# The Opium Wars

## 1.0    Background to the Opium Wars

In the 1700s, European nations such as Britain, the Netherlands, and France sought to expand their Asian trade networks by connecting with one of the major sources of desirable finished products - the powerful Qing Dynasty in China. For well over a thousand years, China had been the source of fabulous luxury items. European companies, such as the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company (VOC), were trade in China.

China however, limited these companies to the commercial port of Canton, did not allow them to learn Chinese, and also threatened harsh penalties for any European who tried to leave the port city and enter China proper. Chinese silks, porcelain, and tea were highly sought after by the Europeans, but China wanted nothing to do with any European manufactured goods, and required payment silver.

Britain soon faced a serious trade deficit with China, as it had no domestic silver supply and had to buy all of its silver from Mexico or from European powers with colonial silver mines. The growing British thirst for tea in particular, made the trade imbalance increasingly desperate. By the end of the 18th century, the UK imported large quantities of Chinese tea annually. In half a century, Britain managed to sell just £9m worth of British goods to the Chinese, in exchange for £27m in Chinese imports. The difference was paid for in silver.

However, early in the 19th century, the British East India Company hit upon a second form of payment that was illegal, yet acceptable to the Chinese traders: opium from British India. This opium, primarily produced in Bengal, was stronger than the type traditionally used in Chinese medicine; in addition, Chinese users began to smoke the opium rather than eating the resin. As usage and addiction increased, the Chinese Qing government grew ever more concerned. By some estimates, as many as 90% of the young males along China's east coast were addicted to smoking opium by the 1830s. The trade balance swung in Britain's favor, on the back of illegal opium smuggling.

## 2.0    Origins of the 1st Opium War

In 1839, China's Daoguang Emperor (one of four Emperors to take the throne in the Qing dynasty until the turn of the century) decided that the British opium smuggling had to be stopped.  He appointed a new governor for Canton, Lin Zexu, who besieged thirteen British smugglers inside their warehouses. When they surrendered in April of 1839, Governor Lin confiscated goods including 42,000 opium pipes and 20,000 150-pound chests of opium, with a total street value of some £2 million. He ordered the chests placed into trenches, covered with lime, and then drenched in sea water to destroy the opium. Outraged, British traders immediately began to petition the British home government for help.

July of that year saw the next incident that escalated tension between the Qing and British. On July 7, 1839, drunk British and American sailors from several opium clipper ships rioted in the

village of Chien-sha-tsui, in Kowloon, killing a Chinese man and vandalizing a Buddhist temple. In the wake of this "Kowloon Incident," Qing officials demanded that the foreigners turn over the guilty men for trial, but Britain refused, citing China's different legal system as the basis for refusal. Even though the crimes took place on Chinese soil, and had a Chinese victim, Britain claimed that the sailors were entitled to extra-territorial rights. Six sailors were tried in a British court in Canton. Although they were convicted, they were freed as soon as they returned to Britain.

In the wake of the Kowloon Incident, Qing officials declared that no British or other foreign merchants would be allowed to trade with China unless they agreed, under pain of death, to abide by Chinese law, including that outlawing the opium trade, and to submit themselves to Chinese legal jurisdiction. The British Superintendent of Trade in China, Charles Elliot, responded by suspending all British trade with China and ordering British ships to withdraw.

## 3.0    1st Opium War breaks Out

The First Opium War actually began with a squabble amongst the British. The British ship *Thomas Coutts*, whose Quaker owners had always opposed opium smuggling, sailed into Canton in October of 1839. The ship's captain signed the Qing legal bond and began trading. In response, Charles Elliot ordered the Royal Navy to blockade the mouth of the Pearl River to prevent any other British ships from entering. On November 3, the British trader *Royal Saxon* approached but the Royal Navy fleet began firing on it. Qing Navy junks sallied out to protect the *Royal Saxon*, and in the resulting First Battle of Cheunpee, the British Navy sank a number of Chinese ships. It was the first in a long string of disastrous defeats for Qing forces, who would lose battles to the British both at sea and on land over the next two and a half years. The British seized Canton (Guangdong), Chusan (Zhousan), the Bogue forts at the mouth of the Pearl River, Ningbo, and Dinghai. In mid-1842, the British also seized Shanghai, thus controlling the mouth of the critical Yangtze River as well. Stunned and humiliated, the Qing government had to sue for peace.

## 4.0    Treaty of Nanking

On August 29, 1842, representatives of Queen Victoria of Great Britain and the Daoguang Emperor of China agreed to a peace treaty called the Treaty of Nanking. This agreement is also called the First Unequal Treaty because Britain extracted a number of major concessions from the Chinese while offering nothing in return except for an end to hostilities. The Treaty of Nanking opened five ports to British traders, instead of requiring them all to trade at Canton. It also provided for a fixed 5% tariff rate on imports into China. Britain was accorded "most favored nation" trade status, and its citizens were granted extraterritorial rights. British consuls gained the right to negotiate directly with local officials, and all British prisoners of war were released. China also ceded the island of Hong Kong to Britain in perpetuity. Finally, the Qing government agreed to pay war reparations totaling 21 million silver dollars over the following three years. Under this treaty, China suffered economic hardship and a serious loss

of sovereignty. Perhaps most damaging, however, was its loss of prestige. Long *the* super-power of East Asia, the First Opium War exposed weaknesses in the Qing's China.


## 5.0    Phase 1 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Opium War

In the aftermath of the First Opium War, Qing Chinese officials proved quite reluctant to enforce the terms of the British Treaties of Nanking (1842) and the Bogue (1843), as well as the similarly odious unequal treaties imposed by France and the United States (both in 1844). To make matters worse, Britain demanded additional concessions from the Chinese in 1854, including the opening of all China's ports to foreign traders, a 0% tariff rate on British imports, and the legalization of Britain's trade in opium from Burma and India into China.

China held off these changes for some time, but on October 8, 1856, matters came to a head with the Arrow Incident. The *Arrow* was a smuggling ship registered in China but based out of Hong Kong (then a British crown colony). When Chinese officials boarded the ship and arrested its crew of twelve on suspicion of smuggling and piracy, the British protested that the Hong Kong based ship was outside of China's jurisdiction. Britain demanded that China release the Chinese crew under the extraterritoriality clause of the Treaty of Nanjing.

Although the Chinese authorities were well within their rights to board the Arrow, and in fact, the ship's Hong Kong registration had expired, Britain forced them to release the sailors. Even though China complied, the British then destroyed four Chinese coastal forts and sank more than 20 naval junks between October 23 and November 13. Since China was in the throes of the Taiping Rebellion at the time, it had no military power to spare to defend its sovereignty from this new British assault.

The British also had other concerns at the time. In 1857, the Indian Revolt (sometimes called the "Sepoy Mutiny") spread across the Indian subcontinent, drawing the British Empire's attention away from China. Once the Indian Revolt was put down, and the Mughal Empire abolished, Britain once again turned its eyes to China.

In February of 1856, a French Catholic missionary named Auguste Chapdelaine was arrested in Guangxi. He was charged with preaching Christianity outside of the treaty ports, in violation of the Sino-French agreements, and also collaborating with the Taiping rebels. Father Chapdelaine was sentenced to beheading, but his jailers beat him to death before the sentence was carried out. Though the missionary was tried according to Chinese law, as provided for in the treaty, the French government would use this incident as an excuse to join with the British in the Second Opium War. Between December of 1857 and mid-1858, the Anglo-French forces captured Guangzhou, Guangdong, and the Taku Forts near Tientsin (Tianjin). China surrendered and was forced to sign the punitive Treaty of Tientsin in June of 1858.

This new treaty allowed the UK, France, Russia, and the US to establish official embassies in Peking (Beijing), open eleven additional ports to foreign traders, establish free navigation for foreign vessels up the Yangtze River, allowed foreigners to travel into interior China and once

again China had to pay war indemnities - this time, 8 million taels of silver to France and Britain. (One tael is equal to roughly 37 grams.)

## 6.0    Phase 2 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Opium War

Although the Second Opium War seemed to be over, the Xianfeng Emperor's advisers convinced him to resist the western powers and their ever-harsher treaty demands. As a result, the Xianfeng Emperor refused to ratify the new treaty.

When the French and British attempted to land military forces numbering in the thousands at Tianjin, and march on Beijing (supposedly to establish their embassies, as set out in the Treaty of Tientsin), the Chinese did not allow them to come ashore. However, the Anglo-French forces made it to land and on September 21, 1860, wiped out Xianfeng's army of 10,000. On October 6, they entered Beijing, where they looted and burned the Emperor's Summer Palaces.

The Second Opium War finally ended on October 18, 1860, with the Chinese ratification of a revised version of the Treaty of Tianjin. In addition to the provisions listed above, the revised treaty mandated equal treatment for Chinese who converted to Christianity, the legalization of opium trading, and Britain also received parts of coastal Kowloon, on the mainland across from Hong Kong Island.
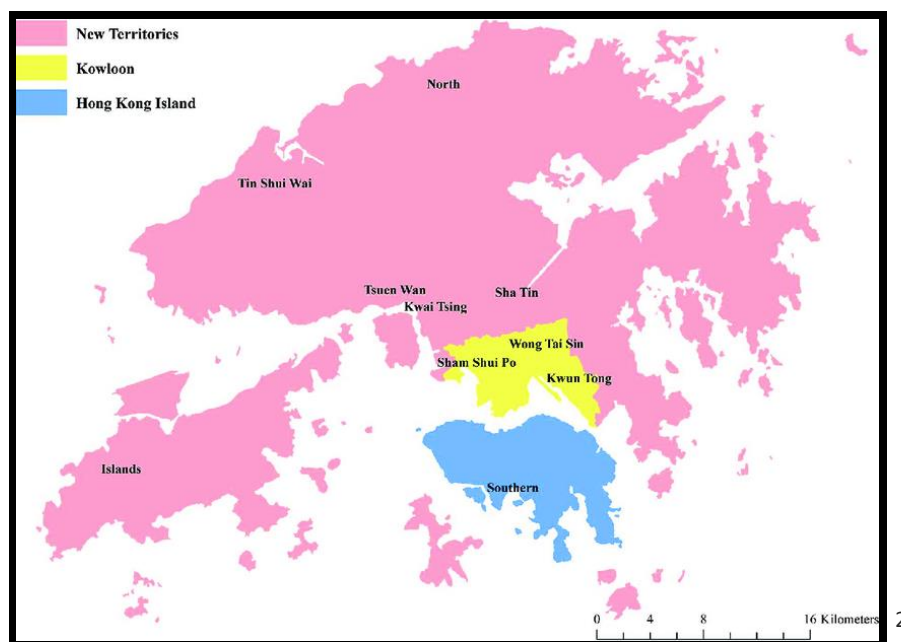


**Kowloon acquired as part of Treaty of Tianjin**

## 7.0    Results of 2<sup>nd</sup> Opium War

For the Qing Dynasty, the Second Opium War marked the beginning of a slow descent into oblivion that ended with the abdication of Emperor Puyi in 1911.
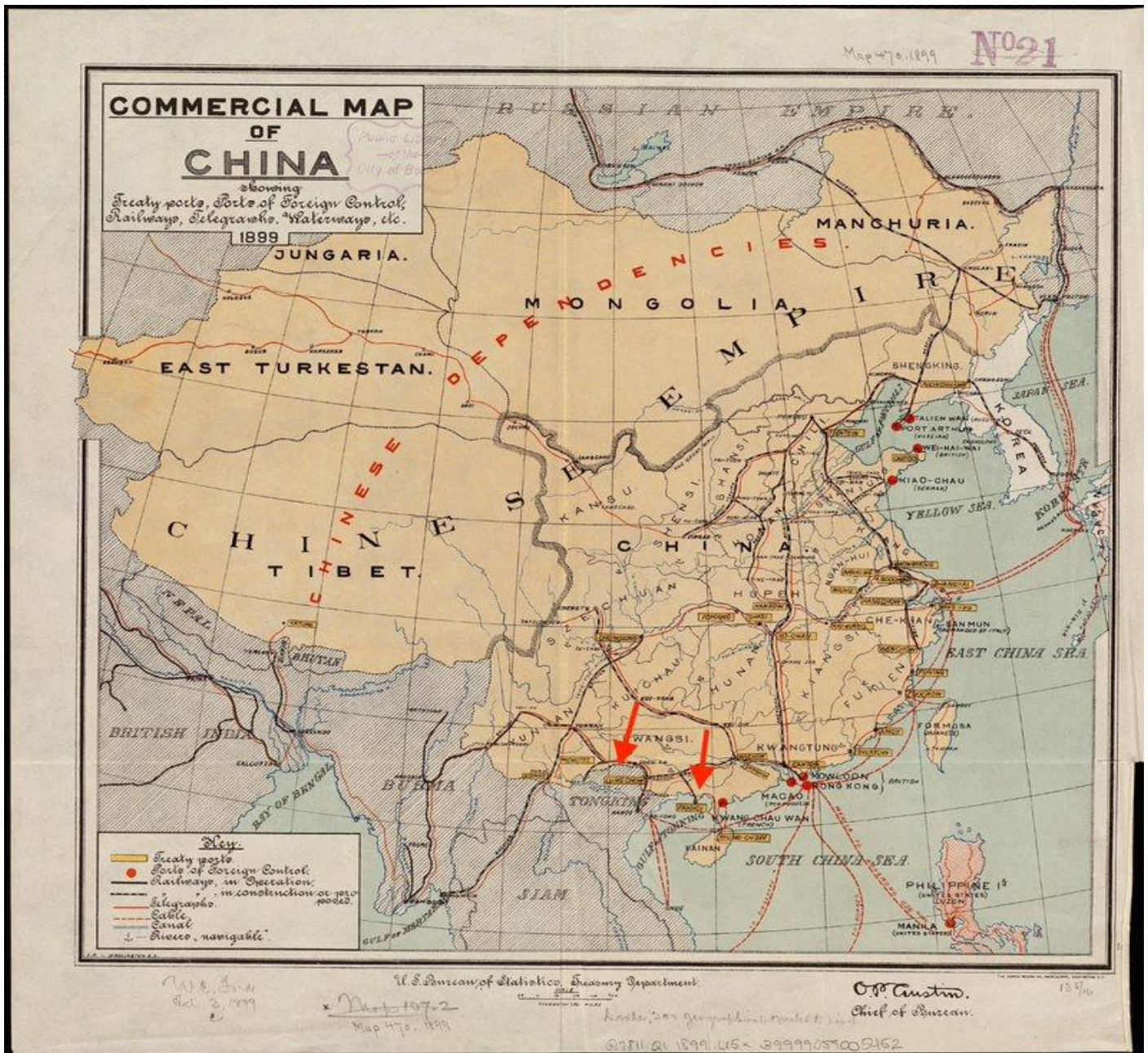
A Commercial Map (above) [3], showing the major treaty ports opened up by 1899 also shows the significance they were to the trade routes for foreign governments. Many more ports and treaties [4] were imposed on China by many foreign governments from 1842 to 1945.

However, the ancient Chinese imperial system would not vanish without one more show of resistance. Many of the Treaty of Tianjin's provisions helped to spark the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, a popular anti-foreign, anti-colonial and anti-Christian uprising by the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists. The rebels were known as the "Boxers" in English because many of its members had practiced Chinese martial arts, which at the time were referred to as "Chinese boxing". The insurrection lasted from 18 October 1899 – 7 September 1901.

[1] ToughtCo - Kallie Szczepanski
[2] www.researchgate.net

[3] 1899 United States Government Commercial map of China

[4] THE LEGACIES OF FORCED FREEDOM: CHINA'S TREATY PORTS - Ruixue Jia*The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (October 2014), pp. 596-608