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A Dance with the Dragon: The Vanished World of Peking's Foreign Colony

by Julia Boyd, Tauris, New York, 2012

(xxiii + 263 pages, price not indicated)

This evocative book takes us back through a time-machine, into the world in which the expatriate community, mainly Western, lived in the quintessentially Chinese Peking in the early 20th century, immediately following the 1900 Boxer Uprising, right up to the 1949 triumph of the Communist regime, China's Liberation. It provides a neat counterpoint to the flood of recent writing on China, showing us through the eyes of foreign residents the real distance the country has traversed. We see in such an account the tribulations suffered by the Chinese people at the hands of multiple, competing colonizing powers, often working with the country's indigenous warlords. The book illustrates the point that modern China makes, that this experience was many times worse than what transpired in countries that came under the rule of a single colonial power.

Such historical analysis may be seen as a variant of subaltern history, where powerful events viewed through the optic of privileged and yet ordinary people, and the way great events affected their lives. The book covers China's transition from an imperial system of the period before 1900, to the takeover by the Communist regime in 1949; this traverses the convoluted period of history that was led by the first republican revolutionaries, and then a succession of warlords, collaborating with Japanese imperialists. These events are captured through the letters, diaries and personal narratives of the small but watchful foreign community that made its home in Peking. The work is original and the product of meticulous and long-drawn study. Much primary research has gone into this work, marshaling of ancient memories of the few that have survived from that era, besides culling through the scattered troves of diaries and correspondence of those early luminaries.

The book opens with a description of the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, and the travails of the besieged foreign community, mainly connected with the 11 foreign legations in Peking. The multinational relief contingent that was mobilized for their rescue included British Indian troops, from the regiments of Sikhs and Rajputs; Bikaner's *Ganga Risala* joined them – alas without their camel mounts – led by the 20-year old Maharaja Ganga Singh (who was to play a leading role in the Chamber of Princes in the 1930s). ‘...Some thought them cruel and not up to scratch, while others considered them among the bravest soldiers in the world’. The lifting of the siege was a relative anti-climax, and was followed by looting of the Forbidden City, the sacking of the Summer Palace and desecration of the Temple of Heaven; ‘When it came to violence, there was little to choose between the Boxer and the barbarian’.

Over the next 50 years Peking became ‘Yanjing’, then ‘Beiping’ when the KMT regime shifted the capital to Nanking (now Nanjing), and finally, Beijing. A chapter, titled ‘Dragon Bone History’ narrates the search by different groups for fossils and bones of prehistoric mammals, unchecked by official regulation, including the ‘Peking Man’ discoveries of 1923-27. Another chapter on Japan’s territorial encroachment notes that ‘most (Westerners) took the view that it was perfectly legitimate for Japan to protect its vested interests...’ But others saw Japan, and China, in different light, among them a young Edward Snow, who also wrote passionately against Western novels about China, including those by Nobel-laureate Pearl Buck; Snow told his publisher about his ‘nausea with the impossible fiction on China by foreign and especially American novelists’. The author details Snow’s travel to Yenan, and the circumstances in which his epochal ‘Red Star over China’ (1937) came to be written; his wife Helen Snow was one of the leading lights of Peking’s swinging set.

Rabindranath Tagore’s 1924 visit to Peking is described as a ‘disaster’. It began well, with fine newspaper accounts of the keen intellectual interest Tagore

aroused. But many Chinese saw his key message, of a return to the ancient values of China and India, as ‘dangerously reactionary’; they sought their country’s escape from subservience, and saw their own history in a different light. In India we have tended to romanticize that historic encounter; Julia Boyd’s account, from diverse foreign sources provides a realistic antidote. She also describes in detail Tagore’s meeting in the Forbidden City with former emperor Puyi. Just a few months later Puyi was expelled from that perch, marking the final end of the Manchu era.

In the 1930s foreign scholars, writers, and artists found in Peking ‘an entrancing survival from a vanished world – an exquisite way of life almost untouched by modernity...foreign intellectuals living surrounded by beautiful objects in the tranquility of their courtyard homes, their every need catered by delightfully eccentric servants – and all on next to nothing.’ As a counterpoint, ‘there was also a murky world of sex and drugs’ in which some of the leading lights were apparently implicated. We also encounter here Colonel ‘Vinegar Joe’ Stillwell, Chinese scholar and art collector, who as General in 1942 went on to command US forces in China-Burma-India – and lent his name to the road that linked India’s North-East with Yunnan province in China, before it fell into disuse. We read of the Talati family, Parsees originally from Mumbai, who had settled in Peking at the turn of the century, and were among fashionable set (they moved to Britain in 1948). There is also mention of Indian exchange students on Peking in 1948; one wonders what became of them.

The book touches on the actions taken by foreigners to build institutions, such as Peking Union Medical College, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, and Peking National University, where a number of foreigners had taught. But contact, social or remotely equal, between Westerners and the Chinese was minimal, leaving out a few aristocrat families. For all their curiosity and admiration towards some aspects of China, the foreign community was a world apart.

The fighting that broke out between Chinese and Japanese troops at Marco Polo Bridge on 7 July 1937, did not seem to portend change, but barely a month later, the Japanese army marched into Peking. This marked the start of Japanese occupation; life for Chinese 'grew daily grimmer, but as the war receded from Peking, life for the foreigners settled back into its familiar rhythm'. The outbreak of World War II soured relationships within the foreign community, but real transformation came after Pearl Harbor in December 1941, when Japanese troops swiftly took over the Legation Quarter. In March 1942, Japan's 'enemy aliens', including the Talatis, were assembled in the American compound, and made to walk to the train station, carrying their own baggage, which was seen by them as a major humiliation. They were herded to a small town 300 miles to the south, Weihsien, and interned there for the duration of the War.

The author does not dwell much on the harsh internment life for the 1500 foreigners, some 1000 of them British, but describes in detail the landing on 17 August 1945 from a low flying aircraft of the seven-man American rescue team. A month later a British colonel addressed the former internees, who were still stuck in Weihsien, warning them that the system of 'Treaty Ports' and 'Extraterritoriality' had ended, and on return to Peking foreigners would have to live under Chinese laws; he advised the British to move on to find jobs in other parts of the Empire.

The foreign community thinned out rapidly after returning to Peking, even though some of the past gaiety lingered. By November 1948, the Communist People's Liberation Army (PLA) was in Manchuria and Peking waited for the end game. Life magazine flew in Henri Cartier Bresson, arguably the world's greatest photographer. One ought to marvel at Cartier Bresson's capacity to be at the right place; he was in Delhi when Gandhiji was assassinated and his photographs are iconic. His portrayal of the demise of the KMT regime and the Communist takeover, in both Peking and Shanghai is equally memorable.

The PLA marched into Peking on 31 January 1949, and held a victory parade three days later. The book ends with these words: ‘...the foreigners...stand guilty of massive failure of imagination. Had they been more astute and less incurious, keener to nurture China’s self-confidence and not to undermine it, had they not lived so insistently in their own bubble...their legacy in China might not now be regarded with quite such contempt and China’s recovery of its former prestige would surely have proved less traumatic.’

Scarcity of information, China’s much delayed and resisted exposure to the West, and the cloak of a seemingly undecipherable language, has produced for China an enduring mystique that has no parallel. (Japan was in a similar situation, but of course it managed much better, with sovereign autonomy, its gradual opening to the West; for all its exceptionalism, it does not have a comparable aura.) The chaotic collapse of China’s last imperial dynasty, and the convoluted aftermath, makes especially valuable this account of the first half of the 20th century, as witnessed by the Westerners living in that capital. Should we hold them responsible, in part, for the insularity and insensitivity they showed towards China? Or was this simply in the logic of the era of imperial colonialism?

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