



King George III (AP/Wide World Photos)

“My capital is the hub and centre about which all quarters of the globe revolve.”

Overview



Arguably the earliest communication between a monarch of China and the ruler of a European country, Qianlong's letter to George III was the official response to Lord George Macartney's mission, sponsored by the British East India Company in cooperation with the British government, to secure diplomatic relations and improved trade conditions with the Qing Dynasty. From its establishment in 1600, the British East India Company was a major exporter of silk, tea, porcelain, and lacquerware from China to England and the rest of Europe. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the East India Company also attempted to sell English and European goods, most of them manufactured products, to China in order to offset a mounting trade deficit. Before the Macartney embassy, the company had sent emissaries to China, hoping to broaden trade relations and gain better access to the Chinese market. None of them was successful.

It was in this context that Lord Macartney undertook his mission. Unlike his predecessors, he was permitted to enter the Qing palaces in Beijing and elsewhere, have an audience with the Qing emperor Qianlong and his confidant Heshen, and present George III's letter to the emperor. None of this had been achieved before. But in the end Macartney failed to realize the goals set by the government and the East India Company for his embassy. Considering himself to be the ruler of the “central country,” at the time the richest and most powerful in the world, Emperor Qianlong rejected all of Macartney's requests. Nor did the emperor think that a small maritime kingdom located several thousand miles away was a force deserving his attention and concern. Little did he know that all this was to change in about a half century.

Context

Several factors prompted the British East India Company and the British government to launch the Macartney embassy to seek diplomatic contact with Qing China, occa-

sioning the letter exchange between George III and Emperor Qianlong. First, during the second half of the eighteenth century the Industrial Revolution was well under way and was playing an increasingly important role in shaping British foreign policy. Propelled by the British desire for raw materials and new markets, British foreign policy became more and more colonialist and expansionist. Having won the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), the British began to establish their colonial empire around the world—a drive that continued despite the later loss of the North American colonies in the American Revolution. Indeed, to some extent, this loss may have served to deepen the English craving to seek compensations elsewhere. Second, the eighteenth century was an era of exploration and discovery. Even as Britain was dispatching the Macartney mission to China, it was beginning to expand its holdings in Canada, India, and Australia. Little wonder, then, that among Macartney's retinue were botanists, artists, and cartographers. The embassy thus was both a diplomatic mission and a voyage of discovery; as the former realized an economic interest, the latter showed a curiosity for first-hand knowledge of the mysterious Far East. Born and raised in Northern Ireland, George Macartney, who was created Viscount Macartney of Dervock right before his departure, was regarded as the best available diplomat and administrator to fill the post, because he had had experience dealing with Catherine the Great of Russia, another despotic ruler.

The third and perhaps most immediate reason for Britain's desire to secure diplomatic relations with China was that though the English trade with China would not be formally established until the early eighteenth century, that trade was nevertheless quickly increasing in importance. Throughout the seventeenth century, for example, tea drinking had gradually become a national habit in England, generating a strong demand for expanded trade with China. Indeed, according to Jonathan Spence, “by 1800, the East India Company was buying over 23 million pounds of China tea at a cost of £3.6 million” (p. 122). Between 1660 and 1700 the East India Company had made attempts to establish a factory in the provincial capital of Guangzhou (known in English as Canton) and elsewhere, but to no avail. By 1710 English merchants were trading regularly in

Time Line

1600	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ December 31 The East India Company is established by charter and soon becomes a major trader with the Indian Subcontinent and the Orient.
1644	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Manchus found the Qing Dynasty, or Empire of the Great Qing.
1683	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Qing, under Emperor Kangxi, unify the whole country by defeating various forces in South China, Tibet, and Taiwan.
1736	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Emperor Qianlong ascends the throne.
1760	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Qing Dynasty imposes the Canton System to control trade in China. ■ October 25 King George III ascends the throne of England.
1763	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ February 10 The Treaty of Paris is signed, ending the Seven Years' War and establishing Britain's dominance of most colonies outside Europe.

Guangzhou, but their activities were straitjacketed by the Canton System imposed by the Qing Dynasty in 1760. By sponsoring the Macartney embassy, the company hoped, through diplomacy, to circumvent the Canton System and other Qing governmental regulations and gain direct access to Chinese goods.

The Qing Dynasty was not completely disinterested in foreign trade and the profit it generated. Although Emperor Qianlong forcefully rejected Macartney's requests for expanded trade, the Qing court reaped handsome customs revenue from seaborne foreign commerce in certain ports along the coast. This stood in stark contrast to the policy of its predecessor, the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), which during the early fifteenth century was known for launching stupendous maritime expeditions that reached the eastern and southeastern coasts of Africa. But from the time of the mid-Ming, troubled by piracy, the dynasty resumed its policy of *haijin*, or “coastal clearance,” forbidding the Chinese to sail into the sea and foreign merchants to come ashore. The Qing rulers continued this “sea ban” policy, though for a different reason—to prevent the recuperation of the remaining Ming forces that had been active along the coast and in Taiwan. After Emperor Kang Xi, the dynasty's second and perhaps most able ruler, had pacified the coastal regions in 1683, he lifted the ban on overseas trade. Ironically, it was during Emperor Qianlong's reign that the sea ban was greatly relaxed, giving rise to the Cohong, a merchant guild that gradually gained a monopoly, authorized by the Qing government, on trading with Western merchants. The Cohong thus became a core agency in the Canton System, which helped put overseas trade under the direct control of both the provincial government and the central government's Ministry of Revenue. The Canton System was aimed at delimiting foreign trade and exploiting its income for the Qing court.

While Emperor Qianlong showed interest in foreign trade, he was clearly not ready to expand it to the extent desired by the British. The Qing was founded by the Manchus, a nomadic group and an ethnic minority that had arisen originally in Manchuria, today's Northeast China. After replacing the Ming Dynasty, the Manchu rulers quickly adopted a policy of presenting themselves as the legitimate successors of the Ming imperial realm. In economic terms, this meant that the Qing continued the traditional emphasis on agricultural development, one that had been in place for two millennia. Like the Ming and most of its predecessors, the Qing considered itself politically and ideologically the owner of the Central Country (Zhongguo, or “Middle Kingdom”), an undisputed center of civilization in the world and one that radiated its cultural influence to the surrounding regions. All this was reflected in the practice of the entrenched “tributary system” that the Qing had inherited from its predecessors in managing relations with its neighbors. Under this system, it was assumed that uncultured neighboring barbarians would be attracted to China and would be transformed by Chinese culture. The Chinese ruler would show compassion for foreign emissaries. In Emperor Qianlong's era, these “tribu-

tary states” could be found not only in today’s Korea, Vietnam, Burma, and Thailand but also in parts of Russia, the Netherlands, and Portugal.

Compared with the Russians, who had established an ecclesiastical mission in Beijing, and the Portuguese, who had held Macao as their enclave, the British were latecomers in seeking a relationship with Qing China. However, powered by the raging Industrial Revolution, this nation of just eight million compared with 330 million in Qing China began to sense that they represented the burgeoning great power in the world. This sentiment was evident in the instructions given by Henry Dundas, the home secretary of the British Government, to Lord Macartney:

1. to negotiate a treaty of commerce and friendship and to establish a resident minister at the court of Qianlong;

2. to extend British trade in China by opening new ports where British woollens might be sold;

3. to obtain from China the cession of a piece of land or an island nearer to the tea- and silk-producing area than Guangzhou, where British merchants might reside the whole year and where British jurisdiction could be exercised;

4. to abolish the existing abuses in the Canton System and to obtain assurances that they would not be revived;

5. to create new markets in China for British products hitherto unknown, such as hardware; and

6. to open Japan and Vietnam to British trade by means of treaties.

The nature and scope of these charges suggest that the British government hoped to attain much more from their contact with the Chinese than had been accomplished by other Europeans. Most important, they wanted their country to be treated as an equal by the Qing ruler. Lord Macartney intended to show the Chinese that a new power had been born in the West.

Steam-driven vessels would indeed bring the English close to the Chinese shore and deliver a serious blow to their empire in the mid-nineteenth century. But Emperor Qianlong did not foresee this. After all, the Qing Dynasty, from the time of its founding in the mid-seventeenth century and until the time of Qianlong, had stood undefeated in all the wars it had fought with its enemies. The emperor was willing to show his compassion for, or even “cherish,” the visit of an embassy from afar, especially one offering belated congratulations for his eightieth birthday and presenting tribute to his Celestial Empire. But he was uninterested in anything beyond that, let alone in any notion of treating the British as equals.

On September 14, 1793, a year after departing from London, Macartney and his retinue were received by the emperor at Rehe, a Qing summer palace north of Beijing. As he presented King George III’s letter to Qianlong, Macartney is said to have knelt on one knee, as if he were being received by his king, though he omitted kissing the emperor’s hand. Macartney and his associates denied that they ever performed kowtow (which required bending both knees) at the Qing court, but new scholarship reveals that while the Chinese ministers were performing the kowtow on one or two other occasions, prostrating their bodies and

Time Line

1760s

- A series of inventions in cotton spinning are patented in Britain, propelling the expansion of its textile industry and sparking interest in acquiring silk and other fabrics from China.

1780s

- James Watts improves the design of the steam engine, a landmark event in the Industrial Revolution and one that led to advances in oceangoing vessels.

1792

- **September**
The British East India Company and British government dispatch Lord George Macartney as ambassador to China for developing trade and diplomatic relations with the Qing Empire, where he remains until 1794.

1793

- **September 14**
Macartney presents a letter from George III to Emperor Qianlong, seeking to secure diplomatic relations and improved trade conditions with Qing China.
- **October 3**
Emperor Qianlong summons Macartney to his court and tenders his reply to King George’s letter.



Time Line	
1796	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emperor Jiaqing ascends the throne.
1799	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emperor Qianlong dies.
1820	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> January 29 George III dies.
1839	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The First Opium War begins.

knocking their foreheads on the ground, the British also knelt on both knees and bowed their heads to the ground. Thus, scholars differ in their reading and interpretation of the sources regarding the kowtow ritual. Despite this, most of them seem to agree that even if the English, or Macartney, had followed the usual ritual in meeting Emperor Qianlong, it would not have altered their mission's outcome—the emperor would still have rejected their requests. For though the Qing court delighted in profiting from tea, silk, lacquer, and porcelain exports to Europe, such things remained luxurious and therefore peripheral to their agriculture-based economy.

About the Author

Emperor Qianlong was born Hongli, the fourth son of Emperor Yongzheng, in 1711. Qianlong was his reign name, and he would not take it until he assumed the throne of the empire. In imperial China, members of the upper class usually had several names for different occasions. The name given by the parents was used strictly within the family. Emperors had a reign name because, out of deference, no one outside the family was supposed to use his given name. Qianlong was the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty, and his reign—which began in 1736 and ended officially in 1795 (though he remained in power until his death in 1799)—was the longest in the dynasty, representing its heyday. Among the emperor's many accomplishments was the acquisition of a huge territory in the northwest, known as Xinjiang, or “New Territory,” which doubled what was then China's territory. Under Qianlong's rule, the population experienced a boom, attesting to the vibrancy of the economy.

Besides being an able administrator, Emperor Qianlong was a cultural dilettante. He penned a great number of

poems and essays in Chinese and was a patron of an ambitious ten-year bibliographic project known as the Four Treasuries (*Siku quanshu*), the avowed aim of which was to cull, catalog, and abstract all existing books. The study of Chinese Confucian culture, in the form of “evidential learning”—an intellectual trend of the Qing period that emphasized an empirical approach to the understanding of Confucian classics—flourished.

Explanation and Analysis of the Document

After he presented King George III's letter to Emperor Qianlong on September 14, 1793, Lord Macartney did not receive a reply until October 3, when he and his assistant were ushered into Beijing's Forbidden City and asked to genuflect before the scroll that represented the emperor's rejoinder. In fact, Qianlong's response had been ready since September 22. Indeed, Qing court documents reveal that the letter had been drafted as early as July 30 and had been submitted to Emperor Qianlong on August 3, more than six weeks before King George III's letter was even delivered. In other words, the failure of the British mission to establish trade and diplomatic relations was “inevitable from the outset” (Peyrefitte, p. 288). Nevertheless, Macartney's omitting to kneel on both knees when he delivered his king's requests to the emperor apparently had served to toughen the letter's tone in rejecting these requests. As an imperial edict, Qianlong's response was written in classical Chinese and rendered into Latin by Jesuit missionaries. Next, the embassy drafted an English summary of the Latin translation, erasing any trace of offensive and condescending phrases. Neither of these texts has survived. The letter exists today only in abridged versions.

◆ Paragraphs 1–6

In the first two paragraphs, Emperor Qianlong politely acknowledges the effort by King George III to send a diplomatic mission, which he interprets as a “desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation.” He delights in the fact that the mission was sent to congratulate him on the anniversary of his birthday. In return for this friendly gesture and for the mission's gifts (which he regards as tributes), the emperor informs King George that he has shown his generosity by personally meeting the embassy and treating them with presents and banquets.

In the next four paragraphs, the emperor proceeds to the first important issue: rejecting the embassy's request to establish a diplomatic residency in Beijing and denying English merchants permission to travel and trade freely in the country. His reasons are three: First, drawing perhaps on the experience of the Jesuit missions, the emperor cites the historical precedent that once a European was permitted to live in China, he then would be expected to adopt the Chinese way of life and would be forbidden to return home. This would not suit the goal that the diplomatic residency hoped to achieve. Second, the emperor suggests that there is nothing wrong with the Canton System of managing and



Seals belonging to the Qianlong Emperor (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D C Anonymous gift, F1978 51a-f)

controlling trade with the Europeans, and he refuses to alter it to accommodate the English request that a resident diplomat be allowed to direct English trade with China. He asks, “If each and all [Europeans] demanded to be represented at our Court, how could we possibly consent?” a reflection of the historical reality that tributary missions from foreign lands would remain in China for no more than several months. It likewise suggests that although the emperor was aware that Europe comprised many nations, he did not know that diplomatic residence had become a

common practice among them. Of course, knowing would almost certainly not have altered his judgment: Qianlong was quite confident that China’s “ceremonies and code of laws” were superior to those of the Europeans.

This sense of cultural superiority stands as Qianlong’s third reason for dismissing the English request. He tells the king that he believes that even if the English envoy “were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilisation, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil.” Considering himself to be the ruler of a superior

civilization occupying the center of the universe, the emperor makes it clear to King George that if he permits certain trade with the English, it is because he wants to bestow grace and extend friendship to a foreign nation, for “we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country’s manufactures.”

◆ Paragraphs 7 and 8

These paragraphs explain the emperor’s refusal to expand trade with the English. They begin with a similar acknowledgment, only now in a somewhat more condescending tone. Noting King George’s interest in seeking to “come into touch with our converting influence” and his “respectful spirit of submission,” the emperor informs the king that he has reciprocated with “the bestowal of valuable presents.”

The emperor continues to explain somewhat haughtily to the English king why he is forced to reject his emissary’s requests. The emperor sees the proposal to expand trade and bypass the Cohong as a violation of the existent practice, which he considers impeccable. Such a request, if granted, would set a “bad example” for other nations. Thus, he not only wanted his ministers to educate the embassy about the rules of his empire but also ordered them to arrange departure for the embassy.

◆ Paragraphs 9–12

The next four paragraphs address Macartney’s detailed requests for gaining access to the Chinese market, which include setting facilities for assisting English ships in port cities other than Xiamen (“Aomen” in the document); establishing a merchant repository in Beijing, the Qing capital; allowing English merchants to reside on a small island near Zhoushan (“Chusan”); and gaining them a residential compound in the city of Guangzhou (“Canton”). The emperor rejects all of these requests because he considers the established Cohong system the best way to handle foreign trade. Specifically, he states that the port city Xiamen, located in southeastern China, is the most ideal geographic location for a merchant repository because it is “near to the sea.” More important, it was where the Cohong ran its operation by which the Qing Dynasty controlled and contained trade with the West. The emperor regards the request for merchant residence and repository as an infringement on the empire’s territorial integrity. But in doing so, he has to explain why the Russians were granted such a facility in Beijing. Although his answer is hardly persuasive, it is nevertheless unequivocal: “The accommodation furnished to them [the Russians] was only temporary.” He underscores the fact that his dynasty restricts the movement of foreigners when he says that they have never been allowed “to cross the Empire’s barriers and settle at will amongst the Chinese people.”

In responding to the request for an island near Zhoushan where merchants could reside and warehouse goods, the emperor is unequivocal that it would set up an “evil example.” He asks how he could comply with such requests from other nations. The same argument is applied to the request for a site in Guangzhou. If he allows the English to gain such a privilege, then other European

nations would seek the same, which he regards as dangerous, for “friction would inevitably occur between the Chinese and your barbarian subjects.” In the same spirit, he sees that this permission would invariably expand their contacts with the Chinese people.

◆ Paragraphs 13 and 14

The next two paragraphs deal with issues related to tax and tariff. One of the major reasons for the English government to send the Macartney mission to China was to seek, in modern language, a “most favored nation status” for Britain. This status would reduce duties and tariffs levied by Qing China on English merchandise. Emperor Qianlong also rejects these requests. As before, he does so by stressing the issue of equality. As he puts it, he does not want to “make an exception in your case” lest the principle of equality exercised by the Qing court in managing foreign trade be violated. Yet what lurks beneath this seemingly grand reason is his refusal to make any changes to the existing Cohong system.

◆ Paragraph 15

The next paragraph, denying the request to conduct missionary activities in China, offers a glimpse into the emperor’s mindset regarding cultural exchange in general and his recalcitrant attitude toward managing overseas trade in particular. Although he does not denigrate Christianity, he clearly regards the Chinese moral system as superior. He describes how this system was established from time immemorial and how it has been religiously observed by generations of Chinese. He reminds the king that Europeans present in China are prohibited from preaching their religion to his subjects. This explanation was consistent with the policy instituted in the early eighteenth century by Emperor Kangxi—Emperor Qianlong’s much-loved grandfather—in the wake of the Rites Controversy, which essentially forbade Christian missionaries from proselytizing the Chinese.

◆ Paragraph 16

Having rejected all of the requests “wantonly” made by the Macartney embassy on behalf of King George III, Emperor Qianlong concludes his letter by blaming Lord Macartney and not the king himself for entertaining and presenting such “wild ideas and hopes.” Even if the king were somewhat involved, the emperor writes, it was out of ignorance and innocence; he assumes that King George III “had no intention of transgressing [Qing dynasty regulations].” He goes on to deliver a stern warning to King George III: If the British government persists in pursuing those proposals, it and its emissaries will face severe punishments. “Tremblingly obey and show no negligence!” he tells the king.

Audience

Emperor Qianlong’s letter was, first and foremost, addressed to the king of England, George III. Although he wrote as one monarch to another, Qianlong was issuing a response in the form of an “imperial edict.” He was placing

“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.”

(Paragraph 3)

“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?”

(Paragraph 4)

“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.”

(Paragraph 5)

“My capital is the hub and centre about which all quarters of the globe revolve.”

(Paragraph 10)

“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. That has no hankering after heterodox doctrines.”

(Paragraph 15)

himself on a quite different footing. Although Qianlong was, in a sense, having his own “audience” with the British king, his condescending tone was that of a superior. King George, as the intended recipient, would have been unlikely to have received the letter in the spirit in which it was offered. We do not know, however, whether the letter was ever delivered.

The more immediate audience for the emperor’s letter was Lord McCartney and his embassy. Written in classical Chinese, the letter had first to be translated by Jesuit missionaries into Latin and then by the embassy into English. The embassy was concerned enough about the language to erase any trace of offensive and condescending phrases. Macartney wrote of the event in his journal, where he describes being received at the palace by the First Minister,

but without the usual graciousness and with a certain constraint. Later, when high officials of the court delivered the letter itself to him at home, Macartney comments that from their manner it had become clear that the Chinese wanted the British embassy to leave. He does not remark on the contents of the letter itself. In early 1794 Macartney sailed for home, disappointed that his mission had failed.

Impact

In response to King George’s request for broadening trade and bettering diplomatic relations, Emperor Qianlong wrote his letter in the form of an imperial edict, explaining in detail



how and why he would not grant such a request. The emperor wanted to tell the English king how ignorant he was about the magnificence of the Chinese Empire and how improper his request was. However, we are unsure whether Lord Macartney actually delivered Emperor Qianlong's letter to King George. Hence, we do not know King George's reaction. In other words, whatever the emperor's intention was in writing the letter, it did not have the intended impact.

This first communication between the Qing emperor of China and the king of England was not entirely fruitless. Although George Macartney failed in his diplomatic mission to open the door to British trade with China, he was more successful in his voyage of discovery. During his six-month sojourn in China he made careful and detailed observations of the country in his journal, as did some of other members in the embassy. Their portrayal of the Chinese as a stubborn and superstitious people and the Qing Dynasty as a backward-looking empire, uninterested in change and novelty, eventually altered the more positive image of China in the European mind generated by the Jesuits' writings and by the *philosophes*. Instead, Macartney and his assistants were convinced that to change China "the effort required would be superhuman and that violence could someday be necessary" (Peyrefitte, p. 541). Violence was indeed used in the First Opium War of 1839–1842.

Further Reading

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Questions for Further Study

1. The British East India Company was a private corporation, but during the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century it represented a projection of British imperial power in Asia and thus became a governing power. How and to what extent was the company able to achieve this goal?

2. Why was China such an important market for Great Britain? What economic reasons did Great Britain have for strengthening trade relations with China?

3. To what extent did cultural differences between China and England lead to the Chinese emperor's rejection of King George III's proposal? What specific cultural practices in China influenced Qianlong's response to King George?

4. Qianlong rejected out of hand every one of Britain's proposals. What do you believe was the underlying reason for his refusal even to entertain the possibility of agreeing to any of these proposals?

5. Compare and contrast Qianlong's Letter to King George III with Lin Zexu's "Moral Advice to Queen Victoria," written less than four decades later in 1839. Did the later letter suggest any advances in relations between Great Britain and China, or was China still "closed" to Britain and its trading goals?



QIANLONG'S LETTER TO GEORGE III

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.

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.

Moreover, our Celestial dynasty possesses vast territories, and tribute missions from the dependencies are provided for by the Department for Tributary States, which ministers to their wants and exercises strict control over their movements. It would be quite impossible to leave them to their own devices. 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 it be said that your object is to exercise control over your country's trade, your nationals have had full liberty to trade at Canton for many a year, and have received the greatest consideration at our hands. Missions have been sent by Portugal and Italy, preferring similar requests. The Throne appreciated their sincerity and loaded them with favours, besides authorising measures to facilitate their trade with China. You are no doubt aware that, when my Canton merchant, Wu Chao-ping, was in debt to the foreign ships, I made the Viceroy advance the monies due, out of the provincial treasury, and ordered him to punish the culprit severely. Why then should foreign nations advance this utterly unreasonable request to be represented at my Court? Peking is nearly two thousand miles from Canton, and at such a distance what possible control could any British representative exercise?

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

Document Text

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.

You, O King, from afar have yearned after the blessings of our civilisation, and in your eagerness to come into touch with our converting influence have sent an Embassy across the sea bearing a memorial. I have already taken note of your respectful spirit of submission, have treated your mission with extreme favour and loaded it with gifts, besides issuing a mandate to you, O King, and honouring you with the bestowal of valuable presents. Thus has my indulgence been manifested.

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. Hitherto, all European nations, including your own country's barbarian merchants, have carried on their trade with our Celestial Empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign *hongs* should

be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence. But your Ambassador has now put forward new requests which completely fail to recognise the Throne's principle to 'treat strangers from afar with indulgence,' and to exercise a pacifying control over barbarian tribes, the world over. Moreover, our dynasty, swaying the myriad races of the globe, extends the same benevolence towards all. Your England is not the only nation trading at Canton. 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 take your requests *seriatim* and to issue my mandate on each question separately. In this way you will, I trust, comprehend my meaning.

(1) Your Ambassador requests facilities for ships of your nation to call at Ningpo, Chusan, Tientsin and other places for purposes of trade. Until now trade with European nations has always been conducted at Aomen, where the foreign *hongs* are established to store and sell foreign merchandise. Your nation has obediently complied with this regulation for years past without raising any objection. In none of the other ports named have *hongs* been established, so that even if your vessels were to proceed thither, they would have no means of disposing of their cargoes. Furthermore, no interpreters are available, so you would have no means of explaining your wants, and nothing but general inconvenience would result. For the future, as in the past, I decree that your request is refused and that the trade shall be limited to Aomen.

(2) The request that your merchants may establish a repository in the capital of my Empire for the storing and sale of your produce, in accordance with the precedent granted to Russia, is even more impracticable than the last. My capital is the hub and centre about which all quarters of the globe revolve. Its ordinances are most august and its laws are strict in the extreme. The subjects of our dependencies have never been allowed to open places of business in

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Peking. Foreign trade has hitherto been conducted at Aomen, because it is conveniently near to the sea, and therefore an important gathering place for the ships of all nations sailing to and fro. If warehouses were established in Peking, the remoteness of your country, lying far to the north-west of my capital, would render transport extremely difficult.

Before Kiakhta was opened, the Russians were permitted to trade at Peking, but the accommodation furnished to them was only temporary. As soon as Kiakhta was available, they were compelled to withdraw from Peking, which has been closed to their trade these many years. Their frontier trade at Kiakhta is on all fours with your trade at Aomen. Possessing facilities at the latter place, you now ask for further privileges at Peking, although our dynasty observes the severest restrictions respecting the admission of foreigners within its boundaries, and has never permitted the subjects of dependencies to cross the Empire's barriers and settle at will amongst the Chinese people. This request is also refused.

(3) Your request for a small island near Chusan, where your merchants may reside and goods be warehoused, arises from your desire to develop trade. As there are neither foreign *hongs* 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. Consider, moreover, that England is not the only barbarian land which wishes to establish relations with our civilisation and 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. Barbarian merchants having business with the *hongs* have never been allowed to enter the city of Canton; by these measures, disputes between Chinese and barbarians

are prevented, and a firm barrier is raised between my subjects and those of other nations. The present request is quite contrary to precedent; furthermore, European nations have been trading with Canton for a number of years and, as they make large profits, the number of traders is constantly increasing. How would it be possible to grant such a site to each country? The merchants of the foreign *hongs* are responsible to the local officials for the proceedings of barbarian merchants and they carry out periodical inspections. 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.

(5) Regarding your request for remission or reduction of duties on merchandise discharged by your British barbarian merchants at Aomen and distributed throughout the interior, there is a regular tariff in force for barbarian merchants' goods, which applies equally to all European nations. It would be as wrong to increase the duty imposed on your nation's merchandise on the ground that the bulk of foreign trade is in your hands, as to make an exception in your case in the shape of specially reduced duties. In future, duties shall be levied equitably without discrimination between your nation and any other, and, in order to manifest my regard, your barbarian merchants shall continue to be shown every consideration at Aomen.

(6) As to your request that your ships shall pay the duties leviable by tariff, there are regular rules in force at the Canton Custom house respecting the amounts payable, and since I have refused your request to be allowed to trade at other ports, this duty will naturally continue to be paid at Canton as heretofore.

(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

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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. I have ever shown the greatest condescension to the tribute missions of all States which sincerely yearn after the blessings of civilisation, so as to manifest my kindly indulgence. I have even gone out of my way to grant any requests which were in any way consistent with Chinese usage. Above all, upon you, who live in a remote and inaccessible region, far across the spaces of ocean, but who have shown your submissive loyalty by sending this tribute mission, I have heaped benefits far in excess of those accorded to other nations. But the demands presented by your Embassy are not only a contravention of dynastic tradition, but would be utterly unproductive

of good result to yourself, besides being quite impracticable. I have accordingly stated the facts to you in detail, and it is your bounden duty reverently to appreciate my feelings and to obey these instructions henceforward for all time, so that you may enjoy the blessings of perpetual peace. 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! A special mandate!

Glossary

tribute missions

persons representing dependent states who appeared before the emperor bearing rare and valuable items as evidence of submission to the Qing Dynasty

Swaying the wide world

a reflection of the emperor's belief his geopolitical importance far outweighed that of Great Britain, continental Europe, and the rest of the known world