

View inside the Yuanming Yuan theme park at Hengqian World Studios.



VISITING SPEAKER SERIES

Replicated Afterlives: Reviving a Ruined Imperial Garden as Theme Park in Post-Mao China

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The Yuanming Yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness) currently stands as ruins on the outskirts of Beijing. Constructed in the eighteenth century as a garden-palace of the Qing emperors, it was infamously looted and burned by the Anglo-French in 1860 at the close of the Second Opium War. In the post-Mao era of the 1980s and 1990s, a fierce debate arose over whether to preserve its form as ruins or to reconstruct the imperial garden. In the meantime, developers seized upon the Yuanming Yuan as a model to replicate in theme park environments. This talk examines the off-site reproduction and displacement of the Yuanming Yuan as theme park reconstructions. I argue that the original Yuanming Yuan's function as a Qing imperial microcosm is precisely what makes it an ideal model for replicating as theme parks that serve as national microcosms. I ask how the theme parks situate the Yuanming Yuan in historical time through the choice of its architectural replications; I also argue that the performances within the parks displace the Yuanming Yuan into a nebulous imperial past while simultaneously projecting it into an imagined national future.

**Monday, May 11, 2026 at 4:00pm
ARTS Screening Room 335**