

**LETTER TO THE RIGHT HON.
CHARLES GRANT, PRESIDENT OF
THE BOARD OF CONTROL, ON
THE PRESENT STATE OF BRITISH
INTERCOURSE WITH CHINA**

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Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant, President of the Board of Controul, on the Present State of British Intercourse with China by Charles Marjoribanks

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LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HON. CHARLES GRANT,

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF CONTROUL,

ON THE

PRESENT STATE OF

BRITISH INTERCOURSE WITH CHINA.

BY

CHARLES MARJORIBANKS, Esq. M.P.

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE IN CHINA.



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497.

LETTER, &c.

SIR,

THE Bill for the regulation of our future intercourse with China having now passed into a law, and, in common with every part of the great East India Question, having received from Parliament less consideration than its importance deserved, I am induced to draw your attention to a subject which involves the interests of what must become one of the largest and most valuable branches of British commerce. I abstain from entering into the details of the early history of our trade to China, which would exhibit few circumstances in any way creditable to our national character. Our first merchants who visited that country, whether servants of the East India Company or

interlopers, as the free traders were then termed, were only animated by a thirst for gain. Credit and principle were alike sacrificed for its attainment. The home government, during the reigns of the Princes of the Stuart family, was little under the influence of public honour; and transactions of its subjects at a distance, however criminal or to be deprecated, were viewed with unconcern. The representatives of the Company were persons of the most illiterate description. Receive, as an instance, the following extract of a letter from their agents in China to the Chairman of the Court of Directors in London, in the year 1660. Speaking of the necessity of submission to the exactions of the Chinese government, they state—

“ We feel assured that to lose a hog would be the vastest imprudence for a halfpenny worth of tar; and we will say this, that 'tis the part of sound policy to be as cunning as a serpent and harmless as a dove, and not to forget that we reckon that the Tartars and Chinese will stumble at a straw, provided in contradiction to their interests, and will jump over a mountain where they can catch the least advantage, though it be as high as the monument.”

The instructions given by the Court of Di-

rectors to their agents were often of the most discreditable kind. Sometimes, by way of adding dignity to their office in the estimation of the Chinese, they possessed the powers of king's consuls. Indeed, at one period, there were two king's consuls in China, the representatives of rival East India Companies. How little our national name or reputation was likely to be elevated in the opinion of the natives or their government, by such a state of things, may be readily concluded. We possessed also none of the advantages of the European nations which preceded us. Both the Portuguese and Spaniards came recommended to the supreme government of Peking by the Roman Catholic missionaries, who, during the sixteenth century, had obtained much influence with both the monarch and his court, an influence which was indiscriminately directed against Protestants. English transactions were also unhappily blended with those of the Dutch, whose whole history, connected with their colonial possessions in the East, is one of degrading avarice and cruelty. The treaties of James the First more strictly associated our policy with theirs, and numerous piracies were committed by them under the English flag on Chinese coasting vessels. This, as might naturally be concluded, when connected with the

then limited extent of our trade, brought the British name into merited contempt. In later periods the rapid and extraordinary aggrandizement of our Indian empire has exchanged this feeling of contempt for one of deep and distrustful apprehension, to mitigate and remove which ought to be the great end and object of the Board over which you preside. This will not be done by pursuing a system of wretched subserviency to a corrupt and despotic government; but by acting in strict accordance with those sound principles of national honour which we apply to our intercourse with most other nations, but which, for some ill-defined reason, we have never yet adopted for the regulation of our connexion, either political or commercial, with China.

I am well aware there are those who maintain, and who will endeavour to influence your mind upon this subject; that as we have for a long term of years been called dogs at Constantinople, we may as well continue to be called devils at Canton and Pekin; but rest satisfied of one great and practical truth, confirmed by every page of the history of our intercourse with China, that acts of subserviency which have proved injurious to our national character, have invariably proved detrimental to our commercial interests. These are mutu-

ally and inseparably associated, they must stand or fall together.

It cannot be otherwise than well known to you, that all foreign commerce in China is restricted, by official proclamation, to one port in the southern province of the empire, and appointed to be exclusively transacted by one body of native dealers, called Hong merchants. This was very far from being formerly the case. In the earlier periods of our trade, all the different ports of the empire were open to our ships. Our merchants were permitted to transact business with any merchants of the country, and it was not till towards the end of the seventeenth century,* that the exclusive privileges of the Hong merchants were conceded to them. The fact is simply this, that foreigners have, for a long succession of years, pursued a system of tame submission to the despotism of China, which, like all other despotisms, trampling upon abject submission, has gone on multiplying its restrictions; and except for the counteracting resistance which it has hitherto met with from the influence of the East India Company, (an influence which has never been exerted to the extent it ought to have been,) we should, in all probability, have been expelled from the port of Canton, as we have been from the more northern ports, by

* A. D. 1680.

the arbitrary exactions and oppressions of the local government. It is a fact not generally adverted to, that the ships of the East India Company continued to trade with the other provinces of the empire besides Canton, long after they were prohibited by imperial proclamation—indeed till very late in the last century. The Company did not then consider this smuggling. I know no very good reason why they should call it so now. The truth is, that the edicts of the emperor fulminated from Peking, are often issued without any expectation, and sometimes without even any wish, that they should be obeyed. They are “mere sound and fury, signifying nothing,” mere harmless thunder; and in that celestial empire every subordinate agent of government, imitating his imperial master, “every petty, pelting officer, uses his heaven for thunder, nothing but thunder.”

As all foreign commerce is at present confined to the port of Canton by the existing imperial proclamation, so are all foreign traders directed to deal exclusively with the Hong merchants; but the corrupt connivance of the officers of the Chinese government renders this, like all other such *laws*, abortive. The Hong merchants are a class of individuals to whom a very inaccurate reputation has gene-