John Shakespeare lived in Peking in 1936. Now in his 80s, he has just gone back there for the first time. His son Nicholas Shakespeare tells the tale
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“They were beheading someone. We were driving down a narrow street in the centre of town, and came out into a big square, Tiananmen Square for all I know—at which point my nanny thrust me to the floor of the car so that I wouldn’t see what was going on.”

My father is one of a handful of Westerners alive today, perhaps no more than a dozen, to have lived in Peking during the 1930s. His recollections fanned the image of China I grew up with, which probably only ever existed on the snuff bottles that his parents brought home to Worcestershire, along with miniature trees dangling with jade leaves, intricately carved camphor-wood chests and paintings of mountain temples on brown silk.

Never having visited China, I persuaded my father last autumn to accompany me as a guide through the fabled walled city of his boyhood. I wanted to see through his eyes the changes that none of us can avoid hearing about.

A child of the Empire, my father saw out its last moments. He is an example of the speed with which national fortunes change. In January 1936, aged five, wearing a black armband because George V had just died, he boarded the troop ship Neuralia, taking his father out to Peking on his posting there as medical officer to the garrison guarding the British Legation. “I can remember the beef tea served by stewards on the upper deck every day at 1 lam,” he says, “and the soldiers noisily playing Housey Housey [a form of bingo] on the decks below.” The journey along the great imperial route lasted six weeks—as opposed to six and a half days by the more expensive Imperial Airways flying-boat. “We stopped at all the British bases, either to disembark detachments of troops or to take on coal. Gibraltar, Malta, Port Said, Aden, Bombay, Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong. On the way from Hong Kong we stopped at Shanghai, which was also a British concession. This meant in effect that throughout the long journey we never once
set foot on foreign soil. At every port, the Union Flag was proudly flying and Royal Navy gunboats lay at anchor in the harbour.”

At the time, Britain remained the chief foreign power in China. By contrast, China had the sort of status Vladimir Putin sees when he calls today’s Britain a small island no one pays any attention to. In 1936 China accounted for a mere 1.3% of British trade abroad, according to the British ambassador, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen (today it is more than twice that). On the list of Britain’s customers, China ranked 25th. “When I was young,” my father says, “it was inconceivable that this country would dominate the world financially.”

The last leg of the journey was by train. After hours of empty desert and monotonous grassland, suddenly, there on its plain, nestling in a crook of mountains, was a vast walled garden containing 1.5m inhabitants. Nothing prepared you for the beauty of this city: it seemed so completely designed. Green burst up from the open courtyards like frozen explosions, and traditions survived that were a thousand years old.

Among my father’s first memories are paper kites flying in the sky, blue-coated men with pigtails and uncut finger-nails, and old women shuffling along on bound feet. “I saw them all the time, slightly hobbled. I was fascinated by their feet—they were absolutely tiny. I didn’t realise how hideously deformed they were.”

With his black armband still on, he entered a Peking that was barely touched by the modern world: a unique, unindustrialised city protected by a series of high crenellated walls within walls. These 40-foot battlements of hardened grey brick were surmounted at intervals by heavy 15th-century watch-towers, with rose-coloured gates that closed at dusk.

The great metal-studded portals stand guard over an unusually low city in the photos that we flick through on our ten-hour flight to Beijing—as Peking became known officially, in 1958, under Mao Zedong, who had established the People’s Republic in 1949. In one image captured by my grandmother’s Box Brownie, my father, actually wearing a pith helmet, stands on the roof of the Jesuit observatory (above), then one of Peking’s tallest buildings, and looks down on a horizon broken by the golden roofs of the Forbidden City—“winged as if to take flight” in Harold Acton’s words.

Acton was one of several British writers living in Peking. Robert Byron was finishing “The Road to Oxiana” in Acton’s house, and disagreed with him about Chinese architecture: “These are tents,
booths and summerhouses, pshaw!—contraptions for bazaars.” Also there were I.A. Richards, the founder of modern literary criticism, and the scholarly forger and fantasist Edmund Backhouse, a homosexual Old Wykehamist who entertained visitors with memories of the last empress, Cixi, whom he claimed personally to have bedded 200 times. All these men were visitors to the British Legation, my father’s home for the next two years.

The family bungalow was reached through a large brick gate on British Road (later rechristened Righteousness Road by the Communists). Inside the walled compound were 22 houses with tiled fireplaces and chintz curtains. It was an artificial existence. The legation was a microcosm of small-town England, where people moved, according to another writer, Peter Fleming, “with the slow, stately and mysterious grace of fish in an aquarium. Round and round they go, serene and glassy-eyed”. There was a theatre, a bowling alley, a squash court; and sentries from the Worcestershire Regiment, to which my grandfather was attached, punctually mimicked the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. They were there in response to the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, in which an ambassador had been killed and the Legation Quarter put under siege for 55 days by the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists—a nationalist sect that had plotted to massacre all foreigners and halt European encroachment and gunboats. The garrison was a defiant blast of reassurance, addressed principally to Peking’s 1,000-strong British community. The only Chinese speaker, it was said, was the legation parrot.

Fronted by two stone lions, the ugly grey gate carried the words “Lest We Forget”. Communication with the population outside was minimal. The handful of Chinese within the legation were “house-boys” or “coolies” who brought water to the bungalow on creaking single-wheeled barrows, and carried away the “night-soil”—plus mounds of wilting pansies and chrysanthemums. My father’s Pekinese, Winks, scampered through flower-beds in constant full bloom which were changed from day to day. “A coolie would turn up with basketfuls of pansies on a shoulder-pole, and the gardener pushed them in overnight.” Otherwise, entry was by letter of introduction.

My grandparents mingled socially with the Chinese only at Paomachang, the dusty racecourse four miles away. Here my grandmother displayed what Acton called “the adaptability of the more masculine, hard-riding, happy-go-lucky type of Englishwoman who haunted Paomachang”. She kept two small, stout, pessimistic Mongolian ponies, Contango and Comyangpat, and raced them in her colours, orange and green. The Chinese, who liked to gamble, bet their shirts on them.

\textit{Top} Same place, different world: A newly wed couple on the roof of the Jesuit observatory, near Tiananmen Square, 2013

\textit{Above} John Shakespeare, aged six, with his nanny, at the same spot in 1936—when it was one of Peking’s highest points
days was a magical place: “you may travel far and wide”, Acton wrote, “but you will never find a
city so beautiful, so complete.” Even so, danger could appear without warning. My father’s English
nanny shielded him from the trauma of witnessing a beheading, but was powerless in the face of
sudden illnesses, like those which had carried off a recent ambassadress and at least one third
secretary. From lettuce grown locally and washed in “night-soil”, my father and his younger sister
cought dysentery and very nearly died. “I see myself in a hospital bed being fed a bowl of stewed
apples every day for six weeks. I have never been able to eat stewed apple again.” Major
Shakespeare’s two children—his first patients in China—were saved by sulphonamide pills, a
precursor to penicillin. From then on, the family kept rigorously to English food and scrubbed their
vegetables in a solution of permanganate of potash. The prospect of an authentic Chinese meal is
something else that excites my father about returning.

Not all the dangers were to do with disease. The previous July, Lloyd George’s former private
secretary, Gareth Jones, had been kidnapped on the Mongolian border after visiting a Swede who
bred the sturdy horses my grandmother bought at auction (for £5). A ransom demand was
dispatched to Peking, allegedly along with “fingers sent in a nice red box”, and when it was not
paid, Jones was killed. His death had a special resonance for my grandfather: his brother Geoffrey
had been Jones’s predecessor as Lloyd George’s private secretary.

Because kidnappers and warlords stalked the Western Hills 12 miles away, my grandfather dared
not risk taking his family to see the temples there, much to my father’s disappointment. The
purplish outline of the hills, which reminded some of the delicate colour of bluebells and others of
the undulating body of a subterranean dragon, was tantalisingly visible as he looked out from the
legation.

Threats existed even closer to Peking. The ambassador’s daughter was out riding one day when she
fell unconscious from her pony, struck by an assassin’s bullet intended for her father. A friend of
our family, the third secretary Gerry Young, found the 0.22 bullet embedded in her forehead, and
tried to extract it using the chancery key. “After a good deal of poking and prodding,” she wrote in
her diary, “the bullet was levered out.” They ended up marrying.

Four months later, in August 1937, her father was machine-gunned by a Japanese pilot who
claimed to have mistaken the ambassadorial car for one containing the Chinese Nationalist leader,
Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). “I suddenly became aware”, Knatchbull-Hugessen later wrote, “of
something very hard going very fast through my middle…” The bullet grazed his spine, put him in hospital for two months, and ended his posting.

Despite the ongoing civil war between the dominant Nationalists and the insurgent Communists, Japan posed the graver danger. Enfeebled, divided and relying on out-of-date equipment, the Chinese were powerless to check the territorial ambitions of their aggressive neighbour. After marching into Manchuria to the north in 1931, Japanese troops now encircled Peking, with a camp just nine miles from the Diplomatic Quarter. The population waited for their inevitable arrival in a state of tension, including my grandmother—following a disagreeable incident when she rode into Manchuria to get some highly prized stamps for my father. She tethered her pony outside the little post office over the border, and when she emerged a Japanese soldier was sitting in her saddle, smirking and taunting her. There was a stand-off and finally the soldier dismounted.

In Peking, my father adopted a technique of non-recognition: “We were aware they were encroaching, that they were the enemy. So I kept staring at the boots of the sentries outside the Japanese Legation, which embarrassed them enormously.” The Japanese Legation was directly opposite the British, and he would watch tiny officers on huge Russian horses conduct manoeuvres in the street.

The fear of what the Japanese would do to the expat community—and did do later that year to hundreds of thousands of Chinese in Nanking—was crystallised in the brutal and unresolved murder, ten months after my father’s arrival, of a blonde teenage girl who had attended the same convent school as him. “I overheard my parents talking in hushed tones, about a boy who had been kidnapped, I thought.” More likely they were discussing Pamela Werner, whose violent death sent a shock wave through the foreign community. Was this the horror that awaited them all?

Pamela was the 19-year-old daughter of a former British consul. On January 8th 1937 her body was discovered on scrubby waste ground below a watchtower near the legation. Her heart had been removed, her rib-cage smashed, and her internal cavities drained of blood. The sight of his child’s face, cut away, haunted Pamela’s father for the rest of his life: “It seemed to drag my eyes out of my head and the shock has permanently injured my heart. During every minute of every day that vision has beat upon my brain.” Her disembowelment, suggesting someone with medical skill, demanded the professional involvement of my grandfather, the doctor in charge of the British Military Hospital. I know this from a pink telegram found among his papers—almost the only document he kept from his time in Peking: “Consul General Tientsin has asked that Major
Shakespeare may be made available to help Inspector Botham BMC police in Werner inquest proceedings which take place Peking 10am the morning 1st February. Comply with request.” The inquest in the British Legation lasted five months against the jitter background of the Japanese advance. Although early suspicions had centred on Japanese agents in Peking, the verdict was “murder by a person or persons unknown”. In the sky, Japanese planes replaced the flocks of musical pigeons with miniature flutes strapped to their tails. My father heard Zeros roaring overhead and the faint boom of bombs exploding on the racecourse, leaving puffs of white smoke. Then the telephones went dead. Rumours spread that Peking was to be gassed at noon.

With memories of the Boxers still raw, the legation offered sanctuary to British nationals. Overnight, the compound became a village of tents and overpriced food and signs to lavatories. Acton and Richards moved in, and Backhouse lodged with the embassy doctor in the next-door bungalow, wearing a black silk skullcap and long Chinese robe.

On August 8th 1937, my father was in the street when the Japanese took formal possession of Peking. My grandmother snapped a few of their troops with her Box Brownie (above). They drove past in khaki-coloured trucks, wearing netted helmets draped with leaves and grass and flowers, and, according to one witness, “grinning like canary-fed cats”. They met no opposition. Soon a large balloon drifted in the azure sky, advertising the names of further Japanese conquests: Zhangjiakou, Datong, Machang. At the legation, the name of Pamela Werner was forgotten. Everyone was packing their bags. There was no thought of Britain helping China against the Japanese, Acton remarked. “Our ‘commercial stake’ was not large enough for our government to bother.”

In November 1937, a month before the rape of Nanking, in which the Japanese slaughtered up to 300,000, the Shakespeares left Peking and sailed to Hong Kong. My father hadn’t been back since.

Top Look back in wonder: John Shakespeare, now 83, in Beijing
Above A murder and an invasion, 1937: Invading Japanese troops snapped by his wife’s Box Brownie

The first thing to strike us as we step out of Beijing’s huge airport is the choking smog. The air-monitoring system
on the roof of the American Embassy has measured the level of pm2.5 particles (posing the highest health risk) at a hazardous 400 (the World Health Organisation recommends a daily limit of 20). Spectators at the Chinese Open tennis are wearing masks. And there’s a warning: “Everyone should avoid all physical activities out of doors.” The second thing we notice is the density of the crowds. In my father’s absence, that population of 1.5m has swelled to 20.5m.

We’ve arrived in Golden Week (above), the public holiday commemorating the 64th anniversary of Mao’s triumphant entry. The streets and parks are congested with holidaymakers, many sporting China stickers on their cheeks in the shape of a red heart. They walk proudly about in T-shirts stamped with English slogans—“Get Naked”, “Hollywood since 2009”, “Superficial is not my motto”—of which they may possess only the haziest understanding, much like Westerners with tattoos of Chinese characters. When we look up, we see not the kites that my father remembers fluttering everywhere in the sky, but displays staged on top of their buildings by Louis Vuitton and Prada.

In the Summer Palace, it takes us 40 minutes to battle our way to the lake. This is where my grandfather used to shoot duck. My father looks around, dazed. “We’d wander through empty grounds, empty buildings, and there’d be no one here. We had the place to ourselves. This is just unbelievable.”

We press on, searching over the flow of heads for the life-size marble paddle-steamer on which my father poses in another of my grandmother’s snaps—“That boat always intrigued me most. As a child, I thought it was floating.” This afternoon, the shoreline is obscured by crowds peering in rapture not at the exquisite beauties of the Imperial Palace, but at a giant yellow duck on the water.

Dutch installation artist, this inflatable rubber duck is a sibling to the unfloatable marble folly built by the empress in 1893 with money intended for the Imperial navy. It takes us a while to absorb the fact that the majority of these people staring at Florentijn Hofman’s bobbing yellow “art piece” are young. They are the fruit of China’s single-child policy, perhaps the most coercive family-planning programme ever devised—started in 1979, and tightened further in 1991, to counteract the devastating effects of Mao’s decree that more babies would make China more powerful. This heartbreaking policy, shortly to be relaxed, has not just come close to abolishing siblings: it has led millions of parents to abort their daughters, creating a deficit of 24m females. After a few days in China, the image is impossible to shift: of a coming generation dominated by inevitably spoilt
bachelors with disposable income to spend, who, besides not finding a wife, may well find
themselves temperamentally unsuited to being told what to do in the skyscraping office-blocks that
are being erected for them in every direction.

The “biggest fact” in the China of the 1930s, reckoned the American historian John King Fairbank,
was its poverty. Today, it is its wealth. “What we’re seeing”, my father says, “is a gigantic middle
class—the very class that Mao destroyed.” The emergence of the middle class has been
encouraged, but with one important proviso. No politics. The unspoken pact underpinning modern
China may be summarised like this: “We’ll let you get rich, if you let us govern. Leave the politics
to us and you can do what you want.” On the afternoon that we walk through the Summer Palace’s
grounds, a groom in the south-east province of Anhui is breaking down in tears and promising to
love his wife for rest of his life, after her parents give him a Bentley at their wedding in Maanshan.
The car is the most expensive wedding gift in the town’s history, the newspapers say. “The bride’s
parents work in the mineral business.”
The ruling Communist Party has managed to conflate what it is to be Chinese with what it is to
support the Communist Party. If you criticise the party, you’re criticising China. The same applies
to history. The party keeps a tight grip on the narrative, which in the National Museum exhibition
in Tiananmen Square begins in 1839—with bullying by Western colonial powers. Neither Tibet,
nor the Mao-induced famine of the 1950s—the worst in history—is mentioned in the history books,
still less Mao’s admission (made in 1957) that he killed 700,000 in the purges of 1950-52, and
another 80,000 thereafter. As a result, there’s little space where people can share experience or
irony. This may explain why Penguin’s bestselling English-language book in China is George
Orwell’s “Nineteen Eighty-Four”: its editor told me that it makes an impact “because, in the
propaganda bureau and the official circles, this is an irony-free country”. These days, it is not the
feet of millions that are bound, but their minds. Taught to be incurious about their own past, they
find it more natural to tether their excitement to an 18-
metre bath toy.

The crowds show no interest in us. When I approach a couple to ask the way, they look at me and
hurry on. (A few days later, a taxi-driver angrily ejects us from his car because we cannot explain
in Mandarin where we want to go, despite showing him on the map.) My inability to communicate
gives me a sense of what it must have been like for a Chinese person in the 1930s: the frus
tration of not being understood by over-entitled Westerners in your own city and in your own language, and
perhaps not even being noticed by them.

Over a camel-humped bridge, my father spots his two-storey white boat. He is moved by a
childhood urge to climb onto the marble paddle-wheel, but a padlocked door blocks the way. We
rattle the chain, and presently a face appears in the crack to say that the boat has been closed to
visitors for more than a decade. Our interpreter explains our mission. Minutes later, we are led into
a courtyard where a squat man with close-
cropped hair sits playing draughts. This person turns out
to be in charge of the immobile fantasy barge, its helmsman.

He hoists his eyes from the draughts board, stares with unbudgeable composure at the black-and-
white photo that we hold out, then at the 83-year-old Englishman before him, and back to the
image of the seven-year-old boy. He nods: we may take a picture of my father on the same spot. It
feels as if, in another mood, in another time, he could equally well have had us shot. If anybody is a
symbol of the “Four Olds” so destructively targeted by the Cultural Revolution – Old Customs, Old
Culture, Old Habits, Old Ideas—it’s my father.

I watch him being escorted out to the stone paddle-wheel, which suddenly assumes the shape of a
clockface. And as he steps onto it, he does seem to be standing, if only for a flash, back in Old
Peking.

Top Golden Week: Holidaymakers brave the smog to celebrate Mao’s establishment of the
People’s Republic of China
The great helmsman, Mao Zedong, pulled the plug on that city. On February 3rd 1949, a pregnant Canadian teacher, Isabel Crook, was one of only two or three foreigners personally invited to witness Mao’s victorious army occupy Peking. Now 97, she gives us dinner in her modest grace-and-favour apartment at the Foreign Studies University in Beijing. She tells us how she stood on a battlemented parapet in the Forbidden City, entranced, as troops with weathered faces came marching out of a dust storm and paraded down the main avenue in their new winter uniforms, eyes fixed ahead. “I saw captured American equipment, tanks, field-guns. The procession lasted six hours, ending with Mongolian horses, cavalry battalions of matched ponies—white, browns, blacks, roans.”

Isabel was born in Chengdu, the daughter of Canadian missionaries, and has the convinced gaze of a nun who may have replaced God with something better. She trades execution stories with my father—“I saw a beheaded corpse on a bamboo mat, head beside body, and my tiny sister shouted up at the guards, who laughed”—and explains how she came to realise that only a violent revolution would help the poor farmers whom she had studied in south-west China. In this, she was encouraged by her husband, a fanatical English communist called David Crook who had spied on George Orwell in the Spanish civil war and came to Nanking to teach English. “David finally convinced me by saying if you had a very serious acute illness that could be cured with an operation, would you not have an operation rather than go on suffering?”

The Crooks were living in the requisitioned Japanese Legation when, on a drizzly day eight months later, they were invited to Tiananmen Square to listen to Mao’s speech announcing the birth of the People’s Republic. The invitation came from the future premier Zhou Enlai. Sitting on damp wooden planks and bamboo chairs, and dressed in military clothes without epaulettes (their teachers’ uniforms, supplied by the school), they watched Mao wave his arms and declare in a hoarse, high-pitched voice, “The Chinese people have stood up”—and in their hearts stood up with him.

A silk scroll painting on Isabel’s wall depicts that moment on October 1st 1949 which “Golden Week” is celebrating.

“What did you think of Mao?” I can’t help asking.
Her grey eyes swivel on me. “I thought he was brilliant.” And no, her imprisonment in the Cultural Revolution as a “spy” had not altered that reverence. “When I was locked up, I read Volumes One to Four of Mao’s complete works three and a half times.” And? “I loved his rare shafts of humour.”

Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966-76) aimed to eliminate all that was old, and indeed cultural. High on the list of those to be purged was anyone associated with Old China—grandparents, teachers, foreigners—which may explain why we saw so few old people in the crowd at the Summer Palace. According to David Kidd, an author and English teacher who was married to the daughter of a former chief justice, even owning a photograph of a grandfather could be enough to get you beaten to death.

Isabel Crook was imprisoned for three years, her husband for six. When she tells us this, my father is reminded of a diplomat he served under elsewhere, Donald Hopson, who was Britain’s ambassador to Beijing in August 1967, when Red Guards stormed the embassy shouting the Boxer chant “Sha! Sha!”(Kill! Kill!). They beat Hopson up and smeared his hair with treacle, a humiliation from which he never recovered.

The savagery that went on is impossible to exaggerate, the Pulitzer prizewinner Nicholas Kristof wrote in “China Wakes” (1994), co-authored with his wife Sheryl WuDunn. Among Kristof’s discoveries were astonishing secret Communist Party documents that revealed outbreaks of cannibalism in southern China, with students butchering, roasting and eating their teachers in school courtyards, after first making them kneel on glass to confess their errors. Kristof, who is a cousin of ours, reported on the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre for the New York Times. “Some day,” he reckons, “historians will have a field day in China.” But not right now. At dinner two days later, I show my father’s old photographs to a bestselling Chinese historian who was once cultural editor of the Beijing News. I don’t know quite what reaction to expect, but at least some bat’s squeak of excitement at the sight of some of the ancient tombs and statues obliterated by Red Guards in the 1960s. Instead, Xie Xizhang, whose biography of the Chinese scholar Liang Qichao (1873-1929) sold more than 100,000 copies, stares at the images of my father sitting in the now-destroyed Tomb of the Princess with Buddha Hands, and returns them without comment. Despite hearing endless talk of 5,000 years of history, I have the strange impression of sitting beside a state historian and Communist Party member who is uncomfortable when dealing with the past. It’s as if he cannot approach anything unanticipated without asking himself “what would be the party’s response from the proper perspective”.

The Cultural Revolution is the main reason why so little survives of my father’s Peking. For all the pleas of those who wished to preserve it, its walls were pulled down as “useless feudal relics” and replaced by ring-roads—smothering the British cemetery where Pamela Werner was buried, and the Paomachang racecourse. “All this”, the Communist catechism said, “is the old evil China.” Unrestrained by sentiment for anything that pre-dates Mao, the brothel in the Badlands where Pamela was thought to have been lured to her death has been demolished to make way for a state-owned guest-house. Jade Street, where on the eve of their departure my grandmother bought a spinach jade bowl (“We guarantee it is over a hundred years old, Ching dynasty, 15/11/37”), is now a characterless alley: the old shops selling antiques, snuff bottles and traditional works of Chinese art supplanted by a California Noodle Bar and stalls flaunting Mao watches (with arm waving), bric-a-brac (Red Lantern radios), and Western luxury glitz (every item a fake).

The British Legation is now the all-monitoring Ministry of Public Security and a no-go zone. Guards rush out to stop us when we try to look in through the ugly grey gate—which stands there still, although stripped of its royal coat-of-arms and the enjoinder “Lest We Forget”. Britain’s present ambassador regrets that he wasn’t able to persuade the authorities to let us in to see my father’s bungalow, but says that not even Douglas Hurd, when he was foreign secretary, was allowed to revisit the compound where he’d worked as a junior diplomat in the 1950s.
Otherwise, virtually the only relic of “the city of lingering splendour”, aside from the watchtowers, the Imperial palaces and the Jesuit observatory, is my father’s school.

Top Isabel Crook, now 97, who witnessed Mao’s entry into Peking—and supported it

It takes us three days to find it: a derelict red-brick building in the centre of town. We look around at the boarded-up windows and the trees sprouting wild from the balconies. Once, this was the Sacred Heart girls’ school, run by French Franciscan nuns. My father spent 18 months here and has brought back his report for 1936-37, signed by Mother Superior Jeanne-Françoise, in which he is treated as an honorary girl and awarded the Testimonial of Merit: “She stands—1st—in a class of—5—pupils”. Armed with his excellent report, we climb a chipped staircase. Inside, sagging floorboards, and black mould on the ceilings. My father’s eyes dart into a small dark room crammed with suitcases and cooking pans. “This is the way it ends, I feel. I’m digging up old ghosts.”

The school kept going until August 1966, when the nuns were taken out and paraded as “spies under religious disguise”. The building was considered an example of “imperial invasion” and seized by rebel Red Guards who made it their headquarters, before its eventual appropriation by military builders working on the subway.

Today, it’s a squat for 60 families. An old woman shuffles cautiously out of the shadows. She is from Chengdu, where Isabel Crook was born. She has lived in this building since 1970 and longs for it to be demolished, so that she’ll receive compensation. We show her my father’s report and watch her dumbfounded. Despite living here for 40 years, she had no idea that this was once a school with a church attached, and that in these decrepit rooms small children in clean white pinafores took their first lessons in history, geography and poetry.

A more rebellious pupil than my father was Pamela Werner, who infuriated the nuns by answering back and was expelled. I wonder if her troubling example lies behind my father’s words in the garden of the Temple of Heaven, where we go for a walk that afternoon (but only after fulfilling his ambition to eat a bowl of noodles in the street). He is leaning forward to sniff a pink-and-yellow rose when a Chinese phrase that he didn’t know he knew tumbles from his lips, as if bound up for 75 years and released by the scent. “It’s funny. Suddenly three words have come back to me from
school, *buhao de guiniang*—bad girls.” And now he remembers: “They were addressed to me in a class of four other girls”—the Mother Superior’s warning of dreadful things in store should he not behave.

Rumours linked Pamela’s mysterious death to a dodgy American dentist in the Legation Quarter who hosted nudist picnics at a temple in the Western Hills. Barred to him as a boy because of kidnappers and then the Japanese, these hills are where my father wants to go on his last morning in China.

Where, I ask Isabel Crook, would she like her ashes scattered?

“In the Western Hills, under a stone bridge in a beautiful gully.”

Backhouse’s ambition was to end his days in a secluded temple in the Western Hills; Acton’s, too. “To fade away in the sunset, among cedars, pines and fir trees, with a fresh breeze blowing through them, would surely be preferable to dying in a clinic.”

A friend of my grandfather at the British Legation rented a Buddhist temple for £15 a year and hired a former imperial eunuch to look after it. Like the Indian hill station of Simla where my father was born, this was where the British came in the summer months to escape the heat, noise and smells of Peking, and to relax.

We settle on the Ordination Temple of Jietai Si. It takes two hours to drive there through the smog and traffic. In 1937, my grandparents’ car with its green Legation plates was one of only 2,000 private vehicles registered in Peking. Right up to the 1990s, everyone rode bicycles. This morning, not one bicycle is visible; merely a slow-moving line of locally made Peugeots and Volkswagens, stretching ahead, bumper to bumper. Along the way on either side, 25-storey apartment blocks recede in ghostly regiments until the pollution swallows them. (Next morning, the smog is so thick that our plane is stuck for two hours on the runway; unable to take off, we sit there reading about: [1] a Japanese study which blames China’s toxic air for the high mercury levels on Mount Fuji; [2] Obama’s no-show at the Asia Summit in Indonesia, the country of his boyhood, allowing the
Chinese president, Xi Jinping, to become the first foreign leader to address the Indonesian parliament; [3] news of Britain’s “largest-ever trade mission” to Beijing, to be led by George Osborne and Boris Johnson, paving the way for David Cameron.)

The smog reminds my father of the dramatic dust storms that swept in from the desert highlands every March, whipping up sand and rubbish, and causing his nanny to bundle him indoors and dash around closing the windows, which remained shut for three days. He gazes out into it, past the Buick Cadillac showrooms and the Kindyroo dance studios, and murmurs: “You ask yourself where the countryside has gone. I’m terrified this may be the future, but I won’t be around when it comes to Wiltshire.”

At the temple, the air is blue with the drift of incense smoke. With its terraces and pavilions on red-lacquered columns and fluted roofs between the trees, it’s all very reminiscent of my grandmother’s silk paintings.

Jietai Si is built on a steep hill among pines, some of them a thousand years old. Founded in 622, it unfolds in a procession of paved courtyards, each containing a shrine and a large bronze burner. Red Guards hammered to furious pieces the porcelain effigies of monks in the great gallery, but they could not obliterate the appeal of this temple or its quiet spirit. My father can’t help noticing that despite Mao’s banning of religion there are people all around us lighting incense sticks, kneeling and praying. “And yet to whom—and for what?”

The future drops back as we walk through the courtyards. Perhaps it’s the incense or the resinous nutty smell of the glossy pine-needles, but a strange peace begins to take hold.

Somewhere above us, a gong booms.

Marble staircases climb to long terraces with moss-covered balustrades. These terraces are transporting—unlike the kitsch marble barge in the Summer Palace. An American writer who lived in 1930s Peking described them as “a motionless hull upon which one was temporarily permitted a journey through the ineffable calms of Buddhist time and space”. The terraces are like the decks of the troopship which conveyed my father to China.

That gong again. And so remote from any sound we heard in Beijing. As if the past is being made audible.

Pouring a pot of green tea in a courtyard an hour later, my father is a man transformed. “This is a wonderful place—everywhere you look. This is how I imagined China. On my last day, I have returned to the China I remember most.”

Top Old China, after all: The Jietai Si temple, where John Shakespeare found the China he was looking for

Above The telegram the author's grandfather, a British military doctor, received after the gruesome murder of Pamela Werner

Nicholas Shakespeare grew up in the Far East and South America before joining the BBC, where he made films on Graham Greene and Dirk Bogarde. He is now a critic and the author of 11 books, most recently “Inheritance”

Photographs Ian Winstanley