

EMPEROR QIANLONG'S RESPONSE TO THE KING OF ENGLAND

In 1793, the King of England sent a mission under Lord Macartney to China to open regular diplomatic and commercial relations with China. The King instructed Macartney to deliver a letter to the Emperor requesting, among other things, that the English be allowed to have an ambassador (also referred to as an “envoy”) who would live in the Chinese capital and who would help represent and protect the interests of British merchants doing business in China and thus facilitate trade between the two countries. The following response from the Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736-1795) illustrates the Chinese attitude toward international relations and foreigners.

You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilization, 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.

**Chinese term for documents addressed to the Emperor*

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 favor and have allowed them to be introduced into my presence...

As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited in 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 [to their] home [country]...

***custom*

...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 nationalities besides your own: if each and all demanded to be represented at our Court, how could we possibly consent? The thing is utterly impractical. 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, making similar requests. The Throne appreciated their sincerity and loaded them with favors, besides authorizing measures to facilitate their trade with China... 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 civilization, 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 civilization, 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 fulfill 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. It behooves 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...

● QUESTIONS

1. Does the Chinese Emperor regard the King of England as an equal? Which words or phrases indicate how the Emperor views the King of England and England's relationship to China?
2. What are the Emperor's arguments against allowing a British representative to reside in Peking?
3. What is the Chinese attitude toward foreign trade?
4. What does the Emperor believe his duties are as a ruler?
5. According to the Emperor, how can China remain strong and prosperous?