

Memories and hallucinations

# The Opium Wars still shape China's view of the West

*Britain and China see each other through a narcotic haze*

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.