

# China's Palace of Memory

In 1860, a Western expeditionary force destroyed the fabulous complex of Beijing palaces known as Yuanming Yuan. Today, the Chinese are debating how the ruined site should be treated. The argument is ostensibly about the physical remaking of Yuanming Yuan. But what's really at issue is China's sense of itself and its past.

*by Norman Kutcher*

**T**he Yuanming Yuan ("Garden of Perfect Brightness") was a residence for the emperors of China's last dynasty, the Qing. Considered the crowning achievement of traditional Chinese architecture, it once occupied a thousand acres in a section of northwest Beijing. Yuanming Yuan was destroyed in 1860, and Chinese are now debating whether it should be rebuilt or left as a ruin. Every Beijing resident seems to have a strong opinion, for at stake is not merely the physical character of the site but the use a people are to make of their history.

Yuanming Yuan, which Westerners know as the "Old Summer Palace," was built and rebuilt over a 150-year period. Though referred to in the singular in both English and Chinese, it was not one palace but a complex of palaces. By the height of its development in the late 18th century, the grounds held hundreds of small buildings, made of rare woods and constructed using techniques that are now all but lost. The palace was not merely a summer home but the beloved main residence of many Qing emperors. In contrast to the ponderous Forbidden City, Yuanming Yuan was an aesthetic retreat, as much a work of landscape architecture as a palace, with manmade hills and countless waterways over which ornate boats carried members of the royal family. In 1860, an

allied expedition of British and French forces plundered and destroyed most of the complex. They were retaliating for the death in captivity of individuals who had been sent to China to enforce treaties that, among other provisions, would have forced China to accede to the residence of Western ambassadors in Beijing.

Even the men who destroyed Yuanming Yuan remarked on its beauty. Charles Gordon, who was to become perhaps the most celebrated of Victorian soldiers, wrote to his mother: "You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them; in fact, these palaces were so large, and we were so pressed for time, that we could not plunder them carefully." The most succinct description of Yuanming Yuan came from an interpreter to Lord Elgin, the British nobleman who ordered the destruction:

Here a solitary building would rise fairy-like from the center of a lake, reflecting its image on the limpid blue liquid in which it seemed to float, and then a sloping path would carry you into the heart of a mysterious cavern artificially formed of rockery, and leading out on to a grotto in the bosom of another lake. The variety of the picturesque was endless, and charming in the extreme; indeed, all that is



*This silk painting from 1738 depicts the emperor celebrating the new year at Yuanming Yuan.*

most lovely in Chinese scenery, where art contrives to cheat the rude attempts of nature into the bewitching, seemed all associated in these delightful grounds.

If part of the current emotional debate among Chinese is over whether such beauty *can* be restored, the larger issue that has captured the popular imagination and is debated in national publications is whether it *should* be restored.

To comprehend the emotion in the debate is to understand something of what Yuanming Yuan means to most Chinese. It marks at once the high point and the low point of their civilization: Yuanming Yuan was the capstone of Chinese architectural achievement, but its destruction revealed how moribund was the Chinese government that had betrayed the nation to Western imperialism. As one of China's leading intellectuals recently put it, "The invaders' raging

fire that burned Yuanming Yuan into a relic is imprinted as a mark of national humiliation on the backs of the Chinese people. It is the alarm bell in the mind of every Chinese person.” The place has a meaning for Chinese akin to that of the Holocaust for Jews: It is an eternal reminder both of what has been lost and of what cannot be allowed to happen again.

**L**ike many who visit China, I was initially saddened at the prospect of the reconstruction, fearing it would yield yet another gaudily painted tourist attraction. There is already too much evidence in China of historic sites that have been garishly restored. Each time I return, I am dismayed to find that a beautiful old ruin has been “restored” into a vulgar tourist trap, its history lost amid the cries of souvenir sellers. A like sense of dismay at the careless treatment of historic sites is gaining currency in China, and a generation of Chinese influenced by the West have begun to discuss in earnest the nature of responsible restoration.

One of the most articulate advocates of keeping Yuanming Yuan a ruin is the famous Chinese writer Cong Weixi. Cong has used prominent Chinese newspapers to educate his compatriots in Western—and, to him, modern and sensible—ideas about the treatment of historic structures. He has described how, while walking through a busy shopping district in Berlin in the 1980s, he came upon an old church that stood in stark contrast to the modern buildings around it. The steeple of the church had been half-destroyed in the war decades before. The sight gave Cong a new, and foreign, perspective on historic restoration: The steeple had been left as it was to remind Germans of a past they dared not forget.

Cong had a similar experience in the city of Koblenz, where a bronze statue of William the Great, the personification of Germany’s martial spirit, was destroyed by a shell in the Second World War. All that survived—and survives still—is the pillar on which William stood, and it is now covered in bird droppings. Cong, finding signifi-

cance even in the bird droppings, compared the wisdom of leaving the column empty with what he feels would have happened in China: “If there had existed such a statue in my country, it would long ago have been replaced. We Chinese have always preferred to repair our history.” That last sentiment has become a mantra for those who oppose the reconstruction of Yuanming Yuan.

A chorus of scholars has joined Cong in asserting that masterpieces can be created but not re-created. They employ another phrase that has galvanized opposition to the reconstruction of Yuanming Yuan, and that I have heard repeated by everyone from taxi drivers to high-level party members: “Relics have their own kind of beauty.” Would any sane Westerner, they argue, consider rebuilding Roman ruins? If the Mona Lisa were destroyed, would someone presume to paint another? These opponents of rebuilding assume the superiority of the Western point of view. They draw their arguments from Western aesthetics and use examples that are uniformly European. Indeed, they are convinced that rebuilding Yuanming Yuan would shame them in Western eyes, for to create a fake antique on a historic site would demonstrate yet again China’s backwardness. (Cong is unaware of a parallel debate taking place in Germany over whether the palace of the Prussian monarchy should be rebuilt in Berlin.)

**B**eijingers have other reasons for questioning restoration. Many believe, for example, that the proposal is motivated by the prospect of financial gain. A well-known architectural historian, Chen Zhihua, has gone so far as to call restoration an exercise in “money worship.” He points to a section of the Great Wall at Badaling, where a completely new wall, a KFC outlet, and a crowd of loud vendors hide the quiet beauty of that frontier fortress.

But there are powerful voices on the other side of the debate as well. Wang Daocheng, a distinguished professor at China’s Qing History Institute in Beijing, is the world’s leading authority on Yuanming Yuan and,

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*The ruins of the Western-style palaces at Yuanming Yuan as they appear today.*

as it happens, an articulate advocate of its restoration. I began visiting him in August 1999, in his apartment at the institute. Professors there live in drab concrete structures that were built in the 1950s for efficiency and not much else: concrete floors, whitewashed plaster walls, and light fixtures with bare fluorescent tubes. Yet Wang insisted that we meet in his apartment. I soon understood why. The professors and their families have begun remodeling the apartments, and the bleakness of the hallways contrasts markedly with what one finds behind each door. After climbing five flights of dingy stairs, I entered Professor Wang's home. It was a completely different world, with wood wainscoting, granite floors, and wood built-ins.

My first visit occurred on a brutally hot day. Over the hum of his newly installed air conditioner, this well-dressed, vibrant senior historian became increasingly animated as he spoke: "Our young people seem to think that Yuanming Yuan was a Western-style palace. They don't realize that

the Western-style palaces it included were something like only two percent of the total Yuanming Yuan." Most people in China know almost nothing of the real Yuanming Yuan, he said, and think that the Western-style palaces, which were designed by 18th-century Jesuit architects and never fully destroyed because they were built of stone rather than wood, were the whole of it. In fact, the heart of the original Yuanming Yuan lay far to the southwest of those palaces, in what is now a barren, walled-off area for "mixed use"—manufacturing tofu, raising pigs, dumping garbage. Outside the walls of this site lies Beijing's version of "Silicon Valley," an area of high-technology industry with connections to China's most prestigious universities. The only public-use area recalling Yuanming Yuan is a park that circumscribes the remains of the Western-style palaces.

In Wang's view, nothing could be more embarrassing to China: The accumulated genius of Chinese architecture lies in a garbage heap, while the ruins of some Western-style buildings miles away, of little architectural or historical interest, have

become symbols of Chinese nationalism. Worse still, the Western buildings have come to stand for the whole of Yuanming Yuan, the great treasure to which the West laid waste. The only adequate response, Wang believes, is a national campaign to return Yuanming Yuan to glory and make it an attraction as splendid as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.

A recent study under the auspices of the Beijing municipal government confirms Wang's view that most Chinese know little of the real Yuanming Yuan. They regard it as a symbol of China's disgrace at the hands of Western powers, but they are as ignorant of the specifics of its destruction as they are of the true nature of its grandeur. For the nationalist Wang, rebuilding Yuanming Yuan will encourage Chinese to learn the truth about their past and shake off the burden of a defeat by Western powers and a betrayal by corrupt internal regimes.

Most Westerners never fully appreciate how profoundly Chinese have been affected by what they call "the century of shame," a period that began in the early 19th century with the first Opium War and ended in 1949 with victory on the mainland by the Chinese Communist Party. I have often heard Chinese describe their subsequent history, using that "century of shame" as a reference point, in a narrative that runs something like this: "Because of the corruption and decadence of the Qing regime, we were overrun by outside powers. Only Mao Zedong and the Communist Party were able to unite us and throw the foreigners out. After Mao came Deng Xiaoping, whose economic reforms put us back on solid footing. Now, with the return of Hong Kong to the mainland, one of the last vestiges of the shame of imperialism has been removed. When Taiwan is returned to the motherland as well, the reunification of China will be complete." Many Chinese would add to that triumphal sequence yet another event—the restoration of Yuanming Yuan.

In answering critics of reconstruction, Wang and his supporters have begun to enunciate a new kind of nationalism, rooted in the principle that the Chinese past must be commemorated in a Chinese way. Like

Wang, Zhang Cheng, a prominent intellectual who is vice director of both the National Cultural Relics Study Association and the Yuanming Yuan Study Commission, rejects the view that the more sophisticated, modern, and tasteful approach to ruins is to leave them as they are:

We have some experts who say: We must be like Greece. They take the side of Cong Weixi and cite examples of many foreign preserved ruins and do not look at Chinese reality. They shut their eyes and use foreign theories as their rule, and consequently they are adamantly opposed to restoring Yuanming Yuan. Their outlooks may indeed be based on patriotic motives, but in reality they are urging that Chinese do things according to foreign rules. . . . How can we make people understand that Yuanming Yuan was not just some imperial garden? It embodied more than 5,000 years of China's traditional culture. It was the zenith of our nation's more than 3,000 years of garden-building tradition. It was the greatest page ever written in the greatest book of our nation's achievement.

Zhang has no use for those who unthinkingly follow Western ways and believe "that the moon is rounder in Western countries." The task that faced China's great leaders, he recalls, was not to adhere to Marxism-Leninism as it was interpreted in the West but to define a socialism with Chinese characteristics: "If the Chinese revolution had blindly copied the experience of foreign revolutions, how much more bitterness would we have had to endure?"

The Chinese approach to historic restoration is born, in part, of differences in the architectural styles of East and West. Western architecture traditionally employed stone, so that even when a building was badly damaged, much of it would survive—and perhaps acquire over time the new kind of beauty Westerners attribute to ruins. But when a Chinese building was destroyed, its reliance on fragile wood materials tended to make the destruction complete. Hence, a Chinese building "survives" only by being reconstructed.

Wang Daocheng is among those writers who have proclaimed the superiority of Chinese architecture to Western architecture—and thereby linked Chinese nationalism with the defense of a traditional Chinese aesthetic. Western gardens, he says, are based on ideas of symmetry and balance, with the buildings placed at the center and even the plants clipped according to geometric principles. In Chinese gardens, the buildings occupy a less important place and are integrated into the landscape. Chinese architecture works in harmony with the landscape and nature, not against them. Others make the point less delicately. Chen Liquan, an Oxford graduate who is chairman of the board of China's Million Land House Corporation, says of those who advocate the German approach to historic preservation, "If they could only see Germany's grotesque and gaudy artistic genres and its disjointed forms, which are so perplexing and alarming, they would not be so quick to praise Germany as a model for rebuilding the national spirit."

Advocates of reconstruction reject the view that what is new and fresh must be inferior to what is authentically old. Landscape is everything in the architecture of Yuanming Yuan, they argue, and the buildings themselves are a designed component of that landscape, as are the plants and the rocks. If the buildings are spoiled, the landscape is spoiled, just as a garden in which all the plants had died would cease to be beautiful. Only when architecture is new can it be beautiful.

This bold defense of the new pervades the writings of the restorationists. And their arguments strike a responsive chord in most Chinese, as they would probably have done with Chinese emperors, who often began their restorations of palaces and temples with wholesale demolition. The Qianlong emperor, who reigned over China for most of the 18th century, would order ancient temples and palace buildings destroyed for no other reason than that he needed their precious *nanmu* wood for a new construction project.

A "make-it-new" approach to the past has been so much the tradition in China that, as advocates of rebuilding Yuanming

Yuan remind their detractors, almost every historic site has been repeatedly reconstructed. Yellow Crane Tower, which sits on a promontory overlooking the great city of Wuhan, is a perfect example of this. Visitors to Wuhan are told that the building dates to the third century but only the *location* of the building has remained the same since the third century. The building itself has been rebuilt in almost every generation. Destroyed by fire in 1884, it existed in name only until 1983, when it was completely reconstructed. Visitors to Beijing who rail against poorly executed restorations don't realize that many of the "old" buildings they admire are reconstructions built after 1949—and transformed by the rapid antiquing process of North China's harsh climate. Even the famous Tiananmen Gate underwent a massive overhaul after 1949 that made it two meters taller.

For modern Chinese in search of an indigenous aesthetic, believing in a rebuildable past is nothing less than the progressive view. Zhang Cheng calls the argument of the writer Cong Weixi "poisonous," because it blocks any opportunity for progress, prevents the evolution of traditional Chinese architecture, and consigns China to a future in which traditional architecture cannot play a role. For Zhang, rebuilding a historic site gives each generation the opportunity to improve it, in accordance with a traditional principle: "When a place is moderately ruined, moderately restore it; when it is massively ruined, massively restore it; when it is completely ruined, completely restore it." The challenge, as in Chinese calligraphy, is to create work that is beautiful and fresh even as it adheres to traditional motifs. This line of thought is vehemently at odds with the thinking of those who embrace Western logic and argue that ruins have their own particular kind of beauty. The notion that a ruin can be beautiful is completely alien to Chinese aesthetics. So, too, is the belief that masterpieces should not be duplicated; Chinese tradition considers emulation of the masterpiece an intrinsic part of the creative process.

The nationalistic elements that inform today's defense of a traditional Chinese aesthetic are especially evident in discussions of the Western-style palaces of Yuanming Yuan. Some of the staunchest supporters of rebuilding the complex are utterly opposed to including those palaces in the plan. Nationalists envision a reconstructed Yuanming Yuan in which the Chinese portions are dazzlingly restored while the Western ones are left in ruins. That would send a message to visitors about the vitality of the new China, the decay of the West, and the outmodedness of a China that sought to fuse East and West.

Whereas the Western-style palaces were once a source of pride and symbols of China's openness to the West, the fashion is increasingly to view them as aesthetically mediocre structures—and symbols of how China was duped by the West. Here is Zhang Cheng's cold assessment:

They were an emblem of imperialism, created by foreign missionaries who wished to display foreign culture and please the likes of Qing emperors to further their causes. After the Western palaces were completed in 1759, there was an illusion of "Chinese-Western amicability." Numbly, China's bureaucratic class permitted the rapid importation of opium, and the national power ebbed just as rapidly. The "Opium War," which occurred only 81 years later, humiliated the nation, caused it to forfeit its sovereignty, made China a colony and a semicolony, and led to the Chinese people's more-than-century-long period of suffering.

Wang Daocheng takes a somewhat different approach to denigrating the Western-style palaces. Adopting a controversial stance, he rebuts the view that the Qianlong emperor decided to build European-style palaces because he was fascinated by Western culture. Instead, Wang argues that the emperor built them to demonstrate, particularly to Westerners, that there was nothing China could not

accomplish. And far from being fascinated by things Western, he actually found the buildings distasteful: He placed them behind an earthen wall so that their ugliness would not detract from the beautiful garden palace that he had created, and he seldom visited them.

Debunking the importance of the Western-style palaces and rediscovering the validity of the traditional Chinese aesthetic are but two ways the partisans in the debate over Yuanming Yuan reflect developments in Chinese nationalism. Much more about this debate is new. Consider that during the Cultural Revolution, historic landmarks were intentionally destroyed by avid Red Guards enforcing a government policy that mandated the destruction of feudal remnants. Although the policy was reversed after the fall of the Gang of Four, there remains more than a dash of ambivalence toward such buildings. When some Chinese began to advocate that the structures be preserved, they justified the policy by invoking tourism and the profits it could bring to the nation. The term they used was not "preserving" a site but rather "opening" it.

The transformation of Yuanming Yuan from a site to be opened for tourism to a site that should be historically preserved is momentous. The first policy allowed the site to be used over the years for a hodgepodge of bizarre amusements, including a "primitive village" and a paintball arena. When people began to advocate rebuilding the palace, many responded that it was more important for the nation to dedicate itself to modernization than to the reconstruction of a feudal relic. It was the reconstruction-minded Wang Daocheng who took the lead in articulating a response to the earlier policy. He argued that Yuanming Yuan should be seen not as a plaything of emperors but as a temple to the workers who built it—and to the accumulated Chinese genius that imperialism destroyed. Yuanming Yuan was "the crystallization of the brightness of the Chinese people and of their sweat and toil" and "a testament to the history of Western Imperialism's invasion of China."



*A photo thought to show the grand palace of Yuanming Yuan shortly before it was set afire.*

This new point of view is especially consequential for issues of land use. In the years after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was considerable discussion of what should be done with the Yuanming Yuan site, a large tract of land that lent itself to easy cultivation, in a nation deeply concerned with agricultural production. It was decided to create a park around the ruins of the Western palaces and to leave the rest of the land vacant. In a now-famous remark, Premier Zhou Enlai said that the land should be kept intact so that, conditions permitting, Yuanming Yuan could one day be rebuilt. The portion of Yuanming Yuan that lay outside the park was slowly and semiofficially given over to agriculture and various other pursuits. But today some Chinese call the farmers who put Yuanming Yuan's land to productive use "squatters who polluted a sacred site."

Zhou Enlai's suggestion that the palace would eventually be rebuilt has allowed

those who would restore Yuanming Yuan to make another argument: They contend that China's newfound wealth and role in the world economy are evidence that the nation has finally begun to exorcise the demons of imperialism that overshadowed a century of its history. When the country was at its lowest ebb, the national treasure that was Yuanming Yuan could be plundered and destroyed. But China today is rich and in a position to restore and maintain the great complex. Proponents of this view are not fazed by the vast sums it will take to rebuild Yuanming Yuan; on the contrary, they revel in the cost.

Over the years, visitors to Yuanming Yuan have been free to remember the past as they chose to remember it. If the complex is rebuilt, it will no longer be a place where memory is individualistic and autonomous. It will become, rather, a place where memory is largely controlled. The site has been home to various sorts of





*Chinese students, wearing communist youth league bandanas, learn history firsthand at Yuanming Yuan.*

artists and freethinkers, and even to advocates of democracy. To rebuild Yuanming Yuan would be to impose control on such groups. Of course, one's imagination is not left entirely free to wander even today when one visits the site; at certain hours, for example, a speaker system blasts mournful traditional Chinese music to imbue visitors with the proper sense of loss. But, for the most part, Yuanming Yuan allows a private response to the past. Those who want the site kept a ruin often mention the sadness that affects them when they walk there. Ye Tingfang, a prominent professor of literature, describes the experience:

On my first trip to the Yuanming Yuan ruins, when I saw the crooked remains of the Western-style palaces, with their broken columns still standing upright in the quiet fields, my heart felt a rush of exquisite emotion. I looked up at them and heard their silent complaint. My eyes filled with tears, and my palms touched my forehead. Since then I have come often to this spot. . . . This great ruin, how beautiful is its tragedy. At any

moment it cleanses my soul. . . . For this reason I believe that Yuanming Yuan should be kept forever as a place that one visits to ponder the past.

Wei Kaizhao, a research scholar in the department of history at the Beijing Academy of Sciences, rejects Ye's free-wheeling emotional indulgence. He argues that seeing Yuanming Yuan as it really was will be a qualitatively different experience from merely *reflecting* on its splendor. Seeing, rather than reflecting, is "a more mature, more systematic, and more effective form of patriotic education." To behold Yuanming Yuan in all its glory, he believes, "is sure to bring about an onrush of devotion to building socialist modernization."

**A** Yuanming Yuan that leaves nothing to the imagination will doubtless gloss over a great deal of history. For example, almost no one I met in China knew that the British and French destroyed the palace complex to retaliate for the death of hostages. There is the further issue of

Chinese complicity in the plunder and destruction: Some scholars now suggest that Chinese warlords, not Westerners, destroyed the Western palaces. Considerable evidence suggests, too, that the people of Beijing were there to profit from the sale of goods once the dust settled.

**M**y former teacher, Vera Schwarcz of Wesleyan University, has astutely described how the Cultural Revolution continues to exert a subtle but powerful influence on the Chinese present. Thanks to her, I have come to understand that reconstructing Yuanming Yuan is in part meant to exorcise the demons of that awful moment in China's recent past when so many historic sites were leveled by zealous Red Guards. I have read article after article in the Chinese media on the reconstruction of such sites, and rarely have I found in them any acknowledgment that the Cultural Revolution was responsible for the sites' destruction. By focusing now on Yuanming Yuan, their architectural crown jewel, and by blaming the West for its destruction, Chinese can avoid the more recent past and turn away from their own complicity in the murderous fate of historic places.

Cong Weixi fears that if Yuanming Yuan is rebuilt, generations to come may lose all memory of its destruction. To that fear, Zhao Guanghua, of the Beijing Garden Science Research Academy, offers a creative response: Reconstruct Yuanming Yuan to look just as it did in late 1860, immediately after the destruction; at that moment, Zhao believes, it was most beautiful—and most poignant. My own view is that signage at a restored Yuanming Yuan would keep the memory of the destruction alive. I am less hopeful that the signage will present a balanced account of the destruction.

Of course, if Yuanming Yuan is fully realized, it will no longer hold its unique place in the Chinese imagination. Reconstructing the lost palace would be akin to reconstructing the temple in Jerusalem. Both structures are more powerful when imagined than when seen; no matter that the reconstruction of each was faithful to its original. Destruction gave

Yuanming Yuan its power. Imagine that it had never been destroyed. Like the Forbidden City, it would have gone through alternating periods of decline and reconstruction. But because Yuanming Yuan was so much more delicate than the Forbidden City, it would have been in much worse shape, and large portions of it probably would have been lost. It would be today a mere shadow of what it once was. Thanks to its destruction by the West, it became instead an enduring symbol of Chinese achievement and a vanished centerpiece of national spirit.

**S**o where does the reconstruction of Yuanming Yuan stand? The latest round of plans emerged after Beijing's successful bid for the 2008 Olympics. The government has announced a compromise between total reconstruction and maintaining the complex in ruins. About 10 percent of the whole will be rebuilt—walls, gates, waterways, and some of the buildings. Work on the walls surrounding the complex is underway, and residents of the area have been relocated. Thus far, details have been scarce, and no one knows whether this restoration is the first phase of a larger project. (Wang Daocheng seems certain that it is.) But given the pressure Beijingers feel to spruce up their capital for the Olympics, something dramatic will surely be done.

My conversations with Wang Daocheng made me see the logic in wanting to rebuild Yuanming Yuan, which may seem an odd admission after I have said that the rebuilt palace may gloss over history. Perhaps I was swayed by Wang Daocheng's personality. Or perhaps I simply let go of my preconception that the Chinese had to commemorate their past in a way we Westerners would deem tasteful. Westerners destroyed Yuanming Yuan. To apply Western standards to reclaiming it would be to add insult to injury. When Chinese commit to this project, they will embrace the past as their ancestors embraced the past and treat a historic site as it would traditionally have been treated. A rebuilt Yuanming Yuan might blur history's details, but it will honor China's past in a Chinese way. □