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Giacomo Rho (1592-1638) and his mathematical work in Beijing.

As Joseph Needham points out, it is necessary to consider social conditions to understand the development of Chinese science. Astronomy, in particular, was very important for the Chinese empire. However, in the Ming dynasty, after centuries of research, astronomy was no longer carefully studied and predictions were not as accurate as in previous times. This is the reason why the Jesuits considered astronomy as the key to establishing a strong position in China. In the 1620s, several Jesuits who were highly qualified in science were sent to China. Among them were Adam Schall von Bell (1592-1666), Johannes Schreck (1576-1630), and Giacomo Rho (1590-1638). After Schreck's premature death, Schall and Rho worked together in order to reform the Chinese calendar. The result was the Chong Zhen Li Shu, a huge mathematical and astronomical work that included more than one hundred small books. One of the treatises included in the Chong Zhen Li Shu is the Chou Suan by Giacomo Rho. This is a translation of the Rabdology by John Napier (1550-1617). Rho also wrote mathematical books on very specific astronomical topics, such as the movement of the planets. In fact, these books may be considered as the real means by which European astronomy was introduced into the Chinese world. (Received September 25, 2005)