



Macartney and the Emperor

- Introduction
 - Reading: Macartney and the Emperor
 - Primary Source: Two Edicts from the Emperor
 - Discussion Questions
-

Introduction

It is highly recommended that the two units "Macartney and the Emperor" and "The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment" be used in tandem. Once students have read about China's negative response to Great Britain's aggressive demands for the expansion of trade and exchange of ambassadors, they will be prepared to appreciate more fully the Chinese perception of the Opium War and the conditions imposed upon the country in the "unequal treaties" that followed. China's experience of Western aggression in the 1800s continues to be an important factor shaping both the nation's foreign policy and its drive for modernization.

The primary source reading, "Two Edicts from the Emperor," provide students with an eloquent statement by the Chinese emperor of how the Chinese view their civilization and position in the world. (Please remind students that King George III of Great Britain, who dispatched Macartney to China, was the same king against whom the American colonies rebelled in 1776.)

In "The Treaty of Nanking," students will find several clauses that forced the Chinese to grant to the British precisely those rights they had denied them fifty years earlier.

Note: The Wade-Giles system of romanization is used in both of these units, following the form of the translation from which the primary source reading was taken.

Canton = Guangzhou

Ch'ien-lung = Qianlong Emperor (1736-1795)

Lin Tse-hsu = Lin Zexu (1785-1850)

"kow tow" = koutou

Macartney and the Emperor

Many Europeans had contact with China over the centuries. When Marco Polo traveled to China in the thirteenth century, he found European artisans already at the court of the Great Khan. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, priests such as the Italian Matteo Ricci journeyed to China, learned Chinese, and tried to make their religion more acceptable to the Chinese. These contacts were made usually by individual entrepreneurs or solitary missionaries. Although some Western science, art, and architecture was welcomed by the Qing court, attempts to convert Chinese to Christianity were by and large unsuccessful. More importantly, the Chinese state did not lend its support to creating a significant number of specialists in Western thinking.

Direct oceanic trade between China and Europe began during the sixteenth century. At first it was dominated by the Portuguese and the Spanish, who brought silver from the Americas to exchange for Chinese silks. Later they were joined by the British and the Dutch. Initially trading took place at several ports along the Chinese coast, but gradually the state limited Western trade to the southern port of Canton (Guangzhou). Here there were wealthy Chinese merchants who had been given monopoly privileges by the emperor to trade with foreigners. Merchant guilds trading with foreigners were known as "hongs," a Westernization of *hang*, or street. The original merchant associations had been organized by streets. The merchants of the selected hongs were also among the only Chinese merchants with enough money to buy large amounts of goods produced inland and have them ready for the foreign traders when they came once a year to make their purchases. The Chinese court also favored trading at one port because it could more easily collect taxes on the goods traded if all trade was carried on in one place under the supervision of an official appointed by the emperor. Such a system would make it easier to control the activities of the foreigners as well. So in the 1750s trade was restricted to Canton, and foreigners coming to China in their sail-powered ships were allowed to reside only on the island of Macao as they awaited favorable winds to return home.

For many years this system was acceptable to both the Chinese and the Europeans. As the demand for tea increased, however, and the Industrial Revolution led them to seek more markets for their manufactured goods, the British began to try to expand their trade opportunities in China and establish Western-style diplomatic relations with the Chinese. This brought them immediately into conflict with the Chinese government, which was willing to allow trade without diplomatic relations, but would only allow diplomatic relations within the traditional tribute system that had evolved out of centuries of Chinese cultural leadership in Asia. In exchange for trading privileges in the capital and recognition of their ruler, neighboring states would send so-called tribute missions to China. These envoys brought gifts for the emperor and performed a series of bows called the "kow-tow." Aside from a handful of foreigners who lived permanently in Peking and served the emperor, foreigners only visited the capital on such tribute missions. Therefore, when British citizens came to Peking in the late eighteenth century, their purpose was misunderstood. When they refused to follow the centuries-old system of tribute relations and began demanding both expanded trade and the establishment of embassies in the capital, they were immediately resisted and seen as challenging the Chinese way of life.

One of the most famous British attempts to enlarge trade with China demonstrates the miscommunication between the two nations. Lord Macartney led a mission in 1793 to the court of the Ch'ien-lung emperor of China. This emperor reigned over perhaps the most luxurious court in all Chinese history. He had inherited a full treasury, and his nation seemed strong and wealthy enough to reach its greatest size ever and also to attain a splendor that outdazzled even the best Europe could then offer.

King George III of England sent Macartney to convince the Chinese emperor to open northern port cities to British traders and to allow British ships to be repaired on Chinese territory. Macartney arrived in North China in a warship with a retinue of 95, an artillery of 50 redcoats, and 600 packages of magnificent presents that required 90 wagons, 40 barrows, 200 horses, and 3,000 coolies to carry them to Peking. Yet the best gifts the kind of England had to offer—elaborate clocks, globes, porcelain-seemed insignificant beside the splendors of the Asian court. Taken on a yacht trip around the palace, Macartney stopped to visit 50 pavilions, each "furnished in the richest manner . . . that our presents must shrink from the comparison and hide their diminished heads," he later wrote.* Immediately the Chinese labeled his mission as "tribute," and the emperor refused to listen to British demands. He also ordered Macartney to perform the kow-tow and dashed off the following reply to the British king.

*The above quote is from Frederick Wakeman, Jr., *The Fall of Imperial China*, p. 101.

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Two Edicts From The Emperor

September 1793, On The Occasion Of Lord Macartney's Mission To China

(a) 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.

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 he might reside. 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 regulations, 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 authorizing measures to facilitate their trade with China. You are no doubt aware that, when my Canton merchant, Wu Chaop'ing, 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 10,000 li 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 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 the 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 a list) 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.

(b) You, O King from afar, have yearned after the blessings of our civilization, 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 memorialize 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 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 recognize 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 inexcusable 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 one by one 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 Macao, 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 Macao.
2. The request that your merchants may establish a repository in the capital of my Empire for the storing and sale of your produce 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 Peking. Foreign trade has hitherto been conducted at Macao, because it is conveniently near the sea, and therefore an important gathering place for the ships of all nations sailing to and from. If warehouses were established in Peking, the remoteness of your country lying far to the northwest of my capital, would render transport extremely difficult. Possessing facilities at Macao, 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. 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 perhaps 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 civilization, 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 contradiction 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 Chekiang 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 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!

*hongs--trading firms licensed by the Chinese government.

Discussion Questions and Suggested Activities

Vocabulary

- tribute system
- edict
- envoy
- mandate
- Macartney
- Chien-lung Emperor
- hong

1. Locate specific phrases in the two edicts that show how the Chinese perceived the British.
2. Did the Chinese think all states were equal in international relations?
3. What did the Chinese emperor think China had to offer England? What did he feel England had to offer China?
4. Why do you think it is important for diplomats to understand the world view of the other party? Would it have been possible for the British in 1793 to change their request in order to get more of what they wanted? If so, how; if not, why not?

Exercises

After the class has read this selection, have two students volunteer to put on a skit, one playing the role of Macartney and the other the role of the emperor, each proclaiming his opinions on and interests in the situation.

As a variation, choose two students to enact a skit before the students have read the selection. To emphasize the differences in worldview, both should be briefed on their side's perception of the world at the time. After each has acted out the situation from that point of view, discuss the skit with the whole class, trying to understand what went wrong in the attempt at communication.