

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,⁶¹ 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 1874,⁶² 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.⁶³

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,⁶⁴ when Reginald F. Johnston, English tutor to the Xuantong 宣統 Emperor Puyi 溥儀, was put in charge of the western pleasures.⁶⁵

⁶¹ 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 Beijing Library, now the Peking National Library. See Zhang Enyin, *Yuan-mingyuan bianqian shi tanwei*, p.178.

⁶² *Qingdai dang'an shiliao: Yuanmingyuan*, vol.1, p.743.

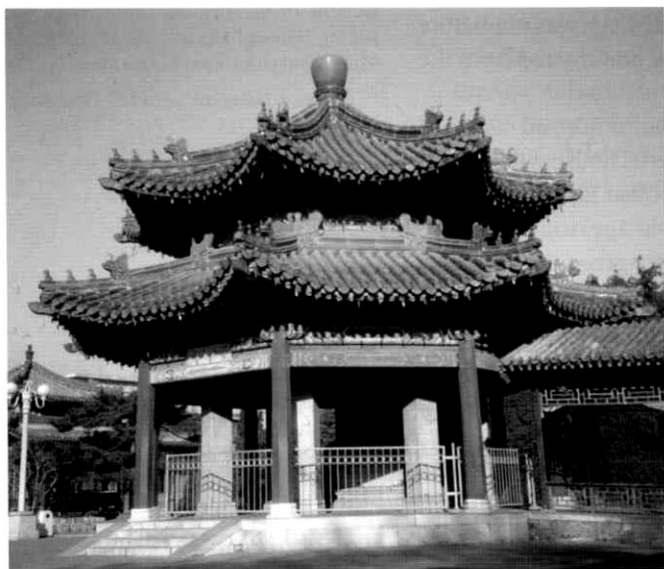
⁶³ For the details of which Bannermen groups destroyed the various sections of the palace see Zhao Guanghua, "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuan de houqi pihuai liju," p.14.

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

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

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*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)**



⁶⁶ For these details see Zhao Guanghua, "Yuanmingyuan jiqi shuyuande houqi pihuai liju," p.17; and on Wang Huaqing also see Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, p.225. Much of the material Wang used for the Da Yuan was taking from the Śrāvastī City and the Anyou Gong Imperial Ancestral Temple.

⁶⁷ 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 Huaqing 王懷慶 (1866–?) had loads of stones carted away to construct the Da Yuan 達園, south of the Yuan Ming Yuan,⁶⁶ (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.⁶⁷

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 spiffification. 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.⁶⁸

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 朗潤園 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

⁶⁸ 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

⁶⁹ Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, pp.398–9.

⁷⁰ 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.

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 though 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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰

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 pleasure 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