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Jesuits and Muslims in China in the account of Tomasz Dunin Szpot, S.J.[1]

Jezuici i muzułmanie w Chinach w relacji Tomasza Dunina Szpota SJ

Abstract

This article examines the perception of Islam and Muslims in China as presented in the historical work Historia Imperii Sinarum by the Polish Jesuit Tomasz Dunin Szpot (1644–1713). Written at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the work constitutes a synthesis of the first century of Jesuit missionary activity in China. The study places Szpot's account within its broader historical context, particularly the political, religious, and intellectual relations between Christian Europe and the Islamic world in the early modern period. It analyses how Dunin Szpot described the origins and development of Islam in China, the role of Muslim communities in Chinese society, and their interactions with Christian missionaries. Particular attention is given to the terminology used by the author, including the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio*, as well

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.

as to the historical narratives concerning the arrival of Islam in China through Persian merchants, Muslim astronomers, and contacts with the Mongol world. The article also discusses the depiction of encounters and polemical disputations between Jesuit missionaries and Muslim scholars in Central Asia and China. By situating Dunin Szpot's account within this wider historical framework, the study demonstrates how early modern European missionary historiography interpreted the presence of Islam in East Asia.

Keywords: Islam in China, Tomasz Dunin Szpot, *Historia Imperii Sinarum*, Christian–Muslim relations, Jesuit missions in China, early modern missionary historiography.

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje sposób postrzegania islamu i muzułmanów w Chinach przedstawiony w dziele historycznym *Historia Imperii Sinarum* autorstwa polskiego jezuity Tomasza Dunina Szpota (1644–1713). Napisane na przełomie XVII i XVIII wieku dzieło stanowi syntezę pierwszego stulecia działalności misyjnej Towarzystwa Jezusowego w Chinach. Studium osadza relację Szpota w szerszym kontekście historycznym, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do politycznych, religijnych i intelektualnych relacji między chrześcijańską Europą a światem islamu w epoce wczesnonowożytnej. Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób Dunin Szpot opisywał początki i rozwój islamu w Chinach, rolę społeczności muzułmańskich w społeczeństwie chińskim oraz ich kontakty z misjonarzami chrześcijańskimi. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono terminologii stosowanej przez autora, w tym rozróżnieniu między *religio* a *superstitio*, a także narracjom historycznym dotyczącym pojawienia się islamu w Chinach za pośrednictwem perskich kupców, muzułmańskich astronomów oraz za sprawą kontaktów ze światem mongolskim. Artykuł omawia również przedstawienie spotkań i polemicznych dysput między misjonarzami jezuickimi a uczonymi muzułmańskimi w Azji Centralnej i w Chinach. Umieszczenie relacji Dunina Szpota w tym szerszym kontekście historycznym pozwala ukazać, w jaki sposób wczesnonowożytna europejska historiografia misyjna interpretowała obecność islamu w Azji Wschodniej.

Słowa klucze: islam w Chinach, Tomasz Dunin Szpot, *Historia Imperii Sinarum*, relacje chrześcijańsko-muzułmańskie, misje jezuickie w Chinach, wczesnonowożytna historiografia misyjna.

The presence and activity of Muslims in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties had already become such a significant socio-political factor that it could not be overlooked by the Jesuits undertaking the mission of spreading Christianity in that country. Nor could it escape

the attention of Tomasz Dunin Szpot S.J. in his historical-apologetic monograph entitled *Historia Imperii Sinarum*, which constitutes a synthesis of the first century of missionary activity of the Society of Jesus in the Middle Kingdom. The role of Muslims may even have been more important for Christians traveling to reside in China for a longer time than for the Chinese themselves, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw an intensification of conflicts between the Islamic world and Christian Europe, occurring on many fronts. Above all this was visible in the Mediterranean basin, where successive Holy Leagues clashed with the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, both of these worlds – Islam and Christianity – possessed their own global networks. Muslims throughout the world were united by the custom of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (the hajj), obligatory at least once in a lifetime for every Muslim, as well as by the role of classical Arabic as the language of the religion of Islam. Christian Europe began its global expansion through extensive ventures of conquest, trade, and missionary activity first undertaken by the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula – Portugal and Spain – on a worldwide scale, from North Africa to East Asia and the New World. These states were later joined by France, the Netherlands, and England, and to a lesser degree also by Denmark, Sweden, and even Brandenburg and Courland. Despite the religious division between Catholics and Protestants, Europe remained a certain civilizational community in which, until the end of the seventeenth century, the Latin language continued to function as a common language – if not of religion, then at least of culture.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were no other global networks besides Islam and Christianity. Therefore, from the very beginning of their presence in China, Christians – first the Portuguese, and later the Jesuit fathers – appeared burdened with the baggage of this global Muslim–Christian conflict of their era. For the local Muslims in China, Christian missionaries were representatives of the maritime empire of Portugal, which was destroying Muslim trade in the Indian Ocean in what was perceived as a piratical manner. The Portuguese first came into conflict with the Middle Kingdom in 1511, when – despite warnings from imperial diplomats of the Ming dynasty – they conquered Malacca, the capital of a sultanate that formally recognized Chinese suzerainty. For Christian missionaries, Chinese Muslims were co-religionists of the Ottoman Turks, the deadly threat that had loomed over Europe since the mid-fourteenth century and had already led to the conquest of the formerly Christian Balkans and Hungary, and which even posed a direct threat to Italy. They were also co-religionists of the Barbary pirates, who captured people on a massive scale not only in the Mediterranean basin but even

as far away as Iceland. They were also co-religionists of the nomadic Tatars, who ravaged the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Muscovy. Likewise, they were co-religionists of the Somali jihadists of Ahmed Grañ, who nearly destroyed the last Christian state in Africa – Ethiopia – had Portugal not provided Emperor Claudius (Galawdewos) with timely military assistance.

Therefore, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was no longer even a shadow of the former cooperation that Christians and Muslims had sometimes entered into in the thirteenth century during the era of the Mongol invasions. In 1243, at the Battle of Köse Dağ, Abkhazian, Armenian, and Trapezuntine troops fought alongside the Seljuk Turks of the Sultanate of Rum, as did 1,000 mercenaries from the Empire of Nicaea and 2,000 Franks under the command of John of Cyprus and Boniface of Genoa.[2] In the thirteenth century, during religious disputations at the court of the Great Khan in Karakorum, Christians and Muslims were capable of forming tactical alliances in order to demonstrate the truth of the God of the Abrahamic religions in confrontation with idolaters – that is, the followers of Buddhism.[3]

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nothing of this remained, except perhaps a hard Realpolitik, which led the ardently Catholic king of France to open French ports to the Turkish fleet sailing against Habsburg Spain, and which prompted the Shiʿite rulers of Safavid Persia to attack the Ottoman Turks in coordination with Christian allies.

The life of Tomasz Dunin Szpot[4] coincided with a particular intensification of relations between the Islamic world and Christian Europe during the years when the Ottoman Porte launched the last offensive in its history against the Christian states of Europe: Poland, the Habsburg Empire, and the Republic of Venice. Although the attempt to conquer the Empire ended in defeat for the Turks during the siege of Vienna in 1683, the end of the war was still far off. In 1684, under the patronage of the

2 Josef Matuz, "Der Niedergang der anatolischen Seldschuken: die Entscheidungsschlacht am Kösedağ", *Central Asiatic Journal*, 17(2/4), Proceedings of the 15th Meeting of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference 7.-12. August 1972 (1973): 180–199.

3 William of Rubruck, *Itinerarium fratris Willielmi de Rubruquis de ordine fratrum minorum, Galli, anno gratiae 1253 ad partes Orientales.* Cap. 36-37, in: *Sinica Franciscana* collegit, ad fidem codicum redegit et adnotavit P. Anastasius van den Wyngaert, vol. I: *Itinera et relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV* (Quaracchi–Florence: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1929).

4 Robert Danieluk, "Konfesjonał i pióro: Tomasz Ignacy Szpot Dunin, polski historiograf jezuickiej misji w Chinach", in *Iesuitae in Polonia – Poloni Iesuitae. Piśmiennictwo łacińskie czasów nowożytnych*, red. Jarosław Nowaszczuk (Szczecin: „Volumina.pl", 2017), 75–10

Pope, the Holy League was formed, and in 1686 Orthodox Russia, under Tsarevna Sophia, joined Poland, the Habsburgs, and Venice – an event without precedent in the history of European crusades, for the activities of the League were regarded as having the character of a crusade and are often considered the last crusade in European history. The League's efforts were supported militarily or financially even by the Protestant states of Brandenburg and Sweden.

When Tomasz Dunin Szpot arrived in Rome in 1689, where he was to spend the last twenty-four years of his life, the France of Louis XIV forced the Habsburg Empire to open a second front of war in the West by launching the Nine Years' War, in which the Protestant states of the Netherlands, England, and Scotland also opposed the Sun King. In that same year the Ottoman Porte suffered defeats on the Croatian-Slavonian-Dalmatian theater in the Great Turkish War. Sultan Suleiman II began peace negotiations, but these were broken off in 1691 by the next sultan, Ahmed II. Thus, the first ten years of Szpot's stay in Rome passed during the course of the great war with Turkey. At that time he also met with Prince Boris Sheremetev, who was preparing the ultimately unrealized visit of Tsar Peter I to Rome.[5] Szpot therefore began writing his works on China in an atmosphere of great optimism prevailing in Europe, connected with the unity of all Christian denominations against the Muslim enemy and with the very concrete hopes of the Jesuit fathers for an easier and safer overland route to China through territories controlled by Moscow.

He finished writing his works in a Europe once again torn apart by conflicting political interests during the War of the Spanish Succession and the Great Northern War, when nothing remained of the spirit of the last crusade of the Holy League, and when Muscovite promises to open a route to China for the Jesuits proved to be false.

Dunin Szpot mentions Islam for the first time already in Chapter VI of Book I of his *Historiae Imperii Sinarum*, devoted to a concise presentation of the geography and an outline of the history of China. In this chapter he discusses the religions of the country, writing:

> The religion of the people, who fill the country with their great numbers, had long ago been divided into three principal sects, even before the

5 Tomasz Dunin Szpot, „Courte relation de ce qui est arrivé au tsar de Moscovie et aux seigneurs de son pays, pendant leurs voyages à Rome et autres lieux en 1698, rédigée par le P. Ignace Szpot, polonais, pénitencier à Saint-Pierre du Vatican", in *Études de théologie, de philosophie et d'histoire*, vol. 2 (Paris: Julien, Lanier, Cosnard et Ce, Editeurs, 1857), 505–508.

> Christian religion, the Koran of Muhammad with the Saracens, and the Tatar idol Foe of the Lamas entered China. One was the genuine religion, which had prevailed in China since the time of the Flood and was proper to the Literati, although there are whole families who preserve it as an inheritance of the Taoists, necromancers and magicians; the third the idolatrous sect of the Bonzes Oscians.[6]

There are six religions in total. Three of them were present in this country before the arrival of the other three. The earlier ones are Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism; the three that arrived later are *Religio Christiana*, *Alcoranus Mahometi cum Saracenis*, and *Lamarum Tartaricum idolum Föe*. Christianity is listed first not only because it is the faith of the author himself, but also because it appeared in China earlier than the other non-native religions. Szpot was already familiar with the contents of the stele from *Si-ngan-fou* (Xi'an), which attests to the first missions of the Church of the East at the beginning of the Tang dynasty.[7] Significant is the way in which Szpot refers to these three systems of belief: *religio Christiana*, *Alcoranus Mahometi*, and *Tartaricum idolum Foe – religio*, *Alcoranus*, *idolum*. The ancient Latin word *religio* originally meant scrupulousness, conscientious exactness; piety, religious scruple, religious awe, superstition, strict religious observance. It was not originally used to designate systems of belief at all. Only in the sixteenth century did the word begin to gain currency in its modern sense, when the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 introduced the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*, meaning that questions of Christian theology, worship, and ritual depended on the ruler of a given territory. Here *religio* meant the "mode of professing the Christian system of faith." Earlier, in the European Middle Ages, systems of belief were divided into laws given by God and transmitted by prophets: the law of Moses (fulfilled by Jesus and therefore no longer binding after his coming), the law of Jesus, and the law of Muhammad (understood as a distortion of the law of Jesus), as well as idolatrous beliefs, regarded as the result of human error and the creation of false divine beings. For this reason early Christian Latin

6 [...] multitudine suâ implentium Religiò, in tres potissimum sectas iam olim, antequam Religio Christiana, Alcoranus Mahometi cum Saracenis et Lamarum Tartaricum idolum Föè Sinam intravit, divisa fuit, unam genuinam, et quae ab ipso Diluvio in Sina regnavit, propriam Literatorum, quanquam non desunt integrae familiae, quae illam hereditate ŕ maioribus suis acceptam, nullâ Superstitione Idolorum contaminatam conservant: Alteram Taosiorum Necromantarum et Magorum; Tertiam Idololatricam Bonziorum OscianorumARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 3r.

7 Hanna Wadas, "Odkrycie i znaczenie steli z Xi'an dla misji jezuickich w Chinach w XVII w. w ujęciu *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* Tomasza Szpota Dunina SJ (1644–1713)", *Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum* 29/4 (2023): 75–88.

authors (Lactantius, Minucius Felix, Augustine) began to introduce the concepts of *religio vera* versus *religiones falsae* – that is, the true Christian way of worshipping God as opposed to other false ones. In the late Middle Ages the word *religiones* also began to be used to designate various religious orders, which followed different rules of worship and monastic life in the service of God.[8]

In the early modern period the word *religio* began to be used to denote all systems of belief, including non-Christian ones. From the sixteenth century onward this occurred first in the context of geographical discoveries and descriptions of the peoples of the New World (for example in Montaigne's *Essays*, where he discusses the religion of the Indians), and then in the seventeenth century in the writings of philosophers (Bacon, Locke) and Jesuit missionaries describing Asia. It was precisely the Jesuit missionaries who, when describing China, Japan, or India, began to speak of the "religions" of Confucius, Buddha, and Brahma, thereby creating and promoting the use of *religio* as a scholarly term referring equally to Christianity as well as to the dharmic traditions of India or the Chinese schools of thought. This meaning of the word *religio* became fully established only in the nineteenth century, leading to the development of the comparative study of religion.

Thus Christianity is *religio*, whereas for Szpot Islam is *Alcoranus*, that is, the Qur'ān, a name used with the Arabic definite article *al-*. This is an extremely appropriate designation of Islam, since the Qur'ān in the Arabic language constitutes a kind of center of that religion. In Muslim belief it is the Eternal Word of God: the Qur'ān, created by Allah, has existed from all eternity in Heaven and was merely transmitted to Muhammad through the mediation of Jibrīl (Gabriel). The question of the relationship between the Qur'ān as the eternal Word of Allah and Allah himself within the consistently monotheistic framework of Islam raises theological problems analogous to those produced in monotheistic Christianity by the concept of three divine persons. By using the expression *Alcoranus Mahometi*, Szpot not only emphasizes the fundamental importance of the book for the religion of Muhammad, but also presents Muhammad as the author of the Qur'ān. This corresponds to the Christian view of Islam as a creation of Muhammad, whereas Muslims regard the book as the work of God and treat Muhammad only as the instrument through which the book was transmitted from Heaven to human societies. Tatar

8 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2013).

Buddhism – that is, Tibetan Lamaism – is summarized by Szpot with the brief phrase *idolum Foe*, meaning the idol or cult statue of the Buddha.

In the same chapter Dunin Szpot additionally discusses Chinese Islam in a separate section in a short paragraph:

> The Mohammedan superstition, now already very powerful in China and surpassing the temples and sanctuaries of the Gentiles with the proud structures of its mosques, entered this empire from Persia at a time that remains uncertain. There are not lacking those who trace its origins to Persian merchants who, coming to Cathay for the sake of trade, brought it with them along with their goods. Others assert that its founders were Mohammedan mathematicians who, having set out from Arabia, entered China together with the Western Tatars and there, at the request of the Tatar emperor of China, corrected the corrupted and antiquated Chinese astronomy by compiling ephemerides and canons of calculation. For this work they were honored with great rewards and privileges.[9]

Here Dunin Szpot uses the expression *superstitio Mahometana*. The Latin word *superstitio* denotes a belief placed above reason, above rationality, which in Polish is rendered by the word *zabobon* ("superstition"). The Polish word *zabobon* originally meant the whispering of spells, muttering incantations – thus performing actions ineffective in relation to the real world. The German *Aberglaube* means "counter-belief," while the Latin *superstitio* signifies an irrational attitude. Lucretius, in his epic *De natura rerum* (1,62–79), criticizes precisely *superstitio*. However, since this word does not fit the hexameter meter in which the poem is written, he replaces it with the word *religio*. As a result, in later periods he came to be regarded as an ancient atheist – a misunderstanding that stems from misinterpreting the word *religio* according to the sense propagated by seventeenth-century Jesuits.

For Szpot, Islam is a *superstitio*, powerful in the China of his own time – indeed the most powerful: *iam nunc potentissima in Sina*. Of course, Islam was not the most powerful religion in China, but rather in other Muslim countries. Nor was it the most powerful among the various

9 Mahometana Superstitio, iam nunc potentissima in Sina, et superbis Moschaearum suarum fabricis fana et delubra Gentilium superans, quo tempore intraverit in istud imperium è Perside, incertum est. Non desunt, qui principia eius ad Negotiatores Persas referant, qui commerciorûm causâ in Cataium venientes secum simul et mercibus illam intulerant. Nonnulli fundatores illius Mathematicos Mahometanos fuisse asserunt, qui ex Arabia profecti intrarunt cum Tartaris Occidentalibus Sinam, ibidemque ad postulata Tartari Imperatoris Sinarum, corruptam et antiquatam Astronomiam Sinicam conscriptis Ephemeridibus, et Canonibus calculandi correxerunt; atque ob eum laborem magnis praemiis et privilegiis fuerunt honorati. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 5r.

systems of belief in China; it was not the dominant religion. It yielded precedence to Confucianism and the state religion, as well as to popular cults, Buddhism, and Taoism. However, the situation of particular Muslim–Christian rivalry, together with the cohesion of Muslim communities – who displayed far greater group solidarity than the adherents of other religions – intensified the impression of the strength of Chinese Islam among European observers. For them, the supposed greatness of Islam was demonstrated by the fact that mosques surpassed in grandeur – described here as pride – the buildings of non-Islamic religions.

Szpot is not certain when Islam reached China, yet he takes Persia as his point of departure. The traditions of the Chinese Hui Muslims associate the introduction of Islam to China with a cousin and companion (*ṣaḥāba*) of the Prophet Muhammad named Saʿd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ ibn Wuhayb al-Zuhrī (595–674). He is said to have accepted Islam as the seventh free inhabitant of Mecca at the age of seventeen, around 612 CE, approximately two years after the first revelations experienced by Muhammad through Jibrīl (Gabriel). The tradition of Chinese Muslims is relatively late, dating from the seventeenth century, and it contains various versions of the circumstances under which Saʿd supposedly reached China. According to one account, this occurred in 615, when he was among the first followers of Islam who fled Mecca to Christian Ethiopia to escape persecution by idolaters, before Muhammad had yet decided on the Hijra, the migration to Medina. From Ethiopia, Saʿd is said to have sailed to China and then returned to Muhammad in Medina in order to take part in the Battle of Badr in 624. This version was accepted by Liu Zhi, a Muslim Neo-Confucian scholar from Nanjing who lived from 1660 to 1739, thus somewhat later than Szpot, in his work 天方至聖實錄 (*Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu*, *The Real Record of the Last Prophet of Islam*).[10]

Already in the fourteenth century, however, a version had become widespread among Chinese Muslims that the *ṣaḥāba* Saʿd was one of the envoys whom Muhammad sent in 628 to the rulers of the world, and that he arrived precisely in China. Yet earlier Muslim sources know nothing about such a mission. The most widespread seventeenth-century version holds that the *ṣaḥāba* Saʿd, the conqueror of the Persians at the Battle of al-Qādisiyya, came to China only in 651 as part of an embassy sent after the death of the last Persian ruler in Persia, Yazdegerd III, whose son and successor Pērōz took refuge precisely in China. At that time Saʿd was said to have built the oldest mosque in China, the Huaisheng Mosque

10 Ulrich Theobald, Religions in China – Islam (*yisilanjiao* 伊斯蘭教), http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Religion/islam.html (accessed on: 14.03.2026).

in Guangzhou, and also to have died and been buried in Guangzhou, where his tomb was later venerated. In reality, however, Saʿd's grave is located in Medina.[11]

All these apocryphal legends, however, arose much later, and their purpose was to demonstrate to the Chinese the ancient presence of Islam in China. It cannot be ruled out that the impulse for this came from the efforts of the Jesuits to show that Christianity had been present in China since ancient times, or at least since the early Middle Ages. Muslims, therefore, did not wish to appear inferior to Christians.

It must nevertheless be acknowledged that Chinese sources from the Tang dynasty do indeed record the arrival, on 24 August 651, of an embassy from the state of Dashi – that is, *Taziq* in Persian, the term then used for Arab Muslims. The embassy was certainly not led by the *ṣaḥāba* Saʿd, and apart from presenting gifts to the emperor it achieved no success in propagating Islam in the Middle Kingdom. Further embassies appeared in 655, 681 (from Tokharia, bringing horses as gifts), 682, 693 (a lion was presented, but Empress Wu refused to accept a carnivorous animal), 703 (horses), 711, 713 (horses; the embassy, however, refused to perform the prostration before the emperor), 716, 719, 724 (horses), 725, 733, 744, 745, 747, 753 (two embassies: one from the Umayyads and one from the "black-robed" Abbasids), 754, 755, 756, 758, 762, 763, 772, 773, 774, 791, and 798. After this there was a break of more than a century. Only in 924 did an embassy appear again, this time to the Khitan Liao state, followed by missions to the Song in 966, and subsequently in 969, 971, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 979, 984, 993, 995, 997, 999 (twice), 1000, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1007, 1008, 1011, 1014, 1016, 1019, 1020, 1021, 1024, 1055, 1056, 1060, 1071, 1072, 1073, 1074, 1084, 1085, 1088, 1089 (twice), 1116, 1129, 1131, 1126, 1168, and 1205/1207.[12]

The embassies that arrived in China and returned to the caliphate certainly facilitated the establishment of Islam in China, especially after the conquest of Transoxiana in Central Asia, which began in 713, significantly bringing the borders of the caliphate and the Middle Kingdom closer together. In 742, still during the rule of the Umayyads, the Great Mosque of Xi'an was built in Chang'an, the then capital of the Tang dynasty. Since the embassy of 681 arrived via Tokharistan, this indicates that embassies

11 Donald Leslie, "The Sahaba Sa'd ibn abi Waqqas in China", in *The Legacy of Islam in China*, *An International Symposium in Memory of Joseph F. Fletcher, at Harvard University on April 14–16, 1989*, ed. Dru C. Gladney, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1–30.

12 Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World 589–1278* (Leiden–Boston: Brill 2005).

from the caliphate traveled along the overland Silk Road from Persia, which had been conquered by the caliphate – just as Dunin Szpot writes.

Muslims, however, reached China in large numbers not by the overland Silk Road but by maritime routes. After establishing a military base in Basra, they gradually took over maritime trade in the Indian Ocean, from which the Romans had been cut off after the loss of Egypt in 642. Arab–Persian merchants established trading factories in Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Hangzhou, which developed very rapidly. A major acceleration in the influx of Muslims occurred after the center of the caliphate was moved from Syria to Iraq, after 762, when Baghdad became the capital of the caliphate. From Siraf, the port of Basra, numerous ships sailed to India and East Asia. By the beginning of the 9th century, the Muslim community in Guangzhou numbered about 200,000 inhabitants, enjoying a form of their own self-government on Chinese soil.

When in 845 Emperor Wuzong issued an edict persecuting all non-Chinese religions – namely Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and above all Buddhism – the edict did not contain a single word about Islam. Most likely the Chinese authorities simply did not address the question of this religion, since Islam was not spreading among the subjects of the Tang dynasty, and they did not wish to alienate foreign merchants.

Merchants were nevertheless sometimes harmed during civil wars in China. Thus in 760, the former commander of An Lushan, Tian Shengong, seized the city of Yangzhou, where he massacred thousands of Persian and Arab merchants and treated their property as tribute intended to facilitate his return to the side of the Tang dynasty. Earlier, in 758, unrest had already broken out within the Muslim community of Guangzhou. In the South China Sea, Muslim pirates operated from bases on Hainan Island, causing trade to cease in northern Vietnam and along the border between the provinces of Guangzhou and Fujian. When another rebellion broke out in Guangzhou in 878, its leader Huang Chao carried out another massacre of Muslim merchants in the city, in which between 120,000 and 200,000 people were killed.

It is precisely to these Persian–Arab merchant communities of the South China Sea that Dunin Szpot refers when describing the beginnings of Islam in China. In this respect he is correct, since this marked the beginning of the relatively large-scale presence of Islam, although it was still practiced primarily by foreigners living in China, rather than by the Chinese themselves.

The beginnings of a native Muslim population in China can be traced to the period of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, that is, to the "Western Tatars"

as Dunin Szpot calls them. The conquest of the whole of China lasted a long time. Genghis Khan himself began the invasions against the Tangut dynasty of Xixia and the Jurchen Jin dynasty in northern China, while only his grandson Kublai Khan eliminated the last centers of resistance of the Song dynasty in southern China. The Mongols had no experience in administering sedentary populations, and therefore from the very beginning they employed foreigners to govern China: related groups such as the Khitan, as well as Uyghurs, among whom Islam had begun to spread since the time of the Karakhanids in the eleventh century, Khwarazmians such as Mahmud Yalavach, the governor of Beijing in 1230, Persians, and various representatives of the Persianized world such as Ahmad Fanākatī, a Persianized Qara-Khitan.

The population of Yuan China was divided into four social groups. At the top stood the Mongols. In second place were the so-called Semu, "people with round eyes," meaning those of Caucasoid appearance, mainly Muslims from the Persian-speaking world, although among them Marco Polo, an Italian, also made a career. During his twenty-year service at the court of the Great Khan Kublai, Marco Polo communicated in Persian and Mongolian and never learned Chinese. In third place were the inhabitants of northern China, and in last place those of southern China, who were regarded as a potentially disloyal element toward the dynasty.[13]

In the second half of the fourteenth century, a series of rebellions broke out in China against the Mongols. These culminated in 1368, when the rebels captured the capital Beijing and proclaimed the new Ming dynasty. During the rebellions and the following decades – the last Yuan loyalist, the prince Naghachu, did not surrender until 1388 – the Mongols were completely expelled from China, as were the followers of Christianity, mostly of Italian origin. The new Ming dynasty, despite its strongly anti-foreign orientation, had to accept the continued presence of Muslims in China, because it was easier to win them over and persuade them to abandon service under the Mongols than to expel them from the country together with the Mongols. For this reason, for example, the great Chinese admiral of the early fifteenth century, Zheng He, was a Muslim from the province of Yunnan.

Dunin Szpot, however, does not refer at all to the role of Muslims as administrators of China in the service of the Mongols. Instead, he draws attention to the achievements of Muslim astronomy in that period, which made it possible to improve the traditional Chinese calendar and

13 Ulrich Theobald, semuren 色目人, http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Terms/semuren.html (accessed on: 14.03.2026).

thereby brought Muslims considerable prestige and influence within the state. This topic was of particular interest to the Jesuits, because in the second half of the seventeenth century it was Christian Jesuits who demonstrated the errors of Chinese astronomers adhering to Islam. This significantly weakened their position and made Jesuit scientific knowledge attractive to the Manchu Qing dynasty, which ruled China at the time.[14] Elsewhere in his historical work, Dunin Szpot describes in detail the conflict between Jesuit and Muslim astronomers over their position at the court of the Qing emperor.[15]

A substantial portion of his *Historia Imperii Sinarum* is devoted to the account of the journey of the Portuguese Jesuit Bento Góis through Central and Inner Asia. Travelling overland from Agra, the capital of the Mughal Empire, he set out in search of Cathay, which at that time was still regarded as a semi-mythical land and which, as Brother Góis's expedition would ultimately demonstrate, was in fact merely another name for China. Particularly noteworthy is the account of the disputation that took place in Kashgar at the court of the local ruler:

> He was not infrequently invited by various kings and princes to dispute about the faith with the Muslim priests, especially by the Mahamedhan king of Kashgar. In these debates he fought with such spirit that, although he did not break their obstinate attachment to their Qur'an, he nevertheless compelled them to acknowledge the truth – namely, that the Christian law is good. And so that they might not appear to have been defeated by this admission, they added that their own law was not bad; and that it would be blessed if Muhammad had such preachers and defenders as he himself was for Christ. One of these priests was more audacious than the others. Having first consulted with his companions, and when reason failed him, he dared – through prayers and great promises – to urge him to give his allegiance to Muhammad. But Benedict, not unaware of what had been discussed in that council, so confounded the instigator as he began to speak that he immediately fell silent and, overcome with shame, had to withdraw to his companions. They expected no other answer from Benedict than his declaration that he would rather allow himself to be cut into the smallest pieces than abandon Christ and His love. After leaving Yarkand, Benedict came to the city of Chalis, which was governed by a son of the king of Kashgar by another wife. There again he entered into conflict with the doctors of the Qur'an, whom Benedict pressed so strongly with arguments that the prince approved everything he had said in defense of the law of Christ against the Muhammadan sect. The impious doctors,

14 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 103, f. 101r-102r.

15 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 103, f. 143r-143v.

however, began to plot against his life, so that he was compelled to remain in that city for three months.[16]

The recounting of victorious disputations between Jesuit fathers and Muslims is among the favorite scenes from the lives of missionaries recorded in *Historia imperii Sinarum* by Dunin Szpot. Thus he presents the disputation involving Nicolò Longobardo:

> But since the Mohammedans taught that there is one true God, Longobardi peacefully requested that, in order to dispel every doubt that might arise concerning the Law itself, the ruler would not hesitate to allow him to meet with the Mohammedan doctors, whom he intended to invite to his palace together with certain mandarins chosen by himself, who would serve as judges and witnesses of the discussion. The ruler embraced the request with both arms. Several meetings were therefore held with the Mohammedans in the presence of the ruler and the mandarins invited by him. In all these debates the arguments presented by Longobardi – so far as the Chinese were able to comprehend them – were demonstrated before the eye of reason and showed how greatly the Mohammedan superstition differs from the true doctrine which Christians profess concerning the nature and substance of the one true God and the true religion, and how far the Qur'an, composed of mere fables, deviates from the truth of the Divine Law.[17]

16 Non rarò à diversis Regibus et Principibus invitatus fuerat ad disputandum de fide cum Mahometanis eorum sacrificulis, praesertim verò a Mahamedhan Rege Cascaris: cum quibus tanto spiritu disputando conflixit; ut licet eorum obstinatam in suo Alcorano †tendo voluntatem non perfregerit, confessionem tamen veritatis expresserit, Legem videlicet Christianam esse bonam: et ne hoc ipso viderentur esse victi, adiungerent: nec suam esse malam; beatamque fore, si Mahometes haberet tales suos praedicatores, et encomiastas, qualis ipse esset Christi. Et fuit unus audacior ex his sacrificulis, qui facto consilio cum suis, ausus fuerat, precibus et promissis ingentibus, cum ratio deësset, illum interpellare ut Nomen Mahometo daret. Verum Benedictus, non ignarus, quid actum fuerit in eo Consilio, Subversorem incipientem loqui, ita confudit, ut statim obmutuerit, debueritque prae confusione recipere ad suos; qui aliud responsum dandum à Benedicto non expectabant, quam protestationem, malle se in minutissimas partes concidi sinere, quam Christum eiusque amorem deserere. Ex Iarcan profectus Benedictus venit in Urbem Chalis, cui praeerat Filius ex alio thoro Regis Cascaris; coram quo iterum ventum est ad conflictum cum Doctoribus Alcorani, quos ita argumentis pressit Benedictus, ut Princeps quidem approbaverit omnia, quaecunque ille disputando pro Lege Christi dixerat contra Mahometanam Sectam, Doctores autem impii insidiari eius vitae coeperint; ut idcirco tres menses in ea Civitate morari debuerit ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 150r-150v.

17 Verum cům Mahometani verum Deum unum esse docerent, pace Longobardi petiit, ut pro dissipando omni suo dubio, quod circa ipsam Legem nasci poterat, non gravaretur congredi cum Doctoribus Mahometanis, quos ipse ad suum Palatium invitaturus esset unà cum selectis à se Mandarinis, qui dicendorum arbitri et testes forent. Amplexus est utroque brachio postulatum Reguli. Fuerunt aliquot congressus cum

Various references to Muslims appear in different parts of *Historia Imperii Sinarum* by Dunin Szpot, who consistently records the religious affiliation of the individuals he describes and distinguishes between Muslim rulers and pagan ones: "and whatever in the southern regions is possessed by rulers, whether Muhammadan or pagan".[18]

He recounts a story about the persecution of Christians – most likely Nestorians from the Church of the East – which Matteo Ricci learned about in the city of Kaifeng:

> In it, they say, there is preserved among ever-burning lamps only the Pentateuch of Moses, written on parchment, clearly a great inheritance of their ancestors who had entered China together with the Western Tatars. At the same time, they say that the Saracens also entered with their Qur'an, and the Christians with their Cross. The Christians are said to live in the provinces of Xansi and Xensi, while in the city of Kaifeng only the memory of them remains among a few people who do not even know what Christ is. They are called Terzans, because perhaps they had come to China from some land called Terza, and their law is called by the Chinese Sce-zu, because of the Cross, whose form among the Chinese represents the number ten. When these Christians were still flourishing, they are said to have had a noble church in the city of Kaifeng. Later, however, when persecution was stirred up by the Saracens, and they were oppressed in the courts by their accusations out of hatred for the Christian religion – on the pretext that they were attempting to stir up seditions and rebellions (for they were men strong in war and powerful in arms) – they became discouraged and, overcome by fear, defected to other sects, both Chinese ones and those of the Hebrews and the Saracens. Their church was then seized by the Ossian Bonzes and dedicated to a certain idol. Those who still secretly practice the Christian religion retain nothing of it except a certain reverence for the Cross, with which they mark their infants on the forehead against witchcraft and other evils, believing that it possesses power against them.[19]

Mahometanis praesente Regulo, et invitatis ab eo Mandarinis: in quibus omnibus producta à Longobardo, quantum Sinae comprehendere animo poterant, ad oculum rationis demonstrata argumenta, ostenderunt, quantum distaret Superstitio Mahometana, à vera, quam Christiani profitentur de unius veri Dei Natura et substantia, Religione, et quantum aberraret Alcoranus è meris fabulis concinnatus, à veritate Legis Divinae. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 103, f. 22v.

18 [...] et quidquid in partibus meridionalibus, sive Mahometani, sive Ethnici Dynastae possident. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 55r.

19 In ea asservari inter lumina semper ardentia Pentateuchon solum Moysis, in Charta pergamena exaratum magnam videlicet haereditatem maiorum, qui cum Tartaris Occidentalibus Sinam intraverant. Eodem tempore ingressos esse etiam Saracenos cum suo Alcorano, et Christianos cum sua Cruce. Christianos habitare in Provinciis Xansi et Xensi, in Caifum autem Urbe solam relictam memoriam in paucis, qui ne quidem scirent, quid esset Christus. Vocari eos Terzanos, ideo quod forte venissent in

In conclusion, it can be stated that the profession of the Muslim faith by some inhabitants of China was usually carefully noted by the Jesuits working there and recorded by Dunin Szpot from the sources he used. His era was marked by rivalry and hostility between the Christian world and Islam. This is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that when Dunin Szpot wished to compare the scale of Chinese distrust toward missionaries of foreign religions, he contrasted it with the hypothetical situation of how the European population would react to the unexpected appearance of Muslim missionaries in their own country:

> For after more than forty years of preaching the Gospel in China, scarcely more than a few thousand Christians are to be found there. This small number of the faithful arises from the suspicions of the Chinese toward foreigners, which are far greater than those that would exist in Christian Europe if some number of Mohammedans were to enter a Catholic region bordering the Turks and, having established their pestilent seat in various cities, were to preach the Qur'an, erect mosques, and convert the people to Muhammad. The Chinese are a nation most hostile to foreigners; when they see a single foreigner, they form a thousand suspicions about him. Macao alone is like a thorn in their eyes, continually tormenting them, lest it should happen to their empire as it did to the Philippines, Malacca, and India, which were taken from their kings by Christian arms.[20]

Sinam ex aliqua terra, quae vocabatur Terza, Legem autem eorum dici à Sinis Sce-zu, propter Crucem, cuius forma apud Sinas exprimit numerum decimum. Hos Christianos cum essent in flore habuisse Ecclesiam nobilem in Urbe Caifum mota deinde persecutione à Saracenis, calumniis eorum oppressos in Tribunalibus odio Christianae Religionis, quasi attentarent excitare seditiones et rebelliones, (erant enim Viri bello fortes, et armis valentes) animis deiectos, victos timore, ad ad sectas alias tum Sinicas, tum Hebraeorum et Saracenorum descivisse. Ecclesiam autem eorum à Bonziis Oscianis occupatam, et cuidam idolo dedicatam fuisse. Eos, qui adhuc clanculum colunt Christianam Religionem, nihil ex illa retinere praeter solam reverentiam Crucis, quâ signant suos infantes in frontibus, contr maleficia, et alia mala, contra quae habere illam virtutem credunt. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 137v-138r.

20 Nimirum post quadraginta et ampliůs annorum praedicationem Evangelii in Sina, non inveniri illic nisi aliquot millia Christianorum; eam paucitatem fidelium provenire ex suspicionibus Sinarum longč maioribus contra Exteros, quam in Europa Christiana fuissent, si quispiam numerus Mahometanorum intrasset in aliquam Catholicam Regionem vicinam Turcis, et positâ in diversis Civitatibus sua pestilenti sede, praedicasset Alcoranum, erigeret Moschaeas, et converteret populum ad Mahometem. Sinae gens inimicissima exteris; qui cum unum Exterum in oculis habeant, mille formant de illo suspiciones. Solum Macaum, spina est in oculis, quae illos continuň torquet, ne sicut Philippinae, Malaca Indiae armis Christianis, ereptae suis Regibus fuerunt, ita fiat cum eorum imperio. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 230r.

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