

THE GARDEN OF PERFECT BRIGHTNESS, A LIFE IN RUINS *

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*Et in Arcadia ego.*¹

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.”²

In the following remarks on the Garden of Perfect Brightness, the Yuan Ming Yuan 圓明園,³ 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 pleasure.

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.]

I would like to thank Francesca dal Lago for her knowledgeable enthusiasm in helping me locate last-minute illustrations for this paper, and also Alastair Morrison, Lois Conner, Jane Macartney, Roberta Wue, Liu Tao and Régine Thiriez for their kind assistance. Special thanks to the unfailing eye and endless patience of Helen Lo, who designed the layout, and to Stephen FitzGerald for permission to quote the anecdote that concludes this lecture. All photographs of the Yuan Ming Yuan in 1996 are mine and are marked with an asterisk (*). [—G.R.B.]

¹ Various translated 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.

² 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.

³ 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 elite 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.”⁴

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.⁵ 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.

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

⁵ 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.