



Opium Wars

British traders did not have much that the Chinese wanted, and they needed a way to break into the huge Chinese economy. They created a demand for opium, which grew well in British-dominated Bengal. But China's Qing government didn't want—and tried to ban—opium imports, as they were bad for society. This was unacceptable to the British who were now making lots of money as drug dealers. They responded with gunships. So began a series of wars over the drug trade across the China Sea, which coincided with the Taiping Rebellion and began a very difficult period for China.



00:01

Map of East Asia shows the location of the Qing Dynasty; timeline between 1830 and 1870

This is a map of East Asia in the 19th century, and you can already see significant imperial control by Western European powers. You have the British East India Company in India. You have the French initially getting a foothold in Southeast Vietnam, in this orange area, but eventually they will take over this entire region that will become one day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. You have the Dutch in Indonesia and you have the Spanish in the Philippines. But what we're going to focus on in this video is the European—and in particular the British—attempt to open up the Chinese markets to British trade, China at the time under the control of the Qing Dynasty.

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Well before this period, Chinese products were in demand in Europe, in particular, Chinese porcelain and Chinese silk. Unfortunate for the Europeans, the Chinese did not have a lot of demand for European products, and so you had a balance-of-trade problem. These products would be exported from China into Europe and you would have hard silver currency going to China. And so the imperial powers, especially the British, were looking for a solution, and they eventually found that opium grown in India—which is a highly addictive drug, it's the core constituent of heroin and morphine—could be addictive to the Chinese people, and maybe could help solve this balance-of-trade problem, that silver could then flow outside of China.

01:32

Second Battle of Chuenpi, 1841 – photo shows ships being destroyed

Well, you can imagine the Chinese government, the Qing Dynasty, had no interest in opium coming in to China. It was destructive to their society—it was an addictive drug. But in 1839, the British decide to force the issue, and you have what will be known as the First Opium War. This is a picture of the Second Battle of Chuenpi. You see the British vessel Nemesis—which is actually owned by a company, the British East India Company—destroying Chinese junk ships, and because of this show of force and this military superiority, they were able to win the First Opium War and extract major concessions from Qing China.

02:15

*5 ports: Shanghai
Ningbo
Fuzhou
Amoy
Canton*

The Chinese had to open up five ports to trade with the British, they had to give the island of Hong Kong to the British indefinitely, and the British would keep control of it all the way until the end of the 20th century. The Chinese had to pay for opium that they destroyed. They had to give reparations to the British to pay for the costs of the war. Now, to add insult to injury, the British were not satisfied, and in 1856, you have the Second Opium War, where they try to extract even more concessions from China, after which opium is legalized, the whole time opium flooding into the country and really undermining the social fabric of society.

02:57

Taiping Rebellion, between 1850 and 1865

To make matters worse for China, you have a major civil war in this time period, the Taiping Rebellion, which was started by this sect of Christianity that viewed it as their destiny to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. And this is one of the most bloody civil wars that any nation has seen in history, with over 20 million people being killed. And historians believe that the Qing concessions to the British and then the French, and also the opium that was undermining Chinese society, was a major contributor to this long and bloody civil war. These Opium Wars are often cited by Japanese in this time period as a reason for their need to industrialize and become an imperial power, so that they don't get unraveled the same way that Qing China does by the Europeans.

03:49

Portrait of William Gladstone

But to appreciate that this was even controversial in Europe, William Gladstone, as we enter into the First Opium War, was a young parliamentarian in Britain, and he will eventually be, at the end of the 19th century, a significant British prime minister. But as the Opium War was beginning, he gave a famous speech in Parliament.

04:14

Image of William Gladstone's speech

"It is a matter of certainty "that if we stopped the exportation of opium from Bengal "and broke up the depot at Lintin "and checked the cultivation of it in Malwa "and put a moral stigma upon it, "that we should greatly cripple, if not extinguish, "the trade in it... "The great principles of justice are involved in this matter. "You--" and he's talking to, I believe, the foreign minister, who is an aggressive proponent of the Opium Wars—"You will be called upon to show cause "for your present intention of making war upon the Chinese. They gave us notice to abandon the contraband trade"—the trade in opium. "When they found that we would not, "they had the right to drive us from their coasts "on account of our obstinacy in persisting in this infamous and atrocious traffic."

05:06

And opium was addictive, and William Gladstone had personal experience with this; his sister became addicted to opium. He went on to say,

"I am not competent to judge how long this war may last, "but this I can say, that a war more unjust in its origin, "a war more calculated in its progress "to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know, and I have not read of." And a few days later, he wrote, "I am in dread of the judgments of God upon England for our national iniquity towards China."