

The Wanderings and Sad Fate of The Golden Temple



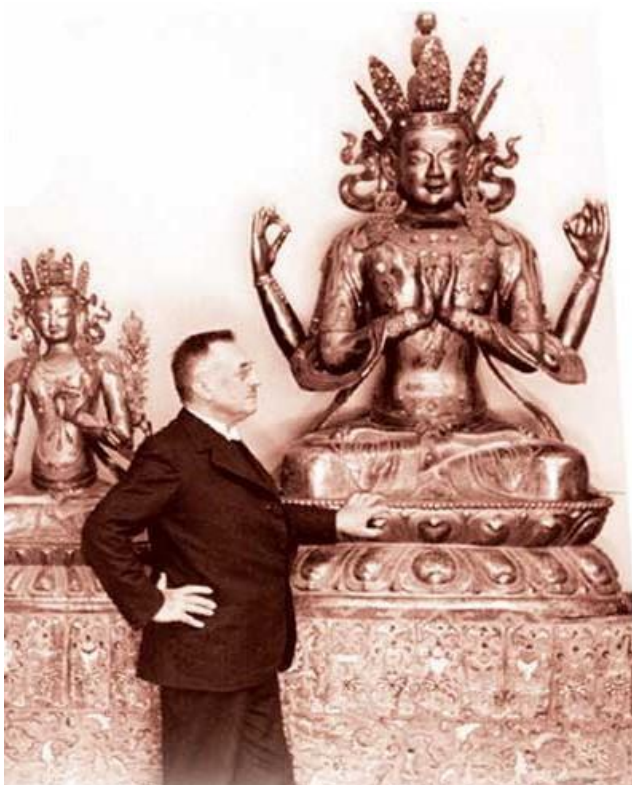
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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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The Manchus who ruled China from 1644 to 1912 were strong believers in and generous patrons of Tibetan Buddhism. Various Manchu emperors sponsored and promoted the religion in various ways and one emperor had the whole Tipitaka newly edited, published and distributed to China's main monasteries, a huge undertaking. In 1703 the imperial court decided to build a summer palace in Chengde, then called Jehol, some 250 km. north-east of Beijing to escape the dust and heat of the capital. Work on the vast palace continued for nearly 100 years and it came to include gardens and pleasure pavilions, artificial lakes and administrative buildings, pagodas, a hunting reserve and quarters for the huge staff needed to run and maintain the palace. In 1766, Qianlong, the greatest of the Manchu emperors and a deeply religious man, wanted to build a Buddhist temple in the palace complex that would be worthy of it. There were already several temples and even a monastery there but Qianlong wanted this one to be for his own private use. The project employed the finest craftsmen, took five years to build and the end result was a masterpiece of Chinese architecture, later to be dubbed the Golden Temple.



Sven Hedin with Chinese bodhisattva statues

A century and a half later the Manchu dynasty had been abolished, China was a republic and Chengde's now empty Summer Palace fell into disrepair. Even the beautiful gardens were decimated, by locals chopping down the trees to use for building material and as firewood. In 1930 the intrepid Swedish explorer Sven Hedin happened to be leading an

expedition through northern China sponsored by the American millionaire industrialist and philanthropist Vincent Bendix who had a keen interest in Chinese architecture, especially Chinese Buddhist temples. Hedin visited the Summer Palace and was overwhelmed by its magnificence and size, despite the general neglect and decay. But of all the things he saw the Golden Temple was the most impressive. He telegraphed Bendix about the temple saying that it would be possible to make an exact replica of it and ship it back to the US. Bendix was delighted with this idea; he had wanted to become part of New York high society and this seemed like an excellent way to achieve it. After all, only someone with the taste and the money could ship a whole temple from China to America. Hedin received the money from Bendix and proceeded

to assemble the architects, craftsmen and workers needed to do the huge job. It was an audacious project and the greatest care was taken to reproduce all the temple's finest details exactly. When the work was finished the dismantled temple was shipped to America and arrived just in time to be reassembled to become the star attraction of the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago. It astonished the thousands who saw it and Bendix received praise from every quarter. Later he had the temple moved to his hometown and reassembled there.



The Golden Temple at the New York World Fair

Towards the end of the 1930s a group of US businessmen conceived the idea of holding a world's fair in New York in the hope that it would

help stimulate the city's and the county's economy, still not fully recovered from the Great Depression. During the planning stage someone suggested that the Golden Temple be included in the fair as a curiosity that might enhance the event's lustre. Bendix agreed with this idea and he and several others including Hedin offered Chinese and Tibetan artefacts, some of them extremely valuable, to be displayed in the temple to promote an interest in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist culture. The New York World's Fair opened in 1939 and immediately the Golden Temple became one of its main 'must-sees'. Altogether 44 million people visited the fair in the two seasons it was open and most of them went to see the temple. Overall though, the fair was a failure; the money poured into it was never fully recovered and the "international brotherhood" which it was touted to be promoting quickly died when World War II broke out even before the event had finished.

By that time Bendix's businesses were headings for bankruptcy so he donated his temple to the liberal arts Oberlin College which planned to use it as the centrepiece of their Asian studies faculty. It took nine railway carriages, 173 large crates and \$10,000 to move the temple and its artefacts to Oberlin but because of the war and consequential financial constraints everything languished in storage until 1949. By that time the college administrators felt they could no longer do anything with the temple so Oberlin offered it to Harvard University's Yenching Institute of Chinese studies which gladly snapped up the offer. The institute had been looking for a building to house their 300,000 books and manuscripts

collection and they thought the Golden Temple would be perfect for the complex of conference room and classrooms they planned to build around it. They also negotiated with Harvard's Fogg Museum to use the temple to exhibit some of the museum's rich Buddhist collection on a rotating basis.

The whole project was both visionary and bold and all that was needed were sponsors to pay for it. Donations and promises indeed came in but much of the money had to be diverted to pay for the temples storage costs. Months drifted into years and years into decades with nothing being done, until finally Harvard decided to offer the temple to others including the Government of Taiwan, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the city of San Francisco to erect in their Chinatown, even Disneyland, but surprisingly there were no takers. One observer joked that its name should be changed from Golden Temple to White Elephant. Several Buddhist groups expressed an interest in having the temple but Buddhism in the US was in its infancy at that time and no group had the financial resources to purchase land big enough to erect it. There would also be zoning regulations to contend to which would require complex negotiations and lawyer's fees. Eventually in 1968, the temple was transferred to Indiana University which had ambitious plans for it but which again never eventuated. The beautiful Buddha statue from the temple's main shrine sat in the student's dormitory for years and part of the temple's facade was actually used to decorate a local pizzeria.

1982, Paul Haering of the National Waste Company in Lorain, Ohio, acquired rights to the temple. However, Haering, a scrap-metal dealer, relinquished all rights to the temple to avert a lawsuit brought against him by the university claiming that instead of trying to restore it as agreed, Haering was actually plundering it. He admitted to melting down some of the temple's 3,000 gold-plated copper roof tiles for their scrap value. Over the years, many other parts of the temple had been lost, stolen or damaged by water. An inventory done in 1983 found that about 70% of the 30,000 original pieces of the temple remained and that the thousands of Buddha and bodhisattva statues, Tibetan scroll paintings, ritual objects and other artefacts originally exhibited in the temple had been lost or dispersed to various museums and private collections.

Finally, in 1986 the crated temple was shipped to Sweden with the promise that it would be repaired and its missing parts replaced. Reports at the time said it was going to be reassembled on the banks of Lake Malaren in Sigtuna, others that it was going to the Sven Hedin Foundation, the organization that honours the man who had originally made the temple, and still others that it would be reassembled in Stockholm's Haga Park. None of this ever happened. Today the temple and the few of its artefacts that remained sit in the cellars of The Golden Temple Foundation in Stockholm, unseen and unappreciated as it has done almost continually since the 1940s. A building that had once been worshipped in by an emperor and awed millions with its beauty is all but forgotten.

As for Chengde's Summer Palace, when the Japanese seized Manchuria in 1931 they stripped it of many of its treasures, the Chinese communists first left it to fall into ruin and then, during the so-called Cultural Revolution, vandalized it. In the past decades the Chinese government has undertaken to restore the complex as an important "cultural relic" and tourist attraction but much of its original character has been lost. During Sven Hedin's visit in 1930 he took numerous photographs of the palace, some of which he later published in his *Jehol, the City of Emperors* and which remains a rare record of much of the palace's vanished magnificence. The original Golden Temple in Chengde suffered much over the years and although it has been restored what many parts originally looked like is uncertain. Those 173 crates languishing in Stockholm may be a great help in restoring the original to its former glory. What happened to the temple's Buddha statue has never been discovered.