Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West

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In Room 145 of the Ceramics Galleries of the Victoria & Albert Museum, at the top of case 50, you can see an 'architectural fragment', which, according to its label, 'once ornamented a palace in Yuanmingyuan or "garden of perfect clarity"'. Made of stoneware, the item comprises a scrolling shell-like form and is covered with an exquisite turquoise-blue glaze.⁽¹⁾ The label tells you no more about how it came to be removed from the palace complex nor how it was acquired by the V & A. For this, you have to go to the nearby electronic catalogue. Alongside the excellent colour illustration, you learn that 'the item was purchased by C. H. Wylde in China in 1912 as a fragment from the Old Summer Palace ... the palace was destroyed by British-French troops during the Second Opium War and all that remains of the splendid buildings are scattered ruins and architectural fragments such as this.'

Factually this is not correct. Although British and French troops indulged in the three day frenzy of looting which preceded the destruction of the palace complex, as Louise Tythacott emphasises in the introduction to this collection of essays on 'Summer Palace' objects, French forces took no part in the destruction, which took place afterwards. On the contrary, ambassador Gros strongly protested when he learned of the order given by Lord Elgin (son of Elgin of marbles fame) which led to the two-day conflagration, generally recognised as the worst-ever act of cultural vandalism.

Leaving that inaccuracy aside, the architectural fragment provokes a number of questions which typically arise in the case of such objects. How should they be displayed and described to best effect? Why is the palace's destruction and the story of this object's acquisition not mentioned on the display case label? Why do neither of the descriptions refer to the looting which preceded the destruction? To say that only architectural fragments remain may be strictly correct but glosses over the fact that well over one million objects emanating from the 'Summer Palace' adorn some 2000 museums and numerous private collections throughout the world. In what circumstances did Charles Wylde, who was the Keeper of Ceramics at the V & A, purchase the fragment? According to his journal, quoted by Nick Pearce in his essay, in the course of a collecting trip, 'having freely entered the palace grounds, [he] was able to secure a few fragments sufficiently large to show the style of the decoration' – no mention of any purchase in this passage. But even if he did pay for these fragments, who had title to sell them, at a time when the country was on the eve

of revolution and in political turmoil? Finally, even if it is not strictly 'loot', should this fragment not be returned to China, given its questionable provenance?

In *Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West*, a range of distinguished academics and curators discuss a number of these questions in the context of the 'movements and shifting meanings' of Yuanmingyuan objects. Edited by Louise Tythacott, they derive, she says, from a conference held in July 2013, and this gives rise to my overall quibble with the volume. Although scholarly and stimulating, the essays suffer from too much overlap and repetition (what Tythacott calls 'crossovers and resonances') – almost every contributor, for example, 'briefly recounts' the events of 1860 – and there is a lack of freshness in some of the detail. Most important, however, is the absence of any essay tackling head-on the issue of ownership and how Chinese interest in, and demands for repatriation of, the objects should be addressed by museums today.

Anticipating this, Tythacott cross-references to the literature discussing 'broader issues of looting and repatriation', and explains that, by contrast, this is the first edited volume to discuss 'the diverse histories and multiple interpretations of [the] material in museums in Britain and France'. However, given that much of that discussion rightly focuses on *how* the material should be displayed, that issue cannot properly be divorced from questions of ownership and *where* it should be displayed. Moreover, those questions hover over a number of the essays. James Hevia, one of the leading authorities on the 'Summer Palace', concludes his essay with the observation, which may have been more valid in 2013 than in today's political climate, that 'we may be at the beginning of a time in which the return of such objects will be understood as necessary to the promotion of international understanding and as a way of acknowledging responsibility for past misdeeds'.⁽²⁾ Nick Pearce, more equivocally, describes the Chinese government's attempts to locate these objects as being 'in most cases ... a somewhat fruitless exercise'. And, whilst James Scott, formerly Deputy Curator at the Royal Engineers (RE) Museum, Gillingham, which has one of the largest collections of looted items, expressly considers the question of restitution, he evades drawing any conclusion because of the difficulties in determining who would be entitled to decide upon their future.

If the absence of any detailed discussion of this issue suggests that the ground has already been exhaustively covered, this is not the view coming out of China. As Liu Zhouzhen shows in her recent study, whilst there is obviously a political dimension to 'the national project' of recovery, the refusal to repatriate these 'lost cultural relics' is seen by many Chinese as 'a denial of cultural identity'.⁽³⁾ Moreover, without having to go as far as repatriation, there is plenty of scope for discussing compromise solutions. For example, as long ago as November 2011, the curator of a regimental museum told Louise Tythacott that, if the issue arose, he would recommend ceding ownership of the item concerned and asking for it to be loaned back 'so that the history of the period could be illustrated in this country at a local level'.⁽⁴⁾ Conversely, museums could consider lending items to Chinese collections, particularly those which they are unable to display. For example, the V & A have a companion piece to the fragment referred to above, also acquired by Wylde, and which, albeit in less good condition, has a band of fine decoration and a similar glaze. However, it is kept permanently in storage and, when I asked in early December if I could view it, I was told that the museum was 'rather understaffed ... and unable to offer such appointments until the new year'.⁽⁵⁾ So much for the argument that such items are best kept in these 'universal museums'.

As Pearce implies, the most immediate task is identifying the whereabouts of these objects in public collections. Louise Tythacott is currently engaged on just such a project, as is Liu Yang, a leading representative of the Yuanmingyuan Management Office. Addressing a recent conference in London, at which the issue of restitution was tackled head-on, and visibly moved by images of the V & A's architectural fragment which he had just seen for the first time, he explained that restitution is not the Office's immediate objective but only a long-term aspiration. The priority is simply establishing where the objects are, a project he has been engaged in for the last 15 years and which gets no easier. 'I write to the museums', he said, 'but they do not reply'.⁽⁶⁾ Given the importance attached to these 'cultural relics' in China, it is obviously disappointing that there is not a single essay giving the Chinese perspective on the issues which are discussed.

After the introduction, the volume begins with two overview essays, in which Hevia and Pearce trace how both the West and China have inscribed new and different meanings onto the looted objects as, respectively, trophies of war and emblems of national humiliation, and by doing so, have masked their identity. Focussing on the renowned Zodiac heads, the questionable attribution of some of them as 'Summer Palace loot' and a controversial sale of two examples at Christies in 2009, each of the authors demonstrates in different ways how easily the question of correct provenance can become subverted to political and commercial ends.

Similar questions concerning provenance and identity thread through the rest of the volume. The first two essays in part two – 'Yuanmingyuan in Britain' – explore how, after these objects were brought to the west in the early 1860s, cultural perceptions of China and the aesthetics of design underwent significant change. Taking the designer, Owen Jones, as an example, Kate Hill shows how he was influenced by what he called 'these truly magnificent works of ornamental Art'. When installing the famous collection at Fonthill House, he included 'copious spoils' which had been recently purchased from Lord Loch, who had acquired them during his time in China as Elgin's secretary. Jones then published a volume comprising 100 illustrations of Chinese ornament, which could be found in the South Kensington Museum and elsewhere, including Fonthill.⁽⁷⁾ Hill meticulously explores how much the 'floral scrolls and auspicious motifs' in these designs may have derived from looted items. In an equally compelling essay, Stacey Pierson discusses similar issues in relation to ceramics and how they became a new category of 'imperial art'. There is obviously considerable potential for mounting an exhibition exploring these themes.

Focussing on two museums, one regimental and one national, the next two essays discuss the difficulty of displaying and describing objects which for so long have been represented as symbols of imperial triumph, a highly topical issue given current debates about decolonisation and the 'ethics' of empire and criticisms by Andrew Roberts, amongst others, of the recently re-opened National Army Museum.⁽⁸⁾ In the context of the Royal Engineers' collection, James Scott discusses how a balance must be struck between maintaining the regiment's *esprit de corps* and acknowledging what most would see as wrongdoing in the past. Whilst in his overview essay Hevia talks of these museums creating 'new historical memory projects [and] evoking a kind of nostalgic remembrance of past British greatness', many curators are seeking to get away from this approach. The problem is that, far from being 'awash in new monies' as Hevia suggests, with very limited funding and over-stretched resources they in fact face an uncertain and challenging future – the Durham Light Infantry Museum, for example, closed in 2016.⁽⁹⁾

This should be seen not only as a problem for those connected with the museums and specialist historians, but also as one that raises wider issues, since their collections constitute an invaluable resource for scholars across the political spectrum: post-colonial, imperial, social and cultural. There are, currently, initiatives to make them more accessible to a public often more interested in the private life of the regiment, in terms of letters home, diaries and personal photographs, than in military glory and the imperial nostalgia to which Hevia refers.⁽¹⁰⁾

For collections like that of the RE Gillingham, where the items are currently all assembled in a single cabinet, the difficulty is how to mount a display which both maintains their Chinese identity and, yet, at the

same time, illustrates how looting was a significant feature of British imperial history. Kevin McLoughlin, former Principal Curator for East and Central Asia at the National Museum of Scotland (NMS), discusses this dilemma in relation to the Hope Grant Ewer, which forms part of the collection. Named after the Commander of British Troops in China, who gave the order for the Palace's destruction and to whom the ewer was presented by the army as a war trophy, it was later gifted by his widow to the NMS. McLoughlin describes it, first, in the context of its Chinese provenance and the influence of Middle East design, stemming back to the eighth century and, then, by reference to its history since 1860, including the engraving of two English inscriptions alongside the one in Chinese. How to do justice to this complex identity was the challenge he faced in 2011, when charged with reinstalling the East Asia Gallery. Taking into account Susan Vogel's cautionary advice, he eventually made 'a conscious choice not to redisplay the ewer in the hope of being able to display it with more appropriate interpretation at a future point'.⁽¹¹⁾

The puzzle is that, whilst he made that decision in 2011, we are given no further information as to what has happened since then. On inquiry, I was told that the ewer is currently in storage and that a new East Asia Gallery is being developed, due to open in 2019, in which it will be displayed.⁽¹²⁾ Currently there is no image available on the museum's website, and only the briefest of descriptions with nothing about the item having been looted, save for a somewhat coy reference lower down, under 'associations' which reads, 'Looting of the Summer Palace, Peking'.⁽¹³⁾ As McLoughlin says, 'the Hope Grant Ewer must be among the very few museum objects to testify so eloquently to a moment of such profoundly felt and displayed hurt and humiliation in the history of another nation'. Yet by the time it is finally on display again, it will have been away from public view for, it seems, well over eight years.

The essays in part three, entitled 'The Yuanmingyuan in France', represent a fascinating counterpoint, not least because of the very different approach the French adopted to the looted objects and their display. John Finlay begins by describing how, in 18th century Paris, Henri Bertin and others amassed a substantial collection of images of the Yuanmingyuan and how these, together with information coming from the French Jesuits in Beijing, fashioned a new idea of China, building intercultural relationships long before the treaty ports were opened.

Whilst those relationships were then significantly revised after the First Opium War (1839–1842), by 1860, as the next two essays explain, Emperor Napoleon III and his wife Eugénie had developed a particular interest in Chinese design. This stemmed, in part, from their being entertained by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in Buckingham Palace's Yellow Drawing-room, which was decorated in a Chinese manner. Whereas Victoria had to be content with a number of miscellaneous items coming from the Summer Palace, including the dog infamously named 'Looty', the French army presented the imperial couple with the entire share of its booty. At about the same time, according to Vincent Droguet, ambassadors, sent from Siam, attended the court at Fontainebleau bringing with them a number of artefacts. Finding themselves in charge of an exceptional collection of some five hundred Asian pieces, the Emperor and Empress decided to create the Musée Chinois. Ornamented by designs drawn from both the Yuanmingyuan and elsewhere, here they could entertain in surroundings decorated in a confection of Asian and Western styles.

In Greg M. Thomas' view, Fontainebleau represents 'the only true *collection* [his emphasis] of Yuanmingyuan art composed into a coherent display that reconstructs – partially and grotesquely – an echo of the collective material life that inhabited the lost palace grounds'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Whether or not this was to misinterpret the objects is not the point. It was 'a sincere attempt by Eugénie and her craftsmen to generate an aesthetic dialogue with Chinese imperial culture [and] to construct an image of the Yuanmingyuan as a site of cultural compatibility'. Restored to their original design, the rooms reflect the ambience in which France's last imperial couple spent their leisure hours.⁽¹⁵⁾ Whilst these two essays are not an *apologia* for the events that took place in 1860, they implicitly advance a case against restitution of these particular objects. How interesting it would have been to have the Chinese response to this interpretation.

Stimulating though the essays are, therefore, this study represents a missed opportunity to explore some of the wider issues which are implicit within them and to have brought Chinese scholars into the debate.

However, the book's most serious failing is in the poor standard of illustration, which is presumably down to the constraints of the publisher, Routledge. Selling at £110 for just over one hundred pages of text, there can be no good reason why there are only black and white images of objects such as the architectural fragment with the unique turquoise glaze, which so impressed Liu Yang.⁽¹⁶⁾

Whilst 'Summer Palace' loot will always give rise to controversy, one point should be beyond argument. Not only are many of the objects aesthetically rich but they all formed, and still form, an integral part of China's heritage. If they are not to be returned to their original owner, then at least they should be displayed and illustrated to the highest standards in the west. In the light of these essays, that does not seem to be happening at present.

Notes

1. C.382-1912 <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O109046/architectural-fitting-unknown/> [2]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(1\)](#)
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2. Cf. James Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, NC, 2003), pp. 74–111.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Liu Zuozhen, *The Case for Repatriating China's Cultural Objects* (Singapore, 2016), pp. 20–2 and the chapter, 'Why lost cultural relics matter in China', pp. 145–66.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Louise Tythacott, 'Trophies of war: representing "The Summer Palace" loot in military museums in the UK', *Museum and Society*, 13 (2015), 469–88, p. 481.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. C 378-1912 <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O494480/architectural-fitting-unknown/> [3]> [accessed 12 January 2018]; email response from the V & A to the writer, 4 December 2017.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Liu Yang, 'British and French Museum collections of Yuanmingyuan cultural relics, *Objects of Contention: Spoils from the Yuanmingyuan in British Museums* (Institute of Historical Research, London, 25 September 2017).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Owen Jones, *Examples of Chinese Ornament Selected from Objects in the South Kensington Museum and Other Collections* (London, 1867).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/06/the-newly-refurbished-national-army-museum-is-full-of-inaccuracies-and-post-colonial-guilt/> [4]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. <<http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/sadness-durham-light-infantry-museum-11121636> [5]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. By way of example, supported by the Army Museums Ogilby Trust (AMOT), *Historical Photographs of China* (hpcbristol.net) is engaged on a project digitising regimental collections of China-related photographs <<http://visualisingchina.net/blog/2017/03/20/andrew-hillier-on-images-of-war-and-regimental-memory/> [6]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Susan Vogel, 'Always true to the object', in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steve Lavine (Washington, DC, 1991), pp. 191–204, p. 201.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Email from NMS to the writer, 13 December 2017.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/collection-search-results/?item_id=314994 [7]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Much of this argument has already appeared in Greg M. Thomas, 'The Looting of Yuanmingyuan and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe', *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, 7, 2 (2008) <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/autumn08/93-the-looting-of-yuanming-and-the-translation-of-chinese-art-in-europe> [8]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Images of the refurbished museum can be found at <https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/garden_perfect_brightness_03/ymy3_essay03.html [9]> [accessed 12 January 2018].[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Contrast this with the lavish illustrations in the digitised re-creation of the palace complex and gardens in Guo Daiheng, *China's Lost Imperial Garden: The World's Most Exquisite Garden Rediscovered*

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