

The Fifty-seventh George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology 1996

**THE GARDEN OF PERFECT BRIGHTNESS:  
A LIFE IN RUINS**

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## THE GARDEN OF PERFECT BRIGHTNESS, A LIFE IN RUINS \*

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*Et in Arcadia ego.*<sup>1</sup>

In 1919, Juliet Bredon wrote:

The history of Peking is the history of China in miniature. The town, like the country, has shown the same power of taking fresh masters and absorbing them. Both have passed through paroxysms of bloodshed and famine and both have purchased periods of peace and prosperity by the murder of countless innocents. Happily both possess the vitality which survives the convulsions that "turn ashes and melt to shaplessness."<sup>2</sup>

In the following remarks on the Garden of Perfect Brightness, the Yuan Ming Yuan 圓明園,<sup>3</sup> I would like to offer a meditation on Bredon's observation.

This is the last Morrison Lecture before China resumes sovereignty over the territory of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997. As we approach this historic juncture it seems appropriate that my topic should deal with the unhappy history of China's greatest palace pleasance.

I say this because the destruction of the gardens in 1860 after the conclusion of the two Opium Wars at the hands of an Anglo-French force marked a victory for British gun-boat diplomacy and a new age in Sino-Western relations. While many slights, indignities and injustices are being recalled in China as the resumption of control over Hong Kong approaches, it is the Garden of Perfect Brightness that remains for both the Chinese authorities and many Chinese the most palpable symbol of the near-century of national humiliation that country experienced from 1840.

The afterlife of the Garden of Perfect Brightness, or what I have chosen here to call its "life in ruins," chronicles in a myriad of ways the sad yet also comic, at times grand but often petty history of which Juliet Bredon spoke.

It is a history that reflects in its many facets the relationship that the Manchu-Qing empire had with the Western powers last century. It is also a

\* The 57th George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology was delivered by Dr Barmé, a Senior Fellow in the Division of Pacific and Asian Studies of the Institute of Advanced Studies, Australian National University, on 10 December 1996. [—Ed.]

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<sup>1</sup> Various translations as "Here I am in Arcadia," or, as a reference to the ever-present spectre of death, "Even in Arcadia, there am I!" See Endnote.

<sup>2</sup> Juliet Bredon, *Peking: A historical and intimate description of its chief places of interest* (Shanghai, 1919; reprint ed., Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Since a conventional use of the *Hanyu pinyin* system of romanisation would require the clumsy orthography of the garden's name as Yuanmingyuan, I have chosen to split the name and write it Yuan Ming Yuan.

**Figure 1**

Backdrop to the Great Fountain (*Da Shuifa* 大水法), the official iconic image of the Yuan Ming Yuan (photograph by Liu Jiwen 劉繼文)



story that has mirrored the relationship of place and power, symbol and rhetoric in China for nigh on three hundred years. Now, at the end of the millennium, the fate of the Yuan Ming Yuan reflects more than ever before a history reworked, one that teaches lessons with a new and calculated urgency.

As the main imperial pleasure and the seat of government during much of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the Garden of Perfect Brightness flourished for over one hundred and fifty years. Its career as ruins, one that is now in its one hundred and thirty-sixth year, has been nearly as long. In many ways, the garden's afterlife has been more eventful than its imperial heyday. At its height the Yuan Ming Yuan was inhabited, em-

bellished and expanded by five Qing emperors. It saw the rise and gradual decline of China's last great imperial house, the Aisin Gioro 愛新覺羅 of the Qing empire.

As a *Trümmerfeld*, or ruin-field, the Yuan Ming Yuan has reflected the waning fortunes of Chinese national inspirations; its decay and recent restoration have mirrored events writ large in the story of China this century. The years since its destruction in 1860 have seen the decline and collapse of the last imperial dynasty, repeated foreign incursions, the unsteady rise of the Republic of China, the invasion by Japan and the baneful rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

The nationalistic imagery and avowed aspirations of the People's Republic are built very much on the ruins of the Manchu-Qing Empire, the last and most splendid, perhaps, of China's 'conquest dynasties'. In innumerable ways, the China of today is the inheritor of the hybrid civilization that grew up under the Manchus during their 270-year rule. After a generation spent assiduously rejecting the elements of traditional China that were created last century to support an anti-Manchu Han nationalism, from the 1980s Chinese political figures and writers have turned to those earlier symbols of nationhood to define their own grasp on China's history. In particular, they have claimed for themselves the Great Wall, the Dragon, the Four Great Inventions and the culture of the Yellow River as their heritage. But they also occupy a cultural (not to mention geo-political) space that was very much defined by Manchu rule.

The territory of the People's Republic itself maintains the contours created for it under the Kangxi 康熙 and Qianlong 乾隆 Emperors, and claimed by rulers since the 1870s. That pinnacle of cultural style, Peking

Opera, flourished under the Manchu while more classic forms, and some would argue far more refined operatic traditions like that of the *kunqu* 昆曲, went into decline. Much that is taken as being quintessentially Chinese today—by both Chinese and non-Chinese—is in reality a conflated culture born of the Manchus, a foreign, conquering people. The Manchus laboured assiduously at being worthy of the civilization they had subdued and now, nearly a century after their fall from power and the end of Chinese dynastic politics, the Han-Chinese state is drawing heavily on the tradition of the Manchus to claim its place both at the centre of a modern national civilization, and at the forefront of its future.

The Yuan Ming Yuan, a massive complex of gardens, villas, government buildings, landscapes and vistas, drew on elements of fantasy, of garden and scenic design, of cultural myth and imaginative practice. It was a receptacle for the achievements of élite Han civilization, an imperial museum, storehouse and abode. After its destruction it was plundered for over one hundred years, and only lately, as the Chinese state has defined itself as the vehicle for national expression and cultural unity, has the Yuan Ming Yuan risen to prominence once more—this time not as a centre of political power, but as a symbol of aggrieved nationalism and patriotic outrage.

### *Moving Heaven and Earth for the Sovereign*

Before we settle into our ruminations on the remains of the gardens, let me first say a few words about the evolution of the Yuan Ming Yuan.

Today travellers to Peking invariably pay a visit to the Imperial Palace Museum in the centre of the city. The impression given is that this formidable edifice, the Forbidden City 紫禁城—the ‘Winter Palace’, was the home to China’s emperors, their Court and the administration from the time of the fall of the Mongol-Yuan dynasty in the mid-fourteenth century to the abdication of the last Qing emperor in 1912. The palace was certainly the centre of political power in the Ming dynasty. From the time that the Manchus swept down from their kingdom in the north-east and established their dynastic capital in Peking in the 1640s, however, they showed little interest in confining themselves to the vast maze of buildings that made up that palace.

The Qing emperors regarded the imperial precinct as prison-like and evinced an eagerness to escape its confines at every opportunity. The Tongzhi 同治 Emperor (r.1862–74), quoting one of his predecessors, went so far as to curse the imperial city as “that dank ditch of a place with its vermilion walls and tiled roofs.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, from the time of the Regent Dorgon 多爾袞 (1612–50) and the Emperor Kangxi who ruled from 1662 to 1723, the Manchus showed a desire to govern from more commodious and open surrounds.<sup>5</sup> They had come from the vast lands beyond the Great Wall, and even after the move to Peking from Shengjing 盛京 (now Shenyang 沈陽) they maintained the martial habits of their forebearers, who enjoyed hunting and living close to the wilds.

<sup>4</sup> 紅牆綠瓦黑陰溝。See Liu Dunzhen, ed., “Tongzhi chongxi Yuanmingyuan shiliao” [Historical materials related to the rebuilding of the Garden of Perfect Brightness during the Tongzhi reign], *Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan*, di 4 juan, er.

<sup>5</sup> Dorgon died in 1650, before his plans for an imperial hunting retreat could be realised. See “Duoergun zhuan” [Biography of Dorgon], *Qingshi gao* [Draft history of the Qing dynasty], juan 218 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976), vol.30, p.9030.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China, self-portrait of K'ang-hsi* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p.8.

<sup>7</sup> On the Changchun Yuan see Carroll Brown Malone, *History of the Peking summer palaces under the Ch'ing dynasty* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1966), pp.21-43. Kangxi also maintained hunting grounds at the Nan Yuan 南園 south of Peking and Tang Quan 湯泉.

<sup>8</sup> See "Jichang panxiang" in the memoirs of the Manchu nobleman Linqing 臨慶 (1791-1846), *Hongxue yinyuan tuji* [Tracks in the snow], reprint ed. (Beijing: Beijing Guji Chubanshe, 1984), vol.1, pt 1, no.23.

As Jonathan Spence wrote in his reconstruction of Kangxi's life, *Emperor of China*:

The gardens [around Peking] are beautiful: the springs are pure, the grasses fragrant, wooded hills rise among the lakes.

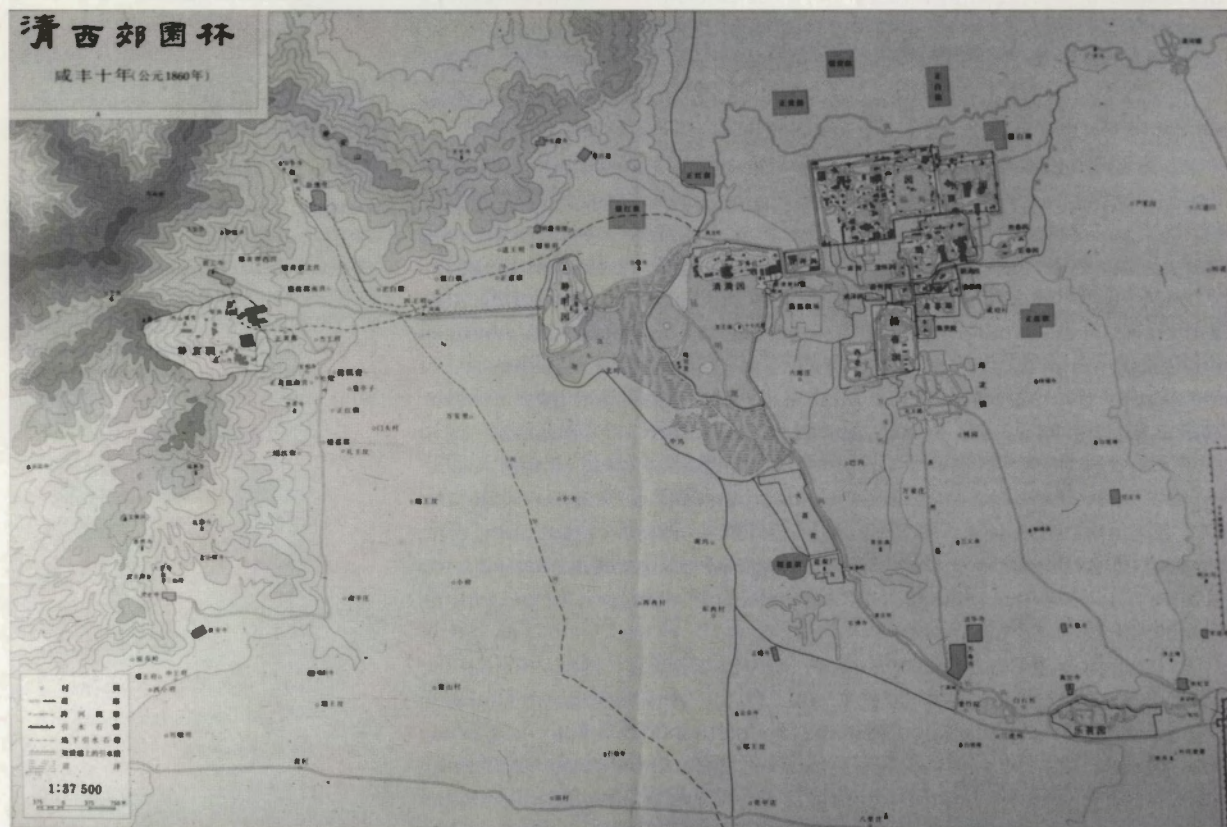
But it is when one is beyond the Great Wall that the air and soil refresh the spirit ... As one moves further north the views open up, one's eyes travel hundreds of miles; instead of feeling hemmed in, there is a sense of freedom.<sup>6</sup>

While passionate about these pleasures, Kangxi was quick to acquire the refined comforts of the Han imperial lifestyle. Like his successors he was anxious to prove himself worthy of the task of ruling the empire, all the while wary not to fall into the decadent ways that had led to the painful decline and eventual collapse of the Ming dynasty before him.

Kangxi balanced both of his interests as huntsman-monarch and Son of Heaven at his palace in Jehol 熱河, the Chengde Summer Mountain Retreat (Bishu Shanzhuang 避暑山莊) beyond the Great Wall, an enclosed hunting ground containing a delicate series of gardens and administrative buildings, and within the confines of the Garden of Joyful Spring (Changchun Yuan 暢春園) on the outskirts of Peking.<sup>7</sup> Located just south of the future Yuan Ming Yuan, the Changchun Yuan was built on the remains of part of an abandoned Ming-dynasty garden, the Qinghua Yuan 清華園 of Li Wei,

**Figure 2**

*The Yuan Ming Yuan and environs c. 1860 showing the Eight Banner garrison towns circling the gardens. (Hou Renzhi, ed., Beijing lishi ditu ji, pp.51-2)*



**Figure 3**

*Digital reconstruction of the imperial inscription for the Yuan Ming Yuan (Zhuda Computer Company, 1996)*

Marquis of Wuqing 武清侯李偉. Deeply influenced by his travels in the south and visits to famous gardens like the Jichang Yuan 寄暢園 in Wuxi 無錫,<sup>8</sup> Kangxi created here a large country dwelling dotted with lakes, man-made hillocks, artificial stone mazes and pavilions designed in the style of traditional southern retreats.<sup>9</sup>

The emperor spent much time in the garden and oversaw the administration of the empire both from there and from Jehol. In 1709, around the time that Peter the Great initiated work on St Petersburg—what was to be his “window on the West”—and at the dawn of an age of splendid imperial and private garden-building in England and Europe, Kangxi began the landscaping of the northern precincts of the old Qinghua Yuan some twenty kilometers from the heart of the capital and just to the north of his own residence.

The area was already crowded with numerous gardens and pleasantries containing intricate waterways and interconnected lakes dating from the Ming<sup>10</sup>; over a dozen enclosures dotted the landscape, taking advantage of the marshy area and the ample supply of water from the Jade Source, the Jingming Yuan 靜明園, to the west.<sup>11</sup>

Although the remodelling of the Qinghua Yuan was undertaken for his son and successor Yinzhèn 胤禛, the future Yongzheng 雍正 Emperor (r.1723–36), Kangxi was so enthralled by the new garden and by one particular pavilion, the Peony Terrace (Mudan Tai 牡丹臺),<sup>12</sup> named for its abundant flowers, that he began holding court there himself. He called the garden ‘Yuan Ming Yuan’, or the Garden of Perfect Brightness, and a plaque with these three words written in his own hand was hung in the pavilion.<sup>13</sup> Qianlong, who often saw his grandfather at the Peony Terrace, defined the name Kangxi had chosen thus: “The meaning of Yüan 圓, [is] ‘round’ or ‘perfect’, and Ming 明, ‘bright’, is the golden mean of a gentleman.”<sup>14</sup> Yongzheng interpreted the name as “Perfection that allows one to arrive at the most mysterious realm, meaning that the gentleman always cleaves to the Middle Way; while Brightness of ability that shines over everything achieves wisdom for those who are worthy.”<sup>15</sup>

Following Kangxi's demise and a three-year period of mourning, Yongzheng had the garden repaired and expanded, thereafter effectively moving the court there. He instructed his ministers that “My residence at the Yuan Ming Yuan is in no way different from my presence in the palace [in the centre

<sup>9</sup> See Liu Tong, *Dijing jingwu lue* [Outline of the sights of the imperial capital] (Beijing: Beijing Guji Chubanshe, 1982), and Xuanye 玄暉 (Kangxi), “Changchun yuan ji” [A record of the Garden of Joyful Spring], in *Guren bixiade Beijing fengguang* [The scenery of Peking as described by the ancients], ed. Zhang San (Beijing: Zhongguo Lüyou Chubanshe), pp.128–9. Under Qianlong it was the residence of the emperor's mother. The Changchun Yuan later fell into ruin. During the Republic it was converted in an army drill ground. It is now a parking lot abutting rice-fields west of the Shao Yuan 勺園, the dormitory complex reserved for foreign students and scholars at Peking University.

<sup>10</sup> Hou Renzi, ed., *Beijing lishi ditu ji* [Collected historical maps of Peking] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1985), pp.51–2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Details of some of the dozens of private villas (*zhatyuan* 宅園) can be found in Jiao Xiong, *Beijing Xijiao zhatyuan ji* [An account of the private villas in the Western outskirts of Peking] (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Later renamed Louyue Kaiyun 鑾月開雲, Engraved Moon and Open Clouds. Peonies had been a feature of gardens in the area since the Ming, and were celebrated by writers like Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 who recorded a trip to the Mudan Yuan 牡丹園 outside Fuchengmen Gate 阜成門.

<sup>13</sup> Gin-Djih Su, *Chinese architecture: past and contemporary* (Hong Kong: Sin Poh, 1964), pp.112–13.

<sup>14</sup> Hope Danby, *The Garden of Perfect Brightness: the history of the Yüan Ming Yüan and of the emperors who lived there* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1950), p.12.

<sup>15</sup> See Yinzhèn (Yongzheng), “Yuanmingyuan ji” [A record of the Garden of Perfect Brightness], reprinted by Cheng Yansheng, “Yuanmingyuan kao” [A study of the Garden of Perfect Brightness], *Yuanmingyuan xuekan* 1 (1980): 96:

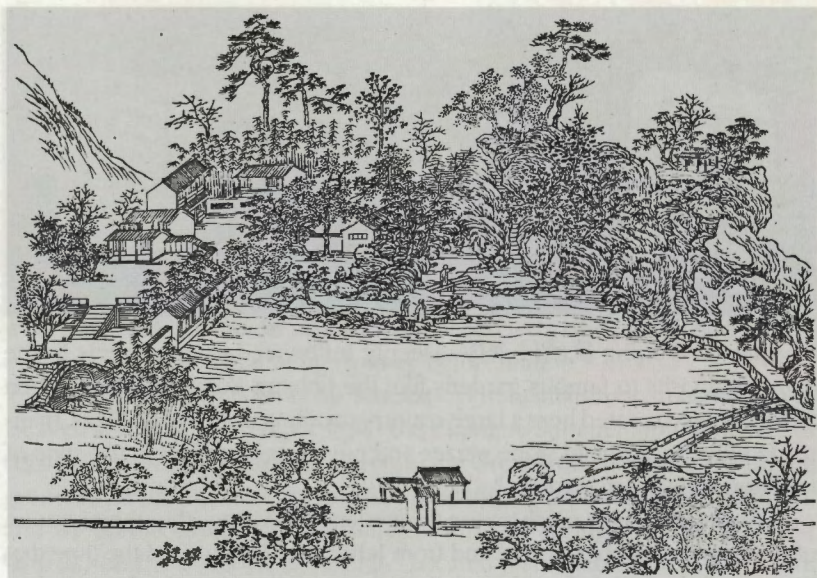
夫圓而如神，君子之時中也。  
明而普照，達人之睿智也。

**Figure 4**

Woodblock illustration of the Jichang Yuan, Wuxi (from *Linqing, Tracks in the Snow*)

<sup>16</sup> "Shizong shilu, Yongzheng sannian bayue" [Veritable record of the Emperor Shizong: eighth month of the third year of the Yongzheng reign], in *Qing shilu, Shizong shilu (I)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), vol.7, p.536.

<sup>17</sup> November 1996.

**Figures 5 & 6**

*The Audience Hall from Forty Scenes of the Yuan Ming Yuan by Shen Yuan 沈源 and Tang Dai 唐岱, commissioned by Qianlong*

*The site of the Audience Hall with commemorative stele today\**

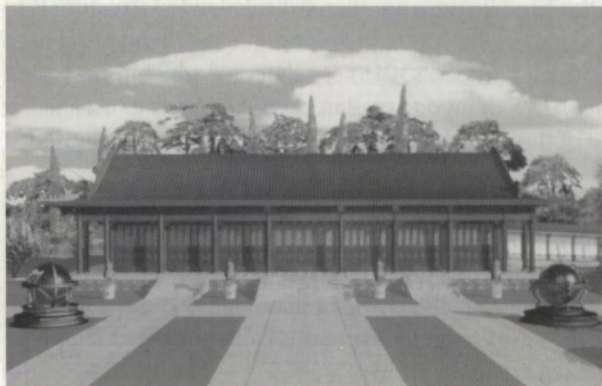


of Peking]. All matters will be dealt with in exactly the same fashion."<sup>16</sup> An impressive, though relatively modest, Audience Hall (the Hall of Probity, Zhengda Guangming 正大光明) was constructed with buildings and bureaux for the management of government set to one side.

As we consider the early history of the gardens I will illustrate my comments with images taken from the paintings commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor of his favourite scenes in the gardens at the height of their glory. To give you an idea of the palimpsest effect that these images have on contemporary visitors to the palace grounds, I have juxtaposed them with photographs I took of the Yuan Ming Yuan this November.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 7**  
*Digital reconstruction of the Audience Hall (Zhuda)*



The main imperial residence was spread over nine artificial islands built around a lake that was dug out behind the Audience Hall. These nine islands symbolized the “Nine Realms” (Jiuzhou 九州) of the empire, and from his apartments on the first island, called “Clear and Calm [View of] Nine Realms” (Jiuzhou Qingyan 九州清晏), the emperor could survey the world in microcosm.<sup>18</sup>

Although the scale of the gardens remained fairly modest, Yongzheng’s designs revealed a fascination with the kinds of architectural folly that would become such a central feature of the garden palaces during the eighteenth century. Averse to the pleasures of the hunt, favoured by both his imperial father and his son, Yongzheng rarely left Peking and concentrated his sybaritic energies instead on construction work at the Yuan Ming Yuan.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 8**  
*Digital reconstruction of the interior of the Audience Hall*



<sup>18</sup> The “Jiuzhou” mentioned in the “Yugong” 禹貢 chapter of the *Shujing* [Book of documents] which encompassed the known world. See *Shujing*, annotated by Cai Shen (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1987), p.37, and Wang Yi, *Yuanlin yu Zhongguo wenhua* [Gardens and Chinese culture] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1990), pp.177–81.

<sup>19</sup> Feng Erkang, Xu Shengheng and Yan Aimin, eds, *Yongzheng huangdi quan-zhuan* [A complete biography of the Yongzheng Emperor] (Beijing: Xueyuan Chubanshe, 1994), p.338.



**Figures 9 & 10**  
*Peace and Harmony in Ten-thousand Directions (Wangfang Anbe) as depicted in the Qianlong Forty Scenes (note the smaller pavilion in the shape of the character shi 十 [‘ten’] in the lower left-hand corner) Wangfang Anbe today, vista from the west\**





<sup>20</sup> A swastika gallery (*wanzilang* 萬字廊) can be found in the Central Sea of the Central and Southern Seas compound (*Zhongnanhai* 中南海), now the administrative centre of both state and Party rule in China. See Oswald Sirén, *Gardens of China* (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), p.111 and plates 23 and 158.

<sup>21</sup> The 'gongzi' 工字 of the Studio for Coolness in Summer (Qingxia Zhai 清夏齋); the 'tianzi' 田字 of Waters and Lakes in Repose (Zhanbo Ningjing 澹泊寧靜); the 'shanzi' 山字 of The Elevated Region of the Magical Pot (Fanghu Shengjing 方壺勝境); the 'kouzi' 口字 of The Pavilion Containing Autumn (Hanqiu Guan 含秋館); and the irregular line (*quchi* 曲尺 or *zhi* 之字) of the Loggia for Enjoying Verdure (Zhancui Xuan 展翠軒). Shu Mu, Shen Wei, He Naixian, eds, *Yuanmingyuan ziliao ji* [Collected materials on the Garden of Perfect Brightness] (Beijing: Shumu Wenxian Chubanshe, 1984), p.5.

Of the buildings he had constructed, Yongzheng favoured in particular a large and auspicious swastika- or fylfot-shaped pavilion named "Peace and Harmony in Ten-thousand Directions" (Wanfang Anhe 萬方安和). It sat in a lake to the west of the Nine Realms; another swastika-styled structure is to be found in the Sea Palaces in the centre of Peking.<sup>20</sup> Yongzheng often used the building as his private apartments, the very shape of which represented the number 10,000 (*wan* 萬), or myriad, and in playful contrast to it a smaller building in the shape of the Chinese character for ten (*shi* 十) was raised at the southern tip of the lake (see Figures 9 and 10).

Pavilions in the design of other Chinese characters were also constructed in the gardens, and within the maze of man-made lakes, knolls and valleys large structures could be found that delineated the words for 'field' (*tian* 田), 'work' (*gong* 工), as well as one in the shape of 'mountain' (*shan* 山) and yet another built to resemble the character for 'mouth' (*kou* 口).<sup>21</sup>

Numerous elements of fantasy were also incorporated into the landscape as it was transformed over the years, inspired by poems or, in the case of the Fairy Island and Jade Terrace (Pengdao Yaotai 蓬島瑤臺) in the middle of the Sea of Plenitude (Fuhai 福海), by a famous painting by the Tang artist Li Sixun 李思訓.<sup>22</sup> Many of the scenes of the garden were miniaturizations of magical realms associated with the universe, immortals and good fortune.

Other visions were more realistic:

For example, Yongzheng had a range of living tableaux designed for the amusement of himself and his family. These included: "Crops as Plentiful as Fields" (Duoji Ruyun 多稼如雲), an island full of busy farmers played by toiling eunuchs, overseen by a pavilion from which the emperor could view their labours at leisure. There was also the Buddhist "City of Śrāvastī" (Shewei Cheng 舍衛城) and "The Stone for Respose by the Stream" (Zuoshi Linliu 坐石臨流) with its Courtyard of Universal Happiness (Tongle Yuan 同樂園),



**Figures 11 & 12**

*The Fairy Island and Jade Terrace as depicted in the Forty Scenes*

*The Fairy Island and Jade Terrace today, seen from the southern shore of the Sea of Plenitude\**



“a township where eunuchs masquerading as storekeepers engaged the emperor and his ladies in make-believe village life.”<sup>23</sup>

In this life-size drama there were fake weddings, fake courts, jails, and police, not to mention all the attendant retail opportunities, a true make-believe where money spent went straight back into the imperial coffers. The French Jesuit missionary Pierre Attiret described the scene in a famous letter written to M. d'Assaut in Paris in 1743:

... a little township in the very midst of these park grounds ... measures a quarter of a *lien* [one kilometer] on each side, and has gates at the four points of the compass, towers, walls with crenellated parapets, it has its streets, squares and temples, its halls, shops, courts of law and palaces, and even a harbour. In a word, everything to be found in the capital one may find here in little ... Perhaps you ask what purpose this serves? The chief motive has been to create for the emperor a condensed picture of the bustling life in a great city where he wishes to see this.<sup>24</sup>

Attiret then describes how the eunuchs play various roles in this make-believe township: some act the part of merchants, others of artisans, soldiers, officers, porters, coolies with baskets and barrows, and so on. Boats put into the harbour and unload their cargoes; the goods are distributed among the various shops and are loudly cried by the tradesmen. There is squabbling and fighting just as there is in the markets of a real city.

Nor are the thieves forgotten at these performances. Their noble rôles are entrusted to some of the most accomplished eunuchs, who act their parts brilliantly. If they are caught in the act they are publicly shamed and punished, bastinadoed or exiled, according to the extent of the theft; but if they swindle and steal successfully they get the laughter on their side and reap applause.—The emperor always buys a good deal on these occasions, and you may be sure that nothing is sold cheaply to him. But the ladies and eunuchs themselves also make purchases. This commerce would not offer such a piquant interest and provoke so much noisy fun if it had no foundation in reality.<sup>25</sup>

This Suzhou Street, or ‘shopping mall’ (Maimaijie 買賣街) as it was called, was the latest imperial reconstruction of a southern Chinese township. Originally, in Haidian 海淀 just south of the gar-

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>23</sup> Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell and William Turnbull, Jr., *The poetics of gardens* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), p.88.

<sup>24</sup> From *Lettres édifiantes*, vol.27 (1749 edition), in Sirén, *Gardens of China*, pp.124–5.

### Figures 13 & 14

*The Stone for Repose near the Stream and the Shopping Mall from the Forty Scenes*

*The Shopping Mall today looking north towards the remains of the City of Śrāvastī\**



<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The only extant 'Suzhou Street' in the former imperial pleasure district of Peking is the one in the Yihe Yuan, reconstructed in the 1980s and 90s in imitation of the street built by Qianlong in the mid-eighteenth century. See Xu Fengtong, *Yibeyuan Suzhou-jie* [The Suzhou Street in the Yihe Yuan] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1993), pp.6-7.

<sup>27</sup> *Beijing lishi ditu ji*, pp.53-4.

<sup>28</sup> The Three Mountains were the Fragrant Hills, Longevity Mountain and Jade Source Mountain (Xiangshan 香山, Wanshoushan 萬壽山 and Yuquanshan 玉泉山). The Five Gardens were the three that comprised the Yuan Ming Yuan as well as Jingyi Yuan 靜宜園 at the Fragrant Hills and Qingyi Yuan at Longevity Mountain. In imperial documents the area was often simply referred to as Dianyuan 淀園—'The Gardens in Haidian'.

den, the Kangxi Emperor had built such an area for his Changchun Yuan, and another was created by Qianlong inside the northern entrance of the Qingyi Yuan 清漪園 (later the Yihe Yuan 頤和園).<sup>26</sup>

Yet it was during the reign of Yongzheng's son, the Qianlong Emperor (r.1736-95), that the garden was developed to its full splendour with the completion of the original Yuan Ming Yuan in 1744 and the addition of two other gardens, the Changchun Yuan (completed in 1751) and the Qichun Yuan 綺春園 (completed in 1772).<sup>27</sup> They covered an area of some 347 hectares (857 acres) and together with the other imperial gardens in the area became known as "The Three Mountains and Five Gardens" (Sanshan Wuyuan 三山五園).<sup>28</sup>

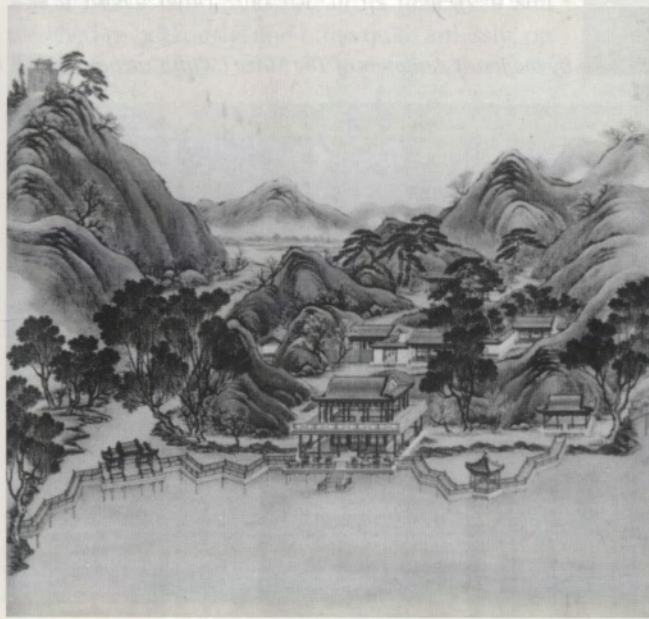
After ascending the throne Qianlong embarked on a number of Tours of the South, *nanxun* 南巡, to inspect his imperial domains, during which he visited some of the most famous scenic spots and gardens in the empire, in particular the Jiangnan 江南 district, the home of literati culture. Subsequently, back in Peking, like Kangxi before him, he decided to recreate those southern wonders in his northern imperial pleasure. Returning from his travels with scroll paintings of the gardens he admired he had his builders reproduce them to scale.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 15** Overview of the Yuan Ming Yuan, Changchun Yuan and Qichun Yuan, c.1860 (Hou Renzhi, ed., *Beijing lishi ditu ji*, pp.53-4)

These reproductions—over forty in number—were to include imitations of scenes from Hangzhou 杭州, a former imperial capital and a city of renown that had never recovered from the Qing invasion.<sup>30</sup> Still famous for its lakeside beauty, Qianlong had many of its choice scenes (*jing* 景) duplicated in his own palaces. They included: The Autumn Moon on Still Waters (Pinghu Qiuyue 平湖秋月); Reflection of the Moon in Three Ponds (Santan Yinyue 三潭印月); Sunset at the Leifeng Pagoda (Leifeng Xizhao 雷峰夕照); Watching the Fish in the Flower Harbour (Huagang Guanyu 花港觀魚); and Winds in the Lotus in the Serpentine Courtyard (Quyuan Fenghe 曲院風荷). The Anlan Garden 安蘭園 of the Chen Family 陳氏 in Haining 海寧 (at the the Siyi Shuwu 四宜書屋); the Tianyi Ge 天一閣 Library (named Wenyan Ge 文淵閣) of the Fan Family 范氏 in Ningbo; and the Lion Garden (Shizi Lin 獅子林) from Suzhou were also transposed to the Yuan Ming Yuan. It was as if by recreating landscapes replete with literary history that Qianlong, the universal emperor, could subsume the culture and sensibility they symbolised. It was also by thus expanding the syncretic garden palace, combining elements of Ming literati gardens with imperial afflatus,<sup>31</sup> that Qianlong created one of the abiding “mythic gardens” of Chinese history that despite its heterogenous origins has, as the twentieth-century has progressed, become the *ne plus ultra* of the “Chinese garden,” “or at least a milestone in the historical development of the garden.”<sup>32</sup>

The discrete scenes and pavilions were linked by numerous bridges, over a thousand of them. They came in many shapes—straight, crooked, zigzag and humped, and were made of stone, brick and wood. Some were punctuated by little teahouses, others were interrupted by summerhouses built for overlooking the lakes or watching the fish that filled the streams and ponds.



**Figures 16 & 17**

*Heavenly Light Above and Below from the Forty Scenes, showing connecting bridges*

*Looking towards Heavenly Light Above and Below from the south today.\* The but perches on a crudely fashioned earthen causeway that bisects the Posterior Lake (Houhu) for the convenience of local fishermen*



<sup>29</sup> See Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, quoted in Moore et al., *Poetics of gardens*, p.84.

<sup>30</sup> See Zhang Dai, *Xibu mengxun* [Searching for the West Lake in dreams], ed. and annotated by Sun Jiasui (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> For the codification of gardens and the complex Ming-dynasty provenance of the *Yuan* see Craig Clunas' illuminating study, *Fruitful sites: garden culture in Ming dynasty China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

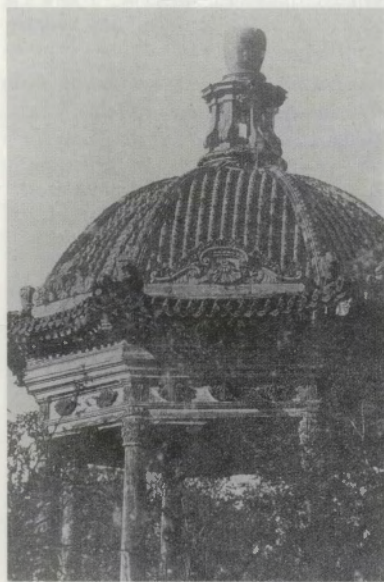
<sup>32</sup> Zhou Wei-quan, "Lüetan Bishushanzhuang he Yuanmingyuande jianzhu yishu" [Some remarks on the architecture of the Imperial Summer Retreat and the Garden of Perfect Brightness], *Wenwu cankao ziliao* 6 (1957): 9.

**Figure 18**

*The sole surviving original bridge in the gardens as seen looking south towards the reconstructed Pavilion for Surveying the Azure (Jianbi Ting 鑑碧亭) in the Qichun Yuan (now the Wanchun Yuan)\**

**Figure 19**

*The Europeanoiserie pavilion at the centre of The Maze designed by the Jesuits for the Qianlong Emperor (photograph by Ernst Oblmer c. 1875, reprinted in Régine Thiriez, "Les Palais européens du Yuanmingyuan à travers la photographie: 1860-1940," Arts Asiatiques, Tome XLV-1990, p.90)*



The eighteenth century was also a time when Jesuit missionaries continued to find favour at the Chinese Court. In their efforts to ingratiate themselves with the imperial family and the ruling élite of the empire they offered their services as astronomers, designers, artists and artisans. The array of ingenuous Western talents that they displayed enthralled Qianlong and he pressed a contingent of Jesuits into his service. When one of their number, Giuseppe Castiglione, showed him pictures of palaces and fountains from France and Italy Qianlong ordered copies to be built in the Yuan Ming Yuan, just as he had instructed his engineers to reproduce follies inspired by sites in the south of China.

**Figure 20**

*A copperplate engraving by the Jesuit designers of The Maze (Wanbuzhen 萬花陣)*



Thus, starting in 1747, Qianlong had his court Jesuits design a series of mock-rococo structures and fountains in the north-east corner of the Garden of Prolonged Spring (Changchun Yuan), and over the following decades the Italian and French missionaries oversaw the construction of a corridor of Western Palaces, the *Xiyang lou* 西洋樓.

It was in these Western-style buildings that the imperial desire to bring all of the world, both Chinese and barbarian, within his grasp reached its apogee. It was also here that the first extended attempt was made to amalgamate Chinese and Western architectural motifs in a style of Europeanoiserie.<sup>33</sup>

The Garden of Perfect Brightness, “the museum of Qianlong’s travels” as the architectural historian Charles Moore has called it, was part of the emperor’s grandiose efforts to prove himself and his dynasty a cultivated and worthy inheritor, not to mention reinventor, of the high culture of previous dynasties. Along with his ambitious empire-building—his expansion of the territory under Qing rule to include the New Domains (Xinjiang 新疆, or Turkestan) in the West and the pacification of Mongolia and Tibet—and his cultural projects like the encyclopaedia of Chinese writings and compilations of histories, Qianlong’s massive building plans marked the final high-point in Chinese imperial history. But his was a heavy hand, and for all its majesty it still weighed ponderously, and often quite artlessly, on all that it touched.

**Figure 21**

*The reconstructed Maze as seen from the air in the late 1980s (photograph by Liu Jiwen)*



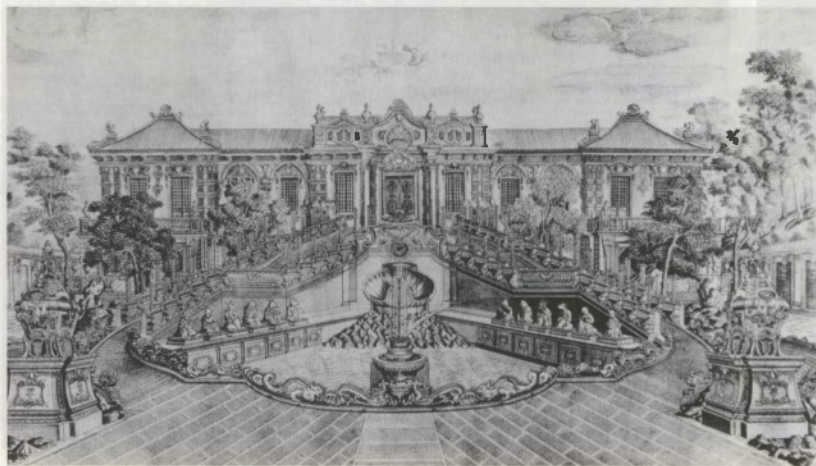
**Figure 22**

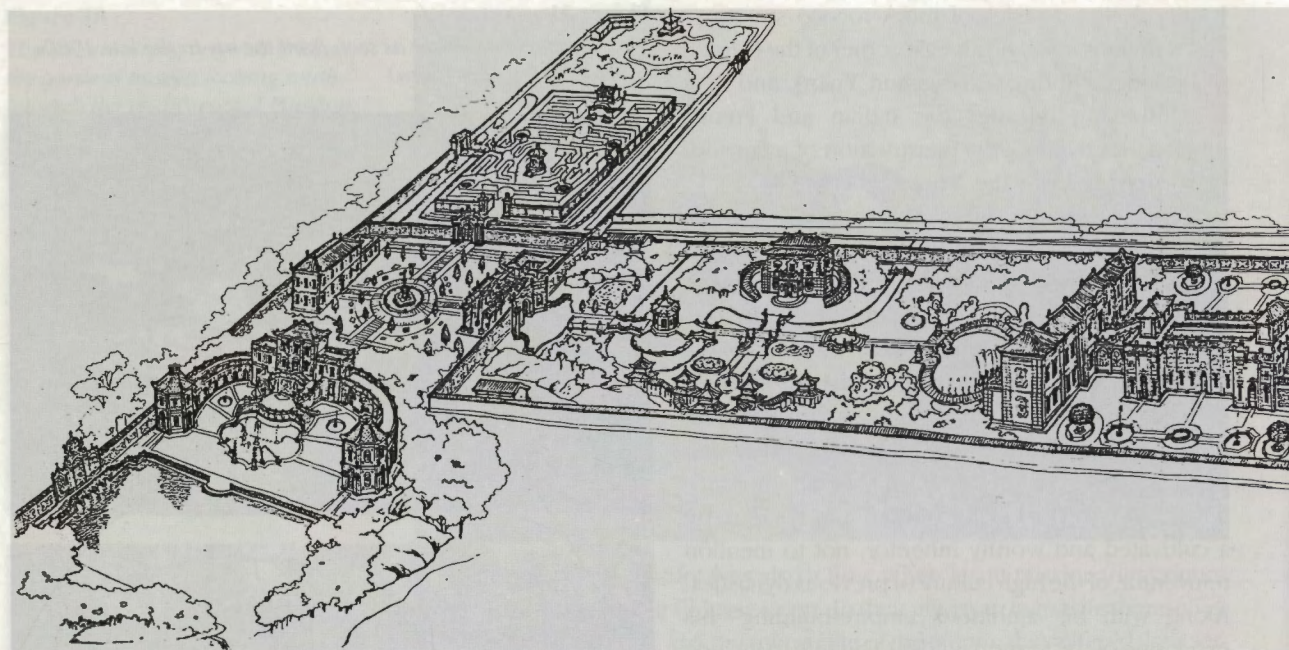
*The Maze today as seen from the remains of the Aviary (Yangquelong 養雀籠)\**

<sup>33</sup> Prior to this, however, there were a number of western-style buildings in the gardens, possibly designed and built by the emperors’ main architects, the Lei Family (*Yuanming-yuan ziliao ji*, p.39).

**Figure 23**

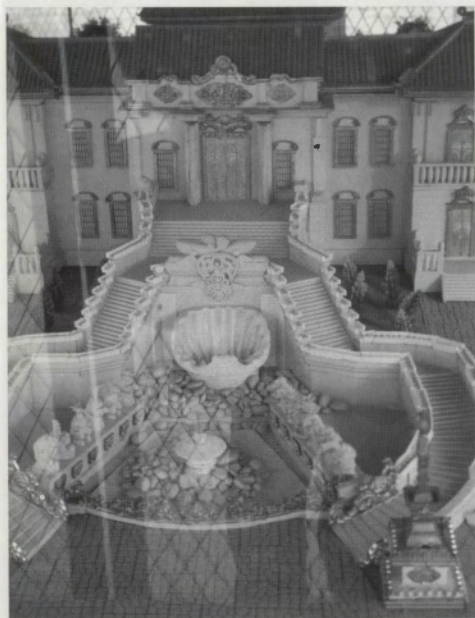
*Original copperplate engraving of the western façade of the Palace of the Calm Sea (Haiyan Tang) showing the cascade and sculpted fountain figures*





**Figure 24**

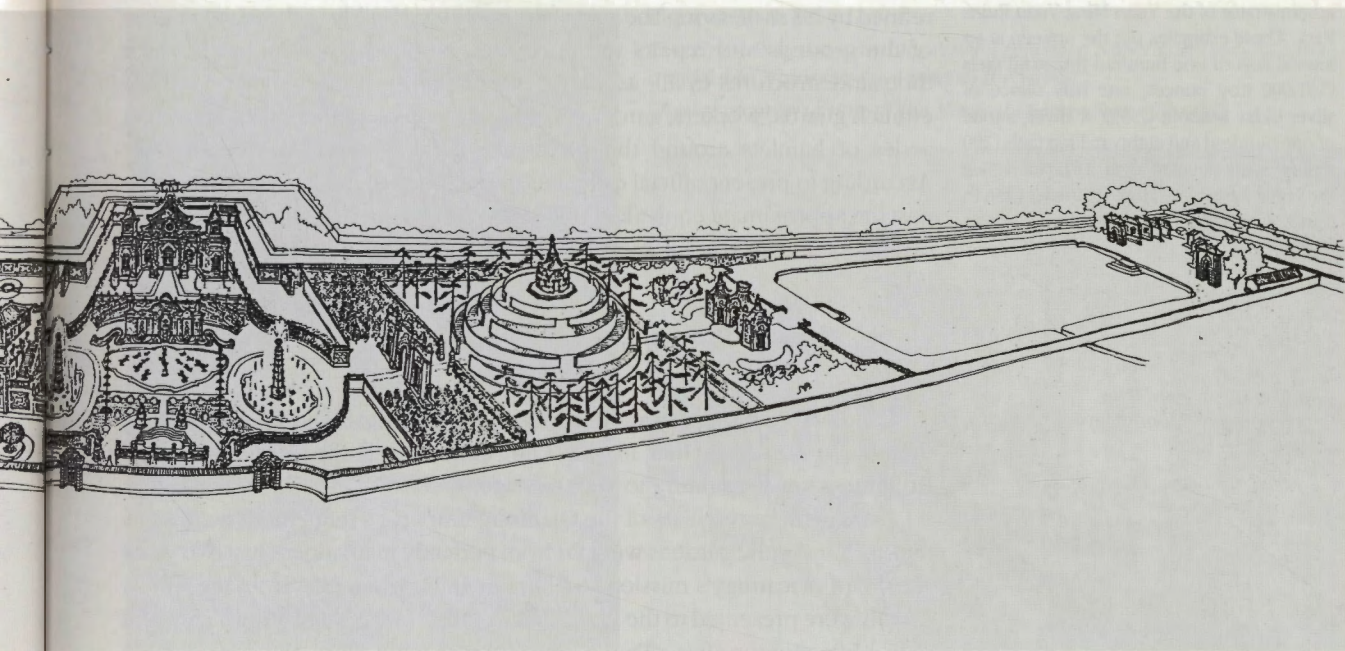
*A reconstruction of the Western Palaces of the Changchun Yuan (illustration accompanying Jin Yufeng, "Yuanmingyuan Xiyanglou pingxi" [A critical discussion of the Western Palaces in the Garden of Perfect Brightness], Yuanmingyuan xuekan 3 (1984): 22-3)*



**Figures 25 & 26**

*A model of the Palace of the Calm Sea in a display case at the site\*  
The restored western façade of the Palace of the Calm Sea today\**





In 1742, his seventh year as emperor, Qianlong wrote of the gardens that "Indeed this is a realm in which heavenly treasures and earthly wonders are gathered. There has never been any imperial pleasure-ground that can surpass it."<sup>34</sup> Little wonder, then, that in a poem about the Yuan Ming Yuan, the late-Qing writer Wang Kaiyun 王闓運 (1833–1916), when contemplating the remains of the gardens, could claim that "The very heavens and earth were transported to rest in miniature within the embrace of our Lord."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> "實天實地靈之區。帝王豫游之地，無以逾此。" Qianlong yuzhi "Yuanmingyuan houji," in Zhang Enyin, *Yuanmingyuan bianqian shi tanwei* [Details from the changing history of the Garden of Perfect Brightness] (Beijing: Beijing Tiyu Xueyuan Chubanshe, 1993), p.91.

<sup>35</sup> 移天縮地在君懷。

#### Figures 27 & 28

*Copies of the Palace of the Calm Sea fountain and sculptures in the atrium of the Grand Hotel (Guibinlou), the west wing of the Peking Hotel\**





<sup>36</sup> Figures according to Wu Fengchun, an administrator of the Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park. These estimates put the upkeep at an annual cost of one hundred thousand taels (161,000 troy ounces; one troy ounce of silver today is about US\$5) of silver, a total of one hundred and eighty million taels (290 million troy ounces) over 151 years. See Benjamin Kang Lim, "Model recreates China's burnt Summer Palace," Reuters News Service, 19 Aug. 1996.

After Qianlong's demise, the gardens were constantly expanded and refined by his successors. The cost of the continued building, the maintenance of the grounds and repairs to the painted wooded pavilions, some three thousand structures in all, as well as the expense of the veritable army of eunuch guards, workers, gardeners and the troops stationed in an encircling series of hamlets around the perimeter of the gardens, was enormous. According to present official estimates, the upkeep of the gardens at the time cost the approximate equivalent of US\$800,000 a year, or some US\$2.5 billion during its one-and-a-half centuries in existence.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Ages of Destruction*

<sup>37</sup> Zhang Enyin, *Yuanmingyuan bianqian shi tanwei*, p.102.

Long before the devastation launched by the British and French in 1860, there were indications that, like the Qing empire itself, the Garden of Perfect Brightness was beginning to show its age.

Even in the latter years of the Qianlong Emperor's reign there were signs that sections of the gardens were far from perfectly maintained. Just two years after Lord Macartney's mission to China in 1893, when gifts from the British Crown were presented to the Court and installed at the Yuan Ming Yuan, and only a few months after a Dutch embassy was fêted there, the considerable lengths of copper piping engineered by the Jesuits to allow for the spectacular waterworks at The Palace of the Calm Sea (Haiyan Tang 海晏堂) of the Western Palaces were dismantled for redeployment.<sup>37</sup> The pumps installed by the Jesuits themselves had long since fallen into disrepair, and following the expulsion of the missionaries there were none who knew how to fix them. Water pressure for the fountains could only be maintained by the prodigious effort of bucket-bearing eunuchs who began filling up the

**Figure 29**

*Photograph by Lois Conner*





Figures 30 & 31

*The Great Fountain and the View of Distant Seas (Yuanying Guan), a model in a display case next to the ruins\**

*Digital reconstruction of the View of Distant Seas (Zhuda)*



reservoirs days in advance of an impending imperial visit.<sup>38</sup> This is just what was done on the occasion of the emperor's eightieth birthday, which also happened to be the sixtieth year of the Qianlong reign, marking the completion of a Perfect Cycle of Years.

Although the first to suffer from imperial neglect, today the Western palaces are the most widely commented on and remembered feature of the Yuan Ming Yuan. Offering the only prominent physical remains of the gardens, they have become the symbol of the palace as a whole. And so it is that the Western Palaces, the creation of Jesuits at the Court of Qianlong, have become the ultimate icon in the Chinese mind of the vandalism of the West, and an abiding totem of national humiliation.

Ding Yi, an American-based Chinese historian, wrote after visiting the site:

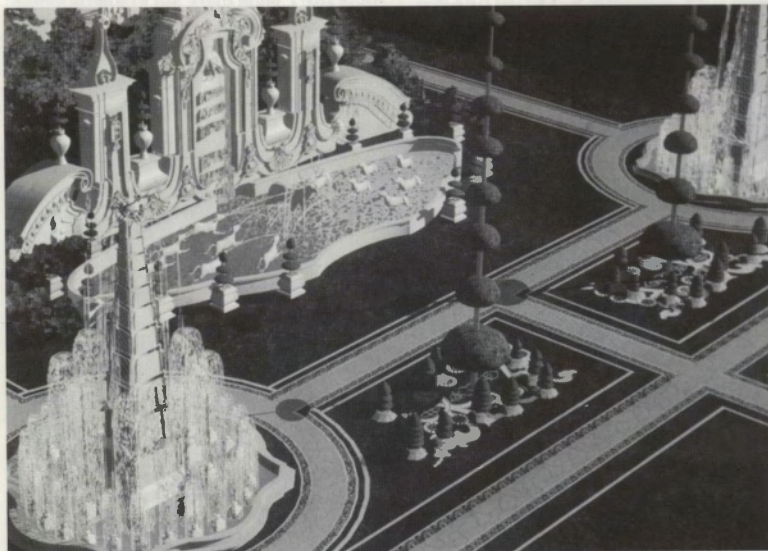
If it were not for the stone ruins of those buildings representing Western culture, structures that didn't burn in the conflagration, and which have survived the passage of time, how could we identify this classic site? Thus the irony: we are forced to rely on their civilisation for lasting proof of their barbarity.<sup>39</sup>

In the sizeable body of imperial poetry devoted to recording the sites in the gardens—totalling some 4,500 poems in all<sup>40</sup>—there are relatively few references to the Western Palaces. They were a diversion for the Qianlong Emperor, certainly, but with water spouting skyward from jets and sculptures, the other emperors found them to be perhaps too much of a perversion of

<sup>38</sup> Dorothy Graham, *Chinese gardens: gardens of the contemporary scene: an account of their design and symbolism* (London: George G. Harrap, 1938), p.147.

<sup>39</sup> Liu Zhanbin, *Yuanmingyuan cangsang ji* [The vicissitudes of the Garden of Perfect Brightness] (Beijing: Beijing Shaonian Ertong Chubanshe, 1991), p.120.

<sup>40</sup> During his twenty-five years' residence at the gardens, Yongzheng wrote fifty poems in their praise; Qianlong composed 2,300 poems to the Garden of Perfect Brightness in his sixty-year reign; while Jiaqing ruled for twenty-five years and wrote 1,900 poems. Only three hundred poems from the first fourteen years of Daoguang's thirty-year rule relating to the gardens are recorded in the *Yuzhi shiwen ji* 御製詩文集 [Collected imperial prose and poetry], while the ill-fated Xianfeng, who reigned for only eleven years, penned a mere seventy poems about the Yuan Ming Yuan, the palace being destroyed in the tenth year of his incumbency. See Zhang Enyin, *Yuanmingyuan bianqian shi tanwei*, pp.111–13.



**Figure 32**

*Digital reconstruction of the Great Fountain in front of the View of Distant Seas (Zhuda)*

<sup>41</sup> See Mengzi, "Liang Huiwang," l.6.

<sup>42</sup> *Renzong shi sanji*, juan 53, in Zhang Enyin, *Yuanmingyuan bianqian shi tanwei*, p.229:

駁遠從來貴嚴肅  
 彼英吉利性難伏  
 每來先蓄圖利心  
 寬則無忌肆貪黷  
 強悍不循中國儀  
 辱其主命宜驅逐  
 大君豈貴貢珍奇  
 所寶惟賢慎司牧

**Figure 33**

*The road leading past the Courtyard of Universal Happiness (Tongle Yuan) to the Shopping Mall (see Figure 14)\**



nature's way, noted by the ancient philosopher Mencius 孟子 in his observation that "water flows downwards" (*shui jiu xia* 水就下).<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, one of the most interesting poems about the Western Palaces was written by Qianlong's successor, the Jiaqing 嘉慶 Emperor (r.1796–1820). Having observed the forceful and ill-mannered way in which the water of the fountains breaks with all natural convention by shooting upwards, he contemplates the uncouth manners of the English ambassador Lord Amherst. The poem was penned in 1818, not long after the Amherst Mission was ejected from the Yuan Ming Yuan on account of the ambassador's failure to perform the kowtow before the monarch.

*Yuanying Guan: A View of Distant Seas*

For those who travel from afar  
 We have always evinced the utmost seriousness;  
 But those English really are too much.  
 Each time they come it is advantage only that they seek.  
 If we are magnanimous their grasping is all the more extreme.  
 Wilful are they and mindless of Chinese custom,  
 Their actions are an insult to their own master, rightfully deserving of expulsion.  
 Why would Our Majesty lay any store in their curious and ingenious tributes?  
 All We treasure is good grace and the talent born of wisdom.<sup>42</sup>

Jiaqing, like other Qing emperors, was trained in a tradition that bred the habit of recording every moment of inspiration in poetry; yet as A. E. Grantham comments in his biography of that ruler, "The composition of verses was ... a pastime [that] ... could but result in a prodigious output of utterly worthless rhymes" —although Grantham did concede that "as a mental exercise it was less numbing than the solving of crossword puzzles."<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, so prodigious was this kind of literary output that by the end of his reign the collected poems and prose of Jiaqing swelled to some forty fascicles. In a caustic aside Grantham suggests that "If the unbelievable happened and a sinologue committed a punishable crime, he should be compelled to wade through those forty volumes, translate and annotate them."<sup>44</sup>

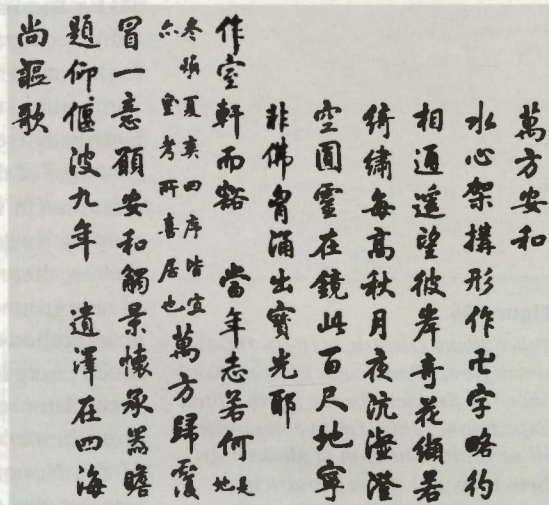
Yet for all the poetry that records the latter years of the Yuan Ming Yuan, there was little in the content or style of later emperors like Jiaqing, Daoguang 道光 (r.1821–50) and Xianfeng 咸豐 (r.1851–61) that matched the world-embracing taste, or even the picturesque whimsy, of Qianlong. Nonetheless, it is in this considerable body of writing that the emperors have left the most solid and, sadly, burdensome monument to those magnificent gardens.

Today it is in the odes to the Forty Scenes of the Yuan Ming Yuan written by Qianlong that the palace survives.<sup>45</sup> They enmesh the dishevelled ruins more surely than any official history. Few visitors to the gardens, however, read the allusion-laden poems; rather, it is the reproductions of the paintings on silk of the Forty Scenes that appear on a series of postcards or at the end of the pamphlets for sale at the shops scattered around the Garden of Prolonged Spring that attract attention.



Figure 34

Description of Peace and Harmony in Ten-thousand Directions with a poem in Qianlong's hand



<sup>43</sup> A. E. Grantham, *A Manchu monarch. An interpretation of Chia Ch'ing* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), pp.16–17.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>45</sup> The poems of the *Yuzhi Yuanmingyuan sisbi jing tuyong* 御製圓明園四十景圖咏 include paintings commissioned by Qianlong and executed by Shen Yuan and Tang Dai. Plundered from the palace before its destruction, these scroll paintings are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. Colour reproductions of the originals were presented to the Chinese government in 1983.

Figure 35

Public Security University compound for the Golden Shield Training Centre between the City of Śrāvastī and the Imperial Library (Wenyuan Ge)\*

<sup>46</sup> Zhang Enyin, *Yuanmingyuan bianqian shi tanwei*, p.103.

<sup>47</sup> 公安大學金盾培訓中心。

### Figure 36

*Felice Beato (British, c.1830–1904), detail from "Panorama of Hong Kong Showing the Fleet for the North China Expedition," 1860 (in five albumen silver prints, Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Jon Hendricks, reproduced in Roberta Wue, ed., Picturing Hong Kong, photography 1855–1910 [New York: Asia Society Galleries in association with South China Printing Company, Hong Kong, 1997], plate 15, pp.75–8) (reproduced with the permission of the Museum of Modern Art)*



As imperial power and playfulness declined the fabric of the Yuan Ming Yuan and its amusements also changed. In 1804, for example, the shopping street leading from the Buddha City, where Qianlong and the Court had enjoyed the pleasures described by Fr. Attiret above, was dismantled.<sup>46</sup> Today the line of this street is marked by a bumpy road leading through clumps of grass and garbage towards the hollow shell of the Buddha City, itself occupied by a clutch of mean dwellings, bordered to the west by a new compound, the Golden Shield Training Centre for the Public Security University (see Figures 33 and 35).<sup>47</sup>

None of these hints of decay should perhaps be taken as clear points of reference in what is regarded as the inevitable vector of desuetude charted now by those who study the decline and fall of the Qing Dynasty. Nonetheless, there was, even in the embellishment of the old and the expansion of new grounds in the gardens under the Jiaqing Emperor and his successors, an indication of a changing temper. While Jiaqing and his epigoni concentrated much energy on the creation of the Garden of Embellished Spring (Qichun Yuan, later renamed Wanchun Yuan 萬春園) in the south-east of the palace area, their constructions displayed little of the fancy and ingenuity of those of the Yongzheng or Qianlong eras. The new pavilions and terraces, temples and studios were in a stolid traditional mold that excite little of the interest that wells up as one contemplates the earlier follies—the buildings in unconventional shapes, the devices for pleasure and amusement, the fountains and a myriad of diversions favoured by the Court.

Here, as the rule of empire became more routine and as the nineteenth century progressed, Qing rule increasingly embattled, the buildings of the Garden of Perfect Brightness evinced a more sober aesthetic, one less

adventurous, as well as a shrinking of the imagination that had so marked the original growth of the gardens. Whereas Qianlong was strenuous in his efforts to embrace high-literati culture to bear witness both to his civilization and to his civilizing prowess—and there is no dearth of evidence of his literary talents in the form of poetry and ponderous calligraphy throughout the empire—his successors seemed more ready to accept their place in the scheme of things, and their caution found expression in the palaces they inherited and remodelled.

In the autumn of 1860, a delegation of English and French negotiators was despatched to Peking to exchange treaties with the Chinese Court following a peace settlement that had been forced on Peking as a result of the Arrow War, also known as the Second Opium War. Among other things, that treaty stipulated the establishment of permanent foreign diplomatic representation in the Chinese capital.

After numerous prevarications, bluffs and acts of deception on the part of the Qing Court, the emissaries of the emperor, Prince Gong 恭親王 (Yixin 奕訢) and General Senggerinchin 僧格林沁, detained the thirty-nine members of the delegation. They were imprisoned in the Yuan Ming Yuan, used as hostages in the negotiations with the foreign powers, and subsequently tortured. Of their number eighteen died and, when their bodies were eventually returned to the Allied forces in October 1860, even the liberal use of lime in their coffins could not conceal the fact that they had suffered horribly before expiring.

As the foreign troops marched on Peking to release the detainees, the Court removed itself to Jehol on the pretext that the emperor, “in keeping with custom,” was embarking on the autumn hunt, leaving Prince Gong to manage the peace negotiations from the Yuan Ming Yuan. Although considerable numbers of Qing forces were engaged in the capital, the Yuan Ming Yuan itself was only protected by a scant force of eunuch guards. The Anglo-French troops under the command of Lord Elgin and Baron Gros were determined that the emperor Xianfeng in particular, rather than his subjects, should be punished for the abuse of the diplomats and his duplicity regarding the peace treaty. To this end Elgin contrived what he thought a fitting retribution for the cowardly murder of the envoys that would inflict pain on the Court and the Manchu dynasty alone.

By this time Western perceptions of the Chinese monarch had changed greatly from the days when Lord Macart-

**Figure 37**

*“The Court at Brighton à la Chinese!!!” by G. Cruikshank, 1816.  
The Prince Regent, later King George IV, orders his ambassadors “to get fresh patterns of Chinese deformities to finish the decoration of the Pavilion.”*



<sup>48</sup> Edward Dodwell, *Tour through Greece*, 1819, quoted in Rose Macaulay, *The pleasure of ruins* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1953), p.160.

ney had met with Qianlong sixty years earlier. Much acrimony had built up between the Western colonial trading powers and the Chinese. The emperor was now, if anything, regarded as a decadent and corrupt oriental despot. If he was ignorant of the rules of diplomatic exchange, then, it was argued, he must be taught a lesson.

Lord Elgin will be remembered as the son of the seventh Earl of Elgin, Thomas Bruce, the man who had connived to strip the Parthenon of some of its marble frieze, the famous 'Elgin Marbles' now housed in the British Museum. The larceny of that earlier generation—not entirely irrelevant as we review the rape of the Yuan Ming Yuan—was described by Edward Dodwell, a witness to the events, in the following way:

Everything relative to this catastrophe was conducted with an eager spirit of insensate outrage, and an ardour of insatiate rapacity, in opposition not only to every feeling of taste, but to every sentiment of justice and humanity.<sup>48</sup>

**Figure 38**

*Digital image of Harmonising the Bizarre and Delightful (Xieqiqu 諧奇趣), one of the Western Palaces (Zhuda)*



And when Hobhouse and Byron toured the city of Athens in 1909–10 they “found everywhere the gaps the Pictish peer had made where he had removed columns, capitals and sculptures.”<sup>49</sup> Now, some half a century later, Elgin’s son fretted over how to exact revenge on the Chinese Court and struck upon the plan of ruining what the Europeans thought of merely as a perfidious emperor’s pleasure palace, the Yuan Ming Yuan. This, Elgin claimed, would be “not an act of vengeance but of justice.”<sup>50</sup>

It is one of the many ironies surrounding the destruction of the Yuan Ming Yuan that Elgin had been at pains not to cause egregious harm or offence to the Chinese people. Indeed, Lord Elgin had been an advocate of a measured and equitable relationship with China, an opponent of the gun-boat style of diplomacy that had been initiated some years earlier. Now faced with the need to force Chinese compliance he had to resolve a dilemma: if the people were too incensed or the Court too seriously denigrated by foreign intervention it may well have led to the precipitate collapse of the Manchu dynasty, thereby creating a chaotic situation that would have endangered any attempts at trade or diplomacy.

Directing his troops from the Hall of Probity, where the Macartney mission had presented its lavish gifts to Qianlong in the 1790s, Elgin ordered first the looting of the palace and then its burning. It was a deed he was to regret, and one for which he and the others involved in it have been censured and excoriated ever since.

The frenzy of destruction began on 18 October 1860, but not before many of the riches accumulated by five generations of rulers were looted, auctioned off among the troops or wantonly destroyed. Hope Danby in her history of the gardens recreates the scene as follows:

It was a clear autumn day, with a cloudless sky. But soon the heavens were blotted out as great columns of black clouds rose thickly in the air. The atmosphere was so still that the smoke stayed poised, like a canopy over the pleasure. Increasing with each passing moment the canopy changed to a vast black pall, heavy like that of mourning. It was such a solemn sight that witnesses spoke, with awe, of its tragic and melancholy appearance. The whole vault of the skies bespoke doom and vengeance.<sup>51</sup>

Not only were the buildings in the gardens of the Yuan Ming Yuan attacked, troops were also sent to burn the other imperial residences and gardens in the vicinity, and an extensive area of the Three Mountains and Five Gardens were put to the torch.

Although without doubt an act of wanton barbarism, it is revealing that in popular Mainland Chinese accounts of the sacking of the palaces available to readers since the 1980s, one is hard pressed to find any mention of the atrocities committed by the Qing negotiators that led to this final act of vandalism. Nor, in these popular histories, are there detailed descriptions of the sly manipulations of the Qing Court in the tense days leading up to the sacking.

A narrative in one 1990s’ children’s reader regarding the British decision

<sup>49</sup> Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, *ibid.* In Canto II of *Childe Harold* Byron wrote of the Scottish lord thus:

But who, of all the plunderers of your fane,  
On high, where Pallas linger’d, loth to flee  
The latest relic of her ancient reign;  
The last, the worst, dull spoiler, who was he?  
Blush, Caledonia! such thy son could be!

<sup>50</sup> Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, p.202. It would appear that the destruction of the gardens, rather than the armed occupation of Peking itself, was suggested by the Chinese guide Gong Cheng 龔橙 (Xiaogong 孝拱), the son of Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 and secretary to Sir Thomas Wade: far better to punish the foreign Manchus than take revenge on the sacred Han city of Peking. See Cheng Yansheng, “Yuanmingyuan kao,” p.104.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201.



It was towards the end of the afternoon. The sentries stood with ordered arms at every gateway, while the commissioners were at work within. Every few moments soldiers who had been detailed for the task came out with their loads of precious things, which aroused wonder and admiration in the groups of men round the sentries ...

The crowd which collected to watch these proceedings was composed of French and English foot-soldiers, riflemen, gunners and dragoons, of spahis, sheiks and Chinese coolies too, all watching with staring eyes and lips parched with greed; suddenly a rumour spread in all the various languages: "When they've had the best, it'll be our turn! To hell with that! We want our share of the cake. We've come far enough for it. Eh, Martin? Eh, Durand?" They laughed and barged forward—discipline began to give way ...

Covetousness suddenly aroused in the Chinese a sense

of patriotism; they told themselves that the hour of revenge had struck, and that, if I may be forgiven the expression—it would be the bread of life to rob the Mongolian [*sic*] dynasty and not to leave the whole windfall to the barbarian invader ...

The peasants of the district, and the common people of Hai-tien had come up to the walls too, or had slunk up, I should say, and there they joined up with our coolies and began talking to them. Our coolies had ladders. They put them up against the wall and a crowd of thieves with black pig-tails hurried along the alleys to the palace ...

So now English and French, officers and other ranks, joined the populace of Hai-tien and our coolies, who had already shown at the storming of the forts of Taku how they hated the Chinese of the North, and swarmed through the palace. There was also a band of marauders who followed



**Figure 39** *Pillage of the Yuan Ming Yuan as depicted in L'Illustration, Paris, 22 December 1860*

the army like ravens, dogs or jackals and had clung to our heels ever since Pe-tang, plundering, stealing and destroying whatever we ourselves had spared ...

I was only an onlooker, a disinterested but curious onlooker, positively revelling in this strange and unforgettable spectacle, in this swarm of men of every colour, every sort, this scrum of all the races of the world, as they flung themselves on the spoil, shouting hurrahs in every language on earth, hurrying, pushing, tumbling over one another, picking themselves up, cursing and swearing, and returning laden with their loot. It was like an ant-hill disturbed by the toe of a boot when the black swarms have been roused up and hurry off in all directions, one with a grub, one with a tiny egg, another with a seed in its jaws. There were soldiers with their heads in the red lacquer boxes from the Empress's chamber; others were wreathed in masses of brocade and

silk; others stuffed rubies, sapphires, pearls and bits of rock-crystal into their pockets, shirts and caps, and hung their necks with pearl necklaces. Others hugged clocks and clock-cases. Engineers had brought their axes to smash up the furniture and get at the precious stones inlaid in it. One man was savagely hacking at a Louis XV clock in the form of a Cupid: he took the crystal figures on the face for diamonds. Every now and again the cry of 'Fire' rang out. Dropping whatever they had hold of, they all ran to put out the flames, which were by that time licking the sumptuous walls padded with silks and damasks and furs. It was like a scene from an opium dream.

—From an account of the sacking by Comte Maurice d'Hérissou, reprinted in William Treue, *Art plunder, the fate of works of art in war, revolution and peace* (London: Methuen, 1960), pp.203–4, 205–6

to destroy the Yuan Ming Yuan is typical of the kind of rhetorical outrage that one finds:

The Anglo-French forces were savage and dangerous, bullying and arrogant in the extreme. Not only were their actions an affront to the timid and corrupt Qing Court, they were also an insult to the industrious and courageous Chinese people. This was a most outrageous insult and humiliation to the Chinese race.<sup>52</sup>

When the garden palace was sacked a small animal was said to be among the first things to be taken by the British. Captain Hart Dunne of the Wiltshire Regiment found a small Pekinese lion-dog wandering lost in one of the pavilions. Aware of Queen Victoria's penchant for pugs (one that continued until the post-Edwardian rise of the corgi), he pocketed the diminutive creature and eventually presented it to the Crown. Named 'Lootie' in recognition of its unique provenance, the Pekinese was the subject of particularly regal attention and its portrait was painted by Keyl. It survived its removal from China for over a decade, eventually dying in 1872.<sup>53</sup>

The Xianfeng Emperor was reputedly devastated by the mayhem in Peking; but he declined to return to the capital, and died at his Jehol retreat in 1862. For its part, the imperial court still determined to keep the Westerners at bay. After agreeing with extreme reluctance to permit diplomatic representation within the Imperial Capital, the Court now suggested that the British and French occupy the extant Western Palaces of the Yuan Ming Yuan (which were still in relatively good order) as the site for their new diplomatic compounds. Rejecting this backhand offer on the grounds that it was yet another ruse to keep them at arms' length, however, the diplomats insisted on being allowed to establish legations within the city walls.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Liu Zhanbin, *Yuanmingyuan cangsang ji*, p.100.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Hurd, *The Arrow War, an Anglo-Chinese confusion 1856–60* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p.241, n.1.

<sup>54</sup> L. C. Arlington and William Lewisohn, *In search of old Peking*, reprint ed. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.6.

#### Figure 40

Stone lion (*à la Lootie*?) set up in the ruins of the southern façade of Harmonising the Bizarre and Delightful\*



<sup>55</sup> Much of the detail in this section comes from Zhao Guanghua's essay "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuande houqi pouhuai liju" [Examples of the later destruction of the Garden of Perfect Brightness and ancillary gardens], *Yuanmingyuan xuekan* 4 (1986): 12–17. My tabulation of the ages of destruction differs somewhat from Zhao's, as I have included the ransacking of the Yuan Ming Yuan during the rebuilding of the Yihe Yuan as the second era of pillage, and regard the 1980s' restorations of the eastern precincts of the palace grounds as a further stage of despoliation. For details of the fate of the loot in Europe see James L. Hevia, "Loot's fate, the economy of plunder and the moral life of objects from the Summer Palace of the Emperor of China," *History and Anthropology* 6.4 (1994): 319–45.

### *The Dispersal of Artifacts*<sup>55</sup>

Despite the sacking of October 1860, much of the palace remained intact. Indeed, although twentieth-century accounts generally claim that the area was completely razed, contemporary records indicate that the Yuan Ming Yuan could have been preserved and repaired without too great an effort. Yet, after desultory attempts at a restoration in the 1870s, over the following century the gardens became something of an inexhaustible mine, providing materials first for further imperial indulgence and then to bolster the waning fortunes of the Manchus. After the collapse of the dynasty in 1911, they fell prey to the rapacious forces released during the political disarray of the Republican era. That age of pillage was followed by the depredations of Japanese rule.

It was thus that the natural decay of the ruins was accelerated. With the incessant intervention of plundering, the defacing and obliteration of the palaces that in the usual course of events may have required the passing of centuries to bring about was achieved in the span of a lifetime. This process of ruination was aided by the fact that so many of the purely Chinese structures



**Figure 41** *The Palace of the Calm Sea looking west (photograph by Hedda Morrison c.1940)*

in the grounds were built of frailer and more transient materials than the marble, brick and stone that have ensured the longevity of ruins in other climes.

The perishable nature of wood and tile, coupled with the incessant raids on the more robust materials that held together the foundations of the structures, meant that little of the surface artifice that marked the gardens has survived. This woeful state of affairs, however, was by no means peculiar to the Yuan Ming Yuan. As one writer observed of pre-1949 China, "crumbling and smitten temples stand about ... with an easy, debonair, light-come-light-go transience."<sup>56</sup> So true was this of the Yuan Ming Yuan that by the 1950s it could be said of the palace-garden that "topography alone survived."<sup>57</sup>

After the conflagration authored by the Anglo-French force, local residents, including the Manchu Bannermen villagers who had originally been garrisoned in a protective circle around the palaces, were witness to the disarray of the Qing army. Evincing none of the *soi-disant* Confucian virtues of loyalty and fealty they immediately set about raiding the gardens and looted much that was precious and rare from the buildings—silks, golden and bronze objects, jades—and virtually anything that was not battered down.

Even when the eunuch guards returned to their posts following the mêlée of late 1860 the thefts continued. Long after order was re-established a steady trickle of memorials to the throne reported that trespassers were making off with materials from the gardens: bronze pipes from the fountains of the Western Palaces; jade and other objects from the Cold Mountain (Zibi Shanfang 紫碧山房); a bronze Buddha from the Temple of the River King inside the southern wall of the Qichun Yuan and even wooden bridge planks. In reality, many of the guardians appointed to protect the 'forbidden gardens' (*jinyuan* 禁苑) themselves surreptitiously felled trees for firewood, traded in pilfered stone, bricks and glazed tiles, and undid what was left of the remaining structures.<sup>58</sup>

Not all those who knew of the fate of the once-sequestered imperial pleasance were so gleeful about the opportunities for plunder that its demise offered. A poem in circulation some seventeen years after the original devastation summed up the melancholic sense of loss experienced by people who now contemplated the obliteration of what had also been a grand imperial collection of antiquities:

A Song-dynasty book lies in an old peasant woman's basket;  
On the wall of a herdsboy's hut hangs a Yuan-dynasty painting.  
Ask not the fate of scriptures writ on precious leaves from India,  
For have not even the pages of the *Encyclopaedia of the Four Treasuries*  
been scattered to the winds?

In a temple incense smoulders in a rusted ancient bronze,  
While market stalls hawk porcelain from venerable imperial kilns.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.392.

<sup>57</sup> George N. Kates, *The years that were fat: the last of old China* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1952), p.191.

<sup>58</sup> For these details see Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'anguan, *Qingdai dang'an shiliao: Yuanmingyuan* [Historical materials from the Qing archives: Yuan Ming Yuan], 2 vols (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1991), vol.1, pp.605-14.

Figure 42

The Water Reservoir (*Xushui Lou* 蓄水樓) of the Palace of the Calm Sea in the 1980s (Photograph by Liu Jiwen)



<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Liu Zhanbin, *Yuanmingyuan cangsang ji*, p.102:

老嫗筐中宋本書  
牧童壁上元人畫  
莫問叢殘貝葉經  
牙籤四庫亦飄零  
僧廊篆鼎蝌文綠  
儉肆柴窑寶氣青

<sup>60</sup> Liu Zhanbin, *Yuanmingyuan cangsang ji*, p.103:

玉闕瓊樓委碧埃  
獸蹄鳥迹走荒臺  
殘碑沒盡宮人老  
空向蒿萊拔劫灰

Nearly half a century later, the educator and revolutionary Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1889–1927) lived and worked not far from the Yuan Ming Yuan. In the early Republic, perhaps in a mood of reverie, he penned the following lines:

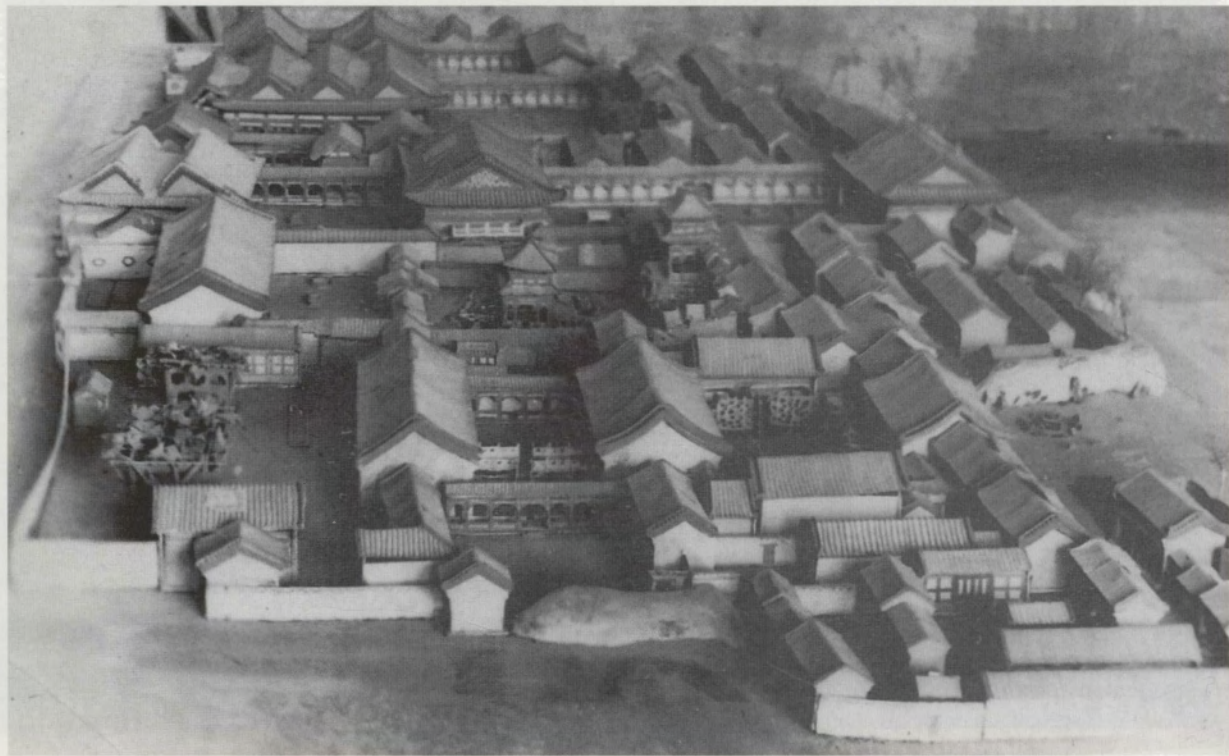
Jade-like balustrades and lustrous pavilions sleep forever  
in the embrace of greening grasses and windswept sands;  
Terraces and gazebos are frequented now only by the footprints of  
animals and the passage of birds.  
Broken stelae lie buried in the dirt, while the palace attendants of  
yesteryear have grown old.  
Sifting aimlessly in the long grasses, what do they search for in the  
rubble of the past?<sup>60</sup>

### *The Summer Palace*

In the early 1870s, there was a fitful attempt by the Court to restore parts of the palace, and rebuild some precincts of the original Yuan Ming Yuan. The construction work was ostensibly aimed at providing the Regent Empresses, “exhausted by the labour of many years,” as the Tongzhi Emperor put it when he reached his majority, with a garden retreat. In reality, Tongzhi’s mother the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧, who had first lived in the Yuan Ming

#### **Figure 43**

*The Lei Family model of the imperial apartments on Clear and Calm View of Nine Realms (Jiuzhou Qingyan) prepared for the Tongzhi reconstruction (looking west) (photograph by Zhao Tingjie 趙廷介)*



Yuan as the main concubine of Xianfeng, was anxious to have the much-beloved pleasure rebuilt for herself. To this end elaborate plans were drawn up, models (*tangyang* 燙樣) of pavilions were made by the Imperial architects, the Lei Family 雷氏,<sup>61</sup> and the restoration begun in 1873. Officials concerned by the political chaos and natural catastrophes facing the empire strenuously protested that such extravagance could not be justified. Although the reconstruction was eventually called to a halt in 1874,<sup>62</sup> it was not before a number of buildings had been restored and much debris cleared from the area around the emperor's quarters.

Following this short-lived attempt at resuscitation, a second wave of destruction was unleashed on the grounds by the imperial house when it was decided to refurbish instead the Qingyi Yuan (Park of Clear Rippling Waters, now renamed Yihe Yuan, the Garden of Harmonious Old Age) to accommodate Cixi's 'retirement' in the 1890s. To carry out this project given the strictures on imperial finances and resources, the Yuan Ming Yuan became the object of exploitation. Thence began its long career of supplying other gardens and retreats of Peking with the wherewithal for their own existence. Most of the remaining buildings in the Yuan Ming Yuan were torn down for the bricks, tiles, wooden columns and stone-work required for the construction of the new Summer Palace.

### *In the Service of the Revolution*

The third great sacking of the gardens began shortly thereafter, in 1900, when trees (numbered in their thousands) and the wooden pillars in the few extant structures, as well as the surviving wooden bridges, were cut or pulled down and stored in the township of Qinghe 清河 for sale or for the manufacture of charcoal.

Added to this was the ruinous confusion of the Boxer Rebellion. Following the occupation of the imperial capital by foreign troops, soldiers were also billeted in the imperial gardens. Bannermen, whose villages surrounded the Yuan Ming Yuan, having found themselves defeated and without effective leadership, now formed marauding gangs and ransacked the grounds in search of profit. They reportedly destroyed all of the remaining trees and buildings of the gardens in the space of a month.<sup>63</sup>

After the 1911 Revolution it was the stones, bricks and rockeries of the palaces that came under threat. The administrators of the Summer Palace, overseen by the Bureau of Household Affairs (*Neiwu fu* 內務府), who also had jurisdiction over the Yuan Ming Yuan, deprived of their former emoluments now relied for a considerable portion of their income on the proceeds of the sale of materials taken from the old palace grounds. It was not until 1924 that the Bureau even determined the exact area covered by the Yuan Ming Yuan gardens,<sup>64</sup> when Reginald F. Johnston, English tutor to the Xuantong 宣統 Emperor Puyi 溥儀, was put in charge of the western pleasures.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> For six generations dating from the mid-Kangxi period the Lei Family (Yangshi Lei 樣式雷) were the imperial architects commissioned to design buildings for the Yuan Ming Yuan. The Leis were reduced to poverty following the founding of the Republic and sold the models and materials related to the gardens to the Beiping Library, now the Peking National Library. See Zhang Enyin, *Yuan-mingyuan bianqian sbitanwei*, p.178.

<sup>62</sup> *Qingdai dang'an shiliao: Yuanmingyuan*, vol.1, p.743.

<sup>63</sup> For the details of which Bannermen groups destroyed the various sections of the palace see Zhao Guanghua, "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuande houqi pohan liju," p.14.

<sup>64</sup> For details see Qin Guojing, *Xun Qing huangshi yishi* [Anecdotes from the former imperial family of the Qing] (Beijing: Zijincheng Chubanshe, 1985), pp.87-8.

<sup>65</sup> Reginald F. Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, reprint ed. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.358.

**Figure 44**

*The pavilion built in Zhongshan Park, Central Peking, 1971, to house the remaining stelae taken from the Stone for Repose near the Stream on which Qianlong commemorates the 353 CE gathering at the Orchid Pavilion (Lan Ting 蘭亭)\**



<sup>66</sup> For these details see Zhao Guanghua, "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuande houqi pohuai liju," p.17; and on Wang Huaiqing also see Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, p.225. Much of the material Wang used for the Da Yuan was taken from the Śrāvāsti City and the Anyou Gong Imperial Ancestral Temple.

<sup>67</sup> This is attested to by the translator Yang Xianyi 楊憲益 and Sang Ye 桑暉, a writer specializing in oral history, both residents of the districts to the north-west of Peking supplied with the stony grain.

Powerful figures like the warlord and Commander of the Peking Gendarmerie Wang Huaiqing 王懷慶 (1866-?) had loads of stones carted away to construct the Da Yuan 達園, south of the Yuan Ming Yuan,<sup>66</sup> (now an exclusive luxury residence compound and home for some years, for example, to the director of the Peking Goethe Institute).

Other beneficiaries of the theft of stones were the new public parks, universities and libraries of the city. The plunder of bricks, roof tiles, slabs of stone, wooden supports, pipes and so on continued daily for some thirty years; and well into the 1950s there were reports that the antique markets of Liuli Chang 琉璃廠 were still offering bric-à-brac from the palaces.

Local farmers had begun cultivating crops in the grounds of the Garden of Perfect Brightness during the 1930s, but it was under the Japanese occupation of Peking when the former capital suffered a shortage of grain that the government sponsored farming projects that led to the first landfills. From 1940, there was a concerted effort to level the man-made hills throughout the gardens, and fill in the lakes

and rivulets to create farmland. For a time the Yuan Ming Yuan was threatened with the same fate as Kangxi's garden, Changchun Yuan, to the south, which had been obliterated by reclamation. The lakes that survived, in particular those within the original precinct of the Yuan Ming Yuan (the Qianhu 前湖 and Houhu 後湖 near the Audience Hall and imperial residences, as well as the Sea of Plenitude) and those in the Garden of Prolonged Spring, only did so because they could be used as fisheries.

Originally, the people living in the area who undertook these labours were the relatives of eunuchs or former custodians of the grounds, but an influx of immigrants from nearby counties gradually led to an increase in the local population.

It was also at this time that what may well be described as a particularly Chinese solution to the problem of the ruins came into being. Having converted many of the old waterways and lakes into ricefields, farmers still found that the limited yields they got from crops could be made to go just that little bit further. This they did by adding ground stone to the husked grain, thus giving both increased weight and bulk to their skimpy produce. According to people who ate the rice cultivated in the Yuan Ming Yuan over the decades, the peasants obtained this lapideous leaven by grinding down the remaining stonework of the palace ruins, in particular marble and masonry scavenged from the Western Palaces. Thus, according to my informants, local school children and others literally dined out on the Garden of Perfect Brightness for years.<sup>67</sup>

In the 1950s and 60s, while Peking itself fell under the sway of an energetic and bulldozing Communist government, the Yuan Ming Yuan remained a forgotten wasteland beyond the realm of the destructive vigour of socialist reconstruction. It became something of an independent kingdom once more, protected not by imperial fiat, but benign neglect.

During those years, however, the population of the gardens increased dramatically. With this influx of people, mostly farmers, came a new wave of spifflication. Ramshackle villages sprouted up on the Nine Realms and on enisled quarters of the old gardens, even more trees were felled and the remaining waterways were filled in to make fields. Thereafter, neighbouring communes established horse paddocks, pigstys, chicken and duck farms in the grounds; a bread factory was built, as well as a small printing shop, a machine repair factory, a shooting range for the local militia, with ever-new *ad hoc* structures being thrown up higgledy-piggledy in subsequent years.

From 1956 to 1960, the newly-established Parks and Forest Bureau of Peking 園林局 purchased all of the arable land in the area apart from the rice fields, and a vigorous program of replanting was undertaken to prevent further erosion of the landscaped grounds. Driven to desperation during the famine years of the early 1960s, however, the peasants reclaimed the land and returned it once more to grain production.

As the revolutionary transformation of Chinese society progressed during the 1960s, local middle schools and universities—the Yuan Ming Yuan was on the edge of the main university district in Haidian—began using the area for their prescribed extramural manual labour classes. By linking themselves to the commune production teams in the area schools were able to organise students and teachers to undertake regular stints of manual labour, including farming or less fruitful tasks in the old palace grounds.

During the Cultural Revolution, for example, a number of the lakes in the south-west corner of the Qichun Yuan were filled in with rocks and earth by a few dozen lecturers at Peking University who had been sent there for short-term labour. Required to transform themselves through physical effort they created jobs for themselves, expending their revolutionary ardour on the hapless environment of the gardens. First stones and rocks were thrown into the dry lakes and the islands were then flattened to fill in what remained.<sup>68</sup>

By the mid 1970s, the only extant building of the original Yuan Ming Yuan was the Lamaist Zhengjue Temple 正覺寺 complex to the south-west of the entrance to the Qichun Yuan, along the road behind Peking University which leads to the western entrance of Qinghua University 清華大學.

Surrounded on three sides by hills and lakes the temple originally nestled amidst huge cedars. It survived the sacking of 1860 and was used by the Boxers in 1900, after which many of its decorations were looted or destroyed by German troops stationed at the Langrun Yuan 郎潤園 abutting it to the south. During the Republic the temple was converted into a private residence and the monks disbanded. The buildings were eventually sold to Qinghua University which converted it into a dormitory for unmarried staff, and it continued in

<sup>68</sup> Zhao Guanghua, "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuande houqi pohuai liju," p.16.



this chastened state until the 1960s when it was taken over by the Haidian Machine Tool Factory. From the mid- to late-1970s the factory constructed new workshops and apartments on the grounds, destroying most of what had been the last undespoiled remnant of the Garden of Perfect Brightness. Today a few vermilion halls and heavy *liuli*-tiled eaves can be made out through the gates of the Peking Great Wall Boiler Factory.

### *The Romance of Ruins*

In ruined palaces there lies peculiar pleasure. The grandeur they had, the courtly life led in them, the banquets, the music, the dancing, the painted walls, the sculptures, the rich tapestries ... —and now the shattered walls, the broken columns, the green trees thrusting through the crumbling floors. Fallen pride, wealth and fine living in the dust, the flitting shades of patrician ghosts, the silence where imperious voices rang, the trickle of unchannelled springs where fountains soared, of water where wine flowed. All this makes for that melancholy delight so eagerly sought, so gratefully treasured, by man in his brief passage down the corridor of time, from which, looking this way and that, he may observe such enchanting chambers of the past.<sup>69</sup>

Those who travel to the north-west reaches of Peking to visit the Yuan Ming Yuan today must be ready for a rude encounter. Virtually none of the original palace area where the emperors lived and ruled is part of the official ruins. Instead, what is promoted as the “Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park” (Yuanmingyuan Yizhi Gongyuan 圓明園遺址公園) is no more than the reconditioned western precincts of the Garden of Perfect Brightness, part of the Qichun Yuan, and the Changchun Yuan, the Garden of Prolonged Spring.<sup>70</sup>

Those who wish to visit the ruins presented as a garishly dolled-up and picturesque socialist park are best advised to keep to the well-trodden cement paths of the new edu-tainment half of the Yuan Ming Yuan. For the real ruins, however, the melancholy remains of the most magnificent imperial pleasance of a ruling Chinese dynasty, you must venture to the west, into the dust and brambles, the faeces-clogged and grave-strewn fields of a former oriental realm of fancy that was once the wonder of European monarchs and garden designers alike.

The latest phase in the devastation of the Yuan Ming Yuan, its official restoration under the ‘Open Door and Reform’ regime, has been underway since the early 1980s. Following a call by concerned individuals for the preservation of the area, plans were drawn up to turn some of the defunct gardens into a public park and patriotic educational site (*aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu jidi* 愛國主義教育基地). Coming, as it did, at a time when the Communist Party was at pains to re-establish its primacy as the embodiment of Chinese patriotic sentiment, and anxious to avail itself of the great enterprise of modern Chinese history as proof that only under its leadership could the wrongs of the past be righted, the Yuan Ming Yuan was subjected throughout

<sup>69</sup> Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, pp.398–9.

<sup>70</sup> Later renamed the Wanchun Yuan 萬春園, or Garden of Ten Thousand Springs. Wanchun Yuan is also the name of a compound of luxury apartments to the east of the main entrance of the present Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park.

the 1980s to—taking a phrase from Rose Macaulay—“the destroying hand of the ruin-clearers.”<sup>71</sup>

Just as the formidable ruins of Rome were debased by the ‘restoration’ of the nineteenth century, so too have the imperial gardens of Peking suffered at the hands of energetic conservationists and propagandists anxious to turn the place into a scene of antiquarian interest and political statement.

Starting in the 1980s, the denuded hills were replanted with trees of various hues and shapes in an attempt to halt the erosion that was threatening to return what remained of the contours of the scenery to the flat and undistinguished landscape from which it had originally sprung. Rice-fields that had provided sustenance to the farmers who had encroached on the precincts of the eastern half of the gardens were dug up, the lakes cleared and filled once more with water. Though they may not bear the colourful pleasure craft of the emperors, or the flat-bottomed ice-skiffs used to chart the waterways during the winter months, these rivulets are now crowded from spring onwards with lubberly swan-headed paddle boats and put-puts, while the Sea of Plenitude, the largest lake in the garden, with the fairy isle Pengdao Yaotai situated as if floating in its centre, hosts long, metal rowing boats painted blue which are rented out by the hour to holidaying families and lovers.

The precincts of the Western Palaces have been regrassed, fenced off so that access is limited to ticket-holders, and some of the ruins set right to provide visitors with a background to record on film the fact that they too have come and seen the remains of European barbarity— able to claim through their cameras: *kodak ergo sum*.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.404.

<sup>72</sup> This is an expression from Joseph Brodsky. See “Flight from Byzantium” in Brodsky, *Less than one, selected essays* (Harmondsworth, Mddlx: Penguin Books, 1987), p.399.

#### Figures 45 & 46

*Mock ruins: the to-scale version of the Great Fountain inside the entrance to the Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park. The flag and national emblem of the People's Republic of China along with a copy of the national anthem are set up within an enclosure for public edification\*  
The photo concession at the Great Fountain\**



Where bridges had been destroyed, new structures have been built. Kiosks have been thrown up to sell trinkets and food. The surrounding 'tigerskin walls' (*bupi qiang* 虎皮牆) of the gardens, long since dismantled for building materials and road construction,<sup>73</sup> have been erected anew, and gates to the palaces, now made of bamboo in the style of ethnic eateries popular in the capital, have been set up at the entrances to both the Yuan Ming and the Changchun gardens.<sup>74</sup>

**Figure 47**

*The new bamboo entrance to the Yuan Ming Yuan proper\**



<sup>73</sup> Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, p.229.

<sup>74</sup> These are the bamboo gates to the Yuan Ming Yuan and the Changchun Yuan which punctuate the north-west wall of the Qichun Yuan. Similar structures were commonly used in Sichuan and Yunnan restaurants around Peking in the 1990s.

<sup>75</sup> Osbert Sitwell, *Escape with me* (London: Macmillan, 1939), quoted in Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.393.

<sup>76</sup> Shu Mu et al, *Yuanmingyuan ziliao ji*, pp.354-60.

It was the very fragility of the Chinese ruins that made this uncomely rebirth possible. As Osbert Sitwell wrote in 1939:

a notable fault of Chinese architecture as well as a notable merit ... consists in its transience: it can disappear, melt into nothingness as easily as, on the other hand, it can be renewed.<sup>75</sup>

Rebuilding the Yuan Ming Yuan in particular has been something of an imperial obsession ever since the reign of the Tongzhi Emperor. As we have noted in the above, the first abortive attempt at restoring the gardens came in the 1870s. This was followed shortly thereafter by an inspired imitative creation of the palaces in Europe by Ludwig II, the mad king of Bavaria, who planned to have the fabled Chinese gardens reconstructed in their entirety in his own

realm. This megalomaniacal project was thwarted by the encroachment of Ludwig's insanity and his eventual death.

During the 1930s, with a lull in the strife that plagued the new Republic of China, architects, impotent to revive them, did their best to offer a reduced-scale vision of the palaces and a large retrospective exhibition on the Yuan Ming Yuan was held in the Palace Museum. This was accompanied by calls for the preservation of the site and a rebuilding program.<sup>76</sup>

In the 1950s, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 issued a directive for the site of the Yuan Ming Yuan to be preserved so that "at some future point partial reconstruction can be undertaken." More than any other imperial structure, the Yuan Ming Yuan had acquired, through its destruction at the hands of foreigners, a charisma that led successive governments to develop their own plans to use it as a site symbolizing national revival. As is so often the case with grandiose projects, little of essence was ever done to restore the palaces.

Indeed, over the years the grounds of the gardens lost virtually all significance in Chinese life. While the Yihe Yuan came to represent the decadent misrule of the Empress Dowager, and the Imperial Palace in central Peking was restored as the "crystallisation of the genius of the Chinese labouring people" from the 1950s, the Yuan Ming Yuan was forgotten. Mentioned only

in passing in texts about the Opium Wars, the site fell prey to the exegicies of revolutionary whim. Despite this official neglect, however, the ruins took on a life of their own.

On 29 May, 1966, students from Qinghua Middle School 清華附中, which was situated next to the palace grounds, gathered at the Western Palaces for what they called the “Yuan Ming Yuan Meeting.” At it they founded a new group of rebellious storm troopers dedicated to protecting the Cultural Revolution. They called themselves “Chairman Mao’s Red Guards” (*Mao zhuxide hong weibing* 毛主席的紅衛兵).<sup>77</sup>

Other members of that same generation of rebels, now tempered by the struggles of the Cultural Revolution itself, returned to the Western Palaces in 1979. They were the editors of the samizdat literary journal *Today* (*Jintian* 今天), Mang Ke 芒克 and Bei Dao 北島, who were joined by supporters and fans including a friend of the magazine, Chen Kaige 陳凱歌—later a prominent film-maker, to hold their own literary salon there. On that occasion, poetry was recited, stories told, speeches made, and a lot of alcohol consumed. They regarded the Yuan Ming Yuan as a public space free from official control, a cultural grey zone to which they could add their own stories. The poet Yang Lian 楊煉, a loquacious and prolific member of this group, composed an elegiac poem to the ruins.

It was in this tradition of bohemian fringe-dwelling that, from the late 1980s, the Yuan Ming Yuan became home to a community of artists, poets and cultural ne'er-do-wells. Because of its relative distance from the city, its borderland nature between urban and rural control and the fact that cheap

<sup>77</sup> The name was inspired by Zhang Chengzhi 張承志. See Pu Dahua in Sang Ye, “Piandi yingxiong xia xiyan: Weidade 1966” [A land of heroes: the great year 1966], unpublished interview transcript from the book “Chinese time, in the autumn of the patriarch.”

**Figure 48**

*The remains of the Aviary—photograph by Ernst Ohlmer, 1880s (from Thiriez, “Les palais européens,” p.93)*



## 自白

— 給一座廢墟

讓這片默默無言的石頭  
為我的出生作證  
讓這支歌  
響起  
動蕩的霧中  
尋找我的眼睛

在灰色的陽光碎裂的地方  
拱門, 石柱投下陰影  
投下比燒焦的土地更加黑暗的回憶  
彷彿垂死的掙扎被固定  
手臂痙攣地伸向天空  
彷彿最後一次  
給歲月留下遺言  
這遺言  
變成對我誕生的詛咒

我來到廢墟上  
追逐唯一照耀過我的希望  
那不合時宜的微弱之星  
命運——盲目的烏雲  
無情地鉤勒着我的心靈  
不是為了哀悼死亡! 不是自亡  
吸引我走向這個空曠的世界  
我反抗屬於荒蕪和恥辱的一切  
——襁褓  
是與墓地不能相容的太陽

在我早已預支的孤獨中  
有誰知道  
這條向夜晚歌唱的路  
閃着磷光通往哪一處海岸  
秘密的地平線  
波動着, 泛起遙遠的夢想  
遙遠的幾乎無窮  
祇有風, 揚起歌聲  
代替着埋進土的殘缺的日晷  
指向我自己的黎明

## Apologia

—To a Ruin

Let this mute stone  
Attest my birth  
Let this song  
Resound  
In the troubled mist  
Searching for my eyes

Here in the grey shattered sunlight  
Arches, stone pillars cast shadows  
Cast memories blacker than scorched earth  
Motionless as the death agony of a hanged man  
Arms convulsed into the sky  
Life a final  
Testament to time  
Once a testament  
Now a curse muttered at my birth

I come to this ruin  
Seeking the only hope that has illumined me  
Faint star out of its time  
Destiny, blind cloud  
Pitiless chiaroscuro of my soul  
No, I have not come to lament death! It is not death  
Has drawn me to this desolate world  
I defy all waste and degradation  
—These swaddling clothes  
Are a sun that will not be contained in the grave

In my premature solitude  
Who can tell me  
The destination of this road singing into the night  
To what shore its flickering ghostfires lead?  
A secret horizon  
Ripples, trawls distant dreams to the surface  
Distant, almost boundless.  
Only the wind rousing a song  
In place of the broken sundial buried in the earth  
Points to my dawn.

—“Birth” (Dansheng 誕生), from Yang Lian, *Bell on a Frozen Lake 冰湖之鐘* (1980), translated by John Minford with Seán Golden, *Renditions, Special Issue: Chinese Literature Today*, nos 19 & 20 (Spring & Autumn 1983): 250–1.

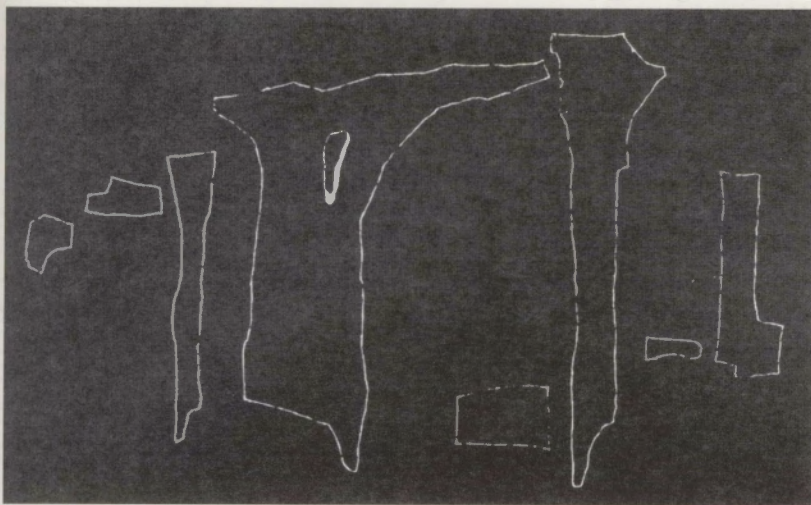
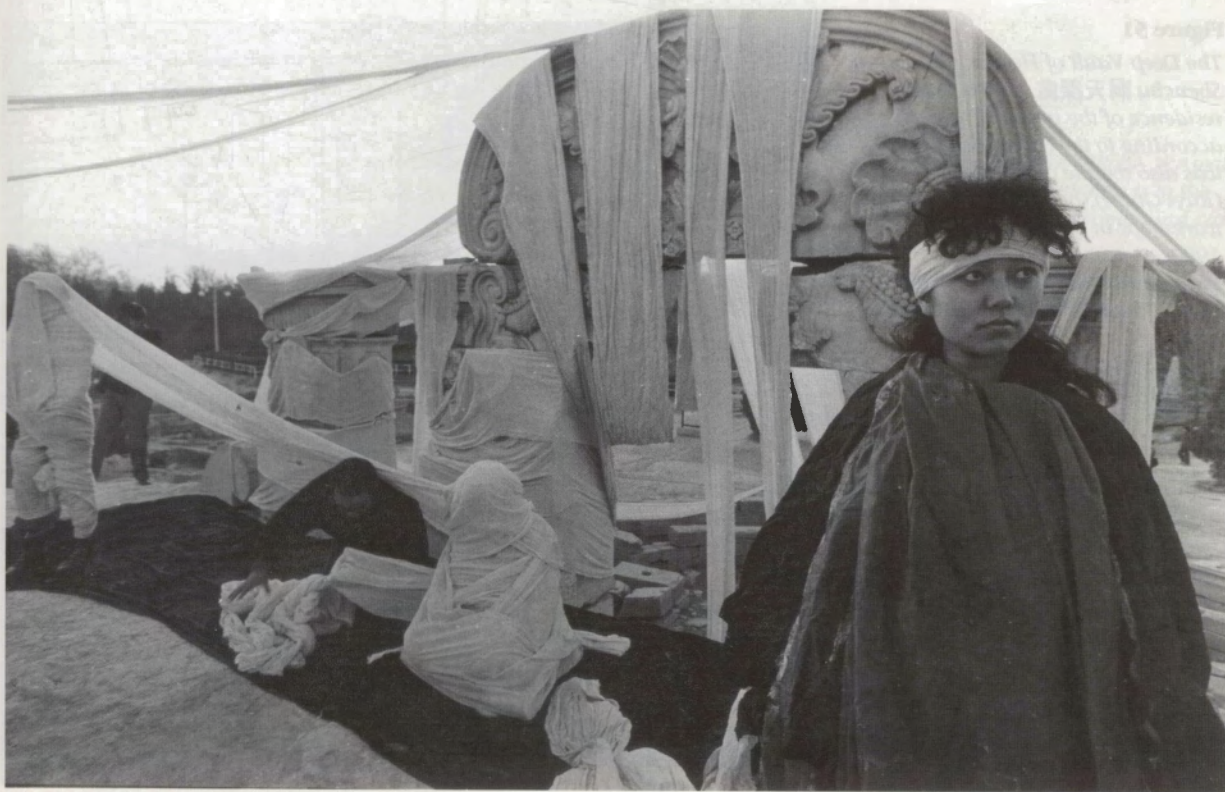
**Figure 49**

Illustration for Yang Lian's poem by  
Gan Shaocheng 甘少成

**Figure 51**

Operation of the "Tide Along Yang  
Arts" bridge in 1988. From the  
Famous Artists: 1988-1989, p. 100.  
Illustration by Liu Tao. The  
operation of the bridge was  
the first work of the artist.

**Figure 50** "Concept 21," 1988 performance art conceived and executed by Liu Tao 劉濤 with the participation of students from the Central Art, Central Industrial Design and Broadcasting Academies. This unwitting homage to the French Christo infuriated the Chinese authorities (photograph by Liu Tao)



accommodation could be rented from the local villagers, Fuyuan Village 福緣村, around what was once the Fuyuan Gate, the main entrance to the gardens for plunderers, developed for a time into the nexus of Peking's alternative cultural milieu. Many of the houses the artists rented were in the area of the Sceptre Lodge (Ruyi Guan 如意館), where Jesuit missionary-artists like Giuseppe Castiglione had worked during the Qianlong reign.

These sino-bohemians developed a community called the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists' Village (Yuanmingyuan Huajiacun 圓明園畫家村), also known waggishly as the 'West Village' (Xicun 西村), which existed until the eve of 4 June 1995 when local police sealed off the area and ejected them. On the surface an act of well-timed cultural pacification, it would appear that this dispersal was merely the prelude to the reclamation of the area by China's powerholders. By mid-1996, an extensive residential complex was under construction just south of Fuyuan Village, next to the Da Yuan Guesthouse. The largest building in the new compound reflected the conservative taste of the nation's leaders: faux traditional rooves, painted eaves and windows providing a muted exterior to conceal the modern luxury, the only hint of which was a satellite dish positioned atop the building. It was rumoured that the buildings, far from the hustle and bustle of central Peking, would be used as week-enders by both Party and State leaders. After one hundred and thirty-six years, China's rulers had finally returned to the Yuan Ming Yuan.

### Figure 51

*The Deep Vault of Heaven (Dongtian Shenchu 洞天深處), school and residence of the imperial princes, according to the Forty Scenes. This was also the site of the Sceptre Lodge (Ruyi Guan), home to the Jesuit workshops in the Qianlong era. In the 1990s, a number of residents in the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists' Village rented lodgings and studios in the area*







Strenuous efforts have been made by the administrators of the new Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park to the east of Fuyuan Village to join the throng of money-making enterprises in the Chinese capital while also pursuing the more laudable official goals of using the site to educate the nation in the rudiments of patriotic fervour. To this end, during the 1980s franchises were sold to various entertainment companies who set about converting sections of the gardens into amusement parks. There are now, for example, funpark rides on what was once the lake Surface of Water in the Heart of Heaven



**Figure 55**

*Funpark rides between Surface of Water in the Heart of Heaven (Tianxin Shuimian) and the Dharmic Realm of Probité (Zhuangyan Fajie)\**



**Figure 56**

*The Paintball Gallery next to the Western Palaces\**

**Figure 57**

*Primitive Totem Exhibition on Mountains in the Sea\**

(Tianxin Shuimian 天心水面) as well as in the Dharma Realm of Probity (Zhuangyan Fajie 莊嚴法界).

The pavilions and waters to the west of this area—the Pavilion for Lying in the Clouds (Woyun Xuan 臥雲軒), the House for Winter's Birth (Shengdong Shi 生冬室), the Studio of Spring Marshes (Chunze Zhai 春澤齋), the Siyi Study (Siyi Shuwu), and the Place for Nurturing the Heart (Hanxin Chu 含心處)—are home to the “World of Wild Animals” nature reserve where, for a price, you can see animals and birds in a slightly more natural habitat than they suffer at the Peking Zoo, but still a far cry from the menageries once kept by the emperors in the gardens for their enjoyment. For those with a more athletic approach to classical ruins, a paintball-shooting gallery can be found at the entrance to the Western Palaces further north, and next to it a go-cart track has been laid out.

The Fenglin Continent (Fenglin Zhou 鳳麟洲) is now a pigeon aviary; and the circular island called Mountains in the Sea (Haiyue Kaijin 海岳開襟) is home to a Primitive Totem Exhibition displaying the oddities of ‘exotic peoples’ (that is, African and other ‘primitives’) with a voyeuristic vulgarity that continues somewhat in the emotional lineage of the creation of the Western Palaces, where curiosities from the extreme occident were once displayed for the Court’s diversion.

So far, however, the energy of the socialist gardeners and park designers has limited itself to the Qichun and Changchun Yuan, as well as to the eastern littoral of the Yuan Ming Yuan itself. The further natural decline of the gardens may have

**Figure 58**

*A stone marking the original site of the pavilion Displaying Poetry and Harmonising Rhymes (Zhanshi Yinglü 展詩應律) featuring an image of the building and a description of its history and destruction by the Anglo-French force\**

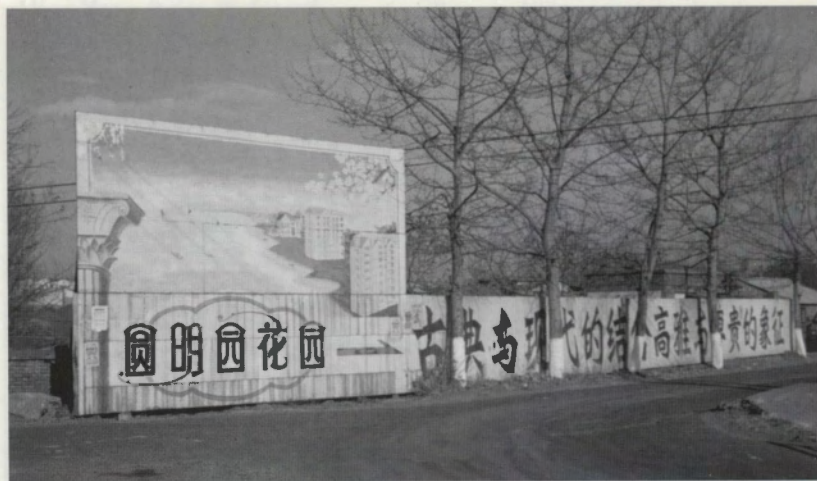


嘉庆六年(公元1801年)已建成,位于绮春园后湖南岸,殿宇五楹,其东有板与涵秋馆毗连,其南与庄严法界隔水相望,其北则平湖净碧,天半空明,西山远映,松栎合窗,于此可览自然之妙趣,抒怀抱而寄吟思,故名“展诗应律”。

公元1860年10月毁于英法联军之火。

**Figure 59**

Hoarding outside the north-west corner of the palace, which reads: "Yuan Ming Yuan Gardens: the classical combined with the modern—a symbol of elegance and refinement"\*



<sup>78</sup> Lim, "Model recreates China's burnt Summer Palace."

been halted, but restoration has been carried out by those who are the descendants not of the original patrons or designers of the parks, nor even of its labourers, but rather by the churlish progeny of the indigenous vandals who enthusiastically devoted themselves to its despoliation for over a hundred years. According to reports in 1996, they will spend some US\$240 million in further improvements to the grounds up to the year 2000. As for plans to rebuild the whole palace, however, Wu Fengchun 吳風春, an administrator of the ruins, told a Reuters correspondent, "There is a desire, but there is no financial ability."<sup>78</sup>

**Figure 60**

One of the first Western 'palaces' built in the Yuan Ming Yuan Gardens estate\*



Various developers, from Hong Kong, Korea and elsewhere, have been at pains to prove their patriotic credentials by proposing to rebuild the gardens. These plans were thwarted by the recent fall of their patron, Mayor Chen Xitong 陳希同. Implicated in numerous corrupt real-estate deals in the city, Chen is renowned among Peking residents for enforcing a building code in the early 1990s that required new high-rise buildings to be capped with mock-traditional-style rooves, so-called 'Chen Xitong hats' (*Chen Xitong maozi* 陳希同帽子). The more canny businessmen avoided the scandals surrounding Mayor Chen and have satisfied their vanity for grand projects by investing instead in a new luxury villa development, the Yuan Ming Yuan Gardens (Yuanming Huayuan 圓明花園), built along the northern wall of the old palaces.

Others have used methods more in keeping with either tradition or post-tradition to achieve

a similar end: in 1983 the Taiwan–Hong Kong director Li Han-hsiang 李翰祥 had a set made of the Western palaces near the Ming Tombs for his film “The Burning of the Yuan Ming Yuan” 火燒圓明園. Liu Zuo 劉佐, of the Tianyi Arts and Crafts Development Corporation in Langfang County 廊坊縣, Hebei province, has employed a traditional model-making method using sorghum stalks to recreate the pavilions of the gardens. It took Liu three years, four million yuan (US\$482,000) and thirty tonnes of sorghum stalks to complete a miniature-scale version of about half the original gardens.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, the Zhuda Computer Company of Beijing 北京珠達電腦動畫公司 embarked on a digital reconstruction of some of the Western Palaces, and of the Audience Hall<sup>80</sup>; and in Canada a group of enthusiasts at the Xingxing 幸星 Company have been constructing a virtual Yuan Ming Yuan on the internet since 1995 with the support of the University of British Columbia.<sup>81</sup>

**Figure 61**

Director Li Han-hsiang and set designer Song Hongrong 宋洪榮 outside the film-set version of *View of Distant Seas* (photograph by Liang Shuang 梁爽)



**Figures 62 & 63**

*The sorghum-stalk Audience Hall (Reuters) and a pavilion from Elevated Region of the Magical Pot (Fanghu Shengjing)\**



<sup>79</sup> Ibid. The details of Liu Zuo's obsession are worth recounting here. He first developed the idea of rebuilding the palace in 1991 when he came across a 1924 book by Puzuo 溥佐, a member of the imperial clan and cousin of the dethroned Emperor Puyi. It contained detailed drawings of the palaces. Liu was subsequently alerted to the possibilities of using sorghum stalks to make models by a television programme about an artisan who specialised in the technique. He bought the patent for the

/process for 50,000 yuan (US\$6,000), and then purchased from the State Bureau for the Preservation of Cultural Relics the patent of a solution that could prevent cracks and mould, as well as keep pests at bay, to apply to the sorghum models. Finally, he found 2.7 hectares of farmland outside Peking to grow the sorghum and leased a 3,500-square-metre abandoned factory in Langfang, where eighty artisans spent three years working on the project. Unable to find a buyer for the final

/model, from late 1996 Liu started selling off the pavilions separately. He also began offering poetic scenes made to order, ranging in price from US\$100 to \$50,000, which would require anything from two weeks to a year to complete. (Details from Lim, “Model recreates China's burnt Summer Palace.”)

<sup>80</sup> See Barmé, “Yuan Ming Yuan: a digital reconstruction of the old Summer Palace.” *Beijing Scene*, 23–29 February 1996, pp.4–5.

<sup>81</sup> [www.cs.ubc.ca:80/spider/cchen/ymyi01.htm](http://www.cs.ubc.ca:80/spider/cchen/ymyi01.htm)

While these computer-generated reconstructions develop apace in cyberspace, in the ancient garden city of Hangzhou another far more palpable version of the Yuan Ming Yuan fantasy has been created. This is the Yuan Meng Yuan 圓夢園 near the Qiantang River 錢塘江. Advertisements for this villa estate, the name of which means the “Gardens for Perfecting One’s Dreams,” featured widely in the streets of the southern city throughout 1996. Further south, in a theme park in Zhuhai 珠海, the Special Economic Zone bordering on Macao, an architectural miscegenation of Yuan Ming Yuan pavilions has been built. A more appropriate geopolitical commemoration of the northern site, however, can be found in Shanghai where, behind the former British Consulate on the Bund (—the more recent Friendship Store), there runs a road named simply Yuan Ming Yuan Lu 圓明園路.

**Figure 64**

*Shops at the entrance to the Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park and the Wanchun Yuan Apartments complex. The sign, put up at the time of the XII Asian Games in 1990, reads “With smiles we welcome guests from throughout the world, who are sure to be satisfied at Yuan Ming”\**



### *A Future in Ruins*

<sup>82</sup> Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.429.

A life as a *Trümmerfeld* requires perhaps something more than garish refurbishments and fanciful simulacra. Fortunately, the tasteless hand of the present, occupied as it is with the eastern precincts of the grounds of the Garden of Perfect Brightness, has yet to reach out and overwhelm the unkempt remains of the original Yuan Ming Yuan.

As Rose Macaulay has observed, “It should be one of the pleasures of palace ruins that their luxurious past should drift about them like a cultured and well-fed ghost, whispering of beauty and wealth.”<sup>82</sup> Yet few cultured and well-fed ghosts disport themselves in the grounds of the Yuan Ming Yuan, and no real heroes’ lives adorn its history; there is no individual whose tragic

tale or sorry fate has given birth to a literature of melancholy or imagination that is associated with the palaces. In Chinese accounts there is only a passing reference to the chief eunuch Wen Feng 文豐, who drowned himself in the Sea of Plenitude when the Western troops first breached the gates, his ruler, the Xianfeng Emperor, having hastily fled to Jehol ostensibly to embark on the 'autumn hunt'.

Unlike the threnody for Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 contained in Bo Juyi's 白居易 "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" (*Changben ge* 長恨歌) there is no literature of note that elicits pity, for example, for the fate of Xiang Fei 香妃, the Fragrant Concubine from Turkestan who, according to legend, lived out her days in the Western Palaces. Nor are there any writings that mourn the horrors wrought on the subjects of the emperor as in Du Mu's 杜牧 poem "Apang Palace" (*Apang gong* 阿房宮) that described the royal domain of Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 and its plangent fate. Even less is there a Lady Mengjiang 孟姜女 whose legend is forever married to the grandest of ruins, the Great Wall. Perhaps only in one major literary work does the lavish style of the Garden of Perfect Brightness survive, albeit in a much-reworked guise. For there is speculation that the Prospect Garden, the Daguan Yuan 大觀園, of Cao Xueqin's novel *The Story of the Stone* is based on these same imperial gardens.<sup>83</sup>

Apart from desultory accounts by some visitors—a few Western, and others Chinese literati-official—the details of the history of the Yuan Ming Yuan must be pieced together from the Veritable Records of the emperors, dynastic archives and the elliptical accounts of imperial inventories covering the building, refurbishing, expansion and alteration of structures and sites around the gardens. These are laconic materials, giving little of the lifeblood of detail that might bring the gardens at the height of their glory into closer view. They help us too little to imagine the living history of the place.

There has been scant love in China for the Manchu-Qing and its rulers. As the 1990s have progressed, however, the glories of the Qianlong era have been touted as a worthy heritage for the revenant nation; but the lack of any abiding affection is not merely the result of decades of anti-feudal indoctrination. Perhaps it is because the Qing was a 'foreign' dynasty and that it succumbed too readily to Confucian-literati culture; or it may be that its ignominious decline, that harrowing process that unfolded over nearly a century, still leaves people bitter and unforgiving. Perhaps its last rulers—the increasingly lacklustre emperors from the time of Xianfeng in the 1850s to the Empress Dowager and her coterie—so lack those qualities that inspire either love or awe that the shadow of dynastic decline obscures the first great symbol of its ruination, the Garden of Perfect Brightness. Perhaps it is also because all of this horror and its attendant shame is too fresh in memory, too painfully recent in time, for people to feel that they can afford to indulge in either sentiment or nostalgia.

For many of the foreign chroniclers of the decline of the Yuan Ming Yuan ruins since the mid-nineteenth century—George Kates and Hope Danby

<sup>83</sup> See Dai Yi, *Qianlongdi ji qi shidai* [Emperor Qianlong and his era] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue, 1992), pp. 494–8. A full description of Prospect Garden can be found in chapters 17 and 18 of *Honglou meng*. See *The story of the stone, a Chinese novel by Cao Xueqin in five volumes*, vol. 1: *The golden days*, trans. by David Hawkes (Harmondsworth, Mddlx: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 324–74. Cao, who lived nearby and whose relatives may have worked in the palace as it expanded under Qianlong, would have certainly been familiar with the Yuan Ming Yuan. See also John Minford, "The Chinese garden: death of a symbol," unpublished manuscript.

<sup>84</sup> Danby, *Garden of perfect brightness*, p.229.

<sup>85</sup> See Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and empire: the evolution of a theme in Augustan and Romantic literature* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), and Anne Janowitz, *England's ruins: poetic purpose and the national landscape* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

being among the most eloquent and plaintive in their accounts—the gardens are tragically romantic. As Danby wrote upon leaving the Yuan Ming Yuan through the crumbling walls near the Western Palaces in the late 1930s:

We turned away reluctantly, seeing the sun as it set behind the screen of blue-green hills that still looked like a dreamy Ming picture. Nature, serene and undisturbed, had taken no heed of the passions of men. She had gone on her way calmly and indifferently, secure in her strength and beauty which had inexorably outlived all the fancies, extravagances and artificialities of the Sons of Heaven of the Great Pure Dynasty.<sup>84</sup>

This the tenor of comments by Western travellers nurtured by the grand lust for ruins that has risen since the early days of the industrial revolution. So it is, perhaps, as the economic boom of the Reform era spawns dreams of classical greatness, the ruins of the Garden of Perfect Brightness will gradually achieve in the minds of future generations a sense of poetic mission.<sup>85</sup>

So far the Yuan Ming Yuan has fared better than many architectural glories and classical sites of imperial China. Although plundered in the Republic—hit by that wave of destructive glee that carried off the walls of the Imperial City, saw the creation of Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 military reviewing podium where once stood the pavilion of the Fragrant Concubine opposite the

#### Figure 65

*The Ancestral Halls (Vast Benevolence and Eternal Blessings, Hongci Yonghu 鴻慈永祐) as depicted in the Forty Scenes.*

*"In China the loveliest spots are always chosen for temples and burial-grounds, and Ch'ien Lung selected the north-west corner of the enclosure for the temple. A low circle of hills gave perfect seclusion to the site that was approached by a road winding through pine-shaded glades.*

*"... the Ancestral Temple ... was the perfection of Chinese architecture. It was double roofed, with many huge red-lacquered pillars supporting the painted eaves; its tiles were golden-coloured and its walls painted a deep earth-red. With the dazzling white of the marble, the dark green of the pines, the shining bronze of the incense-burners and pairs of deer and storks, and the background of blue and purple hills, it was a scene without parallel in dignity, splendour and majesty."*

*(—Danby, Garden of Perfect Brightness, pp.55–6)*



Xinhua Gate 新華門 entrance to the Sea Palaces, and which witnessed the craven occupation of those palaces, Zhongnanhai, by the new government—the area of the gardens remained intact. Even so its contents were, as we have noted, mined for their wealth of building materials and decorative fixtures, and then used to adorn the new public structures and gardens of the jerry-built democracy of the Chinese capital.

The Yuan Ming Yuan was far enough from Peking to be spared much of the onslaught of socialist reconstruction in the 1950s. Kangxi's Changchun Yuan and the other desolate gardens to the south of the Yuan Ming Yuan were none of them able to withstand the zeal for change. Although much of Kangxi's pleasance exists today as a bus-parking lot and open fields, the other parks (Shao Yuan, Minghe Yuan 鳴鶴園, Jingchun Yuan 鏡春園 and Langrun Yuan) were overtaken by the expansive grasp of Yanjing 燕京 (now Peking) University and to an extent preserved. The faculty dormitory buildings of the Weixiu Yuan 蔚秀園, for example, retain a hint of their origins, surrounded as they are by artificial lotus ponds and interconnecting lakes. Similarly, the northern areas of the university campus around Weiming Lake 未名湖 reflect the contours of their scenic past.

Although the resuscitated eastern half of the Garden of Perfect Brightness has been gazetted as "The Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park" and the grounds to the West remain neglected, it seems there will be no vouchsafing the northern section of the demesne. For recent maps of the city show that a new Fifth Ring Road 五環路—the next macadamized bulwark to enclose the ever-expanding urban blight of Peking—is planned to run directly through the northern precincts of the gardens. If the maps hold true then both the Cold Mountain and the original area of the Ancestral Halls (Hongci Yonghu), one of Qianlong's favourite spots in the royal domain, will be obliterated.

Despite this final destruction, and the encirclement of the grounds by the polluting embrace of a superhighway, I would venture that there will be time aplenty for the Garden of Perfect Brightness to rise in romantic stature. As China becomes economically more boisterous and urbanised, the scope for nostalgia will increase manifold. Gradually, the Yuan Ming Yuan may well become more than a *Trümmerfeld* scattered with reminders of the imperial will ignobled, its classical splendour despoiled. It may grow from the rancorous confines of a spiteful and crudely manipulated nationalism to become a ruin of grandeur and wonderment, to be more exquisite in death than it was marvellous in life.<sup>86</sup>

In the grand sweep of time, the Garden of Perfect Brightness is still a youthful site; it has only just embarked on its life in ruins, one that has already been more eventful and dramatic than its existence as a palace.

In conclusion, I would like to recount a story told to me by Dr Stephen FitzGerald, Australia's first ambassador to Peking in the 1970s. It was on the eve of the devastating Tangshan earthquake in the summer of 1976. Dr FitzGerald was accompanying Mr Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister

Figure 66

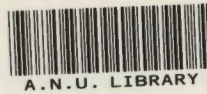
A street number from Fuyuan Village\*



<sup>86</sup> See Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.440.



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whose government recognized the People's Republic of China—an act that among other things made my years in China as an exchange student from 1974 possible—around the Chinese capital. Together they visited the overgrown and, at the time, unprettified remains of the Western Palaces of the Yuan Ming Yuan. Mr Whitlam surveyed all that was before him with the imperious gaze for which he is justly renowned. Then, in his ponderous and breathy accent, he declared:

“I love ruins.”

Ladies and gentlemen, so do I.

Figure 67

Photograph by Lois Conner



#### ENDNOTE

The proverbial phrase *Et in arcadia ego* has a particular resonance, be it as a thinly-veiled classical moral or an indulgent elegiac sentiment, as we contemplate the history of the Garden of Perfect Brightness. It is both a *memento mori*, a reminder that even in the most paradisiacal surroundings there lurks death, and a statement that “I too have been in Arcadia.”

Coined in the early seventeenth century by Giulio Rospigliosi (later Pope Clement IX), who was inspired by the Fifth Book of Virgil's *Eclagues*, the line has been used by artists and writers ever since to explore the complex relationship between a halcyon past and the ever-present pall of death. The first work on this theme was a painting by Giovanni Francesco Guercino commissioned by Rospigliosi, although the most famous depiction of it is Nicolas Poussin's 1630s “Et in Arcadia ego,” now in the Louvre. Goethe called one chapter of his *Italien Reise* “Auch ich in Arkadien,” and Evelyn Waugh uses the Latin tag as the title of “Book One” in *Brideshead Revisited*.

See Erwin Panofsky, “‘Et in Arcadia ego’: Poussin and the elegiac tradition,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1955), pp.295–320.

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