**1840-1860: Opium Wars**

**Trade war: Britain acquires 'a barren rock'**

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**At the start of the 19th century, Hong Kong was little more than a backwater in southern China, with no indication it would one day be a world trade center.**

By the middle of that century, Britain's desire to force opium on China had resulted in two wars -- and the loss of Chinese sovereignty in the territory.

In the early 1800s, Hong Kong was inhabited mostly by subsistence farmers, fishermen and pirates.

At that time, China's major contact with the outside world was taking place farther north, up the Pearl River, at [Canton](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.canton.jpg) -- or what is now known as Guangzhou. It was in Canton that overseas traders from Britain, the United States and elsewhere lived and worked in a small enclave, closely regulated by Chinese officials.

Trade had mostly been in China's favor, until the widespread introduction of opium, grown mostly in Britain's then-colony India. And it was in Canton that the illegal and highly profitable opium trade flourished.

[Opium addiction](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.opium.addiction.jpg) grew to epidemic proportions, ravaging Chinese society. The Ching emperor appointed a special commissioner in Canton, with orders to stamp out the opium trade.

A week after his appointment, [Lin Ze-xu](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.lin.ze-xu.jpg) ordered his troops to surround the international enclave in Canton. He demanded the overseas traders turn over all of their opium stocks. After a six-week stand off, the traders [surrendered](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.opium.surrender.jpg) more than 20,000 chests of the narcotic.

That confrontation brought demands for action from British opium traders, including two of the biggest, William Jardine and James Matheson. It also provoked a belligerent response from the British military, and the start of the [First Opium War](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.first.opium.war.jpg), of 1840-1842.

During that war, on January 26, 1841, a British naval party landed on the northwestern shore of Hong Kong, raised the [Union Jack](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.union.jack.raising.jpg), and formally occupied the island.

China's antiquated navy and army were no match for the British. The First Opium War ended with the [Treaty of Nanking](http://asia.cnn.com/WORLD/9706/hk97/past/opium.wars/link.treaty.of.nanking.jpg), in August of 1842.

That treaty promised, among other things, British trading rights and privileges in five Chinese ports. It also ceded control of Hong Kong island to the British. In the words of the treaty, Hong Kong was "to be possessed in perpetuity by her Britannic Majesty, her heirs and successors."

Most of official Britain was surprised and amused by the Empire's new acquisition, a seemingly worthless, virtually barren rock of an island.

Less than two decades later, a new conflict broke out between the British and China's rulers. The Second Anglo-Chinese War (1856-1860) ended with another British victory and the Convention of Peking, which gave London perpetual control of the Kowloon peninsula, on the Chinese mainland across from Hong Kong Island.

By the century's end, other European countries and Japan had demanded and received concessions from China. Professing concerns about the security of Hong Kong, the British also made new demands on the Chinese -- in particular, a 99-year lease on what is now called the New Territories -- land farther into China, beyond the Kowloon Peninsula.

That lease began in 1898, and expired on July 1, 1997.

**More Hong Kong history**

 1840-1860: [Opium Wars](http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/20/hk.history.01)

 1860s-1940: [In the crown](http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/20/hk.history.02)

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 1945-1960s: [Postwar](http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/20/hk.history.04)

 1960s-1970s: [Revolution](http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/20/hk.history.05)

 1970s -1984: [The deal](http://asia.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/20/hk.history.06/)