a context exalting the subjectivity of Chinese culture? The discrepancy between academic discourses and popular discourses also reminds us that academic studies should break through their barriers and effectively enter the public domain. To let more people know about Christian culture and the history of its spread in China is an issue that needs to be taken seriously in the Sinicization of religion.



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