When Lord Macartney, appointed Ambassador to China in 1792, set off on a voyage to open an embassy in Peking he embarked on a government mission which had been nearly ten years in the making. Macartney’s Embassy considerably enhanced an earlier embassy led by Charles Cathcart in 1787–8, aborted when Cathcart died en route. It cost the East India Company, which largely financed the expedition, £78,000, even though the Chinese defrayed the costs of travel and accommodation while Macartney was in China. Hopes were high for an expedition that cost the equivalent of building ten grand country houses or double the number of large cotton mills. Macartney believed that the gifts he brought the Qiang-long emperor were the epitome of British production, symbols of enlightenment and civility. "The gifts we had to offer would suffer by being confounded with mere curiosities, which however expensive or even ingenious were more glittering than useful." Their merit was to be measured “by their utility and deriving even a credit from the omission of splendid trifles.”

Macartney, stopping off in Canton on his way home, his mission repudiated by the Emperor, yet still wrote optimistically of potential Chinese markets for new British goods. “Already worthless clocks and watches seem to be indispensable necessaries to every Gentleman at Pekin, and even to his principal attendants…” There were great

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1 Early versions of this chapter were presented as the Hicks Lecture in Economic History, University of Oxford, May, 2006 and the Plenary Lecture of the North American Conference of British Studies, Boston, November, 2006.
3 Macartney to Dundas, 9 November, 1793, India Office Records G/12/92, 45.
4 Ibid.
possibilities of products for women, “for the men here seem at all times anxious to procure ornaments of every kind; especially earrings and necklaces of different coloured stones or of glass, or gold, or gilt.” He concluded his reflections, “when the number of Consumers in so vast and populous an Empire as China is considered there are few articles so low priced when singly taken, as collectively to be insignificant, and when demanded by millions they rise to be of value…”

This view of China as a huge untapped market for new British consumer goods was repeated in embassies and trade missions which followed during the next two centuries and more. Understanding Chinese consumer cultures as these engaged with Western trade in the later Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries is now a major theme of histories of consumption. Economic historians long assumed that “supply creates its own demand.” Consumer cultures were to be explained wholly by changes in wages or standards of living. But, as Macartney discovered at the end of the eighteenth century, accessing the curiosity, greed and hunger for novelty of China’s 300 million would be no easy task. The framework for the Embassy, a voyage of Enlightenment, but also certainly of trade, needs to be set in the context of interaction and trade between China and Britain, indeed Europe—an interaction which I believe was crucial to the industrial development of the West. That trade, until China’s ports were opened after the Opium Wars, was primarily about the impact of Chinese goods on European consumer cultures. Chinese export wares penetrated widely and deeply into European culture; the Embassy was in fact the culmination of a long period which I will call the Asian Century of continuous trade between Britain, China and India.

Chinese and Indian merchants responded to distant markets and built up or adapted their production base; European companies and merchants in their turn, built their consumer markets at home and abroad. That trade, of course, for Europe as a whole extended much

5 Macartney to the Chair and Deputy at Canton, India Office Correspondence. G/12/92, 375.