

Spiritual Saga: The Japanese Mission to Europe, 1582-1590

Michael Cooper, 1982

(An article from Francis Britto's *All about Francis Xavier*)

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On March 24, [1982] four 13-year-old boys, accompanied by a group of adults and youths, will leave from Nagasaki on a goodwill visit to Europe to re-enact a delegation that departed from Japan four-hundred years ago. The four boys were chosen from some 130 junior high-school students who applied from all parts of Kyushu.



1. A monument to the four adventurers

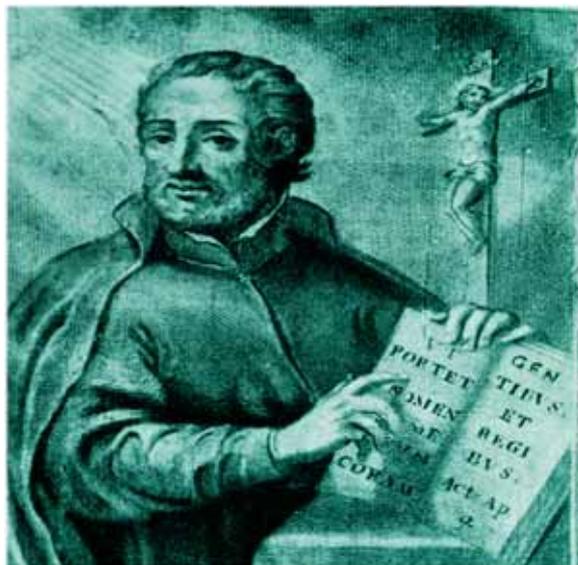
Their itinerary will take in Lisbon, Madrid, Florence and Rome, where they will be received in audience by the pope. During their stay in Europe the four boys will follow the footsteps of the sixteenth-century ambassadors as closely as possible. But there will be one major difference between the two expeditions. The original delegation spent eight-and-a-half years away from Japan, but next month's commemorative journey will last only two weeks.

On February 20, 1582, exactly four hundred years ago, the annual Portuguese trading ship, under the command of Captain-Major Ignacio de Lima, set sail from Nagasaki harbor. On board was the usual complement of merchants and sailors prepared to face the hardships and dangers of the long voyage back to Europe. Among the passengers were four Christian teen-age Japanese who were to tour Portugal, Spain and Italy, and in the course of their travels would set the whole of Europe talking about Japan. They were Mancio Itō, Michael Chijiwa, Martin Hara

and Julian Nakaura, and together they made up what is called in Japanese Tenshō Shōnen Shisetsu, or "The Boys' Mission of the Tenshō Period."

Christianity in Japan

Christianity had been introduced into Japan in 1549 and despite initial setbacks had made remarkable progress in Kyushu. By 1580 the number of Christians in the country was reckoned at 100,000, and this number included the three daimyo of Bungo, Ōmura, and Arima in Kyushu.



2. Alessandro Valignano

The Church, then, was well established when Fr. Alessandro Valignano, who was in Japan on a tour of inspection of the Jesuit mission, hit on the idea of sending a delegation to Rome on behalf of the three converted daimyo. As Valignano explained, the purpose of the expedition was twofold. In the first place, the arrival of the Japanese delegates, exotically clad in their kimono, would awaken European interest in Japan, and this would indirectly help to relieve the mission's pressing needs regarding manpower and money.

Secondly, during their carefully guided tour the members of the delegation could hardly fail to be impressed by the magnificent cathedrals, churches and palaces of Renaissance Europe, and on their return to Japan they would recount to their fellow countrymen the splendors of the West. As a result, the reputation of the Europeans would rise in Japan and the work of conversion would be made correspondingly easier.

Two boys of samurai stock was chosen as the official delegates—Mancio was to represent the powerful daimyo of Bungo, while Michael was to travel on behalf of the daimyo of Ōmura and Arima. Julian and Martin joined the expedition as their companions, although in fact the distinction between the delegates and their companions was usually overlooked and the boys were often called "the four ambassadors."

The choice of boys in their early teens was justified by Valignano, who believed that youngsters would be best able to withstand the rigors of the voyage to and from Europe. Possibly also in his mind was the thought that it would be easy to supervise four young and impressionable envoys.

The boys were accompanied by their teacher, mentor and interpreter, Fr. Diogo Mesquita, who during the course of the long voyage and the frequent stopovers continued to supervise the lessons which they had begun at a Jesuit school in Kyushu. During the course of their tour in Europe, the Japanese were said to speak Portuguese quite well, together with some Latin and Spanish, but at least on formal occasions they preferred to rely on Mesquita to interpret for them.



3. Mancio

The first stage of the voyage was short but rough, and the boys suffered from seasickness before their ship put into Macao on March 9. There they were obliged to stay until the end of the year until transport was available for them to continue on their way to Europe. After another rough voyage, during which part of the cargo was jettisoned to lighten the ship, the passengers reached Malacca on January 27, 1583. They later made an unscheduled stopover at fever-ridden Mozambique for two weeks, and a pilot's error resulted in

their making an unplanned visit to southern India.

Journey through Europe

The voyage to Europe finally came to an end on August 11, 1584, when the youthful delegates reached Lisbon, two-and-a-half years after their departure from Nagasaki. During their stay in the Portuguese capital, they were introduced to various dignitaries, such as the Archbishop of Lisbon and the celebrated author Fray Luis de Granada. They also took the opportunity of visiting the Belem and other famous landmarks, much as the modern tourist does today.

The party eventually crossed over into Spain and spent some time in Toledo, where the Japanese were treated to a detailed inspection of the cathedral and churches. On their arrival in Madrid, they received a summons to visit Philip II and his family, and richly decorated coaches with a military escort were provided to take the delegates to the audience.

The king greeted the Japanese visitors most affably, and with Mesquita interpreting, questioned them about their dress. He seemed particularly interested in the boys' footwear and Martin obligingly took off one of his sandals to allow the monarch a closer look. Speeches were made in Spanish and Japanese, gifts were exchanged,

and Philip provided the party with letters of introduction to his ambassador in Rome and to the governors of the cities through which the boys were to pass.

As a result of the warm welcome extended to them by Philip II, the boys' journey now took on the semblance of a triumphal progress. Embarking at Alicante, they stopped at Majorca for three or four days, and then set foot in Italy at Leghorn on 1 March 1585.

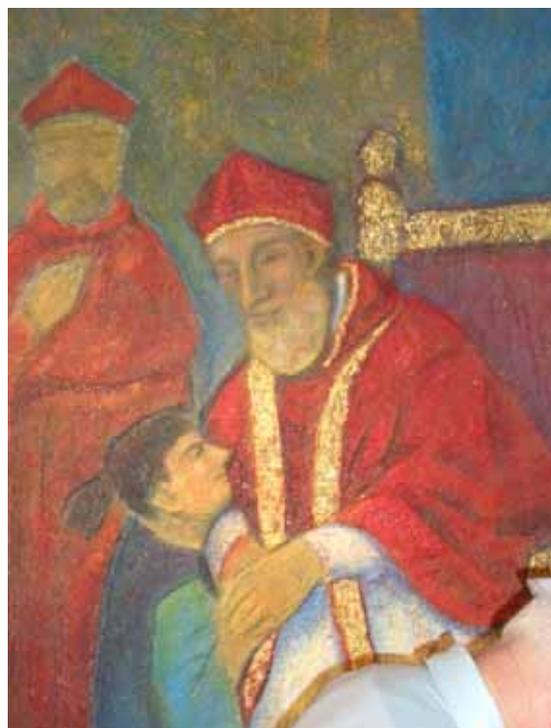
The envoys passed through Pisa, where they were lavishly entertained at a banquet in their honor given by the Grand Duke and Duchess of Tuscany. The duchess, the notorious Bianca Capello, caused some anguish when she invited the youthful Mancio to dance with her. As she was the hostess, Mesquita could hardly withhold permission, and so the Japanese boy accompanied his lady partner as gracefully as possible in the stately dance.

There followed five days in Florence, where the legates attended receptions and banquets at which flowery speeches were made in their honor, and then they visited the cathedral, churches and palaces of the ancient city at possibly a bewildering rate. But messages were being received from Rome urging the party to make all haste as the elderly and ailing Gregory XIII had a premonition of his approaching death and wished to see the Japanese before he died.

Arrival in Rome

The Japanese reached Rome on 22 March 1585, and on the very next day they attended a papal consistory together with twenty-five cardinals. Julian was suffering from a high fever and was forced to miss the event. In a long and elaborate procession the Japanese, clad in their kimono and carrying their samurai swords, rode through the streets on splendidly caparisoned horses. To welcome the visitors from Japan, the church bells of Rome rang out and the cannon of Castel Sant'Angelo thundered in salute.

On their arrival in the audience chamber, the pope wept as he embraced the boys. Mancio delivered a speech in Japanese, while Mesquita spoke in Latin and Italian; letters from the Christian daimyo were also read out in Italian translation. On



4. Julian meeting the Pope

hearing of Julian's illness, the pope ordered the papal doctors to be immediately sent to attend him. Gregory then spent considerable time talking with the Japanese, inquiring about their voyage, the state of the Church in their homeland, and the number of churches there.

A few days later, on 3 April, the Japanese were received in private audience by the pope, and it was on this occasion that they presented him with a magnificent screen depicting the city and castle of Azuchi on the east bank of Lake Biwa. Azuchi had been built by the warlord Oda Nobunaga, who had presented this screen, possibly executed by the master painter Kano Eitoku, to Valignano, even though the emperor had hinted that he would like to receive the screen himself.



5. Michael

Ironically, the castle and the city had been destroyed following the assassination of Nobunaga only a few months after the boys had set out from Nagasaki. No clear depiction of the magnificent but short-lived castle has survived, and despite intensive search in recent times, no trace of this screen, of such immense artistic and historical value, has been found.

Two days after this audience the elderly pope fell sick and died on 10 April. Twelve days later, on Easter Sunday, the cardinals gathered in conclave to choose his successor, and on 24 April Cardinal Felice Peretti di Montalto was elected and took the name of Sixtus V.

On 1 May the Japanese, minus Julian who was still unwell, attended the coronation Mass of the new pope in St. Peter's basilica. The three boys joined with the ambassadors of France and Venice, and other notables, and helped to carry a canopy over the pope as he processed into the basilica. During the solemn ceremony, Mancio entered the sanctuary and offered water to the pope to wash his hands.

During their remaining weeks in Rome, the boys accompanied the pope when he visited churches in the city and were received in several informal audiences. As a sign of his affection and esteem, Sixtus bestowed both honors and gifts on the

Japanese. They were created Knights of St. Peter and given money to cover their travel expenses back to Japan; they also received further donations to help subsidize the seminaries in Japan, presents for the three daimyo whom they represented, and letters of recommendation to facilitate their return journey through Europe. Finally, on 3 June, they set out from Rome on the long journey back to Japan.

The Return Journey

Although the main purpose of their mission had been successfully accomplished, the Japanese still came in for a great deal of public attention and received an ever-warmer welcome from the cities through which they passed.



6. Evora Cathedral

At Venice, for example, celebrations in honor of the city's patron, St. Mark, were postponed for three days so that the Japanese could attend. The visitors were accorded a naval salute and proceeded in procession along the Grand Canal to the reception organized in their honor by the doge. Hunts, banquets and firework displays were held for their entertainment. The great Tintoretto was

commissioned to paint the boys' portraits, but unfortunately his work, if indeed he completed it, has not survived.

While in Milan, however, the Japanese were sketched by Urbano Monte, and these somewhat stereotypical drawings are the only likenesses of the boys which have come down to the present day.

The journey led the party through Saragossa, Madrid, Evora, Coimbra and finally Lisbon, where they had first set foot on European soil. In all, the boys had visited seventy cities in three countries, and were returning to Japan laden with gifts.

Among these presents were paintings and maps which would later be copied by Japanese artists painting in the Western style. Even more important, Valignano had ordered the party to bring back to Japan a European printing press of movable type and this was to prove of immense value to the Christian mission.

The impact of the Japanese legation to Europe was considerable, and no less than seventy-eight books, tracts and pamphlets dealing with the visit were published in various languages between 1585 and 1593. These publications were not limited to the countries personally visited by the boys, for some were produced as far away as Lithuania and England. The voyage back to Japan was no less eventful than the voyage to Europe. The first attempt to leave Lisbon was frustrated by contrary winds, and it was not until 8 April 1586, that the boys' ship was able to make a second and successful departure. The unfortunate passengers and crew had to spend seven months at Mozambique before they could complete the journey to India. Then followed a stopover in Goa for almost a year, and it was there that the boys met up with Valignano, who had been inspecting the missions in India.

Before the party left India, Valignano was appointed the ambassador of the Viceroy of India in order to convey Portuguese gratitude to the ruler of Japan for the protection and patronage accorded to the Christian missionaries. This appointment was to prove a blessing for on their arrival at Macao Valignano and the boys received bad news. Nobunaga's successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, had followed an erratic policy towards the Christian church, sometimes favoring it and sometimes repressing it.

In 1587 Hideyoshi had ordered all missionaries to leave Japan, and although his edict was not strictly enforced and remained very much a dead letter, Valignano was technically banned from returning to Japan.



7. Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598)

After prolonged negotiations Hideyoshi finally agreed to allow Valignano and his party back into the country in his capacity as ambassador. So after a stay of nearly two years in Macao the Japanese envoys set out on the final stage of their travels and reached Nagasaki on 21 July 1590, exactly eight-and-a-half years after they had originally set out.

Back in Japan

The delegates' relatives are reported not to have recognized them when they stepped off the ship, and this is quite creditable. The ambassadors had set out on their epic voyage as immature boys in their early teens and they were now returning to their homeland as sophisticated and much-traveled young men. Various daimyo and officials flocked to meet the envoys and to learn about their experiences in the fabled West during their long absence from home.

But the climax of their return to Japan was to come on 3 March 1591, when they were received in solemn audience by Hideyoshi in his Juraku palace in Kyoto. Crowds gathered as the procession wound its way through the streets of the capital. After formal speeches had been made and presents exchanged, Hideyoshi reappeared in informal dress and chatted with the envoys, plying them with questions about their voyage and their impressions of Europe. The ruler even invited Mancio to enter his service, but the young man discreetly declined the offer.

Finally harp, clavichord, violin and lute were produced, and the young travelers formed a quartet to offer a recital of Western music. This so pleased Hideyoshi that he asked for two encores and handled the instruments curiously.

In this way, the historic embassy to Rome came to a conclusion. It had lasted many years and its participants had traveled thousands of miles with considerable hardship and danger. The envoys' triumphal progress through Portugal, Spain and Italy, to say nothing of their cordial meetings with two popes, Philip II, and ecclesiastical and civil dignitaries, had put Japan on the map as far as the Western world was concerned. Marco Polo's remote, mysterious island of Zipangu had now become a reality for Europeans.

Aftermath



8. Julian statue in Nakaura

After the fanfare greeting their return to Japan had died down, all four Japanese entered the Jesuit religious order so as to devote themselves to missionary work among their fellow countrymen. They followed the usual course of studies and three of them were eventually ordained to the priesthood. Although united in their eight-year embassy to Europe, their later lives were to take strikingly different courses.

After working in Kokura and traveling widely in Kyushu, Mancio died in Nagasaki on 13 November 1612, at the age of forty-three. Michael appears to have apostatized from his Christian faith about 1606 and to have entered the service of his kinsman, the daimyo of Ōmura; the exact date of his death is unknown.

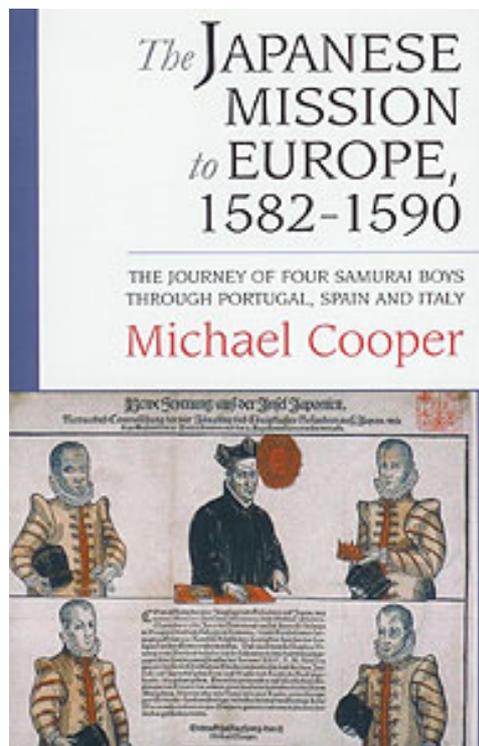
In 1614 missionaries were ordered to leave Japan, and Martin, who had earned a reputation as a preacher, went into exile at Macao. He lived there for fifteen years, teaching in the Jesuit college, caring for Japanese Christians, and giving advice on

the compilation of a history of the Japanese church until he died on 23 October 1629.

As for Julian, he managed to defy the expulsion order, and, based at Kuchinotsu in Kyushu, he continued to help and encourage the persecuted Christians in western Japan for many years. But he was eventually arrested at Kokura at the end of 1632, and condemned to death for propagating the forbidden religion.

Along with other missionaries, both Japanese and foreign, Julian, who had always been the sickly member of the embassy to Europe, withstood three days of torment at Nagasaki by being suspended head-down into a pit before he died as a martyr on 21 July 1633. During his prolonged agony he is said to have whispered, "I am Julian Nakaura who went to Rome."

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9. Cooper Book Cover

This brief article on the Japanese legation to Europe fills a major void, as there is no other general account in English, except for Donald Lach's summary in his *Asia in the Making of Europe*, volume 1, book 2, pp. 688-706, and J. F. Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 6-19. In 2005, Michael Cooper published a book-length account on the legation under the title *The Japanese Mission to Europe, 1582-1590: The Journey of Four Samurai Boys Through Portugal, Spain and Italy* (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2005, 262 pp., xix black and white plates, \$85 (cloth), ISBN 1-901903-38-9).

The 1982 re-enactment of the expedition was a great success, with the four "legates" being received in audience by Pope John Paul II, the king and queen of Spain, and the president of Portugal and his wife. A splendid photographic record of the expedition was later published in Nagasaki.

As regards the date of Michael Chijiwa's death, reports in the Japanese press in early 2004 revealed that his tomb had been identified in Kyushu, and according to an inscription he died in January 1633.

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