Barbarians at the Gate: The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace

Introduction

Jeremiah Jenne (00:00)

Hello, David and I are both on the road this week, but don't worry, we have an episode for you. October 2025 is the 165th anniversary of the destruction of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing. We bring you this encore episode in which David and I discuss the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan, the implications for history, and of course the implications for today. Enjoy.

Jeremiah (00:41)

Another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. I'm your co-host, Jeremiah Jenne, broadcasting from Beijing. And with me, as always, my co-host, David Moser.

So David, this month is the anniversary of the burning and sacking and looting of the Old Summer Palace, what's called the Old Summer Palace, Yuanmingyuan, outside of Beijing at the conclusion of the Second Opium War, sometimes called the Arrow War. And David, have you been out to the Old Summer Palace, the park out there in your travels around Beijing?

David (01:13)

Sure, of course. I was at Beida in the 80s and that was a place that my buddies and I would bicycle out to for picnics or just outings. And also I remember during the 90s when we would go out there—you remember there was an artist colony that sort of sprang up there. I was there to see it for the few years that it existed, just shortly before they ended up tearing it down. So yeah, Yuanmingyuan, I've been there many times.

Jeremiah (01:41)

Weren't many of those artists in the colony there when they tore down the artist colony—weren't a lot of them also the ones who went over to what became 798 in that area as well?

David (01:51)

Yeah, that's correct. A lot of those artists had no place else to stay. It turns out that 798 was this abandoned factory that at the time was not being used. It was just empty space. And yeah, that was where those artists moved in.

Jeremiah (02:05)

Kind of from one set of ruins to another in a way. It's one of my favorite spots in the city. First of all, there's just so much history there. It's a tragic history. This space today is kind of a haunting reminder of this period of colonialism and imperialism in China, and also of a time when you had these two civilizations that were clashing together and the results were often quite disastrous for China.

And of course, as we'll talk about later, this era known as the Century of Humiliation is something that is part of the patriotic education curriculum in the schools. It's part of the media and cultural zeitgeist. And of course, it's important to remember this era because there is no way to parse the idea that imperialism and colonialism in all its forms truly, truly sucks. But also, it's important to remember that this idea of a Century of Humiliation is key to a legitimizing narrative today of the Chinese rejuvenation and the Chinese dream and the great rejuvenation under Xi Jinping.

David (03:09)

So maybe we should first lay a little bit of background. I'm sure most people know the basics of the Yuanmingyuan, but what was its importance? It was first started under the reign of the Emperor Kangxi in the early 1700s. And we'll talk about why it became the target of the foreigners' wrath and why they burned and looted it.

Tell us a little bit about the scale and scope of the thing. It's an incredible architectural and artistic wonder. Europeans who came to visit said that there was nothing like it in Europe. It was the eighth wonder of the world.

Jeremiah (03:51)

Right. Well, as you mentioned, the original idea of these gardens—one of the things about this place too is it gets called the Old Summer Palace in English and that leads a lot of people who arrive there, especially international visitors, to try to look for a palace which never really existed. It wasn't really a palace and it wasn't even used just in the summer. It was in fact gardens. That's really what it was. And by gardens we mean an incredibly, as you said, incredible layout of villas, landscapes, temples, buildings, structures, waterways—just a city unto itself.

In its heyday, just the gardens that we think of as the Old Summer Palace, which includes Yuanmingyuan and two other gardens that were attached to it, was roughly about five times the size of the Forbidden City and about eight times the size of Vatican City. And

that's not even including all the satellite gardens that were around it, ones that we think of today as the so-called New Summer Palace, some of the gardens that became parts of the campuses of things like Peking University and Tsinghua University. It was an amazing complex.

And as you mentioned, the construction of it began early in the 18th century under the Kangxi Emperor. And one of the things about the Kangxi Emperor, as a Manchu, he found the Forbidden City to be somewhat claustrophobic. And so the idea was to create a set of gardens, a space, even a residence that could take advantage of some of what passed for nature in the area around Beijing. In this case, up in the northwest of the city walls, up by the western hills. And the emperor begins by expanding a set of gardens that's out there, kind of setting this place up. But every descendant of the Kangxi Emperor afterwards would just add onto it and add onto it.

And eventually by the middle of the 19th century, when we say Garden or Summer Palace, the best way I think of it is it's a little bit like an amusement park just for a single family. If you could imagine, if you were to give me or give you all the money in the world and a lot of time and access to an endless supply of cheap non-union labor, and we could build an amusement park just for us—every movie or book we've ever read or seen, every place we've ever wanted to visit, every place we visited and want to recreate in the backyard. That's what this was. I mean, it was an Imperial Disneyland. I have to think the only thing that we have in Western pop culture that would compare to this would be like Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch, but much bigger.

David (06:38)

That's a good analogy, yeah. Also, you're right. From what we know about life there, it was sort of a Disneyland and it speaks to the isolated existence of the imperial family. And one thing that I've always found interesting is that the Yongzheng Emperor and maybe the succeeding emperors as well had these living tableaux where he and the family could—the emperor and the family could observe and interact with the ordinary people in everyday life, an ersatz version of it. This sort of hunger for being able to actually see and live in the outside world. In the Forbidden City, a lot of the emperors—that place is so claustrophobic that many were driven mad.

One of these tableaux was a scene that involved court eunuchs pretending to be rural farmers on an island, and the emperor could just sit on the terrace and watch them working. It's all completely an act, and he could imagine watching these rural farmers working on their crops. And the other one that is even more amazing is this sort of—they called it maimaijie, a buying and selling street, where the emperor and his royal family could walk along this fake Disneyland-type street, where all the eunuchs were playing all sorts of roles.

There were fake weddings, fake courts, and fake police, and all the commerce of a normal Chinese street—the snacks, the different cuisines, the beggars, street performers—all make-believe, all eunuchs dressed up playacting. And the eunuchs would sometimes even pretend to get in fights so that the fake police could come and arrest them. Just completely in service of a very small group, the royal family.

And also the amounts of food that they ate, the banquets—thousands and thousands of people involved in the daily preparation of meals. There's some great information in a book that I've just been reading about just the food preparation and the fact that there were more than 1,000 cooks of various kinds, including one person whose only job was to stand and be in charge of the salt shaker. I mean, we're talking about an extraordinary outlay of resources and monetary resources just for a small group of royalty. It's quite amazing.

Jeremiah (09:02)

No, I mean, it was an incredible space. And I think one of the things about it too is this was in some ways—and it varied from emperor to emperor—but for many of the emperors from the early 18th century down to the middle of the 19th century when the gardens were destroyed, we call it summer, a summer palace, but they were resident there eight, nine months of the year. It really was the Forbidden City back in the capital, inside the capital's walls, that was in some ways the office. Most of the time, the emperors were living out in these gardens, and that's why a lot of their attention—in some ways, this was the place that the emperors, the Qing, loved this place the most, because also it was someplace that they had created.

They inherited the Forbidden City from the fallen Ming dynasty. The gardens out in the Yuanmingyuan and the other gardens out there, this was kind of a space for them. You mentioned the living tableaux. I guess if we're going to do stories from the old days, one of my favorite stories about the Yuanmingyuan is many people will know there's a section, a very small section of these gardens where the emperor had built or had ordered constructed a set of palaces that were designed in the Western style. And it's not the whole palace, it's just a very small section kind of tucked up in the northern corner of the Old Summer Palace.

And the story is that the Emperor Qianlong in the 18th century asked one of his court advisors, who was an Italian Jesuit named Giuseppe Castiglione, to design these gardens. And I can imagine that conversation. This is a place, this is a kind of amusement park where the emperor has constructed replicas of different parts of his empire and scenes from some of the literature. So of course he's always curious about adding on new and whimsical elements to his gardens. I can imagine the conversation one day between the Qianlong Emperor and Giuseppe. The emperor's like, "Hey, so Giuseppe, how you doing? You know, I've been hearing you talk about how you Europeans have palaces and I can't believe that because of course you're all hairy monkey people, but maybe you could draw a picture of one of these palaces for me."

And Castiglione sketches out a series of palaces that he remembered from his boyhood in Europe and the Emperor was like, "Hey, that is awesome. Now I know that you're just a painter and an artist, but why don't you build that for me?" And of course, this won't be the last time that a foreign employee of a Chinese state-owned agency is asked to do something wildly outside their job description. And so Castiglione gets with a couple other Jesuits and Chinese architects and constructs these Western-style palaces, and the ruins of these palaces are still there. They're the primary tourist attraction right now in the remains of the Old Summer Palace.

David (11:59)

Because those were the ones that were made of stone mostly, a lot of the other buildings weren't.

Jeremiah (12:02)

That's right. And one part of these Western-style palaces, the one part that's actually been rebuilt in a way so it looks kind of as it did prior to the destruction, is the migong or the maze. And there's a kind of European-style garden maze with a gazebo in the middle. And one of my favorite stories is that apparently the Qianlong Emperor, when he was bored or on certain special occasions like the New Year's festival, would race his concubines through the maze. Like he would give them all little umbrellas, like jockeys with different colors, and he would sit in the gazebo in the middle of this maze as the concubines raced to him. I guess he was the referee slash prize in all of this. So I guess again, these gardens, as you were saying, living tableaux, banquets—this is the kind of place that emperors could do the sort of things when people with absolute power get bored.

The Road to Conflict

David (13:02)

So Jeremiah, what we need probably, or what our listeners need, is an introduction to the events that led up to the conflict which resulted in the looting and burning of the palace compound.

Jeremiah (13:15)

Well, the destruction of the Old Summer Palace occurs at the end of something called the Second Opium War or the Arrow War, which began in 1856. Following the First Opium War, which concluded in 1842 with the signing at first of the Treaty of Nanjing between the Qing Empire and Britain, and then there were subsequent treaties with the United States, with France, with the Kingdom of Sweden and Norway.

In these treaties, the foreign powers received significant concessions in terms of trade, in terms of the ports where they could live, where they could carry out their business. There were all of these privileges that were given to foreigners to reside. Some of these treaties exempted foreigners from being arrested or tried in a Chinese court for any crimes they would commit in China. And while these were pretty enormous concessions, many of the foreign powers almost immediately after they signed the treaties, even as the ink was drying on the paper, kept thinking like, wow, we could have gotten so much more. But it would have to wait a bit until the court would be willing to renegotiate or another crisis would precipitate an opportunity or would create an opportunity to renegotiate the treaties. And that came in 1856.

And like a lot of wars in the 19th century, it started for dumb reasons. In this particular case, down in the port of Guangzhou, in Canton, there was a dispute over a ship that had been seized by the Qing Customs Authorities, or the Qing authorities. It was a ship that was flying a British flag, but had a Chinese crew, and it had a registration in British-controlled Hong Kong, but the registration had lapsed. And the whole thing was pretty shady because the customs authorities or the Qing authorities were pretty sure it was a smuggling ship, but it had been flying the British flag.

And when they seized the ship and seized the crew, the consul, the British consul in Guangzhou, Harry Parkes—he becomes well known in Chinese history for his very, depending upon your perspective, determined stance or belligerent stance towards China—Harry Parkes demands that the governor general of Guangzhou release this ship, release the crew. And when the governor general isn't very forthcoming about this, Parkes decides to then open fire on Guangzhou. And this precipitates a crisis in Guangzhou and they send word back to London.

And when Parliament hears about this, they can't really even believe what they're reading. They can't believe that a consul so many thousands of miles away is trying to start a war with the Qing Empire. There were many people in Parliament who weren't totally wild about the whole military adventurism on the China coast. The First Opium War, that was a hard sell for people who weren't totally convinced that making Queen Victoria the world's largest narco-baron was something that was worth going to war over.

In this particular case, it was a difficult decision for the British government, but the opium merchants had a lot of influence in Parliament. And of course there were just gung-ho supporters of empire in Parliament. And after some debate, the government fell, they had to seat a new parliament. Approval was given for a new adventure on the China coast. The British sent troops and ships to the China coast to blockade ports and to force China to the negotiating table. And they were joined in this by their good friends the French, who, while they didn't have significant trade interests in China, had kind of set themselves up as the protectors of Christianity, particularly Catholicism, in the Chinese Empire, in the Qing Empire. And they were going to war to get redress for the murder of a missionary who had

died in South China a couple of years prior to this. And also because they basically wanted to keep an eye on the British.

And so between 1856 and 1858, you have this campaign in which British ships, many of them these newer ships that can go up and down rivers, they can sail right up against Chinese cities or they can tow large gunships, gunboats, right off the coast of Chinese cities.

David (17:36)

From which we get the term gunboat diplomacy.

Jeremiah (17:39)

Right. I mean, the closest thing we have would be—you remember that movie back in the 90s, Independence Day? And the spaceships hover over Chicago and then one of the aliens presses a button and like, whoops, no more Chicago. And that's what this was. You'd take these gunboats, you'd put them off the coast, you'd blockade a port, put them off the coast of a walled city and you'd say, "Open up or we just destroy the whole city with our gunboats."

And after two years of this, especially once these gunboats and these troops start reaching North China, outside the city of Tianjin, which is only a hundred miles or so away from Beijing, the court's like, "All right, no más, let's negotiate a treaty." And so there's a negotiation in Tianjin, a new treaty is signed, the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858. The foreign powers get even more concessions and one of the biggest ones they get for the first time, and this is something that the foreign powers had wanted for the better part of a century, is the right to establish diplomatic residence, diplomatic representation inside the capital in Beijing. New ports are opened up.

And the treaty is signed in 1858, but when the negotiators show it to the emperor, he kind of vetoes it. And the negotiators aren't really sure how to finesse this, and it becomes a major problem about a year later. In 1859, the British and French, along with the Americans and the Russians and others, show up with their diplomatic representatives. To get to Beijing, you have to go through the mouth of the river that goes from the sea to Tianjin, connects to the canals that go to Beijing. The Qing court decided to make it difficult for the foreign powers. They suggested that the emperor wasn't happy and so they weren't allowed to take their boats along the river or the canal, but they could certainly go overland to Beijing.

And for some of the ministers, like the Russians and the Americans, they were kind of okay with this or willing to at least compromise, but the British and French representatives wanted to go by the route that they had planned on. When they get to this river, they see

that the river is blocked with iron chains and all these obstacles. And there's a couple of forts overlooking the river. They're called the Dagu Forts.

And when they try to clear the river of these obstacles, the forts open fire on the convoy of ships that's trying to get into the river with the diplomats. This convoy is under fire from these forts. They try to land Marines and engineers to clear the river so they can move out and retreat, and they can't do that. And at the end of the day, a couple hundred of the British and French soldiers and sailors are dead. They have to beat a retreat out of the river.

And as you can imagine, the court's like, "Awesome, like high fives all around. We'll never have to worry about foreign powers ever again." But of course, that's not what happened. And a year later, and this kind of brings us to the burning of the summer palace. In 1860, you have this new armada that returns to the North China coast. You've got something like 16,000 troops. They're bringing with them all these new toys, like Armstrong guns, these advanced artillery pieces and guns that were designed to fight land wars in Asia against numerically superior opponents.

And this time in 1860, the year after they were forced to retreat in that debacle in 1859, the British and French troops sweep North China. They destroy the Dagu forts, they occupy Tianjin, and they rout the military of the Qing Empire that tries to stop them. And eventually they push right up against the walls of Beijing. And this is where things then get very, very messy.

The Emperor Flees

David (21:17)

Right, so you have the Xianfeng Emperor in charge and he sees that this situation is not going to turn out well and he actually flees the capital at that point.

Jeremiah (21:28)

He goes to his little brother who's known in history as Prince Gong and he's like, "Hey bro, how you doing? Going on vacation. I filled out the paperwork for my leave of absence. While I'm gone, can you just handle a few things for me? Like feed the fish at the Yuanmingyuan and there's a new dumpling recipe in the kitchen, not wild about it. Can you execute the chef? And oh, there's a massive army of hairy barbarians about to sack our city. See what you can do about that."

So yeah, the emperor completely flakes and leaves the capital. And this also causes a bit of a crisis because now no one's totally in charge. And when the British and French forces try to negotiate some kind of truce or ceasefire, or at least a relatively peaceful occupation

of Beijing, they encounter many members of the Qing military who, despite the fact they're back on their heels, don't just want to open up the gates.

And when a group of diplomats who are accompanied by a French priest—there's a British journalist as well, there's a guard as well, there's a couple of soldiers, many of them are Sikhs—they go to meet with their Qing counterparts and when they reach the place of parley, there's a dispute between none other than Harry Parkes, this consul who way back in 1856 had started this whole mess and was probably from the Chinese side one of the most hated men in China. I mean, Peter Navarro looks like a 中国好友 *zhongguo haoyou* compared to Harry Parkes back in the day.

What ends up happening is that one of the commanders gives the order to round up the entire negotiating party from the foreign side and throws them in a dungeon. The treatment of these prisoners is quite brutal. One of the people who gets locked up is a guy named Henry Loch, who was a secretary to the British commander, Lord Elgin. And if that name sounds familiar, yes, he is the son of the Elgin Marbles Elgin.

Loch has this great passage in his memoirs. He says, "Had it not been for the starvation, the pain from the cramped position in which the chains and ropes retained the arms and legs, the heavy drag of the iron collar on the bones of the spine, the creeping vermin that infested every place, together with the occasional beatings and torture which the prisoners were from time to time taken away for hours to endure, of course returning with bleeding legs and body so weak they were scarcely able to crawl, there really was no great hardship to be endured."

And he was one of the lucky ones. Once they capture these guys, the court doesn't know what to do with them. And many of these men who were captured end up dying in some pretty horrible ways. A lot of what happens is not so much the torture itself, but they have all these injuries from the torture and from the beatings and from the battle. And they're tied with these wet ropes that when they dry constrict, which splits the skin, and then all of these guys get infected in these dungeons and most of these guys die of sepsis. Loch and Parkes are two of the lucky ones. They're the ones who will eventually survive this, but most of the men who were taken prisoner were returned as corpses.

The Decision to Burn

David (24:39)

At this point, there's a decision to be made, which is, what are we going to do about this? And they decided that rather than punish the ordinary people of Beijing or the surrounding area, they want to find something that will hurt the emperor and the imperial family the most. And that thing is the Yuanmingyuan, the Summer Palace.

Jeremiah (25:02)

Yeah, there's an initial idea to try to burn down the Forbidden City. With a civil war going on, the Taiping Rebellion going on in central China, there's some talk about this, but the feeling is if they burn down the Forbidden City, that will be such a blow to the dynasty, the dynasty might fall, and that wouldn't work out because the British would be faced with trying to take over yet another continent-sized colony that hates them.

And so the decision gets made—if we can't burn down the Forbidden City, let's hit what the Emperor really loves and that's these Imperial gardens. And so British and French troops march northwest of Beijing. They take control of the gardens and the first thing that happens is they just loot the place. I mean everything that's not nailed down. You know these stories, the British soldiers have all these diaries about how their French counterparts are running around stealing everything. The French soldiers talk about how the British can't restrain themselves from stealing everything, but really it's a free-for-all.

You have guys running around wearing like eight robes, women's clothing, crowns on their head, carrying like nine vases or bronzes and scrolls. I mean, even today, David, we get these stories of somebody in England—their great-grandmother has died, and the vase that she inherited from her grandmother turns out to be a Ming dynasty vase that was looted from the Old Summer Palace. It's worth millions.

David (26:20)

There's some famous—if I may, there's some famous quotes that I usually show to my students that describe this process. Well, this is a famous one from Captain Charles Gordon, later to be famous as a leader of the Ever Victorious Army against the Taiping rebels. But he wrote home to his mother and sister after receiving orders to burn the palace. And this is a famous excerpt from the letter:

"We accordingly went out and after pillaging it, burned the whole place, destroying in a vandal-like manner the most valuable property, which could not be replaced for four millions. You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the palaces we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them. In fact, these palaces were so large and we were so pressed for time, we could not plunder them carefully. Quantities of gold ornaments were burnt, considered as brass. It was wretchedly demoralizing work for an army."

That quote kind of sums up the mixed feelings of the soldiers whose job it was to burn and loot this place. On the one hand, there was this orgy of greed and excitement. But at the same time, people could see that this was a horrific cultural crime being committed.

There's another slightly longer one I would like to read from one of the French troops, Maurice Deriison. And this is from an article, a classic article by Geremie Barmé where he documents these things. I think it's called "The Garden of Perfect Brightness," I think is the

name of it. But this is an amazing first-person eyewitness account here, just an excerpt from it. So this is Deriison's account. He says:

"I was only an onlooker, a disinterested but curious onlooker, positively reveling in this strange and unforgettable spectacle. In this swarm of men of every color, every sort, the scum of all the races of the world as they flung themselves on the spoil, shouting hurrahs in every language on earth, hurrying, pushing, tumbling over one another, picking themselves up, cursing and swearing and returning laden with loot. It was like an anthill disturbed by the toe of a boot when the black swarms have been roused up and hurry off in all directions, one with a grub, one with a tiny egg, another with a seed in its jaws. There were soldiers with their heads in the red lacquer boxes from the Empress's chamber. Others were wreathed in masses of brocade and silk. Others stuffed rubies, sapphires, pearls, and bits of rock crystal into their pockets, shirts, and caps, and hung their necks with pearl necklaces. Others hugged clocks and clock cases. Engineers had brought their axes to smash up the furniture and get the precious stones inlaid in it. One man was savagely hacking at a Louis XV clock in the form of a cupid. He took the crystal figures on the face for diamonds. Every now and then the cry of fire rang out. Dropping whatever they had hold of, they all ran to put out the flames, which were by that time licking the sumptuous walls padded with silks and damask and furs. It was like a scene from an opium dream."

You get some sense of the absolute surrealistic chaos of this event.

Jeremiah (29:23)

That's some vivid imagery there.

Once the looting was over, and you're right, the looting was just incredible chaos. I mean, at one point they even steal the emperor's kennel. They steal all these puppies and ship them back to England for Queen Victoria. She actually gets one of the puppies and names it Looty.

David (29:47)

Yeah, that's so ironic. She actually named it Looty.

Jeremiah (29:52)

I think there's a reason this is called the Century of Humiliation. Once the looting was done, and I think this is what makes this such a horrific act of cultural vandalism, the Army engineers then went to work. The destruction of the Yuanmingyuan, the systematic way that the soldiers went to each and every building that they could, looked at it as an engineering problem, destroyed it, and then moved on. This wasn't necessarily a case where they had thrown a match over the wall and walked away, or this was a case where

there was a battle and a church got in the middle and it was destroyed and that's terrible, but it was a mistake. This was a plan to level this place.

And while there were some structures that may have survived a little bit, by and large, this amazing area was destroyed down to the foundations. I think that's the—when I think about this, whenever destruction is done systematically with purpose and with intent, I feel like that just adds a level of tragedy to it that is more than even when something is accidentally destroyed in an act of war. And when you look back at this period and you look back at this, yes, there was this incident with the negotiators that kind of led to the destruction or the additional punishment that led to the destruction of the Old Summer Palace. And a lot of that—a lot of the Western literature, especially from that era, kind of focuses on this sort of justified retribution.

But justified retribution can go both ways. I mean, the whole act of this war itself was just another—it was an example of foreign aggression against the Qing Empire. And so it's hard in this kind of situation, it's hard for me to think that despite the horrible way these prisoners were treated, it justified destroying what—if it had survived to this day, which granted given the 20th century in China isn't necessarily a sure thing, but if it had survived to this day, it would be one of the world's great historic sites.

David (31:55)

Yes, the Summer Palace would be the tourist place to go to, not necessarily the Great Wall or the Forbidden City. This would be the one. Yeah. I should just mention this—the fact that there was this continued looting and scavenging that went on well after 1860. And even through the Boxer Rebellion, there were still people tearing things down. And by the way, I forgot to mention when I visited the Summer Palace recently, last fall, I was talking with one of the administrators there. And as I was sitting in his office, a worker came in with an artifact that I didn't recognize at first, but it's something called a wadang, which is a piece of ceramic that they put on the tiles of the roofs that usually has inscriptions on it. It's a very beautiful little object, a round sort of disk.

He brought it into the administrator, whoever it was there, and said, "Here we found this," and he said, "Okay, yeah, go take a picture of it and put a numerical marker on it and then put it in the files and we'll deal with it later." And I said, "Well, what's this?" He said, "They're renovating, they're putting in some lawn there or something. They dug up this artifact that was undiscovered." I said, "That's amazing." He said, "This happens every week, many times. Anytime they do anything, they uncover, they dredge up artifacts of various kinds, not necessarily jewels and diamonds, but artifacts that to this day they can find in the Summer Palace compound." This is incredible amounts of just sheer stuff—still to this day they're finding new, digging up different examples of that. Incredible.

The Ruins as Symbol

Jeremiah (33:39)

I think it's interesting too that there have been calls periodically to restore or rebuild the site. And I find it fascinating that most of the time those calls are rebuffed with the idea that it's a much more powerful symbol as ruins than it would be as a rebuilt theme park. And it reminds us that this continues to be—it's labeled as a patriotic education base, but it's a powerful symbol, a powerful reminder of this period of history.

And the loot itself has become symbolic of an effort by China to repatriate a lot of the material culture that was taken out of China, whether it was stolen, looted, bought under sketchy circumstances, what have you, but this effort to reclaim the lost cultural heritage. And many of these items that came out of the Old Summer Palace, in particular a set of 12 bronze fountain heads, the 12 zodiac animals that decorated a fountain in these Western palaces, have taken on an outsized importance as symbols of this effort. And some of these bronze fountain heads have been returned to China. Some of them are at the National Museum, some are at the Poly Museum in Beijing, but several of them are still missing.

David (35:06)

Yeah, I remember that there were two bronze—two of these bronze animal heads. I think one was the rat and what was the other one? The rat and the rabbit were plundered by the British and French during 1860 and they turned up in 2013 on sale at Christie's auction for I think 24 million. And the Chinese government has made this an agenda of buying these things back, which they now have the money to do so and the wherewithal to do so, which must be a very sickening kind of thing to do, to actually pay money to get these things back repatriated.

I would also mention—it's kind of interesting that historian Jim Hevia has done a lot of work on this. And one of the things he told me was that since the advent of computer technology and archives, they've digitized the entire London Times as far back as from the 1800s. You can now online or at least in the files search for various auctions held in the early part of the century in London and elsewhere and infer from some of the labels, if you search for auctions in these paper records, you can find items for sale like "China, late Qing, Summer Palace," or "Late Qing Beijing artifact" and get a sense that this is one of these items that was looted from the Summer Palace. And then they're able to use that information to trace its path through the private owners in the auctions, on the auction blocks, and sort of figure out where these artifacts are today. Because many museums are sort of ashamed to have them there. They don't want to lose them but they're ashamed to be upfront about the source and so they just say something like "a Beijing artifact from 1860."

But yeah, it's a huge undertaking now to try to get some of these things back. And also a little dirty secret—a lot of the loot was taken by local people, by Beijingers, by Chinese people. They took them home, and you could even still find in hutongs occasionally, or used to anyway, be able to find a few statues or little doorposts, animals or something that had been looted and the family was just keeping them. So yeah, it's a huge issue and it has to do with this redress of this national humiliation.

Jeremiah (37:24)

Not to take anything away from the tragedy of the destruction, but when we go to the Old Summer Palace, they sometimes show a video that shows heroic farmers defending the palace to the last man against the British and French invaders. It's an interesting spin on what happened because there was a lot of fighting between British and French troops and farmers, local people who were in the area around the Summer Palace, the Old Summer Palace when it was being looted. But what it seems to be more like is once the gates were open, the people who lived around the palace, and of course have never been allowed inside, once they saw things were being taken, they wanted to get right in on the action. And the British and French troops had never been taught to share nicely. And so there were all kinds of skirmishes between who would get what.

And you're right, I mean, it is true that many of these artifacts disappeared into the ether here in China. But there's also—you said there's a lot of them that are still out in the rest of the world too. And today, of course, we have this narrative of the rejuvenation, the Chinese dream. And this whole era, this Century of Humiliation becomes really important because, as I sometimes describe it to my students, it's a quasi-religious parable. You can't have the redemption without the fall.

And this Century of Humiliation, this fall from grace, this fall from this glorious past, and when China was laid low—to describe it, you need to wallow in the depths of the tragedy so that when China is redeemed, to the narrative as it's presented in schools and in the National Museum, when it's redeemed by the Chinese Communist Party, and eventually will be further made whole by the rejuvenator-in-chief, you need to remember this era. And I also don't want to make it sound like this is just political propaganda, because there's good reasons to remember this era, but it is worth noting that the idea of rescuing China from humiliation has become a major part of Chinese nationalism and the narrative of the party.

The Ruins Today

David (39:37)

Given all of that and given that I think arguably you could say that the Century of Humiliation is really over now and China—and it may be the US's turn right now perhaps, but what's the new usefulness of the ruins and the symbolic importance of them? Are they going to be stressed, be put up as an example every year, or is this a time for a rethinking or reevaluation of them or reconceptualization of them?

Jeremiah (40:11)

Well, in addition to being a good plot device for this rejuvenation narrative, I think it also serves two other purposes. I think the first one is, and this is also part of the patriotic education curriculum, it's worth reminding people that many of the same nations which continue to lecture China on issues of trade and human rights and a whole host of other challenges are not so coincidentally the same countries that were involved in some of these actions in the Century of Humiliation—Britain, France, and for other events too, you've got Germany and the United States, of course, and others. So I think that's another part of it. It gives a veneer, it makes it easier to point to these critiques and claim hypocrisy. "Look at the foreign powers. They're trying to do now with their human rights agenda and their Nobel prizes what they couldn't do with their gunboats and their armies."

I think the second part of it too, and this again also goes back to the patriotic education curriculum—when I look at those textbooks from the 19th century, David, it lacks nuance, but there's not too much there that's different from the way I would teach it. Again, imperialism sucks. But when you look at the textbooks for the 20th century, it's shocking what gets left out. And I think part of this too is you have to explain why China needs to—if China had this glorious civilization, you have to explain why China needed to be redeemed and rejuvenated in the first place.

And it's probably an easier sell to say, "Listen, we were doing fine. The foreign powers wiped us out. And then beginning with Mao, we kind of started the comeback and here we are, brought to you by Huawei." And I think that's an easier sell than "The foreign powers wiped us out and then we took over in the 1950s and we did a significant amount of damage ourselves and now everything's better but we'd rather you not pay attention to the part that we contributed."

I think complex history, nuanced history is something a lot of leaders around the world would prefer not to have to deal with. And in China, they just have the power and the mechanisms to excise nuance and complexity from the historical narrative when it's convenient for the powers that be.

Well, David, I think we've exhausted the patience of our listeners long enough for this particular episode. And for those of you out there, thank you so much for your support. You can find us on iTunes and wherever you get your podcasts. Also, if you ever have any questions for us, you can get in touch with us. Both David and I are on Twitter, and we'd love to hear from you. All right, thank you, and we'll talk to you again.