Opium had been banned in China even though it had been used in Chinese medicine for thousands of years.

But in the 15th Century it was mixed with tobacco and smoked for pleasure. Soon people from all levels of Chinese society were hooked on the rituals of the opium den.

The social impact was huge and damaging, with addicts prone to sell all their possessions to feed their habit.

The sale and smoking of the drug was banned by Emperor Yongzheng in 1729, but 100 years later there was still strong demand and the British were exploiting it. By 1836 30,000 opium chests were arriving in China each year from India. Jardine, Matheson and Company was responsible for a quarter of those.

By flouting the trade ban on opium, Britain found a way to increase its earnings from China.

“The British realised that because there was so much opium produced on the east side of India smuggling opium to China made sense,” said Professor John Carroll of the University of Hong Kong.

And Canton’s coastal location made smuggling easy for the British:

“They would transfer the goods to smaller boats that could make it up the coast much more easily. There was always someone there to help them bring in the drugs.

“From an economic perspective this all made perfect sense.”

Siege and revenge

But British law-breaking had not gone unnoticed and in 1839 Emperor Daoguang declared a war on drugs. A series of raids were ordered on the Western traders.

The traders in the 13 Factories warehouses were locked in by the Chinese army and forced to surrender.

Goods with a value of £2 million were seized, including 42,000 opium pipes and 20,000 chests of opium.

Incensed by the seizures, William Jardine left Canton for London, where he lobbied the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, to strike back at China.

With opium responsible for a significant part of British India’s tax revenue, it didn’t take long for the government to send in the navy.

In June 1840 the British fleet of 16 warships and 27 transports carrying 4,000 men arrived in the Pearl River Delta, near Humen.

Among them was the Nemesis, a new iron warship armed with a deadly weapon - the Congreve rocket launcher, able to fire exploding rockets up to a distance of two miles.

The Chinese were prepared, but their antiquated defences were no match for the British. Their static canons and armada of war junks were destroyed in just five and a half hours.

Over the next two years the British navy travelled up the coast towards Shanghai. Chinese troops, many of whom were addicted to opium, were overwhelmed at every stage.

The British bombardments resulted in a considerable loss of life - between 20,000 and 25,000 Chinese were killed. Britain lost just 69 men.

Legacy

The Chinese Empire was shattered. In August 1842 aboard HMS Cornwallis, near the town of Nanking, the Chinese signed what became known as the “unequal treaty”.

They agreed to open five ports to foreign trade and pay 21m silver dollars to the British government, as compensation for loss of opium earnings and the cost of war.

For the British the highlight of the deal was the acquisition of Hong Kong Island, which would be used as a hub to increase trade in opium with China.

The Opium Wars have been consigned to history books in Britain, but that is not the case in China, according to Dr Zheng Yangwen, of the University of Manchester. She says students there are taught about the wars from an early age.

“Text books from elementary school, to middle school to high school, to university highlight the wrong doings of the so-called imperialists.

“We have become part of what they call the Patriotic Education Programme, to educate Chinese youths like me so that we remember what you have done to us”.

TAYLOR – @teamHISTORY

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Excerpts from Japan’s Act of Seclusion, 1636

1. Japanese ships shall by no means be sent abroad.
2. No Japanese shall be sent abroad. Anyone violating this prohibition shall suffer the penalty of death, and the shipowner and crew shall be held up together with the ship.
3. All Japanese residing abroad shall be put to death when they return home.
4. All Christians shall be examined by official examiners.
5. Informers against Christians shall be rewarded.
6. The arrival of foreign ships must be reported ... and watch kept over them.
7. The Namban people [Spaniards or Portuguese] and any other people with evil titles propagating Christianity shall be incarcerated in the Imura prison as before.
8. Even ships shall not be left untouched in the matter of exterminating Christians.
9. Everything shall be done in order to see that no Christian is survived by descendants, and anyone disregarding this injunction shall be put to death, while proper punishment shall be meted out to the other members of his family according to their deeds.
10. Children born of the Namban people ... in Nagasaki and people adopting these Namban children into their family shall be put to death; capital punishment shall also be meted out to those Namban descendants if they return to Japan, and their relatives in Japan who may communicate with them shall receive suitable punishment.
11. The samurai [warrior aristocracy of Japan] shall not purchase goods on board foreign ships directly from foreigners.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A  Against what group of people was this decree issued?
B  What nationality were they?
C  What prohibitions were meant to keep Japanese from coming into contact with Christians?
D  How might the Spanish and Portuguese have reacted to this decree?
E  According to your textbook, why did the Japanese institute this doctrine?

West Meets Japan, 1854

In 1854, when Commodore Matthew C. Perry forced Japan to open its doors to the West, the Land of the Rising Sun was ruled by a military dictator called the shogun. Nobles known as daimyos employed warriors called samurai in their service. The samurai practiced a code of conduct known as Bushido, which called for seppuku, or ritual suicide, if one were dishonored. The sword was still the standard weapon.

The shogun’s inability to resist Perry’s demands led to a rebellion, and power passed into the hands of the Emperor Mutsuhito in 1867. Assisted by an informal group of advisors known as the genro, Mutsuhito saw that the only way to avoid coming under Western control was to modernize. During his reign, Japan embarked on a program which converted it to a modern nation by 1900.

Taking the advanced nations of the world as their example, the Japanese transformed the samurai into a modern army and navy. These armed forces were tested in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, which established Japanese hegemony over Korea. The triple intervention of Russia, France, and Germany prevented Japan from gaining what it considered to be its just reward for this victory concessions in southern Manchuria.

Japanese resentment toward Russia, combined with a clash of interests between England and Russia in various parts of the world, led to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1903. This agreement protected Japan against Russia’s allies. Japan then provoked and won the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

When Japan established the puppet state of Manchukuo in Manchuria, its conflict with the United States began. Japan’s further incursion into China led to war with that nation in 1937; the United States responded with economic sanctions against Japan. On Dec. 7, 1941, Japan reacted by attacking Pearl Harbor, the American naval base in Hawaii. Ultimately, the industrial might of the United States began to prevail and Japan was frustrated in its efforts to dominate the Far East by force.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

F  Why did the Japanese Emperor order changes to his military?
G  Given the first reading, Japan clearly did not welcome European guests. How does this relate to Question F?
H  Why was Japan upset with Russia, France and Germany?
I  According to the passage, why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor?
J  After industrializing, Japan felt hampered by lack of access to raw materials for its rapidly growing industries and by a shortage of living space for its rapidly growing population. How did this change its outlook on seclusion?
K  Given the map of African imperialism, which other nation believed itself to be in the same position at the same time?
L  Who would both of these countries likely blame for its lagging position in the race for imperialism?