The significance of 1066, and specifically the significance of the Norman Conquest, stems from the fact that it established a nationwide absolute monarchy to an extent which hadn’t been present before in the country. The figure of a supposedly divinely chosen monarch, set a moral and political precedent for England’s people to conquer civilisations who they viewed as less virtuous. The fact that this notion transcended any individual ruler is borne out through the growth of the British Empire throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, under various royal houses.

A similar system of monarchy, and later empire, was founded in China in 221 BCE following the country’s unification under the Qin dynasty. Like its British counterpart the Chinese monarchy continued to be the leading political force in the country across multiple dynasties, only formally being dissolved in 1912. The similarities between the systems are most clearly seen when comparing their origins, along with the effects of an absolute monarchy on the lives of the countries’ citizens up until the first opium war (1839-42). This event can be interpreted as a cause of the divulsion in the history of the two systems resulting in the two monarchies relinquishing power very differently.

The earliest similarities between the English and Chinese monarchies can be seen in their initial founding. Both William I and Qin Shi Huang took power at times of constitutional turmoil. Following the death of Edward, the Confessor in January 1066, three separate individuals all claimed to be the rightful heir. Similarly, China spent most of the 3rd century BCE divided into 7 regional kingdoms. Much of the success of China’s monarchy in ensuring national unity was due to Qin’s establishment of a universal non-alphabetic script. A shared language helped to remove many of the social barriers between the different regional states, increasing the authority of national government. Parallels can be drawn between this and the entry of French words into the English language following the Norman Conquest. Demonstrating that both early monarchies saw language as a means of establishing cultural authority.

What is cited as an advantage of an absolute monarchy is that it allows vital decisions to be taken far quicker than in democratic states. This can clearly be seen in the support for the crusades (occurring sporadically 1095-1492) given by various English kings, and the Tang campaigns (c. 7th century), by their Chinese counterparts. The ability of an absolute monarch to order military campaigns relatively quickly allowed both countries to form empires that were used as a source of valuable natural resources. Both powers used these to grow to levels of wealth and influence beyond those achievable by a single nation.

The belief that their monarch had been given their position divinely influenced the actions of both governments during the events leading up to the first opium war. One of Britain’s East India trading company’s most profitable activities in the early 19th century was the exchange of opium for Chinese tea; something which greatly angered Chinese Emperor Daoguang who viewed opium sales as undermining China’s moral integrity. Daoguang’s passing of a decree outlawing opium sale within the country, and the subsequent escalation of tensions, stemmed from both the emperor and the British traders believing they held moral authority as representatives of a divinely led empire. The persistence of this notion also contributed to the continuation of the war until 1842 despite it being apparent that the Chinese navy was unable to reclaim any British strongholds.

Foreign interference in China became increasingly common in the late 19th century. This undermined the monarchy’s Confucian principles which demanded that China’s emperor maintain complete control over all aspects of Chinese life. The disillusionment of the Chinese people with this narrative was displayed in the official, undertaking of the emperor’s duties by his advisors in order to prevent a civil war (1908). This could only be achieved however by the dissolution of the monarchy in 1912. The relatively quick fall of the Chinese monarchy contrasts with the gradual relinquishing of power by the English equivalent; occurring over a much longer period (c.1215-c.1928). This difference showcases the impact of military defeat to a more powerful empire on the authority of China’s emperors in their own country.

221 BCE in Chinese history acts as an equivalent date to 1066 in English history as both saw their respective countries united under an absolute monarchy, both politically and culturally, for the first time. The figure of a monarch with theoretically absolute power created a moral precedent and political mechanism for the growth of two empires which first came into conflict during the 19th century. This greatly undermined the authority of imperialism in China, while socially liberal ideas were doing the same in Britain; leading to the eventual replacement of both monarchies with systems of representative democracy.