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Bridging Worlds: Visions of China and East Asia in Antonio Possevino's SJ *Bibliotheca Selecta* and Tomasz Szpot Dunin's SJ Writings on China¹

**Mosty między światami: Wizje Chin i Azji
Wschodniej w *Bibliotheca Selecta* Antonia
Possevina SJ i pismach o Chinach Tomasza
Szpota Dunina SJ**

Abstract

The text compares Antonio Possevino and Tomasz Szpot Dunin as two Jesuits united by one major idea: the planning and description of Christian missions in Asia, especially China. Possevino developed a global Jesuit vision in *Bibliotheca Selecta*, where defense of Catholic orthodoxy was combined with attention to Japan and other parts of the world. The author

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argues that this was both an ideological framework and a practical missionary project, shaped by realism and the need for proper preparation. Writing about a century later, Szpot Dunin focused directly on China, creating a historical and cultural account of Jesuit missions and emphasizing Alessandro Valignano as organizer, strategist, and man of prayer. The main conclusion is that Szpot's work represents the fulfillment of the plan first outlined by Possevino: from a broad vision of world evangelization to a detailed interpretation of China. The author suggests that this was a remarkably coherent and long-term Jesuit strategy, whose importance was not diminished by the fact that it was never fully embraced by the Church and Europe of the time.

Keywords: Possevino, Szpot Dunin, Japanese missions, Chinese missions, Jesuit missions, *Bibliotheca Selecta*

Abstrakt

Tekst porównuje Antonia Possevina i Tomasza Szpota Dunina jako dwóch jezuitów, których łączyła jedna wielka idea: planowanie i opisywanie chrystianizacji Azji, zwłaszcza Chin. Possevino tworzył wizję globalnej misji jezuitów w dziele *Bibliotheca Selecta*, gdzie obok obrony katolicyzmu przed protestantyzmem ważne miejsce zajmowały Japonia i inne kraje świata. Autor pokazuje, że u Possevina była to zarówno konstrukcja ideowa, jak i praktyczny projekt misyjny, oparty na realizmie i potrzebie odpowiedniego przygotowania misji. Szpot Dunin, piszący około sto lat później, rozwijał już wprost temat Chin, budując historyczno-kulturowy obraz misji jezuickich i podkreślając rolę Alessandra Valignana jako organizatora, stratega i człowieka modlitwy. Wnioskiem płynącym z tekstu jest to, że dzieło Szpota stanowi realizację wcześniejszego planu nakreślonego przez Possevina: od ogólnej wizji ewangelizacji świata do szczegółowego opisu i interpretacji Chin. Autor sugeruje, że była to wyjątkowo spójna i długofalowa strategia jezuitów, której znaczenia nie osłabia fakt, że nie została w pełni przyjęta przez ówczesny Kościół i Europę.

Słowa kluczowe: Possevino, Szpot Dunin, misje japońskie, misje chińskie, misje jezuickie, *Bibliotheca Selecta*

Antonio Possevino, a Jesuit and papal legate, arrived in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with a project that from a contemporary perspective may appear utopian: he sought to reconcile the interests of the Commonwealth and Muscovy in pursuit of a broader vision of the Church and Europe. In the Polish historical perspective, this mediatory program was perceived as a naive faith in promises, whereas the experience of the eastern frontier underscored the necessity of negotiating from

a position of strength. Jan Matejko's painting *Stefan Batory pod Pskowem* (*Stefan Batory at Pskov*) visualizes this ambivalence: the central, black silhouette of the Jesuit cassock is frequently interpreted as a dark stain on the canvas, symbolizing the problematic role of the mediator².

This specifically Polish perception of Possevino, which emphasizes his diplomatic activity and its political consequences, remains largely unknown outside national historiography. Only a deeper study of his extensive intellectual and missionary legacy enables a reevaluation of this perspective within the broader context of global evangelization. Nearly a century later, the work of Tomasz Szpot-Dunin, focused almost exclusively on China, fulfills the need for a detailed study of the East outlined by Possevino.

Despite their differences – a diplomat with a global horizon contrasted with an archival scholar – both figures share a hallmark of the Jesuit formation of the era: a clear sense of purpose, subordinating intellectual labor to a long-term missionary project. The article analyzes the visions of China and East Asia in Possevino's *Bibliotheca Selecta* and Szpot-Dunin's writings as two stages of this coherent, enduring strategy of “bridging worlds.”

***Bibliotheca Selecta* – to select and to embrace the whole world**

It is difficult to encompass the vast scope of Antonio Possevino's activities. Alongside diplomatic missions, he became renowned for creating a Jesuit compendium entitled *Bibliotheca Selecta*.³ The work arose in response to threats to Catholic orthodoxy posed by Protestant and Reformation writings, particularly those of Conrad Gesner.⁴

Bibliotheca Selecta had an encyclopedic and bibliographical character, covering theology, history, the natural sciences, philosophy, and other domains of humanistic learning, in line with the pedagogical principles

2 Antoni Maśliński, “Obrazy Matejki w świetle metody ikonograficznej,” *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 17 (1969): 30.

3 Antonio Possevino, *Bibliotheca selecta de ratione studiorum ad disciplinas & ad salutem omnium gentium procurandam*, vol. 2 (Romae: Typographia Apostolica Vaticana, 1593).

4 Paul Nelles, “Reading and Memory in the Universal Library: Conrad Gessner and the Renaissance Book,” in *Ars Reminiscendi: Mind and Memory in Renaissance Culture*, eds. Donald Beecher and Grant Williams (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 150–151.

of the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum*. It served as a model for Catholic libraries. Often regarded simply as a handbook or bibliographical guide, the work was, as J. P. Donnelly noted, also constructed around Possevino's vision of global evangelization.⁵

The first volume consisted of six books devoted to approaches toward various Christian confessions and peoples practicing other religions, arranged to illustrate their proximity to Catholicism. The structure divided groups into the faithful of Orthodoxy, Christian sects, and opponents such as Protestants or atheists.

Texts also addressed non-Christian religions, including Judaism, Islam, and Asian traditions, with Japan receiving particular emphasis. Two extensive books were dedicated to Japan, presented as a catechism authored by Alessandro Valignano.⁶ Exceptional in size and detail, the catechism followed the structure of a Christian apology. It opened with a refutation of Japanese Buddhist teachings and concluded with an exposition of Christian doctrine, including the Decalogue, sacraments, salvation history, and eschatology.

Possevino's selection of Valignano's catechism was both ideological and missionary. Its inclusion highlighted the importance of Jesuit missions in Asia and the political and cultural challenges faced by missionaries. At the same time, it mirrored debates within the order surrounding *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood"), a principle Possevino opposed.⁷ He advocated openness to ethnic diversity as a condition for global evangelization.

Thus, the construction of *Bibliotheca Selecta* was not merely informational. It functioned as an ideological project, promoting both the Jesuit mission of world evangelization and internal debate within the order.

Possevino and China – the next stage

As it was mentioned *Bibliotheca Selecta* represented Possevino's ideological plan. Yet it must be remembered that this Jesuit diplomat – though

5 John Patrick Donnelly, "Antonio Possevino's Plan for World Evangelization," *The Catholic Historical Review* 74/2 (1988): 179–198.

6 Alessandro Valignano, *Catechismus Christianae Fidei, in Quo Veritas Nostrae Religionis Ostenditur, Sectae Japonenses Confutantur* (Olyssipone: Excudebat Antonius Riberius, 1586).

7 Radu Cucuteanu, "Identitary Avatars: Antonio Possevino, S.J., and the Jews during the Post-Tridentine Period," *Studia Judaica* 22 (2017): 97.

he had far-reaching visions – also sought real ways of bringing them into effect.

Possevino was a realist, especially when it came to organizing missions. He knew what they required to begin at all. His realism is evident in his reflections on the material and institutional prerequisites of overseas missions, where he emphasized the indispensability of logistical, political, and social support:

Indeed, those who were sent to the Indies under the protection of kings, and especially by the mandate of the Apostolic See – if they lacked sailors, ships, rowers, soldiers, food, clothing, books, ports, and houses – what could they possibly do among those savage peoples without miracles and the gift of tongues? Or how could they sustain themselves without magistrates and security?⁸

Here he shows two approaches: some ignored “human necessities” and perished, while others accepted reality – and from Florida to the Philippines, through China and Japan, these were the ones who succeeded.

Possevino died decades before the birth of Szpot, yet he foreshadowed his work. In *Bibliotheca Selecta* he wrote:

As for the Chinese, since until now their history has been less known among us, one can now say: the whole matter requires a proper commentary, which – with God’s help – will one day come to light.⁹

This was not the vision of a recluse, nor the whim of a single man, but part of a broader plan intrinsic to the nature of the order. Possevino knew that whoever the future author might be, the evangelization of China required such a study.

When describing the kingdom, he speaks of its fifteen provinces, frequent invasions, the variety of settlements from great cities to countless hamlets, its climate, natural resources, plants and fauna. Then comes a statement – perhaps uttered without full awareness, yet bearing historical weight: “And this nation, which in itself is like paradise on earth, requires nothing from the outside for its pleasures.”¹⁰

This comparison was made at a time when the first serious difficulties were arising for the Japanese missions: political tensions, possible changes in government policy, and reactions to the expanding influence

8 Possevino, *Bibliotheca selecta*, 451.

9 *Ibidem*, 453.

10 *Ibidem*, 453.

of Christianity and its foreign connections. In this perspective, Japan appeared to him as a more important and more accessible mission market than China. It is a testimony shaped by the time in which he wrote and acted.

Dunin Szpot – China in the spotlight

There is no need to discuss the figure of Thomas Dunin Szpot in detail, as comprehensive scholarly studies of his life and intellectual legacy already exist. Particularly noteworthy is the work of Łukasz Burkiewicz and Andrzej Wadas, whose research has firmly established the importance of Dunin Szpot's contributions to early modern sinology and the history of Jesuit missions in East Asia. It is, however, worthwhile to highlight a few comparative aspects in relation to Possevino. The contrast is striking: Szpot's writings focus exclusively on China – constituting a fragment of a global question, yet one considerably broader than the corresponding sections in the *Bibliotheca Selecta*. Written almost exactly a century later, Szpot's work reflects not only chronological distance but also a distinct conceptual orientation. Rather than adopting Possevino's catechetical-pedagogical framework, Szpot develops a historical and cultural narrative grounded in sources documenting the Chinese missions. The missionary instruments that appear in his work are there by virtue of the subject matter, not as part of a systematically elaborated doctrine.

It is significant that Szpot wrote during Japan's period of isolation, which lends particular force to his observations – especially when he recalls Francis Xavier's words that Japan might embrace Christianity if China were to accept it first.¹¹ Such a remark reveals how missionaries gradually learned to grasp the cultural and mental hierarchies of East Asia, where the acceptance of new religious ideas was always conditioned. In Possevino, this theme is far weaker, showing a difference in their understanding of how religious ideas spread in the region.

Against this backdrop, the figure of Alessandro Valignano stands out strongly, mentioned by Szpot in nearly ten substantial passages. These are not passing references, but connected to crucial moments in the history of the mission. Valignano appears as the Visitor of Japan and China, a leader who gave direction to Jesuit activity. He played a central role in opening China itself to missionary work, and his decision to send the

11 Thomae Dunin-Szpot, *Historiae Sinarum Imperii*; Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Jap. Sin. 102, f. 79r.

first fathers – such as Ruggieri – laid the foundations for future Jesuit presence in the Middle Kingdom.

The text further highlights him as an organizer whose returns from Japan and carefully planned strategies redirected missionary work onto a lasting course. The author speaks of his “care and prudence” (“cura et prudentia”), through which “the wishes of Saint Francis, the Apostle of India, were fulfilled, as the East beheld them”.¹² In this matter, Szpot aligns with the spirit of Possevino, who, in formulating rhetorical recommendations for Jesuit letter writers, emphasized the importance of “prudentia” (wisdom) surpassing the merits of style.¹³ Valignano thus appears not through a single heroic gesture, but through longterm and deliberate preparation of a coherent strategy.

At the same time, Szpot emphasizes his spiritual side. Valignano was a man of prayer, seeking God’s help in moments of crisis. This completes his portrait as not only an organizer and strategist, but also a profound Christian, for whom mission was an act of obedience. In Szpot’s account, Valignano emerges both as a key political thinker and as the embodiment of missionary realism that gave historical shape to Francis Xavier’s dream of evangelizing Asia.

Possevino and Szpot – two works one idea

In Possevino’s work we see a disruption of proportions in favor of including the powerful catechism for the Japanese authored by Alessandro Valignano.¹⁴ The Visitor is a point of reference for the author of the *Bibliotheca Selecta*, and the proportion clearly speaks of the importance of the Japanese missions in the 1590s.¹⁵

Szpot writes repeatedly about Valignano’s role in relation to the missions – especially about his function as Mission Visitor to Japan, but

12 *Ibidem*, f. 79v.

13 Grant Boswell, “Letter Writing among the Jesuits: Antonio Possevino’s Advice in the *Bibliotheca Selecta* (1593),” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66 (2003): 252.

14 Linda Zampol D’Ortia, “Alessandro Valignano, Catecismo da fé cristá, no qual se contém de modo fácil e claro a verdade da nossa sancta fé christá,” *Bulletin of Portuguese Japanese Studies* 4 (2018): 19; Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 140.

15 The exact strategy behind Possevino’s decision to include the catechism in *Bibliotheca Selecta* was presented in Paweł F. Nowakowski, “Wątek japoński w *Bibliotheca Selecta* Antonia Possevina SJ i jego związek z sytuacją misji jezuickich,” in *Antonio Possevino SJ (1533–1611). Życie i dzieło na tle epoki*, red. D. Quirini-Popławska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Akademii Ignatianum w Krakowie, 2012), 567–584.

also about his contribution to the Japanese embassy to Rome and to the management of the human resources of the order in organizing missions in China and Japan. For understandable reasons, he only briefly mentions the Japanese dimension of Valignano's activity, focusing instead on his relationships with Jesuit missionaries in China.

What Szpot could not see – and what, it seems, he did not notice – was the feedback effect, that is, for example, the influence of Alessandro Valignano's Japanese experiences on the method of evangelization in China. Such a connection between Valignano's Japanese catechism and Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) was demonstrated by Thierry Maynard in 2013.¹⁶ Ricci's treatise was published about ten years after the *Bibliotheca Selecta*.

We know that Szpot was interested in Japan and also wrote its history, as well as a work on Japanese martyrs. However, the historical moment in which he created was already one in which the hopes placed by Possevino and Valignano had to be put aside. The Chinese environment, therefore, became the primary one – with the whole discussion about the mistakes made in Japan and those issues that could not be influenced despite great hopes.

The beginnings of ethnographic descriptions in the *Bibliotheca Selecta* find their development in Szpot's works – from mentions of the Great Wall through clothing used to spiritual culture.

In the field of Sinology, Szpot fulfills what Possevino had outlined a hundred years earlier in his grand evangelizing project. Here, we can see consequences and the pursuit of a defined direction – so Szpot's work should be considered in this broader context, just as Maynard demonstrated the links between Ricci's Chinese catechism and Valignano's Japanese catechism.

In comparing the two works, one can see the implementation of a single plan – an exceptionally enduring evangelizing idea and a well-designed strategy. The fact that church and European secular authorities could not be persuaded to embrace it does not diminish the uniqueness and significance of this plan. It is hard to say whether the Church, the Jesuit order, and the Western world today have even one idea that is equally well thought out and carried out. I suspect they do not.

16 Thierry Meynard, "The Overlooked Connection between Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* and Valignano's *Catechismus Japonensis*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40 (2013): 303–322.

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