

The Opium Wars

During the 1800's many Western countries, especially Great Britain, attempted to trade with China, which had long been known for its silk, tea and porcelain. Because China, however, was **self-sufficient** it had very little reason to trade with the outside world. For years, Britain looked for something that it could trade with China and found it in the form of an illegal and highly addictive drug called opium. Britain devised a plan to distribute opium throughout the country in hopes of getting people addicted to the drug. In their minds, if they could do this then they would be able to force the Chinese to sell their goods for a cheaper price. IT WORKED! In almost no time, millions of Chinese became addicted to the drug. This resulted in many Chinese merchants lowering their prices as the British threatened to stop their shipments of opium to China.

Angered by these tactics, the emperor of China asked the British government to cease (end) the selling of opium to the Chinese people. Great Britain's leading company (The East India Company) refused to stop selling the product because it was so effective in lowering prices. This led to a series of battles known as the Opium Wars. The battles took place mostly at sea over the course of several years. The Chinese ships were ultimately no match for the superior British navy. As a result, the Chinese suffered a humiliating defeat. In 1842, they were forced sign to the Treaty of Nanjing.



The treaty gave Britain the island of Hong Kong, which it held on to for the next hundred and fifty-five years. In 1997, Great Britain finally gave Hong Kong back to the Chinese government. The treaty also stated that foreigners from the United States and Great Britain were not subject to Chinese law inside their trading ports. Many Chinese people greatly resented the foreigners and the trade of opium as they saw other countries profiting off of China's drug addiction.

Over the next 40 years, China's addiction only grew worse. During this time, China began to experience a population boom. This meant that China's population grew faster than it could produce food. Even during years of abundant crops, China still lacked enough food to adequately feed its people resulting in what historians call a "slippery slope." As more and more people went hungry, they turned to drugs to ease their pain, but because they had no money or food they were forced to steal or commit crimes for their drugs, which resulted in even more problems in society. It wasn't until China's communist government took over in the early 1900's that China was able to effectively address its country's drug problem.