Here’s to make Good Old Boxer turn over inside his grave. In 1927, he was twenty-three years old and proud to see one of his first articles in print. It was entitled “Relação da perda da Nau ‘Madre de Deus’ no porto de Nagasaki em janeiro de 1610” [An Account of the Loss of the Great Ship Madre de Deus in the port of Nagasaki in January of 1610]. In it, the young Boxer demonstrated what were to be his characteristic strengths: a narrative flair, a robust knowledge of a variety of European languages, and an unrivaled familiarity with everything printed related to his topic. But it also already contained the germs of his weaknesses, as I shall analyze here. The article focused on an incident, at the time little known outside Japan, in which the Captain of a Portuguese carrack chose to blow himself up with his ship rather than obey orders from the Nagasaki harbor authority. Such an act could only be considered romantic and heroic in the days before the break-up and disappearance of the European colonial empires in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, by contrast, the same act seems mainly obstinate, stupid, and wasteful.

Two years after his first publication on the incident, Boxer published a greatly expanded version of the same article in English, in no less than two different places in the same year. The booklet under review here is a reprint of the second of these efforts dating from 1929. In these two new publications, the author admitted that his first article in Portuguese was “marred by numerous misprints and typographical errors” (p. 88), but he clearly was not taking any responsibility for their having marred his text. The tenor of the article, however, had not changed: Europeans still had “difficulties with the natives” (p. 29), and the Portuguese captain had behaved heroically, finding “the death he sought in the sea and not in his
enemy’s hands” (p. 53). With these and a few other articles, the scholarly career of the young British officer had gotten off to a well-publicized and exciting start even before the dark clouds of the 1930’s had gathered on the horizon.

It seems that in 1939 or 1940, just before the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Boxer came across a Portuguese manuscript in the Marsden collection of the British Museum that forced him to revisit the same topic a second time. The manuscript was written by the Jesuit Padre João Rodrigues Girão, who was in Nagasaki at the time of the incident and wrote his report a few weeks afterward. Boxer’s first publication to mention the existence of this manuscript dates from 1941, but it is clear that the exigencies of wartime had not yet allowed him to study it in detail. It was only after the war that Boxer must have realized that, for his first three publications on this topic, he had based himself mainly on a second-rate account, written by someone who had never been to Japan but had just been summarizing and embellishing the text he had now found. In other words, he learned the difference between printed and archival sources the hard way.

Boxer’s revision of his already revised article was published in 1948. In it, he wrote of his effort of 1929: “it contains a few minor errors of fact and surmise which are now corrected in this shorter version.” Where just the facts are concerned, we notice that the ship’s name has changed, for example, this time it has become the Nossa Senhora da Graça. More importantly, Boxer mentioned for the first time that there was another problem in Nagasaki caused by the changed regulations of the harbor authorities. Although Boxer did not draw the conclusion (for that would have involved changing the whole direction of his argument), his explanation tracing the disagreement in Nagasaki to previous behavior of the Portuguese captain in Macao was clearly nothing but a convenient excuse for the Japanese to take action. In the new, postwar version, also, the Portuguese captain no longer made a five hundred mile journey inside Japan to have an interview with Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, and he no longer jumped into the sea at the last moment either.

In the historian’s own opinion, these were minor errors, but he admitted that they were his own and that, twenty years earlier, he had wrongly “surmised,” i.e. filled in the gaps between his facts, correct or erroneous, with fantasies (these we will not reproduce in any detail here; suffice it to say they chiefly deal with Boxer’s recreations of what Japanese rulers and officials “must have felt” or “thought”). Next, two years later, in 1950, he composed another article in Portuguese, which was published simultaneously in no less than three different places. Its title nostalgically revisited those days of the twilight of colonialism in
the late 1920’s: “Antes quebrar que torcer” ou Pundonor Português em Nagasaqui, 3–6 de janeiro de 1610. [“Rather Break than Yield” or A Portuguese Point of Honor Made in Nagasaki]. In this article, Boxer presented a straightforward transcription of the document he had found in the Marsden collection ten years earlier. Later, Boxer would write of the incident in Nagasaki harbor twice more, each time shorter than the last, and each time, at least in English, less glorifying the heroics of the Portuguese. Obviously, although one of his favorite topics, Boxer’s story of the explosion in Nagasaki Bay had also become loaded with its own history of errors and was now changing with the post-war and post-colonial fashions to which Major Boxer—to his credit—had been quick to subscribe.

What are we to conclude from this printing history? First of all, Boxer, for all the path breaking work he did in opening up the field of Portuguese diaspora studies in the English language, clearly had a very cavalier attitude towards the details of responsible scholarship, and had a childish habit of rushing his writings into print wherever or whenever he saw an outlet. Second, naturally the question presents itself: did he finally get the story right in his later years? I cannot go into the necessary detail here, but the short answer is: No, for Boxer’s approach to the topic remained centered on the Portuguese and their sources even though the events unfolded in Japan. To really understand the situation that led to the “heroic” action of the Portuguese captain, we have to radically change our perspective rather than uncritically adopt the point of view of one of the parties involved. Clearly, more archival research in both Japanese and European sources is needed to come up with a new framework for the incident. Boxer never did this type of digging, because he was untrained for it and did not have the patience required. It was much easier and rewarding to behave as if history consisted of nothing but great and heroic adventures.

For our purposes here, finally, the most important conclusion must be that the booklet under review is a product from a bygone age. Its text was rewritten many times by its own author, who—if he were still alive—would never have agreed to this reprint. Even in its final versions, however, Boxer’s rendition can no longer satisfy the discerning modern reader. One wonders, therefore, what type of reasoning could possibly justify a reprint of this early version today, let alone put down no less than eighty-five American dollars for these ninety-four measly pages full of errors and youthful sins. Is it perhaps nothing more than just the overblown reputation of the author himself? The usual, unctuous injunction de mortibus nihil sive bonum seems rather out of place in Boxer’s case. A critical reassessment of his complete oeuvre is in order. I fear only a small part of that tremendous output will stand the test of time.
Notes

1 It was his second. His first was “O 24 de junho 1622: Uma façanha dos Portugueses.” (Tradução dum trabalho inédito em inglês), Boletim da Agência Geral das Colónias [Lisbon], 15 (1926): 117–28; 16 (1926): 27–41. It also dealt with a Portuguese feat of arms, in Macao against the Dutch.


4 There is no need to detail these misprints here. Most of them can indeed be traced to faulty typesetting, hasty editing, and inattentive or complete lack of proofreading.

5 British Museum, Additional Mss no. 9860, ff. 129–35. See also: Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu (Jesuit Archive in Rome), section Japonica-Sinica 31, ff. 352–60.

6 As viagens de Japão e os seus Capitães-Mores (1550–1640). Macau: Escola Tipografica do Oratorio de S.J. Bosco (Salesianos), 1941.

7 On page 11, Boxer could still write proudly: “O heróico fim deste capitão é relatada per longum et latum no meo livro The Affair of the Madre de Deus (London 1929). Há relação inédita desta façanha intitulada Relação da Queima da Nao Nossa Senhora da Graça em que veo por Capitão mor da viagem André Pessoa no ano de 1609 (sem lugar nem data, mas escrita em letra miúda sobre papel chinês) . . . .”


10 Ibid., 52.

11 The captain had seen himself forced, when he was the highest authority of Macao in 1608, to discipline with great loss of life a group of Japanese sailors from the Kyushu domain of Arima.

12 First in the Anais da Marinha (Lisbon) 10.14 (1950): 11–39; second in Boletim do Instituto Português de Hongkong 3 (1950): 161–195; and again under separate cover by the Macau Imprensa Nacional (1950). Thus blow the winds of support for those who stroke and fondle the egos of the nationalists!

13 Ibid. 6.

14 In his The Christian Century in Japan (1951), 267–85; and in The Great Ship from Amacon (1963), 71–79.

15 It is noteworthy that in the 1963 publication the essay of 1929, under review here, is no longer even mentioned or referred to.

16 To date the most penetrating analysis of the Portuguese-Japanese silk trade in 1609 has been published by Gono Takashi. “Keichō 14-nen (1609) no kiito bōeki ni tsuite,” in Shigaku Žasshi 81. 11 (1972): 37–64.