

## Navigating the Spanish-Chamorro Transoceanic Encounter: Authorship and Collaborative Work in the *Boxer Codex*

*Este trabajo se propone ampliar la concepción del Códice Boxer mediante el análisis del autor y del artista que representaron el encuentro transoceánico entre los españoles y el pueblo chamorro, escenificado en la imagen inicial del manuscrito y descrito en la primera narración que lo acompaña. Aunque el manuscrito es anónimo, las narraciones analizadas ofrecen información clave sobre el intercambio de conocimientos y la mediación cultural entre los diversos grupos étnicos implicados en su redacción. El análisis no solo descubre pistas sutiles sobre el autor, sino que también destaca la participación colaborativa del artista y la influencia de los intermediarios culturales en su elaboración.*

Palabras clave: Códice Boxer, manuscritos coloniales, encuentros transoceánicos, trabajo colaborativo, interacción cultural oriental y occidental

*The article aims to deepen understanding of the Boxer Codex by analyzing the author and artist of the inaugural transoceanic encounter between the Spanish and the Chamorro people, depicted in the manuscript's initial image and detailed in the first accompanying narrative. Although most of the narratives remain anonymous, they offer valuable insights into the dynamics of knowledge exchange and cultural mediation among the diverse ethnic groups involved in the manuscript's creation. This study not only reveals the subtle hints about the author but also illuminates the collaborative efforts of the artist and the influence of cultural intermediaries involved in its production.*

Keywords: Boxer Codex, colonial manuscripts, transoceanic encounters, collaborative work, Eastern and Western cultural interaction

The *Boxer Codex*<sup>1</sup> emerges as a significant example of an episode of modern globalization occurring at the heart of Manila, the capital city of the Spanish territories in Asia.<sup>2</sup> Manila ascended to the status of the epicenter of global commerce and cultural exchange in Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> It was a place where European settlers, Chinese merchants, Japanese traders, Malayo-Polynesian communities, and indigenous populations coexisted and interacted. These exchanges not only enriched the city of Manila but also laid the foundation for an era of cultural fusion, paving the way for collaborative initiatives among multiple ethnicities and the creation of far-reaching global connections. Chinese merchants engaged in mutually beneficial exchanges with their Japanese and Spanish counterparts, orchestrating transactions that involved the exchange of silver for precious goods.<sup>4</sup> These valuable and exotic goods traversed transoceanic routes, navigating the seas to reach American territories – specifically the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru – and ultimately reaching the distant shores of Spain, giving birth to the famous Manila Galleon.<sup>5</sup> In the local context, Spanish individuals enlisted the talents of Chinese painters, sculptors, and translators to contribute to cultural works. Chinese sculptors and artists, for instance, produced large-scale religious sculptures and integrated European painting techniques to create devotional artworks for churches and monasteries in the region.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Chinese and regional native translators played a crucial role, being commissioned by Spanish officials to interpret documents, letters, and maps, aiding in the navigation of diplomatic pathways.<sup>7</sup> Although the *Boxer Codex* does not explicitly identify its author(s) or collaborators, its visual and textual elements clearly reflect the entangled contributions of multiple cultural producers. It is within this framework of collaborative authorship that I position my analysis.

In this article, my fundamental aim is to augment the comprehension of potential collaborators associated with the *Boxer Codex*. I analyze in particular the author and the artist of the inaugural transoceanic encounter between the Spanish and the Ladrones people (later known as Chamorros), vividly depicted in the manuscript's initial image and detailed in the accompanying narrative titled "Relación de las yslas de los Ladrones" [An Account of the Ladrones Islands], (modern-day Mariana Islands).<sup>8</sup> My analysis not only reveals the subtle autobiographical hints left by the author, but also illuminates the collaborative efforts of the artist and the influence of cultural intermediaries involved in its production.

While my primary attention is directed toward the narrative featuring the Chamorro people, I broaden the scope to incorporate the narratives pertaining to the communities within the Filipino archipelago: Cagayan, Zambales, Visayans, Moros, and Tagalogs. The authorship of these narratives also remains anonymous, but their content nonetheless offers

valuable insights into the manuscript's intended readership and evidences the active participation of multiple ethnic groups in its production. A challenge, however, arises when trying to determine the specific role of authorship behind the work. Is the project's financier the same as the author? If the author is distinct from the individual who funded the project, does this imply collaborative authorship involving multiple contributors? Was one of these individuals familiar with the local languages and their writing systems? Moreover, who facilitated the acquisition of linguistic translators, skilled artists, and knowledgeable cultural intermediaries? Were these local cultural producers, hailing from diverse communities such as the Chinese, Tagalogs, or Visayans? If so, what mechanisms of organizational learning might have been in place to give structure and coherence to this multiethnic collaboration? Did the author serve as a mediator between the locals and the project, and to what extent did these intermediaries influence the outcomes? Another intriguing facet to explore is the legacy of these intermediaries. In other words, did the manuscript's overall design bear the imprint of indigenous work?

These questions gain particular resonance when we turn to the *Boxer Codex*. From its earliest folios, the *Boxer Codex* seamlessly weaves together captivating Spanish narratives with vivid illustrations of various communities across Southeast and East Asia, even extending its reach to encompass a Pacific Island community (Fig. 1). The illustrations depict a wide spectrum of individuals, ranging from Afro-Asiatic figures to indigenous peoples, representing diverse social strata and engaging in various occupations predominantly within the Philippines and China. While its authorship may suggest a secular origin (Boxer 47; Rubiés 57; Ollé & Rubiés 17; Quirino & Garcia 337;<sup>9</sup> Souza & Turley 24), the manuscript integrates elements from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and native spiritualities, mirroring the religious syncretism of the era. Similarly, the codex is a testament of linguistic diversity, blending Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, and a variety of local indigenous languages.<sup>10</sup> It also introduces avant-garde visual techniques with Chinese painting materials not seen in other Spanish works of the same period.<sup>11</sup> The manuscript's visual narrative is enriched by the depiction of Chinese mythological, natural, and divine figures in one notable section. Furthermore, the work features unique decorative patterns along the borders of each page, showcasing artistic designs that were innovative and uncommon, further enhancing its aesthetic charm.



the compilation of the manuscript, a project undertaken sometime between 1590 and 1591 (48). Boxer's proposition marked the inaugural attempt to lift the veil of anonymity that shrouds the manuscript. Since then, some scholars have agreed with Boxer's assertions, while others have advanced alternative theories.

The available scholarship pertaining to the author has delineated a general overview of his identity, offering glimpses into his background and expertise. Carlos Quirino and Mauro Garcia have pointed to Antonio Padua, a soldier who arrived in Manila alongside Governor Dasmariñas, as a potential overseer of the codex project (339). George Bryan Souza and Jeffrey Scott Turley lean toward the Spanish lawyer and high-ranking official Antonio de Morga as a fitting candidate for the manuscript's authorship (55). On a different note, Loreto Romero advances the hypothesis that Martín de Rada (d.1578), an Augustinian with extensive knowledge of Chinese and local customs, could be the elusive author (118). Adding another layer to the discussion, Niping Yan suggests that Juan Cobo was involved in the project by contributing to the creation of the manuscript (28). In their collective analysis, these scholars converge on a common profile: the author of the *Boxer Codex* must have been highly educated, extensively informed, and a widely traveled individual. This Spanish figure possessed the intellectual capacity to assimilate a wealth of information from diverse sources spanning multiple locations. Such an individual, moreover, would have access to substantial financial resources, enabling the assembly of a team comprising artists, linguistic translators, and local cultural intermediaries. Yet, despite this rich body of speculation, the author's true identity remains elusive, amplifying the manuscript's enigmatic resonance and underscoring the need to examine the collaborative dynamics that underpinned its creation. This uncertainty not only widens our perspective on authorship but also invites us to consider the broader visual and intellectual networks at play.

#### VISUAL ENCOUNTER: EXPLORING THE SYMBIOSIS OF ARTIST AND AUTHOR

The *Boxer Codex* opens abruptly with a 24-by-8-inch landscape-oriented image, depicting a transpacific encounter between a Spanish galleon and numerous boats of local people (Fig. 2). In stark contrast to conventional Spanish manuscripts, this document lacks customary structural elements such as a title, date, and notably, an introduction of the author. There is also no index, no preface, or any indication of its intended audience. These elements, usually present to offer context and thematic direction, are absent in this manuscript. The introductory image also omits both an artist's signature and a caption, leaving the initial symbolic illustration without any accompanying textual explanation. This lack of information poses a unique

challenge, hindering the comprehension of both the visual representation and the broader content encapsulated within the manuscript. However, the absence of an introductory note magnifies the significance of the opening illustration, elevating it to the status of the manuscript's preamble. In this capacity, the illustration not only depicts the emerging landscape of the Far East as both reality and thematic cornerstone of the manuscript but also serves as a symbolic epitome – almost a rhetorical summary – of coloniality itself, encapsulating the transpacific encounter and conquest in miniature.

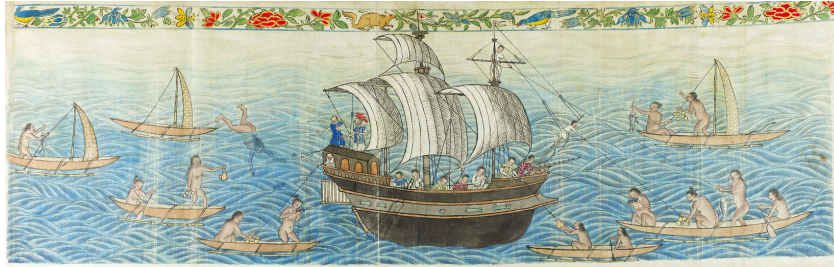


Figure 2. *Codex Boxer*, Introductory Image

After the anonymous introductory image, the manuscript presents two full-size portrait illustrations of human figures (Fig. 3). In the first portrait, an individual is depicted inside a decorative border, alongside a golden inscription located on the top left corner and bearing the term “Ladrones,” denoting the nomenclature employed to identify the Chamorro community.<sup>13</sup> The second portrait mirrors the iconographic elements of the first, portraying another individual in a comparable pose, devoid of attire, and wielding a weapon. Miguel Ibáñez-Aristondo suggests that these two individuals represent a Ladrones couple, embodying a male and a female in tandem (103). However, Ellen Hsieh offers an alternative perspective, noting that all the Chamorro figures depicted in the introductory image appear to be female (123). Immediately following these visual illustrations, there is a Spanish narrative entitled “Relación de las yslas de los Ladrones” [An Account of the Ladrones Islands].

The narrative “Relación de las yslas de los Ladrones” [An Account of the Ladrones Islands], is the first textual account in the *Boxer Codex*. This “Relación” describes the Chamorro people, offering a general exploration of their geographical landscape, demographic composition, cultural practices, and physiological attributes. Serving as an essential cornerstone, the “Relación” narrative establishes a vital framework necessary for deciphering the two human figures depicted as Ladrones by aligning physical textual features with visual representations. More significantly, the

narrative also enhances visibility of the broader contextual underpinnings of the Codex's introductory image.



Figure 3. Ladrones (1v-2r)

The introductory image depicts the moment of the initial encounter along the Acapulco-Manila transpacific route of the Spanish empire, while the “Relación” vividly describes the interaction through descriptive language and historically grounded passages. The unknown author of the narrative explicitly states that the individuals aboard the small boats depicted in the image originate from the Ladrones Islands, offering a definitive identification of their origin: “Ellos salen dos tres leguas a la mar en unos navichuelos chicos y tan estrechos que no tienen de ancho de dos palmos y medio arriba, *son de la forma que ahí van pintados*” (f. 3r, emphasis added). [The Ladrones venture two or three leagues into the sea in small boats that are so narrow they are barely two and a half spans wide. They are like they have been painted here].<sup>14</sup> Within the entire manuscript, this represents the singular occasion when the author makes an intertextual reference to the introductory image. This specific reference assumes considerable significance, as it implies that the narrative was composed subsequently to the landscape-oriented illustration. This chronological insight provides a contextual backdrop, making it possible to discern a sequence of creation between the initial textual and visual components of the manuscript.

The Spanish-Chamorro encounter unfolds in the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, omitting any visual reference to the Chamorro islands. The illustration, instead, focuses on the local inhabitants approaching the Spanish galleon in the open ocean, accentuating the maritime essence of the encounter. The Spanish never set foot on the island. According to the author of the Chamorro narrative, this decision was made due to their ample supplies, which allowed them to proceed without needing to disembark: “[los barcos españoles] suelen hacer aguada en algún puerto de ellas, que hay muchos y buenos y, quando no se hace, como en este viaje que se hizo el año de [15]90 por no haber falta de agua, que sólo por ella se suele tomar puerto” (f. 3r). [The (Spanish) ships dock at one of their many good ports to top up their water supply, and when otherwise, as happened in the expedition of 1590, when there was no lack of water, which is the only reason ships dock at the port]. This textual evidence harmonizes with the artist’s omission of any landmass near the Spanish galleon, underscoring the seamless synergy between textual and visual elements in capturing the essence of the maritime encounter.

Noteworthy in this maritime encounter is the distinct landscape orientation of the illustration, directing attention to the central prominence of the Spanish galleon. Positioned almost symmetrically, the galleon is surrounded by three local ships on the right and four on the left. While uncovering the artist’s ulterior motive for placing the Spanish galleon at the core of the image remains a challenge, it is evident that the artist possessed an intimate familiarity with the events unfolding during the encounter. This awareness suggests two plausible scenarios. First, it implies that the artist was navigating in the Spanish galleon and thus directly experienced the events of the encounter. Second – and perhaps more pertinent – it raises the possibility that the artist was commissioned by a Spanish figure, likely the author of the Chamorro “Relación,” who provided specific guidelines for depicting the encounter.

Ambiguity shrouds the question of whether the artist meticulously depicted the events of the Spanish encounter based on specific instructions or if he autonomously rendered these events from his own experiential perspective. However, one undeniable fact is the remarkable resemblance between the narrative and the illustration, evident in their shared identical passages. To better illustrate, the narrator recounts a specific instance wherein the Chamorro people and the Spanish engaged in the exchange of goods:

Y en biendo hierro se acercan y rrescatan por el todo lo que traen amarrandose para mejor rrescatar de un cabo del nabio por la popa. Y de alli y de todo el nauio les arojan [sic] abundancia de clauos biejos y aros partidos de pipas. Y todo esto es muy de ber

porque en cojiendo la sogá donde ba atado el hierro la cortan con los dientes como si fuese un rrabano. Y atan a ella los cocos o lo que les piden por señas. (f. 3v)

[And when they see iron, they offer for this everything they carry, employing ropes to better transfer this from the ship's stern. From all the boats come a profusion of old nails and broken woven baskets, and it is a sight to see because upon grabbing the rope to which the iron is tied, they sever this with their teeth as if they were biting a radish and tie to this the coconut and anything else signaled to them.]

The narrator recounts the exchange process between the Chamorro people and the Spanish, explaining how goods were traded between the two groups. Initially, the Chamorro islanders catch hold of the rope hurled by the Spanish, to which the iron pieces are attached. They, then, skillfully employ their teeth to cut them before securing coconuts or fish at the end. This precise depiction is mirrored in the introductory image, where Chamorro individuals are portrayed as actively engaged – either holding or biting the rope. Among the seven local boats depicted, four are interconnected by a rope, while two show Chamorro people offering fish and coconuts. The final boat, notably empty, raises questions about the intentions of the Chamorro individual who took a daring leap into the ocean. While the true purpose behind this action remains ambiguous, the narrative bridges this gap in understanding. It reveals that the individual's plunge is linked to the retrieval of a piece of iron thrown by the Spanish, thus providing a comprehensive context to the visual tableau.

The artist skillfully highlighted the encounter by crafting a Spanish galleon at the heart of the illustration, transforming it into a distinctive emblem. Although the intention behind this representation remains unclear, the artist aptly captures the events described in the *Ladrones* narrative. Specific painting techniques in the illustration, furthermore, provide intriguing clues about the artist's expertise. The representation of the ocean adheres to a conventional Chinese pictorial schema, a detail likewise observed by Miguel Ibáñez-Aristondo (112) and Jennifer Nelson (24). This technique, reminiscent of Chinese maps of the era such as the *Modern and Old Topographic Map* (古今形胜之图) (1555) or *Complete Map of the Myriads of Countries of the World and the History of People* (乾坤万国全图古今人物事迹) (1593) (Fig. 4 and 5), incorporates wave patterns to distinguish between ocean and land. The portrayal of the ocean in the *Boxer* in a similar style strongly suggests the artist's familiarity with Chinese painting techniques. Neilabh Sinha has asserted that the illustrations exhibit distinctly Chinese traits, either in their stylistic conventions or artistic derivation (217). Boxer (45), John N. Crossley (115), Nelson (24), and Quirino and Mauro (328), have suggested that the illustration was probably crafted

by a Chinese artist, a viewpoint echoed by Ibáñez-Aristondo, who posits that it was created by an artist of Sangley origin (112). I share their perspective, endorsing the idea that the artist behind the initial image was unlikely to be of Spanish heritage.

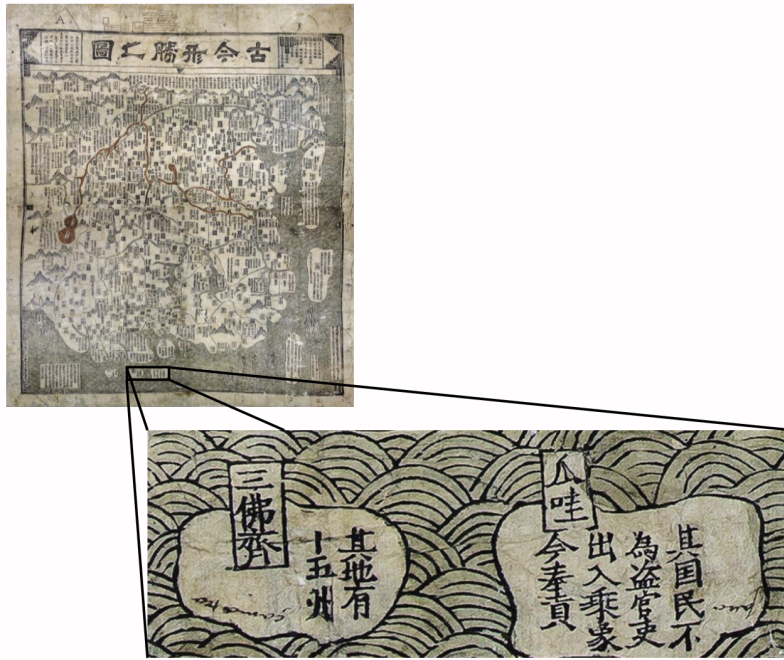


Figure 4. *Modern and Old Topographic Map* (古今形胜之图)

The artwork of the introductory image indicates a harmonious relationship with the textual narrative of the Chamorro people presented in “Relación de las yslas de los Ladrones,” suggesting the artist either followed specific instructions or interpreted the encounter based on firsthand experiences. The presence of Chinese drawing patterns in the depiction of the ocean also hints at the artist’s familiarity with Chinese painting techniques. An appropriate question to ask next is about the connection between the artist responsible for the introductory image and the author of the Chamorro’s “Relación.” Could these roles have been fulfilled by one person, or were they separate individuals in close collaboration – one crafting the narrative in words, while the other through art? Furthermore, did this same artist create all the paintings found within the codex? If they hailed from a distinct background, what language did they use to

communicate with the Spanish author? Was there a need for linguistic translators in this collaboration?



Figure 5. Complete map of the myriads of countries of the world and the history of people (乾坤万国全图古今人物事迹)

Building on this line of inquiry and as previously noted, I maintain that the artist responsible for the initial illustration was likely not of Spanish origin. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that this artist collaborated closely with the author in shaping the visual articulation of the first transpacific encounter – and perhaps even the visual program of the entire manuscript. This artist's work demonstrates not only a refined ability to render anatomically precise male and female figures across populations – possibly including Filipino groups and others in Southeast and East Asia – but also a perceptive engagement with social hierarchies and racial classifications. In this sense, I observe that the artist emerges not merely as a skilled draftsman but as an intellectual figure whose proficiency in Spanish positioned him to operate on an interpretive level comparable to that of the author. His visual contributions reflect not passive transcription but an active role in framing the manuscript's representational strategies and colonial epistemologies. The succeeding section delves into the author of the Chamorro narrative, aiming to comprehend his perspective and

involvement in the Spanish-Chamorro encounter, and to explore how these aspects relate to the artist's contributions.

TEXTUAL INTERSECTIONS: BETWEEN AUTHOR AND CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES

The author of "Relación de las yslas de los Ladrones" adopts a distinct perspective, shifting between first- and third-person singular voices.<sup>15</sup> In this account, the author states that he is circumnavigating in a Spanish vessel coming from Acapulco in 1590, unequivocally affirming his Spanish identity. Boxer has suggested that the author was sailing in the Spanish galleon *Capitana* that departed from Acapulco on March 1<sup>st</sup>, which was the expedition of the newly appointed governor of Manila, Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas (38). While the author does specify the year of the voyage, crucial historical details such as departure and arrival locations along with dates and names of key figures about the Spanish expedition are absent from the text. This omission raises concerns regarding the author's motives for excluding such crucial information. One plausible suggestion is that the author, possibly a subordinate member of the expedition, adhered to a specific role-defined narrative scope. Unlike royal secretaries who traditionally provided comprehensive expeditionary details, this author chose an unconventional approach, leaving gaps in the account. In this case, a compelling line of inquiry emerges. Could the author indeed be Governor Dasmariñas himself? If not, what drives a subordinate, likely possessing some degree of authority, to exclude essential information about his superior's expedition? This uncertainty cultivates the complexities of authorship, authority, and historical representation in the *Boxer Codex*.

This entanglement becomes especially apparent in the anonymous narrative concerning the Chamorro people, which intertwines firsthand experiential accounts with information drawn from external sources. Souza and Turley contend that the author of the Ladrones section is a second-hand reporter, primarily due to the absence of direct interaction between the author and the Chamorro people (303). According to their analysis, the ship never disembarked or halted on land to acquire supplies, leading them to conclude that the author had no firsthand experience with the Chamorro community. However, I posit a distinct perspective, challenging the notion that the author is merely a second-hand reporter. Instead, I propose that the author directly participated in the encounter with the Chamorro people. My assertion finds support in a specific incident narrated in the text. The author recounts, in first-person singular, an episode where he brandished a sword, mimicking a gesture as if to throw it, prompting a startled reaction from the Ladrones: "[T]omé una espada desnuda y hice que se la quería arrojar y al punto que la vieron dieron un alarido alçando grandes voces" (4r). [I drew a sword and made a signal as if wanting to throw it, and as soon as they saw

this everyone cried out]. This act of theatrically wielding a sword to gauge the Ladrones' familiarity with weapons is a distinctly militaristic maneuver – a behavior unexpected from a missionary or a religious figure. This passage strongly suggests that the author actively participated in the ship's crew that interacted with the local inhabitants of what are now the Mariana Islands.

In the introductory image, twelve individuals aboard the galleon are actively engaging with the Chamorro people. On the galleon's poop deck, two distinctive figures are visible, one of them wearing a hat adorned with feathers. Strikingly, the author, who is described as holding a sword aloft, is absent from the illustration. None of the twelve passengers are depicted holding any weapons (see Fig. 6). This absence of evidence in the illustration strongly suggests that the artist and the author of the Ladrones narrative are likely not the same individual. If they were, it would be reasonable to assume that the artist would have portrayed himself wielding a sword or found another way to emphasize his presence.



Figure 6. Twelve individuals aboard the galleon engaging with the Chamorro people. None of them are depicted holding any weapons.

In addition to the events directly witnessed by the author, the narrative incorporates passages originating from one or multiple third-party sources.

These instances can be identified through specific phrases such as: “[D]icen algunos,” “me afirman,” “también dicen,” “afirman los que [en la isla] estuvieron” (3v-4v). [Some people say; They affirm me; They also say; Those who were on the island affirm]. This textual evidence suggest that the author was surrounded by one or more informants who possessed familiarity with the island or had previous interactions with the Chamorro people.<sup>16</sup> The narrative, thus, was likely compiled somewhere in the Philippines, the default destination for Spanish expeditions. Indeed, the author offers physical descriptions of the Chamorro people, including their cultural practices. He draws a parallel between these practices and those of the Moros in the Philippines, specifically using the demonstrative pronoun “this” to geographically refer to the Moros from the Philippines: “[O]tros [Chamorros] los tiñen de negro que tiene la misma propiedad que el colorado y esto hacen también los moros *desta* tierra” (4v; emphasis added). [Others (Chamorros) use a black substance, which acts in the same way as the red one, and this is done as well by the Moros *of this* land (the Philippines)]. This choice of wording suggests that the author composed the narrative while in the Philippines, providing a geographical context to the account. Although the author affirms his participation in the 1590 expedition, I contend that the narrative was likely composed several months, if not years, after the encounter. The details and diverse perspectives presented in the text suggest a prolonged period of information-gathering, indicating substantial interactions with local individuals and potential interpreters during that time.

The author not only reveals a deep understanding of the Chamorro people through cultural informants but also displays peripheral knowledge from multiple regions in Southeast Asia. In the narrative, detailed descriptions provide the Chamorro’s local boats and specify that these vessels are crafted by Moros, particularly those originating from Borneo and Ternate: “[Estos navichuelos] traen vela latina de petate, que es hecho de palma y se sirve mucho de ellos en estas partes y hácenlos los moros con muchas colores y labores graciosas que parecen muy bien principalmente los moros burneys y terrenantes” (f. 3r). [(These small boats) are equipped with a lateen sail made of coconut matting, which is commonly used in these parts, and the Moros, mainly those of Borneo and Ternate, adorn these with many colors and designs that look very pleasant]. The author demonstrates awareness of the boat manufacturing techniques of Brunei and Ternate, two regions located southeast of Manila. Whether acquired through personal exploration or conversations with well-informed sources, the author amalgamates this information, weaving together first- and third-person singular narratives with an impersonal passive voice. This unique blend of perspectives indicates, yet again that the narrative was not composed

simultaneously with the author's journey. Instead, it suggests that the author had previously amassed insights from diverse communities, allowing for the juxtaposition of customs, traditions, and products based on their shared characteristics from various places in Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, the author demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of cultural knowledge from continental Asia by making various references to different regions. For instance, when discussing the clothing of the Visayans, the author notes that they import products from China, stating: "Y algunas ay que las traen de tafetan rrazo y damasco de lo que viene de la china" (f. 27r). [Some (women) wear plain taffeta and damask that come from China]. Similarly, the author mentions that influential Visayan women wear some sort of crowns, also imported from China: "Si son principales suelen lobar las mugeres unas como coronas y guirnaldas en las causas echas de oropel que se les trae de la China a bender" (f. 27v). [If belonging to the *principalía*, the women wear crowns and garlands on their heads made of tinsel imported from China]. In addition, the author displays awareness of the elephants found in India, comparing them with the elephants in the Philippines: "Tienen algunos coseletes echos de cuero de bufano y algunos ay de cuero de elefante que ay algunos en una ysla llamada Sonxolo aunque no tan grandes como los de la Yndia" (f. 34v-35r). [They have corselets made of buffalo skin and some made of skin from elephants, which can be found in an island called Jolo, although they are not as large as those in India]. These references collectively illuminate the author's profound awareness of trade networks and regional products between distant lands, providing a glimpse into the author's cultural expertise.

In the *Boxer Codex*, there are numerous instances where third-party informants left their mark. Within the Chamorro narrative, a few passages bear indications of their contribution – likely individuals of Spanish descent. Interestingly, this influence is absent in the narratives of Cagayanes and Zambales, but it surfaces prominently in several sections dedicated to the Visayans.<sup>17</sup> The author encapsulates the narrative about the Visayans people with the phrase: "Dicen pues estos Bisayas [...]" (f. 30r). [So, these Visayans say]. Drawing information from the community's elders, the author constructs one of the longest and most detailed narratives among the geospatial communities in the Philippine archipelago:

Esto que hasta aquí hemos escripto son los rictos y ceremonias, usos y constumbres que los bisayas y gentes que habitan en las yslas Philipinas del poniente hemos sabido; y esto de las personas más viejas y principales que hay en ellas porque son los que mejor las saben por ynformación vocal de sus pasados que de unos en otros ha venido de tiempo y memorial y lo cantan en sus cantares donde dan a entender

su principio y cuentan sus guerras y todas las demás cosas que hemos dicho; porque no tienen otra escritura ni cosa que se lo diga ni enseñe sino son sus cantares a quien ellos en su lengua llaman *biaus*. (f. 41v)

[This is what we have written thus far. These are the rituals, ceremonies, habits, and customs we have learned of the Bisayans and the people who inhabit these Philippine Islands of the West, from the eldest persons and leading chiefs amongst them, because they are the best informed and most knowledgeable on their past, passed on orally from one to another since time immemorial, and which they sing of in their songs about their origin, their wars, and other matters, which as we have said are transmitted verbally, because they have nothing written to show, except in their songs which they call in their tongue *biaus*.]

For the first time, the author discloses his source of information, putting the local people as the main reference. The author approached the elders and obtained information about the Visayans people, from stories about their ancestries to information about their customs, traditions, wars, calendars, and practices. Although no names are mentioned, the information was presented in the form of “cantares” (songs) and translated by one or multiple translators so that the author could encompass it into one narrative.

It was quite common for royal secretaries, cultural producers, and soldiers to summon the local people, in particular the elders, as the go-betweens to obtain information about their respective territories. Most Spanish and Portuguese authors were subject to the knowledge of local wise men for the authenticity of their stories. The passage of the manner of approaching the Visayans elders by the author replicated the practice done in Mexico. The participation of the local cultural producers helped recover and collect various memories of the Mexican past, such as the case of the preparation of the *Mendoza Codex* (Mohar Betancourt 2; Ollé and Rubiés 17).<sup>18</sup> There are other works where the stories were based only on information acquired by oral reports, such as Muñoz Camargo's *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (Rodríguez López 96). It is in this way that the author of this narrative tells the historical information that includes rituals, demographic displacements, astronomical, and calendrical knowledge of the Visayans people. Echoing a common practice found in many Spanish works crafted in Mexico, the author also chooses to withhold the names and credentials of the local informants and possible interpreters, crafting a narrative rich in content, yet shrouded in the anonymity of its local sources.

The narrative concerning the Visayans people is pivotal not only for comprehending the local sources consulted, but also for discerning the

intended audience of the narrative – and to some degree, the audience of the entire manuscript. Up until this point, tracing a specific intended recipient had been a perplexing task. As mentioned before, the manuscript lacks discernible royal seals and specific keywords that could clarify its overarching purpose and intended audience. For instance, Christopher Columbus’s diary was explicitly intended for the royal court of Spain, a fact evident throughout the narrative due to specific royal titles such as “Vuestra Altezas” [Your Highnesses]. Similarly, the Portuguese Pero Vaz de Caminha’s *Carta do Achamento* incorporates analogous vocabulary that provides insight into its royal recipient: “Vossa Alteza” [Your Highness]. In the *Boxer Codex*, the author explicitly indicates that the narrative is not intended for a royal audience or figure of authority but is instead addressed to the ordinary reader. This challenges the assumptions of scholars who have traditionally interpreted the text through a Spanish royal or ruling-class perspective (Ollé 26; Rubiés 44; Donoso 2019, 130; Nelson 24). When discussing the cultural practices among the Visayans chiefs, the author goes as far as to state: “dexo de las dezir aqui por no cansar con ellas al *letor*” (f. 39r; emphasis added) [I shall not mention them here in order not to tire *the reader*]. This explicit textual reference within the manuscript signals a decisive break from royal directives, constituting the earliest known instance in which the narrative consciously engages a general readership.

In the absence of direct royal or ecclesiastical patronage, it becomes evident that the author had a more expansive aim – to disseminate knowledge beyond the confines of the court or the clergy. This newfound understanding of the manuscript’s intended audience opens pathways for the exploration of the societal context of the time. In an era dominated by hierarchical structures and rigid social boundaries, the *Boxer Codex* emerged as a remarkable effort to democratize knowledge, raising questions about the author’s underlying motivations. Was it a deliberate attempt to challenge established power structures by making knowledge more accessible? Or is it, perhaps, a genuine endeavor to publish an innovative and unprecedented document that could enlighten the general public about the communities of the Far East? Regardless of the precise motivation, the author demonstrates an intention to reach a wider audience, marking a departure from traditional exclusivity.

The author’s identity assumes paramount significance, shedding light on the depth of engagement and accessibility to diverse communities in the Spanish Philippines and around the Spanish Lake. His credentials enabled him to interact with community elders, garnering invaluable information from their respective territories. He also displayed understanding of trade routes with China and exhibited a deep cultural familiarity with regions like India, Brunei, and Ternate. What truly sets the author apart is his autonomy;

there is no indication that he was operating under any royal mandate. Instead, the author's deliberate choice to reach out to a broader readership, beyond the constraints of royalty, marks a big step towards disseminating knowledge to a wider audience. Perhaps, the author's primary objective was to create a distinctive publication. Unlike contemporary royal projects or the conventional *Relaciones Geográficas* [Geographical Reports]<sup>19</sup> which primarily aimed to inform the Spanish monarchs about newly discovered territories, the author's focus was on producing a unique work that blended visual representations with comprehensive textual information about the diverse communities in the Far East.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The *Boxer Codex* stands as a testament to the extensive work undertaken by a well-informed individual coming from Mexico, who was part of a Spanish expedition in 1590. Following the initial maritime encounter with the Chamorro community, the author diligently recorded noteworthy events, meticulously crafting a narrative titled "Relación de las yslas de los Ladrones." This narrative, intertwining first- and third- person-singular voices, synthesizes the author's personal experiences with the perspectives of individuals who have interacted with the Chamorro people. While this narrative unfolds by incorporating the experience of various individuals, many of whom may be of Spanish origin, the accounts related to other communities in the region reveal the author's reliance on indigenous cultural intermediaries. This reliance accentuates the indigenous voice within the manuscript.

It is noteworthy that the Chamorro narrative – and by extension, the entire manuscript – was not documented in real time; instead, it was compiled after the maritime encounter, likely somewhere within the Philippines. Indeed, the author's impressive cultural knowledge, demonstrated by his ability to juxtapose cultural practices and local products, implies a substantial investment of time in gathering information from diverse locations across the archipelago before composing the narrative. The narrative further suggests that it was written after the creation of the introductory image. This illustration not only indicates that the author had access to skilled painters and potential cultural mediators but also had the resources to employ their expertise in the crafting of the manuscript.

In essence, the *Boxer Codex* transcends mere historical documentation; it encapsulates a profound amalgamation of cultures and perspectives from the Iberian Empire and various geospatial communities in East and Southeast Asia. Departing from the conventions of contemporary Spanish manuscripts, it eschews formal titles, dates, introductory textual references,

and authorship marks. Coupled with innovative visual techniques and the integration of imperial languages, the *Boxer Codex* stands as a pioneering work of the early modern period. The author, evidently highly educated, extensively informed, and well-traveled, possessed the necessary qualifications to acquire diverse information from various sources across various locations. He exhibited the financial acumen to sustain a costly project, necessitating the involvement of professional artists, translators, and local intermediaries. While the authorship of such extraordinary work has not yet been recognized, the intention of documenting the communities of the Far East has been partially achieved.

*Kalamazoo College*

#### NOTES

- 1 Today, the *Boxer Codex* remains in the possession of the Lilly Library at Indiana University, where it is preserved and made available to scholars and the general public alike. The library has provided a comprehensive and high-resolution electronic version of the manuscript, which can be accessed through the following link: <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu>.
- 2 The route for the Spanish empire's transpacific trade and exploration, encompassing their possessions in the Americas with those in Asia extended beyond the Philippine archipelago, including territories such as Guam (a focal point of this article), Formosa (present-day Taiwan), and the Mariana and Carolina Islands. This Spanish monopoly of the gateways to the South Sea was coined in historiography as the *Spanish Lake*. For a comprehensive study of the conceptual and geopolitical dimensions of this term, see Rainer F. Buschmann, Edward R. Slack, and James B. Tueller, *Navigating the Spanish Lake: The Pacific in the Iberian World, 1521-1898*.
- 3 See Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680: The Lands Below the Winds*.; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680: Expansion and Crisis*.; John Villiers, "Portuguese Malacca and Spanish Manila: Two Concepts of Empire."
- 4 See Birgit Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China, and Japan in Manila, 1571-1644: Local Comparisons and Global Connections*. For Spanish financial interactions with Chinese and Japanese during this period see Richard Bonney, "Early Modern Theories of State Finance." For a better analysis of the interactions between Spanish Manila and the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru, see Teresa Canepa, "Asian Manufactured Goods in the Spanish Pacific: Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries."
- 5 See William Lytle Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*.

- 6 Governor Luis Dasmariñas of Manila enlisted the talents of a Chinese sculptor to create an imposing representation of the Virgin Mary. This exquisite statue, notable for its delicate ivory features including the face, hands, and child, stands at 139 cm in height (Crossley 117); From the archived letters of the first Bishop of Manila in 1590, there were a number of skilled Christian Chinese artists who were actively engaged in painting devotional artworks for the local churches and monasteries. These artists skillfully merged their techniques with European styles, creating unique and spiritually resonant masterpieces (Boxer 46).
- 7 In 1575, during the initial Spanish envoy to Fujian, a Chinese interpreter with the name of Sinsay played a key role for the Spanish delegation. He translated letters from the Philippine governor-general, written in Spanish, into Chinese for the provincial governor of Fujian (Yan 15).
- 8 The term “Ladrones,” derived from Spanish and translating to “thieves,” was originally used to characterize both the inhabitants and the regions in the north-western Pacific Ocean where encounters with the Chamorro people occurred.
- 9 In the original publication of Carlos Quirino and Mauro Garcia (1958), Garcia’s surname appears without an orthographic accent mark; it is therefore reproduced here in accordance with the consulted source.
- 10 The manuscript is mainly written in Spanish but also contains translations from Portuguese and section titles in Chinese characters. It further incorporates vocabulary from several indigenous Southeast Asian languages.
- 11 Boxer states that the paper and paintings used in the illustrations are Chinese materials from the Ming period (37). Indeed, the overall assemblage of the manuscript demonstrates a considerable financial commitment, featuring high-grade Chinese painting materials, the application of gold lettering, and the employment of skilled artisans.
- 12 The *Boxer Codex* was listed in the following description when Boxer acquired it at the Hodgson’s House auction: “Oriental MS. –75 Coloured Drawings of Native Races in the Far East, including the Ladrones, Moluccas, Philippines, Java, Siam, China, and elsewhere, those of China depicting Royalty, Warriors, Mandarins, etc., in gorgeous Robes, richly heightened with gold, also 88 smaller Coloured Drawings of Birds and fantastic animals (4 on a page), all within decorative borders, and a double folding Drawing of a Ship, and Natives in small craft, with about 270 pages of MS. text, sm. 4to, calf, lettered, *Isla de los Ladrones* (eighteenth century).”
- 13 Boxer, drawing on a remark by Leasing J. Rosewald, notes that the ornate borders featuring foxes, birds, and flowers in the manuscript bear a resemblance to the marginal borders found in 1525 Geoffrey Tory’s *Book of Hours*. Boxer additionally points out a shift in the design towards the end of

the manuscript, exhibiting an arabesque style, indicative of Persian or Indian artistic influences (46); John N. Crossley has also observed that the upper frame bears a striking resemblance to the *Book of Hours*, which belonged to the spouse of Governor Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas (2013).

- 14 All translations of the *Boxer Codex* are taken from Isaac Donoso's 2021 edition.
- 15 Boxer has noted that the section about the Ladrones people is in first person singular, excluding the third person singular that interlace back and forward across the narrative (38).
- 16 There are other passages in the Ladrones section where the author makes various references to information obtained by outside sources. See the following sample: "Dicen que un día estando rescatando en tierra con los españoles, uno de estos yndios se apartó e adelantó de los demás y tres hombres se abraçaron con él para cogerlo y tenerlo" (4v). [There is a story that once, while trading on land with the Spaniards, one of the natives separated from the group and went ahead of the others, and three men tried to drag him and bring him with them].
- 17 After depicting and describing the Ladrones people, the *Boxer Codex* continues with two communities located in the north part of the Luzon Island, Cagayanes (Cagayans) and Çambales (Zambales). Limited information about their respective authors and dates can be collected. There is no information about any source of authority, and this becomes a pattern that will last for the next six sections, from Bisayas to Java. In respect to the previous and prior sections, both narratives are comparatively short. There is no proof that the author consulted information from local people or other Spanish figures as it is exemplified in the Ladrones narrative. It is also difficult to state if the author visited both communities, but it is certain that the individual is partially aware of their customs and rituals.
- 18 The *Mendoza Codex* was commissioned by Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza to inform King Charles V about the ancient Mexicans – their origins, ethnography, and systems of tribute. It is estimated that the manuscript was created several years after the Conquest (ca. 1542), and its content reflects the involvement not only of *tlacuilos* (indigenous scribes or artists), but also of indigenous informants who contributed both to the iconographies and to the preparation of their respective pigments (Ross 12). Structured in book format, the codex includes several Spanish-language texts designed to translate the various iconographic elements.
- 19 The *Relaciones Geográficas* represent a series of documents in the form of a questionnaire issued by King Philip II of Spain in 1577 to survey the territories of the Spanish American colonies. The questionnaire, distributed to officials in the viceroalties of New Spain and Peru, requested basic information about

the nature and characteristics of their lands and the lives of their inhabitants (Cline 341).

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