China – The Opium Wars

Chinese Tribute System

For the Chinese, relations with other nations were based on the idea of Confucian hierarchy, each member state had a prescribed position. China was at the top of this hierarchy and therefore would never recognize the other nations as equal trading partners.

Foreigners were ‘barbarians’.

Any state wishing to set up a trading relationship with China had to fit themselves into the tribute system. Whereby they had the right to honor the emperor by bringing gifts to China. They were obliged to kowtow. Therefore establishing beyond any doubt that they were inferior to China. Then China would present gifts to the barbarians in return. After this was done the Chinese were willing to engage in trade and maintain peaceful relations.

The Europeans were confined to several port cities.
- Portuguese were the first to trade with China, they had a port in Macao
- Then the British and Dutch came to China

British arrived in China in 1637 – they were permitted to establish a trading post at the city of Guangzhou. There was large demand in Britain for Chinese goods (tea) but there was little demand in China for British goods. The Chinese – British had to mostly pay for what they wanted with silver and gold bullion.

They found this situation unsatisfactory. Britain, a growing colonial power, did not like being told what to do nor being restricted. Qing wanted to retain control over the empire and saw foreigners as a threat to that. So they prevented contact between the Chinese and foreigners. Anyone who proceeded to go through a barrier station, was given a punishment of 80 blows. Anyone who left or communicated with foreigners in waters received death by strangling. Those who left were forbidden to return on pain of death. Execution for those learning a foreign language.

Canton System

Had been in operation since 1760. A system of trade with the British.

British merchants could not buy directly from Chinese merchants, they had to go through a special group of people called Cohongs. Who acted as the middlemen to prevent contact with locals.

British merchants were only allowed in factories during the trading season (Sept-Jan), they then had to withdraw to Macao. They were not allowed to bring their families.

Main good was opium in the 18th century. The British saw China to be restricting their global trade.

China and Britain were fundamentally very different which caused them to clash. Britain was determined to open China up and China was determined to keep out foreigners.

Macartney Mission 1793