

The Garden of Perfect Brightness—3

Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860-present)

by Lillian M. Li

Opium War:
The Final Act

Plundering
Paradise

Collecting
Loot

Relics &
Controversy

Ruins &
Memory

Sources
& Credits



The earliest known photographs of the ruins of the European section of the Yuanmingyuan were taken by Ernst Ohlmer in 1873, just 13 years after the looting and destruction of the site. 12 of the original glass negatives were collected for an exhibition at Beijing's China Millennium Monument in 2011.

This depicts the north side of the Xieqiqu, one of the main palaces.

[ohlmer_1873]

In October 1860, the Second Opium War came to a violent end when British and French forces sacked and destroyed the sumptuous imperial retreat known as the Yuanmingyuan. This was defended at the time as a proper response to the torture and murder by Qing officials of a delegation of foreigners sent to Beijing in the final stages of the conflict. In the imperialistic rhetoric of the time, wantonly destroying one of the greatest treasures and pleasures of the imperial court was justified as a fitting and civilized act by which to punish China and its leaders for their barbaric behavior.

The sack of the Garden of Perfect Brightness was thoroughgoing and left no buildings intact. Although scavenging and looting of the site continued for decades thereafter, for all practical purposes the Chinese section was obliterated while the stone and marble palaces and pavilions of the European section survived only as ruins and rubble. Yet the Yuanmingyuan also lived on in two very different, but equally compelling, ways.

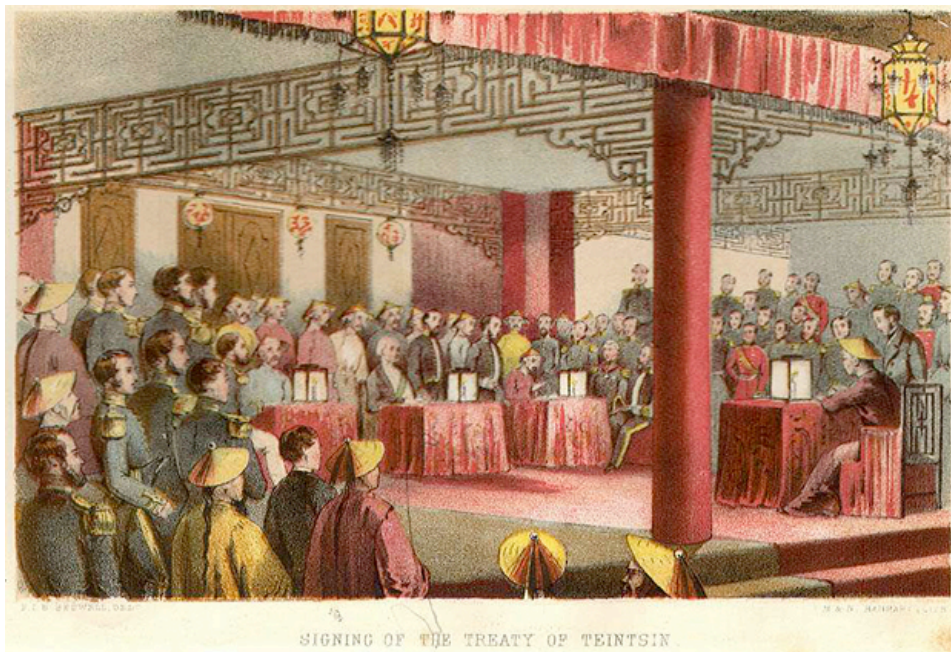
Despite the rampant trashing of untold treasures that had been housed in this vast complex, many valuable objects of art were taken as plunder and made their way into the great “Oriental” collections of the West, particularly in England and France. The issue of looted Chinese art and artifacts, many dating back to this time, continues to make news today.

On the other side of the coin, in Chinese popular consciousness the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan has lived on as perhaps the single most powerful symbol of modern China’s humiliation at the hands of the rapacious foreigners. The ruins of the Western buildings have been turned into a popular theme park—simultaneously a stark reminder of Western barbarity and celebration of Chinese nationalism. Once the nation’s Communist leaders reversed course and embraced rather than denounced the accomplishments of earlier generations—even the Manchu emperors—the Garden of Perfect Brightness became a natural media window for remembering and embracing the great traditions and accomplishments of China’s past.

OPIUM WARS: THE FINAL ACT

In October 1860, British and French troops plundered and destroyed virtually the entire Yuanmingyuan complex of elegant Chinese and European-style buildings. This notorious act marked the final chapter in the so-called Second Opium War (1856-60), and became a vivid symbol of rapacious Western imperialism to which Chinese historians have never ceased to call attention. Dissatisfied with the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing that ended the First Opium War (1839-42), the British and French used various pretexts to secure further trade rights, gain missionary privileges, and, in particular, establish diplomatic representation at Beijing. They wished to conduct diplomatic relations with China as equal sovereign states rather than following outdated tributary-state rituals traditionally demanded by the Chinese court. By so doing, they could further their own imperial ambitions in China.

In 1858, after a series of naval skirmishes, British forces under Lord Elgin (James Bruce, son of Thomas Bruce of "Elgin Marbles" fame) proceeded to northern China. Backed by French troops, they captured the Dagou (Taku) forts, and arrived at the port of Tianjin (Tientsin), about 80 miles from Beijing. Under the threat of direct force, the emperor Xianfeng (r. 1851 to 1862)—only 27 years old—authorized two high-ranking officials to negotiate the Treaty of Tianjin, which gave the foreign powers practically everything they sought.



Lord Elgin at the 1858 "Signing of the Treaty of Tientsin," frontispiece, Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the years 1857, '58, '59, volume 1, by Laurence Oliphant, published 1859.

[1858_TreatyTientsin_bx]



For more British views of the 1859 campaign from this volume, [View on Google Books](#)

The next year, the newly-appointed British envoy Frederick Bruce, who was the brother of Lord Elgin, returned to China expecting to exchange treaty ratifications in Beijing. The court, seeking every way to avoid this, ordered an attack on British forces at Dagu forts when they tried to proceed to Beijing by river rather than the prescribed land route. Taken by surprise, the British lost four gunboats and 89 men, and sustained hundreds of casualties. They were forced to retreat.

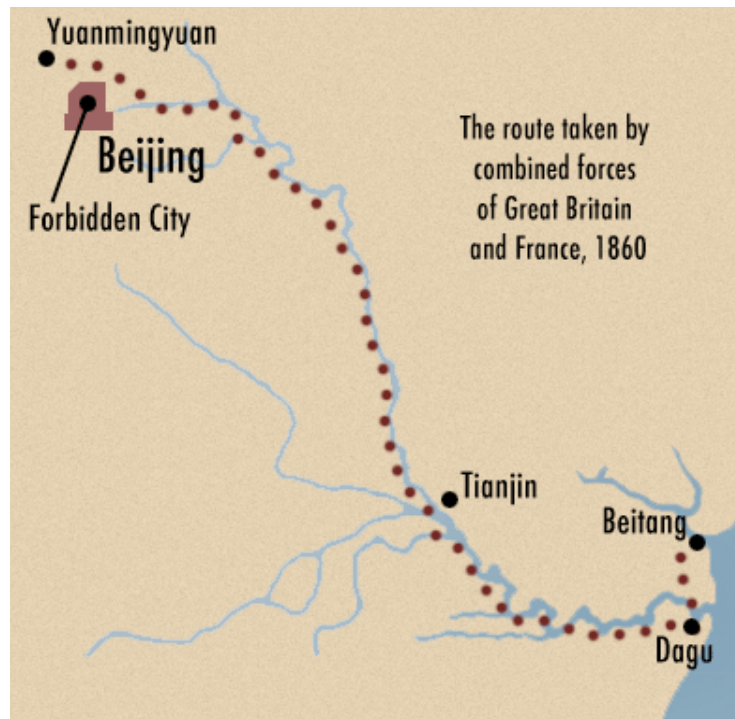
The French supported the British and the two nations returned the following summer with a much larger joint military force. On August 21, 1860, they successfully attacked the Dagu forts and, four days later, took the city of Tianjin. At this point the court agreed to have treaty ratifications take place in Beijing, but further complications developed when the court ordered the arrest of Harry Parkes, a controversial British diplomat who was serving as the interpreter to Lord Elgin. The British forces continued to advance on Beijing, reaching the northern Anding Gate of the Forbidden City on October 5.

Photographer Felice Beato accompanied the British expeditionary force and took this picture of the Anding Gate on the northern wall of the Forbidden City just after the surrender in October. The photograph shows the semi-circular enceinte and guardhouse that guarded the inner gate, the three-storied structure on the left.

[ymy7104]



Two days later a French contingent reached the Yuanmingyuan, northwest of the city, and started to rampage and loot the buildings.



The combined forces of Great Britain and France attacked the Dagu forts on August 21, 1860, proceeded inland to Beijing and, in a final punitive gesture, razed the Yuanmingyuan.



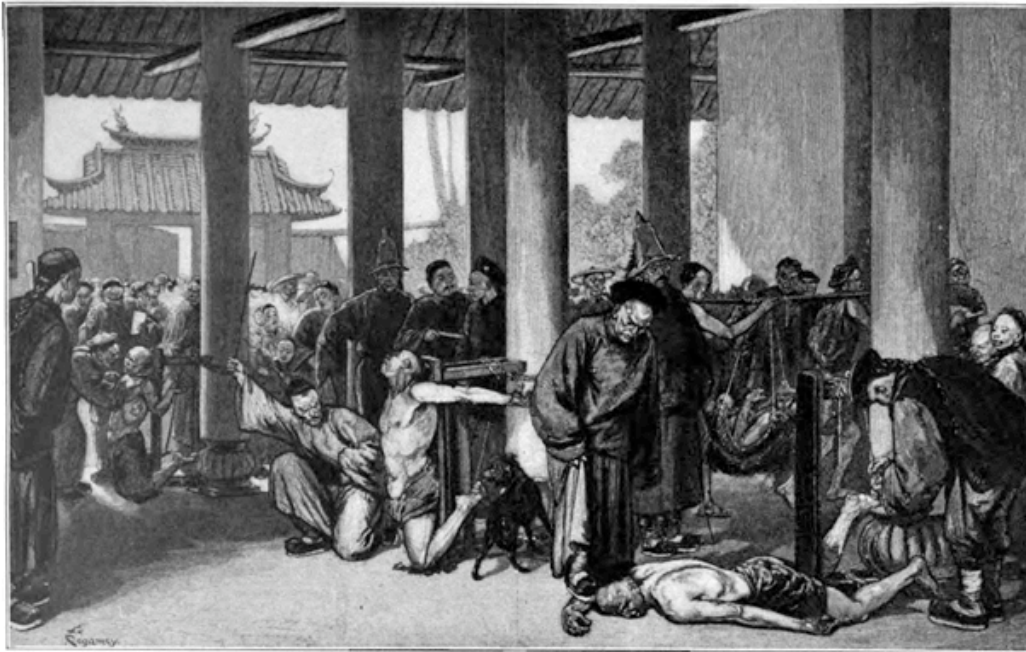
The Xianfeng emperor and most of the court fled to Chengde (Jehol), leaving the emperor's younger brother, Prince Gong (1833–98), in charge. On October 13, Prince Gong acceded to a British ultimatum and opened the Anding Gate, saving the city from siege.

"Portrait of Yixin, 1st Prince Gong"
photograph by Felice Beato,
November 2, 1860.

[ymy7123]

When the British learned of the brutal fate of Parkes' entourage, however—19 dead and evidence of torture—they decided on October 18 and 19 to burn down the Yuanmingyuan as a "solemn act of retribution." Just days later, on October 24, the agreement now called the Treaty of Beijing was signed. [\[1\]](#)

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ADMINISTRATION OF CHINESE JUSTICE
Painting by F. Regamey

This illustration in Robert Douglas' 1906 book China conveys the lingering outrage over the imprisonment and torture of the large diplomatic delegation to Beijing led by Harry Parkes at the end of the Opium War. The death of 19 of the emissaries was used as a rationale for punishing the "barbaric" Chinese by destroying the Yuanmingyuan.

[1906_180a_RbtDouglas]



The Earl of Elgin (seated) and his entourage after the visit of Prince Gong, Beijing, ca. Nov. 2, 1860, photographed by Felice Beato.

[ymy7113]

Cousin de Montauban was the commander of the French forces. Although the French were full partners with the British forces in the invasion and the looting of the Yuanmingyuan, Montauban is said to have disagreed with the British decision to burn the palaces and other buildings. 2

Image from Souvenirs de Voyage: Lettres Intimes sur la Campagne de Chine en 1860 by Armand Lucy

[1861_Armand_Lucy_Souvenirs_gb016]



CH. COUSIN DE MONTAUBAN
GÉNÉRAL DE DIVISION - SÉNATEUR
Grand'Croix de l'ordre impérial de la Légion-d'Honneur.
de l'ordre pontifical de Pie IX,
Chevalier-Commandeur de l'ordre du Bain,
Commandant en chef le corps expéditionnaire de Chine.

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Elgin later explained that he laid waste to the extensive Yuanmingyuan complex because this extraordinary imperial retreat was “the emperor’s favorite residence, and its destruction could not fail to be a blow to his pride as well as to his feelings.” And indeed the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan was not only a challenge to China’s sovereignty and authority, but also a symbolic act of violence against the emperor himself. The young emperor, like his father and grandfather, had grown up and lived in the garden paradise. He never returned to Beijing, but died at Chengde in 1861. Some said he was ashamed of his flight, and had died of heartache over the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan, but it was also true that he was in frail health brought on—it was said—by a life of dissipation. [3]