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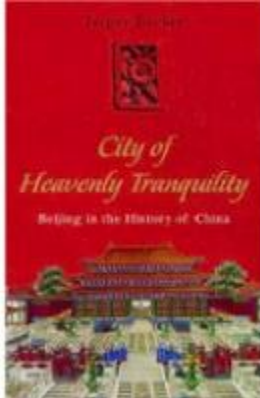
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Beijing à la Jasper Becker

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By Pierre Fuller

A *Financial Times* news brief lay buried in an inside page: At the very moment a few weeks ago when Olympic medals were awarded in front of adoring crowds, “two elderly women” were jailed for seeking permission to demonstrate against “being forcibly evicted from their Beijing homes” back in 2001. And who knows what now stands in the place of these pensioners’ loss – faux Italianate villas? an IKEA? pavement?

Stories like this make a timely book of journalist Jasper Becker’s history of the Chinese capital, *City of Heavenly Tranquility: Beijing in the History of China* from Oxford University Press (and from a division of Penguin in the U.K.) – not the news of the razing of much of old Beijing, which largely began in the 1950s, but its near completion by a “new” China stepping ceremoniously onto the world stage.

Becker’s premise of the near total destruction of Beijing’s charm – and the rise of phony Ming-throwback facades for tourists – is impossible to dispute. His book bounces back and forth from episodes in Yuan or Ming Beijing to a real estate agent called Sunshine showcasing a \$400,000 penthouse in the Middle Sea Purple Gold Garden, a forestry professor eager to talk about stock options, and “The casual ugliness of so much of the Yuanming Yuan... the tacky funfair, a dreary zoo, a so-called ‘primitive people’s totem park’ and amusement rides featuring Snow White.” (84)

But just as media coverage leading up to the recent Olympics suggested China was the inventor of smog, Becker would have it that the Chinese also founded kitsch.

Even if much of Beijing’s facelift is hideous and in many ways tragic, reporting on China – on anywhere – is troubling when uninformed and unhumiliated by a comparative look at one’s origins – in Becker’s case, Britain. But apart from a section on Le Corbusier’s efforts to hyper-modernize elsewhere in the world, his passing hypotheticals to the Anglo-American experience are so poorly chosen you wonder if he’s put any thought to it at all. Becker writes as though he descends from the heavens.

Exasperated by China’s facelift, he asks what “if Wall Street, Central Park... the Bronx...were to be leveled.” (9) The Bronx? Either Becker’s never heard of Robert Moses, New York City’s automobile champion and unelected executor of countless concrete scars, among them the infamous Cross-Bronx Expressway, which razed and diced many a poor South Bronx community (incidentally spawning the rap-hop movement) just so suburbanites could drive right over them... either that or Becker is too caught up in putting the Chinese to the fire to even bother.

What, Becker again asks, “if every landmark – Times Square, Madison Square Gardens, Radio City – were to disappear at once.” MSG? Again, either Becker doesn’t realize 1) that the monstrosity that is Madison Square Gardens is a concrete and glass bubble for ticketed events named, in good Orwellian fashion, after the public gardens it supplanted and 2) that MSG was also built on the ruins of landmark

Penn Station, another blow to the once-majestic railway in favor of cars or entertainment... either that or making such a connection just isn't in the spirit of his treatise.

The real issue is not whether old Beijing is lost for good – there is little doubt about it – but whether Becker puts Beijing's experience into its proper historical and global context. Here he fails, and it is little surprise why. The career China commentator and publisher of *Asia Weekly* is also among those outside observers who position themselves as concerned friends of China while finding nothing right with the place, past or present.

No matter that any claimed continuity between the Han, Tang or Qing dynasties is largely cosmetic, or that Ming and Qing power was many times lighter on the ground (in the form of the magistrate presiding over hundreds of thousands) than, say, that of the French ancien régime. No matter at all. In 2000, Becker opened his tome *The Chinese* with the proclamation – which informed the rest of his narrative – that “The Chinese state is probably the oldest functioning organ in the world, dating back more than 2,000 years... exercising a tighter grip over its subjects than any other comparable government in the last two millennia.”

No matter that the High Qing state drew from a Classical statecraft inheritance to provide its subjects with far more extensive disaster relief – policy and execution – than any of its European peers. Becker launched his 1996 study on the Great Leap Forward famine, *Hungry Ghosts*, with a Chinese “people” who have “always... prostrated themselves before the wayward power of the Emperor,” with “young girls...cast into the rivers to prevent floods,” with the Qing vainly ordering “local officials to build temples and pray” for rain, with the “slaughtering (of) animals to bring rain,” with officials who “sold grain for profit” as people ate their won children to survive.

And all this by page two.

So it is with little surprise that Becker's latest offering rises no higher in analytical nuance. To give some idea of the style of his narrative, Becker opens his first chapter “In Xanadu” with “watchful secret police” in the “vast totalitarian space” of Tiananmen Square before presenting a remarkably bloodless account of the Mongol exploits leading to the Yuan dynasty, later reminding us that some “50,000 ethnic Mongolians” were purged during the Cultural Revolution. The Mongol invasions today are “a reminder that the Chinese were not supreme throughout history,” he writes, “as they claim was the case before the defeats in the Opium Wars.” (15-16, 29)

Hold on. “As they claim”? Who, all 1.3 billion Chinese? Or the *People's Daily*? Maybe the Chinese Ministry of Education? Rarely do Western observers apply such categorical attributions to their own: what would “as the British claim” mean in a story on, say, Cromwell's rape of Ireland? Assigning a “they” to all Chinese suggests that a cookie-cutter Chinese population has it wrong and has it coming to them. So much for telling it like it is.

Karl Marx is later employed by Becker to argue that the Ming-era “Great Wall symbolized the stagnation of the whole Chinese social and economic system.” (63) Not only is this a very tired narrative (can Becker find no better than a Victorian-era Eurocentric classical economist?) but on what stagnant “social and economic system” did the Qing construct a buoyant empire for centuries to come? Perhaps Becker meant the ailing Ming regime, which was soon to fall. Well, then say so much.

Even more disappointing is Becker's treatment of the resident Foreign Powers, who are assigned a *noblesse oblige* worthy of saints. “Had they wished,” Becker assures us, “the Western powers could have gone on to take control of China as they did in India, Africa and the Americas.” (90) To boot, Becker paints this as noble restraint as their envoys are “seized and tortured” by Beijing and “fixed sums” are offered by the emperor “for the heads of the barbarians” – all when Lord Macartney, we hear, had only approached China to get his sovereign to be “treated as an equal.” (87-88)

Another chapter opens with the execution of six reformers in 1898 and the execution calendar of the Qing state; yet another starts with “Beijing people” spending “much of their lives forced to live next door to neighbors who had taken part in their persecution and the death of their family members”

(183); still another with "the violent events that led in 1966 to the suicide or murder of Lao She." (196)

This is not to say that none of these events happened, only that when summing the Chinese experience Becker likes leading with gore – and with a title (*City of Heavenly Tranquility?*) that is totally tongue-in-cheek.

But the pea of Becker's thought lies at the Ming tombs at the outskirts of the capital. There, he explains, "Far from Beijing's ugly pretensions to modernity, one felt a little freer and in such a haunt of ancient peace could savour an unchanging China fixed for ever in romantic decay." (71)

First off, Beijing's ugliness, its conveniences, its empty renewals, its state surveillance of people's lives, these things are no "pretensions to modernity." These things are modernity.

Second, we find that Becker is no further along in his thinking than turn-of-the-century French writer Pierre Loti and other foreigners who were "romantically involved in the mystery of China," as he puts it, seeking a changeless Orient while also seeing romance in a civilization's decay. (109)

Becker, we learn in his closing thoughts, had "arrived in search of exoticism, of girls with almond eyes and slender necks, and found a totalitarian state of spies and informers." (316)

No wonder the man was disappointed.