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Description and presentation of violence in history usually serves the present political institution and collective ideology. How historical violence is selected and narrated could facilitate understanding of the evolution of history and the current social system. Yuanmingyuan is a royal garden of the last feudal dynasty, Qing, in China. It’s construction, destruction and preservation are closely connected to China’s relationship with European countries from colonial to postcolonial era. As a result, the narration of Yuanmingyuan’s history is now centered on the western violence toward China in the modern time. And the year 2020 was commemorated for 160 years after ‘Yuanmingyuan’s destruction by the Anglo-French Allied Force’. However, the Digital Yuanmingyuan Project, with 20 years’ effort to virtually restore the varied appearances of Yuanmingyuan in different historical periods, is against this simplified narration and presentation of its history. This paper analyzes the project’s digital methods to conduct research, build model, render the historical sceneries and produce educational and
commercial products, in order to see how digital technologies push forward the study and preservation of historical architecture, and how they help to problematize the understanding of violence in history and historical narratives.

The requirement of precision and detail in modeling software pushes the study of historical drawings into rigorous comparisons. In this way, unobvious transformations of architectural detail could be discovered and categorized into different time periods. Model building and color rendition processors facilitates the analysis of photo records of Yuanmingyuan’s ruins. Photo analysis not only helps to retrace details of the original buildings, but also helps to tell the stories happened to the ruin within the 160 years after the warfare.

These academic research and heritage restoration facilitated by digital devices reveal that the history of Yuanmingyuan is a history of continuous violence: before the Anglo-French intrusion, there are replanning of Yuanmingyuan caused by domestic political conflicts; and after the foreign destruction, there have been civil damages to the remaining landscape under different social circumstances. Through this case study, the paper highlights the forensic function of digital methods in studies of architectural history: they help to discover hidden stories told by the historical buildings and provoke critical understanding of the predominant historical narration.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Yulin Li is a MPhil student in the University of Cambridge conducting Architecture and Urban Studies. She has an interdisciplinary background: she studied World Culture and Literature and Product Design as double majors in Tsinghua University; and has participated in architectural research and practice in Tsinghua Tongheng Planning and Design Institute.

Her current research focus on the digital design methods, virtual spatial experience, and the impact of digital technology on real urban life. Her broader interest are the varied, untraditional architectural forms, spatial experiences, urban relationships and social systems. She tries to see the capacity and potential of mass media, digital devices and other methods to produce new understanding of space, promote spatial justice, and attract attention to underrepresented regions and communities.

Her recent studies look at the VR heritage preservation, the virtual city in the video game Cyberpunk 2077, the internet cafes and the gaming community. Her field practice in China includes preservation and renovation of historical Hutongs in Beijing; curation of heritage exhibition in Wudian; documentation of the cultural sceneries of the Mosuo maternal society. Her paper “Bridgeman Girls School and the ‘Westernizing’ Chinese Society" is included into the Academic Annual Journal of the 17th Academic Annual
Conference of History of Modern Architecture in China. She also worked as conference organizer and interpreter for ICOMOS conferences held in Beijing; and has devoted to social works related to architecture and community preservation.