Edict from the Emperor Ch’ien-Lung [Qianlong] to King George III


You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas, nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation, 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 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 dependences 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 would come to our Court, his language and national dress differ from that of our people, and there would be no place in which to bestow him. 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 system of etiquette, 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 authorising measures
to facilitate their trade with China. You are no doubt aware that, when my Canton
merchant, Wu Chao-ping, 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 a foreign nation advance this utterly unreasonable request to
be represented at my Court? Peking is nearly two thousand miles 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 civilisation, 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 civilisation, you
could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. Therefore,
however, adept the Envoy might become, nothing could be gained thereby.

Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect
governance and to fulfil 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 has penetrated unto every
country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute
by land and sea. 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 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
an inventory) 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!