

39,000 BC: First archaeological evidence of human habitation (stone tools) in the Pearl River Delta area

6000 BC: Austronesian indigenous people populate the area. Wet rice cultivation, the foundation of Asian civilization, is introduced, contributing to the establishment of small polities.

1700 BC: Bronze tools/ornaments and pottery techniques are introduced from the mainland.

214 BC: **Emperor Qin, China's first Emperor, formally incorporates Hong Kong island and the Kowloon Peninsula into China.**

206BC: After the fall of the Qin Dynasty, Hong Kong and Kowloon fall under the Chinese Nanyue Kingdom ruled by warlord General Zhao Tuo. The Nanyue Kingdom, an adversary to the Han Dynasty, extended along China's southwest coast and into northern and north-central Vietnam.

111BC: The Han Dynasty (China's equivalent to the Roman Empire) annexes the Nanyue Kingdom. Hong Kong and Kowloon grow as fishing and pearling centers.

1200 AD: Hong Kong and Kowloon become part of the Southern Song Dynasty and there is another surge in population and prosperity.

1276: During the Mongol conquest of China, the Southern Song Dynasty moves its capital to Kowloon.

1279: Hong Kong and Kowloon fall to the Mongols (the Yuan Dynasty, under Kublai Khan).

1513: The **first known European to visit Hong Kong, Portuguese mariner-explorer Jorge Álvares**, set up a **trade station known as Tamão**, on Hong Kong island.

1521: The **Chinese Navy attacks and expels the Portuguese**. (They will be back soon - in nearby Macau.)

1661: Under the Qing Dynasty's *haijin* laws which banned coastal activity in order to prevent both piracy and foreign intervention, **Hong Kong and Kowloon are largely depopulated.**

1684: The Qing Emperor lifts the *haijin* bans and the area quickly re-populates.

1780: The term Hong Kong first appears on British trade maps. It is an anglicized version of the local name for the area, **Hueng Gong, which means 'fragrant harbor'.**

1800s: Canton (modern-day Guangzhou) and environs become the site of vigorous trade with Europeans, especially the British, who craved Chinese tea, porcelain, silk, lacquerware, and spices. Chinese demand for British goods is minimal, thus creating a massive trade imbalance with British silver flowing into Chinese coffers. To address this, the British turned to selling opium from India and South Asia to the Chinese. Opium was illegal in China and this narco-trafficking resulted in social degradation of Chinese society which sparked tension and conflict.

1839: The Chinese Emperor appoints an 'opium czar', Lin Zexu, to eradicate the opium trade. Millions of dollars of opium are confiscated, and Chinese and British opium traders are jailed.

1839-42: The British respond in force, commencing **The First Opium War**. The British occupy Hong Kong island in 1841. After a decisive British victory over China's antiquated forces, **Hong Kong island is ceded to Britain in 1842** by the Qing Dynasty in the Treaty of Nanking. Royal Navy officer and diplomat Admiral Sir Charles Eliot negotiated the deal and was widely ridiculed for taking 'no more than a jungle-encrusted rock'. Eliot became the first colonial Governor of Hong Kong. (He was unpopular and was viewed as being too sympathetic to the Chinese, resulting in his transfer to become Consul General in the brand new but short-lived Republic of Texas.) Hostilities between Britain and China persisted due to the ongoing opium trade which had been the *casus belli* to begin with. Historians date China's 'Century of Humiliation' from this year, 1842 (through 1949, when Mao declared The People's Republic of China.)

1856-60: Ongoing tensions result in **The Second Opium War**, with France joining in as well (on the British side). The war concludes with China's ignominious defeat, legalization of the opium trade, and further territorial concessions, including **cession of the Kowloon Peninsula to Britain** in the Convention of Beijing. China at this point was very much 'the sick man of Asia'. But British Hong Kong would grow rapidly and thrive as an entrepot for the next 100 years.

1898: Britain is given a **99-year lease on the New Territories** in the Second Convention of Beijing.

1941: The **Japanese invade Hong Kong** shortly after Pearl Harbor and the city falls on December 25th, a date still known as 'Black Christmas'.

1945: Hong Kong is liberated and returned to British administration.

1949: **With the declaration of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong thrives more than ever as an oasis of mercantile activity** - especially with its main competitor, Shanghai, punished by Chairman Mao for its brash capitalist past and all but shut down (only to be reborn with a vengeance in the 1990s).

1950s: Hong Kong sees **rapid economic development** in both the manufacturing and service sectors and also becomes **the major financial center in Asia**.

1967: **The Hong Kong Riots** rage from May through December in the wake of China's cultural revolution. Political upheaval and social unrest both due to labor conditions and in opposition to British colonial rule result in 50 dead and thousands injured and arrested due to Britain's hardline response. Hostilities ended only when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai ordered leftist groups to cease activities. The 1967 riots would act as a **catalyst for social and political reforms with long-term positive impact**.

1970s: **Extensive free market reforms** helped promote the growth of Hong Kong's economy, along with **labor reform** that improved public spirit. A **shift from labor-intensive manufacturing into technology-intensive industry and financial services** transformed Hong Kong's economy. **Public housing projects** also contributed to social stability and economic productivity. **Anti-corruption initiatives cleaned up government, strengthened banks, and boosted investor confidence**. **Legal reform** made Hong Kong's courts among the fairest and most efficient in Asia. **Education reform** increased opportunity and contributed to the economic boom. **Increased economic links with a newly opening China** further strengthened the economy and social fabric. A **cultural and media renaissance** ensued, including the internationally-successful Hong Kong film industry. By the end of the decade, Hong Kong was an **'Asian Tiger'** (along with Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore). The term **'Lion Rock Spirit'** came to be used to denote Hong Kong's can-do spirit, ambition, and the ability to realize aspirations.

1980s: Continuous vigorous economic growth and success as a financial and business hub.

1984: Margaret Thatcher, recognizing 'the inevitability' of Hong Kong returning to China and preferring it be done peacefully, oversaw the **Sino-British Joint Declaration** along with Chinese Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping. The two leaders brokered an agreement that Hong Kong would return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, with a **'one country, two systems'** policy. The blueprint for the preservation of Hong Kong's democracy was outlined in Hong Kong's mini-constitution known as the **Basic Law**.

1997: **The Handover:** Hong Kong was smoothly and peacefully returned to China on July 1, officially becoming a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. Soon thereafter, the **Asian Financial Crisis** hits. Hong Kong (unlike Thailand, Indonesia, and others) weathers it well, due to its strong banking sector, low corruption, and regulatory controls on speculation.

2002: The 'new' Hong Kong lived up to its 'one country, two systems' bastion of democracy status with a highly favorable ranking - #20 out of 180 countries - in the World Press Freedom Index.

2003: The first blow to the 'one country, two systems' approach occurred when Beijing announced its **Article 23 amendment to the Basic Law** which would institute **severe punishment for 'sedition and subversion'** and **extended the government's right to search and seizure**. This resulted in mass public protests and the new law was withdrawn - only to return with a vengeance in 2020.

2004: The Chinese government introduced amendments to the Basic Law which limited democratic reforms, precipitating further protests - **a dress rehearsal for 2014's 'Umbrella Movement'**.

2014: **Mass street protests** began when **Beijing issued a directive that candidates for Chief Executive would be chosen by the Chinese government** and not by local primary elections. This was viewed as a violation of both the spirit and the letter of the Basic Law. The early protests were spearheaded by older academics and clergy, and the movement was known as **'Occupy Central'**. The movement grew and

became a broad democracy movement with young students emerging as leaders, most notably then-17 year-old **Joshua Wong**. Protests turned violent due to a hard crackdown by Beijing-supported Hong Kong police. When the protesters began to use umbrellas to shield themselves from tear gas and water cannons, the movement acquired a new name: **the 'Umbrella Revolution', or more accurately, the 'Umbrella Movement'**. While a small group of 'localists' have advocated for Hong Kong independence, that is an unrealistic fringe movement and the thrust of the movement was and is to pressure Beijing to live up to its promises of 'one country, two systems' with respect for Hong Kong's democracy as outlined in the Basic Law. A capsule summary of the movement is on a banner I saw: **'NO FAKE DEMOCRACY'**.

2016: The protests were suppressed by harsh police action, but rebellion continued to brew under the surface. **Beijing jailed many of the activists including Joshua Wong and other key leaders**. Some fled to the U.K. to avoid arrest. Things temporarily quieted down after protesters were given a final ultimatum and all the encampments were cleared out in a mass police operation.

2019: Beijing's proposal of the infamous **Hong Kong Extradition Law** (technically known as the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill) **sparked widespread protests again**. The bill would allow Hong Kong residents to be tried for sedition in mainland China, and was viewed as a gross violation of residents' civil rights and of the 'one country, two systems' agreement.

2020: Ongoing protests against the Extradition Bill **re-ignited the pro-democracy movement**. Significant clashes occurred with **strong crackdowns against the protesters and against any Beijing-unfriendly press**. Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam (hand-selected by Beijing) announced that the new bill would not be pursued, but it was not formally withdrawn and continued to ignite protest. In its place, a draconian **National Security Law** was passed, a newer and even uglier version of Article 23 with severe penalties and widespread crackdown on pro-democracy activities. Arrests soon followed, as well as systematic media suppression. The hardline National Security Law crackdown was **spearheaded by John Lee Ka-chiu**, then the Deputy Commissioner of the Police Force (and one of 10 Hong Kong officials sanctioned by the U.S. for 'undermining Hong Kong's democracy and restricting freedom of expression and assembly of the citizens of Hong Kong'). The new National Security Law has had **a profound chilling effect on Hong Kong society which continues to this day**.

2021: **Street protests and all pro-democracy activity now completely quashed**, Beijing instituted legislative and electoral changes which further tightened control over local politics.

2022-24: **John Lee Ka-chiu is appointed Chief Executive** of Hong Kong SAR (again, selected by Beijing, not by local elections). Continued enforcement of the National Security Law and suppression of media freedom has created a different Hong Kong. Hong Kong plummeted to #148 of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom rankings - a precipitous fall from its ranking of #20 in 2002. **Hong Kong's democracy advocates are largely in exile** or forced into silence if still in Hong Kong. In a landmark case, two leading journalists who headed the pro-democracy *Stand News* outlet (shut down in 2021) were convicted in 2024 of sedition and promoting 'illegal ideologies' and sentenced to jail terms. While the territory remains viable from a business perspective, **the 'Lion Rock Spirit' has taken a big hit**. Young people are **emigrating in record numbers and birth rates are the lowest in the world**, both signs of a general malaise. Beijing has, for now, decisively won the contest of wills: **Hong Kong will not have its own system as promised, but rather the system that Big Brother approves**. Call it 'fake democracy'?



Despite the foregoing: **Hong Kong remains very safe for tourists, still has a very robust tourism infrastructure, and is as exciting and enjoyable as ever from the tourist perspective**. The food and the skyline are as brilliant as ever. It is still a storied, dynamic and beautiful destination - though not quite as vibrant as it was 10 years ago before Beijing's crackdown.