

What was china's
attitude towards
western traders in the
late essay



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During the late Seventeenth and then the Eighteenth Century, the countries of Western Europe were going through an Industrial Revolution that would see their economies and societies radically transform due to industrialisation and an increase in foreign trade. China is traditionally seen as being left out of this or even isolating itself from the Western countries, limiting the trade it allowed and generally having a negative attitude. This view will be examined here in tandem with an investigation of the motives behind this negative attitude.

The period in question points mainly to Dutch and British traders, in particular Lord Macartney's mission to China in 1793. This mission provides is a good example of and helps explain China's attitude. However, China's actions towards some of it's neighbours in terms of trade can also provide explanations for China's approach to trade as a whole. The late Seventeenth Century was they heyday of Dutch trade with China, if such a term can be applied to the interaction of the two nations.

The Dutch had settled on Taiwan in 1624 and set up a fort there, being pushed out by Ming loyalists in 1662¹. Whilst this fort served as a useful trading post, the Dutch were only granted limited trading rights in 1656 in the form of one tributary mission every eight years, limited in the amount it could take to China and was very much one way traffic coming from the Dutch to the Qing Court². The Dutch East India Company was the main vehicle for this, mainly through Canton, the system of which will be looked at later.

Hence we can see that China's attitude to Dutch traders was quite subdued and the reasons for this are manifold. John Willis puts forward the view that the Chinese took exception to the Dutch for bringing violence to Chinese waters through wars with the Spanish and Portuguese³. This can seem justifiable, but similar points have been expressed by others with Hsu delivering a damning conclusion, saying 'on the whole, foreign traders in China, who were mostly profit-seeking adventurers and uncouth men of little culture, made a poor show of themselves'⁴.

When Western traders were in Chinese ports they had been at sea for many months - the sudden release of large bodies of men in a small port had its associated problems of crime and general disorder, something the Chinese obviously did not want. Hsu raises an important point that the actions of the either Dutch or English traders would have consequences for the other as the Chinese did not differentiate between the two, simply calling them both 'Red-heads'. The first of these points demonstrates how perhaps the Dutch and English did not give enough respect to the Chinese, acting like hooligans according to Hsu.

However, the second point demonstrates how China did not respect the Western traders to a level of even differentiating between different nations, tarnishing them all with the same brush. Hsu therefore shows how there was a lack of mutual respect. This sometimes understandable lack of respect for traders or trade in general can be seen in the actual system of trade operating in four Chinese ports, but mainly in Canton. Here, merchants had to deal with a core of appointed local merchants, the Co-Hong, who were not

liked and corrupt. This is in contrast to the situation in India at the time where traders were respected men⁵.

Trade, and any other form of interaction, was very difficult at Canton and as a result, much trade was unofficial, something which increased dramatically with the introduction of Opium by the British. An example of the difficulties faced in Canton is illustrated in the case of Commodore Anson of the Royal Navy who stopped at Canton to repair his ship after heavy storm damage in 1741. What he faced was a series of 'bureaucratic brick walls' which prevented him from receiving any help. This is contrary to the mutual Western agreement that a damaged military ship that was neutral could stop at any port and receive aid and repairs at a cost.

The repairs that Anson did receive were at an extortionate price and of a poor standard⁶. This shows Chinese hostility to the West and when the story was reported in Britain, set the British against the Chinese from an early stage. The reasons why the Chinese were so unhelpful to Anson has already been seen - the behavior of merchants and the Dutch understandably made the Chinese unreceptive to Westerners. However, the attitude of the Government itself is perhaps the most important factors in the lack of Chinese trade with Westerners.

Spence, in his overview of modern Chinese history, portrays a very negative picture of the Chinese Government's attitude towards trade. He claims that the Qing were uninterested in potential Government gains with foreign traders, whom they distrusted. Spence's analysis of China's treatment of Taiwan during the time that the Dutch were there provides us with three

main points. Firstly, as has already been said, there was a distrust of trade which was seen as conducive to unrest and disorder, perhaps seen in the behavior of the crews of ships in Chinese ports.

Secondly, it was feared trade would encourage piracy and crime leading to a drain of silver from the country's economy. Thirdly, it was thought that trade gives information on China's defenses to its enemies thus compromising national security at a time when China was trying to define and defend some of its borders. Whilst these points may have been valid at the time and applicable to Western traders, it is interesting to note that China was happy to trade with and other countries in Southeast Asia such as Korea and Burma.

It was felt that these countries shared the basic values of China and if they were subservient to the Chinese in diplomacy, they would be granted trading rights. Perhaps this is where Western traders went wrong, they tried to trade with China on an equal footing, whilst China was used to being superior to all foreigners as the 'Middle Kingdom'⁷. This superiority complex is put forward by Lord Macartney, who used Confucianism as an explanation for China's feeling of superiority. The analogy used was that of an Emperor and a Barbarian, the Barbarian being inferior to the Emperor should pay him tribute and be subservient.

In foreign relations, China was the Emperor and the surrounding countries the Barbarian⁸. The exception being Russia, with whom China signed treaties and seemed to respect with trade caravans allowed at regular intervals. The most important event in understanding Sino-British trade

relations has to be Lord Macartney's embassy to Qianlong in 1793, whose mandate was to open up a permanent embassy in Peking and thus regular trade between the two countries, by-passing, or at least reforming the system at Canton.

A large Naval gunship set sail with two support ships containing over one hundred scientist, artists and translators to 'admire (Qianlong's) celestial empire and help celebrate his birthday', or at least that's what the British told the Chinese in order to get an actual audience with the Emperor⁹. Whilst the trip was seen to go without problems the outcomes were far from what was expected from the British and Macartney was asked to leave after four months, empty-handed.

The reasons for this can be seen in Qianlong's response, an edict to be delivered to George III: 'I have even gone out of my way to grant any requests... in any way consistent with Chinese usage... upon you, who live in a remote and inaccessible region... but who have shown your submissive loyalty by sending this tribute mission, I have heaped benefits far in excess of those accorded to other nations. But the demands presented by your Embassy are not only a contradiction of dynastic tradition, but would be utterly unproductive of good result to yourself, besides being quite impracticable'.¹⁰ Firstly, it is interesting to note that it is an 'edict', showing how Qianlong felt superior, which is easy to explain as he had received many gifts from the British mission which had travelled so far.

Furthermore, the last sentence demonstrates that what Macartney was requesting was against 'dynastic tradition'. As Macartney goes on to point

out in his journal, foreign trade was only tolerated under the guise of tribute and not something that was naturally given to all and this is the crux of the problem why Britain and other countries found China so inhospitable - they were applying Western codes of conduct to a culture that was completely different, a culture in which trade was not needed.

For Britain at the time, trade was its lifeblood and was the main form of interaction with the outside world without which it would straggle to prosper. Hence it was in Britain's interests to trade with as many countries as it could. China on the other hand had other ways of getting luxuries and had a large enough economy to sustain itself comfortably. Adshead also points out another reason for the lack of trade, especially in technology claiming that both countries were very mature in that respect.

An improvement was difficult for the Chinese to see who felt that they could not improve any further. A radical transformation of the whole society was the only way in which China would benefit from outside trade and they were not prepared to do this¹¹. However, Adshead later mentions the fact that China was a very land based economy and its failure to realise the benefits of industrialisation through complacency caused it to get left behind. As Macartney's mission sailed off, so did China's best chance to modernise.

What has to be remembered, as Qianlong articulates, if he allowed concessions to the British then he would have to do so for all of the other countries who were knocking at China's door with good to trade. Some reason can therefore be seen in China's refusal of British traders. In essence, Qianlong's full edict was a damning verdict on the prospect of increased

trade or any form of permanent residence for diplomats in Peking, claiming that China does not need anything that Britain has to offer. On the contrary, Spence quotes the playwright Kong Shangren's poem,

White glass from across the Western Seas Is imported through Macao:
Fashioned into lenses as big as coins, They encompass the eyes in a double frame. I put them on - it suddenly becomes clear; I can see the very tips of things! And read fine print by the dim-lit window Just like in my youth¹². He is of course talking about glasses, which had been imported from Europe, just one of many innovations that were becoming commonplace in Chinese society due to some trade and also the influence of the Jesuits.

It shows that perhaps the Chinese did not need Western items, but they were certainly beneficial to it's society. As has already been stated, Macartney's mission to China is useful as an illustration of Chinese attitudes to Western traders and the evidence in general presents the negative view that China had of Western traders, for various reasons. The behaviour of the traders whilst they were in the Chinese ports must have had a detrimental effect on the view the Chinese had of Westerners as a whole.

Secondly, it was considered rude of the Dutch to bring the war of countries from thousands of miles away to the Chinese waters, which was not helped by the Chinese practise to describe all Westerners with the same word.

However, the most convincing evidence that suggests why China was so negative towards Western trade can be seen in Lord Macartney's embassy to China and Qianlong's subsequent edict confirming that China did not feel the

West could give it anything it wanted, partly because China was relatively self-sufficient but also due to China's feeling of superiority.

It was without doubt the dominant country in the region, and had no reason not to think the largest and foremost in the world - those who were subservient in South East Asia were granted trading rights, but when East and West met, the clash of ideas and arguably egos meant that any exchange was nearly impossible. The two paths of Western industrialised countries and China were to be very different and perhaps China's attitude to Western trade was a principal reason for this.