ON AUGUST 5th 1872 thousands of Londoners put on their Sunday best and boarded trains heading for the outskirts of the capital. Though the weather was cold and rainy, they were determined to enjoy themselves. It was, after all, only the second “August bank holiday” in British history: a Monday off work on full pay—an extremely unusual treat.

Their destination was the Crystal Palace, the world’s first theme park. The glass-and-iron structure, a colossal testimony to Victorian industrial might, overlooked fountains that were compared to those of Versailles. For a shilling a head (half price for children), visitors could expect the most diverse range of exotic thrills available in one place in one day anywhere in the country, including the first sculptures of dinosaurs.
To cap it all, that evening there was to be a re-enactment of a battle with China—“Grand Spectacle: Storming of the Chinese Peiho Forts”, advertisements proclaimed. The strongly built redoubts on the desolate mud flats near the northern Chinese port of Tianjin had been overrun by British and French troops 12 years earlier in what the New York Times called a “dashing little campaign” at the end of the second Opium War.

The daytrippers in south London would have been familiar with their country’s conflicts with the Celestial Empire. The clashes between the two powers, one claiming global supremacy, the other in precipitous decline, had been victories of just the sort of industrial prowess the Crystal Palace had been built to celebrate. The world’s first iron warship had been deployed by Britain to great effect. They had also been squalid conflicts. Calling them the “China Wars”, as the British establishment did, sounded too grand. The general public just called them the Opium Wars. The first one had been triggered by China’s confiscation of 1,000 tons of the drug from British smugglers and its refusal to pay compensation. That entirely reasonable act inflamed long-simmering British resentment of China’s refusal to open its doors more than a crack to foreign products, and to be suitably deferential to British greatness.

The subsequent battles are now largely forgotten in Britain. From the British point of view, they were minor compared with those of the 20th century. And they are on the other side of the peak and decline of Britain’s imperial power, which has tended to obscure them from view. But China has not forgotten the Opium Wars. The conflicts were a humiliation, exposing the hollowness of its claims to be the world’s most powerful empire. They set it on a quest, which continues to this day, to rediscover its strength. Every Chinese schoolchild knows that the modern drive for wealth and power is, at root, a means of avenging the Opium Wars and what followed. How the conflict is remembered still matters very much.
All that mattered to the bank-holiday crowd, however, was that Britain had won. The first war, fought in 1839-1842, had resulted in the handing over to Britain of a desolate little island called Hong Kong and the opening of five Chinese ports to foreign trade. The second, in which Britain had joined forces with the French, was waged in 1856-1860. It resulted in sweeping concessions on trade (including legalisation of the opium traffic) and access for foreigners to China’s hitherto closed interior.

Many of the holiday-makers were probably aware that the Opium Wars had been controversial in Britain and fiercely opposed by some politicians. William Gladstone, then prime minister, had, as a young MP in 1842, said that he did not know of a conflict “more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace” than the first Opium War. The daytrippers could have had no inkling that the wars would put China on a course that would eventually lead to a dictatorship inspired by the writings of two bearded émigrés who, as it happened, were living in north-west London at that time: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. On that bank-holiday Monday both men were getting ready that day for a showdown with anarchists at a forthcoming congress of the International Workingmen’s Association in The Hague.

Contempt for, and suspicion of, China ran deep. That summer a new play opened in London, based on Charles Dickens’s unfinished novel “The Mystery of Edwin Drood”. The story begins with a seedy scene in a London opium den—by then, smoking the drug had come to be viewed not so much as a bad habit encouraged by the British, but as a Chinese vice menacing Britain. As Dickens put it, opium use could even make the smoker take on “the strange likeness of the Chinaman”, including skin colour.

The fireworks show began with a procession of boats, illuminated by Chinese lanterns, on one of the lakes. Then soldiers began laying a pontoon across it towards mock Chinese forts on the other side. A battle erupted on the water, with “Royal Navy” boats exchanging barrages of fireworks with “Chinese” junks. “Victory was on the side of the English as a matter of course,” one newspaper said. The show ended with a chorus of “God Save the Queen”. Such was Victorian fun, brimming with pomp and patriotism. Even as late as the 1890s, more than 30 years after Britain's last conflict with China, the Opium Wars were still being celebrated in extravagant firework tableaux.

The Crystal Palace burned down in 1936, a spectacular blaze visible across London. A subtle reminder of the Opium Wars lingers, however, around one of the garden’s...
lakes. It is fringed with evergreen mahonias, plants introduced to Britain by Robert Fortune, a Scottish plant hunter who found them in the 1840s after the first Opium War had prised open the Chinese door. He also smuggled out 20,000 tea seedlings to Darjeeling, setting up the Indian tea trade. Before that, China had a near monopoly on what was becoming Britain’s drug of choice—frequently bought with profits from opium.

**The other palace**

On the northern edge of Beijing is another park that was, in its day, frequently compared with Versailles: Yuanmingyuan, or the Garden of Perfect Brightness. It is an expanse of lily-filled ponds, weeping willows and winding paths more than four times bigger than the park at Crystal Palace.

Here memories of the Opium Wars are very much alive. “Never forget our national shame,” intones a guide in front of a red-capped group of Chinese visitors. Around them are the few remaining pillars and jumbled stones of an 18th-century Western-style mansion designed by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit missionary. The building was part of a huge complex of pagodas and courtyards that once filled the park—the imperial family’s summer palace. At the end of the second Opium War it was razed by British and French troops in an orgy of destruction.

The soldiers began by plundering anything made of gold or silver, smashing exquisite objects of porcelain and jade, and dressing themselves up for comic effect in ornate silk clothes from the imperial wardrobes. Then, in revenge for the torture and killing of a group of British negotiators by the Chinese, the British commander ordered the complete destruction of everything that remained.

The torching of the Summer Palace stands as one of the greatest acts of cultural vandalism of the past two centuries. “When we first entered the gardens they reminded one of those magic grounds described in fairy tales; we marched from them upon the 19th October, leaving them a dreary waste of ruined nothings,” wrote one British officer.

In 1997 Yuanmingyuan became one of the first sites in China to be named by the Communist Party as a “national base for patriotic education”. The nationwide pro-democracy protests of 1989 had shown the party how much it lacked the public’s support. Officials hoped that teaching people about the country’s miserable past at the hands of imperialist aggressors would make them more supportive of the party, and grateful for its help in making China great again.
The list of such sites keeps growing: another 41 were added in 2017, bringing the national total to 428. Pilgrimages to them are all but obligatory for schoolchildren, university students and officials. At Yuanmingyuan, new recruits to the party are sworn in before the ruins. Students from a nearby school celebrate turning 18 at ceremonies here: they stand before the scattered masonry in their best clothes, release doves of peace and sing patriotic songs.

As China grows stronger, it is laying ever greater weight on its history. It wants the booty back that the British and French seized. And there is a lot of it. In 1865 numerous pieces, gathered by a French officer, were put on display for a few weeks in the Crystal Palace. Many other items are now in Western collections. In 2013 two famous sculptures looted from the palace in 1860 were returned to China by the family of a French art collector. Chinese buyers have purchased others and brought them home.

The nation’s growing wealth allows it a new redress against the plundering of the past. It can acquire symbolic treasures from elsewhere itself: the London Taxi Company, maker of the famous black cabs; House of Fraser, a retailer; Club Med, a holiday firm. In 2013 there was much excitement in London about plans by one of China’s richest businessmen, Ni Zhaoxing, to spend £500m (then $810m) on rebuilding the Crystal Palace. Mr Ni eventually got cold feet, but his company has kept an article on its website that talks of Mr Ni’s hope of “rebuilding the glory of history” in south London. The same term is often used in China by those who dream of a rebuilt Yuanmingyuan.

Mouth of the tiger

There are no great gardens in the town of Humen, where the brown waters of the Pearl river, having flowed through an endless sprawl of factories in the southern province of Guangdong, prepare to spill into the South China Sea. British merchants called this stretch the Bogue—an adaptation of the Portuguese translation of Humen: Boca do Tigre, or Tiger’s Mouth. It was here, in the 19th century, that British ships offloaded their opium onto fast-moving Chinese smuggling boats known as “centipedes”.

The town, which in the past two decades has grown rich by making textiles, is home to one of the country’s first patriotic-education bases: the 1950s-era Opium War Museum. It stands on the site where, in 1839, Lin Zexu, a mandarin sent by the emperor, destroyed the confiscated British opium—the act that triggered the whole shameful affair. Another museum dedicated to the Opium Wars, the Sea Battle Museum, opened nearby in 1999.
As it was when the British warships arrived, Guangdong is still the drugs hub of China. When Xi Jinping became the country's leader in 2012, it was the biggest manufacturing centre of illegal narcotics, and home to one-sixth of the country's registered drug addicts. In 2014 nearly 60% of drug-making crimes recorded by Chinese police, mainly involving methamphetamine (“ice”) and ketamine, occurred in the province. Following a three-year anti-drug campaign called Operation Thunder, the authorities there said a “turning-point” had been reached: Guangdong’s share of drug crimes had fallen to less than 40%. But it is still number one.

The authorities in Guangdong are acutely conscious of the historical echoes. Indeed, they draw attention to them with occasional public burnings of seized drugs in Humen. Underlying all discussions of the issue is always the hint that it was the British who got China hooked on drugs in the first place.

In occasional books and articles, a few Chinese intellectuals ask whether the message of the Opium Wars is really as simple as the party suggests. Huang Yanming, a pro-democracy activist in south-west China, argues that the wars were more about the freedom to trade than a struggle over opium—calling them “Opium Wars”, he says, is tantamount to “abandoning historical truth”. Julia Lovell, a British historian, makes a similar point. In her book “The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China”, she says the move into opium by British traders was not, as claimed by many Chinese historians, a deliberate conspiracy to make narcotic slaves of the Chinese. “It was a greedy, pragmatic response to a decline in sales of other British imports,” she writes.

A Chinese translation of Ms Lovell’s book is on prominent display in Beijing’s biggest state-run bookshop. In it she notes one reason why the government was so averse to the drug: “disquiet about the threat to stability posed by a hedonistic opium culture”. But Frank Dikötter, a Dutch sinologist, argues in his book “Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China” that in most cases opium, in the form smoked in 19th-century China, “did not have significant harmful effects on either health or longevity”. “Historians of China,” he continues, “rarely mention that any respectable person in Europe or America could walk into a pharmacy in 1900 and routinely buy a range of hashish pastes, exotic psychedelics or morphine (together with a handy injection kit), and that opium products were widely on sale in Britain”. Opium dens like those in “Edwin Drood” were a cultural problem, not a pharmaceutical one.
In 1847 *The Economist* described China’s ban on opium as “silly” (it continues to argue that prohibition of drugs does more to boost traffickers’ profits than to prevent addiction). Until 1916, this newspaper listed opium in its weekly list of commodities prices (see above). Only in that year did Britain begin requiring a doctor’s prescription for its purchase.

To Mr Xi, China’s defeats in the Opium Wars are proof that weak countries will be defeated. One of his first public acts after he took over was, with his Politburo colleagues, to visit an exhibition at the National Museum in Beijing called “The Road to Revival”. It begins with the outbreak of the first Opium War and ends with China’s rise under the Communist Party, represented, among other things, by nuclear missiles. The message is clear: don’t mess with us again.

But Mr Xi ignores another conclusion that could be drawn from China’s defeats: that an autocratic political system fearful of Western ideas was at least partly to blame for China’s weakness. The Daoguang emperor, whose fight against opium led to the first war, was a jittery conservative—“an anxious ruler...searching for a scapegoat for the country’s many troubles”, as Ms Lovell puts it. Some Chinese liberals wonder whether painting foreigners, be they Westerners or Japanese, as a threat may serve a similar purpose today.

Museums in China have barely any wriggle room to question the official line. But at the Sea Battle Museum in Humen, which re-opened a year ago after a refurbishment costing nearly 60m yuan ($9m), it is possible to detect some head-scratching.

The new display sticks to the official line, with motion-sensing video games allowing visitors to shoot at British ships by flailing their arms. But the exhibits end on an unusual note: a list of questions about what would have followed if the imperial government had acted differently. What if, for example, it had been “brave enough to step forward” after its first defeat and declare learning from the West a priority? Would the second Opium War have happened? The display offers no answers. To do so would court the wrath of a party that does not want to be told that a lack of reform may have played a part in China’s 19th century sufferings. Instead, the museum plays safe with the closing words: “There are no ‘what ifs’ in history.”

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