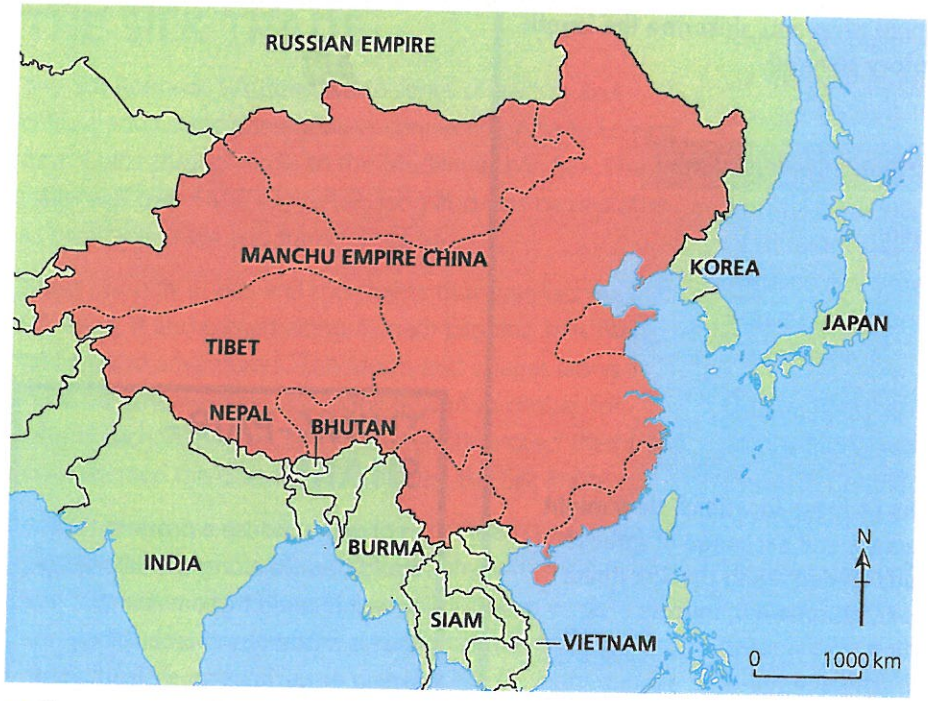

Figure 3.5 China as the 'Middle Kingdom', at the start of the nineteenth century

THE OPIUM TRADE

Opium was also a significant part of international trade in the nineteenth century. It was used for both medicinal and recreational purposes and could offer merchants rich profits. However, opium is extremely addictive and the recreational use of opium was highly damaging to people's health. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were bans across Europe and in parts of Asia, including China, on the 'opium dens' or bars that sold the product to smoke. It was the attempt by British traders to breach Chinese law and continue to sell opium to the vast Chinese market that led to war between China and Britain in 1839. (See more on this on page 52.)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century China believed it was culturally superior to the rest of the world. Surrounded by tributary states or deserts or mountains, it saw itself as the Middle Kingdom.

Links to: Languages

Writing Chinese names

The Chinese language does not use the system of letters familiar to speakers of European languages. It is therefore impossible to read (unless you have learnt Mandarin) and very difficult to use in a book written in a European language.

Chinese names (of people and places) have therefore been transliterated into a form that can be recognized and used. Until the 1980s the Wade–Giles system was used but more recently the Pinyin system has become the accepted version.

What this means is that there are often two versions of the same name. Older books will use one, and more modern books use the other. In this book, names are usually written in the Pinyin version, but in contemporary sources the Wade–Giles form may be used – with the Pinyin in brackets afterwards.

Here are both versions of some of the key names used in the text:

Wade–Giles (old)	Pinyin (new)
Canton	Guangzhou
Kuang Hsu	Guangxu
Kwantung	Guangdong
Liaotung	Liaodong
Nanking	Nanjing
Peking	Beijing
Tientsin	Tianjin
Tsingtao	Qingdao
Tzu Hsi	Cixi

Supranational organizations

The smaller states surrounding China had accepted 'tributary status' or, in other words, had accepted that they were inferior to China and paid 'tribute' to the greater power. These countries included Korea, Tibet and Vietnam.

The Chinese can claim many great achievements – including being the first to invent: paper, gunpowder, waterproof lacquer, money, drought-resistant rice, asbestos suits, credit cards, acupuncture, the compass, the rudder, seismographs for measuring earthquakes, and printing. They also had crossbows and cast iron more than a thousand years before the Europeans. They had mechanical clocks six hundred years before Europeans, too.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, China had been ruled by a succession of royal dynasties for 3500 years. The head of the family was the Emperor, who was considered the Son of Heaven. All his subjects had to be unquestioningly loyal and obedient. The Emperor was said to have the 'Mandate of Heaven', which meant his authority was given by the gods. It was believed that when China had good harvests, and there was peace and prosperity, that mandate was secure. However, if the dynasty was successfully challenged by an army from within or a foreign invasion from outside – then the belief was that the Mandate of Heaven had shifted. Therefore, a ruling dynasty could lose the Mandate of Heaven.

From the 1640s the new ruling dynasty in China was the Manchu or the Qing dynasty. The Manchus came from the north-east and took over from the failing Ming Dynasty. However, they kept the capital in Beijing and retained the existing **civil service** to ensure the smooth running of the vast empire. They continued to use the old system of examinations to recruit new members to the bureaucracy. Manchu rule brought peace and stability to China. China was relatively wealthy and new intensive farming techniques were developed. This helped to foster a population explosion – the population grew from 150 million in 1700 to 400 million in 1850. The vast majority of these people were peasants.

ACTIVITY: A guide to nineteenth-century China

ATL

- Information literacy skills – Collect, record and verify data; Make connections between various sources of information; Process data and report results

Produce a tourist guide to China in the early nineteenth century. Your guide should include 700–1500 words, but you can choose the most appropriate format.

You need to research China between the dates of 1730 and 1830. You could use the following questions to guide your research:

- **How was China governed at the beginning of the nineteenth century?**
- **What were the key religions and beliefs in China at this time?**
- **What was life like for women in China at this time?**
- **How did people spend their leisure time?**
- **What types of art would you find in China at this time?**
- **What types of technology were there?**

Remind yourself how to develop an action plan and how to **evaluate** your results by looking back to Chapter 2, page 40.

Hint

Make sure you record the sources you use as you research nineteenth-century China and use one standard method of referencing.

Assessment opportunities

- This activity can be assessed using Criterion B: Investigating and Criterion C: Communicating.

Confucianism

As part of your research for your tourist guide, you will need to look at the impact of Confucianism on Chinese life and culture. This was a set of beliefs, founded on the teachings of Confucius, who had lived in the sixth–fifth century BCE.

What was Manchu China's attitude to trade with the West?

The Manchu did not want to develop contacts with the West. They resisted contact with European culture and attempted to prevent European merchants, who were increasingly interested in China, from entering the country. Britain was particularly interested in finding new markets for its manufactured goods. Britain also wanted to be able to access key Chinese goods as cheaply as possible – in particular, tea and silk. Other Europeans were interested in China for similar reasons. The Portuguese not only wanted the luxury goods that could be obtained from China, but also wanted to 'save Chinese souls' by sending missionaries there.

The Europeans did not have a good reputation in China: where the Chinese came into contact with them in the port cities, the Europeans behaved very badly. Often sailors would get drunk and get into fights and they were rude to the local Chinese. They were also ignorant of Chinese culture and customs, and unaware of local laws. The Chinese regarded the Europeans as barbarians who were rough, unshaven and uncivilized.

Finally, the Europeans were expelled from China. The Chinese authorities attempted a 'closed door' policy, which allowed only a limited amount of trade with the Europeans, and this could only take place in a restricted number of ports and under strict regulations. The Europeans hated these restrictions, but they also disadvantaged Chinese merchants – for example, two of the main commodities, silk and tea, often had to be transported hundreds of kilometres from villages and towns across China. The Westerners were allowed only to trade with 13 Hongs, which were business organizations set up to deal with the 'foreign devils'.

Figure 3.6 The Imperial Palace of the ruling Manchu dynasty

The Europeans were only permitted to enter small areas in these designated ports. They could not go outside of these areas. They were not allowed to bring their wives to the trading ports, and they were not allowed to settle in these areas. Ordinary Chinese people could not meet the European traders, and if any Chinese national was caught teaching the Chinese language to foreigners, death was the penalty.

The foreign merchants were not at all pleased with all these restrictions. They also did not want to be subject to Chinese laws, which they believed were inhumane and barbaric. A key issue for the merchants was that trade was made very expensive for them as the Chinese insisted on being paid in silver for their goods. This meant trade was 'one way' as the Chinese would not accept any Western goods in exchange for their tea and silk. The British were particularly hostile to this arrangement as they wanted to use China as a mass market for their manufactured goods.

The exchange of silver was also expensive for European merchants as they had to buy silver rather than using their readily available manufactured goods. Silver was also dangerous to carry in ships across the world from Europe to Asia because it was a target for pirates. This in turn made it expensive to insure.

Supranational organizations

Why did the opium trade lead to war between China and Britain in 1839?

LONG-TERM CAUSES OF WAR

Cultural and diplomatic differences

As we have seen, the Chinese saw themselves as the 'centre' of the world – the Middle Kingdom. However, by the early nineteenth century the British too believed themselves to be the number one power in the world, and the most civilized and cultured nation. Thus, the two countries viewed each other as 'inferior' and 'barbaric'.

Britain and China also clashed over how they engaged in international relations. The Chinese tribute system established China as the dominant nation in the region with 'inferior' states expected to offer gifts to China. The British also had a long-established system of 'diplomacy' by which to conduct international relations. This system assumed a degree of equality with foreign nations, but often Britain adopted a superior position. Britain's diplomats expected respect and privileged status.

Economic differences/attitude towards trade

The British were frustrated by China's 'closed door' trading system – known as the Canton system. They wanted an 'open door' or '**free trade**' policy – where their merchants and businesses could trade freely without restriction in China.

Figure 3.7 Chinese Emperor Qianlong, who ruled from 1735 to 1796

The British sent two diplomatic missions to China tasked with improving trade relations between the two countries.

In 1793 an important British mission, led by Lord Macartney, went to China with instructions from King George III to set up diplomatic relations and trade agreements. The mission brought with it gifts for the Emperor and was royally entertained but it failed to secure trade agreements. To the Chinese, the idea of trading with Britain as an equal was abhorrent, and they viewed the mission not as an equal diplomatically but as one from a 'tribute' state paying homage to the Emperor.

An imperial response to the mission was sent to George III:

> 'Our celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders – there is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians for our own produce. The Throne's principle is to treat strangers from afar with indulgence and exercise a pacifying influence over the barbarian tribes the world over. Your barbarian merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land there [Tientsin and Chekiang], but will be subject to instant expulsion. Tremblingly obey and show no negligence. A special Mandate.'

Quoted in Roper, M. 1981. Emperor's China: People's China.

A second mission in 1816 was also unsuccessful. The leader of the mission, Lord Amherst, outraged the Chinese court when he refused to 'kowtow' to the Emperor. The kowtow was a ceremonial gesture made when meeting a person of higher social rank. To perform a kowtow you made three deep bows, prostrating yourself three times after each one with your nose touching the floor. The kowtow operated on all social levels in China – children to their parents, courtiers to the Emperor and the Emperor to Heaven. Lord Amherst refused to demean himself by lying face down on the floor! The Chinese saw his refusal as extremely bad manners and it confirmed their view of Europeans as barbarians.

The two British missions failed to set up full diplomatic relations or to relax trade restrictions for Britain's merchants. They also showed up the key cultural differences and misunderstandings between Britain and China.

ACTIVITY: Source analysis

In pairs, consider the extent to which Source D's description is supported by the image in Source E.

SHORT-TERM CAUSES OF WAR

The dispute over the opium trade

The British merchants wanted to end the massive flow of silver from Britain to China. They wanted to find something they could trade that would interest the Chinese market. They came up with the idea of selling opium to China. Opium is a narcotic drug that for centuries had been used medicinally in China to relieve pain. But the British introduced the drug as a recreational habit, and, being highly addictive, smoking opium quickly took hold in China.

A key motive for the British traders was that the demand for Chinese tea had grown at home, which offered vast profits for companies. The main company trading with China was the British East India Company. This company had sponsored the growing of opium poppies in India. Originally opium had been popular in European cities – where the bars known as 'opium dens' were set up. Due to the horrific impact of opium addiction on the general public, European governments banned the drug. This meant that the growing companies needed a new market.

SOURCE D

A British observer in China wrote of those addicted to opium:

'The evils which arise from opium-smoking are many. It injures the health and physical powers, especially of the working and poorer classes, whose wages are only sufficient to meet their necessities, and who curtail the amount spent on food and clothing to gratify their craving for the vice … Those who have yielded to it for years, and who are slaves to the pipe, are miserable if circumstances should arise to debar them from their accustomed whiffs: it is extraordinary to see how perfectly wretched they are; every attitude, every feature of the face, every sentence, is a living witness that they are in agony till the craving is satisfied. The opium sots or 'opium devils', as the natives term them, are pitiable objects, emaciated almost to a skeleton, until they finally succumb to their vice …'

Quoted in Ball, J. D. 1903. Things Chinese. *Hong Kong. Kelly & Walsh.*

SOURCE E

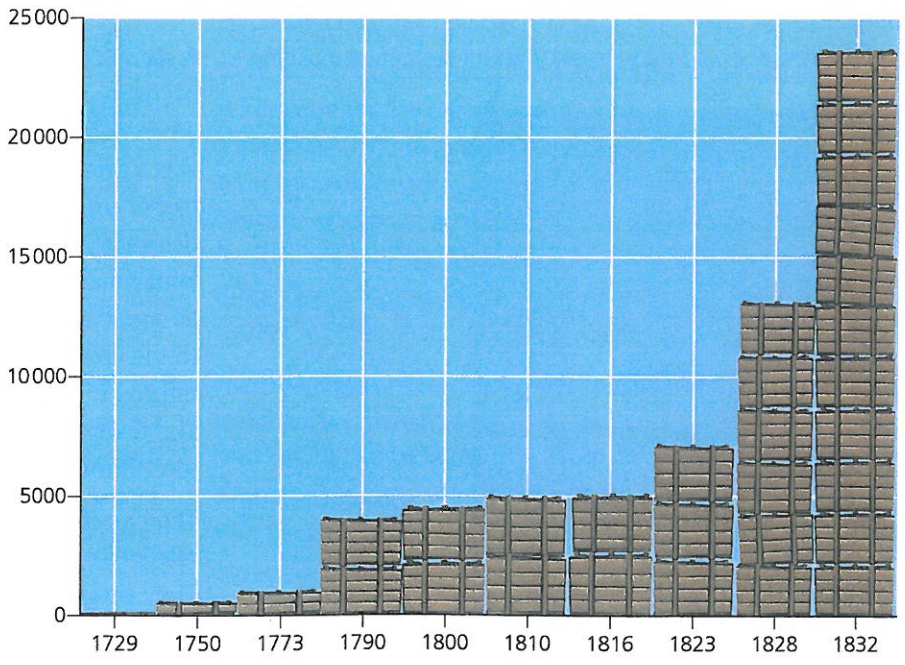

Figure 3.8 Number of chests of opium imported into China

Supranational organizations

The East India Company exchanged vast amounts of opium for tea in China. The social and economic impact of the drug soon had an effect on the Chinese authorities. Opium addiction destroyed families, with some poor families selling their own children to fund their habit.

Instead of silver flowing into China, silver now poured out into the hands of the British opium traders. Indeed, the demand for opium far outweighed the demand for tea. It became far more profitable than selling tea and silk to the home markets. For the Chinese government, opium was not only a social problem but an economic one too, as the Chinese population became less productive. In response the Chinese passed two laws banning the importation of the drug in 1729 and 1796. To get around this ban, and continue making huge profits, the East India Company began to sell opium to Chinese merchants who were able to smuggle it into China. Despite the bans the opium trade grew and grew.

The trade was so lucrative that merchants from other countries, including Portugal, France and America, also got involved.

ACTIVITY: Action plan for the Imperial Government of China, 1838

ATL

- Critical-thinking skills – Gather and organize relevant information to formulate an argument; Consider ideas from multiple perspectives

Task

You and a partner are Chinese officials in the nineteenth century. You have been asked by the Emperor to solve the key problems facing China at this time:

- **More and more Chinese people are becoming addicted to opium.**
- **Many officials are becoming corrupted and are taking part in the opium trade themselves.**
- **China is losing a lot of wealth to Western countries because of the opium trade.**

Requirements

You need to fill in a copy of the proposal to the Emperor, set out on the right. It is up to you to decide what action your government should take.

Some options are:

- **Arrest, try and execute all Westerners found guilty of dealing in the opium trade.**
- **Confiscate all the opium you can find and destroy it; refuse to give compensation to the Westerners who were selling it.**
- **Execute or imprison all Chinese who are opium addicts.**
- **Threaten the Western powers with war unless they stop selling opium.**
- **Offer to make a lot of concessions to the West – open up ports to trade, give them the right to live in China, allow them to be tried in their own courts *if* they stop selling opium.**

Action Plan for the Imperial Government of China, 1838

Your Majesty, I your humble slave recommend the following:

With regard to the opium situation and the foreign devils we should …

I predict that, as a result of this action, the English barbarians will react as follows …

Assessment opportunities

- This activity can be assessed using Criterion A: Knowing and understanding.