

8.8 Britain Requests Trading Privileges (1793)

Source: E. Backhouse, E. and J. O. P. Bland, J. (1914). *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin).

Background: In 1793, Emperor Qianlong sent a letter to King George III of England. In the letter, the Emperor denied a British request for special trading privileges in China and to have a permanent British representative placed in the Imperial court.

Questions

1. What are the reasons Emperor Qianlong gives for refusing Great Britain's request for special trading privileges with China and a permanent delegate to the Imperial court?
2. What is the attitude of Emperor Qianlong towards a Chinese relationship with Europe?



A. 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 (323).

B. 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? (324)

C. 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 (324).

D. 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 (325).