

Life Trajectories of the Yubi Zhiguolun: From Qing Dynasty to British Exhibitory Space

Si Xiao

Abstract

Since the later stage of the Qing Dynasty, many imperial objects have been moved to Europe due to a series of Sino-European wars. Perceived as having less material value, Qing imperial books, manuscripts, and scrolls are studied less by contemporary scholars. The *Yubi Zhiguolun* (‘禦筆知過論’) is one example. The Qianlong Emperor wrote this introspective essay at the age of 71 (1781). Subsequently, it was reproduced as a scroll, carved in jade, presented in paper copies, and shared as a lacquered album. The lacquer album was originally stored in the Yuanmingyuan. It was brought to Europe after the Second Opium War. It is currently preserved in the British Library.

To understand the *Zhiguolun*'s history, the author uses the concept of the ‘social life of things’. Travelling over time and space, its aesthetic value, social meaning, and emotional efficacy changed, corresponding to changes in its social relations. Here, the framework of the ‘social life of things’ will be mobilized to follow the *Zhiguolun*'s life trajectories over three phases: an indigenous life in the Qing context; the moment of rupture, as it departs from China; and its subsequent life in Europe.

Key words: Cultural biography; Collecting history; Qing dynasty; Art history

The Cultural Biography of the *Yubi Zhiguolun*

Since the later stage of the Qing Dynasty, many imperial objects have been moved to Europe due to a series of Sino-European wars. Unlike those with a perceived high material value in Europe, Qing books, manuscripts and scrolls sourced from the Qing Empire are studied much less by contemporary scholars. The *Yubi Zhiguolun* (‘禦筆知過論’) is one such item that deserves attention. The Qianlong Emperor wrote this introspective essay at the age of 71 (in 1781, the forty-sixth year of his reign). Subsequently, it was reproduced through different materials, leading to it being copied as a scroll, carved in jade, duplicated on paper, and reproduced as a lacquer album. The lacquer album was originally stored in the Yuanmingyuan palace, more widely known in English as the Summer Palace. Located in Beijing, Yuanmingyuan was the political centre of the Qing court and housed the personal collections of Qianlong. After his death, during October 1860, the Anglo-French alliance, the European initiators of the Second Opium War, not only burned the palace but also started to trade loot from Yuanmingyuan in European marketplaces. The *Zhiguolun* was brought to Europe as well. The lacquer version of the *Zhiguolun* was later purchased by the British Library.

To better understand the *Zhiguolun*'s importance over time and space, I link its stories with the concept of the ‘social life of things’ (Appadurai 2006). Departing from the Yuanmingyuan to Europe, it still lived, but its life moved into new trajectories. Here, the framework of the ‘social life of things’ will be mobilized to follow the *Zhiguolun*'s life trajectories over three phases: an indigenous life in the Qing context; the moment of rupture, as it departs from China; and its

subsequent life in Europe.

Introduction of the *Yubi Zhiguolun*

Some material characteristics of the lacquer album version of the *Yubi Zhiguolun* render it attractive to its potential audience. On the red-lacquer cover, the title ‘禦筆知過論’ is carved, surrounded by the motif of two dragons. Authorship of the item is evidenced via several personal seals of Qianlong, such as *Hall of Five Happiness and the Seventy-Year-Old Son of Heaven* (‘五福五代堂古稀天子寶’) and the *Seventy-Year-Old Son of Heaven* (‘古稀天子寶’).¹ Also, a seal of *Treasures of Yuanmingyuan* (‘圓明園寶’) indicates its origin (Li and Bai 2005). Apart from the texts written on brown paper squares, a red lacquer box repeats the dragon motif of the lacquer cover and contains the concertina volume of texts. In addition, the *Zhiguolun* has a yellow silk wrap tied with a purple silk string. The wrap is characterized by embroidery depicting two dragons and four peonies.

Although such materials and images on the *Zhiguolun* are highly familiar in Chinese life, Western people may still perceive them as ‘exotic’. For instance, in July and August 1962, an exhibition titled *Oriental Bookbindings* was held at the British Museum. The *Zhiguolun* was part of the Chinese display, characterized as ‘albums of art and calligraphy, . . . [deserving attention] for special luxury productions with lavishly decorated end-boards’ (Gardner 1963). Without proper cultural understanding, only the object’s material worth was evident in the exhibition. The content was not highlighted.

Considered through an anthropological perspective, art objects’ materiality is a projection of subjectivity, entangled with culture-specific ideologies and set within a sensorial sphere of knowledge and experience (Maihoub 2015). In other words, individuals’ perception and the cultural context co-produce meanings about an object’s material form. Based upon this idea, contextualization of the item according to specific historical and cultural conditions can help us to understand how different groups of people produced and interpreted the meanings of the *Zhiguolun*. Especially within the context of the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan in 1860, a Euro-centric and Western imperialistic perception of Chinese imperial arts fundamentally changed the object’s life trajectories.

The Social Life of the *Zhiguolun*



Figure 1 Red lacquer album of the *Yubi Zhiguolun*. Copyright British Library Board (OR 6682)

According to Arjun Appadurai (2006), the ‘social life of things’ indexes how a thing itself can be seen as a form of ‘being’, which does not have radical distinctions from humans. Similar to a person, things participate in social relations between institutions and individuals. Taking the

Zhiguolun as an example, within the Qing Empire, it was created by the Qianlong Emperor in the form of running-hand calligraphic work. Under the emperor's commission, imperial artisans reproduced the piece in the form of a lacquer album. Qianlong's successors preserved it in the Yuanmingyuan, juxtaposed with other items from Qianlong's personal collection. By virtue of integration within webs of social relations, the *Zhiguolun* possesses the attribute of a sacred object that embodies Qianlong's personal prestige and Qing imperial sovereignty.

People have life trajectories, starting from birth, developing, and ending at death. If things are considered to have a social life, similar life stages become possible for them (Joy 2009). However, for the *Zhiguolun*, there might be no certain point in time that represents its 'death'. When it departed from the Yuanmingyuan to Europe, its aesthetic value, significance, and emotional efficacy changed, due to the corresponding alterations in its social relations. We can consider that it still lives, but that its life moves into new trajectories.

Meanings in Indigenous Life: Qianlong's Self-reflection

To describe the *Zhiguolun*'s meanings in its indigenous life, the role of the author or birth-giver, Qianlong, must be addressed. In his later career of emperorship, he described himself as 'Old Man of the Ten Victories' ('十全老人'), in order to celebrate his fruitful achievements as ruler. However, the key motivation for making a confession through this text might have been the result of a series of bureaucratic scandals that threatened the political stability of the empire (Li and Bai 2005). For instance, Qianlong was quite tolerant towards Li Shiyao ('李侍堯'), the Viceroy of Yun-Gui ('云貴總督'), who was involved in corruption and embezzlement on multiple occasions.² In 1780, Li was executed. What shocked Qianlong even more was the Rice Corruption in Gansu ('甘肅冒賑案') in 1781. In that particular case, Wang Danwang ('王亶望')³ and Le'er Jin ('勒爾謹')⁴ conspired to misappropriate goods and materials earmarked for disaster relief in the Gansu Province. This corruption in the bureaucracy led to waves of folk uprisings. One of the typical examples was the Jahriyya Sufi Muslim Rebellion ('蘇四十三起義') of 1781 in Gansu Province. With these perceived risks to his reputation, Qianlong started to reflect on his mistakes and on the luxurious lifestyle that had been responsible for the erosion of officialdom.

As reflected in the text of the *Zhiguolun*, Qianlong identified his major fault as lying in the construction of public works ('興工作'). 'Works' refer to a wide range of projects under his rule. On the one hand, these constructions were planned to support infrastructure and major institutions – such as religion, mausoleums, transportation, and military defence.⁵ On the other hand, multiple imperial gardens were created, which not only included Xiyuan ('西苑'), Nanyuan ('南苑'), Changchunyuan ('暢春園'), and Yuanmingyuan but also the Gardens of Qingyi ('清漪'), Jingming ('靜明'), and Jingyi ('靜宜'). Among these gardens, the largest was the Yuanmingyuan, covering over 500 hectares, whereas the smallest, Jinming, still has 65 hectares (Zhou 1999). The costs of these imperial gardens were astonishing. For instance, the expenditure for constructing the Qingyi (later the Yiheyuan 頤和園) alone was as high as 4.8 million taels of silver by 1764, without counting the costs of plants and indoor furnishings (Jia 2009). In addition, Qianlong was fond of travelling for inspection. When visiting other cities, local bureaucrats competed to create new imperial palaces for the Qing emperor. In his essay, he expressed regrets for encouraging rather than restricting such fawning behaviours.⁶

In the process of weighing up the virtues – between Revering Heaven and Serving People ('敬天勤民') and entertaining the eyes and pleasing the Mind-heart ('遊目賞心') – Qianlong prioritized the former (Revering Heaven and Serving People) and stated his determination to correct the balance in the future. However, a great part of his text consisted of rationalizations for the various constructions. He repeated that raising public works was an aspect of beneficial governance ('善政家法'). As his explanation expounded, these projects not only incentivized and stimulated economic activity and provided opportunities for labour, but they also imposed no heavy taxes or corvée upon the people.⁷ In general, Qianlong's numerous construction projects that were successfully completed went hand in hand with political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural integration of Manchu, Han, and western people. Moreover, for these garden projects, inspired by Ming Dynasty imperial gardens, Qianlong incorporated and blended ritual and aesthetic views from Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, thereby

creating the last flash of brilliance in the history of Chinese imperial gardens (Zhang 2006).

The existence of the *Zhiguolun* signals an inconsistency between the emperor's words and deeds. While expressing regrets and recognizing the moral significance of being thrifty, Qianlong never refrained from a lavish lifestyle. During his life, he undertook six tours of southern China. The sixth tour occurred in 1784, three years after the completion of the *Zhiguolun*.⁸ As estimated by Michael Chang, the cost of the first four of these southern tours ranged between 5.2 and 9.7 per cent of the court's silver reserves. The total expenditure for all six tours was approximately 18.9 million taels of silver, or 3.15 million taels per tour (Chang 2007: 463-5). There was no significant decline in expenditure throughout the six tours. While the precision of the estimation is debatable, it is reasonable to extrapolate that Qianlong did not act in line with the virtues reflected in the *Zhiguolun*. Ironically, towards the end of the text, Qianlong wrote that, not being aware of the faults, the loss of reputation is trivial; but excusing the faults while being aware of them would lead to a greater loss.⁹ Indeed, as Chang (2007: 46) discusses, the decline of the Qing Empire might be attributed to the sky-high costs of the southern tours. The last half of Qianlong's statement came true.

The material presence of the *Zhiguolun* itself also does not support Qianlong's self-reflection well. In contrast to his avowed repentance for extravagance, the object's exquisitely carved lacquered cover and box embodied a complicated and regal artisanship.¹⁰ It was Qianlong who promoted the development of red carved lacquer at the peak of the Qing Dynasty. Under his commission, two sites were created for designing and producing lacquer products: the Palace Workshop ('造辦處') in Beijing and the Manufacture ('織造') in Suzhou. In particular, lacquer items designed for imperial use ('禦用') were mainly based in the Suzhou Manufacture ('織造') (Yang 2011: 107).

During the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722), artisanship of red carved lacquer inherited some features from Ming carved lacquer (Yang 2004: 172). Compared to the latter, the same type of products during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1735-1796) evolved to have thinner coating, a lighter colour, more complex patterns or motifs, and stronger angular carving (Yang 2004: 172). In these ways, Qianlong carved lacquer developed its unique and superior style. All these visual characteristics can be observed in the lacquer album version of the *Zhiguolun*. To maintain the imperial privilege of high-standard lacquer products, additional costs were incurred from time-consuming production and transportation from the Suzhou base to Beijing. Despite this, the economic costs of the *Zhiguolun* were rather modest when compared to the costs of the southern China tours. Nevertheless, the item's production process ran counter to the stated intention of frugality.

Besides the lacquer-carved *Zhiguolun*, the dark-jade-carved version also offers evidence of excessive spending. Made in 1781, this version consists of ten pieces, contained within a red-sandalwood box with dragon motif (Wu 2016: 42). Currently, this version is stored in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. In fact, the jade-carved *Zhiguolun* was only one set within Qianlong's jade-carved collection of his own writings. Other examples in Qianlong's collection include the *Jade Version of the Ten Victories of Qinggaozong* ('清高宗禦筆十全記玉版') in 1792, the *Jade Version of the Stone-carved Imperial Commissioned Thirteen Classics with Preface written at the Piyong Palace* ('清高宗御製書石刻十三經於辟雍序玉版冊') in 1793, and the *Jade Version of Imperial Commissioned of the Legend of Old Man of Ten Victories* ('清御製十全老人記玉冊') without a clear date. If the Qianlong Emperor acted consistently with his self-reflection, then there might have been no reason to reproduce these surplus objects.

As commented by Yan Li and Yan-rong Bai, the way that Qianlong reflected upon his faults in ruling suggests a form of self-appreciation, undertaken in an indirect manner (Li and Bai 2005: 67). In my view, rather than saying that the *Zhiguolun* played a functional role in representing Qianlong's process of self-reflection, it was itself an example of how the emperor sought to justify himself in his old age.

The Turning Point of Social Life: Looting the Yuanmingyuan

During the Second Opium War of 1860, which took place under the next emperor, Anglo-French troops set fire to Yuanmingyuan from 7 to 9 October, destroying or taking about 1.5 million imperial objects (Tythacott 2018: 1). At present, many Yuanmingyuan items are displayed in

more than 2,000 museums around the world.

Without certain historical evidence, we do not know exactly how the *Zhiguolun* departed from Yuanmingyuan and travelled to Europe. However, it is reasonable to relate this turning point in the *Zhiguolun*'s indigenous life to the destruction of Yuanmingyuan. In particular, General Charles Cousin-Montauban (1796-1878), the highest commander of the French Army in the Second Opium War, played a key role in reshaping the social relations of the *Zhiguolun*. According to Frances Wood (1988), a former curator of the British Library's Chinese collections, the *Zhiguolun*, 'wrapped in yellow silk and boxed in red carved lacquer, was purchased from the French General Montauban who had been active in the destruction of the Summer Palace in 1860'. Similarly, Louise Tythacott, a British scholar who has studied Yuanmingyuan collections, notes that it was General Montauban who selected the initial pieces from Yuanmingyuan and sold the *Zhiguolun* in France (Tythacott 2019: 362).

While the exact process of how the *Zhiguolun* was first collected and by whom is absent from historical records, we can still read some underlying meanings in relation to socio-cultural contexts of that time. In terms of responsibility for the destruction and looting behaviour, both the British and the French blamed each other after the plunder of Yuanmingyuan (Hevia 2003: 78). The two national armies behaved differently in distributing the loot from Yuanmingyuan. On the British side, according to their British Prize Law, all the loot should have been submitted to a prize commission. Based on that, a public auction should have been held to convert loot into sales, and the commission should then have distributed proceeds from the sales to individual military staff members according to their rank in the army (Hevia 2003: 84). Compared to this, the French performed a less organized form of looting and handling the proceeds. According to Greg Thomas, General Montauban participated in the first group of the Anglo-French alliance arriving at the emperor's residence in Yuanmingyuan, on the morning of 7 October 1860 (Thomas 2008: 31). The General promised that nothing in the palace would be removed before the arrival of the highest officials of the British army, such as General James Hope Grant and Lord Elgin. However, the splendour of Yuanmingyuan and its objects deeply lured the French soldiers. They started to take things wantonly, such as jade, precious stones, cloisonné vases, ivory, carvings, and watches/clocks. General Montauban acquiesced to the chaos.

The social relations established between the French general and the *Zhiguolun* provide rich implications about how a political perception of art was produced from the cross-cultural interaction between the two civilizations. Due to his superior military rank in the French army, General Montauban had the highest privilege of selecting Yuanmingyuan objects before others began to loot. His personal artistic tastes determined what was selected from the numerous options presented by the Yuanmingyuan objects. These selections would either be presented to the Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie or kept by Montauban for personal reasons. When seeing the art and treasures in the palaces, he was full of praise, saying 'nothing in our Europe can give an idea of equal luxury; and it is impossible for me in these few lines to describe the splendour of it, especially under the impression of bewilderment caused by my view of these marvels' (Malone 1934: 180). Based on these words, the *Zhiguolun* – selected, kept and later sold by Montauban – can be considered as one piece of the loot satisfying Montauban's view of 'Chinese marvels'.

The *Zhiguolun* was perceived as unqualified to act as a 'gift' to the French monarchy. In a letter written to the French Minister of War, the general explained that only certain items were recommended as trophies of war to be presented to the French emperor – based on their value in terms of art or by their antiquity. This was an affront to the political and cultural prestige of Qing's emperors as well as a personal humiliation, even as it celebrated the European sovereigns (Thomas 2008: 34). The general selected a list of Yuanmingyuan objects with political significance, rather than considering monetary value, and omitting the *Zhiguolun*:

Two imperial batons ... A full outfit of the Chinese emperor ... A pagoda of gilded and chased bronze, of remarkable workmanship; gigantic enamel vases in various colours; several gold and enamel divinities. ... Two enormous chimeras in gilded copper, each weighing close to 400 kg. Two fabric blinds of inordinate length and remarkable workmanship. Finally rings, necklaces, goblets, lacquer ware, porcelain, and a thousand curios (Mutrety 1861: 25-6).

As commented by James Hevia, looting the Yuanmingyuan not only demonstrated European military dominance over the Qing court, but also produced sheer enjoyment and pleasure among the invaders (Hevia 2003: 81). For the *Zhiguolun* itself, its shift of ownership mirrored how the French classified themselves as the conquerors, and the Qing empire as the conquered. Montauban was a representative of French imperialism who gained personal enjoyment from possessing and redefining Yuanmingyuan objects according to his own French perception. When plundering the palaces, the General characterized the red lacquered *Zhiguolun* and some other porcelain, enamels, and jade sculptures as being 'treasures of the most dazzling antiqueness' that were admirable and valuable in their own right, but which still caused 'a violent headache' due to their 'most incoherent and grotesque conglomerations' (Fauchery 1860).

It might be surprising to note the Qing imperial albums of art and calligraphy being highly praised by a French general. During this period of looting, those Yuanmingyuan items with explicit monetary worth – such as gold, silver, diamonds, and porcelain – were the most popular trophies and goods in the French and British looters' lists. In contrast, the *Zhiguolun* may have been of much less interest. This is because paintings, calligraphy, and books were highly neglected categories (Hill 2013: 248). Robert Swinhoe, a diplomat and naturalist in the British army during the Second Opium War, characterized this phenomenon: 'no one just then cared for gazing tranquilly at the works of art; each one was bent on acquiring what was most valuable' (Swinhoe 1861: 306).

This, then, was Montauban's special taste for looting – and different from other military plunders. Apart from recognizing the 'dazzling antiqueness' of the *Zhiguolun*, he also showed his affinity to Qing imperial arts through his commenting on the *Forty Scenes of Yuanmingyuan* ('圓明園四十景'),¹¹ a set of square paintings depicting historically recognized vistas in Yuanmingyuan. In his characterization, the views of the painting portrayed 'L'histoire de la Chine' (the whole Chinese history) with vivid colours that '*venaient de sortie du pinceau*' (came out of the brush) (Cousin de Montauban 1932: 315). The compliment may be motivated by his exposure to the French style of Chinoiserie,¹² which allowed Montauban to perceive the artistic resonance between the old royal palace culture in France and Chinese aesthetics.

In addition to his affinity for art, the Qing imperial identity may have been another visual element of the *Zhiguolun* that attracted Montauban. Clearly, identifiers such as the dragon motif, yellow silk, and the red carved lacquer box could hint at the relevance of the object for Qing emperors. While no one can know the extent to which the French general understood Chinese imperial symbolism, images of the Qing empire had been well disseminated among French troops before the outbreak of the 1860 war. As argued by Erik Ringmar, the Orientalist fiction of Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Pierre Loti, and some translated works such as the *Amadis de Gaule* in 1813 and the *Orlando Furieux* between 1830 and 1843, provided a literary canon which supported French soldiers in knowing what Chinese imperial gardens and Qing imperial symbols might look like (Ringmar 2013: 8).

Synthesizing all the evidence above, while the *Zhiguolun* failed to become a gift symbolizing the victory of the French monarch, Montauban's discourses play a role in converting the item into proof of both his personal conquest and his taste and appreciation for art. The *Zhiguolun* and other Yuanmingyuan objects with less perceived monetary value were admired. In Montauban's perception, the Qing imperial arts could be equated with French royal culture. However, such a perceived equivalence was not based on any authentic knowledge or experience of interacting with Chinese civilization, but through an imaginary view about what China's arts should be like. It was Orientalism that proved the source for the French General's perception of the *Zhiguolun*. In Edward Said's opinion, Orientalism could be seen as a form of Eurocentrism, allowing Europeans to reiterate the superiority of their society over Oriental cultures (Said 1978: 15).

After the military conquest, Orientalism came into play via the process of devaluing the Qing empire but not its iconic objects, including the *Zhiguolun*. Montauban's Orientalist view might have been more implicit. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the ability to read a work of art contributes to legitimizing someone as being in possession of cultural competence within a social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984: 2). Simply speaking, a person who is recognized as having good taste in art may claim distinction over members of other social classes, who are unable to appreciate it. Within the milieu of the French troops in the 1860 war,

Montauban held the privilege of being able to judge the monetary, political, and artistic value of various looted objects. To read the value of the *Zhiguolun* seemed a good opportunity for Montauban to demonstrate his own refinement, superiority and distinction of artistic taste for Yuanmingyuan objects, since all members of the French troops were more or less influenced by the Chinoiserie or the continuing Orientalist literary canon from the domestic sphere. Despite this, his rhetorical compliment in selecting the items did not offer any mercy for the Yuanmingyuan and its treasures. Consequently, the *Zhiguolun* became a witness of the humiliation of the Qing empire. Its meanings were dominated by General Montauban, through his appropriating the prestige of the Qing empire to strengthen the honour bestowed on his own sovereign (Thomas 2008: 35).

The European Life: Post-Second Opium War to the Present

According to the British Library, the institution purchased the *Zhiguolun* from Pierre-Paul Birbes in 1906. While we do not know the historical details about how and when the *Zhiguolun* was removed from General Montauban's possession and acquired by Pierre-Paul Birbes, the fact was that the former no longer kept the item in hand. After selling it, General Montauban's personal meanings became detached from the *Zhiguolun*. The item turned into an exchangeable commodity available for a price. In that way, the persons involved in the object's social relations reshaped it, leading to a fundamental change in the nature of the object. In Appadurai's words, 'today's gift is tomorrow's commodity. Yesterday's commodity is tomorrow's found art object. Today's art object is tomorrow's junk' (Appadurai 2006: 15).

The European life of the paintings and calligraphy of Yuanmingyuan began as an extension of their fate within the period of the Second Opium War. Most of the European soldiers had minimal interest in Chinese paintings and calligraphy, and the same climate existed among the European audience when these things arrived there. As Thomas narrates, the paintings of the *Forty Scenes of Yuanmingyuan*, taken by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Dupin (General Montauban's subordinate) went to auction in Paris in 1862 (Thomas 2012: 510). After failing to achieve its lowest bidding price, the painting set was sold to an art dealer at a cheap price. Without appreciation in the art market of either its artistic value or its imperial importance to France, the paintings were ultimately kept by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Compared to those Yuanmingyuan objects that were presented to either the British or the French monarch, other Yuanmingyuan objects that were circulated in European art markets via personal trades were much less valued and documented by art critics, scholars, or dealers. Taking the *Zhiguolun* and the *Forty Scenes of Yuanmingyuan* as examples, neglect seems to be common for these Yuanmingyuan paintings and calligraphy in France between the 1860s and 1900s. This trend can also be observed among the British. For example, in 1895, a British book dealer, Walter Harris, sold a batch of colour-painting folios of the *Huangchao Liqi Tushi* ('皇朝禮器圖式') to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Studied by Ming Wilson, the folios of the Qing manuscripts originated from Yuanmingyuan and were also removed during the Second Opium War (Wilson 2004: 52). However, object biographies and details about the acquisition by Walter Harris after the war remain unavailable.

As profit-seekers, art dealers expected to sell these 'exotic curiosities' at a high price. Unfortunately, when they found that the Yuanmingyuan paintings and calligraphy were neglected in the marketplace, dealers reluctantly chose to sell the devalued goods to museums and libraries, offering only a lower price. However, the decisions of European art institutions to acquire the Yuanmingyuan items were not arbitrary. As argued by Louise Tythacott (2018: 5), museums should be seen as a form of ideological institution that may evoke or reflect public sentiments. Especially between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the way in which British and French museums collected, interpreted, classified, and dominated non-European art objects implied their mission as imperialistic apparatuses. As further discussed by James Hevia, the art objects looted from Yuanmingyuan symbolized conquest and humiliation, regardless of whether they were collected for their fantastic monetary value or for little or no intrinsic meaning at all. They served as tokens of remembrance to demonstrate European superiority over the Qing Empire (Hevia 2003: 99-100).

This was the tragic life of the *Zhiguolun* in Europe. Based on current records in the

British Library, the 1962 exhibition may be the first time that the *Zhiguolun* reappeared in public. After being neglected for over half a century, its ideological and historical meanings were suppressed and kept from the British public. The *Oriental Bookbindings* exhibition was instead intended to display styles of bindings and book coverings from Asian countries such as India, China, and Japan, as well as from North Africa (Gardner 1963: 145). The *Zhiguolun* appeared under this rubric and was placed in the 'Far East' section, characterized as 'finely carved red-lacquer covers of the Emperor Ch'ien-lung's exercises in calligraphy' (Gardner 1963: 145), alongside other cases of silk/paper rolls and folding books originating from different historical periods of China. According to K.B. Gardner's review, examples from ancient Japan and Korea were also presented in the same section. Exhibits of Japanese culture included binding styles such as the Fukuro-toji and Yamato-toji, but no specific cases from Korean culture were mentioned.

British art institutions long covered over imperial histories of domination and looting, with objects folded into an attempted cultural neutrality. This explains why both the British Library and the British Museum kept silent when exhibiting the *Zhiguolun* and other art objects collected from those non-European countries that suffered from British colonial expansion. In the contemporary postcolonial international context, countries such as Egypt, Greece and Nigeria have requested discussions with the British Museum concerning the repatriation of cultural heritage. The museum initially refused most of the requests. In recent years, while the repatriation debate is continuing, the museum has generally been willing to 'loan out' the objects to their countries of origin. However, as commented by Emily Duthie, the British Museum still insists that all these objects looted within British colonial history are 'now part of the museum and, more broadly, the cultural heritage of the nation' (Duthie 2011: 19). The museum continues to hold power over those countries that were invaded (Rooney 2019: 98). Although the *Zhiguolun* is still neglected in the British context, as another national institution located within the same ideological system, the British Library also possesses part of Qianlong's legacy and thus remains part of its journey.

Conclusion

By applying the framework of the social life of things, in this study I have discussed the life of the *Zhiguolun* during three important periods. Created by the Qianlong Emperor, the text of the *Zhiguolun* revealed his dual faces: one was self-reflective, and the other was narcissistic. Furthermore, as observed from the object's material characteristics, the *Zhiguolun* embodied the highest artisanship of Qing imperial red-carved lacquer with wonderful decorative art. However, due to the destruction of Yuanmingyuan in 1860, the turning point of the *Zhiguolun*'s social life may be located in the person of General Montauban, a representative historical figure who used his Orientalist view to compare Qing arts with those of France in order to highlight French superiority. This misrecognition determined the subsequently tragic life of the *Zhiguolun* when it arrived in Europe. With half a century of neglect, it reappeared in a public exhibition arranged by the British Museum, but in a form which stripped it of critical aspects of its core identity. Despite persuasive and persistent underlying imperialist and colonialist ideologies, we may still expect a new future for the *Zhiguolun*'s European life, now that calls for decolonization and anti-colonial resistance are beginning to have an increasing influence on how those art institutions communicate to the public.

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Notes

1. Some other imperial seals in the lacquer-album version include *Still Diligent Every Day* ('猶日孜孜'), *Hall of Sanxi* ('三希堂'), *Collection of Shiqu Baoji* ('石渠寶笈所藏'), *Treasure of Emperor Emeritus* ('太上皇帝之寶'), and two seals of *Treasure of Concern over Phenomenon at Eighty* ('八征耄念之寶').

2. The Qianlong Emperor exempted Li in terms of his intelligence even if Li was accused many times of corruption (李侍堯‘屢以貪黷坐法,上終憐其才,為之曲赦。’) (Zhao 1998).
3. The Chief Secretary of Gansu (‘甘肅布政使’) at that time.
4. The Viceroy of Shan-Gan (‘陝甘總督’) at that time.
5. Within the city, places, temples, buildings, royal gardens, canals and ditches were repaired and restored while dams, water-control projects and city walls were also reconstructed in rural areas (‘內若壇廟, 宮殿, 京城, 皇城, 禁城, 溝渠, 河道以及部院衙署. 莫不為之修其壞新其舊, 外若海塘, 河工, 城郭, 堤堰, 莫不為之修其廢舉其湮。’) (Qianlong 1781).
6. During the emperor’s travels, each city endeavoured to build luxury palaces using the donations of officials and businessmen; ‘I was not in favour of and criticized this. However, it was unrealistic to deny my responsibility for this trend’ (‘若夫時巡所經, 各督撫每繕行宮以備駐憩, 雖雲出自捐養廉, 資商力, 然爭奇較勝, 予不為之喜, 且飭諭之. 究其致如此者’過應歸於予謂之無過, 實自欺也。’) (Qianlong 1781).
7. The money was not from the National Treasury but the tariff surplus of government money. At the same time, project workers were paid at a reasonable rate (‘是皆費用正帑, 惟以關稅盈余及內帑節省者, 物給價, 工給值, 更弗興徭役, 加賦稅以病民。’) (Qianlong 1781).
8. Qianlong’s six tours of south China took place in 1751, 1757, 1762, 1765, 1780 and 1784 respectively.
9. ‘If the person was not aware of the fault, his behaviour was forgivable. If the person realized the mistake without remedy, then he made a big mistake’ (‘夫不知過, 其失猶小。過而弗改, 又從而為之辭, 是文過也, 其失大。’) (Qianlong 1781).
10. Production of red carved lacquer within the Qing Dynasty required putting multiple coats of lacquer on the body of the item (normally 20 to about 100 coating layers). After natural air drying, the craftsman should carve motifs directly on the coating of lacquer.
11. In 1744, under Qianlong’s commission, forty paintings were created by Shen Yuan and Tang Dai, with a calligrapher, Wang You dun, as the complete set of the *Forty Scenes of Yuanmingyuan*. A part of the painting set was burnt in the plunder of Yuanmingyuan, and the remainder was kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
12. The Chinoiserie refers to the European interpretation and imitation of Chinese and East Asian artistic traditions, especially in the decorative arts, garden design, architecture, literature, theatre, and music since the mid-to-late seventeenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century.

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