

Remembering Imperialism in China: British and Chinese Representations of the Destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan

by

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INTRODUCTION

Today the Qing Emperor's pleasure palace, Yuan Ming Yuan, or "Garden of Perfect Brightness," is commonly referred to by tourists as the "Old" Summer Palace. It sits on the outskirts of Beijing as a testament to the ruinous effects of both imperialism and time. The palace was burned in 1860 at the behest of the British plenipotentiary James Bruce, Eighth Earl of Elgin. This proved to be the final act of the Second Opium War. Sometimes called the "Arrow" War, this war lasted from 1856-1860, and, like the first Opium War (1839-1842), was fought by the British to secure greater trading rights for foreigners in China.¹ Broadly speaking, these wars were caused by the Western (mainly British) desire for increased trade in China clashing with the Qing Empire's reluctance to open China up to the foreigners. These conflicts further stemmed from the fact that the main product the British wanted to trade with China was opium grown in India. Not surprisingly, the history of British imperialism in China, including the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, has been a controversial topic for both British and Chinese commentators ever since.

While in China doing research for this project, I ventured to the Dagu² fort, the sight of multiple battles in various imperial conflicts, about an hour outside of

¹ The French joined the British in the Second Opium War.

² All Chinese person and place names are transliterated into pinyin. Some quotations from primary texts use different transliterations and, unless unnecessarily confusing, are left as is. Common transliterations such as Chiang Kai-shek are also left unchanged.

Tianjin at the mouth of the Hai River. In a back corner of the small museum adjoining the fort, I noticed a photograph of Mao triumphantly standing at the top of the battlements, a position that the British had almost certainly occupied in 1860. Looking back on my research, this image stands out as a prime symbol of how the history of Western imperialism in China has been represented and, subsequently, manipulated. The imagery in this photograph is illustrative of how Mao appropriated the history of foreign invaders dominating China to his own ends, namely to portray himself, and his Communist Party (CCP), as the final usurpers of Western imperialism. In Mao's writing, he frequently would position his communist revolution in this light.³ On a wider scale, this image brings to the forefront questions of how Western imperialism in China has been represented more broadly and how those representations have interacted with various political contexts. Though the specific issues raised by this photograph only apply directly to China, they are related to wide-ranging questions concerning how Western imperialism has been remembered by both the colonizers and the colonized, and why those narratives have taken their respective shapes. This thesis hopes to explore these topics with specific regards to the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan.

The ways that the Chinese have represented their past as at least semi-imperial subjects could fill up multiple books by themselves. However, when addressing the broader questions of how imperialism has been remembered and why it has been remembered that way, it is clear that these Chinese representations are only half the

³ Mao Ze Dong, "East Asian Studies Documents: Mao proclaims the founding of the PRC," [UCLA International Institute](http://www.international.ucla.edu/eas/documents/mao490921.htm), (UCLA Center for East Asian Studies) 10 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.international.ucla.edu/eas/documents/mao490921.htm>>.

story. Without some perspective on the British sources it would be too easy to criticize Chinese historians for their misuses of history. Such a critical stance would miss the fact that Western perceptions, carrying their own prejudices, have often interacted, however indirectly, with these views. The necessity of also addressing British representations is even more pressing considering how important the history of imperialism in China still is both for Chinese nationalism and, subsequently, how the Chinese relate to the Western world. Given this contemporary context, it would be irresponsible not to address Western prejudices as much as Chinese. Including an analyses of both the British and the Chinese (and at some points the American) sources has afforded a much more comprehensive assessment of how and why imperialism in China has been remembered differently by the imperialists and the “imperialized.” Taking into account these differences in remembering the past is crucial to both writing a responsible history of how imperialism in China has been represented and understanding China’s relationship with the West.

Representing the Past

The way that this thesis addresses the following British and Chinese historical representations is colored by some basic assumptions about the nature of history and history writing. While I use these assumptions as an interpretive tool, I also hope that my treatment of British and Chinese sources will serve to further validate their views.

This thesis is predicated on the idea that history writing is not simply the task of representing the past as it really was, but rather, is a process of constructing the

past into a useful and meaningful narrative for the historian in the present. To quote Hayden White:

In general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* [White's italicization] and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.⁴

I have adopted White's view that history writing is not, as many have hoped it to be, the scientific process of uncovering the past, but is actually a method of constructing narratives that has much in common with literature. This argument is based on the belief that past events do not naturally occur in comprehensible narratives.⁵

Consequently, when historians attempt to make history understandable, they inevitably manipulate the "facts" at hand to tell a story (that White believed took standard literary forms⁶) that is not representative of the past as it really was. For my purposes, White's argument is mainly helpful for how it calls into question the ability of any of the historians discussed, whether Chinese or British, to accurately recount the history of Yuan Ming Yuan "as it really happened."

Adopting the belief that the "history" of any event is essentially the creation of the historian subsequently raises the question of what influences a historian to construct a given narrative. The most obvious answer is that it is largely the concerns of the present that shape historical representations. According to David Lowenthal, "As with memory, we reinterpret relics and records to make them more

⁴Hayden V. White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 82.

⁵ Ibid. 84.

⁶ Ibid. 85.

comprehensible, to justify present attitudes and actions.”⁷ My analysis of the British and Chinese representations of the destruction ultimately centers on what “present attitudes and actions” have fashioned the various narratives that have appeared during different time periods. Although it is clear that present concerns always shape how historians write about the past, it is also important to note that this is a two way street, and that representations of history can also have great impact on the present. The ability of historical representations to influence the present is readily apparent with regards to both the British, and especially, the Chinese narratives of the destruction. This thesis addresses both what present concerns have shaped British and Chinese representations of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, and how those representations have sometimes influenced the various contexts that they have emerged from.

Two more assumptions that I have operated under that need to be addressed are the related beliefs that, first, as much as history writing is constructed, there is actually a past, and, second, that the past is not the sole property of the historian. Though the first of these assumptions may seem obvious, it is still important to note given the importance I have assigned to the function of the historian as one who constructs narratives of the past. This assumption that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan is not just the construction of historians, but actually did take place, serves the practical function of opening the door to using forms of historical memory other than academic history books. As Raphael Samuel wrote, “History is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as the postmodernist contends, a historian’s ‘invention.’ It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand

⁷ David Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 325.

different hands.”⁸ Samuel’s insights are helpful in revealing that history writing neither owns, nor has “invented,” history, but that it is just one, albeit hopefully the most credible, means of shaping the past. I use a variety of forms of representation, such as cartoons and films, to discuss how the memory of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan past has developed in both Britain and China. Analyzing these different forms has afforded insight into how the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan has often been manipulated outside of the theatre of academic history. Indeed, in China, non-professional historical representations have produced widely held, and greatly disfigured, views of the imperial past. Although it is true that many different forms of representation can contribute to perceptions of the past, this does not mean that I have valued all forms exactly the same. As much as a film might have to say about popular perceptions of the destruction, it is inevitable that such a source should be recognized as more inclined to purposefully distort the past to ideological ends than a work of academic history.

Ultimately this project adopts the view that history writing is an inherently separate entity from the past “as it happened,” an assumption that opens the door for questions about the relationship between the past and the present. The separation between representations of the past and the past itself has colored my interpretations of all of the British and Chinese sources. I hope that this stance has allowed me to critically address how these representations of the destruction have interacted with their respective contexts. To my mind, addressing these interactions is crucial because of the way that, as will be seen, China’s past as a victim of imperialism is

⁸ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994) 8.

still present in Chinese nationalist discourses. For the Chinese, this past is not something that is relegated to history books, but still shapes attitudes on a grand scale. Because these present attitudes are ultimately connected to Chinese views of the West, it subsequently becomes pertinent to address how the West views China. This topic can be at least obliquely investigated through the ways that British historical representations have, like their Chinese counterparts, interacted with the present. This attempt at reading contemporary attitudes through interpretations of the past, and vice versa, would be impossible without the assumption that historical representations ultimately have as much to say about the present as the past.

While this project does largely concern the contemporary relationship between differing Chinese and British views of a shared imperial past, and the subsequent ramifications, it would be difficult to comprehend this relationship without a thorough understanding of how these views have developed over time. Such an understanding clarifies that, in regards to the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, the concerns of the present have always influenced the representations of the past. As a result, these representations have drastically changed according to different historical contexts. This history both gives perspective on why the current interpretations exist and provides a precedent for how they can be viewed as having implications for how China relates to the West.

The main body of this thesis is organized into five chapters. The first presents my own narrative of the events leading up to and including the destruction. The

following four chapters discuss how the event was represented in Britain and China during different time periods. I have chosen to arrange these chapters both chronologically and contextually. Subsequently, Chapters Two and Three address British representations of the destruction and Chapters Four and Five address the Chinese representation.

The narrative presented in Chapter One is largely my own and makes use of archival British sources. I have tried to make it as comprehensive an interpretation as possible given the sources. My narrative focuses on how the destruction was the result of many competing factors, all ultimately colored by British feelings of racial and cultural superiority. Although I do not want to presume the authority of my narrative to those of other historians, I admittedly do present it as standing in contrast to many of the alternative narratives. This narrative provides the basis for how I have critiqued subsequent sources for misrepresenting the causes and purposes of the destruction.

Chapter Two focuses on British representations of the destruction both immediately following the 1860 campaign, and in the period from 1860 until the beginning of the twentieth century. I have chosen to end this discussion at the turn of the century because this time period coincides with an era both when Britain was still the preeminent imperial force in China, and when these interests still occupied a relatively prominent place in British public consciousness. Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, other imperial powers, notably Japan, began to take more prominent roles in China, and British supremacy began to decline. Simultaneously, the general British perceptions of empire, both in China and elsewhere, were

beginning to change for a variety of reasons. Subsequently, the destruction became less likely to emerge in public discourse. Yet, the earlier period was marked by much public discussion, as influenced by Victorian moral concerns, over the justice of acts of imperialism like the destruction. Accordingly, most of the available sources are not works of academic history.

Chapter Three focuses on the portrayal of the destruction in British historiography from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the present day. During this period, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, and British imperialism in China more generally, became topics that were little addressed outside of the historical profession. Ultimately, this chapter poses the hypothesis that as much as British attitudes towards both history writing and imperialism have changed over the course of the twentieth century, the basic narrative of the destruction has remained relatively fixed.

Chapter Four addresses the Chinese representation and reactions to the 1860 campaign until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. This period was marked by relatively little direct representation of the destruction, which in many ways reflected wider Qing attitudes towards Western imperialism and the need for reform. When the destruction of the palace was directly addressed during this period it was largely beyond the purview of formal politics.

Chapter Five concerns how the destruction has been represented from the end of the Qing Empire up to the present in China. It identifies a shift that occurred after 1911 when the history of events like the burning of the palace began to be used to stir up nationalist sentiment in a discourse of “national humiliation.” I trace how this use

has developed and changed over time under both the nationalist government of the Guomindang (the nationalist government headed by Sun Yat-Sen and then Chiang Kai-Shek that fled to Taiwan in 1949 after being overthrown by the communists) and in the People's Republic of China. Finally, this chapter addresses the large body of recent sources that continue to portray the destruction in nationalist terms. This discussion includes an interpretation of how the physical presentation of Yuan Ming Yuan as a monument and tourist attraction has contributed to standard perceptions of the destruction.

In the conclusion I expand on how the historiographical issues addressed in this introduction relate to the way that the destruction has been represented in Britain and China. This discussion leads to a greater expansion of how the twentieth century British historical sources, like those of the China, have also been distorted towards national interests (albeit much more subtly). Finally, I address how the differing interpretations of China's imperial past relate to China's current relationship with the West, and I offer some reflections on ways to overcome the cultural conflicts that have arisen from these representations.

Considering how important ideas of the "national humiliation" caused by imperialism still are to Chinese nationalism, it is necessary to briefly address my own positioning before starting my discussion. Although I am cautious about over-emphasizing my understanding of British history or culture, as I am essentially a third-party observer, I am a student of the "Western" historical tradition who is

studying China. As a result, I am predominately influenced by Western views and practices. Furthermore, I am part of the corporate entity of the West that much recent Chinese nationalism has been directed against. Though from my liberal education I have adopted postcolonial concerns that incline me to demonize the British imperialists, my methodology is firmly “Western.” Consequently, I carry cultural prejudices that force me to view China, and its means of representing the past, in a very particular way. Obviously, this positioning should not preclude me from interpreting both Chinese and British history. As British sociologist Stuart Hall commented about one’s ability to interpret another culture:

I think you always need the double perspective. Before you say that [not criticizing another culture is “remit to intimidation”] you have to understand what it is like to come from that "other" place. How it feels to live in that closed world. How such ideas have kept people together in the face of all that has happened to them. But you also have to be true to your own culture of debate and you have to find some way to begin to translate between those two cultures. It is not easy, but it is necessary.⁹

Ultimately, this thesis is an attempt at analyzing how the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan has been represented while staying true to this “double perspective.” Its goal is to translate between my understanding of history in China, a tradition I am quite unfamiliar with, and my understanding of history in Britain, an institution that, while not my own, is perhaps much closer to my own prejudices, even if I importantly do not suffer under the same national legacy of past imperial greatness.

⁹Tim Adams, "The Interview: Stuart Hall," The Observer [London] 23 Sept. 2007.

Chapter I

The Motives for a Punishment: A Narrative of the Destruction

On September 17, 1860, William de Normann, a young attaché for the Eighth Earl of Elgin on the British and French mission to Beijing, was captured along with 38 other British and French soldiers and diplomatic officials. Lord Elgin and General James Hope Grant, the military commander of the expedition, attempted to negotiate the safe return of all the prisoners, but on October 12 nine Sikhs of Fane's Irregular Horse returned from captivity bringing the news that de Normann, among other prisoners, had died while in the hands of the Chinese.¹⁰ The immediate emotional impact of the death of these prisoners was given by Lord Elgin as the principal reason for his decision to burn Yuan Ming Yuan on October 18.¹¹ Elgin claimed, in an October 25 dispatch, that Yuan Ming Yuan was chosen as the site of this vengeance because it was to this place that the Chinese, "Brought our hapless countrymen, in order that they might undergo their severest tortures within its precincts."¹² The destruction had to be at this site because it was there that the prisoners were held. As

¹⁰, Robert James Leslie M'Ghee, How We Got into Peking. A Narrative of the Campaign in China of 1860, (London: R. Bentley, 1862) 221.

¹¹ James Bruce Elgin, and Theodore Walrond, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969) 366.

¹² *Ibid.* 366.

Elgin presented it, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan occurred solely as a reaction to the murder of the prisoners.

While the burning was always presented as being primarily motivated by a justifiable desire for vengeance, almost all of the British sources also incorporated other concerns when presenting the motives for Elgin's decision. Beyond portraying it as a direct punishment for the murder of the prisoners, these accounts also placed the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan into the wider framework of a desire to punish the Chinese for their perceived insolence. These ideas of punishment had long defined British actions in China, and destroying Yuan Ming Yuan was just the final step to teach the Chinese a lesson about their constant "violation of the law of nations."¹³ This violation included, but was not limited to, the murder of the prisoners. This explanation was never presented by itself and is always presented with mentions of the prisoners, but it certainly is crucial to understanding Elgin's decision. Surely the destruction of the palace was partially an emotional punishment for the murder of the prisoners, but it is also necessary to acknowledge that this decision was the culmination of a campaign that had always been based around ideas of angrily punishing the Chinese for their failure to accord to British desires. In order to fully understand this framework it is necessary to examine the British defeat at Dagu in 1859 as the direct genesis of both the campaign itself and the harsh attitudes that the British, most importantly, Elgin, would take in 1860.

Beyond just speaking to the context surrounding the 1860 campaign, the British willingness to use violent punishment also importantly reflected a wider belief

¹³ James Hope Grant, Henry Knollys ed., Incidents in the China War of 1860, Comp. from the Private Journals of General Sir Hope Grant (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and sons, 1875) 205.

in the need to teach and shape the Chinese until they accorded to British desires. This belief was inevitably tied up with imperial discourses that portrayed the British as racially and culturally superior to the Chinese.

Though a framework that emphasizes the British belief in their racial superiority should be used to define almost all British imperial actions in China, it does not completely explain all the immediate concerns that shaped British actions. On a micro-level, both Elgin's decision to burn the palace, and the entire 1860 campaign, can only be fully understood with reference to the personal and pragmatic concerns that colored the business of empire.

International Law and British Inflexibility

William de Normann had served Lord Elgin for two years by the time of his death in the fall of 1860. Judging by the detailed diary that he kept during this time period, this young man found China to be a strange and wonderful place compared to the Britain he had just left behind. Beyond just presenting a wonderful account of how nineteenth century China appeared to a foreigner, de Normann's diary entries also, occasionally, reflected the wider themes of bending the Chinese to British will that colored the 1860 campaign. Being close to Elgin enabled de Norman to observe and record many of the diplomatic negotiations with the Chinese that were so important in shaping the character of the British campaigns. On Saturday, 25 June, 1859, while accompanying the 1859 mission to send an ambassador to Beijing after the British

had forced the Chinese to sign the humiliating Treaty of Tianjin in 1858, de Normann wrote:

An official came off this morning to the squadron from the-(illegible) of Tien-tsing [Tianjin] through another branch of the Peiho [Hai River]. He brought a letter and provisions as a gift. The latter was refused and the former returned unanswered as character for her majesty was not placed in the same position as it would have been if used with regards to the Emperor of China. In other respects the letter was peaceful, dilatory and impertinent.¹⁴

This description of Anglo-Chinese negotiations reflects the concerns of status and “correct” diplomatic conduct that were central to British imperial actions in China. The British viewed themselves as the representatives of the international law that the Chinese refused to accept and consistently violated. Under these assumptions, it was an unacceptable affront to international law to present Her Majesty as in any way inferior to the Emperor. Addressing similar issues, historian Douglas Hurd wrote that, at least for Sir Harry Parkes, who served a crucial role as Elgin’s chief translator on his mission to Beijing, policy in China was based on the firmly held belief that, “The only way of avoiding trouble with the Chinese was to stand firm from the start on every part of one’s rights, significant or insignificant.”¹⁵ While Hurd was writing about lessons that Parkes learned from the allegedly illegal capture of the ship, the *Arrow*, which was the ostensible reason for the commencement of hostilities in 1856, these views could be seen as shaping British conduct throughout their time in China. In their efforts to open up trade with China, the British presented themselves as having certain diplomatic rights that were defined by the “laws of nations.”

¹⁴ William Charles F Helmuth T de Norman , Diary, 1860, Oriental and India Office Collections 1991-2006, Mss Eur A216, British Library, London.

¹⁵ Douglas Hurd, *The Arrow War*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967) 16.

Subsequently, they believed that it was necessary to absolutely enforce these rights so as to teach the Chinese the correct way to interact with other nations. It is within this framework of asserting British authority and shaping Chinese actions that an act like returning a letter unanswered because of how the Queen was addressed should be viewed.

Although this strict enforcement of international law was ostensibly to avoid future conflicts, considering how quick the British were to go to war with China over such concerns, it is likely that these issues often functioned merely as pretenses for fighting conflicts that were ultimately beneficial to the British. Even if it is believed that the British honestly saw themselves as being insulted by the Chinese, this does not change the fact that these insults only had opportunity to occur because of the British desires to expand their trading interests in China. Fortunately enough for the British, their pretenses to upholding international law provided ready-made excuses and explanations for all their actions to increase trade in China. Even assuming that the British honestly believed all their appeals to international law, that they were so quick to privilege European conceptions of diplomatic rights over local Chinese desires to stop British trade speaks directly to their imperial-era racial prejudices. In any event, this issue of forcing the Chinese to act according to what the British saw as international law, regardless of whether or not the Chinese recognized or understood this law, was central both to the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan and the entire conflict with China.

A Call for Punishment

The campaign in 1860 was in direct response to the events of 1859. In this year the British and French sent envoys to Beijing in order ratify the stipulations of the treaty of Tianjin, the 1858 agreement that ended the first round of confrontations of the Second Opium War. Unfortunately for both the British and, eventually, the Chinese, the progress of these representatives was halted after a battle at the Dagu forts. After this embarrassing defeat there occurred a noticeable shift in British attitudes that would subsequently shape the nature of the 1860 campaign. Immediately following the treaty convention at Tianjin in 1858, British officials had been willing to make some compromises with the Chinese. Following this 1859 confrontation, however, the British attitude stiffened and it was deemed necessary to send a much larger force. The violence of the 1860 campaign is impossible to explain without a close examination of these preceding events.

The Chinese had always resisted the presence of a foreign ambassador in Beijing, and when this stipulation was forced on them after the 1858 allied victory in Tianjin there was great protest. During negotiations following the signing of the treaty the imperial Chinese Commissioners Guai Liang, Hua Sha Na, etc. explained to Lord Elgin that:

The assent of his majesty the Emperor to every proposition really showed an extraordinary desire to accommodate a large abundance of kindly feeling. The condition of residence at Peking is very irksome to China, and as the French and Americans have not this privilege...we beg your Excellency to consider what compromise may be affected.¹⁶

¹⁶Laurence Oliphant, Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan, in the Years 1857, '58, '59 (New York: Harper & Bros, 1860) 625.

The Chinese commissioners hoped that Elgin would take their previous willingness to bend to British demands as a sign of goodwill and not actually force them to accept an ambassador at Beijing, something that they found especially disagreeable. After initially rejecting the Chinese requests, Elgin finally agreed to compromise, writing to the commissioners that he would:

Submit it as his opinion that if her majesty's ambassador be properly received at Peking when the ratifications are exchanged next year, and full effect given in all other particulars to the treaty negotiated at Tientsin, it would certainly be expedient that her majesty's representative in China should be instructed to choose a place of residence elsewhere than at Peking.¹⁷

Elgin was willing to compromise with the commissioners on the issue of a permanent embassy in Beijing if they agreed to receive a British ambassador in 1859. According to Hurd, Elgin's willingness demonstrated a desire, "To leave to his successors a reasonable chance of building a relationship with China based on something better than the periodic use of force."¹⁸ For Hurd, Elgin's ability to compromise showed an aspiration to establish an easier relationship with China that would allow them to negotiate their desires without needing to use force. It was after this expression of a guarded British willingness to compromise that Frederic Bruce, Elgin's brother, sailed to the mouth of the Hai River in 1859 on a mission to get the treaty of Tianjin ratified in Beijing.

Despite Elgin's conciliatory attitude of the previous year, Bruce brought with him sixteen warships under the command of Admiral Sir James Hope (not to be confused with General Sir James Hope Grant) on his ostensibly peaceful mission to

¹⁷ Oliphant 629.

¹⁸ Hurd 167.

Beijing. Bruce and Hope were taken aback to find their path blocked by the newly strengthened Dagu forts at the mouth of the Hai. These forts would not allow the British ships through and on June 21 Bruce authorized Hope to attack the forts and begin the journey up the river. In the disastrous battle that followed, the British suffered 89 killed and 345 wounded when the Chinese forts surprised the British with their ability to stand up to both the warships and the landing of Marines.¹⁹ According to some British sources, this was a shocking defeat that showed supreme treachery on behalf of the Chinese. Theodore Walrond wrote that, “As no such resistance had been expected, no provision had been made for overcoming it.”²⁰ However, in light of the fact that the decision had been made to send a fleet of warships with Bruce, Walrond’s opinion seems slightly disingenuous. This being said, his view probably does express that the British were, if not surprised by the resistance itself, than at least shocked by the ability of the Chinese to defeat British warships.

Although some British sources, such as Walrond, portrayed the attack as a shocking act of treason, others readily admitted that the presence of Chinese resistance at Dagu was no great surprise. Rather, they blamed it on British attitudes that they believed had previously not been harsh enough towards the Chinese. Indeed, Bruce himself blamed Elgin for his willingness to compromise on the issue of a permanent residence in Beijing, arguing that it only emboldened the Chinese. In a letter to Parkes, Bruce stated:

I regret much that when the permanent residence was waived (by Lord Elgin), it was not laid down in detail what the reception of the Minister at Peking was to be. It would have soon appeared that the Chinese

¹⁹ Hurd 180-184.

²⁰ Elgin and Walrond 315.

thought, when we abandoned the exercise of the former right, that we had consented to accept the American article on the visit to Peking.²¹

The “American article” that Bruce referred to was the American agreement to the Chinese request that their ambassador should travel by land to Beijing instead of going up the river, a compromise that Stanley Lane-Poole and Frederick V. Dickins, Parkes’ biographers, denigrated as forcing the Americans to be, “treated exactly like ‘tribute-bearers’.”²² In his letter, Bruce was understanding Elgin’s willingness to compromise as the basis for the Chinese belief that the British, like the Americans, might be willing to abandon their warships and proceed by land to Beijing. In opposition to this Chinese hope, Bruce had always been determined to travel at least to Tianjin in a warship. Indeed, according to Hurd, he had been ordered to do so by Lord Malmesbury, the foreign secretary, in order to insure, “The chances of a British envoy being safely and decently received.”²³ This British determination to travel by warship created a situation where, given the presence of any Chinese resistance, violence was inevitable. Looking back on the event, Bruce himself believed that the Chinese were optimistic that the British would be willing to travel by land, hopes that, given his instructions, Bruce had no choice but to prove false. Though the battle at Dagou was often presented as a completely shocking example of Chinese treachery, it was a treachery that, considering the reception of the American mission and Elgin’s previous willingness to compromise, was not without explanation. This explanation placed at least some blame on Elgin’s previous conciliatory attitude, a fact that would

²¹ Stanley Lane-Poole and F. Victor Dickins, The Life of Sir Harry Parkes, K.C.B., G.C.M.G., Sometimes Her Majesty's Minister to China and Japan (London: Macmillian and co, 1894) 314.

²² Lane-Poole and Dickins 315.

²³ Hurd 181.

shape the stance the British, particularly Elgin, took towards China in the following year.

In the aftermath of the defeat in 1859 all the British officials, including Elgin, were determined to punish the Chinese for their insolence and prove their resolve to absolutely enforce the treaty stipulations. According to Walrond, Lord Russell, the then foreign secretary, sent Elgin back to China in 1860 with instructions to gain, “(1) an apology for the attack on the Allied forces at the Hai; (2) the ratification and execution of the Treaty of Tientsin; (3) the payment of an indemnity to the Allies for the expenses of naval and military preparations.”²⁴ In addition to finally ratifying the Treaty of Tianjin, essential to Elgin’s officially defined mission was punishing the Chinese for their resistance at the Dagu forts in 1859. The demands for both an apology and an indemnity for military expenses, demonstrates the disciplinary nature of the 1860 campaign in China. According to the British, the campaign was only necessary because of the Chinese actions in 1859 and, therefore, the Chinese should be held responsible for the costs of any military actions waged against them. Lord Elgin’s instructions were not just to get the treaty ratified, but also to humiliate the Chinese court by forcing them to apologize and then pay an indemnity. From its outset, then, the 1860 campaign was designed to punish the Chinese for their actions in 1859. This design could further be seen as expressing the British hope that the campaign would teach the Chinese that insolent attacks such as that at the Dagu forts would not be acceptable in the future.

²⁴ Elgin and Walrond 316-317.

The stance that Elgin would personally take towards his new mission reflected the changes in his personal attitude towards China that the British failure at Dagu had forced on him. After accepting his new instructions Elgin determined, “We must finish it, and finish it thoroughly.”²⁵ In contrast to his hesitance to press the Chinese in 1858 and 1859, Elgin was now determined to completely finish his mission of punishing the Chinese. Elgin’s change in attitude is again demonstrated by a September 1, 1860 diary entry where, in response to a Chinese request to see him without previously agreeing to the British terms, he wrote, “I fear a little more bullying will be necessary before we bring this stupid Government up to the mark.”²⁶ By this point Elgin had given up on meeting the Chinese on any terms of friendship and, instead, believed that it was necessary to “bully” the Chinese in order to achieve his goals. This shift was noticed by subordinates such as Parkes, who had, according to Lane-Poole and Dickins, previously thought Elgin “supercilious and essentially weak.”²⁷ In a June 29, 1860 letter to his wife Parkes wrote, “Lord Elgin must feel that matters must now be promptly arranged or they will become very serious.”²⁸ Considering his stance on Elgin’s previously conciliatory attitude, Parkes must have been happy that, after the defeat in 1859, Elgin was finally determined to finish his mission without compromise. The battle at the Dagu forts had forced Elgin to believe that it was necessary to abandon his previous hopes of friendship in favor of a far harsher attitude. This new steadfastness could be seen as an attempt by Elgin to make up for previous conciliatory attitudes. Perhaps it was also a reflection of some

²⁵ Elgin and Walrond 323-324.

²⁶ Elgin and Walrond 349.

²⁷ Lane-Poole and Dickins 339.

²⁸ Ibid. 340.

personal embarrassment he felt about being perceived as “weak” for his previous failures. The perceived Chinese treachery at Dagu in 1859 led the British, specifically Elgin, to believe that it was impossible to compromise with the Chinese, and they subsequently adopted a much harsher attitude in the campaign of 1860. Long before the destruction of October, 1860, the British and, most importantly, Lord Elgin, had already decided that the only way to prevent future episodes like that at Dagu in 1859 was to take a harsh stance towards the Chinese. Obviously this posture had many precedents in previous British attitudes towards China, but it was the events of 1859, and the effects they had on Elgin’s personal outlook, that were the direct precursors to the campaign that ended in the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan.

A Campaign to Humiliate

In 1860, Elgin returned to Beijing. He and his French counterpart, Baron Gros, were appointed as the respective Plenipotentiaries of an allied force made up of approximately 10,000 British and Indian troops and 7,000 French.²⁹ The military commanders of the expedition were General James Hope Grant for the British and General de Montauban for the French. On August 1, British troops started to land at the mouth of the Hai River, about three miles from the Dagu forts, which were guarded by the Chinese general Senge Linqin, and continued over a causeway to find

²⁹ Figures from: Garnet Wolseley, Narrative of the War with China in 1860; To Which Is Added the Account of a Short Residence with the Tai-Ping Rebels at Nankin and a Voyage from Thence to Hankow (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 1972) 1.

the southernmost fort deserted.³⁰ After landing along the Hai, the allied soldiers proceeded to the town of Beitang where, in what would prove to be a reoccurring theme of the campaign, there was notable looting. In his account Robert Swinhoe, who served as an interpreter for the British, blamed almost all of this looting on the French and Indians, claiming that, “What articles they did not want to carry away they ruthlessly destroyed.”³¹ Following this destruction at Beitang, on August 21 the British and French finally attacked the northern forts themselves and captured them fairly easily. The battle at the forts was a significant victory for the allies against Senge Linqin and they would subsequently proceed quickly through Tianjin on what now seemed to be an unstoppable path to Beijing.

As the British advanced from Tianjin they were met by Chinese Commissioners attempting to negotiate a truce with the allies. According to then Lieutenant-Colonel Garnet Wolseley, these Chinese representatives were turned away because they, “Were not possessed of the requisite Imperial decree.”³² He added that because of what Elgin saw as the continued attempts at treachery, “He had determined upon advancing directly to Tung-chow [Tongzhou], and that until he arrived at that place he declined receiving their visits.”³³ This incident further demonstrates the new resolve that Elgin had developed since 1859. He now intended to absolutely enforce his will, only dealing with the Chinese representatives if they

³⁰ Robert Swinhoe, Narrative of the North China Campaign of 1860; Containing Personal Experiences of Chinese Character, and of the Moral and Social Condition of the Country; Together with a Description of the Interior of Peking (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1861) 53-60.

³¹ Swinhoe 64.

³² Wolseley 163.

³³ Ibid. 163.

acted exactly according to his stipulations. It was with this mindset that Elgin and the allied forces advanced towards Beijing.

The allies advanced from Tianjin with only minor incident until reaching Tongzhou, a few miles southeast of Beijing, where Elgin once again agreed to meet with the Chinese to attempt to negotiate an end to the hostilities. On September 18, after two days of negotiations, the chief British and French representatives, including Harry Parkes acting as translator, Thomas Bowlby, a *Times* correspondent, Henry Loch, and de Normann, set out to continue the discussions for a truce.³⁴ The representatives, accompanied by 20 Sikh sepoys and half a dozen Dragoons,³⁵ found their way blocked by a large force of Chinese. After some confused attempts to return to the British lines and alert them of the danger, Parkes and most of his associates were captured. In a letter written to his wife on October 9, Parkes described this experience:

As he (Senge Linqin) had sent in flags of truce to us on various occasions, I hoped that he would respect mine, and for a moment I felt it was well to be taken before a man of such high rank. But the illusion was soon dispelled, for as I approached I was seized by his attendants and hurled down before him.³⁶

Parkes claimed that he was captured while carrying a flag of truce, a symbol he asserted was understood by the Chinese, and had even previously been used by Senge Linqin. Hence, his capture and maltreatment could only be interpreted as a conscious insult. Given these views, it is no surprise that after the capture of Parkes and his colleagues the allies took an even harsher stance towards the Chinese.

³⁴ Lane-Poole and Dickins 234.

³⁵ Jack, Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 299.

³⁶ Lane-Poole and Dickins 236.

As the British and French forces continued to advance towards Beijing, the return of the prisoners was presented as the only way for the Chinese to avoid an assault on the city itself. Elgin noted in his diary, “I sent word yesterday to the Emperor’s brother, who is now named to treat with me, that unless they are returned to the camp within three days time and a pledge is given that the Convention I drew up at Tianjin is signed, Peking will be assaulted.”³⁷ Thus the capture of the prisoners served only to anger Elgin and set the stage for an attack on Beijing itself. This advance on the Qing capital was sealed when the Chinese commissioner answered Elgin’s demands by, “Proposing that the army should retire to Chin-kia-wan, and that then the treaty should be signed and the prisoners restored.”³⁸ This proposal was obviously not acceptable to Elgin and the allied forces continued on their way to Beijing.

In early October the allies advanced unimpeded into the suburbs of Beijing, with the French capturing Yuan Ming Yuan on October 7. In the following days the palace was thoroughly looted by both French and British forces. Along with the later destruction, the looting was to prove one of the most controversial events of the 1860 campaign. All of the British sources blamed the initial looting on the French, sometimes even completely ignoring the role played by British troops. In his account Reverend Robert James Leslie M’Ghee, the chaplain of the campaign, claimed:

By far the greatest part of the property acquired by officers and soldiers in the English force was purchased from the French ...no officer or soldier in the English force got a single article of intrinsic value from the palace...the difference was just this, that while the British officer looked for articles of virtue, as a memento of the place

³⁷ Elgin and Walrond 358.

³⁸ Elgin and Walrond 360.

for himself, or for his friends at home, the Frenchman had an eye to more solid advantages, and he reaped them.³⁹

This account essentially denied that the British took any real initiative in the looting, instead claiming that most of what they did acquire was through the French and, even then, these objects were only taken as gifts, not for profit. M’Ghee’s accusations against the French were echoed by Wolseley when he wrote:

Our allies were so busy in the collection of their plunder that they did not move upon Peking until the 9th October. Numbers of our officers had consequently an opportunity of visiting the palaces and securing valuables; but our men were carefully prevented from leaving camp.⁴⁰

At the same time that Wolseley admitted that some British officers did take items, he also denied that the common British soldiers had any role in the looting. In addition, through his use of “plunder” in regards to the French and “Securing valuables” in regards to the British, Wolseley distinguished the actions of the British officers from those of the French. For Wolseley, any accusations of wild “looting” should have only been leveled at the French.

These claims absolving the British were directly contradicted by other accounts. Swinhoe observed that, “Officers and men, English and French, were rushing about in a most unbecoming manner, each eager for the acquisition of valuables.”⁴¹ As opposed to M’Ghee and Wolseley, Swinhoe implicated British soldiers in the looting. This alternative narrative is also supported by General Hope Grant himself, who, in a diary entry, admitted that he, “Decided to issue an order directing the officers to give up any valuables they might have obtained from the Summer Palace

³⁹ M’Ghee 207.

⁴⁰ Wolseley 237.

⁴¹ Swinhoe 305-306.

for putting them into a general stock, which would afterwards be divided equally.”⁴²

Enough loot had been taken by the British that Hope Grant saw fit to create a prize commission to auction off the valuables. While this more orderly procedure is perhaps more admirable than allowing the soldiers to freely plunder, it certainly does not absolve the British from a role in the lootings, as some soldiers suggested they should have been. These accounts all differ slightly in how much blame is placed on the British as opposed to the French: however, it is certain both parties bore some responsibility for the looting, even if the French did initiate it and carry it out in a more disorderly and destructive way.

Although nineteenth-century European armies were, admittedly, generally prone to looting, the plundering at Yuan Ming Yuan could be read as a further indication of the attitude that the allies carried towards the Chinese. This attitude was shaped by the disciplinary nature the campaign took at its outset, and was further intensified by the Chinese capture of the prisoners. The looting could be interpreted as an additional attempt to punish the Chinese until they learned how to behave as desired, a lesson in diplomatic pedagogy that the entire 1860 expedition sought to instill. This hypothesis of punishment and pedagogy was described by James L.

Hevia when he wrote:

The chaotic processes of looting the Summer Palace and transforming its materiality into curiosities might be understood, therefore, as mechanisms of deterritorialization... Brought low and disordered by these actions, the Qing Empire could then be reterritorialized in a new role: as a backward student of a British tutor.”⁴³

⁴² Grant and Knollys 191.

⁴³ James Louis Hevia, English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 102.

To Hevia, the act of looting the Summer Palace destroyed the idea of the Palace as representative of Chinese civilization and instead made it merely a curiosity that could be commodified. After this process had been completed, any notions of China as an equal to the British had been destroyed, and it was now possible to view China as an inferior nation that could be taught through discipline. Obviously the looting at Yuan Ming Yuan was not the origin of this process, as it had existed in imperial racial discourses for a long time, however, it does provide a clear example of one way that the victims of imperialism were marginalized. According to Hevia, it is this process of marginalization borne out of British feelings of racial superiority that explains how the British could build the entire 1860 campaign around notions of both punishment and “education.”

Although Hevia’s argument is helpful in understanding both the racial assumptions that allowed Britons to commit violent acts in China, and the effects of those actions on the Chinese, it cannot be used to completely explain the particulars of individual British actions in China.⁴⁴ Indeed, no British soldiers would have ever defined their actions in this manner. As a result, Hevia’s argument is not particularly useful in an attempt to explain why exactly the British burned the palace. As should be seen by the narrative leading up to this moment of “marginalization,” the entirety of the 1860 campaign was determined as much by diplomatic, political, and personal missteps and misunderstandings as by desires to express, and impress, ideas of racial superiority. For example, while from a wide perspective Elgin’s harsh stance certainly was influenced by racial ideas, they were also, as has been demonstrated, at

⁴⁴ The entirety of Hevia’s books expands on these notions of pedagogy in different historical contexts.

least partially the results of personal feelings of regret and anger after his previously conciliatory attitude led to the disaster of 1859.

The destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan stands out as one final spectacular act of punishment in a campaign so beset by acts of punishment. As the palace was being thoroughly looted from October 7 to October 9 the British continued to negotiate for the unconditional return of the prisoners to be followed by the ratification of the treaty stipulations. On October 8 the Chinese, “Yielded at last to save the storming of the city,” and Parkes, Loch and one sepoy were returned.⁴⁵ While this gave the British optimism that all of their demands would be met, this hope proved to be misplaced when the bodies of prisoners who died in captivity began to arrive back at the British and French camps on October 12. The final body was returned on the 16th. In total thirty-nine British, Indian, and French soldiers had been taken captive on September 18 and only nineteen survived.⁴⁶ It was immediately following the return of the bodies that Elgin determined that Yuan Ming Yuan should be destroyed, and it was a decision that was ultimately his alone.⁴⁷ On October 18, 1860, one day after the funeral of the murdered prisoners, the 1st Division, under Major-General Sir John Michel began to set fire to Yuan Ming Yuan. The destruction was not complete until the evening of October 19.⁴⁸ Just a few days later, on October 24, a new treaty was signed at Beijing with Prince Gong, the Emperor’s brother (the emperor himself had fled the city a few weeks earlier).

⁴⁵ Elgin and Walrond 362.

⁴⁶ Beeching 323.

⁴⁷ Elgin and Walrond 365.

⁴⁸ Wolseley 278-280.

“...and if there were another building left to burn, you would carry the brand to it yourself”

Though the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan easily fits into the discourse of punishment and pedagogy that defined much of the campaign, these ideas do not fully capture the many motivations that contributed to the British, specifically Elgin’s, decision to destroy this spectacular palace. In order to understand the complexities that went into what we can only hope – in post-colonial, left-leaning, liberal multicultural hindsight – was a difficult decision it is necessary to closely examine the accounts of those involved. Such an examination shows that both ideas of British superiority and more practical and personal concerns played roles in Elgin’s decision.

The primary explanation given for the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was that it was a violent punishment necessary to teach the Chinese a lesson about the rules of war, specifically about the taking of prisoners. Indeed, the destruction was often presented as an extremely regrettable and disturbing incident that the British were forced to carry out as the only effective way to respond to Chinese insolence. In a dispatch dated October 25 Elgin stated his full reasons for burning the palace:

Having, to the best of my judgment, examined the question in all its bearing, I came to the conclusion that the destruction of Yuen-ming-yuen was the least objectionable of the several courses open to me, unless I could have reconciled it to my sense of duty to suffer the crime which had been committed to pass practically unavenged.⁴⁹

To Elgin there was not even any question that there must be some sort of retribution for the murder of the prisoners. Indeed, most of his discussion was based around what would be the “least objectionable” manner of carrying out a punishment that he

⁴⁹ Elgin and Walrond 366.

saw as unfortunately necessary. This theme of the punishment as deeply regrettable, but ultimately necessary, is perhaps best exemplified by M’Ghee’s account, where he waxed poetic about how, “Buildings and all, hallowed by age, if age can hallow, and by beauty, if it can make sacred, are swept to destruction, with all their contents, monuments of imperial taste and luxury,” but then went on to add that:

A pang of sorrow seizes upon you, you cannot help it, no eye will ever again gaze upon those building which have been doubtless the admiration of ages, records of by-gone skill and taste, of which the world contains not the like. You have seen them once and for ever, they are dead and gone, men cannot reproduce them. You turn away from the sight; but before you arises the vision of a sad, solemn, slow procession. Mark that most touching sight, the dashing charger led, not ridden; the saddle is empty, the boot is in the stirrup, but it is empty also; the limb that filled it forms now a part of the skeleton that lies in the coffin on that gun-carriage. You saw that sight two days ago, you see a vision of it now; you turn back and gaze with satisfaction on the ruin from which you had hidden your face, and say “Yes, thank God, we can make them feel something of the measure of their guilt;” and if there were another building left to burn, you would carry the brand to it yourself.⁵⁰

M’Ghee recognized the beauty of Yuan Ming Yuan and lamented that the British were forever destroying this singular work of art. But in the midst of all this sorrow M’Ghee called to mind the murder of the prisoners, specifically the image of a riderless horse, and how that image would have provided solace to the onlooker and even allowed him to find satisfaction in the destruction. Indeed, according to M’Ghee it is because Yuan Ming Yuan was so beautiful that its destruction was such an effective punishment. Men like Elgin and M’Ghee recognized that Yuan Ming Yuan was a beautiful work of art, and subsequently portrayed its destruction as a regrettable act that was only justified as an emotional punishment for what they saw

⁵⁰ M’Ghee 287.

as the far more blameworthy murder of the British prisoners. Considering the number of accounts that emphasize the brutal treatment of the prisoners, it is likely that these actors were not merely spinning the wheels of self-justification, but actually did see the murders as reprehensible enough to warrant the destruction of the palace.

However, the fact that this punishment was assumed to be completely necessary when other options were available again demonstrates just how far British anger had developed by October 18, 1860. Beyond just the genuine sadness over the murder of the prisoners, this anger was also constructed through the combination of general feelings of racial superiority with the military and personal embarrassments of 1859.

In addition to presenting the burning as necessary in retribution for the murder of the prisoners, the British sources are also open about the role that this act of violence had in teaching the Chinese how to behave “properly” in times of war. Specifically, the British aimed to teach the Chinese not to capture men under a flag of truce. In a letter dated October 18, 1860, General Hope Grant wrote that the palace was burned, “Because the English nation will not be satisfied unless some lasting mark of our cause of the barbarous manner in which they have violated the laws of nations be inflicted on the Chinese government.”⁵¹ It is safe to assume that the “laws of nations” that Hope Grant referred to included a stipulation that men under a flag of truce are safe from capture. Hope Grant further explained the British reasoning when he wrote, in a letter to General de Montauban, “If we were to now make peace, sign the treaty and retire, the Chinese Government would see that our countrymen can be

⁵¹General James Hope Grant, Letter to the Home Office, Oct. 18, War Office Collections, “China War: Destruction of Emperor’s Palace following ill-treatment of prisoners by Chinese,” OVERSEAS: China (Code 0(J)): WO 32/8238, National Archives, London.

seized and murdered with impunity. It is necessary to undeceive them on this point.”⁵² The key point here is Grant’s belief that without some form of punishment the Chinese would not learn that capturing soldiers under a flag of truce was an unacceptable practice when dealing with the British. Through these arguments the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan can be seen as a preventive measure for the future. The burning of the Summer Palace was not only an act of direct revenge, as portrayed by Elgin and M’Ghee, but also, like much British action in China more generally, a measure for teaching the Chinese how to properly act according to international standards (which apparently did not include stipulations against either looting or forcing another country to tolerate the opium trade).

This lesson was seen not only as necessary, but even as possibly being beneficial to the Chinese. In his account, Swinhoe wrote, after describing the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, that “There is time yet for China to regenerate herself, and by cultivating friendly relations with foreign empires, learn from them how in the present emergency of her case she may maintain order among her people, and keep pace with the march of progress.”⁵³ Swinhoe’s implication was that the way for China to become a part of the modern world and save itself from disorder was to learn lessons from moments like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. This view would obviously have been impossible without the feelings of British superiority that defined so much of British imperialism. The destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was justified by the British both as cathartic retribution for the murder of the prisoners, and as a necessary lesson that would prove beneficial to both the British and the

⁵² Grant and Knollys 203.

⁵³ Swinhoe 331.

Chinese. These descriptions of the destruction as a way to punish the Chinese, and subsequently teach them a lesson through this punishment, fit well into Hevia's depiction of imperialism in China as a pedagogical exercise

Given that the standard presentation of that the destruction was a direct, and somewhat emotional, punishment for the murder of the prisoners is supported by all of the accounts, it should be taken seriously. With the use of Hevia's arguments it has been shown how this narrative can also be fit into the wider racial discourses of punishment and pedagogy that defined British imperialism in China. At the same time that both of these interpretations are valid, they also tend to omit the more pragmatic motives that surrounded the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan. Namely, the role it played in helping to hasten, and probably even to enable, the signing of the treaty on October 24. Even though it was rarely stated as a motive, the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan could also be viewed as an effective means of quickly ending this expensive conflict and bringing the soldiers home before winter. The war in China was extremely expensive and difficult to maintain, even for Britain's huge empire. According to an article of the *Overland China Mail*, the campaign cost, "A million a month, or Twelve million Pounds Sterling a year." To punctuate the point, the author of the piece then added that this was, "The lowest figure at which the expenses of this China expedition can be truly calculated," and that even this conservative estimate was, "Equal to the entire taxation of the United States for Navy, Army, Government and all other purposes."⁵⁴ There is no question that the weight of this financial burden was felt by British officials. On November 8, 1860 Earl Charles John

⁵⁴"The 'Status Quo' in China," *Overland China Mail [Hong Kong]* 13 Oct. 1860.

Canning, the Governor-General of India, wrote to Sir Charles Wood, the Secretary of State for India, to inform him that:

There is a regiment (European) ready to embark, if needed at Cannanore. [Canning was unaware at this point that Elgin had burned the palace and gained the signing of the treaty.] Bombay can give another. On this side one of the regiments near the Ganges will drop down before [sufficient transport] can be got ready. I do not mean to spend a shilling until [the necessity of doing so is absolutely] certain.⁵⁵

For officials charged with managing the deployment of British forces it was obviously advantageous to resolve the conflict in China as quickly as possible so that further expenditures were not necessary. This seems especially true given that these letters repeatedly mention a developing conflict with the Maori in New Zealand that also called for British troops.⁵⁶

In addition to the logistical and financial advantages in hastily ending the China campaign, by October winter was fast approaching, and wintering in Beijing was an expensive and undesirable prospect. This pressing danger was communicated directly to General Hope Grant by the Secretary at War, Sidney Herbert, in an April 9, 1860 letter stating, "It is clear, however, that we could not winter there, and we should have to leave almost immediately after our arrival."⁵⁷ Even before the start of the hostilities it had already been determined that wintering in Beijing was far from recommended. The British forces had numerous motivations for ending the conflict quickly and retiring before winter set in, a prospect that was endangered by events such as the capture of the prisoners. Fortunately enough, these pragmatic goals were

⁵⁵ Charles John Canning, letters to Sir Charles Wood, Nov. 8, 1860, Oriental and India Office Collections, Mss Eur F78/55/6, British Library, London.

⁵⁶ Charles John Canning, letters to Sir Charles Wood, Oriental and India Office Collections, Mss Eur F78/55/6, British Library, London.

⁵⁷ Grant and Knollys 145.

achieved when the Chinese agreed to ratify the treaty less than a week after the October 18 burning of Yuan Ming Yuan.

While the hostilities had officially ended when Prince Gong answered the British ultimatum and opened the Anding gate on October 13,⁵⁸ allowing the allies into Beijing, the British were still not necessarily in a position to force the Chinese to accept new treaty stipulations and leave the city before winter. Even though by October 17 all of the surviving prisoners had been returned and the allies were in a position to enter Beijing, the Chinese army, led by Senge Linqin was, as Hurd described, “defeated but not destroyed.”⁵⁹ At this time it was still difficult for the British to know whether or not they had achieved the resounding victory they desired. Indeed, it is possible to claim that, Prince Gong and Senge Linqin had, to some extent, dictated the terms of the allied victory, especially given the treatment of the prisoners. While at this point an allied victory had been achieved, it is difficult to say whether or not it would have been possible for the British to force the Chinese to accept the desired treaty concessions without an allied occupation, a move that would have almost certainly forced the allies to winter in Beijing. Hurd wrote: “This timetable left the Ambassadors no room for subtleties or setbacks; they had to hammer Prince Kung [Gong] into submission as hard and as fast as they could.”⁶⁰ It was necessary for the allies to achieve a resounding victory as fast as possible so they could leave before winter. While they had essentially achieved victory with the opening of the Anding gate, if the British were to immediately depart from Beijing

⁵⁸ Hurd 232.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 231.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 231.

without leaving an occupying force, or any other significant reminder of the allied victory, it is doubtful that any treaty signed would have had a lasting impact on the Chinese. It would have appeared to the Chinese that, while the allies were clearly militarily superior, they were either unwilling or incapable of truly damaging the Chinese government. By the end of October, Chinese policy had allowed for an allied occupation of Beijing, signaling the Chinese concession of allied victory; however, this occupation was something that British and French policy would not allow. Even after the return of the prisoners and the opening of the Anding gate, the allies still needed to find a way to efficiently demonstrate the extent of their victory without actually occupying Beijing.

In addition to fulfilling the previously mentioned goals of retribution and teaching the Chinese “proper” conduct in international warfare, it can thus be argued that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan also provided the British with a method of marking their resounding victory over the Chinese. Though this objective certainly relates with previously discussed ideological motivations, it also reflects the more pragmatic goal of quickly ending the campaign in such a way so that the desired results (which of course were ideological in nature) were unquestionably achieved. The specific way that the burning served this goal was by informing the Chinese of the British willingness to use destructive force – and in a way that paid no heed to imperial symbolism. This warning became significant when coupled with British threats to burn the Imperial palace, and possibly sack Beijing if the new concessions were not immediately agreed to. In his account, Wolseley wrote:

It was the stamp which gave an unmistakeable reality to our work of vengeance, proving that Lord Elgin's last letter was no idle threat, and warning them of what they might expect in the capital itself, unless they accepted our proffered terms. The Imperial palace within the city still remained untouched, and if they wished to save that last remaining palace for their master, it behoved them to lose no time. I feel convinced that the burning of Yuen-ming-yuen considerably hastened the final settlement of affairs, and strengthened our ambassador's position.⁶¹

Wolseley claimed that Lord Elgin had threatened to burn the Imperial Palace if the treaty was not signed, and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan served to prove that this was no idle threat. The British wanted the Chinese to know that they were perfectly willing to destroy Chinese buildings, no matter how historically and culturally significant. Wolseley claimed that the dramatic enactment of British determination and seriousness with respect to the destruction of the imperial palace in the form of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan served, in the end, to speed up the Chinese acceptance of the treaty terms. In addition, Wolseley claimed that this action would help to strengthen the position of the British ambassador that the Chinese accepted with the treaty, presumably because the destruction demonstrated the willingness of the British to severely punish the Chinese if they did not bend to their will.

While Wolseley makes the pragmatic purpose of the destruction very clear, this reasoning is rarely mentioned in other sources. Indeed, Henry Knollys, the editor of Hope Grant's diaries and letters, denied that the British ever threatened to burn the Imperial Palace, claiming that, "I have the best authority for stating that, though the expediency of the measure was discussed, such a threat was never actually held out to

⁶¹ Wolseley 279.

the Chinese.”⁶² Knollys did not want to portray the violent and possibly questionable act of burning Yuan Ming Yuan as merely a means for getting the treaty signed. However, despite this desire, he immediately contradicted himself by citing the previously quoted passage from Wolseley. Knollys is further contradicted by an October 20 letter where Hope Grant wrote of the burning: “If after this the Chinese government refused to sign the convention, and agree to our demands, the stronger measure might be taken of seizing the Imperial palace. A dispatch of this effect was addressed by Lord Elgin to the Prince of Kung.”⁶³ This letter absolutely contradicts Knollys and proves that the Imperial Palace was threatened by Lord Elgin in order to intimidate Prince Gong into signing the treaty. In addition, with his statement that it would only be after the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan that the Imperial Palace might be seized, Hope Grant implied that the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan was itself at least partially undertaken to force the signing of the treaty. Although obviously other concerns influenced the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, both it and the proposed destruction of the Imperial Palace were conceived of similarly by Hope Grant. Namely, the British hoped to coerce the Chinese into signing the treaty through a dramatic expression of power. Despite Knollys’s objections, it is clear that the British directly used the burning and the threat of further destruction to convince Prince Gong that signing the treaty on October 24 was completely necessary.

⁶² Grant and Knollys 223.

⁶³ General James Hope Grant, Letter, Oct. 20, 1860, War Office Collections, “China War: Destruction of Emperor’s Palace following ill-treatment of prisoners by Chinese,” OVERSEAS: China (Code 0(J)): WO 32/8238, National Archives, London.

Conclusions

According to these accounts, both the entire British expedition of 1860 and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan itself were based around ideas of punishing the Chinese. This punishment was seen as necessary given the insolent attitude that the Chinese were perceived to possess. This perceived insolence in the face of British global power, as supported by their definition of “international law,” characterized all British conflict with China. While from its outset the conflict between the British and the Chinese had been based around a reaction to these alleged Chinese attitudes, the British defeat at the Dagu Forts in 1859 and the capture of the prisoners under a flag of truce in September 1860 were the events that most directly shaped the harshness of British attitudes towards the Chinese. It was these British, and most importantly Elgin’s, harsh attitudes that defined the violent nature of the 1860 campaign, and ultimately contributed to the decision to burn Yuan Ming Yuan.

When the Chinese captured and murdered the prisoners, the already angry British saw violent punishment as the only remedy for Chinese insolence. This emphasis on punishment, as exemplified by the looting and burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, was defined by Hevia as part of a racially informed discourse of pedagogy that defined all British action in China. While putting the destruction into a wider framework of teaching through punishment is valid, it does not help explain the more pragmatic, and sometimes personal, motivations that drove British decision making in the moment. Ultimately, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was an attempt at pedagogy through discipline, an emotional act of vengeance, and simply a practical

means to quickly end a military campaign. Although these seemingly conflicting motives complicate ideas that the events of the 1860 campaign should be defined within a larger racialized framework, it does not discount this proposal. Indeed, the personal and pragmatic concerns that led to Lord Elgin's decision were only made possible by the ideas of racial and cultural superiority that allowed Britain to seek out better means of selling opium to China in the first place.

Chapter II

Contentious Narratives: British Representations during the Victorian Era

Despite their varying interpretations of events, all of the primary accounts of the 1860 campaign were unanimous in their defense of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. To the majority of the actors involved in the campaign, Lord Elgin's decision was, although perhaps undesirable, absolutely necessary given the actions of the Chinese. If one were to exclusively read these accounts, which admittedly were instrumental in shaping wider perceptions of this event, it would be easy to get the impression that Victorian Britons were generally inclined to wholeheartedly support such unapologetically destructive acts of British imperialism. Indeed, the earliest journalistic reports of the destruction almost always echoed the justifications given by those involved. These news reports, combined with non-written sources such as the photographs of Felice Beato, an Italian photographer who accompanied the allied forces to Beijing, sought to construct a narrative of events that justified British actions in China.

Despite the amount of support Lord Elgin found for his actions among these influential early sources, in later years opinion would prove to vary widely. In fact, in the years following 1860, a relatively large amount of criticism of both Lord Elgin's decision, and British imperial policy in China more generally, developed within British society. Though these critics spoke from a variety of motives, all reflected the

wider tendency to criticize imperial policy that developed in the late-nineteenth century. That these critics, many of whom were in no way scholars of China, did specifically address British actions during the Second Opium War speaks to the lingering presence that memories of 1860 had in Victorian Britain. During this time period, the Opium Wars were still fairly recent events in Britain's story of imperial expansion that continued to have pertinence in ongoing debates on the merits of imperialism. This chronological proximity, combined with the inherently difficult to justify nature of events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, opened these conflicts up to criticism from a wide variety of commentators.

Constructing a Defense

Though little is known about the personal life of Felice Beato, the photographs that he took of the 1860 campaign became the most important images of the conflict with China. These photographs played a key role in how this campaign was represented back in Europe, appearing as the basis for illustrations that appeared in publications such as *The Illustrated London News* and Robert Swinhoe's Narrative of the North China Campaign of 1860.¹ During the nineteenth century, photographs were seen as a means of "objectively" representing reality. Accordingly, photography was believed to be, at least according to mid-nineteenth-century commentator Lady

¹ David Harris, and Felice Beato, Of Battle and Beauty: Felice Beato's Photographs of China (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1999) 35.

Elizabeth Eastlake, “The Sworn witness of everything presented to her view.”² In this context, Beato’s photographs were seen as authoritative images of the 1860 campaign that showed events exactly as they happened.

In contrast to this tendency to take photographs as images of reality “as it was” (a tendency that is still far from being completely discredited), Beato’s depictions were in fact as subjective as any of the written accounts discussed in the previous chapter. Given the photographic technology at the time, Beato was forced to extensively plan out what he photographed.³ As a result, he was predisposed to construct his narrative of the 1860 campaign in a very particular way. The narrative that Beato ultimately chose to represent was one that thoroughly supported and reinforced British imperial ideas about both the events at hand, and China more generally. This choice should be seen as reflective of both Beato’s personal prejudices, and the prejudices of his audience, namely the British. Commenting on Beato’s photography, David Harris wrote that, “The British formed his principal market, and their military interests largely determined his choice of subjects...All his China images share a consistent ideological point of view, one that celebrated the British as a colonial power.”⁴ According to Harris, a need to market his images to British interests ensured that Beato would only photograph events in such a way as to support existing imperial narratives. Though this point is well taken, it is also important to reemphasize that representations of empire, such as Beato’s photographs, could often themselves play a role in constructing the idea of Britain as a glorious

² Harris and Beato 18.

³ Ibid. 29.

⁴ Ibid. 27.

colonial power. As Harris wrote, “These images appear as forms of cultural interpretation and intervention.”⁵ As much as Beato was pandering to British interests, he was also, through the interpretations presented in his photographs, helping in some small way to shape them.

The methods that Beato employed to achieve his influential representations were multitudinous, but, as discussed by Harris, consisted largely of showing only scenes of British triumph. In contrast, he represented Chinese culture only, “By the mute presence of their architecture.”⁶ Chinese people were largely ignored as subjects, and were almost always shown seated in doorways in what Harris saw as a “passive and incidental” position to the British.⁷ Ultimately, Beato’s photographs were far from representing a comprehensive or objective view of the campaign. Instead, they reinforced imperial ideologies that he hoped would make them appealing to the British market. Through these efforts he helped construct a view of the campaign that emphasized the British as glorious conquerors in the face of Chinese weakness.

Given the possibly controversial nature of both the looting and the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, it is not surprising that this event was not extensively represented in Beato’s photographs. In fact, the palace appears in just six images, five of them labeled, “before the burning.”⁸ This lack of representation possibly itself points to a recognition that showing the destruction of such a beautiful place could shape opinion against British actions and Lord Elgin’s decision. The five pictures of the palace

⁵ Harris and Beato 19.

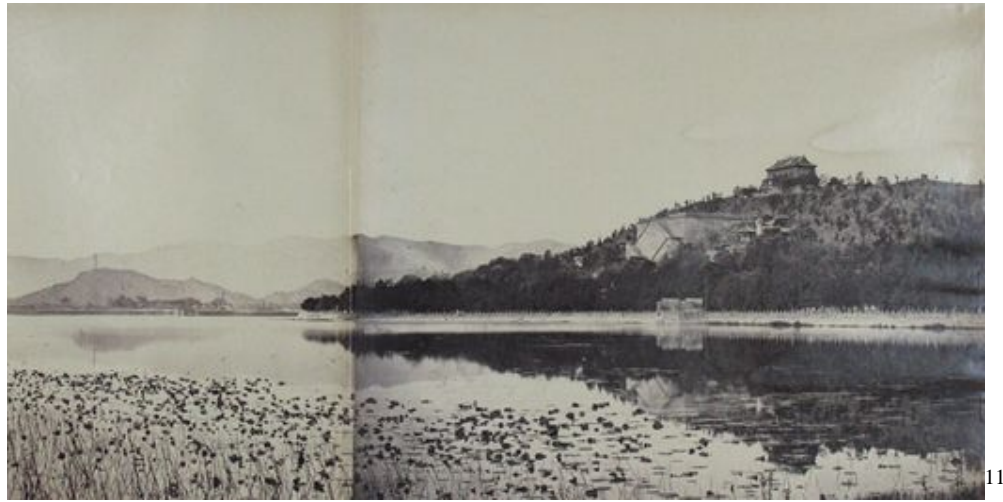
⁶ Ibid. 27.

⁷ Ibid. 27.

⁸ Beato, photographs, catalogue: 46,47, 48,49, 50, 51, Harris and Beato 91-96.

before the destruction are fairly bland pictures⁹ of Chinese buildings that certainly do not capture a palace that was, as M'ghee wrote, "doubtless the admiration of ages."¹⁰

These images were followed by one important picture taken after the burning.



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This photograph was taken from a very distant perspective and denies the viewer any sense of the destruction. No smoking ruins are visible and the only building in the picture seems to be completely intact. The only way that the viewer can tell that the destruction even took place is by noticing the burned trees on the hill. This image, though ostensibly of the palace after its massive destruction, makes the consequences of Lord Elgin's actions to be minimal. Beato depicted the most controversial act of the campaign in a way that thoroughly sterilized it. Consequently, he allowed British viewers to believe that destruction was actually fairly minor. This method of

⁹ Beato, photographs, catalogue: 46,47, 48,49, 50, 51, Harris and Beato 91-96.

¹⁰ Robert James Leslie M'Ghee, How We Got into Peking. A Narrative of the Campaign in China of 1860. (London: R. Bentley, 1862) 287.

¹¹Beato, photograph, "View of the Imperial Summer Palace, Yuen Ming Yuen, after the Burning, Taken from the Lake, Peking," Harris and Beato 95.

representation was completely in line with Beato's hopes to construct an image of the British as glorious colonial conquerors. Lord Elgin's decision became much more defensible when Beato presented these images as the "actual" effects of the burning at home. Given the nineteenth-century belief in the power of photographs to accurately depict reality, Beato's images could have had a particular ability in constructing the public reception of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. Even if these images of Yuan Ming Yuan were not actually widely viewed, they at least reflect an early tendency to represent British actions in China in such a way so that they were easily defensible.

Though photography was a growing form of representation in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1860 the public still received the majority of their news from print sources that never contained photographs. Given this fact, the representation of the destruction in newspapers and newsmagazines becomes the most important source for judging how Lord Elgin's decision was widely presented to the public. Of British newspapers, the foreign press within China, represented largely by the *North China Herald* in Shanghai, was far and away the most supportive of Lord Elgin's decision. This support went even further than that of most of the soldiers involved, as evidenced by the stance the paper takes towards the looting. A correspondent wrote on October 20, 1860:

In the afternoon yesterday a party of French went through the apartments with sticks breaking everything that remained, mirrors, screens, panels. It is said that they did so in revenge for barbarous treatment the released prisoners, their countrymen, had received.¹²

¹² North China Herald [Shanghai] 20 Oct. 1860.

Though, as was common in most representations of the looting, this correspondent blamed the French for most of the looting, he also claimed that they did so in revenge for the death of the prisoners. The correspondent went further to support this reasoning, claiming, “The utter destruction of the interior of the summer palace...Is but small punishment for the Emperor’s contumacy and treatment of the prisoners who were captured whilst on a peaceful mission.”¹³ While this correspondent did deflect blame from the British by claiming that the French were the sole perpetrators of the looting, he also presented himself in allegiance with what he believed to be the French motivations. Given that at the time of this “utter destruction” the prisoners were not even known to be dead, by claiming that the looting was a justifiable act of revenge this correspondent actually went further in his defense of the campaign than any of those actually involved. Unlike this news correspondent, the soldiers involved recognized that the looting was not something that could be easily defended. It was because of this recognition that the blame was so often heaped entirely on the French. Considering that he also claimed the French were the main perpetrators, this correspondent probably did recognize that the looting was, at best, a questionable act. At the same time, he was so in support of the campaign that he depicted this destructive robbery as a justified punishment that he, at least ideologically, had sympathy for.

The *North China Herald* continued its complete support of allied actions with its representation of the burning itself. In a description of the burning printed on November 10, 1860, a correspondent, in a passage that thoroughly broke any pretense

¹³ North China Herald [Shanghai] 20 Oct. 1860.

to journalistic integrity, wrote, “The reception hall formed a fine deep background to this living picture of active red flame that hissed and crackles as if glorying in the destruction it spread around. ‘Revenge is sweet.’ We muttered to ourselves *sic transit gloria mundi*.”¹⁴ This correspondent’s celebratory tone spoke to his belief that the destruction was a completely justified and necessary act of revenge. His use of the Latin, *sic transit gloria mundi*, further romanticized the destruction, portraying the burning of the palace as an indicator of the inevitable decline of China’s imperial civilization at the hands of the superior British. This correspondent supported Lord Elgin’s decision so unquestionably that he was more concerned with how he could poetically convey the flames than any analysis of British justifications. Indeed, in the days following the destruction, the greatest concerns expressed in the *North China Herald* were that the burning might be, as a correspondent wrote on November 17, “Again misrepresented as an accident.”¹⁵ This particular representation probably speaks to the fact that the majority of the *North China Herald’s* readers were foreign (mainly British) traders in China at the time. These merchants obviously found it necessary to be supportive of all actions in a campaign that won what they perceived to be great trading benefits. The viewpoint of the British in China towards the 1860 campaign was both reflected and shaped by the *North China Herald*. Given their private interests, the British traders in China saw it as necessary to be as defensive of allied actions as possible. This meant that sometimes they were more vehement in their support of the destruction than even the soldiers who actually participated in destroying Yuan Ming Yuan.

¹⁴ North China Herald [Shanghai] 10 Nov. 1860.

¹⁵ North China Herald [Shanghai] 17 Nov. 1860.

In comparison to the British press in China, the newspapers in London, represented here by *The Times* and the satirical magazine *Punch*, were relatively more moderate in their support of the campaign. At the same time that there was more moderation in their representations, the general feeling was still one of overwhelming support for Lord Elgin. A poem found in the January 5, 1861 edition of *Punch*, goes: “He has done his work featly, adroitly, completely,/ So Saith Mr. Punch, unaccustomed to Flatter:/ And except that the Welkin don’t rhyme to Lord Elgin,/ The former should ring with the praise of the latter.”¹⁶ Even in a magazine that was known for satirizing the British government (albeit with a generally conservative slant), Lord Elgin was still held up to praise. *Punch*’s general attitude towards the British in China was further demonstrated by a political cartoon captioned “What we ought to do in China,” appearing on December 22, 1860.



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¹⁶ “A Cheer For Lord Elgin,” *Punch*, Jan. 5, 1861 (London: Bradbury, Agnew, & CO. LD., Printers) Volumes 37-40.

¹⁷ “What we ought to do in China,” *Punch*, Dec. 22, 1860 (London: Bradbury, Agnew, & CO. LD., Printers) Volumes 37-40.

This cartoon, and its image of a Greco-Roman horseman swinging a mace at a dragon representing China, again demonstrated *Punch's* overwhelming support of a belligerent policy towards China. Additionally, with the contrast between its representations of the British as a glorious, strong, and civilized warrior, and the Chinese as a backwards, disgusting, dragon, this cartoon reinforced the racial attitudes of the British. Satisfied in their perceived racial and cultural superiority, as demonstrated and reinforced by representations such as this cartoon, the British were willing to support any violent acts against China. The representations found in *Punch* lay bare the support that Lord Elgin's actions had amongst many commentators in London.

Though *The Times*, like *Punch*, was also supportive of British actions in China, it, as a serious publication without the special interests of *The North China Herald*, was more inclined to present events in at least a somewhat more balanced manner. Given that, at the time, the specificities of the looting were still hotly contested by the British and French, the way that this event was represented again proves to be a good measure of how a given author perceived allied actions. In a December 31, 1860 article, a *Times* correspondent continued the common trend of disavowing British participation in the looting, writing:

You have heard, I suppose, how the Emperor's Summer Palace has been "looted," to use a word which the Indian mutiny has domesticated in our military parlance. Our allies decidedly got to windward of us on this occasion, and the amount of plunder which they secured is only equaled by the amount of valuable property which they destroyed.¹⁸

¹⁸ The Times [London] Dec. 31, 1860.

Here the French were again portrayed as the main perpetrators of the looting. Unlike the *North China Herald* though, *The Times* did not describe this act as anything but unjustified theft. While the use of “to windward” does admittedly suggest that the British might have partaken in the looting given the opportunity, the description of the destruction wreaked by the French does not at all suggest that this was a commendable act. This representation reveals that *The Times* saw the looting as reprehensible and, subsequently, sought to claim that the British had not participated.

The Times continued its less polemical tone when, in its description of the burning itself, it presented a relatively thorough discussion of the complete British motives for the destruction. This discussion, instead of demonstrating blind support for Lord Elgin’s decision, often showed a desire to downplay the violence and singularity of the destruction. After discussing the fate of the British prisoners,¹⁹ the same correspondent as quoted above wrote, again on December 31:

The 1st division was sent out on the 18 to complete the destruction of the Summer Palace, which has been so successfully shorn of its grandeur some days before. It is now a heap of blackened ruins, and the demonstration was accompanied by a threat that if our terms were not speedily accepted we would do to the palace and public buildings of Peking as we had done to the Palace of Yuen-Ming-Yuen.²⁰

This representation is notable for how it made the destruction seem less horrible by claiming that the previous looting, supposedly conducted solely by the French, had already stripped the palace of much of its beauty. These efforts demonstrated that, on some level, *The Times* recognized that both the looting and the burning were questionable acts and that it was useful to maintain some level of deniability. Far

¹⁹ *The Times* [London] 31 Dec. 1860.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

from reveling in the destruction as the *North China Herald* had done, *The Times* was more interested in downplaying the significance of Lord Elgin's violent decision.

Interestingly, instead of just portraying the destruction as an emotional and justified punishment for the murder of the prisoners, the author of the above passage also implied that there might have been more practical reasons behind Lord Elgin's decision. While the author did mention the destruction as a "demonstration" for what was presumably the murder of the prisoners, he also implied that the palace was, at least partially, burned to hasten the signing of the treaty. As discussed in the previous chapter, using the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan as a demonstration of the British willingness to destroy the imperial palace if the Chinese did not sign the treaty was a very real phenomenon. However, considering how contentious this use was among soldiers in the campaign, it is surprising to see it referred to in a news article. By implying that this undeniably severe act was carried out, not just as an act of vengeance for the murder of the prisoners, but possibly also for the more pragmatic reason of helping to get the treaty signed, this author unwittingly made it harder to justify.

Ultimately, *The Times'* interpretation was notable for how it downplayed the extent of Lord Elgin's destruction by claiming that the French looting had already caused the palace to be, "shorn of its grandeur." This interpretation is important in how it demonstrated at least an un-conscious realization that the destruction was difficult to justify. Considering this awareness, it is ironic that, by implying that Lord Elgin's rationale for destroying the palace was partially to hasten the signing of the treaty, this correspondent actually left some room for future criticism. Still, it is

important not to lose sight of the fact that this author, as most British at the time, did generally support Lord Elgin's decision. He was just more willing than others to present a wider range of motives than the standard justification that the palace was destroyed as an emotional act of vengeance. This *Times* correspondent's account demonstrates the difficulty in claiming that all newspapers in Britain were either able or willing to construct a narrative that comprehensively propped up an act as potentially controversial as the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan.

Immediate Criticisms

Despite the fact that most early accounts defended the looting and destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, in the years immediately surrounding 1860 some notable critics of British actions in China did emerge. These critics included both liberals and radicals, such as Victor Hugo and Karl Marx, and also the press in foreign countries such as the United States. These commentators from outside of mainstream British society were far less inclined to be prejudiced towards supporting British imperial policy. Marx, in articles he wrote while living in London as a foreign correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, strongly criticized both British policies towards China and the official justifications for those policies. In an article, published on October 1, 1859, after Frederic Bruce had been repulsed at the Taku forts, Marx expressed his skepticism at the British government's stated reasons for renewing hostilities in China, writing:

Now, as the Treaty of Tien-tsin contains no clause granting to the English and French the right of sending a squadron of men-of-war up the Peiho, it becomes evident that the treaty was violated, not only by the Chinese, but by the English, and that on the part of the latter there existed the foregone conclusion to pick a quarrel just before the period appointed for the exchange of the ratifications.²¹

With his interpretation of events Marx denied the validity of the British Government's claims that, by breaking the Treaty of Tianjin by firing at Frederic Bruce from the Dagu Forts on June 25, the Qing had forced the British to start a new war with China. Instead, he claimed that, if the treaty was broken by the Chinese, then it was also broken by the British. Marx went even further with his accusations by asserting that the British had deliberately broken the treaty with the predetermined purpose of starting a new war in China. Though Marx's theory about the real reason for British motivations, involving claims that Lord Palmerston (the Prime Minister) was engineering a new war in collusion with the Russians,²² was fairly ridiculous, his skepticism is important for showing that there was some contemporaneous criticism of British actions in China. While none of his articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* directly mentioned the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, considering that Marx viewed the entire British presence in China as unjustified, it seems likely that he would have also viewed Lord Elgin's stated motivations for the destruction with skepticism.

Marx's criticisms were also notable because they appeared in an American newspaper, an organ that would obviously be less likely to be universally supportive

²¹ Karl Marx, "The New Chinese War," Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization: His Despatches [Sic] and Other Writings on China, India, Mexico, the Middle East and North Africa, ed. Shlomo Avineri (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968) 357.

²² Ibid. 357-360.

of British justifications. In 1859 an American mission did successfully proceed to Beijing to get the treaty of Tianjin²³ ratified without needing to go to war (albeit only by accepting the Chinese desire that they travel by land instead of the Peiho). Considering this success, the British claims that the Chinese had left them with no recourse but war must have seemed ridiculous to the Americans. In an article titled, "The China Question," appearing in the January, 1860 edition of *The North American Review*, the author wrote:

We have no interests in China but those which are commercial. Great Britain ought to have no others, and to commercial interests a China war, with its probable consequences, – the overthrow of an insecure dynasty, and the extension of revolt and internal confusion over those vast provinces whose peaceful industry alone satisfies the cravings of the west, – is fraught only with unmitigated evil and perplexity.²⁴

To this author, who saw his own government expanding American interests in China without needing to start additional wars, the British actions seemed to be completely unnecessary and unexplainable. This perception was reinforced by the fact that the author identified the 1860 campaign as threatening the very sovereignty of the Qing. Indeed, this author viewed British policy in China as being so ridiculous that he, like Marx, though without the dramatic theorizing, also raised questions about whether or not the British actions might signify an attempt to expand their interest in China beyond the commercial realm. Both Marx and this American commentator viewed British policies in 1860 as so unnecessarily harsh that they began to speculate that the British must have had greater motivations in going to war than just opening China up to foreign trade. Though this author demonstrates important skepticism of British

²³ In 1858 the Chinese had been forced to sign essentially the same agreement with Britain, France, Russia, and America under the "Most favored nation clause."

²⁴ "The China Question," *North American Review* [Boston] Jan. 1860: 180.

motivations, it is only fair to note that he was being slightly hypocritical in his analysis. The Americans had only gained their own trading advantages because of the previous wars fought by the British (although Americans did provide limited support in some instances). In any event, the presence of an article like “The China Question” in a prominent American journal demonstrates that various foreign commentators were more than willing to criticize British actions in China.

This foreign view that British actions in China were perplexingly severe and destructive applied to interpretations of the looting and burning of Yuan Ming Yuan itself. French author Victor Hugo was one of the most notable critics of the destruction, describing in a November 25, 1861 letter his opinions of the British actions. Hugo first emphasized the beauty of the palace as a, “Dazzling cavern of human fantasy with the face of a temple and palace,” and then went on to describe how, “One day two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One plundered, the other burned. Victory can be a thieving woman, or so it seems. The devastation of the Summer Palace was accomplished by the two victors acting jointly.”²⁵ To Hugo, the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan was a devastating act that, in its destruction of one of the wonders of the world, called into question the basic morality of both the British and the French. As he exclaimed, “We Europeans are the civilized ones, and for us the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism.”²⁶ By using the destruction to critique European imperial pretensions to a higher level of civilization, Hugo’s interpretation was as far as possible from even the reserved

²⁵ Victor Hugo, "The sack of the summer palace," UNESCO Courier, Nov. 1985, 16 Dec. 2008 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1310/is_1985_Nov/ai_4003606>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

support of a publication such as *The Times*. The criticisms found in the writings of men like Marx and Hugo demonstrate that, both during and immediately after Lord Elgin's campaign, British actions in China, including the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, certainly did not garner unanimous support.

Following the 1860 campaign, the British press, combined with other reporters of the events like Beato, made an attempt to construct a narrative that, to varying degrees, defended Lord Lord Elgin's actions. Despite their best efforts, these reports, especially those slightly more open with information like the ones found in *The Times*, failed in destroying the possibility of criticism of British actions in China. Although these early criticisms came mainly from foreigners, they foreshadowed the wider attacks on British policy in China that were to come from within British society throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Conflict in Parliament

In the face of the generally favorable initial public reception of Lord Elgin's decision, even immediately following the campaign there were those within the British government that seemed concerned about the possibly controversial nature of this event. At this time, some members of parliament seemed much more worried than the general public about both the justifiableness of Lord Elgin's decision, and the long lasting consequences that it might have for opinions of British imperial policy.

On February 14, 1861, just a few months after Yuan Ming Yuan was consumed by flames, a resolution was presented in parliament to give a vote of thanks to the Naval and Military Forces for their service in China. Though this resolution was passed it met with some resistance from within parliament. As recorded in the *Hansard Papers*, chief among these objectors was one Vincent Scully, a member of the Liberal Party from Cork, Ireland. Scully objected to the vote of thanks on the grounds that Lord Elgin had unilaterally decided to destroy Yuan Ming Yuan when his instructions were to make all decisions in consultation with the French plenipotentiary, Baron Gros.²⁷ Though Scully's primary basis for his objection was that Lord Elgin had acted against instructions, his criticisms also pointed to a deeper concern within government over how the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan might be viewed in the future. Scully claimed that Lord Elgin:

Committed that act which certainly in his (Mr. Vincent Scully's) opinion, and in that of a great many out of that House, was an act of barbarism and vandalism, for which it was difficult to find any precedent in ancient or modern history, and the nearest resemblance to which was the burning of Persepolis under somewhat similar circumstances by Alexander the Great.²⁸

Scully obviously recognized the questionable morality of Lord Elgin's decision and, by declaring it an event without precedent, dramatically presented it as an act that would forever be remembered for its barbarity, justified or not. Given this opinion of the destruction, Scully's objection to the vote of thanks on the grounds that Lord Elgin did not act in accordance with the wishes of his French allies makes sense as a means of protecting British imperial policy from criticism. Beyond the possibility of

²⁷ Vincent Scully, 14 Feb. 1861, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, vol. 161, Commons, col. 400-18.

²⁸ Ibid.

his own personal moral objections to the destruction, it is likely that Scully's denunciation was also motivated out of fear that, because Lord Elgin did not act in agreement with Gros, the British would become the sole villains of what he viewed as a regrettable act of vandalism. By denouncing Lord Elgin he presumably hoped to provide the entire British government some form of protection from the judgments of history.

It is obviously difficult to determine all of Scully's motivations for denouncing Lord Elgin, but given that he was a member of Palmerston's ruling Liberal Party²⁹ (though admittedly a Catholic representative from Ireland who would vote against Palmerston in a vote of censure in 1864³⁰) it is likely that he acted out of at least some real concerns, not just hopes for political advantage. Scully's criticism points to a recognition within parliament that the destruction was difficult to justify. Consequently, it must have seemed prudent to protect British imperial policy from questioning by refusing to celebrate Lord Elgin's actions in China. Scully's desire to divorce the British government from Lord Elgin's decision becomes prescient in light of the ways that the destruction would be criticized in years to come.

Debatable Merits

Unsurprisingly, in the years following 1860 it appears that the destruction at Yuan Ming Yuan largely disappeared from parliament's attention. Despite the criticisms of

²⁹James Dodsley, Annual Register (London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1872) 155.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 155.

men like Scully, there was never any sort of inquiry into Lord Elgin's actions. Additionally, given the relatively stable nature of Britain's relationship with China for the remainder of the nineteenth century, there was little to stimulate further discussion of the burning. This being said, the destruction obviously was a major event in Britain's imperial history and, at least according to a survey of the *Hansard Papers*, was sometimes referenced in later parliamentary debates over British Imperial policy. Although the resolution for a vote of thanks to the armed forces was passed in 1861, in these later references the destruction was most often used as an example of regrettably harsh Imperial policy. In a May 10, 1870 debate over whether the British should trade Opium to China, the destruction was brought up as a prime example of the many injustices of British policy towards China. In the opening statement of the debate, Sir Wilfrid Lawson, a member of the Liberal Party, spoke against The Second Opium War, claiming that, "We carried on the war in the most horrible manner, and, among other outrages, perpetrated the greatest piece of Vandalism of the present century, in burning and looting the Emperor's Summer Palace."³¹ Lawson believed that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was a reprehensible act that was a direct result of Britain's unjust interest in trading opium to China.³² In keeping with his view that all efforts to expand the opium trade were essentially immoral,³³ Lawson saw the destruction as just one further example of the moral bankruptcy of Britain's position in China. Considering that even immediately following the 1860 campaign the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan was sometimes a controversial decision, it is not at

³¹ Wilfred Lawson, 10 May 1870, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, vol. 201, Commons, col. 485.

³² Ibid. col. 485.

³³ Ibid. col. 480-90.

all surprising that later members of parliament should reference this event in discussions of the injustices of British policy in China.

Beyond just being used by liberals in specific reference to policy in China, Lord Elgin's decision to burn Yuan Ming Yuan was also used in parliamentary debates as a more general example of the injustices of imperialism. In a May 4, 1874 debate in the House of Commons, Henry Richard, a Liberal and member of the Peace Society, argued against British settlement on the Gold Coast of Africa by claiming that past imperialism had produced things, "Upon which He thought scarcely any Englishman could look back with pride. The bombardment of Canton—the burning and looting of the Emperor of China's Summer Palace."³⁴ To a liberal like Richard, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was a detestable act that served as an example of the negative effects of a type of imperialism that he was arguing against. In the late-nineteenth century, those opposed to imperialism could point to the burning of the Summer Palace as an example of the byproducts of empire that, "Were not triumphs of Christian civilization, but of barbarism and brute force."³⁵ For an anti-imperialist like Richard, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was an embarrassing event that pointed to all that could go wrong in irresponsible imperial expansion.

While opponents of imperialism within parliament presented the actions of 1860 as exceedingly harsh and regrettable, this was not always the majority view. Indeed, in at least one instance the destruction even used by the supporters of imperialism as an example for how uncooperative powers should be dealt with. In an August 14, 1878 discussion of what to do over the murder of a *Times* correspondent,

³⁴ Henry Richard, 4 May 1874, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, vol. 218, Commons, col. 1634.

³⁵ Ibid. col.1634.

C.C. Ogle, in Turkey, Henry Samuelson, also a member of the Liberal party, invoked the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan as setting a precedent for harshly punishing a government for murdering British citizens.³⁶ Although he did not necessarily advocate punishments as extreme as those inflicted on China in 1860, he did invoke Lord Lord Elgin's actions when making his case for why Turkey should be punished. He claimed, "Those murders (of the British prisoners in 1860) took place when China was at war with us, and what penalties were paid! But the murder of Mr. Ogle took place when Turkey was not only at peace with us, but almost in alliance with us."³⁷ Samuelson believed that Turkey should be punished and that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was the precedent for this desired action. He argued that it would be against British policy to leave Turkey unpunished when the British had punished China so harshly in 1860 for what he saw as a similar crime. By using the destruction as a possible model for British action Samuelson was at least tacitly endorsing Lord Elgin's decision. If anything, this use demonstrates that, despite the speeches of Richard, in the late-nineteenth century, the view that the destruction was a regrettable act not to be repeated was not unanimous in either parliament or the Liberal Party.

The varying references in parliament to the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan demonstrate that Lord Elgin's decision became a contentious act during the late-nineteenth century. Despite the general support that Lord Elgin found for his actions in the British press, even immediately following the end of the campaign various members within parliament recognized the possibly controversial nature of such a dramatic act of destruction. Considering that liberals such as Richard would later use

³⁶ Henry Samuelson, 14 Aug. 1878, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, vol. 242, Commons, col. 1956.

³⁷ Ibid. 1985-86.

Lord Elgin's decision as an example of bad imperial policy, it seems that, in his desire to denounce Lord Elgin in 1861, Scully did accurately recognize that this event was a possible liability. Speaking in 1874, Richard's representation was almost certainly informed by the development of a wider ambivalence to both British policies in China, and imperialism more generally. For men like Richard and Lawson, as with other critics of imperialism to be discussed in the next section, the opium wars and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan were unjustifiable blights on the history of British Empire. In their hopes to shape the future of the Empire in a certain way, these members of parliament looked to the past in China for examples of what policies to avoid. These desires would be reflected by the growing trend to criticize imperialism that was developing in all parts of Victorian society.

A Variety of Critics

During the late-nineteenth century there was a great increase in the visibility and influence of critics of imperial policy. The increased presence of these criticisms was probably a function of the fact that it was during this period that the British Empire was at the height of its expansion. Additionally, after the dissolution of the British East India Company's control over India in 1858, all imperial concerns were now exclusively the responsibility of the British government. This new situation opened up the government itself for direct criticism. The history of the British in China did not escape the view of critics of imperialism, especially considering the always

controversial nature of the opium trade. The opium trade was considered by many critics to be the basis of all British action in China and, subsequently, British policy towards China was presented as particularly unjust and immoral. Though it would be incorrect to say that the many of the critics of imperialism, even those who did touch on British policy in China, extensively discussed the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, when these commentators did reference this event, it was rarely in a positive light.

The mid-Victorian era was one that saw the development of increased attitudes of the need for public morality, both within British society and, pertinent to this discussion, Britain's imperial expansion. It was in this framework of calls for morality and decency in Britain's civilizing mission that the opium trade in China stood out as a particularly unjust and immoral aspect of the British Empire. In what was a reflection of these attitudes, the Anglo-Oriental Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade with China was formed in 1874 in order to advocate the end of the opium trade. Andrew Blake writes that, "The Society's foundation belongs to the high moment of mid-Victorian Liberalism, when several other moral-reform pressure groups were active in carrying their 'civilizing mission' into public life."³⁸ To Blake, the Society was very much a product of a Victorian tendency to see Britain's increased imperial expansion as an opportunity to civilize the world. Presumably, this model excluded policies as morally questionable as the opium trade.

The Society would go on to publish a monthly magazine detailing the evils of opium in an effort to cause the cessation of the trade. In an August 1874 edition of

³⁸ Andrew Blake, "Foreign Devils and Moral Panics: Britain, Asia, and the Opium Trade." The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural History Ed. Bill Schwarz (London: Routledge, 1996) 241.

the magazine, the author captured the basic views of the Society when he wrote that the opium trade:

Adds nothing to the wealth of the world, but selfishly drains the resources of one nation to satisfy the greed of another. It prostitutes land that should be used to grow the staff of life to the production of an insidious poison. It reduces the capacity to labour, and so destroys the productive force of the world.”³⁹

In this clear statement on the evils of opium and the opium trade, the Society could not help but further implicate the opium wars and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan as acts committed to uphold what was an essentially immoral policy. Indeed, the society claimed that the trade was carried out from 1780-1860 against the will of Chinese government and that this situation, “Was a wrong-doing of which we have to repent.”⁴⁰ The Society’s stance against opium as immoral necessitates the view that the process taken to achieve the trade’s legalization in 1860, namely the opium wars that culminated in Lord Elgin’s burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, was a great “wrong-doing.” According to Blake, the society’s objection to the opium trade emerged more from concerns over a need for Britain to be more morally upstanding than the Chinese, who supposedly were so susceptible to smoking opium because their racial and moral weaknesses, than any real concern for China.⁴¹ However, even accepting this argument, it is undeniable that the Society still represented a very prominent voice against the sort of imperialism that produced events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. Whatever the true motivations and implications of movements for

³⁹ The Friend of China: The organ of the Anglo-Oriental society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade Aug. 1877: III: No. 1.

⁴⁰ The Friend of China: The organ of the Anglo-Oriental society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade June 1891: 133 XII: No.4.

⁴¹ Blake 250-254.

moral-reform like that propagated by the Society, their attacks are important in revealing how controversial British imperial policy in China was in a framework of “mid-Victorian liberalism.” For them, imperialism in China, as characterized by the opium trade, represented a barrier to imperialism as a “civilizing mission.”

Of all the anti-imperial liberals of the late-nineteenth century, J.A. Hobson might be one of the most well known. Like the anti-opium Society, he also specifically identified British policy in China for his criticism. In his notable 1898 work, Imperialism: A study, Hobson attempted to identify what he saw as the true motives for imperialism. This project led him to single out imperial policy in China out as, “The clearest revelation of the nature of Imperialism.”⁴² To Hobson, British policy in China revealed the true nature of imperialism because:

It is now hardly possible for anyone who has carefully followed these events to speak of Europe undertaking “a mission of civilization” in China without his tongue in his cheek. Imperialism in the Far East is stripped nearly bare of all motives and methods save those of distinctively commercial origin.⁴³

Like the anti-opium Society, Hobson saw imperialism in China as failing in any sort of “civilizing mission.” Instead, he claimed that it was motivated purely by greed. Hobson’s views differed from those of moral-reformers’ like the Society in that, as an economist, he saw the amoral commercial imperialism in China as epitomizing the true motives of all imperialism. This belief led him to discount any statements that, ideally, imperialism was intended to “civilize” the imperialized, a view that the Society’s attacks were based on. Though Hobson never addressed any specific events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan in his writings, from his arguments it can be

⁴²J. A. Hobson, Imperialism (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1938) 306.

⁴³ Hobson 307.

assumed that he would have believed such acts were committed only to better Britain's economic position in China. Accordingly, Hobson would have interpreted all statements that the burning was carried out so that, as Reverend M'Ghee wrote, "We can make them feel something of the measure of their guilt,"⁴⁴ as irrelevant because they denied the inherent economic motivations for all imperialism in China. Hobson's chapter on imperialism in Asia again demonstrated that, in the late-nineteenth century, criticisms of British policy in China could be fit into wider critiques of imperialism more generally.

Though Hobson and the anti-opium Society did not directly attack Lord Lord Elgin's decision to destroy Yuan Ming Yuan, this does not mean that this event went forgotten by critics of the British Empire. Indeed, this event was sometimes itself attacked as a grave injustice. Interestingly, at times these attacks came from commentators who were not even necessarily generally opposed to imperialism. In his biography of General Charles "Chinese" Gordon, who had participated in the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, Colonel Sir William F. Butler wrote of the destruction, "It is difficult to believe that the perpetration of such an act of vandalism could be possible in these later days of the world by men who were supposed to represent the most advanced civilization."⁴⁵ The fact that Butler's condemnation appeared in a biography glorifying Charles Gordon (who was something of an imperial folk hero notable for his actions leading a mercenary army against the Taiping rebellion and fighting the self-proclaimed Mahdi, Mohammed Ahmed, in the Sudan) points to the

⁴⁴ M'Ghee 287.

⁴⁵ William Francis Butler, Charles George Gordon (London: Macmillan and co, 1889) 44.

wide-spread shame felt over the destruction, even by someone who was generally a champion of the Empire.

This trend to condemn Lord Elgin's actions as unjust could even be seen amongst imperialists living in China. Given that it was British policy in China that had gained such people their positions, it seems that they, if anyone, might have been inclined to defend the destruction. When living in Beijing in 1886 Sir Charles Stewart Addis, an employee of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, surveyed the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan. He wrote in a July 15 letter to his sister, "I do not think that one of us can look down on that scene, lovely in desolation, without a little feeling of shame, that we should ever have had a hand in an act so shameless, so barbarous. No wonder they hate us."⁴⁶ Though it is perhaps not surprising that a British observer looking on the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan might feel shame for his countrymen's actions, Addis largely owed his position at HSBC to British victories in the Opium Wars. Addis was a direct benefactor of British victory in the Opium Wars, but even for him the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was a shameful and regrettable act.

Despite the staunch defenders that Lord Elgin found within the British press and parliament immediately after 1860, both his actions and British policy in China in general were criticized from various sectors of British society throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Even for those who condoned a certain type of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, British actions in China, including the

⁴⁶ Sir Charles Stewart Addis, Letter to sister, July 15, 1886, SOAS Archives, PP MS 14/64 SOAS library, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

looting and burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, were still difficult to defend. For many British commentators, Lord Elgin's decision exposed the evils that could be wrought by imperialism when it was performed irresponsibly.

Conclusions

During the late-nineteenth century, when Britain was still the primary imperial power in China and the memory of the destruction was fresh in the minds of both critics and defenders of empire, Lord Elgin's decision to burn Yuan Ming Yuan was up to much debate. While the destruction was initially represented by British journalists as a necessary and justified act, this was far from the final interpretation of the subject. Indeed, even immediately following 1860 there was some dissension within parliament over whether to celebrate or disparage Lord Lord Elgin. These debates spoke to a recognition on the behalf of at least some members of parliament that the destruction was a potentially controversial act. Consequently, men like Scully advised that it might be wise for the British government to avoid officially associating itself with Lord Elgin's decision. Obviously the British government did not follow Scully's advice and Lord Elgin's actions were officially celebrated. In the face of this official acceptance, critics would later emerge to use British actions in China as examples against a certain type of irresponsible imperialism. That during the late-nineteenth century this criticism was not just coming from radicals like Hugo and

Hobson, but also from members of parliament and imperialists like Addis points to its widespread prevalence.

The existence of this criticism reflects wider concerns within late-nineteenth century over the status of imperialism. The critics of imperialism who referred to British policy in China often did so to speak to their contemporary concerns over the wider morality and justifiableness of imperialism. For them, acts like the opium trade or the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan were prime examples for just how “uncivilized” imperialism could be when it was performed irresponsibly. As Britain continued to expand its empire, many commentators, even those not necessarily opposed to imperialism in general, criticized British policies in China as examples of the dangers of empire that should be avoided at all costs. Perhaps, for imperialists like Addis, these criticisms also stemmed from a desire to distance their every day experiences as imperialists from exceptional events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. In so doing, people generally supportive of imperialism could find self-justification in the fact that at least they were not looting and burning palaces.

Ultimately, the history of the representation of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan in the nineteenth century is one of varying interpretations speaking to differing purposes. These conflicting opinions become doubly important in light of the way that the destruction would be widely represented in the twentieth century. During this subsequent period, the destruction stopped being pertinent to contemporary imperial concerns and, instead, became a topic primarily addressed by historians of the Empire. As will be seen in the following the chapter, these historians largely did not expand on the criticisms of the early commentators. Instead, they chose to focus on

providing “objective” explanations for the destruction. These narratives ultimately proved to be far less varied than those of non-historian Victorian commentators. Obviously there is nothing wrong with attempting to accurately explain past events, but it is curious that, in their search for (sometimes) balanced interpretations, these later historians sometimes appear more “pro-imperial” than commentators living at a time when Britain actually had valuable imperial interests in China.

Chapter III
A “Cultural Confusion:” Twentieth Century British
History Writing on Yuan Ming Yuan

Unsurprising, by the onset of the twentieth century the memory of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan had begun to noticeably fade from British public consciousness. This was a function of both the passage of time and changing political circumstances. Around the turn of the century Britain rapidly lost its position as the primary foreign power in China to new imperial players like Japan. This development ensured Britain would no longer be unilaterally enforcing its imperial will as it had done in the Opium Wars. After the shock of the Boxer uprising (1898-1901), there would be little else to sustain public interest in China (which had always been peripheral to imperial concerns). Although, in reality, British interests in China continued to grow until the Second World War, the nature of this relationship was drastically different from that of the previous era. In 1860 the British had finally succeeded in their attempts to force China to open up to foreign trade. Consequently, in this later period, all that was left for Britain to do was to find ways to increase its already established economic presence. That, during the early part of the twentieth century, this project was undertaken by numerous other imperial powers (including Japan) only underscored that Britain no longer had a privileged position in China. Even if it was admitted to be the genesis for all foreign presence in China, the

previous British project of seeking out violent conflicts to aggressively increase their interests must have appeared anachronistic in this new era. Indeed, throughout the Empire, the days of aggressive and violent imperialist wars of expansion proved to be largely over by the end of the First World War. In the twentieth century, events like the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan soon stopped being pertinent to Britain's contemporary situation, either for imperialists or ant-imperialists. It was because of this change, combined simply with increased distance from 1860, that the Opium Wars soon became, less issues to be brought up in parliamentary debates on imperial policy, and more the exclusive concerns of historians.

In comparison to the representations of the nineteenth century, the way that twentieth century historians represented the Second Opium War, and the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan more specifically, was notable for how it remained relatively static over a long period of time. The first true histories of the 1860 conflict in China, presumably based primarily on the first-hand accounts of men like Elgin, laid out an interpretive framework that would color the majority of accounts written throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that any sort of significant change occurred in how British policy in China was represented by British historians.

The first works addressing the Second Opium War that could truly be called professional histories did not begin to appear until the beginning of the twentieth century. These early works used interpretations of events that did not differ greatly from those found in the accounts of men who had served during the Opium War. Often they were expressed in the common "Whig" style that used history to

emphasize the glory of the British and their Empire. Although over the course of the twentieth century the Whig style of history would become discredited, within the historiography of the Second Opium War, and the British Empire in China more generally, it took a long time for this unashamedly prejudiced method of writing history to completely die. Indeed, even after the historians who addressed the destruction became more professional and analytical in their methodology, they still tended to approach China with a set of cultural assumptions that were not entirely dissimilar from those Lord Elgin carried in 1860. With a few exceptions, it was not until long after post-colonial ideas had been given plenty of time to infiltrate the British history writing profession that a few historians in the 1990s began to discuss imperialism in China in ways that were dramatically different from their predecessors. Even though this recent shift has been significant, it still has not signified a comprehensive change in the British historiography of China.

Ultimately, the British historiography of the Second Opium War over the past century has been marked by, as T.H. Barrett commented in regards to general British writing on China, a “Singular listlessness.”¹ Few historians have even addressed the topic, let alone studied it in interesting and innovative ways. Excepting a few recent scholars, this failure stands in stark contrast to the twentieth century American historiography of China and its history with the West. In this historiography, such towering figures as John King Fairbank, though far from unassailable, have approached the study of imperialism in China with an intellectual openness that few of their British colleagues could match. Where American historians have been

¹Timothy Hugh Barrett, Singular Listlessness: A Short History of Chinese Books and British Scholars (London: Wellsweep, 1989).

willing to study imperialism in China from multiple approaches, the British, perhaps in an attempt to defend their imperial predecessors, have been far more inclined to rely on standard tropes.

Original Paradigm

The earliest historians of the Second Opium War interpreted the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan in very similar way to the soldiers involved in the campaign. The accounts left by these commentators posited that the destruction, and indeed the entire conflict, was inevitable due to the arrogant and xenophobic character of the Chinese. This characterization of the Chinese stood in contrast to the way the soldiers portrayed themselves as admirably fighting a war to uphold the civilized British ideals of free trade. In his account, Wolseley explained that all British action in China was undertaken to protect British trading rights from the “insolence, arrogance, and oppression,” of the Chinese.² According to Wolseley, the destruction itself was, beyond being a direct response to the murder of the prisoners by the Chinese,³ “The most crushing of all blows which could be leveled at his Majesty’s [Emperor Xianfeng] inflated notions of universal supremacy.”⁴ Wolseley based his analysis of events of 1860 on a simplistic conception of arrogant Chinese attitudes standing in stark contrast to the morality and civilization of the British. By presenting the British

Garnet Wolseley, Narrative of the War with China in 1860; To Which Is Added the Account of a Short Residence with the Tai-Ping Rebels at Nankin and a Voyage from Thence to Hankow (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 1972) 293.

³ Ibid. 277.

⁴ Ibid. 281.

imperialists as the morally and technologically superior protectors of free trade, Wolseley's narrative justified the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan as both unavoidable and necessary. Ultimately, this view relied on an assumption that the British were culturally and racially superior to the Chinese. Consequently, it obviously did not include any wider questioning of why the British were in China in the first place. This view that it was primarily the arrogance of the Chinese that forced the British into action would be adopted by the first historians of the Second Opium War. It would remain standard for years to come.

Early Historical Styles

In 1905 Reginald Brabazon, 12th Earl of Meath, wrote one of the earliest professional histories to address the Second Opium War.⁵ Lord Meath's work was a survey of the entire history of the British Empire and, as a result, only discussed British Imperialism in China briefly. However, in this brief discussion, Lord Meath's interpretation was notable for how closely it reflected the views of men like Wolseley. He wrote of the First Opium War, "So in 1840, the 'Opium' War began, 'the result' to quote Dr. Cantlie's forcible words, 'of 200 years of insult, injury, and wrong heaped upon British subjects by the Chinese.'"⁶ Lord Meath, like Wolseley, explained the conflict with China as inevitable given the character of the Chinese to be, "Extremely contemptuous of European systems, and most tenacious of their

⁵ Reginald Brabazon Meath, M. H. C. Legh, and Edith Jackson, Our Empire, Past and Present (London: Harrison, 1901).

⁶ Lord Meath, Legh, and Jackson 730.

vaunted isolation.”⁷ Though he did not write specifically about the burning of the Summer Palace, given his justification of the First Opium War, Lord Meath would have likely seen the destruction as a necessary act produced by the arrogance of the Chinese.

Considering that Lord Meath was a conservative politician and staunch imperialist who is perhaps most well renowned as the founder of Empire Day, it might be irresponsible to consider his work to be generally representative of his contemporaneous historians. Despite this disclaimer, even historians who were less ideologically inclined to defend all British imperialism still wrote about China with the same basic assumptions. Wyatt Tilby was one such late-Victorian historian who, in his five volume work, Britain in the Tropics: 1527-1910, demonstrated sympathy with the Chinese position. He even strongly criticized the British for disrespecting the Chinese laws that forbade the opium trade.⁸ At the same time that Tilby criticized the British for trading opium, he also chastised the Chinese for causing the Opium Wars through their “pride of Oriental ignorance.”⁹ Tilby wrote, “If one nation can refuse to open its trade to another, however it cannot continuously ill-treat the subjects of another state without protest or punishment.”¹⁰ With these statements Tilby essentially justified the Second Opium war as a punishment for the Chinese tendency to mistreat British citizens. To Tilby, as with Lord Meath, this Chinese tendency was born out of their essentially xenophobic and insolent character. Though Tilby did not necessarily endorse the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, merely claiming

⁷ Lord Meath, Legh, and Jackson 726.

⁸ Wyatt A. Tilby, Britain in the Tropics, 1527-1910 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914) 359.

⁹ Ibid. 360.

¹⁰ Ibid. 360.

that it was part of the “decisive” campaign of 1860,¹¹ his claims about the justifiableness of the Opium Wars suggest that he at least tacitly endorsed Lord Elgin’s decision. That even Tilby, a historian who seemed more than willing to criticize the British trade in opium as immoral, used the same basic assumptions about the arrogance and xenophobia of the Chinese as Wolseley and Lord Meath, demonstrates that this was the standard model historians in the early twentieth century used to represent the conflict. This model defended Lord Elgin’s decision to destroy Yuan Ming Yuan as a justified act of vengeance for the murder of the British prisoners, an act that was often portrayed as illustrative of Chinese arrogance and xenophobia.

That these early historians of China shared common prejudices regarding the character of the Chinese that might be today considered “racist” or “imperialist” was in no way outstanding for their time. Indeed, the work of Lord Meath, and to a lesser extent Tilby, was emblematic of the “Whig” style of history writing that was still relatively standard in the early twentieth century. As described by Herbert Butterfield in his famous indictment of the Whigs, this phenomenon was characterized by:

The tendency in many historians to write on the side of the Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.¹²

Butterfield believed the project of the whigs was to create a teleological version of history that always served to vindicate the British present. Under this model, historians defended and justified even possibly regrettable events such as the

¹¹ Tilby 367.

¹² Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1951) v.

destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan so that they could fit into a portrayal of Britain's past as a procession to greatness.

Further pertinent to a study of imperial history writing, the whig style of history outlined by Butterfield also, according to Michael Bentley, "Rested on an implicit idea of the superiority of the English culture...in which the empire seemed no more than a natural outcome of character and enterprise."¹³ This belief in the superiority of English culture is obviously reflected in the views of a historian like Lord Meath. Such historians made it clear that it was the xenophobic Chinese national character that made it necessary to fight two wars in order to create ports where, "all might trade free of import and export charge."¹⁴ Whiggish historians like Lord Meath presented the Opium Wars as the inevitable and justified results of the British attempts to bring their civilized ideas of free trade to the backwards Chinese. Though, given his criticisms of the Empire, it might be unfair to classify Tilby as a whig, he still justified the Second Opium War on the assumption that the Chinese were antagonistic towards the British because of their, "Pride of Oriental ignorance." This justification demonstrated Tilby's belief in some notion of British cultural superiority. Ultimately, the feelings of racial and cultural superiority that beset early British historians of the Second Opium War reflected wider attitudes present in the "whig interpretation of history."

Beyond just demonstrating the whig belief in the superiority of the British, Lord Meath's work also exemplified the striking characteristic of early history

¹³Michael Bentley, Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 5.

¹⁴ Lord Meath, Legh, and Jackson 731.

writing to portray Empire in terms of a morally justified civilizing project. As explained by C.A. Bayly, many early historians portrayed the story of the Empire as a narrative of, “Redemption...born out of the supposedly Christian civic culture of the British conqueror.”¹⁵ According to Bayly, this idea of “redemption” (which assuredly fit into the teleological attitudes of the whigs) was based on the supposed need for the morally superior British to come and save the degenerate orient.¹⁶ Though in Lord Meath’s work it is hard to specifically identify this theme of redemption in regards to China, he certainly demonstrated it when discussing the British Empire in India. In his preface Lord Meath dedicated his work to King Edward VII as, “The first male sovereign who in the history of ages has ever reigned over a united India-and not only over a united, but what is of infinitely greater consequence over a practically contented India.”¹⁷ Lord Meath claimed that it was only the British who were able to unify India, and that this unification was an inherently good thing. In so doing, he portrayed British imperialism in India as a project that had admirably saved a formerly backwards society. While it is completely expected that early historians of the British Empire in China would share many of the same basic assumptions as their contemporaneous peers, what is surprising is how long these early models of interpretation would be used in the historiography of the Second Opium War.

¹⁵ C.A. Bayly, “The Orient: British Historical Writing about Asia since 1890,” History and Historians in the Twentieth Century, ed. Peter Burke, [British Academy centenary monographs] (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2002) 91.

¹⁶ Ibid. 91.

¹⁷ Lord Meath, Legh, and Jackson xiii.

Continuations

As discussed by Bentley, even though it has often been claimed that whig historical methods were discredited by the First World War, their style of history in fact managed to survive much later into the twentieth century.¹⁸ This persistence of older ideologies in history writing was, at least according to Bayly (who never actually uses the distinction “whig”), especially manifest in the historiography of the British Empire. Bayly explained how, “Until very recently Asian history continued to be built around a narrative which had served to make European dominance appear the natural consequence of the weakness of oriental government and the factionalism of its politics.”¹⁹ Bayly believed that this tendency was especially strong before 1950, but still persisted until very recently, even, “While in other English-speaking countries postmodernists and postcolonialist themes have occupied the high ground.”²⁰

W.C. Costin’s Great Britain and China: 1833-1860, published in 1937, was one work that demonstrated the continuation of racist imperial attitudes deep into the twentieth century. Costin’s work employs both the more general trend of distinguishing British dominance as the result of oriental weakness, and the earlier, and perhaps more “whiggish,” attempt to place imperial history into a narrative of “redemption.” Costin’s interpretation of British imperialism in China was ripe with representations of British actions as the inevitable consequences of the clash between the cultures of Britain and China. According to Costin:

¹⁸ Bentley 7.

¹⁹ Bayly 89.

²⁰ Bayly 88.

There could be by one Son of Heaven, and to him all other sentient creatures owed reverence and obedience. It was this unbridgeable difference in attitude towards each other that made impossible the harmonious development of international relations between China and Great Britain...and this was the fundamental cause of the antagonism which manifested itself in two wars.²¹

Here Costin clearly connected what he saw as the xenophobic national character of the Chinese to the outbreak of both Opium Wars. Reflecting Bayly's comments on how historians portrayed European domination as a natural result of oriental weakness, Costin's strategy placed the entirety of the blame for these conflicts on arrogant Chinese attitudes. Costin continued this tendency to blame the Chinese in his discussion of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan itself. After vividly describing the ways that one prisoner, Lieutenant Anderson, had died in captivity,²² Costin went on to write of Elgin's decision to burn the palace: 'It was necessary, he (Elgin) thought, to mark by a solemn act of retribution his government's indignation at such perfidy and gross brutality on the part of the Chinese officers.'²³ Costin's strategy of first describing the "gross brutality" caused by the Chinese, and then stating Elgin's claim that destruction was a reaction to those actions, made it clear that he was in full agreement with Lord Elgin that the destruction was necessary. He further demonstrated his prejudices by criticizing the French for failing to support Elgin's decision.²⁴ Costin fit Lord Elgin's decision into his wider interpretive framework that assigned all of the responsibility for violent British actions in China to the Chinese. Consequently, he described the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan as being a necessary

²¹W. C. Costin, Great Britain and China, 1833-1860 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 12.

²² Ibid. 332.

²³ Ibid. 333.

²⁴ Ibid. 336.

and inevitable reaction to the Chinese murder of the prisoners. According to Costin's interpretation, in destroying the palace the British were merely acting as they had been forced to by the Chinese.

Beyond just clearly articulating the same interpretations of the Opium Wars that had governed the work of earlier historians, Costin also fit these conflicts into the sort of "redemptive" narrative discussed by Bayly. Writing in 1937, the year the Japanese openly declared war on China, Costin was privy to the final destruction of Chinese sovereignty at the hands of imperial powers. Given this context, it might be expected that Costin would be circumspect about discussing the role that the British played in this final decline. Instead, he claimed that this imperial influence might eventually prove beneficial, writing:

The collapse was inevitable if there was to be a full recognition of that equality of status and common humanity which was the real demand of the British and other foreign Governments. It is certain that the modern Chinese with his strong nationalist feeling is the abiding result of the contact between the European Governments and the Ruler of Peking. Whether the young nationalist educated in and by the West is as alien in the land of his birth as were the British in China in the middle of the last century, or whether through him the horizon of his fellows...will be lifted beyond their immediate vision, so that in due time they may reach out into the full and free life of a positive common citizenship and a collective partnership with other peoples, is the question which any Englishman who contemplates the first step in such a possible development is bound to ask himself in all humility and reverence.²⁵

In this remarkable passage Costin admitted the role that British imperialism had in causing the collapse of Qing. He then went on to again defend and explain British imperial domination as inevitable because of the conflict between the supposedly moral goals of British policy and the backwards attitudes of the Chinese. Costin even

²⁵ Costin 346.

went so far as to imply that this initially destructive influence might eventually be beneficial to China because of the group of Western educated nationalists that it had produced. Because Costin saw development along a Western model as the only possible way for the Chinese to become a modern and free member of the world community, he ultimately found a way to celebrate the destruction that his countrymen had caused. Costin saw no irony in both proclaiming that British imperialism had influenced the collapse of Chinese sovereignty, and hopefully hypothesizing that this imperial influence might eventually prove to have redeemed the Chinese.

“Cultural Confusions” at the end of Empire

Many of the basic assumptions that colored British history writing on the Second Opium war in the first half of the twentieth century would carry over into the work of historians writing after the effective end of the British Empire. At the same time, after the Second World War there were some changes in the British historiography of imperialism in China. Historians writing in this time period had clear pretensions to ideological objectivity and distained the sort of celebratory and redemptive history exemplified by the work of Costin. Bentley described these “modernists:” “They saw themselves as intelligent, critical historians approaching the technical work of history in a systematic, increasingly professional way.”²⁶ According to this description, these new historians were certainly not inclined to make broad statements about the

²⁶ Bentley 3.

beneficial influence of British imperialism. This turn towards a more professional history was often coupled with a tendency to question previous imperialist attitudes. Bayly wrote of this shift, “War cracked the edifice of colonial officialdom and many of the attitudes to race, religion and history associated with it.”²⁷ As Bayly saw it, the wars in Asia around the middle of the century had forced historians to question their previous assumptions about both the benefits of Empire and the characteristics of those countries they had imperialized. In light of Bayly’s proposed mid-century revolution in the British historiography of Asia, it is remarkable how little the interpretations of the Second Opium War and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan actually changed during this period. While these historians of imperialism in China certainly were more professional in their approach, they did not extensively question previous assumptions. Taking Bayly’s comments to have validity, the attitudes of mid-century historians of the Second Opium War stood in contrast to the developments that arose in the British historiographies of other Asian countries.

W.R. Lumby’s 1960 article, “Lord Elgin and the Burning of the Summer Palace,” was exemplary of how little representations of the destruction truly changed during this period when Britain was fast losing its grip on the Empire. Though, unlike previous historians, Lumby tried to hide his biases behind footnotes and pretensions towards professionalism,²⁸ it is clear that his sympathies ultimately lay with Lord Elgin and the British. Lumby’s purpose in writing was to explain how a supposedly humanitarian man like Lord Elgin, who, according to Lumby, honestly

²⁷ Bayly 111.

²⁸ E.W.R.Lumby, “Lord Elgin and the Burning of the Summer Palace,” History Today July 1960: 481. See page 481 for an example of Lumby’s use of objective language to describe British and Chinese motivations in, respectively, expanding and stopping the opium trade.

believed that opening up China for free trade would be beneficial to the Chinese,²⁹ could be brought to commit such a violent act as destroying Yuan Ming Yuan. The answer that Lumby ultimately settled on was that Elgin, “Had become the victim of his situation, of his humanity, and of the tragic mutual incomprehension between China and Great Britain.”³⁰ This was essentially a defense of Elgin on the basis that the arrogant actions of the Chinese, specifically the murder of the prisoners, an act Lumby characterized as a “crime,”³¹ had forced the British to destroy the palace as a punishment.

The only major way that Lumby’s interpretation was different from that of earlier historians was that, in its attempts at objectivity, it portrayed Lord Elgin’s decision as a tragedy in the history of Anglo-Chinese relations as opposed to a success. However, even in this conception, Lumby portrayed the destruction as a tragedy, not just for how it hurt Chinese society, but also for how it damaged Chinese perceptions of the British and Lord Elgin. Lumby wrote that the, “Chinese, naturally enough, forgot the crime and remembered only the punishment, which confirmed them in the belief that the Western peoples were barbarians.”³² To Lumby, the destruction was tragic largely because it tarnished later Chinese perceptions of a man who was generally benevolent. Instead of attempting to sympathize with the fury of the Chinese, Lumby chose to claim that the Chinese, because they had murdered the prisoners, actually had little justification to be angry.

²⁹ Ibid. 481.

³⁰ Ibid. 487.

³¹ Ibid. 487.

³² Ibid. 487.

Different from the celebratory interpretations of historians like Costin, Lumby's tragic tone did at least demonstrate his recognition that, in a world rapidly becoming more and more anti-imperial, the destruction appeared regrettable. Lumby's article reflects that, by 1960, it was no longer acceptable to celebrate violent acts of imperialism. Despite this shift in tone, as demonstrated by both his sympathy for Lord Elgin, and his explanation of the destruction, Lumby viewed the events of 1860 in a way that was not far removed from the interpretations of earlier historians.

The mid-twentieth century tendency to continue to portray the events of 1860 as a result of a cultural confusion is perhaps best exemplified by Douglas Hurd's authoritative 1967 work, The Arrow War: An Anglo-Chinese Confusion. This work is well researched and was clearly the product of a professional historian. At the same time, Hurd's actual interpretation of events was not drastically different from those of previous historians. Hurd's main argument was, as has been seen before, based on a staunch belief that the British honestly, "Saw themselves as doing in China what their immediate predecessors had done in Britain, sweeping away the hampering traditions of the centuries, the ancient restrictive rubbish which prevented the people from achieving prosperity and freedom."³³ In comparison to his portrayal of British motives as idealistic, Hurd, like previous historians, posited that the Chinese acted out of their assumption of superiority which led them to refer to all foreigners as "barbarians."³⁴ In specific regards to the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, Hurd again characterized Elgin's decision as purely a reaction to the murder of

³³Douglas Hurd, The Arrow War: an Anglo-Chinese Confusion, 1856-1860 (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 132.

³⁴ Hurd 72.

the prisoners.³⁵ Hurd's study reiterated the belief of many British historians that, even if incredibly tragic, given the presumed context of Anglo-Chinese relations, the destruction was completely inevitable and justified.

It is only fair to note that Hurd, unlike earlier historians, was serious in his scholarship and used a wide range of sources to present his findings. As a result, he did not try to glorify the imperialists, but instead emphasized the "confusion" aspect of the war so that he made it clear that the events of 1860 were the results of regrettable misunderstandings.³⁶ From these efforts, it is clear that Hurd did not view the war as part of a glorious civilizing mission. Though his scholarship is admirable, Hurd used it in such a way that it only continued to propagate the same racial assumptions about the role inherently "Chinese" characteristics played in defining the conflict. The quest for objectivity drove Hurd to search for plausible explanations for British actions from the available primary sources. Yet, Hurd almost exclusively used only British sources,³⁷ and throughout declined to question the authority of these predominantly pro-imperial nineteenth century accounts. As a result, he unsurprisingly came up with a conclusion that was sympathetic towards the British. This tendency was only reinforced by the fact that almost all of Hurd's descriptions of the Chinese were apparently also filtered through nineteenth-century British sources. (In what could probably only be derived from a British source, he described the viceroy of Canton as a, "Fat sour intelligent man with a taste for astrology."³⁸) Even if Hurd did make a real effort at keeping his prejudices out of his writing, by

³⁵ Ibid. 234-235.

³⁶ Ibid. 241.

³⁷ Ibid. 245-6. Hurd's bibliography does not include a single Chinese source.

³⁸ Hurd 17.

unquestionably basing his interpretation on imperialist sources, he ensured that his interpretation would not stray far from that of earlier historians.

Compared to earlier historians, Hurd and Lumby, writing in the 1960s, obviously went to great lengths to be professional and objective historians. At the same time, the only true shift in how these later historians actually explained the events was that, instead of a narrative of redemption, now they wrote the story of the Second Opium War in the form of a tragedy. With their emphasis on the conflict as the unfortunate result of mutual cultural “confusions,” Hurd and Lumby suggested that somehow the British shared in experiencing the effects of this tragedy. Ultimately, both Hurd and Lumby wrote with the goal of finding acceptable explanations for British actions. For them, this project did not entail a broad inquiry into what motives had brought the British to China in the first place. Instead, they were all too ready to accept British imperialist statements that all action in China was predicated on idealistic beliefs in the necessity of free trade. Hurd and Lumby coupled this view of the British as motivated primarily by idealism with a recitation of the old characterizations of the Chinese as arrogant and xenophobic. By taking this narrow and unquestioning perspective, Hurd and Lumby, whether consciously or not, continued to both absolve the British from full responsibility, and propagate the old racially prejudiced views of Chinese culture.

Real Changes in Interpretation

Up until the 1960s the changes within the British historiography of both the Second Opium War and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan were fairly superficial. However, starting in the 1970s, this historiography finally began to reflect the wider trends in British history writing to criticize European imperialism. One important step in this process was to stop looking for explanations that declared the conflict as inevitable. Even if a “cultural confusion” did exist in the form described by historians like Hurd, it only resulted in war because British desires for imperial expansion took them to China in the first place. The only truly “objective” way of looking at the conflict was to realize that, at least on a wide scale, the entirety of the blame for both the opium wars and the destruction fell on the shoulders of the British.

In 1975, Jack Beeching attempted this condemnation of British actions with his work, The Chinese Opium Wars. In an attack that was very different from the explanations of Hurd and Lumby, Beeching disregarded Lord Elgin’s claims that his actions were necessary because of the murder of the prisoners. Instead, he based his critique on the assumption that, from his perspective, Lord Elgin’s decision, “Sounds almost insane.”³⁹ Beeching was skeptical of Elgin’s justification that the event was necessary in order to punish the Chinese and protect supposedly idealistic British policy goals.⁴⁰ He believed that this was a fiction made up by Elgin to justify what was ultimately a personal act of violence driven by personal frustrations with China.⁴¹ For Beeching this harsh criticism of British actions in China extended beyond just the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan to what he saw as the basis for the British

³⁹ Jack Beeching, The Chinese Opium Wars (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 325.

⁴⁰ Ibid 323.

⁴¹ Ibid 324-325.

intervention in china, namely opium. Near the beginning of his work Beeching explained that the British expanded into China solely, “So that the British public could go on drinking their millions of gallons of tea each year, twice as many Chinese opium addicts (and, for that matter, British opium addicts) had somehow to be created.”⁴² To Beeching, the starting point for analyzing British imperialism in China was not an “Anglo-Chinese confusion,” but the strictly economic motives that drove the British desire to expand the opium trade. Beeching’s interpretation denied that either the destruction, or the Opium Wars more generally, were regrettable tragedies caused by basic cultural misunderstandings. Instead, he placed complete blame on the British for both becoming involved with China for questionable motives, and then committing what he saw as an acts of excessive imperial violence like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan for unjustifiable reasons.

The project of deconstructing the British motives for getting involved in China from an economic perspective was carried out most comprehensively by John Y. Wong.⁴³ Beyond just being a vehement attack on British policy in China, Wong’s extensively researched 1998 work, Deadly Dreams: Opium and the Arrow War (1856-1860) in China, also directly attacked the previous historiography of the Second Opium War. He specifically described Hurd’s book as, “Leaving the perplexing issues alone.”⁴⁴ Wong criticized the interpretations of earlier historians

⁴² Beeching, 34.

⁴³ Though he lives and teaches in Australia, Wong is included in this section because he was clearly a product of the British historical tradition. He completed his doctorate at Oxford University. Additionally, his position as an ethnic Chinese living in Australia makes him a product of the British Empire more generally, and has almost certainly helped shape his work on the Second Opium War.

⁴⁴ J. Y Wong, Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism, and the Arrow War (1856-1860) in China, Cambridge studies in Chinese history, literature, and institutions, (Cambridge [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 12.

like Hurd for being too hasty to emphasize a “cultural conflict” between the British and the Chinese. According to Wong, this came at the expense of addressing the underlying economic motives for British actions in China, namely opium. Wong wrote:

The role of cultural differences in the making of war and peace is a rich area for systematic exploration, witness Chapters 2-6, but one must not repeat the mistake of casting it in a vague general concept and then using it as an excuse to ignore economic and other imperial realities, as so many historians have done.⁴⁵

Wong fully admitted that “cultural conflicts” of the kind discussed by Hurd did exist, and probably did contribute to the *casus belli*. However, in what was a direct attack on the previous historiography, he also believed that it was inaccurate and unfair to emphasize such conflicts as the primary factors that shaped the Anglo-Chinese conflict. In the place of an emphasis on cultural conflicts, Wong engaged in a complex analysis of the economic and political motivations for British involvement in China. He ultimately came to the conclusion that, “All these desires, plans, and objectives combined seem to manifest a general intention, conscious or subconscious, to establish British dominance in China.”⁴⁶ This interpretation, by refusing to portray British policy in China as anything other than another move for imperial expansion, left no room for the tacit defenses of the British seen in the work of previous historians. Although Wong never actually addressed any of the actual events of the 1860 campaign, his work is still pertinent to a discussion of the historiography of Yuan Ming Yuan for the way that it explicitly undermined the basic assumptions of previous historians of the Second Opium War. Wong’s work is important because it

⁴⁵ Wong, *Deadly Dreams* 485.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 481.

shows how, by the end of the twentieth century, historians of the Second Opium War had finally started to criticize both the actions of British imperialists, and the previous interpretations of the conflict.

Wong's work was a comprehensive economic critique of the hypothesis that British action in China was mainly defined by opposing cultural values. Yet, by ignoring the war itself it did not go far in addressing previous explanations of why specific events happened as they did. Like Wong, James L. Hevia also sought to break with the previous historiography of the Second Opium War. However, unlike Wong, he chose to closely analyze the events themselves as opposed to the more remote causes of the conflict. As discussed in Chapter One, Hevia wrote from a postcolonial framework that deconstructed British actions in China as being determined by imperial discourses of European racial and cultural superiority. He viewed violent British actions in China, like the looting and burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, as efforts at destroying, or "deterritorializing," the notion of the Qing Empire as a great power and then redefining, or "reterritorializing," it as a pupil of the more civilized British.⁴⁷ According to Hevia, this process was carried out to bend the Chinese to British policy aims as seen appropriate. To him the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was the ultimate "lesson" in teaching the Chinese how to behave in their new role as a deterritorialized "other."⁴⁸ With his introduction of postcolonial jargon into the historiography, Hevia's interpretation racialized the destruction. In the process, he made any defense of either Elgin's decision, or British policy in China

⁴⁷ James Louis Hevia, English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 102.

⁴⁸ Hevia 106.

more generally, seem equally imperialist and racist. Like Wong, Hevia's approach critiqued simplistic explanations based around ideas of a "cultural conflict," (although, as previously demonstrated, Hevia's analysis can itself be criticized for being equally reductionist and simplistic) in the process making it clear that the British should be held solely responsible for their actions in China.

Though the work of Beeching, Wong, and Hevia does demonstrate a shift in British historical attitudes towards both the Second Opium War and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, it is telling that this shift did not even begin to occur until after the 1970s. Prior to this time, British historians like Hurd and Lumby were all too willing to rely on the same sort of pro-imperialist biases that had colored the writing of an earlier generation of historians. Indeed, even after the re-analysis of these assumptions by more recent historians, the historiographical shift has been far from complete. The sluggish nature of British history writing on China was demonstrated by Jack Gray's, Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000, which, though admittedly a survey history that glosses over many historic events, continued to rely on the same basic interpretations first proposed by men like Wolseley. Gray again claimed that the war was because xenophobic Chinese attitudes stood in the way of British desires for, "Peaceful diplomatic interchange between two equal states, each acknowledging the interests, rights and responsibilities of the other."⁴⁹ Within the framework of this interpretation, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan again becomes an unavoidable tragedy that was forced on the British by the actions and attitudes of the Chinese. Indeed, Gray directly presented this interpretation when he

⁴⁹ Jack Gray, Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000, Short Oxford history of the modern world, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 88.

described the destruction as nothing but an act of vengeance for the murder of the prisoners.⁵⁰(In fact Gray went even further in defending the destruction. He, echoing other defenders of the British, claimed that at the time of the destruction it had already been severely damaged by both allied and Chinese looters.⁵¹ As has previously been discussed, this claim implied Lord Elgin's decision was less dramatic than usually assumed to be). Even after previous historians like Wong had demonstrated that there were other ways to view the conflict than in terms of a cultural clash, Gray still reverted to this old method of interpretation. The fact that this antiquated analysis was still deemed acceptable enough to be included in Oxford University's, "Short Oxford History of the Modern World," in 2002 signifies that there has still not been a comprehensive shift in the British scholarship surrounding the Second Opium War. This phenomenon implicitly points to wider trends in British society to fail to comprehensively address the difficult questions involved in writing about Britain's imperial past. Ultimately, the only historiographical shift that can be said to have universally occurred in the past century is that British historians have come to view the events of the Opium Wars not as acts to celebrate for the positive influence they had on China's development, but as imperial tragedies.

American Perspectives

The failure, or at least the tardiness, of the British historiography to examine the Second Opium War in ways that did not define the conflict with the simplistic, and

⁵⁰ Gray 93.

⁵¹ Ibid. 93.

pro-British, idea a “cultural clash” stands in contrast to the American historiography. This historiography, colored by the work of the towering figure of John King Fairbank, was more open to differing interpretations of both British and Chinese motivations for far longer than its British counterpart.

John King Fairbank was one of the preeminent scholars on both Chinese history, and the role that the West played in shaping that history. Paul M. Evans spoke to the vast importance of Fairbank in the American study of Chinese history when he wrote, “Successors may well surpass Fairbank’s intellectual achievements, but none is likely to assume a position at the center of so many academic enterprises, as a bridge between the academic community and the American public.”⁵²

From very early in his career Fairbank demonstrated an attitude towards the study of Chinese history that was very different from that of his contemporaries in Britain. These differences could already be seen in the 1954 work that he wrote with Ssu-yu Teng, China’s Response to the West, where Fairbank attempted to address the question of how the impact of nineteenth century Western imperialism shaped China’s development. From the very goal of their book it is clear that Fairbank and Teng had a very different perspective on Anglo-Chinese interactions than historians like Hurd and Lumby. Where these contemporaneous British historians were discussing the Second Opium War in terms of how the British were forced to react to a simplistic view of Chinese attitudes, Fairbank was attempting to discover what exactly those Chinese attitudes were and how they shaped China’s reacted to the West. Although this strategy also defined Anglo-British actions in terms of a culture

⁵²Paul M. Evans, John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China (New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1988) 337.

clash, it did not allow for the simplistic reductions of the British historians. Indeed, Fairbank and Teng fully acknowledged the dangers in trying to exactly define the nature of this cultural interaction, writing:

Any study of the acculturation of one society by another involves a number of independent variables. One must appraise and characterize the value systems or ideals of both societies, and this requires one to generalize upon a scale so broad as to be sometime almost meaningless...Not only must the student of the cultural miscegenation turn from one culture to the other, ambivalently, but he must also live in the past as well as the present, and appreciate the Confucianism of old China as well as the utilitarianism of Victorian England. This is a well-nigh impossible task at a time when we know so little of the actual content of life and thought in premodern China. But the attempt must be made, sooner or later, as best we can.⁵³

Fairbank and Teng recognized that any attempt at identifying the nature of either mid-nineteenth century China or England was inherently problematic and inclined to broad generalizations. At the same time, they also believed that such an attempt at understanding was absolutely necessary. Both of these beliefs set Fairbank and Teng far ahead of the views of British historians at the time. These British historians clearly did not believe that generalizing the Chinese as “xenophobic” could be problematic. Consequently, they did not make any effort at achieving a deeper understanding. Fairbank’s work stands out from that of his British contemporaries not so much in his general interpretation of the history of China’s relations with the West, which he also saw as defined by a conflict between two very different cultures, but in its intellectual curiosity and hesitance to make broad generalizations. That Fairbank was writing in 1954 makes his nuanced approach all the more remarkable, possibly speaking to a more advanced state of American historiography on China.

⁵³Ssu-yu Teng, and John King Fairbank, China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) 3.

While it would be unfair to characterize the American historiography solely through the works of Fairbank, especially considering he never wrote a specific account of the Second Opium War, it is undeniable that his methods set an admirable precedent for subsequent American historians. Although Lydia Liu has probably only been tangentially influenced by Fairbank's scholarship, (indeed she specifically criticizes Fairbank's not at all ridiculous belief that the Chinese were in fact to some extent xenophobic⁵⁴) she is one such historian who has carried on Fairbank's tradition of questioning established narratives. In her radical 2004 book, The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making, Liu deconstructed the assumption that the Chinese were inherently xenophobic that has colored so much British scholarship on China. She specifically questioned the validity of translating the Chinese character for foreigners, *yi*, into the word "barbarian." This translation, initiated in the early-nineteenth century, obviously helped shape Western perceptions that the Chinese were inherently xenophobic. Using the tools of semiotics and literary theory, Liu claimed that the translation of *yi* as barbarian was the result of, "Hetero-linguistic catachresis. By this term, I refer to the act of (mis) translation that manipulates the meaning of a super sign by transgressing the boundaries of languages and camouflaging the traces of that transgression at the same time."⁵⁵ In the midst of all this jargon, Liu was claiming that the character *yi* was incorrectly assigned the meaning of "barbarian" by imperialist translators. Liu believed that this mistranslation shaped both the British justification for going to war in the nineteenth

⁵⁴Lydia He Liu, The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004) 39.

⁵⁵ Liu 45.

century,⁵⁶ and, later, the work of historians on China. Liu believed that this, “Sleight of hand in citational and translingual practices has major consequences for people’s understanding of modern history and cross-civilization encounters.”⁵⁷ At its heart, Liu’s work contained a radical condemnation of almost all previous histories that perpetuated the idea that the Chinese were xenophobic. By positing that Chinese “xenophobia” was largely an imperialist linguistic construction, Liu’s critique, whether founded or not, called into question the basic assumptions of almost all the histories discussed in this chapter. Ultimately, Liu demonstrated that it is both possible and plausible to challenge the cultural assumptions that most British historians used to interpret the Opium Wars.

Considering that, even in the 1950s, American historians like Fairbank had already started questioning standard narratives on China, it might not be incidental that Liu emerged from American, as opposed to British, academia. At the same time that Gray was perpetuating the idea of the Chinese as inherently xenophobic, Liu was questioning the very basis of Western historians’ conceptions of Chinese culture. This disparity perhaps points to a fundamental difference in the way that American and British historians have addressed the Western imperial encounter with China. The intellectual precedent Fairbank set as far back as 1954 only further clarifies the differences between the American and British views on imperialism in China. While Fairbank was actually attempting to study the Chinese views of the West, his British contemporaries were still trying to find ways of justifying imperial acts like trading opium and destroying Yuan Ming Yuan.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 69.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 39.

Conclusions

Though it would be unfair to discount the recent work by historians like Wong and Hevia, it seems that, generally speaking, the British historiography of both the Second Opium War and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan has been incredibly slow to change over the past 100 years. The majority of these works have continued to base their interpretations of the Anglo-Chinese conflicts on generalized assumptions of the nature of British and Chinese cultures. These assumptions were based on a generalized picture of a Chinese xenophobia standing in opposition to a British belief in the sanctity of free trade. Consequently, they made it seem that all British action was forced by the stubbornness and arrogance of the Chinese. When fit into this framework, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan could not become anything but a reaction to the stereotypical “Chinese” act of murdering the allied prisoners. This view was adopted not just by early historians with “whiggish” tendencies, but also by later, more professional, historians who did not explicitly celebrate British imperialism. Indeed, given that Gray provided just such a justification as late as 2002, it could even be claimed that British historiography has still not comprehensively shifted away from understanding the events of 1860 through the framework of a “cultural confusion.”

The idea that a “cultural confusion” shaped British conflict in China is not entirely false, as, at a local level, such a conflict certainly did help shape British

actions such as the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. However, portraying this conflict as the primary determining factor in the Second Opium War only obscures the true issues that provided the basis for British imperialism in China. From a wide perspective, the British desire to expand their trade of opium in China played the primary causative role in conflicts like the Second Opium War. If the British had not sought to expand their economic presence in China against Chinese wishes, then Yuan Ming Yuan would never have been burned. Ultimately, the relatively static nature of British historiography on the Second Opium War suggests that they have been generally unwilling to raise these more difficult questions.

The stagnant nature of the twentieth century British historiography of the 1860 campaign stands in contrast to both the views of American historians, and, to a certain extent, the greater public debate of such issues in the nineteenth century. Commentators writing during this earlier period, though probably more liable to be racist and imperialist than twentieth century historians, were also more inclined to question others' views on controversial events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. Even if it was often carried out for reasons other than deep concern over Chinese welfare, this earlier questioning still clarifies the generally static nature of historical representations in the twentieth century.

As Britain's imperial preeminence in China declined, the Opium Wars and, specifically, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, left public memory and became the exclusive concerns of professional historians. These historians generally declined to question the justifiableness of imperialism in a peripheral location like China. Although this failure is unsurprising from whig historians writing in the early part of

the century, when Britain most clearly still did have an empire, it is striking that it persisted long after the end of colonialism. This persistence must somehow reflect the way that twentieth-century British society has viewed Britain's relationship with both China and the Empire more generally. Indeed, despite the recent efforts of Wong and Hevia, the antiquated interpretations of many British historians have probably contributed to a wider British view on their past in China that does not take into account the true violence of imperialism. The implications of both this view and the stagnant nature of British history writing will be addressed more extensively in the conclusion.

Chapter IV
*Minimizing and Emoting: Early Chinese Reactions to
the Destruction*

Whereas uncovering the British reactions to the destruction at Yuan Ming Yuan is a straightforward problem, isolating the reactions of the Chinese, whether Qing officials or Chinese people more generally, is more complicated. There are few sources, either official or unofficial, in translation. The most easily available texts are the writings of Qing officials, which often appear in the form of memorials to the emperor. Though the British and French had just dramatically demonstrated their power by invading Beijing and destroying the emperor's own pleasure palace, the earliest of these memorials tended to glorify the Qing Empire while downplaying the impact of the West. This tendency to minimize the significance of the results of Western imperialism often interacted with discussions over the wisdom of making reforms in reaction to the Western intrusions.

Although obviously the destruction must have made a great impact on Chinese commoners living in Beijing, the Qing government had the prerogative to share, or not share, as the case more often was, news of this event with the wider population. As such, it is these Qing reactions that are most important in determining how the destruction was generally received in the period immediately following 1860.

At the same time that there was a general trend amongst most Qing officials to belittle the impact of the West after the destruction, there were some commentators who clearly did recognize the ramifications of the West's ability to defeat the Qing and destroy Yuan Ming Yuan. Upon wider examination it becomes clear that the events of the Second Opium War, including the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, actually did have an impact on the thoughts and actions of many nineteenth-century Chinese people, even if this significance was officially downplayed. Indeed, this influence can even be seen in the actions of a character as reportedly conservative as the Empress Dowager Cixi.

The wider impact of the West on China is a subject that has been hotly debated by both Western and Chinese historians over the past 100 years.¹ These historians have often disagreed over the extent to which the impact of Western imperialism was responsible for China's revolutionary changes in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. However, studying reactions to both the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, and the Second Opium War, make it clear that these events truly did have at least some effect, however limited, on the way that China developed until the revolution of 1911.

The Official Line

By the time that British had finished burning Yuan Ming Yuan it had been comprehensively demonstrated that the Qing government was utterly incapable of

¹ For perspectives on this debate in an American context see: Paul A Cohen, Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past, Studies of the East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

standing up to Western military force. Considering these ramifications, it is to be expected that Qing officials would have reacted strongly to the destruction. Indeed, even before the burning, the intrusion of the foreigners into Beijing had caused the Xianfeng emperor to flee to Manchuria,² an act that seemingly reflected Qing recognition of the direness of their situation. However, instead of expressing panic over the British impingement on Qing sovereignty, many of the imperial documents written in the immediate aftermath minimized the devastation wreaked in Beijing. According to Young-Tsu Wong, “The terrible losses were never publicized in detail by the court or the government. The official announcements of the demise of the magnificent imperial garden were always brief: The Yuanming Yuan caught fire, or catastrophe befell the Yuanming Yuan on a certain date.”³ Clearly the official Qing position was to not publicize the destruction, even to the degree that they obscured that it was the British who destroyed the palace. This strategy allowed the Qing to minimize the true extent of the consequences of the Anglo-French incursion into the imperial capital, presumably in order to maintain a facade of strength at a time when foreigners threatened the very existence of the empire.

The Qing desire to deny the importance of the events of 1860 was further made clear by pronouncements concerning the future of Qing relations with the foreign powers. In a memorial written in November 1860 with the express aim of convincing the Emperor Xianfeng to return to Beijing, Shen Chao-lin, president of the Board of War, wrote:

²Jonathan D Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: Norton, 1990) 181.

³Young-tsu Wong, A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001) 155.

Though they entered the city with more than ten thousand soldiers, they withdrew after the signing ceremonies had taken place. The entire city has suffered no harm. Thus we can be firmly convinced that their aim is exclusively to make money and they have no other purpose whatsoever.⁴

Though the soothing tone of this memorial was probably largely due to Shen's goal of coercing the Emperor to return to Beijing and resume the seat of his Empire, it also reflected the wider Chinese belief that the foreigners were not a true threat to the Qing and could be managed. According to Shen, even though the British and French had penetrated into Beijing, they did not pose a great danger to the Empire because their interest in China was purely economic.

Shen's belief that the British and French did not want to actually conquer China implied that, with some effort, the Qing could effectively manage the foreigners. Prince Gong and his colleagues, Guai Liang and Wen Xiang, expressed this confidence in an 1861 memorial that advocated the founding of the Zhongli Yamen, a new bureau designed specifically to deal with the Western powers. These officials wrote to the emperor in regards to England:

As to England, her purpose is to trade, but she acts violently, without any regard for human decency. If she is not kept within limits, we shall not be able to stand on our feet. Hence she may be compared to an affliction of our limbs. Therefore we should suppress the Taipings and the Nien bandits first, get the Russians under control next, and attend to the British last.⁵

Although the British clearly were perceived as a menace, in comparison to both the various rebellions taking place within China and the incursions of the Russians from

⁴ Shen Chao Lin, Memorial to the Xianfeng Emperor, Nov., 1860, quoted in Masataka Banno, China and the West, 1858-1861: The Origins of the Tsungli Yamen, Harvard East Asian series, 15 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) 215-216.

⁵ Gong, Guai Liang, Wen Xiang, Memorial to the emperor, Jan. 13, 1860, quoted in Ssu-yu Teng, and John King Fairbank, China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) 48.

the north, they were a relatively peripheral concern. Gong wrote of the British: “Even though they may make great demands, still they will not suddenly cause us a great calamity.”⁶ Even after the dramatic humiliation of 1860, Qing officials still believed the British, and their desires for expanded trade, did not actually threaten the survival of the empire and could be managed. These official beliefs again speak to the apparently minimal response that the foreign invasion initially garnered among the policy makers of the Qing Empire.

Given that all of the preceding passages were addressed to the emperor and had specific political aims, it is tempting to disregard them as not accurately reflecting the Chinese response to the events of 1860. However, there is evidence to suggest that the Qing might truly have viewed the success of the Western powers as a reasonably unexceptional event. Indeed, at the time there were precedents both for foreign incursions into Qing territory and for the Qing to deal with such threats through strategies of appeasement. Fairbank argued that the Qing’s use of treaties to appease the British had precedent in techniques they used to counter the incursions of the Khanate of Kokand into Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang). Fairbank related how, after the Khanate had proved its military strength, the Qing reached an agreement with these foreigners whereby they were allowed to establish commercial officials with special privileges in Kashgar and five other cities in the area.⁷ This agreement could be seen as a precedent for the concessions granted to the Westerners after both the First and the Second Opium War. By the mid-nineteenth century the Qing had become used to dealing with strong foreign powers attacking their borders.

⁶ Teng and Fairbank 48.

⁷John King Fairbank, The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985 (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 90.

Consequently, they had worked out tactics to deal with those threats. Given the success of their policy of appeasement in regards to Kokand, it is not unexpected that they would apply the same methods to the Westerners.

Fairbank argued that the Qing did not initially perceive the intrusion of the Westerners as a unique or paradigm-changing event. He compared this more general lack of reaction with to the Chinese refusal to widely accept steamships, writing, “In this as in so many other respects, the unequal treaties brought less drastic changes to China than the foreigners thought they did.”⁸ Fairbank believed that the unequal treaties did not immediately force the Chinese to change their worldview. According to Fairbank’s argument, the “unequal treaties” gained by the Western powers after the opium wars could be seen as not the results of Western imperial powers imposing their will through superior military force, but merely part of a policy of appeasement that had a precedent in earlier Qing diplomatic practices. If the Chinese really did view the foreigners and their influence with such indifference, then a minimal Qing reaction to the results of the Second Opium War is not entirely surprising.

The Word on the Street

It is important to note that Fairbank was discussing Chinese policy in regards to the First, as opposed to the Second, Opium war. As much as there might have been a general precedent for the Qing to grant concessions to foreign powers, by 1860 the British had so thoroughly proved their power, especially after the looting and burning

⁸ Fairbank, The Great Chinese Revolution 99.

of the Emperor's personal palace, that it must have been clear they could not be dealt with as easily as Kokand. In this light, it is unlikely that the general Qing response was truly as unconcerned as the imperial memorials written after the event implied. Indeed, numerous Chinese sources did understand the defeat in 1860 as a truly devastating event, even if they did so in a notably apolitical way.

The Xianfeng emperor's own writings demonstrated the power that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan had to elicit emotional reactions from Qing officials. Upon learning of the occupation and looting of the palace Xianfeng berated his generals for their failure to stop the foreign invaders. He claimed:

The fact that Senge Linqin and Ruilin, commanding a huge number of troops, suffered repeated defeats has proved their cowardice and incompetence. They shamefully watched the occupation, burning, and looting of the imperial garden without even trying to do anything. [In the opinion of this throne], they can hardly absolve their guilt.⁹

Despite the fact that he himself had abandoned Beijing at the first sight of British and French soldiers, Xianfeng was still furious at his generals for "allowing" the desecration of his palace. Xianfeng's anger at his generals almost certainly arose at least partially from the way that he was personally affected by the devastation of Yuan Ming Yuan, a place for which he had great affection. Indeed, according to Wong, "On his deathbed, he had the Yuanming Yuan very much in his mind. He personally handed the seal of the Tongdao Hall, where he had his last meal in the Yuanming Yuan, to his two widows and the young crown prince as a souvenir."¹⁰ Though this story could easily be apocryphal, it does further point to the emperor's

⁹ Xianfeng emperor, quoted in Wong, Paradise Lost 145.

¹⁰ Wong, Paradise Lost 153.

personal connection with Yuan Ming Yuan. These personal feelings help explain Xianfeng's anger at the generals for failing to stop the destruction.

Xianfeng never actually returned to Beijing to witness the true extent of the damages, dying at his hunting retreat in Jehol in August 1861. This failure to return to Beijing could itself be viewed as just one more example of the effect that the destruction and, more generally, the success of the Anglo-French forces, had on the emperor's psyche. According to Masataka Banno, the emperor failed to return to Beijing at least partially because of his fear that upon his return the foreigners would once again demand an audience with him.¹¹ Xianfeng still felt compelled to avoid such an audience, but there remained some British and French forces stationed at Tianjin.¹² He knew, after the events of 1860, that if they wanted to enter Beijing and force an interview there was nothing he could do to stop them. This fear of the foreign powers was surely reinforced by the willingness of the British to burn Yuan Ming Yuan. The Emperor's aversion to return to Beijing and accept a meeting with the British or the French ambassadors demonstrated both his continued (if misplaced) pride, and the power that the foreigners now had over him. In order to save himself from what the Emperor saw as yet another grave humiliation, Xianfeng allowed himself to become an exile in his own Empire. This situation would have been impossible if the British and French had not so thoroughly impressed their power on him by entering Beijing and destroying Yuan Ming Yuan.

The impact of the destruction on the imperial family is further expressed by the poetry of Prince Yihuan, the brother of the emperor. Unlike his brother, Yihuan

¹¹ Banno 215.

¹² Ibid. 217-218.

actually viewed the destruction first hand and, as a result, was much more inclined to a strong emotional reaction. Vera Schwarcz quoted a poem written by Yihuan on October 1860:

The ravaged garden
Is not my wound

Rather a generation born
Into a misshapen world.¹³

Yihuan's poems, which, according to Schwarcz, "Pulsate with ongoing grief,"¹⁴ are revelatory for their ability to express an incredibly emotional Qing reaction to the destruction. For Yihuan, the degradation caused by the British did not just apply to the physical structure of the garden, but also to the Qing Empire (and maybe China) more generally. He grieved for the future generation that was now "born into a misshapen world." As Schwarcz wrote, "Just how 'misshapen' the world had become would be fully apparent in the days following the burning of the Summer Palace. Not only did the tribute system vanish, but a new period of ruination began at the hands of foreign and native foes alike."¹⁵ In his poem, Yihuan, according to Schwarcz, had foreshadowed the true ramifications of the destruction. This foreshadowing demonstrated a far greater recognition of the direness of the Qing situation in 1860 than that expressed by either the emperor or the founders of the Zhongli Yamen.

Lord Elgin's decision to burn the palace had an impact, then, on the minds of the Qing imperial family. As demonstrated by Yihuan's poetry, it was difficult for those who actually observed either the destruction or the ruins to have a flippant

¹³ Prince Yihuan, Oct. 1860, quoted in Vera Schwarcz, Place and Memory in the Singing Crane Garden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 111.

¹⁴ Schwarcz 121.

¹⁵ Ibid. 111.

attitude towards Lord Elgin's decision. Viewing the destruction, and the ruins it caused, also left deep impressions on a variety of other, non-imperial, Chinese observers. Though the number and influence of these observers was limited by the official Qing discourse (and the fact that throughout most of the Qing period the gardens themselves were ostensibly still the property of the Qing, even guarded by eunuchs¹⁶), their reactions are still important for demonstrating the continued power of the ruins.

As is readily apparent from the British accounts of the burning, the destruction on October 18 was incredibly dramatic. Wolseley wrote that the smoke was so thick, "It seemed as if the sun was undergoing a lengthened eclipse."¹⁷ The few available Chinese sources directly addressing the events of the 18th also conveyed the great devastation caused by Lord Elgin's decision. The Chinese scholar Wu Kedu wrote in an October 18 diary entry, "A vast column of smoke arose from the northwest direction ascertaining that the Barbarians had burnt the Summer Palace. [I also learned] that the Three hills were not spared, leaving the area absolutely bare."¹⁸ Wu saw the same scene of desolation that soldiers like Wolseley did, yet, given that what he was watching was the destruction of his own city, he was unable to rationalize – and justify – the burning (as the British were inclined to do). Instead, he was simply left horrified by the British presence in and effect on the capital. Wu expressed this wider indignation at the actions of the foreigners in the Chinese capital when he wrote, "They [the allies] moved about in our midst at will as if in an uninhabited

¹⁶ Geremie Barmé, The Garden of Perfect Brightness: A Life in Ruins, The George Ernest Morrison lecture in ethnology, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1996) 137.

¹⁷ Wolseley 279.

¹⁸ Wu Kedu, Diary entry, Oct. 18, 1860, quoted in Wong, Paradise Lost 150.

wildness.”¹⁹ Obviously the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan would have done nothing to dispel this impression. This Chinese fury at the allies was further articulated by the scholar Li Ciming when he wrote, “The occupation forces were running wild inside and outside the walled city, setting fire to houses, disturbing civil order, and harassing women in public.”²⁰ The allied invasion that culminated in the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan left these residents of Beijing indignant at the audacity of Western troops to intrude on their lives.

The trauma and humiliation caused by the destructive invasion of foreigners into the heart of the Qing Empire was not limited to the days immediately following October 18. For years the vast ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan would continue to elicit emotional reactions from Chinese observers. Some of the Chinese sources that best demonstrate the lingering power that the ruins had to evoke memories of pain and humiliation are the poems written by various members of the intellectual and courtly elite who wandered the site in the years following 1860. In 1871, the scholar poet Wang Kaiyun toured the ruins²¹ and composed a poem that perfectly captured the sense of loss embodied in this site that had once been a beautiful symbol of the glory of the Qing:

Burned in the windswept smoke,
The country royal estate has been ruined.
The Jade spring flows as usual,
But with sighing sounds.
Alas! Kunming Lake has silted up.
I come, but what can I see?
Buried in thrones are the broken bronze rhinoceros.
The great Green Rocks become

¹⁹ Wu Kedu, Diary entry, quoted in Wong, Paradise Lost 159.

²⁰ Li Ciming, quoted in Wong, Paradise Lost 159.

²¹ Wong, Paradise Lost 162.

The hideouts for crying wolves;
And the fish under the Bridge of the Embroidered Ripples
Seem to be sobbing.
Alas! An old eunuch at the Happy garden Gate
Had once attended his majesty.
The buildings here all disappeared,
Gone also the loud excitements of crowds of people.
The lonesome visitors stand in the garden's solitude.
The exciting past, the sorrowful present,
Distinguished guests shall never come.
Not any more!
When I peep behind the scenes
Of the Inner Palace Gate and the Main Audience Hall,
I find a lot of broken bricks.
None of the crumbling walls,
Gone is the Clear Sunshine Belvedere facing the lake,
Where the late (Xianfeng) emperor often enjoyed the morn.
They said His Majesty once had a strange dream,
An old man who says he is the guardian of the garden,
He wants to quit because peace can no longer be maintained.
The Buddha statues inside the Sravasti Wall,
Thousands of them,
Where are they now?
Look around from side to side,
Cattail leaves grow wild in the lakes.
Mugwort grass rustling in the air, blocking stairways.
Some burned trees blossom anew,
But are cut and taken away for firewood.
The startled fish jump in the stream,
Trying to avoid nets.
The wonderful Peony Terrace,
Where three great rulers once met,
None of them could foresee misfortune.
The bamboo trees grow so disorderly
Out of the messy mosses.
One can no longer see in the spring days
The dropping dew and the blossoming peony.
Westward to the Smooth Lake,
A chamber is still there,
But where is its window paper?
Behind the bursting Chinese chives,
Emerged the gradually elevated road.
But where are the footprints of beautiful ladies?
The beauties left behind their black pigment makeup,

Imprints on windows in green everywhere.²²

This poem was essentially a testament to the sense of loss and decay felt by Wang in place that would have once been filled with life. Wang juxtaposed what he could see in 1873, namely the “broken bricks” and “crumbling walls,” with the memories of the “loud excitements of crowds of people,” in order to elicit the overwhelming desolation that he saw as pervading the formerly great palace. A place that had once been full of life and wonder had become as “silted up” as Kunming lake. Wang made no attempt at hiding that this devastation had all been caused by the “windswept smoke” wrought by Lord Elgin. As a beautiful evocation of the sorrow and pain that he felt as he observed the ruins, Wang’s poem demonstrated the power that the British actions had over future witnesses of the palace. Although Qing officials like Prince Gong might have downplayed the impact of the British and French invasion on China, for those who laid eyes upon the devastated palace there was no way to avoid the pain that these invaders had wrought.

In addition to the pain caused by the physical decay of the ruins, the loss of so many valuable artifacts in the wake of the sacking was another issue that continued to raise the ire of later observers. In the years after the destruction, many of the artifacts that had not been taken to England or France circulated throughout Beijing markets.²³ This commodification of so many works of Chinese imperial art served to further corrode Qing prestige. An 1873 poem by an unknown author quoted in Geremie Barmé’s article, “The Garden of Perfect Brightness, A Life in Ruins,” recounted:

A Song-dynasty book lies in an old peasant women’s basket;

²² Wang, Kaiyun, quoted in Wong, *Paradise Lost* 163-164.

²³ Barmé, “The Garden of Perfect Brightness” 137.

On the wall of a herdsboy's hut hangs a Yuan-dynasty painting.
Ask not the fate of scriptures writ on precious leaves from India,
For have not even the pages of the Encyclopedia of the Four Treasuries been
scattered to the winds?
In a temple incense smoulders in a rusted ancient bronze,
While market stalls hawk porcelain from venerably imperial kilns.²⁴

This poem captured the author's distress over how the sacking of the palace had allowed beautiful Chinese artworks to be degraded into profane market wares. Though the decision to burn Yuan Ming Yuan might not have weighed too heavily on the conscience of British soldiers, the lingering effects of this action were constantly reminding Beijing residents of the damage the foreigners had done to Chinese culture. The conversion of objects that had once symbolized the glory of Chinese civilization into products to be sold at Beijing markets served only to underscore this degradation.

At the time Wang Kaiyun was writing, barely a decade had passed since the destruction and the former beauty of the palace was still fresh in Chinese memory. Yet, emotional reactions to the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan would continue to emerge for years to come. Wong discussed how these later spectators, mostly writing in the early twentieth century, instead of just focusing on how the site reflected the decline of Qing opulence, also began to associate the ruins with a wider nationalist sorrow.²⁵ For them the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan served as a symbol for how the foreign imperialists had caused the general dissolution of Chinese power and glory. In a poem written in the early twentieth century Gu Sui, a scholar at Yanjing University, which was established by Americans near Yuan Ming Yuan in 1919, expressed the grief and anger that the ruins were still capable of arousing. He wrote:

²⁴ Anonymous poem, 1873, quoted in Barmé, "The Garden of Perfect Brightness" 137.

²⁵ Wong, *Paradise Lost* 156.

I sit atop a hill,
Every look can be heartbreaking,
Few new huts and broken palace walls.
Where comes the cry of a cock?
Boundless sunset shines in splendor,
Up the rugged hills and withered grass,
Come down cows and sheep.
Let us grieve for
This desolate land of ours.²⁶

Though Gu was clearly affected by the ruins as strongly as Wang had been, the grief he felt was of a very different sort than that of the earlier poet. Where Wang explicitly mourned the decline of imperial splendor, Gu saw the ruins as symbolizing the desolation of his entire “land,” not just the loss of a beautiful pleasure palace. Gu’s poem demonstrates how, by the early twentieth century, the Qing ruins were no longer simply a Qing thing, but had begun to symbolize the wider collapse of Chinese civilization that had followed 1860.

Gu’s view that the disintegration of Yuan Ming Yuan was emblematic of a wider destruction that had been done to Chinese society could obviously be put to overt political purposes. Indeed, starting at about the time he was writing, and proceeding throughout the twentieth century, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was in fact used as a symbol of humiliation to stir up nationalist sentiment (these ideas will be fully discussed in Chapter Five). Despite the way that Gu’s poem foreshadowed the later, more artificial, nationalist uses of the destroyed Yuan Ming Yuan, it is important not to overstate Gu’s own politics. From the expressive language in Gu’s poem it is clear that, whatever his politics, the ruins really did make him feel powerful emotions. Instead of a direct political statement, it is more likely

²⁶ Gu Sui, Poem, quoted in Wong, *Paradise Lost* 157.

that Gu's poem was merely the work of a political man emotionally reacting to the devastation still embodied at Yuan Ming Yuan long after 1860.

Reactionary Reform

Other than the angry decrees of the Emperor, and Yihuan's emotional poetry, there is little documented evidence of official reactions to the burning. However, the Qing attempts at reform that followed 1860 make it clear that the destruction wrought by the allies did leave a lasting impression on the Qing government, perhaps demonstrating that more officials than just Yihuan recognized its true ramifications. Lord Elgin's decision to destroy the palace was the final blow to any Qing hopes of successfully maintaining an antagonistic and isolationist stance towards the Western powers. The foreigners, especially the British, had clearly demonstrated that they were both willing and able to use unlimited force to impose their will on the Chinese. Regardless of their confident language, even the most conservative Qing officials knew that in the wake of 1860 they had to change the way that they dealt with foreigners to avoid future humiliations. Teng and Fairbank spoke to this change in attitude:

The shocking realization by the court that the two main supports of the Manchu throne – the Manchu army at Peking and the Chinese troops in each province – had both been shattered brought about a reversal of policy towards the Westerners that was to prevail for over twenty years. This new attitude was particularly in evidence after the debacle of 1860.²⁷

²⁷ Teng and Fairbank 47.

Teng and Fairbank believed that, because the British and French had definitively demonstrated their ability to exercise their will by destroying the Qing forces and entering Beijing, 1860 marked a turning point in the way that the Qing dealt with Westerners.

The change in the way that the Qing related to foreigners after 1860 was most clearly exhibited by the creation of the Zhongli Yamen in 1861 as a special agency to deal with the Western Powers. Though the memorial founding the Zhongli Yamen was full of overconfident anti-Western language, the decision to create such an agency itself reflected the Qing's recognition that they needed to somehow change the way they dealt with the West. Gong, Guai, and Wen, stated:

The barbarians take advantage of our weak position and try to control us. If we do not restrain our rage but continue the hostilities, we are liable to sudden catastrophe...The ancients had a saying, 'Resort to peace and friendship when temporarily obliged to do so; use war and defense as your actual policy.' This is truly a well-founded statement.²⁸

This passage perfectly captured both the contradictory language of the memorial, and the conflicted thoughts of the Qing officials. At the same time that the Qing officials recognized the power of the barbarians and the need to change policy in order to avoid future conflicts, they also boasted about how this would merely be a temporary and superficial change. This passage even went so far as to imply that in the future the Qing would be able to victoriously wield its military against the foreigners, a claim that was completely ridiculous considering the defeats of 1860. This confident language was surely not all posturing, and, as previously discussed, probably actually did reflect the thoughts of many Qing officials. However, it is important that this

²⁸ Gong, Guai Liang, Wen Xiang, Memorial to the emperor, Jan. 13, 1860, quoted in Teng and Fairbank 48.

language be examined in its context –that is, in a document that was changing Qing policy in response to a humiliating defeat. As much as this memorial might have reflected continued Qing assumptions of superiority, its very existence also clearly demonstrated that pragmatic Qing officials did recognize the need to change their diplomatic policies. Ultimately, the Zhongli Yamen should be viewed for what it was: an agency that was reluctantly created out of the recognition that the Western powers were at least temporarily more powerful than the Qing. Officials like Gong had been forced to accept that it was now necessary to have constant diplomatic relations with the Westerners in order to avoid further humiliations.

The creation of the Zhongli Yamen was perhaps the only example of a Qing policy change that could be described as a direct response to the events of 1860. Yet, the humiliations suffered at the end of the Second Opium War clearly influenced the writings of various reform minded officials from this period. While these reformers did not always find a positive reception for their proposals among higher officials, the prevalence of their ideas demonstrates the impact of the military defeat in the Second Opium War on some Chinese intellectuals. The most obvious lesson that Chinese thinkers learned from the intrusion of the British and French into Beijing was that Chinese military technology was woefully inferior to that of the Westerners. Consequently, many intellectuals recognized that military reform was absolutely necessary if the Qing ever hoped to stand up to the foreign powers. The scholar Feng Kui Fen expressed these sentiments in essays that he wrote in 1861 while working as a government official in Shanghai:

Yet now we are shamefully humiliated by those four nations in the recent treaties-not because our climate, soil, or resources are inferior to theirs, but because our people are really inferior...Why are they small and yet strong? Why are we large and yet weak? We must try and discover some means to become their equal, and that also depends upon human effort...The way to correct these four points lies with ourselves, for they can be changed at once if only our Emperor would set the general policy right. There is no need for outside help in these matters...What we then have to learn from the barbarians is only one thing, solid ships and effective guns.²⁹

Feng explicitly acknowledged that the humiliations suffered in 1860 were completely due to Chinese military inferiority. Just this acknowledgement of Chinese weakness was fairly radical in comparison to official Qing posturing of the time. Feng went even further with his reforms by proposing that the Qing abandon their old military policies and comprehensively adopt Western military technology. Beyond this belief in the need to study the technology of the West, Feng's policy of reform was also notable for its emphasis on self-strengthening. Feng might have recognized the superior learning of the West in some matters, but he certainly did not want to promote or recommend more basic changes in Chinese society. Instead, he just wanted to make China strong enough to compete with the Western powers.

Radical as he might have been in 1861, Feng was not the only advocate of self-strengthening. In fact, many Qing officials adopted similar ideas in the years following 1860. At times, they even made real attempts, with varying degrees of success, to implement such reforms. One of the chief engineers of China's self-strengthening program was the Qing official Li Hongzhang, who, as Jonathan Spence explained, was responsible for a "disproportionate number" of reform projects.³⁰

²⁹ Feng Kui Fen, "On the Manufacture of Foreign Weapons," 1861, quoted in Teng and Fairbank 53.

³⁰ Spence 218.

These projects included developing arsenals in Tianjin in the 1880s, creating a national telegraph network, and even approving a limited number Chinese students to travel to the United States for a brief period of time.³¹ Li's ideas about military reform directly originated from his experiences watching the success of the Western armies in their campaigns against the Chinese. Li personally witnessed the success that the so-called "Ever Victorious Army," a force of Western mercenaries and Chinese soldiers led by the British officer Charles "Chinese" Gordon, had against the Taiping rebels in the early 1860s. In a letter to his fellow reformer Zeng Guo Fan, Li described the weapons of the Ever Victorious Army. He exclaimed:

I feel deeply ashamed that the Chinese Weapons are far inferior to those of foreign countries. Every day I warn and instruct my officers to be humble-minded, to bear the humiliation, to learn one or two secret methods from the Westerners in the hope that we may increase our knowledge.³²

The genesis for Li's ideas on Chinese self-strengthening was the "humiliation" that he felt after seeing the superiority of Western technology. Although in this letter Li did not actually mention the defeat of 1860, it is likely that this event, being a dramatic example of the effects of China's military inferiority, factored into his sense of humiliation. Just like Feng, the desire to overcome the history of humiliation at the hands of Western military superiority provided a large part of Li's motivation for launching reforms. Considering that the Chinese had known of their technological inferiority since at least the First Opium War, it would be incorrect to draw too direct a connection between the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan and the motivations of Qing reformers. However, it is also likely that this act did serve as one more,

³¹ Spence 218-219.

³² Li Hongzhang, Letter to Zeng Guo Fan, Feb, 1863, quoted in Teng and Fairbank 69.

particularly striking, warning of the dangers involved in failing to strengthen the Chinese army along Western lines. That the reform movement did not truly get under way until after 1860 provides even more evidence that the arresting humiliations of that year played an important role as a catalyst in China's burgeoning program of self-strengthening.

Conservative memories

Qing reform in the late-nineteenth century was a very complicated process that has been the subject of numerous books. Explaining it through simple trends and motivations does not in any way do it justice. At the same time, at least two conclusions can be reached with a fair level of certainty: first, China's relationship with the West colored at least the nature of the reforms (if not their very existence), and, second, these programs were ultimately unsuccessful in either having a widespread effect, or saving the Qing from its ultimate disintegration in 1911. Although there has been much debate over the reasons for the Qing failure to successfully adapt to the realities of the late-nineteenth century, most historians assign at least partial responsibility to the personality and policies of the empress dowager Cixi. When Xianfeng died in 1861 the Tongzhi emperor came to power at the age of five with his mother, Cixi, acting as regent.³³ From 1861 until Tongzhi's death in 1875, Cixi ruled in collaboration with a number of prominent provincial

³³ Spence 194.

officials and imperial advisors, including Prince Gong.³⁴ It was after 1875, when she subverted the Qing's rule of succession and appointed her three-year-old nephew, Guangxu, as Emperor, that Cixi, still acting as regent, began to exercise more direct power.³⁵

Due largely to the fact that Cixi was the only female ruler of China, many male Chinese commentators have blamed Cixi for the majority of the problems that beset the Qing in the late-nineteenth century.³⁶ However, as always, the true story of the empire's woes was far more complicated. Spence wrote of Cixi's character as a ruler: "Politically conservative and financially extravagant, she nevertheless approved many of the self-strengtheners' restoration ventures; at the same time, she tried jealously to guard the prerogatives of the ruling Manchu imperial line."³⁷ According to Spence's analysis, Cixi was a contradictory ruler, both willing to approve reform yet too conservative and protective of imperial privileges to allow for any real changes in the structure of imperial society. The true test of Cixi's willingness to accept reforms came in 1898 when the Guangxu Emperor attempted to assert his own power. Guangxu issued a decree on June 11, 1898 recognizing the need for drastic changes.³⁸ These reforms, which included the further adoption of Western technology, changes in education policies, and the abolition of some establishments of Confucian conservatism, such as the importance of so-called "eight-legged essays" in official examinations, threatened Cixi's power.³⁹ In what was, according to Teng

³⁴ Spence 194.

³⁵ Ibid.217.

³⁶ Ibid. 217.

³⁷ Ibid. 218.

³⁸ Teng and Fairbank 175.

³⁹ Ibid. 175.

and Fairbank, a move solely motivated by Cixi's desire to maintain her rule, the Empress Dowager ended the reform movement and imprisoned Guangxu on September 21.⁴⁰ Two years later, in a move that spelled disaster for Qing sovereignty, Cixi followed the advice of conservative aides and allied herself with the anti-foreign Boxer movement.⁴¹ The Boxers, with the official support of the throne, attacked foreigners throughout China until they were ultimately put down by a force of 20,000 European soldiers known as the Eight-Nation Alliance. In the aftermath of the uprising, the Qing was forced to sign the Boxer Protocol. This agreement included various humiliations, not least the payment of a \$333 million indemnity.⁴² After this final blow to Qing power it was a quick, though very complex, path to the revolution of 1911.

Cixi's decision to ally herself with the Boxers demonstrated her tendency towards anti-foreignism. This stance possibly itself points to Cixi's response to the horrors of 1860. It is easy to see how watching the British burn Yuan Ming Yuan, where she had begun her romance with Xianfeng,⁴³ could have helped catalyze her opinion against the Westerners. This being said, the history of Cixi's poor decision making also reveals how little she and her advisors had actually taken the lessons of 1860 to heart. While the Boxers were clearly anti-foreign, and Cixi's alliance with them could possibly be seen as an angry reaction to the brutality the Europeans had demonstrated in 1860, this does not mean that she truly considered the events of the past when making her decisions. That Cixi resisted the further adoption of Western

⁴⁰ Teng and Fairbank 175.

⁴¹ Ibid. 187.

⁴² Spence 235.

⁴³ Wong, Paradise Lost 161.

learning, and then allied the Qing with the Boxers, confirmed her lack of comprehension of the power of the foreign imperialists to enforce their will. The destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan 40 years previously should have taught Cixi that the Qing could not stand up to the foreigners without adopting Western military technology. Ultimately, it was both wishful thinking, and a failure to learn from the humiliating past, that drove Cixi and her conservative advisors to overestimate the ability of the Qing to resist the West without adopting real reforms. Even though the ruined palace might have been able to elicit strong emotions from many Chinese people, including Cixi, for the empress dowager these emotions did not translate into decisions that were designed to avoid future such humiliations.

Considering her failure to take to heart the lessons that should have been learned in 1860, it is ironic that of all Qing officials Cixi was perhaps most obsessed with rebuilding the ruined palace. The plans to rebuild at least part of the palace had first been proposed in an 1873 decree from the Tongzhi emperor. Tongzhi stated that the palace would be rebuilt with the express purpose of, “Allowing the dowagers to live in it.”⁴⁴ According to Wong, this decree almost certainly bore the influence of Cixi, whose, “Pressure on the throne was beyond doubt.”⁴⁵ Despite the desires of the Tongzhi and Cixi, the initial plans to renovate were always beset by budgetary problems. After many protestations and scandals Prince Gong finally convinced Tongzhi to halt the renovation in a personal audience.⁴⁶ When Tongzhi died in 1875, Cixi assumed even greater power and decided to go ahead with renovations despite

⁴⁴ Wong, Paradise Lost 167.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 174.

⁴⁶ Wong, Paradise Lost 173-174.

the protests of various officials. She decided to rebuild a section of Yuan Ming Yuan that would become known as Yihe Yuan (What tourists today refer to as “The Summer Palace”). Yihe Yuan was completed on March 13, 1888, at a vast expense that has been estimated to be anywhere from 30 to 80 million taels.⁴⁷ Though Cixi wielded her power effectively and forced the construction with relative ease, her actions were quite controversial. Indeed, she had diverted much of the money for the project from funds raised by Li Hongzhang to create a modern navy. This situation was later blamed (probably unfairly) for the Chinese defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895.⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that the reformer Wen Xiang had presaged just such a disaster years before in an 1874 memorial. Wen explained the necessity to, “Cut off lavish expenditures, to stop public works which are not urgent, and to plan for the most needed coastal defense.”⁴⁹ Wen clearly recognized the cash-strapped position that the Qing were in and correctly believed that expenditures on unnecessary projects like Cixi’s Yihe Yuan could only be detrimental to the welfare of the Empire.

Cixi’s determination to go ahead with her construction plans in the face of what were more reasonable considerations demonstrated her unshakable desire to rebuild the palace. Although it is difficult to conjecture on the Empress Dowager’s true motives, it seems likely that her plans were closely tied to her memory of 1860. Teng and Fairbank believed that Cixi’s project emerged from her “hatred toward the

⁴⁷ Wong, *Paradise Lost* 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 176.

⁴⁹ Teng, and Fairbank, 90.

foreigners.”⁵⁰ They wrote, “It was the foreigners who had forced the court including herself to flee from the old summer palace near Peking and who had sacked it in retaliation for mistreatment of allied envoys. The Empress Dowager apparently set her heart on restoring the summer palace.”⁵¹ Teng and Fairbank’s implication that the Empress Dowager’s flight from the palace in 1860 was connected to her later attempts to rebuild is illuminating. Perhaps she saw rebuilding as a way of recovering some of the grandeur and prestige that both she personally, and the empire more generally, had lost in Lord Elgin’s flames. Whatever Cixi’s motivations were in building Yihe Yuan, her unreasonable persistence demonstrated that, even if she did not learn the same lessons from the destruction as the advocates of reform, the ruins still held a certain power over her, imbuing her with a resolute desire to build anew.

Conclusions

In some ways the last decades of the Qing era were marked by few representations of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. Apparently it was official Qing policy to deny the impact that the British and French invasion had on the Empire. As tempting as it is to completely disregard this minimal reaction as political posturing, there were real precedents for the Qing to deal with foreign intrusions, such as Kokand’s, through a policy of appeasement. Consequently, the Qing tendency to make light of the true significance of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was not necessarily ridiculous or

⁵⁰ Teng and Fairbank 89.

⁵¹ Ibid. 89.

artificial. This trend of Qing overconfidence continued through 1900, when, by allying with the Boxers, Cixi again put misplaced conviction in the ability of unreformed Chinese military strategies to stand up to Western armies.

At the same time that many Qing officials did not react as strongly to the destruction as might be expected, Lord Elgin's decision clearly did elicit powerful reactions from some Chinese commentators. These reactions took the form of both calls for reform in the mode of self-strengthening, and also the emotional laments of poets, such as Wang Kaiyun and Prince Yihuan, for what had been lost in the destruction. Even Cixi, who resisted accepting the influence of the Westerners until the bitter end of her rule, could not deny the powerful impact that Lord Elgin's hasty decision had on the Chinese landscape. Indeed, both her obsession with reconstructing what had been lost in 1860, and perhaps also her ardent anti-foreignism, reflected the impressions the British destruction had made on her.

While all of these reactions are evidence that, despite the efforts of early officials, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was able to elicit strong reactions from various Qing-era observers, they are not necessarily emblematic of a wider national reaction. Generally, discussing the destruction was not part of Qing political culture. There were few poets like Wang and Yihuan, and the Qing controlled access to the site (though, given the amount of looting that took place throughout the period, apparently not very strictly). It was not until the early-twentieth century that a man like Gu Sui could look on the ruins with eyes largely unfettered by imperial concerns and see the destruction as an event that had caused sorrow for, not just the Qing, but all of China. While Gu Sui's poetry had nationalistic overtones, he was probably not

writing for explicit political purposes. Rather, his poetry demonstrated the continued power of the ruins to touch a raw nerve for Chinese observers.

Ultimately, the earliest Chinese reactions to the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan were multitudinous and confused. Gu Sui's emotional response to the ruins, the efforts of Qing reformers to strengthen China to stand up to the foreigners, and even Cixi's angry anti-foreignism and desires to rebuild represented the various ways that the memory of the destruction impacted Chinese people. As significant as these responses were, only Gu Sui's poetry, coming after the end of the Qing dynasty, pointed to any sort of wider consciousness of the destruction as having national significance. Yet, these disparate conceptions all proved that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan could have momentous effects on Chinese thoughts and actions. Eventually, twentieth-century nationalists would take advantage of the possibilities aroused by these emotions and manipulate the history of the destruction to serve very clear political purposes.

Chapter V

National Humiliation and Yuan Ming Yuan: Twentieth Century Chinese Representations of the Destruction

Today the crumbling ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan, now referred to as “Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park,”¹ sit in the outskirts of Beijing as a popular tourist destination for both foreigners and Chinese desiring a glimpse of a ruined past. Though some might be drawn to the site as a testament to Qing palace building prowess, as the word “ruins” in the official name suggests, it is likely that a vast majority come to experience the traumatic history embodied in the garden. Indeed, the palace is both constructed, and perceived, as a monument to the foreign domination of China. Even if the wider gardens still do contain some impressive sights, it is undeniable that the main attraction, complete with a reconstructed maze and separate entrance fee, are the dramatic ruins of the Western-style buildings that were built in 1759 under the Qianlong Emperor.² These buildings, left as piles of rubble (the majority of the Chinese-style buildings were made from wood and have long-since disappeared), are the clearest evidence that the palace was destroyed in 1860. That this area, and subsequently the entire park, is directed at eliciting memories of the destruction is

¹ Shanguan Feng, Guo Linxiang, Xiao Zhong, Zhang Hui, Gan Juntong, ed., Yuan Ming Yuan Yizhi (“Yizhi” should be translated as “ruins” or “relics,” but is not in the English title) Gongyuan, (Yuanmingyuan Park-An Eternal Monument) (Beijing: New World Press, 2002).

² The Qianlong emperor had commissioned two Jesuit missionaries, Father Guisepppe Castiglione and Father Michel Benoit, to help him design these baroque-style buildings that were completed in 1759. Young-tsu Wong, A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001) 60-63.

neither surprising nor entirely accidental. While financial concerns have obviously played a major role in why ruins are the most visible things one sees when visiting the park, this has also been due to purposeful efforts to construct both the monument, and its history, in a specific way to achieve explicit aims.

In his immense and illuminating study of the place and uses of the past in modern society, The Past is a Foreign Country, David Lowenthal described the ease by which cultural relics such as Yuan Ming Yuan can be transformed:

Every act of recognition alters survivals from the past. Simply to appreciate or protect a relic, let alone to embellish or imitate it, affects its form or our impressions. Just as selective recall skews memory and subjectivity shapes historical insight, so manipulating antiquities refashions their appearance and meaning. Interaction with a heritage continually alters its nature and context.³

Lowenthal believed that the ways we both appreciate, and then manipulate historical relics, forever alters the ways that they are perceived. This argument is wonderfully helpful when examining the Chinese memory and representation of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan in the twentieth century. Over the course of this century, Chinese intellectuals, including historians, used a variety of means to manipulate the history of 1860 in ways that spoke to emerging political purposes. These sources ran the gamut from academic histories, political polemics, popular histories, and movies, to the physical presentation of the ruins as a tourist attraction. The twentieth-century Chinese representations of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan are notable for the extent and visibility of their manipulations, which have often served specific nationalistic purposes. These manipulations most often fit into the framework of

³ David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 263.

using the “national humiliation” of the past as a means for stirring up patriotic sentiment.⁴

“Nationalist” Humiliation

As strange a concept as it might appear from a perspective where nationalist narratives most often take a triumphalist form, for the past century in China, one of the most common means of eliciting nationalist sentiment has been through appeals to the past humiliations suffered at the hands of foreign powers. Geremie Barmé explained this phenomenon when he wrote:

In their representation of China as a nation ruthlessly violated by Western imperialism after the Opium Wars, many literati as well as twentieth-century intellectuals pointed out that China’s military and spiritual weakness made it an easy prey to aggressive foreigners. Questions of racial and political impotence have been central to Chinese thought and debates ever since. Reformist and revolutionary movements in China over the past century have been born out of a passion for national independence and strength. Most of the ideologically contending groups in China have, despite ideological clashes and heated debates, essentially pursued similar nationalistic goals.⁵

The humiliations the Chinese received at the hands of foreign powers were accentuated by intellectuals so as to motivate the Chinese to achieve a strength that would ensure such subordination to the West could not be repeated. By constantly

⁴ Paul Cohen, China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003) 148.

⁵ Geremie Barmé, In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 255-256.

referring to the past in terms that highlighted Chinese weakness, nationalists hoped to change China for the future. Though the precise means and aims of such manipulations would change according to varying historical contexts, the basic framework of emphasizing humiliation to serve political ends would remain standard throughout the twentieth century.

The Qing reformers discussed in the previous chapter who hoped to, as Feng Kui Fen wrote, “Discover some means to become their (the foreigners) equals,”⁶ were, in some ways, direct predecessors to this trend of using humiliations for nationalistic purposes. In their efforts to explain why it was necessary to achieve some sort of reform, officials like Feng inevitably ended up appealing to the Chinese defeats in the Opium Wars as motivating factors, even if they did not overtly emphasize the Chinese as excessively weak. Additionally, these reformers’ ultimate goal of encouraging Chinese self-strengthening was essentially the same as the aims of many twentieth century nationalists.

While men like Feng certainly did use humiliations to provide impetus for reforms, it would be incorrect to describe them as either being “nationalists,” at least in the modern sense of the word, or using such humiliations to stir up nationalist sentiment. Indeed, even if truly nationalist feelings did begin to arise during the late Qing, these feelings were rarely encouraged by the imperial government. Cohen explained:

With a revolutionary movement in progress that defined nationalism in terms of the overthrow of the Manchus and the explosive growth in the first decade of the twentieth century of other forms of

⁶Ssu-yu Teng, and John King Fairbank, China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) 53.

nationalism...the Qing had no great interest in the nurturing of Chinese nationalist sentiment.⁷

Ultimately, all appeals to a Chinese greater nationalism threatened Qing power and were not encouraged. In fact, considering that after 1860 the Qing continually made concessions to the imperial powers, it is possible to see how emphasizing a humiliation like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan could be viewed as almost a subversive act. Merely studying the history of such humiliations, let alone directly looking to them as a source of nationalist sentiment, would have inevitably led Chinese commentators to question Qing strategies and power. It is quite likely that this conflict between the possible use of sites like Yuan Ming Yuan as nationalist symbols, and the efforts of the Qing to retain power, at least partially explains why there was not a wider discussion of the destruction in the late-nineteenth century. Though even directly following the end of the Opium Wars the humiliations suffered by the Chinese had been used as stimulus for reforms, because of Qing official concerns it would not be until the early twentieth century that such events were used for truly nationalistic purposes.

The first few decades of the twentieth century, with the final collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, witnessed a complete shift in the political structure of China. It was during this revolutionary period that intellectuals began to use past humiliations like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan in a discourse that could truly said to be “nationalist.” Cohen explained how opposition to foreign imperialism greatly increased during the period immediately following 1911, and the question

⁷ Cohen, China Unbound 169.

became, in specific reference to the Japanese Twenty-One Demands of 1915,⁸ “How long the Chinese people could sustain a mood of anger and resentment built around these actions.”⁹ According to Cohen’s analysis, by 1915 many educated Chinese both heavily opposed imperialist acts like the Twenty-One Demands, and perceived a need to sustain these feelings in order to stimulate a greater Chinese strength. The basic framework for how intellectuals believed humiliations should be viewed was outlined by the editor of the magazine *Dongfang Zazhi*, Zhang Xichen. In an April 1915 article entitled, “Enduring Humiliations and Shouldering Burdens,” Zhang wrote:

First, they must reflect on the sources of the humiliations and the burdens...A nation must attack itself before others attack it. The fact that today the powers dare to impose humiliations on us and add to our burdens with impunity is surely something we have brought upon ourselves...Second, they must not forget the humiliations endured and the burdens shouldered...If in our enduring of humiliations we constantly think of ways to eradicate them, what humiliations will there be? If in our shouldering of burdens we constantly devise ways to ease them, what burdens will remain?¹⁰

To early Chinese nationalists like Zhang, reflecting on the humiliation of the past was a means to prepare for the future. This reflection was intended to be a period of self-criticism that would blame the wrongs of imperialism first on the Chinese, and then on the foreigners. According to Zhang’s strategies, it was important for the Chinese to note that the humiliations of 1915 were only possible because there had been no response to the earlier humiliations of the nineteenth century. The obvious result of

⁸ In 1915 the Japanese government forced Yuan Shikai, the then ruler of China, to sign the Twenty-one Demands. These demands asked for greatly expanded economic rights throughout the country. Many perceived these demands to be so extensive that they compromised Chinese sovereignty. See: Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990) 285-286.

⁹ Cohen, *China Unbound* 154.

¹⁰ Zhang Xichen, “Enduring Humiliations and Shouldering Burdens,” *Dongfang Zazhi*, April 15, 1915, Quoted in Cohen, *China Unbound* 153-154.

this period of reflection was to teach Chinese people to strengthen themselves so that humiliations could not occur in the future.

Zhang's beliefs would have been deemed radically subversive under Qing rule. In the nationalist period, by contrast, such views were not only tolerated but propagated. Indeed, after 1927, when the Guomindang came to power, the celebration of "National Humiliation Days," which commemorated anniversaries of instances of the imperial domination over China, was assiduously and officially promoted.¹¹ Beyond just being the general call to national strength that Zhang saw them as, after 1927 these commemorations also insinuated that it was only through allegiance to the Guomindang that the Chinese could overcome the humiliations of the past. Indeed, Chiang Kai-shek himself portrayed the success of the Guomindang as necessary to end the humiliation. He wrote, "Our Nationalist Revolution had its origin in the state's distress and the suffering of the people. If the revolution fails, the state's distress and the people's suffering will deepen."¹² According to Chiang, it was only through supporting the Guomindang that they could avoid the suffering of the past (in his writing Chiang often refers directly to the phrase "national humiliation"¹³). Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang explicitly manipulated the memory of past humiliations to draw allegiance to their new government.

Ultimately, in the early-twentieth century, the Chinese perception of instances of foreign imperialism and domination, as exemplified by the Twenty-One Demands,

¹¹ Cohen, China Unbound 160.

¹² Chiang Kai-shek and Philip J. Jaffe, China's Destiny & Chinese Economic Theory (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947) 76.

¹³ See Chapter Two of China's Desitiny, "The Origins of National Humiliation and sources of the Revolution," Chiang 44.

and presumably also the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, was that these acts should be used to motivate China to develop the strength to avoid such situations in the future. For these early thinkers, especially the leaders of the Guomindang, constantly referencing past humiliations helped construct national unity. Though there is little direct evidence of how the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was perceived under this early nationalist call to arms, given the extent of these strategies, it is easy to believe that such an event was probably viewed through this framework. Indeed, as will be discussed later in this chapter, there is much evidence that the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan has been more recently portrayed in ways that are very much in keeping with the discourse of national humiliation that was started in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Communist Perceptions

Ironically enough, at the same time that the first half of the twentieth century saw the development of a distinct form of Chinese nationalism, it was also a period marked by a further increase in the foreign impingement onto Chinese sovereignty. This intrusion culminated in Japan's 1937 invasion. When, four years after the end of the Japanese occupation, the CCP came to power in 1949, they understandably emphasized their role as the final usurpers of foreign imperialism. According to Cohen, "An important source of legitimation for China's ruling Communists Party was its part in vanquishing imperialism in the 1940s- and the closure this brought to

the country's 'century of humiliation.'"¹⁴ Considering how effective opposition to imperialism had been at stimulating patriotic sentiment under the nationalists, portraying themselves as the final conquerors of imperial influence was a natural and clever stance for the communists to take. This strategy was only more effective at helping to create national allegiance to the party due to the fact that, in 1949, the CCP truly had succeeded in uniting China under one government for the first time in almost forty years. Mao himself expressed this pretension that the communists were the final vanquishers of foreign imperialism. In his opening address at the "First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference" in 1949, the leader stated, "It is because we have defeated the reactionary Kuomintang government backed by U.S. imperialism that this great unity of the whole people has been achieved."¹⁵ By associating the Guomindang (which, ironically, had actually borne the brunt of the burden in fighting the Japanese occupation) with the history of imperial influence in China, Mao clearly portrayed his party as the long-awaited usurpers of imperialism. Mao presumably hoped that, because nationalism and opposing imperialism had been intertwined in China for so long, a final victory over imperialism would be perceived as tantamount to achieving the "unity of the whole people."

In 1949, many people were probably still unsure about whether or not the CCP would actually be successful at finally uniting China. However, after sixty years of communist rule, the common perception is that Mao's ascension to power really

¹⁴ Cohen, China Unbound 148-149.

¹⁵ Mao Ze Dong, "East Asian Studies Documents: Mao proclaims the founding of the PRC," UCLA International Institute (UCLA Center for East Asian Studies) 10 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.international.ucla.edu/eas/documents/mao490921.htm>>.

did represent the end of imperial influence and the reemergence of a strong and sovereign China. Recent nationalist literature (which still relies on ideas of national humiliation) illustrates the continued triumph of Mao's representation of himself as the vanquisher of imperialism at shaping people's perceptions. In the 1996 work Jindai Zhongguo Bainian Guochi Ditu (Maps of Modern China's hundred years of National Humiliation), the author of the preface, wrote:

People were searching for a path of light in the darkness until the Communist party successfully led the democratic revolution, and established the People's Republic, that event finally concluded 100 years of colonialism, and the history of the imperialists enslaving the Chinese people. On September 21, 1949, Comrade Mao Zedong solemnly exclaimed, 'the Chinese people, comprising one quarter of humanity, have now stood up.'"¹⁶

This author truly did believe that Mao's 1949 victory represented the end of Chinese humiliation and the salvation of China. While this author is clearly a nationalist propagandist in his own right, that he was able to still write and publish such polemical words in 1996 speaks to the fact that, for many people, Mao fully succeeded in constructing his ascension to power into the perceived turning point of modern Chinese history.

Given how quick Mao was to use references to foreign imperialism in defining his victory, it might be assumed that under his rule Chinese historians and intellectuals would have continued to emphasize events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan within the discourse of national humiliation. Yet, from 1949 until the start of China's opening in the late-1970s and early 1980s, there was little interest in

¹⁶ Ren min chu ban she, Jin dai Zhongguo bai nian guo chi di tu (Beijing: Ren min chu ban she, 1997) first page of preface. (Unless otherwise noted all quotes from Chinese books are rough translations achieved with the help of Wesleyan University sophomore Guangshuo Yang).

continually referring to such past weakness. Though much of this lack of attention can be explained by the internal turmoil caused by events like the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward, it also speaks to a larger shift in attitudes towards the past. This shift is most notably characterized by a trend among Chinese historians to portray everything in Marxist terms. In their authoritative history of China, first published in 1961, just prior to the Cultural Revolution, Zhu Bian and Jian Bo Zan presented a very perfunctory description of both the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan and the entire Second Opium Wars. The entire description of the events from 1856-1860 took up just two pages, and the destruction was recounted with the single sentence:

Upon entering Beijing the allied forces savagely looted and destroyed, at the magnificent site in northwest Beijing, praised as the ‘garden of a thousand gardens,’ the Emperor’s palace of Yuan Ming Yuan was burned and transformed into ruins.¹⁷

This description was followed by a brief account of the Treaty of Beijing, after which, “The half-colonization of China quickened and deepened.”¹⁸ While this account certainly did demonize the allies by making no mention of either the murder of the British and French prisoners or Lord Elgin’s stated motives, what is most notable is how little attention was actually paid to the destruction. This lack of emphasis is especially noticeable in comparison to the in-depth discussion of the contemporaneous Taiping Rebellion. Zhu and Jian assigned great importance to this movement, writing:

¹⁷ Jian Bo Zan, Zhu Bian, Zhongguo Shi Gangyao (The Essential History of China) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006) 624.

¹⁸ Ibid. 624.

This incident in Chinese history was the largest scale war of the common people that violently attacked the feudal rule, determinedly resisting foreign arms and invaders, they used blood and fire to write their heroic chapter in China's recent history."¹⁹

With its celebration of the Taiping as a movement of the "common people" to overthrow "feudalism," this description implicitly put the rebellion in Marxist terms, clearly revealing the authors' prejudices. Such Marxist rhetoric was sometimes also used to refer to the opium war, and Mao himself wrote, "The preparatory period for taking the first step began with the Opium War in 1840 when China began to change from a feudal into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society."²⁰ Yet, it still seems that for historians attempting to give a triumphant Marxist history of China, a mass movement like the Taiping Rebellion held more attraction than the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan.

Ultimately, Jian and Zhu's account of the Second Opium War reveals how the concerns of Chinese historians had changed since 1949. By the 1960s the Maoist vision of society had so firmly taken hold that revolutionaries must have deemed it less important to use past humiliations, or at least the type of humiliation embodied at Yuan Ming Yuan, to stir up patriotic sentiment. Historians like Jian and Zhu saw themselves (or at least, through radical movements like the Cultural Revolution, were forced to see themselves) as living in the final version of Chinese society. Even though this utopia still depended on fierce nationalism, the communists no longer relied as heavily on the humiliations of the past to drum up this national allegiance (at

¹⁹ Jian and Zhu 658.

²⁰ Dan N. Jacobs, and Hans H. Baerwald, Chinese Communism, Selected Documents (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 64.

least not compared to the other, more sinister means, employed during a movement like the Cultural Revolution). Within history writing, the fact that all Chinese historians now constructed Chinese history into a Marxist dialectic culminating in the triumph of Mao in 1949 also lessened the emphasis that was placed on a specific humiliation like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. The destruction was obviously something felt primarily by the “feudal” Qing, not the Chinese people. As discussed by Edmund S.K. Fung, Marxist historians portrayed the recent history of China as a class struggle against both foreign imperialism, and the feudal Qing rulers.²¹ An event like the foreign destruction of a feudal emperor’s pleasure palace did not directly fit into these narratives. This did not mean, as evidenced by Jian and Zhu’s brief account of the destruction, that when historians referred to the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan they did not still vilify the foreign powers, but it did mean that the humiliating aspects of this sort of event became less important for encouraging nationalism. These perceptions perhaps explain, and are reflected by, the fact that during the period of Mao’s rule the site of Yuan Ming Yuan was allowed to fall into disrepair. Indeed, the first moves to preserve the ruins were not taken until 1976 (the year of Mao’s death).²² If the national humiliation of Yuan Ming Yuan was no longer important, then the physical monuments to such a history were also irrelevant reminders of a forgotten and embarrassing past.

²¹Edmund S.K. Fung, "Post-1949 Chinese Historiography on the 1911 Revolution," Modern China Apr. 1978: 181-214.

²²Wong, Paradise Lost 188.

The Rebirth of National Humiliation

If Mao's China was a utopia, then it was clearly a utopia that was rejected by many Chinese citizens. After Mao's death in 1976, his successor, Deng Xiaoping, immediately introduced dramatic reforms that were to again open up China to the world. With these historic changes the issues of how to retain national allegiance to a government that suddenly appeared questionable would once again emerge. One major way that the communists sought to avoid the possibility of revived dissent was by again stirring up nationalist feelings. As Barmé wrote, in the years following the opening up of China, "The rapid decay of Maoist ideological beliefs and the need for continued stability in the Chinese Communist Party led to an increased reliance on nationalism as a unifying ideology."²³ When looking for a way to stir up this stabilizing nationalism it is unsurprising that the communists once again looked towards the strategy of national humiliation that had served the Guomindang so well fifty years previously. As Cohen explained, "The explosion of writing on *guochi* (national humiliation) at the end of the twentieth century was part of a broader phenomenon of resurgent nationalism that characterized these years."²⁴ This reemergence of nationalist feelings now very often did include the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan as a prime example of national humiliation. Indeed, in the 1980s, and to an even greater extent in the 1990s, the representations of the destruction from a variety of sources tended to emphasize the events of 1860 as a humiliation that should be guarded against in the future. Under this communist conception of the past,

²³ Barmé, In the Red 211.

²⁴ Cohen, China Unbound 167.

the destruction was portrayed as a humiliation for, not just the Qing Empire, but also the common people.

One of the first post-Mao representations of the destruction to play into this revived nationalist discourse was the 1983 film, “*Huo Shao Yuan Ming Yuan*” (The Burning of Yuan Ming Yuan). This melodramatic film (which, though admittedly made in Hong Kong, was widely marketed and shown in China) placed the blame for the defeat of 1860 squarely on the incompetence of the Emperor Xianfeng, who was portrayed as a hopeless opium addict, and the meddling of Cixi.²⁵ Taking a great liberty with historical facts (liberties that even included showing the general San Ko Lin Sin engaging in physical combat with Harry Parkes), the film followed the events that culminated in the British and French march into Beijing.²⁶ As the film progresses it stops being so much about the intrigues of the Qing court as about the disgraces the Chinese people suffered at the hands of the heartless foreigners. In the lead-up to the destruction itself, the British and French were shown raping and pillaging Chinese commoners in the streets of Beijing.²⁷ In yet another liberal portrayal of history these commoners were shown as putting up a heroic, but ultimately futile, resistance to the British army. These humiliations suffered by the people were compared to the Emperor’s position. The narrator explained, “Peace and Prosperity is the monarch’s prerogative, only war and disasters are reserved for the people.”²⁸ In a fashion that revealed the director’s pro-communist tendencies, this

²⁵Liu Xiaoqing, Liang Jiahui, and Li Hanxiang , *Huo shao Yuan ming yuan (The burning of Imperial Palace)*, (Hong Kong: Huan yu lei she lu ying you xian gong si, 2000).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

statement clearly placed the burden of the humiliations on the commoners, and not the Xianfeng emperor.

This film claimed that the British occupied Yuan Ming Yuan while chasing Chinese commoners who had fought the British soldiers.²⁹ The narrator explained that Lord Elgin subsequently decided to burn the palace because, “The ‘Master’ won’t allow them to plunder.”³⁰ At least according to the accounts given by Lord Elgin and all of the British (and for that matter most of the Chinese) histories, this explanation was far from historically accurate. As the final destruction was graphically demonstrated, the narrator recounted the main political message of the film. He explained, “Fire sears shame into every Chinese face and stamps profound hatred on every Chinese heart...Fire destroys the palace, but awakens countless people from their dreams.”³¹ With these words, the film had most clearly secured itself a place in the new, communist, discourse of national humiliation. Throughout, the film used manipulations of historical facts to exaggerate the humiliating effects of the 1860 campaign on the heroic commoners, and these final words made this goal explicit. The narrator’s words implied that the humiliation suffered at Yuan Ming Yuan served as a stimulant for the future overthrow of the imperialists by the commoners and, subsequently, the Communist Party. This film was a clear attempt at reminding Chinese viewers of the horrible humiliations they had been forced to endure before the communists came to power. With its very existence, *Huo Shao*

²⁹ Liu Xiaoqing, Liang Jiahui, and Li Hanxiang, *Huo shao Yuan ming yuan (The burning of Imperial Palace)*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Yuan Ming Yuan spoke to the fact that, by 1983, it had once again been deemed acceptable to use the humiliations of the past to revive nationalist sentiments. Furthermore, the type of nationalism produced by this film was directly designed to help stimulate allegiance with the CCP.

Distorted representations of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan were not confined to melodramatic films, but also emerged in ostensibly serious history writing. In his 1991 article, “Di er ci Yopian Zhanzheng zai Zhongguo Shi shang de Diwei,” published by the *Renmin Daxue* (a fairly prestigious university in Beijing) university press, Zhao Xi Rong also highlighted, to the point of exaggeration, the humiliation of 1860. Zhao stated his Marxist perspective at the outset by quoting an article by Marx referring to the importance of the Opium Wars in forcing China out of feudalism.³² He then explained:

During 1860 the Qing government (and the Chinese people) received and unprecedented humiliation. The foreign armies flames of war extended into Beijing, burned Yuan Ming Yuan, and forced the Qing to sign the Treaty of Peking, which had great political influence.³³

In Zhao’s retelling, the events of 1860 were an extremely important turning point in China’s history, mainly as a humiliation that sparked Qing decline. This was coupled with the specific failure to mention the murder of the allied prisoners when describing Elgin’s reasons for destroying the palace. Though Zhao did use a quote from Elgin in which the prisoners were mentioned, the conclusion that he ultimately settled on was, “How is this talk (Elgin’s) accurate and correct? They burned Yuan Ming Yuan to

³² Zhao Xi Rong. “Di er ci Yopian Zhanzhen zai Zhongguo Jindai Shi shang de Diwei” (The Second Opium War in the Modern History of China) (*Zhongguo Jindai Shi*. Beijing: Zhongguo ren min da xue, 1991) 52.

³³ *Ibid.* 53.

express their ‘military success.’”³⁴ Zhao’s article was most notable for how it presented itself as an accurate and objective historical account, yet still managed to portray the events in such a way that played into feelings of humiliation. This retroactive humiliation fits easily with the more overtly nationalist sentiments expressed in a work like *Huo Shao Yuan Ming Yuan*. Indeed, Zhao himself made clear the connection between the Second Opium War, as he perceived it, and feelings of nationalism. He wrote, “Chinese nationalism, according to my history, started from the opium war, and especially after the second opium war.”³⁵ Ultimately Zhao’s article is an example of how, during the final decades of the twentieth century, the discourse of national humiliation was so pervasive that even works that were not directly political, and contained definite academic pretensions, could still easily be interpreted as helping to serve nationalistic purposes.

Post-Tiananmen Representations

Zhao’s article, written in 1991, was part of a gradual shift towards relying on nationalism for ensuring national unity. This shift was largely due to both the pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in 1989, and the world’s reaction to the government’s subsequent crackdown. During this period, parties both at home and abroad were actively questioning the authority of the CCP. Consequently, the

³⁴ Zhao 54.

³⁵ Ibid. 57.

authorities went to great lengths to make sure that the state did not unravel.

According to Cohen:

In the aftermath of 1989 there was a felt, if unstated, need on the part of the Chinese government to come up with a new legitimating ideology to burnish the rapidly dimming luster of the original Marxist-Leninist-Maoist vision...the logical candidate for the fulfillment of this function was nationalism.³⁶

After 1989, the CCP saw a need to counter both the rapidly spreading international view that the communists were losing their grip on power, and any possible continuation of internal questioning. This desire was paired with the coming fiftieth anniversary of the victory over Japan, and the prospect of the British handover of Hong Kong in 1997, to produce a situation that was ripe for increased nationalist sentiment. Cohen recounted how, partially in response to this context, the 1990s saw an even greater reemergence of nationalist writing than in the period immediately following the end of Mao's regime.³⁷ It follows that the body of national humiliation writing that emerged in the 1990s tended to directly refer to this tumultuous context.

Indeed, the author of the preface to Jindai Zhongguo Bainian Guochi Ditu wrote:

Last year was the 50th anniversary of the victory of the world's people in the war against Fascism and also the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese people in the War or Resistance against Japan. Next year will bring the 60th anniversary of the July 7th incident and also the joyous day of the return of Hong Kong to the motherland. Recalling the national humiliation at this time has special significance because for people who have grown accustomed to living in time of peace, especially the generation of youth born after the war, it is difficult to grasp the true meaning on national humiliation and the intense pain

³⁶ Cohen, China Unbound 167.

³⁷ Cohen, China Unbound 166-167.

occasioned by the defeat of the nation and the destruction of the family.³⁸

This passage spoke directly to both the historical context of the 1990s, and the corresponding perceived need to remind the new generation of the past humiliations. It can only be assumed that this trend was a direct reflection of concerns that the new generation, influenced by international opinion and the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, would be inclined to criticize the Communist Party if they were not reminded of China's humiliating past. Unsurprisingly, the instructive form that this emphasis took was very similar to the framework originally provided in the first decades of the twentieth century—namely, that the humiliations should serve as motivation for the future. The author of the Jindai Zhongguo Bainian Guochi Ditu preface wrote, “Past experience, if not forgotten, is a guide for the future. We need to review history and not forget the national humiliation!”³⁹ Ultimately, the tumultuous events of the 1990s called for a new accentuation of the importance of nationalism. The form that this nationalism took was largely a restatement of the goals of earlier Chinese nationalists. Now, however, there was a greater emphasis on the role that studying national humiliation should have in revealing the continued need for the authority of the anti-imperialist communist government.

The destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was one example of China's humiliating past that was continually referred to in the new nationalist literature of the 1990s. Indeed, the cover illustration of Jindai Zhongguo Bainian Guochi Ditu included a very prominently placed photograph of the decaying ruins of the palace.

³⁸ Jindai Zhongguo Bainian Guochi Ditu preface, quoted in Cohen China Unbound168.

³⁹ Jindai Zhongguo Bainian Guochi Ditu preface, quoted in Cohen China Unbound168.

Additionally, the avowedly patriotic book Guochi bei Wang Lu: Zhongguo Jindai shi shang de bu Pingdeng Tiaoyue (Never forget national humiliation: The unequal treaties in China's modern history), by He Yu, dedicated an entire chapter to the Second Opium War and the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. In addition to the standard failure to mention the Chinese murder of the allied prisoners, he also misrepresented the 1860 conflict more widely. According to He's interpretation, the battle at the Dagu forts was, "completely the result of Britain and France's premeditated provocation."⁴⁰ Although it could be argued that Bruce's decision to travel by warship to Tianjin inevitably did lead to the battle, it is certain that such an event was not desired or premeditated (as discussed in the first chapter, Bruce expressed surprise over at least the result of the battle). Bruce merely wanted to exchange the treaties in the manner that he saw fitting, not necessarily to cause another war.

He's account of the destruction itself further exemplified this tendency to misconstrue the facts in order to exaggerate the impact of the humiliation. He wrote that the palace was assuredly destroyed to, "Give the Qing Emperor a severe punishment, and also to leave behind an unforgettable mark."⁴¹ While this interpretation might ironically be closer to truth than many of the British history books on the subject, not mentioning the murder of the prisoners does not do justice to either the true historical situation or the stated reasons given by Lord Elgin. He then went on to make the claim that, "The British and French 'atrocities' of looting and

⁴⁰ He Yu, Guo chi bei wang lu Zhongguo jin dai shi shang di bu ping deng tiaoyue (Never forget national humiliation: The unequal treaties in China's modern history) (Xin hua shu dian Beijing fa xing suo jing xiao, 1995) 93.

⁴¹ He 98.

burning Yuan Ming Yuan encountered not only the rage of Chinese people, but the severe criticism of progressives from around the world.”⁴² This interpretation exaggerated both the international reaction to the destruction, and, more tellingly, its impact on the consciousness of the Chinese population in 1860. Instead of just portraying British actions in 1860 as unsavory and reprehensible military acts designed to punish the Qing, He’s work depicted the conflict, including the destruction, in such a way as to fit it into a wider discussion of imperialist injustices committed against all Chinese people. This representation serves as a clear example of how, in the 1990s, past injustices like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan were again emphasized as grave national humiliations to help stir up nationalist sentiment.

Physical Reminders

Walking around the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan today one cannot help but notice that the site is presented and constructed in a very purposeful manner. The specific way that the ruins have been physically transformed into a monument and tourist attraction has itself played a role in shaping Chinese perceptions of the past embodied at Yuan Ming Yuan.

Lowenthal claimed that any treatment of the physical past inevitably alters it,⁴³ and that these alterations are often consciously carried out in order to suggest specific historical interpretations. To Lowenthal, these attempts at interpreting the

⁴² He 99.

⁴³ Lowenthal 264.

past are omnipresent, appearing most visibly when historical sites and artifacts are displayed to the public.⁴⁴ This availability of historical interpretation necessarily influences the ways that people view the past. He wrote, “It is clear that the more interpretation becomes available, the more people rely on it; they imbibe history in comfort in heritage centres and are seldom conscious of, or worried about, the alterations of the past that interpretation implies.”⁴⁵ According to Lowenthal, most people are either unconcerned, or fail to recognize, that the physical presentations of monuments carry clear interpretations, and, consequently, alterations of the past. The willingness of the public to unquestioning rely on these interpretations subsequently gives the presentation of historical sites great power in shaping common views of past. Accepting these assumptions, the ways that the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan have been presented to tourists has necessarily contributed to people’s perceptions of the site’s history. Unsurprising, this presentation clearly has (and still does) fit into the wider nationalist narrative that has emphasized the destruction as a humiliation for all of China.

The history of Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park as a tourist attraction stretches back only to 1976. In this year, coinciding with both Mao’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Yuan Ming Yuan Management Office was founded to oversee the preservation of the ruins.⁴⁶ According to Young-Tsu Wong, the first actions taken to preserve the palace occurred in 1980, a date taken advantage of as the 120th anniversary of the burning, at a symposium of the Chinese Association of

⁴⁴Lowenthal 271.

⁴⁵Ibid. 273.

⁴⁶Wong, Paradise Lost 188.

Architects.⁴⁷ The decisions made at this meeting laid the foundation for the future efforts at preservation. This timeline of the preservation efforts is itself reflective of the new interests in Chinese nationalism that surfaced after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Now that Chinese nationalism was regaining importance in China's cultural discourse, there was renewed attention paid to sites like Yuan Ming Yuan.

The way that Yuan Ming Yuan was developed as a tourist attraction clearly bore the influence of these nationalist sentiments, specifically, the idea of "national humiliation." This influence is reflected by the fact that the early preservation efforts, which started in 1984, focused on the ruins of the European-style buildings. Wong wrote of this focus:

Clearly this particular site was chosen because it retained some visible remnants and rocks from the fallen Baroque buildings, which testified to the history of national humiliation, not to mention that the broken gigantic rock pieces displayed a solemn look.⁴⁸

According to Wong, the European style buildings became a focus of preservation efforts particularly because their highly visible ruined state was the most immediately noticeable reminder of the humiliations suffered in 1860. The vast majority of the palace structures were wooden and, by the 1980s, the process of disintegration (not to mention looting from both Chinese and foreigners) had been so complete that it was only the scattered stones of the European style buildings that remained as direct proof of the destruction. Tellingly, though preservation efforts were focused on these buildings, these efforts did not include much reconstruction. Indeed, Wong described how, at a symposium in 1982, a conscious decision was made to, "Leave the broken

⁴⁷ Wong, *Paradise Lost* 189.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 192.

rocks as they were so as to retain ‘a pathetic image of the ruins park.’⁴⁹ This did not mean that the stones were left haphazardly laying around, rather, they were carefully arranged to create a, as Wong put it, “Monument to the ruins.”⁵⁰ When one surveys the site today it becomes clear that the goal of creating a dramatic testament to the destruction was achieved. Once they have paid the additional entrance fee to this section of the park, tourists are left to wander around the remains of structures that are undeniably utterly destroyed, yet still recognizable as formerly spectacular palaces.



When viewing these arranged remains, as exemplified by the mock ruins of Dashuifa (Great Fountain)⁵¹ pictured above,⁵² it is hard for tourists not to experience a sense of loss for what must have once been spectacular structures. This part of the park is

⁴⁹ Wong, Paradise Lost 192.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 191.

⁵¹ Ibid. 191.

⁵² Personal photograph, Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park, July 2008.

immediately evocative of the pain and destruction that was wrought by Lord Elgin's forces in 1860. Given that preserving this area in its ruined state had always been the main focus of the park, it is clear that such feelings are far from inadvertent, but instead, are actually intended to be an important part of a visit to Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park.

Beyond just being designed to elicit feelings of pain and loss among viewers, the way that Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park has been constructed is also explicit in instructing tourists on how they should understand the past that occurred there. A sign placed at the entrance to European-style buildings reads, in both Chinese and English:

Every carved stone work at the exhibition would tell visitors both at home and abroad the heavy history of China at the time. Those works give a full expression to the consummate skill of art of the ancient Chinese labouring people. And they at the same time sharply denounce the imperialist crimes, arouse our patriotic enthusiasm and warn every Chinese to bear in mind the heavy historic *lesson* that if we fall behind, we'll be beaten and allowed to be trampled upon.⁵³

That this message could have been taken almost word for word from any of the previously discussed works emphasizing national humiliation speaks to how the park was constructed to fit with this nationalist discourse. This sign directly instructs viewers that they should feel a patriotic anger when looking on the ruins, and subsequently use these painful emotions to help stimulate national strength. If anything, the sign, given its placement among the ruins, is far more effective at stirring up nationalist sentiment than any book or movie could ever hope to be. With

⁵³ Sign at Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park, English version, Personally transcribed, 2008.

the painful consequences of national weakness directly at hand, such a call to strength is sure to have real resonance for Chinese tourists.

Considering the constant reinforcement of the discourse of national humiliation from various sources, including the presentation of Yuan Ming Yuan as a monument, it is not surprising that many visitors to the park have internalized such patriotic sentiments. From my conversations with Chinese tourists in the summer of 2008, it becomes clear that some people really do view the palace as a symbol of humiliation – a humiliation that can, and must, be avoided through national strength. When asked what they learned from a visit to Yuan Ming Yuan, a common response among tourists was that China had to now become a strong nation to avoid such humiliations in the future.⁵⁴ One such tourist from Shandong Province replied:

When we were dropped behind the time in late Qing and the government was corrupted and weak, so foreigners were able to invade us. They robbed what they could seize and burnt down what they could not take. It was such a shame for all Chinese. And we have to build a stronger nation.⁵⁵

Such sentiments reveal that the discourse of national humiliation, at least when in an environment so explicitly constructed as a “monument to the ruins” as Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park, actually has succeeded in increasing nationalistic feelings among some people. Although such conversations are admittedly beset with numerous problems, especially considering my status as a foreigner with minimal language skills, they can be viewed as a casual indicator of the feelings evoked at Yuan Ming Yuan for at least some visitors. The content of such feelings point to the success that

⁵⁴ Anonymous (I am withholding names), Conversations, Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park, July 13, 2008. (Conducted with the help of Peking University student Zhang Zeyi and translated with the help of Wesleyan University student Guangshuo Yang)

⁵⁵ Anonymous, Conversations, Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park, July 13, 2008.

both the designers of the park, and probably also the authors of national humiliation literature, have had had at using the humiliation of an event like the 1860 destruction to stimulate national allegiance. At least some Chinese visitors to the palace have, as Lowenthal might have described, chosen to unquestioningly rely on the interpretations of history that have been presented to them.

While the type of nationalism evoked by a site like Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park is obviously centered on feelings of shame and humiliation, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that such monuments are also testaments to Chinese cultural glory. This ability to evoke a glorious past almost certainly also contributes to feelings of nationalism, and is actually closely connected to the lessons of humiliation. Yuan Ming Yuan was a spectacular achievement, and even the combination of a horrible act of destruction and 150 years of neglect has not been enough to completely wipe away reminders of this glory. Even if the ruins of the European-style buildings dominate the park, the vast majority of land is actually devoted to pathways winding through gardens, lakes, and small reconstructed buildings.



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⁵⁶ Personal photograph, Yuan Ming Yuan Ruins Park, July 2008.

It is difficult to imagine that all visitors come to the park solely to see a solemn monument to humiliation, and it is likely that the surrounding gardens themselves serve as an attraction for visitors hoping to see something of the palace's past glory. According to a book titled, Yuanmingyuan Park-An Eternal Monument, bought in the park gift-shop:

Over the past decade, they have repaired bridges, paved roads, cleared lakes, and reforested hills... Thus visitors from all over the world can now capture some of the original beauty of this summer resort, and appreciate the glamour of more than a dozen replicas of ancient buildings.⁵⁷

These efforts, which the authors of this work were clearly proud of, do not directly focus on national humiliation, but instead reflect an attempt at evoking some sense of the palace's past grandeur. The attempts to beautify the park also speak to Chinese nationalism, but do so in a very different way than the ruins of the European-style buildings. Instead of appealing to a sense of humiliation to stimulate national allegiance, they ask Chinese visitors to have pride in what their culture had previously been able to accomplish.

Perhaps the best example of this appeal to Chinese pride can be found at Yi He Yuan, the section of Yuan Ming Yuan that Cixi repaired in 1888. This palace is now a far more popular tourist attraction than Yuan Ming Yuan. Unlike Yuan Ming Yuan, Yi He Yuan has been fully preserved and, other than the odd plaque mentioning that the palace had been destroyed in 1860, there are few reminders of its violent past. Instead, it stands merely as a symbol of Chinese palace building

⁵⁷ Zhang Enmeng, et al., Yuanmingyuan Park An Eternal Monument (Chinese/English edition), (Beijing: New World Press, 2002) 7.

proress. This different purpose that Yi He Yuan has been designed to serve is illuminated by a guidebook to the palace that reads:

The garden was reborn after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The government of New China has been funding since 1951 to thoroughly renovate all ramshackle buildings and scenic spots according to the original designs and bring them back to their former grandeur.⁵⁸

These statements point to the fact that the entire preservation effort at Yi He Yuan has, unlike the projects at Yuan Ming Yuan, been directed towards restoring the palace's glory. This guide book is also telling in the way that it associates the start of the preservation efforts with Mao's take over in 1949. The Communists are described as the protectors and restorers of imperial glory. Although the appeals to national humiliation found amongst the ruins at Yuan Ming Yuan are more directly political, these claims to the past grandeur of Chinese civilization also serve their own political purpose. This is especially true considering that the Communists are portrayed as the guardians of that civilization. At Yi He Yuan Chinese people are asked to be proud of both what their civilization accomplished in the past (even if that past was far from the communist utopia of modern China), and also, their newly strong present that has allowed for the protection of that past.

The pride in preserving the past found at Yi He Yuan could actually be seen as related to the nationalist discourse of national humiliation found at Yuan Ming Yuan. Where Yuan Ming Yuan serves as a reminder for the dangers that come with a weak China, Yi He Yuan serves as a symbol of Chinese cultural accomplishment,

⁵⁸ The Summer Palace (Chinese/English & More Edition) (Beijing: China Nationality Art Photograph House, 2003) 6.

and, perhaps, the ability of the Chinese to overcome the humiliations of the past. At the same time that the strength embodied at Yi He Yuan appears secure, considering how seriously the idea of learning from national humiliation has been taken by many Chinese people it is likely that it is not taken for granted. Instead, it is presumably viewed as contingent on maintaining a strong and united nation. If recent nationalists have been at all successful, then the ideas “taught” at Yuan Ming Yuan park should drive Chinese people to support the central government so that the cultural glories represented by Yi He Yuan, and to a lesser extent the restored areas of Yuan Ming Yuan, can never again be threatened by foreign invaders.

Conclusions

For the past century, ever since the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the idea of national humiliation has continually been a focus Chinese nationalist discourses. Nationalists have emphasized China’s humiliation at the hands of foreign powers in order to explain why China must shape itself into a united and strong nation. Presumably, if the Chinese learned from events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, then they could create a better future where such injustices were impossible. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, moments like the destruction did spark moves for reform from Qing officials, these reactions were not national in character. Instead, it was nationalists hoping to create a new China who looked to humiliations of the past as a possibly unifying force.

This movement first got its intellectual definition in the period prior to the Second World War, and then was shaped by changing communist aspirations in the late 1970s to reach its current form. While Mao clearly emphasized his role as the usurper of foreign imperialism, under his rule, the national humiliation embodied at a place like Yuan Ming Yuan became less important for defining nationalism. It was not until the absolute authority of the party began to be called into question after Mao's death, and the following reform movement, that nationalism, and national humiliation, reemerged as useful tools at retaining power. These renewed nationalist concerns were further amplified by the turmoil of 1989 and the pro-democracy movement, and, subsequently, the 1990s saw a great expansion in the number of nationalist writings.

As a prime example of imperial injustice, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan was often referred to within this discourse of national humiliation. A vast majority of the works of "history" that addressed the events of 1860 inevitably distorted events to make the destruction more easily serve as a nationalist symbol. Indeed, even the physical presentation of Yuan Ming Yuan as a tourist attraction has been specifically designed to serve these nationalist aims.

Though distorting history to serve nationalist purposes appears as anathema to Western historians, this stance is somewhat hypocritical considering that the twentieth century British history writing on the destruction has, as discussed in Chapter Three (and to be taken up to a greater extent in the conclusion), constructed its own narrative to serve British historians' own concerns. Obviously this process did not have as many overt nationalist implications as that of Chinese thinkers, but

that does not mean that it is in no way comparable. In some ways the Chinese distortion is actually more easily explainable. The destruction was an incredibly violent and traumatic event (even if in 1860 it did not actually have many “national” ramifications), and it is perfectly understandable that Chinese nationalists trying to construct some sense of unity would find a way to turn it into a rallying point. Additionally, considering the minimal treatment such events have received from British historians, the Chinese emphasis and exaggeration of this past could even be seen as perhaps a reaction to the West’s failure to extensively acknowledge the violence of its imperialism in China. Even though it is doubtful that many Chinese nationalists have read British histories of the Second Opium War, the fact that the West has never put much emphasis on its imperial past in China surely played into feelings, real or constructed, of national humiliation.

Ultimately, the Chinese use of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan to help stimulate nationalism is almost the exact inverse of the goal Elgin had in mind when he burned the palace. Rather than teaching the Chinese a lesson about how to behave according to Western standards, the destruction actually provided just one more example for why it was necessary to reject the West. Instead of just forgetting this past injustice, a task that would have proved nearly impossible considering that the ruins are located just outside of Beijing, Chinese nationalists took possession of it and made it a “positive” force. Obviously such a process necessitated grave distortions that raised new problems, many of which continue to the present day. However, assuming that emphasizing national humiliation might have had a real role in helping

Chinese people throw off the emotional yoke of imperialism, it cannot have been an entirely bad thing, even if it has been bad “history.”

Conclusion

In the preceding survey of both historical and non-historical interpretations of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, I have intended to reveal how this event has been both remembered and historicized by the British and Chinese since 1860. These interpretations have obviously changed greatly over time and have always interacted with, and sometimes even helped in some small way to create, their contemporaneous cultural climates. For the British, these representations have most often reflected the changing British views on their empire. For the Chinese, they have helped reveal, first, the Qing reaction to foreign imperialism, and then later, how this history of foreign intrusion has featured into nationalist narratives. Though this survey perhaps most obviously points to conclusions about how contemporary concerns in Britain and China have shaped both historical writing and historical memory, given the importance that events such as the destruction still have in helping to shape Chinese nationalism, interpretations of this extraordinary event also have further ramifications for any analysis of how China relates to the Western world. Far from being consigned to the realm of history writing, the efforts of Chinese nationalists have insured instances of Western imperialism like the sack of Yuan Ming Yuan have continued to remain pertinent to any analysis of Chinese attitudes towards the West. While understanding the Chinese uses of this past appears most immediately significant to such a discussion, in order to hope to achieve any real understanding of

China's complicated relationship with the West it is equally important to examine the Western, here British, views on their past imperial presence in China. Indeed, after examining how a Western nation like Britain has historicized a violent act like the destruction of the palace, it immediately becomes clear that it is unfair to blindly criticize the Chinese for their distortions of history. Western, British, historians have also, albeit much more subtly, distorted the imperial encounter with China.

Memory, History, and Distorting the Past

The 1860 burning of Yuan Ming Yuan was an incredibly destructive act that was carried out for a variety of reasons. This decision was more than just, as Lord Elgin and most of the other British soldiers involved claimed, an emotional reaction to the Chinese murder of British and French prisoners. Instead, it should also be seen as an act that, while extraordinary, was very much in keeping with both a campaign, and a more general policy, that had been designed from its outset to punish the Chinese for their perceived insolence. This campaign of punishment, of which the destruction is far and away the most remarkable act, served the pedagogical function of forcing the Chinese to deal with the British in ways that, though sometimes portrayed as the proper manner as determined by "the law of nations,"¹ accorded completely to the British will. As James L. Hevia has pointed out, this pedagogical use of violent destruction would have been impossible without racist discourses that portrayed the

¹ James Hope Grant, Henry Knollys ed., Incidents in the China War of 1860, Comp. from the Private Journals of General Sir Hope Grant (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and sons, 1875) 205.

Chinese as backward students in need of civilized British teachers.² In addition to this racial interpretation of events, there is also strong evidence to suggest that, as discussed in Chapter One, the decision to burn the palace was as much influenced by practical military concerns as by either an emotional desire for revenge or a perceived need for violent education.

Although I have presented this interpretation of the destruction as somehow more correct than many of those analyzed in this thesis, it is important to reiterate the tendentious nature of all history writing. As Paul Cohen (echoing many other recent historians and theorists) wrote, “No matter how much of the original, experienced past historians choose or are able to build into their narratives, what they end up with will, in specific and identifiable ways, be different from the past.”³ Ultimately, all history writing is divorced from the event it is trying to represent, and each interpretation should properly be viewed as just one more “narrative” of the past. This being said, after a survey of the historical representations of 1860, it is clear that many of the interpretations of the destruction have gone beyond just constructing narratives to actively distorting the past. Within this historiography, the distortion of the past has been especially evident due to the fact that many of the sources used make no claim to be objective histories. Though these sources are not as objective as the work of professional historians, that does not mean they should be discounted. As Raphael Samuel has said, historians are not the sole, or even necessarily the most authoritative, guardians of the past. Instead, “history,” as it is perceived within

² James Louis Hevia, English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)102.

³Paul A Cohen, History in Three Keys: The Boxers As Event, Experience, and Myth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 3.

society, is also a product of non-academic representations.⁴ Indeed, these less academic representations have reflected and interacted with the work of avowed historians. Despite his more formal language, the narrative professed by a historian like Zhao Xi Rong is actually quite similar to that found in the film *Huo Shao Yuan Ming Yuan* in the way that it manipulates “facts” to achieve very clear ideological ends. This being said, academic histories admittedly are less inclined towards explicit ideological distortions than other sources.

An examination of modern Chinese sources, the majority of which were not the sort of professional histories that emerged in the West, on *Yuan Ming Yuan* reiterates that some forms of historical representation are more likely to distort the past than others. In the twentieth century, many Chinese representations of the destruction began to actively use past instances of imperialism in China within a discourse of “national humiliation” that explicitly served nationalist aims. To achieve these aims various sources distorted the history of the destruction. This phenomenon was quite different from the previous, more apolitical, interpretations that emerged under the Qing dynasty. Obviously all Chinese discussions of the destruction were not propagandist in nature, and there were some professional historians who wrote on the event. However, as previously discussed, the work of these historians often reflected the same ideological concerns as the propagandists, a situation that reiterates how all forms of representing the past are immediately suspect to some distortion.

While the distortion of the 1860 destruction committed in the name of reinforcing Chinese nationalism is an obvious misrepresentation of the past, the

⁴ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994) 8.

British historiography of the destruction, which since at least the middle of the twentieth century has been couched in terms of objectively representing the past, is also testament to the constructed nature of all history writing. This distortion through the process of historicization is immediately apparent from the comparison between the way that Lord Elgin's decision was contested by a variety of sources in the nineteenth century and the relatively standard interpretive framework adopted by twentieth century historians. Considering that the 1960 interpretation of a "professional" historian like E.W.R. Lumby was so vastly different from that presented in an 1861 parliamentary debate by the politician Vincent Scully, it becomes immediately clear there is no "standard" representation of this event. Instead, later British historians created their own narratives. Obviously part of this change in interpretation was due to the fact that the distance in time allowed for a more dispassionate reading of the evidence. Additionally, professional historians like Hurd and Lumby held themselves to standards of "objectivity" that a politician like Scully clearly did not share. However, when Lumby's views are further compared to those of other, more critical, twentieth-century historians, like Beeching for example, it becomes clear that his interpretation was still very subjective. This subjectivity reveals that the British historians could distort the history of destruction just as easily as the Chinese nationalists. Though the distortions created by twentieth-century British historical narratives were far more subtle, and probably unconscious, than those of the creators of a work like *Huo Shao Yuan Ming Yuan*, they certainly did exist.

British Nationalism and Imperial Historiography

Though calling into question the authority of British historical interpretations of the destruction is far from revelatory, what is interesting is how at least some of these narratives have fit into imperial and post-imperial British conceptions of the nation. That the early, whiggish, histories of men like the Earl of Meath, served the propagandist goal of glorifying the Empire is fairly obvious, but the way that later, more academic, works fit into post-imperial British national identity does require further expansion. These interactions between British history and British nationalism have never been nearly as explicit as those seen from China, but in some ways the different functions of history within British and Chinese national discourses are not entirely opposed to each other.

Assuming that all history writing is divorced from the actual past and each historical account is, admitting the danger of hyperbole, merely an invented “verbal fiction,”⁵ it is clear that “history” constantly interacts with the cultural context that it emerges from. Based on this assumption, the majority interpretation of British historians that the events of 1860 were the results of a “cultural confusion” inevitably points to late twentieth century British views of their imperial past. In order to uncover these views in relation to British history writing, it is important to first realize that the British Empire did not suddenly die after Indian independence in 1947, or the Suez crisis in 1956, or any of the other dates commonly referred to as

⁵ Hayden V. White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 82.

marking the end of empire. Instead, both reminders of imperialism and even imperial attitudes continued to persist throughout the second half of twentieth century. This persistence of imperialism within British culture is partially due to the mere fact that decolonization was an incredibly long process. Even after the majority of British imperial dominions gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, it would not be until 1997 and the handover of Hong Kong that the process could truly be said to come to an end (though maybe still not *the* end). While the length of the decolonization process explains why any historian writing about the British Empire would have had to reckon with the fact that imperial concerns still affected British society, it does not completely explain why imperialist pride continued to be revived in public arenas long after the Empire had started its long decline.

Perhaps the best example of how difficult it was for Britain to let go of its imperialist aspirations was the 1982 Falklands War. During this short conflict Margaret Thatcher's conservative government responded to Argentina's invasion of these scarcely inhabited south Atlantic islands with a decisive, and popular,⁶ two-month long military campaign. From a British perspective, what is most notable about this distant conflict is how easily it was turned into a nationalist cause by the Thatcher government. Stuart Hall claimed that these appeals to imperialist nationalism were part of an effort to divert attention away from Britain's economic troubles.⁷ Hall wrote, "As the country drifts deeper into recession, we seem to possess no other viable vocabulary in which to cast our sense of who the British

⁶ After the conflict a poll showed 52% of manual workers, who traditionally voted for Labour, were willing to vote Conservative. See: Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988) 69.

⁷ Hall 68-69.

people are and where they are going, except one drawn from the inventory of lost imperial greatness.”⁸ According to Hall, the popular nationalist sentiments that surrounded this military expedition to recover a group of barren and unimportant islands stank of an effort to recover imperial glory in the face of an uncertain present. Although the Thatcher government deserves the majority of the blame for its portrayal of the expedition as a military and nationalist necessity, the success of these efforts would have been impossible without the continued importance of the Empire in defining, “who the British are.” As Hall elegantly explained, “Empires come and go. But the imagery of the British Empire seems destined to go on forever. The imperial flag has been hauled down in a hundred different corners of the globe. But it is still flying in the collective unconscious.”⁹ Ultimately, the nationalist reaction to the Falklands conflict is one of the clearest examples of how desires for empire did not necessarily end with massive decolonization, but continued to persist as a major factor in British nationalism for years to come.

Given that some British nationalist sentiments were based on the need for defending the Empire into at least the 1980s, it is not surprising that the works of men like Hurd and Lumby in the 1960s did not necessarily contradict views that glorified the Empire. Their presentation of the events of 1860 as the result of a cultural confusion between the xenophobic Chinese and the idealistic British, who supposedly fought for the sanctity of free trade and international law, immediately opened the door for a wider defense of British imperial practices. This is especially true in the case of Lumby and his staunch defense of Elgin as a well-intentioned victim of his

⁸ Hall 68.

⁹ Ibid. 68.

circumstances. Although Lumby and Hurd did portray the events as a horrible tragedy, their interpretations were far from complete denunciations of British policy. Failures such as this inevitably allowed memories of British imperialism, even in a context as difficult to defend as the Second Opium War, to remain at least partially untarnished. Obviously it cannot be claimed that Hurd and Lumby either explicitly manipulated history for nationalist purposes or that their interpretations directly contributed to the continued reemergence of imperialist nationalism in instances like the Falklands conflict. Yet, their efforts certainly did reflect the continued belief in the validity of imperial ideals within British collective consciousness. Just as the British public had not completely left behind their pride in the Empire, in the second half of the twentieth-century mainstream British historians still did not comprehensively denounce the violence of imperialism in places like China.

The tacit defense of imperialism evident in much of the British historiography of Yuan Ming Yuan can be connected to the continued glorification of imperialism in British nationalist discourses. However, it is difficult to find evidence that British nationalism has continued to rely on pride in either the past Empire or the present Commonwealth throughout the entirety of the twentieth century. This obviously does not mean that the imperial past does not still effect British national consciousness, just that it now operates in more complex and obscure ways than it did in instances like the Falklands conflict. Within the British historiography, the fact that Jack Gray's 2002 Short Oxford History of the Modern World revived Hurd and Lumby's interpretation of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan being the result of a cultural

conflict reflects the different, more subtle, type of imperial influence that still persists in British society.

More than anything else, the relatively static nature of the British historiography points to the fact that the British are yet to truly deal with their imperial legacy in comprehensive ways. This claim has been most coherently made by the sociologist Paul Gilroy in his attempt to answer the question of why it is that the British victory over the Nazis in World War Two has continued to have such a hold on British self-understanding when so much else of importance has happened in the subsequent sixty years.¹⁰ The conclusion that Gilroy reached is that, “This is done so that Brits can know who we are as well as who we were and then become certain that we are still good while our uncivilized enemies are irredeemably evil.”¹¹ While this claim is not in itself surprising, it necessarily raises the subsequent question of why both the imperial past, and the shocks of decolonization, have been absent from British nationalist discourse. According to Gilroy, this history of imperialism and decolonization has simply proved too ambiguous to deal with and, as a result, it has been far easier to emphasize something like the defeat of the Nazis as uncontroversial proof that Britons are in fact still “good.” He wrote:

Once the history of the empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than work through those feelings, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then if possible, actively forgotten.¹²

Gilroy has properly recognized that it is difficult to justify violent events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, and that, accordingly, the history of imperialism has

¹⁰Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 87-88.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 88.

¹² *Ibid.* 90.

been distorted to protect the British psyche from such moral minefields. Instead of finding a place for the truth of empire in modern Britain, many British techniques of remembering the past have allowed for continued dreams of British national strength, which often revolve around victory in the Second World War.

Beyond just the fact that there simply are not many works discussing the war with China, in its continued reliance on old tropes and interpretations, much of the British historiography of the 1860 campaign is exemplary of Gilroy's claims that the actual experiences of empire have been diminished in recent British memory. By portraying the destruction as the result of a series of "cultural confusions" that culminated in the murder of the British prisoners, historians from Hurd to Gray have denied the possibility that Lord Elgin's decision was nothing other than the final act of violence in an unwarranted war fought to achieve financial gains for an unjust empire. While this interpretation itself suffers from oversimplification (see chapter one), from the commonly held Western-liberal perspective that imperialism is inherently wrong, it is difficult to argue that it is incorrect. Even though it is almost certain that, as an Oxford historian writing in 2002, Jack Gray shared this perspective on the injustices of imperialism, his methods served only to obfuscate the issue. Gilroy described this phenomenon in British history writing more generally when he wrote that:

The invitation to revise and reassess often triggers a chain of defensive argumentation that seeks firstly to minimize the extent of the empire, then to deny or justify its brutal character, and finally, to present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims in their extraordinary imperial successes.¹³

¹³ Gilroy 94.

According to Gilroy, all the historical interpretations that have attempted to explain and give contextual justifications for Lord Elgin's actions, in the process portraying him as a victim of his circumstances, ultimately have protected the Empire from its deserved criticism.

Given the violent and reprehensible nature of the 1860 destruction, it is perfectly understandable that the few British historians who addressed the event might have trouble coming to terms with the actions of their countrymen. At the same time, Gilroy is correct in pointing out that failing to fully deal with such acts of violence as in some sense unjustifiable, as many historians of 1860 have done, denies the actual experience of imperialism. Interpretations like that of Gray help to create a situation where the experiences of Empire can be relegated to history without causing national distress. This process of historicization has helped foster a sort of national consciousness that does not have room for the shame of imperialism. Gilroy went on to claim that this phenomenon has been instrumental in shaping British racism towards immigrants from the former colonies.¹⁴ Obviously, Gilroy's aims are too broad to take into account that there are historians of empire, Hevia and J.Y. Wong included, who are admirably wrestling with the moral ambiguities of imperialism. This being said, his insights on how British society has tended to misremember its imperial past in a way that reinforces a certain form of national identity should be well taken. The ways that this process worked within the British historiography of 1860 are subtle. Though it is likely that none of these historians willingly wrote to support any nationalist ideologies, given the impossibility of ever completely

¹⁴ Gilroy 92.

separating the historian from their context, they most certainly did mirror, and maybe even help contribute to, the national consciousness of post-imperial Britain.

Considering the constructed nature of history writing, the interaction between British historians of the Second Opium War and nationalist discourses should not be surprising. Yet, when put in comparison with the very clear propagandist distortion found in China it is hard not to observe that the British representations of the event appear, and most of time are, more inclined towards objectivity. This is further reinforced by the fact that, while by the twentieth century in Britain the destruction had largely left popular memory and become a topic of study for a handful of professional historians, in China it had become an important issue in the discourse of “national humiliation” that was propagated largely by non-historians. Although at first it seems unfair to compare the British historical representations with Chinese propaganda, these professional histories have also carried, albeit much more subtly, nationalist meanings. Consequently, there is more common ground between British and Chinese representations than is immediately apparent. This study has, I hope, demonstrated that it is important not to immediately privilege one form of knowing the past over the other, as “professional” histories can sometimes be just as susceptible to distortion as other forms of representing the past.

The Present

This study of how British and Chinese representations of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan have evolved to present two very different views of imperialism in China pertains to both questions of how and why the past is remembered, and how different means of remembering the past can have influence on the present. While this latter phenomenon has been explained in the individual contexts of Britain and China, it also has important ramifications for how China currently relates to the West and vice versa. Given that neither the discourse of national humiliation in China nor the ignorance of the true impact of imperialism in the West have disappeared, uncovering how an event like the destruction was remembered differently in Britain and China is not an idle exercise, but rather provides an important perspective on Chinese foreign relations.

One recent example of how the imperial past continues to shape the present in China is the controversy over Western protests to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The Chinese hoped the Olympics would be a sort of coming out party to demonstrate the new strength of modern China. The prestige of hosting the Olympics was directly perceived in terms of national pride, and, for China, this meant that ideas of “national humiliation” immediately came into play. Xu Guochi claimed that, to the Chinese, the Olympics represented, “A validation of their nation’s long labors toward international acceptance, a sign that China has overcome its ‘century of humiliation and shame’ to become a full member of the community of nations.” From the outset, past humiliations had factored into Chinese perceptions of the event, and the games

had been turned into one more opportunity to demonstrate how far the Chinese nation had come. Unfortunately for these nationalist aspirations, Western attitudes towards China once again emerged to dampen, if not ruin, the party.

This new “humiliation” came in the form of the Western criticism of China in the months leading up to the Olympics. It was specifically the way that China was criticized in the Western media that caused the most Chinese indignation. For the Chinese, the most offensive attacks were both the numerous protests decrying China’s repression of Tibet that followed the passage of Olympic torch and the subsequent anti-Chinese Western media coverage. This criticism was met with harsh indignation over what was perceived as the West’s continued efforts to humiliate the Chinese. According to Orville Schell, “What these Chinese at home and abroad chose to see on television was not oppressed Tibetans seeking a redress of grievances, but China again under siege and again being demeaned in the most public of ways.”¹⁵ Any sincere hopes (and considering the efficacy of using “national humiliation” to shape nationalism this sincerity is up to question) that the Olympics would be the moment for China to throw off its past of humiliation were severely hurt by the Western criticism. These attacks led many Chinese to believe that they were still being excluded from the international community. In keeping with the tradition of humiliations playing a role in nationalist sentiment, the reactions to these criticisms were notably harsh and included numerous counterdemonstrations.¹⁶ Given that the Olympics had always been conceived in China a means of overcoming China’s

¹⁵ Orville Schell, “China: Humiliation and the Olympics,” New York Review of Books 14 Aug. 2008.

¹⁶ Ibid.

humiliating past, it is wholly unsurprising that the West's criticism was immediately seen as an affront to Chinese nationalism.

While it is true that the Chinese resentment over the attacks was largely a product of constructed nationalism, these controversies could be seen as equally the fault of the careless, and often hypocritical, writings of Western journalists. One of the prime targets of the Chinese criticism of Western media coverage of the Olympics was the *Times* journalist Jane Macartney (who is directly descended from Lord George Macartney, the first official British envoy to China in 1793; Lord Macartney is notorious for refusing to Kowtow to the Emperor, an action that set the precedent for future British interactions with China). In an editorial proudly titled, "How I became the most hated woman in China," Macartney laid out the charges the Chinese had leveled against her and other members of the Western media. Though this article begins as a relatively balanced account of the way the Western media was perceived by the China, Macartney soon revealed her own historical blinders when she described the historical basis for the Chinese perceptions, writing:

In casual conversation, many Chinese tell me they believe that the Games will demonstrate that their country has finally emerged from its humiliation at the hands of Western powers during the nineteenth century. Several comments take up the nationalist theme by reminding Britain of the damage it inflicted on China with the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century, which forced treaty ports open for trade. Many comments voice fury at the burning by Britain and France of the Yuan Ming Yuan, the summer palace of the Qing dynasty emperors. (They do not mention that this action was partly in retaliation for the murders of members of an international diplomatic delegation, including a *Times* correspondent.)¹⁷

¹⁷Jane Macartney, "How I became the most hated woman in China," *The Times [London]* 29 Mar. 2008.

It is in the parentheses that Macartney seems to have made an attempt at implicitly chastising the basis of Chinese nationalism as based on historical distortions and, subsequently, absolving the British from the substance of the attacks. Ironically (if unsurprisingly for someone who ridiculously described the efforts at cleaning Beijing in the lead-up to the Olympics as resulting in a, “Potemkin city where any unsightly building has been shielded from the eyes of the world”¹⁸), Macartney’s description of the burning was itself beset by historical misrepresentation. It would be hard to find any reputable source that would describe Harry Parkes et al. as just an “international diplomatic delegation.” At best they were negotiators speaking on behalf of an invading military force. Through her failure to give the wider context of the campaign, Macartney essentially led her readers (most of whom were probably ignorant of the history) to believe that the Chinese actions were completely unprovoked and extraordinary. Indeed, her description was so vague that it could have even led an unaware reader to believe the murders took place prior to the arrival of the invasion force. Even if one were to accept that the murder was the main reason for the burning, Macartney’s lack of proper description still presented an account that ignored the historical context, and possibly negated the Chinese criticisms of the British.

Macartney’s use (whether purposeful so or not) of an incorrect historical narrative to discredit the Chinese criticisms of Western journalists points to the way that common British interpretations of the destruction could both be equally distorted, and have the same impact on public consciousness, as those of the Chinese

¹⁸ Jane Macartney, “China’s Way of Hiding Shame,” The Times [London] 13 Aug. 2008.

nationalists. An uninformed British reader would walk away from Macartney's article with the perception that the current Chinese criticisms were unfounded, and, more dangerously, that the British actions in 1860 were really not that astonishing. Such a result would obviously do nothing to enhance cultural understanding, rather, it would only increase the animosity felt by both the British and the Chinese.

The continued conflicts that the alternate Western and Chinese narratives of imperialism have produced have not been limited to coverage of the Olympics. On February 25, 2009, Christie's auctioned off two bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac that had been looted from Yuan Ming Yuan in 1860. The Chinese reaction to this event was unsurprisingly full of the same nationalist fervor that had colored the criticisms of Western media coverage of the Olympics. A Beijing Lawyer, Liu Yang, fighting to stop the auction commented in *The New York Times*:

'The Old Summer Palace, which was plundered and burnt down by Anglo-French allied forces during the Second Opium War in 1860, is our nation's unhealed scar, still bleeding and aching' ... 'That Christie's and Pierre Bergé would put them up for auction and refuse to return them to China deeply hurts our nation's feelings.'¹⁹

While this comment is full of propagandist rhetoric, it is undeniable that the auctioning of looted relics in the face of calls for their return is deeply insensitive to the power that this history holds for the Chinese. The stance of both Macartney and Christie's reflects a basic misunderstanding of the influence of the past in China. Though the Chinese narrative of events is, admittedly, incredibly distorted, the Western ignorance of, or disregard for, Chinese sensibilities is still irresponsible given the animosity that it generates. Additionally, the problems in the Western

¹⁹ David Barboza, "China Seeks to Stop Paris Sale Bronzes," [New York Times](#) 16 Feb. 2009.

perceptions (as represented here by Macartney and Christie's) of the imperial past are not just limited to miscalculations of Chinese attitudes towards it, but are also due to a basic tendency to themselves misconstrue and misrepresent events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. It is difficult to believe that if either Macartney or the heads of Christie's had understood the destruction as a violent and unjustifiable act of imperialism that they would have been so flippant about Chinese criticism. This lack of understanding is, beyond just general ignorance, also due to the larger societal failure to come to terms with the ambiguities of imperialism. As described by Gilroy, this process at least partially hinges on how historians have written about the past. Though both Gilroy's arguments, and my own historiographical survey, have solely concerned the British representation of imperial history, this discussion, to varying degrees, can serve to illuminate how the West more generally has chosen to deal with the sometimes anti-foreign nature of Chinese nationalism. Namely, the West has ignored and obfuscated the real historical basis for these anti-foreign expressions. This process has inevitably only led to unnecessary polarization. Given the generally peripheral nature of China to British imperial history, it would be ridiculous to hope that either more historians address this past or that all those who deal with China have an in-depth knowledge of it. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that those who do choose to deal with this past do so with sensitivity, so as to take into account both its continued importance to the Chinese and their own tendency to "forget."

Ultimately, many of the cultural conflicts that continually bubble up between China and the West have a strong basis in the way that the histories of imperial events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan have been represented over time. In specific

reference to this event, both the Chinese and the British share some fault in creating representations that distort the past to serve national purposes. Although the distortions carried out by the Chinese, with the discourse of “national humiliation” that they created, are far more obvious and extreme than those of the British, the efforts at writing “objective” histories in Britain have themselves proved far from infallible. Indeed, once the Western pretensions to writing history that objectively represents the past as it was are called into question, it becomes clear that the British historiography could also be reflective of national interests. The failure of the British, and other Western nations, to recognize this possibility is as responsible for the continuing political and cultural conflict with China as the direct manipulation of the past carried out by the Chinese. It seems unfair to ask the Chinese to give up their discourse of “national humiliation” until Western nations like Britain cease to cling to their misunderstanding of the true nature of the violence of imperialism in China. Obviously there is no guarantee that the Chinese would ever give up such an effective means of generating nationalist sentiment, but if the West honestly does want to reach a greater understanding with China, then addressing perceptions of the imperial past might not be a bad place to start.²⁰

²⁰ Indeed, there is currently a project underway called the “Road to Reconciliation” that hopes to redress the European imperial past in China. Under this project, a group of delegates, led by a German, Gaetan Roy, intends to go to China in 2010 and apologize for the wrongs of imperialism. This trip is planned to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, and Roy has proposed that the apology take place at the ruins of the palace because of their value as a symbol of Western imperialism in China. According to the group’s executive proposal, their goal is, “Strengthening harmonious and honourable relationships between nations and its people.” As admirable a goal as this is, the methods are slightly up to question given Roy’s position as an evangelical Christian and a stipulation that, after the apology, there be an, “Appropriate response from the Chinese.” According to the project’s proposal, such a response would include Chinese recognition of the good Westerners, presumably Western missionaries, have done in China. Ultimately, it is unclear whether or not such an effort at direct apology is the correct way of addressing the current situation in China, especially when that apology, however heartfelt, seems so clearly intended to

Hope for a Post-National Future

This thesis has up until now presented a fairly pessimistic view of how the past has been misrepresented, and often manipulated, by both the British and Chinese. It should not be concluded, however, that there have not been notable critics of the standard narratives on both sides. These criticisms have emerged most noticeably from Britain, a phenomenon that points to a greater tendency within the British history tradition to accept self-critical intellectual currents. The most important intellectual trend to influence imperial history in the past century is undoubtedly postcolonialism. Leela Gandhi explained at least the practical value of postcolonialism:

If *postcoloniality* can be described as a condition troubled by the consequences of a self-willed historical amnesia, then the theoretical value of postcolonialism inheres, in part, in its ability to elaborate the forgotten memories of this condition. In other words, the colonial aftermath calls for an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past.²¹

According to Gandhi's definition, postcolonialism is designed to redress the pain of the imperial past. Within the British historiography of empire discussed here, this tendency can be most clearly seen in the work of Hevia and Gilroy. With different methodologies, both Hevia and Wong have searched for new ways to criticize British imperial actions, Hevia with specific reference to the Second Opium War. Their

improve Chinese opinion of Western Christians. Additionally, it is unclear why Roy, as a German, should be apologizing at Yuan Ming Yuan. (Thanks to Professor Vera Schwarcz, who Roy has consulted for historical guidance, for informing me of this fascinating project.)

²¹ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 7-8.

efforts speak to a desire to change how Britain's imperial legacy is viewed, presumably with some eye on creating an "ameliorative and therapeutic" version of the past. The work of Hevia and Gilroy is notable for how it rises above their most obvious national interests to create a version of history that is more international. Although there surely are national and cultural interests that have influenced Gilroy and Hevia, their histories, unlike those of the vast majority of historians discussed, do not directly speak to pro-national agendas. Instead, they are marked by at least their attempts, if not their success, at achieving a post-national perspective on the past. Such attempts are absolutely necessary to help redress the British tendency to mischaracterize the nature of imperialism. Hopefully, such a project could, as a byproduct, eventually create a situation where it is more difficult for the Chinese to continue to refer to their mistreatment at the hands of the West. Obviously, both these hopes are idealistic and perhaps over-emphasize the ability of historians to shape opinion. Yet, that does not change the fact that more historians of imperialism in China, both British and Chinese should be willing, as Hevia and Gilroy have been, to rise above nationalist tendencies and criticize the dated prejudices that have played such a large role in constructing the standard narratives of events like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan.

As important as the post-national cosmopolitanism of a historian like Hevia is in its attempts to find ways to redress current views on imperialism in China, it is necessary to recognize the limits of his methods. In their efforts to find ways to criticize imperialism, historians like Hevia necessarily miss some of the ambiguities involved in the imperial experience. By only looking to criticize imperialism such

scholars fail to recognize that their own cosmopolitanism is a product of imperialism. For an example, J.Y. Wong, who has also been extremely critical of the British imperial project, would have obviously never attended Oxford if not for British imperial influence. Rana Mitter wrote of these ambiguities:

The challenge for the new historiography of China has been to bring the imperial presence into the narrative of Chinese history, avoiding both a black-and-white condemnation of the imperial presence simply as degradation and plunder, and the complacent position that imperialism was essentially a 'helping hand' in bringing China to modernity. Empire was about power; but the manifestations of that power were never simple or one-sided.²²

Mitter's conclusions are reflected by my own interpretation of the destruction, namely that, as much as it was an expression of power, it was also motivated by more pragmatic, and even possibly emotional, local goals that do not necessarily fit into any broad postcolonial critique. Beyond just providing insight onto the nature of the imperial experience, Mitter's analysis also suggests that the legacies of imperialism could be as ambiguous as its events. What imperialism left behind in China is incredibly complex, and cannot be comprehended through any single interpretation. While postcolonialism certainly is a necessary a salve for the British failures at comprehensively representing their imperial past, and should be celebrated for its post-national character, its methods do not go far enough in actually finding a way to achieve greater cultural understanding. It seems impossible that a theory based on attacking one version of history could either do justice to that history or come up with a more progressive means of viewing the interaction between cultures.

²² Rana Mitter, "Historiographical Review: Modernity, Internationalization, and War in the history of Modern China," *The Historical Journal* 48, 2 2005: 523–543.

Ultimately, what should be taken away from postcolonialists like Hevia is both their recognition of the inherent evils of imperial violence (though not necessarily their methodology of only addressing the violence of imperialism), and, perhaps more importantly, their post-nationalism. It is this post-national identity that provides a framework for a new way of looking at both the past and the current international situation. Ironically, this cosmopolitanism is itself a product of the imperial past, and must be recognized as such. This recognition is important because it can be related to how imperialism, however unjust, was instrumental in creating the China that exists today. The intellectual traditions introduced through Western imperialism were a major influence on the first Chinese nationalists, the Communist Revolution, and even the current forms of Chinese patriotism. Obviously these traditions have been transformed to fit the needs of Chinese intellectuals, but it is undeniable that they have been a main driving force in China's recent intellectual history. It is possible to see how this appropriation of Western ideas for Chinese purposes could ultimately turn into a post-national viewpoint (though it should not be lost sight of that the imperialism which first introduced these ideas is completely indefensible). However, given the overwhelming influence of imperialist ideas of Western racial superiority on the way that China has interacted with the West, the path towards this post-nationalism is long and complicated.

One needs only to look at the work of Lu Xun, the father of contemporary Chinese literature, in the early twentieth century to see how a certain internationalism, has long informed Chinese critical thought. In the preface to his Call to Arms, Lu discusses how his transformation to a nationalist writer began after he watched his

father die due to the inadequacies of traditional Chinese medicine. He hoped to overcome these inadequacies, which he saw as part of a cultural deficiency, by studying Western medicine. After going to Japan for a Western medical education, Lu became even more distressed by the weakness of the Chinese in comparison to the rest of the world. Consequently, he decided to use literature to stimulate a new national strength.²³ He began this task with his first story, *A Madman's Diary*, about an invalid who sees the words "Eat People" inscribed between the lines of Confucian classics.²⁴ Although Lu, like many of the other Chinese author's discussed here, was also writing in order to arouse Chinese national strength in the face of the imperial powers, his means of carrying out this awakening was to adopt some Western practices to replace those of traditional China. In a different context, specifically one where foreign powers were not threatening Chinese sovereignty, such an adoption could possibly be put to less antagonistic uses.

This being said, much current Chinese nationalism, of which Lu is at least indirectly an intellectual forefather, is a form of chauvinism largely inspired by fears of cultural weakness. As anti-foreign as much of this nationalism is, it also clearly holds the West's strength up as something that must be matched. This belief obviously carries the implication that Chinese culture is itself inherently weak. Vera Schwarcz wrote, in specific regards to liberal Western characterizations of the destruction as a "rape," "Beneath the rhetoric of humiliation and rape lay an old assumption: If this ancient civilization had not been so female – so delicate somehow

²³ Lu Xun, Xianyi Yang, and Gladys Yang, *Call to Arms* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981) i-vi.

²⁴ *Ibid* 4.

– she may not have been subjected to forcible ravage again and again.”²⁵ Though Schwarcz here refers to the inherent racism of liberal Western criticism of the destruction (an interesting point in itself), her argument ironically also applies to the way that Chinese have themselves portrayed their past as one of humiliation due to cultural and technological weakness. In some ways, Chinese nationalists “feminized” their own past. This has been just one more unfortunate byproduct of the fact that Chinese nationalists have attempted to strengthen China in opposition to the West, in the process probably reflecting Chinese internalization of racist Western imperialist discourses. Though this Chinese nationalism was a product of accepting international ideas, this does not mean that the intellectual openness of someone like Lu Xun necessarily has to have bad consequences. Indeed, as previously mentioned, it is possible this could produce in China, as postcolonialism has produced in the West, a more post-national and conciliatory perspective. To achieve this goal it would be necessary for the Chinese to be open to Western ideas without either denigrating their own culture (which current Chinese nationalism, to some extent, does) or immediately turning those ideas back on the West in an antagonistic fashion.²⁶ Obviously such attacks on the West are completely deserved, however, the forms that they take are rarely helpful for anyone except those in power.²⁷

²⁵ Vera Schwarcz, Place and Memory in the Singing Crane Garden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 127.

²⁶ For one example of this phenomenon, Geremie Barme discusses how Chinese intellectuals have often appropriated postmodern and postcolonial ideas to validate their nationalist projects. Geremie Barmé, In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 262-265.

²⁷ It is important to note here that there is another option for China’s future, namely the complete rejection of the West. As Frantz Fanon wrote, “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name

Schwarcz gave some hints for different, more productive, ways of viewing both the past and the present. Schwarcz saw the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan as themselves embodying a, “Hardened, more enduring visage,”²⁸ than the meanings assigned to them by both nationalist and Western observers. To her, Yuan Ming Yuan is a “Capacious repository for cultural memory,”²⁹ with significance that is separate from the nationalist concerns of so many who have written on the destruction. Perhaps, the simpler, less constructed, implications still contained at the palace could provide some sort of framework for getting out of the morass of distorted historical representations that have contributed to so much conflict.

In fact, my experiences in Beijing have made it clear that many well-educated Chinese actually are, if not progressing towards a post-national utopia, than at least much less accepting of the politics of “national humiliation” than many of the author’s surveyed. While researching the destruction I was helped extensively by a number of students from Peking University and their views were almost unfailingly more complicated than the nationalist narratives allowed for. One of my friends who helped me the most, a student,³⁰ was especially open to expressing his distaste for government policies. When I discussed the destruction with him he tended to think that it was an event that had not significantly affected Chinese history (at least in comparison to the contemporaneous Taiping Rebellion), and directly criticized the

of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration”(Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965)). Of course, at this point, this is probably no longer a realistic option for China or any other formerly imperialized nation.

²⁸ Schwarcz 127.

²⁹ Ibid. 216.

³⁰ I am declining to give his name just to make sure he could never get in trouble for the views he expressed to me. Conversations, Beijing, July, 2008.

Chinese government for its tendency to manipulate history for nationalist ends. He was generally opposed to the sort of nationalism that supported the CCP and expressed disapproval over how China's recent development has left so many people behind. Ultimately, he concluded that some moves towards democracy were the only means of responsibly developing China. At the same time, he in no way celebrated the West over China and was more than willing to criticize America in regards to something like the Iraq War. Ultimately, (perhaps naively) I see his views, and our friendship, as providing hope for a future where it is not necessarily to immediately fall back on prejudices defined by the "nation."

Considering the violence and injustice inherent in imperialism, it is ironic that my friend's willingness to question the standard nationalist narratives can actually be seen as an example of at least one positive result of imperialism. As loathsome as it is to speak of imperialism as benefitting the imperialized, given the fact that imperialism happened and nothing can change that, it is only practical to look at what might be salvaged from the experience. The cosmopolitan influences that have allowed my friend to receive what is essentially a Western education in China, has also allowed him to view the past in a way that is more nuanced than allowed for by either a Chinese nationalist perspective or a postcolonial narrative.

Although the nationalist critique of the British and other imperial powers is not unwarranted considering how horribly Western powers have treated China in the past, it is also counterproductive to creating a situation where the conflicts of the past are not carried over into confrontations in the present. By questioning the standard

CCP views, my friend is essentially practicing a form of self-critical post-nationalism similar to that of Hevia, though without the postcolonial prejudices.

Ultimately, the ways that both the Chinese and the British have represented imperial events like Yuan Ming Yuan have created a situation where the past has too easily served contemporary national interests. Fortunately, within both Britain and China there are trends that seek to redress this manipulation. For the British these critical trends are exemplified by the postcolonial, and subsequently post-nationalist, ideas of scholars like Hevia and Gilroy, which, although certainly far from flawless given their sometimes too jargon-laden approach to history, go far in the admirable task of deconstructing the standard narratives. Although Hevia and Gilroy's approach is a positive force within British historiography, it might be dangerous within a Chinese historical tradition that has always placed far too much importance on moments of imperial violence like the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan. As opposed to the post-national uses of Hevia and Gilroy, in China it is likely that postcolonial ideas could all too easily be used to support the nationalist narrative that has (justifiably) never been hesitant to criticize the Western powers.³¹ Instead, for the Chinese, it is the ability to interact with foreign ideas while not compromising Chinese identity that could overcome both the standard nationalist narrative and, hopefully, cultural conflicts with the West. Obviously, the development of a wider trend towards post-nationalism would only be useful or possible if Western nations like Britain stopped dealing with China, and the entire subaltern world for that matter, in a way that continues to propagate old imperialist attitudes. In the end, it can only

³¹Barme, In the Red 262-265.

be hoped that, in addition to the British finding a way to write about their imperial past that is free from old prejudices, China can find a way to assert their strength and intellectual independence that does not necessitate an immediate gravitation towards the anti-foreign sentiments of “national humiliation.”

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