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# The Style of Tomasz Dunin Szpot, S.J., in *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*: Early Modern Learned Latin as a Language of Describing and Interpreting China

Styl Tomasza Dunina Szpota SJ w *Historiae  
Sinarum Imperii*. Nowożytna łacina erudycyjna  
jako język opisu i interpretacji świata  
chińskiego<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The article attempts to analyze the style of Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ on the basis of his work *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*. It demonstrates that the author employs a highly self-conscious form of early modern scholarly Latin, combining academic rigor, classical periodic rhetoric, and missionary-theological narration. Szpot's style fulfills cognitive, persuasive, and

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interpretative functions: it enables the translation of Chinese realities into the language of Latin culture and endows the history of China with a providential meaning. The analysis is based on numerous quotations from the original text, illustrating the author's syntax, vocabulary, rhetorical figures, and conceptual strategies.

**Keywords:** Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ, *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*, early modern Latin, Jesuits in China, Latin style, missionary rhetoric, historiography.

### Abstrakt

Artykuł stanowi próbę analizy stylu Tomasza Dunina Szpota SJ na podstawie dzieła *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*. Wykazuje, iż autor posługuje się wysoce świadomą formą nowożytnej łaciny erudycyjnej, łączącą rygor naukowy, klasyczną retorykę okresu oraz narrację misyjno-teologiczną. Styl Szpota pełni funkcję poznawczą, perswazyjną i interpretacyjną: umożliwia translację realiów chińskich na język kultury łacińskiej oraz nadaje dziejom Chin sens opatrnościowy. Analiza opiera się na licznych cytatach z oryginału, ukazujących składnię, leksykę, figury retoryczne oraz strategie konceptualne autora.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ, *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*, łacina nowożytna, jezuiti w Chinach, styl łaciński, retoryka misyjna, historiografia.

Tomasz Szpot Dunin's *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* represents one of the fullest examples of a Latin language treatment of China, as well as one of the most stylistically complex works of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> The text includes multiple literary genres, and makes no pretense toward neutrality. Instead, its language reveals a multi-layered construction, in which academic rigor, classical rhetoric and a theological interpretation of history create a solid, tense narrative style. The tension between documentation and interpretation, between description and meaning, comprises the key to understanding both the author's style and the purposes of his work. Szpot's style serves to both impart information and fill an epistemological role: it orders a foreign reality, imparts meaning to it and incorporates it into the conceptual universe of learned Latin culture.

Already in the opening sections of the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* the author reveals his encyclopedic ambitions. His description of the Chinese Empire begins with a precise definition of its geographical situation, employing the simple language of cartography, lacking emotion and stylistic tropes:

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2 The English translation is by John Jefferson.

Amplitudo Imperii Sinici inter mare quod ipsi ad Austrum est et Murum Magnum à Septemtrione continetur inter gradus latitudinis poli Borealis vigesimum secundum et quadragesimum quartum. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 1r)

This sentence resembles a scholarly definition. It lacks subjective judgements, employing numerical data, geographic terminology and an informative syntax. The style is reminiscent of early-modern atlases and geographical compendia, in which the world is presented as a measurable, describable and ordered whole. Descriptions of provinces, borders and islands are laid out in a similar tone. This description of Haynan island provides an example:

insula Haynan sceptris Sinicis subiecta... sub gradibus poli borealis decimo octavo, nono, vigesimo et vigesimo primo à Natura collocata. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 1r)

This sort of description not only informs, it conveys precision, incorporating China into the European system of geographic knowledge, rendering it a portion of the mappable world. At the same time, the academic rigor does not result in a stylistic aridity. Szpot often moves from dry description to rhetorical amplification, particularly in moments he judges as possessing great symbolic significance. This is clear in his description of the Great Wall, defined as

[...] opus illud immortale, quod Sinarum opes et magnificentiam sui Conditoris per tot retro saecula demonstravit, etiamnum demonstrat, demonstrabitque postea. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 1r)

In this sentence one sees features of classical rhetorical prose: the anaphoric repetition of the verb *demonstrare*, the temporal triad consisting of past, present and future. Yet the clause also moves with a rousing rhythm. The wall is not merely an architectural object or a defensive structure, it becomes a monumental symbol of civilizational endurance and historical greatness. Style becomes a tool for judgment.

A particular feature of Szpot's prose is formalism, which appears in the sections dedicated to law, administration, and institutions. The author often adopts a normative, somewhat legislative tone, imbuing his statements with the status of general principles. When he describes the legal custom that obtained after the end of a dynasty, he formulates it in a style reminiscent of a law code:

Lex est in Sina, ut deficiente atque adeò extinctâ regnante Familia, omnes Coloni... libertatem suam adipiscantur. (Jap. Sin. 103, f. 36r)

The construction of the sentence, beginning with the impersonal formula *Lex est*, resembles a legal article or definition in a juridical treatise. There is no emotion or commentary. The style suggests the objectivity and systematic order of the Chinese state, and at the same time allows the European reader to interpret an alien reality in terms known from the traditions of Roman law. Such formalism coexists with an elaborate rhetorical syntax typical of Latin scholarly prose. Szpot uses multiple complex sentences in which the density of information is precisely controlled through classical syntax. Sentences that are repeatedly complex, full of interjections and additions, create a demanding but logically coherent narrative. Such constructions, often based on ablative absolutes and indirect discourse (accusative plus infinitive), allow the author to condense the message without sacrificing rhetorical elegance. This is particularly evident in fragments of a moral and religious nature, such as the sentence:

Haec Domus Domini caeli non habet mancipia, nec pagos nec oppida, et qui ad illam habitant, non habent alias possessiones, quam virtutem et ex illa celeberrimum nomen. (Jap. Sin. 103, f. 36r)

A series of negations and syntactic parallelism culminating in the concept of *virtus* give this passage a rhythm and sublimity typical of the classical period and close to the homiletic prose of the Church Fathers.

The most essential aspect of Szpot's style remains his theological interpretation of history. The history of China is not a series of accidental historical events, but a stage for Divine Providence. The fall of the Ming dynasty, for example, becomes a clear part of the divine plan:

Divini igitur consilii opus fuit, ut inveteratae in suis malis Familiae Taimingae [...] praeparaverit Gentem extra Sinam. (Jap. Sin. 103, f. 35 v.)

The language in this fragment is clearly theological. Abstract ideas appear, and historical processes are subordinated to the logic of salvation. The style plays a semantic role here, lending events a significance far beyond pure factography and incorporating them into the Christian view of world history.

A similar mechanism is apparent in the descriptions of missionary activity, which often take on the narrative of a heroic story. The Fathers of the Society of Jesus are presented in the story as heroes of the Faith,

who have undertaken a difficult and dangerous expedition and have sailed thousands of miles across a stormy sea to spread the Christian faith in China:

[...] inter pericula vitae, octo millium leucarum Oceanum emensus, ad claustra Imperii pervenit. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 80v)

[...] relictâ suâ Patriâ octodecim millia milliarium procellosi et periculosi Oceani conficere non dubitaverit; ut in Sina Literatorum Patria Literatus et ipse vivere posset. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 106r)

[...] emensis inter gravissima vitae pericula, octogenis millibus milliarium procellosi Oceani. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 161v)

[...] commisimus nos Navigationi per furentis Oceani, octodecim millium leucarum, inter syrtes et scopulos spatia, et iudicavimus nos feliciter impendere pecuniam, tempus, afflictiones, aerumnas, vitam, modo appelleremus in Sinam. (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 213v)

[...] relictâ Patria, [...] per tot pericula exantlata Oceani, itinere octoginta millium milliarium, in Sinam pervenerunt. (Jap. Sin. 103, f. 40v)

The rhythm and word choice as well as the focus on the effort, risk, perseverance and difficulties of the journey place the missionary in an epic, almost hagiographical framework, though one based in historical and geographical realities. The style augments the ideological message, presenting the mission as simultaneously heroic and providential.

Szpot's use of Latin takes on particular significance in this context, in which he employs Latin as a tool of cultural translation. The author is forced to describe ideas and realities, which have no ready correspondents in classical Latin. He does this through phonetic adaptation, transliteration, and semantic reinterpretation. When he writes about the Chinese notion of *Tian*, he states:

Hunc, cùm praestantius atque nobilius nomen in sua lingua reperire non possent, vocarunt Tien, Caelum (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 3r)

The Latin word *caelum* is not a neutral equivalent here, but one rife with Christian metaphysical connotations. In this way Szpot's Latin not only translates, but interprets and theologizes a foreign concept, bringing it into the European conceptual system.

A similar pursuit is visible in the juxtaposition of Confucius with ancient philosophers, with Szpot dubbing him "Princeps vestrae Philosophiae" (Jap. Sin. 102, f. 127v). This comparison is not accidental, but

consciously places Chinese thought within the patristic *praeparatio evangelica*, wherein pagan philosophy comprises a preparation for revelation. Style becomes a tool for cultural dialogue, but this dialogue has an asymmetric character and is subordinated to a Christian teleology.

In light of the above observations Tomasz Szpot Dunin's style is a model of global early modern Latin, capable of describing the world on an intercontinental scale. This Latin combines academic precision with rhetorical elegance and a theological interpretation of history, creating a language which not only describes reality, but organizes and evaluates it. The *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* is thus not only a source of knowledge about China, but also a testimony to the European attempt to intellectually grasp the non-European world with the tools of the classical philological tradition and Christian historical thought. Szpot's style – dense, demanding and multi-layered – is an integral part of this cognitive project, and without its analysis, it is impossible to fully understand the meaning of the work.

### **Problems with critically editing and translating Tomasz Dunin Szpot's *Historiae Sinarum Imperii***

The attempt to prepare a critical edition of Tomasz Dunin Szpot's *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* and translate it into a modern language reveals a complex tangle of philological, linguistic and cultural problems that go beyond the standard difficulties associated with editing early modern Latin. Szpot's text is not only a historical account written in a classical language, but a testimony to the role of Latin as a tool of global knowledge in the seventeenth century. His language is situated on the border of the classical tradition, Renaissance humanism and Baroque missionary prose, which makes it particularly demanding for both editor and translator.

The main problem in creating a critical edition is the variable notation, which in Szpot's work is not accidental. Spelling and capitalization fluctuate, which can sometimes be interpreted as a conscious semantic strategy. Differences such as *Imperator* and *imperator*, *Murus Magnus* and *murus magnus*, *Mandarinus* and *mandarinus* appear within the same volume and even in close textual proximity. They are not only the result of the author's negligence, but can reflect a hierarchy of concepts; capitalization is sometimes reserved for institutions of a formal or dignified nature, lowercase for descriptive uses. The editor is faced with the decision whether to keep this variability as a feature of the author's style

or to unify it in the name of modern editorial standards. In the case of Szpot, each normalization carries the risk of losing shades of meaning.

A separate challenge is the transliteration and identification of proper names. Szpot consistently adapts Chinese personal, geographical and ethnic names to Latin phonetics and inflection, using forms such as *Quantum*, *Fokien*, *Vanlye*, *Humquam* or *Xunchi*. Without additional commentary, these forms are often inscrutable to the modern reader. Their identification with the names used in contemporary sinology can be difficult and sometimes ambiguous. The editor must decide whether to leave the Latin form unexplained or to introduce a critical apparatus that allows it to be unambiguously identified. The creation of a parallel corpus of names that would allow one to trace the relationship between the Latin form, the Chinese original, and the modern transcription seems a practical necessity.

Translation presents even greater difficulties. Szpot's Latin is not semantically neutral. Its rhetorical and theological connotations often go beyond the dictionary equivalents. Particularly problematic are passages in which the author interprets Chinese concepts using Christian terminology. When Szpot writes about the concept of *Tian*, stating that the Chinese "vocaverunt Tien, Caelum," he is not merely translating, but reinterpreting. The Latin *Caelum* carries biblical and metaphysical connotations that are not identical with the Chinese understanding of *Tian*. The translator is faced with a dilemma: whether to render the term literally, risking anachronism, or to mark the semantic difference at the expense of a smooth translation.

Similar difficulties apply to religious and philosophical terminology. Szpot willingly juxtaposes Chinese thought with Greco-Roman and patristic philosophy, describing Confucius as "Princeps vestrae Philosophiae". Such a stylistic device has a clear persuasive purpose, but in translation it can be perceived as overly normative or Eurocentric. However, the translator's task is not to neutralize this perspective, but to make the reader aware of it. The translation must therefore maintain the tension between description and interpretation, which is characteristic of Szpot's style.

Another problem is posed by the long, multi-layered, complex Latin periods, characteristic of Szpot's prose. These sentences, based on classical periodic syntax, often contain several levels of information, numerous interjections and parenthetical expressions. Their literal reproduction in a modern language threatens syntactic overload and loss of legibility. On the other hand, the excessive breakdown of periods into shorter sentences risks destroying the rhythm and logic of the argument, weakening the

rhetoical power of the text. Therefore, the translator must each time strike a compromise, balancing between fidelity to the original structure and the functionality of the translation.

Passages of a theological nature, in which Szpot interprets history in Providential terms, are particularly delicate. The sentence “Divini igitur consilii opus fuit, ut inveteratae in suis malis Familiae Taimingae...” (Jap. Sin. 103, f. 35 v.) is not just a description of political events, but an expression of a specific vision of history. A translation that would try to soften the theological, emphatic nature of this language would falsely represent the meaning of the work. The translation of the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* cannot be a neutral historical report; it must preserve the author’s perspective, even if it is alien to the contemporary audience.

All of these difficulties lead to the conclusion that the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* demands a new type of critical edition, combining the tools of classical philology with consideration for cultural translation. Such an edition should include extensive linguistic, historical and cultural commentary, enabling the reader to understand both the facts and the way in which they were interpreted by the author. Only then will it be possible to fully appreciate Szpot’s work as one of the key texts of early modern Europe’s approach to China.

### ***Historiae Sinarum Imperii* by Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ as an example of early modern global Latin**

An analysis of the stylistic, structural, editorial and translation problems of the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* allows us to look at the work of Tomasz Dunin Szpot SJ not only as one of the many Jesuit sources concerning China, but as a text of exceptional importance for the history of early modern intellectual culture. It is a work in which Latin – a language formed in the ancient world and which developed over the centuries – is used to describe a global reality radically different from the one in which it originally arose. In this sense, the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* is one of the most vivid examples of Latin as the language for accessing knowledge of the world in the seventeenth century.

Stylistic analysis shows that Szpot’s prose is not homogeneous or haphazard. Its structure is based on a dynamic tension between scholarly rigor and rhetorical amplification, between factual description and a theological interpretation of history. The author uses Latin with a high degree of stylistic awareness, drawing on both the classical historiographical tradition and Baroque missionary rhetoric. This language allows

him to simultaneously document the Chinese reality and give it meaning within the framework of the Christian vision of universal history. Style is not an ornament here, but a tool of cognition and interpretation. Of particular importance is the fact that Szpot does not limit himself to describing China as an exotic “other world”. On the contrary, he consistently incorporates China into the universal, truly catholic framework of the rational and moral order known to Latin culture. He does this through the language of law, administration and philosophy, as well as through conscious juxtaposition of Chinese thought with Greco-Roman and patristic traditions. Thanks to these efforts, the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* is not only an account of China, but an attempt to “translate” it intellectually into the language of European learned culture.

From a historical linguistic perspective, Szpot’s work shows the moment when early modern Latin reaches its full adaptive capabilities. Latin becomes a language of cultural translation, capable of describing unknown institutions, religious concepts and geographical realities. It simultaneously reveals the limits of this project. The reinterpretation of Chinese concepts or the incorporation of Chinese philosophy into the *praeparatio evangelica* framework shows that this translation is not neutral, but laden with a European theological and axiological perspective. It is in this tension between cognition and interpretation that the full complexity of early modern global Latin is revealed.

The *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* requires a special philological approach. The variable orthography, ambiguous transliteration of proper names, multi-layered periodic syntax and strong theological character of the language mean that any attempt to modernize the text risks the loss of nuance. Szpot’s work is not readily suitable for editorial standardization or translation “smoothing”. On the contrary, it demands a critical edition that preserves internal tensions and allows the reader to see both the richness and limitations of the early modern European perspective. In this context, the *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* appears as a borderline text: standing at the junction of epochs, cultures and intellectual traditions. On the one hand, it is rooted in classical Latin and the humanistic ideal of science, on the other it is cosmopolitan and open to the new cognitive challenges of the seventeenth century. An analysis of Szpot’s style allows us to see that early modern missionary historiography was not only a tool of religious propaganda, but also an area of intensive linguistic and intellectual experimentation.

Tomasz Dunin Szpot’s *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* deserves a permanent place in the study of early modern Latin, global history and the history of the European reception of China. This work not only documents

the meeting of two civilizations, but also shows how seventeenth-century Europe tried to understand, describe and interpret this encounter using a language that for centuries was considered a universal medium of knowledge. In this sense, Szpot's Latin remains not only a witness to a bygone era, but also an important point of reference for contemporary reflection on cultural translation, the history of ideas and the limits of language in the description of the world.

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