

The Opium Wars

The Opium Wars were two significant conflicts in the nineteenth century involving Great Britain (and later France) and Imperial China. These wars dramatically changed China's relationship with Western powers, opening up its markets and weakening its imperial rule.

The First Opium War: 1839–1842

The First China War, more commonly known as the First Opium War, began due to a major trade dispute between Britain and Imperial China. The immediate cause of the war occurred in May 1839, when the Chinese government forced Charles Elliott, the British Chief Superintendent of Trade in China, to surrender large stocks of opium at Canton (Guangzhou) for destruction. This act caused outrage among the British and ignited the war.

Relations between Britain and China were already strained before the opium crisis escalated. Fighting officially began in November 1839, after several skirmishes. Two British naval vessels, HMS *Volage* and HMS *Hyacinth*, defeated 29 Chinese vessels during the evacuation of British refugees from Canton.

In June 1840, a British naval force, led by Commodore Sir Gordon Bremer, arrived off Macao and then moved north to the island of Chusan (Zhoushan). On 5 July, the port of Ting-hai (Dinghai) was bombarded and subsequently occupied by British troops. Following this defeat, the Chinese fleet admiral, Kuan Ti, requested a truce. Ten of his 13 war-junks had been captured and his flagship destroyed, while the British forces suffered minimal casualties. In January 1841, Kuan Ti signed an agreement, in the face of overwhelming British strength, which ceded the island of Hong Kong to become a British territory.

Despite the truce, negotiations failed. The British foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, demanded compensation from the Chinese and the cession of a coastal island for use as a trading station. When China refused these demands, hostilities resumed.

On 7 January 1841, the British captured forts on the islands of Chuenpi and Taikoktow, which guarded the approaches to Canton at the mouth of the Pearl River. The British, reinforced with a military contingent under Lieutenant-General Sir Hugh Gough, advanced up the Pearl River and captured Canton on 27 May 1841. They withdrew after the Chinese agreed to pay reparations of £60,000. However, Charles Elliott, who negotiated this settlement, was dismissed by Lord Palmerston, who felt

that he had not extracted sufficient concessions. Elliott's replacement, Sir Henry Pottinger, imposed further demands, including compensation for the confiscated opium and war costs, the opening of more ports to international trade and the establishment of diplomatic relations.

The British continued their advance north, capturing Amoy (Xiamen) in August 1841 and repossessing Chusan in October. Changhai (Zhenhai) was taken later that month, followed by Ningpo (Ningbo) without opposition. Operations were suspended for the winter, and negotiations again proved fruitless. The Chinese launched a counter-attack in March 1842 but were easily repelled. The British pressed on, capturing Chapu (Zhapu) in May 1842, an operation that saw brave Chinese resistance. Many Chinese defenders fought until their defences were breached and their positions set on fire. British casualties were relatively low.

General Gough and Admiral Sir William Parker then moved to Shanghai, which was captured in June 1842. Continuing up the Yangtze River, British forces engaged the Chinese at Chinkiang (Zhenjiang) in July. The city was captured and its military commander, Hai-lin, was burned in his house, which he had ordered to be set alight. With modest British casualties, and facing the possibility of a British assault on Nanking (Nanjing), the Chinese sued for peace.

The war officially ended on 17 August 1842, with the signing of the Treaty of Nanking. This treaty compelled the Chinese to relax their control over foreign trade, including the trade in opium. Hong Kong was formally ceded to Britain, and five 'treaty ports' – Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou), Shanghai and Ningpo (Ningbo) – were opened to all traders. The Chinese were also required to pay reparations.

The Second China War (1856–1860)

Also known as the Second Opium War, this conflict took place between 1856 and 1860. In this war, British–Indian forces joined with French forces in a military expedition against Imperial China. Their victory further opened China to Western traders and significantly weakened the Qing dynasty's imperial regime.

Adapted by Barbara Trapani from The National Army Museum,
<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/first-china-war-1839-1842>