

Imperial Vertigo and the Themed Experience: Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland Compared

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Yuanmingyuan, the “Summer Palace” of the emperor of China, located a few miles north-west of Beijing, was by all accounts a remarkable place. It was so remarkable in fact that the few Europeans who gained entry could compare it to nothing except Palais de Versailles of Louis XIV.¹ The Yuanmingyuan was a marvel to behold and the most beautiful place imaginable. And yet these descriptions are impossible for us to verify since the palace disappeared in October 1860 when European troops, in an act of exceptional cultural barbarism, first looted the buildings and then burned them to the ground. Reading about the Yuanmingyuan today the comparison which seems most apt is not with Versailles but with Disneyland. On the face of it this may sound like a flippant parallel. The Yuanmingyuan was where one man, the Emperor of China, worked, worshiped and was entertained; it was a place of cultural sophistication and scholarship. Disneyland is a commercial venture and one of the world's most visited tourist attractions; it has been described in many ways but never as a place of cultural sophistication and scholarship.

This article does not deny these differences but looks beyond them to identify a number of respects in which Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland really are strikingly alike. Both are “magical kingdoms,” separate worlds of wonder and delight, set in radical opposition to the mundane realities of the outside world. Both are theme-parks, comprising a number of artificial environments inspired by exotic foreign places and

nostalgic remembrances of domestic scenes. Both are places of entertainment but also manifestations of a political ideology. Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland express the way eighteenth-century China and post-World War II United States related to themselves and to the rest of the world. And, as we will conclude, many of the similarities can be explained by means of the ontological reassurance the two parks provided to their respective sovereigns. A comparison of Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland allows us to study these ideologies and how they were made manifest in the morphology of the parks.

Eighteenth-century China and post-World War II United States occupied functionally similar positions: both were hegemonies of recent making, the parvenu leaders in their respective parts of the world, and both faced the problem of how to describe, explain and justify their new-found powers. By definition, hegemonic power necessarily appears self-assured. Indeed, a self-doubting hegemon would already have ceded a great deal of its power. And yet, self-assurance is never simply there but must be constructed through processes that present hegemonic rule as both natural and necessary. This problem is particularly acute for parvenu powers. Let's call it "imperial vertigo." Just as vertigo may overcome a person who suddenly is elevated to a great height, imperial vertigo may overcome a political power that suddenly is elevated to great power status. In both cases we need reassurance — that the ground is safe under our feet; that we indeed are the masters of everything we survey. There are many ways in which imperial vertigo may be cured, but as we shall see Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland provide two particularly powerful solutions.

the sovereign in his garden

There are, we said, great and obvious differences between Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland. However, if we suspend disbelief for a moment and take the official

rhetoric seriously, we can say that both were gardens of the sovereign of their respective countries. This provides us with a rationale for a comparison. Moreover, both gardens are powerful expressions of the official world-views, the official ideologies, of two empires and two imperialisms. This is most obviously the case for Yuanmingyuan. First laid out by the Kangxi emperor in 1709, and greatly extended by Qianlong throughout a reign which started in 1735 and ended only in 1796, the Yuanmingyuan was the residence of the ruler of China, his women and the eunuchs and officials of the court.² In Yuanmingyuan the emperor conducted business of state and carried out his ritual duties but he also relaxed and was entertained. As the Jesuit friar Jean-Denis Attiret pointed out, the Chinese emperor is "too much a slave to his grandeur to shew himself to his people."³ Since he was not of this world, he needed an alternative world to inhabit — and the Yuanmingyuan was it. Not surprisingly, many emperors spent more time here than in the Forbidden City or any of the other royal palaces.⁴

Disneyland too is very much the expression of the mind of its maker. Built in 1955, in Anaheim, California, Disneyland was created entirely to Walt Disney's specifications; "Walt personally walked every inch of Disneyland and supervised every detail."⁵ For Walt Disney too the park was a place to work but also where he could relax and have a good time. Disney built an apartment for himself on top of the fire-station on Main Street, and from here he could not only supervise the operations of his park but also gain easy access to its attractions when it was closed to visitors.⁶ Disney was particularly fond of the steam trains which he treated as his private railroad. Disneyland was, a friend remarked, "the world's biggest toy for the world's biggest boy."⁷ Although built to please himself, it was Disney's firmest belief that his tastes also were the tastes of the American public. "He came to view himself as a yardstick of popular values and would tell directors, story men, and animators that if he liked a

production, everybody would like it.”⁸ And, overwhelmingly, the American people did. Within six months after opening a million visitors had passed through the turnstiles; in 1960 the park had 5 million yearly visitors and in 2010 the number approached 15 million.⁹

It is these visitor numbers, together with the visitors’ reactions, that make also Disneyland into the garden of a sovereign. After all, in the United States it is the people — “We the People” — who is sovereign; it is the people who rule; and after 1955 there was no garden in America which was more visited by the American people. Just like the Chinese emperor in Yuanmingyuan, it was to Disneyland that the American people came to relax and be entertained, to have their world-view set out before them and their preconceptions reaffirmed. The blatant commercialism of the venture does not contradict this conclusion but highlights instead the precise nature of American democracy. In advanced capitalist countries sovereignty is shared between citizens and consumers — every fourth year the voter gets to play king but on a daily basis the king is the consumer.

We may indeed have our doubts regarding these official accounts. “The people” may not be as sovereign as Americans are made to believe and the Chinese emperor was never the absolute ruler described by the official ideology.¹⁰ Yet what we are interested in here is not the actual exercise of sovereignty but instead the official ideology through which it was legitimized. What we want to know is how the purportedly sovereign rulers in imperial China and in neo-imperial United States explained the world to themselves and how their worlds were explained to them.¹¹ For such an investigation the Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland provide unique evidence. In order to structure the comparison, and avoid being overwhelmed by facts, consider the following morphological principles: dislocation, idealization, model-building and thematization.

1. *dislocation*

In contrast to royal gardens such as those at Versailles and Schönbrunn which were intended for ostentatious display, Disneyland and Yuanmingyuan are radically set off from their surroundings. To Yuanmingyuan outsiders were admitted only as a sign of imperial grace and at Disneyland you need to pay a steep \$72 to gain admission.¹² Both parks are turned inward, towards themselves, and like a medieval *hortus conclusus* they are surrounded by walls impossible for outsiders to climb.¹³ As a result people on the outside cannot see in and people on the inside cannot see out. From inside Yuanmingyuan you could see only the far-distant mountains, and from inside Disneyland you can see nothing at all since the local building code prohibits the construction of tall buildings and since Walt Disney buried all telephone and power cables which might remind a visitor of external realities.¹⁴ “I don’t want the public to see the real world they’re living in. I want them to feel they’re in another world.”¹⁵

It is only by passing through the official gate — in both cases presented as a border-control separating two countries — that visitors can enter this alternative reality.¹⁶ But once inside, where are they? In a magical place, they are told, in “the happiest place on earth,” or in what looks suspiciously like a *u*-topia — a place without an exact temporal and geographic location. A number of features contribute to this sense of dislocation. First of all, since both parks are entirely man-made there is no continuity with the environment which surrounds them. Instead they are best located in terms of the psychological environment of their makers. They resemble nothing except other parks created by the same person: the imperial retreat in Chengde or other Disney parks.¹⁷

Their character as non-places is accentuated by the rejection of everything reminding the visitors of their everyday lives. The parks contain no toil and strife;

there are no signs of work, anger or deviance; no social problems, no crime and no political agitation.¹⁸ At Yuanmingyuan all service activities took place along two walled roads which reached deep into the park, thereby allowing deliveries to be made, staff to be moved and trash to be collected with a minimum of disturbance. The emperors never understood how their lives were sustained. Likewise, at Disneyland lunch and dressing rooms, offices and kitchens are hidden underground and trash removal and crowd control are carried out by staff dressed in brightly colored costumes who pretend that their work is play. The sense of dislocation contributes to the sense of magic — only by magic after all can we be in a place without a location.

Time is suspended in a similar fashion. In both parks there are few signs of temporal processes and there is no death. Everything living is constantly renewing itself and presents the visitors with an ever-present youthfulness. At Disneyland traces of the previous day are removed on a nightly basis — attractions are repainted and sod is replaced.¹⁹ At Yuanmingyuan, apart from daily maintenance, the emphasis on rock features and water gave the garden an eternal aspect.²⁰ Without a past firmly situated in relation to a future, the present becomes infinitely elongated. Moreover, since most visitors visit the gardens on their time off, time spent there is not used for any particular purpose. This purposelessness is bound to remind them of their childhoods. In childhood too we never counted the time — time was endless and this is what made it fly. When in adolescence we for the first time became conscious of time's passing, childhood immediately sealed itself off as an enchanted world to which we no longer have access. Unless of course we are fortunate enough to enter an enchanted park where time once again is endless and where it once again flies.

The sense of dislocation is accentuated by a disregard for money. In the ordinary world money is the standard means by which we measure both time and space. Space, redefined as "real estate," has a certain price and time as we know "is money."

Yet inside both gardens the use of money is concealed. Yuanmingyuan was a gift economy: the emperor was brought expensive gifts and he gave even more lavish gifts in return.²¹ At Disneyland, after paying a lump sum at the entrance, all attractions are free. Instead of minimizing the number of rides in order to save money, visitors try to maximize them in order to get as much out of the tickets as possible. Disneyland provides the illusion of a world of endless abundance, and if there is no scarcity there can be no prices.²²

2. idealization

Like other u-topias, Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland were populated by people, things, institutions and social customs which resemble those of the regular world — only perfected and idealized.²³ As such both gardens convey what we could call a pedagogy of transfiguration. As the imperial guest ritual made clear, foreigners came to China in order to benefit from the blessings of Chinese civilization and “to be transformed” in the process.²⁴ In much the same fashion, as Walt Disney reminded the first visitors in 1955, “Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and hard facts that have created America.”²⁵ And he hoped that the park “will be a source of joy and to all the world.”

Idealization starts with nature. In both places nature is asked to “look natural” but at the same time to “behave itself.” Both parks have collections of trees taken from many different ecosystems and made to grow where they normally would not survive.²⁶ Despite their unconstrained look, plants in Yuanmingyuan were constantly pruned and stunted, and Disneyland uses growth retardants and hormones to convince plants to stay in their designated places or to flower out of season.²⁷ Both parks have artificial lakes and rivers and man-made mountains — a copy of Matterhorn in the case of Disneyland, a copy of Mount Sumeru, in the case of Yuanmingyuan. Artificial rocks

are also scattered around both parks. Fake rocks have the advantage that they can be placed exactly where they are needed and that they look more “rocky” than real rocks.²⁸

Animals feature prominently in both places but they too are well-behaved and thoroughly anthropomorphized. An astonished Marco Polo discovered lions and tigers that walked around freely in the apartments of Kublai Khan's palace, and unusual animals — rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses, even giraffes — were a common gift from foreign delegations.²⁹ At Yuanmingyuan the emperor kept animals which were regarded as evidence of the virtues of his reign — deer, large birds, fish and “lion-dogs,” later popular in Europe as the “Pekinese.”³⁰ Animals are a main feature of Disneyland too of course but none of them is real. The Jungle Boat Ride has mechanical crocodiles and the Tiki Room has mechanical tropical birds. The animals that run around in the park, and which provide such popular photo opportunities for visitors, are staff members dressed up in over-sized costumes. Mickey Mouse is a rodent, Donald Duck is a bird and Goofy is a dog, but they display few animal characteristics.

The people working in the two parks are idealized in much the same fashion. Yuanmingyuan was largely staffed by eunuchs who constituted no threat to the emperor's women and who had no children of their own who they might favor in discharging their duties. Eunuchs, at least in theory, were easier for the emperor to control. Employees at Disney are neutered in a similar fashion. There is a strict code outlawing jewelry, heavy perfume and excessive hair-dos for women, and male staff are supposed to have smart hair cuts and no facial hair. Disney employees should be all-American — perky and well-groomed, just like “the kid next door.”³¹

Visitors to both parks attest to the effects of such idealizations. In Yuanmingyuan the change in behavior was mandatory. Visitors had to follow the etiquette of the

imperial court which prescribed a specific set of actions — most notoriously, the *koutou*, which forced visitors to prostrate themselves before the imperial throne. There are no similar formal rules at Disneyland — all changes are voluntary — but as visitors explain, the cheerful, friendly and utterly safe mood makes you feel cheerful, friendly and at ease, and smiles and greetings are difficult not to return.³² The Disney “magic” makes a killjoy out of anyone who does not give in to it. In both places the pedagogy of transfiguration operates on the visitors mainly through the examples set by their own actions.

3. model-building

An effective way of idealizing the world is to make a model of it. Models are also great pedagogical aids. By emphasizing some features and neglecting others, they show only the essence of a situation. As a result models communicate in a very direct fashion, without dissimulation or guile.³³ In addition, models resemble toys, they remind us of our childhood, and for that reason alone they are both inviting and enchanting. As observers of the models we are asked to participate in the *bijou* realities they present to us.

Miniatures are a first example.³⁴ The emperor’s collections at Yuanmingyuan had a very large number of small-scale works of art. Qianlong collected lacquered boxes filled with assorted miniature objects — jades, ivories, stones, jewels, tiny books and paintings.³⁵ In Yuanmingyuan the buildings themselves were small — especially compared with the imposing structures of the Forbidden City — and even the trees, employing *bonsai* techniques, were stunted. “In the pleasure grounds of Yuen-ming-yuen,” said Garnet Wolseley, a British officer who forced entry into the park in 1860, “there are seen, compressed into every little nook or comer, tiny canals, ponds, bridges, stunted trees and rockery, so that it resembles more the design of a child in

front of her doll's house than the work of grown-up men."³⁶

Wolseley attributed this love of miniaturization to the "national character" of the Chinese but Disneyland gives abundant examples of the same fascination. "Main Street, USA," the replica of a small-town street located right behind Disneyland's entrance, provides an illustration. "We had every brick and shingle and gas lamp made five-eighths true size," Walt Disney explained. "This costs more, but made the street a toy, and the imagination can play more freely with a toy. Besides, people like to think their world is somehow more grown up than Papa's was."³⁷ The 5/8th scale is used also for the *Mark Twain* steam-ship and the trains on the Santa Fe and Disneyland railroad lines. In addition, tall objects are foreshortened. In the buildings along Main Street the first floor is 9/10th of the original, the second floor 7/8th, and the third floor 5/8th. Similarly, the trees on the side of "Matterhorn" are progressively stunted the further up the mountain-side they are planted.³⁸

Automata are a second example of model-making.³⁹ The Chinese emperors were famous collectors of mechanical gadgets, known as "sing-songs," for which there was a flourishing market in Guangzhou.⁴⁰ Already Odoric of Pordenone who spent three years in China in the 1320s describes the golden peacocks he saw in the palace of "the Great Khan" in Beijing. When the courtiers want to amuse their lord, Odoric reported, they clap their hands and the birds flap their wings. "Now this must be done either by diabolic craft, or by some engine underground."⁴¹ George Macartney, when visiting the imperial summer retreat in Chengde in 1793, found a large collection of "every kind of European toys and singsongs; with spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automatons of ... exquisite workmanship." And yet he was told "that the fine things we have seen are far exceeded by others of the same kind in the apartments of the ladies and in the European repository at Yuen-min-yuen."⁴²

Automata held a strong fascination for Walt Disney too. On vacation in New

Orleans in 1931 he bought a mechanical bird which he brought back to the studio and had his engineers take apart.⁴³ Soon he began collecting similar mechanical gadgets and in the late 1940s the engineers put together an ambulating attraction named “Disneylandia,” which consisted of twenty-four peep-show views of important moments in American history.⁴⁴ Although Disneylandia eventually was deemed not to be commercially viable, the technology itself was put to ample use once Disneyland was constructed. There are mechanical versions of the Disney cartoon characters scattered throughout the park; ferocious plastic crocodiles in the waters of the jungle ride; flying wind-up witches in the fantasy ride; menacing manikins in the Haunted House, and so on.⁴⁵

Taking the technology further the Disney engineers introduced what they referred to as “audio-animatronics,” an elaborate system of levers and hydraulic pumps, guided by audiotapes, which made the automata move their limbs and mouths, and even dance.⁴⁶ The first display of the technology took place at the sets Disney designed for various American corporations at the World Fair in New York in 1964 but soon audio-animatronics powered many of Disneyland’s own attractions. The *pièce de résistance* is a life-like version of Abraham Lincoln — unkindly referred to as “the winkin’ blinkin’ Lincoln” — who solemnly gets up from his chair and with a clear voice and emphatic gestures explains the meaning of American liberty and the virtues of representative government. When first premiered, audiences reacted with wild cheering, even tears to this mechanized rendition of American values. As the *New York Daily News* reported, “Those who have seen Lincoln ‘come to life’ are stricken with something akin to awe.”⁴⁷

4. thematization

The most obvious similarity between Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland has so far been

ignored — both were theme parks. A “theme” is an artificial environment designed to capture the essence of a place or a situation, typically somewhere remote in space or time.⁴⁸ A theme is similar to a model but it is life-sized and it provides a setting with which the visitors can engage. Our first questions when coming upon a theme are typically: “what’s going on here?” or “what are you supposed to do?” A themed environment, that is, is similar to a stage-set in a movie: it is as though somebody temporarily has left the scene and while they are away we take the opportunity to explore.⁴⁹ The theme demands our participation, expects our performance.

In Yuanmingyuan the Kangxi emperor selected 28 scenes as places from which the garden presented itself in particularly attractive fashion or where a visitor was most likely to engage in contemplation of some specific theme. The Qianlong emperor expanded the number of scenes to 40 and commissioned two painters to paint a picture of each one, to which he added poetry in his own hand.⁵⁰ Among them were buildings and environments taken from around China and the world: temples from Mongolia and Tibet, a hamlet and a river scene from Hunan, gardens like the ones Qianlong had seen when he visited Suzhou and Hangzhou, and a set of European-style palaces, *Xiyanglou*, created by Jesuit architects in the 1750s. These latter buildings housed the emperor's considerable collection of European works of art; they had a European-style labyrinth and elaborate fountains copied from Versailles.⁵¹

Yuanmingyuan even had a faithful replica of a regular Chinese street filled with shops, stalls, hawkers, customers and beggars. On this “Main Street, China,” the emperor moved around at his own leisure and his women struck bargains with the eunuchs who played the part of vendors. The street, said Father Attiret, had “all the Commerce, Marketings, Arts, Trades, Bustle, and Hurry, and even all the Rogueries, usual in great Cities.”⁵² The street even had its own pickpockets, although everything successfully stolen was returned to their rightful owners at the end of the day. In

addition Yuanmingyuan contained an environment constructed around a rural theme complete with fields, farmhouses, animals and all kinds of agricultural equipment. Here it was possible for the emperor and his court to "imitate every thing that is done in the Country; and every thing express a rural Simplicity, and all the plain Manners of a Country Life, as nearly as they possibly can."⁵³

Much in the same way, themed "lands" are what makes up the Disneyland experience.⁵⁴ After passing through the front gate visitors end up on "Main Street, USA," modeled on Disney's hometown of Marceline, Missouri, of circa 1910.⁵⁵ Here there are shops, a library, a drug store, a church, a fire- and a police station and so on. Just as in Yuanmingyuan, purchases are real although the merchandise all bear the Disney logo. Leaving Main Street visitors are confronted with a choice of four separate themed experiences. Fantasyland presents the settings made famous by Disney's animated movies, with a heavy emphasis on European fairy tales. Adventureland introduces far-away, exotic, locations, with rides down rivers, up mountains and through jungles. Frontierland is Disney's version of the Wild West, complete with cowboys, Indians and all the requisite paraphernalia,⁵⁶ Tomorrowland is a celebration of the progress of man and the brighter future which will be ours thanks to the continuous advances of science and technology.⁵⁷ To these original lands were later added a "New Orleans Square," a "Critter Country," and the most recent attraction — "Mickey's Toontown."

The themed environments are laid out in a similar manner in the two parks [*see aerial views on separate sheet*]. In both Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland curves are more common than straight lines; paths are zigzagging and waterways are meandering. This "anti-symmetry" was a feature always commented on by European visitors to Yuanmingyuan; it created a "beautiful disorder," Attiret insisted, which was "quite ravishing and enchanting"⁵⁸ In fact this asymmetry was to have a great impact

in Europe — in England in particular. The “English garden” which Englishmen tend to think of as a quintessential expression of their national “genius” is arguably modeled on the aesthetics of the Chinese garden.⁵⁹ Obviously inspired by such a *jardin anglo-chinois*, Disneyland expresses the same asymmetry — of which the crooked houses in Toontown are an extreme example. Here, just as in Yuanmingyuan, asymmetry leaves the visitors with a delightful and enchanted feeling.⁶⁰

In both parks the visitors' vision is constrained by obstacles — by buildings, artificial mountains and tall deciduous trees — and many features are purposely hidden or only accessible through roundabout routes.⁶¹ Since next to nothing can be taken in with one glance both parks have to be discovered one step at the time. And for those who do not want to walk there were boats and palanquins in the case of Yuanmingyuan, and boats, steam-trains and futuristic “people-movers” in the case of Disneyland. With every corner the visitors turn, with every bend in a man-made river, a new scene comes into view. It is a landscape which quite naturally leaves its trace in the form of a narrative — the story which the delighted visitors tell when they exhausted return home at the end of their visit.

When taken together the themed environments of both Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland make up a coherent universe, a representation of “all there is.” Making their way around the parks, the visitors experience times past and times future, different countries, exotic animals, flora and fauna, high mountains, oceans, the countryside and the city.⁶² Although these themes differ radically from each other, they easily blend into one another and find their place in the harmony constituted by the whole.⁶³ In this way the entire world is swallowed up, digested and incorporated into each park. Suddenly its complexity, diversity and sheer size are easy to grasp. “It is,” as Disney put it, “a small world after all.”

imperial vertigo

The obvious question is how these similarities should be explained. One possibility is that they draw on a common source. One candidate here are the classical gardens of Persia which have influenced European garden art but which may have had an impact in China, especially during the Tang dynasty. Another possibility is that the one garden influenced the other — that Disney copied off Yuanmingyuan, if not directly at least by some indirect route. A candidate here, as we saw, are the European eighteenth-century gardens which in their meandering style drew inspiration from Chinese examples.⁶⁴ The problem is only that while individual features of the parks can be explained in this way it cannot explain the similarities in the basic morphology.⁶⁵ After all, the similarities do not concern individual features but instead two entire, self-contained, worlds.

Consider an alternative hypothesis. The two gardens looked alike, we will argue, since the morphology they share constitutes a particularly effective way of bringing ontological reassurance to a sovereign who suffers from what we will refer to as “imperial vertigo.” Vertigo is a brief spell of dizziness, a certain spinning sensation, which may accompany a quick change in position, such as a sudden elevation to a great height.⁶⁶ Vertigo is cured as soon as the subject can be convinced that the new position really is safe. Imperial vertigo, by implication, is the ontological dizziness which overcomes a political power that suddenly is elevated to an imperial position. Imperial vertigo too is cured through reassurance: the sovereign needs someone who can explain the meteoric rise, define the new identity, and bring legitimacy to the imperial claims.

The United States in the 1950s provides an often discussed example.⁶⁷ In the post World War II era, rapid economic change brought far-reaching social changes, but

above all there was anxiety regarding America's place in the world. In 1945 the United States was the only hegemonic power yet it was a country without imperial traditions and with precious little experience of how to actually govern the world. By the mid-1950s its position of dominance was challenged by the Soviet Union, a Communist state which rejected American claims to hegemony and presented a radically different narrative regarding the goals of society and the sources of historical change. This was the context in which Disneyland was created.⁶⁸ "There's an American theme behind the whole park," as Walt Disney explained in 1957. "I believe in emphasizing the story of what made America great and what will keep it great."⁶⁹

An American, at Disneyland, is first and foremost a family member. Americans drive to Disneyland with their families and they spend the whole day in their company. Furthermore, at Disneyland Americans are outdoorsy. They love the challenges of the rides in Adventureland and they like Frontierland since it allows them, like cowboys, to feel resourceful and in charge of their lives. Americans, that is, are individualists but at the same time they take great pride in their communities. They feel at home in the nostalgic rendition of Main Street, USA, where they are on nodding terms with everyone they encounter. Listening to a mechanical version of Abraham Lincoln their patriotic feelings are stirred and they are stirred once again when they realize what wonderful inventions that have been prepared for them by the research-prowess of American multinational corporations. Before the family returns home they visit the Disney store to stock up on their already plentiful collection of Disney memorabilia, thereby affirming their identities as consumers.⁷⁰

Qing dynasty China too, lets suggest, suffered from a similar case of imperial vertigo. One day the Manchu khans — the leaders of a small tribe from the backwaters of the north-eastern steppes of Asia — found themselves the masters of the known universe. The question was how they had been elevated to this position

and with what right they, as foreigners and conquerers, could rule China. These concerns were foremost on the mind of the Kangxi emperor, responsible for constructing Yuanmingyuan, but they were still relevant to Qianlong in the middle of the eighteenth-century.⁷¹ In addition, Qianlong had to grapple with the vast extension — by at least a third — of his empire to the south and into Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia. No longer a khan among others, Qianlong was emperor of CHIna and as such personally responsible for keeping Heaven and Earth in harmony with each other.⁷²

The ideology of rulership developed by the Manchus provided a response to such anxieties and this ideology permeated every aspect of Yuanmingyuan.⁷³ As the undisputed ruler of a garden in which everything was included, the emperor was the undisputed ruler of the world. The garden was his place of pleasure but also of work. The emperor's ritual labor at the Ancestral Shrine and the various other temples made sure that the world was harmoniously ordered and at peace. The efficacy of the rituals was confirmed by the harmony and peace of Yuanmingyuan itself. The perfect garden represented the perfect virtue of imperial rule. For the emperor to merely contemplate its many varied features was an exercise in statecraft since he through this act absorbed the entire universe.⁷⁴ To thank him for these efforts on behalf of mankind, representatives of peoples and rulers from around the world gathered in the Audience Hall of the Yuanmingyuan, bringing gifts and *koutou*-ing. Receiving the visitors with great hospitality and giving even more lavish gifts in return, the emperor was confirmed in his status as the benevolent ruler of the world.

a morphology of reassurance

The ideologies expressed by Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland are entirely different to be sure, and yet they are expressed in strikingly similar horticultural language. The reason, lets suggest, is that this combination of morphological features is a particularly

effective way of dealing with the problem of imperial vertigo.¹ Dislocation is reassuring since it allows us to create a separate world which we can organize entirely as we fancy. Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland were secret gardens, intended as locations where the sovereign could be by, and with, himself. Idealization — our second principle — is reassuring since it allows us to reintroduce those features of the outside world of which we approve, but to do it in a more perfect fashion. In this way the garden becomes an image of just how great the world would be if we exercised an equal measure of power over it. Model-making — the third principle — is reassuring too since it allows us to create a representation of our ideals which we can hold in our hands and manipulate at will.⁷⁵ Looking at a miniature we obtain an instant overview of a situation and we are likely to realize that the problem really is far smaller, and more manageable, than we previously had thought.⁷⁶ Creating an automaton we have a being who is entirely at our mercy, who follows our instructions slavishly, and communicates without guile.⁷⁷

Themed environments reassure in much the same fashion. In their comprehensiveness and manipulability, Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland are miniature models of the world. When brought down to size and reduced in complexity, the diversity and divisiveness of the world turns out to be surprisingly easy to manage.⁷⁸ Both theme parks are the playthings of benevolent rulers, and to play, also for a sovereign, is comforting. When taken together the morphological features of the two parks provide for a thoroughly reassuring experience. First you are dislocated from your ordinary life, next you are relocated in an artificial and totally controlled environment. The models you are presented with here are idealized images which you are asked to emulate and engage with. Emulation and engagement take place as you

1 Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 439; This is also the guiding theme of Karal Ann Marling, ed., *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* (Flammarion, 1998)..

wander from one scene to another, acting out the roles suggested by each attraction. It is like a rite of passage or a brain-washing session: first you are cut off, then overwhelmed, and finally you come out transfigured.

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Near the city of Dongyang in Zhejiang province, at the center of China's movie industry, a complete reconstruction of the Yuanmingyuan is under way, at a cost of close to 3 billion US dollars.⁷⁹ "It will be a multi-functional theme park," explained Xu Wenrong, president of the film studio undertaking the project, "and it will bring new growth to the local economy, especially regarding tourism." By comparing the reconstructed park with the ruins in Beijing, it is hoped visitors "will keep in mind the sufferings of our nation in modern history." In addition, the reconstructed site will be used as a set for movie and TV productions. The studio already receives some 3.2 million annual visitors to its imitation of the Forbidden City, a Qin dynasty palace, and a replica of a Song dynasty street.⁸⁰ According to the plans, the new Yuanmingyuan will be completed by 2013. Since economic reforms were put in place in the early 1980s, China's rise has been meteoric. The transition from failed Communist utopia to economic superpower has happened in no more than a few decades. Just as in Disneyland and in the original Yuanmingyuan, the reconstructed Yuanmingyuan will provide a place where millions of Chinese visitors can come for ontological reassurance.

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- 2 Jean Denis Attiret, "A Description of the Emperor of China's Gardens and Pleasure-Houses Near Pe-King," in *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese*, ed. Thomas Percy (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1762), 149-201.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 170-171.
- 4 Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles," 117-118.
- 5 Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 402-403.
- 6 Karal Ann Marling, "Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream," *American Art* 5, no. 1 (Winter - Spring 1991): 185.
- 7 Quoted in Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney, [1968]* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 310.
- 8 Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 401-402.
- 9 Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 387; Themed Experience Association, *Attendance Report, 2008* (Burbanks, 2009), <http://www.themeit.com/TEAERA2008.pdf>.
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- 11 Louis Marin, "Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland, [1973]," in *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1990).
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- 14 Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 326.
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- 16 Malone, *History of the Peking Summer Palace*, 70; Marin, "Utopic Degeneration."
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- 18 The illusion is not always successful, compare the strike at Disneyland in 1986, discussed in Smith and Eisenberg, "Conflict at Disneyland."
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- 20 Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), 71-77.
- 21 See, for example, Allen J. Chun, "The Ching Tribute System as Guest Ritual: A Preliminary Description," in *Proceedings on the Second International Conference on Sinology* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1989), 169-208.
- 22 Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 320; M. Gottdiener, "Disneyland: A Utopian Urban Space," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 11, no. 2 (1982): 139.
- 23 Marin, "Utopic Degeneration."
- 24 Chun, "Ching Tribute System."
- 25 Quoted in Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," 170.
- 26 Gustave Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries de l'antiquité à nos jours*, 3 tomes (Paris: O. Doin, 1912), II:37; The Imagineers, *Walt Disney Imagineering: A Behind the Dreams Look at Making the Magic Real* (New York: Disney Editions, 1998), 157.

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- 28 Imagineers, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 155; Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality, [1975]," in *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1986), 44.
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- 33 Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 438.
- 34 Steven Millhauser, "The Fascination of the Miniature," *Grand Street* 2, no. 4 (Summer 1983): 128-135; Tuan, *Dominance and Affection*, 60-63, 100-102.
- 35 Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 281-282.
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- ⁴³ Marling, “Disneyland, 1955,” 190; Imagineers, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 118.
- ⁴⁴ Marling, “Disneyland, 1955,” 190-192.
- ⁴⁵ Marling, “Disneyland, 1955,” 192; Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 412.
- ⁴⁶ Imagineers, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 118-121; Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” 45-46.
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- ⁴⁸ Richard Francaviglia, “History after Disney: The Significance of “Imagineered” Historical Places,” *The Public Historian* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 69; Randy Bright, *Disneyland: Inside Story* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 195; Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 438.
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- ⁵⁴ Marin, “Utopic Degeneration.”
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- 67 Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 384; Francaviglia, "History after Disney," 72.
- 68 This paragraph summarizes Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 268-269, 287, 302, 393; Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," 201-205. Imagineers, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 62, 66-67; Marin, "Utopic Degeneration."
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- 70 Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality," 43..
- 71 Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 224-246; Mark Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (London: Longman, 2009), 100, 102, 124.

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- ⁷⁸ Imagineers, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 84.
- ⁷⁹ Xi Yang, "Lucrative Yuanmingyuan Duplication Scheme," *China.org.cn*, January 31, 2008, http://www.china.org.cn/business/2008-01/31/content_1241508.htm.
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