

Vicente Emilio Braga

Accountant, Pioneer of double-entry book-keeping in Japan

Born: Macau, 2 December 1834

Died: Kobe, Japan, 21 March 1911

Vicente Braga was one of three brothers who were among the earliest Hong Kong Portuguese to leave the British colony in search of a better life abroad. His elder brother, João Joaquim, went to England with his family in 1867, while Vicente and his younger brother Carlos both went to Japan. Here, Vicente had a notable career that left a lasting impact. He became a significant figure in the financial system developed in Japan during the decade after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. However, this success came at a price. He left his family behind him in Hong Kong and lost contact with all but his eldest son who eventually joined him in Japan. There his name was held in high esteem, but in Hong Kong, he was all but forgotten.

He was born in Macau, the 3rd son and 5th child of João Vicente da Rosa Braga and his wife Priscila da Trindade de Noronha. In the early 1840s João Vicente took his family to Hong Kong, where he set up a pharmacy.¹ Several members of the Braga family followed their father into this occupation over the next twenty years, notably Vicente's eldest brother, João Joaquim, who by 1848 was the Managing Proprietor of the Victoria Dispensary.² By 1861, he had dropped the name Rosa, and had five Portuguese employees.³ By then, Vicente and his younger brother Carlos were also in business as chemists, possibly having picked up some knowledge from their father and elder brother.⁴ On 13 May 1862 Vicente married Carolina Maria Noronha, daughter of a leading member of Hong Kong's Portuguese community, Delfino Noronha. Eight children were born in the next ten years, though only four survived to adulthood.

The next ten years are obscure, but the pharmacy seems to have been short-lived. Like many young Portuguese men, Vicente joined a British-owned bank as a clerk, gaining knowledge, experience and contacts that would soon prove vital.⁵ From mid-1866 to early 1868 he was an accountant at the short-lived Hong Kong Mint, where he won the esteem of Major William Kinder, the Master. The Hong Kong branch of the Royal Mint, established in 1866, was not a success, and it closed early in 1868.⁶ When it closed, he found employment as a clerk in the

¹ K. Nishikawa, *Nihon boki shidan*, p. 117

² *Hongkong Almanack and Directory for 1849*, p. 22, quoted by J.P. Braga, *the Portuguese in Hongkong and China*, p. 166.

³ *China Directory, 1861*, quoted by J.P. Braga, *the Portuguese in Hongkong and China*, p. 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ K. Nishikawa, *Nihon boki shidan*, p. 82.

⁶ R.S. Hanashiro, *Thomas William Kinder and the Japanese Imperial Mint, 1868-1875*. p. 36. The failure of the Mint is discussed by G.B. Endacott, *History of Hong Kong*, p. 147.

Colonial Secretary's Office.⁷ The Mint seemed to have offered a splendid opportunity, and its closure must have been a cruel blow to Vicente. He already had four children, and another three were born in the next two years including twin sons born in June 1870. However, one twin died in infancy. With a large family, he needed a fresh opportunity and a secure income. Moreover, the economic outlook in Hong Kong at the time was bleak.⁸ Out of the blue came the offer of a senior and responsible position in Japan. The Japanese government, keen to establish a new currency, purchased the machinery of the Hong Kong Mint and employed its Master to set up the Imperial Mint at Osaka. Kinder, now Director of the Japanese Imperial Mint, was keen to take with him experienced and capable staff from Hong Kong.

For more than two centuries until 1867, foreign trade had been all but prohibited by the Japanese government, though sufficient contact was kept with the Dutch for the government to be aware of the vast growth of Western power and influence in the first half of the 19th century. Matters came to a head in 1868, when a small group of samurai seized power in the name of the young emperor, who had recently ascended the throne. They began a thoroughgoing overhaul of the Japanese political and economic system. One of the leaders of the new Japan was Ito Hirobumi, who as a young man of 26 was sent abroad in 1870 to study Western currency systems. Returning to Japan in 1871, he established a new taxation system and was the prime mover in currency reform.

Ito realised that a firmly-founded monetary system is one of the necessary conditions for the development of industry and the progress of trade.⁹ At the time of the Restoration the monetary system of Japan was in a hopelessly confused state, there being then in currency over sixty kinds of gold, silver, copper, and iron coins of heterogeneous forms, sizes, and qualities. Besides these there were as many as 1,600 kinds of coins current only within the dominions of various daimyo clans. This unsatisfactory state was made still worse by the fact that the Imperial Government coined pieces of inferior quality to meet its pressing need for money during the War of the Restoration when troops had to be paid to fight daimyo who resisted the new order.

In 1871 a new currency adopting the gold standard system was promulgated, in line with international practice. The new mint was an essential first step in ensuring its success. Ito was fortunate that both plant and personnel were available in the Far East. To keep the accounts of the mint, Kinder recommended the appointment of two men who had worked under him in Hong Kong. They were Vicente Braga as Chief Accountant and his brother Carlos as book-keeper.¹⁰ The mint was an enormous project for the Japanese government.¹¹ It went much further than the regulation of the Japanese currency. It was one of the key institutions of the Japanese government's effort to modernise Japan.¹² Braga, who remained at the Mint until 1875, was one of three Westerners who filled crucial roles in the early development of

⁷ *Morrison's Directory*, 1870, cited by K. Nishikawa, Tokyo, in a letter to J.M. Braga, 5 October 1959. J.M. Braga Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4300, series 4.4.

⁸ G. B. Endacott, *History of Hong Kong*, p. 159.

⁹ Much of the following discussion is based on T. Masuda, *Japan: its commercial development and prospects*, London, n.d. [1907], pp 45-46.

¹⁰ Notes by K. Nishikawa, evidently from the records of the Imperial Mint, sent to J.M. Braga, October 1959. J.M. Braga Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4300, series 4.4. V.E. Braga was employed by the Mint from 15 June 1871 to 13 March 1875, and C. Braga from 18 July 1872 to 11 January 1875.

¹¹ R.S. Hanashiro, *Thomas William Kinder and the Japanese Imperial Mint, 1868-1875*. p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.4.

double-entry book-keeping in Japan. The others were an Englishman, Alexander Allan Shand (1844-1930), who was in Japan from 1867 to 1877, and an American, William Gogswell Whitney (1825-1882), in Japan from 1870 to 1875.¹³ Braga may not have realised that he was among the first Portuguese to be involved in Japanese commercial activity since the expulsion of all Portuguese merchants in 1639, more than two centuries earlier.¹⁴

Braga hesitated for some time before accepting the position offered to him in Japan. Following the death of little Manuel António, he had six small children, and leaving them in Hong Kong was initially too much to contemplate. It is not known whether he contemplated taking them to Japan, but taking his large family to a strange country without modern medical care was too great a challenge, to say nothing of the expense. At first he declined the offer, but in October 1870 he changed his mind and wrote to Kinder, already in Osaka, seeking to withdraw his refusal. Kinder sent the letter on to the Minister of Finance, strongly recommending Braga's appointment.¹⁵

Well knowing the intricate and difficult accounts you will have in your department of the Mint I cannot too strongly advise you to accept his services as I am certain his special knowledge gained partly in Banks and partly under myself in the Royal Mint, Hong Kong, will be of great advantage to you.

Braga appears to have left Hong Kong for Osaka in June 1871, when the Imperial Mint was ready to commence operations. By then his wife Maria was heavily pregnant with another child. José Pedro Braga, their eighth and last, was born a few weeks later. Vicente Braga seems never to have returned to Hong Kong, but his elder surviving son, Francisco Xavier, later followed his father to Japan and settled there.

In Japan, Vicente Braga did not disappoint his employer. He kept all the books of the Mint in English; these were then translated into Japanese, thus making complete sets of books in each of the two languages. His personal influence was so great that his style of penmanship was practised in the Mint long after he had left it.¹⁶ He remained at the Mint for less than four years, but left with a glowing testimonial.¹⁷ In 1875, he left the Mint and joined the Japanese Finance Department.¹⁸ Here he drafted an accounting and book-keeping system for the Japanese Government, and gave courses in accounting which were attended by several pupils who later became teachers and writers on book-keeping.

The Imperial Mint had an immediate and profound effect on the Japanese system of currency. A special silver coin, similar in quality and weight to the Mexican dollar then in general use in Asian countries, was coined as the medium for trading, and was circulated, under the name of the 'trade silver yen' as legal tender within the limits of the ports already opened to foreign trade. Over time, it proved impossible for the Japanese government to maintain the gold

¹³ K. Nishikawa, 'The Early History of Double-entry Book-keeping in Japan' p. 380.

¹⁴ C.R. Boxer, *Fidalgos in the Far East 1550-1770*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 121.

¹⁵ K. Nishikawa, *Nihon boki shidan*, p. 82.

¹⁶ K. Nishikawa, 'The Early History of Double-entry Book-keeping in Japan' p. 381.

¹⁷ K. Nishikawa, *Nihon boki shidan*, p. 108.

¹⁸ *Japan Chronicle*, 28 March 1911. Notes taken by H.S. Williams. H.S. Williams Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 6681/3/7, Box 35.

standard adopted in 1871, and from 1878, the silver yen was circulated freely throughout the country.¹⁹

A British visitor to Japan in 1877, Anna Brassey, left an impression of the Mint's impact, emphasising the powerful Western influence in the way it operated:

The Imperial Mint of Japan is a large handsome building, in great force just now, for the whole of the old money is being called in and replaced by the government. The contrast between the two moneys is very great. The ancient coinage consisted of long thin oval obangs and shobangs, worth from two dollars to eighteen pounds each, square silver itzeboos, and square copper pieces, with a hole in the centre; while that which is taking its place is similar to European coinage, and is marked in English characters, and ornamented with Japanese devices, such as the phoenix and the dragon. It did not seem worth while to go minutely over the Mint, as it is arranged on exactly the same principle as the one in London, and the processes are carried out in the same manner.²⁰

Little is known of Vicente Braga's later life, apart from a brief comment in an obituary that between 1887 and 1895 he was the Portuguese Vice-Consul in Kobe.²¹ This was usually an honorary appointment, given to a leading national resident in the city. It was during this time that three of his sons died in a smallpox epidemic in Hong Kong. Of the two remaining sons, Francisco came to Japan, and at the time of his father's death was employed by Cornes & Co, Kobe, a leading commercial house.²² The other, José Pedro, had commenced a notable career in Hong Kong, at first in the printing business of his maternal grandfather, Delfino Noronha. It seems likely that Vicente had also obtained a position in Cornes & Co., where his commercial ability and government contacts would have been invaluable.

Did he ever think of the family he left in Hong Kong? We shall never know, but when a new Catholic cathedral was being built in Hong Kong in 1888, Vicente Braga and his brothers presented one of three altars, dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows.²³

Vicente Braga died in Kobe on 21 March 1911, and was buried there in Shogahara Cemetery. His grave is notable for its unique decoration. It bears an open ledger in recognition of his important role in the introduction of double-entry book-keeping to Japan.²⁴ Much later, a drawing of the grave appeared in Ripley's *Believe it or not*. Sadly, his death passed unnoticed and unrecorded by the family in Hong Kong upon whom he had turned his back forty years earlier. His youngest son, José Pedro, had nine sons, several of whom were named after both his grandfathers and his brothers who died young, but not after his own father. His last two children were daughters, born in 1911 and 1914. Both were named in memory of their grandmother, who had died on 11 January 1906. The first was Carolina Maria, the second,

¹⁹ T. Masuda, *Japan: its commercial development and prospects*, London, n.d. [1907], p. 46.

²⁰ A. Brassey, *A Voyage in the 'Sunbeam'*, p. 348.

²¹ *Japan Chronicle*, 28 March 1911.

²² *Japan Chronicle*, 28 March 1911. Cornes & Company Limited was established in Yokohama in 1861 and is the oldest international trading house in Japan. Under the leadership of its founder, Frederick Cornes, a young English textile merchant, the company began trading in silk and tea but soon expanded its activities to include other merchandise, and then shipping and insurance. <http://www.cornes.co.jp/eng/about/> Accessed 30 April 2009.

²³ J.P. Braga, *The Portuguese in Hongkong and China*, p. 188.

²⁴ K. Nishikawa, *Nihon boki shidan*, p. 113.

Maria Carolina. The exclusion of his father from those held in memory was thus even more pointed.

However, the family of his eldest son Francisco in Japan remembered him fondly. A later photograph shows his granddaughter, Maria Luisa Britto, who had married Luiz Gonzaga Britto, son of another Portuguese family that moved to Japan, standing in front of her grandfather's grave, heaped with flowers.²⁵ She had been born in Kobe in 1890, and must have known her grandfather well, though her cousins in Hong Kong knew nothing of him. Perhaps the dedication of the altar in Hong Kong cathedral was apt.

Stuart Braga, great-grandson, 9 May 2009

²⁵ K. Nishikawa, *Nihon boki shidan*, pp. 113, 117.

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