

Liberal Barbarism and the Oriental Sublime: The European Destruction of the Emperor's Summer Palace

Erik Ringmar

In 1860, a combined Anglo-French army looted and burned the Yuanmingyuan, a vast compound of palaces, temples, pagodas and gardens belonging to the Chinese emperor. This act of barbarism, they argued, was necessary in order to bring civilisation to China. This article explains this event as an expression of European' confrontation with the 'Oriental sublime', a fiction created by them as an exotic counterpart to the liberal and rationalistic social order they themselves represented. The desire for sublime experiences is still strong in modern societies and it still leads Europeans — and North Americans — to commit atrocities in the name of liberal values.

In Europe the nineteenth century was an era of endless liberal self-confidence. Establishing itself as a political doctrine through the revolution in France and as an economic doctrine through the industrial revolution in Britain, liberalism stood for political equality and *laissez-faire* capitalism. Everyone was to have the same opportunities to pursue their own ends, governed only by the rules of reason. As the liberals self-confidently declared, old prejudices and traditional hierarchies, unable to justify their existence before the court of public opinion, would soon disappear. In this way a better world would be built for everyone.

But the nineteenth century was also the era of European imperialism. This was when most parts of the globe came to be occupied by European powers, and when parts left unoccupied – such as China, Japan or Thailand – were subject to intense military pressure. It may indeed be difficult to understand what it was that turned the liberals into empire builders. Domination of others would seem to conflict with the liberal commitment to freedom and equality and the extensive network

I am grateful to Lin Chun, Song Nianshen and Qalandar Memon for comments on a previous version of this article.

1. As indeed the first generation of Enlightenment thinkers – Diderot and others – concluded. See Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 165–73.

of colonies to contradict the tenets of free trade.¹ Although there were certainly different idiosyncratic reasons for countries such as Britain or France to become imperialist, there is nevertheless a more general cause, intrinsically linked to the liberal ideology. The connection, let us suggest, was a result of the liberal definition of reason.

It is the use of reason, liberal thinkers concluded, which separates children from grown-ups.² It is through the exercise of reason that we learn to take responsibility for ourselves and gradually become independent. Reason makes it possible to study the world scientifically and to organise our societies efficiently. Economic markets apply a stern test – in the long run the existence of that which is not commercially viable cannot be effectively defended. Yet not all countries are equally far along the path to enlightenment. Like a child, a society will come to exercise its reason and learn to determine its own fate only gradually. If a society cannot do it for itself, it will need the help of others.³ This more than anything was the rationale for liberal imperialism. Dutifully shouldering the burden of colonies, the Europeans set to work occupying, enlightening, rationalising and commercialising.

At the same time rationality was never enough. Reason is a principle of accountability which forces us to justify ourselves to others and a principle of efficiency which requires constant comparisons and measurements. Yet always justifying ourselves and competing makes for a poor social environment. The rationalistic air was always too arid, the economic imperatives too categorical, and in the end rationalism made the Europeans sick. Not surprisingly they took refuge in dreams.⁴ Thus the nineteenth century was the era of not only liberal self-confidence but also Victorian Romanticism, with its cult of the obscure, the transcendent, the unutterable, shadowy and grotesque – Frankenstein's Monster, Edgar Allen Poe's Raven, Freud's Subconscious and Nietzsche's Zarathustra.⁵ Together these capitalised entities tell the

2. Immanuel Kant [1784], 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983); compare Eli Kedorie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

3. As John Stuart Mill put it in relation to China: 'if they are ever to be further improved, it must be by foreigners', John Stuart Mill [1859], *On Liberty* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 137. This is also the reasoning behind the racist doctrines of the era. For the case of France, see Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 90–170.

4. The seminal account is M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).

5. The most famous discussion of this contrast is of course Nietzsche's distinction between the forces of Apollo and the forces of Dionysus. See

unofficial story of modern society – reason’s mad and embarrassing twin brother whom we keep locked up in the attic of our collective consciousness.

The relationship between reason and unreason is neatly brought out by the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime, as discussed most famously by Edmund Burke.⁶ Burke explained that we enjoy the things which are beautiful since they are pleasing to the senses; beautiful objects are objects which our senses can hold and control. The sublime, on the other hand, is always beyond our grasp; the sublime gives intimations of other worlds ruled by obscure and terrifying forces. Thus while the beautiful can be subject to our reason, the sublime we cannot reason with; instead the sublime is an awesome power which forces us silently to succumb.

In terms of these aesthetic categories, the tension between reason and unreason can be understood through the desire for transgression. From the Latin *transgredi*, to ‘pass over a threshold’, to transgress is to move from one world to another. Most commonly, perhaps, we think of transgression as ‘moral transgression’, but transgressive acts can just as well be social, cultural or political. As our mothers or our teachers will tell us, transgression is wrong, but it is at the same time also tempting – in fact it is tempting because it is wrong. Transgression is liberating, or to be more precise, to imagine yourself as a transgressor is to imagine yourself as free from the social norms which rule your normal existence. This is why people in modern society like to read about transgression, watch films and fantasise about it, and why transgressive acts constantly pop up in our dreams.

This explains the temptation of the sublime. By submitting ourselves to the power of the unknown we liberate ourselves from the requirement to make sense. We escape from the tyranny of reason by claiming that we temporarily have been overpowered by forces beyond our control. Yet of course this is only so much hyperbole. The thrill of the sublime is a vicarious pleasure. It excites us since it gives us the sensation of transgressing without actually having to do it. It is a fantasy which never actually comes true. We stay within the realm of reason while pretending to abandon it. Contemporary society is built around this hypocrisy: we constantly see ourselves as escaping modernity while at the same time reaping all the benefits from it. Yet without this

Friedrich Nietzsche [1870–71], *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 3–146. For a comprehensive discussion see the contributions to M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

6. Edmund Burke [1759], *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

hypocrisy, no doubt, modern society would become unbearable.

European, nineteenth-century imperialism illustrates this argument perfectly. Imperialism is a transgressive act *par excellence*. The colonisers left Europe behind and passed over the threshold to other lands, ruled by other gods, customs and moral precepts. With them the Europeans brought their weapons and their comparative advantages in manufactured goods, but above all they brought their reason. Yet it was never clear how far reason would travel and what force it would have in these alien settings. This was not least the case since the Europeans constantly felt the attraction of the exotic sublime. They came as rulers but secretly they wanted to be ruled; the people whom they sought to control were those to whom they also wanted to yield: people more attractive than themselves – more sincere, more innocent, more spiritual, more feminine.⁷

Yet of course this is just another version of the modern hypocrisy. The people whom the Europeans wanted to control actually existed, whereas the people they wanted to yield to never did. The latter were instead nothing but a creation of European imagination: people the Europeans dreamt up in order to make the tyranny of their own self-confident selves more bearable. The Europeans created sublime others which provided them with vicarious thrills — compare nineteenth-century Orientalism in art, architecture, fashion and interior design as well as in academic scholarship.⁸ Recreated as exotic, Oriental, others, people in other parts of the world were deprived of their voices and their reason and thereby they became easier to control. The hypocrisy was obvious to the colonised but never to the colonisers.

The Destruction of the Yuanmingyuan

Consider the following case study. On the morning of 7 October 1860, French and British troops entered the grounds of the Yuanmingyuan, the ‘Garden of Perfect Brightness’, or what the Europeans liked to refer to as the ‘summer palace’ of the Chinese emperor.⁹ This compound, located

7. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1–63.

8. The classical study is, of course, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

9. The main contingent was French; the larger part of the British army had lost its way and only arrived the following day. The destruction of the Yuanmingyuan is discussed in Bernard Brizay, *Le sac du Palais d'Été: l'expédition anglo-française de Chine en 1860* (Paris: Rocher, 2003); Nora Wang, Ye Xin and Wang Lou, *Victor Hugo et le sac du Palais d'Été* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2003); James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 74–118; John Newsinger, ‘Elgin in China’, *The New Left Review*, 15 May/June 2002, 119–40.

north-west of Beijing, was the secluded world of the Chinese rulers, a vast complex of palaces, pagodas, pavilions, temples, lakes, gardens and groves, including a European-style palace – the Xiyanglou – built by Italian architects in the eighteenth century. In addition the Yuanmingyuan was the place where tributary gifts from foreign princes were stored, making it into one of the most extraordinary collections of artefacts ever assembled.

The emperor's summer palace, in short, was the very epitome of the 'exotic east' and it was one of the main sources of inspiration for the fashion in Chinese garden design that swept across Europe in the eighteenth century. Father Jean-Denis Attiret, a French Jesuit priest, had published a famous account of the Yuanmingyuan in 1749, and already in 1753 a 'Kina Slott' had been built at the summer palace of the Swedish king outside Stockholm, while in 1761 a 'Chinese pagoda' was erected for Princess Augusta, Princess of Wales, in what later became the Royal Botanic Garden in Kew.¹⁰ Yet, as Father Attiret made clear, it was quite impossible to make a European audience understand what the Yuanmingyuan was like 'because there is nothing in the Whole, which has Likeness of our manner of Building, or our Rules of Architecture'.¹¹ It was simply too vast, too varied, too refined, too ephemeral and ultimately completely overwhelming. It was 'une merveille du monde', as the French author Victor Hugo put it, 'une énorme modèle de la chimère', 'un édifice lunaire', 'un songe construit du marbre'.¹²

The European soldiers who entered this secluded world on the morning of 7 October 1860, were completely overwhelmed by all the splendour. They were Aladdins in an Oriental palace paved with diamonds and gold. The French general, Montauban, wrote: 'Nothing in our Europe, can give us an idea of such luxury', and, dazed by it all, they were quite unable to describe it.¹³ Another French soldier, Armand Lucy, wrote: 'I was dumbfounded, stunned, bewildered by what I had seen, and suddenly *Thousand and One Nights* seem perfectly believable to me.'¹⁴

And then the destruction began. During forty-eight hours the Yuanmingyuan was subjected to 'an orgiastic rampage of looting'. The soldiers destroyed vases and mirrors, tore down paintings and scrolls,

10. Jean-Denis Attiret, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la compagnie de Jésus* (Paris: Guérin, 1749). Published in English as 'A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Gardens Near Pekin', 1752, available at [inside.bard.edu/~louis/gardens/attiretaccount.html].

11. *Ibid.*

12. Translated as: 'the model of an illusion', 'a lunar edifice', 'a dream built in marble'. Hugo [1861], quoted in Wang, Xin and Lou, *Hugo et le sac du Palais d'Été*, 9.

13. Negroni quoted in Brizay, *Le sac du Palais d'Été*, 268.

14. *Ibid.*, 287.

broke into the storehouse of silks and used the precious fabrics for tying up their horses; they draped themselves in the empress's robes, and stuffed their pockets full of rubies, sapphires, pearls and pieces of crystal rock.¹⁵ Lucy wrote, 'During two days I walked on more than 30 million francs worth of fabrics, jewellery, porcelain, bronzes and sculptures.'¹⁶ It was an amazing and hallucinatory orgy, 'le rêve d'un mangeur de haschisch' (a haschisch eater's dream).¹⁷

Finally, on 18 October, the British commander, James Bruce, the eighth earl of Elgin – the son of the seventh earl, the notorious collector of Greek marbles – ordered the Yuanmingyuan to be burnt to the ground.¹⁸ During the subsequent two days, groups of soldiers were dispatched around the grounds to set fire to the various palaces, pagodas and other buildings. A particular loss was the imperial library and archive, which contained some 10,500 volumes, including the rarest and most beautiful works on Chinese history, science, philosophy and the arts. Since many of the buildings were made of cedar-wood they burned well and for days an aromatic smoke filled the sky over Beijing's northern suburbs. The Anglican pastor to the British army, Robert McGhee, wrote, 'No eye will ever again see this testimony to the artistic talents and tastes of another era.' Yet there was no remorse. 'Save not one, no not one building. Let there be no remnants of the palace. Now let us return to Beijing, the good work is done.'¹⁹

The destruction of the Yuanmingyuan is undoubtedly one of the worst acts of cultural vandalism of all time.²⁰ It is on a par with the burning of the library at Alexandria or the overrunning of Rome by Gothic hordes. As French sources had already noted at the time, it was as though the Louvre and the Bibliothèque Nationale had been destroyed simultaneously. And the action is remarkable given that it was committed by the representatives of two countries ostensibly out to 'civilise' the non-European world. The destruction of the Yuanmingyuan illustrates the hypocrisy of this project and the racist foundations on which it rested. In Europe, in relations between civilised nations, such acts of cultural destruction were unthinkable even during times of war, but the Chinese were evidently not included in this moral universe. The lesson was not lost on the Chinese, and it is vividly remembered to this day. The 'Western barbarians' turned out to be exactly that – Western barbarians.

15. Montauban in his *Souvenirs*, quoted in Brizay, *Le sac du Palais d'Été*, 272–3.

16. *Ibid.*, 286.

17. *Ibid.*, 278.

18. *Ibid.*, 364–5.

19. Quoted in *ibid.*, 354.

20. For a comparative study see Russell Chamberlin, *Loot!: The Heritage of Plunder* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983). See also Chalmers Johnson, 'The

Explaining the Destruction

So why did the Europeans do it? How did they explain these actions to themselves at the time and how have their historians later justified them? Obviously some pretty good explanations are required, if nothing else, in order to protect the Europeans' image of themselves. It is not possible, after all, to think of oneself as a force for good while simultaneously committing such heinous deeds. 'Just because we did it' the argument must be, doesn't mean it's the kind of thing we would do.'²¹

In coming up with an explanation, the destruction has often been divided into two parts – the looting which took place on 7 and 8 October, and the burning which took place on 18 and 19 October. The looting has variously been blamed on the inherent human desire to destroy, on the cruel logic of warfare, or on the expectations on the part of the soldiers of a reward which was commensurate with their efforts. When seeing the palace with all its riches, they just could not contain themselves. This was particularly the case of the army's rank-and-file.²² In contrast to their officers, who were expected to know better, the ordinary soldiers were simple men who never realised what it was they were destroying.

The final burning down of the Yuanmingyuan – an act for which Lord Elgin bore sole responsibility – had, the historians explain, a particular cause. During an earlier incident the Chinese had taken a number of French and British subjects prisoner. They were returned on 14 October, or rather the surviving ones were returned but were found to be in a very bad state. They had been tortured and subjected to cruel and degrading treatment. Seeing the state they were in, Elgin decided that he had to teach the emperor a lesson.²³ This was not least the case since one of the prisoners was a journalist with *The Times*, and Elgin wanted to pre-empt the jingoistic rhetoric he expected from the British press. To flatten the Yuanmingyuan seemed appropriate since the action would hurt the emperor personally rather than his subjects, and also Elgin believed the palace was where the foreign prisoners had been kept. Besides, to the extent that the sacking convinced the Chinese about the superior power of the Europeans, it would serve to prevent further

Looting of Asia', *London Review of Books* 25, no. 22 (20 November 2003). Available at [www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n22/john04_.html].

21. To paraphrase Rob Corddry's remark on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, 6 May 2004, in relation to the revelation that US soldiers were torturing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. Quoted in Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004), 24.

22. Woolseley quoted in Brizay, *Le sac du Palais d'Été*, 314–15.

23. The concept of the English 'teaching lessons' is Hevia's key metaphor in *English Lessons*.

warfare. Surely thousands – perhaps tens of thousands – of human beings are worth more than an imperial museum full of assorted antiques?²⁴

Yet these justifications-*cum*-explanations are fairly unconvincing. We may doubt, for example, whether there really is such a thing as an inherent human desire to destroy, and we may wonder why the soldiers, if they really sought to enrich themselves, wantonly smashed whatever they got their hands on. And even if we accept that the soldiers were uncouth jobs, we may still wonder why the more culturally sophisticated officers did nothing to stop them. The emperor's palace was a secluded world after all, to which access could have been restricted quite easily. Attempts to pass the eighth earl Lord Elgin off as a rational humanist also fail. Even if we accept the perverse notion that the European intruders had a right to punish the Chinese authorities on Chinese soil, there must have been other actions they could have contemplated, actions less obviously reprehensible. Unless of course – and this is a possibility we shall explore – there is some other reason, not officially stated, for the Yuanmingyuan being singled out for destruction.

What none of these explanations touches on properly is the orgiastic quality of the actions of the Europeans. When they first came across this hidden world, the Europeans were struck with awe and at a loss for words. Yet, as soon as the first porcelain vase was broken, the spell seems to have been broken too.²⁵ Suddenly everything was permitted and the Europeans went on a rampage which ultimately culminated in a kind of furious delirium. Afterwards a feeling of weariness overcame them and astonishment at their own actions and reactions. The dream of a haschisch-eater indeed! The question is only how to explain it.

Sublime Possession

The beginnings of an answer can be found by looking at the aesthetic theories current in the nineteenth century. After all, the Europeans reacted to the Yuanmingyuan, its buildings and artefacts, as artistic objects and judged them with the help of aesthetic categories. And in their imagination, the emperor's summer palace was more than anything an instantiation of the sublime. The idea of the sublime had a particular hold on the imagination of the Europeans. Through their reading of classical authors such as Longinus, modern authors such as Nicolas Boileau, Joseph Addison and Immanuel Kant developed a full-

24. Compare the argument of the French general, Collineau, quoted in Brizay, *Le sac du Palais d'Été*, 360.

25. As the French clergyman François Pallu pointed out. Quoted in *ibid.*, 266.

fledged theory of the sublime.²⁶ For an English-speaking audience, however, it was more than anything Edmund Burke who provided the seminal statement.²⁷

The sublime, Burke explained, resembles the beautiful but it is nevertheless entirely distinct from it. The sublime is ‘a sort of delightful horror’, a ‘tranquillity tinged with terror’, which the mind experiences whenever it is overwhelmed temporarily by some object or sensation.²⁸ The sublime is terrifying but the danger is never real. The sublime gives us the *frisson* of fear, the delight of realising that we really are perfectly safe. Often such reactions are brought out by encounters with nature. Burke’s favourite illustration is a stormy ocean – such as *Rough Sea with Wreckage* and *Snowstorm*, painted later by J.M.W. Turner – but dark woods, spacious caverns, poisonous snakes and large menacing felines can have the same sublime effects.²⁹ Man-made objects can be sublime too, provided they are sufficiently awesome – such as the Egyptian pyramids or St Peter’s in Rome.³⁰ In general, sublime sentiments are brought out by the obscure, the dark, the hidden, the vast, the deep, the ancient, the great, the tragic, the silent, the exalted, the infinite and the eternal.

It is above all by causing astonishment that the sublime works its effects. Astonishment temporarily disables our rational faculties; Burke explains that suddenly ‘the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it’.³¹ The sublime floods our senses, short-circuits our cognitive processes and leaves us speechless and bedazzled. For the person concerned this sensation is often experienced as an act of yielding or as a submission. The sublime forces us to subject ourselves to it and we are enthralled by its hidden powers. In this way the sublime seems to give us intimations of the transcendental, of the extra-human powers which reside in the object before us and which through it act on us.

26. Longinus [3rd century AD], *On Great Writing* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1957), trans. Boileau in 1674. Addison’s articles in *The Spectator* in the 1710s served to popularise the topic in England; available at [tabula.rutgers.edu/spectator/]. Kant treated the sublime in both [1763], *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), and [1790], *Critique of Judgement* (New York: Hafner, 1951), especially at 82–105.

27. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*. A precursor of Burke’s, Shaftesbury, also discussed the concept extensively. See Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury [1711], *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially, 351–94.

28. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 123.

29. Shaftesbury provides a list of examples in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions*, 316.

30. Kant, *Observations*, 49.

31. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 53; compare Halberstam, *Totalitarianism*, 183ff.

This explains the thrill of the sublime. Sublime experiences take us away from ourselves and give us time out from our everyday lives. Suddenly we find ourselves on a moral holiday, with diminished faculties and reduced responsibilities. Often sublime experiences are associated with exuberant and intoxicating sensations and in extreme cases we become as though possessed: suddenly seized by a divine fury we begin having visions and speaking in tongues. This, of course, is all very scary but it is at the same time strangely exciting, and while we may want to resist these forces, we also have a strong urge to succumb to them. Truly sublime experiences are like the rape fantasies of proverbial Victorian middle-class women – what you officially dread is also what you secretly dream of.

The Politics of the Commonsensical

And herein lies the danger. People who are astonished and possessed are unable to use their judgement and as a result they are no longer capable of rational self-rule. The aim of the state, as Thomas Hobbes already had argued approvingly, is to keep its subjects 'in awe', and this awe served as a restraining and pacifying force which made sure that the subjects were too 'gob-smacked' to cause any trouble.³² Yet, by the eighteenth century authors such as the earl of Shaftesbury were reacting strongly against such repressive strategies. The absolutist state was 'awful' in the precise technical sense that it filled people with awe, thereby robbing them of their ability to reason.³³ Organised religion, from the Egyptians to the Jews and onwards to the Catholic Church, had used the same obscurantist mumbo-jumbo in order to silence dissent and instil obedience.³⁴

As Shaftesbury pointed out, however, such tactics were likely only to make people more fanatical. Since they had never been trained to reason, people living in absolutist states were more likely to turn into fanatics.³⁵ They became 'enthusiasts' (from the Greek *entheos*, meaning to be 'transported by the divine').³⁶ Enthusiasts are dangerous, intolerant people who embark on wild-goose chases and endless crusades. It was

32. Thomas Hobbes [1651], *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), I: 13, 185. Compare the discussion in Reinhart Koselleck [1959], *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), 23–31.

33. Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 154–60.

34. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions*, 365–407.

35. On Burke's view of the French Revolution in light of his theory of the sublime, see George Steiner, 'Aspects of Counter Revolution', in *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and Its Legacy* (London: Fontana, 1988).

36. See, for example, Ronald A. Knox [1950], *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

enthusiasm, Shaftesbury made clear, that started the English Civil War, and it was enthusiasm, Burke would later argue, that produced the French Revolution. Or, we might add, it was unthinking submission to authority which in the twentieth century prepared the way for both genocide and state terror.³⁷

The best protection against the awful and its fanatical servants was the culture of polite society, of which the English gentleman and the French *homme de lettres* were the principal custodians. This culture was characterised by intense sociability, by endless amusements, and above all by constant conversations on matters ranging from plain gossip to debates on the latest events in politics or trends in the arts.³⁸ By talking together the members of these elite groups learnt to appreciate each others' opinions but also to exercise their own judgement. Since they constantly were forced to consider the arguments of others, they never developed extremist views. In face of the sublime, English gentlemen and French *hommes de lettres* stayed stoically calm; they remained ironic, sceptical and good-humoured. Often, in fact, these members of elite society were surprisingly anti-monarchical and sometimes shockingly irreligious, but more commonly they had no particular views at all and took nothing very seriously – except, that is, their own elevated social positions.

Compare these reactions with the reactions of a person struck by the sublime. More often than not such a person would be incapable of both listening and expressing himself properly. As a result he would either have monopolised the conversation or fallen completely silent – and either way he would have been thoroughly impolite and an embarrassment to any *salon* or gentlemen's club. Not surprisingly, enthusiasts were never invited anywhere and spent most of their time alone. Yet instead of blaming the individuals concerned for their failings, the members of polite society detected a tactic of the absolutist state. By breaking up civil society and by separating and isolating their subjects, absolutist states created the social conditions for the loneliness which the rulers required in order to assure peace and secure their rule.³⁹

37. Compare Halberstam, *Totalitarianism*, 155–68; and Hannah Arendt [1951], *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1979), 460–79.

38. Keith Michael Baker. 'Public Opinion as Political Invention', in his *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Compare Erik Ringmar, *The Mechanics of Modernity: The Institutional Origins of Social Change and Stagnation* (London: Routledge, 2005), 109–17.

39. Compare Shaftesbury's ironical comments on the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: 'A life without natural affection, friendship and sociableness, would be a wretched one, were it to be tried', in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions*, 56.

As protection against the seductive powers of the sublime, gentlemen and *hommes de lettres* had above all their commonsensical outlook on life. At the time, just as today, common sense denoted an empirical, practical and sceptical attitude, but in addition it also had the connotation of a *sensus communis*, a 'shared sense', developed collectively by people who interacted closely with each other for long periods of time.⁴⁰ Thus understood, common sense was more similar to a shared sense of judgement, or a kind of collective intelligence, and although you certainly were free to disagree with the conclusions it reached you always had to acknowledge the existence of this collective judgement. Its decentralised nature and its location in polite society meant that the *sensus communis* was defined independently both of the State and the Church – and therefore, at least occasionally, in opposition to both. Common sense honed in mercilessly on pomposity, false credentials and blind faiths – all of which were declared 'superstitions' that had to be abolished. Common sense unmasked the sublime much as the little boy in H.-C. Andersen's story unmasked the naked emperor.⁴¹

Standing up to the Oriental Sublime

Returning to the Yuanmingyuan with these considerations in mind we find that the reaction of the Europeans never was only aesthetic but was also perfectly political. Or rather the aesthetic was the political and the political the aesthetic. The Chinese state was sublime in both senses and it was explicitly organised in order to inspire awe. The Yuanmingyuan is an architectural illustration of this programme. For the person observing it from the outside – such as a Chinese peasant or a foreign traveller – it was a walled-off, secret garden: a world which was sublime above all by being entirely inaccessible. However, those who were lucky enough to pass through its gates – such as foreign diplomats – were affected rather more directly. As we saw above, they were all amazed, awe-struck, filled with wonder and at a loss for words. Those sublime experiences were more than anything the reason that the Europeans were fascinated by the Yuanmingyuan – and it is also why they eventually destroyed it.⁴²

40. Compare Shaftesbury's essay, '*Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and humour in a Letter to a Friend*', in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions*, 29–69, For a discussion see Hans-Georg Gadamer [1975], *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & War, 1989), 19–42.

41. But for their 'dignified capacity', as Bagehot pointed out, Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales are really nothing but 'a retired widow and an unemployed youth'. Walter Bagehot [1867], *The English Constitution* (Brighton: Sussex, 1997), 21.

42. Compare the Orientalising fantasies which Segalen attached to the

When Europeans first came into sustained contact with China in the sixteenth century they were unanimously impressed by the next-to-infinite powers of the emperor.⁴³ The unity and order of Chinese society contrasted favourably with the disunity and strife of Europe in the post-Reformation era. The Chinese state was indeed awe-inspiring and this was why, the Europeans believed, China was peaceful and well governed. The emperor made no attempt to involve his subjects in decision-making or to explain his actions to them; the Chinese state was silent in relation to society and acted without publicly stated rationale.⁴⁴ That is, the emperor was doing what the king of France tried to do but more successfully so. The Chinese emperor was far more awesome, far more 'awe-full', than his European counterparts. The Yuanmingyuan was also a much better example of the sublime than any Palais de Versailles.

In the course of the eighteenth century some Europeans began for the first time to criticise the Chinese political system, and these voices came from entirely predictable quarters: the increasingly self-confident members of polite European society – the English gentlemen and the French *hommes de lettres*.⁴⁵ To Baron de Montesquieu, for example, the problem with Chinese absolutism was exactly the same as the problem with French absolutism. The submission required by all the elaborate rituals created passive subjects who could be easily led and as easily misled. The term for this kind of polity was 'Oriental Despotism'.⁴⁶ From this perspective the sublime was turned into a basic principle of statecraft. As such it served as a lesson to Europe and as a negative standard by which European institutions could be assessed. The more Chinese Europe became, the more trouble the continent was in.

emperor's palace in the novel by Victor Segalen [1922], *René Leys* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003).

43. See, for example, Donald Lach and Edwin J. van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe: Volume III. A Century of Advance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

44. See, for example, Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 198–200.

45. Baron de Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), vol. 2, 227–995. For a discussion, see Ho-fung Hung, 'Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East–West Differences from 1600 to 1900', *Sociological Theory* 21, no.3 (2003).

46. Juan-Pau Rubiés, 'Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu', [*Journal of Early Modern History* 9, no.1-2 \(2005\): 109–80.](#)

The Macartney mission to China in 1793 illustrates this clash of civilisations perfectly.⁴⁷ George Macartney was a diplomat and a gentleman, and he was a keen conversationalist often spotted in fashionable London clubs. As a diplomat he was a servant of the king to be sure, but as a member of the landed gentry he belonged to the social class which constituted the backbone of English society. He was his own man, used to exercising his own judgement. Not surprisingly Macartney ran into trouble with the etiquette of the Chinese court. According to the elaborate Chinese ritual it was possible to approach the imperial throne only if one performed the 'kowtow' – *koutou* – and prostrated oneself on the ground nine times as a sign of reverence and submission. Predictably Macartney refused to go along with this custom. Any kowtowing on his part would have placed his own king in an inferior position *vis-à-vis* the emperor and it would have involved Macartney himself in a ritual game for which he had nothing but disdain. In the end he simply knelt down on one knee – much as he was expected to do when approaching his own monarch. Macartney was quite literally standing up to the Oriental sublime. Not surprisingly perhaps, nothing of much substance came of his diplomatic mission.

In the nineteenth century criticism of China became more general and the image of Oriental despotism spread widely among European intellectuals. As they discovered, not only was the awe-inspiring Chinese state destructive of human liberty but despotism also led to economic and social stagnation.⁴⁸ In Europe of the mid nineteenth-century, the industrial revolution was well under way and its promise of ceaseless progress gave the Europeans a new sense of superiority. Europe had made a leap into an exciting world of economic prosperity and unprecedented technical mastery of nature; new hopes were connected to individualism, liberalism and democracy. Nowhere was this more obvious than in Britain where the Smithian idea of self-organisation – the 'hidden hand' of the market – provided a new model for social order to be established and maintained without constant interventions by the state.⁴⁹ The logic of the market, as Smith had explained, might indeed be hidden from its participants but sublime it was decidedly not.

47. Extensively discussed in James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

48. On Marx's discussion of China see Timothy Brook, 'The Asiatic Mode of Production in China', in *Chinese Studies on China* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1989). Compare K.A. Wittfogel, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* (Leipzig: Hirschfeld, 1931).

49. Compare the discussion in Ringmar, *Mechanics of Modernity*, 118–26.

In all these respects China had failed to follow. Looking at their own part of the world the Europeans saw change everywhere; looking at China they saw nothing but ‘stagnation’ and ‘the despotism of custom’. According to John Stuart Mill, there is no freedom and no individuality in China and for that reason there can be no progress.⁵⁰ Here ‘the despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement’. The Chinese defer to the judgement of others, Mill argued, and neither character nor originality are allowed to develop. The minds of the Chinese are, like the feet of their women, ‘maimed by compression’. The best hope for the country was that Europe – through its colonies, its commerce and its church – would destroy the ancient social structures and rebuild them according to European principles.

It was with these considerations very much in their minds that the Europeans returned to the Yuanmingyuan in 1860. Lord Elgin and his French counterpart, Count Montauban, were both gentlemen and members of polite society, and as such they knew exactly what was wrong with the Chinese state. Elgin was no monster; on the contrary, he was a liberal – a very reasonable man – and if anything a rather reluctant imperialist.⁵¹ He came to China not in order to destroy and dominate but in order to open the country to foreign, and mutually advantageous, trade. But it was as a liberal that he knew what was wrong with the Chinese state. It was incredible to him that the Chinese emperor had such a faulty conception of himself and the role his country played in the world. Moreover, the emperor had treated Britain and its subjects with contempt. The lesson Elgin wanted to teach concerned exactly this: to point out that behind the awe-inspiring symbols there was absolutely nothing; to demonstrate that the sublime was a mere illusion; to reveal the emperor as stark naked. Burning down the Yuanmingyuan made these points perfectly.

Yet on the day everyone seemed to go crazy. There is probably no way of destroying a marvel while keeping a level head. The sublime, even if you do not believe in it, still has the power to enchant you, and ordinary soldiers were surely far more susceptible to enchantments than their commanding officers.⁵² Less inoculated by the commonsensical

50. Mill, *On Liberty*; this and the following quotes are from 135–7.

51. Newsinger, ‘Elgin in China’, 119–25.

52. Compare Veyne’s discussion of the power of myths: ‘I hold ghosts to be simple fictions but perceive their truth nonetheless. I am almost neurotically afraid of them ... Nothing would reassure me more than to learn that ghosts “really” exist. Then they would be a phenomenon like any other, which could be studied with the right instruments, a camera or a Geiger counter.’ Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 87.

culture of polite society they were more prone to be struck by awe. At the precise moment of committing their crime the Europeans were taken over by the very forces they were seeking to destroy; they became furious in order not to be destroyed by the furies; only as barbarians could they effectively spread the blessings of civilisation. It was only once the work was done – once there was nothing left of the Yuanmingyuan but a smouldering heap – that things returned to normal and the Europeans gradually returned to themselves.⁵³ The point was conclusively proven, the ghosts were effectively exorcised, yet the Europeans were at the same time surprised and shocked at their own actions. At the moment when the Yuanmingyuan was destroyed they had themselves come under the spell of the sublime.

New Imperialism, New Transgression

During the 150 years since the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan, the victory of the commonsensical has become next to complete. We are today living in a world where the pragmatic, the scientific and the economically efficient have come to dominate our lives completely. All superstitions and all naked emperors have been exposed; the 'awe-full' is considered truly awful and commonsensical arguments trump all others. Reason has won the day. Everyone everywhere is a European liberal or at least a European liberal in the making.

Yet the yearning for transgression has not gone away. Beyond the brightly lit and the clearly elucidated there are still fleeting shadows in sylvan groves and small vessels on stormy seas. We know this is the case because we see it in our dreams and in our nightmares. In fact, the more sense we make of the world, the more the sublime will come to attract us. In an era when everything is rational and tangibly real, we need the sublime more than ever in order to rescue us from our reason and our reality. This is why the cultures of contemporary societies are filled with portrayals of transgressive acts – in computer games, films, music, drug culture, religious prophecies and internet porn. Although officially we may be loath to admit it, vicarious experiences of this kind are what we spend most of our time and our money on. Never properly admitting this tension in our lives, we are still hypocrites.

Overt imperialism is of course a thing of the past. Europeans no longer directly control other parts of the world. Today we are firm believers in democracy, self-determination and free trade. Today Europeans – and their North American counterparts – use development experts and consultants to advise countries in what used to be known as the 'Third World', and they use international agreements on trade,

53. Compare Hevia, *English Lessons*, 101–2.

finance and intellectual property in order to impose reason, order and accountability. They speak to poor and underdeveloped countries with authority and knowledge, sure of themselves and their own superiority. The poor and underdeveloped may initially resist such impositions but eventually they will always give in.

Yet the desire for transgression remains as powerful as ever. The countries which once used to be European colonies are still our Oriental others, the 'exotic' locations which we visit on vacation or where Hollywood blockbusters are set. They are also the places where acts of liberal barbarism continue to be performed. Going off to a war in a foreign land is today one of the few ways in which an average European or American kid legally can get their transgressive kicks. As soldiers they are expected to kill and as prison guards they are expected to treat their captives harshly.⁵⁴ All their training is geared towards overcoming their natural aversion to killing and their prior socialisation and humanity. Here the boys finally get to transgress for real and they can become their own action heroes. And their leaders – like once Lord Elgin and General Montauban – can spread their liberal values through acts of barbarism.

*Erik Ringmar is Professor at the Center for Cultural and Social Studies
at the National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan.*

54. On the recent Iraq war from this context see Evan Wright, *Generation Kill: Living Dangerously on the Road to Baghdad with the Ultraviolent Marines of Bravo Company* (London: Bantam, 2004); Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004).