

# LETTER TO KING GEORGE III

## 1793

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*Emperor Qian-long*

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In the 15th century, the Chinese government withdrew from contact with the rest of the world. Eventually, China resumed limited trading with other countries. By the late 18th century it still traded with the West through one port in southeastern China. In 1793, Lord Macartney, an English nobleman, managed to gain an audience with the Chinese emperor Qian-long. Macartney brought a request from King George III for increased trade between Britain and China. Qian-long refused and gave his reasons in the following letter to the king.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias**

What is Emperor Qian-long's view of the West? What clues in the letter reveal his attitude?

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You [George III], 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. . . . 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. To manifest my indulgence, I have entertained them at a banquet and made them numerous gifts. . . .

As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited to my Celestial Court<sup>1</sup> 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. . . . 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

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1. **Celestial Court:** Qian-long's seat of government

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has penetrated into 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.

**Source:** Excerpt from *China and Foreign Powers: An Historical Review of Their Relations*, edited by Sir Frederick Whyte (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 39.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER**

Emperor Qian-long views Western culture as vastly inferior. He states that his "dynasty's majestic virtue" is desired by all the world and all kings show tribute. He refuses trade because the only reason that the British want to trade with China is to import superior Chinese products. Qian-long also states that although British products are "strange" and "ingenious," they do not compare to the products of the Chinese, who "possess all things."