

Yuan Ming Yuan

Foreword

This document was originally written in 2005, when I had just started filming a documentary about the Old Summer Palace in Beijing. The Chinese name of the documentary is the same as the name of the Old Summer Palace, whose site is now a public park in Beijing, Yuanmingyuan (圆明园). Although the requirements placed on the actors were not (thankfully) great, the project itself was quite prestigious. After all, it involved the destiny of a place that has become almost a sacred site in the consciousness of Chinese people and a living symbol of their struggle and their history. The project had an unprecedented budget for computer graphics, needed to recreate a picture of what the gardens might have looked like in their heyday, and when it was finished it had its premiere in the Great Hall of the People.

My reason for revisiting this document now is that this film has now been released in an English language version on Youtube. I know that the producers always intended it to be sold abroad in foreign language versions, and over the years a rumour came to my ears that a German language version had been prepared, but I assume they must have given up hope of getting a television or cinematic release and decided to place it on Youtube. It can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DU9Hd9a4Q54>

(Note: it covers the whole history of Yuanmingyuan, not just the destruction of it).

Since filming this thing, I have done quite a lot more reading about the burning of Yuanmingyuan and the second Opium War in particular. Quite a lot of source material is now available on the internet. The film itself made extensive use of the narrative of the Rev. R.J.L McGhee "[How we got to Peking](#)". I also found interesting material in Viscount Wolseley's "[Narrative of the War with China 1860](#)". This latter also contains an interesting account of a meeting with Taiping rebels, as well as much more detail about what happened to the captured truce party to provoke the burning of Yuanmingyuan. A selection of [Elgin's diaries and letters](#) is available on Project Gutenberg. For the background to the Opium Wars and more specific detail about the first Opium War, there is plenty of detail in Julia Lovell's book "[The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China](#)".

I think what struck me most strongly in reading these accounts, particularly Wolseley's account, was the vast difference between modern warfare and warfare in the 19th century. Of course the Anglo-French force was an expeditionary force and not an army of occupation, their aim was to enforce trading treaties and establish concessions, not the large scale annexation of territory. But reading these accounts the feeling one gets is of a mixture of military skirmish, working holiday and, frankly, out and out tourism. The actual amount of time spent in battle was minimal compared to the amount of time they spent organizing supplies, moving troops and equipment and generally exploring their unfamiliar surroundings. There were no planes, there were no cars, there was no telephone or telegraph. Moreover, the policy of the allies was to pay for produce they consumed and they soon found people willing and eager to trade with them. Although the Opium War was a vile campaign and ultimately the sufferers of the opium trade were ordinary Chinese people after

all, the actual Qing government was probably quite a remote entity to most of the population of greater China, and an entity to be feared rather than identified with. The arrival of Elgin's troops probably left people with a feeling of being sandwiched in the middle of a fight between two remote imperial powers, rather than of being invaded. After all, quite a few of them were already in conflict with the Qing and might have felt the arrival of the allied forces to be advantageous to themselves. (Wolseley claims that the Chinese civilians were more afraid of the Tartar Cavalry than they were of the allies.)

Elgin died only three years after the burning of Yuanmingyuan, and one might be tempted to wonder whether the destruction of such magnificence weighed on his mind, but whatever else he may have regretted he never expressed regret at the burning of Yuanmingyuan. It's hard now, with the insight of an after-the-fact Zhu Geliang, not to feel that this was an act of cultural vandalism towards the whole Chinese people, but at the time these events happened the property destroyed was the private property of the emperor. The ordinary people were never admitted, there was no prospect of them ever being admitted. Elgin's force, as already mentioned, was a small expeditionary force. They had returned to China because of the failure to ratify a treaty already signed in 1858. At the time of the burning of the palaces winter was approaching and Elgin's troops did not have the necessary resources to winter over in China. They were under orders to deliver a significant military punishment to the Qing government and they needed to get back to Tianjin while the going was good. I think what Elgin did was very logical under the circumstances. Rather than kill a lot of people, he destroyed a lot of property belonging to a very rich and rather degenerate family. He was also *intensely* angry that his negotiating party had been captured while under a flag of truce and brutally tortured with the loss of many men, including his personal secretary.

He had no way of knowing that a mere half century later the stranglehold of this regime would be broken by Sun Yat-sen's Xinhai revolution and it would very soon vanish for good.

I've made only minimal changes to the document that follows; the chief change has been to break it into two sections, one of background information and a second part which deals more specifically with Elgin and the experience of playing him. I think the sections could be read in either order.

Ben Thompson: December 2014

The background

“Imagine some inexpressible construction, something like a lunar building, and you will have the Summer Palace. Build a dream with marble, jade, bronze and porcelain, frame it with cedar wood, cover it with precious stones, drape it with silk, make it here a sanctuary, there a harem, elsewhere a citadel, put gods there, and monsters, varnish it, enamel it, gild it, paint it, have architects who are poets build the thousand and one dreams of the thousand and one nights, add gardens, basins, gushing water and foam, swans, ibis, peacocks, suppose in a word

a sort of dazzling cavern of human fantasy with the face of a temple and palace, such was this building. The slow work of generations had been necessary to create it.”

This was Victor Hugo, writing in 1861 to a Captain Butler who had asked his opinion about the Anglo French expedition to China of the previous year. Hugo was expressing his outrage at the looting and sacking of the Summer Palace (in Chinese known as Yuanmingyuan or Garden of Perfect Brightness).

Yuanmingyuan was constructed in what are now the northwest suburbs of Beijing between 1709 and 1859, although there had been imperial gardens and summer palaces in that region since at least the Liao dynasty (1125AD). In 1709 the Qing dynasty Emperor Kangxi started the development of the Yuanmingyuan in that region and also gave it its name. In traditional Confucian philosophy, Yuan (circle) means the doctrine of the mean; Ming (bright) means wisdom and insight. Kangxi used this name to encourage his son to follow Confucian philosophy and have a wise insight into state affairs. Kangxi himself didn't develop Yuanmingyuan very far, he was not a big spender; he kept only three hundred women and advised his sons to do the same. Kangxi's son Yongzheng added more palaces to serve as part-time offices. When the emperor Qianlong was on the throne the Qing dynasty's finances were quite stable and Yuanmingyuan was greatly expanded, two other gardens were added and it is said that during the 60 years of his reign construction on the gardens didn't stop for a single day. In order to "move heaven and hell inside his arms", he traveled all over the country six times, visiting famous sites of outstanding scenic beauty. He searched out the most skilled architects and used them to copy China's most famous gardens; he collected precious artifacts from all parts of the country and moved them into Yuan Ming Yuan.

Yuanmingyuan actually consisted of three interconnected gardens. The site had a circumference of 10 kilometers and covered around 350 hectares, about the same as the Forbidden City in the centre of Beijing. The emperor and his wives spent more time in Yuanmingyuan than they did in the Forbidden City, moving there after Chinese New Year and staying until the autumn. Many famous scenic spots from all parts of China were integrated into its design, for example, the ten famous sites from the West Lake in Hangzhou were imitated and placed around the Sea of Fortune (the largest of the lakes). Besides an abundance of splendid Chinese architecture of various styles, there was also a mock European building, designed by Jesuits, which had a magnificent fountain with many fine animal sculptures. Owing to the fact that the Chinese buildings were mostly wood, the most durable of the remaining ruins belong to this European complex, but in its time it only comprised some 5% of the buildings area of about 160,000 square meters. Besides the magnificent buildings and gardens, Yuanmingyuan was a treasure house of Chinese art and literature. The interiors were packed with antiques, jade articles, paintings, books, jewelry, famous porcelain and handcrafts of all kinds. Besides this, the library held a copy of Four Complete Volumes of Chinese Classics which had 79,003 volumes and 853,453 pages,

making it the largest book ever in the world. The Sea of Fortune itself had an area of around 28 hectares and contained three islands. Around the lake there were more than 60 scenic places. The names of some of them might give an idea of the flavour of the place, "Pagoda in Sunset", "House of Colorful Clouds", "Ripples over a Lake", "Chrysanthemum and Pine in Bloom", "House of Tranquility", "House of Finding the Cloud", "Pavilion of Jade", "Watching Fish", "Flower Vase", "Room of Ease", "Hall of Studying with Willows", "Good Writings Everywhere like Flowers Falling on the Surface of the Water", "House of Truth", "Listening to Spring Water under Pine Trees", "Hall of Watching Water Ripples", "Another World", "Chimes at Sunset", "Hall of Fragrance", "House of Bamboos", "Hall of Wind from Pine Trees", "A Curtain of Green Clouds", "Autumn Moon over Lake" and many others. The Sea of Fortune was also host to a large variety of dragon boats with similarly fancy names ("Floating Study", "Boat with Paintings and Calligraphy", "Sitting in a Boat in the Sky", "Boat of Pines Bamboo and Plum", "Ark of Carrying the Moon", "Boat of Doing Nothing" etc.). When the Emperor prepared for a nocturnal boat ride, he took a dragon boat more than thirty meters long and covered with fish scales made of gold, with moving paws sticking out of the side. After sunset, several dozen ladies-in-waiting started to row the boat, which was equipped with hundreds of glass lanterns, decorated with red chiffon so that the water surface would appear red all over. There were lanterns along the side of the lake and on the tree tops also, giving the appearance of a starry night overhead. In the daytime, boats of various shapes and sizes moved around in the lake like floating pavilions, offering an attractive spectacle against the backdrop of the scenic sites on the lake's edge.

This magnificent edifice was destroyed in three days in the winter of 1860. The authors of this destruction were the English party of an Anglo-French expeditionary force on the orders of the British Plenipotentiary, James Bruce, eighth Earl of Elgin and Kincardine. If the name sounds familiar, it's probably because Elgin's father, the seventh Earl of Elgin, notoriously acquired some marbles from the Parthenon, which are still in the British Museum. The eighth Earl was the second son of Elgin of the marbles, but became heir to his father's title following the death of his elder brother. He started his working life by managing the family coalmines. In 1841, at the age of 30, he was elected a Member of Parliament and at the age of 31 was appointed governor of Jamaica. In 1846 he was appointed governor of Canada, and had some success in stabilizing the country during the revolutionary ferment of 1848. In 1854 he returned to England, by this time his political sympathies were tending towards the Whigs but he took a seat in the Lords as an independent. His next posting was to be as British High Commissioner and Plenipotentiary to the Manchu Empire.

Britain, along with a number of other foreign powers, was at that time jostling for commercial advantage in China. The first Opium War (1839 – 42) had opened up China to the lucrative opium trade and the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony. However, the Chinese were still insufficiently cooperative as far as the British were concerned, and particularly with reference to Canton. The British wanted access

to Canton but the Chinese refused. A pretext for military action was therefore sought, and was found in a trivial incident involving the arrest of a lorcha called *The Arrow*, allegedly for smuggling (actually, it later emerged that she was smuggling). Contemporary spin-doctors went to work on this and soon managed to convert it into a grave insult to the British flag and so on and so forth. The opinion of the Attorney-General was sought as to the legality of using military force against China. The Attorney-General, whilst conceding that a strong case could be made against the British in international law, nevertheless finally concluded that international law was not applicable when dealing with “barbarous states”.

In December 1857, a line of British warships assembled off Canton. The bombardment of the city walls began on December 28th and continued for a whole day. The following day the walls were stormed and the city taken against barely any resistance. The Anglo-French forces continued towards Beijing. They had the advantage of modern artillery with rifled barrels which was far more accurate at far greater range than the old smooth bore cannons of the Qing gunners. The only significant obstacles en-route were the forts at Dagu at the mouth of the Baihe River, which were taken with only light allied casualties. Once in Tianjin, the allies employed military blackmail to force the emperor’s emissaries to sign the “Treaty of Tientsin”, which awarded Britain a one million pound indemnity and opened up the Yangtze River as well as five new treaty ports. The emperor also agreed to the appointment of a British ambassador and the post was given to Elgin’s brother, Frederick Bruce. Elgin next visited Japan, where he signed a treaty which did not, however, attempt to impose opium on the population, then returned briefly to China to make a military excursion up the Yangtze, mainly in order to cow the Taiping rebels who were currently active in the region.

The treaty concluded, Elgin returned to England where he was appointed Postmaster-General and given the freedom of the City of London. But back in China things weren’t going according to plan. Elgin’s brother insisted on traveling to Beijing in triumph up the Baihe River accompanied by a large military force. The Chinese were not keen and suggested an alternative route and a smaller force. Bruce turned a deaf ear to diplomacy and tried to force his way past the forts at Dagu but, to his dismay, his army was repulsed with heavy losses of men and equipment. Not surprisingly, after this debacle the Qing emperor showed little interest in ratifying the Treaty of Tientsin.

In 1860 Elgin set off again for China with orders to occupy Beijing if necessary. His armed forces were under the command of General Sir James Hope Grant who had proved his military prowess, often against formidable odds, in India. Again they stormed the forts at Dagu, the Anglo-French casualties this time were 360 men killed or wounded and the Chinese casualties at least 2,000. Elgin’s position was somewhat precarious, in that the British did not actually want to see the Manchu empire fall (a British force was actually helping the Manchus put down the Taiping rebels in

Shanghai at the same time as Elgin was attacking the forts at Dagu). Because of this, Elgin pursued a policy of continual negotiation, hoping at every stage to avoid further bloodshed. During one such round of negotiations, a group including Elgin's secretary was taken prisoner by the Chinese, whereupon Elgin decided there was no alternative to an assault on the capital itself.

Discipline in the expeditionary force was hard to maintain. Prisoners were abused and killed and looting was widespread. On arrival at the Yuanmingyuan there was an orgy of looting which lasted for 2 days. In an attempt to introduce some semblance of fairness for those soldiers who had refrained from looting, General Hope Grant ordered that all the booty should be collected and an auction held, the result being that every soldier got 19 pieces of silver, the equivalent of 4 gold sovereigns, with which they were well pleased. After the looting was over, Elgin ordered his soldiers to burn the palaces to the ground. This was in reprisal for the treatment of the prisoners taken earlier during the negotiations, who had suffered appallingly and of whom less than half had survived. Elgin's anger was directed not so much at the Chinese people but at the emperor personally, and the destruction of his beloved Yuanmingyuan was designed "to hit the emperor where it hurt". The French contingent regarded the burning of the palaces as an act of lunacy and refused to take part. The burning took a full two days. Charles Gordon (later to become "Gordon of Khartoum") wrote,

"We accordingly went out, and after pillaging it, burned the whole place, destroying in a Vandal-like manner most valuable property which would not be replaced for four millions . . . You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them; in fact, these palaces were so large, and we were so pressed for time, that we could not plunder them carefully. Quantities of gold ornaments were burnt, considered as brass. It was wretchedly demoralizing work . . ."

Elgin

Ever since I've been coming to Beijing I've loved the remains of Yuanmingyuan. There is very little left of its original splendour besides a few carved stone pillars left over from the European style palace. The Sea of Fortune is still there, but nothing remains of the many scenic pavilions that once surrounded it. The whole place has a wild and desolate feeling to it and also a real sense of history, an aching open wound in the Chinese psyche. Because there are no remaining palaces and monuments entrance is cheap and if one goes between the first and the fifth of the month one can buy a monthly ticket for little more than the price of one visit. I often like to stroll there, practice Tai Chi or try and compose a poem. More than once I have been walking there with a Chinese friend and we have wandered deep into the gardens into a wild place beside some lake glutted with dried lotus stems and she has suddenly turned to me and said "You did this to us". The place has a strange and almost psychoanalytical potency. So I was delighted to get a call recently from a CCTV unit

who are making a full-length documentary about Yuanmingyuan and wanted me to play the part of Lord Elgin.

The part of Elgin is perfectly suited to my acting ability, since there are almost no words in the script and my duties mainly consist of projecting a somewhat pompous middle-aged English persona, which is the strategy I usually adopt with the Chinese anyway. I have a white wig and side-whiskers, which make me look rather like Dr Who. So far I have done 5 days of filming. The first two days were done in a theme park in Langfang where there is a reconstruction of the European palace with its magnificent fountain. General Hope Grant sits in front of the fountain and plays the cello (he was, in fact, an excellent cellist). We also make some rather improbable, but not actually illegal, moves in a game of chess. The second two days were filmed on a site where there is a reconstruction of the outer city wall of old Beijing. The set belongs to the August First Army Film Unit and the Qing soldiers were played by real Chinese soldiers whose patience and discipline put our army of foreign Chinese language students to shame. On the fifth day we were somewhere out near the Great Wall and filmed scenes involving firing cannons at the Qing cavalry. The Chinese horse team were amazing, galloping at breakneck speed towards the cannons as huge flashbooms exploded all around them. My part mostly consisted of riding, or walking, amongst piles of corpses, the director constantly exhorting me to “keep my head up”. I am, after all, a gentleman.

A question which exercised me somewhat was this: when looking at the corpses, should I smile? When I arrive in Yuanmingyuan the director specified that I should smile, so I did. Perhaps Elgin would have smiled when he entered Yuanmingyuan since his mission was, after all, accomplished. I doubt if he would have smiled at the corpses, though. Actually, imperialist though he was, by profession, Elgin was not a butcher. During his governorship of Canada he had at one stage incurred the wrath of the crowds who stormed his residence, but he refused to call out the troops, saying, "I am prepared to bear any amount of obloquy that may be cast upon me, but, if I can possibly prevent it, no stain of blood shall rest upon my name." He retained this abhorrence of violence all his life. En route to China in 1860 he read a newly published account of the suppression of the Indian Mutiny, “My Diary in India”. He wrote,

“It has made me very sad; but it only confirms what I believed before respecting the scandalous treatment which the natives receive at our hands in India. I am glad that he has had the courage to speak out as he does on this point. Can I do anything to prevent England from calling down on herself God’s curse for brutalities committed on another feeble Oriental race? Or are all my exertions to result only in the extension of the area over which Englishmen are to exhibit how hollow and superficial are both their civilisation and their Christianity?”

As he observed the walls of Canton from a line of English men-of-war anchored in front of the town, he wrote, “I never felt so ashamed of myself in my life.... I feel that

I am earning for myself a place in the litany immediately after ‘plague, pestilence and famine’”. And when the original Treaty of Tientsin was signed he regarded his great achievement as having concluded the treaty with a minimum loss of life. And yet this seemingly liberal gentleman with his horror of war and growing skepticism of the values of his own so-called civilization actually put a torch to Yuanmingyuan, the “Garden of Gardens”, thus earning himself a niche in Chinese history as possible the most hated foreigner of all time.

Actually, I have some sympathy with Elgin. Personally I like Yuanmingyuan the way it is. If he hadn’t burned it I would have to pay 100 RMB to get in and be packed shoulder to shoulder with American and Japanese tourists and people trying to sell me 10 RMB cigarette lighters at 100 RMB apiece. We already have the Forbidden City, and some people say (don’t look at me!) that when you’ve seen one massive gilded throne room with meter thick glossy red pillars, you’ve seen them all. I don’t like wealth, ancient or modern. And that’s just what Elgin was destroying, the Emperor’s wealth, the Emperor’s private residence. What sparked the burning was the mistreatment, effectively torture, inflicted on the legation’s members who had been captured and imprisoned at Yuanmingyuan, and of whom at least half had died. I doubt if Elgin could have imagined that little more than half a century later the Qing dynasty would fall and within a few years China would become a people’s republic. If Elgin had responded to the murder of the prisoners by putting a few thousand of the local population to the sword, history might have been kinder to him than it has been and I doubt the Emperor, in his hiding place well away from Beijing, would have been overly concerned. Actually, it seems to me now, and perhaps I am reacting to my own contemporary context here, that if the burning of Yuanmingyuan has a moral it’s just this: once armies resort to torture all bets are off.

Sic Transit Gloria Mundi. There have been several schemes to rebuild Yuanmingyuan since then, but the task would be impossibly expensive. Some kind of further development will occur on the site, and in recent years more than 200 artifacts have been returned by the local population in response to an appeal by the government. Last year a group of animal heads from the fountain was sold at auction in New York for over 3 million US dollars to a company in Beijing who were eager to repatriate the pieces. Meanwhile, anyone interested will soon be able to see an artist’s impression of what Yuanmingyuan was like in the shape of our film, which is called, appropriately enough, *Yuan Ming Yuan*. I’m looking forward to going to Chengdu in the New Year for the next bit.

Acknowledgments:

Material about Lord Elgin and the Anglo-French expeditionary force was mainly taken from “**Elgin in China**” by John New Singer (New Left Review 15, May June 2002), I found this article through “Google” but it may have since been removed from the web.

Material about Yuanmingyuan was mainly taken from the website:

<http://www.cs.ubc.ca/spider/wang/ymy/whole-map.html>

The full text of Victor Hugo’s letter can be found at:

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1310/is_1985_Nov/ai_4003606