

⁵⁵ Much of the detail in this section comes from Zhao Guanghua's essay "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuande houqi pohuai 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*⁵⁵

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."⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷

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 filial piety 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 battened 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.⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.392.

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

⁵⁸ 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)



⁵⁹ 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

⁶⁰ 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?⁶⁰

The Summer Palace

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)

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

