JAPAN DESCRIBED IN A 1755 LATIN GEOGRAPHIC TREATISE. ISSUES OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

Yusuke SUMI
Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Japan
anachoretes.ou.o@gmail.com

Abstract:
The book entitled *Geographica globi terraquei synopsys, a multis praefertim quod Hungariam attinet, erronibus, qui in Celeberrimo alias Geographo Hùbnero, aliisque circumferuntur, expurgata, in qua omnium muldi Regionum, et locorum situs pro Mapparum Geographicarum usu exactissime describuntur* has the following editorial data: Tyrnaviae[1], Typis Academicis, Societ. Jesu, anno MDCCLV), 353 pages and an index of 41 pages.

What is of particular interest to us is the part that mentions Japan. The references to Japan are to be found, of course, in *Pars tertia Asia*. It starts with *cap. I De Asia in genere* (about Asia, in general), *cap. II. De Imperio Turcico, cap. III. De Imperio Persico, cap. IV. De India, cap. V. De Tartaria Magna, cap. V. De China,* and *cap. VII. De insulis Asiaticis.*

Keywords:
The book, Latin language, Japan, geographic names, proper names.

[1] Trnava, the old Slovak city located about 47 km from Bratislava, was a powerful Roman-Catholic centre, an archiepiscopal residence from 1541 to 1820, also known as *Parva Roma* "Little Rome". In 1561, the humanist of Romanian descent Nicolaus Olahus, the archbishop of Trnava, invited a group of Jesuit monks, known for their intellectual preoccupations, to develop education of all levels in the area. They first founded a theological seminary, which later became the famous Jesuit University of Trnava (1635-1777), where one of the most active printing centres in the entire (then Hungarian) kingdom functioned. The geography treatise discussed here appeared in the most favourable period of the editorial-printing service of the well-known academic centre, during about the same years as the extensive treatise of Christian morals *Medulla Theologiae Moralis*, Tyrnaviae, Typ. Acad., 1753.

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

1. The book

The work consists of six parts: *Pars prima Europa* (Europe)*, Pars secunda de Europa reliqua* (about the rest of Europe)*, pars Pars tertia Asia* (Asia)*, Pars quarta Africa* (Africa)*, Pars quinta America* (America) and *Pars sexta de terris incognitis* (about unknown countries). In the beginning, the book briefly presents on two pages the important data that had been known so far regarding the Earth: the size of the Earth, division into countries, description of seas and so on.

In *Caput VII, De insulis Asiaticis*, 10 Asian islands are mentioned briefly on two pages: *1. Ceylanum, 2. Maldivae, 3. Sumatra, 4. Java, 5. Borneo, 6. Celebes Macassar (quidam ad Moluccenses referunt), 7. Insulae Moluccae, 8. Philippinae, 9. Formosa*, and *10. Japonia*. The part about Japan is the longest, as two pages are dedicated to it.

Here is the full Latin text about Japan and the English translation:

Original text	English translation
10. Japonia, auro, argento, margaritis, elephantis, camelis, hordeo, oriza &c. opulenta, in 3. commodum insulas partita est : in Niphoniam regna 57. ubi Amangucium cum insigni portu, Ximo regna 9. inter quae regnum Bungi, cui vicina ins. Firandum, & Xicoco 5. continentem. Meacum urbs ampla, regis olim residentia, dividitur in urbem Superiorem regio Palato superbam, & Inferiorem portu, ac Fuxime fortalitio nobilem. Hodie Rex in urbe Jeddo residet ad ripam Tonkato, seu Toukon fl. Palatium regium opus sane magnificum ternis vallis ambitur : cubile, in quo legatos Rex excipit, auro stratum, inauratis palis innititur. Fanum ibidem Japonensium celeberrimum, regiae duntaxat familiae, & Archibonziis pervium : Idolum Amida argento tegitur, equo 7. capitum insistens, cujus ungula, & pes totus auro, unionibus, adamantibus ornatus &c. Etsi provida	10. Japan, rich in gold, silver, pearls, elephants, camels, barley, rice etc., is divided precisely into 3 islands: in ***Niponia*** (there are) 57 kingdoms, where there is ***Amangucium*** with the famous port of ***Ximo***, 9 kingdoms, among which the kingdom of ***Bungi*** neighbouring the island of ***Firandum*** , & ***Xicoco*** with 5 dependants. ***Maecum***, a great city once the residence of the king, is divided into the Upper City, with its beautiful Royal Palace, & the Lower Port, with ***Fuxime***, known as a fortress. Today the king's residence is in the city of ***Jeddo***, upon the banks of the River ***Toukon***. The glorious Royal Palace is a building surrounded by triple reinforcements: the hall where the king receives the envoys, covered with gold, is supported by golden pillars. The very famous Japanese temple, accessible only to the royal family and to Arch-Bonzes, is in the same place: the Idol ***Amida*** is covered in silver, sitting on a 7-headed horse, whose

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

circa ignem ac fures Japonensibus cura, an. 1658. incendium adeo in urbem hanc grassatum, ut damnum aestimaretur 58. millionum auri. Regulis plurimis dominatur Imperator (hodiernus Quane dictus regnare feretur ab anno 1603.) quem intueri incolis raro licitum. Japones gens literarum aeque, ac armorum amans, nobilitatis decus insectatur, ac cuivis facile aurem praebet. Daemones, Heroes, Regesque defunctos, ut Numina, colunt, ac in 12. sectas dividuntur. Bonzii quaestuosa pietate indigenis conspicui, sacra administrant, quorum 3000. coram Rege Bungi S. Xaverius, Japoniam, a Lusitanis an. 1542. detectam subiens, convicit disputans adversus transmigrationem animarum : idem an. 1549. 200000. Christo peperit : ejus Socius P. Cosmus Turrianus Firandum ins. dein excoluit, Amangucii Regem Christianis sacris initiavit, a quo ad Gregorium XIII. Sum. Pont. legatio missa : post P. Alexander Valignanus S. J. ante an. 1636. a ternis Regulis Legatos ad Apostolicae Sedis venerationem eduxit : exortae dehinc persecutiones Christianorum sub Daifusama &c. hodie Missionarii Orthodoxi accessu prohibentur.	claw and entire leg are decorated with gold, pearls, diamonds etc. Although the Japanese are very careful about the fire and watch out for thieves, in 1658 a fire advanced so far into the city that damages are estimated at 58 million in gold. The emperor reigns over several rulers (it is said that the present one, ***Quane***, has been ruling since 1603), and the inhabitants are rarely allowed to see him. The Japanese are people who love both science and weapons and criticise the embellishment of nobility and anyone who easily obeys. They honour the daemons, heroes, dead kings as deities and divide them into 12 sects. The Bonzes, regarded with profitable piety by the natives, attend to the holy matters. Upon his arrival in Japan, discovered by the Portuguese in 1542, S. Xaverius convinced 3,000 of them (to convert to Christianity) before the King of ***Bungo***, during a dispute over the metempsychosis; in 1549, the same man won over 200,000 people for Christ: then his companion, P. Cosmus Turrianus, cultivated the island of *Firandum*, and initiated the King of ***Amangucium*** into Christian rites, and sent a message from him to Gregorius XIII. Sum. Pont.: then before1636, P. Alexander Valignanus S. J., led the envoys of the young rulers to the worship of the Apostolic See: afterwards, the Christians started being chased under ***Daifusama*** etc. Today, the access is forbidden to Christian missionaries.

1. Some observations on the facts described

These pages are not geographic or historical, but the philological comment prompts us to make some content-related observations. The information about Japan must have been obtained after 1603, as the text states: "*it is said that the present one, **Quane**, has been ruling since 1603*".

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

1.1. Elephants and camels

Elephants are not animals typical of Japan. The first elephant imported to Japan arrived at *Obama* (*Fukui* county) in 1408 and was brought by Aretsushinkei[2], who is believed to be the ruler of Sumatra[3]. During the age of Edo (1603-1868), various rare objects and animals were imported from abroad, particularly through the port of *Nagasaki*, and there are treatises on elephants. But elephants are atypical of the Japanese and it is strange that this geographic treatise mentions that Japan was rich in elephants. Camels have an older history than elephants. According to the chronicle of Japan *Nihon Shoki* (720)[4], the first camel was imported in 599. Just like elephants, camels were also imported from abroad during the Edo period. But they were rare animals.

1.2. The geographic names of Japan

In this treatise, Japan is divided into three large islands: *Nipponia, Ximo* and *Xicoco*. The idea of dividing Japan into three islands was popular following the 16th century. In the summary[5] of his work "*From island to islands – a study on the change in recognising the geography of Japan among the Jesuits in the mid-16th century*" (2012), Hiroshi SHINA writes:

"In the 16th century, the Jesuits visiting Japan often depicted this country rather as an island (Port. ***ilha*** */ Span.* ***isla****), not islands (****ilhas / islas****), no later than the 1560's. Then, Alessandro Valignano S. J., in his work "Sumario de Japón" (1583), described Japan as "a country with various islands, divided into 66 kingdoms", admitting it consisted of three major islands (Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu) and many others…"*

Although in the work of *Alessandro Valignano S. J.* the number of kingdoms does not coincide with that in *Geographica globi terraquei synopsys...*, under discussion here, it obviously points out to the common data regarding the

[2] 亜烈進卿

[3] 税所次第, „応永十五年六月二十二日南蕃船着岸、帝王の御名亜烈進卿、蕃使使臣問丸本阿、彼帝より日本の国王への進物等、生象一疋黒、山馬一隻、孔雀二対、鸚鵡二対、其外色々"< https://www.library-archives.pref.fukui.lg.jp/fukui/07/kenshi/T2/T2-5-01-02-05-01.htm> v. webografie.

[4] Nihonshoki, vol. 22: "〇秋九月癸亥朔、百済貢駱駝一疋驢一疋羊二頭白雉一侯".

[5] 椎名 浩, 2012,「「島」から「列島」へ 16世紀中葉のイエズス会士による日本地理把握の変遷についての一考察 」」熊本学園大学論集『総合科学』19巻1号pp. 137-161.

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

geography of Japan in those centuries, namely the idea that it consists of three large islands – an idea also launched by Alessandro Valignano.

In terms of the present-day geography, *Nipponia, Ximo* and *Xicoco* are now *Honshu* (the largest island which includes Tokyo), *Kyushu* (separated from *Honshui* by the straits of *Shimonoseki*, reminding of its former name, *Ximo*) and *Shikoku* (which means "four provinces"). In the old days, the fourth major island, *Hokkaido* (formerly known as *Ezo*), was not known to foreigners.

The names of several cities in Japan are mentioned. ***Amangucium***, i.e *Yamaguchi,* is a present-day county. ***Bungo*** is a province roughly located in the current county of Oita. ***Firandum*** is *Hirado*, the well-known port where Francis Xavier, a missionary and co-founder of the Society of Jesus, landed in 1550. ***Maecum*** is *Miyako*, which means "the city of residence of the Emperor". At that time, Miyako was Kyoto. ***Fuxime*** is *Fushimi* from Kyoto, the home of the famous fortress, as mentioned in this treatise. ***Jeddo*** is Edo, the old name of Tokyo metropolis, Japan's present-day capital.

"The ***Tonkato*** bank, or the River ***Toukon***" is an interesting part of the text in question. It may be the River *Tone*, the second longest river in Japan, after the *Shinano*. However, it is not pronounced *Tonkato* or *Toukon* in Japanese, and it wasn't during past centuries either. The name of this river consists of two Chinese characters 利(to)根(ne). In Japanese, there are not the same rules of combining letters and sounds as in Chinese. Chinese characters have more phonetic variants, which change according to their combination, types of words or habit. The graphical form 利 may also be pronounced *li*, which is actually the Chinese pronunciation, whereas 根 is also pronounced *kon*, which is the old Chinese pronunciation (it is currently pronounced *gēn*). In Japanese, the old pronunciation of borrowed words is still preserved today. Though unusual, *Tonkato* or *Toukon* appear to derive from the incorrect reading of Chinese characters of this river.

1.3. Proper names

Several proper names – anthroponyms or theonyms – occur in this treatise. The idol ***Amida*** is a Buddhist deity. But, as far as we know, the idol *Amida* is not described on a one-headed horse, let alone one with seven. Therefore, it may be another Buddhist god or the god of another cult. Emperor ***Quane*** seems also to be some erroneous information. First of all, because the letters *qua-* would point to a Chinese name. It is written: "The emperor… (it

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

is said that the present one, Quane, has been ruling since 1603"). In those days, the 107th *Go-Yozei* emperor (1571～1617)[6] was ruling. The name Go-Yozei is in no way similar to the mentioned name **Quane** and the period of reign of this Emperor (1586-1611) does not coincide with the information provided by the Trnava treatise. ***Daifusama*** or *Daifu* (*-sama* is an honorary suffix) is a title meaning "minister of the interior" (alongside of it, there were also *right* and *left*), given to the chief of the Samurai, who was known as the *Shogun*.

1.4. Historical events

The anonymous author writes that "*in 1658, a fire advanced into the city*". It is a real event, attested in history as the "Great fire of Meireki". This fire destroyed a large part of the city of *Edo*. However, the fire is recorded in 1657[7].

The passage: "*upon his arrival in Japan, discovered by the Portuguese in 1542*" refers to the visit of the first Western travellers to Japan, also mentioned in *Teppoki* ("History of Guns", 1606), an important document about the first import of firearms in Japan[8].

The Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier is well-known in Japan. But, the number 200,000 Japanese that Xavier supposedly Christianised, according to this treatise, seems exaggerate. It is also true that we cannot verify either. As the treatise states, a delegation of 4 young Japanese was sent from Japan to Rome in the year 10 of the Tensho age, i.e. in 1582.

2. Remark on the orthography

This treatise mentions several names of localities or proper names of people in Japan. Of these, three toponyms include the letter *x*, namely: *Ximo, Xicoco* and *Fuxime*. By comparison with other names of present-day localities, we realise they are *Shimo*, *Shikoku* and *Fushimi* (according to the English spelling). *Shimo* means "lower part" and points to the current *Kyushu* region. *Kyushu* is located south of Japan, while *Kyoto*, once also called *Kami*

[6] e-Museum National Treasures & Important Cultural Properties of National Museums, Japan, *Letter Written in Kana Script by Emperor Goyôzei.* See webography.

[7] Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, „明暦3年（１６５７）江戸大火と現代的教訓", *Buletin Oficial Bosai*, nr. 26,2005/3, pp. 16-7.

[8] TOKO, Hirohide, 2013, „西欧人との出会い", *470 周年京都外国語大学図書館報『GAIDAI BIBLIOTHECA』*, nr. 200, Kyoto: Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, p.12.

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

("upper part"), is located further north. Letters *sh* point to the voiceless alveolo-palatal fricative [ɕ] from Japanese. Latin does not have a letter to render this phoneme or a similar sound as the voiceless post-alveolar fricative [ʃ]. Here we notice that their names are written according to the Portuguese orthography, in which the phoneme [ʃ] is rendered by the letter *x*.

Although written in Latin, we note the influence of the Portuguese spelling on this text. Latin does not have a letter symbolising the voiceless alveolo-palatal fricative [ɕ] or the voiceless post-alveolar fricative [ʃ]. The letter *x* from Portuguese, rendering [ʃ], supplements the Latin language spelling, most likely being understood that it is pronounced [ʃ], in addition to the standard Latin pronunciation [ks], among the readers and speakers of Portuguese. In 1603, at Nagasaki, the Jesuit missionaries published *日葡辞書 / Nippo jisho - Vocabvlario da Lingoa de Iapam* (*Vocabulário da Língua do Japão* in modern Portuguese), i.e. *Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary*, including roughly 32,000 words. The Portuguese Jesuits' research became the base of data on Japan in the Western world. In this treatise, the names of localities and those of people remained written in Latin, as they appeared in Portuguese, from which they were taken.

3. Conclusions

This text is written in Latin, but many Japanese words are noted according to the Portuguese spelling. Several Japanese names are difficult to understand today and it is quite likely that at least some of them should be completely wrong. It is the case of Emperor *Quane*, whose name is spelled in such a way that we cannot tell who he was as a historical figure. Foreign proper names in historical texts should be analysed from several points of view. The 1755 treatise remains, nevertheless, a document of great value to several fields of knowledge, including philology.

Bibliography

CABINET OFFICE, Government of Japan, „明暦3年（１６５７）江戸大火と現代的教訓", *Buletin Oficial Bosai*, nr. 26,2005/3, pp. 16-7.

MIYOSHI, Tadayoshi, 1984,「日本地図の変遷とイエズス会報告」 *『歴史地理学』*, Tokyo: Association of Historical Geographers in Japan, nr.126, pp. 36-48.

PRISTA, Alexander da R., 1966, *Essential Portuguese Grammar*, New York:

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)

Dover Publications.

SHINA, Hiroshi, 2012, „「島」から「列島」へ　16世紀中葉のイエズス会士による日本地理把握の変遷についての一考察 」“, *熊本学園大学論集『総合科学』*, vol. 19/1, Kumamoto: Kumamoto Gakuen University, pp. 137-161.

SOCIETAS JESU, 1755, *Geographica globi terraquei synopsys*, Tyrnavia: Societas Jesu.

TOKO, Hirohide, 2013, „西欧人との出会い“, *470 周年京都外国語大学図書館報『GAIDAI BIBLIOTHECA』*, nr. 200, Kyoto: Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, p.12.

Webography

Fukui Prefectural Archives, [last updated 28.03.2019], *Chronicle of Fukui County*, 第五章 中世後期の経済と都市, 第2節　日本海海運と湊町, 5　外国船の来航と対外関係, 若狭来航の南蛮船 <https://www.library-archives.pref.fukui.lg.jp/fukui/07/kenshi/T2/T2-5-01-02-05-01.htm> [cited on 10.05.2019].

Obama City, Fukushima County, [last updated 02.07.2006], *The first elephant was brought to Japan at Obama*, < http://www1.city.obama.fukui.jp/topic/?Page=9 > [cited on 10.05.2019].

e-Museum National Treasures & Important Cultural Properties of National Museums, Japan, [last updated 07.05.2019], *Letter Written in Kana Script by Emperor Goyôzei*, < http://www.emuseum.jp/detail/101050/000/000?mode=detail&d_lang=ja&s_lang=ja&class=&title=&c_e=&region=&era=&century=&cptype=&owner=&pos=489&num=8 > [cited on 10.05.2019].

Cabinet Office Japan, Disaster Management in Japan, [last updated 12.10.2018], *Report Great fire of Meireki from Edo 1697*, < http://www.bousai.go.jp/kyoiku/kyokun/kyoukunnokeishou/rep/1657_meireki_edotaika/index.html> [cited on 10.05.2019].

BDD-A30386 © 2019 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:57 UTC)