



The Macartney Expedition and the Global Economy

In 1793, the global economy was centered in East and South Asia, not in Europe. The British embassy, led by Lord Macartney wanted to change that. He failed.



00:01

*Video footage of
Portsmouth Historic
Dockyard; Trevor Getz and
Nick Dennis stand at the
dockyard*

TREVOR: In 1793, the world's economy was beginning a great transformation. But hardly anybody knew it. Hello, I'm Trevor Getz.

NICK: And I'm Nick Dennis. There are many ways to study the changing global economy of the mid-18th century. You can focus on a particular trade good, like silver, or tobacco, or porcelain. Or you can focus in on an individual, or small group of people to see how they experienced these changes. Maybe you can look at one location and try to see how it is connected to the rest of the world. Or you could look at a single event to see how it exemplified bigger trends. We're here in Portsmouth, England to use a variety of these techniques. We're going to look at the 18th century global economy through a place, Portsmouth, through the experiences of a person, George Macartney, and through an event, Macartney's Embassy to the Qianlong Emperor of China.

01:17

**A Brief History of
Portsmouth**
*An old map of the region
where Portsmouth is
located
Artworks depict the
Roman fort and conflict in
Portsmouth
Drawing of the Mary Rose*

TREVOR: And our story begins here in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England. Like many other important trading cities around the world, Portsmouth is a naturally occurring harbor. An inlet where ships could be protected from the heavy weather of the English Channel, or the ships of enemies. In fact, this is the most fortified city in Europe—because there were plenty of enemies. In the third century, when Rome occupied the island they built a fort here to repel Saxon Raiders. In the 14th century, when England was locked in 100 years of conflict with France, the French burned the town at least three times. Then, in the 15th century, King Henry the 8th turned this into England's first major naval base. Its docks manufactured some of the largest European vessels of the day, including Henry the 8th's flagship, the Mary Rose.

02:10

*A painting of the crowded
city of Portsmouth*

Drawing of British ships

*Video footage shows the
HMS Victory*

NICK: By the 18th century, the city was bursting at the seams with sailors, soldiers, and traders, including many from the Caribbean, Africa, and southern Europe. Trading ships left from Portsmouth to conduct commerce around the world, or just across the channel in France. Convoys left from here to transport convicts and debtors to Australia, where they would be resettled in brutal circumstances. From its naval base, Britain's modern fleet departed to fight great battles. The town itself was dominated by the shipyards, which rapidly expanded as Britain updated its fleets, protecting its growing trade and empire. It was in this period that the great ships of the British Imperial Navy were built in industrial shipyards like Portsmouth, Woolwich, and Chatham. Most, like this vessel, the HMS Victory, which led Britain's naval victory against Napoleon's fleet at Trafalgar, were at one time or another posted here, in Portsmouth.

03:12

**The Mid-18th Century
Global Economy**

*Map shows India, Qing
Dynasty China, Korea, and
the Philippines, and the
silver trade routes around
them*

TREVOR: Despite its growing naval power and trading fleet, Britain was not the world's greatest economic power in the late 18th century. The real economic center at the time was in Asia, where China and India were the biggest producers of manufactured products before industrialization. These two vast economies produced much of the world's high-quality, expensive goods—those goods that were worth transporting long distances. China, in particular, produced luxury goods that were in high demand in Europe—ceramics, silks, and tea were profitable enough to ship thousands of miles across the world from China to England.

03:54

But these Asian countries, and their neighbors in Southeast Asia and Korea and the Philippines, had such large populations that they largely focused on producing goods for themselves and their nearby neighbors. Massive local and regional markets meant that they had generally little interest in trade with Europe. By contrast, European states competed mightily with each other to control the lucrative trade to Asia. Hence the need for large fleets and for modern industrial shipyards like Portsmouth.

Map shows silver trade route expansion through Spanish America; a drawing of the silver mines of Potosi, Bolivia

04:52

Among European powers, Spain was the first to effectively break into that Asian marketplace. You see, the one thing that the big Asian states did need was money to keep their huge economies afloat. And that money came largely in the form of silver. By the 17th and 18th centuries, most of that silver came from mines in the Americas, and most of those mines were in the Spanish American colonies.

Map shows the Dutch East Indies; a drawn depiction of a Dutch invasion

Other European states, like Portugal and the Netherlands, didn't have access to the Spanish silver mines and couldn't provide silver in exchange for Chinese or Indian goods. So they found other ways to join this trade. The Portuguese, for example, served as middlemen, offering their ships as a transport service and making a small profit. The Dutch, by contrast, invaded islands in Southeast Asia, and began growing spices and other goods that they could transport and sell in Europe. But anyone who wanted to trade with China still had to buy goods using the one thing China needed: silver currency.

05:33

**Macartney Embassy,
1792-1793**

portrait of Macartney

Like other Europeans, the British wanted to find a way into the Asian economic system, but Britain had no silver mining colonies to produce the money to buy Chinese goods. So, late in the 18th century, an expedition was prepared to try to get China to accept something else as payment. King George the 3rd of Britain sent out an ambassador, Lord Macartney, from these docks in Portsmouth to the Chinese Qianlong Emperor, hoping to convince him to allow British merchants to try to sell goods produced in Britain or its colonies.

06:09

Map shows the route Macartney took from Portsmouth to Jehol; drawings of Jehol

NICK: Macartney left Portsmouth in September, 1792. His small convoy of ships traveled mainly via ports owned by the Portuguese, who were allies of the British. They sailed down to the west coast of Africa, then to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and then onward around the southern tip of Africa, and then stopped in Jakarta on the island of Java. The embassy reached the Portuguese colony of Macao on the edge of China in June, 1793—a 10-month journey. After some negotiations, they proceeded upstream in barges along the High River to Beijing, and then to the city of Jehol, where the Qianlong Emperor was residing.

06:48

Artwork depicts a visitor bowing deeply before the Emperor

Macartney finally reached the court of the emperor in August, 1793, where there was a brief argument about whether he would bow down before the Qianlong Emperor, and if so, how deeply and how many times. It was usually expected that visitors meeting the Emperor would bow down on both knees, so that their forehead touched the ground. Being an experienced diplomat, and wanting the mission to be a success without compromising British pride, Macartney decided that he would lower his body by bending on one knee to the ground in the same way he would do before his own king.

07:24

A drawing shows the Emperor being carried on a seat by many people

Finally, the Emperor received Macartney. The Ambassador offered gifts, friendship, and everything he could to convince the Emperor to allow the British merchants to pay for Chinese goods with something the British could produce, like rice or the drug, opium, grown in British territory in India. Despite his efforts with the Emperor, Macartney's embassy produced no change in Chinese policy. After a year of travel across thousands of miles and three oceans, he came home empty-handed. Declining to change the conditions of trade, the emperor wrote that China: "already possessed all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. In addition, Britain should know its place in the world by strengthening its loyalty and swearing perpetual obedience so as to ensure that your country may share the blessings of peace."

08:27

Think about this amazing message for a second. It may turn everything you thought you knew on its head. Here is Macartney, the representative of Britain, which we are taught was the world's greatest industrial economy, being turned away and being told that Britain should swear loyalty to China. Here is the emperor of China, which we know was to lose three major wars and become a victim of imperialism in the century to come, stating that China was so strong that it needed nothing from Britain.

08:57

Artwork depicts a Chinese port around the 1790s

In fact, the failure of the Macartney mission tells us quite a lot about the global economy of the mid-18th century. We are used to thinking of this era as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution that would drive Britain and all of Europe into a position of global economic prominence for about 200 years. But in the 1790s, the Industrial Revolution was just beginning. China, and to a lesser degree, other parts of Asia, were still the engines of global trade.

Modern-day photo of Yangshen Deepwater Port in Shanghai

270 years later, Asia is once again at the center of global trade and manufacturing in the 21st century. Any look at global economies today would probably start on a dock in Shanghai, the world's largest port, and not in Portsmouth, which is still comparatively tiny. But Britain's turn was about to come. And industrialization was already beginning to turn it from the country that would plead for trade with the emperor of China, into the world's largest economy... for a while.