
Fragmented Bodies, Substitute Bodies: Zodiac Heads from the Garden of Perfect Brightness and the Translation of Cultural Heritage

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On 28 December 2015, the National Palace Museum in Taiwan celebrated the opening of its Southern Branch in Chiayi. During the opening ceremony, Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou and Hong Kong superstar Jackie Chan unveiled the movie star's donation to the museum: bronze heads of twelve zodiac animals, each installed atop its own rectangular concrete pillar in the museum's central courtyard. Two days later, a pair of Taiwanese student activists upended cans of red paint over the heads of the Dragon and the Horse (fig. 1). Then they spray-painted the words "cultural united front" (*wenhua tongzhan* 文化統戰) over the concrete pedestals, transforming the sculptural installation into steles of protest. They posted the photographic evidence of their vandalism to social media; the publicly accessible post denounced the new museum's supposed abandonment of its founding principles and condemned its complicity in the marginalization and subordination of native Taiwanese culture to the cultural imperialism of mainland China.¹

These seemingly innocuous animal sculptures may appear to be an odd target for a protest against warming cross-strait relations. The sculptures, however, were not simply generic zodiac animals; they were directly based on the bronze zodiac heads from the Yuanmingyuan 圓明園 (Garden of Perfect Clarity, or Garden of Perfect Brightness), an imperial garden of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) near Beijing that was looted and burned in 1860 by British and French forces during the Second Opium War (1856–60). The act of vandalism against its copies in the central courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan is but one development in the long biography of the Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads and their afterlives.

This essay will situate the heads within the history of the Yuanmingyuan, trace their reappearance on the auction market, and address the negotiation of their value as Chinese cultural heritage in contemporary cultural heritage discourse. It will ask the question: Of all the objects taken from the Yuanmingyuan, why has this particular set of zodiac heads become the most potent representative of looted Chinese cultural heritage,



FIG. 1. — Vandalized bronze head of the Dragon produced and donated by Jackie Chan, installed in the central courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum, Chiayi, Taiwan, 2015. Photographer unknown.

inspiring fervent calls for repatriation? I argue that it is in their sculptural forms as fragmented bodies, specifically as decapitated heads, that they serve as substitute bodies that continuously revive the trauma of national humiliation in national memory. The saga of the zodiac heads does not end with their repatriation but continues through their multivalent sculptural reproductions, in which contemporary makers, including Ai Weiwei have given the heads new physical form and revived them for new audiences. Because these reproductions are not exact copies, I argue that these acts of artistic reproduction can be considered acts of translation. As “translations,” the new heads move the conversation about cultural heritage into site-specific contexts and give voice to questions about heritage, identity, tradition, and global justice. These acts of translation can elevate the originals, satirize them, challenge them, and take on their own lives.

Looting and Vandalism at the Yuanmingyuan

Located about five kilometers northwest from the Forbidden City, the Yuanmingyuan occupies about 3.4 square kilometers and measures a rough rectangle of about 2,415 meters by 1,890 meters.² Most of its grounds follow Chinese principles of garden design, featuring pavilions set alongside winding brooks and connected by zigzagging paths and bridges. In a letter to a friend in France, Jesuit missionary Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–68) celebrated the garden’s grandeur and beauty and its cultivated resemblance to nature.³ At the same time as European aristocrats delighted in what the French termed *les jardins anglo-chinois* (Anglo-Chinese gardens), the polyglot Qianlong emperor (1711–99, r. 1735–96) also indulged in “Européennerie” and ordered the court

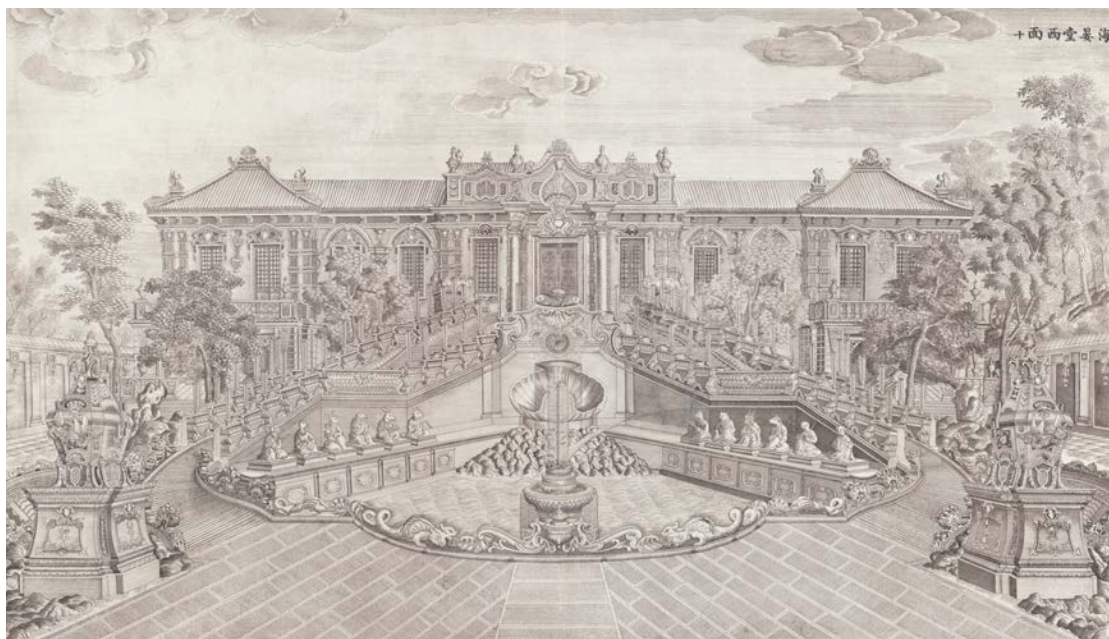


FIG. 2. — Yilantai (Manchu, active 1749–86). West facade of the Hall of Calm Seas, engraving, 50 × 87.5 cm. From *The European Pavilions at the Garden of Perfect Clarity*, portfolio of engravings, 1783–86. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B26695.

Jesuits, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) and Michel Benoist (1715–74) to construct the European Pavilions (*Xiyanglou* 西洋樓).⁴ From 1747 to 1783, a series of Sino-Baroque pavilions with white marble facades and tiled Chinese roofs were erected on a 750-meter-long strip in the northeast corner of the garden.⁵

Although the site currently lies in ruins, the architectural facades of the European Pavilions were translated into a set of twenty copperplate engravings by Manchu court artist Yilantai (active 1749–86) in 1781. The bronze zodiac heads are found in the tenth print, which depicts the western facade of the Hall of Calm Seas (*Haiyantang* 海晏堂) (fig. 2). Here, the animal heads still have berobed human bodies. Arranged within a large fountain, the zoocephalic sculptures were literally fountainheads: every two hours, a different animal took its turn spouting a stream of water from its open mouth; at noon, all the animals spouted together. The animals that embodied the astronomical cycle of the years also served to embody the cycle of the daily hours.

In October 1860, in the closing days of the Second Opium War, Anglo-French troops under the command of James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, occupied the Yuanmingyuan, which the Xianfeng emperor had hastily abandoned days prior. The British and French troops engaged in several days of looting and destruction, culminating in Elgin's order to set fire to the entire complex. The destruction of a site long known as one of artistic and cultural achievement was greeted with ambivalence in Europe. French writer Victor Hugo, who was already invested in the salvage of French cultural heritage and national identity, lamented its destruction and elevated the Yuanmingyuan into the company

of the greatest monuments of classical and medieval antiquity: “People spoke of the Parthenon in Greece, the pyramids in Egypt, the Coliseum in Rome, Notre-Dame in Paris, the Summer Palace in the Orient. . . . This wonder has disappeared. One day two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One plundered, the other burned.”⁶ Hugo explicitly connected the looting of the Yuanmingyuan with the earlier despoiling of the Parthenon by the elder Elgin: “Mixed up in all this is the name of Elgin, which inevitably calls to mind the Parthenon. What was done to the Parthenon was done to the Summer Palace. . . . We Europeans are the civilized ones, and for us, the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism.”⁷ Although Hugo’s letter concludes with a call for repatriation, it is likely that he also purchased Chinese silks looted from the Yuanmingyuan for his Chinese rooms at Hauteville House.⁸

In Elgin’s eyes, however, it was the Qing government that had failed to abide by still-uncodified standards of wartime conduct and treatment of captives. As the Anglo-French troops neared Beijing, thirty-nine of their civilian negotiators and soldiers had been seized after a negotiating session in September. By the time they were returned, on 9 October, the Anglo-French forces were already stationed at the Yuanmingyuan. Of those captured, only eighteen came back alive, and the living testified to the indignities of starvation, beatings, and neglect during captivity.⁹ Elgin thus perceived that a “great crime” had been committed and that the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan would be a “solemn act of retribution.”¹⁰ General James Hope Grant justified Elgin’s decision in a letter to their superiors: “First . . . the prisoners were treated with such barbarity, being bound hand and foot together for three days, with nothing to eat or drink; and secondly, because the English nation will not be satisfied unless more lasting marks of our sense of the barbarous manner in which they have violated the laws of nations be inflicted on the Chinese government.”¹¹

To Elgin, the violations upon the bodies of his men were a criminal act in need of retribution. In the absence of the emperor, the Yuanmingyuan had to serve as a substitute. In a letter to his wife on 27 October 1860, Sir Harry Parkes explained to her that “considering that Yuen Ming Yuen was the scene of the atrocities committed on our countrymen, I consider that it was the proper one of the two [the other being Beijing] to make a monumental ruin of.”¹² Parkes’s biographer, Stanley Lane-Poole, offered further commentary: “From an artistic point of view it was an act of vandalism; from that of sound policy it was statesmanlike.”¹³

In the decades that followed, the remains of the garden fell into greater and greater disrepair. The wooden pavilions of the garden’s Chinese side had been consumed in the flames; the stone and brick of the European Pavilions, on the contrary, remained partially standing. Chinese-language histories of the Yuanmingyuan emphasize its ruins as a memorial to national humiliation, as witness to a moment when imperialist forces committed an act of hypocritical barbarism in the name of civilization.¹⁴

It is within this discourse of national humiliation that the historian Xiang Da describes the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan as “vandalism” in his Chinese-language

article in *Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan* [Journal of the Chinese Architecture Society] of 1931:

Destroyed by Western vandalism [*xi yang fan da zhu yi* 西洋番達主義], this is a great loss to Chinese culture, and it is the first of that which our fellow countrymen must never forget. . . . Since the time of Sino-Western encounter and exchange, Western vandalism has brought disaster upon China [*xi yang Vandalism zhi wei huo yu Zhongguo* / 西洋Vandalism之為禍於中國], of which this campaign was the first and greatest.¹⁵

Vandalism is not translated into Chinese but is directly printed into the text in English and as a transliteration, pointing to its origins as an imported foreign concept. By using the English, Xiang Da constructs the act itself as something foreign. By characterizing the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan as *vandalism*, the author implicitly harks back to the origins of the term in the sacking of Rome by the Vandals, drawing historic parallels to a centuries-old civilization whose decline was hastened by the invasion of foreign barbarians.¹⁶

Where the term does appear in Chinese characters in the article, it's technically a transliteration, where it is put into Chinese pronunciation: 番達 *fan da*. But the transliteration can also be read as a hidden play on words: the character for *fan* can mean "foreigner," and the character for *da* can mean "to arrive," and thus *vandalism* is defined as what happens when foreigners arrive.

The author also calls out the international community for inconsistent application of their own principles. He points out, "When Germany invaded Belgium in 1914 and bombed the Leuven Library, this act was condemned by all nations."¹⁷ He compares the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan to the bombing of the Leuven Library, and calls on "those adherents of international law from Western civilized nations" to acknowledge the parallels.¹⁸ Writing in 1931, the same year as the Athens Conference (First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments) that called for the preservation of historic sites, he was surely aware of the frustrating contradiction in the rhetoric of historic preservation arising decades too late for the Yuanmingyuan.

The interpretation of the significance of the Yuanmingyuan was thus transformed from a private Qing imperial space to a Chinese national site of the collective memory of national humiliation. Proponents of its restoration argued for a new identity as a site celebrating the genius of Chinese landscape gardening and design.¹⁹ The revival of the Yuanmingyuan since the 1980s forms part of a larger conversation about national memory of the past and how that past should inform the direction of the future.

The zodiac heads are a key part of that conversation. Between 1860 and 2000, however, they have almost no history. In the nineteenth century, the looted objects that garnered the most attention in Europe were the items symbolic of Qing sovereignty and military paraphernalia. An exhibition of French loot in April 1861 at the Tuileries



FIG. 3. — "Fine and Rare Bronze Head of a Monkey, circa 1750" and "Fine and Rare Bronze Head of a Boar, circa 1750," lots 134 and 135 in *Fine Chinese Decorative Works of Art*, auction cat., Sotheby's New York, 9–10 October 1987. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 87-P18570.

Heads on the Auction Blocks

In June 1989, Sotheby's London featured the head of the Tiger on its catalog cover for the sale of "Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art" (fig. 4). The auction also included the heads of the Ox and Horse, and My Humble House acquired all three: the Ox for £148,500 (US\$240,570), the Tiger for £137,500 (US\$222,750), and the Horse for £181,500 (US\$294,030).²² At this point, four heads were in a Taiwanese collection. My Humble House would make one hundred full-scale replicas of the Monkey head in bronze to sell

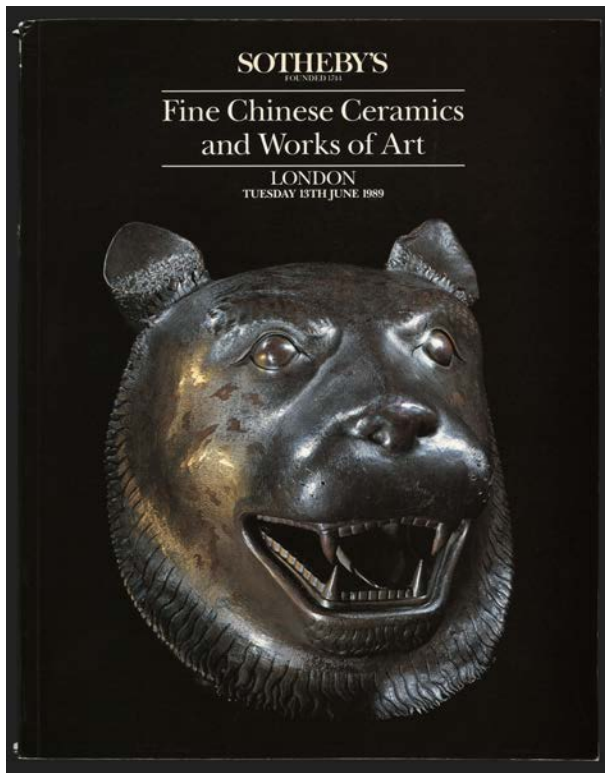


FIG. 4. — Cover of the auction catalog for *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, Sotheby's London, 13 June 1989, featuring lot 68, "An Important Bronze Zodiac Tiger's Head, Qianlong." Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 89-P5233.

as collectors' items.²³ It does not appear that the dealer made replicas of the other heads in his possession, and he soon put the Tiger back up for auction at Christie's Swire in Hong Kong in October 1991; it sold for US\$429,000.²⁴

In the spring of 2000, the Monkey, Ox, and Tiger returned to the auction block in back-to-back sales by Christie's and Sotheby's Hong Kong.²⁵ The sales from 1987 to 1991 had proceeded quietly, but in Hong Kong in 2000 the Chinese government and pro-Beijing groups lobbied to have the sales halted. Protestors stormed the Sotheby's salesroom at the Island Shangri-La Hotel, ironically located by the hotel restaurant named the "Summer Palace."²⁶ Rather than resorting to legal action, the Chinese state recovered the three heads (Monkey, Ox, Tiger) by delegating the Poly Art Group—a spin-off of the People's Liberation Army—to win them back at auction. Exceeding all estimates, the Poly Art Group successfully acquired the heads by spending about one million US dollars each on the Ox and Monkey and nearly two million on the Tiger.²⁷ Rather than relying upon diplomatic pressure or legal channels, the Chinese state recovered the heads by outspending rival bidders.

At the intersection between patriotism, repatriation, and strategic business dealing, in 2003, the "Gambling King of Macao" Stanley Ho purchased the Pig from a private collector in New York for US\$770,000 and donated it to the Poly Art Museum



FIG. 5. — “An Exceptionally Rare and Magnificent Bronze Horse Head Made for the Zodiac Fountain of the Summer Palace, Qing Dynasty, Qianlong Period,” lot 1321 in *Yuanmingyuan: The Garden of Absolute Clarity*, auction cat., Sotheby’s Hong Kong, 9 October 2007. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2771-007.

in Beijing.²⁸ In October 2007, Sotheby’s Hong Kong featured the Horse head as the centerpiece of its special sale, “Yuanmingyuan: The Garden of Absolute Clarity” (fig. 5).²⁹ To avoid public outcry, Sotheby’s ultimately facilitated the acquisition of the Horse head by Ho as a private transaction between him and the consigner. Ho acquired the Horse, estimated at HK\$60 million (US\$7.7 million), for US\$8.9 million and expressed his intention to donate the Horse head back to the nation. The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China lauded Ho’s “patriotic act.”³⁰ Presumably, his business ventures, now that Macao itself had been repatriated to China in 1999, also benefited from this act of patriotism.

Following Ho’s acquisition of the Horse, it was exhibited in the Sotheby’s Hong Kong autumn sales preview so that the public could “appreciate this national treasure.”³¹ Following its exhibition in Hong Kong, the Horse was subsequently displayed in the lobby of Ho’s newest Macao endeavor, the Hotel Grand Lisboa.³² Chinese state media celebrated the homecoming of the Horse, but its actual location in a hotel casino within the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Macao raises the question of what might be considered “home” for repatriated objects. On the one hand, the Horse was not back at the Yuanmingyuan; nor was it in the collection of a state museum. On Macao, it resided just barely within the borders of the nation-state that

claims it as its cultural heritage. On the other, if “China is not a country but an idea which was reformulated in the twentieth century to fit with the hegemonic world nation-state system,” where all artifacts from within its current borders are “recast as ‘national cultural heritage,’” then the Horse’s spatial distance from the Yuanmingyuan does not matter.³³ If anything, its presence within the Grand Lisboa also served to anchor the peripheral SARs to the central state.

In 2009, the Rat and Rabbit head came up at a Christie’s Paris auction from the estate of Yves Saint-Laurent.³⁴ The Chinese government lodged a protest and demanded their repatriation; a group of Chinese lawyers also attempted to halt the sale, but they were refused by the French courts. Sino-French tensions were already high due to President Nicolas Sarkozy’s criticism of China’s human rights violations in Tibet.³⁵ The international drama reached a climax when Xiamen-based businessman and collector, Cai Mingchao, won the bid at US\$18 million for each head but then refused to pay, casting himself as a patriot and claiming that the heads were illegally removed from China and should be repatriated.³⁶ Instead, the heads remained with Pierre Bergé, the partner of Saint-Laurent, who then stated that he would return the heads when China addressed human rights violations in Tibet. In another demonstration of the intersection between cultural heritage, global politics, and economy, French luxury-business magnate François-Henri Pinault, who had acquired the Rat and Rabbit from Bergé after the failed Christie’s auction in 2009, donated the heads back to China during a diplomatic trip to broaden trade relations between the two countries in 2013.³⁷

In November 2019, during the seventieth anniversary year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Ho officially presented the Horse head to the National Museum of China and the Ministry of Culture.³⁸ In late November 2020, the Horse was transferred to the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park where it was displayed to mark the 160th anniversary of the burning of the Yuanmingyuan.³⁹

Fragmented Bodies

The zodiac animal heads have served as case studies on the repatriation of cultural relics in contemporary China.⁴⁰ Scholars have argued that repatriation operates at the intersection of art, politics, and the economy; political scientist Richard Kraus characterized the zodiac heads as objects that are “prized as ‘national’ treasures for political, not aesthetic reasons.”⁴¹ On the international stage, the repatriation efforts are a form of global competition in which China-as-nation-state competes against other nation-states in the fields of “civilizational antiquity” and “unbroken continuity.”⁴² Other scholars have argued that the zodiac heads are situated “within a history of shifting values” that closely links them “to the development of two intersecting discourses, national humiliation and world cultural heritage.”⁴³ In the post-Tiananmen Square period, the narrative of national humiliation was revived to bolster nationalism among the youth who had no living memory of the actual events of national humiliation. Concurrently, the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park was formally established in the early 1980s

and opened to the public in 1988. In 1994, the park was designated a Patriotic Education Base; it was also a site of celebration in 1997 with the repatriation of Hong Kong.⁴⁴ By the mid-1990s, the ruins of the European Pavilions had been cleaned up, and they came to be metonymic with the Yuanmingyuan as a whole—the logo of the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park takes the form of the ruined archway of the Grand Fountain in the European Pavilions.

There have been many suggestions to explain the elevated attention on the zodiac heads (versus the other looted objects from the Yuanmingyuan) and why they suddenly mattered around the year 2000. The heads are immediately identifiable as objects from the Yuanmingyuan, and the bronzes are legible as animals and relatable as personal zodiac signs, even to audiences who know little about the Yuanmingyuan. The earlier auction at Christie's London on 13 June 1989 had been overshadowed by the Tiananmen Square massacre occurring just days earlier on June 4. Although the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park opened in 1988, excavation of the European Pavilions was not completed until 1992, so the most well-known images of the ruins were not disseminated until the late 1990s. At the time of the Hong Kong sales in 2000, the repatriation of the former British colony of Hong Kong in 1997 was still cause for celebration and had turned thoughts toward the repatriation of other ceded territories or looted objects from the Opium Wars. And, in the wake of China's ratification of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention in 1985, the rhetoric of "cultural heritage" had been used increasingly in Yuanmingyuan-related materials.⁴⁵

To add to the above insights, I would also emphasize that medium, size, and number matter. The zodiac heads are similar in scale to many surviving examples of ritual bronze vessels. As art historian Kristina Kleutghen has pointed out, the zodiac heads are contemporary counterparts to the legendary nine bronze tripods from Chinese antiquity that granted political legitimacy to their possessors.⁴⁶ Just as the divine tripods form a numbered set of nine, the bronze heads form a closed set of twelve figures, each one a part of a widely recognized zodiac sequence and possessed of an individual identity. As a closed set, the gaps in the sequence are all the more obvious: Until the heads of the Dragon, Snake, Ram, Rooster, and Dog reappear, the Yuanmingyuan zodiac set is incomplete, signaling the incomplete project of China's recovery from national humiliation.

I propose addressing the heads as a fragmented set of literally fragmented bodies in the form of decapitated heads. Other objects looted from the Yuanmingyuan, such as porcelain and cloisonné vessels, were originally produced in multiples and often moved around the imperial residences. In contrast, the zodiac heads were made specifically for the clock fountain at the Hall of Calm Seas; as sculptural fountainheads, they are inextricably tied to their location in the European Pavilions.

Although no records specify how the heads were removed from the grounds of the Yuanmingyuan, their forms create an imagined moment of decapitation, of deliberate bodily fragmentation. Appearing on the auction block as heads on pedestals, they resemble trophy heads taken by enemy forces whose mutilated forms evince the victor's

barbarity and the victim's humiliation.⁴⁷ As heads, the zodiac sculptures also attest to the imposition of imperialism disguised as justice. After all, Lord Elgin ordered the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan as an act of retributive justice against the mistreatment of English prisoners. Before the heads appeared on the auction block, it is easy to imagine that Elgin put them on the executioner's block.

In the collective memory of Chinese citizens today, the occupation and looting of the Yuanmingyuan by the Anglo-French in 1860 is often conflated with the invasion and looting of the Forbidden City by the Eight Powers Expeditionary Force in 1900 when they aimed to subdue the Boxer Rebellion. The foreign occupation of the Forbidden City was punctuated by public executions of suspected Boxer rebels, whose beheaded bodies served as silent witnesses to the imposition of foreign justice and civilizing violence.⁴⁸ Images of fallen Chinese bodies, imprisoned bodies, subjugated bodies, and decapitated heads circulated in sensationalist journalism and souvenir photo albums of the China campaign that reinforced Orientalist tropes of cruelty and punishment (fig. 6).⁴⁹ In the twentieth-century Chinese imagination, decapitation formed the "primal scene" of national and personal trauma.⁵⁰ Late Qing and Republican Chinese intellectuals seized upon the imagery of the brutalized Chinese body to call for urgently needed reform, often couched in the terms of a strengthened national body.⁵¹

The narrative of national humiliation that frames the period from the Opium Wars to World War II as a century of humiliation continues to conflate distinct historical moments into one singular moment. The display that opens the permanent exhibition *Road of Rejuvenation* in the National Museum of China continues to draw visual equivalence between foreign aggression, looted object bodies, and despoiled Chinese bodies. The repatriated Rat and Rabbit heads occupy a case positioned under



FIG. 6. — William Saunders (English, 1832–92). *Hinrichtung* (Execution) from *Views from the Iltis in China*, album of photographs, compiled ca. 1919. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2003.R.2.



FIG. 7. — Bronze heads of the Rat and Rabbit, ca. 1750, displayed in the permanent exhibition *Road of Rejuvenation* in the National Museum of China, Beijing, 2014. Photograph by the author.

photographs of Japanese soldiers beheading Chinese soldiers during the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894, as well as photographs of foreign soldiers of the Eight Powers Expeditionary Force seated upon the imperial throne after marching into Beijing (fig. 7). In their display, the zodiac heads serve as physical manifestations of a mutilated national body, ones that must be repatriated and made complete to heal the national wound.

The zodiac heads remain a broken, fragmented set; therefore, it is only in acts of reproduction that the broken set can be made whole again. In the following section, I address two examples of reproduction that are not exact copies or, to use a biological metaphor, “cloned substitutes” that could be mistaken for the originals. The original heads as a “parent” set bore multiple “offspring” sets who share characteristics with their progenitors but speak in their own voice. To put it a different way, the sculptural reproductions of the zodiac heads are acts of cultural translation; they not only fill in the lacunae of the missing heads through acts of artistic creation but also imbue the heads with additional layers of meaning that address contemporary concerns about the negotiation of cultural heritage in the twenty-first century.

Ai Weiwei's Circle of Animals

The publicity of the Christie's auction in 2009 sparked near-simultaneous projects: artist-activist-provocateur Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals* and martial-art superstar Jackie Chan's movie *Chinese Zodiac* (2012) and accompanying sculptural set.

The works of Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) have questioned the value of Chinese cultural heritage; he has painted over Neolithic pottery, dropped a Han dynasty vase, and contorted Ming furniture into nonfunctional forms. In 2009, Ai lambasted the Chinese media attention given to the Rat and Rabbit heads at the Christie's auction. He condemned corrupt Chinese officials for expressing concern over the bronze heads when they paid no attention to the dead children crushed under the debris of collapsing schoolhouses. He denied the value of the heads and called out the hypocrisy of cultural heritage in China: "The rabbit and rat bronzes from the Old Summer Palace are not Chinese culture, and they have no artistic value. Patriotism is not a love of the Aisin Gioro [Qing ruling house] family name, and twelve playthings manufactured in the West are not the quintessence of Chinese culture. . . . Over the first few decades of a New China, in the name of the revolution and during the Cultural Revolution, across the entire nation and in Tibet, you destroyed countless cultural relics."⁵² When the auction occurred, Ai Weiwei was already in discussions with Larry Warsh, the director of AW Asia, to create a work of public sculpture.⁵³ The controversy over the heads inspired his monumental sculptural project *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, which reproduced the Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads as monumental bronzes.

As an act of artistic translation, Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals* cannot truly be referred to as a set of copies or replicas. In general, it does follow the original forms and material of the zodiac heads. But the heads have been enlarged to a monumental scale, measuring about four to five feet across, each head mounted on a much thinner column of bronze that elevated the looming heads ten feet high over the viewer (fig. 8). To make a complete set, Ai and his team of artists creatively devised the appearance of the five missing animals. With the artistic freedom to break away from the established form of the extant heads, Ai and his team imbued their interpretation of the five missing heads with a greater degree of liveliness and character than the other heads, taking the liberty to completely redesign the Tiger into a fierce, snarling beast. Ai's version of the zodiac heads does not quite retain their original function as fountainheads that track time. In his sculpture, the open mouths of the animals are not filled with streams of water, leaving them free to "speak" on their own terms.

In the catalog for the traveling installation of *Circle of Animals*, arts journalist Susan Delson describes the thin pillars of bronze as jets of water buoying up the heads in a "spirit of playfulness," referencing their original position as fountainheads.⁵⁴ Roberta Smith for the *New York Times* spies a suggestion of "an abstracted lotus stem and leaves," again drawing a connection to water and fountains.⁵⁵ Seen in another light, however, the columns gain a sinister cast. Their knobbed and gnarled striations suggest not so much a jet of water but bloodied wooden stakes impaling the results of a grisly hunt. Is this a condemnation of the looting of the Yuanmingyuan, despite Ai's vehement disavowal of



FIG. 8. — Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing, China). *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, 2010, twelve bronze sculptures, dimensions variable (h: between 300 and 340 cm). Installation view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 20 December 2024. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Budi Tek and the Yuz Foundation, M.2020.95.1-12. Art © Ai Weiwei. Photograph by the author.

their heritage value? Or is this a skewering (pun intended) of the supposed value of the heads as national cultural heritage?

Although the heads directly reference the Yuanmingyuan zodiac set, they also offer a flexibility of interpretation that moves beyond the specific context of the Yuanmingyuan. Most prominently, the arrest and detainment of Ai Weiwei by Beijing authorities on 3 April 2011 overshadowed the subsequent world tour of *Circle of Animals*. Exhibition reviews focused almost exclusively on the absent body of the artist and condemned Chinese authorities for political oppression and restricting free speech. As heads, the sculptures appeared to speak for their silenced maker; they acted as substitute bodies for the artist, who remained in Beijing under a travel ban. Ai Weiwei's passport was not returned until July 2015; he is now working outside of China.

As *Circle of Animals* toured the world, each exhibition venue opened up new interpretative possibilities. The sheer physicality of the monumental bronzes emphasized their occupation of any given site. In physical form, *Circle of Animals* both copies and transforms the original zodiac heads; as an edition of six sculptural sets, Ai Weiwei's heads also replicate each other. The six sets moved independently of each other, resulting in concurrent and overlapping exhibitions of *Circle of Animals* around the world. Each installation location opened up different possible interpretive frames, whose multiplicity I will briefly explore.⁵⁶

In May 2011, *Circle of Animals* served as the inaugural outdoor exhibition of the courtyard of Somerset House in London. The former parking lot for government bureaucrats had just been renovated into a space for public art programming. The unveiling of Ai Weiwei's sculptures proclaimed a new relationship between the hulking historic building and the twenty-first century British public. The mood was dampened, however, by the conspicuous absence of the artist. Media discussion around the sculptural installation focused on the arrest and detainment of Ai Weiwei and the suppression of artistic freedom by the Chinese government.⁵⁷ The presence of the monumental zodiac heads gestured toward two injustices: the ongoing one of the artist's absent and traumatized body and the historical injustice of the British empire. Somerset House is a site of layered histories. As the seat of the British Admiralty in the nineteenth century, it architecturally reframes Ai Weiwei's sculptural animals as a parodic scene of Yuanmingyuan loot on display, as if they were trophy heads proudly displayed in a perverse celebration of British victory in the Second Opium War.

Arrayed in front of the Fountain of Freedom of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs from 2012 to 2017, the heads connect issues of looted cultural heritage, human rights, and international politics. In the summer heat, however, teenagers and school children splash in the water, paying the heads little notice. The heads, denied of their referent to an agonized past of imperialist encounter and national humiliation, are relegated to a playful backdrop for childhood innocence (fig. 9).

From 2013 to 2014, standing in the courtyards of encyclopedic art museums such as the Cleveland Museum of Art, the heads are pivoted toward multiple areas of museum collecting. They stand in celebration of a famous contemporary artist's new creation and continue in the lineage of sculptural portrait busts in the European galleries. Simultaneously, their bodiless heads also echo the broken forms of fragmented Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, whose headless bodies and disembodied heads raise difficult questions about the provenance and acquisition history of Asian art in US American collections.⁵⁸

In 2015, at the National Museum of Wildlife Art, Wyoming, the zoological aspect of the sculptures is emphasized, and the conversation shifts from cultural heritage to the conservation of the natural world. The larger-than-life sculptures hark back to the extinct megafauna of previous geological ages, offering a warning of the calamitous consequences of climate change. Ai Weiwei's own activism provides the bridge for his sculptures to address environmental justice and human rights.

In front of Chicago's Adler Planetarium, the heads revert to their identity as zodiac animals keeping track of the movement of the heavens and the cyclical passage of time. During the installation in September 2014, the Adler covered the heads with stark white cloths to express solidarity with Ai Weiwei, silenced and under house arrest (fig. 10).⁵⁹ The muzzled and blinded animals thus called attention to the violation of their maker's rights to free speech and free movement.



FIG. 9. — Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing, China). *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, 2010, twelve bronze sculptures, dimensions variable (h: between 300 and 340 cm). Installation view at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 16 July 2015. Private collection. Art © Ai Weiwei. Photograph by the author.

After receiving his passport back in 2015, Ai was finally able to personally unveil the zodiac heads when they were exhibited at the National Gallery of Prague. There, he explicitly associated the heads with his other artworks that call attention to the Syrian refugee crisis by wrapping each head in the same protective gold foil used by the Syrian refugees as emergency blankets.⁶⁰ In this case, the animals were no longer Ai Weiwei's substitute body but the substitute bodies of refugees.

Images of Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals* continue to appear in his more recent art, including as large mosaic portraits made from Lego bricks, a medium that the artist first used in portraits of political prisoners. Their images adorn the cover of his illustrated memoir, *Zodiac: A Graphic Novel* (2024), where Ai Weiwei further removes the zodiac heads from their original referents in the Yuanmingyuan and regrafts them onto his artistic and autobiographical body.

Vandalizing Jackie Chan's Zodiac Heads

Since the auctions of the zodiac heads in Hong Kong in 2009, the martial arts movie star Jackie Chan (b. 1954) has been vocal in his support for the repatriation of looted artifacts from China. Playing to his own strengths, he responded to the controversial auction of the Rat and Rabbit head at Christie's in 2009 by writing, directing, and starring in an action adventure movie, *Chinese Zodiac* (十二生肖), released in 2012. Chan



FIG. 10. — Ai Weiwei (b. 1957, Beijing, China). *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads*, 2010, twelve bronze sculptures, dimensions variable (h: between 300 and 340 cm). Installation view at the Adler Planetarium, Chicago, IL, September 2014. Art © Ai Weiwei. Photograph courtesy AW Asia, NY.

plays a globe-trotting mercenary who is hired to locate and retrieve the missing zodiac heads by an unscrupulous French auction company. The movie positions Chinese and French student protestors as the everyday heroes who lobby against the sale of looted artifacts. The movie props of the heads have also acquired a second life, as Chan's production company created additional sets to raise awareness of the zodiac heads as lost cultural relics (fig. 11). Sets have been gifted to the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park and to the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, but it was in Taiwan—in the courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum—that they inspired an act of vandalism.⁶¹

Whereas Ai Weiwei criticized the original zodiac heads for being “not Chinese,” in the context of a museum space in central Taiwan, Chan's reproduction heads were perceived as “too Chinese.” The student activists saw the imposition of these icons in the central space of the new museum as a form of cultural imperialism. In a public post on social media, they argued that the Southern Branch was constructed “to connect the native people of Taiwan, to educate Taiwanese on the cultural diversity of Asia, and to create some separation from the National Palace Museum in Taipei.” The acceptance of the heads, therefore, constituted a “cultural invasion and colonization” by China that was not to be borne by Taiwanese who refuse to be “culturally Chinese.”⁶²

The Southern Branch was constructed as a counterbalance to the main branch in Taipei. The initial founding of the National Palace Museum in 1925 allocated the



FIG. 11. — 12 Zodiac Sculptures (Dragon), 2012, bronze, 30.5 × 31.6 × 28 cm. Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Gift of Mr. Jackie Chan, 2013-00331.

treasures of the Qing imperial house to the body politic of Nationalist China. When the Nationalist government moved to Taiwan in 1949, they moved the collection of the National Palace Museum with them; the museum collection serves as political legitimizer of the Nationalist government on Taiwan as the inheritors of the Chinese state.⁶³ In recent years, however, more voices are advocating for Taiwanese independence and arguing for a uniquely Taiwanese identity set apart from ties to mainland Chinese identity.⁶⁴ The Southern Branch was founded as a pan-Asian museum whose mission is to feature the cultural exchanges across Asia as well as highlight the Indigenous and native cultures of Taiwan.⁶⁵ In the catalog that introduces the new museum's architecture, grounds, and permanent exhibitions, the Southern Branch omits the connection between the zodiac-head sculptural installation and the Yuanmingyuan. Instead, the museum presented the twelve animals of the zodiac as a cultural tradition shared across Asia whose presence would help communicate the institutional mission of "respecting cultural relics and protecting the universal value of humanity's cultural heritage."⁶⁶

Objects and images, however, are rarely neutral representatives of cultural heritage. In particular, art of the Qing imperium in relation to Taiwan often testifies to a history of conquest from the mainland. The Qianlong emperor, who commissioned copperplate prints to commemorate the military victories over the Dzungars in Xinjiang

and, later, the completion of the Yuanmingyuan's European Pavilions, also utilized the copperplate medium to celebrate the campaign against Taiwan to quell the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion of 1787–88.⁶⁷ When military commander Fukang'an (d. 1796) led the Qing navy across the Taiwan Strait, he was bestowed a Qing ritual object: a rare, right-spiraling conch shell that would guarantee the fleet's safe passage across the sea. In late 2015, the first object seen in the Southern Branch's inaugural exhibition on the local history of Chiayi was the Qing imperial conch shell.⁶⁸

Immediately after the official unveiling of Chan's sculptural reproductions, the Taiwanese newspaper *Liberty Times* (*Ziyou shibao*) ran an article criticizing the zodiac-head donation on two fronts: It questioned first that, as a world-class museum, what was the National Palace Museum doing by accepting reproductions (and headlined the article "Even fakes are accepted" [*lian yanpin ye shou* 連贗品也收]). Second, and more importantly, how could the museum not see that this was a ploy by Mainland China to wage cultural warfare against Taiwan?⁶⁹ It is likely that this article inspired the act of vandalism by the student activists, who were previous participants in the Sunflower Movement of 2014 protesting Ma Ying-jeou's policies that strengthened political and economic ties between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. Vandalizing Jackie Chan's animal heads is a continuation of the sentiments expressed in the Sunflower protests. The red-drenched heads pillory the president while simultaneously evoking the bloodied heads of protestors asserting their national identity as Taiwanese in the face of growing rapprochement with China (see fig. 1).

The vandalism created a visual rebus that furthers the answer to the question of why these heads and not other objects. In Chinese, "animal heads" is pronounced "獸首 *shou shou*." Taiwanese commentators picked up on its homophonic relationship to another phrase, also pronounced "授首 *shou shou*" but meaning "to surrender, to be killed," and most tellingly, "to be decapitated," used historically in reference to subduing rebels and robbers.⁷⁰ "To accept" is also "收受 *shou shou*," and so the form of the heads creates a chain of homophonic equivalences wherein "to accept animal heads" is "to accept decapitation." The linguistic play on words is reinforced by the physical form of the zodiac animals as "heads" mounted for display in public space.

As the *Liberty Times* article speculated, President Ma and Mr. Chan, whose Chinese names include the characters for "horse" and "dragon," had hoped that their combined presence would invoke the idiom "the spirit of the dragon and the horse," generally used to describe a person advanced in age who is still full of life, or in this case, an ancient nation or a museum of ancient artifacts that still has vitality. So when the article derided the zodiac installation by calling it "peeling paint" (落漆 *luoqi*), a local colloquialism meaning a loss of face, the student activists instantiated all the puns by literally throwing paint over the heads of the Dragon and Horse.⁷¹

Physically, the vandalism did little damage: The paint was easily removed.⁷² But the discussions that followed ultimately led the Southern Branch to issue a statement in September 2016 saying that they were removing the heads from the courtyard and that



FIG. 12. — The central courtyard of the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum, Chiayi, Taiwan, after the removal of the replica zodiac animal heads donated by Jackie Chan, 29 March 2025. Photograph by the author.

the space would display local art instead.⁷³ The bronze heads are now deinstalled, but the concrete pedestals remain. The material remnants of the installation stand like silent steles to the proxy battle over cultural claims and national identities (fig. 12).

Copies are never neutral, and neither are the spaces that they inhabit. The copy, as an act of translation, responds to the original referent and is also made to respond to its own particular moment. The original Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads became the iconic representatives of looted Chinese cultural heritage by sharing in the visual rhetoric of decapitated bodies; their repatriation aims to be an endpoint to the wounds of national humiliation. In their replicated afterlives, the zodiac heads also serve as a multitude of substitute bodies: detained artistic bodies, looted bodies, embattled political and national bodies. Within each site-specific frame of display, they give new voice to contestations over cultural heritage, identity, and global justice.

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Notes

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