Possessions of Empire: The Construction of Imperial Identities in Britain and China

By
Olivia Holder

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History Department
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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Approved:

Dr. Michelle King

Dr. Inger Brodey
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Introduction

“The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it.”¹ In the Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard philosophizes on the ways that human create, relate to, and dwell within their homes. He devotes a chapter to the ‘miniature,’ and writes of miniature worlds, “They then offer themselves for our ‘possession,’ while denying the distance that created them. We possess form afar, and how peacefully!”² The miniaturizing and possession of worlds is what this paper is predicated upon. In the eighteenth century, the Chinese Bedroom at the Badminton House and the Chinese Pagoda at Kew Gardens in Britain and the Western Palaces of Yuanming yuan in China were miniatures built to depict the world of the cultural other. Through possessing these condensed foreign worlds, the patrons who commissioned these miniatures in both the British and Chinese Empires asserted their imperial identities. This paper will examine the role of the possessions of empire in the self-identification and contests for competing global identities in both realms.

Before Princess Augusta commissioned Sir William Chambers to build the pagoda at Kew (1761-1762) or before the 4th Earl of Beaufort hired John and William Linnell to assemble a “Chinese Bedroom” at Badminton House in 1754, British perceptions of China grew out of the awe-filled accounts of travelers, missionaries, and merchants who had visited the distant land. Prior to the eighteenth century, the western world was impressed with the intellectual challenges posed by this foreign culture. They

² Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, 172.
were intent on deciphering the formidably complex yet highly rational language system and unpacking the presiding philosophies and religions.³

Reports written by figures such as the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci of their forays into the Chinese mindset and worldview presented a culture that elicited the respect and admiration of British intellectuals. Eighteenth-century European thinkers believed that, despite its eastern veneer, Chinese philosophy was predicated on “a pure and authentic revelation of the divine” and a sense of order and rationality informed by antiquity, as manifested in their writing system.⁴

This original respect for Chinese intellectual and cultural sophistication devolved in the mid seventeenth century as China began to be defined by its export goods.⁵ Rather than presenting questions of philosophical and theological import, China came to provide an aesthetic in which the exotic could be possessed.

Confucius is arguably the greatest contributor to Chinese thought and is widely recognized across the globe. His name and associated school of thought, Confucianism, were recognized in Europe during the early seventeenth century due to the accounts of Ricci.⁶ In fact, in 1699, Le Comte posited that Confucius, in his sagacity and great philosophical contributions, ought to be ranked “amongst our Sages of Antiquity.”⁷ From afar Europeans admired China’s stable government, beholden to an all-powerful yet benevolent Emperor, its culture built on civility and respect, and its civilized code of law

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and established rituals. Though the West praised Chinese civil and philosophical systems, an element of mystery persisted. The western notion of China was wrapped in a physical ambiguity; there was wide confusion on how the eastern land looked.

When Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci arrived in Beijing in 1601, in his confusion, he asked those around him “where he could find Cathay.” He had been looking for the land of fantasy described in the “travel accounts” such as those of Sir John Mandeville of the previous centuries. In his account, Mandeville described islands ruled by unrecognizably foreign monsters and plants bearing fruits of gems. This hazy notion of China was born out of the fact that information regarding China reached the West through written accounts which provided imagery of the land that often hyperbolized the foreign and fantastic while failing to ground their descriptions with actual images of the country. In 1665, Johan Nieuhoff, of Dutch origin, was the first to provide images of the fabled land. Upon returning to Europe from his travels in China, he published a collection of series of engravings. The most famous of these depictions was his drawing of the porcelain tower of Nanking (Nanjing). Though his work was released in Dutch, translations in various other European languages were quickly produced, and a 1669 edition became one of the most popular of the travel books that were so well received in Europe. These illustrations formed the basis for later European depictions of China.

Just as Nieuhoff’s collection of engravings were so prized because of the lack of bonafide Chinese imagery in Europe, Chinese objects were, too, highly valued because of their scarcity in the West. In Britain, the East India Company was responsible for the

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importation of Eastern goods. The only goods that they would purchase from China were tea, silk, and porcelain. Yet, those who worked on the trading ships of the company were allowed to conduct their own private deals. As Jacobson notes, “It was this private trading—in furnishing textiles, dress fabrics, wallpapers, ceramics, lacquer ware, silver and gold, ivory and fans—that brought Chinese objects to Britain.”\textsuperscript{12} Private trading, however, could never satiate the market for these desirable goods. And thus, the British turned to employing European artists for imitation goods.

To explore these imitations, this paper investigates the examples of William and Jacob Linnell’s assembly of the “Chinese Room” in Badminton House and Sir William Chambers’ construction of the Chinese Pagoda amid his collection of exotic follies at Kew Gardens. British artists intended these spaces to represent China both as they understood the country and as they imagined their patrons desired it to be. Each artist made intentional decisions in the way that he shaped physical space, including and excluding details to exact an effect. Through examining these choices Chapter One will explore the British assumptions of China that were built into the spaces as well as the perceived identity of the patrons and that identity’s relationship with China.

The Chinese Empire

China has long known herself to be 中国 (zhongguo), The Middle Kingdom. Her worldview was predicated on her centrality in the world. Rooted deep in Chinese thought is the concept of 天下 (tianxia), that which is under Heaven. This realm “under Heaven” included the vast lands of East, Southeast, and Central Asia—those countries ruled by

\textsuperscript{12} Jacobson, Chinoiserie, 21.
their own kings as well as the peripheral, largely ungoverned, hilly stretches of Zomia.\textsuperscript{13} Although China considered this realm to be subject to her imperial power, the term 天下 refers to all that sits under Heaven, the whole world. The Emperor of China enjoyed the special role of being the Son of Heaven and ruled via the Mandate of Heaven. Thus, through divine right, the whole world was under his jurisdiction.

In 1600, China was the world’s “largest and most sophisticated” empire.\textsuperscript{14} Peoples of a multiplicity of ethnic groups, religions, and regions lived under the Emperor’s rule. Despite this diversity, in China proper, order and unity was achieved throughout the dynasties through a balancing of an assimilation of non-Han\textsuperscript{15} cultures and control of divergences that possessed the potential to challenge authority.\textsuperscript{16} The lands on the periphery of the Empire were controlled through a tributary system in concert with soft power achieved through exporting their high culture. Submitting to the Emperor conferred political legitimacy and trading rights upon kings of tribute states. Across Asia, cultural sophistication was expressed in the Chinese language, Confucian values, and Chinese artistic sensibilities. An impressive swath of the world’s population lived under the gaze of the Son of Heaven.

The emperor’s presence extended to the whole of the world and accordingly all interactions with foreigners were interactions with supplicants seeking to align themselves with civilization. In 1789, the British Macartney Embassy was concerned to find that they were admitted into Peking with the understanding that they had arrived on

\textsuperscript{14} Jonathan D. Spence, \textit{The Search for Modern China} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 7.
\textsuperscript{15} Han refers to majority ethnic group in China that had (and has) monopoly over Chinese culture.
\textsuperscript{16} Spence, \textit{The Search for Modern China}, 8.
behalf of Britain’s King George III to pay tribute to the Emperor.\textsuperscript{17} An ongoing mission of Jesuits in the capital constituted the majority of early Chinese contact with Europeans. Tellingly, they were considered part of the Emperor’s imperial household, and they were managed by administrators who looked after the imperial food stocks, precious silks, the preservation of the various imperial estates.\textsuperscript{18} The Jesuits were essentially possessions of the Emperor. In that role, they were not alone.

\textbf{The Influence of Rococo and Natural Gardens}

The “Chinese” spaces in England were undeniably influenced by the pervasive views of China and the cults of fashion to which the artists’ patrons subscribed. As Europe entered the seventeenth century, along with a change in time came a shift in the dominant style. The Baroque period was characterized by symmetry, discipline, classicalism, and grandeur. Very much in contrast with Baroque’s weighty gravitas, the new century introduced the Rococo, ushering in asymmetry, vivid colors, and the playful inspiration of untamed nature. Known for its distinctive and repetitive S and C scrolls that imitate the shapes of shells and swirls, this lighthearted style was easily wedded to the perceived frivolity of the Chinese aesthetic, as seen in chinoiserie.

Integral to the Rococo and the natural settings of these prints is the prevalence of natural gardens and the decline of formal gardens. This was a transition from landscape architecture to planned wilderness, from symmetry, controlled borders, and classical architectural elements that demonstrated man’s dominance over nature to a style of

\textsuperscript{17} French, \textit{Everything under the Heavens}, 7.
\textsuperscript{18} Spence, \textit{The Search for Modern China}, 116.
asymmetry, openness, and harmony. This overthrow of restrictions echoed the transition from Baroque to Rococo. The English took inspiration from Chinese gardens in their quest for cultivated wilderness and created *le jardin anglo-chinois*. The most impactful of China’s gardens was the venerable imperial Yuanming yuan. In 1749, Jesuit Father Jean Attiret published *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China’s Garden near Pekin*. Perceiving themselves as emulating the emperor Kangxi’s imperial garden plans, European gardeners and their patrons took note.

Back in England, the new rococo chinoiserie encouraged artists to take inspiration from garden architecture, and one of the many artistic disciplines under rococo chinoiserie, and therefore impacted by garden architecture, was that of japanning or lacquer-ware.

To fill the gap between the coveted lacquered furniture from the East and the amount that was imported, Europeans developed processes to reproduce the brilliant base lacquer embellished with polychrome elements and beautiful gilding. During the Baroque period japanned furniture was valued for its luster rather than elegance of form, thus a cabinet could be quite plain yet transformed through lacquer. These sentiments changed with the entrance of Rococo. With the whimsical and natural vistas as the vogue, japanned furniture was decorated with highly imaginative renderings of foreign natural scenes.

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20 Originating in France and spreading abroad, this name came to be widely recognized as describing the gardens English gardens that found inspiration in “Chinese” style.
22 “A name given to various methods of imitating oriental lacquer, it was employed in the 18th century to decorate wooden objects such as boxes, trays, and small pieces of furniture. Using gum-lac, seed-lac, or shelllac, dissolved in spirits of wine, many layers were built up, usually in black, red, or green. Gold decoration was added by applying gum arabic and sawdust gilded with metal dust and then burnished. Chinoiserie was a popular style of decoration on japanned objects. Japanning could also be applied to metal items, such as trays, teapots, and tea caddies. The tinplated sheet iron was covered with black varnish and then decorated in gilt and colours.”
Definition from the Grove Art Online
Joseph Goupy’s House of Confucius in Kew Gardens, one of the progenitors of the Chinese garden houses, inspired the important work of William Halfpenny, *New Designs for Chinese Temples, Triumphal Arches, Garden Seats, Palings…*, the first book singularly interested in chinoiserie patterns. This work influenced much of the chinoiserie that artist created after Halfpenny published it in 1750.23

Eighteenth-century China, meanwhile, saw an influx of Chinese occidenterie, or洋货 (*yanghuo*), lit. “ocean goods.” The term occidenterie refers to both imported Western goods as well as objects that presented exotic depiction of the West.24 Materially, the West was represented by curiosities such as clocks and glassware along with artwork that simplified the West into a curiosity itself. Jonathan Spence notes some “Chinese descriptions of foreign countries continued to contain an exotic blend of mystical tales and fantasy in which foreigners were often likened to animals or birds and were described in patronizing or deliberately belittling language.”25 Ironically chinoiserie and occidenterie during the period depicted the cultural other in remarkably similar manners. And curiously, the purported apogee of Chinese garden aesthetic displayed in the famed Yuanming Yuan borrowed, in part, from the European brain trust in Peking, the Jesuits, to build palaces in China that recreated the “exotic” Rococo style. Chapter two will look closely at these 西洋楼 (*xiyanglou*), Western Palaces, which symbolically placed Europe within the Chinese Empire and recognized the West as merely another land existing “under Heaven.”

25 Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 117.
Possessive Power Plays

As Chi-ming Yang notes, there were many “Easts” and “Wests” that existed in the eighteenth century, and their delineations were contingent on the location of one’s point of view. The Eurocentric dichotomy of the orient and occident is disturbed by China’s consideration of goods from the India and Britain to both originate in the West. The categories of East and West are further challenged by the blending identities of each region’s respective exported aesthetics and the concomitant, nearly identical, physical representations of the cultural other. This paper seeks to disabuse the reader of the notion that China was a passive recipient of Imperial Britain’s characterization and depiction of China, but asserts that China, an empire in its own right, produced a nearly parallel identity for European culture and aesthetics.

In the eighteenth century, both the British and Chinese Empires boasted imperial might through the possession of built environments that depicted the cultural other. While the artistic creations of both realms asserted the global reach of each empire, they demonstrated two different approaches to possession. This paper argues that the British owned through understanding and the Chinese possessed through assimilation. The British sought to project a mastery of Chinese culture through defining the Chinese aesthetic and cataloging China within the annals of British knowledge. China, on the other hand, was less concerned with forming an understanding of Europe but rather sought to assimilate representations of the West within China’s universal empire, placing Europe within the Empire’s China-centric global hierarchy. Again as seen in Chapter 3, in the nineteenth century, the material possessions of empire were used as proxies in a

contest of imperial identities as Britain and China fought for their differing conceptions of the world order. Even in the twenty-first century, past the dusk of the imperial age, the continuing battle over the possessions of empire marks the lasting significance of the two powers’ imperial identities. From the exhibition focused spaces in Britain to the Xiyanglou in Yuanming Yuan, this paper will examine both European chinoiserie and Chinese occidenterie and the ways in which both the British and Chinese Empires sought to assert their imperial identities through artistic media and the possession of a foreign aesthetic.
Chapter 1

Microcosms of “China” in the British Empire

The Chinese pagoda at Kew and the Chinese bedroom at Badminton House are an architectural assembly and an artistic collection; they are artistic presentations composed of multiple parts that collectively present the intention of the artists. Both of these assemblies are their designers’ renderings of China and were created to present a particular interpretation of this foreign land. Intentionally representative of Chinese culture and aesthetic, they can be considered to be early British exhibitions of China.

All exhibitions are assembled according to implicit assumptions and are chosen to present a particular narrative ordering or defining the collection. The Linnells’ designs at Badminton House and William Chambers’s construction at Kew were created by artists who saw China as a land of whimsy, a primitive country, belonging to a culture and aesthetic that can be possessed. Building upon these assumptions, the artists created personal spaces for their patrons, which, by their very nature of being possessed by those who commissioned them, reflected on the identities of the patrons.

Through defining the Chinese aesthetic, the British reinstated their own aesthetic; in depicting China, British artistic renderings delineate and define British identity by distinguishing it from a perceived Chinese identity. If China was whimsical, primitive, and able to be possessed, the British could be rational, civilized, and imperial. Chinoiserie was a key enforcer of these identities yet, interestingly, provided a bridge in which the rational could delight in the irrational, the civilized revel in the primitive, and
the imperial dwell within the possessed. The development of chinoiserie was born out of a Western need for escape.

The Chinese Bedroom at Badminton House

In 1754, William and John Linnells’ assembly of the furniture for the Chinese Room at Badminton House was not only a product of the Linnells’ artistry, but was also influenced by the words and images propagated by the artists that came before them. In addition to serving as an apprentice in his father William Linnell’s workshop, John Linnell also studied woodcarving at St Martin’s Lane Academy.²⁷ There he would have studied the influential work of Halfpenny and been introduced to his emphasis on latticework, gardens, pagodas, and dragons.²⁸ The fanciful style indicative of Halfpenny’s influence is certainly visible in the work at the Badminton House.

The work that the Linnells completed at Badminton House was a stylistic update of the stately home. Famed for its magnificent gardens and impressive interior, Badminton had received many significant redecorations and architectural and artistic additions. Although richly and elaborately designed at the start, the house had been redecorated in in French style, Palladian style, and later with a new exterior. Less than one hundred years after the very first remodeling, the 4th Earl of Beaufort followed in the footsteps of the Earls before him and commissioned the Linnells to design a Chinese Bedroom for his fashionable home.²⁹

²⁸ Hayward, “Chinoiserie at Badminton,” 136, 139.
²⁹ Hayward, “Chinoiserie at Badminton,” 134.
Although not all items originally assembled for the Chinese Room at Badminton House have been recorded and identified, the pieces that remain and are known provide a window into eighteenth-century perceptions of China. In my reading of the existent works, upon entering the room the great canopy bed catches one’s eye.\textsuperscript{30} Japanned in a dramatic palette of black, red, and yellow, its four posters rise at a summit to form the iconic shape of a pagoda. The four corners are guarded by golden, swooping dragons, and the finial is crafted out of gilt metal leaves shaped to mimic the wings of the imposing dragons. The fretted panels japanned in black and red serve as the backboard of the bed. The posts of the bed have a bamboo like appearance and are similarly japanned with sprays of flowers and reeds. Having only looked at the bed, one can see the influence of Halfpenny’s designs. In front and to the side of the bed sit chairs, which echo the bed with their fretwork backs and pagoda-like crests.\textsuperscript{31}

Also impressive is the dressing commode. Japanned in black and package-gilt in gold it displays fanciful, simplistic landscapes of China—of oversized weeping plants, small houses featuring dramatically upturned roofs, fishermen, and bridges over meandering rivers. However there is a noticeable lack of detail creating gaps of nothingness surrounding the nature scenes. These abstractions of the Chinese landscape undulate on the three main serpentine draws. The draws bulge at either two ends of the

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lengths of wood with a depression between the projecting bulges. Each drawer features three main illustrations between which are the stretches of nothingness. This composition lends a playful dynamism to images; they seem to float outward and back inward away from the black lacquer background. Thus, the Linnells depict China as a light-hearted collection of diminutive fishermen; exaggerated pagodas; and whimsically large, towering plants bobbing in and out on a sea of black nothingness. They create a land that lacks substance and depth in which the only scenes depicted are of small people doing small things in playful houses.

David Porter also explored this concept remarking, “English sinophiles’ insistence on the vacuity of their object of admiration constitutes precisely the king of ‘flattening’ of cultural value that is the hallmark…of chinoiserie.” Additionally, Bachelard explores the category to which the Linnell dressing table belongs in his chapter entitled “drawers, chests, and wardrobes”. Using wardrobes as an example, he states, “In the wardrobe there exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder. Here order reigns, or rather, this is the reign of order.” Bachelard asserts that drawers are places of intimacy in which one characterizes himself and institutes a “reign of order.” Thus, the dressing table effectively delineates the disorder of “China” from the order that is maintained in the personal effects of the dressing table’s British owner. The set of draws demarcates two opposing identities. On either side of the drawers are additional sets of three draws hidden behind black and gold lattice doors. The sides and back of the top of this dressing table feature a fretwork gallery, which echoes the gallery that crowns the bed. This elegant ensemble is finished with a whimsical mirror that uses japanned

34 Porter, Ideographia, 139.
35 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, 78.
wood to form a scene of rococo-style foliage, a maze of climbing steps, and a pagoda shaped top.  

Interestingly, this commission was the first in which John Linnell assembled both the design for a room as well as the accompanying furniture. With his work at Badminton house, the designer experimented with creating rooms that were intended to be seen as an

Dressing Table, Victoria and Albert Museum©  

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ensemble. Soon he began to offer his clients works *en suite.* The collection he assembled at Badminton House is an exhibition of China. Linnell designed this room with the goal of conveying a specific rendering of China, one of frivolous simplicity. By designing these pieces for a room belonging the 4th Earl of Beaufort, Linnell also implicitly characterizes his patron as an imperial “owner” of a slice of exotic China. His designs of fretwork, depictions of gardens, and inclusion of dragons, are a testament to the influence of William Halfpenny. Yet, William Halfpenny had never been to China. He merely used existing definition of the Chinese aesthetic that was cherished by the British— elements of nature-inspired rococo décor and an attractive irrationality— to provide prints of a dreamed fairyland in the east. It was this type of depiction that William Chambers sought to rebut.

**Chinese Pagoda at Kew Gardens**

After studying under a surgeon, seventeen-year-old Chambers joined the Swedish East India Company as a cadet in supercargo. After his first journey to the East in 1740, Chambers embarked on a second in 1742. It was on this second journey that Chambers experienced China, its culture and its architecture first hand. Drawing on his experiential knowledge, in 1757, Chambers published his influential work, *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses*…. He hoped that his words and prints would “be of use in putting a stop to the extravagancies that daily appear under the name of Chinese, though most of them are mere inventions, the rest copies from the lame representations

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found on porcelain and paper-hangings." He introduced a new definition for the Chinese aesthetic, one purportedly backed by the knowledge of first hand experience. His work was the first book that attempted to present with accuracy and a professional and experienced eye the little-known culture and architecture of China. With this publication, Chambers sought to repudiate the prevailing fantastical notions of the eastern land and confer an academic gravitas to the study of Chinese architecture and design. Just months after releasing this work, he was granted the prestigious position of architect to Augusta, Dowager Princess of Wales, and tutor to her son, George, soon to become King George III. Most notable is Chambers’ work at Kew Gardens, Augusta’s private pleasure gardens.

The most important of Chambers’ works at Kew was his Chinese pagoda, which was at the time of its creation the most widely known piece of chinoiserie architecture in Europe. Influenced by the previously mentioned porcelain tower of Nanking, it stood 163 feet tall and is composed out of ten octagonal stories, each progressively smaller as the structure climbs in height. Within the structure there is a winding staircase that allows access to each floor, and on the six façades of each level are three arched doorways and three arches filled in with brick. It was built with grey brick, finished with luminous glazed tiles, and topped with a decorative gilt fleuron. In his published plans of his buildings at Kew, *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and*

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42 Jacobson, *Chinoiserie*, 151.
Buildings At Kew in Surry, Chambers claims that his pagoda imitated the Chinese Taa\textsuperscript{43} that he describes in Designs, Buildings, Gardens.\textsuperscript{44} Describing his structure he writes,

Each story finishes with a projecting roof, after the Chinese manner, covered with varnished iron of different colours; and round each of them there is a Gallery enclosed with a Rail. All the angles of the roofs are adorned with large dragons, being eighty in number, covered with a kind of thin glass of various colours, which produces a most dazzling reflections; and the whole ornament at the top is double gilt.\textsuperscript{45} The railing is the type of fenestrated “Chinese railing” that Chamber features in his Designs, Buildings, Gardens. The eighty dragons were gilt in a gleaming gold and roof tiles shone in colorful rows of green and white.\textsuperscript{46}

Despite its colors and fanciful dragons the pagoda was incongruous with the rococo chinoiserie of the time period. Even with some whimsical décor, it was still quite serious, lacking in the period’s delicate style, and comparably not very “exotic.” While not overly fanciful like many other contemporary depictions of China, it is not clear that Chambers fully learned his architectural lessons while in China. His pagoda does not look convincingly Chinese in appearance. He chose to construct his work using ten levels, a number uncharacteristic in the Chinese aesthetic.

Just as important as its architectural details are the Pagoda’s surroundings. One of the famous prints of the pagoda and the grounds at Kew is Chambers’ A View of the Wilderness, with the Alhambra, the Pagoda and the Mosque in Kew Gardens. At the left

\textsuperscript{43} Chinese: 塔; English: pagoda
\textsuperscript{44} William Chambers, Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings At Kew in Surry (London: Gregg Press Limited, 1763) 5.
\textsuperscript{45} Chambers, Plans, Elevations, Sections, 5.
of this landscape is Chambers’ Alhambra.\textsuperscript{47} The Alhambra is highly colorful building named after the Islamic palace in Spain. It was designed with columns, gold crescents, and arches.\textsuperscript{48} To the right of the Alhambra, the Pagoda dominates the print with its height. To the right of the tower is a stretch of greenery, behind which the line of trees recedes hazily into the horizon and in front of which lies a sunlit path leading out of the “wilderness” and toward the left is of the frame on which noble men and women stroll. To the far right of the pagoda is the Mosque which is comprised of a domed, octagonal rotunda flanked on either side by flagged minarets. Of the Mosque Chambers writes, “I have endeavoured to collect the principal particularities of the Turkish Architecture.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Chambers, \textit{Plans, Elevations, Sections}.
\textsuperscript{49} Chambers, \textit{Plans, Elevations, Sections}, 6.
View of the Wilderness at Kew, The Metropolitan Museum
Chambers created a garden in which visitors travel through the wilderness, emerge, and find themselves among Moorish and Turkish architecture with Chinese architecture asserting its dominance with its sheer height. John Harris also picked up on to this point when he wrote, “The message that Chambers was leading his visitors on a walk through world architecture is abundantly clear. Kew was the first of the World Fairs with their compression of world architecture!” Chambers assembled a selection of cultures to display and with his designs represented cultures with a designer’s intentionality. His collection of exotica within a British context anticipates the approach of the exhibits at the British Museum. He grafted China into Britain’s collection of known eastern lands. The exotic space that Chambers created at Kew is an exhibition of these eastern countries, and allowing strollers in Kew Gardens to meander through the wilderness and encounter his collections ascribes a primitivism to the cultures that he depicts. Chambers’ geographical decisions made when curating his exhibit correspond with those in his book Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils, in which he depicts Chinese culture for his audience. In this work he wrote of Chinese literature, “I look upon them as toys in architecture: and toys are sometimes, on account of their oddity, prettiness, or neatness of workmanship, admitted into the cabinets of the curious, so may buildings be sometimes allowed a place among composition of a nobler kind.” This paternalistic attitude toward Chinese culture adds an attribution of

Note: This is a watercolor version of the print created by Marlow based on the print by Chambers published in Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings At Kew in Surry in 1763.
53 Chambers, Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils B.
primitivism to the perceptions of China to those introduced by the Chinese room at Badminton House. China represented one of the many cultures that could be understood, mastered, and therefore owned by the British.

**Visitors’ Accounts of Britain’s China**

These exhibitions were assembled for their respective patrons, but many others beside the patrons also visited them. Fortunately, a few these visitors left accounts of their observations, which now paint a picture of the opinions and observations held during this time period of these depictions of China and also describe the impact that the collections had in forming opinions of China.

*The Travels Through England of Dr. Richard Pococke* is a collection of letters written by Dr. Pococke and chronicle his extensive travels throughout England in the eighteenth century. An Englishman himself, Dr. Pococke shares the lens through which those living in the century viewed their world. On the 22nd of June 1754 Dr. Pococke traveled to “the Duke of Beaufort’s park and to the Duke’s House.” Pococke takes note of “a fine Sarcophagus on which there are Alt reliefs, Bacchus &c,” tables of “Porphyry54,” “a Cabinet of what they call Pietre Comesse of Florence55,” and “an original drawing of Raphael.” Among the list of these treasures, he mentions, “one bedchamber is finished and furnished very elegantly in the Chinese manner.”56

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54 A highly valued Egyptian stone.
collection of Egyptian rocks, classical relics, and Italian paintings is the Linnell’s Chinese bedroom.

From Pococke’s account, it is clear that of the Duke’s possessions the most impressive were those items that have a foreign aspect. Fascinatingly, from Pococke’s account it would appear that all of these objects were valuable because of this authenticity. The sarcophagus was valued because of the sense of place lent by the presence of Bacchus on its face. Additionally, Pococke mentions that it was a gift from the Cardinal Mazarine, an Italian cardinal famous for his own collections. Pococke firmly establishes the classical and authentic past of the piece. He does the same for the “original drawing of Raphael’s.” He grounds it in an authentic and recognizable past when he states, “it is the corner only of the famous piece of the Transfiguration of Raphael as St. Pietro Montorio in Rome.” 57 Not only does he assert that the drawing is indeed Raphael’s, but he also traces its physical origins to a location: Rome.

In contrast, no such authentication for the Chinese bedroom is deemed necessary. That it is “in the Chinese manner” is enough for admiration. No histories of the objects are needed. From Pococke’s report it is clear that he and his contemporaries believed that a Chinese bedroom would not have to have originated in China at all. Although the Raphael and the sarcophagus had a concrete sense of place, the Chinese bedroom was considered Chinese as long as it had identifiable features that match Pococke’s notation of Chinese.

His account of the Badminton House proves that the Chinese aesthetic can be possessed. While objects hailing from Egypt and parts of Italy, Western or Western-influenced areas, can be owned, the Chinese aesthetic, in addition to material culture, can

be possessed. In his global collection, the Duke owns classical ruins, an original Raphael, precious porphyry, and bound within the four walls of his Chinese bedroom, he owns China.

Kew gardens were created for the royal family, but were also used, like a jewel of the imperial crown, to display Britain’s might. On September 8th 1786, “the Duke and Duchess of Milan, the Prince and Princess of Albani, Chevalier Rofalez, and the Marchioness of Cufani, went to Kew, where they were received by their Majesties, and the Princess Royal, and Princess Augusta, with every mark of respect due to their dignity.” Presenting a tour of his grounds, “His Majesty conducted them to Richmond and Kew gardens [where] the observatory, the pagoda, and cottage, were particularly delighting to the guest.” The account goes on to include a description of the entourage’s placement and appearance in their carriages. “His Majesty in person being charioteer, with the Duke of Milan on the same seat with him, the Queen and Duchess of Milan seated next to them, an in the third seat of the vehicle the two elder Princesses being placed, had a very singular and superb appearance, when followed by five more carriages, with the attendants on the Royal family and the distinguished guests.”

Although seemingly an inconsequential detail, the arrangement of the party in their carriages is a form of communication.

A chariot was not an everyday vehicle. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a period definition of chariot as “A stately vehicle for the conveyance of persons; a triumphal car, a car of state, or a carriage for private use.”

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58 *Caledonian Mercury*, September 13, 1786, 2:2.
Royal State Coach for King George III. This ornamental vehicle was designed to be a testament to Britain’s imperial power with inclusions of classicizing symbols of her possessions upholding the Imperial Crown along with “Neptune and Amphitrite emerging from their palace in a triumphal car attended by the Winds, Rivers, Tritons and Naiads to bring the tribute of the world to British shores.” Since 1762, this emblem of Britain has been used to convey British monarchy during great occasions of state and continues to be used at time of writing.60

Thus, the details of the carriage arrangement of King George III’s visiting dignitaries and attendants are telling inclusions. “In person being charioteer,” King George III held the reins of the chariot while presenting his microcosm of the world as assembled at Kew. With himself at the helm, his admiring dignitaries at his side, and an entourage of five trailing carriages, he led the party into the wilderness that Chambers had constructed at Kew and displayed his collection of foreign lands. Of this sampling of “the East” the Chinese pagoda was the most “delighting.”

“Ownership Confers Mastery”

Chinoiserie provided respite from the presiding Renaissance design with its strict form of symmetry and formality. This new style was characterized by a disappearance of axes, asymmetry, and disorder.61 The great champion of Palladianism even concedes a desire and use for an aesthetic that lacks order. As noted before, in his widely read and appreciated work, Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses…., Chambers

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describes Chinese architecture “as toys in architecture: and as toys are sometimes, on account of their oddity, prettiness, or neatness of workmanship, admitted into the cabinets of the curious.” Chinese architecture held value, in his eyes, in its ability to amuse. In addition to providing descriptions and drawings of architecture in China, Chambers touches on furniture, utensils, dress, etc. These, he claims, “may be useful in masquerades, and other entertainments of that kind.” 62 The “Chinese” aesthetic was useful as a source of entertainment and escape.

There are many foreign cultures that the British came in contact with before and during the eighteenth century, so the question stands, then, of why Western interpretations of the Chinese aesthetic filled this escapist role. 63 Closely related questions are why were English artists such as William and John Linnell commissioned to make a Chinese bedroom when they had never been to China? Why was Chambers who had only ever been to China twice 64 an authority on the Chinese aesthetic gaining acclaim for his two China related publications: Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses… and A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening? These questions are answered by a matter of distance. China was geographically inaccessible for the majority of the British population and existed in a far eastern corner of the Western notion of the world. 65 The remoteness of China was correlated to the amount of fanciful imagination that filled in informational gaps in the portrait of the foreign land. Thus, the willingness of the Linnells to furnish Badminton House with their whimsical imagination was welcome, and the

63 After the instability of the Ming dynasty and before the establishment of the Qing, the West looked to Japan for eastern goods.
64 Some sources allow William Chambers three trips to China, but the third trip is suspect.
65 Sweetman. The Oriental Obsession, 3.
collections of sketches that Chambers etched as a youth granted him a voice of authority. China’s remoteness made way for a freedom that was absent in the rationality of the Renaissance style and allowed for the Linnells’ aesthetic of vague images to confer a refreshing lack of meaning.\textsuperscript{66} Within this freedom the Linnells and Chambers constructed spaces for their patrons.

The fact that Kew gardens and the Chinese bedroom are spaces in which one can enter is important. The artists created not only items that relaxed the rigidity of the Renaissance style but also spaces in which the patrons could enter into the escape of the foreign. Yet, even though these spaces offered a rest from formal styles, they still enforced the opposing identities of China and the West. Descending into the disorder of the Chinese bedrooms highlights the order of the Palladian features of the rest of Badminton House. Venturing into the primitive wilderness of Kew gardens serves to emphasize the civilized nature of the recognizable Britain back up the path. The ability to move between and own these spaces identifies the patrons as partakers in the British imperial identity. As David Porter notes, “ownership confers mastery.” \textsuperscript{67}

Demonstrated in these spaces is the movement of “ownership of China” from the home to the nation, and concomitant to this shift is the gendering of perceptions of China along the timeline of the eighteenth century. The Chinese aesthetic was originally perceived as being a delightfully disordered aesthetic that elegantly decorated the domestic and mostly feminine sphere. Yet, the second half of the century saw a male ordering of understandings of the East. Fanciful spaces, such as the Chinese bedroom at

Badminton House were seen as amusement for women while the work of men was the instillation of Western order upon the confusing geographical notions of the East. Men such as the famed colonist Hans Slone, whose personal colonial collection served as the foundation for the British Museum, called for truthful and methodologically sound representations of the world. This ordering of the non-Western world unsurprisingly followed the imperial intentions of colonialists. Accordingly, Chambers’ ordering of the East at Kew gardens for the Crown follows the imperial gaze of British Empire. Out from the domestic circle and into the global sphere, the trends of chinoiserie, as displayed by these two spaces, demonstrated the growing possessive identity of those in Britain—eventually reflecting the imperial aspirations of the Empire. As the room at Badminton has been described as “in its day the grandest example of the China-mania that swept through the boudoirs of mid-eighteenth-century England” and the Pagoda is “the best known chinoiserie structure in Europe,” these curated spaces speak authoritatively about England’s perceptions and uses for China.

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69 Jacobson, *Chinoiserie*, 139.

70 Jacobson, *Chinoiserie*, 151.
Chapter 2

The “World in a Pot”: European Palaces in Yuanming Yuan

When a country obtains great power,
it becomes like the sea:
all streams run downward into it.
—Tao te Ching: 61

Qing Emperor Qianlong’s imperial court commissioned four of its artists, Ding Guanpeng, Jin Tingbiao, Yao Wenhan, and Zhen Lianggong, to paint an ethnography of the Empire. The Illustrated Tributaries of the Qing Empire is composed of four separate scrolls (each painted by one of the four artists), and together the scrolls mapped out the world’s nations with China at the center. Between 1751 and 1755 the artists depicted the peoples bridging from China’s vassal states to those in the uncivilized borderlands, the breadth of the nations “under Heaven.” The first of these scrolls lays out those with whom China had diplomatic relations, notably the Europeans. A short description of the people living in each country accompanied each image, and China’s description of Britain is a testament to the cool gaze with which China viewed the foreign as objects of curiosity.

British dress is similar to that of The Netherlands. The nation is wealthy.

Men are commonly dressed in duoluorong (woolen flannel) and like drinking alcohol. Women, before marriage, bind their waists to make them narrow. They wear short tops and long dresses and let their hair flow.

72 Young-tsu Wong, A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), 10.
loosely over their shoulders. When going out they wear an overcoat. Some people carry a snuff bottle in a little bag made out of golden thread.  

Handscroll, *Illustrated Tributaries of the Qing Empire*, detail, Europeans

It must be noted that this same curious gaze was directed at the many other foreign people groups that populated the four scrolls. The *Illustrated Tributaries of the Qing Empire* was housed in the imperial map room and served to depict China’s concentric, China-centered worldview. This ‘map’ located these curious Europeans among the西洋, western countries, with an intentionality that contrasts strongly with the British desire to fling China into their imagined far eastern realms of simplicity and “nothingness.” Similarly, the Chinese studied, attempt to relay accurately the dress and habits of the British casts into relief the Western preoccupation with fanaticizing China as a land of personal escape that, through comparative identities, lends its European visitors sophistication.

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74 Translation from Zhang, *The Qianlong Emperor*, 66.
75 Ding Guanpeng, ink, *Handscroll, Illustrated Tributaries of the Qing Empire, detail, Europeans*, 1751-1775 (Palace Museum, Beijing) ARTstor.
Despite the Chinese desire to depict foreigners accurately, they did not do so impartially; the Chinese, too, constructed spaces that attempted to recreate a foreign world, in this case European. Similarly, their designed worlds advanced the country’s imperial identity and characterized the Emperor as the Son of Heaven whose rule encompassed all. The Western Palaces of Yuanming yu unambiguously assert Europe as another nation within tianxia, and, similarly, the palaces of Chengde place depictions of the west amongst the other cultures in possession of the Chinese Empire.

The use of possessions to proclaim an imperial identity in China was less about asserting a cultural dominance, as in Britain, than it was focused on maintaining the world’s order. As Craig Clunas so well states, the Qianlong Emperor’s “patronage of ateliers of painters, enamellers, weavers, carvers, lacquerworkers, clockmakers and artisans in a hundred different crafts – all this formed a part of wen. Wen means ‘culture’, sometimes in the narrow sense of ‘literature’, but more often in the wider sense of ‘pattern’, the cosmic ‘pattern’ which holds human activity and the powers of the universe in equilibrium.”76 The artistic treasures that filled the imperial stores were not mere boosts to its owner’s identity but served as symbols of a rightly functioning world. Within that world was Europe, and among the imperial collections were European goods.

The early importation of Western goods to China has been well documented and dates back many dynasties, but it was the Qing emperors Kangxi (r. 1661-1722) and Qianlong (r. 1736-1795) that were known throughout the world for their collection of European objects.77 These goods sat along side the prized Chinese paintings and lacquer-
works mentioned above as well as tribute gifts from the kings of Vietnam, Korea, Japan, etc. Some assert that the Qing artistic style is distinct in character because of the influence of the great influx of European aesthetics, but it is clear that Chinese artistic creations have long incorporated the multivarious aesthetics of the many cultures under Heaven. Indeed, one of the iconic elements of Chinese building, the liuli, glazed tiles, were imported from Southwest Asia. The term, itself derived from Sanskrit, entered common architectural parlance in China and identified the hallmark, bright yellow, blue, and purple tiles that were widespread beginning with the Tang dynasty. China’s history, in accordance with the nation’s understanding of wen’s role in the maintenance of a cosmic pattern, shows that upon encountering new cultures, China modifies and assimilates art forms and cultural elements of the foreign nations that she encounters. One of the harbingers of the Western aesthetic was the mission of Jesuits who resided in Beijing.

In 1583, Mateo Ricci arrived in mainland China, initiating an era of cultural transfer between Europe and China. He and his fellow Jesuits, who followed him to the Celestial Kingdom, began proselytize to China’s lay people but realized their western body of knowledge paired with an understanding of the Chinese Classics positioned them to share their ideas and theology with the literati class. Soon, their learning and Western ingenuity granted them a permanent position in the imperial household and the occasional audience with the emperor. There, their lessons on physics, astronomy, geometry, mechanics, and painting, among others, filled the minds of the scholar class of the Chinese court and even the pages of the imperial encyclopedia, the Complete Library of

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78 Wong, A Paradise Lost, 15.
the Four Treasuries, as with the Illustrated Discourse of Far Western Extraordinary Machines. Similarly, the “scientific toys” that the Jesuits brought to China such as clocks, or “self-sounding bells,” astronomic machines, and the like filled imperial halls.

Despite the Jesuits’ appreciated contribution of Western knowledge they were by no means the independent and highly important order that they described in their letters and accounts sent back to Europe. The Chinese government had no department that dealt with foreign affairs, rather relations with foreign peoples were dealt with by “a variety of bureaus and agencies that, in different ways, implied or stated the cultural inferiority and geographic marginality of foreigners, while also defending the states against them.” In the case of the Jesuits, they were under the authority of the same bureau that oversaw the maintenance of the material structure and contents of the imperial estates, hardly an indicator of significance in the court’s hierarchy.

**The World Condensed into A Garden**

In Chinese tradition the Emperor’s imperial gardens were created to be microcosms of his kingdom. This symbolism traces back to the legendary pattern that metaphorized the world of 一池三山, one pool and three mountains, that harkens back to the islands bound in the East Sea of Daoist fame. This pattern has inspired imperial gardens since the Qin dynasty, and the mixture of land and water to symbolize the world continued down to the Qing dynasty when the Yongzheng Emperor created a new center

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of governance in his new garden palace, Yuanming yuan. Additionally, historically imperial gardens borrowed vistas of the world for inspiration. In the Northern Song dynasty, Emperor Huizong’s garden, Genyue, was known to have replicated all of the greatest scenes of China’s many landscapes. The Qing Emperor Kangxi used the venerable sights of the Jiangnan area to plan his Garden of Uninhibited Spring. It was a partition of this garden that the emperor gifted to his heir, who beginning in 1747 would turn this land into the famed Yuanming yuan.83

China’s greatest imperial garden ever built, Yuanming Yuan, was initiated by the Yongzheng Emperor but serviced five emperors (Yongzheng, Qianlong, Jiaqing, Daoguang, and Xianfeng) as a microcosm of their Empire. In the collective memory and the annals of history, China is composed of the ancient Nine States. Accordingly, Yongzheng condensed the kingdom into the confines of his garden by structuring the front of the garden as nine islands inside of a large lake.84 At completion, the garden palace complex was composed of five gardens. Its over one hundred scenes mimicked “famous legends, great paintings, imaginary palaces, historic temples, and unique libraries.”85 In its flowerbeds plants brought by the King of Burma as tribute thrived.86 So that his garden would display the wonders of China, Qianlong ordered court painters to copy his favorite scenes from the many private gardens of Jiangnan, and those paintings were used as models for imperial landscape artists to create vistas at Yuanming yuan.87

The Emperor of China was the ruler not only of the country’s choice scenes but also the ruler of his people. So, in his distillation of the cosmos he included the world of

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83 Wong, A Paradise Lost, 4-10.
84 Zou, A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture, 35.
85 Wong, A Paradise Lost, 19.
86 Wong, A Paradise Lost, 19.
87 Zou, A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture, 10.
his people. He planted the crops of his people so that when he caught sight of the fields he would remember his subjects. In his records, Yongzheng wrote, “With a casual glance into the distance, my reverie extends to the whole country, as well as wishes for a good harvest. When I lean on a balustrade inspecting the crops or stand beside the field watching the clouds, I wish for a good rain to come during the right time and hope for a climate responsive to sturdy seedlings. Images of assiduous and tired peasants and of the toil of tilling the land suddenly seem to appear in the garden.” From the views of Jiangnan to the image of the laboring peasants, Yuanming Yuan embraced and depicted the Emperor’s universal empire.

Yuanming Yuan, 圆明园, can be translated as the Garden of Round Brightness. There are many translations of the characters and discussions on what the name means, but in his records, Qianlong postulated on the meaning that his father, the Yongzheng Emperor, referred to when he chose the name Yuanming yuan. He stated,

Round Brightness is used to highlight the meaning of the residence, stimulate the body and mind, piously experience the idea of heaven, cherish forever my father’s holy instruction, propagate all creatures, and maintain harmony and piece. I do not ask for peace for myself but rather wish it for the whole country. I do not seek leisure for myself but rather long for happiness for all the people, so that generation after generation can step on the spring terrace and wander in the happy kingdom. I stabilize

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88 Translation of Yongzheng’s records provided in Zou, A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture, 24. Further translations of the Qing Emperors’ records of their other imperial gardens are also available in the Appendix for reference.
the mighty foundation of the country to make people’s good fortune and well being last into the future.\textsuperscript{89}

Yuanming yuan was the imagination of the perfect ordering of China. Unlike with the Badminton House, this imagination was not concerned with image of its owner specifically\textsuperscript{90}, but the state of the empire as a whole. From his spring terrace, Qianlong saw that his right rule would bring harmony, peace, and stability. The construction of the garden was part and parcel of governance, an extension Clunas’s cosmic order. The miniaturization of the Emperor’s boundless rule into the corners of the garden takes part in a common practice in China of symbolizing worlds into a smaller representative unit, or “squeezing ‘the world in a pot’”.\textsuperscript{91} Included in the Emperor’s pot was Europe.

\textbf{Europe in the Pot}

Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) is often considered to have been the Jesuit order’s most artistically gifted member to exert an influence in the Chinese court, and it was he that the Emperor requested design a series of Western Palaces for Yuanming yuan. Castiglione, known in China as Lang Shining 郎世寧, was a painter by trade who was famous for bringing to China the Western linear prospective to Chinese art. This technique was appreciated in Beijing as it was previously unknown in China. One Qing dynasty admirer of his work proclaimed upon viewing his painting hanging in a hall during that Castiglione’s scenes “when you see them at a distance, you are tempted to enter. If you touch it, you will suddenly find that it is a wall.”\textsuperscript{92} It was this artist who

\textsuperscript{89} Zou, \textit{A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture}, 25.
\textsuperscript{90} Or at least not the natural body of the Emperor but the body politic.
\textsuperscript{91} Phrase quoted in Wong, \textit{A Paradise Lost}, 10.
\textsuperscript{92} Zou, \textit{A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture}, 86.
could make disarmingly realistic scenes with paint that deceived one into thinking that they could enter his paintings was elected by the Emperor to recreate visions of the West to add to the microcosm of his universal empire.

Castiglione created images of Italian and French Baroque-inspired palaces for architects to actualize in Yuanming yuan. He was aided by another Jesuit, Father Michel Benoît, who was knowledgeable in both mathematics and hydraulics. These men with a handful of Western treatises on architecture, written correspondence with experts back home, and fleet of Chinese builders unfamiliar with the architectural style created a whole section of the garden, a series of Western Palaces or as they were called by the Chinese Xiyangluo 西洋楼, Western Multistoried Buildings.\(^\text{93}\)

Although the complex included many European inspired buildings, this paper is most interested in the Calm Sea Hall (Haiyang Tang). The building was distinctive in that though Castiglione largely used a baroque style, the Calm Sea Hall was redolent of Versailles; the floor plan of the hall seems to have been inspired by Court of Honor at the French palace. The hall was built to contain an enormous water tank within it that not only supported a colony of goldfish, but also more importantly stored a large amount of water to service the grand fountain that decorated the building’s face. Around the tank was netting made of wire that supported climbing grapevines. Aside from the reservoir, the building held the hydraulic machines that powered the elaborate fountains outside the doors of the hall. At the top of a highly embellished grand staircase that reached to the second floor of the building and was decorated with ‘s’ scrolls that were reminiscent of waves, stood two opposing lion fountains, and at the top of the landing two dolphins

\(^{93}\text{Wong, A Paradise Lost, 60.}\)
spurted water down a cascade that fell down the length of the staircase. The two ramparts of the stairs ensconced a large center fountain on the first floor of the building. In the middle of this large basin stood a shell centerpiece. Surrounding the shell at the base of either side of the staircase were six zodiac fountainheads, twelve in total. These heads corresponded with the twelve Chinese animals that characterize the twelve-year birth cycle: the rat, bull, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar. The animal heads were placed atop human bodies sitting in various positions. Every two hours one of the heads spouted water into the pool and at high noon all twelve animals sprayed water into the basin.\footnote{Wong, \textit{A Paradise Lost}, 64-65. Beurdeley and Beurdeley, \textit{Giuseppe Castiglione}, 68-69.}
The Calm Seas Hall, Victoria & Albert Museum

The hall functions as an excellent example of the way that the Western Palaces fused the Chinese and European aesthetics. Firstly, Castiglione’s use of the Versailles as a model along with other stylistic inspirations indicates that the places on a whole were not meant to replicate one specific architectural style or a particular Western country’s architecture, but rather gesture at grand European architectural style more broadly. Yet, these Westerns Places in Yuanming yuan were also Chinese. Amidst the carved foliage and Corinthian columns, fundamental elements of Chinese architecture still found their way into the buildings. The Calm Sea Hall’s roof was still sheathed in Chinese ceramic tiles and the ridges of the gables adorned with the imperial crouching beasts. In accordance with tradition, the lions on either side of the door appear to be male and female. Among the European ‘s’ scrolls, snaking Chinese dragons created similar lines showing the melding of Western and Chinese motifs.

Additionally, the Chinese interest in Western design and fountains, or “water works,” were combined with China’s understanding of the passage of time in the zodiac fountain. The fountain was essentially a Chinese water clock that counted time according to two-hour increments, separating night and day in a fundamentally Chinese way. The Qianglong Emperor requested that the Jesuits create for him a fountain “which should never cease to play.” The measurement of night and day according to the spurts of a Western fountain accorded with the cyclic nature of time in China. This is intimated by

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95 Yi Lantai, Copper engraving, *The Yuanming Yuan European Palaces, Western Facade of the Palace of the Calm Sea (Haiyantang),* 1781-1786 (Victoria & Albert Museum) ARTstor.
96 Wong, *A Paradise Lost,* 64.
the use of the zodiac figures that the Chinese calendar cycles through within the sixty-
year cycle, a system of time that combines the cycles of “heavenly stems” and “earthly
branches”. Cycles within cycles and the repetition of the past and the future are central to
the passage of time in China and these notions were successfully conveyed in the
Western fountain, asserting a universality and adaptability of Chinese culture.

The Calm Sea Hall was surrounded by a maze, a totally Western construct, called
Huayuan, the Garden of Flowers, that further showed the receptability of other cultures
under Heaven to Chinese cultural elements. An additional name for this architectural
feature was Lanterns of Yellow Flowers, a name that recalls the Chinese folktale of the
Mid-Autumn Festival. The walls of this maze-garden were planted with yellow flowers
that created a mural of yellow flowers that could be perceived from the heightened
platform at the center of garden. As a celebration of the important holiday, the Mid-
Autumn Festival, the young ladies of the imperial court raced through the maze carrying
their lanterns under the light of the year’s fullest moon and the warm glow of fireworks.98
The result was the full realization of a Chinese folktale within a distinctly Western
architectural concept. Within the center of the maze, the Emperor’s ability to look “down
upon the circulative movement of lanterns from the central pavilion enhanced the
emperor’s feeling of power.”99 It should be noted that along with providing an exotic
architectural piece and form of entertainment, the maze was also constructed to represent
the universe. Traditionally, heaven is represented by a circle and earth by a square. In the
square of the maze were nine circles that symbolized the six sided world: four sides, top,

98 Wong, A Paradise Lost, 63.
Beurdeley and Beurdeley, Giuseppe Castiglione, 68.
Zou, A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture, 108.
99 Zou, A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture, 108.
bottom, past, present, and future.\textsuperscript{100} Sitting at the symbolic center of the universe, the emperor viewed the harmony of heaven and earth and fulfillment of a Chinese legend in European architecture.

The Western Palaces of Yuanming Yuan contained many other pieces of novelty architecture. Included in Castiglione’s plans was the Big Water Works, \textit{Dashuifa}. The largest of the fountains, with this piece the emperor appropriated the symbols of social and martial power of the West. Atop an imperial throne the emperor could look down upon the fountains scene: one of the hunt—one deer and ten hounds. The flow of water lent the picture a sense of movement. Additionally, behind his throne, the emperor’s ownership of the West’s power was literally carved into stone—a marble slab with European weapons carved in relief served as the backdrop of his seat of power.\textsuperscript{101} Some of the many other structures built in the Western section of the garden were the aviary for exotic birds and the Belvedere, a building which was outfitted to house the emperor’s concubine from Turkestan. The Belvedere featured Arabic engravings and paintings of the emperor’s concubine’s home Asku painted by Castiglione in the Western, believable \textit{Trompe l'oeil} prospective.\textsuperscript{102}

The very orientation of the Western Palaces was planed to augment the emperor’s imperial power. Castiglione’s European structures were not constructed because Chinese emperors unduly admired western architecture. It should be noted that the distinguished Qin Shi Hunagdi, the first emperor to rule over a unified China, built his palaces at the Upper Woods to replicate the six states that he vanquished during his ascendency.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{100}Wong, \textit{A Paradise Lost}, 62.  
\textsuperscript{101}Wong, \textit{A Paradise Lost}, 65.  
\textsuperscript{102}Beurdeley and Beurdeley, \textit{Giuseppe Castiglione}, 70-73.  
\textsuperscript{103}Wong, \textit{A Paradise Lost}, 11.
assimilation of cultures within the Empire through possession of the architecture of a
tribute nation has long reinforced the wide breadth of the Emperor’s rule.

Also according to Confucian thought, to rule effectively, an emperor “merely
placed himself gravely and reverently with his face due south.”104 The section of the
Western Palaces was constructed at the northern end of Yuanming Yuan, and in
accordance with Confucian thought all of the imperial thrones faced south. The layout of
the garden was planned such that the many of the thrones overlooked views of the
various waterworks spraying water into the sky. Writing of one of these views, The View
of Distant Seas, Emperor Jiaqing stated “My little heart includes the distant seas./ The
benevolence extends to far and wide./ The distant and near celebrate peace and harmony.
/ To govern the country one has to ponder deeply and extensively, / In the house I
remember the difficulty of defending the achievements.”105 Thus in his northern city
looking south toward past the European section of his garden, to the Chinese structures,
into all of China, and the far reaches of the nations under Heaven, at the foreground of
the Emperor’s gaze were the tops of the sparkling Western fountains. With his gazes
south, he was reminded that “If ingenious people long to serve in distant places [as these
Westerners do],/ The territory of the country will be as stable as a solid gold bowl.”106
Firmly seated in his Western palace the Emperor saw his rule extend to the world’s six
directions.

As a seat of power, the Western Places were used by the Emperor to command
respect during political interactions. Of the building of his fountains, the Qianlong

Emperor wrote, “Because China was a big country and the water method was simply one of ingenious makings, I thus ordered a Westerner in the capital, Shining Lang (Castiglione), to make this water method so that the ambassador could come to appreciate it. Two years ago when the English ambassador Macartney came to Beijing, I also led him to the water methods and he gazed in admiration.” Through his European palaces, the emperor could assert his dominance over the cosmic pattern not only to kings of the surrounding Asian nations, but also to diplomats from the Western countries. This era when the emperor’s southern imperial gaze looked out at the world grounded by his fountains marked the height of Chinese confidence. In his self assured reflections, the emperor reflected on an impending visit of a Dutch ambassador, “If he pays tributes, I might not regard them as precious things because China is so big and there is no wonder that China has not.”

A Crack in the Pot

When Macartney’s diplomatic mission arrived in Beijing, they brought not only gifts that the emperor accepted as tribute, but also the future that the emperor unwillingly accepted as well. Amid the tribute gifts were items such as celestial globes, items of Wedgewood porcelain, and a planetarium. Along side these items was a miniature British warship with six model size field guns. Curiously, this last gift was installed on permanent view in Yuanming yuan. It purportedly “looked like a preview of the British pavilion at an international exhibition,” and gathered an audience of many ranked

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Chinese officials and princes who wanted to catch a glimpse.\textsuperscript{109} The events of 1860 would see this imperial possession, a Trojan horse of sorts, call into question the dominance of the Chinese Empire and just which Empire was in possession. It was indeed a preview. A foreshadowing of the destruction of the Yuanming yuan palace and the Chinese cosmic order that would occur in a matter of decades.

\textsuperscript{109} Wong, \textit{A Paradise Lost}, 85.
The Chinese pagoda still sits where William Chambers built it in Kew Gardens. Although the array of other “Eastern” buildings no longer ensconces the pagoda and the gardens are no longer the private pleasure grounds of the crown, the grounds still identify Britain with a global possession. The pagoda stands on greens where peacocks strut with their exotic plumage on display and where the overflowing flowerbeds boast the ordering powers of imperial plant hunters and famed horticulturalists such as Robert Fortune and John Dalton Hooker, who “made sense of” and categorized the wild brush of Chinese and Indian flora. An assembly of the main items of the Chinese bedroom at Badminton House is on view in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. This exhibit of the “Chinese” aesthetic provides an impressive display in the museum’s British Galleries, a collection that chronicles the history of Britain’s art and design.

What then became of the Xiyanglou of Yuanming Yuan? Tracing the story of China’s microcosm of the universe drags the possessive identities of Britain and China and their assertions of imperial might out of the eighteenth century, into nineteenth century, and through to the twenty-first century. The artistic exhibitions in both Britain and China were created and displayed to assert each empire’s global dominance through the acquisition of other cultures. The collision of the two empires in the garden of

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Yuanming Yuan through the possession or dispossession of material culture highlights a contest of self-definition, one that continues to the modern day.

The Imperial British interventions in 1793 with George Lord Macartney’s Embassy to The Qianlong Emperor’s court in China gained little traction. These interventions, however, would in the nineteenth century check the Qing’s sovereignty and disassemble the Chinese notion of and precedence over tian xia. This reversal of powers was made apparent in the empty shell of the looted and destroyed Yuanming Yuan.

By the eighteenth century, both the British people and the British government were distressingly reliant on imports from China, namely tea. The Chinese did not reciprocate British trade and further exacerbated the trade imbalance with their protective policies regarding trading with foreign powers. Chinese laws restricted Westerners’ access to a single commercial port and interaction to a limited and partial group of merchants. Seeking to address the unbalanced trade between China and Britain, Macartney travelled to Beijing with the hopes of spreading the British “gospel” of free trade. There, he was addressed by the Emperor who rebuffed his efforts by assuring Lord Macartney that, in China, “we possess all things.”

The British later found an opening in the Chinese market, their Indian opium. British leveraging of this addictive good led them into the two Opium Wars against China. In 1860, during the Second Opium war the British and French sent an allied force to Beijing to coerce the Qing government to ratify the Tianjin Treaty. The British Lord Elgin and the French Baron Gros headed the diplomatic team. According to Elgin, the

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112 Note that this is James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin and 12th Earl of Kincardine, son of Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin and 11th Earl of Kincardine, the same who famously removed the Elgin marbles in Greece
infamous destruction of the Palace “was an act which was calculated to produce a greater
effect in China and on the Emperor than persons who look on from a distance may
suppose. It was the Emperor’s favorite residence, and its destruction could not fail to be a
blow to his pride as well as to his feelings.”

What Lord Elgin’s words fail to account for, however, is the great loot of the
palace that occurred before the destruction of the complex. Thus, he obscures the frenzied
lust of the looting Allied troops and the contest of cultural self-definition that the
architecture and contents of magnificent palace inspired in the Westerners. Tracing these
important forces leads to the 2009 sale of the ruins of Yuanming Yuan and the struggle of
self-identification through display that is still manifest in the present day.

An Imperial March

On August 1st the allied Franco-British troops landed in Peitang, and from there
they began their push inward toward Beijing to enforce the agreements established by the
Treaty of Tianjin. The defensive Chinese forces fought for the sovereignty of their nation.
The treaty of Tianjin was an infringement on China’s sovereignty that, among other
stipulations, pried open the interior of the country making it available to the travel and
trade of Westerners, dictated that official documents would be in English, established that
foreign import taxes would be abandoned, and provided for a British ambassador to
represent British interests from a residence in Beijing. Too great a humiliation to bear,

from the Parthenon. They now are displayed, controversially, in the British Museum. For more on the
Lords Elgin, see Sydney Checkland, The Elgins, 1766-1917: A Tale of aristocrats, proconsuls and their
wives (Great Britain: Aberdeen University Press, 1988).

James Bruce Earl of Elgin, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin Governor of Jamaica,
Governor-General of Canada, Envoy to China, Viceroy of India, ed. Theodore Walrond (London: John
Murray, Albemarle Street, 1872), 366.
Beijing refused to allow an ambassador to live in the capital.\(^{114}\) And in the late summer the Western forces marched toward the city.

Throughout their journey the British engaged in unsuccessful negotiating with various Chinese ambassadors whom they perceived as seeking to interrupt their march with proposals of new agreements. The Chinese, however, were vacillating between war and peace and were consistently confused by the Western forces’ signals—whether they sought peace or war. They began their defense intent to right the scales of power and regain sovereignty within their borders, confident that they would see “no more vainglory of the barbarians if we deliver a few more blows to them, and our country will then enjoy some decades of peace.”\(^{115}\) However, they were willing to negotiate. The proclaimed intentions of the British of peace and ratification belied their military intent. Their thousands of soldiers, dozens of warships, and hundreds of guns betrayed violent intentions. On September 1\(^{st}\), frustrated by the slow pace of negotiations and the indirect forms of communication, Lord Elgin wrote, "I fear a little more bullying will be necessary before we bring this stupid Government up to mark."\(^{116}\) With their militarily more advanced forces and the instability of Qing dynasty, an Allied victory seemed certain. And in the mind of Lord Elgin, the Chinese were already an inferior power subjected to the will of the British Empire. In their stupidity, the Chinese had to be brought “up to mark.” The “vainglory of the barbarians” continued.

\(^{114}\) Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 3\(^{rd}\) ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), 176-177.


Unbeknownst to the Western forces, the Chinese dignitaries speaking for Beijing were indeed interested in reaching a peace treaty provided that the terms were not merely further insults to the throne. Yet, it was not clear if British were, themselves, interested in entering into negations with an appreciation for sovereign equality. After all, “Why should they bring in troops if they want peace? … If they bring in troops they would dictate to us even more unacceptable terms” the Xianfeng Emperor reasoned.\textsuperscript{117} With this thought process the Emperor dismissed the terms brought by Guiliang, a negotiator who had befriended Elgin during a previous bilateral between the two countries. On September 8\textsuperscript{th}, upon discovering the perceived duplicity of his trusted negotiator, Elgin proclaimed, “I am at war again! My idiotical Chinamen have taken to playing tricks, which give me an excellent excuse for carrying the army on to Pekin.”\textsuperscript{118} The intention of the Allied forces had been a non-violent resolution if possible, but disenchanted with the negotiation process Elgin decided that “it is better that the olive-branch should advance with the sword.”\textsuperscript{119}

An “olive-branch” seemed to have been grasped onto by both sides on the 14\textsuperscript{th} of September; an agreement was established, and it was decided that on the 17\textsuperscript{th} a delegation would ride ahead to Beijing accompanied by a Chinese entourage that included the Imperial Prince. Yet, on the 16\textsuperscript{th} Lord Elgin’s prescient musings foreshadowed a less than peaceful resolution. Considering his march upon the capital, he stated, “I hope to effect my pacific entry into Pekin…. This place has been, I am sorry to say, much maltreated, for the people ran away, and when that takes place it is impossible to prevent

\textsuperscript{117} Wenzong xianhuangdi shilu 1937-1938, vol. 93, juan 326, pg. 10a.
\textsuperscript{118} James Bruce Earl of Elgin, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin, 350.
\textsuperscript{119} James Bruce Earl of Elgin, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin, 350.
plundering.” Elgin recognized that the fear of the people and the breakdown of the local structure would embolden his troops to succumb to their greed and assert their dominance in the form of plunder. This display of dominance, it seems, was inevitable. The British army had just recently repressed the Indian Mutiny in 1857 and reinforced the rule of the British Empire. During their campaign in India, they had accumulated their loot and sent the money back to England to be distributed. These proceeds were still being processed during this march.  

As their march on Beijing proceeded, the probability of a violent end increased. On September 18th news reached Elgin that their agreement had broken down. Although the only reports that he received were of firing ahead, it was on this day that the Chinese captured and imprisoned the Allied diplomatic party. The reports that were conveyed to him, however, were enough to enrage Elgin’s sense of British dignity and superiority and to reaffirm the comparative identities of the Western forces and the Chinese. In his report to the British Government he wrote, “there was that mixture of stupidity, want of straightforwardness, suspicion, and bluster, which characterises so generally the conduct of affairs in this country; but I cannot believe that, after the experience which Sang-ko-lin-sin had already had of our superiority in the field, either he or his civil colleagues could have intended to bring on a conflict in which, as the event has proved, he was so sure to be worsted.” The Chinese possession of the Western envoy was an assault upon British notions of superiority and the respective identities of the Chinese and the British. A Chinese government that failed to recognize its inferiority and had the audacity to

122 James Bruce Earl of Elgin, *Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin*, 357.
assert dominance through possession must be brought “up to mark.” In response, Elgin issued an ultimatum regarding the seized negotiators. He wrote, “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 Tientsin is signed, Pekin will be assaulted… [Yet] No notice was taken of this. So on the 21st we advanced, and attacked a large body of Tartars, encamped between Tung-chow and Pekin.”

On the 6th of October they arrived in Beijing. Count D’Hérisson of the French force described their approach. “Pekin—that mysterious and gigantic city, which had seemed in our European dreams at such an immense distance—Pekin—at last, Pekin! Officers, one after another, climbed the brick furnaces, and up behind them scrambled the soldiers, stretching their eyes to catch a glimpse of the walls said to surround so many marvels and which none of them had ever expected to see.” The British may have seen the Chinese people as “stupid,” but her material culture inspired a lust in the Western heart. As seen in Badminton House, the perceived simplicity of China afforded power to its owner. It was this power that the soldiers saw over the wall.

“With Their Eager Eyes and Their Mouths Dry with Desire”

On Sunday October 7th, that lust manifested in loot. The assertion of dominion through possession originally gave way from fear. Upon reaching the gates of Yuanming...
Yuan, the French forces faced a paltry collection of armed Chinese soldiers. D’Hérisson wrote

In the dusk, our men saw for the first time a regal building of magnificent aspect, and heard the magic word which had already secured an astounding prestige among them: ‘The Emperor!’ so that the sudden panic which broke out on hearing these inoffensive shots was not surprising, even if it occurred in the midst of troops which had been victorious at every point since arriving in China, never recoiling a foot, and who did not consider that the fact of their plunging in such a small number into the midst of a nation of 400,000,000 souls was an act of unheard-of heroism.\(^{126}\)

The magnificence of the palace’s architecture granted its owner, The Emperor, an awesome, fearful character. The splendorous structure checked the confident superiority of the Western forces, and their military might was dwarfed by the vision of the fabled palace. Yet, they soon realized that this treasure trove was evacuated and left virtually undefended. As the troops stood outside the gates guarding the palace allowing their superiors to explore its depths, they gazed with “their eager eyes and their mouths dry with desire.”\(^{127}\) In accordance with Elgin’s predictions, fear gave way to loot.\(^{128}\) At five that night Lord Elgin recorded, “I have just returned from the Summer Palace. It really is a fine thin—numberless buildings with handsome rooms, and filled

\(^{126}\) Count D’Hérisson, “The Loot of the Imperial Summer Palace at Pekin,” 614.
\(^{127}\) Count D’Hérisson, “The Loot of the Imperial Summer Palace at Pekin,” 624.
\(^{128}\) [discuss the varying accounts of who began the plunder]
with Chinese *curios*, and handsome clocks and bronzes, &c. But alas! such a scene of desolation."  

The purportedly inevitable plundering had begun.

In the history of conquests and empires, plunder is no new arrival, yet at Yuanming Yuan the looting was particularly crazed and paradoxically destructive. The violence enacted upon the palace suggests that there was more than goods and wealth at stake in the loot. Lieutenant General Sir Gerald Graham described the scene he encountered when riding on the road toward the palace in his journal. “A troop of Probyn’s Horse passed us, each man having a pile of plunder before him. At the palace the scene was one of wonderful confusion—silks strewn about, broken furniture, clocks, vases, &c., all thrown in heaps and trampled down.”  

As a victor interested in accumulating wealth through conquest, to merely unpack and take possession of the riches of the imperial palace is sensible, yet in the looting of Yuanming Yuan was characterized by a unexpected disregard for the actual worth of the objects.

The practice of plunder was well established in the British army and followed a delineated code of conduct. Under the expectation that all would share their prize, the steps included turning over one’s treasure, creating an inventory, holding an auction, allotting amounts of money to each soldier, handing over prize money to the Royal Hospital at Chelsea (who would distribute the funds), advertising the distribution in the papers, and allowing members of the force or their family members to retrieve the prizes.  

Lord Elgin revealed, however, that this plunder of the palace broke with custom. He wrote, “There was not a room that I was in which half the things had not been

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131 Hevia, *English Lessons*, 83-84.
taken away or broken to pieces. I tried to get a regiment of ours to sent a guard to guard
the place, and then sell the things by auction; but it is so difficult to get things done by
system in such a case.”132 “Such a case” was a “human torrent” of insatiable
“Englishmen, Frenchmen, officers, and soldiers…with the inhabitants of Haitien, with
our coolies” seeking to take possession of the objects that were emblematic of the power
of the Emperor, the name of whom instilled such fear in their hearts just days ago.133 In
reversing this power dynamic—from fear to loot—, the men were not only gaining a
prize for themselves but also, importantly, demeaning the Emperor and asserting British
superiority.

On the 14th of October, Lord Elgin learned that the prisoners that the Chinese had
captured were poorly treated and many of them killed during their imprisonment.134 On
the 18th the British set light to the building that had held the captives. Shining his decision
in an honorable light, he wrote in his dispatch to the government, “As almost all the
valuables had already been taken from the palace, the army would go there, not to pillage,
by a solemn act of retribution, the horror and indignation with which we were inspired by
the perpetration of a great crime.”135 It must be noted however that the treasures of the
palace were not passively “taken” by an unknown group of people, but actively plundered
by the Westerners themselves, and they had done so long before receiving news of the
captives. The impetus for the looting and burning was a force distinct from retribution.

132 James Bruce Earl of Elgin, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin, 361.
133 Count D’Hérisson, “The Loot of the Imperial Summer Palace at Pekin,” 625.
134 James Bruce Earl of Elgin, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin, 365.
135 James Bruce Earl of Elgin, Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin, 366.
General Graham wrote, “all the palaces were in flames—a fine sight. The bright sun gleamed through the smoke like the moon.” It was a display of dominion.

Imperial Identities in Conflict

As Lydia Liu states, “Civilizations do not clash, but empires do.” The collision of the British and Chinese was not simply an interaction between nations, but rather a battle of empires and their associated concepts of dominion. Empires are fueled by a sovereign control of a collection of other territories, and as seen in the previous two chapters, the British and Chinese empires asserted a global dominion through objects. In Beijing, China’s identity as an empire was checked by the Tianjin Treaty and military prowess. Britain sought to establish its dominion through the creation and assertion of the treaty but found its assumption of superiority challenged by the Chinese. China was once a distant entity symbolically owned by Britons in willow plates, mock pagodas, and japanned furniture. In the magnificence of Yuanming Yuan they were confronted with the fact that the material culture of China was greater than that which was within their microcosms of the British Empire, that the grandeur of China was yet unpossessed by the West. In fact, in the European palaces and the collections of occidenterie, China asserted ownership of the West. The looting and burning of the palace was a reassertion of European Empires’ dominance and served to challenge China’s identity as a country that encompasses everything “under the heavens.”

D’Hérisson, of the French force, was surprised to find that the sophistication of the palace rivaled the European pinnacle of architectural grandeur. He consistently compared it to Versailles. He stated that the final bill that Louis XIV paid for his palace was so great that its news drifted across the continent and landed in the ear of the Chinese Emperor. D’Hérisson constructed a history to explain the existence of the Chinese palace.

The Son of Heaven found it strange an inappropriate that there should be on earth a king who took the sacred emblem of the sun and who allowed himself treasures which he, the true Son of Heaven, had not secured. And what sort of king? A mere kinglet, a man who governed a paltry handful of human beings, 25,000,000 souls, who was consequently only one-thirteenth of his own importance. And in this way, strange as the thing appears, Versailles gave birth, in some measure, on another continent, to the richness and magnificence of Yuenmingyuen.138

D’Hérisson’s account forgets, of course, the long history and presence of impressive imperial gardens in China, Yuanming Yuan being the most recent and the small number of European palaces in an extensive garden that boasted a collection of the quintessential building styles of the country. His account projects the challenges to identity that the European forces, themselves, felt when viewing the palace upon the Emperor. It is clear that global importance and local control was communicated and perceived through architecture, and the Chinese palace communicated such importance that it set in contest the Chinese and the French emperors. D’Hérisson’s history demonstrates the dwarfing effect that the palace had upon the Europeans and explains their desire to assert their self-proclaimed

identity of superiority. In the same way that the French saw Versailles in
Yuanming Yuan, Elgin saw an “English park” in the palace. C. B Macpherson’s
*Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* establishes that, beginning in the
eighteenth century, possessions in Britain were foundational to forming
identities.  

The formation of identities under this system also has implications
for interactions with the cultural other. Macpherson states, “Everyone is
necessarily pulled into the competition for power over others. Everyone seeks to
acquire more power than he naturally has, and can do so only by converting to his
own use some of the powers of others. Hence everyone is liable to incessant
invasion of his powers by others.”

This competition for power was put on
display at the confrontation of the Allied and Chinese forces at Yuanming Yuan.

The British were experts at converting cultural relics of plunder into
private possessions and hallmarks of dominion, and the items looted from the
palace became emblems of the British Empire along with the exhibitions of many
of the world’s treasures, proclamations of a global sovereignty. Many of China’s
greatest treasures once in Yuanming Yuan are now held in private collections in
Britain and, symbolically, in the British Museum, the home of the British
identity. In private collections, items from the loot still circle within the realms
of European Empires. In 2009, a sale by Christies of two of the bronze heads from
the impressive zodiac fountain in Yuanming Yuan, the monkey and the ox,
revived these imperial contests for superiority. Questions of sovereignty and

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141 Along with the Elgin Marbles.
assertions of self-identification were pushed back into the limelight. Possessive identities through display were shown to have retained their relevance throughout the centuries, evoking questions of whether imperial identities ever fall with their empires.
Conclusion

“From the top of his tower, a philosopher of domination sees the universe in miniature. Everything is small because he is so high. And since he is high, he is great, the height of his station is proof of his own greatness.” Gaston Bachelard’s words could have characterized either King George III standing at the top of his Chinese Pagoda looking at his collection of eastern lands at Kew Gardens or the Qianlong Emperor sitting on his throne observing his universal realm above the bubbling water spouted by the waterworks of his Western Palaces. Looking upon the miniaturization of his global empire the ruler was assured of his county’s imperial identity, yet where does this gaze of domination belong in the twenty-first century world and to which empire does that gaze belong?

Modern China is no longer ruled by a dynastic Emperor. It is no longer courted by tributary states. And it no longer claims to “possess all things.” Yet in its current period of global ascendency, China has fought to regain the cultural relics that recall the country’s imperial dominance. As China seeks to reclaim global influence and position Beijing as a political, cultural and economic center, through agendas such as the Belt and Road Initiative, it is calling upon an historic possessive identity.

January of 2005 saw the implementation of one of many directives that sought to unify the nation around the relics and ruins of the lost Yuanming Yuan. “In a bid to promote folk efforts in retrieving relics lost overseas,” a set of stamps featuring the twelve bronze heads of the famous zodiac fountain colored postage throughout the

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142 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, 173.
country. According to Xinhua News Agency, before the infamous loot the bronzes stood “guarding a mansion in Yuanmingyuan Park.” The set of stamps was issued “to remind people to work harder still to retrieve the other treasures lost and help the 12 animals reunite at their homeland.” At the time that the stamps were distributed, four of the twelve heads were already repatriated and possessed in Chinese museums. The retrieval of the bronzes is seen as a national effort to regain Chinese cultural treasures. Interestingly, the bronzes were considered to be treasures that “guarded,” rather than adorned, China’s greatest imperial palace. The historical interpretation of European soldiers un-guarding not only highlights the misdeeds of the Western troops but also depicts China’s imperial identity as still unguarded. This call for citizens to join the cause was soon answered.

Because the zodiac heads are deeply entrenched in the China’s historic memory, Chinese people have rallied around the effort to reclaim these icons of China’s imperial might. The remains of the Haiyangtang fountain (of Calm Seas Hall) were spared total destruction and have been pieced together. This fountain was a salient image of the grandeur of Yuanming Yuan for many Chinese citizens. Although not Chinese himself, Lark E. Mason phrased the sentiment well. “We don’t have depictions of the interiors showing the Western tapestries and the great Western works of art that Qianlong received, the great Chinese works that were there, the Chinese artworks inside the palace that were made in a Western style—the jades, the bronze, the paintings, all types of

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144 “China Issues Stamps of 12 Stolen Bronze Animals” Xinhua News.
things that were in there but we have a picture of the fountain and it’s easy to see the heads.”

In 2009, the famed British auction house, Christies, included two bronze heads, the rabbit and the rat, from the zodiac fountain in a February sale in Paris. The collection was that of the estate of the French designers, Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Berge. The inclusion of the zodiac bronzes inflamed the national pride of many in China. The resulting fires took shape in the form of an illegal auction bid, artistic installation, blockbuster movie, lawsuit and the reemergence of the Qing imperial family.

Ahead of the February sales, lawyer Liu Yang sought to use the law to assert Chinese ownership of the bronzes. In an effort to assemble his (unsuccessful) case, Liu tracked down “a descendant of China’s royal family to serve as plaintiff.” In an attempt to challenge the modern “descendants” of the old looting Franco-British Allied Forces, the powerful French design house and the eminent British auction house, Liu called upon China’s own descendants of its imperial age, China’s largely forgotten royal family. Once again imperial identities through possessions were at stake. On the day of the auction, Cai Mingchao won the bid for the bronzes with two $18 million bids. He chose however to default as a declared sign of patriotism. He told the news reporters, “I think any Chinese person would have stood up at that moment…I want to emphasize that the money won't be paid.” Although there were questions regarding whether or not Cai’s financial situation rather than his moral and patriotic sensibilities caused him to

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148 Fotopoulos, “Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China,” 620.
default, across China, he was seen as a Chinese hero who challenged Europe’s claim to
the looted art.

In response to this interruption of the bidding on his estate, Bergé decided to keep
the two heads and claimed that he would be happy to give the bronzes to the Chinese
government providing they “give liberty to the Tibetan people and welcome the Dalai
Lama.”

Tibet along with the Dalai Lama was and still is a political sore point for the
Chinese government; the government sees the Dalai Lama as a separatist and fears the
secession of Tibet. Thus, in discussion of the Tibetan conflict, Bergé made clear that this
issue of the bronze heads once again called into question the Chinese government’s
sovereignty. The zodiac figures which were a symbol of the Chinese Empire’s global
hegemony, were looted by foreign imperial forces, and in the twenty-first century China’s
inability to repatriate the objects in conjunction with power struggles within its own
borders check China’s historic and present sovereignty and imply the European powers’
continuing dominion over China.

China’s outrage continued and actions took creative forms. In 2011, Ai Weiwei,
arguably China’s foremost artist, created an instillation entitled Circle of Friends/Zodiac
Heads (动物生肖／十二生肖授首). His work recreated the zodiac heads on a larger than
life scale, and as these towering figures traveled around the world the various factions of
its audience elicited differing interpretations of Ai’s work. For many in China, it
displayed the unjust seizure of Chinese heritage by Europeans and voiced the anger of
many Chinese people at Europe’s continued possession of Yuanming yuan’s treasures.

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153 Frederik H. Green, "The Twelve Chinese Zodiacs: Ai Weiwei, Jackie Chan and the Aesthetics, Politics,
It should be noted that Ai Weiwei himself created this work, not because he considered the bronzes to be national treasures (he did not), but to create a conversation around the pieces. He was particularly interested in questioning what was real or what was fake. He was interested in challenging the government’s motives. Were they interested in the restoration of pieces central to national identity or were they using the conflict to score political points and drum up support for the Communist Party? He also claimed that the pieces were not truly Chinese. “They were designed by an Italian, made by a Frenchman, and presented to a Qing Emperor…whose forbears had invaded China.”

However, this paper argues that this multicultural origin of the bronzes is what gives them their significance across time. Their European authorship distinguishes the Yuanming yuan loot from other “national treasures.” They are unique in that they are emblematic of China’s imperial past, a time when Europe courted Chinese emperors.

In 2012, Jackie Chan joined in Ai in using artistic media to effect social and political change. He stared in a movie titled CZ12 (十二生肖) or Chinese Zodiac. In this film, he played a treasure hunter who functions at the crossing of Indiana Jones and National Treasure. His character was originally tasked with stealing the collection of zodiac heads still in private collectors’ hands for a dirty corporation. While completing his mission, he meets a host of young activists who are workings to repatriate the bronzes to the Chinese people. He takes up their cause, and in the film the activists receive nationwide recognition and support. Chan’s CZ12 was a wild success and ranks as one of China’s top earning films at the box office. To say that it garnered the public’s support is an understatement. The heads, which were already emblems of the lost glory of

Yuanming yuan, were raised as emblems of China’s stolen identity. Rather than merely more pieces of the 1.6 million Chinese treasures held abroad, the bronzes symbolized The Chinese Empire and its control over *tianxia*.\(^{156}\)

In 2013, the tale came full circle. Francois Henri Pinault and his family returned the rabbit and the rat zodiac heads to China. Pinault, who bought the each head for $18.3 million, claimed, “By returning these two marvels to China, my family is loyal to its commitment to preserving national heritage and artistic creation.”\(^{157}\) In response, the Chinese government saw this act as “an expression of deep friendship with the Chinese people.”\(^{158}\) Yet, beyond general altruism, there seem to be ulterior motives behind the Pinaults’ actions. Pinault’s high profile retail company, Kering, just months before had bought its first stake in the China with the anticipation of further expansions into country’s market.\(^{159}\) Curiously, another of his companies owns the auction house Christies.\(^{160}\) It is not clear that China truly repossessed their historical imperial identity from the Allied Forces, rather, to say that the tale came full circle with Pinault’s gift of the bronze zodiac heads perhaps should be to say of the Franco-British and China identity contests and power play that the hand that giveth taketh away…and giveth again.

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\(^{158}\) “Two bronze animal heads, stolen 153 years ago, returned to China.” *Reuters*.

\(^{159}\) “Two bronze animal heads, stolen 153 years ago, returned to China.” *Reuters*.

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