German Beer and the Making of a New China

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The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Šimková**.

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The first commercial filmed in China was a 1947 effort to sell Tsingtao Beer, one of the world's most famous brands. "Tsingtao" is an older spelling of the name "Qingdao," the city that is still home to the beer company. Today, Qingdao is a large metropolis of over nine million located on Shandong's Jiaozhou Bay, facing the Yellow Sea and Pacific Ocean. The film begins with pure water flowing down from the Laoshan mountains and into beer bottles and human bellies. It ends with cheerful and relaxing urban landscapes boasting sea and sunshine. Yet behind this "tonic of nature," then and now, lies a complicated history of water, plants, soils, fertilizers, pesticides, factories, urban growth, pollution, and waste. Beer is almost too beloved and popular a drink to be subjected to critical scrutiny, but its history can reveal the powerful effects it has wrought on cultures, peoples, and natural environments around the world.

What the film did not remind viewers of was the fact that foreign imperialists from Germany were the ones who created not only a beer but also a city where none had existed before. The film omits that history, but since Qingdao's founding more than a century ago, it has become proud both of its beer and its German legacy.

In 1897, the large bay and plain belonging to China became an outpost of German settlers, power, and civilization. After the Second World War, China regained ownership of its coast. While the country's leaders were eager to break free from their colonized, subservient past, they were also willing to embrace foreign tastes and the ideals of nature embodied in the beer.

The film opens with a bird's-eye view of red-tiled Bavarian-style dwellings within walking distance of rocky shores and sandy beaches. Enter the famous beer, bubbling and glowing with light. The film then flashes back to the mountains looming over the city to the east before returning to the lowlands, where green fields overflow with barley and hops. We move through the brewery's fermentation rooms, then on to neon-lit urban bars where smiling drinkers hold up their glasses. The film ends with a cascade of beer bottles. Tsingtao Beer promised more than cool, refreshing swigs of alcohol and pleasant memories. It linked the city's residents to a larger world, a happy blend of local nature and cosmopolitan civilization.

What beer has meant to people has never been simply human labor and natural resources, or economic power and social hierarchy. Beer appealed to the Chinese and Germans alike as a source of fun, relaxation, and freedom—and as a symbol of a city living in harmony with nature.

Qingdao was nothing like the ancient Chinese capitals of Beijing or Luoyang, which embodied centralized administration, political authority, and social stratification. Neither did it resemble antique and picturesque cities like Hangzhou and Suzhou, wrapped in layers of melancholic poetry. The image of Qingdao was as effervescent and light as the lager it produced. Instead of exuding power or antiquity, this city symbolized a new era of mass consumption, democracy, and global culture.

Such an image had started with the Germans, who envisioned creating an East Asian equivalent of Munich or Naples. Their dream became reality, and Qingdao became widely viewed as the most livable city in China. A guidebook published in 1933 credited the city's appeal to the Germans' environmental planning. "Since the Germans established the colony," wrote the author, "they designed according to the local environment and divided the city into five zones," separating commercial, industrial, living, recreational, and military zones, yet giving them all a harmonious unity. "Although one lives in the city," the guidebook extolled, "it feels like living in nature. … [A]way from the industrial zone, people are not plagued by smoke and coal dust. Its fresh air and beautiful scenery are the best in the country."

The brewery itself represented German accuracy, efficiency, and rationality. It was a chemistry-based industry with standardized formulas and meticulous calculation, different from old Chinese breweries that had long guarded some secret family recipe, folded up and handed down from generation to generation. The "old" beer was now

considered unhealthy, whereas German beer was the “cleanest and most sanitary beverage.” Shiqiu Liang, a popular writer, recalled how once, in this city, he had eaten a thick, juicy steak and drunk a mug of cool draft beer in a German-style restaurant, looking out onto the most prosperous commercial road of the city that had been designed by Germans. He was in no mood to lament the colonial origins of this experience.

Like its publicists, residents and tourists tended to de-emphasize the environmental problems that beer had brought to the coastal plain: the vast heaps of malt dregs and pools of wastewater, the brewery’s pollution of bay and rivers, or the increasing air pollution. To transform the tonic of nature into a human-crafted beverage, the German builders and their successors had created many unintended consequences.

This story might be framed as a tragic encounter between dark foreign imperialists and exploited non-Western peasants and fishermen. But the usual anti-colonial argument does not work here as well as in some other places. The German invasion left the people it dominated with some happy memories instead of merely extracting the natural and human wealth of China. The Germans left a legacy here that came to be embraced by the colonized and turned to their advantage. In Qingdao, the Chinese have found nothing less than a new China.

Beer was only one knot in this emerging network of images and designs, but it stood at the center, connecting to the other knots that made up Qingdao. China’s people continue to come here to dream about a better life. Here, they have been inspired to think about nature in new ways, beyond their traditions of dusty fields or rice paddies. Here, they have quaffed a golden beverage and strolled through a green city. And the rest of the story that did not turn out so well? Well, that is not Qingdao.