

# Macartney Embassy & Qianlong's Letter

- By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the British Empire had an 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 Indian Company, dispatched their first diplomatic envoy to China: Earl Macartney. The Earl, brazenly, proceeded directly to the court of the Qing Emperor, Qianlong (pronounced chee · an · laang), 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 (pronounced *gwaang · jow*, aka Canton).
- Protocols presented a problem for the British delegation and Qing 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 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.
- Macartney'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.<sup>1</sup>
- The meeting between the Emperor and Earl Macartney took place on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 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.<sup>2</sup>
- 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:<sup>3</sup>

*You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas, nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation, you have dispatched a mission respectfully bearing your memorial. Your Envoy has crossed the seas and paid his respects at my Court on the anniversary of my birthday. To show your devotion, you have also sent offerings of your country's produce.*

<sup>1</sup> Peyrefitte, Alain (2013). *The Immobile Empire*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. ISBN 9780345803948.

<sup>2</sup> 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].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*I have perused your memorial: the earnest terms in which it is couched reveal a respectful humility on your part, which is highly praiseworthy. In consideration of the fact that your Ambassador and his deputy have come a long way with your memorial and tribute, I have shown them high favour and have allowed them to be introduced into my presence. To manifest my indulgence, I have entertained them at a banquet and made them numerous gifts. I have also caused presents to be forwarded to the Naval Commander and six hundred of his officers and men, although they did not come to Peking, so that they too may share in my all-embracing kindness.*

*As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited to my Celestial Court and to be in control of your country's trade with China, this request is contrary to all usage of my dynasty and cannot possibly be entertained. It is true that Europeans, in the service of the dynasty, have been permitted to live at Peking, but they are compelled to adopt Chinese dress, they are strictly confined to their own precincts and are never permitted to return home. You are presumably familiar with our dynastic regulations. Your proposed Envoy to my Court could not be placed in a position similar to that of European officials in Peking who are forbidden to leave China, nor could he, on the other hand, be allowed liberty of movement and the privilege of corresponding with his own country; so that you would gain nothing by his residence in our midst.*

*... Supposing that your Envoy should come to our Court, his language and national dress differ from that of our people, and there would be no place in which to bestow him. It may be suggested that he might imitate the Europeans permanently resident in Peking and adopt the dress and customs of China, but, it has never been our dynasty's wish to force people to do things unseemly and inconvenient. Besides, supposing I sent an Ambassador to reside in your country, how could you possibly make for him the requisite arrangements? Europe consists of many other nations besides your own: if each and all demanded to be represented at our Court, how could we possibly consent? The thing is utterly impracticable. How can our dynasty alter its whole procedure and system of etiquette, established for more than a century, in order to meet your individual views? ...*

*If you assert that your reverence for Our Celestial dynasty fills you with a desire to acquire our civilisation, our ceremonies and code of laws differ so completely from your own that, even if your Envoy were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilisation, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. Therefore, however adept the Envoy might become, nothing would be gained thereby.*

*Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me.*

*If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures. This then is my answer to your request to appoint a representative at my Court, a request contrary to our dynastic usage, which would only result in inconvenience to yourself. I have expounded my wishes in detail and have commanded your tribute Envoys to leave in peace on their homeward journey. It behoves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country hereafter. Besides making gifts (of which I enclose an inventory) to each member of your Mission, I confer upon you, O King, valuable presents in excess of the number usually bestowed on such occasions, including silks and curios—a list of which is likewise enclosed. Do you reverently receive them and take note of my tender goodwill towards you! A special mandate.*

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*Yesterday your Ambassador petitioned my Ministers to memorialise me regarding your trade with China, but his proposal is not consistent with our dynastic usage and cannot be entertained . . . If other nations, following your bad example, wrongfully importune my ear with further impossible requests, how will it be possible for me to treat them with easy indulgence? Nevertheless, I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea, nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire. I have consequently commanded my Ministers to enlighten your Ambassador on the subject, and have ordered the departure of the mission. But I have doubts that, after your Envoy's return he may fail to acquaint you with my view in detail or that he may be lacking in lucidity, so that I shall now proceed . . . to issue my mandate on each question separately. In this way you will, I trust, comprehend my meaning....*

*(3) Your request for a small island near Chusan<sup>4</sup>, where your merchants may reside and goods be warehoused, arises from your desire to develop trade. As there are neither foreign hongers nor interpreters in or near Chusan, where none of your ships have ever called, such an island would be utterly useless for your purposes. Every inch of the territory of our Empire is marked on the map and the strictest vigilance is exercised over it all: even tiny islets and far-lying sand-banks are clearly defined as part of the provinces to which they belong.*

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<sup>4</sup> Island chain near the mouth of the Yangtze River.

*Consider, moreover, that England is not the only barbarian land which wishes to establish . . . trade with our Empire: supposing that other nations were all to imitate your evil example and beseech me to present them each and all with a site for trading purposes, how could I possibly comply? This also is a flagrant infringement of the usage of my Empire and cannot possibly be entertained.*

*(4) The next request, for a small site in the vicinity of Canton city, where your barbarian merchants may lodge or, alternatively, that there be no longer any restrictions over their movements at Aomen, has arisen from the following causes. Hitherto, the barbarian merchants of Europe have had a definite locality assigned to them at Aomen for residence and trade, and have been forbidden to encroach an inch beyond the limits assigned to that locality... If these restrictions were withdrawn, friction would inevitably occur between the Chinese and your barbarian subjects, and the results would militate against the benevolent regard that I feel towards you. From every point of view, therefore, it is best that the regulations now in force should continue unchanged....*

*(7) Regarding your nation's worship of the Lord of Heaven, it is the same religion as that of other European nations. Ever since the beginning of history, sage Emperors and wise rulers have bestowed on China a moral system and inculcated a code, which from time immemorial has been religiously observed by the myriads of my subjects. There has been no hankering after heterodox doctrines. Even the European (missionary) officials in my capital are forbidden to hold intercourse with Chinese subjects; they are restricted within the limits of their appointed residences, and may not go about propagating their religion. The distinction between Chinese and barbarian is most strict, and your Ambassador's request that barbarians shall be given full liberty to disseminate their religion is utterly unreasonable.*

*It may be, O King, that the above proposals have been wantonly made by your Ambassador on his own responsibility, or peradventure you yourself are ignorant of our dynastic regulations and had no intention of transgressing them when you expressed these wild ideas and hopes.... If, after the receipt of this explicit decree, you lightly give ear to the representations of your subordinates and allow your barbarian merchants to proceed to Chêkiang and Tientsin, with the object of landing and trading there, the ordinances of my Celestial Empire are strict in the extreme, and the local officials, both civil and military, are bound reverently to obey the law of the land. Should your vessels touch the shore, your merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land or to reside there, but will be subject to instant expulsion. In that event your barbarian merchants will have had a long journey for nothing. Do not say that you were not warned in due time! Tremblingly obey and show no negligence! . . .<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> From E. Backhouse and J. O. P. Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), pp. 322--331