

2.19 Session 4: Popularisierung der Astronomie, 17. bis 20. Jahrhundert

2.20 *Johann Adam Schall von Bell S.J. and the First Dutch Embassy to the Emperor of China 1655–1657: A Case Study of the Role of a „Cultural Broker“*

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This paper examines the role of Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666), who occupied an important position at the Chinese Imperial Astronomical Bureau and thus also at court, in relation to the first Dutch embassy to the emperor of China in 1655–57. Thereby, emphasis is placed on the intricate and complex relations between the agents involved during this cultural encounter, which presented manifold possibilities for misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Conflicts arose between the two diplomatic traditions because of each side’s misapplication of expectations and habits previously developed elsewhere. The tension was further aggravated by language difficulties and each party’s lack of coherent information about the other as well as by negative stereotypes on both sides. In this situation the Jesuit father was called to serve as a cultural and political mediator, a task that he was able to fulfill due to the position gained as an astronomer as well as due to his personal and skills and characteristics, which rendered him familiar with both European and Chinese ways. In this context, the case study examines the agenda as well as the strategies according to which Schall von Bell tackled his task, unraveling different layers in the enterprise of “cultural brokerage”.

While drawing on Johann Nieuhoff’s (1618–1672) travelogue as well as on Jesuit correspondence, this paper acknowledges that due to the position gained as a highly esteemed astronomer, Schall von Bell was enabled to successfully include different tasks in his work, among others that of serving as a diplomat. Thus the case study serves as an example to illustrate that “astronomy” with all its implications was highly entangled with other political and social issues, which provided an opportunity for its applicants to interact with agents other than their immediate colleagues involved in astronomical knowledge production and beyond the confines of the concrete spaces in which they usually practiced their craft.