

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 through 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

the 1980s to—taking a phrase from Rose Macaulay—“the destroying hand of the ruin-clearers.”⁷¹

Just as the formidable ruins of Rome were debased by the ‘restoration’ of the nineteenth century, so too have the imperial gardens of Peking suffered at the hands of energetic conservationists and propagandists anxious to turn the place into a scene of antiquarian interest and political statement.

Starting in the 1980s, the denuded hills were replanted with trees of various hues and shapes in an attempt to halt the erosion that was threatening to return what remained of the contours of the scenery to the flat and undistinguished landscape from which it had originally sprung. Rice-fields that had provided sustenance to the farmers who had encroached on the precincts of the eastern half of the gardens were dug up, the lakes cleared and filled once more with water. Though they may not bear the colourful pleasure craft of the emperors, or the flat-bottomed ice-skiffs used to chart the waterways during the winter months, these rivulets are now crowded from spring onwards with lubberly swan-headed paddle boats and put-puts, while the Sea of Plenitude, the largest lake in the garden, with the fairy isle Pengdao Yaotai situated as if floating in its centre, hosts long, metal rowing boats painted blue which are rented out by the hour to holidaying families and lovers.

The precincts of the Western Palaces have been regressed, fenced off so that access is limited to ticket-holders, and some of the ruins set right to provide visitors with a background to record on film the fact that they too have come and seen the remains of European barbarity—able to claim through their cameras: *kodak ergo sum*.⁷²

⁷¹ Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.404.

⁷² This is an expression from Joseph Brodsky. See “Flight from Byzantium” in Brodsky, *Less than one, selected essays* (Harmondsworth, Mddlx: Penguin Books, 1987), p.399.

Figures 45 & 46

Mock ruins: the to-scale version of the Great Fountain inside the entrance to the Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park. The flag and national emblem of the People's Republic of China along with a copy of the national anthem are set up within an enclosure for public edification The photo concession at the Great Fountain**



Where bridges had been destroyed, new structures have been built. Kiosks have been thrown up to sell trinkets and food. The surrounding 'tigerskin walls' (*bupí qiang* 虎皮牆) of the gardens, long since dismantled for building materials and road construction,⁷³ have been erected anew, and gates to the palaces, now made of bamboo in the style of ethnic eateries popular in the capital, have been set up at the entrances to both the Yuan Ming Yuan and the Changchun gardens.⁷⁴

Figure 47

*The new bamboo entrance to the Yuan Ming Yuan proper**



⁷³ Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, p.229.

⁷⁴ These are the bamboo gates to the Yuan Ming Yuan and the Changchun Yuan which punctuate the north-west wall of the Qichun Yuan. Similar structures were commonly used in Sichuan and Yunnan restaurants around Peking in the 1990s.

⁷⁵ Osbert Sitwell, *Escape with me* (London: Macmillan, 1939), quoted in Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.393.

⁷⁶ Shu Mu et al, *Yuanmingyuan ziliao ji*, pp.354–60.

It was the very fragility of the Chinese ruins that made this uncomely rebirth possible. As Osbert Sitwell wrote in 1939:

a notable fault of Chinese architecture as well as a notable merit ... consists in its transience: it can disappear, melt into nothingness as easily as, on the other hand, it can be renewed.⁷⁵

Rebuilding the Yuan Ming Yuan in particular has been something of an imperial obsession ever since the reign of the Tongzhi Emperor. As we have noted in the above, the first abortive attempt at restoring the gardens came in the 1870s. This was followed shortly thereafter by an inspired imitative creation of the palaces in Europe by Ludwig II, the mad king of Bavaria, who planned to have the fabled Chinese gardens reconstructed in their entirety in his own

realm. This megalomaniacal project was thwarted by the encroachment of Ludwig's insanity and his eventual death.

During the 1930s, with a lull in the strife that plagued the new Republic of China, architects, impotent to revive them, did their best to offer a reduced-scale vision of the palaces and a large retrospective exhibition on the Yuan Ming Yuan was held in the Palace Museum. This was accompanied by calls for the preservation of the site and a rebuilding program.⁷⁶

In the 1950s, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 issued a directive for the site of the Yuan Ming Yuan to be preserved so that "at some future point partial reconstruction can be undertaken." More than any other imperial structure, the Yuan Ming Yuan had acquired, through its destruction at the hands of foreigners, a charisma that led successive governments to develop their own plans to use it as a site symbolizing national revival. As is so often the case with grandiose projects, little of essence was ever done to restore the palaces.

Indeed, over the years the grounds of the gardens lost virtually all significance in Chinese life. While the Yihe Yuan came to represent the decadent misrule of the Empress Dowager, and the Imperial Palace in central Peking was restored as the "crystallisation of the genius of the Chinese labouring people" from the 1950s, the Yuan Ming Yuan was forgotten. Mentioned only

in passing in texts about the Opium Wars, the site fell prey to the exegies of revolutionary whim. Despite this official neglect, however, the ruins took on a life of their own.

On 29 May, 1966, students from Qinghua Middle School 清華附中, which was situated next to the palace grounds, gathered at the Western Palaces for what they called the "Yuan Ming Yuan Meeting." At it they founded a new group of rebellious storm troopers dedicated to protecting the Cultural Revolution. They called themselves "Chairman Mao's Red Guards" (*Mao zhuxide hong weibing* 毛主席的紅衛兵).⁷⁷

Other members of that same generation of rebels, now tempered by the struggles of the Cultural Revolution itself, returned to the Western Palaces in 1979. They were the editors of the samizdat literary journal *Today* (*Jintian* 今天), Mang Ke 芒克 and Bei Dao 北島, who were joined by supporters and fans including a friend of the magazine, Chen Kaige 陳凱歌—later a prominent film-maker, to hold their own literary salon there. On that occasion, poetry was recited, stories told, speeches made, and a lot of alcohol consumed. They regarded the Yuan Ming Yuan as a public space free from official control, a cultural grey zone to which they could add their own stories. The poet Yang Lian 楊煉, a loquacious and prolific member of this group, composed an elegiac poem to the ruins.

It was in this tradition of bohemian fringe-dwelling that, from the late 1980s, the Yuan Ming Yuan became home to a community of artists, poets and cultural ne'er-do-wells. Because of its relative distance from the city, its borderland nature between urban and rural control and the fact that cheap

⁷⁷ The name was inspired by Zhang Chengzhi 張承志. See Pu Dahua in Sang Ye, "Piandi yingxiong xia xiyan: Weidade 1966" [A land of heroes: the great year 1966], unpublished interview transcript from the book "Chinese time, in the autumn of the patriarch."

Figure 48

The remains of the Aviary—photograph by Ernst Ohlmer, 1880s (from Thiriez, "Les palais européens," p.93)



自白

— 給一座廢墟

讓這片默默無言的石頭
為我的出生作證
讓這支歌
響起
動蕩的霧中
尋找我的眼睛

在灰色的陽光碎裂的地方
拱門，石柱投下陰影
投下比燒焦的土地更加黑暗的回憶
彷彿垂死的掙扎被固定
手臂痙攣地伸向天空
彷彿最後一次
給歲月留下遺言
這遺言
變成對我誕生的詛咒

我來到廢墟上
追逐唯一照耀過我的希望
那不合時宜的微弱之星
命運——盲目的烏雲
無情地鉤勒着我的心靈
不是為了哀悼死亡！不是自亡
吸引我走向這個空曠的世界
我反抗屬於荒蕪和恥辱的一切
——襁褓
是與墓地不能相容的太陽

在我早已預支的孤獨中
有誰知道
這條向夜晚歌唱的路
閃着磷光通往哪一處海岸
秘密的地平線
波動着，泛起遙遠的夢想
遙遠的幾乎無窮
祇有風，揚起歌聲
代替着埋進土的殘缺的日晷
指向我自己的黎明

Apologia

—To a Ruin

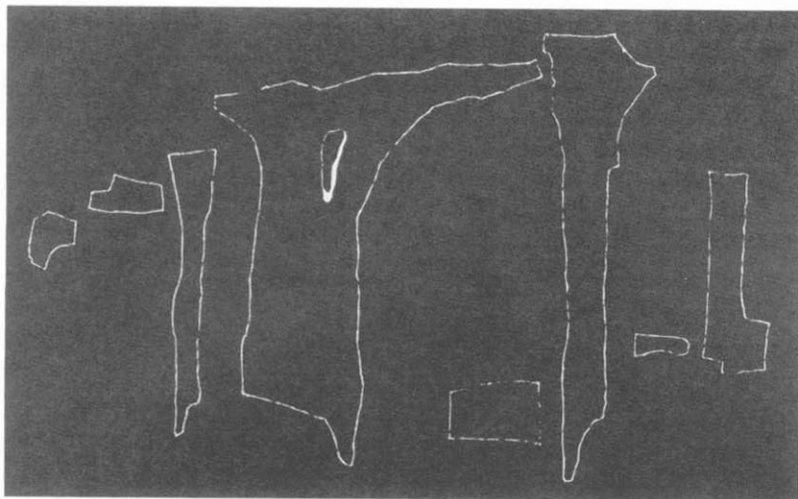
Let this mute stone
Attest my birth
Let this song
Resound
In the troubled mist
Searching for my eyes

Here in the grey shattered sunlight
Arches, stone pillars cast shadows
Cast memories blacker than scorched earth
Motionless as the death agony of a hanged man
Arms convulsed into the sky
Life a final
Testament to time
Once a testament
Now a curse muttered at my birth

I come to this ruin
Seeking the only hope that has illumined me
Faint star out of its time
Destiny, blind cloud
Pitiless chiaroscuro of my soul
No, I have not come to lament death! It is not death
Has drawn me to this desolate world
I defy all waste and degradation
—These swaddling clothes
Are a sun that will not be contained in the grave

In my premature solitude
Who can tell me
The destination of this road singing into the night
To what shore its flickering ghostfires lead?
A secret horizon
Ripples, trawls distant dreams to the surface
Distant, almost boundless.
Only the wind rousing a song
In place of the broken sundial buried in the earth
Points to my dawn.

—“Birth” (Dansheng 誕生), from Yang Lian, *Bell on a Frozen Lake 冰湖之鐘* (1980), translated by John Minford with Seán Golden, *Renditions, Special Issue: Chinese Literature Today*, nos 19 & 20 (Spring & Autumn 1983): 250–1.

**Figure 49**

*Illustration for Yang Lian's poem by
Gan Shaocheng 甘少成*

Figure 50 "Concept 21," 1988 performance art conceived and executed by Liu Tao 劉濤 with the participation of students from the Central Art, Central Industrial Design and Broadcasting Academies. This unwitting homage to the French Christo infuriated the Chinese authorities (photograph by Liu Tao)

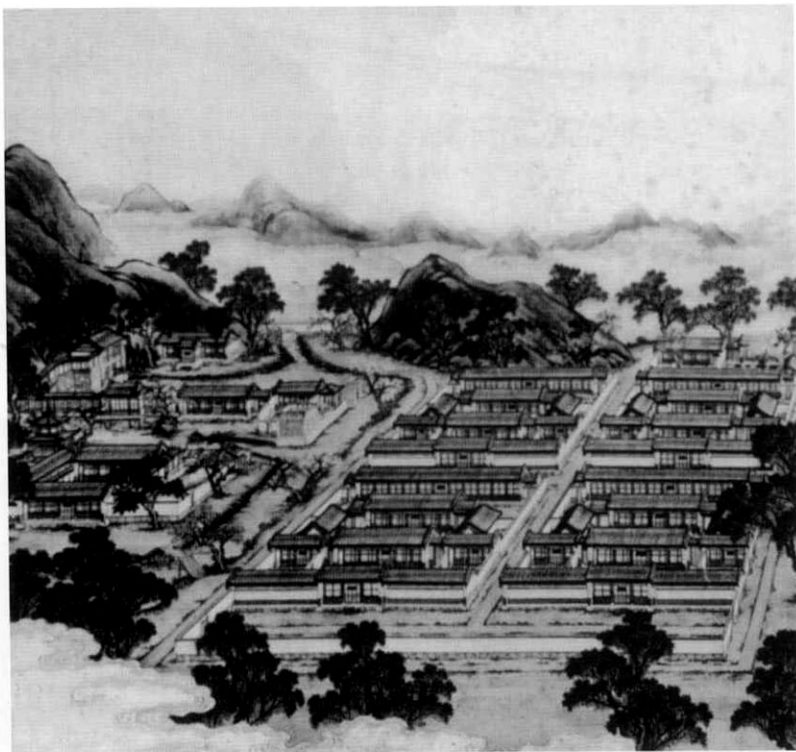


accommodation could be rented from the local villagers, Fuyuan Village 福緣村, around what was once the Fuyuan Gate, the main entrance to the gardens for plunderers, developed for a time into the nexus of Peking's alternative cultural milieu. Many of the houses the artists rented were in the area of the Sceptre Lodge (Ruyi Guan 如意館), where Jesuit missionary-artists like Giuseppe Castiglione had worked during the Qianlong reign.

These sino-bohemians developed a community called the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists' Village (Yuanmingyuan Huajiacun 圓明園畫家村), also known waggishly as the 'West Village' (Xicun 西村), which existed until the eve of 4 June 1995 when local police sealed off the area and ejected them. On the surface an act of well-timed cultural pacification, it would appear that this dispersal was merely the prelude to the reclamation of the area by China's powerholders. By mid-1996, an extensive residential complex was under construction just south of Fuyuan Village, next to the Da Yuan Guesthouse. The largest building in the new compound reflected the conservative taste of the nation's leaders: faux traditional rooves, painted eaves and windows providing a muted exterior to conceal the modern luxury, the only hint of which was a satellite dish positioned atop the building. It was rumoured that the buildings, far from the hustle and bustle of central Peking, would be used as week-enders by both Party and State leaders. After one hundred and thirty-six years, China's rulers had finally returned to the Yuan Ming Yuan.

Figure 51

The Deep Vault of Heaven (Dongtian Shenchu 洞天深處), school and residence of the imperial princes, according to the Forty Scenes. This was also the site of the Sceptre Lodge (Ruyi Guan), home to the Jesuit workshops in the Qianlong era. In the 1990s, a number of residents in the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists' Village rented lodgings and studios in the area



When Juliet Bredon, whose words I quoted at the beginning of this talk, observed that Peking was possessed of a power that enabled it to take on fresh masters and absorb them, she had not foreseen the destructive vitality of Communist Party cadres.

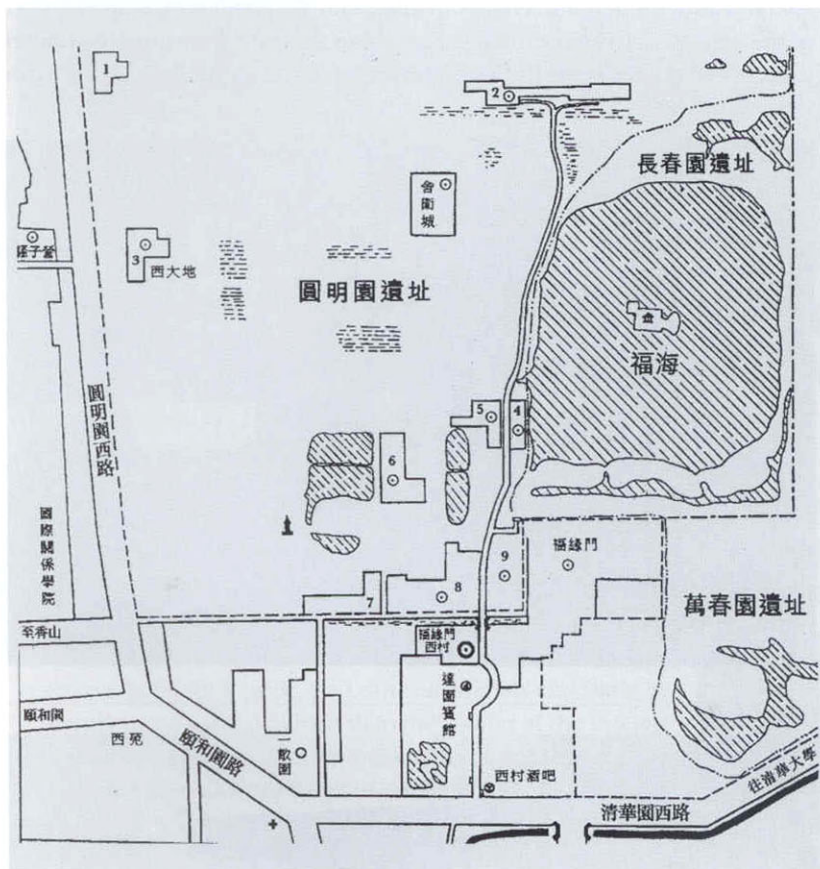


Figure 52

Overview of the "Yuan Ming Yuan Artists' Village" c. 1995. From Jin Yinong 金逸農, "1995 yishucun dataowang toushi" [An examination of the 1995 exodus from the Artists' Village], *Ershiyi shiji* 33.2 (1996): 74 (reproduced with permission). Areas marked ⊙ indicate the disparate dwellings and studios of the artists

Figures 53 & 54

Approaching Fuyuan Village, the wall of the Da Yuan Guesthouse is to the left and the new Party compound can be seen in the distance*

Closer view of the compound under construction in November 1996*



Strenuous efforts have been made by the administrators of the new Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park to the east of Fuyuan Village to join the throng of money-making enterprises in the Chinese capital while also pursuing the more laudable official goals of using the site to educate the nation in the rudiments of patriotic fervour. To this end, during the 1980s franchises were sold to various entertainment companies who set about converting sections of the gardens into amusement parks. There are now, for example, funpark rides on what was once the lake Surface of Water in the Heart of Heaven

Figure 55

*Funpark rides between Surface of Water in the Heart of Heaven (Tianxin Shuimian) and the Dharma Realm of Probity (Zhuangyan Fajie)**



Figure 56

*The Paintball Gallery next to the Western Palaces**



**Figure 57**

*Primitive Totem Exhibition on Mountains in the Sea**

(Tianxin Shuimian 天心水面) as well as in the Dharma Realm of Probity (Zhuangyan Fajie 莊嚴法界).

The pavilions and waters to the west of this area—the Pavilion for Lying in the Clouds (Woyun Xuan 臥雲軒), the House for Winter's Birth (Shengdong Shi 生冬室), the Studio of Spring Marshes (Chunze Zhai 春澤齋), the Siyi Study (Siyi Shuwu), and the Place for Nurturing the Heart (Hanxin Chu 含心處)—are home to the “World of Wild Animals” nature reserve where, for a price, you can see animals and birds in a slightly more natural habitat than they suffer at the Peking Zoo, but still a far cry from the menageries once kept by the emperors in the gardens for their enjoyment. For those with a more athletic approach to classical ruins, a paintball-shooting gallery can be found at the entrance to the Western Palaces further north, and next to it a go-cart track has been laid out.

The Fenglin Continent (Fenglin Zhou 鳳麟洲) is now a pigeon aviary; and the circular island called Mountains in the Sea (Haiyue Kaijin 海岳開襟) is home to a Primitive Totem Exhibition displaying the oddities of ‘exotic peoples’ (that is, African and other ‘primitives’) with a voyeuristic vulgarity that continues somewhat in the emotional lineage of the creation of the Western Palaces, where curiosities from the extreme occident were once displayed for the Court’s diversion.

So far, however, the energy of the socialist gardeners and park designers has limited itself to the Qichun and Changchun Yuan, as well as to the eastern littoral of the Yuan Ming Yuan itself. The further natural decline of the gardens may have

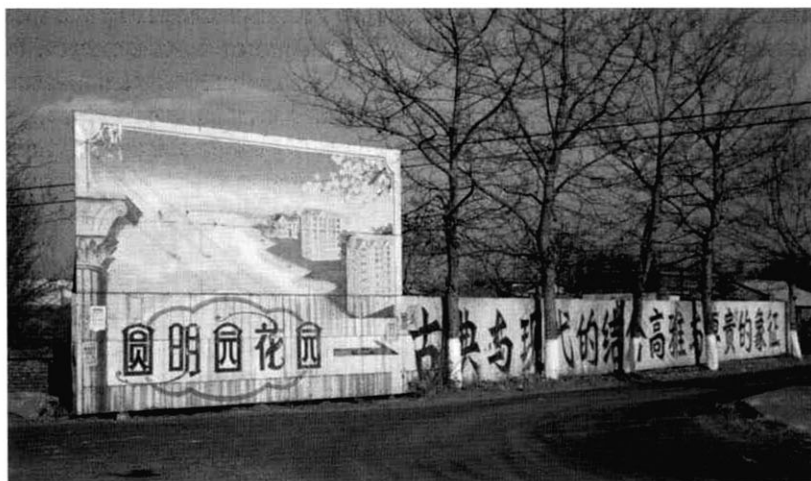
Figure 58

*A stone marking the original site of the pavilion Displaying Poetry and Harmonising Rhymes (Zhanshi Yinglü 展詩應律) featuring an image of the building and a description of its history and destruction by the Anglo-French force**



Figure 59

*Hoarding outside the north-west corner of the palace, which reads: "Yuan Ming Yuan Gardens: the classical combined with the modern—a symbol of elegance and refinement"**



⁷⁸ Lim, "Model recreates China's burnt Summer Palace."

been halted, but restoration has been carried out by those who are the descendants not of the original patrons or designers of the parks, nor even of its labourers, but rather by the churlish progeny of the indigenous vandals who enthusiastically devoted themselves to its despoliation for over a hundred years. According to reports in 1996, they will spend some US\$240 million in further improvements to the grounds up to the year 2000. As for plans to rebuild the whole palace, however, Wu Fengchun 吳風春, an administrator of the ruins, told a Reuters correspondent, "There is a desire, but there is no financial ability."⁷⁸

Figure 60

*One of the first Western 'palaces' built in the Yuan Ming Yuan Gardens estate**



Various developers, from Hong Kong, Korea and elsewhere, have been at pains to prove their patriotic credentials by proposing to rebuild the gardens. These plans were thwart-ed by the recent fall of their patron, Mayor Chen Xitong 陳希同. Implicated in numerous corrupt real-estate deals in the city, Chen is renowned among Peking residents for enforcing a building code in the early 1990s that required new high-rise buildings to be capped with mock-traditional-style rooves, so-called 'Chen Xitong hats' (*Chen Xitong maozi* 陳希同帽子). The more canny businessmen avoided the scandals surrounding Mayor Chen and have satisfied their vanity for grand projects by investing instead in a new luxury villa development, the Yuan Ming Yuan Gardens (Yuanming Huayuan 圓明花園), built along the northern wall of the old palaces.

Others have used methods more in keeping with either tradition or post-tradition to achieve

a similar end: in 1983 the Taiwan–Hong Kong director Li Han-hsiang 李翰祥 had a set made of the Western palaces near the Ming Tombs for his film “The Burning of the Yuan Ming Yuan” 火燒圓明園. Liu Zuo 劉佐, of the Tianyi Arts and Crafts Development Corporation in Langfang County 廊坊縣, Hebei province, has employed a traditional model-making method using sorghum stalks to recreate the pavilions of the gardens. It took Liu three years, four million *yuan* (US\$482,000) and thirty tonnes of sorghum stalks to complete a miniature-scale version of about half the original gardens.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the Zhuda Computer Company of Beijing 北京珠達電腦動畫公司 embarked on a digital reconstruction of some of the Western Palaces, and of the Audience Hall⁸⁰; and in Canada a group of enthusiasts at the Xingxing 幸星 Company have been constructing a virtual Yuan Ming Yuan on the internet since 1995 with the support of the University of British Columbia.⁸¹

Figure 61

Director Li Han-hsiang and set designer Song Hongrong 宋洪榮 outside the film-set version of *View of Distant Seas* (photograph by Liang Shuang 梁爽)



Figures 62 & 63

The sorghum-stalk Audience Hall (Reuters) and a pavilion from Elevated Region of the Magical Pot (Fangbu Shengjing)*



⁷⁹ Ibid. The details of Liu Zuo's obsession are worth recounting here. He first developed the idea of rebuilding the palace in 1991 when he came across a 1924 book by Puzuo 溥佐, a member of the imperial clan and cousin of the dethroned Emperor Puyi. It contained detailed drawings of the palaces. Liu was subsequently alerted to the possibilities of using sorghum stalks to make models by a television programme about an artisan who specialised in the technique. He bought the patent for the

/process for 50,000 *yuan* (US\$6,000), and then purchased from the State Bureau for the Preservation of Cultural Relics the patent of a solution that could prevent cracks and mould, as well as keep pests at bay, to apply to the sorghum models. Finally, he found 2.7 hectares of farmland outside Peking to grow the sorghum and leased a 3,500-square-metre abandoned factory in Langfang, where eighty artisans spent three years working on the project. Unable to find a buyer for the final

/model, from late 1996 Liu started selling off the pavilions separately. He also began offering poetic scenes made to order, ranging in price from US\$100 to \$50,000, which would require anything from two weeks to a year to complete. (Details from Lim, “Model recreates China's burnt Summer Palace.”)

⁸⁰ See Barmé, “Yuan Ming Yuan: a digital reconstruction of the old Summer Palace,” *Beijing Scene*, 23–29 February 1996, pp.4–5.

⁸¹ www.cs.ubc.ca:80/spider/cchen/ymyi01.htm

While these computer-generated reconstructions develop apace in cyberspace, in the ancient garden city of Hangzhou another far more palpable version of the Yuan Ming Yuan fantasy has been created. This is the Yuan Meng Yuan 圓夢園 near the Qiantang River 錢塘江. Advertisements for this villa estate, the name of which means the “Gardens for Perfecting One’s Dreams,” featured widely in the streets of the southern city throughout 1996. Further south, in a theme park in Zhuhai 珠海, the Special Economic Zone bordering on Macao, an architectural miscegenation of Yuan Ming Yuan pavilions has been built. A more appropriate geopolitical commemoration of the northern site, however, can be found in Shanghai where, behind the former British Consulate on the Bund (—the more recent Friendship Store), there runs a road named simply Yuan Ming Yuan Lu 圓明園路.

Figure 64

*Shops at the entrance to the Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park and the Wanchun Yuan Apartments complex. The sign, put up at the time of the XII Asian Games in 1990, reads “With smiles we welcome guests from throughout the world, who are sure to be satisfied at Yuan Ming”**



A Future in Ruins

⁸² Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.429.

A life as a *Trümmerfeld* requires perhaps something more than garish refurbishments and fanciful simulacra. Fortunately, the tasteless hand of the present, occupied as it is with the eastern precincts of the grounds of the Garden of Perfect Brightness, has yet to reach out and overwhelm the unkempt remains of the original Yuan Ming Yuan.

As Rose Macaulay has observed, “It should be one of the pleasures of palace ruins that their luxurious past should drift about them like a cultured and well-fed ghost, whispering of beauty and wealth.”⁸² Yet few cultured and well-fed ghosts disport themselves in the grounds of the Yuan Ming Yuan, and no real heroes’ lives adorn its history; there is no individual whose tragic