LONG-TERM CAUSES OF WAR

Cultural and diplomatic differences

As we have seen, the Chinese saw themselves as the ‘centre’ of the world – the Middle Kingdom. However, by the early nineteenth century the British too believed themselves to be the number one power in the world, and the most civilized and cultured nation. Thus, the two countries viewed each other as ‘inferior’ and ‘barbaric’.

Britain and China also clashed over how they engaged in international relations. The Chinese tribute system established China as the dominant nation in the region with ‘inferior’ states expected to offer gifts to China. The British also had a long-established system of ‘diplomacy’ by which to conduct international relations. This system assumed a degree of equality with foreign nations, but often Britain adopted a superior position. Britain’s diplomats expected respect and privileged status.

Economic differences/attitude towards trade

The British were frustrated by China’s ‘closed door’ trading system – known as the Canton system. They wanted an ‘open door’ or ‘free trade’ policy – where their merchants and businesses could trade freely without restriction in China.

The British sent two diplomatic missions to China tasked with improving trade relations between the two countries. In 1793 an important British mission, led by Lord Macartney, went to China with instructions from King George III to set up diplomatic relations and trade agreements. The mission brought with it gifts for the Emperor and was royally entertained but it failed to secure trade agreements. To the Chinese, the idea of trading with Britain as an equal was abhorrent, and they viewed the mission not as an equal diplomatically but as one from a ‘tribute’ state paying homage to the Emperor.

An imperial response to the mission was sent to George III:

“Our celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders – there is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians for our own produce. The Throne’s principle is to treat strangers from afar with indulgence and exercise a pacifying influence over the barbarian tribes of the world over. Your barbarian merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land there [Tientsin and Chekiang], but will be subject to instant expulsion. Tremblingly obey and show no negligence. A special Mandate.”


A second mission in 1816 was also unsuccessful. The leader of the mission, Lord Amherst, outraged the Chinese court when he refused to ‘kowtow’ to the Emperor. The kowtow was a ceremonial gesture made when meeting a person of higher social rank. To perform a kowtow you made three deep bows, prostrating yourself three times after each one with your nose touching the floor. The kowtow operated on all social levels in China – children to their parents, courtiers to the Emperor and the Emperor to Heaven. Lord Amherst refused to demean himself by lying face down on the floor! The Chinese saw his refusal as extremely bad manners and it confirmed their view of Europeans as barbarians.

The two British missions failed to set up full diplomatic relations or to relax trade restrictions for Britain’s merchants. They also showed up the key cultural differences and misunderstandings between Britain and China.

Figure 3.7 Chinese Emperor Qianlong, who ruled from 1735 to 1796

3 Does trade and exchange promote cooperation or lead to exploitation?
SHORT-TERM CAUSES OF WAR

The dispute over the opium trade

The British merchants wanted to end the massive flow of silver from Britain to China. They wanted to find something they could trade that would interest the Chinese market. They came up with the idea of selling opium to China. Opium is a narcotic drug that for centuries had been used medicinally in China to relieve pain. But the British introduced the drug as a recreational habit, and, being highly addictive, smoking opium quickly took hold in China.

A key motive for the British traders was that the demand for Chinese tea had grown at home, which offered vast profits for companies. The main company trading with China was the British East India Company. This company had sponsored the growing of opium poppies in India. Originally opium had been popular in European cities — where the bars known as ‘opium dens’ were set up. Due to the horrific impact of opium addiction on the general public, European governments banned the drug. This meant that the growing companies needed a new market.

SOURCE D

A British observer in China wrote of those addicted to opium:

'The evils which arise from opium-smoking are many. It injures the health and physical powers, especially of the working and poorer classes, whose wages are only sufficient to meet their necessities, and who curtail the amount spent on food and clothing to gratify their craving for the vice... Those who have yielded to it for years, and who are slaves to the pipe, are miserable if circumstances should arise to debar them from their accustomed whiffs: it is extraordinary to see how perfectly wretched they are; every attitude, every feature of the face, every sentence, is a living witness that they are in agony till the craving is satisfied. The opium sots or 'opium devils', as the natives term them, are pitiable objects emaciated almost to a skeleton, until they finally succumb to their vice...'

Quoted in Ball, J. D. 1903. Things Chinese. Hong Kong. Kelly & Walsh

SOURCE E

Figure 3.8 Number of chests of opium imported into China
The East India Company exchanged vast amounts of opium for tea in China. The social and economic impact of the drug soon had an effect on the Chinese authorities. Opium addiction destroyed families, with some poor families selling their own children to fund their habit.

Instead of silver flowing into China, silver now poured out into the hands of the British opium traders. Indeed, the demand for opium far outweighed the demand for tea. It became far more profitable than selling tea and silk to the home markets. For the Chinese government, opium was not only a social problem but an economic one too, as the Chinese population became less productive. In response, the Chinese passed two laws banning the importation of the drug in 1729 and 1796. To get around this ban, and continue making huge profits, the East India Company began to sell opium to Chinese merchants who were able to smuggle it into China. Despite the bans the opium trade grew and grew.

The trade was so lucrative that merchants from other countries, including Portugal, France and America, also got involved.

---

**ACTIVITY: Action plan for the Imperial Government of China, 1838**

**Task**

You and a partner are Chinese officials in the nineteenth century. You have been asked by the Emperor to solve the key problems facing China at this time:
- More and more Chinese people are becoming addicted to opium.
- Many officials are becoming corrupted and are taking part in the opium trade themselves.
- China is losing a lot of wealth to Western countries because of the opium trade.

**Requirements**

You need to fill in a copy of the proposal to the Emperor, set out on the right. It is up to you to decide what action your government should take.

Some options are:
- Arrest, try and execute all Westerners found guilty of dealing in the opium trade.
- Confiscate all the opium you can find and destroy it; refuse to give compensation to the Westerners who were selling it.

**Action Plan for the Imperial Government of China, 1838**

Your Majesty, I your humble slave recommend the following:

With regard to the opium situation and the foreign devils we should ... I predict that, as a result of this action, the English barbarians will react as follows ...
IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF WAR

Britain claims extraterritoriality

Tension between Britain and China intensified. The trigger for the outbreak of war came not from an incident specifically to do with the opium trade - but as the result of the murder of a Chinese national by drunken British sailors in a fight in the city of Kowloon. Charles Elliott paid compensation to the Chinese man’s family, but the Chinese authorities wanted the culprits handed over to stand trial. The British refused, arguing that the men would not get a fair trial under Chinese law as confessions were extracted under torture. They also objected to the public execution the men faced if they were found guilty.

Therefore, the trigger for war was the British attempt to claim extraterritoriality.

The British conducted their own trial of the men and did not hand them over to the Chinese authorities. In retaliation, Lin ordered the ports to be blockaded and stopped food supplies to foreigners. The British response was to send warships to Guangzhou to ‘protect their interests’. These warships then destroyed a large number of inferior Chinese war junks, leading to a huge loss of life.

The British were then expelled from Guangzhou - which led to 20 warships being sent to China with 4000 troops on board. These bombarded Guangzhou and then sailed up and down the coast, causing many deaths and widespread destruction.

Extraterritoriality

Extraterritoriality is where people are exempted from local law. In the nineteenth century, the British claimed extraterritoriality for their nationals working in China. This meant that if a foreign national committed a crime in Chinese law they could not be prosecuted in China’s courts but would be judged under the jurisdiction of their own government.

THE END OF THE FIRST OPIUM WAR

The First Opium War lasted from 1839 until 1842. The British forces were better trained and better armed - the Chinese were no match for them. The Chinese were fighting to stop the import of opium into their country - and the British fought to protect this lucrative trade. Many historians have suggested that this war was one of the most shameful in British history.

The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing. The treaty did not mention the opium trade, which had been the key cause of the conflict.

Treaty of Nanjing

The terms of the treaty included:
- Four additional ports were to be opened up to trade with the West.
- The British were no longer to be subject to Chinese law - but were to be subject to the laws of their own country (extraterritoriality).
- The British were to have special rights in areas where they lived, called ‘Concession Areas’.
- The Chinese had to pay 21 million silver dollars in compensation for the war. They also had to pay for all the opium they had destroyed.
- In all future dealings, China had to treat Britain as an ‘equal’.
- Britain was to be given the port city of Hong Kong.
- Britain was given ‘most favoured nation’ status, which meant that it could demand the same rights granted by China to any other country.
The Manchu rulers were not consulted on the terms of the treaty, nor did they have any choice but to sign it. British ships threatened to again bombard Chinese coastal towns until the treaty was signed. This was the first ‘unequal treaty’. It was unequal because Chinese interests were completely ignored.

After the war, opium flowed into China in ever increasing quantities. The Chinese authorities could only impose harsher and harsher punishments on users to try to cut down on the drug use. For example, possession of the drug was punishable by beheading, and the drug user’s family could not sit the civil service exams for three generations. France, the Netherlands and the USA increased their involvement in selling opium in China too.

**WHY WAS THERE A SECOND OPIUM WAR?**

Another war broke out between China and Britain in 1856. This time the war was triggered by an incident involving a ship called the Arrow. The ship was flying a British flag – although it was owned by a Hong Kong Chinese – and it was boarded by Chinese officials who believed that there were some well-known pirates on board. The Chinese police arrested the crew but in the struggle that followed the British flag was torn down. The British were furious and ordered the release of the crew and an official apology for the treatment of the flag. The Chinese returned the crew but did not apologize. Chinese gangs attacked and set fire to British homes and warehouses and the British warships bombarded Guangzhou. War broke out again, and again the Chinese were humiliated. The war ended in 1858 with another unequal treaty, the Treaty of Tientsin.

**TREATY OF TIENTSIN**

- Six more ports were opened to foreign trade.
- Opium importation to China was made legal with a small import duty.
- Christian missionaries were to be given complete freedom to convert people.
- Europeans were allowed to travel anywhere in China without restriction.
- Ambassadors of European countries were allowed to set up residence in Beijing – the Imperial capital.

Tension remained high between the British and the Chinese – the latter attempted to resist fully implementing the unequal treaties. In 1860 British and French troops were sent to Beijing to enforce the terms of the treaties. While they were there, allegedly in response to the death of 21 members of a negotiating team, the troops looted and burnt the Imperial Summer Palace and forced the Emperor to flee into exile. The violence was widespread and the Chinese were again forced to sue for ‘peace’ and grant even more concessions (see information box below).

China had been utterly defeated and demoralized. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain, France and Germany had seized huge territories in China, which were known as their ‘spheres of influence’. Russia had also taken territory in the north, and had gained influence in Manchuria and Mongolia. The final humiliation came in 1894–95, when China was beaten by a much smaller Asian nation – Japan. Japan had formerly been a tributary state. Japan took control of Korea, Taiwan and the Ryukyu islands.

**CONCESSION OF BEIJING**

- Reaffirmed the rights of diplomats to live in Beijing
- Increased the cash compensation China had to pay
- Gave the Kowloon Peninsular to the British
What were the effects of the opium wars on China?

The unequal treaties gave foreign powers certain advantages:
- They had control and/or influence in some Chinese cities.
- The import of opium was now legal.
- The Chinese had to agree low tariffs on imported manufactured goods from Europe, which damaged China's own industries.
- Extraterritoriality meant that the Chinese government had no effective control over foreigners in their own country.
- The tribute system was ended.
- Missionaries were now able to live and work in China (this led to a lot of discontent).
- Britain had 'most favoured nation' status.

China had been thoroughly humiliated by the West, but the social and political structure of China remained intact. The Emperor still controlled the country; however, he needed to deal with the situation that the unequal treaties had created. Some Chinese began to believe that the Mandate of Heaven may have shifted away from the ruling dynasty.

HOW SHOULD CHINA'S GOVERNMENT RESPOND TO EXCHANGE WITH THE WEST?

In the late 1850s and 1860s contact between Westerners and Chinese increased. This led some Chinese officials to realize that the country would remain weak unless an effort was made to learn Western technology. The leading reformers believed that modernization should be introduced, but without abandoning the Confucian way of life. In other words, their aim was not to Westernize China but to build a strong defence against the foreign powers. The modernizing movement was known as the 'self-strengthening' movement.