

LEUVEN CHINESE STUDIES XLIX

BRINGING CHINA HOME:

FR. JOZEF MULLIE

*A Flemish Scheutist, Educator
and Sinologist*

Simon Yongjun Zheng

FERDINAND VERBIEST FOUNDATION

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Introduction

History often remembers through symbols. In the history of Sino–Belgian relations, that symbol has long been Ferdinand Verbiest. The seventeenth-century Jesuit astronomer at the Qing court has become the emblem of Belgium's early engagement with China, and his remarkable achievements continue to occupy a prominent place in both historical scholarship and public memory. His legacy is unquestionably deserved. Yet, its prominence has also had the unintended consequence of obscuring another tradition of Belgian engagement with China, one that took place not at the imperial court in Beijing but across the towns, villages, and frontier regions of northern China.

For nearly a century, missionaries of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), commonly known as the Scheut Fathers, lived and worked in China's far northern reaches. While their principal mission was religious, many nonetheless turned into careful observers of Chinese society, with a number eventually emerging as scholars in their own right. Beyond the work of evangelization, they preserved local cultural traditions, documented regional dialects, assembled remarkable libraries, and introduced successive generations of their compatriots to Chinese civilization.

Among them was Jozef Mullie, one of the few Belgian missionaries who devoted themselves so fully to the study of China. During more than two decades in northern China and throughout his subsequent establishment as a scholar in Europe, he combined missionary service with an enduring commitment to Chinese language, literature, and historical studies. He became a prolific scholar, a respected professor, and the builder of a Chinese library that continues to shape research today. Despite the breadth of his achievements, Mullie's name has largely faded from historical memory, and the documentary traces of his personal history remain scattered across archives in Belgium and beyond.

The present volume, *Bringing China Home: Fr. Jozef Mullie — A Flemish Scheutist, Educator, and Sinologist*, seeks to restore Mullie to that history and serves as the inaugural publication of the Mullie Studies research programme. Conceived as a long-term scholarly initiative, this programme aims not only to reconstruct Mullie's life and intellectual legacy, but also

to provide a useful lens through which to reconsider Scheut missionary involvement and the development of modern Sinology in Belgium, as well as their place within Sino–Belgian relations. Missionaries, at first glance, are often treated primarily as religious agents. Mullie’s career complicates this distinction. His example demonstrates that missionary work and scholarly inquiry were not separate pursuits but deeply intertwined enterprises, each shaping the other in the production and circulation of knowledge about China.

Methodologically, this study is grounded in microhistory, an approach that illuminates broader historical processes through the close examination of an individual’s life, activities, and surviving documentary record. By drawing on Mullie’s personal archival materials, it reconstructs his trajectory from missionary activity in northern China to his later career as a scholar in Europe. Rather than presenting a narrowly biographical account, the work uses his life and work to interrogate the intersecting fields of missionary enterprise, linguistic scholarship, cultural exchange, and transnational intellectual formation. In addition, this study attempts to recover patterns of lived historical experience that become invisible within large-scale institutional frameworks.

This volume unfolds through three complementary perspectives. It first follows Mullie’s formation in Flanders and his twenty-two years as a missionary in northern China, where the acquisition of the Chinese language became inseparable from his encounter with Chinese society itself. Chinese was not merely a tool of evangelisation; it became the medium through which he entered local worlds, forged relationships, and laid the foundations for his later academic career. It then turns to his role as an educator and scholar of Sinology, exploring how his experience in China reshaped missionary language training and led to his appointment as Professor of Chinese at the University of Utrecht. Finally, it examines Mullie’s lifelong pursuit of Chinese book collecting, showing how the library he assembled became one of the enduring material legacies of his scholarship and an important foundation for Chinese studies in Belgium.

Together, these three roles—as a Flemish missionary, Sinologist, and bibliophile—allow us to view Mullie not merely as a learned figure but as an entry point into the broader dynamics of Sino–European knowledge transfer in the early 20th century. His life path shows how missionary activity intersected with linguistic science, how local experience shaped academic discourse, and how personal initiative and private collections contributed to the development of Chinese studies as a discipline. In this sense, the

microhistorical approach represents a methodological necessity rather than simply a stylistic choice: through a close reading of the fine-grained details of Mullie's life, we are able to gain a fuller understanding of how the intertwined histories of mission, scholarship, and cultural exchange were articulated across the space between Europe and China.

This book therefore invites readers to consider how global historical processes are lived, and sometimes preserved, by individuals who never occupied the center of power yet engaged deeply with the world around them. Following Mullie's journey across the archives of Scheut, the missionary correspondence from northern China, and the book stacks of the University of Leuven Library, we encounter the story of a Flemish missionary who, through his efforts and scholarship, sought to "bring China home"—both for himself and for the generations of scholars in his native land who followed.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that no scholarly endeavor is ever accomplished alone. The research for this volume would not have been possible without the assistance and encouragement of many colleagues, institutions, and friends, to whom I owe a profound debt of gratitude.

First of all, I extend my sincere thanks to Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx, founder of the Verbiest Institute, who has been a steadfast supporter of the Mullie Studies research programme from its very beginning. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Dominik Declercq, head of the Research Group of the Verbiest Institute, and Mr. Frank Vroman. They were among the first to read the manuscript, and their careful suggestions and corrections significantly improved its clarity and quality. My special thanks also go to Mrs. Lucia Wong Tingyi, responsible for the Research and Publication Section of the Verbiest Institute. Her generous assistance, together with her archival and technical support, proved indispensable throughout the preparation and publication of this volume.

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During my research, I also had the opportunity to visit several Scheut mission houses in Belgium. The Scheut Fathers who still preserve the memory of Mullie warmly shared their testimonies and personal stories. These vivid oral accounts provided a dimension of lived experience that is rarely captured in archival sources. In particular, Fr. Nol Quartier's recollection of having served as Mullie's altar boy during his time as a Scheut theology student in Leuven was both amusing and memorable.

Finally, I wish to thank my closest friends, who read parts of the manuscript with great interest and care. Their comments, suggestions, and encouragement were crucial throughout the writing process, and I remain deeply grateful for their support and shared journey.