

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*

<sup>82</sup> 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.”<sup>82</sup> 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

tale or sorry fate has given birth to a literature of melancholy or imagination that is associated with the palaces. In Chinese accounts there is only a passing reference to the chief eunuch Wen Feng 文豐, who drowned himself in the Sea of Plenitude when the Western troops first breached the gates, his ruler, the Xianfeng Emperor, having hastily fled to Jehol ostensibly to embark on the 'autumn hunt'.

Unlike the threnody for Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 contained in Bo Juyi's 白居易 "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" (*Changben ge* 長恨歌) there is no literature of note that elicits pity, for example, for the fate of Xiang Fei 香妃, the Fragrant Concubine from Turkestan who, according to legend, lived out her days in the Western Palaces. Nor are there any writings that mourn the horrors wrought on the subjects of the emperor as in Du Mu's 杜牧 poem "Apang Palace" (*Apang gong* 阿房宮) that described the royal domain of Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 and its plangent fate. Even less is there a Lady Mengjiang 孟姜女 whose legend is forever married to the grandest of ruins, the Great Wall. Perhaps only in one major literary work does the lavish style of the Garden of Perfect Brightness survive, albeit in a much-reworked guise. For there is speculation that the Prospect Garden, the Daguan Yuan 大觀園, of Cao Xueqin's novel *The Story of the Stone* is based on these same imperial gardens.<sup>83</sup>

Apart from desultory accounts by some visitors—a few Western, and others Chinese literati-official—the details of the history of the Yuan Ming Yuan must be pieced together from the Veritable Records of the emperors, dynastic archives and the elliptical accounts of imperial inventories covering the building, refurbishing, expansion and alteration of structures and sites around the gardens. These are laconic materials, giving little of the lifeblood of detail that might bring the gardens at the height of their glory into closer view. They help us too little to imagine the living history of the place.

There has been scant love in China for the Manchu-Qing and its rulers. As the 1990s have progressed, however, the glories of the Qianlong era have been touted as a worthy heritage for the revenant nation; but the lack of any abiding affection is not merely the result of decades of anti-feudal indoctrination. Perhaps it is because the Qing was a 'foreign' dynasty and that it succumbed too readily to Confucian-literati culture; or it may be that its ignominious decline, that harrowing process that unfolded over nearly a century, still leaves people bitter and unforgiving. Perhaps its last rulers—the increasingly lacklustre emperors from the time of Xianfeng in the 1850s to the Empress Dowager and her coterie—so lack those qualities that inspire either love or awe that the shadow of dynastic decline obscures the first great symbol of its ruination, the Garden of Perfect Brightness. Perhaps it is also because all of this horror and its attendant shame is too fresh in memory, too painfully recent in time, for people to feel that they can afford to indulge in either sentiment or nostalgia.

For many of the foreign chroniclers of the decline of the Yuan Ming Yuan ruins since the mid-nineteenth century—George Kates and Hope Danby

<sup>83</sup> See Dai Yi, *Qianlongdi ji qi shidai* [Emperor Qianlong and his era] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue, 1992), pp. 494–8. A full description of Prospect Garden can be found in chapters 17 and 18 of *Honglou meng*. See *The story of the stone, a Chinese novel by Cao Xueqin in five volumes*, vol. 1: *The golden days*, trans. by David Hawkes (Harmondsworth, Md: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 324–74. Cao, who lived nearby and whose relatives may have worked in the palace as it expanded under Qianlong, would have certainly been familiar with the Yuan Ming Yuan. See also John Minford, "The Chinese garden: death of a symbol," unpublished manuscript.

<sup>84</sup> Danby, *Garden of perfect brightness*, p.229.

<sup>85</sup> See Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and empire: the evolution of a theme in Augustan and Romantic literature* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), and Anne Janowitz, *England's ruins: poetic purpose and the national landscape* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

being among the most eloquent and plaintive in their accounts—the gardens are tragically romantic. As Danby wrote upon leaving the Yuan Ming Yuan through the crumbling walls near the Western Palaces in the late 1930s:

We turned away reluctantly, seeing the sun as it set behind the screen of blue-green hills that still looked like a dreamy Ming picture. Nature, serene and undisturbed, had taken no heed of the passions of men. She had gone on her way calmly and indifferently, secure in her strength and beauty which had inexorably outlived all the fancies, extravagances and artificialities of the Sons of Heaven of the Great Pure Dynasty.<sup>84</sup>

This the tenor of comments by Western travellers nurtured by the grand lust for ruins that has risen since the early days of the industrial revolution. So it is, perhaps, as the economic boom of the Reform era spawns dreams of classical greatness, the ruins of the Garden of Perfect Brightness will gradually achieve in the minds of future generations a sense of poetic mission.<sup>85</sup>

So far the Yuan Ming Yuan has fared better than many architectural glories and classical sites of imperial China. Although plundered in the Republic—hit by that wave of destructive glee that carried off the walls of the Imperial City, saw the creation of Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 military reviewing podium where once stood the pavilion of the Fragrant Concubine opposite the

## Figure 65

*The Ancestral Halls (Vast Benevolence and Eternal Blessings, Hongci Yonghu 鴻慈永祐) as depicted in the Forty Scenes.*

"In China the loveliest spots are always chosen for temples and burial-grounds, and Ch'ien Lung selected the north-west corner of the enclosure for the temple. A low circle of hills gave perfect seclusion to the site that was approached by a road winding through pine-shaded glades.

"... the Ancestral Temple ... was the perfection of Chinese architecture. It was double roofed, with many huge red-lacquered pillars supporting the painted eaves; its tiles were golden-coloured and its walls painted a deep earth-red. With the dazzling white of the marble, the dark green of the pines, the shining bronze of the incense-burners and pairs of deer and storks, and the background of blue and purple hills, it was a scene without parallel in dignity, splendour and majesty."

(—Danby, *Garden of Perfect Brightness*, pp.55–6)



Xinhua Gate 新華門 entrance to the Sea Palaces, and which witnessed the craven occupation of those palaces, Zhongnanhai, by the new government—the area of the gardens remained intact. Even so its contents were, as we have noted, mined for their wealth of building materials and decorative fixtures, and then used to adorn the new public structures and gardens of the jerry-built democracy of the Chinese capital.

The Yuan Ming Yuan was far enough from Peking to be spared much of the onslaught of socialist reconstruction in the 1950s. Kangxi's Changchun Yuan and the other desolate gardens to the south of the Yuan Ming Yuan were none of them able to withstand the zeal for change. Although much of Kangxi's pleasance exists today as a bus-parking lot and open fields, the other parks (Shao Yuan, Minghe Yuan 鳴鶴園, Jingchun Yuan 鏡春園 and Langrun Yuan) were overtaken by the expansive grasp of Yanjing 燕京 (now Peking) University and to an extent preserved. The faculty dormitory buildings of the Weixiu Yuan 蔚秀園, for example, retain a hint of their origins, surrounded as they are by artificial lotus ponds and interconnecting lakes. Similarly, the northern areas of the university campus around Weiming Lake 未名湖 reflect the contours of their scenic past.

Although the resuscitated eastern half of the Garden of Perfect Brightness has been gazetted as "The Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park" and the grounds to the West remain neglected, it seems there will be no vouchsafing the northern section of the demesne. For recent maps of the city show that a new Fifth Ring Road 五環路—the next macadamized bulwark to enclose the ever-expanding urban blight of Peking—is planned to run directly through the northern precincts of the gardens. If the maps hold true then both the Cold Mountain and the original area of the Ancestral Halls (Hongci Yonghu), one of Qianlong's favourite spots in the royal domain, will be obliterated.

Despite this final destruction, and the encirclement of the grounds by the polluting embrace of a superhighway, I would venture that there will be time aplenty for the Garden of Perfect Brightness to rise in romantic stature. As China becomes economically more boisterous and urbanised, the scope for nostalgia will increase manifold. Gradually, the Yuan Ming Yuan may well become more than a *Trümmerfeld* scattered with reminders of the imperial will ignobled, its classical splendour despoiled. It may grow from the rancorous confines of a spiteful and crudely manipulated nationalism to become a ruin of grandeur and wonderment, to be more exquisite in death than it was marvellous in life.<sup>86</sup>

In the grand sweep of time, the Garden of Perfect Brightness is still a youthful site; it has only just embarked on its life in ruins, one that has already been more eventful and dramatic than its existence as a palace.

In conclusion, I would like to recount a story told to me by Dr Stephen FitzGerald, Australia's first ambassador to Peking in the 1970s. It was on the eve of the devastating Tangshan earthquake in the summer of 1976. Dr FitzGerald was accompanying Mr Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister

**Figure 66**

*A street number from Fuyuan Village\**



<sup>86</sup> See Macaulay, *Pleasure of ruins*, p.440.

whose government recognized the People's Republic of China—an act that among other things made my years in China as an exchange student from 1974 possible—around the Chinese capital. Together they visited the overgrown and, at the time, unprettified remains of the Western Palaces of the Yuan Ming Yuan. Mr Whitlam surveyed all that was before him with the imperious gaze for which he is justly renowned. Then, in his ponderous and breathy accent, he declared:

"I love ruins."

Ladies and gentlemen, so do I.

# Figure 67

Photograph by Lois Conner



## ENDNOTE

The proverbial phrase *Et in arcadia ego* has a particular resonance, be it as a thinly-veiled classical moral or an indulgent elegiac sentiment, as we contemplate the history of the Garden of Perfect Brightness. It is both a *memento mori*, a reminder that even in the most paradisiacal surroundings there lurks death, and a statement that "I too have been in Arcadia."

Coined in the early seventeenth century by Giulio Rospigliosi (later Pope Clement IX), who was inspired by the Fifth Book of Virgil's *Eclogues*, the line has been used by artists and writers ever since to explore the complex relationship between a halcyon past and the ever-present pall of death. The first work on this theme was a painting by Giovanni Francesco Guercino commissioned by Rospigliosi, although the most famous depiction of it is Nicolas Poussin's 1630s "Et in Arcadia ego," now in the Louvre. Goethe called one chapter of his *Italien Reise* "Auch ich in Arkadien," and Evelyn Waugh uses the Latin tag as the title of "Book One" in *Brideshead Revisited*.

See Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia ego': Poussin and the elegiac tradition," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1955), pp.295–320.

Geremie R. Barmé

Division of Pacific and Asian History  
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies  
Australian National University  
Canberra ACT 0200