Opium, Conflict, and Spheres of Influence in China

The Qing or Manchu dynasty was the last Chinese dynasty. It was not interested in Western technology and believed Europeans were inferior. This ethnocentric attitude led to the dynasty’s lack of modern weapons and its inability to resist Western demands.

European nations were very interested in China. They established spheres of influence in China or areas where a European nation could control trade without interference from other Western nations. European nations began to economically control parts of China. Wishing to participate in trade with China, the United States insisted on an “Open Door” Policy or allowing all nations interested in commerce with China equal trading rights.

While Europeans and Americans benefitted from trade with China, the Chinese suffered, particularly as Opium, a highly addictive drug, was increasingly imported into China.

Questions:
1. What problems faced the Qing dynasty?

2. What was a sphere of influence?

3. Why do you think Europeans and Americans were interested in trade with China?

4. What was the “Open Door” Policy?
The Opium War (1839-1842)

As the British imported more and more Chinese goods, particularly tea, its treasury was being depleted. The Chinese were very ethnocentric and believed that China was the Middle Kingdom. Therefore, the Chinese were not interested in European products. As a result of these attitudes, the British had developed an unfavorable balance of trade with China. In order to correct this imbalance, the British realized that they could sell opium to the Chinese people. Opium was a highly addictive drug. The British were able to easily acquire poppy plants, the plants from which opium was derived, from its colony of India. The poppy plants were processed into opium and then the opium was sold directly to the Chinese people. As more and more Chinese men and women succumbed to opium addiction, Chinese officials tried to ban the importation of the highly addictive opium. In 1839, Chinese officials destroyed 20,000 chests of the drug and imprisoned British traders selling it. The British responded by sending a fleet of ships to invade China.

The Chinese were forced to sign the Treaty of Nanjing, which:
- Reimbursed Britain for costs incurred fighting the Chinese
- Opened additional ports to British trade
- Provided Britain with complete control of Hong Kong
- Granted extraterritoriality to British citizens living in China (British citizens accused of crimes would be tried in their own courts and by their own laws).

Questions:
1. Why did the British sell opium to the Chinese?
2. Why did Chinese officials try to stop the opium trade?
3. How did the Treaty of Nanjing affect the Chinese?
4. Explain extraterritoriality:

Vocabulary: Use a dictionary to define the following words.
- derived
- succumbed
From imperialism to opium addiction, the Chinese people faced grave dangers. Some reacted peacefully; others violently.

Some Chinese rebelled against the Qing Dynasty. They hoped to change China. The Taiping Rebellion occurred in 1850. The Chinese government turned to Westerners for help to crush the rebellion.

The Boxer Rebellion occurred in 1898. The Boxers or “The Righteous and Harmonious Fists” were a religious society. They wanted to drive all “foreign devils” out of China. The Boxers killed Chinese who supported Western ways. They even killed some foreigners and attacked Western embassies in China. Ultimately, the Boxer Rebellion was crushed by an international force. The Chinese were forced to pay money and give away more privileges.

Questions:
1. Why did some Chinese rebel?
2. Who were the Boxers?
3. What did the Boxers want?
4. How were the Chinese affected by the Boxer Rebellion?
“You ask me about what is called imperialism. Well, I have formed views about that question. I am at the disadvantage of not knowing whether our people are for or against spreading themselves over the face of the globe. I should be sorry if they are, for I don't think that it is wise or a necessary development. As to China, I quite approve of our Government's action in getting free of that complication. They are withdrawing, I understand, having done what they wanted. That is quite right. We have no more business in China than in any other country that is not ours.”

Questions:
1. What are Mark Twain’s views on imperialism?
2. Do his views surprise you? Explain your answer.

Excerpt adapted from Fei Ch'i-hao, a Chinese Christian. Here he recounts the activities of the millenialist "Boxers" in the Boxer Rebellion (Fordham.edu)

“Early in June my college friend K'ung Hsiang Hsi came back from T'ungchou for his vacation, reporting that the state of affairs there and at Peking was growing worse, that the local officials were powerless against the Boxers, and that the Boxers, armed with swords, were constantly threatening Christians scattered in the country.

From this time we had no communication with Tientsin or Peking. All travelers were searched, and if discovered bearing foreign letters they were killed. So though several times messengers were started out to carry our letters to the coast, they were turned back by the Boxers before they had gone far. It was not long before the Boxers, like a pestilence, had spread all over Shansi. School had not closed yet in Fen Chou Fu, but as the feeling of alarm deepened, fathers came to take their boys home, and school was dismissed before the end of June.

…On the 28th of June all day long a mob of one or two hundred roughs, with crowds of boys, stood at the gate of the Atwater place, shouting: "Kill the foreigners, loot the house…Late in July a proclamation of the Governor was posted in the city in which occurred the words, "Exterminate foreigners, kill devils."

Questions:
1. What did the narrator’s friend report when he returned home?
2. Why were all travelers searched?
3. What did the mob shout?
4. What was stated in the proclamation?