Ministry of Science and Higher Education
Republic of Poland

NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANITIES

Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum
The Ignatianum Philosophical Yearbook
Vol. 32, No. 1 (2026), s. 235–248
PL ISSN 2300–1402
DOI: 10.35765/rfi.2026.3201.14

Hanna Wadas

ORCID: 0000-0002-3399-6233
Ignatianum University in Cracow

Maximus inter maximos Imperatores. The Idealisation of the Kangxi Emperor in the Account of Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot SJ[1]

Maximus inter maximos Imperatores. Idealizacja cesarza Kangxi w relacji Tomasza Ignacego Dunina Szpota SJ

Abstract

The article analyses the image of the Kangxi Emperor (1661–1722) in the account of the Polish Jesuit Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot preserved in the manuscript with the shelfmark Jap. Sin. 111. The aim of the study is to examine the way in which the ruler is portrayed in Jesuit missionary

1 The quotation is taken from the manuscript of Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot. In full it reads as follows: "[Camhi–H.W.] maximus inter maximos Imperatores, quos Sina habuit dictus fuerit." ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, f. 6r. 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.

literature and to identify the mechanisms leading to his idealisation. Drawing on reports of missionaries active at the Qing court, Szpot presents the emperor as a monarch endowed with the qualities of an ideal ruler: extraordinary memory, intellectual acuity, a love of learning, and the ability to govern the state with prudence. An important element of this narrative is also Kangxi's interest in European sciences and the activities of Jesuits – especially Ferdinand Verbiest and Thomas Pereira – who served as his teachers in mathematics, astronomy, and music. An analysis of Szpot's text demonstrates that this description fits into the characteristic pattern of missionary accounts that tended to idealise rulers favourable to the activities of the Jesuits.

Key words: Kangxi Emperor, Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot SJ, Jesuit missionaries in China, idealisation of the ruler.

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje obraz cesarza Kangxi (1661–1722) w relacji polskiego jezuity Tomasza Ignacego Dunina Szpota zachowanej w rękopisie o sygnaturze Jap. Sin. 111. Celem pracy jest ukazanie sposobu przedstawiania władcy w jezuickim piśmiennictwie misyjnym oraz mechanizmów prowadzących do jego idealizacji. Szpot, opierając się na relacjach misjonarzy działających na dworze Qingów, kreśli wizerunek cesarza jako monarchy obdarzonego cechami władcy doskonałego: niezwykłą pamięcią, bystrością umysłu, umiłowaniem nauki oraz zdolnością do roztropnego kierowania państwem. Istotnym elementem tej narracji jest także zainteresowanie cesarza Kangxi naukami europejskimi oraz działalność jezuitów – zwłaszcza Ferdinanda Verbiesta i Thomasa Pereiry – którzy pełnili funkcję jego mistrzów w zakresie matematyki, astronomii i muzyki. Analiza tekstu Szpota pokazuje, że opis ten wpisuje się w charakterystyczny dla relacji misyjnych model idealizowania władców przychylnych działalności jezuitów.

Słowa klucze: cesarz Kangxi, Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot SJ, misjonarze jezuiccy w Chinach, idealizacja władcy

One of the central elements of the missionary strategy of the Society of Jesus in the early modern period lay in its effort to shape societies through their political and intellectual elites. The Jesuits operated on the assumption that the conversion – or at least the goodwill – of the ruler might open the way to a broader diffusion of Christianity among his subjects. This modus operandi, observable across different parts of the world, found particularly clear expression in the Jesuit missions of East Asia. Within this hierarchical vision of social order, a decisive role

was assigned to the monarch, whose disposition, in the eyes of the missionaries, could tip the balance between the success and the failure of their evangelising enterprise.

In Jesuit historical and moral reflection, exemplary rulers – judged both negatively and positively – played a central role. Figures such as Sardanapalus and Nero functioned as classical exempla of tyranny and the moral corruption of power. Set against them were idealised monarchs, who in Jesuit writings were presented as models of the Christian ruler: just, prudent, and attentive to the common good. Among these figures was Louis XIV,[2] and in the context of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sigismund III Vasa.[3] This conception of authority, however, has a much older genealogy and reaches back to the Christian historiographical tradition, in which the ideal monarch was portrayed as an instrument of Divine Providence. A classical example of such a narrative remains Eusebius of Caesarea's *Vita Constantini,* in which Emperor Constantine the Great is presented as a ruler chosen by God to fulfil His designs.[4]

Similar mechanisms of idealising the ruler may also be observed in the medieval historiographical tradition of Central Europe. In his *Cronica et gesta ducum sive principum Polonorum*, Gallus Anonymous portrays Bolesław the Brave as an almost exemplary monarch – powerful, just, and capable of ensuring order within the realm. In his account of the reign, he emphasises such qualities as courage, generosity, concern for the Church, and the ability to maintain unity and stability in the kingdom. In this way, a characteristic feature of premodern historiography

2 The motif of the ideal monarch also appears in the work of the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730). Two of his works from 1697, dedicated respectively to Louis XIV and to Louis, Duke of Burgundy, and his consort, belong to the Jesuit tradition of presenting the monarch as a model of perfect rulership: Joachim Bouvet, *Portrait historique de l'empereur de la Chine, présenté au roy* (Paris: Estienne Michallet, 1697); *idem*, *L'Estat présent de la Chine, en figures. Dédié à Monseigneur le Duc & à Madame la Duchesse de Bourgogne* (Paris: Pierre Giffart, 1697). The strong attachment of French Jesuits active in China to the French monarchy is also evidenced by the example of Joseph-Marie Amiot, who resided in the Middle Kingdom from 1751 and – according to the account of his confrère Louis Pfister – died in 1793 of grief upon hearing of the execution of Louis XVI; see: Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine, 1552–1773*, vol. II: *XVIIIe siècle* (Chang-hai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1934), 837–860.

3 On the ideal of the Christian monarch in the context of the reign of Sigismund III Vasa, see: Piotr Skarga, *Kazania sejmowe*, ed. Stanisław Kot (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1925), in which a Polish Jesuit develops the concept of royal authority as established by God and obliged to care for the common good of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

4 *The Life or the Blessed Emperor Constantine, in Four Books, from 306 to 337 A. D. by Eusebius Pamphilus* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1845).

comes into focus: the ruler appears not merely as a political actor, but as a moral point of reference for the entire community.[5]

In the Middle Kingdom, an essential element of the religious and political order was the concept of the sage-ruler, rooted in the classical Confucian tradition. In Chinese historiography, the earliest emperors were portrayed as ideal rulers who, through wisdom and moral excellence, were able to ensure harmony within the state. This mode of interpreting China's past was further developed, among others, by Martino Martini (1614–1661) in his work *Sinicae historiae decas prima*. In this work, the Italian Jesuit not only systematised the legendary accounts of such emperors as Fuxi (Chinese: 伏羲) and Huangdi (Chinese: 黃帝), but also presented them as historico-symbolic figures whose activity expressed a striving for order, virtue, and the harmony of the world. Martini interpreted this tradition not merely as a testimony to ancient wisdom, but also as an expression of knowledge accessible through the light of reason, in accordance with the Christian concept of natural theology.[6]

A similar understanding of authority also developed within the sphere of Neo-Confucian Korean culture. Studies of the monarchy of the Chosŏn dynasty emphasise the significance of the idea of the king as a moral guardian of both social and cosmic order. He was regarded above all as an ethical model for the entire community, whose personal virtue and continual self-cultivation were believed to have a direct impact on the well-being of his subjects and the stability of the state. This concept was rooted in the Confucian model of the sage-ruler, whose task was not only to govern, but above all to maintain harmony between the moral and the social order. This idea is particularly evident during the reign of King Yŏngjo (Kor. 영조; Hanja: 英祖), the twenty-first ruler of the Yi dynasty, who reigned from 1724 to 1776. As JaHyun Kim Haboush has shown, in eighteenth-century Korea his image was consciously shaped in accordance with the Confucian ideal of the sage-ruler. Yŏngjo consistently drew upon the rhetoric of moral governance, presenting his reign

5 Gall Anonim, *Kronika polska*, trans. Roman Grodecki, ed. Marian Plezia (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1989).

6 In *Sinicae historiae decas prima*, Martino Martini intended to present the history of the Chinese emperors – from legendary rulers such as Fuxi (ca. 2852–2737 BC) to his own time, that is, the reign of the first emperor of the Manchu Qing dynasty, Shunzhi (1638–1661). Ultimately, however, he brought his narrative only to the end of the Western Han dynasty, concluding it with the reign of Emperor Ai (7–1 BC): Martino Martini, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 4, t. 1-2, *Sinicae Historiae Decas Prima*, ed. Franco Demarchi, Giuliano Bertuccioli a cura di Federico Masini, Louisa M. Paternicò (Università degli Studi di Trento, 2010).

as an effort to restore harmony within the state after a period of intense factional conflict, which in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had deeply divided the elite of scholar-officials. In court narratives, he was portrayed as a monarch striving to overcome factional divisions through an appeal to the principles of the Confucian moral order. In this context, his actions – both in the symbolic sphere and in concrete administrative reforms – were interpreted as an attempt to realise the classical Confucian model of governance, in which the authority of the ruler rests not only on dynastic legitimacy, but above all on personal virtue, moral charisma, and the capacity to maintain social and political harmony within the state.[7]

In the case of China, particular attention among early modern historians has been drawn to the figure of the Kangxi Emperor (Ch. 康熙), who in numerous Jesuit accounts was portrayed as an exceptionally capable ruler and one open to knowledge. This is likewise emphasised by Jonathan Spence in his studies devoted to the Qing period. Kangxi reigned for an exceptionally long time – from 1661 to 1722 – and his rule ranks among the longest in the history of the Middle Kingdom. In modern historiography, it is often noted that this period brought the empire a significant degree of political stability and a consolidation of the administrative apparatus. Spence further observes that Kangxi is regarded as one of the most outstanding rulers in Chinese history, and that his reign is frequently compared with those of such European monarchs as Louis XIV[8] and Peter the Great. One of the most characteristic features of the emperor was his insatiable intellectual curiosity and his wide-ranging scholarly interests. He was particularly engaged by such fields as astronomy, mathematics, mechanics, cartography, and medicine, and his court became a centre of numerous scientific undertakings carried out

7 JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea. Yŏngjo and the Politics of Sagacity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1–11.

8 The comparison between the Kangxi Emperor and Louis XIV is entirely justified, as both rulers may be regarded as parallel examples of absolute monarchs, embodying the apogee of the power of the Qing dynasty and the French monarchy. Both ascended the throne at a very young age and reigned for an exceptionally long time, while also acting as patrons of science and the arts. Kangxi showed a keen interest in Western astronomy and medicine and extended his protection to the Jesuits active at the imperial court, whereas Louis XIV supported the activities of French missions in Asia. Both also conducted numerous military campaigns and were proficient in several languages, although their styles of governance and modes of royal representation differed markedly: Kangxi was regarded as a restrained and frugal ruler, while Louis XIV was renowned for his ostentatious splendour and the elaborate ceremonial of his court. See further: Philippe Mansel, *King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV* (London: Penguin Books, 2022).

by scholars gathered around him. At the same time, he remained faithful to the traditional model of the Confucian monarch, who, as the "Son of Heaven," fulfilled the role of intermediary between the cosmic order and the human world. In this symbolic capacity, the emperor stood at the centre of the political and ritual order of the empire, combining the direction of state administration with the performance of numerous ceremonial duties associated with the cult of Heaven and dynastic tradition.[9]

The reign of the Kangxi Emperor also coincided with a period of intense contacts between China and Europe. Numerous Jesuits were active at his court, serving as astronomers, cartographers, physicians, and technical advisers. The emperor held their knowledge in high esteem and made use of it in various state undertakings, including the reform of the calendar and in cartographic projects.[10] These contacts were reflected in numerous European accounts of the emperor and his court. In many of them, Kangxi was portrayed as a prudent ruler, curious about the world and favourably disposed towards scholars, which contributed to the consolidation of a distinctly idealised image of him in Jesuit writings.[11]

9 Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China. Self-portrait of K'ang-hsi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), XI–XXV.

10 Already Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), during his missionary activity in the Middle Kingdom, understood that the path to the imperial court lay through scientific expertise, especially in the fields of mathematics and astronomy, upon which matters of the calendar and the ordering of the state depended. The effectiveness of this strategy was confirmed by the work of his successors – Adam Schall von Bell (1591–1666) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) – who, under the Qing dynasty, particularly during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, held high positions in the Imperial Astronomical Bureau. The emperor's trust was also manifested in the Kangxi Edict of Toleration (1692), which permitted the free propagation of Christianity and may be interpreted as a political and cultural confirmation of the effectiveness of Ricci's method. For more on the strategy of the Italian Jesuit, based on gaining the trust of Chinese elites through scientific competence, see: Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham–Boulder–New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011).

11 Spence, *Emperor of China*, XVIII–XIX. In the context of the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, the study by Jonathan D. Spence devoted to the emperor's relationship with Ts'ao Yin – an official belonging to the circle of so-called bondservants – is also of particular interest. Spence demonstrates that Kangxi employed them as trusted officials of the Imperial Household, entrusting them with important tasks in the provinces and making use of the information they provided about the situation in the empire. In this way, the ruler was able to exercise control over the state apparatus without relying solely on the formal structures of the bureaucracy. This system reinforced the personal character of imperial authority and allowed him to depend on a circle of loyal collaborators directly connected to the Imperial Household. Such relationships present Kangxi as a ruler actively engaged in administrative affairs and consciously constructing a network of trusted agents to implement his policies. See further: Jonathan Spence, *Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-hsi Emperor. Bondservant and Master* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1965).

This article argues that Szpot's portrayal of Kangxi should be understood not merely as descriptive, but as a deliberate rhetorical construction embedded in Jesuit strategies of political accommodation. An interesting example of such a portrayal of the emperor may be found in the manuscript of Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot, catalogued as Jap. Sin. 111 in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI). The Polish Jesuit based his account primarily on reports provided by his confrères residing at the Chinese court. He explicitly notes that he drew upon the letters of Father Antoine Thomas (1644–1709), as well as upon a characterization of the emperor composed by Father Joachim Bouvet, who, after leaving Beijing in 1693, brought his description of the ruler to Europe – first to Paris, and subsequently to Rome. Szpot collected these materials and supplemented them with additional information drawn from later missionary correspondence. On this basis, he composed the first part of his manuscript, entitled *De virtutibus & studiis Europaeis imperatoris Sinarum Camhi*, in which he focuses on presenting the virtues and scholarly interests of the Kangxi Emperor. At the outset, he offers a brief description of the ruler's person, cast in a panegyrical tone:

> The Emperor Camhi, or Canghi [Kangxi – HW], had as his father the most illustrious prince Xunchi [Shunzhi – HW], the first emperor of China from among the Tatars known as the Manchus. The very name Camhi signifies "peaceful", a meaning he himself confirmed through his deeds, restoring peace both in China and in Tartary, within the realm and beyond its borders. Born of such a father, Camhi received – alongside other gifts of body and fortune – also the distinguished qualities of character with which he had been endowed by nature. In his person there was never anything that the watchful eye of an observer might deem unworthy of so exalted a throne, to which he had been raised upon the death of his father while still a boy not yet ten years of age. Upon reaching manhood, his stature was between the moderate and the tall, and his whole bearing seemed to breathe a royal and majestic spirit. All the features of his face were in harmonious proportion: his eyes keen, lively, and somewhat larger than those of most Tatars; his nose likewise slightly aquiline, gently curved at the tip; and, in sum, his whole countenance seemed to address the beholder with a certain grace worthy of an emperor. Within such a body there dwelt that great soul – would that it might one day be Christian! – which we here describe. Divine generosity endowed it with a felicitous memory, a keen and penetrating intellect, a spirit prepared for every turn of fortune, and a capacity most suited to the undertaking and execution of designs; and – what in a ruler of so vast an empire is particularly worthy of admiration – an inexhaustible

> zeal and a desire for the pursuit of knowledge amid the many burdens of state [trans. Hanna Wadas][12].

After presenting the emperor's appearance and offering a brief, distinctly idealising characterisation of his person, Dunin–Szpot proceeds to describe the ruler's military and hunting skills. He emphasises the extraordinary proficiency of the Son of Heaven in the use of various kinds of weapons – both traditional and more recent, known in China and in Europe – which elicited admiration even among the highest dignitaries of the court and seasoned military commanders. Particular attention is also given to the emperor's skill in horsemanship, an ability – he notes – highly esteemed in Manchu culture. In Szpot's account, Kangxi, from an early age, distinguished himself by courage, confidence, and remarkable dexterity both in riding and in the handling of weapons on horseback.[13] The description of these abilities is cast in a distinctly hyperbolic tone, characteristic of the idealised image of the ruler:

> He makes use of a bow which none of the dignitaries is able to draw; he, however, not only bends it with ease, but directs it with such skill that, whether on foot or on horseback – whether the horse stands still or gallops – he scarcely ever looses an arrow, with either his right or his left hand, that does not return having pierced its quarry, even when it is a bird in the swiftest flight [trans. Hanna Wadas].[14]

---

12 "Imperator Camhi vel Canghi Patrem habuit Principem Nobilissimum Xunchi primum Imperatorem Sinarum è Tartaris Mantchou dictis. Nomen ipsius Camhi, pacificum significat, quod ille factis ipsis pacificatâ domi forisque Sinâ et Tartariâ illustravit. Ex eo Patre nascendo Camhi cum alia Corporis et fortunae bona, tum indolem optimam à Natura sortitus est. Nihil in ipsius persona unquam comparuit, quod minus dignum tam insigni solio, in quod à Patre suo moriente nondum decennis puer assumptus fuit, observatur oculus invenisset, statura illi, dum in virum evasit, mediocrem inter et proceram media, isque totius Corporis habitus, qui Regium et augustum animum spirare videtur. Lineamenta vultûs omnia aptissime sibi cohaerentia: oculi acuti, vividi, ac caeteris plerisque Tartaris paulò grandiores, natus item aliquantum aduncus, et in acumen leniter inflexus: tota denique facies, gratias quasdam Imperatore dignas intuentibus loquitur. In tali Corpore domum sibi posuit magna illa anima, utinam aliquando Christiana! quam hic describimus: cui memoriam felicem, acre et perspicax ingenium, spiritus ad omnes aequè fortunae casus paratos, mentem suscipiendis atque promovendis consiliis aptissimam, quodvè prae caeteris mirandum est in tanti Imperii Principe ardorem et sitim, inter multiplices curas Imperii addiscendarum scientiarum inexplebilem Divina contulit liberalitas [manuscript transcription: Hanna Wadas]." ARSI, Jap. Sin 111, f. 1r–1v.

13 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, f. 1v–2r.

14 "Eo arcu utitur, quem nullus è primoribus curvare valeat, quem tamen ille et flectit facile, et tam dextrè dirigit, ut sive pedes, sive equo infidens, seu morante seu currente equo, dextrâ et sinistra, nunquam fere iagittam emittat, quae cum praeda confossa non

Tomasz Dunin Szpot further observes that, alongside these practical and technical accomplishments, the Kangxi Emperor earned distinction through his scholarly pursuits, which focused on the study of the Chinese classics:

> There is no kind of writing in China that he has not mastered; no branch of learning that he has not acquired in a most perfect manner; no book held in greater authority among Chinese scholars that he himself has not read, nor anything that he has ever read in them which he has not retained in memory. In the art of eloquence and of poetry, which flourishes in China both in the Chinese and in the Tatar language, he has attained such proficiency that no one employs these two tongues with greater refinement, nor passes sounder judgement on the works composed in either. All the works of Confucius, all those authentic books which the Chinese revere as sacred volumes, as well as the entire history, both Chinese and Tatar, he retains in his memory with such ease that nothing drawn from them remains unknown to him [trans. Hanna Wadas][15].

The Polish Jesuit also recounts an anecdote that brings into sharp relief the extraordinary memory of the "Son of Heaven." According to Szpot's account, this faculty was so highly developed that the emperor retained with effortless ease not only the books he had read, but also the people he had encountered and the information he had heard, preserving them in his memory even after the passage of many years:

> As for his memory – to say something further of it here – by means of which he mastered all the branches of learning, both Chinese and European, to which he devoted himself, it may without doubt be affirmed that there is nothing that he has once seen, heard, or read which he does not remember, and that together with even the smallest details, the persons, and their names, even if the greatest number of affairs were to distract his attention or though a very long time should have passed. This was experienced both

---

redeat ad ipsam etiam ex avibus pernicissimè volantibus [manuscript transcription: Hanna Wadas]." ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, f. 1v.

15 "Nullum apud Sinas genus est literarum, quod ille non calleat, nulla Scientia, quàm ille perfectè non possideat, nullus liber maioris inter Doctores Sinenses authoritatis, quem ipse non legerit, adeoque quae unquam in iis legisset non meminerit. Eloquentiae Poeticaeque artis, quae apud Sinas viget, tam lingua Sinica, quàm Tartarica, eam peritiam acquisivit, ut nemo illo cultuque utraque linguâ loquatur, nemo qui de illis operibus, quae utroque idiomate exarantur, meliùs iudicium et censuram ferat. Omnia Confutii Opera, omnes autographos illos libros, quos Sinae, tanquam Sacra Volumina venerantur, omnem historiam cum Sinicam tum Tartaricam eâ felicitate memoriae tenet, ut nihil eum, quidquid ex ipsis proferatur, lateat [manuscript transcription: Hanna Wadas]." Jap. Sin. 111, f. 2r.

> by our other Fathers (whom, when he saw them in the provinces during his visitations, he never allowed their names, the features of their faces, their stature, nor the words they had spoken in private conversation with him to escape his memory; so that, when he visited the same provinces a second time and our men came to greet him, he addressed each of them by name), as well as by Father Ferdinand Verbiest. For on one occasion, when he was accompanying the emperor on a journey to Tartary and a certain bird flew over them, its Flemish name, which Ferdinand then gave in response to the emperor's question, remained so fixed in his memory that, when after several years the emperor undertook the same journey again and a bird of the same kind flew over them, Ferdinand – who had almost forgotten his native tongue and therefore hesitated, not knowing what word to utter in reply to the ruler's question about the name of that bird – was instructed by the emperor himself. For he, with a smile, perceiving his hesitation, supplied the Flemish word by which [that bird – HW] was to be named [trans. Hanna Wadas].[16]

As Szpot relates, Ferdinand Verbiest is said on that occasion to have felt a certain embarrassment at the limitations of his own memory, and at the same time a sense of admiration for the singular generosity of God, who had endowed the emperor with such extraordinary abilities. By virtue of these gifts, the ruler was capable not only of governing so vast an empire, but – so the Flemish missionary believed – might also have contributed to the propagation of the Christian religion, both through his own example and among his subjects. Ferdinand Verbiest thus entertained the hope that, just as the emperor had not forgotten

16 "Et quantum ad memoriam ipsius, ut aliquid hîc de illa dicamus, attinet, quâ ille omnes scientias tum Sinicas tum Europaeas, quibus studuit possedit, illud proculdubio affirmari potest; ut nihil sit quod ille aut viderat semel aut audiverat, legeratvè, cuius ipse cum minimis etiam circumstantiis, personis, eorumque nominibus, quantalibet occupationum multitudo mentem distraxerit, aut quantumvis longum temporis intercesserit intervallum, non meminisset. Quod quidem cum alii Nostri Patres, (quos cum in Provinciis, dum eas visitabat, vidisset, nunquam eorum nominum quibus vocarentur, lineamentorum, et staturae corporis quae haberent, atque dictorum, quae in familiari colloquio cum ipso protulerint memoriam sibi passus est excidere, ita, ut cum secundò easdem Provincias lustrasset nostrique ad eum salutandum venissent proprio quemque nomine appellârit) tum Pater Ferdinandus Verbiest fuit expertus. Cum enim quodam tempore cum in Tartariam discedentem comitaretur, et quaedam Avis eos praetervolaret, illius nomen Belgicum, quod ipsi sciscitanti tum dixerat Ferdinandus, ita inhaesit memoriae, ut cum elapso aliquot annorum spatio, idem iter remetiretur Imperator, eiusdemque speciei Ales praetervolaret, oblito iam penè maternae linguae Ferdinando, ideoque cunctantae ac haerentae, quid ad Principis interrogationem vocabuli, quo vocaretur illa volucris proferret, ipse Imperator subridens ad eius cunctationem docuit, quomodo appellaretur prolato vocabulo Belgico" [manuscript transcription: Hanna Wadas]. ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, f. 2v–3r.

a single word once heard, he might in time also recall the efforts of the missionaries undertaken at his court, allowing the law of God to spread within that empire without hindrance. To this remarkable memory – Szpot emphasises – was joined a particular acuity of mind and maturity of judgement, by virtue of which the emperor possessed the ability to discern the truth even when it lay concealed. In Verbiest's view, this meant that, were the ruler to embrace Christianity, he might not only permit the free preaching of the Gospel, but also bring it about that the entire Chinese and Manchu empire would come under the "sweet yoke of Christ."[17]

In the further course of his account, Tomasz Dunin Szpot turns to the emperor's interest in the European sciences and to the role of the Jesuits, who served as his instructors in mathematics, astronomy, and music. As the Polish Jesuit relates, the ruler's zeal for knowledge in these fields was such that he chose Ferdinand Verbiest as his teacher. Under his guidance, over the course of some two years, he became acquainted with Euclid's *Elements*, the use of the principal mathematical instruments, as well as selected topics in geometry, statics, and astronomy. To this end, Verbiest prepared for the "Son of Heaven" special treatises addressing the more elementary topics, designed to facilitate the consolidation of the material; he also constructed and installed in the so-called Mathematical Tower (Turri Mathematica) new astronomical instruments for observing the movements of celestial bodies and phenomena such as eclipses. Soon thereafter, the Kangxi Emperor developed an interest in European music. Its principles were imparted to him by Thomas Pereira (1645–1708), who composed treatises on the subject in Chinese and oversaw the construction of appropriate instruments, through which he introduced the emperor to the principles of European harmony and the art of melodic composition.[18] These studies were, however, temporarily interrupted by the armed conflicts that shook the state during this period. Even so – as Szpot emphasises – the emperor continued to return to the knowledge he had acquired, gradually extending it as circumstances allowed, even amidst political turmoil. Once the fighting had ceased and

17 Lat. *suave iugum Christi*. A reference to the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 11:30): "Iugum enim meum suave est, et onus meum leve." In the King James Bible: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, fols. 3r–3v.

18 For a broader discussion of the activities of Thomas Pereira at the court of the Kangxi Emperor, especially in the transmission of knowledge of European music theory and the composition of musical treatises in Chinese, see: Sheryl Chow, "A Localised Boundary Object: Seventeenth–Century Western Music Theory in China", *Early Music History* 39 (2020): 75–113.

peace was restored in the empire, allowing both the ruler and his subjects to recover from the hardships of war, the Kangxi Emperor resumed his study of the European sciences with renewed zeal.[19]

The analysis of the manuscript demonstrates that the portrayal of Emperor Kangxi in the account of Tomasz Ignacy Dunin Szpot conforms to a model of ruler idealization characteristic of Jesuit literature. He is presented as a monarch endowed with an almost complete constellation of virtues associated with the ideal sovereign: exceptional memory, intellectual acuity, a marked devotion to learning, military capability, and the capacity to exercise prudent governance. This portrayal is distinctly panegyrical in character and reflects a broader tendency in missionary accounts, wherein rulers favourable to Jesuit activity were represented as near-ideal figures. It should further be noted that the first part of the manuscript Jap. Sin. 111 devoted to Emperor Kangxi comprises thirty-one folios, in which the Polish Jesuit recounts subsequent developments in his reign and examines various aspects of the governance of the Manchu ruler. In the present article, particular attention is devoted to those passages that foreground the virtues and attributes of the Chinese monarch, as it is precisely these that most fully illuminate the mechanism of idealization at work in the narrative. Consequently, in the light of the account, Emperor Kangxi emerges as an almost perfect ruler, whose virtues cohere into a harmonious whole, such that in his person – as the Polish Jesuit concludes – one may discern everywhere the presence of a great emperor:

> To this admirable zeal for the acquisition of knowledge in so great a ruler were joined other virtues as well, and in such concord and harmony that, whether one considers the art of governing, the care devoted to the management of his own household, or the diligence in mastering his emotions, one finds everywhere in his person a great emperor [trans. Hanna Wadas].[20]

The idealised image of Kangxi that emerges from Szpot's account is not simply a description, but a carefully shaped construction, one that draws upon a wider intellectual tradition. What we encounter here is not only a record of the emperor, but also a reflection of how early modern Jesuits made sense of non-European political authority by translating it

19 ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, f. 3v– 4r.

20 "Huic sciendi ardori mirando in tanto Principe, caeterae Virtutes respondebant, et quidem tanta consensione ac unione inter se, ut sive artem regnandi, sive domesticam regendae familiae curam, sive moderandorum suorum affectuum diligentiam in ipsius persona spectes, ibique magnum Imperatorem invenies [manuscript transcription: Hanna Wadas]." ARSI, Jap. Sin. 111, f. 5v.

into categories familiar to their own world. In this portrayal, the figure of Kangxi moves between two traditions: the Confucian vision of the sage-ruler, in which the authority exercised outwardly mirrors an inner discipline of wisdom, and a Western conviction that true sovereignty must be grounded in learning, as expressed in the Latin maxim that *rex illiteratus quasi asinus coronatus*.

Bibliography

Manuscripts

Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI)
Jap. Sin. 111

Printed sources

Bouvet Joachim, *L'Estat présent de la Chine, en figures. Dédié à Monseigneur le Duc & à Madame la Duchesse de Bourgogne* (Paris: Pierre Giffart, 1697).

Bouvet Joachim, *Portrait historique de l'empereur de la Chine, présenté au roy. Par le P. J. Bouvet, de la Compagnie de Jésus, Missionnaire de la Chine* (Paris: Estienne Michallet, 1697).

Martini Martino, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 4, t. 1-2, *Sinicae Historiae Decas Prima*, ed. Franco Demarchi, Giuliano Bertuccioli, a cura di Federico Masini, Luisa M. Paternicò (Università degli Studi di Trento, 2010).

Pfister Louis, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine, 1552–1773*, vol. II: *XVIIIe siècle* (Chang-hai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1934).

Skarga Piotr, *Kazania sejmowe*, ed. Stanisław Kot (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1925).

The Life or the Blessed Emperor Constantine, in Four Books, from 306 to 337 A. D. by Eusebius Pamphilus (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1845).

Books and monographs

Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J. Jesuit Missionary, Scientist, Engineer and Diplomat 1623–1688, ed. John W. Witek, *Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XXX* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994).

JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea. Yŏngjo and the Politics of Sagacity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

Mansel Philippe, *King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV* (London: Penguin Books, 2022).

Fontana Michela, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham–Boulder–New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011).

Piotrowicz Ludwik, *Kult panującego w starożytności*, wstęp i opracowanie naukowe Leszek Mrozewicz, *Klasycy Nauki Poznańskiej*, vol. 2 (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2006).
Spence Jonathan, *Emperor of China. Self-portrait of K'ang-hsi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).
Spence Jonathan, *Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-hsi Emperor. Bondservant and Master* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1965).

Journals

Chow Sheryl, "A Localised Boundary Object: Seventeenth – Century Western Music Theory in China", *Early Music History* 39 (2020): 75–113.

Chapters in monographs

Collani Claudia, "Kangxi's Mandate of Heaven and Papal Authority", in *Europe Meets China, China Meets Europe: The Beginnings of European-Chinese Scientific Exchange in the 17th Century*, ed. Shu-Jyuan Deiwiks, Bernhard Führer, Therese Geulen (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2014), 177–209.