Within the space of 30 years the British monarch sent two embassies to the court in Beijing. From the 1760s, the British community at the China coast was growing, although never to large numbers. During the embassies and in Canton, the British had to take into account the reaction of the Chinese to the image of Britain and China formed by the British. This was a stark contrast to the philosophers, merchants or appreciators of Chinoiserie in Britain, who could create their own image of China quite unencumbered by any real contact. In particular, Canton was to become one of the main hubs in which knowledge about China was created, used and transferred to and from other regions of Asia and back to Britain from the 1760s to 1840s, radically changing the way China was understood in the British Empire.

The search for knowledge about the Chinese Empire was central to the endeavours of the British in Canton as well as during the Macartney and later the Amherst embassies. They hoped that knowledge of Chinese customs, law and language would give them more agency in their dealings with the Chinese. Moreover, it would allow them to style themselves as ‘China experts’ who not only knew how to interact with this seemingly so peculiar country but also, especially towards the end of the period, to advocate what China needed for its own improvement. The geographical proximity to India and the institutional link between the EIC in Calcutta and the Select Committee in Canton meant an increasing influence of the British presence in India and the ideas developed in this context for this ‘contact zone’ in the south of China.

3.1 A diplomatic expedition

The Macartney embassy holds a prominent place in reflections about British–Chinese relations and the image of China in this period. For
the first time, a representative of the British Crown reached the court of Beijing and met the Emperor of China, who had held the position of a philosopher king in the European imagination. The narration of this contact developed many of the themes which were significant during this period of British–Chinese contact and the meaning of China developed in this ‘contact zone’. Some had already played an important role in Canton in the years after 1750, when the British first came to stay there, but with the embassy, and especially its ultimate failure, they were to become even more prominent after 1794.

The 1780s brought significant changes in the structure of the British Empire and the role of the state in Eastern expansion. This was a result of the increasing importance of Asia for Britain, and with it the China trade. The main focus of these transformations was India, and thus connecting India and China even more strongly in the British imagination.

The American War of Independence ended in 1783 and brought with it the loss of Britain’s largest settler colony. In Asia, the EIC had increased its debt significantly by its engagement in ever further wars and conquests, while stock market speculations in Britain added to its precarious situation. In this context, the gains from the tea trade became increasingly important to the British government. The Commutation Act, introduced in 1784, reduced the duties on China teas from 120 per cent to 12.5 per cent to limit smuggling and thus increased the excise revenue, while at the same time helping the shaken EIC. The British involvement in India became more lucrative due to the export of Indian textiles and later opium to China to pay for the tea. Finally, the increased need for an entrepôt for the China trade led to new, reinforced efforts to find a suitable spot in Southeast Asia and thus really started off British expansion into this region.1

At the same time, Pitt’s India Act established a stronger government influence on the EIC’s Indian affairs. During the Warren Hastings trial, the ambiguous role of the EIC in India had drawn public attention. The Company was accused of ruling its Indian possessions like an Asian tyrant and being a hoard of corruption.2 This, and just as importantly, its huge debts, led to the introduction of stronger government control over its political business in Asia. The Act established a Board of Control, which was appointed by the King and consisted of one of the Secretaries of State, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and four other members of the Privy Council. The Board was to supervise the political decisions and administration of the Company in India.3 As president of the Board, Henry Dundas soon established the importance and influence of this