

Emperor to King: A Letter

Directions: In 1793, British diplomat Lord George Macartney came to China. He delivered a letter from British King George III to Chinese Emperor Qian-long. In the letter, King George requested that China lift many of its restrictions on trade with Britain. The emperor wrote a letter replying to the king. Read these excerpts from it. Then complete one or more of the suggested role-play exercises that follow.

Emperor Qian-long to King George III

You, O King, from across the seas have yearned to enjoy the benefits of our civilization. . . . I have noted your respectful sense of humility and have treated your mission with high favor and gave them many gifts. . . .

Your proposal [to set up British trading posts] does not conform with the custom of our dynasty and cannot be considered. Until now, all Europeans, including your own country's barbarian merchants, have traded with our Celestial Empire at Guangzhou only. This has been the way for many years, even though our Celestial Empire has all things in tremendous abundance and produces all it needs or wants within its own borders. We therefore had no need to import the goods manufactured by outside barbarians in trade for our own products. But we realize that the tea, silk, and porcelain that our Celestial Empire produces are necessities that European nations cannot do without. So we have permitted you, as a notable mark of favor, to trade with our licensed merchant guilds. In this way, your desires for our products could be met, and your country could thus participate in our goodness. . . . Our dynasty, ruling over the many and varied races of the world, extends the same kindness to all.

I do not forget that your island is lonely and remote, cut off from the world by wide wastes of sea, nor do I fail to note your excusable ignorance about the customs of our Celestial Empire. I have therefore commanded my Ministers to enlighten your Ambassador about this matter. . . . Tremblingly obey!

1. Assuming the roles of the ministers and advisors of King George, discuss your reactions to the tone of the emperor's letter and a reply to it.
2. Assuming the roles of members of Macartney's mission and Chinese officials, debate the question of increased trading privileges for British merchants in China.
3. The Chinese scorned the gifts that Lord Macartney's mission brought to the Chinese court in 1793. Consulting with your merchant partners, draw up a list of European products that you think the Chinese will welcome and admire. Then, as a Chinese court official, react to these gifts.

