RUINS & MEMORY

While the treasures of the Yuanmingyuan were widely distributed among European art collections, the ruins of the European palaces—which had been made of stone, marble, and sturdy materials—mostly remained in recognizable form after 1860. The ruins were often visited by Western residents of Beijing on outings. They were frequently photographed in the 1870s, when photography became more widespread than it had been in the 1860s.

In the succeeding decades, the site was continually plundered for its raw materials and remaining artifacts. During the Boxer uprising and the siege of Beijing in 1900 to 1901, Western troops participated in further plunder. But much of the subsequent looting and damage was the work of local Chinese vandals, who sold antiquities in the local markets. [11] Photographs show how the ruins of the European palaces diminished in scale over the years; distinguished in this regard is a run of photos taken in 1873 by Ernst Ohlmer (1847–1927), a German customs official. [12]

Ernst Ohlmer’s 1873 Photos of the Ruins

In the decade following the torching of the Yuanmingyuan the area was officially off-limits, but it was difficult for the eunuchs and watchmen to secure. Looting and outbreaks of fire contributed to the decay of the garden. Ernst Ohlmer, a young German clerk, was discovered in one of the buildings and, as he had not stolen anything, was pardoned. In 1873, just 13 years after the sack, Ohlmer photographed the ruins of the European palaces, leaving the earliest known visual record of the devastated site. Although the buildings are damaged and the grounds overgrown with weeds, the basic architecture remains recognizable. The following 12 glass negatives were the source of a 2010 exhibition at Beijing’s China Millennium Monument.
Pavilion Harmonizing Surprise and Delight, Xieqiqu 諧奇趣

Xieqiqu, south façade
Built in 1751, this was the first pavilion in the Xiyanglou. Depicted in Engraving 1.

[ohlmer_1873_a]
This Xiegiqu panorama shows the lake in front overgrown with weeds.

[ohlmer_1873_b]
Xieqiqu, Music Pavilion

Not depicted in the 20 engravings, the Music Pavilion overlooked the lake and was connected by a bridge to the main part of the Xieqiqu.
Xieqiqu, eastern side of the main building

The ornamentation on this imposing Western structure had Chinese elements. The Music Pavilion is visible in the back left. Depicted in Engraving 3.

[ohlmer_1873_d]
Xieqiqu, north façade
Depicted in Engraving 2.

[ohlmer_1873_e]
Westerners felt comfortable in the remote, lightly-guarded Xiyanglou, and often visited the ruins. Here, four customs officials relax at the gate to the Maze. The gazebo can be seen through the archway. Depicted in Engraving 4.
Observatory of Lands Beyond, Fangwaiguan 方外觀

Fangwaiguan. Depicted in Engraving 8

[ohlmer_1873_g]
The best-known view of the Haiyantang, showing the large clam-shell fountain in the center, but missing the zodiac animal statues that formed the clock-fountains. The largest structure in the European section, the Haiyangtang housed a reservoir that supplied water to all the fountains in the central portion. Depicted in Engraving 10.

[ohlmer_1873_h]
Haiyantang, north façade

This perspective resembles Engraving 11, which suggests that Ohlmer may have seen the engravings. Several rooms in the northwest corner of the main building of the Haiyantang are featured. Depicted in Engraving 11.

[ohlmer_1873_i]
Observatory of Distant Oceans, Yuanyingguan 遠瀛觀

Yuanyingguan, southern (or front) side

The ornately decorated pillars are intact, but appear to have only a decorative function. The brick structure of the building is exposed on the right side. The photographer stood in front of the Grand Fountain looking up at the elevated Yuanyingguan. These pillars are among the most prominent of the ruins at the Yuanmingyuan Park today. Depicted in Engraving 14.

[ohlmer_1873_j]
From his throne in front of this stone screen, the emperor viewed the Grand Fountain and the Yuanyingguan behind it. Depicted in Engraving 16.

[ohlmer_1873_i]
The European Section Ruins Over Time

As Régine Thiriez has documented, the European section ruins continued to be photographed by Westerners from the 1870s through the 1930s. [13]

Of particular interest among these images is a photograph by Théophile Piry, taken around 1911, which shows two French and Russian diplomatic families celebrating the engagement of two of their children to each other. The picnic in the ruins perfectly illustrates the ironies of the Yuanmingyuan European palaces—built by the Qing emperor on European models, destroyed and looted by European troops, and later enjoyed by Europeans as a recreational site. The Chinese servants in the background do not seem to be enjoying the occasion very much.

French and Russian diplomats picnic at the Yuanmingyuan ruins around 1911. Their Chinese servants, still wearing the queues the Manchus required of their male Chinese subjects, are visible off to the side. [14]

Photograph by Théophile Piry. Collection, Charles Blackburn, Neuilly, France.
The Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park Today

Over the years, as the Yuanmingyuan was repeatedly culled of its artifacts by both foreigners and Chinese, its grounds were turned into farmland and housed villages of farmers. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, 15 work units numbering about 270 people were located there. Under the constant urging of Premier Zhou Enlai, in 1988 the Fuhai Lake area and the European ruins were opened to the public, and in the 1990s some of the other gardens were developed into a recreational park, with its lakes available for boating, children’s amusement, restaurants, tourist shops, and the like.

The European ruins are by far the area most visited and photographed. Most recognizable is the arch of the gate that formed the background for the Great Fountain (Dashuifa), with the ornate columns of the Yuanyingguan on the hill above it. No tourist could fail to have his or her picture taken in front of these iconic ruins, and the many photographs and videos of Yuanmingyuan Park that now appear online convey the different uses and aspects of its restoration.
The most photographed ruin in Yuanmingyuan Park today is the arched gate that stood behind the Great Fountain (Dashuifa 大水法), with the ornate columns of the Yuanyingguan standing slightly elevated behind it.

photographs by Druh Scoff / Flickr
The base of the shell-shaped fountain at the front of the Haiyantang survives by itself, with only a few shards of the palace itself remaining. This is where the 12 zodiac animals signaled the hours by spouting water at prescribed times.

photograph by Druh Scoff / Flickr