2-19-2009

Debating the Summer Palace

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While scholars, like James Hevia in *English Lessons*, have revised historical views of the impacts of Western imperialism in China during the nineteenth century, China’s government is arguing for a revision of its own. Earlier this week, the *New York Times* reported that the Chinese government has been pressing for relics stolen from the Summer Palace—about to go up for auction at Christie’s—be returned to China:

The two Qing dynasty bronze animal heads, one depicting a rabbit and the other a rat, are believed to have been part of a set comprising 12 animals from the Chinese zodiac that were created for the imperial gardens during the reign of Emperor Qianlong in the 18th century.

China views the relics as a significant part of its cultural heritage and a symbol of how Western powers encroached on the country during the Opium Wars. The relics were displayed as fountainheads at the Old Summer Palace, known in Chinese as Yuanmingyuan, until it was destroyed and sacked by British and French forces in 1860.

At a press briefing in Beijing last week, a spokeswoman for China’s Foreign Ministry said the two bronzes should be returned to China because they had been taken by “invaders.” And a group of Chinese lawyers says it plans to file a lawsuit this week in Paris seeking to halt or disrupt the sale. But Christie’s says the sale is legal and plans to go ahead with the auction on Monday through Wednesday in Paris, where the two bronze items could fetch as much as $10 million to $13 million apiece.

*The Edge of the American West* (a group blog) provided a little historical context: (hat tip: Danwei):

In both Tianjin and Beijing, there was extensive looting in the summer of 1900. As one American Marine remembered:

“Soldiers of all nations joined the orgy...Men of the allies staggered through the streets, arms and backs piled high with silks and furs, and brocades, with gold and silver and jewels.”

A brisk trade in looted goods broke out, with open air markets buying and selling goods.

This sometimes led to particularly odd moments. American troops began to sport interesting clothing combinations after the capture of Beijing. As one officer remembered:
'Not a man was completely clad in American uniform. As they lined up for inspection, some of them wore blue or rose Chinese trousers, others mandarin coats, and almost all of them were shod in Chinese silk boots.'

For reflections on the debates surrounding Yuanmingyuan, see this feature at China Heritage Quarterly from 2006, including a piece by Geremie Barme:

In the early 1990s, the Western Pavilions became a site used by state and party leaders to recall the humiliations of the past and to celebrate the regnant nation (and it featured prominently in the 1997 return of Hong Kong to mainland control). In 1993-1994, the government proposed using foreign capital to construct a miniature replica of the Yuanming Yuan on the site of the original, and draft plans and initial archaeological surveys were made. This plan focused on three areas in the southwest section of the site—the Garden of Aquatic Plants (Zaoyuan), the Thirteen Locales (Shisansuo) and the Mountain and River Retreat (Shangao Shuichang). To comply with state regulations on cultural relics protection, Beijing Municipality commissioned archaeologists from the Beijing Cultural Relics Institute to survey and excavate the sites and prepare a draft plan. Shortly thereafter, an area of more than 4,600 sq m at Zaoyuan was excavated between September and December 1994. The entire building complex in the southwest corner of the garden was uncovered. Although all the buildings had been levelled, the outline of the stone paths and ponds could still be seen at the time of the survey.

The Beijing government’s proposal to launch incursive reconstruction project in the garden, however, resulted in a public outcry and the proposal was scrapped. However, the idea was floated again in 1998 at the Beijing Municipal Political Consultative Conference, and in May 1999 the Beijing government authorised the Beijing City Planning Authority to draw up a draft plan for the Yuanming Yuan site. The debate spread in the mass media after the historian Wang Daocheng and Chen Liqun voiced their opposition, and the novelist Cong Weixi published a rebuttal in Beijing Evening News (Beijing wanbao).[3] Fuelled by enthusiasm for Beijing’s 2008 Olympic bid, the plan was, however, eventually approved in August 2000. Authorities on ancient architecture and the environment were quick to denounce it again. The contretemps about whether the park be preserved as it was, partially restored, partially rebuilt or fully restored raged in the print media for some months, and every time a new incident involving the gardens occurs the familiar battle lines are redrawn and the debate unfolds anew.

The site has spawned other debates, including this one last year over plans for a Summer Palace theme park:

The Hengdian Group, a private company, initiated in 2006 the project to create a reconstructed version of this fabulous park, which was historically known as the “Garden of Gardens” for its luxurious palaces, mansions and décor that utilized both Western and Eastern architectural styles. Their plan would create an exact replica of the undamaged park at its original size. It is scheduled to be completed in 2013. The firm estimates that the investment will cost 20 billion yuan (US$2.78 billion)...

However, the plan has met with mixed public response. About 63 percent of the netizens surveyed were against the project, among whom 9 percent believed that it represented a lucrative business venture and would cause destruction; 23 percent felt that the project would promote traditional Chinese culture, according to a poll...

“It will be a multi-functional theme park and it will bring new growth to the local economy, especially regarding tourism,” Xu explained.

But, according to Xu, a specialized committee will be established overseas to collect missing cultural relics, thus making the project a public welfare undertaking.

He said that any reclaimed cultural treasures would be returned to the government after they had been duplicated.
Charles Hayford wrote a piece for *Asia Media* a few years ago that discusses the continued resonance of 1860 in China today:

Professor Yuan’s article begins by observing that after the Cultural Revolution people explained their violent excesses by bitterly commenting “we grew up drinking wolf’s milk.” But in looking through middle school history texts, Yuan was stunned to find “our youth are still drinking wolf’s milk!” The textbooks’ treatment of key nineteenth century incidents make his point. The authors present the Taiping rebels and the Boxers as patriotic and heroic precursors of revolution. The crimes of the British in the Second Opium War (1858-1860), such as the burning of the Summer Palace in 1860, are correctly characterized, he says, but the texts fail to hold the Qing government responsible for its own obstinate and criminal acts, which are simply described as patriotic. Yuan concludes that these views are not in the true spirit of China’s revolution but represent the “poisonous residue of the vulgarization of revolution.”