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Fornax Babylonica: The Tyranny of Zhang Xianzhong in Jesuit Accounts Recorded by Tomasz Dunin Szpot¹

Fornax Babylonica: Tyrania Zhang Xianzhonga
w relacjach jezuitów spisanych przez Tomasza
Dunina Szpota

Abstract

This article examines the representation of Zhang Xianzhong's (張獻忠, 1606–1647) rule in the account of the Jesuit Tomasz Dunin Szpot, preserved in the manuscript *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis* (Jap. Sin. 104). A major rebel leader of the late Ming period, Zhang established his regime in Sichuan in 1644, where his rule was associated, in both Chinese and European sources, with extreme violence and large-scale destruction. The article argues that Szpot does not merely record these events but actively reshapes them within a framework drawn from classical and biblical traditions. Through the language of anti-tyrannical discourse and scriptural and

1 This research was funded by the state budget under the programme of the Minister of Education and Science, *National Programme for the Development of the Humanities* (project no. NPRH/U22/SP/0021/2023/12), entitled *Historiae Sinarum Imperii and Collectanea Historiae Sinensis* by Tomasz Szpot Dunin SJ – *the Polish Contribution to the Study of Chinese Culture and History in the Early Modern Period*. The funding amount was PLN 1,566,263.42, which is also the total value of the project.

classical references, Zhang Xianzhong is constructed as a paradigmatic insane tyrant whose rule embodies the collapse of political and moral order. By situating Szpot's narrative within the broader context of Jesuit historiography, the study demonstrates how early modern missionary writing transformed episodes of mass violence into a form of moral and theological reflection. In doing so, it highlights the role of interpretative frameworks in mediating cross-cultural encounters and in shaping European understandings of political catastrophe in early modern China.

Keywords: Zhang Xianzhong, devastation of Sichuan, Jesuit historiography, Tomasz Dunin Szpot, early modern China, anti-tyrannical discourse, mass violence in early modern history.

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje sposób przedstawienia rządów Zhang Xianzhonga (張獻忠, 1606–1647) w relacji jezuita Tomasza Dunina Szpota, zachowanej w rękopisie *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis* (Jap. Sin. 104). Zhang, jeden z głównych przywódców rebelii schyłkowego okresu dynastii Ming, ustanowił swoje rządy w Syczuanie w 1644 roku, gdzie jego panowanie było w źródłach zarówno chińskich, jak i europejskich kojarzone ze skrajną przemocą i zniszczeniem na wielką skalę. Artykuł dowodzi, że Szpot nie ogranicza się jedynie do rejestrowania tych wydarzeń, lecz aktywnie je przekształca, ujmując w ramy zaczerpnięte z tradycji klasycznej i biblijnej. Za pomocą języka dyskursu antytyrannicznego oraz odniesień do Pisma Świętego i tradycji klasycznej Zhang Xianzhong zostaje ukazany jako paradygmatyczny, obłąkany tyran, którego rządy ucieleśniają załamanie porządku politycznego i moralnego. Umieszczając narrację Szpota w szerszym kontekście historiografii jezuickiej, artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób wczesnonowożytne piśmiennictwo misyjne przekształcało epizody masowej przemocy w formę refleksji moralnej i teologicznej. W ten sposób podkreśla rolę ram interpretacyjnych w mediowaniu spotkań międzykulturowych oraz w kształtowaniu europejskiego rozumienia katastrofy politycznej w Chinach epoki wczesnonowożytnej.

Słowa kluczowe: Zhang Xianzhong, zniszczenie Syczuanu, historiografia jezuicka, Tomasz Dunin Szpot, Chiny epoki wczesnonowożytnej, dyskurs antytyranniczny, masowa przemoc w historii wczesnonowożytnej.

Introduction

The figure of Zhang Xianzhong (張獻忠, 1606–1647),² one of the most prominent rebel leaders of the late Ming period, occupies a distinctive place in both Chinese and European historical writing. In European Jesuit sources, where he often appears under the Latinized name Taxun, his rule in Sichuan is associated with extreme violence and large-scale devastation, remembered as one of the most destructive episodes of the seventeenth century.³ Among the accounts that record these events, the narrative of the Jesuit Tomasz Dunin Szpot remains relatively understudied, despite its considerable historical value.⁴ Drawing on reports by missionaries, including eyewitness accounts, Szpot offers not merely a description of events in Sichuan, but an interpretation shaped by a distinct set of conceptual and rhetorical resources. He constructs the image of Zhang Xianzhong within an intellectual framework designed to render these events legible to a European audience. This article therefore asks what conceptual matrix the Polish Jesuit employs in order to translate an unfamiliar and violent reality into terms intelligible within early modern European thought, and how episodes of extreme violence are recast in the language of classical and biblical traditions.

2 See his biographical entry in: Lin Yutang, “Chang Hsien-chung,” in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644–1912)*, vol. 1, ed. Arthur W. Hummel (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 37–38.

3 On Jesuit accounts of Zhang Xianzhong’s rule in Sichuan, see Chan (2011). The author analyzes the testimonies of the Jesuit missionaries Lodovico Buglio and Gabriel de Magalhães, who lived in Sichuan during Zhang’s regime (1644–1647), drawing primarily on the Chinese compilation *Shengjiao ru Chuan ji* (1918) prepared by the French missionary François-Marie-Joseph Gourdon from earlier Jesuit reports. Chan Hok-lam, “傳教士對張獻忠據蜀稱王的記載” (Jesuits’ Impressions on Zhang Xianzhong in Sichuan (1644–1647)), *Journal of Chinese Studies* 中國文化研究所學報52 (2011): 65–94. Contemporary historiography: “He also had a craving for human flesh. After each person was dismembered in front of him and roasted, he would lift up several slices of meat [and eat them]. Also, when he destroyed Huangzhou, he ripped open all the functionaries in the city, and the women’s fingernails dripped blood which flowed across [the ground]. After the dissection was finished, they were all crushed. Fred-eric Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise, The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, vol. 1 (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1895), 339, footnote 65.

4 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, ff. 51r–66r.

Jesuit witnesses in Sichuan

Szpot based his narrative primarily on the testimonies of two missionaries active in Sichuan during the rebellion, Gabriel de Magalhães and Ludovico Buglio.⁵ Both men came into direct contact with Zhang Xianzhong and left detailed accounts of the events they witnessed. Their reports circulated widely within Jesuit correspondence networks and became among the principal European sources on the devastation of Sichuan. In the *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis*, Szpot devotes approximately sixteen folios to Zhang Xianzhong, the destruction of Chengdu, and the wider devastation of the province. It is important to note that the drama presented by Szpot unfolds on two interrelated levels. The destruction of the province is rendered through the experience of the missionaries, whose individual suffering becomes inseparable from the catastrophe affecting the broader community. In this way, personal testimony is woven into a wider narrative of collective calamity.⁶

An approaching storm

Although violence had accompanied Zhang Xianzhong's campaigns prior to his takeover of Sichuan, many mandarins initially received his rule with misplaced hope. Szpot presents this early phase as one of apparent order and promise, in which the new ruler sought to secure support through displays of generosity and justice, thereby winning the allegiance of both civil and military officials. Yet from the outset the narrative is marked by a sign of impending catastrophe: the burning of the Jesuit residence and church, which Szpot records as a moment of particular gravity and as a prelude to the wider destruction that would soon engulf the city. This movement from hope to catastrophe is further expressed through a contrast drawn from natural forces. The new regime appears at first as a rising sun, promising renewal and the restoration of order.

5 See: Gabriel de Magalhães, *Relação da perda e destituição da Provincia e Christianidade de Su Chuen e do que os pes. Luis Buglio e Gabriel de Magalhães passarão em seu cativ*, report sent to Manuel de Azevedo; dated May 18, 1649. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 127, ff. 1r- 35v.

6 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, ff. 51r-67r. Erik Zürcher, "In the Yellow Tiger's Den: Buglio and Magalhães at the Court of Zhang Xianzhong, 1644-1647," *Monumenta Serica* 25 (2002): 355-372; Erich Hauer, "Li Tzê-Chêng und Chang Hsien-Chung: Ein Beitrag zum Ende der Mingdynastie," *Monumenta Serica* 1 (1935): 1-44; James B. Parsons, "The Culmination of a Chinese Peasant Rebellion: Chang Hsien-chung in Szechwan, 1644-46," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 16/3 (May 1957): 387-400.

In retrospect, however, this expectation is overturned: what had seemed a source of light proves instead to herald an impending storm descending upon the province. Through this opposition of *sol* and *tempestas*, Szpot gives shape to a sequence in which promise gives way to devastation. These expectations thus quickly proved illusory. As Szpot observes, of the roughly one thousand mandarins who gathered around Zhang, only a few dozen ultimately survived, a stark indication of the rapid descent from anticipated renewal into catastrophic destruction.

Meanwhile Cham-hien-cium [Zhang Xianzhong – AW] entered the metropolis not without slaughter and fires – at which time even the house of the Fathers and the church were burned – and on the fifth day of September in the year 1644, in a solemn ceremony, he had himself inaugurated as king of the province of Suchuen. He began his reign under auspices of liberality, justice, and magnificence, by which he won the support of all [...] Seeing these beginnings of the rule of this tyrant, the mandarins conceived hopes of better fortune for the empire to which he was already aspiring; they believed that under this new family the provinces and cities would flourish again, and that the empire would return to that condition in which Humwu [the Hongwu Emperor – AW], the first founder of the imperial family of Taiming, had left it to his descendants. Yet, wretched men, they were unaware what a storm this rising sun among the clouds was soon to portend, in which, of the thousand mandarins who at that time formed his court, all perished except for twenty-five.⁷

The destruction of Chengdu

Instead of a dynastic founder who was to shine with virtue like the sun in the heavens, the province came under the rule of a tyrant who spread a savage, beast-like cruelty throughout the capital, Chengdu.⁸

7 “Interea Cham-hien-cium non sine caedibus et incendiis, quo tempore etiam Domus Patrum et Ecclesia conflagrarvit, ingressus Metropolim die 5ta Septemb. anni 1644 solemnī ritu se in Regem Provinciae Suchuen inaugurari fecit; caeptque regni sui auspiciis, a liberalitate, iustitia, et magnificentia, quibus omnium animos sibi captivavit; [...] Visis ergo his primordiis Regni huius Tyranni, conceperant spem melioris fortunae sui imperii Mandarinī ad quod ille iam humi aspirabat; foreque arbitrabantur, ut sub nova hac familia reflorcerent Prouvinciae et Urbes, et Imperium rediret ad eum statum in quo Humwu primus fundator Taimingae Imperialis familiae suis posteris reliquerat; ignari miseri quantam tempestatem ille inter nubila oriens Sol paulo post fuisset portendens, in qua ex mille Mandarinis Aulam ipsius tunc facientibus, solis viginti quinque exceptis omnes perierunt”. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 51v.

8 “[...] spargens per urbem immanem et ferinam saevitatem”. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 51r.

What follows is a sustained account of extreme violence directed against the educated elite. Szpot records a range of elaborated and repeated forms of execution, conveying both the scale and the systematic character of the repression. The tyrant's actions bore the marks of bestial ferocity (*belluina ferocia*), and his words fell like thunderbolts from the sky (*ex ore illius fulmina*). According to the Jesuit missionaries:

They saw many Mandarins fall – some by the sword, others by the gallows, others flayed, others cut into tiny pieces, others beaten to death with cudgels, others fastened to tree trunks, others tormented by fire, others by iron – all victims of this tyrant's fury.⁹

The force of this passage lies in its anaphoric and repetitive structure. The recurrence of “others” (*alios*) creates a rhythm of accumulation, in which each act of violence reinforces the last, transforming individual instances into a continuous pattern. What emerges is not a series of isolated punishments, but a sustained process of destruction directed at the administrative and moral order embodied by the literati. This passage conveys the systematic nature of the violence and the multiplicity of punishments inflicted upon the victims.

Zhang directed his violence with particular intensity against the Buddhist monks. While a small number of Confucian literati survived the devastation, the Buddhist monastic population was exterminated in its entirety. Szpot presents this destruction as complete. Of the two thousand Buddhist monks residing in Chengdu, not one survived. A similar fate befell the monastic population in other towns of the province. According to Szpot, the tyrant harboured a particular hatred for them, believing them to be responsible for instigating continual rebellions against him.¹⁰

The massacre of the inhabitants of Chengdu is described by both Martino Martini and Tomasz Dunin Szpot in some of the most dramatic passages preserved in the Jesuit sources. Szpot's account, however, provides a more detailed description than Martini's *Regni Sinensis a Tartaris*

9 “Viderunt cecidisse plurimos Mandarinos, alios gladio, alios furca, alios excoriatos, alios minutim in frustula concisos, alios sub fustibus mortuos, alios truncis arborum affixos, alios igne, alios ferro cruciatos, victimam furori huius tyranni”. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 53v.

10 “Nam ex duobus millibus Bonziorum, quos Chimtu Metropolis intra moenia sua alebat, nullus gladium evasit, nullus superstes remansit”. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 53v. For Jesuit-Buddhist contacts during the rule of Zhang Xianzhong, see: Thierry Meynard, “A Buddhist Christian Encounter in Late Ming Dynasty: New Insights from the Chengdu Conflict of 1643–1644,” *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 6/2 (2023): 65–110.

devastati enarratio (1654). The following passage illustrates how the Italian Jesuit depicted the suffering of the population:

First, he ordered that all the inhabitants of Chengdu, the metropolitan city – men and women of every rank and condition – should be bound in chains by a detachment of his army that had entered the city. Some writers report that their number amounted to six hundred thousand. Shortly afterwards he himself rode through the ranks of these prisoners. With lamentable cries and tears – capable of moving even a stone – they addressed him as their king and lord, kneeling and begging that he spare his innocent people. For a brief moment he halted, as if human nature, recoiling from such horrors, exerted some restraining force upon his cruelty. Yet soon reverting to his usual disposition, he cried out: “Kill them! Kill these rebels!” Thus, on the same day, all were slaughtered outside the city walls, while the bloodstained bandit himself stood watching the massacre [trans. Andrzej Wadas].¹¹

Szpot’s account, however, amplifies the same episode considerably. Whereas Martini offers a relatively concise narrative of the massacre, the Polish Jesuit transforms the scene into a far more elaborate and dramatically constructed tableau of collective supplication and destruction. The following passage illustrates how Szpot expands and intensifies the episode:

By now the of the City, filled with an innumerable multitude of people, lay beyond the city gate, at the southern bridge of the river Chimtu, when the Tyrant came there on horseback. At the sight of him, all the wretched men fell to their knees and, striking the ground with their heads, poured forth with tears their pitiful cries: ‘Our King, great King, live ten thousand years! You are our King; we are your People, who have never wished in any way to offend you! In all things we have served and obeyed you. Why do you kill us? Whom do you fear, O King? We are all unarmed. We are a people, not soldiers! Your people, not your enemies! Forgive us, O King, most mighty King, have mercy on your innocent People!’ At these tearful cries, the Tyrant halted, thoughtful, and seemed for a moment, as if driven by

11 “Primum itaque omnes omnis generis ac conditionis in Chingtu metropolitana urbe cives, ab intromissa exercitus parte, vinculis constringi voluit; sexcenta hominum milia fuisse scribunt. Mox ipse per hos vinctos obequitans transivit, quem lamentabili eiulatu ac lacrymis, quibus vel lapidem movissent, regem ac dominum compellabant, flexis genibus rogantes ut innocenti populo suo parceret. Stetit ipse tantillum, natura humana diris visceribus ac crudelitate vim aliquam inferente; mox tamen ad ingenium rediens: ‘Occidite’, inquit, ‘occidite hos rebelles.’ Quare omnes eodem die extra urbis moenia, spectante ac vidente sanguinolento latrone, trucidati sunt.” Martino Martini, *De bello Tartarico historia* (Antwerp: Balthasar Moretus, 1654), 110.

the stings of conscience, to begin to be moved to pity. But that adamant heart was so hard that it admitted no compassion into his soul; rather, inflamed with a wild beast's rage, after reproaching them with conspiracies, rebellions, and plots laid against his life, he gave spurs to his horse and rushed from the place, shouting: 'Strike! Slay! Butcher the rebel and the traitor!' The cruel sentence was carried into execution, by which the Metropolis Chintu was turned into a desert without inhabitant. The river Humqua, flowing past, was reddened with the blood of the slain, rolling more blood than waters; and by reason of the multitude of corpses that were thrown into it from the bridge, it was not navigable [trans. Andrzej Wadas].¹²

The two accounts differ markedly in their narrative structure, rhetorical intensity, and interpretative framing of the massacre of the inhabitants of Chengdu. Martino Martini's version presents a relatively concise and restrained report of the events. His narrative focuses primarily on the sequence of actions: the inhabitants are bound in chains, the tyrant rides through the ranks of prisoners, briefly hesitates when confronted with their lament, and ultimately orders their execution. Although the scene includes elements of pathos – particularly the people's plea for mercy – the description remains compressed and largely factual. The massacre itself is summarized in a few sentences, culminating in the striking image of the *sanguinolentus latro*, the bloodstained bandit who watches the slaughter outside the city walls. Szpot's account, by contrast, expands the same episode into a much more elaborate and dramatically constructed narrative. The setting is carefully staged on the plain beyond the city gate near the southern bridge of the river Chintu, where an immense crowd gathers to implore the tyrant for mercy. Their supplication is rendered in extended direct speech, which intensifies the emotional force of the scene. Szpot also deepens the psychological dimension of the tyrant's conduct: the moment of hesitation reported by Martini becomes an internal struggle between conscience and cruelty. The episode ultimately culminates in imagery of total devastation, as Chengdu is transformed into a deserted city and the nearby river is said to run red with blood. In Szpot's description, this amounts to a vision of total destruction: human beings reduced to slaughtered cattle (*velut totidem pecora trucidari iussit*), and the province itself turned into a desert (*factam desertum*).¹³

The language employed by Szpot may be situated within a classical rhetorical tradition, recalling patterns of Ciceronian moral invective, particularly as exemplified in his oration *Pro Sulla*. There, Cicero portrays

12 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, ff. 55v.-56r.

13 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 55r; ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 54v.

his opponents through a vocabulary of excess, moral corruption, and bestial imagery, placing them outside the bounds of reason and civic order. A comparable strategy is evident in Szpot's account. The use of cumulative enumeration and the depiction of the tyrant in terms of *belluina feritas* align his narrative with a classical mode of representing political disorder as a regression from humanity to bestiality.¹⁴

Szpot moves beyond Martini in shaping the image of the ruler. The usurper is presented as a head without a body (*caput sine corpore*) and a king without subjects (*rex sine populo*), from whose reign nothing will remain but an empty and meaningless name (*cui nihil restat ex regno praeter inane et vanum nomen*). The figure of a ruler without subjects and a body severed from its head evokes not only the collapse of legitimate sovereignty, but also the dissolution of political order into a hollow form devoid of substance. In this perspective, tyrannical power assumes the character of an insatiable lust for domination, a force that, like Shakespeare's "universal wolf," ultimately turns upon itself and consumes its own source.¹⁵

Szpot consistently frames Zhang Xianzhong's rule within a classical and Christian anti-tyrannical vocabulary. The rebel ruler is described as *tyrannus* and *latro*, underscoring both the illegitimacy of his power and the violence through which it was exercised, and at times as an *imaginarium imperator*, a self-proclaimed emperor whose claims are exposed as hollow. This terminology is reinforced by a cluster of terms such as *saevitia* and *rabies*, which present the tyrant not merely as a violent

14 "[...] nolite, iudices, arbitrari hominum illum impetum et conatum fuisse: neque enim ulla gens tam barbara aut tam immanis umquam fuit in qua non modo tot, sed unus tam crudelis hostis patriae sit inventus, beluae quaedam illae ex portentis immanes ac ferae forma hominum indutae exstiterunt. [...] introspicite Catilinae, Autroni, Cethegi, Lentuli ceterorumque mentis; quas vos in his libidines, quae flagitia, quas turpitudines, quantas audacias, quam incredibilis furores, quas notas facinorum, quae indicia parricidiorum, quantos acervos scelerum reperietis!" Pro P. Sulla Oratio 76. See critical edition: Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro P. Sulla Oratio*, ed. D. H. Berry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 116–117.

15 "Belluina feritate [...] caput sine corpore, Rex sine populo [...] cui nihil restat ex regno praeter inane et vanum nomen". ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 56r. Kenneth M. Swope analyzes the rebellion of Zhang Xianzhong within the broader context of the Ming-Qing transition and the collapse of state authority in southwest China. He argues that although Zhang's rule in Sichuan was marked by extreme violence, the scale of devastation in the region resulted not only from his campaigns but also from subsequent warfare and political turmoil: Kenneth M. Swope, *On the Trail of the Yellow Tiger: War, Trauma, and Social Dislocation in Southwest China during the Ming-Qing Transition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 1–16. On the "universal wolf," see: William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. David Bevington (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), 1.3.111–114.

political actor but as a figure who has forfeited his humanity. Within this framework, the three dominant features of his tyranny emerge: *idolatria*, *rabies*, *deliria*, *crudelitas*.¹⁶

Szpot reflects on Zhang Xianzhong's attempt to legitimize his rule through a moralized interpretation of dynastic change. By claiming that even Confucius had once rejected the people of Sichuan, the tyrant invokes the notion of a providential condemnation of the region, thereby justifying the punishment of its population as a form of collective responsibility. At the same time, the reference to the cyclical replacement of ruling houses echoes the Chinese doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), which Zhang appropriated in order to present his rebellion not as banditry but as the divinely sanctioned foundation of a new dynasty.¹⁷

Theatrum crudelitatis

Another image Szpot employs is that of *theatrum crudelitatis*, suggesting that the devastation of Sichuan unfolded as a vast spectacle of violence. The phrase “*Lacrymabilis illa fuit Patribus mutatio scenae in eo Crudelitatis Theatro*”¹⁸ introduces a theatrical metaphor that situates Szpot's narrative within an early modern culture of violence. This notion points to a context in which acts of punishment and destruction were not only carried out but also made visible – through public executions, ritualized displays of torture, and the devastation of war. Events such as the Sack of Rome (1527), the French Wars of Religion, and the Thirty Years' War offer clear parallels.

Within this framework, *mutatio scenae* denotes not merely a change of circumstance, but a transition between successive phases in a structured sequence of violence. Szpot's language thus presents the experience of the missionaries as participation in a theatre of cruelty, in which violence is simultaneously enacted and witnessed. The metaphor underscores the

16 His usurpation: ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, 57r., f. 60r.; his madness: ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 61r.; his idolatry and cruelty: ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 60; his fury: ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 54v.

17 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 58r.

18 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 63v.

visibility of suffering: cruelty appears not as hidden excess but as something staged and repeated.¹⁹

In this sense, Szpot's account reflects an early modern understanding of political violence as both destructive and demonstrative, operating through display as much as through force. The scale of destruction was such that it left a lasting imprint on collective memory. Later historiography suggests that the province remained largely depopulated for decades. Descriptions of abandoned roads, roaming wild animals, and travellers moving through forests that had reclaimed former settlements underscore the extent of the devastation. Some chroniclers even refer to the phenomenon of so-called "tree-jumpers," further illustrating the transformation of the landscape. Together, these accounts evoke a region profoundly reshaped by catastrophe.²⁰

Hic fuit Suchuensis provinciae Troia

The image of *theatrum crudelitatis* is complemented in Szpot's account by another motif drawn from the classical tradition, namely the destruction of Troy (Hic fuit Suchuensis Provinciae Troia)²¹ Sichuan is thus presented as a space of devastation comparable to a city long remembered

19 On the early modern Jesuit understanding of martyrdom as spectacle (*spectaculum facti sumus*), see: Gerard Kilroy, Edmund Campion, *A Scholarly Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 331–348.

20 For seventy years Szechwan lay a deserted wilderness; jungle grew up and covered the roads. From Chengtu northwards as far as Paoning there was to be seen "no human smoke". The chroniclers record that, with no hunters to keep the numbers down, herds of savage tigers began to appear and infested the jungle-covered roads, and in the desperation of hunger these tigers would attack the villages in packs, and would burst their way through closed doors. Hordes of fierce, famished wild dogs added to the miseries of those who had to travel along the roads; and according to these histories a new race of men began to appear, the so-called "tree-jumpers". To avoid the attacks of these fierce dogs on the ground, these men would make their way from place to place by leaping from one tree to another, through the forests which still covered a large part of Szechwan: Vyvyan Henry Donnithorne, "Chang Hsien-Chong and the Dark Age," *The West China Missionary News* 40/7–8 (July–August 1940): 238.

21 "Ad explendam suam saevitiam belluinam parum Tyranno Taxun fuit non reliquisse habitorem in Urbe, quin ipsam Urbem sibi sepulchrum faceret, cuius cineribus et ruinis inscriberetur: Hic fuit Suchuensis Provinciae Troia. Primum igitur omnium iussit unam sui Palatii partem incendere, quam ardentem ex alia parte non sine magna sui crudelis animi voluptate spectavit. Postquam egressus fuit ex Chintu, etiam reliquam partem Palatii, et quidquid in Urbe fuit aedificiorum, tum Regiorum, tum privatorum, templa deorum, Claustra Bonziorum, Collegia Literatorum et Academies Confucianas incendio dedit, atque in cineres aut exspoliata cadavera vertit." ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 62r.

as the paradigmatic symbol of total ruin. In his account of the massacres, Szpot avoids graphic detail and instead frames the events within a register of moral and theological reflection. While his narrative may be placed in dialogue with contemporary European works such as Richard Verstegen's *Theatrum Crudelitatum Haereticorum*²² and Arnold Haven's *Speculum Haereticarum Crudelitatis*,²³ the contrast is marked. These works rely on visual excess and vivid representations of violence to affect their audiences, whereas Szpot interprets cruelty through allegory and moral reasoning. His account thus transforms atrocity into a site of reflection on human depravity, divine justice, and the fragility of political order.

To satiate his beastly cruelty, it was not enough for the tyrant Taxun to leave no inhabitant alive in the city; he must also make the city itself his tomb, inscribed with its own ashes and ruins. This was the Troy of the Province of Szechuan [...] Thus that city, once the metropolis of the province and lately teeming with people, became, with no man and no building left, a desert like Arabia. [...] Thus he went wherever his eyes led him, without any fixed road; and each day in every place he left the marks of a beast raging against mankind (*ferocientis in homines, belluae signa relinquebat*) [trans. Andrzej Wadas].²⁴

Szpot's comparison of Chengdu to Troy, which he employs on two occasions – *Hic fuit Suchuensis Provinciae Troja [...] ubi Troia fuit* – functions not merely as ornament, but as interpretation. Like Troy, the city is not simply taken, but erased. Its destruction is total: not only its inhabitants, but also its institutions – temples, academies, and dwellings – are reduced to ashes. What had been a centre of order and continuity is transformed into an empty space, a “desert,” marked only by the absence of life. It is turned into a desert – an open grave, strewn with unburied corpses. Yet the parallel also marks a difference. In classical tradition, the fall of Troy retains a tragic structure, governed by war and fate. In Szpot's account, that structure collapses. The tyrant destroys without measure or purpose, taking evident pleasure in ruin and extending violence even beyond the city's fall. The execution of the guide signals this loss of order: no longer led, he moves without direction, leaving behind only the traces of a beast. Chengdu thus appears not simply as another

22 Richard Verstegen, *Theatrum crudelitatum haereticorum nostri temporis* (Antverpiae: apud Hadrianum Huberti, 1587).

23 Arnoldus Havens, *Speculum haereticarum crudelitatis* (Coloniae: apud Servatium Erfens, 1608).

24 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 62r.

Troy, but as its radicalization: a city whose destruction no longer belongs to the logic of war, but to that of unbounded cruelty, in which the very form of human settlement is undone.

Fornax Babylonica

Szpot grounds his central theological argument in the third chapter of the Book of Daniel, which recounts the confrontation between the three youths and King Nebuchadnezzar and their miraculous deliverance from the fiery furnace. He reads the fate of the Jesuit missionaries at Zhang's court through this biblical paradigm. Central to his narrative is the metaphor of the *fornax Babylonica*²⁵, by means of which the sufferings of the missionaries and the inhabitants of Sichuan are cast as a trial analogous to the persecutions endured by the righteous in sacred history.

The parallel extends beyond the image of the *fornax Babylonica* and turns on a more fundamental point: the interpretation of signs. Daniel survives because he can explain what the ruler cannot understand. Dreams are not private phenomena; they concern rule, judgment, and the order of the realm. His knowledge is at once dangerous and necessary, and it is this ambivalence that secures his survival. The Jesuits in seventeenth-century Sichuan occupied a comparable position. They did not interpret dreams, but the heavens. Eclipses, calendars, and other celestial signs carried political significance and demanded explanation. In this context, astronomy assumed a role akin to prophecy: it exposed the interpreter, yet at the same time rendered him indispensable. Chinese scholars, by contrast, proved of no use to Zhang, just as the Babylonian sages failed Nebuchadnezzar. Western astronomy, however, held a particular appeal for him, in much the same way that Daniel's interpretation of dreams proved decisive for the Babylonian king.²⁶ The missionaries were sustained within this *fornax sinica* not only by faith, but also by their astronomical expertise. One striking line from the sources encapsulates this condition: "O blessed calendar, through you we live!" – a poignant reflection of their self-understanding amid these horrors.²⁷

Alongside these two explicit references to the Book of Daniel, Szpot's narrative also contains a third implicit allusion. In William Blake's famous

25 "Petiit uterque Pater, ut ex illa fornace Babylonica ad suum se transferrent tentorium; negavit utrique Tyrannus," ARSI, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 65r.

26 The Book of Daniel 2:1–49.

27 "O beatum Calendarium, per te vivimus" ARSI, Jap. Sin. 143, f. 222r.

engraving, an iconographical commentary on the fourth chapter of the book, Nebuchadnezzar is rendered as a profoundly bestial, hybrid figure, fusing traits of a predatory bird with those of a terrestrial animal. Reduced to a degraded, crawling posture, he moves on all fours in a state of frenzied derangement, his matted beard trailing along his hand. His nails have assumed the form of talons, his flesh is depicted in coarse, almost visceral tones, and his fixed, glaring eyes have all but relinquished their human expression.²⁸ While Nebuchadnezzar, in the biblical narrative, ultimately recovers his reason and humanity, Zhang in Szpot's account lives as a beast and perishes as one.

Theological and cultural interpretations of violence

Jean Jarric (1566–1617), a Jesuit writer, distinguishes between two kinds of cruelty: the diabolical, arising from demonic motives, and the barbaric, stemming from human nature itself. These categories provided a framework through which the missionaries could interpret the excesses they witnessed.²⁹ More strikingly still, Zhang – evil incarnate – presents himself as a defender of moral order. In his conversations with the missionaries, Zhang Xianzhong sought to justify his rule through theological reasoning: he argued that although the missionaries had come to proclaim the law of the Lord of Heaven, the people had refused to obey it, and that, despite having received all things from Heaven, they gave nothing in return. He further claimed that even Confucius had regarded the people of the province as corrupted beyond repair. This logic echoes, in distorted form, earlier imperial reasoning. The last Ming emperor, Chongzhen, is said to have advised his successor, Li Zicheng, to punish the officials whom he blamed for the fall of the empire – he was willing to sacrifice the mandarins but sought to spare the common people.³⁰ Zhang, by contrast, extends guilt to all. For him, the entire population

28 The Book of Daniel 2:25–30; George M. Harper, “Blake’s ‘Nebuchadnezzar’ in ‘The City of Dreadful Night,’” *Studies in Philology* 50/1 (January 1953): 68–80.

29 Pierre Du Jarric, *Histoire des choses plus memorables advenues tant ez Indes Orientales, que autres païs, de la descouverte des Portugais, En lest ablisement & progres de lafoy Chrestienne & Catholique: Et principalement de ce que les Religieux de la Compagnie de Jesus y ont fait, & enduré pour la mesme fin* (Bourdeaus: Par Simon Millanges Imprimeur ordinaire du Roy, 1610), 341, 459–461. A more detailed explanation see: Hanna Kawon Wadas, *Pozycja i znaczenie tradycyjnych religii we wczesnonowożytnych Chinach w świetle relacji misjonarzy jezuickich*, Doctoral thesis (Kraków: Uniwersytet Ignatianum w Krakowie, 2025), 25–26.

30 “Macta Mandarinis, conserva meum populum.” ARSI, Jap. Sin. 103, f. 34v.

of Sichuan stands condemned – by Heaven, by Confucius, and by himself, as the supposed agent of divine will. He thus provides a theological justification for indiscriminate violence: since all are equally corrupt, none deserve to be spared. In Zhang’s view, all people are equally evil and therefore equally worthy of death.³¹

Thomas Dunin Szpot and genocide studies

The Jesuit testimony concerning Zhang Xianzhong’s massacres in Sichuan can also be situated within the broader framework of contemporary genocide studies. On the theological plane, the abyss between bestial cruelty and human heroism recalls the reflections of Father Konstanty Michalski, who during the Second World War meditated on the moral gulf separating bestiality from heroism.³² In legal and conceptual history, the category of genocidium, first defined by Raphael Lemkin, has been further developed by Ryszard Szawłowski, who introduced the notion of *genocidium atrox*, a particularly cruel and dreadful form of extermination.³³ The tragedy of Sichuan, with its scale of violence and systematic destruction surpassing, in terms of sheer atrocity, even the later Taiping rebellion. Jesuit accounts, beginning already with Martino Martini, register the unprecedented nature of this bloodshed, while modern scholarship, including *The Cambridge History of Genocide*,³⁴ has provided a conceptual lens through which to interpret such early modern instances of mass killing within the history of global violence.

31 “Coelum fecit res universas propter homines, et homines nihil propter coelum”. ARSI, Jap. Sin 103, f. 58r.

32 Konstanty Michalski, *Między heroizmem a bestialstwem* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Mariackie, 1949).

33 Ryszard Szawłowski, „Rafał Lemkin (1900–1959) – polski prawnik twórcą pojęcia ‘ludobójstwo,’” in *Zbrodnie przeszłości. Opracowania i materiały prokuratorów IPN*, vol. 2: *Ludobójstwo*, ed. Radosław Ignatiew, Antoni Kura (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008), 7–22; *idem*, “Trzy tematy z dziedziny ‘genocydologii,’” in *Zbrodnie przeszłości. Opracowania i materiały prokuratorów IPN*, vol. 2: *Ludobójstwo*, ed. Radosław Ignatiew, Antoni Kura (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008), 26–27.

34 *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*, vol. 2: *Genocide in the Indigenous, Early Modern and Imperial Worlds, from c.1535 to World War One*, ed. Ned Blackhawk, Ben Kiernan, Benjamin Madley, Rebe Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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