

## The Garden of Perfect Brightness—3 Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860-present)

by Lillian M. Li

Opium War:  
The Final Act

Plundering  
Paradise

Collecting  
Loot

Relics &  
Controversy

Ruins &  
Memory

Sources  
& Credits



*The earliest known photographs of the ruins of the European section of the Yuanmingyuan were taken by Ernst Ohlmer in 1873, just 13 years after the looting and destruction of the site. 12 of the original glass negatives were collected for an exhibition at Beijing's China Millennium Monument in 2011. This depicts the north side of the Xieqiqu, one of the main palaces.*

[ohlmer\_1873]

*In October 1860, the Second Opium War came to a violent end when British and French forces sacked and destroyed the sumptuous imperial retreat known as the Yuanmingyuan. This was defended at the time as a proper response to the torture and murder by Qing officials of a delegation of foreigners sent to Beijing in the final stages of the conflict. In the imperialistic rhetoric of the time, wantonly destroying one of the greatest treasures and pleasures of the imperial court was justified as a fitting and civilized act by which to punish China and its leaders for their barbaric behavior.*

*The sack of the Garden of Perfect Brightness was thoroughgoing and left no buildings intact. Although scavenging and looting of the site continued for decades thereafter, for all practical purposes the Chinese section was obliterated while the stone and marble palaces and pavilions of the European section survived only as ruins and rubble. Yet the Yuanmingyuan also lived on in two very different, but equally compelling, ways.*

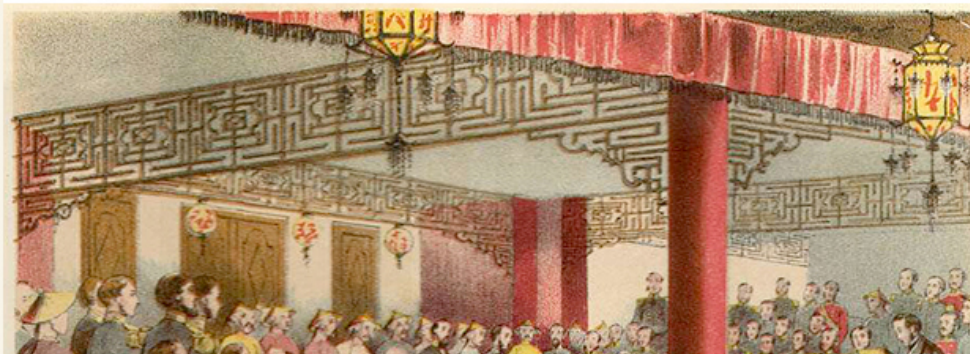
*Despite the rampant trashing of untold treasures that had been housed in this vast complex, many valuable objects of art were taken as plunder and made their way into the great “Oriental” collections of the West, particularly in England and France. The issue of looted Chinese art and artifacts, many dating back to this time, continues to make news today.*

*On the other side of the coin, in Chinese popular consciousness the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan has lived on as perhaps the single most powerful symbol of modern China’s humiliation at the hands of the rapacious foreigners. The ruins of the Western buildings have been turned into a popular theme park—simultaneously a stark reminder of Western barbarity and celebration of Chinese nationalism. Once the nation’s Communist leaders reversed course and embraced rather than denounced the accomplishments of earlier generations—even the Manchu emperors—the Garden of Perfect Brightness became a natural media window for remembering and embracing the great traditions and accomplishments of China’s past.*

#### **OPIUM WARS: THE FINAL ACT**

In October 1860, British and French troops plundered and destroyed virtually the entire Yuanmingyuan complex of elegant Chinese and European-style buildings. This notorious act marked the final chapter in the so-called Second Opium War (1856-60), and became a vivid symbol of rapacious Western imperialism to which Chinese historians have never ceased to call attention. Dissatisfied with the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing that ended the First Opium War (1839-42), the British and French used various pretexts to secure further trade rights, gain missionary privileges, and, in particular, establish diplomatic representation at Beijing. They wished to conduct diplomatic relations with China as equal sovereign states rather than following outdated tributary-state rituals traditionally demanded by the Chinese court. By so doing, they could further their own imperial ambitions in China.

In 1858, after a series of naval skirmishes, British forces under Lord Elgin (James Bruce, son of Thomas Bruce of “Elgin Marbles” fame) proceeded to northern China. Backed by French troops, they captured the Dagu (Taku) forts, and arrived at the port of Tianjin (Tientsin), about 80 miles from Beijing. Under the threat of direct force, the emperor Xianfeng (r. 1851 to 1862)—only 27 years old—authorized two high-ranking officials to negotiate the Treaty of Tianjin, which gave the foreign powers practically everything they sought.





SIGNING OF THE TREATY OF TEINTSIN

*Lord Elgin at the 1858 "Signing of the Treaty of Tientsin," frontispiece, Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the years 1857, '58, '59, volume 1, by Laurence Oliphant, published 1859.*

[1858\_TreatyTeintsin\_bx]



*For more British views of the 1859 campaign from this volume, [View on Google Books](#)*

The next year, the newly-appointed British envoy Frederick Bruce, who was the brother of Lord Elgin, returned to China expecting to exchange treaty ratifications in Beijing. The court, seeking every way to avoid this, ordered an attack on British forces at Dagu forts when they tried to proceed to Beijing by river rather than the prescribed land route. Taken by surprise, the British lost four gunboats and 89 men, and sustained hundreds of casualties. They were forced to retreat.

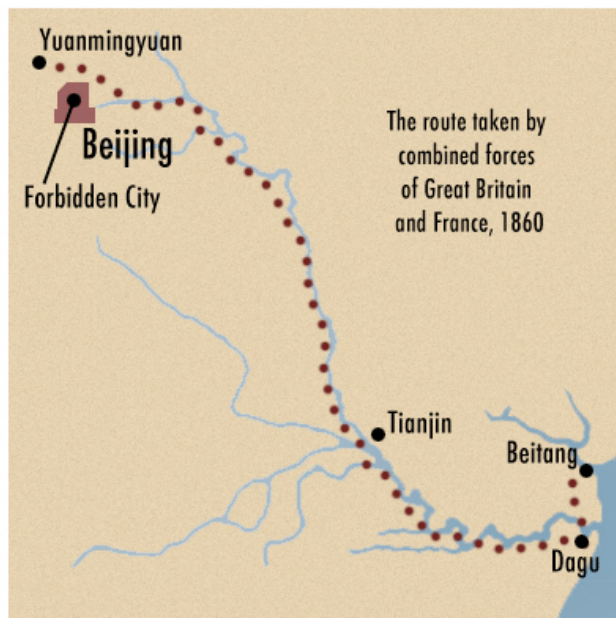
The French supported the British and the two nations returned the following summer with a much larger joint military force. On August 21, 1860, they successfully attacked the Dagu forts and, four days later, took the city of Tianjin. At this point the court agreed to have treaty ratifications take place in Beijing, but further complications developed when the court ordered the arrest of Harry Parkes, a controversial British diplomat who was serving as the interpreter to Lord Elgin. The British forces continued to advance on Beijing, reaching the northern Anding Gate of the Forbidden City on October 5.

*Photographer Felice Beato accompanied the British expeditionary force and took this picture of the Anding Gate on the northern wall of the Forbidden City just after the surrender in October. The photograph shows the semi-circular enceinte and guardhouse that guarded the inner gate, the three-storied structure on the left.*

[ymy7104]



Two days later a French contingent reached the Yuanmingyuan, northwest of the city, and started to rampage and loot the buildings.



*The combined forces of Great Britain and France attacked the Dagu forts on August 21, 1860, proceeded inland to Beijing and, in a final punitive gesture, razed the Yuanmingyuan.*

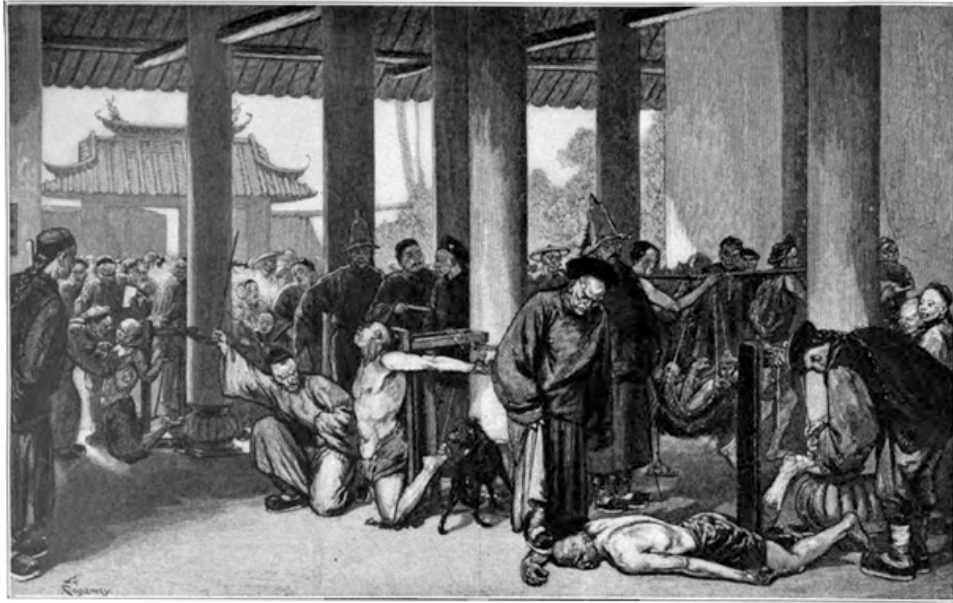


The Xianfeng emperor and most of the court fled to Chengde (Jehol), leaving the emperor's younger brother, Prince Gong (1833–98), in charge. On October 13, Prince Gong acceded to a British ultimatum and opened the Anding Gate, saving the city from siege.

*"Portrait of Yixin, 1st Prince Gong"  
photograph by Felice Beato,  
November 2, 1860.*

[ymy7123]

When the British learned of the brutal fate of Parkes' entourage, however—19 dead and evidence of torture—they decided on October 18 and 19 to burn down the Yuanmingyuan as a "solemn act of retribution." Just days later, on October 24, the agreement now called the Treaty of Beijing was signed. [\[1\]](#)



**ADMINISTRATION OF CHINESE JUSTICE**  
*Painting by F. Regamey*

*This illustration in Robert Douglas' 1906 book China conveys the lingering outrage over the imprisonment and torture of the large diplomatic delegation to Beijing led by Harry Parkes at the end of the Opium War. The death of 19 of the emissaries was used as a rationale for punishing the "barbaric" Chinese by destroying the Yuanmingyuan.*

[1906\_180a\_RbtDouglas]



*The Earl of Elgin (seated) and his entourage after the visit of Prince Gong, Beijing, ca. Nov. 2, 1860, photographed by Felice Beato.*

[ymy7113]

*Cousin de Montauban was the commander of the French forces. Although the French were full partners with the British forces in the invasion and the looting of the Yuanmingyuan, Montauban is said to have disagreed with the British decision to burn the palaces and other buildings. 2*

*Image from Souvenirs de Voyage: Lettres Intimes sur la Campagne de Chine en 1860 by Armand Lucy*

[1861\_Armand\_Lucy\_Souvenirs\_gb016]




CH. COUSIN DE MONTAUBAN  
GÉNÉRAL DE DIVISION. SÉNATEUR  
Grand-Croix de l'ordre impérial de la Légion-d'Honneur.  
de l'ordre pontifical de Pie IX,  
Chevalier-Commandeur de l'ordre du Bain,  
Commandant en chef le corps expéditionnaire de Chine.

左  
督  
邦

Elgin later explained that he laid waste to the extensive Yuanmingyuan complex because this extraordinary imperial retreat was “the emperor’s favorite residence, and its destruction could not fail to be a blow to his pride as well as to his feelings.” And indeed the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan was not only a challenge to China’s sovereignty and authority, but also a symbolic act of violence against the emperor himself. The young emperor, like his father and grandfather, had grown up and lived in the garden paradise. He never returned to Beijing, but died at Chengde in 1861. Some said he was ashamed of his flight, and had died of heartache over the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan, but it was also true that he was in frail health brought on—it was said—by a life of dissipation. [3]

*On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: click here.*

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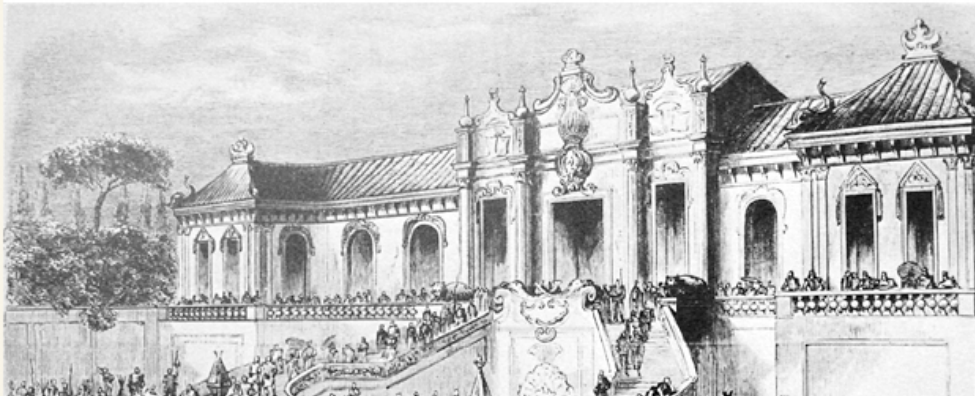
### PLUNDERING PARADISE

The plunder that took place before the burning of the palaces was perhaps even more shocking than the destruction of the buildings themselves. The British said that the first round of “plunder and wanton destruction” was the work of the French. Soon, however, the British did more than their share. They ransacked each building, appropriating the contents of the private quarters and public rooms. Great amounts of gold, furs, robes, silks, jades, porcelains, and statues were taken, as well as Western clocks and ornaments—gifts of the 1793 Macartney mission, or from European contacts of earlier eras. Much was destroyed or damaged in the melee.

Numerous first-person accounts by both British and French dramatize the total, unbridled greed and savagery, and the extent to which the violence was wreaked on material objects. Frederick Stephenson, adjutant-general of the British army, wrote his brother:

*The rooms and halls of audience... and specially the Emperor's bedroom, were literally crammed with the most lovely knick-knacks you can conceive.... Large magazines full of richly ornamented robes lined with costly furs, such as ermine and sable, were ruthlessly pulled from their shelves, and those that did not please the eye, thrown aside and trampled under foot. There were large storerooms full of fans. Mandarins' hats, and clothes of every description, others again piled up to the ceiling with rolls of silk, all embroidered, and to an incredible amount.... All these were plundered and pulled to pieces, floors were literally covered with fur robes, jade ornaments, porcelain, sweetmeats, and beautiful wood carvings. [4]*

Garnet Wolseley, a lieutenant colonel with the British forces at the time, later recalled arriving at the Yuanmingyuan just in time to see “a string of French soldiers going in empty-handed and another coming out laden with loot of all sorts and kinds. Many were dressed in the richly embroidered gowns of women, and almost all wore fine Chinese hats instead of the French kepi.” [5] The riotous scene he recalled actually found representation in prints published in France at the time.





*Occupation of the Yuanmingyuan by Anglo-French Forces,  
published in L'illustration, December 22, 1860, France.  
(full image and detail highlighted in red)*

[ymy7121] Wikimedia Commons







*Almost a mirror-image of the illustration of French revelers in front of one of the looted European-style palaces that appeared in L'Illustration, this print was done by G. C. de Fortavion, an artist who accompanied the French high command in China in 1860.*

*(full image and detail highlighted in red)*

[ymy7102]

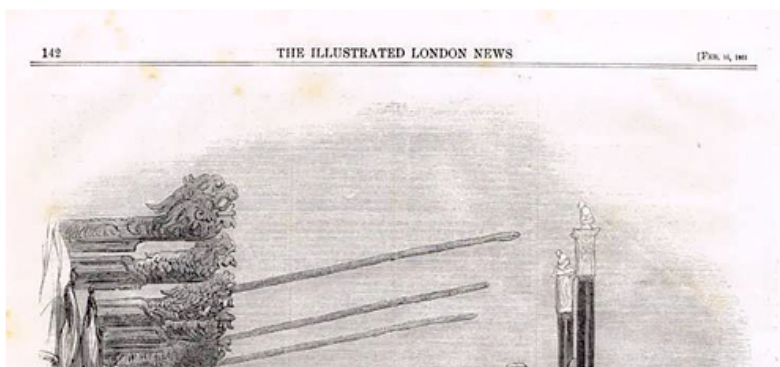
*This vivid illustration from a French memoir published by Armand Lucy in 1860 depicts a French soldier leading on a leash a mustachioed Chinese "peasant" who carries a halberd, dwarfs him in height, and carries various items taken from the Yuanmingyuan on his back. The soldier carries a parasol in one hand and a fan in the other. His booty includes, remarkably, a bird in a cage.*

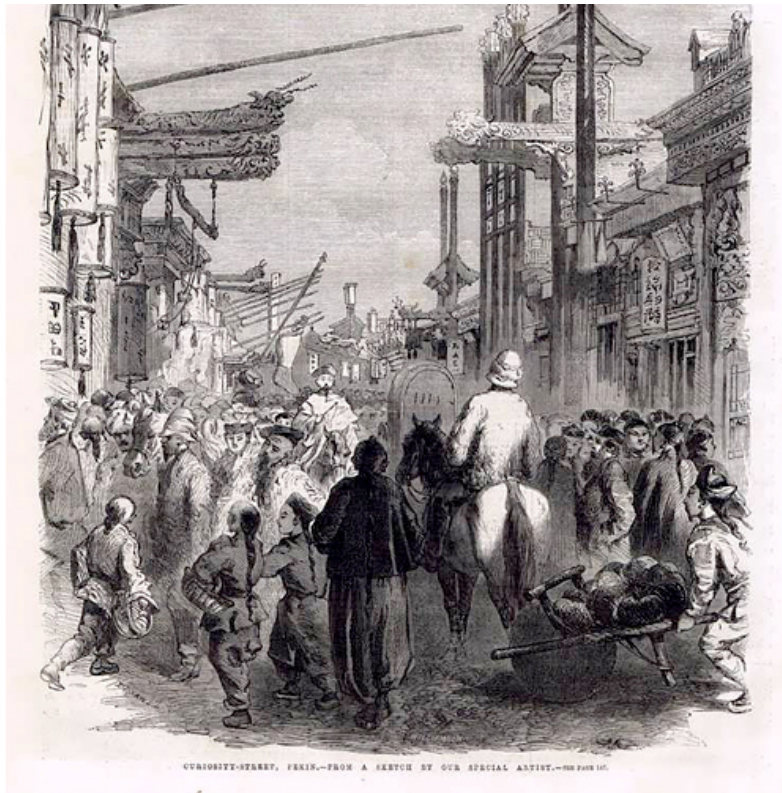


Caption under the drawing:  
 "Cela s'appelle: ENTREPRISE DE DÉMÉNAGEMENTS CHAUVIN ET Cie, POUR LA CAMPAGNE ET L'ÉTRANGER." (translation: "This is called: Business and Removal Chauvin and Co., Campaign and Abroad.")

[8161\_113\_Armand\_Lucy\_gb135]  
 Google Books

Both the British and French called attention to the fact that local Chinese also took advantage of the chaos at the Yuanmingyuan to help themselves to works of art and other precious items. Many of these looted goods showed up in the antique shops at Liulichang, which the British called "Curiosity Street."





*"Curiosity-Street, Peking," an illustration in the Illustrated London News, Feb. 16, 1861, shows the market where looted goods were likely to be traded.*

[ymy7111] Wikimedia Commons

The burning of the palace two weeks later was accompanied by mixed feelings of triumph, awe, and revulsion. Captain Charles Gordon—later to be famous as the leader of the Ever-Victorious Army against the Taiping rebels and still later as "Gordon of Khartoum"—wrote home to his mother and sister that after receiving orders to burn the palace:

*We accordingly went out, and after pillaging it, burned the whole place, destroying in a Vandal-like manner most valuable property, which would not be replaced for four millions... You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them; in fact these palaces were so large, and we were so pressed for time, that we could not plunder them carefully. Quantities of gold ornaments were burnt, considered as brass. It was wretchedly demoralizing work for an army. Everybody was wild for plunder. [6]*

As soon as these events occurred, conflicting accusations flew: the British saw the French as the initiators of the looting, while the French pointed out that they had not participated in the burning of the palaces. The British had devised their own method for dealing with the spoils of war: they allowed soldiers to do some looting, but required them to turn over the goods to a common pool for later auction. The proceeds were then divided among soldiers and officers according to rank. Thus much of the loot reached a public market; items were not necessarily taken home by the individual who had seized them.

Valuable objects from the imperial collections ended up in museums in England and France. Others were offered for sale at fashionable auction houses in London and Paris. Still other items were retained in family collections in private homes all over Europe, but particularly in England.

## Victor Hugo's Letter of Protest

Both the British and French illustrated press published engravings depicting this vandalism, and the great French writer Victor Hugo expressed his shame over his country's actions in scathing words that carry a ring of prophesy to the present day:

*One day two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One plundered, the other burned...Before history, one of the two bandits will be called France; the other will be called England. But I protest, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity! the crimes of those who lead are not the fault of those who are led; Governments are sometimes bandits, peoples never.*

Writing to his friend Captain Butler, he wrote emotionally and scathingly of the wanton destruction of the Summer Palace, which he considered to be "a wonder of the world," comparing it to the Parthenon in Greece, the pyramids in Egypt, the Coliseum in Rome, and Notre-Dame in Paris. He said it was a work of the people.

*If people did not see it they imagined it. It was a kind of tremendous unknown masterpiece, glimpsed from the distance in a kind of twilight, like a silhouette of the civilization of Asia on the horizon of the civilization of Europe.*


He compared Elgin's destruction of the Summer Palace to the theft of marbles from the Parthenon. Then, in a voice heard echoed a century and half later, he opined:

*The French empire has pocketed half of this victory, and today with a kind of proprietorial naivety, it displays the splendid bric-a-brac of the Summer Palace. I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China.*

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### COLLECTING LOOT

The quantity of treasures stolen from the Yuanmingyuan that reached European museums and private collections was staggering. James Hevia has argued that the public seizure, flaunting, display, and later sales of the crowns, jewels, silks, furs, and other personal artifacts belonging to the emperor and his family was in the first instance a sign of the triumph of European imperialism over the Chinese empire. During the looting, some of the more conspicuous items were plundered explicitly in the name of Queen Victoria or Emperor Napoleon III. A Pekinese dog taken from the emperor's palace was named "Looty" by the British officers, and later presented personally to Queen Victoria. [7]



LOOTY, A LITTLE DOG FOUND IN THE SUMMER PALACE, NEAR PEKIN.—SEE SUPPLEMENT, PAGE 563.

#### THE VICTORIA PRESS.

...tion of women into the printing trade can now claim the  
... to a successful experiment. The Victoria Press was  
... 1860, and has therefore stood the test of one year's  
... ment over all the preliminary difficulties with  
... could not fail to be attended. The  
... that former failures were to be  
... the nature of the work. They

to the interests of women, he also joined  
Press continues to obtain the public  
extended to it there is no doubt  
a commercial undertaking, and  
only ground on which the  
urged.

Visitors are all  
five o'clock  
was

*"Looty, A Little Dog Found in the Summer Palace, near Pekin." This picture and story appeared in the Illustrated London News, June 15, 1861. The origin of the Pekinese breed in Europe is often attributed to "Looty," who was presented to Queen Victoria by the British forces who sacked the Yuanmingyuan (widely known at the time as the "Summer Palace").*

[1861\_June15\_Looty]



the International

Exhibition of 1862.



London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company.

No. 35.—Enamels, from the Emperor of China's Palace.

*"Enamels, from the Emperor of China's Palace" is the caption of an 1862 stereograph published by the London Stereoscopic and Photography Company.*

[1862\_MSC-28b] Terry Bennett Collection

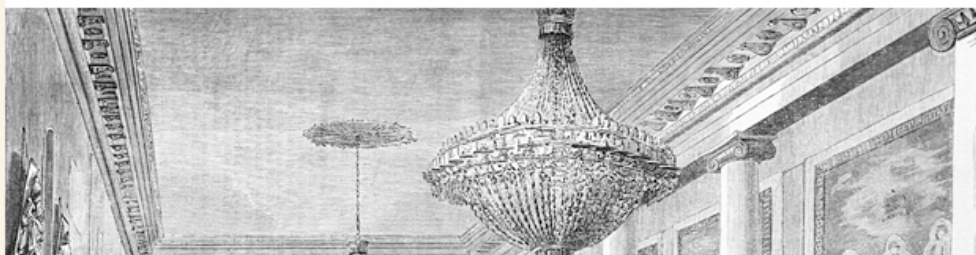
After the sack of the Yuanmingyuan, French officers presented a large cache of treasures to Napoleon III and his empress Eugénie. Initially displayed at the Tuileries Palace, they were moved to Fontainebleau Castle near Paris in 1863. Some 400 treasures from the Yuanmingyuan—many dating from the Qianlong period (1736 to 1795) including jades, cloisonné, lacquer, textiles, and objects in gold as well as bronze—filled a suite of three rooms at Fontainebleau called the Musée Chinois (Chinese Museum), where they remain to the present day.

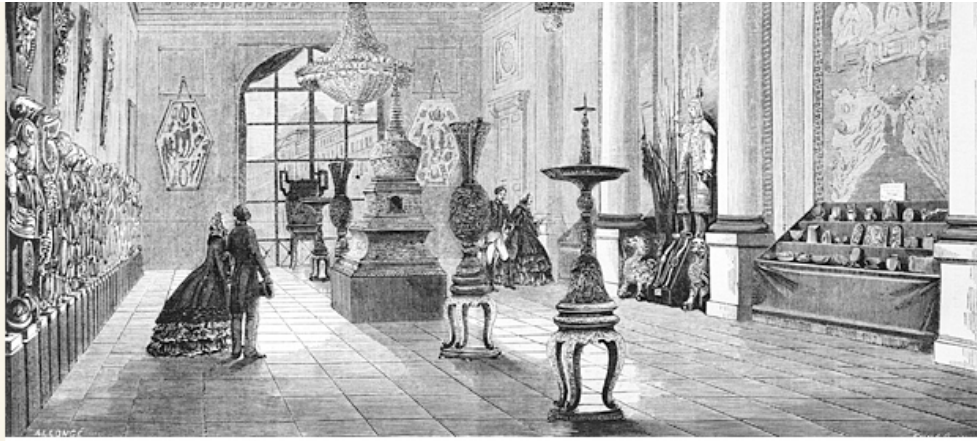


*"French Spoils from China Recently Exhibited at the Palace of the Tuileries"*

Illustrated  
London News,  
April 13, 1861

[1861\_ILN\_Apr13]





*"Exposition des curiosités Chinoises offertes à l'empereur par l'armée expéditionnaire" (Exhibition of the Chinese curiosities given to the Emperor by the expeditionary army), an illustration published in Le Monde Illustré, 1861*

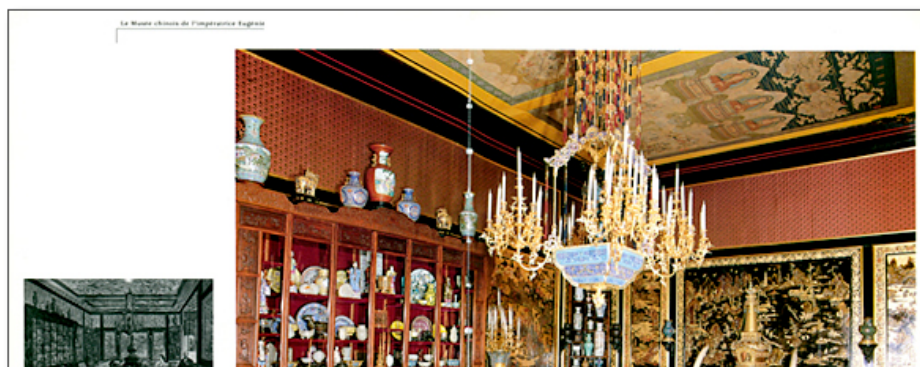
[1861\_ExChCurio\_brd]

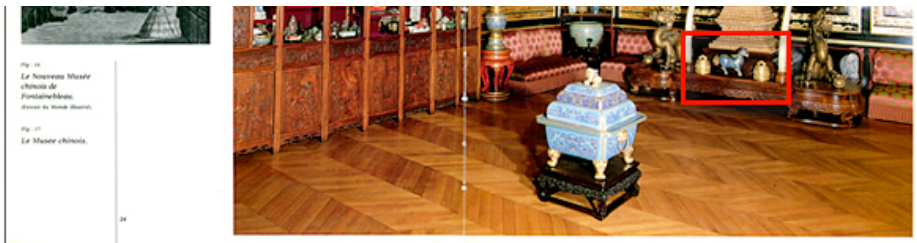


Le nouveau Musée chinois de S. M. l'Impératrice, installé dans le palais de Fontainebleau. (d'après le croquis de M. Moullin.)

*The July 4, 1863 issue of Le Monde Illustré featured a depiction of the new Chinese museum of the Empress Eugénie at Fontainebleau. Caption: "Le nouveau Musée chinois de S. M. l'Impératrice, installé dans le palais de Fontainebleau", Bertrand & Lix from a sketch by Moullin.*

[1863\_4July\_moullin]





*The 1863 illustration was juxtaposed with a photograph of one of the recently restored Chinese rooms in the 1994 catalog Le Musée Chinois de l'Impératrice Eugénie to show how closely the original installation was maintained. The luxurious ambiance at Fontainebleau palace underscores the imperial provenance of precious relics acquired in the 1860 sack of the Yuanmingyuan.*

[1994\_Musee\_Chinois\_p24]



*Chinese objects include a blue and gold cloisonné "chimera"—a mythic animal with a lion's body and dragon's head—and an elegantly embossed pair of bronze bells (detail highlighted in above in red).*



The Chinese rooms house the Empress's original collection of jades, gold, cloisonné, lacquer, and textiles. One of the most striking displays at Fontainebleau is a set of five ritual vessels of blue and gold cloisonné. They are pictured in the museum catalog resting on a set of five red lacquered stools against a background of French chandeliers, which might sound culturally discordant but in fact seems totally appropriate in the ornate and aristocratic setting of this castle.





*Five ritual vessels from the Yuanmingyuan, pictured on pages 62-63 of the 1994 exhibition catalog, Le Musée Chinois de l'Impératrice Eugénie at Fontainebleau.*

[1994\_Musée\_Chinois\_p62-62]

Soon after the events of 1860, loot from the Yuanmingyuan began to appear as commodities on the market in London and Paris. Between March 1861 and June 1866, more than a dozen sales were held at London auction houses. [8] Over the years, many of these objects changed hands more than once, increasing their financial value. The availability of such prized "collector's items" launched another phase or stage of Orientalism. Although Chinese porcelains and designs had long been valued by the monarchs and aristocrats of Europe, and even popularized through Chinese export-ware, in the mid-19th century the taste for *chinoiserie* received a great boost from the looting of the Yuanmingyuan. [9]

In the ensuing century and a half, items from the Yuanmingyuan—sometimes not explicitly identified as such—continued to appear on the market. The catalog of an auction at Christie's Hong Kong on April 30, 2000 was titled "The Imperial Sale—Yuanmingyuan," yet only a few items were explicitly advertised with a Yuanmingyuan provenance, probably out of apprehension that the Chinese government might demand their repatriation.

*Title page of "The Imperial Sale—Yuanmingyuan" catalog, Christie's Hong Kong, 2000*

[2000\_ImpCat]

## THE IMPERIAL SALE —YUANMINGYUAN—

### AUCTION

SUNDAY, 30 APRIL 2000  
4.30 PM (LOTS 501-633)  
JW MARRIOTT HOTEL, PACIFIC PLACE,  
88 QUEENSWAY, HONG KONG

ENQUIRIES AT THE JW MARRIOTT HOTEL

GENERAL ENQUIRIES TEL: (852) 2918 1362 FAX: (852) 2877 1709

BIDS TEL: (852) 2918 1761 FAX: (852) 2973 0136

SPECIALISTS TEL: (852) 2918 4278 FAX: (852) 2973 0521

### SELECTED VIEWING

SINGAPORE, THE GRAND HYATT HOTEL

SATURDAY-SUNDAY 15-16 APRIL 10.00 AM - 6.00 PM

TAIPEI, THE FU BON LIFE ASSURANCE BUILDING

FRIDAY-SUNDAY 21-23 APRIL 10.00 AM - 6.00 PM

### VIEWING

HONG KONG, 3/F, THE JW MARRIOTT HOTEL

FRIDAY-SATURDAY 28-29 APRIL 10.30 AM - 6.30 PM

SUNDAY 30 APRIL 10.30 AM - 2.00 PM

### SALE CODE

IN SENDING WRITTEN BIDS OR MAKING ENQUIRIES,

THIS SALE SHOULD BE REFERRED TO AS

YUANMINGYUAN-2030

THIS SALE IS SUBJECT TO THE CONDITIONS OF BUSINESS  
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## Treasures in the News

*In recent years, treasures plundered from the Yuanmingyuan have commanded attention in the media, and huge sums in the antiquities market. Here are two contrasting examples of the fate of exquisite looted porcelains that recently made headlines.*

### New Zealander returns looted Yuanmingyuan treasures

Adjust font size:  

Two long lost porcelain vases have finally returned to China. They were looted from their home country more than one century ago.



Two long lost porcelain vases have finally returned to China. They were looted from their home country more than one century ago.

*“New Zealander returns looted Yuanmingyuan treasures”*  
[click to read article](#)

CNTV.cn Oct.19, 2010

### Qing Dynasty Relic Yields Record Price at Auction

By JOHN F. BURNS  
Published: November 12, 2010

LONDON — As treasure-in-the-attic stories go, the 18th-century Chinese vase sold at a suburban auction house in outer London on Thursday night will be hard to beat.

#### Qing Dynasty Relic Yields Record Price at Auction

LONDON—As treasure-in-the-attic stories go, the 18th-century Chinese vase sold at a suburban auction house in outer London on Thursday night will be hard to beat. The delicate, decorative 16-inch vase started at a not-inconsequential \$800,000, but after a half-hour of unexpectedly spirited bidding, the gavel fell at \$69.5 million. It was the highest price ever paid at auction for a Chinese antiquity.

[click to read article](#)


New York Times, Nov. 12, 2010



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### RELICS & CONTROVERSY

#### The Controversy Surrounding the 12 Zodiac Animal Heads

The saga of the 12 zodiac animal heads looted from the European section of the Yuanmingyuan offers a lively illustration both the breadth of the present-day international market in Chinese antiquities as well as the rise of nationalistic Chinese demands for repatriation of stolen art. The most significant items at Christie's Hong Kong sale in 2000 were a bronze monkey head and ox head from the water-clock fountain at the Hall of Calm Seas (Haiyantang 海宴堂) palace. The monkey originally spouted water between three and five o'clock in the afternoon, while the ox spouted water between one and three in the morning.



*These looted monkey and ox heads, originally part of the zodiac animals that graced a fountain in the Yuanmingyuan, were auctioned in Hong Kong in 2000 and purchased for a new state-owned museum in Beijing devoted to celebrating traditional culture and retrieving lost relics.*

[ymy8025] [ymy8026]

The auction of the monkey and ox heads stimulated Chinese interest at all levels in seeing the stolen zodiac animals returned to China. The Poly Art Museum in Beijing purchased the two sculptures (and also the tiger head, from a different source) for a total of about \$4 million. This state-owned museum was founded in December 1998 and opened to the public a year later, under the auspices of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the Beijing Cultural Relics Bureau. <sup>[10]</sup> In 2003, the head of the zodiac pig was purchased for \$770,000 from a New York collector by Stanley Ho, a Macau gambling magnate, and donated to the Poly Art Museum the following year. Later, in 2007, Stanley Ho purchased the horse's head for around \$8.9 million from a

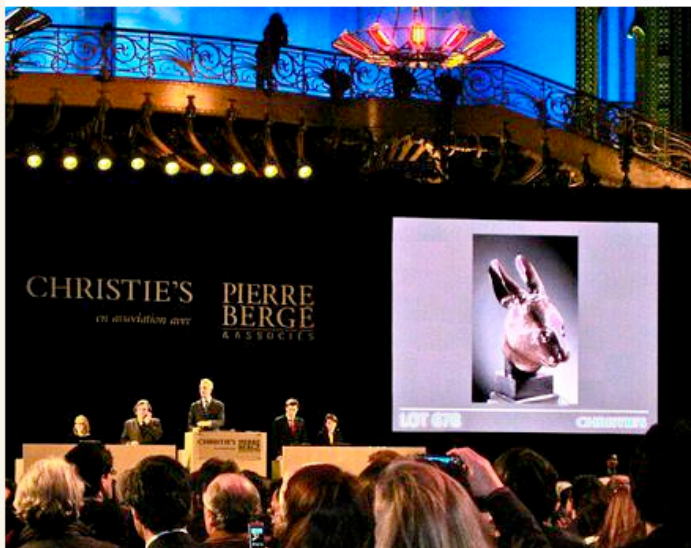
Taiwan collector (who had paid \$400,000 for it at Southeby's in London in 1989), and donated it to the Capital Museum in Beijing.

In addition to these five animal heads that have been repatriated to China, two additional heads appeared on the Paris market in 2009, when the bronze rat and rabbit were auctioned by Christie's for the estate of the French designer Yves St. Laurent. The Chinese government protested the auction and argued that these stolen objects should be returned to China. When the auction house ignored this plea, a Chinese bidder, at first unidentified, successfully bid \$18-million each for the two heads. The buyer then refused to pay up, stating that "every Chinese would have done the same as I did. It's just that I got the opportunity. I have fulfilled my duty." He later identified himself as an adviser to China's National Treasures Fund named Cai Mingchao. After this incident, Pierre Bergé, the partner of Yves St. Laurent, said he would keep the two zodiac heads in his own possession.

As of 2011, the remaining five heads—the dragon, snake, sheep, rooster, and dog—had not been located.



*This zodiac horse's head from the Yuanmingyuan, auctioned by Southeby's in September 2007, was purchased by a Chinese billionaire in Macau and donated to China.*



*Christie's auction of the rat and rabbit zodiac heads, offered for sale by the estate of Yves St. Laurent in February 2009, received extensive critical coverage in both the Chinese and international media, including dissemination of these two photos. The heads were purchased by a Chinese bidder who subsequently refused to pay.*

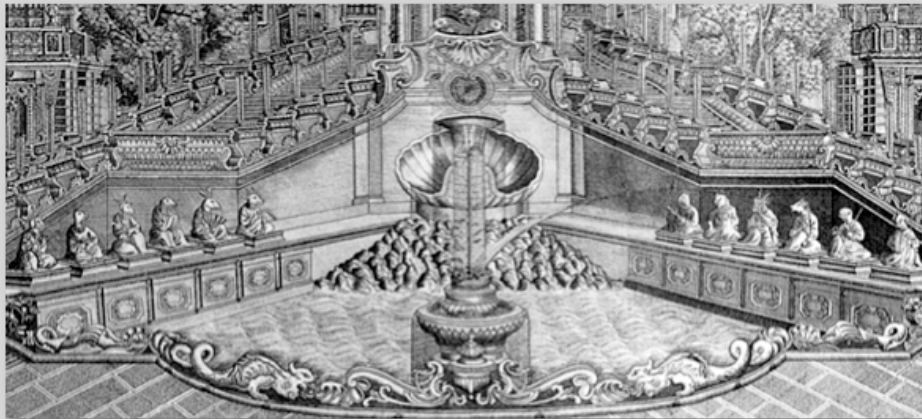




*A Chinese cartoon depicts the bodies of fountain figures bidding at the Christie's auction to retrieve their heads.*

Studio Yuan Jiao Man's Space  
on Blog QQ.com, 2009

### *The Fate of the Zodiac Animal Heads*



*Worldwide debate surrounds the Haiyantang fountain zodiac animal heads (pictured in above detail) as items looted from Yuanmingyuan. According to one website as of March 1, 2009 they are accounted for as follows:*

***Rat:** was in Yves Saint Laurent's collection. Sold for \$18 million at hammer price (\$20 million with fees) to an anonymous bidder in Paris in February 2009. Chinese bidder, Cai Mingchao, won't pay for YSL auction statutes.*

***Ox:** bought by the China Poly Group in 2000 for \$954,000, now at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.*

***Tiger:** bought by the China Poly Group in 2000 for \$1.99 million, now at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.*

***Rabbit:** was in Yves Saint Laurent's collection. Sold for \$18 million at hammer price (\$20 million with fees) to a telephone bidder in Paris in February 2009. Chinese bidder, Cai Mingchao, won't pay for YSL auction statutes.*

***Dragon:** unknown.*

*Snake: unknown.*

*Snake: unknown.*

*Horse: was in a private collection in Taiwan. Purchased by Macau gaming magnate Stanley Ho in 2007 for \$8.84 million and donated to China. Currently at the Capital Museum in Beijing.*

*Sheep: unknown.*

*Monkey: bought by the China Poly Group in 2000 for \$1.05 million, now at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.*

*Rooster: unknown.*

*Dog: in 2003, a Hong Kong auction house claimed to be selling the dog from the Summer Palace water clock, but consultants from the Poly Art Museum said the craftsmanship didn't match the other four the Poly Group has recovered.*

*Pig: purchased by Stanley Ho in 2003 (from a NY collector) and donated to China. Currently at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.*

[ymy2010]

Source: [Yuanmingyuan \(Old Summer Palace, Imperial Summer Palace\) > 圆明园](#)

### Replicas and Recreations of the Zodiac Animal Fountain

The looted zodiac heads have inspired not just patriotism, but also considerable entrepreneurship in China. Replicas of the zodiac statues—sometimes just the heads, sometimes in their original full figures—are displayed in public places including the Yuanmingyuan Park that now exists on the site of the old imperial complex. In 2010, a large-scale recreation of all 12 heads created by the prominent and controversial Chinese sculptor Ai Weiwei went global and has been on tour internationally, including an installation in New York's Central Park, since then. On-line coverage of these now world-famous 12 animals is extensive, and patriotic Chinese consumers can choose from a variety of replicas including a set of heavy gold seals.



*The zodiac animal sculptures have been reproduced with the full bodies and placed on display at the Yuanmingyuan park.*

Wikipedia Commons



*Another recreation of the zodiac animal sculptures—in precious jade—is on display in Xi'an, northern China, near the site of the Terra Cotta Warriors of the First Emperor.*

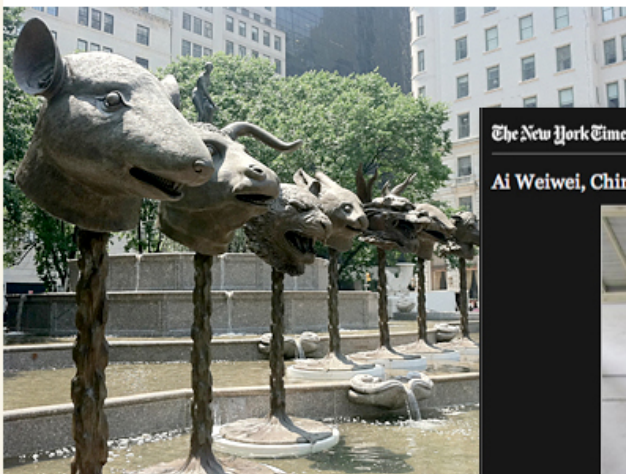
[view video](#)



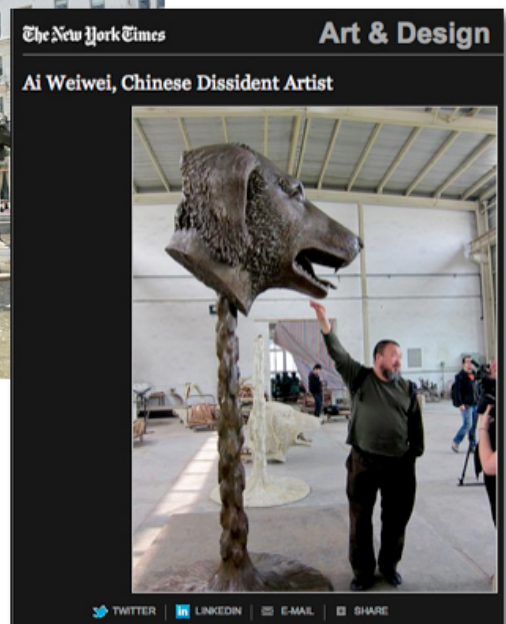
中新網  
Chinanews.com

*The popularity of the zodiac animal heads continues with set of gold seal reproductions displayed in Beijing in March 2011.*

Photo by Su Dan, China News Agency




*Sculptor Ai Weiwei's huge replication of the Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads toured Europe and the United States in 2011, including an installation in New York's Central Park (above). The full run of his "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" appears below.*





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## The Garden of Perfect Brightness—3 Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860-present)

by Lillian M. Li

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### RUINS & MEMORY

While the treasures of the Yuanmingyuan were widely distributed among European art collections, the ruins of the European palaces—which had been made of stone, marble, and sturdy materials—mostly remained in recognizable form after 1860. The ruins were often visited by Western residents of Beijing on outings. They were frequently photographed in the 1870s, when photography became more widespread than it had been in the 1860s.

In the succeeding decades, the site was continually plundered for its raw materials and remaining artifacts. During the Boxer uprising and the siege of Beijing in 1900 to 1901, Western troops participated in further plunder. But much of the subsequent looting and damage was the work of local Chinese vandals, who sold antiquities in the local markets. <sup>[11]</sup> Photographs show how the ruins of the European palaces diminished in scale over the years; distinguished in this regard is a run of photos taken in 1873 by Ernst Ohlmer (1847–1927), a German customs official. <sup>[12]</sup>

### *Ernst Ohlmer's 1873 Photos of the Ruins*

*In the decade following the torching of the Yuanmingyuan the area was officially off-limits, but it was difficult for the eunuchs and watchmen to secure. Looting and outbreaks of fire contributed to the decay of the garden. Ernst Ohlmer, a young German clerk, was discovered in one of the buildings and, as he had not stolen anything, was pardoned. In 1873, just 13 years after the sack, Ohlmer photographed the ruins of the European palaces, leaving the earliest known visual record of the devastated site. Although the buildings are damaged and the grounds overgrown with weeds, the basic architecture remains recognizable. The following 12 glass negatives were the source of a 2010 exhibition at Beijing's China Millennium Monument.*

### *Pavilion Harmonizing Surprise and Delight, Xieqiqu 諧奇趣*





*Xieqiqu, south façade  
Built in 1751, this was the first pavilion in the Xiyanglou.  
Depicted in Engraving 1.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_a]



*This Xieqiqu panorama shows the lake in front overgrown with weeds.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_b]





*Xieqiu, Music Pavilion*

*Not depicted in the 20 engravings, the Music Pavilion overlooked the lake and was connected by a bridge to the main part of the Xieqiu.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_c]



*Xieqiu, eastern side of the main building*

*The ornamentation on this imposing Western structure had Chinese elements. The Music Pavilion is visible in the back left. Depicted in Engraving 3.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_d]





*Xieqiqu, north façade  
Depicted in Engraving 2.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_e]

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*Gate to the Garden, Huayuanmen 花園門*



*Huayuanmen beimian, north façade*

*Westerners felt comfortable in the remote, lightly-guarded Xiyanglou, and often visited the ruins. Here, four customs officials relax at the gate to the Maze. The gazebo can be seen through the archway. Depicted in Engraving 4.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_f]

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*Observatory of Lands Beyond, Fangwaiguan 方外觀*





*Fangwaiguan. Depicted in Engraving 8*

[ohlmer\_1873\_g]

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*Hall of Calm Seas, Haiyantang 海宴堂*



*Haiyantang, west façade*

*The best-known view of the Haiyantang, showing the large clam-shell fountain in the center, but missing the zodiac animal statues that formed the clock-fountains. The largest structure in the European section, the Haiyantang housed a reservoir that supplied water to all the fountains in the central portion. Depicted in Engraving 10.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_h]



*Haiyantang, north façade*

*This perspective resembles Engraving 11, which suggests that Ohlmer may have seen the engravings. Several rooms in the northwest corner of the main building of the Haiyantang are featured. Depicted in Engraving 11.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_1]

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*Observatory of Distant Oceans, Yuanyingguan 遠瀛觀*





*Yuanyingguan, southern (or front) side*

*The ornately decorated pillars are intact, but appear to have only a decorative function. The brick structure of the building is exposed on the right side. The photographer stood in front of the Grand Fountain looking up at the elevated Yuanyingguan. These pillars are among the most prominent of the ruins at the Yuanmingyuan Park today. Depicted in Engraving 14.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_j]

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### *Great Fountain, Dashuifa 大水法*



*Dashuifa (Great Fountain)*

*This archway is the iconic structure in the Yuanmingyuan today. It faced the Yuanyingguan (previous photo), which can be seen just above and beyond the archway. Depicted in Engraving 15.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_k]

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### *Throne for Observing the Great Fountain, Guanshuifa 觀水法*





*Guanshuifa*

*From his throne in front of this stone screen, the emperor viewed the Grand Fountain and the Yuanyingguan behind it. Depicted in Engraving 16.*

[ohlmer\_1873\_1]

### **The European Section Ruins Over Time**

As Régine Thiriez has documented, the European section ruins continued to be photographed by Westerners from the 1870s through the 1930s.<sup>[13]</sup>

Of particular interest among these images is a photograph by Théophile Piry, taken around 1911, which shows two French and Russian diplomatic families celebrating the engagement of two of their children to each other. The picnic in the ruins perfectly illustrates the ironies of the Yuanmingyuan European palaces—built by the Qing emperor on European models, destroyed and looted by European troops, and later enjoyed by Europeans as a recreational site. The Chinese servants in the background do not seem to be enjoying the occasion very much.







*French and Russian diplomats picnic at the Yuanmingyuan ruins around 1911. Their Chinese servants, still wearing the queues the Manchus required of their male Chinese subjects, are visible off to the side. [14]*

Photograph by Théophile Piry. Collection, Charles Blackburn, Neuilly, France.

### **The Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park Today**

Over the years, as the Yuanmingyuan was repeatedly culled of its artifacts by both foreigners and Chinese, its grounds were turned into farmland and housed villages of farmers. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, 15 work units numbering about 270 people were located there. Under the constant urging of Premier Zhou Enlai, in 1988 the Fuhai Lake area and the European ruins were opened to the public, and in the 1990s some of the other gardens were developed into a recreational park, with its lakes available for boating, children's amusement, restaurants, tourist shops, and the like.

The European ruins are by far the area most visited and photographed. Most recognizable is the arch of the gate that formed the background for the Great Fountain (Dashuifa), with the ornate columns of the Yuanyingyuan on the hill above it. No tourist could fail to have his or her picture taken in front of these iconic ruins, and the many photographs and videos of Yuanmingyuan Park that now appear online convey the different uses and aspects of its restoration.





*The most photographed ruin in Yuanmingyuan Park today is the arched gate that stood behind the Great Fountain (Dashuijia 大水法), with the ornate columns of the Yuanyingguan standing slightly elevated behind it.*

photographs by Druh Scoff / Flickr



*The base of the shell-shaped fountain at the front of the Haiyantang survives by itself, with only a few shards of the palace itself remaining. This is where the 12 zodiac animals signaled the hours by spouting water at prescribed times.*

photograph by Druh Scoff / Flickr



*The gazebo that stood at the center of the maze has been reconstructed, as has the maze itself.*

photograph by Lillian M. Li

### **Nationalism and Historical Memory**

In recent decades, the Yuanmingyuan has often been used as an icon of Chinese nationalism. Perhaps no other image better symbolizes the victimization of China by European imperialist powers in the 19th century than the arch of the Great Fountain in the European ruins. In 2010, when China observed the 150th anniversary of the Anglo-French barbarity, this photogenic archway was virtually ubiquitous in posters and publicity.

Contrary to Mao Zedong and other first-generation revolutionary leaders, the present leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have viewed the Qing emperors not as decadent (“feudal” in Maoist-Marxist terminology) rulers of China’s past, but rather as enlightened and admirable builders of the Chinese empire. TV docudramas and films have featured the emperors and court in a gigantic historic epic that often spills over into soap opera. A two-part documentary televised in 2009 dramatizes the three great emperors and the building, expansion, and later destruction of the Yuanmingyuan—with Jesuits like Castiglione and others playing prominent roles.

*“Yuanmingyuan—Garden of Gardens”*

*This 2-part 2009 docudrama from Chinese television celebrates the creation and splendor of the garden at considerable length, before concluding with its destruction*

[view video](#)





*“Yuanmingyuan—150 Years After the Fire”  
Screened in 2010, the 150th anniversary of the destruction, this emotional  
seven-part treatment focuses in enormous detail on the disaster of 1860.*

[view video](#)

Significant scholarly work has taken place involving the ruins of the larger Chinese sections of the Yuanmingyuan, as seen in the publication of many articles and convening of academic conferences. For archaeologists, art historians, and historians, the importance of this work lies in the ability to understand and imagine the physical spaces of the grounds, the waterways, and the numerous buildings and compounds that comprised the original three sections: the Yuanmingyuan, the Qichunyuan and the Changchunyuan. One major archeological site is that of the Hanjingtang, the complex on the island at the center of the Changchunyuan. Here excavations have uncovered the footprint of the original compound, and have yielded Buddhist icons, porcelain shards, and roof tile with decorations. [15]

Rebuilding some of the original Yuanmingyuan buildings has been a subject of discussion for the last couple of decades. Apart from the expense, there are heated controversies about the need and the standards for reconstruction. Critics say that preservation (*baohu*) is the goal, not restoration (*xiushan*). In Beijing in general, academic specialists have been pitted against those government officials in the Cultural Relics Bureau and developers whose goal in historical preservation is not historical accuracy but the commodification of history for tourism. Many projects took place in the period prior to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

Many historians and archaeologists, as well as local residents, have complained that the Yuanmingyuan has been developed principally as a tourist site and recreational park in a way that ignores its importance as a historical site worthy of study and possible restoration. “They have turned it into just an ordinary park,” said local residents when it was first opened. So popular and intriguing are the European ruins that replicas—some miniaturized—have been created in theme parks in various parts of China.





*Detailed miniature models of the European ruins sit in glass cases set among the ruins at the Yuanmingyuan Park. This model of the Yuanyingguan and Dashuifa seems to attract those seeking good fortune.*

[ymy7204] Photograph by Lillian M. Li




*In the ongoing debate over how best to restore and remember the Qing emperors' "Garden of Perfect Brightness," critics in China warn of the danger of turning the site into little more than a commercialized "theme park." A 2010 event marked the 150th Anniversary of the sack of the Yuanmingyuan and highlighted issues pertaining to restoration of both the park and looted objects.*

source: Xinhua/Luo Xiaoguang

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# The Garden of Perfect Brightness—3

## Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860-present)

by Lillian M. Li

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## LINKS

["The Garden of Perfect Brightness: A Life in Ruins," Geremie R. Barmé's pioneer study of the Yuanmingyuan over the decades that followed its destruction.](#)  
(Click here to view short article)

["Gong Xiaogong and the Sacking of the Garden of Perfect Brightness"](#)

["European palaces within ruins of Yuanmingyuan, Beijing," photos by Druh Scoff on Flickr](#)

## NOTES

1. This account of events follows Hevia, James L., *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), Chapter 2.

2. On October 18th, Montauban expressed shock and regret at the incineration. "I've just been informed...that all the magnificent pagodas, whose marvelous workmanship I had admired are at this moment the victim of flames: a vengeance unworthy of a civilized nation because it destroys the admirable objects that have been respected for several centuries." Quoted in Thomas, Greg M, "The Looting of Yuanming and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*, Vol 7, Issue 2 (Autumn 2008), p. 19.

3. Hevia, Chapter 2. The above account is taken from Li, Lillian M., Alison J. Dray-Novey, and Haili Kong, *Beijing: From Imperial Capital to Olympic City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 107-111., which in turn is based on Hevia, Chapter 2.

4. Stephenson, Frederick, *At Home and On the Battlefield* (London, 1915), pp. 272-273, quoted in Hevia, p. 79.

5. Wolseley, Viscount Garnet, *The Story of a Soldier*, Vol. 2 (A. Constable & Co., Ltd., 1903), p. 77.

6. Boulger, D. C., *The Life of Gordon* (London, 1897), pp. 45-46, as quoted in Malone, Carroll Brown, *History of the Summer Palaces under the Ch'ing Dynasty* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1934), pp. 187-88.

7. Hevia , Chapter 4, provides a detailed account of the looting.
8. Hevia, pp. 94-95.
9. Greg M Thomas provides an outstanding discussion of the multiple cultural meanings of this nineteenth-century European Orientalism in "The Looting of Yuanming and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*, Vol 7, Issue 2, Autumn 2008.
10. The website of the Poly Art Museum states: "Poly Art Museum was founded in December 1998 with the approval of State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China and Beijing Cultural Relics Bureau and opened to public in December 1999. It is the first museum operated by a state-owned enterprise in the Chinese mainland. The aim of the museum is to develop and display traditional national culture and art, and to rescue and protect Chinese cultural relics lost abroad."
11. Part 7 of the CCTV documentary "[Yuanmingyuan: 150 Years after the Fire](#)" provides many details of extensive looting of stone and wood—for the raw materials, rather than for art—by local residents and public institutions.
12. Wong, Young-tsu, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), p. 115.
13. Thiriez, Régine, *Barbarian Lenses: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998).
14. On Piry, see Thiriez, pp. 93-101.
15. Extensively documented and photographed in *Yuanmingyuan Changchungyuan Hangjingtang yizhi fajue baogao 圓明園長春園含經堂遺址發掘報告* (Report on the excavation of the Hangjingtang ruins at the Changchungyuan of the Yuanmingyuan), edited by Wenwu Yanjiuso (Beijing: 2006).

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