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# Travels with Boxer, Pacific University's Chinese Mascot

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## Travels with Boxer, Pacific University's Chinese Mascot

### **Description**

Boxer, Pacific University's mascot, has its origins in China's Ming Dynasty, making it at least 300 years old. Boxer was brought to Pacific by an 1867 graduate, Joseph Elkanah Walker, and after years of campus groups stealing the mascot from each other, its whereabouts are currently unknown.

### **Comments**

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### Travels with Boxer, Pacific University's Chinese Mascot

*Steve Dodge*

On one wall of the workshop, like the fevered imaginings of a nightmare: creatures, grinning and snarling, odd combinations of deer, lion, dragon and dog. On another side, fire burns and a cauldron spits and steams as molten metal glows inside.

The air is hellish too, heavy and hot, full of the acrid odors of heated stone, copper, tin and lead. Toward the center of the room, as the mythical beasts look on from their cooling shelves, workmen, honored specialists in this delicate task, place ceramic molds in a sand pit and secure them against movement. The molds are hollow inside where intricate wax or clay models once fit snugly before melting out to leave a cavity.

Slowly, and with great care and precision, the workmen move the cauldron from the fire and place it near an opening in the mold. They tip the cauldron and pour the molten bronze, hissing in a great cloud of steam and smoke, into the mold.

When cooled, the bronze figure, this one a single-horned dragon dog called a qilin (pronounced "chee-lin") will be filed, sanded and polished before leaving the workshop. Usually such figures, believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits, are placed on the paths leading to imperial tombs or at gates to royal households. But this one, likely after serving similar duties for a few hundred years, will end up in Forest Grove, Oregon.

According to University records, **Boxer** was cast during China's Ming Dynasty, making it at least 300 years old. A druggist or apothecary in Shauwu, Fukien (Fujian) province had it on display on the counter of his store when it was spotted by missionary and 1867 Pacific graduate Joseph Elkanah Walker. In a 1921 letter to professor Henry Bates, Walker said the "figurine" was commonly used in drug stores to "ward off the imps of disease." He purchased the statue for \$5 and sent it home to Forest Grove. The Walker family gave it to the University in 1896. A 1908 article in the *Index* coined the term "Boxer" after the 1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion in China.

The "Campus Spirit," as it was originally known, sat peacefully on display in Marsh Hall's old Brighton Chapel until a visiting lecturer told a campus audience in 1899 of an eastern school that had a foreign mascot with a history of disappearances. In the audience: Richard Faulkner, class of 1902, the first one to spirit Boxer away.

Over the years, the University's **fraternities** took the lead in stealing Boxer from each other. The groups eventually devised a system where Boxer would be "flashed" or shown at a gathering, and by tradition, soon after "tossed" or thrown out on the campus lawn. A toss often brought out the entire campus to **witness or participate** in the part rugby scrum, part **brawl**. Some of these tosses, which later included non-fraternity clubs and athletic groups like wrestlers and football players, went on overnight, moving across campus and through town until someone was able to get the statue to a waiting car. In between tosses, Boxer would occasionally be brought out for **photos** but was mostly kept hidden, in Forest Grove attics or freezers, in the trunks of cars or even one time tied to a rope and submerged in the Willamette River. He's traveled to Montana, California and Europe. Creative tosses have included throwing out the

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statue in a block of ice and chaining him to a tree. One flash had him dangling from a helicopter over the football field at half time.

Then came the 1960s. Although the University mascot had been the Badger since 1921, students in 1967 voted in Boxer as the official mascot of the University. However, according to alumnus Dean Croshere's 2007 movie "Boxer: The Evolution of a Mascot," some African-American students resented all the attention paid to Boxer in a time of rising social tension over civil rights and the Vietnam War.

During a toss that lasted several hours in 1969, African-American students were able to wrest Boxer from the crowd and speed away in a car. One member of the Black Student Union, citing Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," told the *Pacific Index* at the time, "You don't see us, but you sure see that dog—and you won't see it any more." The original has not been seen since.

Flash forward to 1982. Students Kim Smith, Linda Parker and Janet Leashen arranged to have a new statue cast, in hopes of giving school spirit a boost. Then, in 1992, the serious injury of football player Eric Ross (who later died of the injury) contributed to the end of the football program. In addition, a head injury suffered by a student during the Boxer toss that year resulted in the practice being banned upon pain of criminal prosecution.

School spirit — and enthusiasm for Boxer — has waxed and waned in the meantime. Billy Merck '98 told Croshere '07 that he and his roommate had **Boxer II** at home on top of a water heater for at least a year in 1997-98, and no one seemed concerned about its whereabouts.

They seem to care now. After Croshere completed his movie last year — his senior project — he decided to take Boxer on an extended U.S. road trip and write a blog along the way. He took photos of the campus mascot in Las Vegas, Detroit, Washington D.C. and many other places during his 41-state, 16,000-mile journey. (See [www.roadtrip-life.com](http://www.roadtrip-life.com)) Some students were upset that he took Boxer II out of town. Letters to the *Index* and a petition called for the icon's return.

Croshere, a member of the Gamma Sigma fraternity, which flashed Boxer at the opening of fall term, is back in Forest Grove and said that his whole reason for taking the mascot was to spark more school spirit. "[Some students] called me selfish, and I suppose it was, but it got people talking."

Croshere had planned a big event in March to include a peaceful toss in the form of a trivia contest. He said he had lined up business sponsorship and had Boxer out for photos to give to sponsors when two young men ran up, grabbed the statue and took off with it. The tradition continues. Boxer is on the road again.

### What is It?

It's a question that Dean Croshere '07 heard so much on his cross-country trip with the Boxer replica that at one point, when a woman inquired "Is it a goat?" he wearily replied, "Yeah, it's a goat."

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What the Boxer statue actually is has been a matter of debate since it arrived on campus in 1896. Most often it is described as a qilin (pronounced chee-lin), a kind of unicorn gargoyle.

Croshere, the film and philosophy major who did his senior project on Boxer, said his research indicates it's Suame, one of the mythological children of the Chinese dragon. However, Charles Lachman, Curator of Asian Art at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum at the University of Oregon, after examining photographs of Boxer, determined that it is a Foo Dog, derived from "Fo," the Chinese term for Buddha. He said the dogs morphed from representations of lions, a common Buddhist symbol in India. Lachman said Boxer likely came from the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), not the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) as has often been stated.

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