

December 4, 1975

POOL REPORT - PRESIDENT FORD AT THE SUMMER PALACE
(Pool 24, 25, 26)

President Ford spent two hours wandering leisurely through the Summer Palace listening to the history of the construction and chatting with his hosts, Vice Premier Li Hsien-nien, and Ambassador Huang Chen. Translation was done by Nancy Tang.

The Summer Palace, according to the western experts, was built in the Ching Dynasty by the Dowager Empress Tzu-shi. It is a complex of buildings, arcades, pagodas, and cedar groves around a man-made lake on the edge of Peking. The summer Palace is now a public park and it was filled with Chinese, presumably out sightseeing on their day off.

When Mr. Ford arrived shortly after 2:00 p.m. he was greeted by Li who said "I hope your wife is feeling well". Ford replied, "Yes, she is, she went to the friendship store with all my money." With that auspicious beginning Ford walked on down the path viewing the large sculpture and the huge rocks set artistically in the courts. As he learned about the Ching Dynasty having started about 200 years ago, he said "That's as old as our country." He paused to view one bronze sculpture with a dragon face, the antlers of a deer, horses hoofs and a tail of a lion. Said Ford admiringly, "That's got all the power."

His guides explained about the incense animals in the courtyard -- how they were filled with incense each day and the perfume permeated the whole area.

Ford asked if the park was opened to the public and was told that it was and a ticket cost 5 cents. As many as a hundred thousand a day sometimes visited the Palace.

Vice Premier Li went into some detail explaining the Dowager Empress' extravagance. "She stole 5 million ounces of silver from the Treasury that had been allocated to the natives to build the palace." Ford got a kick out of that. He turned around and said to Jim Lynn, his Budget Director, "See what happens." Lynn replied, "They needed a Budget Director."

Ford walked on to the Hall of Happiness and Longevity. Out in front was a bronze statute of a deer with one uplifted leg rubbed shiny. Nancy Tang told Ford that to rub the knee of the deer encouraged the longevity. Ford rubbed it twice.

Inside the hall, he viewed the area where the Empress used to eat. It took 50 ounces of silver to feed her everyday. That would have fed 5,000 laborers a day Nancy Tang explained. The Empress insisted that 128 different dishes be set out even though she might not eat any of it.

Ford looked into her dressing room and asked, "Did the women have many clothes in those days too?" The answer from the guides, "So many they couldn't count them."

Ford walked on chatting about the history in which he seemed genuinely interested. The symbols of longevity were written everywhere. Objects signifying longevity like monkeys, peaches, children, also embellished the building. Ford was told that the rulers were dreadfully fearful of death and so wrote the longevity script everyplace. "Do you think that would help us today?" Ford asked. Nancy Tang replied, "Nobody believes in those characters anymore."

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Ford paused on a bridge over a small pond holding a small boy in the middle of a Chinese family. The child looked to be about two or three. He squirmed loose from the President and stood at his feet for the pictures. The little boy ignored further Presidential entreaties and ran off behind the group clutching a badminton racquet.

Ford next asked about the trees and was told they were cedars, both pines and cedars being evergreens were considered symbols of longevity. The President admired the lake then turned around and looked up at a pagoda, "It must be a beautiful view from there," Ford said. "I'd like to go but I'm not sure these other people could make it." His hosts explained that it was 130 meters up to the look-out on the pagoda. Ambassador Huang insisted, "I'm an old soilder of the long march -- I can make it." Off they trooped. Half-way up the stairs Ford admired the view saying, "It would be a shame to come here and not go to the top. On they trudged and reached the top of the stairs. Ford admired the spectacular view, the sun reflecting off the lake, the towers of pagodas in the distance against the hills. Ford was told that the tallest pagoda in the distance marked the jade spring which furnished the water for the lake and for the city.

Ford led the way back down the hillside. On one stretch of stairs he said "This would be a good ski slope -- there's a nice sharp turn down there." At this point, as they neared the bottom, Nancy Tang explained in response to Ford's questions that the Dowager Empress was carried up and down in a sedan chair by four or eight young men carefully selected for their stamina.

At one other spot in the descent Ford had noticed the very low railing along the ledge. His guides explained that in the old days the walk-way was not very crowded. Ford pondered it a few seconds and said: "A few Mao Tais. . . .", everyone laughed.

The party paused for tea and peanuts in the Pavillion for listening to orioles, part of which had been turned into a tea house. The President lighted up his pipe after tea and walked on to the end of the tour which was the stone boat-- a replica of a river boat made of marble and wood jutting into the lake.

At 4:20 Ford headed for home.

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Hugh Sidney
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