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# Impact of Western transmission of the Peking Gazette on Late-Qing China's information security

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The Peking Gazette, as a widespread and effective medium for the dissemination of important information from the Qing government, played a significant role in the internal governance of the empire. In the 19th century, Western missionaries, diplomats, and businessmen in China respected the authenticity and authority of the content in the Gazette, and carried out large-scale translations of political, social, cultural, economic, and military-diplomatic information into English. Western transmission of the Peking Gazette to some extent promoted cultural exchanges between China and the West and also provided the Western powers, which were in a period of expansion, with a wealth of political and military intelligence. The internally focused Qing dynasty was initially unaware of the Western transmission of the Peking Gazette and later took a series of doomed measures, leading to severe damage to national information security and political safety. The historical lessons of the Qing empire are enlightening for countries worldwide today: there is a need not only for openness and transparency but also for balancing the relationship between information disclosure and national security.

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## Introduction

Throughout pre-modern engagements with the West, China found itself inadvertently drawn into the currents of globalization. On one hand, the West catalyzed China's journey towards modernity by founding schools, newspapers, publishing houses, and hospitals, among other infrastructures; on the other, Western sinologists translated numerous Chinese texts, thereby integrating Chinese wisdom and data into the global sphere, marking a pivotal chapter in pre-modern Sino-Western interactions. The English translations of some literature, notably the Peking Gazette, played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of interaction between China and the West during that era.

Originating in the Tang dynasty (618–907), the *Dibao* 邸报<sup>1</sup> was a key channel that was used by successive Chinese dynasties for the large-scale and continuous public dissemination of important political information. It was published by key departments of the central government, and the imperial edicts and memorials it transmitted were printed verbatim without any omission or alteration, making the political information it contained highly authoritative. This fidelity met the need for the long-distance transmission of central government decrees across the vast expanse of the empire. In the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), the *Dibao*, better known as *Jingbao* 京报 (Peking Gazette), continued under the systems established during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, with even more robust institutions (Liu, 2014, p. 41, 90, 95). The Peking Gazette maintained its function of disseminating various kinds of political information and played a significant role in daily government administration, information circulation, and political-cultural construction. The Gazette circulated within all levels of the Qing government administration and served as a primary channel for officials and gentries to access internal government news and probe political trends. Moreover, the distribution speed of the Gazette was much faster than that of official documents. Thus, it was highly valued by bureaucrats and had a broad social impact, making it a unique and valuable medium for the Qing government to make public information disclosures (Deng & Chen, 2022, p. 3). Prior to the 19th century, except for some excerpts translated by the French Jesuit missionary Cyrus Contancin in the first half of the 18th century to promote the Chinese emperor's wisdom and greatness,<sup>2</sup> the Gazette remained a medium effective only within China, playing a crucial role in maintaining Qing dynasty rule.

The story was different in the 19th century when Western powers entered China on an unprecedented scale. At that time, countries such as Britain and the United States urgently desired to expand trade with China and spread Christianity, and naturally, they were eager to understand the true state of China in all its aspects. Diplomats, businessmen, and missionaries in China were very aware of the authoritative nature of the Peking Gazette. Consequently, they went to great lengths to collect the Gazette through various channels and translated a large amount of its content into English, bringing it into the global public domain. Overall, the translation of the Peking Gazette into English, initiated by Robert Morrison in the early 19th century, had a different purpose than the translations by Contancin, who aimed to convey “information”<sup>3</sup> about the Chinese emperor's excellence. Instead, the 19th-century translations were mostly aimed at acquiring “intelligence”<sup>4</sup> that could serve the interests of the translators' own countries (Deng & Chen, 2022, p. 5).

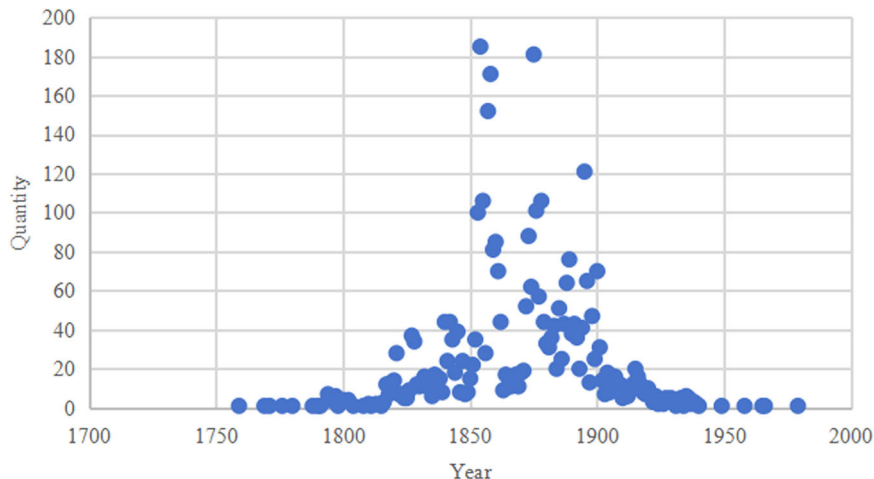
Until the First Opium War, the Qing-dynasty rulers were unaware that Westerners had already taken an interest in the Peking Gazette and had been translating and reprinting it. Consequently, they continued to use the Gazette in the usual manner to publish internal information. Given this context, the Peking Gazette served as a medium for the Qing government to

disseminate a wealth of politically sensitive intelligence internally. Once this sensitive information was translated and utilized on a large scale by the West, what kind of impact did this have on Late-Qing China?

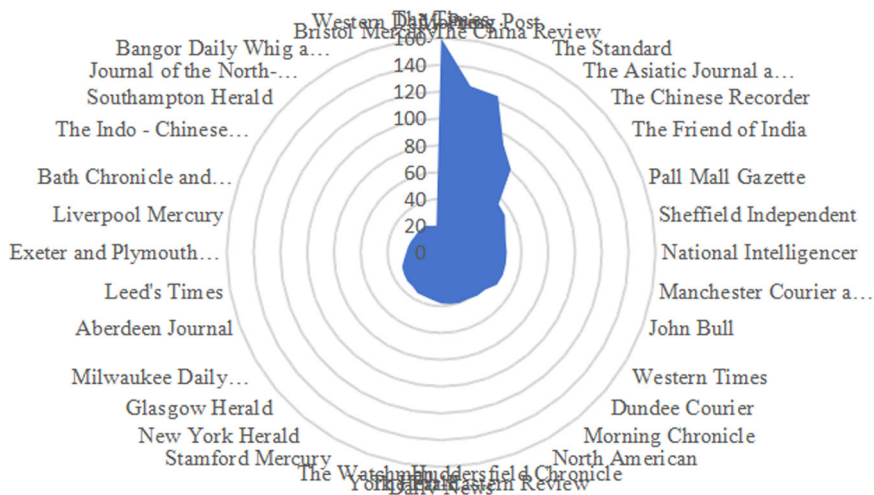
According to a review of the literature, no scholars have yet attempted to answer this question. The literature on government information disclosure and information security mainly focuses on the conflict and coordination between contemporary disclosures and information confidentiality (Kerr, 2012; Davisa, 2011; Mei & Chen, 2023), the security risks of information disclosure (Jaffer, 2010; Gray & Citron, 2013; Xiao & Su, 2022), and the necessity of information confidentiality for national security (Pozen, 2005; Fuller, 2017). Most authors suggest maintaining a balance between information disclosure and national security from institutional (Wells, 2006; Zheng, 2023), technological (Li et al., 2023), and personnel (Wu et al., 2023) perspectives. Only a few studies focus on government information disclosure and security during the Qing dynasty, such as the management of military information security (Wei & Xiong, 2021) and the memorial system (Zhu, 2019). However, there is no related academic research on the impact of the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West on information security.

Academic research on the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West began with Britton's (1933) book *The Chinese Periodical Press (1800–1912)*. Closely related to the theme of this paper, Standaert (2020) and Wu (2015) believe that the Chinese Peking Gazette entered the global public domain as early as the 18th century and had a certain impact in Europe. Mokros (2021) reported on the political and administrative functions of the Peking Gazette, suggesting that they offer insights into the channels of information for the central government's affairs and the ways of achieving policy objectives at that time. Focusing on the role of the Gazette in Sino-Western diplomatic relations, Yin (2005) and Wang, Wang (2014) identified the importance of the Gazette in cross-cultural communication. Wang (2012), Jin and Li (2016), and Zhao (2018) recognized the value of the Peking Gazette as intelligence, considering it as one of the best channels for the West to obtain political intelligence on China.

A comprehensive review of existing research shows a focus on the content, form, cultural function, and readership of the Peking Gazette. However, there is a lack of specialized research on the information security issues triggered by the transmission of the Gazette to the West. There has been no attempt to link the transmission of the Peking Gazette with national information security in Qing Dynasty China, nor has there been an effort to derive historical lessons from problems with historical information security. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) defines information security as the “preservation of confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information”<sup>5</sup>. Following the ISO definition, we propose an operational definition in this article: information security means that the entire information system of a country runs stably and smoothly, without being threatened or even destroyed by internal or external disturbances. As a medium of government information disclosure during the Qing dynasty, the Peking Gazette was closely linked to information security. Its transmission to the West posed significant risks to the information and even national security of the Qing dynasty (Deng & Chen, 2022, pp. 7–8). This paper presents the global dissemination of the Peking Gazette in order and a meticulous analysis at a micro level of how it entered the global public domain. Exploring how the Western transmission of the Gazette threatened Chinese information security, this paper reveals the true nature of the Qing government's policy of isolation and attempts to provide a historical mirror for the construction of contemporary global information security.



**Fig. 1** The coverage of the Peking Gazette in Gale.



**Fig. 2** A list of publications in the Gale that feature the Peking Gazette (due to space constraints, only a partial list is shown).

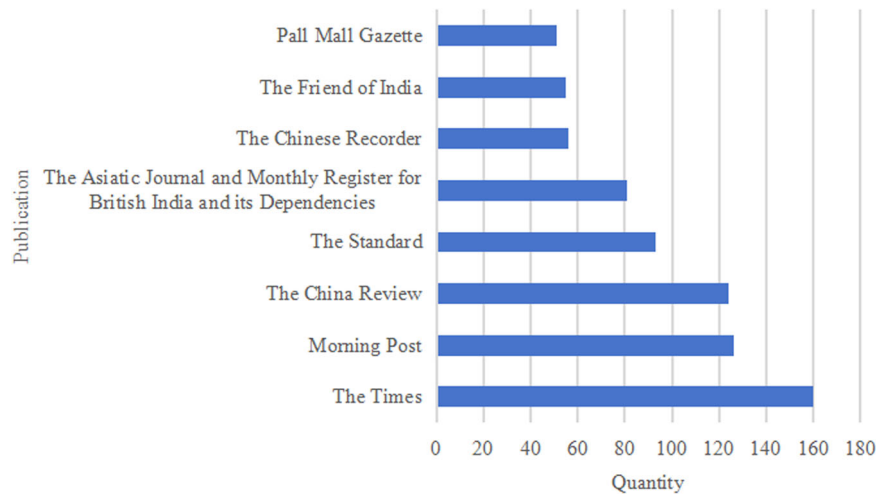
**The dissemination of the Peking Gazette to the global public**

Mokros (2021, p. 131) correctly notices that “in the English-language press, a common term for the court periodical emerged, Pekin(g) Gazette”. We searched “Pekin Gazette Not Peking Gazette” and “Peking Gazette Not Pekin Gazette” in the Gale Primary Sources, finding 3889 related documents, including books, manuscripts, newspapers, journals, and archival records. From the available materials, it is evident that Western interest in the Peking Gazette was continuous from the 18th century to the end of the 20th century (see Fig. 1). There are over a hundred English-language publications that have mentioned or reprinted the Peking Gazette (see Fig. 2), with at least eight of these publications featuring more than 50 articles from the Gazette (see Fig. 3). In addition to the texts contained in the Gale Primary Sources database, there are several other important books and publications that also contain numerous reports from the Peking Gazette (see Table 1). According to Zhao (2018), *The North-China Herald* published translations of 20,000 Gazette reports, and *The Chinese Repository* carried more than 80 such reports.

Using the above data as a clue, we investigated related literature to obtain the historical outlines of the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West. As early as the first half of the 18th century, Contancin discovered that reading the Peking Gazette was particularly educational for Westerners in China (Du, 2001, p. 241). As a result, he read extensively and made extracts and

translations. These translations quickly circulated and gained significant attention in Europe. Some of the content was reprinted as early as 1730 by the prestigious French journal *Journal des Scavans*, and some of the translated excerpts were referenced by Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Quesnay, and Montesquieu (Standaert, 2020).

At the end of the 18th century, following the Macartney Embassy to China, the Peking Gazette began to enter the English-speaking world. Staunton’s (1797, pp. 296–297) *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* is probably the earliest English book to mention the Peking Gazette, discussing its nature and content. Entering the 19th century, with the expansion of trade between the West and China and the spread of Protestant Christianity in China, Westerners began a new chapter in translating and utilizing the Peking Gazette. Especially after the Opium Wars, there was a surge in Western demand for intelligence from China, leading to an unprecedented popularity for the translation and introduction of the Gazette. Beginning in 1809, Morrison (1815, pp. 11–38), commissioned by the East India Company, continued to translate the Gazette for over twenty years. His book *Translations from the Original Chinese* includes eight Peking Gazette articles. *The Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, as the earliest English publication to record the Peking Gazette, almost entirely sourced its “Miscellany” “Journal of Occurrences” and “Indo-Chinese News”



**Fig. 3** A list of publications in the Gale that contain over 50 articles from the Peking Gazette.

**Table 1** Books and journals with English translations of the Peking Gazette (not covered by Gale).

Books	Journals
Staunton G. <i>An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China</i> . 1797	<i>The Chinese Repository</i> . 1832-1851
Morrison R. <i>Translations from the Original Chinese, with Notes</i> . 1815	<i>Chinese Courier and Canton Gazette</i> . 1833
Staunton GT. <i>Narrative of the Chinese Embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartars, in the Years 1712, 13, 14 &amp; 15</i> . 1821	<i>Canton Register</i> . 1835
Davis JF. <i>The Chinese: A General Description of that Empire and its Inhabitants</i> . 1836	<i>Canton Press</i> . 1835
Williams SW. <i>The Middle Kingdom</i> . 1848	<i>The China Mail</i> . 1845-1871
Wade TF. <i>Note on the Condition and Government of the Chinese Empire in 1849</i> . 1850	<i>The North-China Herald</i> . 1850-1941
	<i>Foochow Advertiser</i> . 1867
	<i>The Cycle</i> . 1870-1871

sections on Chinese affairs from Morrison’s translations of the Gazette. Morrison also frequently included translations from the Gazette in his communications with the London Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Morrison, 1821, pp. 197–198), as well as in his personal diaries and letters to George Thomas Staunton, Milne, and others (Morrison, 1839, p. 2). Later, John Robert Morrison (1838, p. 226) continued his father’s work in translating the Gazette, stating that “A regular perusal of the Peking Gazette throws much light on many points in the mechanism and policy of the Chinese government”. Staunton (1821, pp. 258–330) was also among the earliest to translate the Gazette into English, including 40 translated reports in the *Narrative of the Chinese Embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartars, in the Years 1712, 13, 14 & 15*.

In *The Chinese Repository* founded by Bridgman, there was a regular column “Journal of Occurrences” featuring news about Chinese affairs, all of which were excerpted and translated from the Peking Gazette (Morrison, 1832, pp. 78–80). *The North-China Herald* published over 700 translated articles on the Taiping Rebellion and Shanghai affairs from the Peking Gazette between 1850 and 1867. In 1872, Wade (1873, pp. 38–44), the British then-Minister Plenipotentiary in China, published several articles in *The China Review* observing current Chinese affairs and frequently cited the Peking Gazette to support his views. The British diplomat and renowned sinologist Mayers (1874, pp. 13–18) published an extensive article, introducing five aspects of the Peking Gazette: distribution channels, source materials, publication models, official control, and historical origins. This clearly demonstrates that the tradition of using the Peking Gazette to obtain information on Chinese government affairs was highly valued by Western diplomats stationed in China.

In fact, “Gazettes remained the paramount source for Europeans intrigued by contemporary Chinese politics through the nineteenth century” (Mokros, 2021, p. 116). Looking back at the history of the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West, two notable features stand out. First, English-language newspapers were the primary channel for the dissemination of the Gazette in the West. Second, the participants in the translation of the Gazette formed a vast group, including missionaries, diplomats, merchants, and sinologists. It was precisely because of the widespread nature of newspaper distribution and the diverse identities and backgrounds of the translators that rich information about various aspects of China was able to enter the global public domain and spread broadly.

According to the Gale, the content of the Qing dynasty Peking Gazette transmitted to the West encompassed a large amount of data, such as the emperor’s lifestyle, royal dynamics, laws and regulations, court rituals, social customs, the virtues of filial piety and womanhood, official assessments, disaster relief efforts, commendations from the Ministry of Rites, agricultural development, and job adjustments. The domains of the publicized content can be categorized into political information, social information, cultural information, economic information, and military and diplomatic information<sup>7</sup> (see Table 2).

In terms of content, political information was a focal point of the Peking Gazette made publicly available globally. This primarily included royal dynamics, imperial edicts, appointments and dismissals of court officials, and government governance. Military information also constituted a significant portion, mainly encompassing Sino-Western conflicts, local military and civilian uprisings, and foreign policies. Economic, diplomatic, and social information was also covered, mainly reflecting the diverse

**Table 2 Peking Gazette information transmitted to the West (Due to space limitations, only a part of each category is displayed).**

Categories of information	Subcategories	Themes	Journals or newspapers	Article title
Politics	Governance	Piracy control	<i>The Times</i> (No. 33116, Saturday, Sept. 13, 1890)	Piracy in China
		Governance of Tibet	<i>Sheffield Daily Telegraph</i> (No. 15134, Wednesday, Jan. 13, 1904)	China and the Tibet Expedition China
		Riots suppression	<i>The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies</i> (vol. 24, No. 139, Sunday, Jul. 1, 1827, p 98-99)	China
		Grassroots guidance	<i>The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies</i> (vol. 26, No. 104, Aug. 1, Wednesday, 1838, p 223)	The Awakening of China
		Reform of administrative institutions	<i>Edinburgh Evening News</i> (No. 10473, Thursday, Nov. 8, 1906, p 3)	The present emperor of China
		Education of emperor's sons	<i>The Times</i> (No. 30971, Wednesday, Nov. 7, 1883)	Degradation of Prince Kung The Emperor
		Demotion of the crown Prince	<i>York Herald</i> (No. 5542, Thursday, Nov. 12, 1874, p 3)	The latest imperial edict
		Health of the emperors	<i>The Baptist Magazine</i> (vol. 8, Saturday, Nov. 1, 1845, p 574)	France and China
		Official punishment system	<i>Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser</i> (vol.77, No. 13883, Wednesday, May 8, 1901, p 10)	Chinese legislation
		Personnel appointment system	<i>Leicester Chronicle</i> (vol.75, No. 3870, Saturday, Apr. 18, 1885, p 3)	Li Hung Chang's illness
		Criminal punishment system	<i>The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies</i> (vol. 28, No. 164, Saturday, Aug. 1, 1829, p 211)	Queries
		Li Hongzhang's illness	<i>Daily Inter Ocean</i> (vol. 18, No. 42, Sunday, May 5, 1889, p 10)	The heir of Confucius
		Officials' real estates	<i>The China Review</i> (vol. 15, No. 1, Jul-Aug. 1886, p 54)	Births, deaths, marriages and obituaries The population of China
		The death of Confucius	<i>The Times</i> (No. 28876, Tuesday, Feb. 27, 1877)	There has been an awful earthquake in China Famine in China
		Social affairs	Public concerns	Death of the Chinese emperor
Population of China's provinces	<i>National Intelligencer</i> (vol. 5, No. 1439, Tuesday, Aug. 19, 1817)			The Chinese government and the famine
Earthquake disaster situation	<i>National Intelligencer</i> (vol. 24, No. 7201, Friday, Mar. 11, 1836)			
Shandong famine situation	<i>Raleigh Register</i> (vol. 55, No. 7, Wednesday, Nov. 30, 1853)			
The move of a Chinese philanthropist	<i>The Congregationalist</i> (vol. 36 and 59, No. 24, Thursday, Jun. 12, 1884, p 2)			
Government response to famine strategies	<i>Western Daily Press</i> (vol. 40, No. 6263, Friday, Jun. 21, 1878, p 3)			



**Table 2 (continued)**

Categories of information	Subcategories	Themes	Journals or newspapers	Article title
Culture	Ancient traditional customs	Chinese folk stories	<i>Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser</i> (vol. 50, No. 5655, Saturday, Dec. 26, 1874, p 4)	A Chinese love story
		Chinese funeral etiquette	<i>The China Review</i> (vol. 7, No. 5, Mar-Apr, 1879, p 351)	Bidens, mourning etiquette
Economy	Economic infrastructure	Chinese feudal superstition	<i>Arkansas Gazette</i> (vol. 61, No. 66, Saturday, May 5, 1894, p 8)	Childish Chinese superstitions
		The emperor pray for heaven	<i>The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies</i> (vol. 21, No. 82, Saturday, Oct. 1, 1836, p 86-87)	Effect of the emperors
Military and diplomat	Actual economic condition	Railway construction in China	<i>Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser</i> (vol.72, No. 12467, Friday, Oct. 23, 1896, p 5)	Railway construction in China
		Hong Kong tea price changes	<i>Leed's Times</i> (vol. 23, No. 1285, Saturday, Oct. 31, 1857, p 6)	China
Military and diplomat	War between China and the West	China's foreign debt	<i>Morning Post</i> (No. 32957, Tuesday, Feb. 12, 1878, p 6)	China
		Tax projects in China	<i>The Far-Eastern Review</i> (vol. 11, No.11, Apr. 1915, p 461)	China's revenue increasing
Military and diplomat	Chinese and Western exchanges	The Chinese army evacuated	<i>France and China</i> (No. 9912, Monday, Apr. 20, 1885)	Dundee courier
		Border conflict between China and Russia	<i>Cheltenham Chronicle</i> (vol. 36, No. 2471, Tuesday, May 5, 1857)	Collision between the Chinese and Russians
Military and diplomat	Chinese and Western exchanges	The British army entered Tibet	<i>Exeter and Plymouth Gazette</i> (vol. 131, No. 17633, Tuesday, May 26, 1903, p 7)	British mission to Tibet
		Members of the British mission stationed outside China	<i>The Watchman and Wesleyan Advertiser</i> (vol. 13, No. 671, Wednesday, Nov. 10, 1875, p 360)	The Chinese Mission to England
Military and diplomat	Chinese and Western exchanges	Burmese emissaries come to China	<i>The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies</i> (vol. 19, No. 114, Wednesday, Jun. 1, 1825, p 853-854)	Burmese embassy
		The Chinese sent Western emissaries back home	<i>The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies</i> (vol. 36, No. 142, Friday, Oct. 1, 1841, p 191)	Review of Eastern news
Military and diplomat	Chinese and Western exchanges	The Chinese government has allowed Westerners to conduct religious activities	<i>The Times</i> (No. 33442, Tuesday, Sept. 29, 1891)	The Chinese Government on Foreign Missionaries
		The Qing government exchanged etiquette with Western officials	<i>Bury and Norwich Post</i> (No. 4868, Tuesday, Oct. 12, 1875, p 5)	Great Britain and China

aspects of Chinese society. Hence, the Peking Gazette held unique value in aiding Westerners in exploring and understanding the policies and attitudes of the Qing emperors, the thoughts and perspectives of officials, and significant political, sociocultural, and diplomatic activities in the Qing empire during the 19th century.

### Impact of the Western transmission of the Peking Gazette on Late-Qing China's information security

After the Peking Gazette fell into the hands of Westerners, it became an important source of intelligence. For instance, in the 1840s, Gutzlaff wrote several political reports based on the Gazette news, aiding the British Foreign Office in understanding the Qing royal family, official system, and tributary relationships.<sup>8</sup> Westerners also used the Peking Gazette to gather military intelligence. During the First Opium War, some Westerners in China systematically acquired military intelligence through the Gazette, conveying trends in Qing military decisions to the British, including strategic and tactical decisions, military orders, official reassignments, and personnel deployments. In the Eastern Zhejiang Battle in 1842, the British army learned in advance about the Qing government's stance on "war or peace". Before Yi Jing 奕经, the newly appointed Chief-commander, arrived in Zhejiang, the British were already aware of the Qing government's intentions and prepared accordingly. Moreover, the British army gathered information from the Peking Gazette about commanders such as Yi Jing and Wen Wei 文蔚, and key generals such as Liu Yunke 刘韵珂 and Yu Buyun 余步云, including their personalities, styles, and tactics. They also obtained crucial intelligence on the basic deployment, tactical planning, army provisioning, and the planned timing of the Qing army offense in the Eastern Zhejiang Battle, thereby formulating a highly targeted plan for engagement (Jin & Li, 2016, p. 201). In addition to this direct intelligence, the British army also acquired "indirect intelligence" through translated Gazette. John Robert Morrison and others had collected and compiled a series of articles about Chinese government politics from the Peking Gazette, organizing detailed lists of central and local officials to assess the Qing court's political and military policy trends.<sup>9</sup> Articles about the Chinese government originally contained reasonable amounts of public information, but after processing and analysis, these articles became strategically valuable intelligence. As a matter of fact, from the beginning of the 19th century, the Peking Gazette shifted from being an "information channel" to an "intelligence medium" from the Western perspective. The transmission of the Gazette meant that "in the nineteenth century, the reach of the Qing Gazette, called the Peking Gazette by foreigners, was unprecedented" (Mokros, 2021, p. 4), allowing global readers to glimpse Qing political dynamics, strategic information, and military intelligence. The Peking Gazette served as a unique source of intelligence for the Western powers in their intercourse with China. The direct or indirect military intelligence provided by the Gazette played a pivotal role in the tragic outcome of the Qing dynasty's defense of the three eastern Zhejiang cities. It can be said that the Western transmission of the Gazette created favorable conditions for Western diplomatic strategy and military operations. Correspondingly, the covert actions from external sources repeatedly placed the Qing government at a disadvantage in diplomatic affairs, resulting in a series of catastrophic military defeats.

"Information is a form of power and authority related to security, and the effective operation of the Qing dynasty government depended on control over information" (Kuhn, 1990, p. 77). For Western countries, controlling the Peking Gazette meant increasing their influence in China. After the Second Opium War, when some Western diplomats discovered that Qing officials engaged in "backdoor operations" and "untrustworthy behavior"

in diplomatic affairs, they took special measures to force the Qing court to publicly disclose the details of negotiation incidents, demanding that related important information be published in the Peking Gazette. For example, in 1858, France, in the *Additional Articles to the Treaty of Tientsin*, demanded in treaty terms that the removal of Zhang Mingfeng 张鸣凤, the county magistrate of Xilin, Guangxi province, be made public. It was explicitly stated that "once the county magistrate of Xilin was dismissed, the matter should be communicated to the French Minister, and the reasons for the dismissal should be fully recorded in the Peking Gazette" (Qi et al., 2014, 3, vol.28, p. 1034). The British, in the 1860 *Treaty of Peking*, stipulated in the eighth additional article that, after the exchange of the original *Treaty of Tientsin* in Beijing, the emperor of China must "issue an edict to all provincial governors and officials outside Beijing to circulate and publish this original treaty and the additional treaty in the streets", and only after the edicts were received in each place, would the British withdraw the troops previously stationed there (Qi et al., 2014, 7, vol. 67, p. 2506). In the 1870s, the British even proposed that the *Treaty of Tientsin* be published in the Peking Gazette (Union, 1875, p. 2).

Similarly, during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1900), to suppress secret societies and crack down on Chinese civilian organizations, Western countries also demanded that the Qing court publicize in the Peking Gazette some decrees condemning "anti-Christian societies in Shandong and Chihli", stating that "the public should obey the judgments of officials" (Landor, 1901, pp. 44–48), declaring "the complete suppression of secret societies" and warning that "harboring members of societies is a serious violation of the law" (Smith, 1901, pp.181–182, 191). Additionally, British and French diplomats drafted "imperial edicts" that met their own demands, replacing the Chinese emperor's role, and insisted that these "edicts" be published in the Peking Gazette (Qi et al., 2014, 7, vol. 67, pp. 2496–2503). Thereafter, foreign embassies in Beijing frequently requested that the Chinese government publish apologies in the Peking Gazette until these publications became a common practice. The aim of the West was partly to ensure that the Chinese emperor and officials accepted the terms through the Peking Gazette, guaranteeing the authenticity and effectiveness of the treaties. Partly the West also intended to use the widespread reach and authority of the Peking Gazette to announce negotiation outcomes to the Chinese public, ensuring their acceptance. Third, the Peking Gazette was intended to be a tool that would publicize the political intentions of the Western powers and create conditions for diplomatic negotiations. Before the Second Opium War, the Qing emperor had sole decision-making power over the Peking Gazette, controlling its content, public scope, distribution channels, and readership. In 1860, however, when Lord Elgin, representing the Anglo-French-American allied forces, negotiated with Prince Kung and demanded that the treaty's signing be published in the Peking Gazette before they would withdraw, Prince Kung was obliged to agree. The Prince also accepted the Lord's requests that "250 copies of the treaty prepared by Prince Kung himself, 1,200 copies of Peking Gazette and five official letters be transmitted by Royal Navy to Chinese authorities in Kwangtung and other coastal provinces" to ensure strict compliance with the treaty rules.<sup>10</sup> These series of events marked the Qing court's cession of part of the decision-making power to the West over the Peking Gazette's content. The prolonged struggle between China and the West in this regard was actually a power contest in information dissemination, in which China was the losing party.

The Western transmission of the Peking Gazette directly impacted the information security of Late-Qing China and became one of the key reasons for the dynasty's downfall. On one hand, as demonstrated by the case of the Eastern Zhejiang Battle, the leakage

of crucial intelligence and the loss of information control resulting from the transmission of the Gazette led to continuous military, diplomatic, and political defeats for 19th-century China against the West. This resulted in repeated territorial concessions and indemnities, further weakening the already declining national strength. On the other hand, the Western transmission of the Gazette broke through the official political information network constructed by the emperor, forming a challenge to the discursive power of the court. This led to domestic public questioning of the imperial authority, plunging the self-proclaimed prosperous era of the Late-Qing dynasty into a crisis of trust. The uncontrollable new armies and continuous local uprisings further destabilized the era. Under the dual threats of domestic and external factors, the Qing government ultimately met its downfall.

### Causes of information security issues in the Qing empire

The intelligence leak caused by the Peking Gazette, along with the partial loss of control over their information, undoubtedly endangered the information security of the Qing empire. Regarding the issue of intelligence leakage, why did the publicly disseminated Gazette become an indispensable channel for Western countries to obtain crucial intelligence about the empire? We believe that the key reason is China's extreme lack of understanding of the outside world, to the extent of not even comprehending what "foreign countries" meant, resulting in a lack of awareness to prevent information leakage. For the partial loss of control over the Peking Gazette, the key reason lies in the stark disparity in national power, putting China at an absolute disadvantage in its struggle with the West. China's backwardness in the 19th century in terms of information security awareness and overall national strength was ultimately due to its prolonged period of self-imposed isolation. From the perspective of information management or information warfare, the West, which grew stronger through openness, had both a strong demand for external information and effective means to acquire it, while China, weakened by its closure, experienced the opposite.

Entering the 19th century, Western powers such as Britain began seeking larger foreign markets, leading to a surge in demand for various types of information, including Chinese military and political intelligence. Consequently, for Westerners in China, such as missionaries, merchants, and diplomats, understanding various authoritative news from the Qing government became a crucial task, and the Peking Gazette catered to this need. Before the start of translations of the Gazette, the West had long suffered from "inconsistency and contradictions" in knowledge and information about China (Bridgman, 1832, p. 3). The authentic and authoritative nature<sup>11</sup> of the Gazette content perfectly addressed this issue. Additionally, Western powers had been open to the outside world for a long time, and by the 19th century, they had developed a strong intelligence awareness, focusing on collecting intelligence from official publications of various governments (Headrick, 2000, pp. 59–95). Taking Britain as an example, in the 19th century, the British Foreign Office's embassies and consulates abroad were not only diplomatic institutions for maintaining British diplomatic and commercial interests, but also intelligence agencies for collecting information about the host countries. In 1834 it established a Superintendent of Trade of British Subjects in China,<sup>12</sup> with a system where the Chinese Secretary's Office was responsible for collecting information on China and analyzing internal Chinese affairs (Su, 2005, pp. 169–202). It then relied on the Peking Gazette, informants in the Guangdong and Guangxi regions, and its own sinological knowledge to gather intelligence, integrating political intelligence collection into everyday negotiations and espionage (Guan, 2017, p. 301). In the 1840s, the Sino-British *Treaty of Nanking* and the *General Regulations of the Five Ports Opened to*

*Trade* enabled the British to seize Hong Kong and granted them the right to deploy consular officials to five trading ports along China's southeastern coast (The Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1917, p. 383). With the Superintendent of Trade office and consulates established in Hong Kong and the Southeastern Chinese coastal trading ports, the British Foreign Office's intelligence network extended its tentacles into China.<sup>13</sup> A vast amount of intelligence concerning China's politics, trade, diplomacy, customs, and geography continuously flowed toward Britain through the official dispatches of the diplomatic and consular missions in China. From 1843, the Chief Superintendent of Trade and Plenipotentiary and consuls gradually built a "British diplomatic and consular service intelligence network in China" (Zheng & Zhang, 2021, p. 134). Western countries' understanding of China and their subsequent decisions heavily depended on the intelligence work of their missions and consulates in China. This intelligence became the informational foundation for British planning of commercial expansion in China and formulating policies towards China, as well as for its military operations there.

Before the Opium Wars, the closed Qing dynasty was completely unaware that the content published in the Peking Gazette could lead to information leakage, and they were oblivious to the fact that Westerners were translating and reading these reports. Influenced by the long-standing policy of isolation, the Qing court in the early 19th century was arrogantly self-important and uninformed, considering itself the center of East Asian civilization and focusing solely on domestic life (Fairbank, 2008, p. 8), with no concern for countries outside China. In fact, from the arrival of the Portuguese and Spanish in China, until the eve of the Opium Wars, more than three hundred years had passed, and although the British arrived later, they had been in China for two hundred years by the time of the Opium Wars. However, the Qing rulers still had no clear understanding of these countries. Wei Yuan 魏源 wrote about this, "How can we claim to be vigilant about border affairs when we know nothing about a country with which we have had contact for two hundred years, its location, or its alliances and separations?" (Wei, 1868, p. 4). Therefore, the Qing dynasty was significantly unaware of Western intelligence activities. The government officials remained oblivious for a long time that British missionary Robert Morrison had already published systematic translations and introductory texts of the Peking Gazette; they were further unaware that many missionaries joined the translation efforts afterward. The Qing government initially had no defenses against intelligence-gathering activities carried out by Western embassies and Christian missionaries, simply because they did not recognize these as intelligence activities against China. Due to the Qing government's extreme lack of international information security awareness, even though its internal information control system was relatively comprehensive,<sup>14</sup> it could still not prevent information involving state secrets from flowing into the Western world.

Even when the information security risks brought by the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West were gradually understood, China lacked sufficient governance capacity to address them. On the eve of the Opium Wars, commissioner Lin Zexu 林则徐 reported to the Daoguang 道光 emperor that the British, who had been in Guangdong province for many years and were "cunning", often purchased and scrutinized the Peking Gazette to examine and speculate about the contents (Qi et al., 2014, 1, vol. 8, p. 219). Initially, the Qing court did not take any measure to prevent Westerners from reading the Gazette upon receiving this report. Later, Qiying 耆英 reported again that "British barbarians" were reading the Peking Gazette (Qi et al., 2014, 4, vol. 54, p. 2089), and only then did the Daoguang emperor order local governors to strictly investigate those who delivered the Peking Gazette, issuing an edict that said to "punish them according to law and report back" (Qi et al., 2014, 4, vol. 54,



p. 2091). The emperor simultaneously gave his order to cut off the British access to the Gazette from the source. The edict stated, “Anyone who delivers the Peking Gazette to these barbarians is undoubtedly a traitor. They must be sought out, and once captured, interrogated about the specifics of how the gazette was delivered and punished severely” (Qi et al., 2014, 5, vol. 57, p. 2211). The Qing court tried to prevent Westerners from reading the Peking Gazette, thus ordering all departments and localities to “strictly inspect and control” and “strictly investigate those who deliver the gazette to cut off its flow, especially those who copy and distribute it to block its source”. Following this edict, officials in the districts of Liangxiang 良乡 and Zhuozhou 涿州 arranged for officers to specially manage this matter (Guo, 1966, pp. 17–18). However, due to the decision-making power and considerable discretion of provinces and localities, the vertical supervision of the Qing court was lax, and horizontal supervision at the local level was ineffective; thus the central directives were not fully implemented. Additionally, the distribution of the Gazette was sanctioned by the Qing court and its channels were diverse. As a consequence, the “strict investigation” was limited to Emperor Daoguang’s review of Liu Yunke’s memorial and did not see any resulting specific measures. Ultimately, the required “investigation and punishment” ended without any concrete results. It was only after the Qing empire suffered greatly in a series of wars against Western powers in the 19th century and realized the importance of intelligence information that an unprecedented sense of crisis formed, leading to a national emphasis on constructing information security.

## Conclusion

For the Qing Empire, the Peking Gazette was an important tool for the imperial court to exercise control over the localities and strengthen centralization, as they could disseminate political information from the highest center of power across a vast geographic area at a relatively fast pace. They accurately expressed the emperor’s will, allowing local officials and gentries to comprehensively, accurately, and swiftly obtain information on imperial policies. The Qing emperors allowed the widespread dissemination of the Peking Gazette because they never anticipated that Westerners would mine them for intelligence to use against the empire. Indeed, when Contancin in the 18th century sent translations of excerpts from the Peking Gazette to Europe, the China he presented was a nation of high political civilization and ceremonial propriety, a model of civilized wisdom and moral order, even influencing Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire. Therefore, it can be said that at this time, the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West was mainly a form of cultural exchange and did not impact the information security of the Qing dynasty.

The situation in the 19th century significantly differed. The dissemination of the Peking Gazette through Western channels broke through the seemingly powerful and vast information management network established during the Qing dynasty, surpassing the scope of the internally oriented official information network. The transmission itself was not problematic, symbolizing the integration of China with the outside world and reflecting the gradual trend of global openness. However, when the Gazette was employed for military purposes by Western powers, their essence underwent a transformation. Before the Western transmission of the Peking Gazette, the Qing government had complete control over it. However, after its transmission to the West, the integrity of the Qing government’s control over the Peking Gazette was disrupted. It began to lose its independent political status, marking a destabilization of the Qing government’s rule and the legitimacy of its political power. It should be noted, however, that the translation or Westward dissemination of the Gazette in the 19th century was not solely serving military and

political forces as intelligence. In other Western literature not discussed in this article, there were also diverse introductions and benevolent uses of the Peking Gazette as cultural information.

Viewed in isolation, the policy of isolation and seclusion itself does not necessarily lead to a political crisis; its motivation is to maintain national and cultural security, serving as a defensive self-protection strategy against external threats (Gao, 2022, p. 17). In a self-sufficient feudal society, isolation often serves as a means for rulers to maintain political stability. However, once commerce and global trade began to develop, the world became an interconnected whole, exposing the drawbacks of this policy. The misfortune of the early 19th-century Qing dynasty lies in its prolonged isolation and lack of awareness of international affairs, leading to a lack of awareness about information security. There was a complete failure to anticipate the serious risk of international leaks of the rich intelligence in the Peking Gazette which had been intended to be disseminated internally. When these risks were exposed, placing the country in an extremely disadvantageous position, the Qing dynasty, facing a significant power disparity with the West, took a series of measures that were destined to be unsuccessful. From a historical perspective, the Qing Empire’s tragedy paradoxically heralded a significant boon for the Chinese people. Western transmission of the Peking Gazette, along with its subsequent Western control that infused it with modern media traits, epitomizes China’s unintended entanglement in globalization. This challenging journey catalyzed China’s march towards modernization, hastening the Qing empire’s decline and setting the stage for crafting a new era in Chinese history.

In terms of the thematic focus of this article, the transmission of the Peking Gazette to the West resulted in severe issues with information security and national security for the Qing empire. This crisis in information security is not just a historical problem but also serves as a lesson for the information security development of countries in the present world. First, policies of isolationism and the preservation of national information security through self-imposed restrictions are not viable. Despite the coexistence of globalization and anti-globalization in the current era, globalization is an inevitable historical trend. Some countries currently generalize the concept of national security and choose to be “self-contained” in areas such as the internet and information technology. Such security concepts and methods are destined to be ineffective. The historical fact of Chinese intelligence leakage due to the global visibility of the Peking Gazette objectively confirms this conclusion. Without a global perspective, the ideas and system designs for information security are only temporary expedients. Therefore, facing the complexity of global risks and the practical challenges they bring to national information security governance, countries should align with the trend of globalization. They should strengthen communication and cooperation between nations, actively participate in global security governance, and enhance international security cooperation. This involves establishing mechanisms for mutual trust and cooperation, paving the way for a globally shared and mutually beneficial approach to security, and building a world characterized by universal security, common prosperity, openness, and inclusivity. Second, information disclosure needs to consider its “public” boundaries. Transparency is one of the key aspects of modern democratic governance, essential for achieving participatory and deliberative democracy in the modern era. However, transparency is not without its boundaries. Protecting national security and interests is the ultimate goal of all countries and governments, and matters related to national secrets are generally not disclosed. If information involving national security is completely made public, it could irreversibly damage national security and public interests. Balancing information disclosure and preserving national secrets is crucial. Countries should not

only promote the maximization of information disclosure to achieve the goal of transparent governance but also ensure national security. This involves preventing the inappropriate disclosure of national secrets and maintaining a balance between information disclosure and information security. Therefore, on the one hand, with the evolution of new media technologies, the practice of digital-based information transparency has been intricately woven into the fabric of political, economic, and social frameworks. The mass media, serving as vigilant gatekeepers, plays a pivotal role in championing the cause of transparent governance, fostering the creation of administrations distinguished by their commitment to openness and transparency. Simultaneously, entities tasked with information disclosure must enforce stringent and precise distinctions concerning matters of national security, ensuring that sensitive information is safeguarded through effective confidentiality measures. On the other hand, excessive secrecy should be seen as negative, especially when it leads to superficial security measures at the expense of genuine security measures; these means should be adopted reluctantly only after the failure of conventional political approaches.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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### Notes

- 1 The *Dibao* 邸报 in Chinese history, known by various names such as *dichao* 邸抄, *chaobao* 朝报, *jingchao* 京抄, *kechao* 科抄, etc., was commonly referred to as the Peking Gazette by Westerners during the Qing dynasty.
- 2 Jesuit missionary Contancin was among the first Westerners to place significant importance on the Peking Gazette. He read a vast number of its articles, excerpted and translated them, and from 1725 to 1730, he provided detailed introductions to the Gazette in three letters sent to Europe (Du, 2001, pp. 189–196, 241–268, 312–339).
- 3 The concept of “information” in this article refers to data, facts, or details that are collected, received, or communicated, which can be used to increase knowledge or understanding about a particular subject, situation, or phenomenon.
- 4 The concept of “intelligence” in this article refers to various types of information about China’s politics, trade, economy, geography, customs, culture, etc., obtained by Western countries through public or secret channels, and the various reports, memorandums, etc., written based on this information.
- 5 ISO/IEC 27000:2018 (en). Information technology–Security techniques–Information security management systems–Overview and vocabulary. <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/en/#iso:std:iso-iec:27000:ed-5:v1:en>.
- 6 The Gale Specialty Databases are a renowned series of databases from the American Gale (Thomson Gale) group. The core content of these databases is derived from numerous reference book series published by the Gale group over the course of 50 years. The reference materials in these series are widely recognized as the most authoritative and comprehensive in their respective fields (such as literature, history, business, biographies, etc.) worldwide.
- 7 The political information in this text primarily refers to information generated from state political activities, mainly reflecting the structure, personnel, functions, and procedures of the Qing government institutions. Social information mainly involves the following: matters of direct interest to citizens or other organizations; issues that require broad public awareness or participation; the state of social welfare projects; and emergency plans, early warnings, and responses to sudden public events. Cultural information primarily concerns traditional ancient customs. Economic information arises from economic activities and includes the state’s economic policies, long-term planning, major initiatives, and updates and trends in economic development. Military and diplomatic information pertains to the military and wars, focusing on national defense construction, activities of armed forces, and diplomatic and foreign affairs activities.
- 8 Gutzlaff KF, State of China in 1846, FO 17/124, pp. 45–51. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4235038>; Gutzlaff, Retrospect of the Events during

- 1848, FO 17/153, pp. 36–50. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4235067>.
- 9 Please refer to “List of the person holding office in China” and “List of officers at Peking in the imperial government” (The Chinese Repository 4(10):473–484 and 12(1):20–33).
- 10 Prince Kung to Bruce. FO 682/1993/86, Nov. 16, 1860. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4923659>.
- 11 Regarding the authenticity and authority of the Peking Gazette, many Westerners have offered their views. For instance, Cyrus Contancin, one of the first to translate the Gazette, noted that it only published matters related to the emperor, and its reliability and authority far exceeded the “rumors” found in European newspapers (Du, 2001, pp. 267–268). In *The Chinese Repository*, an English journal founded by Western Protestant missionaries in China, a special column called “Journal of Occurrence” was established with the aim of reflecting the actual situation of Chinese people (Bridgman, 1836).
- 12 FO to Napier, Jan. 25, 1834, FO 17/5, London: The National Archives, pp. 1, 8, 10–11. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4234918>.
- 13 FO to Davis, 28 Feb. 1844, FO 17/85, pp. 59–60. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4234999>.
- 14 Until the *Tongzhi* 同治 era, this remained the case. For instance, *Woren* 倭仁, a Grand Secretary was known for opposing figures like *Prince Kung* 恭亲王 for “pandering to foreigners”, was deeply dissatisfied with the secrecy of the *Zongli Yamen* 总理衙门 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The *Zongli Yamen* then petitioned to allow him access to the relevant documents, with a special admonition not to disclose their contents. After reviewing the documents, *Woren* also emphasized in his response that he was doubly careful and did not leak any information (Qi et al., 2014, 5, vol. 48, pp. 2021–2022).

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**Ethical approval**

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

**Informed consent**

No informed consent was needed as this study did not include human subjects.

**Additional information**

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