

THE "MANCHU CANNONS" CAST
BY FERDINAND VERBIEST AND THE HITHERTO
UNKNOWN TITLE OF HIS INSTRUCTIONS

GIOVANNI STARY

Giovanni Stary teaches Manchu language and literature at the University of Venice (Italy). His researches are devoted to Manchu literature, history and culture, with special reference to Manchu shamanism. He is editor-in-chief of the "Central Asiatic Journal" and published several monographs and articles.

Very few people are aware that seventeenth-century cannons were brought to Italy after the Boxer Rebellion. They are to be found in two Roman museums. Three of these cannons - quite small in size - are in the *Sala della Giustizia* of the *Castel Sant'Angelo* Museum. On the breech of each one there is a bilingual Chinese-Manchu inscription which is hard to read since it is considerably damaged, and thus fragmentary, and also, because of the none too happy installation of the cannons: vertically on a wall, and only a few decimeters off the floor. The inscriptions look very primitive; the ideograms measure six to eight millimeters, and the Manchu writing is equally small, with the word *baitalara*, for example, measuring fifteen millimeters. Despite this, however, I have been able to decipher the date of casting as the twentieth year of Kangxi, 1682, and also the name of the maker, Nan Huairen, in Manchu Nan Hûwai-jin. We are dealing, then, with the work of the Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest, one of the most famous missionaries in Chinese missionary history.

There are another four cannons to be seen in the *Museo dell'Istituto Storico di Cultura dell'Arma del Genio*, at Lungotevere della Vittoria, 31. They differ from those already mentioned both in size and in the rich ornamentation on the barrel. They too have bilingual Manchu-Chinese inscriptions on the breech, more elegant in form and perfectly legible.

