



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

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1. Introduction

This summer, I had the opportunity to work under the supervision of Dr. Lily Chang, assisting in the compilation of a comprehensive bibliography on the use of fire in modern China from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Within this broad field, I concentrated my research on the 1860 burning of the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan).

My work was carried out across both London and Hong Kong, where I consulted a wide range of libraries and research databases. This enabled me to draw on diverse collections, including English- and Chinese-language scholarship, as well as archival sources.

In this report, I present an overview of my research methodology, the central problem addressed, and the historical background of the Yuanmingyuan incident. I then outline my key findings, followed by a reflection on the limitations of the research and the lessons I gained from this process.

2. Research Process

The project pursued two main objectives: first, to compile a comprehensive bibliography, and second, to conduct an in-depth case study of my choice. The bibliography required me to identify, review, and scan both primary and secondary sources, provide full references and links, and produce a concise summary of each.

My research began with a broad survey of several episodes involving fire in modern China, including Lin Zexu's destruction of opium in 1838, the burning of Hankou during the 1911 Wuchang Uprising, the May Fourth Movement, the Boxer Rebellion, and the destruction of Yuanmingyuan. This comparative exploration allowed me to gauge the availability of materials and assess which topic most suited my interests. While I ultimately chose the Yuanmingyuan as my primary focus, I continued to include sources on the other events in the bibliography to ensure its breadth and completeness.

After two weeks of exploratory reading, I selected the burning of Yuanmingyuan for detailed study. I was particularly drawn to the contested question of why Lord Elgin ordered the burning, which continues to provoke debate among scholars. Over the remaining weeks, I examined both primary records and secondary analyses to trace the different interpretations of this controversial decision.

3. Methodology

To address this research problem, I employed a comparative methodology and reviewed sources from various perspectives. I drew on both primary and secondary materials in Chinese and English, accessed through databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest, the China Academic Journals Full-Text Database, the Chinese Periodical Full-Text Database (1911–1949), Shenbao, and Dacheng Old Journals Full-Text Database. In addition, I conducted on-site research at major libraries including SOAS, the British Library, the University of Hong Kong, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

For primary sources, I examined newspapers, diplomatic correspondence, military diaries, Qing court memorials, and official reports. These sources provided valuable first-hand perspectives but also revealed stark contradictions, for example, British and French accounts often downplayed looting, while Qing memorials emphasised foreign atrocities. To account for these discrepancies, I compared multiple primary accounts side by side and paid attention to the political context in which they were produced to avoid biases.

Secondary sources were used to interpret and critically evaluate these primary materials. I reviewed academic books and journal articles in both Chinese and English, as well as translated French works. This range of sources enabled me to situate my research within ongoing scholarly debates.

To summarise, my methodology followed three steps. Firstly, source identification. I systematically collected primary accounts related to the burning itself from different perspectives, including the Qing government and the Anglo-French ally. Secondly, critical comparison. To identify possible bias, silences or rhetorical strategies of

different sources, I cross-examined conflicting narratives to build a full picture of the event. Lastly, engagement with historiographies and modern academic debates over the burning of Yuanmingyuan. I engaged with modern scholarship to understand how the event has been interpreted and politicised.

4. Research Problem

Following a review of the existing scholarship, I defined my central research question as “Why did Lord Elgin order the burning of the Yuanmingyuan in 1860?” This question remains contested, as historians disagree on the motive of destruction. The purpose of the burning has long been subject to speculation, with contemporary justifications often diverging from underlying political or military motives.

Based on evidence, I argue that Lord Elgin’s decision to burn the Yuanmingyuan was driven by a combination of interrelated objectives rather than a single motive. The destruction served as a public retribution for the capture and mistreatment of Western envoys to satisfy the British public, while simultaneously accelerating Qing compliance in signing a new treaty. At the same time, targeting the Yuanmingyuan symbolically shattered the cultural and political heart of the Qing dynasty. Taken together, these factors reveal that the burning was a deliberate act intended to assert Western superiority, both politically and culturally, over the Qing empire.

5. The History of Yuanmingyuan and the background of the burning of Yuanmingyuan

To understand the controversies surrounding the purpose of the burning of Yuanmingyuan, it is crucial to have a holistic view of the historical background and events leading up to its final destruction.

Yuanmingyuan, the ‘Garden of Perfect Brightness’, is located in Beijing (Sitwell, 1938, p237). Its construction began under the Kangxi Emperor in 1708, building on the foundations of the Ming dynasty’s abandoned garden (First Historical Archives of China, 1991, p1-2). Expansion continued under the Yongzheng Emperor and the Qianlong Emperor. Yuanmingyuan functioned as a royal palace for five successive Qing emperors to administer state affairs, reside, and for leisure (Qiao, 1985, p7-9).

Architecturally, the garden combined Chinese and European styles. The European-style section, the Xiyanglou, was designed and built in the 18th century by Jesuit missionaries serving the Qianlong Emperor (Thiriez, 1994, p6). The six principal European-style buildings, including Xieqiqu, Dashuifa, Yangquelong, Fangwai Guan, Haiyantang, and Yuanying Guan, all reflected the Rococo style then fashionable in Europe (Qiao, 1985, p75). Today, only the ruins of the Xiyanglou remain, with scattered stone pillars standing as reminders of the palace's grandeur, since the Chinese-style wooden palaces were largely reduced to ashes (Lee, 2012, p.1). The Second Opium War (1856–1860) unfolded in two main stages (Liu, 1969, p63-65). The first began in October 1856 with the Arrow Incident, when Guangzhou police boarded the ship Arrow to arrest alleged criminals. This escalated into conflict because the British government insisted the vessel was under British registry, while the Qing claimed it was a smuggling vessel. Tensions expanded over British access to Guangzhou, leading to Anglo-French military intervention and the involvement of Russian and American representatives (Ding, 1962, p.102). This phase ended in June 1858 with the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin, which promised formal ratification the following year (Huang, 2020, p99).

The second phase began in June 1859. Lord Elgin and Baron Gros, leading the British and French forces, returned to China to secure ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin. Against Qing instructions, they attempted to approach Beijing via the Dagu Forts (Liu, 1969, p65), but suffered a major defeat, with 345 soldiers killed (Huang, 2020, p99). In February 1860, Elgin and Gros were reappointed to lead the mission. They captured the Dagu Forts in August and advanced toward Tianjin (Zheng, 2022, p143). After occupying Tianjin, the Qing court sent Guiliang and Hengqi to negotiate the treaty, but the Anglo-French soon realised these envoys lacked full plenipotentiary powers (Gros, 2011, p47-51). This affected Qing credibility, prompting the Xianfeng Emperor to appoint Zaiyuan and Muyin as full representatives (Huang, 2020, p100).

In mid-September, Senggelinqin led Qing forces to surround the Allies near Zhangjiawan, capturing 39 diplomats, envoys, and soldiers (North China Herald, 1860). The treatment of these captives remains controversial. Some sources

suggest they were severely mistreated, with several tortured to death, while others argue the evidence of torture was exaggerated or fabricated.

On 21 September 1860, the Battle of Baliqiao took place, resulting in a decisive Qing defeat and the loss of weapons to the Allied army. The following day, the Xianfeng Emperor fled to Rehe (Hong, 2004, p80).

On 6 October, with the fate of the 39 envoys still unclear, Anglo-French forces entered Yuanmingyuan (Pei, 2014, p92). Looting ensued between 6–9 October, though the timing, duration, and participants remain disputed. While British and French soldiers were the primary looters (Zhang, 1994, p12), some accounts also implicate Indian sepoy, Chinese labourers, and even local residents (Chen, 1926, p50).

Reports of mistreatment and deaths among the captured envoys ultimately fueled Elgin's insistence of the burning. Of the 39 captured envoys, 26 were British and 13 French, with only about half survived to return and many bore signs of abuse (Zhang, 2012, p328). While Baron Gros opposed the idea of burning the Yuanmingyuan, arguing it would provoke Qing retaliation and obstruct peace negotiations, Elgin insisted on proceeding. He justified the act as punishment directed at the Qing court rather than the Chinese public, and as a symbolic gesture to take vengeance for the captured envoys (Gros, 2011, p104; Liu, 1969, p103–104).

On 18 October 1860, General Grant ordered 3,500 soldiers under General Michel to set Yuanmingyuan aflame (Zhang, 2000, p89). The fire raged for two days and nights, destroying most of Yuanmingyuan and spreading to adjacent imperial gardens, including the Summer Palace, Jingmingyuan at Yuquan Shan, Jingyiyuan at Xiangshan, and Changchun Yuan (Zhao, 2019, p96). The destruction not only obliterated centuries of Chinese architecture and art but also ruined the Jesuit-designed European palaces within Yuanmingyuan (Thomas, 2008, p23). On 24 October 1860, the Convention of Peking was signed in the Forbidden City, formally ratifying the Treaty of Tientsin and securing the Allies' demands (Wu, Li, 2011, p70).

6. Research Outcome

In this session, I will express my viewpoint towards the different proposed purposes of Lord Elgin's command of the burning of Yuanmingyuan. The different purposes include primary sources directly quoting Lord Elgin's conversations and mails and secondary sources providing further analysis and new proposals of the purposes. It is also important to note that the mainstream arguments of the reason for burning differ in Chinese-spoken academia and English-spoken academia.

6.1 Vengeance

One widely accepted interpretation is that Lord Elgin ordered the burning as vengeance for the 39 captured envoys, especially those who were killed or abused. This argument appears in both English and Chinese scholarship (Klaus, 2019, p.14; Thomas, 2008, p25; Zhao, 2019, p94; Fu, 2010, p43; Huang, 2020, p100-101; He, 1990, p192) and is also supported by primary sources (Gros, 2011, p104-107; Brizay, 2015, p384; Liu, 1969, p103). The central claim is that the Qing violated international law by abusing and killing envoys who should have been protected as diplomats (Zhong, 2019, p.103). According to this view, Lord Elgin, upon learning of these deaths and abuses, ordered the destruction of Yuanmingyuan, a palace not only beloved by the Xianfeng Emperor but also symbolically important as a site of imperial residence and governance (Zhang, 2012, p334).

To evaluate whether vengeance can account for Elgin's decision, I consider three questions. First, did mistreatment and killings of hostages in fact occur? Second, was Yuanmingyuan itself the site of these abuses, as Elgin and some reports claimed? Finally, even if such abuses took place, was burning Yuanmingyuan a proportionate or credible form of retribution?

6.1.1 Credibility of the Hostage Abuse Accounts

The first issue is whether the envoys and diplomats were indeed jailed, abused, and killed by the Qing. Evidence here is highly contested. Some primary records, including British and French envoys' own testimonies (Brizay, 2015, p367–368) and newspapers such as the North China Herald (20/10/1860), describe mistreatment. In *Négociations entre la France et la Chine, en 1860* , for instance, Gros was informed

by Parkes and others after their release that they had been beaten in captivity, and that other envoys passed away due to the fatal torture such as The Times correspondent Bowlby (Gros, 2011, p102).

Yet Chinese secondary sources often downplay or dispute this. For example, from the book *The Old Summer Palace and the Rise and Fall of the Qing Dynasty*, the author Zheng cites *Buzu Xuanwen Ji*, which argues that although the prisoners were treated harshly, the abuse was not fatal. Zhao Guang's account also suggests that Parkes and his companions were actually well treated, provided with better food and medical care when sick (Zheng, 2022, p167–170). This line of reasoning implies that claims of torture and death were fabricated or exaggerated. Still, most Western primary accounts consistently record that 19 of the captives died, and Zheng also admits: "only twenty survived, for reasons complex and requiring further study" (Zheng, 2022, p169). This vagueness, combined with multiple corroborating testimonies, makes it more convincing that significant abuse and killings did occur, even if not all captives suffered equally, where Parkes, for example, appears to have been spared harsh treatment.

6.1.2 Was Yuanmingyuan the Site of the Killings?

Another question is whether Yuanmingyuan was where the abuse occurred.

According to a Chinese academic paper written by Pei, he analysed and quoted different Chinese archival documents, including records written by Chinese officials and memorials by Prince Gong, all sources showing no evidence that captives were held inside the palace grounds (Pei, 2022, p41).

Meanwhile, another source suggests that Parkes and Locke were imprisoned in a jail near Beijing and later moved to a private residence not Yuanmingyuan (Brizay, 2015, p363). Still, *Négociations entre la France et la Chine, en 1860* recorded that one captive, Mr. Norman, was tied up in the Yuanmingyuan gardens, where he eventually died of exposure and neglect (Gros, 2011, p102). The Illustrated London News (Liu, 2015, p74-81) also reported that prisoners were taken into Yuanmingyuan. Taken all sources together, this conflicting evidence suggests different groups of prisoners may have been held in different places, making it

impossible to establish a complete picture. Nevertheless, the uncertainty itself did not prevent Elgin from presenting the Yuanmingyuan as the site of the atrocities (Pei, 2022, p40-41).

6.1.3 The Broader Context of Vengeance

Beyond establishing whether mistreatment occurred, it is also important to consider why Elgin would have felt compelled to act. As commander of the expedition, he bore direct responsibility for the safety of diplomats and the successful conclusion of the Treaty of Tientsin. With 13 dead, including The Times correspondent Bowlby, Elgin risked being blamed for failing to protect envoys (Hong, 2004, p4). Given The Times' enormous influence as a quasi-official newspaper shaping public opinion, Bowlby's death placed Elgin under intense scrutiny. As a regular reader of The Times, he would have been acutely aware of how the press could tarnish his reputation. Burning Yuanmingyuan therefore served as a dramatic gesture to show both Queen Victoria and the British public that he had acted decisively, turning personal liability into a display of authority (Zheng, 2020, p57-59; Brizay, 2015, p363).

Moreover, The Times itself questioned Lord Elgin's decision, reporting Baron Gros's opposition to the burning. This suggests that Elgin would have strategically linked the burning to the hostage incident to justify his decision and shield other potential motives. Notably, his negotiations with Prince Gong also focused more on treaty ratification than on securing the release of prisoners, and even after the Allied victory at Baliqiao demonstrated military superiority, he did not use force to recover the hostages. This undermines the idea that saving the captives was his priority and undermines his motive to take vengeance for the captives.

6.1.4 Was Burning Yuanmingyuan Proportionate Retribution?

Finally, even if vengeance was Elgin's motive, was burning Yuanmingyuan a proportional response? The destruction of an imperial garden of such political and cultural importance far outweighed the Qing's killing of 20 envoys. French opposition to the act reinforces this point. Baron Gros argued that the destruction involved excessive violence, against the teaching of Christianity (Gros, 2011, p106), and

risked escalating conflict causing the Qing to retaliate (Liu, 1969, p103). Moreover, other than burning the Yuanmingyuan there were other alternative approaches, such as demanding financial compensation, constructing a monument in Tianjin, or even threatening the Forbidden City (Pei, 2015, p6). France accepted only the financial compensation proposal to avoid violence. However, Elgin rejected these options and insisted on large-scale destruction, suggesting that vengeance alone cannot fully explain his command.

In sum, while there is credible evidence that some envoys were abused and killed and that Elgin framed his act as vengeance, this rationale is not entirely convincing on its own. The burning of Yuanmingyuan was disproportionate compared to the alleged offense and even opposed by Britain's ally due to excessive violence. A more persuasive explanation is that Elgin used vengeance as a convenient justification to protect his reputation at home and to demonstrate accountability to Queen Victoria and the British public. The account of taking vengeance for the envoys cannot be dismissed entirely, but it likely functioned alongside other motives rather than as the sole driver of Elgin's decision.

6.2 Pressuring the Qing to Sign New Treaties

Another line of interpretation argues that the burning of Yuanmingyuan was intended to pressure the Qing court into concluding the ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin and signing new agreements that would secure Anglo-French economic and trade interests (Zhang, 2012, p334; Ding, 1962, p126). To test this explanation, three questions must be considered. First, how much did the hostage crisis and subsequent negotiations demonstrate Qing unwillingness to sign? Second, did the destruction of Yuanmingyuan materially accelerate the treaty process? Third, even if it accelerated negotiations, was the burning necessary given other available means of coercion?

6.2.1 Negotiation Delays and Qing Resistance

After the Allied occupation of Tianjin, the Qing dispatched Gui Liang and Hengqi for peace talks. Elgin and Gros quickly realised they lacked the authority to represent the court, which deepened mistrust and slowed progress. Later, when Zaiyuan and

Muyin were appointed as plenipotentiaries, negotiations still failed. On 17 September, Anglo-French envoys met Qing representatives in Tongzhou. Elgin and Gros believed this meeting could finalise the agreement. However, Parkes insisted on personally presenting the credentials to Xianfeng. When Prince Gong rejected this demand, the negotiation collapsed. In the following morning, Senggelinqin's troops surrounded the Allies at Zhangjiawan and seized 39 envoys and soldiers as hostages. This ended all progress in the negotiations (Biznay, 2005, p363).

6.2.2 Impact of Looting and Burning on Treaty Progress

Correspondence between Elgin, Gros, and Prince Gong reveals that the hostage issue stalled all discussion, and Allied generals like Montauban expressed open distrust of Qing sincerity. However, after the looting of Yuanmingyuan, Prince Gong softened his stance and released surviving hostages. The Allies then escalated their demands: additional indemnities (Biznay, 2005, p383) and even the cession of Andingmen Gate for military control (Biznay, 2005, p376). The destruction thus appeared to increase the Allied bargaining power. From a military perspective, an early winter in October and shortages of food meant the Allies could not afford to remain in Beijing long-term (Wu, Li, 2011, p71). By destroying Yuanmingyuan, they accelerated the pace of Qing concessions, enabling withdrawal before winter (Pei, 2015, p98). Indeed, only four days after the burning concluded (20 October), Prince Gong signed the Convention of Peking (24–25 October), conceding nearly all Allied demands.

6.2.3 Was Burning Yuanmingyuan Necessary?

Although the burning undeniably accelerated treaty conclusion, its necessity remains questionable. Other forms of coercion were available, such as invading more parts of Beijing, which would have equally undermined Qing political authority. As Pei argues, after Xianfeng's flight to Rehe, it created huge political chaos with officials fleeing and public panic, the worsened situation had already left the Qing with little bargaining power. Thus, the Allies may not have needed to destroy Yuanmingyuan to secure their terms. Rather, the more decisive factor was the approaching winter and supply shortages, which forced the Allies to push negotiations quickly.

In short, the destruction of Yuanmingyuan undoubtedly sped up the signing of the Convention of Peking, but whether it was essential is doubtful. Treaty ratification might have been achieved through alternative threats. Therefore, while this explanation highlights the military and diplomatic pressures of 1860, it cannot by itself fully explain Elgin's decision to target Yuanmingyuan specifically.

6.3 Destroying the Emperor's Prestige and Demonstrating Superiority

A third interpretation is that the burning aimed to shatter the prestige of the Xianfeng Emperor and to assert Western imperial superiority. For instance, *The Illustrated London News* described the destruction as intended to "destroy the Emperor's prestige, and dissipate with a rude hand that halo of divinity with which he has always been surrounded in the imagination of the people" (Liu, 2015, p88). Chinese scholarship similarly argues that Yuanmingyuan, as the Emperor's most beloved palace and a symbol of Qing authority, was deliberately destroyed to humiliate the dynasty (Zhang, 2011, p334; Wu, Li, 2015, p69 ; Qiao, 1985, p75).

To evaluate this account, three questions should be asked. First, how is Yuanmingyuan's destruction linked to weakening the Emperor's prestige? Second, how did shifting Western perceptions of the Qing and Chinese society feed into this symbolic act? Third, does this argument complement other explanations by clarifying why Yuanmingyuan specifically was chosen for destruction?

6.3.1 Yuanmingyuan as a Blow to Imperial Prestige

British and Chinese sources alike emphasise the symbolic power of Yuanmingyuan. General Grant reportedly commented that its destruction would "leave a permanent scar in the people's memory" (Zhang, 2011, p334). Scholars note that the palace was the Emperor's most cherished residence, and its loss dealt a devastating blow to his pride and legitimacy (Qiao, 1985, p79-82). By attacking the Emperor's beloved site, Elgin struck at the cultural and political heart of the dynasty.

6.3.2 Western Perceptions of China and its People

In *Malice in Wonderland: Dreams of the Orient and the Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China*, Ringmar illustrates the burning within the broader transformation of Western attitudes toward China. Earlier European travellers marvelled at Yuanmingyuan, viewing it as the Oriental dream and accepted Chinese rituals like the 'kowtow'. But by the 19th century, the perspective of viewing Yuanmingyuan in awe had shifted. Diplomats dismissed its architecture as poorly constructed, and viewed 'kowtow' to the Chinese emperor as humiliation (Ringmar, 2011, p275-286). From secondary sources' depiction, Allied soldiers expressed disdain for opium-smoking Chinese civilians and corrupt officials. The Allied Force also found Chinese coolies mocking their own dead to be absurd, which reinforced perceptions of inferior and barbaric Chinese (Zhong, 2018, p107-108). Thus, destroying Yuanmingyuan was not only a military act but also a symbolic assertion that a 'barbarian' culture could be humbled by a superior European imperial power through shattering the once Oriental Dream into pieces, which glorified the victory of the Allied Force (Ringmar, 2011, p293-294).

6.3.3 Complementarity with the Argument of Pressuring the Qing to Sign New Treaties

This account explains why Yuanmingyuan, rather than Beijing gates or the Forbidden City, was chosen. By destroying the palace, the Allies both humiliated the Emperor and symbolically annihilated Qing cultural authority. Unlike the treaty-pressure argument, which explains why destruction was urgent, this interpretation explains why Yuanmingyuan specifically was targeted. Together, they form a more convincing rationale: without vengeance as a public pretext and military urgency as a strategic motive, Elgin may not have carried out the burning. Nonetheless, the symbolic value of destroying Yuanmingyuan made it the most powerful target to demonstrate the European's superiority to their perceived inferior barbaric Chinese.

6.4 Conclusion

Having analysed three main accounts explaining why Lord Elgin commanded the burning of Yuanmingyuan, each account on its own contains flaws or gaps that

cannot fully explain the decision. However, when combined, they provide a more reasonable and evidence-based explanation of the purpose.

In conclusion, the hostage incident provided both an excuse and a pressing need for Lord Elgin to escalate his military actions in order to protect his reputation and manage public opinion. Combined with the urgency of forcing the Qing to sign treaties within a very short timeframe, an effective, rapid, and large-scale military action became necessary. Given the political nature of the Yuanmingyuan, being both as a symbol of Qing imperial authority and as Emperor Xianfeng's most cherished palace, its destruction also satisfied the Allies' desire to shatter what they perceived as the cultural heart of a 'barbarian' empire, destroying the remnants of what had once been Europe's Oriental dream (Ringmar, 2011, p293-294).

It is therefore important not to rely on a single line of argument, but rather to combine these different explanations and take a broader perspective. Thinking beyond conventional frameworks allows for a more comprehensive understanding of why Yuanmingyuan was burnt. By incorporating both Anglo-French and Chinese perspectives, and by drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources, I have sought to construct a fuller and more nuanced account of Lord Elgin's command.

7. Limitations of the Research

Although approximately 70 sources related to Yuanmingyuan were reviewed during this research, significant limitations remain, which affect both the validity of my arguments and the understanding of the historical context.

Firstly, inconsistencies and silences in primary records. Different accounts of events often contradict one another, with omissions and biases either unidentified or misidentified. For example, the truth of the hostage incident remains uncertain due to conflicting records. My interpretation may therefore be flawed. Moreover, some primary accounts carry clear political agendas. For instance, certain Chinese sources downplay the Qing court's responsibility for the mistreatment of the envoys in order to blame the Anglo-French forces entirely and construct nationalist narratives (Weatherly, Zhang, 2017, p71). Conversely, some Western sources

sought to downplay the conduct of the Allies to evade historical responsibility. Such biases and agendas inherently affect how events were recorded and, by extension, the validity of my arguments.

Secondly, errors or biases in translation. A portion of the primary sources I used are translated texts, such as *Négociations entre la France et la Chine, en 1860*.

Translation introduces potential errors due to differences in linguistic context and cultural nuance, which may distort or obscure the original meaning (Zou, 2015, p95). In addition, inconsistencies in terminology and formatting in some translated editions raise further concerns about accuracy. Many secondary analyses also rely on translated sources, thus reproducing these inherent biases in later interpretations.

Thirdly, incomplete primary records. Many primary sources do not provide complete documentation. This is particularly the case for personal journals, some of which were deliberately edited. For example, *Négociations entre la France et la Chine, en 1860*, contained most of the letters Gros sent and received in 1860, but certain correspondence was omitted for military or security reasons. This selective record-keeping undermines attempts to reconstruct a full and accurate picture of events. Furthermore, time and resource constraints limited my ability to access additional primary sources from other archives and libraries that could have enriched the analysis, especially with a lack of primary sources from Qing.

8. Reflection

My interest in Chinese history made this project a valuable opportunity to explore a meaningful academic field. The journey was challenging yet rewarding, with several important takeaways.

The most important lesson I learned was how to conduct historical research independently. As this was my first individual research project, I encountered technical skills I had never practised before, such as navigating multiple databases, locating relevant archival materials, and using tools such as microfilm scanners to access historical newspapers. These experiences familiarised me with resources widely used in history research and databases used in Chinese academia.

Moreover, the journey also strengthened my ability to identify and retrieve relevant materials from large library catalogues and archival collections.

Equally important was the recognition that historical research requires critical engagement with sources. Many of the materials I encountered reflected biases, intentional omissions of information, or even political agendas. This required me to approach them with a questioning attitude, probing for inconsistencies, cross-checking with different sources and even considering the backgrounds of authors or sponsoring institutions. I came to appreciate that historical records are rarely complete or entirely factual, and that critical reading is essential for constructing a more balanced account.

I also developed key soft skills that improved the progress of my project. Time management and planning proved crucial in a self-directed project. In the initial two weeks, I spent excessive time on background reading without prioritising sources effectively, which limited my efficiency. Learning from this, I adopted a more structured approach afterwards through breaking large topics into smaller sub-questions, arranging them in logical order, and planning when to access physical and digital sources. This systematic approach improved both my efficiency and the comprehensiveness of my research.

Despite these gains, there are several areas for improvement I would want to address in possible future projects. First, I would formulate a research hypothesis or guiding theme at an earlier stage. In this project, I only identified my central focus halfway through. Earlier clarification would have allowed more targeted planning and a deeper investigation of the case study. Second, I would set clearer goals for each stage of the project. Since this research project had two major aims (compiling a bibliography and developing a specialised case study), early goal-setting, such as specifying which databases to consult and within what timeframe, would have provided greater structure. Finally, shortening the exploratory phase would free more time for in-depth analysis of the case study, thereby enhancing the quality of the final research.

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