

Ringmar, Erik. *Liberal Barbarism: The European Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China* by Erik Ringmar, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Scientific publications tend only in the rarest of cases to become page-turners. Erik Ringmar's *Liberal Barbarism: The European Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China* is one such rare exception. Ringmar, who teaches political science at Lund University (Sweden) and whose publications cover international relations theory, historiography, and cultural and economic sociology, among other topics, sets out to find an answer to the question of what motivated cultivated European liberals to act like barbarians on their mission to make China part of the "civilized world." Assuming an intrinsic connection between liberalism and barbarism, Ringmar investigates "the European way of relating to China and by implication to the rest of the world" (p. 6), and, as a convincing case study, he establishes the 1860 ransacking and subsequent ruination of the Old Summer Palace¹ as an illustration of this barbarism. In order to understand and explain the motives that guided those European liberals, the author lays out a historical context and recreates their worldview in which those motives once made sense. He combines cultural and narrative theory and uses literary tropes of European cultural history and context-related *thick description* to make the history of imperialism appear a public spectacle fueled by political actors and their respective worldviews performing on the world stage of (failed) diplomacy. Dwelling on performative and ritualistic aspects of international relations theory, the author shows in detail the incompatible conceptualizations of the two international systems and their tragic deadly encounter.

Ringmar identifies the 1860 looting and burning of Yuanmingyuan, the Palace of the Emperor of China, by the Anglo-French army as a key moment of radical transformation within the international community and its inter-state relationships. The demolition of the Emperor's Palace, the author argues, was not simply the collateral damage of European imperialist warfare but a fundamental clash of the European world perception and the Sino-centric system, on the one hand, proving "the failure of the European liberal project" and, on the other, showing the irreversible destruction of an alternative world view. Ringmar first deftly guides the building of the reader's image of the imperial palace as a refuge of all-encompassing perfection—"the best of all possible worlds" (p. 42); he then escorts the reader through the theater of war during the North China Campaign of 1860, populated by "men of culture and sophistication" (p. 61). The destruction of the Old Summer Palace is designed as the climax of Ringmar's narration. He portrays a staged 19th century version of the Expulsion from Paradise—which resulted in China's rude awakening from what had been a period of long lasting self-sufficiency (if not total isolation) and peacefulness—as a tragic comedy in which British and French colonial troops perceive themselves as acting as armed representatives of the Old Testament's stern God, expelling the emperor from his "fantasy world" within his palace and forcing him into the "modern age": a world of knowledge, work, relentless improvement, progress, and international relations. Thus marked the advent of the modern nation state *ante portas*, the "carefree" Chinese Garden of Eden forever gone.

After having laid bare the methodological and thematic framework in an introductory exposition, the author, in the second part of his intellectual venture, displays the Sino-centric worldview. The palace and garden compound are presented as nothing less than the materialization of a perfect world, unaffected by change, decay, or death. The timelessness of the "imperial theme park" (p. 37), which neither related to any past or to any future, nor to any particular purpose, says Ringmar, resembled (to the European eye) an infantile world, in which the emperor took refuge from the ordinary. Ringmar then maps out European mid-nineteenth century conceptions of the Self and the Other in differentiating layers. By making extensive use of French and British archives and source material, and by tracing literary,

social, legal, and political discourses, he pinpoints ideologies and imagined constructions of liberal aspirations such as free trade and international law, which become the self-evident prerequisites of imperialist endeavors and colonial warfare, open racism, and military aggression. The slight weakness in this part of the argumentation stems from the fact that the presentation of the Sino-centric system itself is a reconstruction based almost explicitly on Western sources. As such, Ringmar not only misses the opportunity to truly examine the cultural, social, and political discourse of Late Qing China but duplicates the prevailing Western image of China as a homogeneous, self-contained, and enclosed world.

The third and main part of the analysis draws on performances and practices. Here, Ringmar presents clear evidence that the destruction of Yuanmingyuan in 1860 was not an impulsive or spontaneous overreaction but a conscious act meant to instill awe in the Chinese. Lord Elgin, the British High Commissioner in charge, who oversaw the looting of the Old Summer Palace, confirms this claim: “[T]he aim was to stage an event that would strike the Chinese with awe and leave no doubt regarding the sublime nature of Europe’s power” (p. 33). It goes without saying that the Emperor’s Palace had no strategic relevance or military value for the imperialistic forces, and as such, its looting and razing appeared entirely personally and ideologically motivated, with the event remaining to this day a symbol of traumatic national humiliation for China. Importantly, says Ringmar, the event marked a total clash between two ontological entities: between “liberal civilization” and “hierarchic barbarism”—between two inter-state systems that made peaceful communication and agreement simply impossible. On a deeper level, and even more importantly, the destruction marks the end of a self-confident alternative to the European/Western world order. “China as idea,” as a “world concept,” simply disappears from the world stage. Subsequently, the Chinese concept of *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven empire) is inevitably replaced by *Guojia* (nation-state), forcing China to implement a radical change to its foreign policy.

The author shows that all these three casually connected issues—the destruction of the Old Summer Palace, the humiliation of China, and a radical change in Chinese foreign policy—could not have taken place in civilized Europe at the time, but could only have happened in the context of performance: “The destruction was not just a barbarian act, but a performance that took place before an audience made up of not only the emperor, the court, and the Chinese public, but also the European soldiers themselves and a general audience of newspaper readers back home in Europe” (p. 33). Despite the fact that the act of destruction was staged for a Chinese as well as for a Western audience, it nevertheless conveyed different messages. Modern achievements like newspapers and the beginning of mass literature played an prominent role in forming public opinion and creating a new taste for sensation. Again, the author’s brilliant reconstruction of the Western audience’s reception of this historical event leaves the reader to wonder how the Chinese audience perceived this performance. Here again, the author misses the chance to account for the Chinese perception and instead largely confirms Western ideas about China. To be fair, however, it should be mentioned that Ringmar states explicitly that *Liberal Barbarism* is neither a book about history generally nor about China specifically but rather that it was developed in the spirit of critical European self-contemplation (therefore acknowledging that the text basically disregards the Chinese side of the coin).

Liberal Barbarians is a stimulating and intellectually appealing, scholarly contribution to the literature that can be recommended to students and scholars in the fields of international relations, cultural sociology, historiography, imagology, and China Studies, or to anyone who is interested in current debates and happenings in China and the world at large (including the topics of global acts of terrorism intended to instill awe; Western crusades in the name of humanity; the narrative of Chinese nationalism as fueled by national humiliation;

and the stubborn refusal of British and French royal, military, and private art collectors to return the historically looted “booty” to China; to name just a few). Having turned the last page, one cannot but ponder how much the “barbarian other” is still needed in order to affirm our liberal Western civilization.

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¹The “Old Summer Palace” was the European term for the Chinese Imperial Garden and Palace compound in North-Western Beijing.