

Ghosts of Imperialist Wars Past: China's Tourist Hot Spots Today

Doug Bandow
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BEIJING—Modern China continues to rise. But ancient China remains. And bears witness to a history the West would prefer to forget.

The Summer Palace is one of Beijing's most enchanting tourist destinations, ranked third by visitors. Covering 860 acres, the grounds include lakes, islands, dikes, gardens, gates, pavilions, walks, bridges, hills, temples, fountains, causeways, and lots of water lotuses. Some of the old buildings are in ruins—courtesy of the Western powers.

Imperial China long was a cultured and advanced civilization. The dominant power in Asia, it eventually turned inward and fell into decay. By the 1800s the Western powers had begun to carve out concessions and colonies. Even then the seeming illimitable markets of China awakened dreams of trade and profit.

The desires of the Chinese people did not enter into the consideration of Western democracies, which at home claimed to represent their populations. Of course, that was no different from how the Chinese people's own rulers treated them.

The emperor was served by an army of attendants living in the famed Forbidden City. The Summer Palace was meant to ease the life of the royal family in a world before air conditioning. Nothing was too good for those at the top.

The gardens and palace first were created in the 12th century. Starting in 1750 Emperor Qianlong deployed designers to capture various styles around China and tens of thousands of workers to bring the latter's plans to life, establishing what he called the Garden of Clear Ripples, also eventually called the Old Summer Palace. In 1886 the Empress Dowager Cixi (Tzu-his in Chinese) used funds planned for a navy to rebuild the royal playground. At least she constructed a large and impressive marble boat.

She called the site the Garden of Peace and Harmony, an appropriate name, except for the garden's unwanted guests. In 1860 during the Second Opium War French and British troops destroyed most of what is now called the Old Summer Palace. The British High Commissioner to China ordered the action after two British envoys were tortured and several of their escorts were murdered. The allies erected a sign stating: "This is the reward for perfidy and cruelty."

In 1900 came the Boxer Rebellion, named for the violent xenophobic, spiritual movement named the “Righteous and Harmonious Fists.” The Boxers targeted foreigners, especially missionaries, and Chinese Christians. The revolt, supported by the Empress Dowager, reached Beijing, in which Western diplomats were killed and legations were besieged. The Western nations raised an eight-nation rescue force, including American troops.

The allied forces eventually relieved the city—alas, the Boxers discovered that their training did *not* render them immune to bullets. Western troops, with that acute sense of hypocrisy so common to imperial powers, deplored the outrages committed by Chinese without considering the outrages committed against Chinese over the years. Allied troops killed and raped Chinese people and stole Chinese property.

One of the casualties was the New Summer Palace, with the gardens and buildings burned by the allies. Objects contained within were plundered. One U.S. Marine recounted, “Men of the allies staggered through the streets, arms and backs piled high with silks and furs, and brocades, with gold and silver and jewels.”

The Empress Dowager had to rebuild again on her return to Beijing, which she had fled in advance of the allies. Alas, she didn’t have much time to enjoy her retreat. She died in 1908 and the republican revolution occurred three years later, after which the grounds were opened to the public. Much of the lands were abandoned and turned into farmland. In the 1980s the People’s Republic of China (PRC) undertook serious restoration efforts.

This unseemly history is of more than just academic interest. It helps explain Beijing’s behavior today.

No doubt, some Chinese, both in and out of the PRC’s boundaries, have an exaggerated sense of Chinese history, civilization, and destiny. And Imperial China, despite the fascinating esoterica surrounding it, was an unfriendly place for most of the humane values that we respect today. Nevertheless, China has been treated badly, especially by the Western powers which today are most insistent on Beijing following Western standards.

This historical experience helps explain the nationalism that afflicts even young Chinese who are liberal in many other ways. The same students believe in a strong, even dominant China.

They tell me without equivocation that Taiwan is part of China and that the PRC is the rightful owner of most every island in the South China Sea. In fact, many ethnic Chinese living outside of the PRC, even some who fled the mainland after the communist revolution, cheered Hong Kong’s 1997 reversion to Beijing’s control. For them, the issue was *CHINA*, not the particular regime ruling the territory known as China at this moment.

More important, those in charge feel a special responsibility and opportunity as their nation gains the resources, influence, and power necessary to reverse a century or more of humiliation. That may not justify increasing Chinese assertiveness, especially in the West’s eyes. But it helps explain the behavior.

This doesn't mean other nations should automatically concede to the PRC's claims. But it suggests that Chinese assertiveness involves something other than malevolent aggression. In which case Washington is foolish to militarize disputes that are, at most, of only moderate geopolitical interest. Other nations, especially those, like Japan, whose behavior has been, shall we say, less than exemplary, have a special responsibility to accommodate Beijing's perceptions and interests.

China is ancient. The remnants of its history attract tourists across China.

That history helps explain Beijing's policies and politics today. While those in the West might have amnesia about what their ancestors did to the forebears of China's leaders, the latter are not so likely to forget. Policymakers in the U.S. would do well to consider that history in designing their approach to Beijing. A peaceful and prosperous 21st century might depend on it.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire (Xulon).