

Heading toward the Opium Wars

*Notes taken from Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler's *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2006)



The Qing Empire, 1644-1911

- Founded by the Manchus, the Qing Dynasty ruled China until the early 20th century.
- By 1680 the Manchus had put down any meaningful resistance and consolidated their power in China.

- The Manchus were careful to preserve their own ethnic and cultural identity. They outlawed intermarriage with the Chinese, and forbade them from travelling to Manchuria or even learning that Manchurian language.
- Qing authorities forced Chinese men to shave the front of their heads and grow a Manchu-style queue as a sign of submission.
- Strong imperial leadership marked the 17th and 18th centuries – the emperors were heavily involved in the running of their empires as human beings designated by heavenly powers to maintain order on the earth.
- Power of the emperor peaked under Qianlong – the emperor even cancelled tax collection four times because the treasury was so full! Emperor Qianlong was a sophisticated and learned man – he is credited with composing one hundred thousand poems.
 - However, toward the end of his reign Qianlong paid less attention to imperial affairs and delegated many responsibilities to his favourite eunuchs. His successors continued this practice, devoting themselves to earthly pleasures rather than government, and by the 19th century the Qing dynasty faced real problems.



Manchu-style Queue



Emperor Qialong (1736-1795)

Macartney Embassy

- By the 16th century the British Empire had a unquenchable appetite for one Chinese product: **tea**. However, the Qing Dynasty (like the Ming before it) heavily regulated trade with the outside world (restricting it to a few coastal cities).
- In 1793 the British Government, at the request of the East India Company, dispatched their first diplomatic envoy to China: Earl Macartney. The Earl, brazenly, proceeded directly to the court of the Qing Emperor, Qialong, rather than deal with any intermediaries. Macartney carried £15000 worth of presents from the East India Company, the highlight of which was a Planetarium with the latest astronomical technology from Europe, to be presented to the Emperor of China.



- Macartney's goals were the following:
 1. Opening new ports for British trade in China.
 2. The establishment of a permanent embassy in Beijing.
 3. The cession of a small island for British use along China's coast (which would observe British law and not that of the Emperor).
 4. The relaxation of trade restrictions on British merchants in Guangzhou (Canton).
- Protocols presented a problem for the British delegation and Chinese Court.
 - The ritual of the kowtow, which requires an individual to kneel with both knees on the ground and bow so as to touch their forehead to the ground was required not only when meeting the emperor, but also when receiving imperial edicts from his messengers.
 - British subjects, who regarded the act as slavish and humiliating, generally avoided kowtowing to the emperor's edicts by leaving the room when such messages were received.
 - Macartney was concerned about the status of the two sovereigns, George III and Qianlong. Macartney believed that Britain was now the most powerful nation on Earth. However, as a diplomat, he had decided that whatever ceremony he participated in must present the two monarchs as equals. Throughout his meetings with Chinese officials, Macartney was repeatedly urged to perform the kowtow during his audience with the emperor. Macartney submitted a written proposal that would satisfy his requirement of equal status: whatever ceremony he performed, a Chinese official of equal rank would do the same before a portrait of George III.

- Mccartney's proposal was rejected on the grounds that this notion of reciprocal equality was incompatible with the Chinese view of the emperor as the Son of Heaven, who had no equal. According to such a view, the British embassy was regarded officially as a tribute.
 - With no agreement in sight and the ceremony only days away, Qianlong grew increasingly impatient, and considered scrapping the meeting altogether. Finally, it was agreed that Macartney would genuflect before the emperor as he would before his own sovereign, touching one knee to the ground, although without the usual hand kissing, as it was not customary for anyone to kiss the emperor's hand. ¹
- The meeting between the Emperor and Earl Macartney took place on September 14th, 1793. The Earl presented the valuable gifts and a letter from George III, in which the King of England requested permission from the Emperor to establish a British Resident Minister in Peking in charge of overseeing trading affairs.²
- A few days later, Macartney and his entourage were invited to the Emperor's eightieth birthday party but to Macartney's disappointment, the Emperor himself did not show up. On 3 October, he received a reply from Emperor Qianlong in a formal ceremony in the Palace:³

Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce.



¹ Peyrefitte, Alain (2013). The Immobile Empire. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. ISBN 9780345803948.

² Help for Researchers. (2018). China Trade and the East India Company. [online] Available at: <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpregion/asia/china/guidesources/chinatrade/index.html> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2018].

³ Ibid.