Preventive conservation of the human environment

Architecture as an element of the landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Yuanmingyuan, or “the Gardens of Perfect Brightness”, was a large-scale garden and palace complex in northwestern Beijing. Beginning in the early 18th century, it served as the imperial garden and administrative center for Qing dynasty emperors up until the mid-19th century. It has also been commonly called “the Old Summer Palace”, since it was the predecessor of Empress Dowager Cixi’s “Summer Palace”, and is a current UNESCO World Heritage Site, widely known among the Western audience. As an important icon in modern Chinese history, Yuanmingyuan went through different phases of development and deconstruction over its more than three hundred years of history. Nowadays it still calls the attention of many historians, preservationists, tourism developers, as well as the general public, not only because of the information and values it contains, but also because of the complicated preservation issues related to this site, especially the treatment of missing landscape, which is commonly seen as testimonies to traditional Chinese architecture and garden design.

This paper will first introduce the historic background of this garden, its original scenery, process of development and deconstruction over its more than three hundred years of history. Nowadays it still calls the attention of many historians, preservationists, tourism developers, as well as the general public, not only because of the information and values it contains, but also because of the complicated preservation issues related to this site, especially the treatment of missing landscape, which is commonly seen as testimonies to traditional Chinese architecture and garden design.

TIMELINE OF DEVELOPMENT

Garden design and construction has a long-standing tradition in China. Throughout the country’s thousand years of history, almost every city, from imperial capitals to provincial towns, had its own garden scenery, although most of them were for private enjoyment, instead of public use. Yuanmingyuan, as an outstanding example of this tradition, was built solely for the Qing emperors of China, who ruled the country from the mid-17th century to the early 20th century. Because the Manchurian people, who established the Qing dynasty, were a group of northern tribes originally lived in north-eastern China, they were not used to the hot and humid summer outside of Manchuria. After entering Beijing, the capital city, one of their solutions was to build palaces and gardens, surrounded by waterways, at the hillsides of nearby mountains, which could help them to live through the long summers. Besides practical reasons, the continuity of cultural tradition was also important, as people believed that a great capital city could not exist without its imperial gardens. As seen in many different cultures around the world, a garden often represents a living paradise on earth, and the Qing emperors shared the same idea. Their gardens were not only for enjoyment, but also a show off aesthetics and power, as nothing else in the country should compare to their own paradise.

When the Qing troops defeated their enemies in the South, and the country itself gradually recovered from the previous warfare, Emperor Kangxi (reigned 1661–1722) commissioned the first small-scale garden to be built near the northwest mountain area of Beijing, which marked the starting point of the construction of a series of imperial gardens in this area. Yuanmingyuan, commissioned by Kangxi and given to his heir in 1709, later known as Emperor Yongzheng (reigned 1722–1735), was located slightly north of Kangxi’s private garden. However, the scale and complicity went way beyond this. Yuanmingyuan was not only a garden of manmade natural beauty, but also a large complex of different building types, including pavilions, galleries, temples, pagodas, libraries and audience halls. In fact, starting from Yongzheng, most Qing emperors spent most of their lifetime in Beijing, not in the Forbidden City, but in this garden complex. In other words, the imperial palace in the centre of the city was mostly used for ceremonial occasions and festivals, for example, the coronation, royal wedding or civil service examination, while the garden complex of Yuanmingyuan became the de facto administrative centre of the empire, and the emperors devoted a considerable amount of time and resources to carefully design and furnish this residence.
Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1799), Kangxi’s favourite grandson and Yongzheng’s successor, who is known for his particular interests in art and literature, further expanded the garden and commissioned an album of paintings and poetry dedicated to the buildings and landscape in the 1740s. The forty views of Yuanmingyuan, now in the collection of Bibliothèque Nationale de France, was among the best surviving visual evidence on this garden that people could find today. The hand drawn album explains the name given to each landscape element, as well as the cultural or religious meanings behind the building design or the arrangement of stone and water bodies (Fig. 1). In addition to architecture and garden design, the collection of artworks, jewellery, manuscripts and other treasures were also among the most precious ones in the entire country. Once again, the fact that Yuanmingyuan was considered “the garden of all gardens” in China showed much about its importance, not only as a series of monuments, but also a symbol of artistic achievement.

One thing unique about Yuanmingyuan was the existence of Western style buildings. During Emperor Qianlong’s reign, many European travellers made their ways to the Qing Empire. On one hand, because many of

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Fig. 1. Yuanmingyuan: Harmony of the Present with the Past (Rúgǔ hánjǐn), View 11 from the Forty views of the Yuanmingyuan, 1744. Bibliothèque nationale de France (after: Wikimedia Commons)
them were priests as well as scholars, their mission was to attract the Chinese people to Christianity and their idea of God. Serving in the court and having the chance to speak directly to the emperor was doubtlessly a great advantage. On the other hand, Emperor Qianlong was willing to have foreign artists and architects working for him, since that would show his absolute power and legitimacy as “the ruler of the universe”. In term of the imperial garden, he considered that besides all kinds of Chinese style designs, why not having some foreign style buildings? Not to mention that engineering features like water fountains were still a myth in the eyes of the Chinese emperor. All these kinds of sentiments and amusements added together and led to the creation of a special area in the garden in the year 1747, called Xiyanglou (European style palaces), located at the northeastern corner of Yuanmingyuan. An Italian missionary Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) designed these palaces. A French Jesuit and mathematician Michel Benoist (1715–1774) was the primary supervisor of fountain engineering and construction. A series of twenty copperplate engravings were also commissioned to document these interesting designs. Since these buildings were mainly made of marble, stone and metal works, they largely survived the destruction of mid-19th century warfare, thus became the best standing monuments in today’s Yuanmingyuan.

The heyday of Yuanmingyuan lasted for more than a century, with five emperors living and working in the garden. Members of the imperial family were born and died here. However, with the decline of Qing power, the fate of this imperial garden was completely changed by the Second Opium War between China and Anglo-French armies in 1860. Having lost the previous Opium War, Emperor Xianfeng, Qianlong’s great grandson, this time escaped Beijing with his entire court when the Western powers threatened to invade his capital city. While the garden was left unattended, the British and French troops could do whatever they wanted to the precious collections in this garden (Fig. 2). According to many soldiers’ accounts at the time, once the first one started to take something with him, the rest followed. After looting the emperor’s private collections and destroying many things they could not make sense of or take away with, the troops sent out fire to erase the evidence, in order to create the illusion that the garden was destroyed accidentally on fire instead of looting. Since the area was huge and the fire lasted almost a month, vast majority of

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**Fig. 2.** Godefroy Durand, Looting of the Yuanmingyuan by Anglo-French forces in 1860. “L’Illustration”, 22 December 1860 (after: Wikimedia Commons)
the Chinese style buildings got burned down, and only the European style buildings survived\(^2\).

The saddening disaster at Yuanmingyuan was followed by many decades of abandonment and decay. When Emperor Xianfeng died on the road, his chief consort, known as Empress Dowager Cixi returned to Beijing. Reconstruction of the palaces in Yuanmingyuan began in 1873, but shortly after, the work was stopped due to a lack of funding and building material. Later on, the Empress Dowager commissioned her own summer palace to the west of Yuanmingyuan, known as “the new summer palace”, which largely survived until today, thus became the major example of Chinese imperial garden design. The old paradise rested in ruins was quickly forgot by the rulers. Ordinary people suddenly had the chance to go into the ruins of the once forbidden imperial palaces, and sadly enough, during the following decades until the establishment of the Republic of China, nearby residents contributed to the further looting and destruction of the garden, taking away the marble and stone materials left, and even sold many of the remaining artifacts. It was not until the 1920s that Yuanmingyuan was designated as a park for public use. During the Sino-Japanese War in late 1930s and early 1940s, the national government again lost its control to this area, and many local households moved in and turned this garden ground into farmland and space for other constructions, like factories and schools. Later on, the People’s Republic of China government defined the boundary of this area and established Yuanmingyuan as a state protected site and historical relics park in the 1980s.

**HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC VALUES**

Often being referred to as “the Chinese version of Versailles”, the importance and values of Yuanmingyuan can never be overemphasised. First of all, in term of artistic value, it was believed that the garden represented the highest achievement of Chinese architecture and landscape, drawing inspirations from around the country. While varying in form and composition, these buildings and landscape all adhered to the Chinese ideal of appearing natural while being solely the product of artifice.\(^3\) Everything was carefully designed and arranged in groups, to create individual views and yet to form an overall landscape. Officials and guests would enter the garden following certain routes, which reflected the imperial routes and axil design as seen in many Chinese capital cities. Meanwhile, the walkways in the garden were often interconnected and were interacting with plants and other landscape, which created a natural effect that made people feel lost in some ways. Therefore, joint together were the magnificent visual and spiritual effects brought by Chinese architecture, and the details and curiosity brought by Chinese landscape design. With the help of various literary and visual art evidence, people could imagine the scale and beauty of the garden, and in this way, the studies of Yuanmingyuan are still necessary and important today for artists, architects, landscape designers, historians, and also the general public, to learn and appreciate the ancient artistic traditions and wisdom.

Another aspect is the historical value, in terms of both Qing history and the history of China’s encounter with the West. As has been discussed above, Yuanmingyuan contained the Qing emperors’ residence, imperial libraries, religious constructions and entertainment facilities. It was in these buildings that they spent most of their lifetime, practising their religious belief and individual artistic tastes. There were also audience halls where they received officials and guests from all over China and even around the world, so it was also in these buildings that they worked on administrative affairs of the empire, and came out with important policies on domestic society and foreign relationships. Official records and personal writings of the emperors and members of the imperial court provide evidence of how things worked out at a daily basis, and the garden itself serves as a physical witness to the most part of Qing history. In other words, many important historical events happened in Yuanmingyuan, which automatically gave the garden its historical value, as people widely agree upon today. This point can be further emphasised if we look at the history of its fall and decline. What was being done there? Who destroyed the garden and when? What led to the events and how people reacted afterwards? It is reasonable to say that the studies of Yuanmingyuan not only contribute to the overall research on Qing history, but also form a large part of the history of European colonial invasion in China, and the history of East-West encounter and conflicts in terms of cultural exchange and cross-cultural communication.

From a contemporary perspective, since the garden became a public park and historic protection site in the 1980s, a lot of things could be learned from the process of preservation and revitalisation. Among all the things related to Yuanmingyuan nowadays, patriotism education was highly emphasised. The image of decay and ruined landscape calls for nostalgia and sorrow in the mind of Chinese public, constantly reminding people that in a dark age of Chinese modern history, colonial powers were able to destroy the highest artistic achievement in the heart of the country, and that is not supposed to ever happen again. As described in textbooks and stories that are told to school children, the weakness of the Qing government, its failures in military and diplomacy, was the biggest cause of this tragedy. This negative image is being constantly rehearsed in contemporary China, and

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\(^2\) Ringmar 2013.

\(^3\) Gao and Treib 2006: 13.
the fact that Yuanmingyuan has become a major site for patriotic education among school children, explains the reason behind its revitalisation. In Haiyan Lee’s word, this is a matter of “how to enjoy national wound”. Many films, whether documentary or fictional, were made with the fall of Yuanmingyuan as their backdrop. Some people believe that current education materials are over-emphasising the backwardness of Qing court in terms of politics and economy, therefore fail to address the actual architectural or artistic value of the garden, which help to create misconceptions of the garden’s image, as many people still believe that the ruined Western style marble buildings are the representative scenery of Yuanmingyuan. Other people hold the idea that the historical memories and feelings evoked by the ruins are the most important thing, because no other building or site in China could serve better than Yuanmingyuan as a vivid evidence of late-Qing colonial invasion. Although the European invasion was seen as a barbarian attack on Chinese civilisation, the government back at the time could not make effective resistance, and even the capital with its imperial palaces and gardens were left to the hand of the destroyers. In this sense, the missing landscape of Yuanmingyuan does communicate a strong historical memory that appears to most Chinese people.

**Preservation and Revitalisation**

With all these values widely shared and discussed, the question of what the best way to treat Yuanmingyuan should be, has emerged as a widely debated question. Before going into the contemporary era, we should consider what had been done to Yuanmingyuan in the past century. As previously mentioned in the timeline, the ruins of the imperial garden, after the fall of Qing empire, was made into a public park by the Nationalist government in the early 20th century. Then the Sino-Japanese War and a series of domestic conflicts erupted during the 1940s and 1950s, so the whole area fell into chaos again, and a large number of people moved into the garden area and used the land as residential plots and farm fields. It was not until the 1970s, after the end of Cultural Revolution, that the People’s Republic of China government realised the value and importance of this site, therefore, began to put efforts into its preservation and revitalisation. In 1976, the first administrative office of Yuanmingyuan was established with less than 20 staff members working on the planning and organising schemes. During the 1980s, scholars and researchers of Qing history, garden and landscape design started to work on site and they raised the problem of the remaining population that were still living in this area. It was during that time, the idea of building a “historic relics park” came into mind to many scholars, and also urban planners and governmental officials, who were trained with a background in history or architecture. Many research institutions were set up by people who were interested in Yuanmingyuan, and during their early symposiums, they came into agreement that the government should make serious plans about the preservation of this site. In 1983, the municipal government of Beijing passed the park plan, and around the same time, started to move previous settlers outside of the designated walls, so that the ruins would remained as they were, without further destruction. However, after many decades of human activities and a lack of protection, the remaining foundations of the architecture and landscape could hardly be seen.

Since the 1980s, with the help of legislative efforts and academic support, Yuanmingyuan was put under careful administration and was transformed into a cultural and tourism hotspot. Although different stakeholders might have their own vision of the future of this garden, one thing they all agreed upon was that first of all, it was important and necessary to “unveil the true face” of the ruins. In other words, cleaning out all the debris of the 20th century human activity encroachment was definitely the first step in preservation or any kind of development. An enclosure wall was built to clearly define the boundary of the park, and the remaining architectural pieces in the European garden area were counted, numbered, and carefully archived according to the available visual and written records. Scholars also started to travel around the world to find any item or story that related to Yuanmingyuan, and in that sense, trying to reconstruct a “cultural concept” of the garden with all the remaining relics, beyond the actual physical boundary of Yuanmingyuan in Beijing. In fact, people had already discovered many Yuanminyuan relics in the museums and collections of different European countries, United States and Canada. All these efforts contributed to the reconstruction of this garden’s visual and cultural identity, which in a larger sense, would be seen as an essential step in preservation work.

While this knowledge was being generated, the next step began to raise questions. What do we want to do with all the information we have? Should Yuanmingyuan remain a public park with its natural scenery and public space function, or should we make it into a cultural heritage site, which means that we focus on education of the historical and artistic values? This kind of questions has become the centre of the debate in the past few decades. The current administrative body of Yuanmingyuan, which is under the district government of Haidian, tends more to favour the public space idea. Their motivation is quite clear. The park, although theoretically embracing great historical and artistic values, is still one of the many public parks in Beijing, in terms of its administrative structure and funding scheme. Unlike the Forbidden
City, the Temple of Heaven and even the new Summer Palace, Yuanmingyuan is not even a World Heritage Site. That means it receives much less financial and technical support from both the national government and external parties like private foundations and international organisations. The park performs very well nowadays, with its tourism income and local governmental funding support. Basic preservation work, like clearing up unrelated remains, paving roads and recreating landscapes with plants and water bodies, all went on smoothly as planned. However, there is actually no additional money and human resources available to launch large-scale reconstruction work. Whether reconstruction projects would generate enough revenue and attract more tourists to balance out the cost remains a highly doubtful question for the park administrators. From a preservation perspective, this situation is understandable, since the administrative side has put enough attention into preserving the current condition and avoiding further destruction of the site.

Apart from the park administration, some scholars and educators believe that it is still necessary to recreate the original buildings and landscape, addressing to all the previous discussions about values, historic memories and misconceptions. For them, Yuanmingyuan has so much more to offer than simply being a public park. Its rich stories should be told in a more effective way, and many are upset about the current situation that the general public knows only the decayed European palaces in Yuanmingyuan. Tourism developers also agree to this idea, although from a different motivation. The economic value behind the site’s tourism potentials is unquestionable, but how to carry it out sufficiently and sustainably remains unclear. With all these concerns, reconstruction work went slowly but carefully. From 1987 to 1989, the labyrinth in the European garden was reconstructed, according to the details shown in the survival set of engravings. This choice was made because there were much physical remains at that site, and both visual and literary resources were enough to support the reconstruction work. From 1977 to 1992, other building foundations in the European garden were cleared out and surviving architectural elements were archived and rearranged to their original locations. Necessary supporting elements were added to the stone structures, and the “new” and “old” were differentiated with numbers and years marked on the actual pieces. For the Chinese part of the garden, similar kind of treatments were also being done to the building foundations (Fig. 3). Water routes were unearthed and stone wharf structures were repaired (Figs 4–6). Today, at these sites, visitors can still see the year marked on these foundations referring to when the reconstruction or rearrangement was done. This kind of small-scale projects and individual treatments were seen as experimental but quite successful. Again, from a preservation perspective, they reflect the idea of authenticity, because they were done based on solid evidence and references. These projects also work with the available funding and techniques, which is an important practical aspect of preservation practices.

At the end of the day, mass reconstruction, in any sense, remains impossible. People from different perspectives agree that ideally it would be a great idea to recreate Yuanmingyuan as it was in its heyday, and that this would obviously satisfy many objectives. However, as the funding is limited and the research on visual, literary and physical reference is still underway, it is dangerous to launch a massive reconstruction campaign at least in our time. With this in mind, the current solution is to make an intangible reconstruction of ideas and concepts, before any physical work could begin. In other words, public education becomes the primary goal to which different stakeholders put in much effort. The park administration started cultural programs, outdoor exhibitions and book fairs during school breaks and festival occasions, to attract visitors and at the same time educate people about the historical values and environment of this park. Museums were set up in the park, with collections on display not only about Yuanmingyuan, but also about Qing dynasty history and Chinese architectural and landscape design in general. Transportation was much improved during the past decade, making it possible for
Figs 4–6. Yuanmingyuan: treatment of The Magnanimous World (Tantan dangdang, Fig. 4) and Peace and Harmony Everywhere (Wanfang anhe, Fig. 5), originally the fishpond of the emperor and a wharf front along the water route in the garden. Although the buildings did not survive, stone foundations were cleaned up and water routes were recreated. Misplaced pieces were put back in place, and as seen in the photos, additional pieces were made of brick instead of stone, or marked with year numbers (Fig. 6) to be distinguished from the original (photos by M. Liu)
local residents in Beijing and external visitors to come to this site easily by public transportation. Intangible cultural heritage has also found its home at Yuanmingyuan, as vendors were set up selling all kinds of goods along the tourist routes, from traditional artefacts to local cuisines. Local communities continued to benefit from the development of the park, as more areas were opened up, roads paved and natural scenery was being recreated.

One thing particularly interesting that stands out in the preservation and revitalisation process is a team of architectural historians and computer engineers working on the digitalisation of traditional Chinese architecture and landscape originally in Yuanmingyuan. These are the people from local universities, architectural and urban planning firms, also focus on the promotion of Yuanmingyuan and the revitalisation of its historical and artistic values. The mobile device application they developed is based on the authentic visual resources, and it has many interactive features, showing the history and different stages of development of each landscape view. Visitors would be able to stand on-site and refer to the digitalised materials in their mobile devices, and in this way, without any physical reconstruction, the images and concepts of how the garden would originally have look like would become clear. This team of developers has already been promoting this idea in many occasions, both academic and commercial, and they even have been shown exhibitions overseas. This reminds us about the possibility of digital representation of cultural heritage and landscape, and how different possibilities could be tested out by using available technologies, before making any kind of decisions that would actually touch the fragile physical remains.

CONCLUSION

With the discussion of historical development, current preservation debates, as well as limitations and possible solutions, the case of Yuanmingyuan and the treatment of its missing landscape could teach us a lot about cultural heritage protection and promotion, not only for architecture and gardens alike, but also for other kinds of heritage that call for our attention. First of all, documentation and research of the historical background is vital before any decision could be made. Referring to the existing reliable sources and discovering other possible sources are essential tasks for scholars and other professionals who get involved in this preservation process. If without the Qing historical documents, the remaining painting album and engravings on Yuanmingyuan, many projects could not even start, let alone the idea to reconstruct the entire garden. Secondly, public involvement process cannot be missed in any preservation work. It is easier for the case of Yuanmingyuan because it eventually became a cultural relic park, which means that the administrators do not need to deal with a residential population in the area. But for some historical neighbourhoods’ preservation and revitalisation, getting the native residents into conversation is unavoidable and should be treated as a necessary step. Every preservation work has the goal to benefit the local communities and to connect them to the values contained in the historical site. If the person or organisation that is responsible for preservation fails to address the local residents’ interests, their work could hardly be seen as successful. The final point involves the alternative ways of representing cultural heritage. Communicating the values of historical sites could happen in many different ways. Museum exhibitions, cultural programs, and digitalisation of architecture and landscape could all get people involved in the appreciation of art and history, and therefore educate people about the idea to protect our common heritage. In summary, the original landscape of Yuanmingyuan, as a great Chinese imperial garden and an outstanding example of the civilisation’s past achievement might be gone, but its legacies still remain there for people to discover and take care of. The preservation and revitalisation of Yuanmingyuan involves different stakeholders with their own perspectives and motivations, and it is a long-lasting and complicated task. Nevertheless, the progress has been made and is oriented towards a positive direction. Learning from this story would definitely be helpful for people working in the preservation field to make better decisions for other projects in the future.

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Ringmar, E.

Rujivacharakul, V.

* Rujivacharakul 2012.
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