Derek Masarella, ed. Translated by Joseph F. Moran. 

Sixteenth-century Jesuit literature and correspondence from the Japanese mission evokes a sense of triumph over religio-political adversity, and indeed the flourishing of the Society’s Asiatic flowers in the garden of God. It is arguably in Japan that a true sense of the Society’s globalism is substantiated. To this extent, such a context of conversational affirmation inspired Alessandro Valignano, Jesuit visitor to the East Indies, to co-ordinate a Japanese delegation to the European heart of Christianity between 1582 and 1590. Michael Chijiwa Seizaemon, Mancio Itō Sukemasu, Julian Nakaura, and Martin Hara, representing various ruling lords of the regions of Ōmura, Arima, and Bungo, embarked on what would be retrospectively referred to as the Japanese embassy to the Roman curia. Valignano pursued this venture in fulfillment of two key objectives: firstly, it would draw attention to the importance of the Japanese mission in an effort to increase political and economic support of the Jesuits; and secondly, it would “impress upon the four youths the glory and grandeur of the Christian religion, the majesty of the European rulers who had embraced it, the richness and splendour of Europe’s kingdoms” and the beauty of the arts that prospered within them (7). The boys’ presence in Portugal, Spain, and Italy was impressed on the minds of many Europeans, inspiring numerous accounts to be written.

In a masterful English translation of the De Missione Legatorum Iaponensium ad Romanam Curiam [A Dialogue Concerning the Mission of the Japanese Ambassadors to the Roman Curia], the late Joseph Moran brings to new readers one of the most important texts of intercultural contact in the sixteenth century. Published in 1590 as a translation of the boys’ personal writings into Latin by Duarte de Sande in Macao, the “Dialogue” takes the form of a Humanist colloquium. Throughout the thirty-four colloquia, Michael Chijiwa offers observations on European politics, war, religion, culture, and the arts, in response to questions asked by his cousins, Leo and Lino, who demonstrate great zeal in learning from the delegates’ experiences. Valignano saw further utility in publishing these first-hand accounts as demonstrated in the preface to the “Dialogue” in which he directly addresses the pupils of the Japanese seminaries. In effect, this colloquium completed his desired trinity of didactic texts: a catechism, a moral theological instruction, and this, a cultural guide, for “[t]here remained the need for some book to provide [them] with the instruction about European things, which are so closely linked with, and indeed in large part drawn from Christian devotion” (37).
The “Dialogue”’s intended place in the Japanese Jesuit educational curriculum proves an important point when considering the embassy’s experience of European cultural aesthetics, and the consequent dissemination of these experiences to the Japanese people. In this way, the text is laden with rich descriptions of theatrical and musical performances and offers early examples of comparative analyses of performative aesthetics between European and Japanese art forms. In Coimbra, Portugal, alone, there are references to four identifiable plays in one day, three of which relate to the celebration of the Japanese embassy in Europe. Moreover, there are numerous references to private plays in Milan, as well as musical performances, orations, and liturgical processions throughout Portugal, Spain, and Italy. To this extent, the “Dialogue” offers an interesting counterpoint to the performative chronology of the geographical journey the boys made across the European continent.

As a text intended for Japanese students, the unavoidable reality of Europe, as represented in the “Dialogue,” is one of selective projections of superiority. Michael Chijiwa claims: “I shall put aside my Japaneseness and pretend that I am worldly, a cosmopolitan, an inhabitant and citizen of the whole world [...] I judge and frankly declare that Europe is the most excellent of all the world [...] it stands out among all the other regions for its climate, for the abilities, the industry, and the nobility of its nations, for its organization of life and of government, and for the multiplicity of its arts” (445–6). In this light, the adept editorial work of Derek Massarella provides a well-researched socio-political context for the otherwise propagandist nature of the “Dialogue.” In so doing, many idealizations of the European state of religious unity, military procedure, and cultural life are deftly brought to a clearer historical reality in Massarella’s bountiful footnotes. These demonstrate an impressive knowledge of primary and secondary sources relating to the Japanese embassy and appropriately draw on the substantial body of Japanese academic work about this encounter. This latter point is of particular significance, for the Tenshō shōnen shisetsu (the Tenshō era boys’ embassy) has captured the imagination of Japanese academics, novelists, and artists since the mid-twentieth century, including an annotated Japanese rendering of the “Dialogue” in 1942. Massarella has successfully integrated these insights alongside those of their European counterparts to bring a broad perspective to this monumental translation. The volume is complimented by the incorporation of three modern maps illustrated by Daisy Fearns, as well as thirteen illustrations, including a selection of striking engravings by Abraham van Diepenbeeck from Corenlius Hazart’s Kerckelycke Historie van de Gheheele Wereldt (1667).