

The Macartney mission to Peking: Contextual background

A global view of history in the 18th century during the reign of the Qing would place China as one of the largest and most prosperous regions in the world. It was a nation with advanced technology, expansive trade contacts and rich resources. It was a country which wanted for nothing.

China had well-established contacts with countries outside its own territories, which stretched back further than Marco Polo's visit and his journey along the famed Silk Road. Marco Polo found Europeans had been living in China even before he arrived in the 13th century. The development of seafaring and sailing technology among European countries allowed for a huge expansion of contacts, and trade truly began to be worldwide. Asian countries, however, had a huge trading culture on a scale unknown to Europeans well before Europeans began sea trading. At the centre of this Asian trading culture was China, whose goods were highly prized for their diversity, quality and practicality. This was what made Chinese goods so attractive to Europeans later on, as Chinese goods were accessible to the emerging middle classes of Europe and were not confined to the ultra-wealthy.

Early Western contacts with China provided limited trade opportunities for Western nations. The Portuguese had established territorial interests in Macao by 1557 and had trading posts in several other northern Chinese ports. Early attempts by the British to establish trading contacts were unsuccessful, but eventually the British East India Company established a trading post in Taiwan in 1672 and had contacts with several other ports along the Chinese coast.

The Chinese considered merchants to be at the bottom of the social scale and they saw no advantage in engaging with merchants from other countries at the imperial level. China adopted a restrictive policy towards trade with other countries and would not allow foreign merchants into China proper. By 1700, the port of Canton was designated as the only port through which any trade could take place. Trade was restricted to the 'factories' on the waterfront at Canton and foreigners were required to withdraw and reside in Macao during the off season. The key trade items from China were tea, porcelain and silk and Chinese products were increasingly popular in Europe. It was fashionable to have Chinese porcelain and other items in one's house and some wealthy homes even had a 'Chinese' room.

The imperial administration gave exclusive rights of trade to a guild of Chinese merchants, the hong, and these acted as the intermediary between Chinese merchants and Western traders. The hong merchants became very rich but were still despised by the mandarin class of China. The local imperial officials imposed huge taxes on the hong who in turn passed on all costs to the foreign traders. The British East India Company resented these exorbitant costs and sought help from the British government to bypass the local officials.

The British appointed Lord Macartney as Ambassador to China and a mission was organised to send Macartney to China to meet with the Qianlong Emperor. The British Home Secretary gave instructions to Macartney that his mission had commercial objectives. These included requests to the Chinese Emperor:

- to open up more ports to trade

- to allow a permanent British embassy in Peking (now Beijing).
- to reduce the duties on imports
- to increase imports from Britain to China.

Macartney also carried a letter from King George III to the Qianlong Emperor. The British entourage was very large and tons of gifts were brought along as a demonstration of the advantages of trade with Britain. The arrival of the British mission coincided with the Qianlong Emperor's 82nd birthday.