

³⁶ 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.³⁶

The Ages of Destruction

³⁷ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

In the sizeable body of imperial poetry devoted to recording the sites in the gardens—totalling some 4,500 poems in all⁴⁰—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

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

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

⁴⁰ 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.

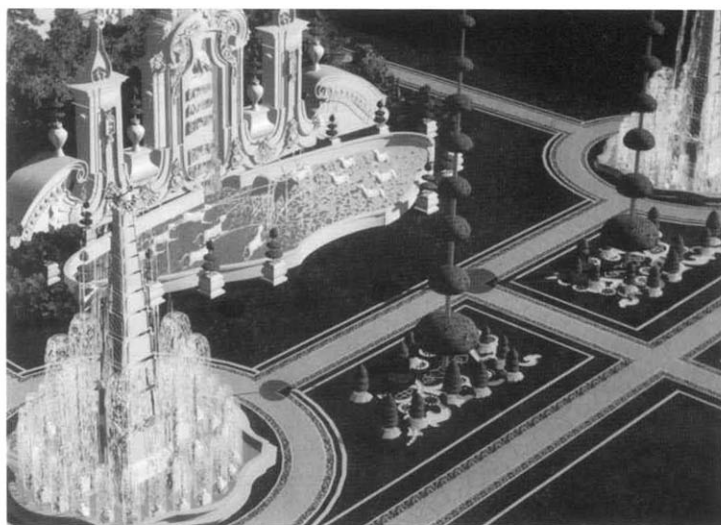


Figure 32

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

⁴¹ See Mengzi, "Liang Huiwang," 1.6.

⁴² *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).⁴¹

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 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.⁴²

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."⁴³

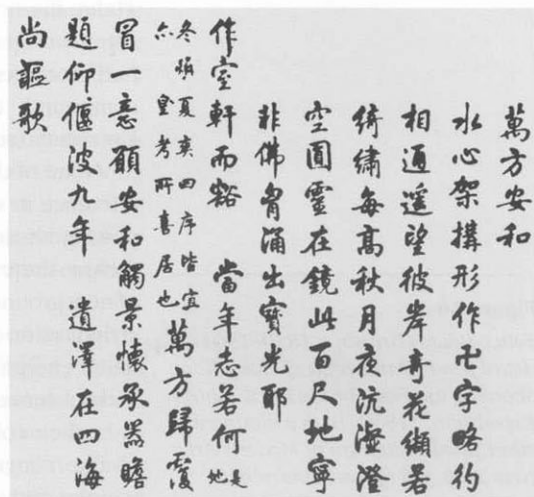
Indeed, so prodigious was this kind of literary output that by the end of his reign the collected poems and prose of Jiaqing swelled to some forty fascicles. In a caustic aside Grantham suggests that "If the unbelievable happened and a sinologue committed a punishable crime, he should be compelled to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

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.⁴⁵ 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



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

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.18.

⁴⁵ 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)**

⁴⁶ Zhang Enyin, *Yuanmingyuan bianqian shi tanwei*, p.103.

⁴⁷ 公安大學金盾培訓中心。

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.⁴⁶ 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).⁴⁷

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

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)



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.

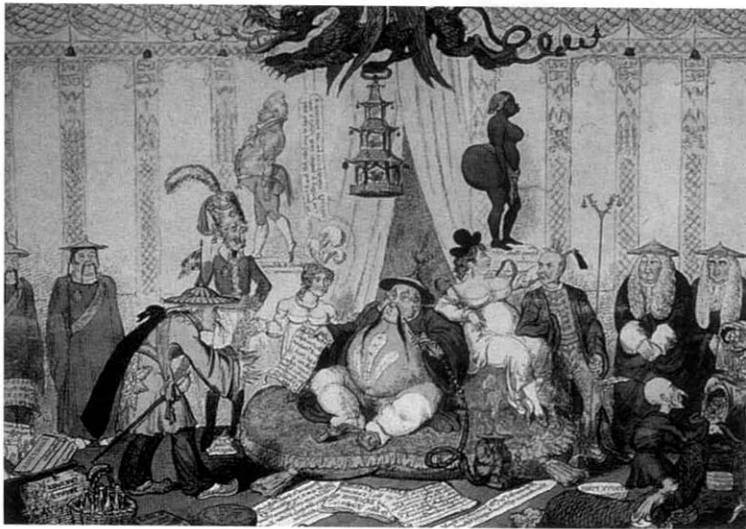
After numerous prevarications, bluffs and acts of deception on the part of the Qing Court, the emissaries of the emperor, Prince Gong 恭親王 (Yixin 奕訢) and General Senggerinchin 僧格林沁, detained the thirty-nine members of the delegation. They were imprisoned in the Yuan Ming Yuan, used as hostages in the 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.”*



⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁸

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.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

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

⁴⁹ 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!

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ *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

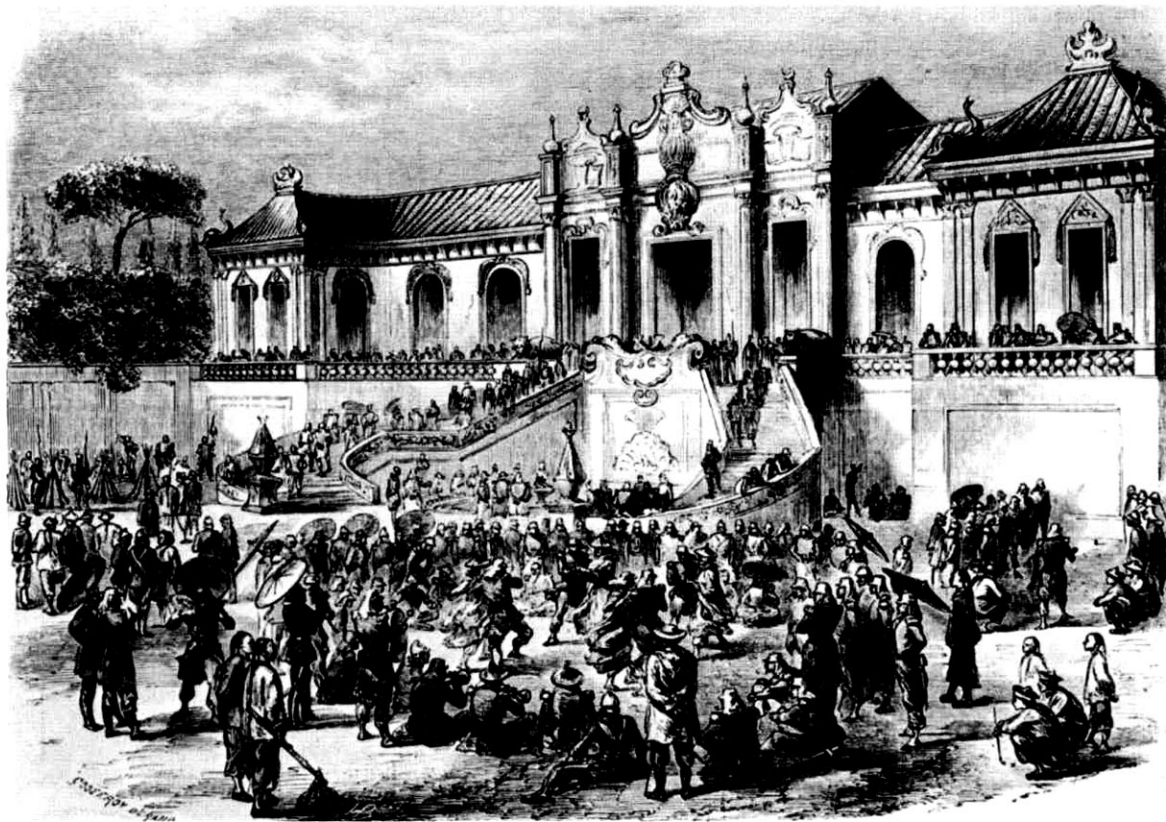


Figure 39 Pillage of the Yuan Ming Yuan as depicted in *L'Illustration*, Paris, 22 December 1860

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.⁵²

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 1872.⁵³

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.⁵⁴

⁵² Liu Zhanbin, *Yuanmingyuan cangsang ji*, p.100.

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

⁵⁴ 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**

