

# The Burning of the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) in 1860: An Analysis of Lord Elgin's Motives

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## Project Summary:

**Project Aim:** Assisted Dr. Lily Chang in compiling a comprehensive bibliography on the use of fire in modern China (19th–20th centuries), while conducting a focused case study of my own choice on the 1860 burning of the Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace).

**Research Problem:** Investigated the contested question of why Lord Elgin ordered the burning of Yuanmingyuan in 1860 during the Second Opium War. Sources reveal controversies and contradictions, particularly regarding the underlying motives of Lord Elgin's command, the treatment of captured envoys, and the political context of the destruction.

**Key Findings:** The burning was not motivated by a single cause but by three interrelated objectives, retribution for the treatment of envoys, pressure to accelerate Qing treaty compliance, and symbolic destruction of the Qing dynasty's political and cultural heart, all ultimately serving to assert the Allied Force's superiority against the Qing Empire.

## Methodology:

### 1. Exploration & Topic Selection:

- Conducted two weeks of exploratory reading across multiple fire-related events, including Lin Zexu's opium destruction, Hankou during 1911 Wuchang Uprising, Boxer Rebellion etc.
- Selected burning of Yuanmingyuan as case study due to abundant sources and unresolved debates

### 2. Source Collection & Analysis:

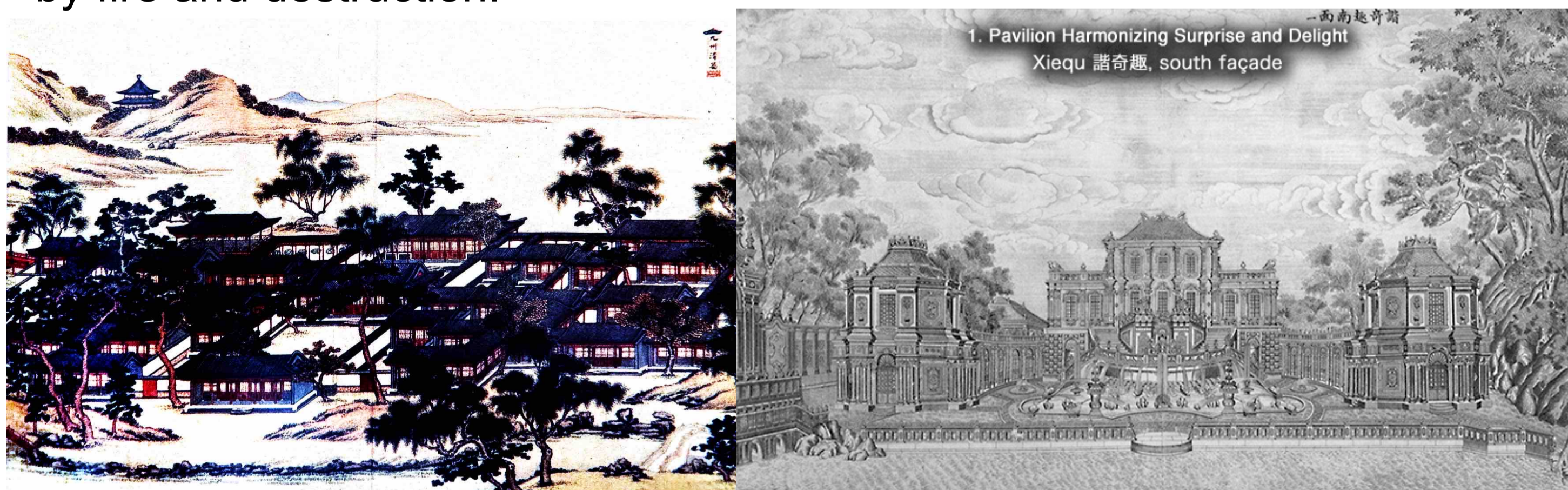
- Accessed archives and libraries in London and Hong Kong
- Collected primary sources (newspapers, correspondence, diaries, Qing memorials)
- Reviewed secondary sources (scholarly articles, books, translations)
- Compared conflicting accounts to identify biases and silences

### 3. Critical Engagement & Synthesis:

- Analysed how scholars interpret the burning and its motives.
- Evaluated political contexts behind different narratives
- Engaged with historiographical debates to spot biases
- Reviewed wider themes (how the burning of Yuanmingyuan affects nationalism, return of looted relics)

## History of Yuanmingyuan:

Yuanmingyuan, the "Garden of Perfect Brightness," was built in 1708 under the Kangxi Emperor on the site of a former Ming garden (First Historical Archives of China, 1991, p.1–2). Expanded by Yongzheng and Qianlong, it served as a royal palace for five Qing emperors. The garden blended both Chinese and European architecture, with a balance of garden. Today, only its stone ruins of Xiyanglou remain, as the wooden palaces were destroyed by fire and destruction.



## Second Opium War and the Burning of Yuanmingyuan:

The burning of Yuanmingyuan happened during the Second Opium War (1856-1860). The Anglo-French military captured the Dagu Forts in 1860 and advanced toward Beijing for a ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin. In September, Qing forces captured 39 envoys, diplomats and soldiers of the Allied Force. 20 of whom died in captivity, reportedly tortured. This incident shaped Lord Elgin's decision to burn Yuanmingyuan as symbolic retribution against the Qing court, despite French objections. On 18 October, under Lord Elgin's command, British forces set the palace aflame. After a few days, the Convention of Peking was signed and formal ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin was completed, marking the Qing Empire's defeat (Gros, 2011; Brizay, 2015).

## Research Outcome:

### Vengeance

One explanation is that Lord Elgin ordered the destruction of Yuanmingyuan as vengeance for the mistreatment of captured envoys. Primary sources such as Elgin's correspondence frame the act as retribution (Brizay, 2015, p384). Yet the severity of abuses remains disputed, with some sources suggesting exaggeration, and Yuanmingyuan's role as the site of captivity still contested. The deaths, including The Times correspondent Bowlby, placed Elgin under pressure to defend his reputation before Queen Victoria and the British public, making the burning a dramatic gesture of both vengeance and assertion of authority (Zheng, 2020, p.57–59). Thus, vengeance offered a powerful justification, but was unlikely the sole motive.

### Pressuring the Qing to Sign Treaties

Another interpretation holds that Elgin aimed to pressure the Qing court into ratifying the Treaty of Tientsin and signing the Convention of Peking (Ding, 1962, p126). Negotiations halted after the hostage crisis, causing more tension between Qing and the Allied Force (Biznay, 2005, p363). The looting and burning of Yuanmingyuan accelerated concessions as Prince Gong quickly released surviving captives and agreed to treaties. Yet some historians argue the Qing were already weakened after Xianfeng left Beijing and could have been coerced without burning Yuanmingyuan. While the burning sped up treaty ratification, its necessity remains debatable. Moreover, this account alone fails to justify why Yuanmingyuan was chosen for destruction.

### Destroying Emperor Xianfeng's Prestige and Demonstrating Superiority

A third view stresses the symbolic value of Yuanmingyuan. As the Xianfeng Emperor's most cherished palace, its loss inflicted deep humiliation and shattered Qing authority. British newspapers also openly described the aim as destroying the Emperor's prestige and esteem. This symbolic act also reflected shifting Western perceptions of China. She was once admired as an 'Oriental dream' but was increasingly dismissed as weak and inferior (Ringmar, 2011, p275-294). By targeting Yuanmingyuan, Elgin struck at the cultural heart of Qing rule, exerting European superiority over China. This interpretation complements the second argument by explaining why this palace specifically was chosen.

### Limitations of the Research Outcome:

However, the arguments might be weakened due to:

1. Inconsistencies and potential biases in primary records
2. Errors and biases in translated sources
3. Incomplete and limited use of primary records

### Bibliography:

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