

F. The Turning Point: The First Opium War (±1839-42)

1. How are we to understand the peculiar fact that an ancient culture like China only began to trade with the world in 1978?
2. The answer lies in the way early Chinese culture struggled to adapt itself to the wider world, which imposed itself on China.
3. As most students of history know, American history hinges on the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492. This anchor fact of world history helps us to understand Chinese history in a number of ways. First of all, Columbus was trying to reach China. Secondly, Europeans did soon reach it despite the obstacle of the newly discovered Americas in their way.
4. When they arrived, the Chinese considered them “barbarians” from the “Tai Xi” (the “far west”) and the emperors insisted that they only trade at the port of Canton.
5. Having learned very little of the Europeans over the centuries that followed, China’s leaders did not consider them a serious problem or threat until the British began to sell opium (a highly addictive drug) to the Chinese people.
6. When the Chinese emperor—as benevolent despot—tried to prohibit the opium trade, and seized British supplies of it, the British viewed this as an illegal and offensive action. They sent a fleet of advanced steam-powered warships to bombard the Chinese coast and navy.
7. **The First Opium War (±1839-42)** was an utter defeat for China, because European industrial and military technology had by that point surpassed that of all other cultures.
8. China was forced to accept trade with Britain and the rest of Europe.

G. The Collapse of Traditional Government: The Chinese Revolution (±1911)

1. As the name suggests, the *First Opium War* was not the only one. After an internal rebellion against the emperor, there was another, *and again China lost*.
2. They then made a half-hearted attempt to adopt Western technology in the so-called “Self-Strengthening Movement.”
3. The failure of this strengthening initiative was made painfully obvious when Japan, a much smaller country that had previously been viewed by China as a subordinate, wrested control of Korea from China in the *Sino-Japanese War*. Japan had successfully modernized itself, whereas China had not.
4. Another rebellion, known as the “Boxer Rebellion,” failed to dislodge the monarchy and the foreigners, but the emperors of China simply had no answer to the challenge of dealing with the modern world.
5. As was always the case when a Chinese dynasty was judged to have failed the people, rebellions grew in intensity until the dynasty was overthrown. This finally occurred through the **Chinese Revolution of ±1911**.

H. The Failed Republic

1. What followed is perhaps the greatest tragedy of Chinese history.
2. A number of separate groups rebelled against the monarchy, and the last emperor, a child name Puyi, was forced to abdicate (to formally give up the throne).
3. The most promising leader of the rebellions was an American-educated man named Sun Yat-Sen, who hoped to create a “republic,” as the new form of Chinese government, in keeping with the need to modernize.
4. Unfortunately, the most powerful military commander in China, Yuan Shikai, had his own ideas. The rivalry between Sun Yat-Sen and Yuan Shikai was never resolved. In dragged on for a few years, and then both men, who were elderly, both died, leading a great vacuum of power and ideas.



Sun Yat-Sen (left) and Yuan Shikai (right) were the competing leaders of China in and after the *Chinese Revolution of 1911*. Their failure to make a lasting republic and their deaths in quick succession left China without a clear direction.