Hong Kong and the Opium Wars

How did Hong Kong become part of the British Empire?
In 1997, Hong Kong stopped being a British colony after more than 150 years of British rule. Authority over Hong Kong was transferred to China. Many see this moment as the end of the last significant colony in the British Empire.

Hong Kong became a British colony through two wars: the First and Second Opium Wars. The First Opium War broke out in 1839. It is called the ‘Opium War’ because of one of its major causes: the British were smuggling opium from their Indian colonies into Chinese ports against the wishes of the Chinese government. This was to help pay for the large amounts of Chinese tea that they were importing – by the early 1800s, tea was a popular drink with the British public. Britain also wanted more control over their trade with China, as they could only trade with certain officials called Hong merchants.

The Opium Wars resulted in two treaties, each expanding the size of Britain’s Hong Kong territory. These treaties were followed by a 99-year lease in 1898 that allowed Britain to control even more land – a lease that ran out in 1997.

Use this lesson to find out the causes behind the First Opium War and how Hong Kong became part of the British Empire. How important were economic factors in the growth of the British Empire? How can we explain the unique position of Hong Kong in the world today?

**Introduction**

**Suitable for:**
- KS 5

**Time period:**
- Empire and Industry 1750-1850

**Connections to curriculum:**

**Key Stage Five:**

**Edexcel:**
- Britain: losing and gaining an empire, 1763–1914
- The changing nature and extent of trade

**OCR:**
- From Colonialism to Independence: The British Empire 1857–1965
- China and its Rulers 1839–1989
- Key topics:
  - China and the wider world
- Depth studies:
  - The First Opium War and its impact

**AQA:**
- The British Empire, c1857–1967
- The Transformation of China, 1936–1997
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This lesson looks at why the Opium Wars happened and how Hong Kong became a British colony. It shows the importance of ports and trade routes for the British Empire around this time, and how economic factors were linked to its growth.

Please note that this lesson includes two sources that deal directly with the opium drug trade.

To begin with, students examine three maps of British Hong Kong. The first map shows what Hong Kong looked like after the First Opium War, when it was just Hong Kong Island. The second map shows what Hong Kong looked like after the Second Opium War, when Kowloon was added. Finally, the third map shows what Hong Kong looked like after the 1898 lease, which added the New Territories – this map is identical to what Hong Kong looks like today.

Sources 2a and 2b show students the importance of tea in Britain during the 1800s. Source 2a is an advertisement for tea in the late 1800s, showing how tea was associated with an exotic and stereotypical vision of ‘East Asia’ around this time. It also shows that tea was marketed towards everyday people, reflecting that it was now part of daily British life and culture. Source 2b shows a table that records the amounts and values of different Chinese goods imported into Britain by the East India Company from 1811-1828. By following the numbers, students can clearly see how valuable tea was and the large amounts that were being imported.

Sources 3a and 3b are translated from Chinese and show China's perspective on Britain's opium smuggling. Source 3a describes the negative effects of opium, and that British colonies were the source of the drug. It also outlines the economic impacts of opium smuggling, draining silver from the Chinese economy and flipping the trade imbalance previously experienced by the British. Source 3b shows how Britain's refusal to obey trade restrictions and the opium ban was leading to heightened tensions. The First Opium War broke out just two years later.

The final source shows extracts from the Treaty of Nanking, after Britain won the First Opium War. It shows two of the most important things that Britain gained – not just the
territory of Hong Kong, but a lifting of trade restrictions for British merchants.

Further questions/activities:

Look closer at the treaty that resulted from the First Opium War. Treaty of Nanking (Catalogue ref: FO 93/23/1b)

- What does it tell you about what Britain wanted through its treaties with China?
- This treaty is often referred to as one of the first of the ‘unequal treaties’ in China. Why do you think that is?

Explore Hong Kong under British colonial rule. What was life like for Hongkongers under British rule? How did Hong Kong become known as a global financial centre in the latter half of the 20th century? Potential topics to cover can include:

- Segregation in colonial Hong Kong
- The 1894 Hong Kong plague
- Protests in the 1960s against the colonial government
- The unique history of the Kowloon Walled City. Why was it not colonised in the same way as the rest of Hong Kong? How did its story end?

Sources

1a. Hong Kong, surveyed by Captain Sir Edward Beleher, 1841. Catalogue ref: FO 925/2293
1b. Hong Kong Sun-on District, 1868. Catalogue ref: CO 700/HONGKONGANDCHINA3A (1)
1c. Map of Hong Kong and of the Territory leased to Great Britain under the Convention between Great Britain and China signed at Peking on the 9th of June 1898. Catalogue ref: MPG 1/796
2b. Printed Accounts, etc. of the East India Company's China trade, 1830. Catalogue ref: PRO 30/9/4/38
3a. Chinese translations on opium, 1836. Catalogue ref: FO 228/4
3b. Letter from Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces in Fukien, 1 September 1837. Catalogue ref: FO 682/2462/41
In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Britain was experiencing a problem with its trade with China: it bought more than it sold. Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, and especially tea were very popular. However, Chinese merchants did not want to buy British goods in return. As a result, Britain had to pay silver for the goods that it was importing, eventually risking a silver shortage.

Britain's solution to this trade imbalance was opium. Opium is an addictive and dangerous drug made out of plants. Britain started growing opium in its Indian colonies and exporting it to China, where it spread through the population. China now started experiencing its own problems: it was losing silver, and there was a rapidly growing rate of opium addiction amongst its people. In response, opium was completely banned in China in 1796. However, British merchants kept illegally smuggling opium into the country.

At the same time, the British were unhappy with the restrictions on who they could trade with in China. All foreign trade in China had to go through the Hong merchants. This was a group of officials who made sure that foreign traders followed rules and regulations. British merchants could only trade with the Hong merchants at the southern port of Canton (now Guangzhou), which was close to Hong Kong.

By the early 19th century, the drug problem in China was worsening. It was spreading across the country and the British were smuggling in over 1,000 tonnes of opium per year. Suggestions to ease the prohibitions were rejected and by 1838, opium smugglers risked the death penalty.

In 1839, Chinese official Lin Zexu was tasked with stopping the opium smuggling. He famously seized large amounts of opium from foreign ships and threw it into the sea. He then introduced a system where traders would only be allowed to enter China if they signed a bond stating that they had no illegal goods. The British Superintendent of Trade in China, Charles Elliot, ordered British merchants not to sign.

Other events around this time further heightened tensions – including the murder of Lin Weixi, a villager from Tsim Sha Tsui, by British merchant sailors. Elliot ordered the arrest of the sailors and refused a request from Lin Zexu to turn them over to Chinese authorities. In retaliation, Lin put up a blockade against Macau, where the British had been staying, causing them to be expelled and move to Hong Kong. Lin also prevented food from being sold to the British.
Background

The First Opium War eventually broke out on 4 September 1839 when Elliot issued an ultimatum stating that, if the British would not be allowed to trade for food with locals in Kowloon, British ships would open fire.

Britain won the war in 1842, leading to the Treaty of Nanking. This treaty gave Hong Kong Island to Britain, allowed for free British trade with any merchants in China, and forced China to pay damages for the destroyed opium.

However, Britain was not completely satisfied with the treaty and demanded that it be renegotiated. Among other things, they wanted the opium trade to be legalised and the whole of China to be open to foreign trade. This led to the Second Opium War breaking out in 1856. China was defeated once again, ending in the Treaty of Tientsin, which gave Britain the area north of Hong Kong Island called Kowloon.

The final expansion of British Hong Kong came in 1898. This was the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory, a lease signed between Britain and China. This lease granted Britain the territory above Kowloon that is today known as the New Territories – but only for 99 years. Britain likely did not think they would ever need to return it.

However, 99 years later, China did indeed demand this land back. By this point, most of Hong Kong’s population lived in the New Territories, and it was not possible to separate it. On 1 July 1997, Britain officially transferred authority over Hong Kong to China, ending over 150 years of British rule. This is known in the English-speaking world as the ‘handover’.

Today, Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China. One of the conditions of the 1997 transfer was to maintain the existing colonial systems of government and economy for 50 years. This is known as ‘one country, two systems’.
External links

Opium War – National Army Museum
Overview of the First Opium War from the National Army Museum.

The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment – Asia for Educators
Resource for teachers on the First Opium War from Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University.

History KS3 / GCSE: The First Opium War, 1838-1842
Resource for teachers from the BBC about the causes behind the First Opium War as part of the BBC series The Story of China.

Connections to curriculum

Key stage 5

Edexcel:
- Britain: losing and gaining an empire, 1763–1914
- The changing nature and extent of trade

OCR:
- From Colonialism to Independence: The British Empire 1857–1965
- China and its Rulers 1839–1989
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AQA:
- The British Empire, c1857–1967
- The Transformation of China, 1936–1997

1 https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/opium-war-1839-1842
2 https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1750_opium.htm
1. Maps of Hong Kong over time

Look at sources 1a – c. These three maps show what Hong Kong looked like at three different points in history: 1841, 1868, and 1899.

- ‘Hong Kong Island’ – which is just one small part of today’s Hong Kong – is present in all three of these maps. Can you find it?
- In each map, identify which is the British territory and which is the Chinese territory.
- What do you think has happened in between each of these maps to change the borders?
- Look at a map of Hong Kong today. How similar is it to Source 1c?
- Today, Hong Kong Island is the political and economic centre of Hong Kong. Looking at these maps, why do you think that is?

2. The importance of tea

These two sources both show how popular tea had become in Great Britain in the 19th century.

- Look at Source 2a (the advertisement). Based on the wording in the tagline, do you think tea in the 1800s was a common or occasional purchase?
- This advertisement depicts a fictional woman whose style and surroundings incorporate stereotypical elements of both China and Japan. Why do you think she has been used to sell tea?
- Now look at Source 2b (the table). By looking at the table, can you list three goods that were imported from China into Britain in the early 1800s?
- Look at the numbers at the very bottom of the table. Based on them, can you tell which good was the most popular and most profitable?
- What does this table tell you about the British East India Company and their role in British trade at this time?
- By looking at Source 2a and b together, how would you describe Britain’s relationship to tea in the 1800s?

3. Opium smuggling and growing tensions

Sources 3a and 3b are both translated from Chinese, and show Great Britain’s opium smuggling and the ensuing increase in tensions between the two countries.
Tasks

- Look at Source 3a. Who do you think wrote it and who do you think translated it?
- Based on this text, name two reasons why the opium smuggling is a problem for the Chinese government.
- What is the author implying by listing the places where the opium is coming from?
- Look at Source 3b. Who do you think wrote it, and who do you think it’s addressed to?
- According to this letter, what are the British doing? Why is the Chinese government unhappy with this?
- The First Opium War started about two years after this letter. Does it give us any clues about why the war started? What do you think might have happened in those two years?

4. Extract from Nanking treaty

Source 4 is an extract from the Nanking Treaty. This is the treaty signed after Great Britain defeated China in the First Opium War.

- What is this source? What is its purpose?
- What does article 3 give to Britain? Why do you think Britain wanted this?
- What does article 5 give to Britain? Why do you think Britain wanted this?
- How does this source show the importance of trade to the British Empire at the start of Queen Victoria's reign?
Source 1a: Hong Kong, surveyed by Captain Sir Edward Belcher, 1841.
Catalogue ref: FO 925/2293
CHINA

HONGKONG

Surveyed by Capt. Sir Edward Belcher

In H.M.S. Sulphur

1841.

Map description

Map showing Hong Kong Island labelled ‘HONG KONG’. Underneath is an island labelled ‘LAMMA ISLAND’. Above a bay labelled ‘VICTORIA BAY’ is a piece of land labelled ‘Kowloon’ with two forts marked out.
Source 1b: Hong Kong Sun-on District, 1868. Catalogue ref: CO 700/ HONGKONGANDCHINA3A (1)
MAP OF THE
SUN-ON-DISTRICT,
(KWANGTUNG PROVINCE,)

DRAWN FROM ACTUAL OBSERVATIONS MADE BY
AN ITALIAN MISSIONARY OF THE
PROPAGANDA

In the course of his Professional Labors During a Period
OF
FOUR YEARS.

Being the first and only map hitherto published

May 1868.

REFERENCES.

[Circle with dot] = MANDARIN RESIDENCE
[Pink square with extended corners] = LARGE MARKET PLACE
[Pink square] = SMALL MARKET PLACE
[Pink circle] = VILLAGES
[Pink circle with crucifix] = ROMAN CATHOLIC CHAPEL
[Pagoda symbol] = PAGODA OF SOME CONSIDERATION
[Corridor symbol] = PASS THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS
[Light pink line] = BRITISH TERRITORY
[Blue line] = CHINESE TERRITORY
[Ship symbol] = NAVIGABLE FOR LARGE CHINESE JUNKS.

Height of the Mountains in English Feet.

Soundings in Fathoms.
The uncertain pronunciation of the Chinese Characters is fixed according to Williams’s Dictionary.

Engraved by F. A. Brockhaus, Leipzig.

Map description

Map of Hong Kong Island and the territory surrounding it. Hong Kong Island and the area just above it across the water, the bottom half of Kowloon, are outlined in light pink, as is Stone Cutter Island next to Kowloon. The rest of the land on the map, including the rest of Kowloon and today’s New Territories regions, as well as Lantau and Lamma Islands, are outlined in blue.
Source 1c: Map of Hong Kong and of the Territory leased to Great Britain, 1899. Catalogue Ref: MPG 1/796
Enclosure 1 in despatch No. 9 of 9th January, 1900, from Governor Sir Henry A. Blake.

MAP OF HONG KONG AND OF THE Territory leased to Great Britain under the Convention between Great Britain and China signed at Peking on the 9th of June 1898

Scale 1/84480 or ¾ Inch = 1 Mile

REFERENCE

[Circle with flag] = Mandarin Residence
[White square] = Large Market place
[Dark square] = Small Market place
[White circle] = Villages
[White circle with crucifix] = Churches & Mission Stations
[Pagoda symbol] = Pagoda of importance
[Cross] = Pass
[Double line] = Existing Roads
[Dotted line] = Bridle Roads
[Dotted double line] = Carriage Roads proposed
[Railway line] = Tramways
[Line with dots] = Telegraphs
[Anchor symbol] = Navigable for large Junks
[Triangle followed by number] = Heights in feet above Sea Level

Note

This map has been compiled from existing intelligence Division maps of Hong Kong, Admiralty Charts and a map of the Sun On District compiled in 1866 from the observations of an Italian Missionary.

Map description

Map of Hong Kong showing Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories, Lantau Island, Lamma Island and other surrounding islands depicted in different colours and with borders indicating different districts.
Source 2a: Phillips and Co.’s Teas, Coffees and Cocoas, 1886. Catalogue
Ref: COPY 1/74/28
Transcript: Source 2a

Phillips and Co's Teas, Coffees and Cocoas are the Best and Cheapest.

8 King William Street. City. London. E. C.
### Source 2b: Printed Accounts, etc. of the East India Company’s China trade, 1830. Catalogue Ref: PRO 30/9/4/38

**No. 1. — An Account of all Goods Imported from China into Great Britain from the Year 1811 to the Year 1828 both inclusive, specifying the Quantity and Value of the principal Articles imported, and distinguishing the Trade of the East India Company from the Privilege Trade.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st May to 1st May</th>
<th>Teas</th>
<th>China Raw Silk</th>
<th>Nankeen Cloth</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>Value (£)</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>Value (£)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>19,710,735</td>
<td>3,263,338</td>
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<td>2,987,702</td>
<td>58,151</td>
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No. 1. – AN ACCOUNT of all GOODS IMPORTED from CHINA into GREAT BRITAIN from the Year 1811 to the Year 1828 both inclusive, specifying the Quantity and Value of the principal Articles imported, and distinguishing the Trade of the EAST INDIA COMPANY from the PRIVILEGE TRADE.

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<th>COMPANY'S TRADE</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Value</th>
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</thead>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teas.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Hong Kong and the Opium Wars

Transcript: Source 2b

No. 1. – AN ACCOUNT of all GOODS IMPORTED from CHINA into GREAT BRITAIN from the Year 1811 to the Year 1828 both inclusive, specifying the Quantity and Value of the principal Articles imported, and distinguishing the Trade of the EAST INDIA COMPANY from the PRIVILEGE TRADE.
Source 3a: Chinese translations on opium, 1836. Catalogue Ref: FO 228/4
This passage is introduced with the text: ‘Heu Naetse, vice-president of the Sacrificial Court, presents the following memorial [statement] to show, in regard to opium, that the more severe the interdicts [prohibitions] against it are made, the more widely do the evils arising therefrom spread...’

This was presented to the Emperor of China as part of a debate on whether to ease the prohibitions on opium or enforce them even more harshly. Both sides wanted to improve the situation that China was in. The Emperor heard arguments presenting the pros and cons of each side and eventually decided to make the prohibitions even stronger.

**Transcript**

Of those who use it to great excess, the breath becomes feeble, the body wasted, the face sallow, the teeth black: the individuals themselves clearly see the evil effects of it, yet cannot refrain from it. It is indeed indisputably necessary to enact severe prohibitions in order to eradicate so evil a practice.

On enquiry, I find that there are three types of opium: one is called Company's, the outer covering it is black, and it is also called ‘black earth’; it comes from Bengal; a second kind is called ‘white-skin’, and comes from Bombay; the third kind is called ‘red-skin’, and comes from Madras. These are all places belonging to England.

Formerly, the barbarian merchants brought foreign money to China; which, being paid in exchange for goods, was a source of pecuniary [financial] advantage to the people of all the sea-board provinces. But latterly, the barbarian merchants have clandestinely [secretly] sold opium for money; which has rendered it unnecessary for them to import foreign silver. Thus foreign money [i.e., silver] has been going out of the country, while none returns.
Source 3b: Letter to British representatives in China from Chen Huacheng. Catalogue Ref: FO 682/2462/41
Chen [Huacheng], Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces in Fukien and of the Troops of Formosa, and Dou [Zhenbiao], Commander in Kinmen and Surrounding Areas,

Again issue their clear commands:

According to the statutes of the Celestial Court, your foreign ships are only allowed to trade in Guangdong; you are not allowed to cross over to other provinces. The established rules have set down these restrictions. But instead of abiding by the regulations, you foreigners repeatedly cruise about off the coast of Fukien. Your coming and going, even if you do not stop in a single place, is already against the law, not to mention the fact that you are trading opium.

I, the Admiral, have been at sea observing your movements for twenty days. You have been sailing up and down the coast, all the while refusing to return southwards to Guangdong. When the naval vessels arrive in pursuit of you, you sail away, but as soon as you have drawn them away to open water, you approach the coast again. You appear to be respectful and dutiful, but you are in fact crafty and deceitful. It would not be difficult for me, the Admiral, to command the fleet to come together and round you up, so that the problem may be resolved once and for all. But considering that you may still be ignorant, this order is now issued again. All of your foreign ships must immediately return southwards and, in compliance with the law, head for Guangdong to trade. Not a single ship will be allowed to tarry. If you dare continue to disobey the rules by lingering here, by fleeing to a different place after being driven away, or by your going and then coming again, I, the Admiral, will have no choice but to order my fleet to open fire on you. Do not say that you have not been informed in advance. Be warned.

A special order given in the seventeenth year of Daoguang, on the second day of the eighth month [1 September 1837].
Source 4: Treaty of peace and friendship, commerce, indemnity (Treaty of Nanking), 1842. Catalogue Ref: FO 93/23/1b (5)
Article 3

It being obviously necessary and desirable that British subjects should have some port thereat they may careen and refit their ships when required, and keep stores for that purpose. His Majesty The Emperor of China cedes to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain the Island of Hongkong to be possessed in perpetuity by Her Britannic Majesty, Her Heirs, and Successors and to be governed by such laws and regulations as Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain shall see fit to direct.

Article 5

The Government of China having compelled the British merchants trading at Canton to deal exclusively with certain Chinese merchants called Hong merchants (or Cohong) who had been licensed by the Chinese government for that purpose, the Emperor of China agrees to abolish that practice in future at all ports where British merchants may reside, and to permit them to carry on their mercantile transactions with whatever persons they please...
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