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IN MEMORIAM

AN ENDURING AFFAIR

CHARLES R. BOXER'S FASCINATION WITH JAPAN

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From his youth until his nineties the late Charles R. Boxer (1904-2000) was fascinated with Japan, its people, and their culture. Even his harsh wartime imprisonment by the Japanese did not diminish his respect for Japanese people generally, nor did it lead to the sort of bitter hatred of Japan that has characterized many former POWs ever since the Pacific War.

Charles first became interested in Japan's culture when as a young man he visited the home of his paternal grandmother on the Isle of Wight. She possessed a collection of *netsuke*, perhaps given to her by one of Charles's nineteenth-century forebears, a naval officer who participated in a bombardment of Japan in the 1850s. Wishing to learn more, he turned to the then standard Arthur D. Innes, *The History of the World* (7 v. London, 1909). There he discovered that the Portuguese had been the first European people to reach Japan (1543), that they had served as vital intermediaries in the silk trade between the archipelago and China, and that Jesuits in the Portuguese Assistancy had been the first to introduce Christianity there. He also found that during the early seventeenth century both Portuguese merchants and the missionaries were expelled from Japan and that the former were succeeded by aggressive Dutch traders. That was the beginning of Charles Boxer's interest in the imperial histories of those two bitter maritime rivals, the Portuguese and the Dutch. During the 1920s, soon after he received a commission in the Army's Lincolnshire regiment, he began to visit both Holland and Portugal, to learn their languages, and to establish vital links with scholars, archivists, and librarians.

¹ This paper is based on one of the themes in my forthcoming biography of Charles R. Boxer, *Charles R. Boxer: Soldier, Historian, Teacher, Collector, Traveler* (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2000).

Beginning in 1926, he began publishing the first group of articles and books that would ultimately total 342. Among the first was his study of the loss of the Portuguese carrack *Madre de Deus*, deliberately destroyed by its captain in the port of Nagasaki in January 1610. Charles was fascinated by the dilemma and courage of Captain André Pessoa and wrote about his exploit repeatedly². He also contributed other essays about both Dutch and Portuguese relations with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Japan³.

In 1930 Charles Boxer fulfilled his longtime ambition when he was posted to Japan as a language officer. There, after an intensive language course, he was attached to Japanese military units as an observer-participant. He traveled extensively throughout the archipelago, learned *kendo*, and augmented his growing scholarly library with a collection of rare Japanese books, as well as screens, sword fittings, and drawings⁴.

Charles completed his assignment to Japan in 1933 and returned to Britain where he joined the intelligence staff of the War Office. In 1935 he was invited to Holland by the Royal Netherlands Geographical Society to give two lectures that were expanded into his first book concerning Japanese history. *Jan Compagnie in Japan, 1600-1817: an Essay on the Cultural, Artistic and Scientific Influence exercised by the Hollanders in Japan*⁵, an obviously now dated effort to trace the cultural impact of the Dutch upon Japan.

In 1937 Boxer returned to the Orient. He was assigned to the intelligence staff at Hong Kong as Japanese language specialist. He was destined to remain at that beleaguered outpost for nine years. For the next several years he performed his responsibilities skillfully and competently. He often spent weekends working in the archives of Macao gathering material for future studies, including the silk trade with Japan. In 1939 he and his first wife honeymooned in Japan, where they spent three weeks in June and July ostensibly visiting Kyoto, Kobe, Tokyo, and Nikko, but Charles, who had made several return trips to Japan since 1936, was also consulting colleagues and gathering material for an intelligence report that he prepared for circulation at the highest levels. In that report he warned about the

2. He did so once from memory when he contributed an essay to a barracks magazine when he was a prisoner of war in the Argyle Street Camp in Kowloon in 1943.

3. S. George West, *A List of the Writings of Charles Ralph Boxer Published between 1926 and 1984* (London: Tamesis Books Ltd., 1984), 1-4; alternatively, see Centro de Estudos do Mar, Homenagem ao Professor Charles Ralph Boxer. A Tribute to Professor Charles Ralph Boxer (Figueira da Foz, 1999), 72-73.

4. The several hundred Japanese books that Charles acquired are now in the vault of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, where they await a skilled person to catalog and process them. Any interested and qualified person should apply to the Lilly for a Helm fellowship to examine these neglected sources which date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

5. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1936); revised in 1950 and again in 1968.

serious deterioration in Anglo-Japanese relations and concluded that in the event of war Hong Kong was doomed⁶.

Charles Boxer was absolutely correct. On Christmas Day 1941 Hong Kong surrendered to Japanese forces after a brief, bloody, bitter campaign. One of the casualties was Major Charles Boxer. He spent many recuperating in a military hospital and then transferred to the Argyle Street POW Camp in Kowloon. There he became implicated in the exchange of secret messages between the POW camps and a Sino-British underground. He also translated and disseminated news obtained via a secretly built and operated camp radio. The Japanese discovered those activities and Charles was among those arrested. He was rigorously questioned, though not tortured. Though some of his comrades were executed, he was spared but was sentenced to five years at hard labor, a punishment initially performed in solitary in Stanley Prison and later in a Canton jail.

Following Japan's surrender, Charles Boxer was liberated and returned to duty. However, he left Hong Kong in October 1945 and sailed to the United States, where he joined the American freelance writer Emily Hahn whom he married soon after his arrival in New York City. In January 1946 Boxer returned to Japan. Unlike many former POWs, he did not approach the stricken former enemy with hostility or with the spirit of vengeance. Despite the punishment that he had received and the loss of many of his comrades at arms, he bore no animosity toward the Japanese people. He once told a fellow former POW that "the war's over and its time that you forgot about it."⁷ That was an uncommon view but it was one shared by a number of other former captives in the Orient.

Charles's willingness to forget the past stood him in good stead with a group of Japanese scholars whom he had known and admired before the war. One recounted their encounter in a famous Tokyo bookstore in mid January 1946. As Koda Shigetomo recalled in his memoirs,

"When I arrived [...] he was already there. Since I fairly danced up the stairs in anticipation, he must have heard my step, because he quietly folded the old edition of an Edo picture scroll he was examining, rose from his chair, and walked [...] in my direction. [...] we grasped each other's hands in a very warm handshake. We greeted each other with the same words, 'How good to see you,' simple words that conveyed a wealth of meaning. [...]my

6."Notes on a Visit to Japan during June-July, 1939," 15 July 1939 (Copy No. 2), Great Britain, Public Records Office, FO371/23573.

7. Interview with Bill Wiseman, St. Albans, 25 Nov. 1997.

eyes were watering. [Several other Japanese scholars soon joined the town] and we adjourned to a *tatami* room on the 3d floor. There, with light filtering in from the glass door, our conversation moved from one subject to another, but both he and we were careful not to speak about the recent war or about Boxer's present mission. Our guest that day was not the British army officer nor the member of the Far Eastern Commission but the great historian and book collector.

I have often heard that Westerners carry pictures of their loved ones [...] into battle. When I asked Boxer if he had carried such pictures on his person, he pulled out his wallet and said, 'See, I still do.' And he showed me a small fragment of an ancient manuscript with the Roman letters 'tadaoqui' [Hosokawa Tadaoki, a famous seventeenth-century daimyô] printed on it, and another with the signature of the great Portuguese historian Diogo de Couto dating back to 1612. 'Splendid!' I exclaimed, 'that's what I would have expected of you.'⁸

Boxer was in Tokyo as a member of a British advisory delegation headed by George Sansom. Sansom and Boxer had become close friends since the early 1930s and Sansom arranged for him to join the team so that he could search for his highly esteemed scholarly library. Japanese troops had seized it immediately after the fall of Hong Kong and it subsequently vanished. Ultimately Charles successfully traced it to a library and museum in Ueno. Except for a few missing volumes, most of his collection of over a thousand mostly rare items was still crated with his name on the boxes. By 1947 his library had been returned to him in Great Britain.

That year Boxer resigned from the Army and accepted the Camões chair at King's College, London, though he lacked the conventional academic qualifications for such a position. With one brief interlude, he retained that chair from 1947 until 1967. Those were the years when Charles Boxer crafted many of his most important writings. Several of them pertained to Japan. The best known is *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650*, portions of which he had assembled since the 1920s.⁹ In that masterful volume Boxer analyzed the beginnings, growth, and violent suppression of Christianity in Japan

8. Koda Shigetomo, *Zenshu*, 7 (Tokyo: Chuo Koron-sha, 1972), 294-299. I am very grateful to Dr. Michael Cooper for having found this source and to Fr. Francis Mathy, S.J. of Sophia University (Tokyo) for kindly translating the text.

9. (Berkeley: University of California, 1951), reprinted (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993). In 1926 the editor of a Portuguese periodical announced that Boxer had in preparation "um outro vasto trabalho que intitula 'Subsidios para a história dos Portugueses no Japão, 1542-1640.'" *Boletim da Agência das Colônias* (Sept.-Oct. 1926), Pt. V, 41. Some have objected to the title *Christian Century* but that was a creation of the publisher, not the author who, in fact, did not care for it.

during the inclusive years. He gave particular emphasis to the endeavors of the Jesuits whom he admired for their ethics, intelligence, and courage, but he also was sympathetic toward their Franciscan rivals, who were among the first Christian martyrs in Japan. The book won praise from leading Far Eastern specialists in the United States including Edwin O. Reischauer and Kenneth Scott Latourette.

Two other books that Boxer wrote about the same time also warrant mention. The first is *Fidalgos in the Far East 1550-1770*, a work that Charles originally hoped would attract commercial publishers in the United States. When it failed to do so he arranged for its publication in The Hague by his old friend Martinus Nijhoff. It has been reprinted several times since its 1948 imprint. Although the primary focus of the book's fifteen essays is upon Macao, several of the essays relate to Portuguese activities in Japan. One is entitled "*The Great Ship from Amacon*." Like classical musical composers, Charles often reused titles that caught his fancy. In this instance he utilized the same title for one of his most cited publications, *The Great Ship from Amacon: Annals of Macao and the Old Japan Trade, 1555-1640*.¹⁰ That volume marked a return to one of Boxer's favorite themes, the silk trade between South China and Japan, for which he now provided documents drawn from archives in Goa, Lisbon, The Hague, and Japanese sources as well as supporting commentary.

By the time *The Great Ship from Amacon* was published Boxer's interests had shifted away from the Far East. He became more concerned about the activities of the Portuguese and the Dutch in Brazil and India, for example. But he always retained his personal interest in Japan and visited the archipelago to see old friends there frequently. He made his last trip in 1991 at the invitation of Tenri University. It was then that he read his last paper and was prominently interviewed by a leading Tokyo newspaper. Though in declining health and burdened by diminished vision, he retained his interest in Japan until nearly the end of his days. Not long ago the emperor of Japan visited London and was rudely treated by still embittered former prisoners of war. Charles Boxer strongly disapproved. His death was a loss for Japan and for much of the rest of the world.

10. (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1960), several times reprinted.

Charles Ralph Boxer FBA (8 March 1904 at Sandown, Isle of Wight – 27 April 2000 at St. Albans, Hertfordshire) was a historian of Dutch and Portuguese maritime and colonial history. In Hong Kong he was the chief spy of the British army intelligence in the tumultuous years leading up to World War II, but it is his lead role in one of the most flamboyantly public love stories of the 1940s, his romance with Emily Hahn, author and one of The New Yorker's most prolific contributors, that accounts for most The New York Times. Archives|THE ENDURING FASCINATION OF SECRET PLACES. campaign: nons_inyt_march_bau_projectocean_0219_bar1, creative: Bar1, source: optimizely, creator: DH. SUBSCRIBE NOW. While Mr. Jackson might have been a magician, the Los Angeles architect Charles Moore designs houses with an intentional sense of surprise and discovery, and talks of buildings in terms of their magic. He and his associates have built secret rooms in a number of houses. In the extensive remodeling of his own home, Mark Simon, a partner in Moore Grover Harper, an Essex, Conn., architectural firm, created secret compartments in a square room that he converted into an octagon. Ten boxer briefs, reviewed. because every man needs a new pair of boxer briefs sometimes. Specifically, boxer briefs. They're notably the best of both ends of the men's underwear spectrum: the support of a brief with the coverage of a boxer. For comfortable everyday wear, it doesn't get any easier. Here are the best boxer briefs out there right now.