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Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 4(1)

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/R74155773

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Synthesizing a Dual-Definition of *Façade* in the Western Palaces of Yuanming Yuan: Art, Politics, and Place-making in the Garden of Perfect Brightness

Stella Gatto

Yuanming Yuan, also known as the Garden of Perfect Brightness, was the Imperial Summer Palace residence of five Qing emperors. The garden, built during the time of the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722), emerged as the center of the political world as it shifted from a place of residence and escape to a place of work.¹ The site was located 22.5 kilometers outside the city of Beijing and comprised of 865 acres of land with more than 200 buildings scattered around artificially-constructed lakes and courtyards.² At its northern end, the Eternal Spring Garden included Western-style buildings designed to exhibit twelve integrated landscapes. In the mid-nineteenth century, tension began percolating between China and Britain in response to British demands to revise treaties and obtain further concessions. This demand was met with Chinese resistance and led to the eventual outbreak of the Second Opium War and the burning and destruction of Yuanming Yuan in 1860.³ The façades and structures of the Western-style buildings, constructed from stone, were the only buildings not completely obliterated by the 1860 fire. The burning of Yuanming Yuan, described in China as a “national humiliation,” led to efforts in the 1980s to preserve any remains of the burnt palace gardens and to document the site and its national significance.⁴ Although the first to suffer from imperial neglect, the Western-style palaces are the only prominent physical remains of the gardens—the European-style buildings, in other words, have become the symbol of Yuanming Yuan.

This essay explores how Yuanming Yuan embodies a dual-definition of façade: both the buildings' decorative exteriors and their void interiors give the palace an appearance of history that never existed in the first place. After providing a brief history of the palace, I turn to a detailed description of its Western-style buildings in the eighteenth-century engravings produced pre-fire (1783–1786) by Chinese court artist Yilantai (1749-1786). Next, I analyze photographs taken post-fire in 1873 by German photographer Ernst Ohlmer (1847-1927) to show how theatricality and the European artistic tradition of the picturesque frame Yuanming Yuan through a lens of imperialist nostalgia. Putting these two representative forms in conversation with one another, I argue they both replicate and perpetuate the illusion and theatricality of the buildings themselves. Additionally, I rely on English-language sources to discuss how Western art historical scholarship functions as a kind of façade as well: an illusionistic screen onto which contemporary politics in China regarding Yuanming Yuan are projected. Finally, I turn to a more recent case in which the palace site was turned into the Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park tourist attraction. The park creates an additional illusion of the past for nationalist purposes. Embodying the dual-definition of façade as both architectural feature and illusion, the various representations of the Western-style buildings create an uncanny mixture of the factual and the fantastic, reality and farce.

A Brief History of Yuanming Yuan

The Imperial Summer Palace was built during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) and was home to five Qing emperors. Kangxi's son Yongzheng (1678–1735) was the first to relocate from the Forbidden City in Beijing to Yuanming Yuan in the 1720s and officially made it his place of residence for both work and pleasure.⁵ The European, or Western-style, buildings were built under Qianlong (1711–1799), who is credited with expanding the gardens and making them more opulent during his reign. He hired Italian Jesuit missionary and court artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) to design the European palaces, a small part of the garden built from stone rather than wood. Emperor Xianfeng (1831–1861) was the last emperor to reside at the Imperial Summer Palace and was associated with its downfall. In 1860, French and British troops began looting the palace and selling their spoils, including twelve bronze zodiac heads, at auction in Europe.⁶ The gardens continued to be looted by visitors and peasants until 1980 when the Chinese government decided, with the support of academics and architects, to erect the Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park.⁷

Yuanming Yuan's primary identity as a national site became crystallized in public discourse during the reform era of the early 1980s that sought to replace a class-based nationalism with a culturalist one. Historians, city planners, municipal officials, and park managers competed to fix the site.⁸ The question that preoccupied all parties was whether and how Yuanming Yuan should proclaim its symbolic status. The Chinese government applied for UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1985 in hopes that the twelve zodiac heads would be repatriated to China.⁹ According to Annetta Fotopoulos, the heads metamorphosed into icons of national patrimony during the government-sponsored campaign for the repatriation of China's cultural heritage, as political agents saw the evocative power of the zodiacs as a convenient means of rousing the populace to assert China's right to reparations.¹⁰ With this in mind, the dominant historical narrative in Chinese-media sources appears as an arc that traces a cycle of construction, destruction, and reconstruction. Yuanming Yuan's historical narrative has become part and parcel of a meaning-making mechanism: a sacrosanct national site teaching ruin and renewal.

The narrative of destruction at the hands of foreign invaders is replayed in numerous documentary films today; the most elaborate is the seven-part CCTV documentary series *Yuanmingyuan: 150 Years after the Fire* (2010). This narrative is also a key feature of China's patriotic education program.¹¹ Within the historical narrative, the Western-style buildings have become the iconic figures of the entirety of the palace gardens. Representations of the buildings blur the line between fantasy and reality, their ambiguity contributing to the historical narrative of ravage and revival. The opulent façades of the buildings are most evident in the first set of images examined in this paper: a selection from twenty black-and-white engravings produced circa 1783-1786 by Manchu court artist Yilantai.

The Western-style Buildings at Yuanming Yuan

The Western-style buildings spread across the northern end of the Eternal Spring Garden and were designed to exhibit twelve integrated landscapes; each small tableau was linked by pathways that led from one view to the next for Qianlong's enjoyment.¹² Many buildings in the European section were based on eclectic, somewhat Baroque architectural models with huge stone columns, marble balustrades, extensive use of glass windows, and several European fountains.¹³ Qianlong's apparent fascination with European fountains, of which there were several in the complex, presumably began when he was introduced to images of fountains by Castiglione.¹⁴ The second phase of the building project resulted in the

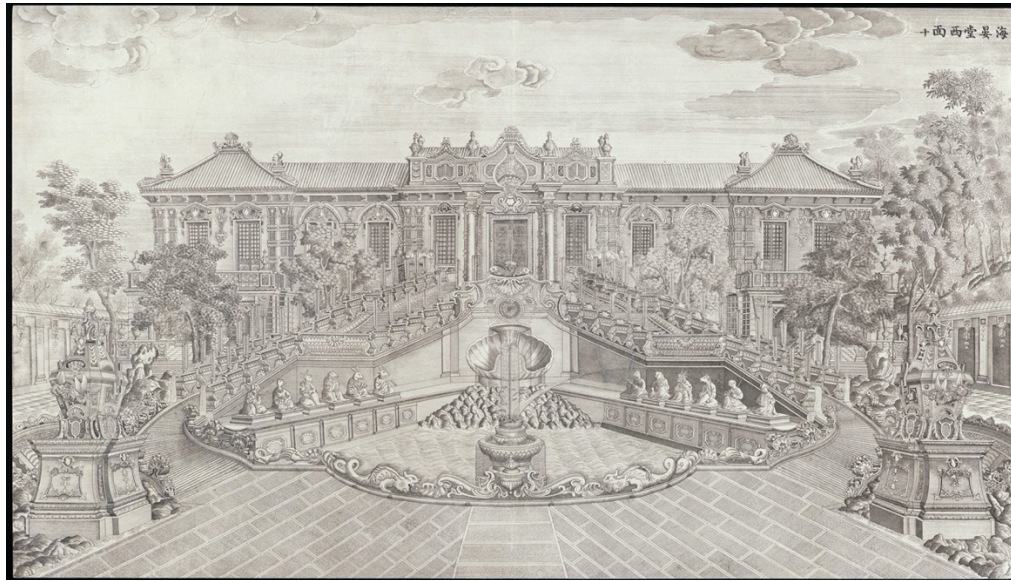


Figure 1 Yilantai, West façade of the Hall of the Calm Ocean, ca. 1783–86, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:
https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

completion of one of the largest and most famous fountains called the Hall of the Calm Ocean in 1781. The Hall of the Calm Ocean is often compared to the Court of Honor at Versailles.¹⁵ As Yilantai’s engraving of Hall of the Calm Ocean (fig. 1) shows, two broad, symmetrical, and winding staircases on each side of the building rose to a second-floor landing. The large fountain in the center was accompanied by a Chinese-style water clock (*loubu*) surrounded by twelve bronze animal heads mounted on human figures—rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig—representative of the twelve zodiacs. Nearby the Hall of the Calm Ocean stood the Grand Fountain building (fig. 2), composed of several smaller pools, fountain statues, rock and shell ornaments, and a large main pool in the shape of eleven animal figures.¹⁶

The hybridized style of Yilantai’s engravings combines Western linear perspective and chiaroscuro with Chinese-visual patterning and technical brushstrokes to create a blend of visual vocabularies.¹⁷ Greg M. Thomas observes that “the print translates the building’s multiple levels and irregular curves into a theatrical play of variety, patterning and counterpoint equally typical of both *Chinoiserie* and *Européenerie*.”¹⁸ Thomas’s use of the term “theatrical” signals how the façades of the buildings, as shown in the engravings, embody a dual-definition: a decorative aspect, but also an illusion given that several of the Western-style buildings were devoid of interiors.



Figure 2 Yilantai, South façade of the Grand Fountain, ca. 1783-1786, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:
https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

Qianlong was fascinated by theater and play, and several of the buildings in the European section acted as backdrops for theatrical productions.¹⁹ Life in Yuanming Yuan provided entertainment of many sorts, but the annual favorite was, especially during Qianlong’s reign, a “make-believe” southern town set up inside the All-Happy Garden. In the theatrical town, eunuchs ran the market and played the roles of shop and teahouse keepers, while others were vendors and sold antiques, books, silk, porcelain, and varnish works.²⁰ To make the street scene even more realistic, the eunuchs would act out scenes of arrest between security guards and thieves for Qianlong’s amusement.²¹ Hui Zou notes that the entire Baroque garden complex epitomized entertainment and play because, upon entering the complex, visitors had to venture through a labyrinth to find the emperor, whose throne sat at the center of the maze.²² By creating an artificial town, this form of “play” on everyday life highlighted the role of theatrics at court.

The rest of the Yuanming Yuan complex continued the theme of theatricality, artificiality, and façade because it consisted of additional re-creations of villages and vistas from the emperor’s tours of south China. For example, ten scenic spots of the famed West Lake in Hangzhou were recreated in Yuanming Yuan and exemplified the imitative design strategy that reinforced the symbolism of the garden palaces as the center, or microcosm, of the universe.²³ The European garden section in particular was an entirely original arrangement of structures that formed what might now be understood as a quasi-theme park. Painted images of the West



Figure 3 Yilantai, Perspective Painting of the Lake to the East, ca. 1783-1786, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:

https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

were translated into three-dimensional reality, further embodying the dual-definition of façade as decorative interior and illusionistic exterior.

The Western section included gateways, mansions made of stone, and the famous mechanical fountain, and it culminated in an open-air theater at the eastern end of the complex, as seen in the engraving *Perspective paintings of the lake to the East* (fig. 3). Qianlong had two open-air theaters within the garden complex that employed the technique of *trompe l'oeil*. For example, the Hall of the Calm Ocean was a two-story structure that acted as a backdrop for the fountain at the end of the large basin.²⁴ Once reaching the View of Great Waters, a throne nestled at the center awaited the emperor, from where he could enjoy the glistening waters in the Grand Fountain displayed amidst intricately carved decoration (fig. 4).²⁵ Further east was the Hill of Perspective, enclosed in the distance by a stage set painted to represent a small European town (fig. 3). The foreground of the engraving situates the viewer at the position of the square lake, looking out onto a European-style village. We know, however, that what appears as a three-dimensional village is Castiglione's backdrop of various buildings painted using linear perspective. This fools the eye into perceiving the buildings stereoscopically: the painted backdrop suggests the presence of real structures with depth and solidity. The perspective paintings east of the lake are the best example of the illusory theatrical stage settings reminiscent of Italian Renaissance gardens; they resemble the set designs of Serlio and Pozzo where the ground gradually slopes up to make the illusion more

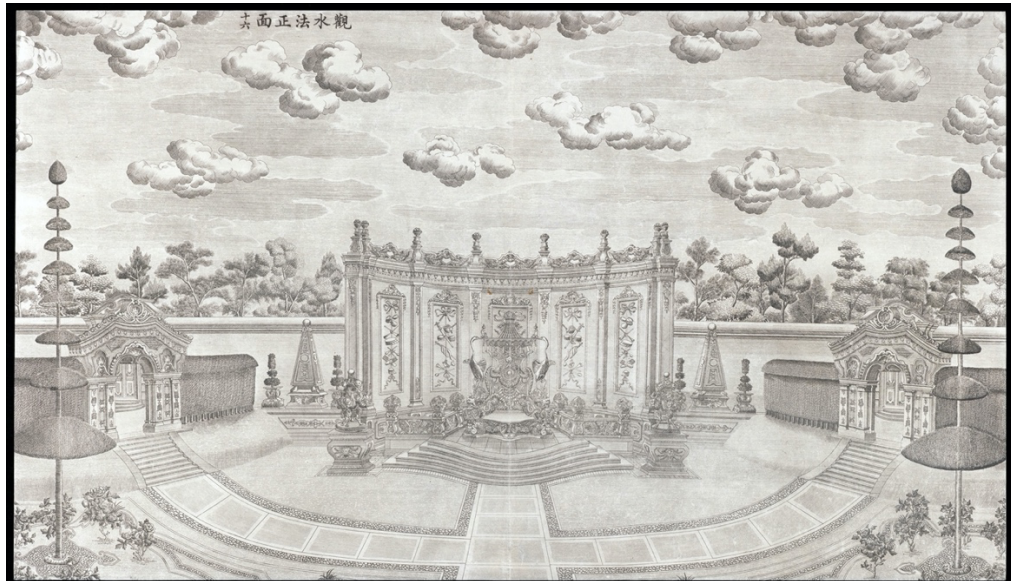


Figure 4 *Yilantai*, Front side of the View of the Fountain, ca. 1783-1786, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:

https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

real.²⁶ Kristina Kleutghen’s detailed analysis of these “stages” or “theater” fronts notes that at the final “scene” of the European Palace complex, the emperor or the imperial visitor always stood at a distance across a sunken stream. The viewer could never walk through the European village off in the distance because there was no village: it was simply a *trompe l’oeil*, a façade.²⁷ Kleutghen continues,

[T]he Square Lake itself becomes the “stage” where Qianlong performs the dramatic climax of his visit. The organization of this entire section recalls European indoor theaters of the period more than garden-theaters or *trompe-l’oeil* gardens, adding an even sharper edge of theatricality to the already dramatic European Palaces.²⁸

The presence of the European village paintings becomes a backdrop against which “the emperor can perform a more perfected, if stylized, version of his own imperial reality.”²⁹

The Western-style gardens’ decorative Baroque motifs not only provided the emperor with visual access to an evocative, distant, and exotic idea of Europe, but also engaged the larger historical context of the time. European missionary-artists were active in court workshops creating Chinese imperial fantasies of the distant West as the Qing Empire reached its widest limits. The Manchu empire

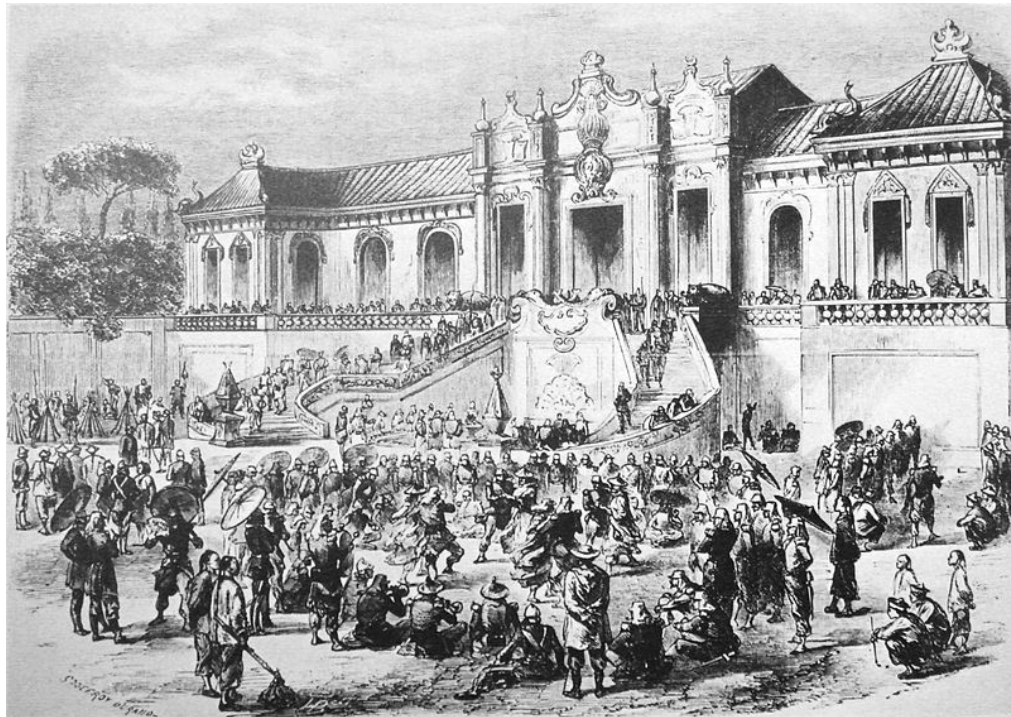


Figure 5 Godefroy Durand, Looting of the Yuan Ming Yuan pavilion by Anglo French forces in 1860, December 22, 1860. *L'Illustration*. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Looting_of_the_Yuan_Ming_Yuan_by_Anglo_French_forces_in_1860.jpg

was at its zenith: the territory of the Chinese state was at its largest and international commerce flourished thanks to export industries such as silk, cotton, porcelain, and tea.³⁰ The gardens reflected Qianlong's desire for a sanitized and idealized image of his reign where he sat at the center of a totally ordered realm, imagining himself as universal ruler.³¹

The Burning and Looting of Yuanming Yuan

The illustration *Pillage of the Yuan Ming Yuan* (fig. 5) published in the popular French magazine *L'Illustration* depicts what the 1860 burning and looting of the gardens by French and British troops may have looked like. Western war photographers captured the European-style buildings that survived the worst of the blaze, framing the structures as ruins in a picturesque manner with the hope of evoking a sentimental appeal.

In Régine Thiriez's *Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (1998), the author examines a large body of work by several



Figure 6 Ernst Ohlmer, Belvedere, ca. 1873, wet collodion glass negative. In Régine Thiriez, Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 43.

European photographers who captured the Western-style buildings after their destruction between the years 1860 and 1925. Thiriez notes the work of hired war photographers such as Felice Beato (1832-1909) and Thomas Child (active 1871-89), and Ernst Ohlmer (1847-1927), who was not a war photographer but worked for a customs agency and took photos for pleasure. Ohlmer's photographs depict the Western-style buildings as ruins in the picturesque tradition of European painting and photography.

At the turn of the twentieth century, it was fashionable to depict architectural structures bearing the marks of wear and deterioration or being reclaimed by nature. Architectural photographs taken by Ohlmer also reflect the influence of picturesque aesthetics popular in late-eighteenth-century Europe in which ruins evoked “pleasing melancholy” and a return to the state of nature.³² The tradition of depicting ruins in the picturesque mode—a formulaic composition based upon certain rules of classical proportion—produced images with an identifiable composition meant to guide the viewer's eye to the middle of the painting.³³ By channeling the viewer's eye, framing devices functioned to create a balanced composition that provided a sense of harmony and variety. Thus, picturesque scenes were meant to evoke a harmonic relationship between humans, nature, and the built



Figure 7 Ernst Ohlmer, Haiyantang, west, ca. 1873, wet collodion glass negative. In Régine Thiriez, Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 44.

environment. Ruins in European art also functioned as a reminder of humanity's transience. The concept of the ruin was not simply a description of things that had undergone deterioration, but rather an aesthetic category of its own; the damaged and fragmentary nature of a ruin is what struck the senses and imagination of nineteenth-century Romanticist artists and intellectuals.³⁴ Ruin photography was much like paintings. There was such a mania for ruins in Europe that sham Greek or Roman ruins meant to evoke historical memory and architectural forms were erected in the gardens of the wealthy.³⁵ This phenomena led art historian Alois Riegl to pen his famous 1902 theoretical mediation on "the modern cult of monuments," where he observed that ruins comprised two divergent yet collaborative aspects. Ruins possessed historical value for what they disclosed about the life and culture of the past, and they also manifested "age value" because they bore the marks of wear, damage, and deterioration.³⁶ Maureen Warren notes that the ruin-aesthetic as shown by Ohlmer's photographs should be considered part of the European tradition of picturing ruins.³⁷

Undoubtedly aware of the Romanticist tradition, Ohlmer was a sailor who washed onto China's shores after a shipwreck and began his new life as a professional photographer in Xiamen, eventually working for the Imperial Maritime Customs agency.³⁸ There are fifteen wet plate collodion negatives of Ohlmer's work

on the European-style palaces.³⁹ *Belvedere* (fig. 6) shows a building covered and overgrown with trees, crumbling from neglect and consumed by nature. *Haiyantang, west* (fig. 7) employs a similar framing in which nature, abundant and overgrown, devours the foreground and directs the eye to focus on the large and bright central building in the background that contrasts with the dark foliage. Warren notes that “Ohlmer’s photographs of the ruined European-style palaces not only record a specific stage in the social life of the Yuanming Yuan, but also participate in the ongoing remembrance and conceptual reformulation of the site.”⁴⁰ Upon seeing the ruins, Ohlmer is said to have been struck with sadness. His feelings are akin to Victor Hugo’s, who received news of the fire in France and wrote in an open letter to Captain Butler, “I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China.”⁴¹

Ohlmer and Hugo’s apparent sympathy for China contrasts with Felice Beato’s photographs, which depict the destructed site not as a place of mourning, memory, or ruin but as a site of conquest (fig. 8). Beato was a war photographer who accompanied Lord Elgin and the British troops during the Second Opium War, and his camera bore witness to the after-effects of the burning of Yuanming Yuan. Beato’s photographs served two purposes: to follow the troops and track their invasion, and to show “landmarks of conquered territory.”⁴² In *View of the Imperial Summer Palace, Yuen Ming Yuen, after the burning*, little remains atop a hill scorched shortly before the photograph was taken.⁴³ Wu Hung suggests Beato’s photos convey “a lesson” or the “doomed attempt to resist the foreign forces.”⁴⁴

Ohlmer and Beato both capture the palace site through a colonial lens by framing the palace as a ruin to be mourned and consumed by the European public. This differs from the original mode in which the palace was viewed and consumed by the emperor and his court, where imperial control was set in a theatrical and Western landscape. By framing the palace within the tradition of the picturesque and ruin-aesthetic, the photographs by Ohlmer and others exemplify what scholar Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia,” where the colonizer “uses a pose of innocent yearning both to capture people’s imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.”⁴⁵ Rosaldo highlights the colonialist nature of ruin-aesthetics in Western photography regardless of their intent. As Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson note, “the foreign viewer did not want to observe, much less live in, a place that appeared either too raw or too frightening,” therefore “the aesthetic concept of the picturesque had an important impact on the imaginative reconfiguration of colonial space for the benefit of the Western public.”⁴⁶

Jeffrey Auerbach adds that picturesque representations were in large part about “the domestication of the ‘exotic’” by “regarding and reordering the foreign to look very much like England itself.”⁴⁷ That is, the “exotic” was still present in



Figure 8 Felice Beato, View of the Imperial Summer Palace, Yuen-Ming-Yuen, after the Burning, Taken from the Lake, Peking, 1860, albumen silver print, 23.2 × 29.8 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007.26.198.50. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/241397/felice-beato-henry-hering-view-of-the-imperial-summer-palace-yuen-ming-yuen-after-the-burning-taken-from-the-lake-peking-british-negative-october-18-1860-print-1862/>.

the picturesque but “largely stripped of its difficult otherness, allowing the viewer to remain in his or her visual comfort zone.”⁴⁸ The buildings of Yuanming Yuan thus appear as though they could be anywhere in Europe, further adding to the fallacious nature of their exteriors. Without the captions identifying location, Ohlmer’s photographs might be mistaken for documenting European ruins. For example, *Belvedere* partially obscures the building’s ceramic tiled, double hip-and-gabled roof, and the photograph presents an otherwise Baroque-style structure. The image draws attention to the nuances between documentation and picturesque photography: it privileges framing techniques that mark the building as legibly European and removes contextual cues that highlight the site as Chinese.

When Engravings and Photographs Collide

Yilantai’s engravings and Ohlmer’s photographs bear an interesting and complex connection to each other, as both technologies are major revolutions in image production: the rise of the printed image in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the rise of the photographic image in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The engravings follow the distinct Italian historical genre known as “views” (*vedute*): paintings or engravings meant to evoke civic pride.⁴⁹ This genre is echoed in the title of Yilantai’s works, *Twenty views of the European Palaces of the Yuanming Yuan*. As presumably truthful indexes of the buildings, the engravings use symmetry and incredible detail to portray the reality of the buildings. For instance, all twenty of the engravings depict topiaries symmetrically arranged around a central feature, gently inclined to provide comprehensive, holistic, and therefore accurate representations of the buildings. The architectural centerpieces of these symmetrical layouts are displayed to be examined and appreciated for their intricacy. With their detail, plans, and perspectival views, the engravings act as reliable models of the palace buildings.⁵⁰

Ohlmer’s photographs might also be understood as documentary evidence, an index of what once was. In Ohlmer’s photograph *Southern Side of the Palace of the Distant Horizon* (fig. 9), for instance, the tightly cropped image directs the gaze to the intricate detailed carvings of the stone. The emphasis on capturing precision—whether through linear perspective or the documentary potential of photography—is evident in both mediums.

However, it is crucial to recall that most of the structures were not buildings at all, but massive masonry walls covered in perspectival paintings. The dual-definition of façade is useful in understanding the way Yilantai’s engravings depict the reality of the palace’s design on one hand and the illusion of European village life centered around China’s empire on the other. The engravings are therefore critical to our understanding of theatricality at court, for the images not only provide visual evidence of the uncanny presence of a European village in eighteenth-century China, but also recreate the playful, entertaining experience a visitor would have as they recognized the deception. For instance, the title *Perspective Painting of the Lake to the East* (fig. 3) unmasks the building’s true nature as a painted backdrop. Kleutghen notes that appreciating both the view and the paintings together “required a sophisticated viewer capable of holding reality and illusion in balance, a key feature of seventeenth-century Chinese conceptions of theatricality and spectatorship.”⁵¹ The painted backdrops were arranged in a pattern derived directly from European stage technology to enhance their perspectival effects, thereby also incorporating European ideas of theatricality.⁵²

Moreover, at the heart of the engravings lies the design concept of *jing*, or “scene:” a discrete and pleasing space that includes a combination of water features, architectural structures, decorative rocks, floras, faunas, and artificial landscaping composed to appear natural within the larger landscape of a designed garden of linked yet independent scenes.⁵³ According to the earliest extant Chinese



Figure 9 Ernst Ohlmer, Southern Side of the Palace of the Distant Horizon, 1873, wet collodion glass negative. In Maureen Warren, "Romanticizing the Uncanny: Ernst Ohlmer's 1873 Photographs of the European-style Palaces in the Yuanmingyuan" in Nineteenth-Century Photographs and Architecture: Documenting History, Charting Progress, and Exploring the World, edited by Micheline Nilsen (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 241.

manual on garden design, clever sequencing of these distinct scenes produced a successful and aesthetically-pleasing garden.⁵⁴ Thus in the Qing dynasty, the "scene" created a multidimensional experience that encouraged a sensory, intellectual, and emotional response to viewing the garden whether in person or through an image.⁵⁵

If we take each engraving as a particular "scene" of the garden and apply the same logic of "scene" to Ohlmer's photographs, illusion becomes doubly evident. That is, Ohlmer framed the buildings he captured by creating various views: staging "scenes" with a European picturesque aesthetic that add another layer to the multiplicity of illusions already framing Yuanming Yuan's Western-style façades. Much like Chinese garden "scenes" were meant to elicit emotion in their viewers through theatrical entertainment, so too did the Romanticist tradition of depicting ruins elicit an emotional response, this time one of mourning and imperialist nostalgia.

Considering the Western-palace images as a cohesive whole that react and respond to the site, both the engravings and photographs produce an uncanny mixture of the factual and the fantastic. Documentary modes of representation are, in this case, acting in service of illusion. In their formal methods, both present the buildings in a theatrical sense, capturing the “fairyland” quality Qianlong had in mind when commissioning their construction. Qianlong had engravings made of the void structures in a Western aesthetic, visually mimicking architectural and decorative traditions of Versailles. By the time the photographs were taken, the new ruin-aesthetic gave the buildings an appearance of a history that never happened, since the buildings were never used as such and were no more than façades.

Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park

In 1976, many political leaders, scholars, and architects expressed concern over how to preserve the remaining buildings in Yuanming Yuan. Reconstruction became a national priority: a preparatory committee was formed and led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the Yuanming Yuan Institute was established. The institute’s focus on research, cultural activities, and reconstruction transformed the space into a memorial park by renovating several of the Western-palace structures.⁵⁶ Prior to the Ruins Park, the relatively barren site was made up of farms, factories, and schools.⁵⁷ Photographs of the site during this time are difficult to track down, but scholars such as Young-Tsu Wong note that Yuanming Yuan had become “a place for peasants who were destroying the landscape.”⁵⁸ The land was composed of 182 acres of rice fields, 55 acres of huts, and 150 acres of roads, alongside twenty villages.⁵⁹ After the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the new administration resumed, with increased vigor, the initiative to restore and preserve remaining artifacts. The government evicted people from their homes and claimed the land as historically sacrosanct. Nearly all who contributed to the restoration debate at the time agreed Yuanming Yuan should primarily be a symbolic site that fostered a range of moral and sentimental experiences in its visitors, from awe, pride, humiliation, rage, and resentment to patriotism.⁶⁰ The Western-style buildings became architectural icons representative of Yuanming Yuan and continued to serve as theatrical façades for political, nationalist, and economic purposes.

John Friedmann notes how a building or structure can symbolize a city as a whole. Friedmann refers to historic buildings such as the Coliseum in Rome or the Eiffel Tower in Paris as iconic forms of architecture that, in today’s competitive and capitalist world, “brand” cities, just as the classic Coca Cola bottle is universally recognized by its shape.⁶¹ In this case, the reconstructed Western-style

buildings on display at the Ruins Park have become a highly recognizable icon, the “brand” of Yuanming Yuan.

Similar to Ohlmer’s photographs, the Western-style buildings function today as sites of nostalgia, mourning, and patriotism promoted by the state’s investment in the palace and garden complex as a heritage site.⁶² If Yuanming Yuan achieves UNESCO World Heritage Site status, it would solidify Yuanming Yuan as a “branding site” in Friedmann’s sense.⁶³ This gesture would confirm that the buildings have become a protected pleasure park once again—a “Disneyscape,” or “a product of [a] two-decade-long process of resurrecting the ‘fallen’ site and transforming it into a national monument and a revenue generator.”⁶⁴ In a way, the site as a “Disneyscape” would reproduce Qianlong’s original objective behind the construction of the European section: he described it as “fairyland on earth.”⁶⁵ Inherent to both the intention and presentation of Yuanming Yuan’s Western-style palaces are the twofold nature of their façades: the exterior surfaces have become a visual paradigm for artificiality.

Conclusion

From their inception, the Western-style buildings have in a sense always been façades. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when China’s emperors resided there, they were places of play and make-believe. The decorative exteriors and void interiors of Yuanming Yuan’s Western-style buildings operated as theatrical illusionistic spaces during Qianlong’s reign. Their representation in ensuing centuries built on and intersected with this notion in various ways. Yilantai’s eighteenth-century engravings reify the theatrical farce of the buildings through their attention to detail, stage-like presentation, and titling of various buildings that exposed them as painted sets rather than structural walls. Ohlmer’s nineteenth-century photographs falsely historicized the buildings to fit them into a Romantic picturesque tradition common in Europe at the time. Finally, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park operates as a façade wherein the buildings’ ornate and empty structures provide the backdrop onto which a complex synthesis of art, politics, and the Chinese tourist market are projected. In some ways, the Yuanming Yuan’s European style-palaces never stopped functioning as a façade, in both senses of the term: ranging from the faithful application of European styles to the imaginative staging of European life, or in other words ranging from the factual to the fantastic. The continued reproduction of the site—in Yilantai’s engravings, Ohlmer’s photographs, and today’s tourist market—demonstrates

the role of visual representation in mobilizing the dual-definition of façade for political, national, and economic purposes.

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Notes

¹ Young-tsu Wong, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 76, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824863876>.

² Régine Thiriez, "Old Photography and the Yuanmingyuan," in *Art History through the Camera's Lens*, edited by Helene E. Roberts (Cambridge, M.A.: Gordon and Breach, 1995), 263, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315075433>.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴ Annetta Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China: World Cultural Heritage, National Humiliation, and Evolving Narratives," *Modern China* no. 41 (2015): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700415571259>.

⁵ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Haiyan Lee, "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan: Or, How to Enjoy a National Wound," *Modern China* 35, no. 2 (March 2009): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700408326911>.

⁹ At this point Chinese site managers began to actively market sites as "world cultural heritage" in hopes of including them on UNESCO's official World Heritage List. This helped stake a claim to the zodiacs based on international law laid down by the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the

Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property of 1970 and the subsequent UNIDROIT Convention of 1995. China joined the ranks of other nations demanding the return of illegally obtained cultural heritage. Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China," 655.

¹⁰ Ibid., 622.

¹¹ Lee, 163.

¹² Régine Thiriez. *Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 37, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203827277>.

¹³ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 59.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Greg M. Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles: Intercultural Interactions Between Chinese and European Palace Cultures," *Art History* no. 32 (2009): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2008.00652.x>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hui Zou, "The Jing of Line-Method: A Perspective Garden in the Garden of Round Brightness" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2005): 222-223.

²⁰ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 127.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hui Zou, "The Jesuit Theater of Memory in China," *Montreal Architectural Review* no. 2 (2015): 38.

²³ Cary Y. Liu, "Architects and Builders of the Qing Dynasty Yuanming Yuan Imperial Garden-Palace," *The University of Hong Kong Museum Journal* no. 1 (2002): 43.

²⁴ Thiriez, *Barbarian Lens*, 42.

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ Sebastiano Serlio and Andrea Pozzo were architects and stage set designers considered masters of illusory perspective in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Italy. Their stage designs influenced the first Chinese book on linear perspective, *Shixue*, which was published by Nian Xiyao in 1729 and adapted from Pozzo's *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum* (1693). Zou, "The Jing of Line-Method," 304.

²⁷ Kristina Kleutghen, "Staging Europe: Theatricality and Painting at the Chinese Imperial Court," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* no. 42 (2013): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2013.0000>.

²⁸ Kleutghen, "Staging Europe," 92.

²⁹ Ibid., 99.

³⁰ Wen Fong, "The Time of Qianlong (1736-1795)," *Phoebus* 6, no. 1 (1988): 9.

³¹ Maxwell K. Hearn, "Document and Portrait: The Southern Tour Paintings of Kangxi and Qianlong," *Phoebus* 6, no. 1 (1988): 131.

³² Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012): 99.

- ³³ Jeffrey Auerbach, “The picturesque and the homogenisation of Empire,” *The British Art Journal* no. 5 (2004): 48.
- ³⁴ Carolyn Korsmeyer, “The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* no. 4 (2014): 431, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12104>.
- ³⁵ Hung, *A Story of Ruins*, 15.
- ³⁶ Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” in *The Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture 1973–1984* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 621–51.
- ³⁷ Maureen Warren, “Romanticizing the Uncanny: Ernst Ohlmer’s 1873 Photographs of the European-style Palaces in the Yuanmingyuan,” in *Nineteenth-Century Photographs and Architecture: Documenting History, Charting Progress, and Exploring the World*, edited by Micheline Nilsen (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013): 237, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315090498-15>.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.
- ³⁹ It is unclear whether only fifteen negatives were taken or if others were lost. After Ohlmer’s death in 1927, his widow gave twelve glass negatives to Ernst Boerschmann, an architect and art historian in Berlin. The glass negatives disappeared until 1988, when Régine Thiriez found them with Boerschmann’s grandson in Berlin and gave them to The Science Museum in London, which made prints from them. In 2010 Qin Feng, a Taiwanese journalist and collector, purchased Ohlmer’s negatives. Warren, “Romanticizing the Uncanny,” 234.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ⁴¹ Victor Hugo, *The Chinese expedition: Victor Hugo on the sack of the Summer Palace*. Napoleon.org. November 25, 1861, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/the-chinese-expedition-victor-hugo-on-the-sack-of-the-summer-palace/>.
- ⁴² Hung, 131.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ⁴⁶ Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, “Introduction: Photography, ‘race,’ and post-colonial theory,” in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing race and place*, edited by Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): 5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315015262>.
- ⁴⁷ Auerbach, “The picturesque,” 53.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001): 84.
- ⁵⁰ Thomas, 130.
- ⁵¹ Kleutghen, “Staging Europe,” 83.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 84.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 190.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lee, "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan," 168.

⁶¹ John Friedmann, "Reflections on Place and Place-making in the Cities of China," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* no. 31 (2007): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00726.x>.

⁶² Lee, "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan," 181.

⁶³ Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China," 655.

⁶⁴ Lee, "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan," 156.

⁶⁵ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 47.