

Imperialism of China

The Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing

China was affected by imperialism just like Africa, and India. The Chinese like the Africans and the Indians did not want the Western powers to enter. Many powerful nations decided to split it up China just like Africa and India. Countries like Great Britain, Germany, Russia, France and Japan all were involved. China itself was a major trading country and it was involved in trade with many major world powers. It traded things like tea, porcelain and silk for gold and silver.

Great Britain traded opium from India for Chinese tea. This was very costly for the Chinese because many Chinese people became addicted to opium. Because of their addiction the Chinese people began to trade silver for the opium, which disrupted the Chinese economy. The only way to stop the drug was to outlaw opium in China; they did this and asked the British to stop trading it. The British did not stop trading.

The only step the Chinese could take was war. The Opium War broke out when Chinese junks [ships] attempted to turn back English merchant vessels in November of 1839; although this was a low-level conflict, it inspired the English to send warships in June of 1840. The Chinese, with old-style weapons and artillery, were no match for the British gunships. The Chinese were equally unprepared for the technological superiority of the British land armies, and suffered continual defeats. Finally, in 1842, the Chinese were forced to agree to an abusive peace under the Treaty of Nanjing.

The Treaty of Nanjing imposed a heavy weight on the Chinese and entirely favored the British side. Its first and fundamental demand was for British "extraterritoriality"; all British citizens would be subjected to British, not Chinese, law if they committed any crime on Chinese soil. The British gained five open ports for trade. No restrictions were placed on British trade, and, as a consequence, opium trade more than doubled in the three decades following the Treaty of Nanjing. The treaty also gave Britain indemnity, which was payment for all losses incurred during the war and Hong Kong was ceded to the British.

1. Why did the Opium War begin?
2. What was the Treaty of Nanjing?
3. Define extraterritoriality.

Crumbling China

The Opium Wars had a huge impact on the global perceptions of China. For centuries, the world knew that China was one of the more advanced civilizations. With the clear-cut British defeat of China with relatively few troops, the world realized that China was an easy target. What's more, the Chinese themselves knew that their government was weak, and so they, too, started to rebel against it.

Internal rebellion started at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the White Lotus Rebellions led by Buddhists who were frustrated over taxes and government corruption. It continued through the middle of the century with the Taiping Rebellion. The Taipings, led by a religious zealot claiming to be the brother of Jesus, recruited an army nearly a million strong and nearly succeeded in bringing down the Manchu government. It is estimated that nearly thirty million people died during the Taiping Rebellion, which at that point was the largest death total of any war until World War II. The rebels failed, but the message was clear. China was crumbling from within, and unable to stop foreign aggression from outside.

In the 1860s, the Manchu government tried to fix the problems with the Self-Strengthening Movement, but it did not work. In 1876, Korea realized China was weak and declared its independence. Later, in the Sino-French War in 1883, the Chinese lost control of Vietnam to the French who established French Indochina. A decade later, the Chinese were defeated in the Sino-Japanese War, when the rising imperial power of Japan wanted some of China. The Japanese soon received trading rights and privileges that the Europeans had received earlier.

Meanwhile, the European powers were rushing to establish a greater presence in China. By establishing spheres of influence, France, Germany, Russia, Japan and Britain carved out pieces of China. The spheres were not colonies, but areas that were invested in by the Europeans. They installed military bases, and set up businesses, transportation, and communication operations. The Manchu Dynasty was still the authority in the spheres.

By 1900, the United States, which had its own trading designs in Asia, was worried that China would become another India or Africa, and that the U.S would be shut out of trade if the Manchu government fell and the Europeans took over the government. Through its Open Door Policy, the United States pledged its support of the sovereignty of the Chinese government and announced equal trading privileges among all imperial powers.

1. Why were rebellions appearing in China during the nineteenth century?
2. How was China weakened by imperial powers?
3. What is the Open Door Policy?

The Treaty of Nanjing

When the Chinese lost the Opium Wars to Britain, they were forced to agree to the terms of defeat which were signed and sealed with the Treaty of Nanjing.

HER MAJESTY the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and His Majesty the Emperor of China, being desirous of putting an end to the misunderstandings and consequent hostilities which have arisen between the two countries, have resolved to conclude a Treaty for that purpose . . .

Who, after having communicated to each other their respective Full Powers, and found them to be in good and due form, have agreed upon and concluded the following [selected] Articles:

III. His Majesty the Emperor of China cedes to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, &c., the Island of Hong-Kong, to be possessed in perpetuity by Her Britannic Majesty, her heirs and successors, and to be governed by such laws and regulations as Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, &c., shall see fit to direct.

IV. The Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of 6,000,000 of dollars, as the value of the opium which was delivered up at Canton in the month of March, 1839, as a ransom for the lives of Her Britannic Majesty's Superintendent and subjects, who had been imprisoned and threatened with death by the Chinese High Officers.

V. The Emperor of China agrees to allow all ports British merchants to trade freely and allows them to carry on their mercantile transactions with whatever persons they please; and His Imperial Majesty further agrees to pay to the British Government the sum of 3,000,000 of dollars, on account of debts due to British subjects by some of the said Hong merchants.

VII. It is agreed, that the total amount of 21,000,000 of dollars, described in the 3 preceding Articles, shall be paid as follows:

6,000,000 immediately.

6,000,000 in 1843; that is, 3,000,000 on or before the 30th of the month of June, and 3,000,000 on or before the 31st of December.

5,000,000 in 1844; that is, 2,500,000 on or before the 30th of June, and 2,500,000 on or before the 31st of December.

4,000,000 in 1845; that is, 2,000,000 on or before the 30th of June, and 2,000,000 on or before the 31st of December.

And it is further stipulated, that interest, at the rate of 5 per cent per annum, shall be paid by the Government of China on any portion of the above sums that are not punctually discharged at the periods fixed.

XII. On the assent of the Emperor of China to this Treaty being received, and the discharge of the first installment of money, Her Britannic Majesty's forces will retire from Nanking and the Grand Canal, and will no longer molest or stop the trade of China.

1. What is the purpose of this treaty?
2. What effect would articles like these have on China?