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# The Centralization of Imperial Power in China During the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties, in Light of Tomasz Szpot's *Historia Sinarum Imperii*[1]

## Centralizacja władzy cesarskiej w Chinach w okresie późnej dynastii Ming i wczesnej dynastii Qing w świetle *Historia Sinarum Imperii* Tomasza Dunina Szpota

## Abstract

This article examines the centralization of imperial power in China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties through a specific reading of *Historia Sinarum Imperii*, an unpublished Latin manuscript by the Polish Jesuit Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot (1644/1645–1713). Situating Szpot's work within the intellectual traditions of the seventeenth-century Jesuit

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mission and Sarmatian political thought, the study employs a historical-comparative method that combines textual analysis of Jesuit sources with insights from modern sinological scholarship. Particular attention is given to Szpot's conceptualization of imperial authority through the *anima-corpus* metaphor, his rejection of *tyrannicum*, and his emphasis on legal constraints, bureaucratic mediation, and the *libertas monendi* as internal limits on centralized power. By comparing Szpot's interpretation with modern analyses by Joanna Waley-Cohen, Timothy Brook, and Ch'ien Mu, the article demonstrates that Szpot articulated an early modern understanding of Chinese imperial centralization as a system that combined strong monarchical authority with moral and institutional restraint. At the same time, Szpot's explanation of the Ming collapse reveals his awareness of the structural vulnerabilities inherent in such a centralized system when moral leadership and bureaucratic harmony failed. The study argues that *Historia Sinarum Imperii* should be reconsidered not merely as a compilation of Jesuit knowledge about China, but as a significant contribution to the comparative history of political thought and the early formation of Western Sinology.

**Keywords:** Tomasz Dunin Szpot, Jesuit sinology, late Ming China, early Qing China, Chinese imperial ideology.

## Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje centralizację władzy cesarskiej w Chinach w okresie późnej dynastii Ming i wczesnej dynastii Qing na podstawie szczegółowej lektury *Historia Sinarum Imperii*, nieopublikowanego łacińskiego rękopisu polskiego jezuity Tomasza Ignacego Dunina Szpota (1644/1645–1713). Umieszczając dzieło Szpota zarówno w kontekście tradycji intelektualnych siedemnastowiecznej misji jezuickiej, jak i myśli politycznej Rzeczypospolitej sarmackiej, studium przyjmuje metodę historyczno-porównawczą, łącząc analizę tekstową źródeł jezuickich z ustaleniami współczesnej sinologii. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono koncepcji władzy cesarskiej w ujęciu Szpota, wyrażonej w metaforze *anima-corpus*, jego odrzuceniu pojęcia *tyrannicum* oraz podkreśleniu znaczenia ograniczeń prawnych, mediacji biurokratycznej i *libertas monendi* jako wewnętrznych ograniczeń władzy scentralizowanej. Porównanie interpretacji Szpota z analizami Joanny Waley-Cohen, Timothy'ego Brooka i Ch'ien Mu pozwala wykazać, że Szpot sformułował wczesnonowożytne rozumienie chińskiej centralizacji imperialnej jako systemu łączącego silną władzę monarszą z ograniczeniami moralnymi i instytucjonalnymi. Jednocześnie jego wyjaśnienie upadku dynastii Ming ujawnia świadomość strukturalnych słabości takiego systemu w sytuacji, gdy zawodzą przywództwo moralne i harmonia biurokratyczna. Studium dowodzi, że *Historia Sinarum Imperii* powinna być ponownie rozważona nie tylko jako kompilacja jezuickiej wiedzy o Chinach, lecz także jako

istotny wkład w porównawczą historię myśli politycznej oraz wczesne kształtowanie się zachodniej sinologii.

**Słowa klucze:** Tomasz Dunin Szpot, sinologia jezuicka, późne Chiny dynastii Ming, wczesne Chiny dynastii Qing, chińska ideologia imperialna.

## Introduction

This study employs a historical-comparative method designed to situate Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot's *Historia Sinarum Imperii* within both the intellectual world of the seventeenth-century Jesuit mission and the current state of sinological scholarship on late Ming and early Qing administrative structures. The analysis proceeds along three complementary axes: the critical examination of Jesuit sources; the contextualized reading of Szpot's text; and the integration of modern historiographical research.

First, the study undertakes a systematic reading of *Historia Sinarum Imperii*, examining not only its narrative content but also its structure, vocabulary, and rhetorical strategies. Particular attention is given to Szpot's choice of political terminology, such as his use of the *anima-corpus* metaphor for imperial governance, and to the ways in which Sarmatian political ideology and Jesuit intellectual traditions shape his interpretation of Chinese political institutions. By analyzing Szpot's descriptive and interpretive layers separately, the article identifies where his account reflects inherited Jesuit perspectives and where it represents an original contribution.

Second, Jesuit sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are evaluated through the criterion of cognitive proximity. Accounts based on direct experience of China, such as those of Matteo Ricci, Ferdinand Verbiest, Johann Adam Schall von Bell, and Álvaro Semedo, are given greater evidentiary weight than works written at a geographical or experiential distance, such as those of Athanasius Kircher. This approach allows for a more precise assessment of how Szpot relied on, adapted, or diverged from earlier missionary narratives when presenting the Chinese administrative and bureaucratic system.

Third, Szpot's descriptions are compared with insights drawn from modern scholarship on Chinese imperial governance, including studies by Joanna Waley-Cohen, Timothy Brook and Ch'ien Mu (錢穆). These works provide a contemporary analytical framework for understanding bureaucratic centralization under the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

The criteria used to evaluate Szpot's interpretation include:

1. its consistency with established sinological historiography, especially regarding centralization, bureaucratic practice, and institutional continuity across the Ming-Qing transition;
2. the degree of dependence on earlier Jesuit accounts and the extent of Szpot's original contributions;
3. the presence of ideological elements, particularly those derived from Sarmatian political thought, such as concepts of *Aurea Libertas*, anti-tyranny discourse, and the moral expectations of rulership;
4. the cognitive value of *Historia Sinarum Imperii* as a document reflecting European perceptions of China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, regardless of its factual accuracy.

By combining these methodological components, the study interprets Szpot's work not only as a historical source but also as a transcultural intellectual artifact, shaped by the interaction of Jesuit missionary knowledge, European political categories, and early modern encounters with Chinese civilization. This approach makes it possible to appreciate both the scholarly value and the ideological limitations of Szpot's depiction of the Chinese administrative and bureaucratic system and to place his work meaningfully within the global history of early modern political thought.

## China in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

The late Ming (明) and early Qing (清) period (roughly the 17th century) was marked by dynastic transition, intense political turbulence, and eventual administrative consolidation. The Ming dynasty established in 1368 by a native Han (漢) Chinese regime, collapsed in 1644 due largely to lavishness of the emperors, fiscal failure, eunuchs' intervention in the imperial court, corruption of officials, peasant rebels and Manchu invasion, finally giving way to the Qing dynasty founded by the Manchus (Man 滿).[2] The remnants of Ming Imperial family then retreated to Southeastern China with their loyalists, where the short-lived Southern Ming (Nan Ming 南明) persisted until the execution of the Yongli emperor (永曆) in 1662. Despite the violent transition, the new Qing rulers largely preserved and continued the Ming imperial

2 Cf. Denis Twitchett, Frederick W. Mote (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 8: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 165–166.

institutions and Confucian bureaucratic framework.[3] Under the Qing, especially during the long reign of the Kangxi Emperor (康熙 1661–1722), China entered a phase of renewed stability and prosperity after years of war and chaos. The imperial state remained highly centralized, with the emperor at its apex, supported by the Grand Secretariat (Nei Ge 內閣) and the Six Ministries (Liu Bu 六部) in the capital, and a hierarchy of provincial and local officials selected through the civil service examinations known as Keju (科舉). This examination system, which ensured that only those with the highest scholarly degrees could enter government, was a defining feature of Chinese administration carried over from the Ming into the Qing. The Qing did introduce some innovations, for instance, integrating the Manchu aristocracy through the banner system (Ba Qi八旗) and practicing a dual appointment of Manchu and Han officials in top posts, yet the distinctive patterns of social and administrative organization that emerged in Ming times persisted in essential form under Qing rule.[4]

## Jesuit Missionaries and the Transmission of Knowledge about China

Europe's understanding of China's history and civilization during this era depended heavily on reports and writings by Catholic missionaries, particularly Jesuits, who lived in or gathered information about the "Middle Kingdom" (Zhong Guo中國). From the late 16th century onward, these missionaries served as cultural brokers, publishing influential works that introduced Europeans to China's geography, government, religion and customs.[5] Jesuit pioneers like Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci pro-

3 Cf. Twitchett, Mote, *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8*, 9; cf. Willard J. Peterson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 9, Part Two: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 14, 18.

4 Cf. Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9, Part Two,* 119–120.

5 The groundbreaking early examples were the *Tractado em que se cõtam muito por estẽso as cousas da China*, by the Portuguese Dominican friar, Gaspar Da Cruz, printed at Evora in 1569, and the *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China*, by Juan González de Mendoza, O.S.A., published in 1585 at Rome. The former work is regarded as the first detailed European book on Ming China, which was not frequently quoted by latter writers owing to the great plague year, while the latter compiled reports from clerics and explorers, especially from Gaspar Da Cruz and the Augustinian friar, Martín de Rada, to present a broad survey of China's politics, economy, and rituals during the Ming dynasty. Mendoza's book became a model for European writing about China in the 16th and 17th centuries, shaping a generally

vided first-hand information that further deepened Europe's appreciation of Chinese civilization. Matteo Ricci's journals (Chinese: Li Madou 利瑪竇), translated into Latin by Nicolas Trigault (Chinese: Jin Nige 金尼閣) as *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas*,[6] offered one of the earliest outsider glimpses of Chinese society and governance. Subsequent Jesuit accounts continued to highlight aspects of Chinese statecraft and history: for example, Álvaro de Semedo's (Chinese: Zeng Dezhao 曾德昭) *Imperio de la China*[7] described the administrative divisions and justice system of Ming China, and Martino Martini's (Chinese: Wei Kuangguo 衛匡國) works recounted both ancient Chinese history and the contemporary Manchu conquest.[8] Polish Jesuit Michał Boym (Chinese: Bu Mige 卜彌格) played a crucial role at the Southern Ming court, serving as an imperial envoy to the Holy See, and published a *Flora Sinensis* in 1656 at Vienna, describing China's natural world. Another Portuguese Jesuit Gabriel de Magalhães (Chinese: An Wensi 安文思), whose *Nouvelle relation de la China*, published in 1688 after his death, detailed Chinese government and customs also broadened European knowledge of China.[9] Through their letters and books, missionaries portrayed China as a highly civilized empire with an orderly bureaucracy and rich cultural traditions,[10] tempering fantastical legends with empirical observations.

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favorable and curious image of China in Europe, cf. Charles Ralph Boxer (ed.), *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), xi–lxvii.

6 Orig. publ. Augsburg: Christoph Mang, 1615. The brief information on different edtions of the same book see: David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh, 1985), 48.

7 The first edition of Álvaro de Semedo's work was published in Portuguese in 1641 at Madrid, and the following year it was translated into Spanish under the title *Imperio de la China*, on which the Italian, French and English versions are based. Cf. Mungello, *Curious Land*, 75.

8 Martini's *Sinicae historiae decas prima: res à gentis origine ad Christum natum in extrema Asia, sive Magno Sinarum imperio gestas complexa* was firstly published in 1658 at Munich in Latin, cf. Mungello, *Curious Land*, 124. His another work entitled *De Bello Tartarico Historia* was firstly published in 1654 at Antwerp in Latin, the further information on contents and different versions see: Edwin J. Van Kley, "News from China; Seventeenth-Century European Notices of the Manchu Conquest," *The Journal of Modern History* 45/4 (1973): 563–568, Mungello, *Curious Land*, 110–116.

9 The major work of Gabriel de Magalhães entitled *Nouvelle relation de la China* published at Paris actually derived from his *Doze excellences da China*, a manuscript composed in 1668 in Portuguese. Cf. Mungello, *Curious Land*, 95–96.

10 Numerous early Jesuit accounts of China emphasize the empire's high level of "*urbanitas ritusque politiores* (Li 禮)," its developed "*artes illiberales* (Ji 技)": "*Cum publica omnium fama experientiaque teste, constet, hanc gentem in paucis esse industriam, facile ex superioriore capite colligitur, artes omnes illiberales apud eam reperiri, cum materia nulla desit, merces quoque ipsa ingenia pelliciat*" (Since public reputation and

By the late 17th century, figures like Johann Adam Schall von Bell (Chinese: Tang Ruowang 湯若望) and Ferdinand Verbiest (Chinese: Nan Huairen 南懷仁), Jesuits serving as astronomers (qintianjian 欽天監) at the Qing court, were themselves examples of China's openness to Western technical expertise, and their letters back to Europe emphasized the sophistication of Qing statecraft.

These cumulative contributions were synthesized by writers both within and outside the mission. Daniello Bartoli, a Jesuit historian, published *Dell' Historia Della Compagnia di Giesu La Cina Terza Parte Dell'Asia* (1663) in Italian at Rome, which provides a detailed account of Jesuit missions in China from the death of St. Francis Xavier in 1552 to 1640.[11]

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the testimony of experience show that this people is extraordinarily industrious, it is easy to infer from the preceding discussion that all the mechanical arts are found among them, for no material is lacking and wealth attracts talented minds themselves.). *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas*, 18. "*Antiquum sibi Sinarum regnum cognomen indidit ab urbanitate ritibusque politioribus; quin etiam urbanitas numeratur una e quinque virtutibus, quae apud eos velut cardines caeterarum praedicantur*" (The ancient kingdom of the Chinese gave itself its name on account of its urbanity and rather polished rites; indeed, urbanity is counted as one of the five virtues, which among them are proclaimed as the foundations of all the others.). *Ibidem*, 63. Matteo Ricci stressed the exceptional moral culture of the Chinese, especially "*parentum observantia* (Xiao 孝)" as well: "*Omnes Sinarum libri, qui de moribus aguntur, toti sunt in excitandis filiis ad parentum observantiam, maiorumque venerationem. Et sane si externam illam pietatis faciem intueamur, nulla alia toto terrarum orbe cum Sinis comparari potest*" (All the Chinese books that deal with morals conduct are wholly devoted to encouraging children to show obedience to their parents and reverence for their ancestors. And truly, if we consider that outward expression of piety, no other nation in the whole world can be compared with the Chinese.). *Ibidem*, 79. Martino Martini even claimed the primordial antiquity of Chinese sciences: "*Inde constat scientiam primam apud Sinas Mathematicam fuisse, atque a Noe ad posteros quasi per manus propagatam*" (It is therefore clear that the first science among the Chinese was Mathematics, and that it was handed down to their descendants as if transmitted from Noah.). *Sinicae Historiae Decas Prima*, 17.

11 For additional specialized discussions of this book, see: Yinlan Wu, *La Cina di Daniello Bartoli* (Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 2014). Tomasz Dunin Szpot likewise consulted this work while composing his *Historia Sinarum Imperii*. One particularly interesting passage concerns Wei Zhongxian (魏忠賢), the powerful Chinese eunuch who, immediately after the death of Emperor Tianqi (天啟), hurried to the residence of Xin Wang (信王) and proclaimed that he had already been chosen as the new sovereign. Daniello Bartoli reported this episode in a brief and straightforward manner: "*e appena hebbero pochi passi il piè fuor del palagio, che si videro sopraggiunti, e trapassati da Gueicun a cavallo, e a tutta briglia corrente, a dar'egli a Sinuam il felice annuntio, d'esser Imperadore, e invitarlo a palagio.*" (And they had scarcely taken a few steps outside the palace when they saw themselves overtaken and passed by Wei Zhongxian on horseback, riding at full speed, to bring to Xin Wang the happy news that he was Emperor, and to invite him to the palace.). Daniello Bartoli, *Dell'historia della Compagnia di Giesù. La Cina, terza parte dell'Asia* (Rome: Nella Stamperia del Varese, 1663), 879. Szpot, however, transformed the same event into a vivid and dramatic scene: "*nihil moratus, admotis equo calcaribus praevolaturum se omnem famam putavit,*

Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (1667)[12] was an encyclopedic Latin volume collecting diverse Jesuit reports, on everything from Chinese history and language to flora, fauna, and myths, accompanied by abundant illustrations. Kircher, who never visited China himself, maintained a voluminous correspondence with fellow Jesuits in China, collecting all the information he could from their letters and journals. Drawing on these sources, Kircher's work vividly introduced European readers to Chinese inventions, monuments, and even the marvelous Nestorian Stele. In the early 18th century, the massive four-volume *Description de l'Empire de la Chine* (1735)[13] compiled by Jean-Baptiste Du Halde crowned this Jesuit scholarly enterprise. Du Halde was entrusted by his superiors to edit the published and manuscript accounts of Jesuit travellers in China, ultimately incorporating the firsthand narratives of twenty-seven Jesuit missionaries into an authoritative compendium of Chinese history, government, religion, and arts.[14]

Through such works by western Catholic missionaries, especially Jesuits, Europeans gained an unprecedented window into how China was governed and how its people lived. The Jesuits' role as knowledge-brokers was crucial, for they transmitted factual information about China's imperial bureaucracy and Confucian ethos. This context of rich Jesuit Sinology set the stage for Tomasz Dunin Szpot's own contribution at the turn of the 18th century.

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*allaturumque faustum Nuncium Sin Vamo Principi… et admissus ad Principem, Quod faustum inquit fortunatumque sit Tibi et Imperio Princeps. factus es Imperator Sinarum. Te iam Palatium, Te Thronus maiorum tuorum exspectat, ingredere bonis avibus Regium augustale, conscende Thronum, quem tibi vota nostra designarunt, et impera*." (Without delay, urging his horse forward with his spurs, [Wei Zhongxian] thought he would outstrip all rumor and bring the fortunate message to Xin Wang… And admitted into the presence of the Prince, he said: 'May this be favorable and prosperous for you and for the Empire, Prince. You have become Emperor of the Chinese. The palace now awaits you; the throne of your ancestors awaits you. Enter the royal palace under good auspices, ascend the throne that our vows have designated for you, and rule!). ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 17r. This comparison reveals not only that Szpot was thoroughly trained in classical literature, with clear echoes of Ciceronian diction, but also that he possessed a remarkable talent for narrating historical events with dramatic intensity.

12 The complete title of the book is: *China Monumentis qua Sacris qua Profanis, nec non Variis Naturae & Artis Spectaculis, Aliarumque Rerum Memorabilium Argumentis Illustrata*. Further information on this work see: Mungello, *Curious Land*, 134–143.

13 The complete title of this monumental work is: *Description Geographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*.

14 Isabelle Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine: La "Description" de J. B. du Halde, jésuite, 1735*. (*Qing Zhongguo zuozheng: Duhede de "Zhonghua diguo quanzhi"* 请中国作证：杜赫德的《中华帝国全志》), trans. Xu Minglong (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2015).

## Ignacy Dunin Szpot and *Historia Sinarum Imperii*

Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot, S.J., was born in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the same year when the Shunzhi emperor (順治 1638-1661) was enthroned as empeor of China in Peking (1644). He possessed a deep interest in China and the civilizations of the Far East. Having consulted a large body of historical materials that had circulated from China to Europe, He compiled the *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis*[15] and the *Collectanea Pro Historia Sinica* in Latin, works that on the one hand explained to the Holy See the rationale behind the Jesuit strategy in China, and on the other provided the Western religious world and intellectual community with abundant information about the ancient civilizations of the East. In his later years, he completed his life's great achievement, the *Historia Sinarum Imperii*. This historical treatise describes Chinese history, as well as the diplomatic activities of the Jesuits in Sino-European relations. His *Opera Omnia* resulted in eight voluminous manuscript volumes, a total of 2234 pages of Latin text, among them the *Historia Sinarum Imperii* comprises more than 500 pages. However, due to the Holy See's changing attitude toward the *Societas Iesu*, his *Opera Omnia* were never printed, and the manuscript remained preserved in the *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*, receiving scholarly attention only in recent years. Szpot called himself in his work entitled *Collectanea Historia Sinensis* as "*unus Sarmata scriptor*",[16] which highly emphasizes his ethnocultural identity. As a Sarmatian writer, he gladly accepted the concepts of Sarmatianism, higly estimating the usage of Latin language, supporting the values of equality and *Aurea Libertas*, defending virtues and avoidng vices,[17] which were deeply rooted in his mind and greatly influenced his way of interpretation towards Chinese History, for in *Historia Sinarum Imperii*[18] the author gave us many examples of Chinese

15 *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis* is a title assigned to the work by a later editor, as we know from the manuscript cover and the first page prepared by that editor. Szpot himself, however, preferred to call the work *Collectanea pro Historia Sinarum*.

16 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 1r

17 Sarmatianism was a dominant ideology in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and exerted a profound influence on many Polish writers of the seventeenth century. Cf. Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386–1795* (Seattle–London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 211–232.

18 Although some modern scholars cite the title of the work in the plural: *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* (for example, Professor Robert Danieluk S.J.), I contend that it should be cited in the singular: *Historia Sinarum Imperii*. If we examine only the form of the title as it appears in the manuscript: *Historiae Sinarum Imperii Pars I* (ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 1v), "*Historiae Sinarum Imperii* " may indeed be understood either as a nominative

rebellions against Manchus due the motive for "*libertas*," although in fact this kind of interpretation is problematic from a Chinese perspective, because the Chinese people living in the 17 century higly maintained different concepts of liberty from the Europeans, for them who were deeply immersed in the tradition of Confucianism rebellions aimed at maintenance of "Xiao (孝)" and "Li (禮),"[19] at the defence of traditional Chinese dress which is the sign of highest humanity and civilization. Nevertheless, his account offers a unique Sarmatian interpretation of Chinese civilization, one that holds significant value for the history of Western Sinology and enriches its intellectual scope. As a Jesuit, Szpot shared a historical outlook similar to that of other Jesuits of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who had undertaken missionary work in China. He approached Chinese civilization and its bureaucratic system with both curiosity and respect, yet also with a critical eye. Consequently, to understand his interpretation of Chinese civilization, especially his view of the centralization of imperial power in China during late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which constitutes the central focus of this article, we must first consider his dual identity: that of a Sarmatian and a Jesuit.

The *Historia Sinarum Imperii* is divided into three parts and provides a broad panorama of Chinese history, scilicet from the very beginnings of Chinese civilization up to the year 1697, as well as a narrative of Jesuit missionary activity. The first part, *Sina a Tartaris obscurata*, focuses primarily on general Chinese history and offers detailed accounts of the major historical events of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, together

in apposition to "*Pars I*" or as a genitive modifying it, depending on the author's stylistic preference. However, when we consider Szpot's other work entitled: *Collectaneorum Pro Historia Sinarum Tomus I* (ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 1v), it becomes clear that "*Collectaneorum*" must be taken as a genitive. This indicates that Szpot himself favored using such titles in the genitive case rather than the nominative. Consequently, the proper restituted title should be *Historia Sinarum Imperii* rather than *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*.

19 Xiao (孝) and Li (禮) are two important concepts in Confucian philosophy. Both notions embody distinctive modes of thought derived from indigenous Chinese Confucian culture, and it is difficult to find precise equivalents in European languages. Even among the highly learned Jesuits who came to China, their translations of these terms diverged considerably. For example, xiao was variously rendered as "*parentum observantia*," "*obtemperare parentibus*," "*obedire et servire parentibus*," "*pietas et obedientia*," and "*officium pii atque obedientis filii*." Similarly, li was translated as "*urbanitas ritusque politiores*," "*officium*," "*officia civilia*," "*regula rectae rationis*," and "*primaevum illud temperamentum naturae rationalis*." See: Thierry Meynard, S.J., *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius: The First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687) Published in the West* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2015). This diversity of interpretations and translations vividly reflects the early attempts of the Jesuit missionaries to mediate between Chinese and Western intellectual traditions within a Latin linguistic framework.

with descriptions of China's geography, cultural life, military institutions, traditional beliefs, administrative system, and ethnic characteristics. The second part, *Sina Evangelica Luca sub Imperatoribus Sinis Illustra*, covers the missionary enterprise under the late Ming emperors from 1552 to 1644, while the third part, *Sina Evangelica Luce sub Imperatoribus Tartaris illustrior mundo facta*, concentrates on missionary work during the early Qing period. Broadly speaking, the first part of the work deals with Chinese history in a manner that could even attract the serious interest of Chinese readers today, whereas the second and third parts focus on Jesuit missionary activities. Numerous detailed historical reports are preserved in this work, many of which are otherwise lost, making *Historia Sinarum Imperii* not merely a reflection on the past but, in many instances, a valuable reconstruction of both Chinese history and the history of the evangelic mission. In the following pages, we will examine Szpot's interesting account of the centralization of Imperial power in China from his *Historia Sinarum Imperii*, and consider the continuing significance of his work for contemporary Chinese studies.

## Centralization of imperial power

Galeote Pereira, a Portuguese traveler imprisoned in southern China between 1549 and 1552, produced one of the earliest European accounts based on personal experience. He reported that for many years the thirteen provinces of China had been subject to a single emperor residing in Peking. Pereira also heard that a golden tablet inscribed with the emperor's name was placed before the nobility, who saluted it daily in reverence.[20] These descriptions offered Europeans an early impression of the highly centralized imperial authority of the Ming dynasty. Mendoza, however, went further and provided a more philosophical and political explanation of the imperial title, noting that among the Chinese the emperor is regarded as "*Señor del mundo*" and "*hijo del Cielo* (Tianzi 天子)."[21] Matteo Ricci elaborated upon this conception, explaining that the emperor is called "*filius caeli* (Tianzi)" because the Chinese venerate

20 Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century*, 3–45.

21 Mendosa, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China*, I.3.1. Since Latin served as the principal medium of communication within the literary world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Latin version of this work, published in 1591 under the title *Nova et succincta, vera tamen historia de amplissimo, potentissimoque, nostro quidem orbi hactenus incognito … regno China*, rendered the two imperial titles as "*dominus orbis*" and "*filius caeli*," see p. 131.

Heaven as the supreme divinity (*supremum numen*);[22] to call the emperor the "Tianzi" he observed, is essentially equivalent to calling him the son of God. Another common form of address was "Hoamsi (Huangshang 皇上)," meaning the Supreme Emperor or Monarch.[23] Semedo recorded yet another title, "Kium Vam (Junwang 君王)," explaining that Kium (Jun 君) is used to address foreign kings, while Vam (Wang 王) is the name by which the sons of kings are called; when combined as Kium Vam, the expression was used to refer to the Chinese emperor.[24] Among all the Jesuits of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese missionary Magalhães provided the most detailed list of imperial appellation, recording ten titles: Tien Hu (Tianzi 天子), Son of Heaven; Xim Tien Hu (Shengtianzi 聖天子), Holy Son of Heaven; Hoam Ti (Huangdi 皇帝), August and Great Emperor; Xim Xoam (Shengshang 聖皇), Holy Emperor; Hoam Xam (Huangshang 皇上), August Sovereign; Xim Kium (Shengjun 聖君), Holy Prince; Xim Xam (Shengshang 聖上), Holy Sovereignty; Que Chu (Guozhu 國主), Lord of the Kingdom; Chao Tim (Chaoting 朝廷), the Royal Court; and Van Sui (Wanshui 萬歲), ten

22 Ricci's interpretation of *tian* (天) as a "*supremum numen*" was not merely a missionary strategy intended to align Confucianism with the Catholicism. Rather, it also reflected his deep study of the Confucian classics and his affirmation of the meaning of *tian* as a sovereign power found in pre-Qin (先秦) texts. Jesuit missionaries, following Ricci's lead, generally upheld the pre-Qin Confucian understanding of *tian* and rejected the Neo-Confucian (Songming Li Xue 宋明理學) reinterpretation. In their view, Neo-Confucianism transformed the sovereign *tian* into a moral–principled *tian*, thereby denying a supreme dinivity endowed with independent will and ultimately reducing itself to "atheism." Thus, the Jesuits' approach to Sinological studies also stimulated Chinese intellectuals to reflect upon their own cultural tradition, thereby enriching the content of classical Chinese scholarship. Modern Chinese academia likewise tends to recognize three fundamental meanings of *tian* in Chinese philosophy: (1) the natural *tian* (自然之天), that is, the physical sky; (2) the sovereign *tian* (主宰之天), the supreme divinity with an independent will, the meaning upheld by Ricci and other Jesuits; and (3) the moral–principled *tian* (义理之天), the Neo-Confucian interpretation articulated by Zhu Xi (朱熹) and other Song–Ming thinkers. See Dainian Zhang (张岱年) (ed.), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Chinese Philosophy (Revised Edition)* [*Zhongguo zhexue da cidian (xiuding ben)* 中国哲学大辞典（修订本）] (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2014), 19.

23 "Ex eo quod huius regni fines ita longe lateque proferantur, & exignoratione transmarini Orbis, arbitrantur Sinae Regem suum orbi universo imperare, ideoque specioso illum nomine Caeli filiumThiencu dicunt, & hodie ut olim semper, appellant, quia porro caelum ipsi pro supremo numine colunt, idem est caeli ac Dei filium nominare. Vulgo tamen non hoc nomine sed Hoamsi appellatur, hoc est, supremum Imperatorem aut Monarcham." Matteo Ricci, Nicolas Trigault, *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu: ex P. Matthaei Riccii eiusdem Societatis commentariis libri V* (Augsburg [Augusta Vindelicorum]: Apud Christophorum Mangium, 1615), 45.

24 Semedo, *Imperio de La China*, 146.

thousand years.[25] Understanding these various forms of imperial appellation was essential for the first Jesuits who came to China, as it provided an important key to grasping concepts of Chinese imperial power. Drawing on the extensive materials preserved in Rome, Szpot offered a notably accurate reflection of this system. As he cited Verbiest:

> Quantum vero ad Regimen Civile Sinarum attinet, illud tam perfecto Monarchicum est, ut ei par nulla unquam Monarchia aut habuisse aut habere suo quidem iudicio, sed multorum annorum in Regia Pekinensi experientia acquisito Ferdinandus Verbiest asseruerit.[26]

(As for the civil administration of China, it is so perfectly monarchical that, in Verbiest's judgment, formed not only by opinion but by many years of experience at the Imperial Court in Peking, no other monarchy has ever equaled it or equals it now.)

In fact, Jesuit opinions regarding the Chinese monarchical system were far from uniform. Ferdinand Verbiest maintained a decidedly positive assessment of it, and Matteo Ricci shared a similar view. Ricci observed that the entire Chinese empire was governed by a class of *literati*, whom he regarded as philosophers. In such a system, the minds of rulers could be cultivated through literature, which had always been esteemed more highly than the military profession. He therefore assumed that this was why the Chinese were not inclined to expand their territory.[27] Kircher, by contrast, offered a far more negative evaluation of the Chinese monarchy. While acknowledging that the Chinese empire was the richest in the world, he contended that its political structure should be described as an "*Absoluta Monarchia*," with the emperor himself serving as an "*Absolutissimum Caput et Dominus*." In such a system, he argued, no political matter was permitted to anyone without the emperor's prior consultation. Kircher even declared that the empire, plunged into a deep darkness of paganism and exposed to the corruptions of unspeakable

25 Gabriel de Magalhães, A *New History of China, Containing a Description of the Most Considerable Particulars of that Vast Empire* (London: Thomas Newborough, 1688), 254–255.

26 Jap. Sin. 102, f. 7v.

27 Universum regnum ut supra dixi, a suis Philosophis administrari, & in iis merum mistumque imperium reperiri." "Id inde fortasse habet originem, quod studiis litterarum hominis animus nobilitetur, aut ideo quod iam inde ab ipsis huius regni promordiis litterae mansuetiores pluris semper fuerint, quam professio militaris, apud gentem minime cupidam imperii proferendi." Ricci, Trigault, *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas*, 59–60.

luxury, was destined to suffer "*aeternae poenae.*"[28] Szpot, however, adopted Verbiest's perspective. Verbiest, the Flemish Jesuit missionary, had not only spent nearly thirty years in China but had also served as an imperial astronomer deeply involved in crucial court affairs, forming a close relationship with the Kangxi Emperor. For Szpot, Verbiest's *experientia* carried far more weight and credibility than Kircher's *iudicium*, especially since Kircher had never been to China. This contrast reveals Szpot's methodological rigor and his preference for firsthand empirical testimony over speculative judgment.

Now let us consider Szpot's brief but remarkably accurate description of the centralization of imperial power in China:

> The emperor is the soul from which alone this vast body of the empire receives and preserves its strength and vital movement.[29]

The terms *anima* and *corpus* are essentially theological categories used to express the nature of the human person. Szpot is the first author to apply this analogy to the Chinese empire, thereby clothing a secular political system in a distinctly sacred vocabulary. Yet this raises an important question: as a writer shaped by Sarmatian ideology, how could Szpot view the centralization of Chinese imperial authority in a positive light? To answer this, we must look at his description of Chinese political functions:

> Nevertheless, wise antiquity so restricted him [i.e. emperor] by its laws, and so bound him by the counsels of the magistrates and by the freedom of admonishment whenever he should go stray, that although he holds all power within his empire, he can do nothing that is absolutist. Rather, he governs his subjects solely according to the rule of equality and justice. The authority to reward and to punish rests with him alone.[30]

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28 Athanasius Kircher, *China monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis, nec non variis naturae et artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata* (Amsterdam: Apud Joannem Janssonium à Waesberge et Elizeum Weyerstraet, 1667), 165–166.

29 Imperator est anima a qua sola totum hoc vastum Imperii Corpus vigorem suum et motum vitalem accipit, conservatque. Jap. Sin. 102, f. 7v.

30 Nihilominus provida antiquitas, ita eum suis legibus circumscripsit, ita consiliis Magistratuum, et libertate monendi, sicubi in devia laberetur, constrinxit; ut qui omnia in suo imperio potest, nihil, quod tyrannicum sit, possit: sed sola aequi iustique ratione regat suos subditos. Penes illum solum est potestas praemiandi et puniendi. Jap. Sin. 102, f. 7v.

Matteo Ricci had already clearly defined the Chinese political system as a mixture of monarchy and aristocracy.[31] Setting aside Kircher's harsh judgment, Szpot accepted Ricci's view. He explained that although the emperor stood at the center of political power, his authority was not unlimited; it was restrained by laws, by the counsels of his officials, and, above all, by what Szpot called the *libertas monendi*, the freedom to admonish the ruler. None of these features contradicted Sarmatian political ideology, which strongly rejected only the *absolutum dominium*, called *tyrannicum* by Szpot, yet supported the political rights of the *nobiles*, who could speak freely before the Polish king and cast votes in the *sejmik* (local diet) and the *sejm* (parliament).[32]

For Szpot, an ideal Chinese emperor could also serve as a model for a perfect Polish king, one who lends an attentive ear to the nobility and governs the realm with equity and justice. In this sense, Szpot occupies a uniquely significant position: he interpreted Chinese civilization through the dual lens of a Jesuit and a Sarmatian political thinker.

Szpot's observations on the centralization of Chinese imperial power even remain highly relevant to modern scholarship. Professor Joanna Waley-Cohen has described the Qing emperor as the centripetal center of imperial authority, emphasizing that such centralization operated through flexible governance rather than uniform absolutism.[33] Imperial authority, in her view, was grounded in moral and ritual performance and should not be reduced to *absolutum dominium*[34] Similarly, Timothy Brook characterizes late-Ming government as an autocratic system marked by an enhanced concentration of power in the imperial institution, while at the same time stressing the practical limits of such centralization.[35] In the late Ming, particularly during the reign of the Wanli emperor (萬曆), imperial authority increasingly became indirect: the throne was often vacant, and the business of the realm proceeded "offstage" through bureaucratic routines, eunuchs, and grand secretaries. Effective governance thus depended less on the emperor's active personal

31 "Et dixerim initio, Monarchiam esse huius regni administrandi rationem, tamen e dictis facile constat, & e dicendis constabit, Aristocratiae non parum admisceri." Ricci, Trigault, *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas*, 45.

32 Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386–1795*, 177–189.

33 Joanna Waley-Cohen, "The New Qing History," *Radical History Review* 88 (2004): 198.

34 Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Culture of War in China* (London–New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 12.

35 Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 86–89.

intervention than on political skill, moral authority, and elite cooperation, as officials formed factions to sustain administrative functioning.[36]

If Chinese emperors had consistently embodied moral excellence and the imperial mechanism had been truly perfect, it would be difficult to explain why the Ming dynasty was ultimately replaced by the Qing. Szpot was clearly aware of the collapse of the Ming empire and sought to explain why an empire dominated by the Han population could, twice in Chinese history, pass into the hands of the *Tartari*. He articulated this insight with remarkable breadth, observing that:

> An empire so populous, so wealthy, so prudently and wisely fortified at home and abroad by the laws of peace and justice, and so renowned throughout all those realms for its wisdom, was brought to ruin by the avarice of emperors, the negligence of generals, and the rivalry of the mandarins.[37]

Through this judgment, Szpot demonstrates a distinctly critical awareness of the limits of imperial centralization. While he cited Ferdinand Verbiest's idealized description of the Chinese political order, he simultaneously identified the internal structural crises: imperial avarice, military incompetence, and bureaucratic rivalry, that ultimately undermined the system and led to dynastic collapse.

In contrast to European scholars such as Frederick Mote, who described Ming governance as "despotism," and Edward Farmer, who classified it as "autocracy,"[38] the prominent Chinese historian Ch'ien Mu argued that such Western categories were problematic when applied to the Chinese imperial system. Ch'ien Mu introduced a crucial conceptual distinction between "power" (权) and "obligation" (職責), rejecting a sovereignty-based understanding of politics.[39] In his interpretation, imperial centralization meant that political authority was symbolically and morally concentrated in the ruler,[40] while actual governance oper-

36 *Ibidem*, 100–103.

37 Tam populosum, tam opulentum, tamque providè et sapienter ad pacis et iustitiae leges domi et foris munitum, et sapientia per omnia illa regna celebratissimum Imperium, prodidit avaritia Imperatorum socordia Ducum, et aemulatio Mandarinorum. Jap. Sin. 102, f. 10r.

38 Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 86–89.

39 Ch'ien Mu, *Merits and Demerits of Political Systems in Dynastic China*, trans. Siying Zhang (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press; Berlin: Springer, 2019), 114–116.

40 *Ibidem*, 137–142.

ated through delegated bureaucratic structures.[41] Imperial power was thus conceived less as direct administrative control than as a concentration of political and moral responsibility, internally constrained by Confucian ethics, remonstrance practices, and established bureaucratic norms. While Szpot articulated an early modern, Jesuit-informed vision of centralized yet non-tyrannical rule, Ch'ien Mu provided an indigenous theoretical justification for how such a system could function without collapsing into *absolutum dominium*. Despite their vastly different historical and cultural contexts, both converge on a shared model in which moral authority and institutional structures serve to restrain centralized sovereignty.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the centralization of imperial power in China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties through the lens of *Historia Sinarum Imperii* by Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot, situating his work within both the Jesuit intellectual tradition and modern sinological scholarship. By combining close textual analysis with a comparative historiographical approach, the article has demonstrated that Szpot's account is neither a naïve idealization nor a simple repetition of earlier missionary narratives, but rather a sophisticated and critically informed interpretation of Chinese imperial governance.

Szpot conceptualized the Chinese emperor as the *anima* of a vast imperial *corpus*, a metaphor that underscores the highly centralized nature of political authority in China. At the same time, he explicitly rejected any understanding of this centralization as *tyrannicum*. Instead, he emphasized the role of laws, bureaucratic institutions, and above all the *libertas monendi*, as internal restraints on imperial power. This dual emphasis on central authority and institutional limitation reflects both Jesuit political ethnography and Szpot's Sarmatian intellectual background, particularly his hostility toward *absolutum dominium* and his valorization of moral governance.

When read in dialogue with modern scholarship, Szpot's observations appear remarkably prescient. His explanation of the Ming collapse shows that he did not mistake institutional ideals for historical reality. Centralization, in his view, could ensure order and justice only when

41 *Ibidem*, 83–89.

sustained by moral leadership and institutional harmony; once these failed, the same structure could accelerate dynastic decline.

Taken together, these findings suggest that *Historia Sinarum Imperii* deserves renewed attention not merely as a reflection of Jesuit information about China, but as a serious contribution to the comparative history of political thought. Szpot's work demonstrates how early modern European observers could grasp the distinctive logic of Chinese imperial centralization, one that combined strong central authority with non-tyrannical restraint, and how this logic continues to resonate with both modern Western historiography and Chinese intellectual traditions. In this sense, Szpot occupies a unique position in the history of Western Sinology: as a Jesuit, a Sarmatian, and a perceptive interpreter of Chinese statecraft whose insights remain meaningful for contemporary scholarship.

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