

# Chinese century of humiliation essay sample

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The Chinese held the Middle Kingdom mentality for thousands of years, demonstrating their belief of the superiority of the Chinese and their Emperor. The Century of Humiliation, lasting from the first Opium War in 1839 until the 1940's and the rise of the Communist Party, forced Western ideas into China and caused doubts of and the eventual fall of the Middle Kingdom. Many factors of the Century of Humiliation, ranging between the Taiping Rebellion, the 'rice bowl' mentality of the Chinese in the face of reform, and World War 1 influenced the cultural shifts and the humiliation of China, but the most significant of the contributing events of the Century of Humiliation was the Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaties, especially the Treaty of Nanking.

The beginning of the Century of Humiliation was the Opium Wars, which not only rid China of its tribute system but also was the beginning of opium was banned by the Chinese government, denying the British the trading rights they saw that they superiorly deserved. This began the illegal importation of opium by the British, which continued through the early 19th Century.

Further illegal importation of opium by 1839 caused the emperor to permit Commissioner Lin Zexu to confiscate illegal opium upon a British ship in the port of Guangzhou, inciting the first Opium War between the British and the Chinese (5-6). The Chinese overwhelmingly lost to the British due to the superior firepower of the British navy. The victory of the British began the placement of the unequal treatise, which continued following the Second Opium War in 1858. The first unequal treaty was the Treaty of Nanking, established in 1842 in the aftermath of the first Opium War. Under the Treaty

of Nanking, China had to pay indemnities for the opium it seized during the Opium War.

Furthermore, the British weren't allowed to levy taxes higher than five percent on British imports. The cities of Canton, Foochow, Amoy, Ningpo, and Shanghai were opened to British trade, and British residents of said cities were exempt from Chinese law. These factors began the spheres of influence in China, allowing Britain to assume economic control of Chinese society through these controlled ports. The island of Hong Kong was additionally taken from the Chinese as a trading base for the British (2-3). Numerous other treaties were implemented during this era of unequal treaties.

The most prominent of these were the Treaty of Wanghsia, which furthered extraterritorial privileges and opened internal waterways to American ships, and the Tientsin Treaties following the Sino-French War, in which England and France reestablished opium trade, allowed missionary activities in China, and assumed perpetual control of Chinese customs. In both cases, the rights gained by America and France, respectively, were assumed by Britain under the most-favored-nation clause of the Treaty of Nanking (3). The results of the Opium Wars and the unequal treaties established the Western dominance of China that began the series of events in the Century of Humiliation, weakening the dynasty system and most importantly allowing the Chinese to question and alter their assumed superiority (6).

The questioning of Chinese tradition and the influence of Western ideas that began in the Opium Wars led to the Taiping Rebellion, another major contributor to the Chinese Century of Humiliation. Led by Hong Xiuchuan, a

man influenced by the influx of Western ideas and the religious basis of Christianity to the point of declaring himself the brother of Jesus called to establish the Heavenly Kingdom, the Taiping Rebellion began with rapidly increasing success. The Taiping rebels seized Nanjing in 1853 and claimed it to be the capitol of the new kingdom. The influence of Western ideas in combination with the civil unrest of the Chinese peasants was combined and demonstrated through the rapid growth and power of the Taiping Rebellion. The rebels rose to control cities, some falling briefly while others turned to civil wars lasting up to 14 years.

Through these uprisings and civil wars, the Taiping Rebellion became one of the most destructive civil wars in known history. Approximately twenty million people died in the Taiping Rebellion, and major cultural and industrial areas like the Yangzi delta were destroyed. The Manchu government lost further power in this rebellion, not only in the unrest of their people but from the need to allow warlords and foreigners to suppress the rebellion for them (6). The superior influence of the Taiping Christian-Chinese over the Chinese people and the government of Southern China furthered the humiliation of the Chinese. The advancement and message of the Taiping rebels, from individual persecution of officials to Hung's declaration of himself as the Prince of Heaven and the declaration of the kingdom as the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, when coupled with the power given to the warlords and foreigners for defense furthered in contribution to the humiliation and downfall of the Chinese Empire (32-3).

The ineffective nature of China in the face of Western influence and ideas was the “rice bowl mentality” of the Manchu government system which contributed to the humiliation of China. This rice bowl mentality was the response to the attempts at reform within the Manchu government. The reforms were set to westernize and advance the Chinese people, but those who would lose individual power through the new reforms or diversion from tradition actively blocked the reforms from enacting. In preventing the reforms and westernization, the Chinese were kept stagnant in progress as the West advanced. The rice bowl mentality altered Manchu government through unchallenged corruption by Empress Dowager Cixi and those whose corruption she allowed. Despite three young emperors being on the throne, Empress Dowager Cixi cunningly maintained hidden power over the decisions of China from 1861 to 1908.

The scholar gentry assisted Empress Dowager Cixi in the blocking of reform, as alterations to education, government, agriculture, and military policy and operation would threaten their power, wealth, and luxurious lifestyles. This greed was similarly held by Cixi, who took money intended to build a defensive fleet in the Sino-Japanese War and used it to build a garden for herself. Instances such as this contributed to such humiliation as the loss of the Sino-Japanese War, and further delayed the modernization in China (7). This rejection of westernization and modernization for selfish, personal benefit resulted in the lasting effect of the humiliation of China, with the opinion of the scholar gentry being accurately held in the quote:

“ Our scholars and officials have confined themselves to the study of stanzas and sentences and are ignorant of the greatest change of the last several thousand years: they are accustomed to the temporary security of the present” (34). This ineffective rice bowl mentality that allowed corruption in the Chinese government withheld the industrialization necessary for China to surpass the West, or even the westernizing Japan. This withholding factor contributed to the humiliation of China through ceasing its progress and allowing its loss to the ‘ inferior’ nations surrounding it (7-8).

The last most significant event that contributed to the Century of Humiliation was World War I. During World War I, Japan took advantage of the dismay in Europe to seize the Shandong Peninsula in China in effort against Germany. Although Japan was in the Allied forces, the opportunity for power and control of China was not passed. Past the defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War due to the rice bowl mentality and corruption, this further defeat by the traditionally lesser Japan extended the humiliation in China. To increase the humiliation, the Japanese presented the Twenty One Demands to China, calling for Japanese possession of the Shandong Peninsula, the extension of Japanese rights in Manchuria, and half interest in Chinese iron and steel mills in central China (19-20). The Japanese also demanded the denial of any other foreign nation leases on their cost, as well as demanding China to purchase all arms from China and entrust military and police work to Japanese officials.

To counter this, the Chinese joined the Allied ranks to try to negotiate themselves out of the Twenty One Demands after the war. The Treaty of

Versailles did not give fair acknowledgement of China's needs and allotted the lands to Japan. Due to this, China refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles and was thus ignored within it. The lesser status given to China through these measures in a multinational agreement contributed greatly to the dishonor of the Century of Humiliation in China (20). The Century of Humiliation in China was wrought by an inefficient and corrupt government faced with a more advanced and culturally different opposing nation. The Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaties, with the Treaty of Nanking most prominent amongst them, first and foremost humiliated China through destroying the dominant mentality and attitude of Chinese foreign relations.

Their defeat and the policies forced upon them contradicted their central beliefs towards their government and opposing nations. The Taiping Rebellion marked the common people's response to this western influence and the humiliating defeat of the supposed superior Middle Kingdom. The rice bowl mentality of the ruling Manchus stopped China from properly advancing and defending itself. The involvement of China in World War I and the Treaty of Versailles further humiliated China in respect to the other nations involved in World War I. These events were not the sole points of humiliation during the Chinese Century of Humiliation, but each most importantly influenced and demonstrated the important factors in said humiliation and the fall of the Chinese Empire and development of the modern Chinese government.