

Italian Influence in the “Naples of Japan,” 1859–1941

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Collina Presso Nagasaki. Casa giapponese, terrazza e giardino. In fondo, al basso, la rada, il porto, la città di Nagasaki. (A hill near Nagasaki. A Japanese house, terrace and garden. In the background, at the bottom of the hill, the roads, harbor and city of Nagasaki.)

Thus begins the libretto of Giacomo Puccini’s world famous opera *Madama Butterfly* set in Nagasaki. However, until the June 1996 presentation of a life-size statue of Puccini in Glover Garden by an Italian government delegation from the composer’s home province of Lucca, few residents of the city thought of the opera in terms of its Italian-Japanese connections. A small relief of Puccini had existed in the Garden since 1963, but it was dwarfed by a statue of Miura Tamaki, the most famous Japanese soprano to perform the role of Cho-Cho San. The fact that the opera was based on a story by the brother of an American missionary stationed in Nagasaki and revolved around the relationship between an American sailor and a Japanese prostitute (falsely rumored to be modeled after the Japanese wife of the Scottish merchant Thomas Glover), evoked images of the United States and Britain, not Italy.

However, just as the harbor and city of Nagasaki served as the background to *Madama Butterfly*, so too did the Italian presence here provide a significant, if subtle, backdrop to the development of this western Japanese seaport town in the years between Perry’s opening of Japan and the outbreak of World War II. For, whatever the story of *Madama Butterfly* may have been, the words were sung in Italian and the hauntingly beautiful music was the creation of an Italian operatic master. Using *Madama Butterfly* as a metaphor for Italian influence in Nagasaki during the period, one can argue that while the British and Americans dominated the more visible aspects of the Western community here, Italians helped shape the subtle character of the so-called “Western Exoticism” that survives in the city to this day even if this legacy has been unnecessarily altered to satisfy the needs of local tourism.

Prior to World War II, this exotic Italianate aura was captured by the common reference to Nagasaki as the “Naples of Japan.” or the “Naples of the Orient.” Both cities served as the major southwestern ports of their countries, and both enjoyed deep, blue harbors with verdant hills that appeared to rise directly from the water’s edge. It is somewhat ironic that after the war, just as City of Nagasaki tourist officials began to promote the fictitious Glover-Butterfly connection, they all but abandoned the earlier Naples reference.

Although this article focuses on late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Nagasaki, Italian influence dates back to 1579 and the arrival of the Jesuit priest Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606). Among his many accomplishments, Valignano organized an embassy to Europe (primarily Spain and Italy) of four young Japanese Christians from the Nagasaki area from 1582 to 1590. In Italy, the young ambassadors visited cities such as Leghorn, Pisa, Florence, Siena, Rome (where they met with two popes), Bologna, Venice (where they apparently had their portraits painted by Tintoretto), Milan and Genoa. One result of the embassy’s mission was the introduction into Japan of a printing press with movable type. Begun as an initiative of Valignano, the Jesuit Mission Press operated out of Nagasaki from 1598 to 1614. Established in connection with the Jesuit Press was the School of Fine Arts, which was founded by another Italian Jesuit, Giovanni Nicolao. In 1591, Nicolao

opened his school in Amakusa, and from 1603 to 1614, he operated out of Nagasaki. In addition to teaching European painting, Nicolao also made musical instruments, bamboo organs, and clocks. One such clock, made as a gift for Tokugawa Ieyasu, not only told the time, but “indicated the days of the month and the movement of the sun and moon.” Ultimately, however, the goodwill gesture to Ieyasu only prolonged the inevitable, as Nicolao and his Japanese art students were deported to Macao in 1614 in accordance with the Tokugawa proscription of Christianity.

In spite of the ban, some Catholic missionaries, including a number of Italian Jesuits and a few Italian Dominicans, continued to proselytize in the Nagasaki region until Japanese authorities began to torture and execute Christians in the 1620s and 1630s. Western missionary activity in the country remained dormant for another seven decades, until the Italian priest Giovanni Sidotti (1668-1715) attempted one last time to challenge the bakufu’s sakoku (national seclusion) policy by returning to Japan in 1708. Landing in the Ryukyus, Sidotti was captured and taken briefly to Nagasaki before being transferred to Edo. There, he died of exhaustion in his small underground cell in 1715.

By the time Italians once again came ashore at Nagasaki, both Italy and Japan were in the midst of major political changes that would result in the creation of modern states on the Italian peninsula and in the Japanese archipelago. These changes of the 1860s led to the Meiji Restoration in Japan (1868) and the creation of the Kingdom of Italy (1871). By 1940, these two relatively young, but highly industrialized, modern nations had joined together as members of the Axis coalition – a decision which resulted in their destruction and defeat within five years.

Italians, too, were among the first Westerners to document the changes that occurred in Nagasaki after the opening of the foreign settlement in 1859. Among the earliest-known photographs were those commissioned by the British Consul George Morrison in 1860. He had a visiting photographer from the London-based Italian firm of Negretti & Zambra take a series of panoramic photos of the harbor and the new foreign settlement.

The most famous of all the early Western photographers in Japan was the Italian Felice (Felix) Beato, who visited Nagasaki in 1864. His photos of the harbor, foreign settlement, and native town at Nagasaki are among the most famous from this period. Particularly impressive are his photos of Japanese temples and cemeteries.

The first Italian merchant in Nagasaki arrived around the same time as Beato. Since Italy was not yet a unified modern state and had no diplomatic presence in town, C.N. Mancini sought and received protection from the British consulate. By the summer of 1864, she was renting a lot at No. 28B Oura in the foreign settlement. From 1868 to 1883, Mrs. Mancini was proprietor of the Belle Vue Hotel at Naminohira on an intermittent basis. During one of her periods away from the Belle Vue, she managed the Commercial Hotel at No. 27 Oura.

One of the Belle Vue’s main competitors during the latter half of the 1870s was the Hotel de Garibaldi (later called the Garibaldi Inn), named for one of the great heroes in the fight for Italian independence, Giuseppe Garibaldi. The hotel operated in Nagasaki from 1875 to 1880. Other Italian hotels in Nagasaki included the Bernardi Hotel, operated by P. Bernardi from 1899 to 1901 at No. 13 Oura and Hotel Antonetti (No. 14 Oura), which opened in 1906. Managing the Central Hotel at No. 25 Oura in 1897 was the Italian Giuseppe Sammariva.

In addition to his hotel work, P. Bernardi worked as a “pastry-cook, confectioner and wine mer-

chant” for a time in Nagasaki. Another Italian, G. Zancola, also opened a bakery in 1886 at No. 22 Oura.

The Italian merchant with the longest residence and greatest impact on Nagasaki was the ship-chandler and compradore Carlo Fioravante Urso. Urso, who was born in Italy in 1849, probably came to Nagasaki in the mid-to-late 1880s, although he did not open his own business until 1895. From this time until his death in 1918, he presented himself as “Compradore for the Italian, Spanish and Austrian Navies.” Originally operating out of No. 36 Sagarimatsu, Urso & Co. moved to No. 37 Sagarimatsu in 1907. The Urso family residence was situated at No. 26 Sagarimatsu.

C.F. Urso married a Japanese woman (Take) about half his age in the late 1880s. In the two decades between 1889 and 1909 Take gave birth to sixteen children. Eight died in infancy and were buried in Sakamoto International Cemetery. Of the surviving eight, a daughter, Caterina, married a Japanese man named Nakahara and died at the age of forty-two in 1950. Four others (Angela, Eugenio, Maria and Camillo) lived into their seventies and were buried in the addition to the Sakamoto Cemetery between 1976 and 1980. There, they were laid to rest next to Carlo, who died at the family residence in 1918, and Take, who passed away in 1939. Today, several Urso family descendants continue to live in Japan.

There are also a number of other Italians buried in the international cemeteries of Nagasaki. The oldest extant Italian tombstone belongs to one Antonio Glaochi, who died in Nagasaki on 14 November 1870 and was interred at Oura International Cemetery. Italian sailors buried in Nagasaki include Sebastiano Battaro (1899) and Rinaldo Cervelli (1902), both laid to rest at Sakamoto. Also at Sakamoto are Serra Lucini, a thirty-three-year old housewife who passed away in 1897, and Caterina Bassi, who died two years later at age fifty-five. Buried across the street at the Sakamoto Addition is the Borioni family. F. R. Borioni, the chief Examiner at the Chinese Maritime Customs at Ningbo, died while vacationing in Nagasaki in July 1920 at the age of fifty-seven. Four months later, his eleven-year-old daughter, Maria, died and was buried next to her father. Borioni’s Japanese wife, Chiyo (Italian name Margarita), lived until 1949, when she was interred alongside her husband and daughter. The most recent Italian burial also occurred at the Addition in 1937 upon the death of Z.E. Volpicelli.

The most renowned of the Italians laid to rest in Nagasaki is the opera singer Agostino Pagnoni. The acclaimed tenor was visiting Nagasaki when he suddenly became ill and died at the Belle Vue Hotel on 15 December 1884 at the age of sixty-six. Pagnoni, a native of Pesaro, Italy, had been part of an opera touring group headed by the celebrated prima donna Luisa Marchetti. The French inscription—read today only through piecing together the puzzle of stone fragments piled in front of the tombstone—includes the simple descriptive “Le Celebre Tenor.”

During the period under discussion, there were never enough Italians living in Nagasaki to warrant an official Italian government presence in the city. Instead, Italian interests were managed by consuls from other European nations. From 1870 to 1874, a consular agent from the Netherlands (initially, the Dutch merchant W. F. Gaymans) oversaw Italian concerns in Nagasaki. From 1875 to 1892, and then again from 1916 to 1924, the Russian Consul served as Acting Consul for Italian affairs. The years 1893 to 1915, saw the German Consul in charge of Italian interests, and finally from 1925 to 1939, the British handled Italian concerns.

Italian merchant ships and their crews carried freight to and from Nagasaki on a regular basis. While

the voyages were usually rather uneventful, one nearly ended in tragedy for its crew in the spring of 1906. The Italian barque *Erasmus*, captained by R. Ameglio, was carrying kerosene and machine oil from Philadelphia to Nagasaki when the entire crew became ill near Kagoshima. The captain raised the flag of distress and the *Erasmus* had to be rescued by a passing German ship, which towed it to safety at Nagasaki. Apparently, all twenty-four crew members were suffering from beriberi due to a lack of fresh food.

While the Italian military presence in East Asia was minimal, on occasion, Italian warships and their crews visited Nagasaki. Around the time of the Russo-Japanese War, a regular visitor was the Italian cruiser *Marco Polo*. When in port, the ship's orchestra occasionally performed at the Public Hall. Another such instance occurred during World War I, when the Italian gunboat *Sebastiano Caboto* came to port and stayed for eighteen months. During this interval, an officer of the ship, Lt. Ugo Victor Umberto Pocherra, fell in love with Daisy Walker, the daughter of Wilson and Charlotte Walker, long-time British residents of Nagasaki. Ugo and Daisy were married in Nagasaki on 22 January 1917 and later moved to Italy.

It is, however, a much more famous liaison between a Western sailor and a Nagasaki woman that represents the most enduring Italian influence in this Japanese port town. The tragic affair of Lt. Pinkerton and Cho-Cho San is of course at the heart of Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*. The American scholar Arthur Groos has recently argued that this relationship was based on actual events that occurred in Nagasaki in the early 1890s.

Years before the development of stories contrived in the postwar period (stories initiated by American Occupation personnel and later embellished by Nagasaki tourism officials) linking *Madama Butterfly* with Thomas Glover's house, a fortuitous meeting occurred in Nagasaki that more accurately reflects the historical role of Nagasaki in Puccini's opera. In June 1922, Miura Tamaki, the Japanese opera singer who traveled the world performing as Cho-Cho San, visited Nagasaki after a successful tour abroad.

According to a local newspaper account, Miura came to Nagasaki "in order that she might see places connected with the opera." In that event, her timing could not have been better, since the person responsible for conveying the historical incident upon which the original "*Madama Butterfly*" story was supposedly based, happened to be in town at the time visiting her son, who was U.S. Vice-Consul to Nagasaki.

According to Groos, Jennie Correll, the wife of the Methodist missionary Irvin Correll, related details of an actual relationship between an American naval officer and a Nagasaki prostitute to her brother, John Luther Long, who published the original story of "*Madama Butterfly*" in *Century Magazine* in 1898. The story drew the attention of the American playwright David Belasco, who, in collaboration with Long, adapted it into a one-act play, which debuted in New York on 5 March 1900. Seven weeks later, Belasco took a three-act version of his production to London, where it played to full houses at the Duke of York Theatre. In the audience one night that summer was Puccini, who was in London to supervise the first English production of *Tosca* at Covent Garden. Puccini immediately fell in love with the play and decided that his next project would be to create an opera based on the story.

Puccini opened his two-act opera, *Madama Butterfly*, at La Scala in Milan on 17 February 1904

and it proved to be an unqualified disaster. He withdrew it, made some modifications (including changing it back to a three-act performance), and presented the revised version at Brescia, near Milan, on 28 May of the same year. The opera was a stunning success and went on to receive rave reviews in performances around the world.

Miura Tamaki had portrayed Cho-Cho San on numerous occasions abroad and was certainly the most famous Japanese opera singer of the day. Butterfly was usually portrayed by European women made up to look Japanese when she arrived in Nagasaki in 1922. On the morning of her 2 June concert, Miura visited No. 14 Minamiyamate, the building that had served as the U.S. consulate from 1893 to 1898 and an important site of action in the opera, with Jennie Correll, Correll's son (the U.S. Vice-Consul at Nagasaki), and the Nagasaki historian Muto Chozo.

It is interesting to note that the party did not visit Glover's house, but instead had its picture taken at No. 14 Minamiyamate, which had been built for the British merchant William J. Alt as a family residence in the mid-1860s before it was used as the U.S. consulate. Italian connections with the house are strong, as its large Tuscan pillars were constructed of marble brought in from Carrara, Italy and Alt himself passed away at a family villa in Italy in 1908. The Australian journalist Harold S. Williams was clearly correct when he asserted after visits to Nagasaki in the mid-1950s and early 1960s that the Butterfly-Glover connection was a post-war myth. Indeed, if Nagasaki tourism officials want to claim a building as having a historical connection with *Madama Butterfly*, they might choose the old Alt House, which lies near Glover's House within the confines of Glover Garden. Not too far away is another possible site; No. 12 Higashiyamate, the building in which the Corrells lived in the 1890s, and from which they used to look across at the U.S. consulate, still exists in excellent condition within the grounds of Kwassui Women's College.

Today, Nagasaki officials have retreated from earlier claims that Glover House is the house where the Butterfly story took place. Instead, current language tries to maintain the link between the Glover House and Butterfly through association. A recent guide of Glover Garden claims that "Although there is no direct connection, the Glover House has been referred to as the Madame Butterfly House' because it is reminiscent of the hillside setting in Puccini's famous opera." While ambiguous enough not to be an outright fabrication, the statement still misleads visitors when more likely historical connections exist nearby.

After finishing her tour of No. 14 Minamiyamate and talking with the Corrells, Miura gave her concert in the evening at a local theater (Minamiza) to a packed house of Westerners and Japanese alike. The scheduled program of Western and Japanese music concluded with the aria *Un bel di* from *Madama Butterfly* and Miura added the final song from the opera during an encore. The Western newspaper in town called it a successful concert, praising the rare compass of her voice, its tones of surprising sweetness and richness, and her perfect enunciation.

Prior to Miura's Butterfly numbers, Aldo Franschetti, her Italian accompanist, thanked the audience and expressed his pleasure at visiting the city. He also reminded those present that "Madame Butterfly' (the opera in which Madame Miura has made a name in Europe, America, and other parts of the world) belongs essentially to Nagasaki, the story being woven round the port and the scenery taken from 14, Minami Yamate." He concluded by telling the people of Nagasaki that he hoped to bring the entire opera to Nagasaki for the first time the following year.

While ticket sales and concert arrangements for the 1922 visit were handled by the Nagasaki Nichi

Nichi Shinbun, a local Japanese-language newspaper, the relatively restrained response by townspeople indicates that most Nagasaki residents were not yet prepared to recognize the opera as an important component of local culture. With the continued decline of the Western population in town and the movement in Japan toward increased nationalism and patriotism, a tragic love story between an American naval officer and a Japanese prostitute was hardly the most popular fare of the day. Only after the war, when Nagasaki's industrial base had been destroyed by the atomic bomb, did local government officials turn to tourism as a major source of income. Why not turn the area around Glover's House into a tourist attraction and call the house itself the "Madame Butterfly House?" Besides, was it not the music rather than the story that made the opera universally popular? Who was going to care if historical accuracy was stretched a bit for the sake of attracting a few more visitors and their money?

To this day, the City attempts to capitalize on the connection through the Madame Butterfly Festival, which is billed as a "Light and Illumination" event at Glover Garden every Saturday evening this summer between 18 July and 10 October. The poster advertizing the festival has a picture of the Glover House in the background and "GLOVER GARDEN" written in large letters across the top. Festivities begin in the area in front of the statues of Miura Tamaki and Puccini.

My argument is simply that Nagasaki should get credit for its inspiration of the opera, but that it has a much stronger claim than the spurious Glover House connection that has been so widely advertized. I view it as a good sign that a statue of Puccini now stands within Glover Garden and that the contributions of Italians to the city are finally being recognized.

The Italian influence in Nagasaki is one primarily of texture: the music, the photographic images, the materials for buildings and cemetery fixtures, the tombstones of long-forgotten sailors, singers and ordinary family members, and the descendants of Italian men and Japanese women who have slipped quietly into the Japanese community. It is not a legacy that dominates the landscape, but sit atop one of the city's many hills overlooking the harbor on a hot summer's day and you will have no problem envisioning the Nagasaki of days of yore when it was, indeed, the "Naples of Japan."

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