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A Sarmatian on China. Tomasz Szpot Dunin and His Account of Jesuit Missions in the Far East¹

Sarmata o Chinach. Tomasz Szpot Dunin i jego relacja o misjach jezuickich na Dalekim Wschodzie

Abstract

The article presents Tomasz Ignacy Szpot Dunin as a Jesuit historiographer of the Chinese mission who consciously described himself as a “*Sarmata scriptor*” and projected the cultural experience he had acquired in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth onto his account of China. The opening section outlines Szpot’s formative background: Podlasie as a borderland region, followed by the Vilnius Academy and Jesuit colleges located on the eastern fringes of the Polish–Lithuanian state. The author links his biography with the experience of multiethnicity and multiconfessionality, as well as with the proximity of the steppe world, particularly

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the presence of the Lithuanian Tatars, their military ethos, genealogical memory, and distinctive attitude toward authority. This borderland experience helps explain why Szpot – although he never visited China – did not portray the Orient solely in terms of exoticism, but rather as a reality that could be interpreted through analogies familiar from Eastern Europe. Drawing on examples from Szpot's works, the article demonstrates that he described imperial authority in China using the language of moral obligations, akin to the Old Polish ideal of the ruler as the "father" of his subjects. The author compares this mode of narration with the tradition of Polish politico-moral reflection and points out that, in Szpot's writing, the description of facts constantly shifts into ethical interpretation. His tendency to view Chinese history within a broad "Eurasian" horizon is also emphasized, one in which the tension between the agrarian world and the steppe constitutes one of the key organizing principles of the narrative. The article also discusses the way in which Szpot organizes Chinese religious and ethical traditions, distinguishing the "teaching of the scholars" as the oldest and supreme doctrine, while treating other practices as lower forms. The author interprets this as an echo of the Sarmatian experience of a multi-confessional order safeguarded by the authority of the ruler. Taken as a whole, the analysis leads to the conclusion that Szpot's writings should be read not merely as a compendium on China and the missions, but as a Sarmatian, theological-political reflection on order, morality, and the Christian mission in the non-European world.

Keywords: China, missions, Jesuits, Sarmatism, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Tatars

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia Tomasza Ignacego Szpota Dunina jako jezuickiego historiografa misji chińskiej, który świadomie określał siebie jako *Sarmata scriptor* i przenosił doświadczenie kulturowe zdobyte w Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów na swój opis Chin. W części wprowadzającej omówiono środowisko formacyjne Szpota: Podlasie jako region pogranicza, a następnie Akademię Wileńską i kolegia jezuickie położone na wschodnich krańcach państwa polsko-litewskiego. Autor wiąże jego biografię z doświadczeniem wieloetniczności i wielowyznaniowości, a także z bliskością świata stepowego, zwłaszcza z obecnością Tatarów litewskich, ich etosem wojskowym, pamięcią genealogiczną oraz szczególnym stosunkiem do władzy. To doświadczenie pogranicza pomaga wyjaśnić, dlaczego Szpot – choć nigdy nie odwiedził Chin – nie przedstawiał Orientu wyłącznie w kategoriach egzotyki, lecz raczej jako rzeczywistość możliwą do interpretacji poprzez analogie znane z Europy Wschodniej. Odwołując się do przykładów z dzieł Szpota, artykuł pokazuje, że opisywał on władzę cesarską w Chinach językiem obowiązków moralnych, podobnie jak w staropolskim

ideale władcy jako „ojca” swoich poddanych. Autor porównuje ten sposób narracji z tradycją polskiej refleksji polityczno-moralnej i wskazuje, że w pismach Szpota opis faktów nieustannie przechodzi w ich interpretację etyczną. Podkreślona zostaje także jego skłonność do ujmowania historii Chin w szerokiej perspektywie „eurazjatyckiej”, w której napięcie między światem rolniczym a stepowym stanowi jedną z kluczowych zasad organizujących narrację. Artykuł omawia również sposób, w jaki Szpot porządkuje chińskie tradycje religijne i etyczne, wyróżniając „naukę uczonych” jako najstarszą i najwyższą doktrynę, podczas gdy inne praktyki traktuje jako formy niższe. Autor interpretuje to jako echo sarmackiego doświadczenia ładu wielowyznaniowego, zabezpieczonego autorytetem władcy. Całość analizy prowadzi do wniosku, że pisma Szpota należy odczytywać nie tylko jako kompendium wiedzy o Chinach i misjach, lecz także jako sarmacką refleksję teologiczno-polityczną nad ładem, moralnością i chrześcijańską misją w świecie pozaeuropejskim.

Słowa kluczowe: Chiny, misje, jezuita, sarmatyzm, Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, Tatarzy.

Tomasz Ignacy Szpot Dunin, a Polish Jesuit writing at the end of the seventeenth century about the development of Jesuit missions in China, addressed the reader in the prologue to the first volume of *Collectanea historiae sinensis* with the following words:

Father Daniello Bartoli of the Society of Jesus brought his *History of China* down to the year 1640 and ended it at that point, almost entirely abandoning the further work in which he had intended to present the subsequent development of the Christian religion in that vast empire. Our present collection was therefore meant to serve as a continuation of that work. It has been compiled from various writings produced at different times, whether from the annual letters of that mission or from other reports, most often written in Portuguese, as well as from Roman directives. These materials cost no small amount of effort to one Sarmatian writer, both in deciphering characters that ‘speak’ more through abbreviated expressions than through fully developed words, and in gathering annotated sheets scattered through various archival fascicles and mixed in with documents of different missions, concerning both official matters and other writings.²

A close reading and comparison of Tomasz Szpot’s writings on China makes it clear that the designation “Sarmatian writer” (*Sarmata scriptor*) is not a mere ornamental phrase. Rather, it points to a consciously

2 Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Jap. Sin. 104, f. 1r.

adopted self-characterization by an author who transfers his own formative background, rooted in the culture and education of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, into the sphere of reflection on the Chinese mission. As a result, a locally shaped perspective is creatively reworked and yields an approach that distinguishes Szpot from the dominant patterns of Jesuit sinology – not so much through a break with its principles as through a clear shift in interpretative emphasis.

Tomasz Szpot grew up in Podlasie, a borderland region where Latin, Ruthenian, and steppe traditions intermingled from an early age, and where the experience of cultural plurality formed part of the ordinary fabric of life. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the distinctiveness and a certain innovativeness of this Polish Jesuit writing about early modern China – an author who consciously identified himself as a Sarmatian, a term denoting membership in the multiethnic and multinational noble elite of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.³ Importantly, the subsequent stages of his formation did not lead him beyond this milieu; on the contrary, they reinforced his experience of life at the intersection of cultures. In such an environment, his Sarmatian identity matured – understood not as a mere costume, but as the mentality of a person accustomed to borderlands, to a multiplicity of languages, confessions, and cultural orders, and at the same time to thinking in terms of genealogy, custom, and historical memory. In Vilnius, in August 1664, he began a two-year novitiate in the Lithuanian Province of the Society of Jesus. Between 1674 and 1678 he studied at the Vilnius Academy, receiving priestly ordination toward the end of that period. He completed his tertianship in 1680–1681 in Nesvizh, likewise situated within the same zone of intersecting traditions and communities, after which he spent five years working at the Jesuit college in Pinsk, where he taught, among other subjects, rhetoric and philosophy.⁴

In all these places, Szpot had the opportunity not only to absorb classical Greco-Latin learning, but also to encounter the world of Muslim steppe communities, above all the Tatars. At this point, it is worth explaining the enduring presence of Tatars in Lithuania. The principal

3 On more about Sarmatism, cf. Stanisław Cynarski, *Sarmatyzm – ideologia i styl życia*, in *Polska XVII wieku. Państwo, społeczeństwo, kultura*, ed. Janusz Tazbir (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1969), 220–243; Janusz Tazbir, “Sarmatyzm a barok,” *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 76/4 (1969): 815–830; Stanisław Grzybowski, *Sarmatyzm* (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1996).

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*, ed. Jarosław Nowaszczuk (Szczecin: Volumina, 2017), 75–77.

organizer of Tatar settlement there was Grand Duke Vytautas, who took advantage of the crisis of the Golden Horde at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to settle Tatars in Lithuania and Poland as a military population. Some of them arrived voluntarily and retained Islam; others, especially those who settled in Poland, accepted baptism and gradually underwent assimilation. Tatar settlement in Lithuania had both economic and political causes: wars, dynastic conflicts, and the disintegration of the structures of the Golden Horde made the nomadic way of life increasingly difficult and limited opportunities for raiding expeditions. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, by contrast, attracted them with its stability, land grants, and the protection of its rulers, which inspired trust among Mongol and Tatar refugees. This migration led to the permanent settlement of Tatars in Lithuania and to the transition of many groups from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life. The most favorable period in the history of the Lithuanian Tatars fell during the reign of Sigismund Augustus, who extended his protection to them and granted numerous privileges. From the time of Stephen Báthory and Sigismund III Vasa onward, Lithuanian Tatars were enlisted for military service in paid Tatar banners, becoming a permanent component of the armed forces of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁵

Lithuanian Tatars enjoyed a status similar to that of the local nobility: they were personally free, could own dependents, exercise patrimonial jurisdiction, and benefited from legal and judicial protection, although for a long time their property rights and participation in political life were partially restricted.⁶ At the same time, they preserved not only their own faith but also distinct customs and dress. Among Lithuanian Tatars, memory of ancestors – of descent from specific murzas, beys, or even khans – retained far greater importance than in the surrounding Christian society. This was not merely a matter of prestige but a foundation of identity. A mode of thinking grounded in genealogy and blood ties has a clearly steppe origin and corresponds to the Mongol-Tatar model of social organization, in which lineage outweighed territorial affiliation.⁷

5 Stanisław Kryczyński, *Tatarzy litewscy. Próba monografii historyczno-etnograficznej* (Warszawa: Wydanie Rady Centralnej Związku Kulturalno-Oświatowego Tatarów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1938), 5–27.

6 Andrzej B. Zakrzewski, “Czy Tatarzy litewscy rzeczywiście nie byli szlachtą? (w związku z artykułem «PH» t. 77, z. 3, 467–480, Sobczak, J., Czy tatarska ludność Litwy należała do stanu szlacheckiego?; zob. też «PH» t. 79, z. 2, 345–358),” *Przegląd Historyczny* 79/3 (1988): 573–580.

7 Kryczyński, *Tatarzy litewscy*, 150–200.

An important feature of Tatar society was the durability of its military ethos and patterns of behavior characteristic of steppe culture. Lithuanian Tatars long preserved their own style of warfare, horsemanship, and weaponry, as well as distinct military terminology. Their readiness for mounted service, attachment to the horse as the foundation of military existence, and the belief in the hereditary nature of military duty were direct legacies of the world of the Golden Horde and its successors. Their military mentality remained “steppe,” based on mobility and loyalty to a leader and the community, rather than on feudal hierarchy in the Western sense. Continuity with Mongol traditions is also evident in their distinctive attitude toward authority and law. For a long time, Lithuanian Tatars accepted the overlordship of the Grand Duke or the Polish king, while at the same time maintaining a strong sense of their own internal autonomy, especially in matters of custom, family life, and religion. This reflects the Mongol model of relations between the khan and individual clans, in which obedience was personal and contractual rather than abstract and institutional. Also notable among them was the persistence of historical images and narratives in which the steppe, the Horde, and the world of past migrations occupied a central place. Even after several centuries of settled life in Lithuania and Poland, Tatars preserved in their tradition images of eastern origins, stories of khans, dynastic struggles, and flights from civil war. This was not regarded as mere legend, but as an element of collective memory characteristic of communities emerging from a nomadic culture, where history was transmitted in the form of oral clan narratives.⁸

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For Tomasz Szpot, images of the Tatars and the memory of their place in the history and structures of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth became not merely an element of cultural background, but also an

8 Artur Konopacki, *Życie religijne Tatarów na ziemiach Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w XVI–XIX wieku* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2010), 21 ff.

important point of reference to which he later turned when organizing and explaining Chinese realities through analogies drawn from the experience of the steppe world. His school and religious formation in colleges located on the eastern frontiers of the Polish–Lithuanian state took place within the cultural and geopolitical conditions described above. These were regions where Latin, Orthodox, and Islamic civilizations met, and at the same time a space of intense contact with the Oriental tradition – both real and imagined. In such circumstances, knowledge of the Orient was not exclusively a bookish construct, but part of a broader intellectual and religious experience. In Jesuit colleges, the foundation of education remained the *Ratio studiorum*, approved in 1599, which emphasized thorough mastery of Latin, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology. This program was universal and, in its essential framework, was implemented in a similar way throughout Europe; in practice, however, local conditions influenced the choice of examples, supplementary readings, and topics for rhetorical exercises. Jesuit education in the Commonwealth, which naturally absorbed the Sarmatian imagination and the intellectual style of the elites, played an important role in unifying the cultural horizon of the nobility, introducing it to a world of concepts and references extending far beyond local realities.⁹ Szpot, shaped within this very tradition, demonstrates how the universal model of Jesuit formation could be creatively “translated” into the language of borderland experience and then used to describe a world as distant as China.

One of the most important areas of Jesuit activity in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was the education of political and military elites. From this perspective, knowledge of Islam and the Ottoman Empire held particular significance. The “Turkish question” was a constant presence in Jesuit preaching, polemical writing, and the teaching of history. Although their stance was clearly apologetic, Jesuits conveyed relatively extensive knowledge about the structure of the Ottoman state, its administration, and its military system – knowledge that was both practical and polemical. The future soldier, as well as the preacher and teacher, was expected not only to know theological arguments against Islam, but also to understand the political and social realities of the Muslim world. For students in the frontier colleges, who had opportunities to encounter Tatars and sometimes even Turks, such knowledge was not abstract. In

9 Jakub Niedźwiedź, *Inkulturacyja szkolnictwa jezuickiego w Polsce i na Litwie w XVI–XVIII wieku*, in *Formowanie kultury katolickiej w dobie potrydenckiej. Powszechność i narodowość katolicyzmu polskiego*, t. 6 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2016), 222–248; *idem*, “Jesuit Education in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 5 (2018): 441–455.

their schools, Jesuits transmitted a vision of the world grounded in the opposition between Christianity and Islam, the idea of defending the *respublica Christiana*, and the conviction of a moral duty to resist the Ottomans.¹⁰

Contact with knowledge about Central Asia and the Far East, disseminated through the Jesuit network of correspondence, was also of great importance for young Jesuits. This interest stemmed primarily from missionary and scholarly aims, while in the case of Persia an additional significant thread emerged: the search for a potential ally against the Ottomans.¹¹ China, Japan, and India were not the subject of systematic instruction, but circulated within the internal networks of the order through missionary reports, letters, and hagiographic literature. Jesuit colleges played a key role in popularizing knowledge about the Asian missions, both among students and among a wider audience. These accounts portrayed the Far East as a sphere requiring exceptionally high intellectual competence.¹²

China in particular was portrayed as a civilization grounded in ethics and a rational social order, which encouraged the belief that Christianization did not have to entail the destruction of local culture. This image,

10 The Jesuits played a key role in shaping soldiers in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth as a group requiring pastoral care and discipline, creating special catechisms for them and permanent structures of military chaplains. They also promoted the idea of fighting against Muslims, presenting war with them as a particular fulfillment of a soldier's vocation. Mirosław Lenart, *Miles pius et iustus. Żołnierz chrześcijański katolickiej wiary w kulturze i piśmiennictwie dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (XVI–XVIII w.)* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2009), *passim*; Damien Tricoire, “To Fight, or Not to Fight: Piotr Skarga, the Catholic Ideal of Christian Soldier, and the Reformation of Polish Nobility (around 1600),” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4 (2017): 624–636.

11 The example of Jesuit activity in Persia shows that they were not only carriers of geographical, ethnographic, and political knowledge about Asia in Europe, but also connected to political projects concerning the Ottoman Empire. Ryszard Skowron, *La contribución de Tadeusz Krusiński S.I. al conocimiento de Persia y del Cáucaso en Europa. La circulación de la información y propiedad intelectual en el siglo XVIII*, in *Eastern Europe, Safavid Persia and the Iberian World. Frontiers and Circulations at the Edge of Empires*, eds. José Cutillas Ferrer, Óscar Recio Morales (Valencia: Albatros, 2019), 59–79; *idem*, “Tłumaczenia i recepcja w Europie i Turcji prac Judy Tadeusza Krusińskiego SI o wojnie afgańsko-perskiej i upadku dynastii Safawidów,” *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Prace Historyczne* 147/1 (2020): 13–36.

12 Duc Ha Nguyen, *Polscy misjonarze na Dalekim Wschodzie w XVII–XVIII wieku* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2006), 137–138; Joanna Wasilewska-Dobkowska, “Wyobrażenia Dalekiego Wschodu w środowisku polskich jezuitów,” *Toruńskie Studia o Sztuce Orientu* 1 (2004): 16; Tomasz Graff, Bartłomiej Wołyniec, “Rola i znaczenie kolegiów jezuickich w propagowaniu wśród mieszkańców Rzeczypospolitej wiedzy na temat działalności misyjnej Towarzystwa Jezusowego na Dalekim Wschodzie,” *Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum* 29/4 (2023): 115–120.

consolidated in Jesuit writings, exerted a lasting influence on ways of thinking about Asia within religious circles. Contact with missionary literature had an existential dimension for many young Jesuits. Accounts of martyrdom in Japan and of the hardships of missions in China and India stirred the imagination and shaped the ideal of the missionary as a scholar, diplomat, and witness to the faith. Jesuit colleges were places where missionary vocations were born, although only a few received permission to depart; consequently, the literary activity of Jesuits who remained in Europe became an alternative form of participation in the missions.

The case of Tomasz Ignacy Szpot Dunin, author of *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* and *Collectanea Historiae Sinensis*, illustrates this model well.¹³ The form and content of his works grew out of an intellectual formation in which interest in Asia had already been instilled at an early stage of education. In this context, it is worth emphasizing the specific character of the schools he attended. They played an important role in shaping cognitive horizons and sensitivity to questions concerning the East. Many of these institutions operated in a multi-confessional and multiethnic environment, which fostered intellectual openness while maintaining a clear Catholic identity. Knowledge about the Orient and Asia developed here out of a borderland experience, where religious and cultural differences posed concrete pastoral and educational challenges. The first Jesuits active in the Commonwealth reported to Rome that Vilnius would be an excellent location for establishing a college. This was justified by the argument that, in the long term, it could open the possibility of charting an overland route to China, leading through Moscow and Tatar territories – a route considered far safer than sea travel.¹⁴ These arguments contributed to the founding of the Vilnius Academy in 1579, which served

13 Despite repeated efforts, Szpot did not obtain permission from his superiors to go on mission to China. Instead, his training, expertise, and evident interest in Chinese affairs led the order's authorities to entrust him with another task, equally important for the mission: organizing archival materials and compiling a history of Jesuit engagement in the Far East. Danieluk, *Konfesjonal i pióro*, 82, 88–89; Thierry Meynard, "For the record: The Canton exile of the missionaries (1666–1671) by the Polish Jesuit Szpot Dunin," *Annales Missiologici Posnanienses* 25 (2020): 147–148; Graff, Wołyniec, "Rola i znaczenie kolegiów jezuickich," 114.

14 Jan Korewa, *Z dziejów diecezji warmińskiej w. XVI. Geneza Braniewskiego Hosianum. Przyczynek do dziejów zespolenia Warmii z Rzeczpospolitą (1549–1564)*, Poznań–Lublin: Księgarnia św. Wojciecha, 1965, 124; Józef Włodarski, Zhao Gang, "Kontakty Polski z Chinami od XIII do końca XVIII wieku – próba nowego spojrzenia," *Gdańskie Studia Azji Wschodniej* 5 (2014): 24.

not only as the principal Jesuit center of learning but also as a cultural bridge between West and East.¹⁵

Unlike many of his contemporaries among Western European Jesuits who dealt with Oriental matters, Szpot – though he never visited China – did not perceive the Orient solely as an exotic and distant reality. His image of the East also grew out of the borderland experience of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. For him, Tatars were not an abstraction but fellow citizens, neighbors, soldiers of the Commonwealth, and sometimes even co-religionists – converts. Their presence within the social and military structures of the Polish–Lithuanian state, as well as their religion and customs, constituted a real point of reference for him. As scholars of Sarmatism have shown, the myth of Sarmatian genealogy was not merely a fantasy, but a cultural construct that encouraged identification with steppe peoples whom the Western world usually regarded as “barbarian.”¹⁶ It is no exaggeration to say that a Polish Sarmatian might have felt a spiritual affinity with a Tatar, much as a Roman once did with a Scythian. The Roman association of *virtus virilis* with barbarian austerity was closely linked to martial courage, self-mastery, disdain for luxury, and readiness for sacrifice, as evidenced, for example, in the writings of Horace and Seneca.¹⁷ This symbolic affinity translated into a particular capacity to understand the political, military, and religious logic of nomadic peoples. In Sarmatian ideology, one can easily discern a strong presence of references to the East and of Oriental motifs. The most pronounced revival of these ideas occurred in the second half of the seventeenth century, during the reign of John III Sobieski.¹⁸ This ruler made efforts to establish contact with the court of the Kangxi Emperor through the mediation of Jesuits connected with the Beijing mission, while also showing interest in the concept of an overland route to the Far East via Moscow and Tatar territories, viewed as an alternative to the uncertain maritime route.¹⁹ Although these initiatives did not result in

15 Ludwik Piechnik, “Związki kulturowe dawnej Akademii Wileńskiej z Zachodem w latach 1570–1773,” *Analecta Cracoviensia* 19 (1987): 343–362.

16 Tadeusz Mańkowski, *Genealogia sarmatyzmu* (Warszawa: Tow. Wydawnicze “Łuk,” 1946), 20–28; Ewa Anna Żukowska, “Sarmacja i sarmatyzm w kulturze polskiej XVII stulecia w świetle opinii badaczy,” *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 52/2 (2004): 71–73.

17 Horace wrote of the Scythians, living in simplicity amid the frost, as an example of people who were hardy and unyielding. Q. Horatius Flaccus, *Carmina* III 24, 9–16; Seneca, *De Vita Beata* 7.3–8; *idem*, *Epistulae Morales* 114.10–15.

18 Mańkowski, *Genealogia sarmatyzmu*, 77.

19 Jerzy Paszenda, “Jezuici w Moskwie za króla Jana III Sobieskiego,” *Nasza Przeszłość* 97 (2002): 371–380; Monika Miazek-Męczyńska, *Przez Moskwę do Chin? Polski wkład w jezuickie poszukiwania drogi lądowej na Daleki Wschód*, in *Itinera clericorum*.

lasting diplomatic relations, it may be assumed that a political calculation was also present in the background – namely, the search for a potential point of leverage in the broader strategic game against Muscovy and the Ottoman Porte.

Below are several examples of how Szpot transfers patterns of thought shaped in the realities of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth onto the world he describes. This is most clearly visible in passages that appear purely informative – in remarks on court ceremony, offices, and discipline – where the choice of emphasis and the language of evaluation reveal the author’s perspective. It is in such places that one can most readily observe that China is viewed through the prism of experiences and categories characteristic of noble culture, without any explicit intention of conducting a comparative analysis. For this reason, it is worth first examining how Szpot constructs the image of imperial authority, for example in his characterization of the reign of the Kangxi Emperor.

Although care and vigilance in governing his empire consumed a large part of his time, from the very beginning – in accordance with the teaching of the Teacher of the Empire, Confucius, which the Chinese call great – he was convinced that he ought to be not a lord but a father to his subjects, to rule them with justice and love, and to ensure their peace and security. Hence he devoted all his efforts to ensuring that he did not neglect his duties in selecting officials of the empire and in keeping them faithful to their obligations.²⁰

The analysis of the passage suggests an image of a ruler whom Tomasz Szpot presents as a moral guardian of the people rather than a despot. In his view, the Chinese emperor was not a tyrant, but rather a father to his subjects, guided by principles of justice and love. He ruled according to the Confucian *Doctrina Magna* – the teaching of the moral duty of the ruler toward society – and understood his role not in terms of power, but of responsibility. His task was to ensure the peace and security of his subjects, and concern for the common good formed the foundation of the entire system of authority. In this context, imperial officials appeared

Kulturotwórcze i religijne aspekty podróży duchownych, ed. Danuta Quirini-Popławska, Łukasz Burkiewicz (Kraków: Akademia Ignatianum – Wydawnictwo WAM, 2014), 515–527.

20 *Quanquam magnam partem temporis attrahebat ad se sollicitudo et vigilantia in gubernando suo imperio: ut, cum iam à principio ex Doctrina, quam vocant Sinae Magnam, Magistri Imperii Confucii sibi persuasisset, se debere esse non Dominum sed Patrem suorum Subditorum, eosque regere iustitiâ et amore, ac pacem eorum securitatemque procurare, in hoc totum suum studium collocaret, ne suo debito in eligendis, continendisque in suo officio Magistratibus Imperii deesset.* ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 75r.

as an extension of his moral mission. Their just actions and loyal service were understood not merely as administrative duties, but as an expression of the ethical order of the state. This conception aligns with the Confucian ideal of the ruler as the moral linchpin of the state, shaping his subjects primarily through personal example and concern for social order. Szpot presents it, however, in a tone that renders the image of the emperor reminiscent of political ideals familiar from the culture of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, particularly in the language of evaluation and the emphasis on the ruler’s duties toward the community.

The key context for this line of reasoning is provided by the works of the Polish Jesuit Piotr Skarga, especially his famous Sejm Sermons.²¹ According to Skarga, the ruler of the Commonwealth was to be the “father of the fatherland,” concerned with the common good. Similarly, another Polish author, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, in his treatise *O poprawie Rzeczypospolitej* [*On the Improvement of the Commonwealth*],²² described the monarch as just and morally accountable to both God and the citizens. Another Old Polish writer, Stanisław Orzechowski, in *Quincunx*, wrote that the king is, on the one hand, *primus inter pares*, but at the same time the father of the nation.²³ In the thought of Sarmatian-era authors, the king was to act as the father of the noble nation – exercising authority within the framework of law. The monarch ruled not through fear, but through love, justice, and alignment with the will of God. His duties included careful selection of officials, respect for the “golden liberty,” and concern for peace and the faith. The ideal of governance was thus grounded in a moral relationship, rather than a purely political one.

The passage from *Historiae Sinarum Imperii* reflects Szpot’s characteristic attempt at civilizational parallelism – his Sarmatian nostalgia for the model of a “gentle, paternal monarchy,” shared by both the idealized image of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and Confucian China. It also reveals the author’s deeply rooted conviction that common constitutional and ethical forms could exist despite differing cultural traditions. By depicting the Chinese emperor as the father of his people, Szpot

21 The first edition of Skarga’s Sejm Sermons appeared in Kraków in 1597 as part of a larger collection of his sermons entitled *Kazania na niedziele y święta całego roku x. Piotra Skargi [...]* w drukarni Andrzej Piotrkowczyka (Kraków: [Andrzej Piotrkowczyk], 1597), 657–707.

22 *Commentariorvm de republica emendanda libri quinque Andreae Fricii Modrevii ad regem, senatum, pontifices, presbyteros, equites, populum[quoque] Polonis ac reliquae Sarmatiae [...]* (Kraków: Lazarus Andreae excudebat, 1551).

23 *Quincunx, to jest wzór Korony Polskiej na cynku wystawiony, przez Stanisława Orzechowskiego Okszyca z przemyskiej ziemi, i za kołędę posłom koronnym do Warszawy na nowe lato roku pańskiego 1564 posłany* (Kraków: [Łazarz Andrysowicz] 1564).

consciously or unconsciously frames him within a Sarmatian model of monarchy. He adopts the same rhetoric used by preachers and moralists of the old Commonwealth. The Confucian model of “rule by virtue” and the “caring monarch” is translated in his account into the language of Latin republicanism – intelligible and acceptable to a Polish nobleman. In this way, governance in China and Poland, though formally different, appears in Szpot’s perspective as a parallel world of virtues, where *virtus virilis* prevails rather than force or the whim of a tyrant.

Comparing Szpot’s narrative with that of his contemporaries – such as Fr. Martino Martini, SJ,²⁴ Fr. Álvaro Semedo, SJ,²⁵ or Fr. Gabriel de Magalhães, SJ²⁶ – it becomes clear that, although all of them drew on the experiences of the missions and contacts with Chinese elites, their perspective remained deeply rooted in the Western European model of statehood. They presented China as an administrative-bureaucratic system, describable and mappable. Szpot, by contrast – raised in the realities of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, a religiously and culturally pluralistic state marked by experience with wars against the Tatars – perceived China as a living socio-political-religious organism, whose rhythm was shaped by border tensions. He portrays Chinese history not only from a Sinocentric perspective, as his Jesuit colleagues did, but as a continuous dialogue (and conflict) between agricultural civilization and the nomadic world of the steppes. He stretches this world from Manchuria to the steppe frontiers Wild Fields of Ukraine, sketching a distinctive “Eurasian horizon of history.” The Polish Jesuit describes invasions, reforms, and the rule of dynasties of Tatar and Manchu origin, not demonizing them, but seeing in them instruments of Providence for the renewal of ossified order. The fall of the Ming and the rise of the Manchus are presented not as a catastrophe, but as a natural dynastic transition, an element of historical order. Moreover, he notes that Christianity and the Jesuit mission flourished even under Tatar rule. Hence the title of the third book of his *Historiae Sinarum Imperii: Sina Evangelicâ luce sub imperatoribus Tartaris illustrior mundo facta*.²⁷ This mode of

24 Martino Martini, *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (Amsterdam, 1655).

25 Álvaro Semedo, *Imperio de la China, i cultura evangelica en èl, por los religiosos de la Compañia de Jesus* (Madrid: Juan Sánchez, 1642).

26 Gabriel de Magalhães authored *Doze Excellencias da China* in Portuguese in 1668. It was subsequently translated into French and printed in 1688 as *Nouvelle Relation de la Chine* (Paris: Chez Claude Barbin au Palais sur le second Perron de la Sainte Chappelle, M. DC. LXXXVIII, 1688).

27 Which can be rendered into English: China Made More Renowned to the World by the Light of the Gospel under the Tartar Emperors ARSI, Jap. Sin. 103, f. 35r.

narration is almost providential in character – for Szpot, the history of China is not only a political process, but also part of God's plan. He presents it as a dynamic space, responsive to external impulses and capable of spiritual transformation.

In Szpot's narrative, one can also discern a Sarmatian approach to religions in imperial China. Beginning his remarks on the subject in *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*, he wrote:

The religion of the entire population, inhabiting the fifteen provinces – Beijing, Xantum, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian, Huguang, Jiangxi, Henan, Zhejiang, and Nanjing – had long ago been divided into three main sects, even before the arrival of the Christian religion in China, the Koran of Muhammad along with the Saracens, and the Tatar idol Foe Lam. The first was authentic and had prevailed in China since the time of the Flood. It belonged to the Scholars, although there are entire families who have preserved it, inheriting it from their ancestors untainted by any idolatrous superstition. The second was the sect of Taoist necromancers and magicians; the third was the idolatrous sect of the Oscan monks.²⁸

Faithful to his Jesuit education, Szpot then organizes Chinese religious and ethical traditions according to a scheme familiar from Christian comparative theology. He places first the “authentic” teaching of the scholars (*literati*), which he links to the most ancient history, reaching back, as he writes, to “the time after the Flood.” This is not, however, an analysis of Confucianism as a strictly philosophical-moral system; rather, it assigns it the role of the overarching norm that orders public life and custom – what, from his perspective, corresponds to the “religion of the scholars.” In this classification, one can see an echo of the way religious pluralism was understood in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth: as both a political fact and a hierarchical arrangement oriented toward Catholicism. Just as in Poland different confessions coexisted under the authority of the king, so in China different cults and schools of thought functioned under the emperor's authority, while the primacy of the scholars' teaching – which Szpot interpreted as dominant – was maintained.

There are many more such comparisons and examples in the works of Tomasz Szpot, and the recurring pattern of combining description with interpretation, knowledge with moral evaluation, allows us to see in his writing something more than a mere account of the Far East. Tomasz

28 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 3r.

Szpot's oeuvre is not only descriptive; it is also a theological and political reflection. It blends historical narrative with preaching and moral discourse. His Sarmatism was not a lifestyle, but a way of understanding the world: a borderland sensibility, a readiness for dialogue, and moral responsibility toward the community. His love of order, combined with Christian universalism, makes Szpot surprisingly close to the modern notion of a borderland humanist. In an era when the Orient was either idealized or demonized, Tomasz Szpot chose a third path: one of empathetic understanding, rooted in the experience of multiculturalism. For this reason, his work should be read not only as a compendium of knowledge about China, but also as an original Sarmatian reflection on history, morality, and the Christian mission in the North East Asia.

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