In response to an imperial edict from 713 demanding thorough reports on natural resources, geography, ancient traditions, and so forth from across the land, the gazetteer from Hitachi Province (modern-day Ibaraki Prefecture) included the following account of the eradication of local resistance to imperial rule:

According to the elders, long ago, [this area] was home to the Kuzu tribe. (They were commonly referred to as “Earth Spiders” or “Long Shins.”) Rebels of the Wilds they were. They dug earthen caves all around and lived in them. At the approach of people, they would flee into their caves; when the people left, they would reemerge and caper about. Their natures were those of wolves and night owls, spying rat-like and stealing in the manner of dogs. None had been tamed, and they deviated ever further from the customs of the land. At this time, [Lieutenant-General] Kurosaka, a member of the Ō no Omi family, waited until a time when the Kuzu were out and about, and he had his men place thorn branches in their caves. He then ordered his horsemen to charge them in the fields. As usual, they rushed to their caverns, but the thorn branches barred the way and all were fatally wounded. Because of this, the word meaning thorns, ubara, was adopted as the name of this Imperial District.²

In terms of form and style—the narrative appended to the explanation of a local geographical feature or place name—the above is reminiscent of continental records. In terms of language, it is composed in an idiom largely interchangeable with the bureaucratic writing of the neighboring Tang empire, Classical Chinese. And it unquestionably co-opts the worldview of the Chinese state, with a single imperial center extending its civilizing reach outward in all directions. Yet despite the Sinitic contours to its discourse, these were the terms in which the fledgling Nara state (710–784) asserted not a place on the periphery of an eighth-century Sinosphere, “in the middle of nowhere,” but rather its own centrality.³

* * *

As this opening citation should suggest, encountering “Romanization in the Middle of Nowhere” as one who works on a regional power—Japan—with an elite that was fascinated by the ideal of another empire—Han
China—coeval with the one examined in Carlos Noreña’s essay, highlights just how “Roman” the discourse of “Romanization in the Middle of Nowhere” is. It shows us exactly how the technologies of empire are intended to work from the perspective of the top and center. The phenomena that it examines as manifestations of Romanization—architectural, iconographic, and epigraphic—are analyzed as unequivocally monosemous: they can only be read as the participation in and reproduction of Roman (central) values. In short, all roads truly do lead to Rome.

My own expertise would ill equip me to focus on the mechanics, motivations, or performance of elite networks in the geographical territory of the Roman Empire that lie at the center of Noreña’s study. Instead, I would like to focus on the abstract nature of “-ization” itself and, briefly, the challenges of interpreting two of its manifestations: urban architecture and writing. To do so, I will take up the case of the early Japanese state as a counter-example of how we can think about the intersections of imperial technologies and ideologies. This will, I hope, highlight some of the benefits of relativizing the case of the Roman Empire and the inferences we might make based upon it about the nature(s) and practices of premodern empires. For, as the Japanese case will demonstrate, the importation and deployment of Sinitic technology was not synonymous with the acceptance by Japan of the peripheral and subservient position that the worldviews of the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) empires would have demanded. Rather, their successful use was essential to efforts to establish the Yamato court as a new center, a center that would be symbolized after 710 by Heijō-kyō (Nara) and, after 794, Heian-kyō (Kyoto). Taking advantage of Sinitic writing, coins, and models of governance, in other words, did not mean for the Japanese state that all roads led to Chang’an.

Let us begin with the question of what is at stake in very idea of “-ization” in this context, i.e., the issue of what it means for a geographically peripheral site to deploy the tools of the center. In the early Japanese state, we might refer to the adoption of the Classical Chinese writing system, Chinese geomantic principles for urban development, and even Chinese models for legal and administrative codes as a certain “Sinicization.” Yet this was by no means a sign of “writ[ing oneself] into the Empire.” After all, that would have meant acceptance of the position of peripheral barbarian tributary vis-à-vis culturally “superior” rulers of the Central States. Instead, mastery of Sinitic discourses was used as a tool for asserting the validity of local (Japanese) authority, and even for justifying early expansionist myths.

The *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan, 720) is the earliest example of an imperially commissioned history modeled on Chinese historiography. But intriguingly, Chinese-derived imagery can already be seen in the 712 *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters), the earliest extant...
history of Japan, and arguably its least “Chinese.” Specifically, Record of Ancient Matters makes use of the familiar Chinese trope of the people choosing of their own volition to follow a benevolent morally superior ruler on at least one major occasion: Empress Jingū’s non-violent conquest of the kingdoms of Silla and Paekche (in what is now Korea). Despite the use of familiar Sinitic models to justify the Japanese court’s “civilizing mission,” however, the power relations that result from Jingū’s excursions do not take China as a center. Instead, they reorient the regional powers towards a new Japanese center.

In this famous account, the Sun Goddess possesses Jingū, charging her to instruct Emperor Chūai to journey west, to where there are “many lands . . . piled with rare treasures.” Chūai imprudently objects, stating, “When I ascend to a high spot and gaze west, I don’t see any land—there is only a vast sea.” For his failure to heed the divine command, the emperor dies on the spot, slumped over his koto. After damage control is implemented in the form of a purification, the gods are petitioned again. Once again, the ruler, now Jingū, is instructed to go west, and after the deities’ identities are confirmed, she is guided through the steps needed for a successful westward expedition. Jingū subsequently sets off to conquer the peninsular kingdoms, and she finds herself and her ships deposited by a giant wave in the middle of Silla, where “the king of the land was in awe and said, ‘Henceforth, I will follow the command of the Emperor.’” Tribute is promised in perpetuity, and Silla is established as an imperial “stable,” while Paekche is slated to be a “granary.” Thereupon, Jingū establishes the territory as a divine protectorate, and the story turns to her return to Japan and the difficulties that beset it.

Though not explicitly stated, just as China is subduing (or trying to subdue) the peoples on its borders as an imperial power, the Japan of this early work is likewise creating a world order in which peripheral kingdoms recognize its inherent worth and authority. While the main point of the episode is the power of the divine will of the kami (native deities), it should also be noted that Jingū’s victory is not only blood-free, but conflict-free, too. This is not, of course, the only way in which threats are subdued in the Kojiki, and in that regard, I want to avoid over-emphasizing the point. However, it is worth noting that when Jingū goes overseas to pacify kingdoms, she does so in a mode of virtuous conquest reminiscent of continental heroes such as King Wen of Zhou. This—the King Wen-style ideal—can be seen in summations such as the following from the Mencius:

Mencius said, “The tyrant is he who uses force and dissimulates humaneness. A tyrant requires a large kingdom. The king is he who uses virtue and implements humaneness. To behave as a king does not require one to await a large kingdom [to draw upon]. Tang did it with seventy li, and King Wen with a hundred. When
one uses force to subdue men, they do not submit in their hearts, but because their strength is not adequate to resist. When one uses virtue to subdue men, in their hearts they are pleased, and they sincerely submit, as was the case with the seventy disciples in their submission to Confucius.\textsuperscript{11}

Like King Wen, Jingū does not require a massive army to impose her will.\textsuperscript{12} She arrives as a model of enlightened rule, and the people of the peninsular kingdoms bow to her obvious superiority, the promise of eternal tribute attesting to their complete conversion.

As both the provincial gazetteers and \textit{Record of Ancient Matters} attest, in the context of a would-be rapidly centralizing eighth-century Japan, to broadly adopt a rhetoric and worldview modeled on imperial “Chinese” norms (as in the excerpts here or subsequent imperial histories more overtly modeled on Chinese historiography) is to take on the mantle of a civilizing and centralizing mission. It is not to subscribe to Japan’s place within the Chinese-determined world order; it is to assert parity with an existing empire, even if only aspirationally. This disaggregation of technology and ideology is also, to an extent, visible in at least two parallels to the examples raised in Noreña’s study: urban planning and the use of writing.

If for the early Japanese state self-initiated Sinicization was not the equivalent of subscribing to the Chinese geo-political worldview, perhaps one of the clearest examples of this is the modeling of the eighth-century capital, Heijō-kyō, and later Heian-kyō, on the Chinese city of Chang’an.\textsuperscript{13} It is generally accepted that this—like the wholesale importation of Chinese institutions and bureaucracy, religion and cosmology, and even certain social values—was because China constituted a working model of an empire, and a nearby one, no less. It did not, however, represent an uncomplicated effort to emplace oneself in the Sinosphere, per se.

For Segobriga, Noreña reads architecture as faithful to imperial discourse, because it reproduced not only the external trappings but also the values of the center in a way that was unambiguously legible to/from the center: “What is clear, though, is that no visitor from Italy or the city of Rome, from any time after the early first century CE, would have doubted for a moment that Segobriga was a ‘real’ Roman city.”\textsuperscript{14} Once again, Japan’s position as an aspiring center hints at a relevant alternative perspective. Would an eighth-century visitor from Chang’an have looked around Nara and thought he was in a Chinese city? Perhaps.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps residents of a central authority are predisposed to always read replications of the language of that authority as a demonstration of fealty to its ideals. Even so, a city is never only populated by representatives of the center. In the case of early Japan, recent archaeological discoveries have suggested the presence of at least one “Persian lecturer” involved in educating government officials in Nara, attesting to the distant origins of some
of the capital’s residents.16 (To say nothing of the important roles played by Koreans in the transfer of continental technology to Japan.) Would this Persian have believed he was in a Chinese city? Or, more fundamentally, would he have equated the visible manifestations of a culture originally imported from the continent with “Chinese”? Or simply with “civilized”? Or “imperial”? In short, we may expect representatives of the center to reproduce the interpretations of the center; but as Japan should remind us, in the case of a cosmopolitan empire, that is unlikely to ever be the only perspective in play. Even if, as Noreña says, “what the inhabitants of the town really thought about” its architecture is ultimately unknowable, is there a way to read it that allows for the possibility of a non–centrally oriented interpretation?17

This brings us to one last point for exploration, which is not unrelated to that of the recognizability of a city as “Roman” or, in this case, “Chinese.” In the case of Nara, while it may have featured many “Chinese” visual elements, once we add a soundtrack of speaking humans, thinking of it as a “Chinese” city becomes untenable. This, despite the fact that the forms of Japanese spoken in the eighth century were largely recorded in a writing system that was often (but not always) visually indistinguishable from that of Classical Chinese. David Lurie’s work on the nature of the relationship between the writing system and the spoken language(s) it represented—a form or forms of Japanese within the archipelago—has demonstrated the fallacy in the East Asian case of equating a common writing system with a single oral realization.18 Or, in the case of what he has termed “alegible writing,” with any realization at all.19 This disparity between the visual identity of a script and its multiple forms of possible consumption throughout the Sinosphere cannot but color how an East Asianist reads discussions of public epigraphy. Lurie’s discussions of early Japanese mirror inscriptions are particularly germane, since they repeatedly indicate that in this context, writing could convey symbolic meanings independent of content.20 Because of this, I want to resist the impulse to read inscriptions generated by (representatives of) the “center” as uniformly and monosemously legible. How do we think about the impact of inscriptions without considering the difficult issue of audience? If there are no sources that speak to the “readers,” how can we avoid the seeming circularity of collapsing reading and writing into a single process and all readers into a single category?

For the early Japanese state, rather than suggesting a commitment to a Chinese worldview, the use of Chinese script in public and private writing provided a choice not so much between writing in Japanese and Chinese as between being able to write at all or not. The questions of varied notions of legibility that such practices invite are relevant for any stratified society. While writings in a given prestige idiom may convey
one thing to someone literate in that idiom, other audiences will likely have differing takeaways from their encounters with, for instance, public inscriptions. In early Japan, the decision to write in Chinese took on much of its performative meaning as a translocal idiom, I would suggest, only when there was a viable alternative after the eighth century.

To summarize, the importation and adaptation of Chinese models in this context signified a major advance in statecraft, urban planning, and writing (to name but a few of the foreign technologies), but not at the expense of well-developed autochthonous traditions. And despite this immense cultural debt to China, the Chinese worldview itself could never be entirely imported into Japan, because to do so would be to internalize Japan’s place on the margins in a Sino-centric context. Here, too, the rhetoric and ideology of empire are not something that are inhabited as much as they are wielded, in some extremes, even to at least discursively confront the authority that first produced them.²¹

To conclude, throughout this response, I have seen my task not as suggesting false equivalencies between Noreña’s object of inquiry and my own interests, but rather as providing a perspective from outside of the center. In a very real sense, I am the opposite of the “visitor from Italy or the city of Rome” who at once recognizes the familiar codes of the discipline as legible in a particular way. Instead, I am the interloper who strives to render sensible an alien system through the tools familiar to me—the foreign traveler from outside of the empire—a process that always raises questions of materials, interpretation, and orientation. In this role, I believe it important to repeat that I realize that Japan and Segobriga do not occupy equivalent positions (unless, perhaps, when viewed from the “central” perspective of the empires that produced the technologies under discussion), but I do think that they lend themselves to comparison to the extent that both existed in relation to larger cultural spheres that were backed by an empire. In that regard, at least, we can imagine that both were forced to negotiate the realities of their non-central positions (in every sense) with the aspirations of the people who called them “home.” Thus, it seems to me that both the circulation of technology and cultural (or political) authority as well as the impulse to define oneself vis-à-vis a distant center are operative across these in many ways disparate landscapes.

Despite the dissimilarities between the specifics of Japan and Segobriga, bringing them into conversation as case studies invites the question: To what extent are a civilization’s imperial technologies separate from the specific hierarchies of its worldview? In the Segobriga case, each iteration of Roman technology becomes evidence of Romanization, even “in the middle of nowhere.” Yet the case of early Japan’s “Sinicization” and the claims to (relative) centrality it enabled demonstrate that this is not
the only possible relationship between the implementation and outcome of the technologies of an empire. Japan’s “Sinicization” suggests a context in which the appropriation of imperial norms is more equivalent to civilizational advancement than to allegiance to the specific worldview that generated the norms in the first place. In the ways that the Japan/China case highlights other possible relationships between the rhetoric and realities of empire(s), I would suggest that it calls attention to presuppositions both about “culture” as an analytical category more broadly and, in particular, about the possible multiple significations of borrowing anything from an elite central tradition.

Notes
2. Translation heavily modified from Michiko Aoki, Records of Wind and Earth (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1997), 44–45; Uegaki, Fudoki, 366–69. In rendering tsuchigumo 都知久母 and yatsukahagi 夜都賀波岐 “Earth Spiders” and “Long Shins,” respectively, rather than simply transliterating them, I have followed common variant spellings that suggest these pejorative connotations: 土蜘蛛 and 八束脛. On Kurosaka’s probable position, see p. 367, n. 22. I have also, for expediency, taken the anachronistic approach of Romanizing words based on the modern Japanese pronunciation. Because English is the koine of Fragments, while I will draw on Japanese and Chinese primary sources, I will restrict references to secondary scholarship to recent Anglophone works.
3. Or, as Torquil Duthie puts it, “Like their classical and contemporary exemplars, the Han and Tang dynasties, Yamato courtiers envisioned themselves as inhabiting a central metropolitan capital ruling over an expansive realm containing peoples that exhibited diverse forms of appearance, custom, and speech.” Torquil Duthie, Man’yōshū and the Imperial Imagination in Early Japan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1. For a study of early diplomatic relations between the archipelago and the continent that often were at least in part bids for Chinese endorsement, see Wang Zhenping, Ambassadors from the Island of the Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005). Duthie’s first chapter complicates our understanding of these exchanges. Duthie, Man’yōshū and the Imperial Imagination, 15–56.
4. To borrow a phrase from Lori Watt, speaking of Japanese writers in colonial Korea, in a talk at Princeton University, 2011.
5. For a short overview of the Kojiki’s “non-Sinic” worldview, see Duthie, Man’yōshū and the Imperial Imagination, 115–17.
8. Ibid., 245–47; citation from 247.
9. Ibid., 247.
10. Ibid., 248–49.

12. Indeed, we are given no sense of the size of her army at all, being told only that she assembles one and has them travel by boat. Cf. Yamaguchi and Kōnoshi, Kojiki, 247.


15. Nancy Steinhardt offers a Sino-centric perspective in reflecting on the more general developments of Chinese architecture: “From Kashgar to Kyoto, one is aware one has entered the Chinese sphere as soon as ceramic tile roofs projecting above low walls come into view. Adoption of Chinese symbolic space, even in instances when the symbolism was ignored, enhanced the process of empire formation at all of China’s borders.” (Italics added.) Nancy S. Steinhardt, “The Tang Architectural Icon and the Politics of Chinese Architectural History,” The Art Bulletin 86.2 (June 2004): 231. It is precisely this uncoupling of technology from the specific ideological commitments that is germane to the discussion at hand. On potential for change as well as intended perception, see also Matthew Stavros, 7–8.

16. Gabriel Samuels (October 6, 2016), Piece of Carved Wood Suggests Persian Taught Maths in Japan 1,000 Years Ago. Retrieved from https://www.independent.co.uk. The article, which draws on one from the Japan Times, clarifies that this is not an isolated contact, noting, “Previous discoveries have revealed that Japan had direct trade links with Persia as early as 600 AD.”

17. Citation from Noreña, “Romanization,” 8.


19. This is not to say that such writing does not bear one or more meanings to the “reader” and/or “spectator.” Lurie provides a succinct explanation of how he differentiates between the two terms. Lurie, Realms of Literacy, 29–30. The complicated and contentious relationship between writing and its “reception” is a central topic of Lurie’s first chapter, 15–66.

20. His discussion of the circulation of Chinese coins in Japan, though short, is also relevant. See Lurie, Realms of Literacy, 52–55. On mirror inscriptions of both Chinese and Japanese origins, see 57–62 and 99–103. For restatement of the broader claim about reading/writing, see 103–04.

21. Lurie provides a similar assessment in terms of writing: “The domination of peripheries by more ‘advanced’ centers is an indisputable fact of human history in general, and also of the history of writing in particular. But it is essential to acknowledge the power the periphery has to deny or modify—often incompletely, to be sure—the structures of the center, even as they are imposed by agents of the center, or through imitation and emulation by the powerful within the peripheral society.” Lurie, Realms of Literacy, 65–66.