Johann Adam Schall von Bell was a German Jesuit missionary, mathematician, and astronomer. He modernized the Chinese calendar during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties and contributed to the introduction of Western contemporary science to China. After the Qing takeover in 1644, Schall became head of the imperial astronomical bureau, which remained in the hands of Jesuits until 1776.

Johann Adam Schall von Bell (Tang Ruowang) was born into an aristocratic family in Cologne, Germany in 1592. He joined the Jesuit order in 1611 and finished his education at the Collegio Romano in Rome. He reached Macao in 1619 and spent more than a decade working for the Jesuits in Beijing and Xi’an. In 1630 Schall was asked to assist in the reform of the Chinese imperial calendar, a project initiated by the Christian official Xu Guangqi (1562–1633). In collaboration with Giacomo Rho (1592–1638) and a staff of Chinese astronomers, Schall completed the project and published extensively on mathematics and astronomy. He also made converts to Christianity at the imperial court.

Having supported the Ming dynasty’s failed efforts to stay in power through battle plans and the casting of cannons, in 1644 Schall nonetheless moved his allegiance to the new Qing dynasty. He soon became head of the imperial astronomical bureau.
astronomical bureau—the first European to hold high office in China—and subsequently prepared the annual calendar for the Qing empire based on Western mathematics. Schall’s position and proven expertise provided some protection for all Jesuits in China during this period of transition.

Schall’s experience at the court in Beijing included great achievements and great setbacks. Schall became a teacher of Western science and a friend to the Shunzhi emperor (reigned 1644–1661). In 1650 Schall received permission to establish the first Catholic church in Beijing. In 1658 he was promoted to mandarin of the first and highest rank. However, the emperor’s sudden death left Schall vulnerable to intrigue. In 1664 he was accused by the anti-Christian activist Yang Guangxian (1597–1669) of having caused the emperor’s death by choosing an inappropriate day and site for the funeral of his infant son. Schall was thrown into prison, and most of his fellow missionaries were asked to leave Beijing for Guangzhou (Canton). On 15 April 1665, Schall, who had lost his voice in a stroke, was sentenced to death. However, a major earthquake the next day convinced the judge of Schall’s innocence. Schall returned to the Jesuit residence, where he died the next year.

Regardless of his success at the Qing court, Schall’s work faced heavy scrutiny among Jesuits and the Catholic authorities in Rome. He was accused of holding an office contrary to the rules of the Jesuit order and of supporting idolatrous practices by editing the imperial calendar. Both claims were judged insubstantial under the specific circumstances. In 1668 the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722) had Schall’s rank fully reinstated and ordered a state funeral for him at the Jesuit cemetery at Shala.

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Further Reading


