

# Benjamin Franklin and China

---A Survey of Benjamin Franklin's Efforts at Drawing  
Positive Elements from Chinese Civilization during the Formative Age  
of the United States

Dave Wang Ph.D  
Manager of Hollis Library  
Adjunct Professor of St. Johns University

Benjamin Franklin “has a special place in the hearts and minds of Americans.”<sup>1</sup> How special it is? His story has been regarded as “the story of the birth of America - an America this man discovered in himself, then helped create in the world at large.”<sup>2</sup> He certainly was “the most eminent mind that has ever existed in America.”<sup>3</sup> Americans show respect to him because he was “generous, open-minded, learned, tolerant” in the formative period of the United States – a special period in American history, a “period eminent for narrowness, superstition, and bleak beliefs.”<sup>4</sup> He had a clear vision of the road America should take and he spent time in helping to make sure that it would be achieved.<sup>5</sup> His ideas and visions helped to lay the foundation for the United States of America, as we know it today.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Alan Taylor, For the Benefit of Mr. Kite, in *New Republic*, March 19, 2001, vol. 224 issue 12, p.39.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Van Doren, “Meet Doctor Franklin,” in Charles L. Sanford ed., *Benjamin Franklin and the American Character*, D. C. Heath and Company, 1961. Boston, p.27.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips Russell, *Benjamin Franklin: The First Civilized American*, Blue Ribbon Books, New York, 1926, 126, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Benjamin Franklin: Glimpses of the Man*,  
<http://sln.fi.edu/franklin/philosop/philosop.html>

Franklin is a figure we want to understand if we want to understand the American character.<sup>6</sup> We owe much to him for the formation of the civilization we call American civilization today. No other figure has had such a clear vision concerning the future of American civilization and how American civilization could grow out of European civilization. Scholarship on the study of Franklin's image for the past two centuries shows that Franklin's "legacy had a distinctive place in American culture. Few national heroes have played a more significant posthumous role in shaping the American way of life than Franklin."<sup>7</sup>

Franklin "knew that the breaking of the old world was a long process, in the depths of his own under-consciousness he hated England, hated Europe, and hated the whole corpus of the European being. He wanted to be American."<sup>8</sup> How to be an American? Or put it in another way, how to build an American civilization? In this paper, I will survey Franklin's hard work in drawing valuable elements from Chinese civilization, in his efforts to build an American civilization.

I believe that Franklin's attempt to draw positive elements from Chinese civilization in order to build an American civilization carried much weight in Franklin's contribution to the formation of American civilization. With the great

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Baida, *Poor Richard's Legacy—American Business Values From Benjamin Franklin to Donald Trump*, William Morrow and Company, Inc, New York, 1990, pp.39-40.

<sup>7</sup> Nian-sheng Huang, *Benjamin Franklin in American Thought and Culture, 1790-1990*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994, p.240.

<sup>8</sup> D. H. Lawrence, "Benjamin Franklin," in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Copyright 1961 by the Estate of the late Mrs. Frieda Lawrence. Reprinted by permission of the Viking Press and Laurence Pollinger Limited, see Brian M. Barbour ed. *Benjamin Franklin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall Inc, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1979.p.73.

vision in the “narrow eighteenth-century ideas about other cultures,”<sup>9</sup> Franklin “kept his eyes open to a “world that went far beyond the wharves jutting out into Boston Harbor and far beyond the canons of Puritanism.”<sup>10</sup>

Franklin “was very fond of reading about China.”<sup>11</sup> His correspondence and miscellaneous papers throughout his life indicate that Franklin was familiar with Chinese culture. It is not beyond the fact to say that Franklin was “the first and foremost American Sinophile” in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Franklin was an expert on China, even according to today’s academic standard. His understanding of Chinese civilization was better and deeper than many of today’s scholars. Franklin explored almost every aspect of Chinese civilization, from spiritual to material. His interest in China included Confucius moral philosophy, industrial product, industrial technologies and agricultural plants. He endeavored to use Confucius moral philosophy to improve his own virtue. Through his autobiography, he tried to pass on his these personal experiences to the younger generation.

## **Franklin’s Early Contact with Chinese Civilization**

During the formative age of the United States, China was not a stranger to the inhabitants of Britain's north colonies. The information about China "was almost as

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<sup>9</sup> James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin—An Explanation of a Life of Science and Service*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois; 1999, p.236.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Bernon Tourtellot, *Benjamin Franklin—The Shaping of Genius: The Boston Years*, Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York, 1977, pp.177-178.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “A Letter from China,” in John Biglow ed., *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. VIII, New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1888, p.474.

<sup>12</sup> A. Owen Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Presence of China in the American Enlightenment*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1993, p.25.

widespread and as readily available in America as in Europe."<sup>13</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, every major European work about China "could be found in American libraries and bookstores."<sup>14</sup>

Chinese civilization enriched "American life in many, many ways."<sup>15</sup> Before American independence, the colonialists had been well aware of China and its products. During the early colonial period Chinese cultural influence in North America was characterized as "novelty".<sup>16</sup> For those Americans who lived a Puritan life, China was a source of tea and silk.<sup>17</sup> During the mid-eighteenth century, the colonists bought a huge amount of "Chinese Chippendale" furniture, Chinese wallpaper, silk, and porcelain. Some Chinese products, such as chinaware and less expensive handicrafts "had spread among less affluent sectors of American society."<sup>18</sup> Chinese tea had become a popular drink for the majority of colonists. Significantly, the American Revolution had relations with China. On a famous night in December 1773, the patriots dumped into the Boston harbor the tea from Xiamen (Amoy) in Fujian Province of China, protesting Britain's control of American trade with China.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.264.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> C. Martin Wilbur, "Modern America's Cultural Debts to China," in *Issues & Studies: A Journal of China Studies and International Affairs*, vol. 22, No.1, January 1986, p.127.

<sup>16</sup> William J. Brinker, "Commerce, Culture, and Horticulture: The Beginnings of Sino-American Cultural Relations," in Thomas H. Etzold, ed., *Aspects of Sino-American Relations Since 1784*, New York and London: New Viewpoints, A Division of Franklin Watt, 1978, p.11.

<sup>17</sup> Tea had become part of daily fare in New England as early as the 1720s, and by the early 1780s most Americans had acquired the tea-drinking habit. See Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p.7.

<sup>18</sup> Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, (4<sup>th</sup> edition), New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p.2.

In 1723, at the age of seventeen, Franklin moved from Boston to Philadelphia. This was an important move that changed his life forever. Philadelphia had become an “exceptional cosmopolitan center” within the later part of the colonial period.<sup>19</sup> It was known as “a town of remarkable intellectual activity.”<sup>20</sup> Within the British Empire, Philadelphia was “the third only to London and Edinburgh in intellectual activity.”<sup>21</sup>

It was in Philadelphia where Franklin had the opportunity to access his knowledge of Chinese civilization. Philadelphia was the center of Chinese culture in North America. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “things Chinese, or in the Chinese style, then began a steady infiltration of the homes of the American city-dwelling merchant.”<sup>22</sup> The Philadelphian inhabitants “had access to more reliable knowledge concerning this aspect of Chinese life than readers anywhere else in the West”.<sup>23</sup> It was popular for the residents of Philadelphia to use Chinese wall paper to decorate their homes. Powel Room, located at 244 South Third Street in Philadelphia, was decorated with beautiful Chinese wall paper.<sup>24</sup> Chinese products, including teas, silk, porcelain, and cloth “became part of the social milieu of colonial and post-Revolutionary Philadelphia.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Gordon Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade, 1784-1844*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984, p.23.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Van Doren, “Meet Doctor Franklin”, in Charles L. Sanford ed., *Benjamin Franklin and the American Character*, Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1955, p.29.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Taylor, “Poor Richard, Rich Ben,” in *New Republic*, January 13, 2003, vol. 228, p.31.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Gordon Lee, p.23

<sup>23</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.83.

<sup>24</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City duplicated the room. The original owner of the House was Charles Stedman (1765-1769) and Samuel Powel (1769-1793). The room exhibited in the Museum and was located on the second floor of the building.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Gordon Lee, p.23.



**Powel Room, located at 244 South Third Street in Philadelphia, was decorated with beautiful Chinese wall paper. The Picture was taken by this author in Metropolitan museum of Art in New York City.**

It is a well-known fact that the *Empress of China*, the first American ship to sail to China from the new nation, started its long journey from New York instead of Philadelphia largely because the Delaware River in Philadelphia was frozen in February 1784.<sup>26</sup> Actually, we could say that American trade with China was started by the Philadelphians.<sup>27</sup> The China trade fever, started by the *Empress of China*,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>27</sup> The sailing of the *Empress of China* was initiated by John Ledyard (1751-1789), a famous traveler. Ledyard was believed to be the first United States citizen to see China with his naked eyes. Impressed by the richness of China and the tremendous profits from trade with China, Ledyard developed a plan to organize trade between the United States and China. In early 1783, he came to New York City, to convince the merchants to take the adventure. Although he failed, Ledyard was not discouraged, and he turned his eyes

was so high in Philadelphia that almost all of the ‘old families’ of the city gained interest in China.<sup>28</sup>

It was in Philadelphia that Franklin accessed books about China. In 1738, Franklin studied *Description of the Empire of China*, published in Paris in 1735 by Du Halde, in which Du Halde collected many kinds of texts about Chinese culture written by Jesuits who had been to China.<sup>29</sup>

Franklin was deeply impressed by China. Due to the limited communication between China and the United States, Franklin was forced to use extra efforts to collect information on China. Unsatisfied with the books he read, he tried to contact people who had been to China. In order to obtain information on Chinese life and customs, he contacted the “sailors on the Packet who had previously made the trip to the China seas.”<sup>30</sup> Franklin obtained “his knowledge of Chinese navigation from Captain Truxtun who in the following year himself made the voyage to China.”<sup>31</sup> He even tried to visit China personally, and told his friend, “If he were a young man he should like to go to China.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Franklin and Confucius Moral Philosophy**

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to Philadelphia. With his “revolutionary new plan for China trade,” Ledyard contacted Robert Morris (1734-1806), the “Financier of the American Revolution,” and currently Superintendent of Finance of the United States.” Morris accepted the plan. Under Morris’ support, the *Empress of China* sailed to China on February 22, 1784.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Gordon Lee, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> A. Owen Aldridge, p.18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.84.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.89.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “A Letter from China,” in John Bigelow ed., *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. VIII, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1888, p.474.

Confucius was well-known in America throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

Amazed by Confucius moral philosophy, Franklin introduced Confucianism to public readers in North America for the first time.<sup>34</sup> In 1737, Franklin carried a series of papers, titled “*From the Morals of Confucius*” in his weekly magazine, *Pennsylvania Gazette*.<sup>35</sup> In this essay he introduced to his readers the content of Confucius moral philosophy. According to him, Confucius moral philosophy “treats of three considerable things:

1. Of what we ought to do to cultivate our Minds, and regulate our Manner,
2. Of the Method by which it is necessary to instruct and guide others, And
3. Of the Care every one ought to have to tend to the Sovereign Good, to adhere thereunto, and, I may say to repose himself therein.<sup>36</sup>

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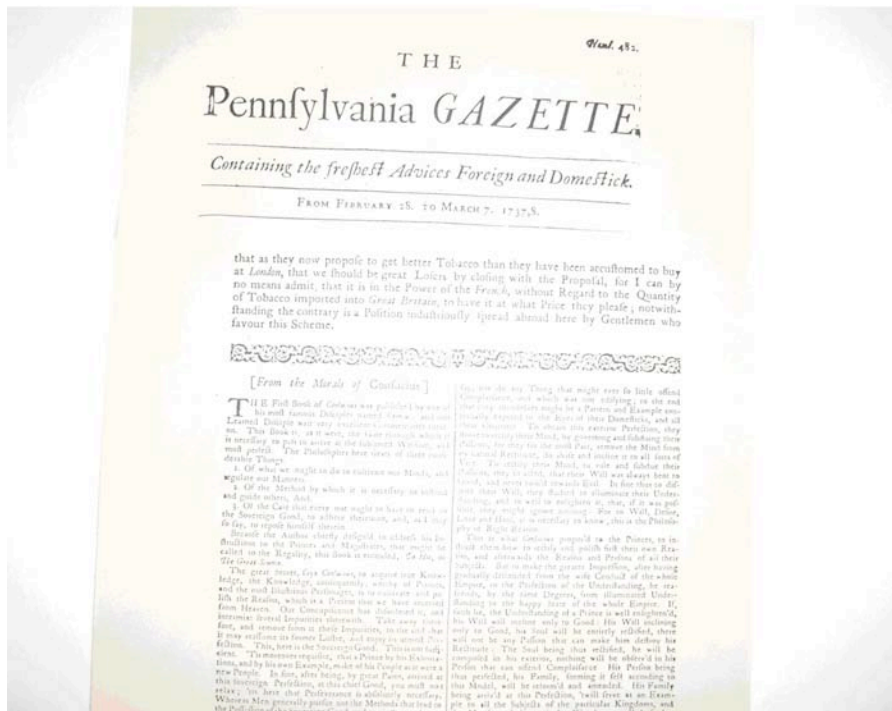
<sup>33</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.19.

<sup>34</sup> I will give a brief introduction to Confucius philosophy. Confucius (551-479 BC) lived in a period of Chinese history called the Spring and Autumn. He was the most influential thinker and educator of ancient China. Confucius stressed the importance of duty, honesty, sincerity and obedience. His social philosophy focuses on *Ren* “compassion” or “loving others.” Cultivating or practicing such concern for others involved depreciating oneself. People should try to avoid artful speech or an ingratiating manner that would create a false impression and lead to self-aggrandizement [*Lunyu* (Analects) 1.3] Those who have cultivated *Ren* are “simple in manner and slow in speech.” [*Lunyu* (Analects) 13.27] Confucius regards devotion to parents and older siblings as the most basic form of promoting the interests of others before one’s own and teaches that only those who have learned self-discipline can accomplish such altruism. He believed that society functioned best if everyone respected laws and behaved according to their positions. His philosophy became the dominant philosophy throughout Chinese history. Confucius’s idea formed the basis of government in China for the next two thousand years. See Alex Woof and Steven Maddocks ed., *Exploring Ancient Civilizations*, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, p.8-9. For a quick reference, reader can browse <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius>.

<sup>35</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette* 7 and 21 March 1738.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *From the Morals of Confucius*, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, from February 28 to March 7, 1738.





**Franklin’s Essay “From the Moral of Confucius. (Courtesy of American Philosophical Society. The original was provided by Mr. Roy E. Goodman, Assistant Librarian and Curator of Printed Materials. The Picture was taken by this author.)**

Franklin’s essay reflected his own attempt at using Confucius’ teaching to purify his and others’ morals in North America. Franklin told his readers Confucius moral philosophy was “the gate through which it is necessary to pass to arrive at the sublimest wisdom and most perfect.”<sup>37</sup>

Franklin made great efforts to apply the philosophy to the practice of elevating his own virtue. Recent scholarship has found that Franklin published the essay on Confucius due to the fact that Confucius teaching related to Franklin’s “efforts to

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Franklin, From the Morals of Confucius, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, from February 28 to March 7, 1738, p. 74.

establish a personal code of behavior.”<sup>38</sup> Through his autobiography, Franklin related to us a vivid story of how trained virtue could change a person’s life.

Having emerg’d from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born & bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro’ Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.<sup>39</sup>

Franklin treasured his own success and tried to pass on his personal experience to the younger generation. What did he want to pass on? It is reasonable to believe that one of the main concepts that he wanted to let his reader to understand is how he tried to use Confucius moral philosophy to improve his virtue. Through his autobiography, Franklin emphasized that his moral virtue was extremely important to his success, both socially and economically. From reading his autobiography, we have learned that Franklin trained his virtue throughout his life. Franklin said,

“I conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection. I wish’d to live without committing any Fault at my time; I would conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead me into.”<sup>40</sup>

It is well known that Confucius maintained that an individual’s moral perfection was the ultimate value of one’s life and of society.<sup>41</sup> In his autobiography, Franklin provided us with a vivid description on how he tried to arrive “at moral Perfection.”<sup>42</sup> He listed in his autobiography the thirteen virtues he thought to be the most important elements that contributed to his rise from a lower

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<sup>38</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.26.

<sup>39</sup> Louis P. Masur, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin with Related Documents*, (second edition), Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003, p27.

<sup>40</sup> Louis P. Masur, p.94.

<sup>41</sup> Wang Yuechun, *Discover the Orient [Faxian Dongfang]*, Beijing: Beijing Library Press, 2003, p.108.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed., by Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield and Hellene H. Fineman, Yale University Press, 2003, p.148.

class petty printer to a worldwide famous individual. The thirteen virtues clearly played an important role in Franklin's drive for moral perfection, which include: 1) Temperance; 2) Silence; 3) Order; 4) Resolution; 5) Frugality; 6) Industry; 7) Sincerity; 8) Justice; 9) Moderation; 10) Cleanliness; 11) Tranquility; 12) Chastity; and 13) Humility.<sup>43</sup> In total, there are actually fourteen virtues. The one virtue not listed among the thirteen that Franklin sought to cultivate was charity, love of one's fellow man, the one virtue that in Morgan's words was the "great principle" of Franklin's life. Morgan explained this curious omission "by exhibiting it conspicuously in his own life while making no pretension to it, he was perhaps affirming to himself the superiority of a 'moral perfection' that has nothing to do with Christianity."<sup>44</sup> One doesn't have to be a scholar specializing in Confucianism to tell that all Franklin's fourteen values are one of the most important contents of Confucius moral philosophy.<sup>45</sup>

We have noticed that Franklin put Temperance as the first of the thirteen virtues. For him, "Temperance first, as it tends to procure that Coolness and Clearness of Head, which is so necessary where constant Vigilance was to be kept up, and Guard maintained against the unremitting Attraction of Ancient Habits, and

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp.95-96.

<sup>44</sup> Jay Tolson, The Many Faces of Benjamin Franklin, in *U.S. News & World Reports*, June 23, 2003, vol. 134, Issue 22, p.37.

<sup>45</sup>The institutes and organizations of studying Confucianism have been established throughout the world. In the United States only over 50 universities have established the study institutes of Confucianism, including Harvard University, Yale University and Columbia University. Thanks to modern technology, knowledge about Confucius can be easily accessed anywhere in the world through Internet. For instance, if you type "Confucius" in yahoo.com and click search button, you will find about a million entries within a second. For your convenience, I recommend you a reference website, which provides you with the main content of Confucius moral philosophy. See <http://www.friesian.com/confuci.htm>

the force of perpetual temptation.”<sup>46</sup> It is fair to say that Franklin had decided to control his feeling in accordance with the Confucius moral philosophy. He wrote in 1737;

[Confucius moral principle] concludes, that the principle of Business of a Man is to rectifies his Mind, and so well to rule his Heart, that his Passions might always be calm; and if it happen that they be excited, he ought to be mov'd no further than is necessary, in a word, that he may regulate them according to right Reason. For as for instance, adds he, if we suffer our selves to be transported with excessive Anger, that is to say, if we fall into a rage without any cause, or more than we ought when we have Reason, we may conclude, that our mind had not the Rectitude it ought to have. If we condemn and mortally hate a person, by reason of certain Defects that we observe in him, and render not Justice to his good and excellent Qualities, if endowed therewith, if we permit our selves to be troubled by a too great Fear; if we abandon our selves to an immoderate Joy, or to an excessive Sorrow, it can not be said that our Mind is in the State wherein it ought to be, that it has its rectitude and uprightness.<sup>47</sup>

However, I should still be very careful in deriving at the above conclusion. It could be very controversial due to the fact that some scholars have considered the above virtues to be from the Puritan tradition.<sup>48</sup> Thanks to the conclusion derived from other scholars' thorough research, I do not need to argue within this paper the issue of whether Franklin's virtue plan was derived from Confucianism or

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<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed., by Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield and Hellene H. Fineman, Yale University Press, 2003, p.150.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Franklin, From the Morals of Confucius, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, from March 14 to March 21, 1737, p. 81.

<sup>48</sup> Numerous authors have labeled Franklin's virtues as the values from Puritan. In the following I just list some main authors' names and their works; interested reader can find and read them in order to know more about their argument. Paul Anderson and Max Harold Fisch, *Philosophy in America: From the Puritan to James*, New York, Appleton-Century, 1939; Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; David Levine, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: the Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art," in *Yale Review* 53, no.2 December 1963; Perry Miller, "Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards," in Miller ed., *Major Writers of America*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962; Stow Persons, *American Minds: A History of Ideas*, New York: Henry Holt, 1958; Larzer Ziff, *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World*, New York: Viking, 1973.

Puritanism. It is a well-proven fact that Franklin was “no Puritan.”<sup>49</sup> Franklin’s virtues “had proponents well beyond the realm of Calvinism.” Professor James Campbell has also realized that “it seems much more valuable to emphasize Franklin’s connections with other practical-minded moral thinkers for whom, unlike the Puritans, a social and naturalistic conception of human well-being was the central interest.”<sup>50</sup> Social and naturalistic conception of human well-being is none but one of Confucianism’s most important concepts.

It shouldn’t be surprised us when we learn through reading of Franklin’s autobiography that Franklin gave “strict attention to each of the Virtues successfully.”<sup>51</sup> In his essay *From the Morals of Confucius*, Franklin had advised himself and his readers;

He [Confucius-author] says we know the End to which must attain, it is necessary to determine, and incessantly to make towards the End, by walking in the Ways which lead thereunto, by daily confirming in his mind resolution fixt on for the attaining it, and by establishing it so well that nothing may in the least shake of it.

When you have thus fixt your mind in this great Design, give up your self, adds he, to Meditation: Reason upon all things upon your self: Endeavour to have some clear Ideas thereof; Consider definitely what preventh it self to you. Pass, without prejudice, solid judgment thereon; Examine every thing, and weigh every thing with Care. After Examination and Reasonings you may easily arrive at the End where you must fix, at the End where you ought resolutely to stand, viz, at perfect conformity of all your Action, with what Reason suggests.<sup>52</sup>

In order to further examine Confucius’ influence on Franklin; I will give the following two specific examples, comparing Confucius teachings with Franklin’s own efforts to raise his own virtues.

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<sup>49</sup> James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, 1999, P.166.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed., by Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield and Hellene H. Fineman, Yale University Press, 2003, p.151.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *From the Morals of Confucius*, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, from February 28 to March 7, 1738, p. 74.

First, Confucius said that he would “examine” himself every day to bring up his good virtual and moral.”<sup>53</sup> Franklin told his readers he checked his own behavior on “each day of the Week”, making sure he followed exactly his thirteen good virtues.<sup>54</sup>

Second, Confucius taught, “In the home, the young should behave with filial piety, and out in the world, with brotherly love. They should be prudent and trustworthy.”<sup>55</sup> Now let’s look at what Franklin did to his elder brother, who treated Franklin in a way a brother shouldn’t use towards his younger brother. First we can tell from Franklin’s autobiography that Franklin’s elder brother treated Franklin very poorly;

When he [Franklin’s elder brother-author] found I would leave him, he took care to prevent my getting employment in any other printing-house of the town, by going round and speaking to every master, who accordingly refus’d to give me work. I then thought of going to New York,<sup>56</sup>

Now let’s see how Franklin, in turn, treated his brother;

After ten Years Absence from Boston, and having become easy in my circumstances, I made a journey thither to visit my Relations, which I could not sooner well afford. In returning, I call’d at Newport to see my Brother, then settled there with his Printing-House. Our former Differences were forgotten, and our Meeting was very cordial and affectionate. He was fast declining in his Health, and requested of me that, in case of his Death which he apprehended not far distant, I would take home his Son, then but 10 Years of Age, and bring him up to the Printing Business. This I accordingly perform’d, sending him a few Years to school before I took him into the Office. His Mother carry’d on the Business till he was grown up, when I assisted him with an Assortment of new Types, those of his Father being in a Manner worn out. -- Thus it was that I made my Brother ample Amends for the service I had depriv’d him of by leaving him so early. —

Franklin, once he accumulated wealth, gradually retired from business, entrusting his press to a junior partner. He “remade himself” as “a public-spirited

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<sup>53</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, Chapter 1, Verse 4, also it can be accessed through <http://www.confucius.org/lunyu/ed0104.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Louis P. Masur, p.97.

<sup>55</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, Chapter 1, Verse 6, also it can be accessed through <http://www.confucius.org/lunyu/ed0106.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Louis P. Masur, p.95

gentleman.”<sup>57</sup> This action demonstrated that Franklin was not a “prototype of the American Capitalist.” Had he possessed the soul of a true capitalist, he would have devoted the time he saved from printing to making money in other businesses.<sup>58</sup> What did Franklin do next? He donated his time and energy to public affairs and welfare. During the period from the 1730s to the 1740s, Franklin helped to found some cultural and philanthropic institutions, including the Library Company, the American Philosophical Society, the Public Academy of Philadelphia (the University of Pennsylvania) and a network of volunteer fire companies.<sup>59</sup>

Anyone with a basic knowledge of Confucianism will find that Franklin’s behavior demonstrated that he was a typical Confucius gentleman. In traditional Chinese society, Confucius gentlemen “always claimed moral leadership to exercise proper influences was necessary to put the country in good order.”<sup>60</sup> They “devoted attention to local welfare institutions,” such as promoting education.<sup>61</sup> They “printed their rhymed quotations for effective communications to the less educated as rhymes were easy for them to learn.”<sup>62</sup>

The above description presents us with a vivid role model of Confucius moral philosophy. If we imagined Franklin living in China during his lifetime, we can image him receiving an award from the Chinese imperial government. He was a

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<sup>57</sup> Alan Taylor, For the Benefit of Mr. Kite, in *New Republic*, March 19, 2001, vol. 224 issue 12, p.40.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> James T. C. Liu, *China Turning Inward: Intellectual-Political Changes in Twentieth Century*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003, p.39.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p.138.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p.140.

“filial” son to his parents and a “filial” younger brother to his elder brothers.<sup>63</sup> Confucius moral philosophy had a tremendous influence on Benjamin Franklin’s virtue development. Franklin admitted that “in the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name.”<sup>64</sup> The reader will find that Franklin did not mention the name of Confucius. Why didn’t he mention Confucius name? We know that Franklin learned of Confucius through European sources. Europeans’ attitudes towards Confucianism certainly influenced Franklin. By the last three decades of the eighteenth century, about the time when Franklin wrote his autobiography, the Jesuits, the main carriers of transmitting Chinese civilization to Europe, became “thoroughly discredited.” Since then the esteem for China had declined in Europe.<sup>65</sup> This may explain the reason why Franklin did not mention Confucius name under the excuse of “numerous” persons that had influenced his virtue growth.

## **Franklin and the Chinese Governmental System**

Franklin had a very deep interest in the Chinese governmental system, such as its legal code, the way of social promotion, statistics system and economic theory. During the beginning years of the American Revolution, Franklin was appointed

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<sup>63</sup> Franklin had the following sentence inscribed in his parents’ marble stone monument “Their youngest son, In filial regard to their memory, Places this stone.” See Louis P. Masur, pp.35-36.

<sup>64</sup> Louis P. Masur, p.95.

<sup>65</sup> Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth*, New York: The John Day Company, 1949, p.263. Creel (1905-1994) was a “highly regarded authority on Confucianism.” See *New York Times*, June 4, 1994.



one of the three commissioners seeking France's support for American independence. In his conversation on the Chinese political system with Arthur Lee, his fellow commissioner, Franklin showed his "admiration for Chinese government."<sup>66</sup> Arthur wanted to know Franklin's opinion on America sending an envoy to the Chinese imperial court. Lee told Franklin that Americans should inform the Chinese emperor that

Being a young people, desirous of adopting the wisdom of his Government, and thereby wishing to have his code of Laws, it might induce him to give it, as they would not appear, as other Nations had generally appeared, in a state to alarm the fears and excite the jealous of that Cautious Government.' Franklin was of the same opinion.<sup>67</sup>

### **Governmental Statistics**

When discussing the efficient management of the state government, Franklin noticed the efficiency of the Chinese imperial governmental statistics system. He hoped that the government of Pennsylvania could learn something from the system.

I have somewhat read that, in China, an Account is yearly taken of the Numbers of People, and the Quantities of Provision produc'd. This Account is transmitted to the Emperor, whose Ministers can thence foresee a Scarcity likely to happen in any Province, and from what Province it can best be supply'd in good time. To facilitate the collecting this Account, and prevent the Necessity of entering Houses, and spending time on asking and answering Questions, each House is furnish'd with a little board, to be hung without the Door during a certain time each year; on which Board, is marked certain Words, against which the Inhabitant is to mark Number or Quantity...

All under sixteen are accounted children, and all above men and women. Any other Particulars, which the Government desires Information of, are occasionally mark'd on the same Boards. Thus the Officers appointed to collect the Accounts in each District, have only to pass before the Doors, and enter into their Book what they find marked on the Board without giving the least Trouble to the Family. There is a Penalty on marking falsely; and as Neighbors must know nearly the Truth of each other's Account, they dare not expose themselves by a false one to each other's accusation.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Benjamin Franklin, "The Committee for Foreign Affairs to the American Commissioners, Philadelphia May 2d, 1777," in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol.24, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, pp.14-15

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Franklin to Percival," ALS (draft): American Philosophical Society; copy; National Library of Scotland, in William Willcox ed., *The Papers of*

## The Chinese Way of Social Promotion

After the victory of the American Revolution, all of the people in North America were concerned about the future of the newly founded nation. Should the United States be developed into another European country on the new continent? Since the majority of colonists who waged the war against the British rule were from Europe, some considered that it would be natural for the colonists to establish a country just like the countries in Europe. In 1784, the Society of Cincinnatus was established. Some tried to use this organization, which formed during the last period of the American Revolution, to serve as means of bestowing a type of hereditary nobility on all the soldiers who had fought on the American side.<sup>69</sup>

Franklin stood up to show his position concerning the direction American should take. He opposed firmly the concept of establishing any kind of hereditary aristocracy in United States political system. He used the example of China to promote his argument against it.

Among the Chinese, the most ancient, and from long Experience the wisest of Nations, honour does not *descend*, but *ascends*. If a man from his Learning, his Wisdom, or his Valour, is promoted by the Emperor to the Rank of Mandarin, his Parents are immediately entitled to all the same Ceremonies of Respect from the People, that are establish'd as due to the Mandarin himself; on the supposition that it must have been owing to the Education, Instruction, and good Example afforded him by his Parents, that he was rendered capable of serving the Publick.

This *ascending* Honour is therefore useful to the State, as it encourages Parents to give their Children a good and virtuous Education. But the *descending Honour*, to Posterity who could have no Share in obtaining it, is not only groundless and absurd, but often

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*Benjamin Franklin*, Vol.20, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, pp.442-443. See also John Biglow ed., *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. IV, New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887, pp.421-422.

<sup>69</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.29.

hurtful to that Posterity, since it is apt to make them proud, disdain to be employ'd in useful Arts, and thence falling into Poverty, and all the Meannesses, Servility, and Wretchedness attending it; which is the present case with much of what is called the *Noblesse* in Europe.<sup>70</sup>

## Economic Theory

Franklin also showed a great interest in Chinese economic theory and practice.

At some point between 1765 and 1774, Franklin studied Chinese economic theory.

He wrote the following to convey a pamphlet on economic theories by George

Whatley, his English friend;

It was an excellent saying of a certain Chinese Emperor, I *wil, if possible, have no Idles in my Dominions' for if there be one Man idle, some other Man must suffer Cold and Hunger.* We take this Emperor's Meaning to be, that the Labor due to the Public, by each Individual, not being perform'd by the Indolent, and necessary to furnish his Subsistence, must naturally fal to the share of others, who must thereby sufer."<sup>71</sup>

From his autobiography we learn that Franklin practiced the Chinese emperor's theory at his home. In his own home he "kept no idle Servants"<sup>72</sup>.

In October 1786, Franklin showed his position "against accumulation of debts as a practice adverse to the economy and cited the high interest in China as a salutary means of discouraging borrowing." He stated that interest was 3 percent per month, for 10 months in China, or 30 per cent per ann., which promoted industry, kept down the price of land, & made freehold more common."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The Founders' Constitution, Volume 3, Article 1, Section 9, Clause 8, Document 4 [http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1\\_9\\_8s4.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_9_8s4.html)

The University of Chicago Press. Albert Henry Smyth ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 vols. New York: Macmillan Co., 1905--7.

<sup>71</sup> William Willcox ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol.21, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980, p.171

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, Vintage Books/The Library of America, New York, 1990, p.78.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin Rush, "Excepts from the Papers of Dr. Benjamin Rush" in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 29, pp.23-29; also see A Owen Aldridge, p.89.

Franklin's examination of Chinese economics was so broad that even by today's standard his study was more extensive than certain so-called experts specializing in Chinese economics. Franklin tried to gather economic information from China as detailed as he could. He recorded in his notebook, a silversmith's and his apprentice's salary in a month, and a medical doctor's income for his visit to his patients.<sup>74</sup> Interestingly enough, Franklin even examined the "Fee paid on a Gift from the King."<sup>75</sup> His study of silk economy also gives readers a very deep impression. After examining the silk economy in China, Franklin pointed out the perspective for silk economy in Pennsylvania.

That Part of the Imperial Revenue in China paid in Silk, amounts to above 955,000lb. Troy, and perhaps this is not the twentieth Part of the Produce of that Empire. One Million of Trees disposed into Mulberry Walks, in Pennsylvania, would in a few Years, enable a yearly Remittance to Great-Britain of a Million Sterling, and no Ways interfere with the other necessary Branches of Labour in the Community.<sup>76</sup>

## **Franklin and Chinese Industrial Products and Technologies**

### **Franklin and Chinese Products**

Like other founding fathers, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin loved Chinese porcelain ware. We know, due to his frugal life style and minimal income in his early years, he didn't buy any Chinese porcelain ware. His wife bought for him his first Chinese porcelain ware. "Being called one Morning to Breakfast, I found it in a China Bowl with a Spoon of Silver.

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<sup>74</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Notes on Reading an Account of Travel in China," in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 10, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1966, p.182.

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Notes on Reading an Account of Travel in China," in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol.10, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, pp.182-183.

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Memoirs of the Cultures of Silk," in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 12, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1968, p.12.

They had been bought for me without my Knowledge by my Wife.” His wife thought Franklin deserved a “China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbours.” Later, when his life condition changed, Franklin tried to buy as much Chinese porcelain as he could. He bought “several Hundred Pounds in Value.”<sup>77</sup>

Franklin tried to develop porcelain production in North America. In England, he examined porcelain factories and bought samples from these factories when he prepared to return home. Franklin hoped that North America could produce porcelain. As early as 1772, he showed his happiness when his daughter informed him that some colonists in Pennsylvania tried to make porcelain there. He told Deborah he “was pleased to find so good a Progress made in the China Manufactory. I wish it Success most heartily.”<sup>78</sup>

When Franklin was in Europe he spent some time on learning how to make Chinese products. He took time out of his busy schedule to visit European factories in order to find “the Difference of Workmanship” in making Chinese products. In May 1771, Franklin visited the china pottery manufacturers and silk mill in Derby.<sup>79</sup> He found that “there is something from all the China works in England.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, America, New York, 1990, p.78.

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To Deborah Franklin London, January 28, 1772,” in William Willcox ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 19, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1975, p.42.

<sup>79</sup> Journal of Jonathan Williams, Jr., of His Tour with Franklin and Others through Northern England, in William Willcox ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 18, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1974, p.116.

<sup>80</sup> Robald W. Clark, *Benjamin Franklin: A Biography*, Random House, New York, 1983, p.147

In addition to porcelain ware, Franklin showed his desire and interest in exploring some other various Chinese products, including a kind of vinegar made of fruits and painted candles.<sup>81</sup>

### **Franklin and Chinese Industrial Technologies**

Franklin always had the necessary needs of North Americans in mind. In the process of learning Chinese technology, Franklin focused on technologies in improving quality of life and livelihood standard; such as materials of clothing, heating the room in the winter and the means of enhancing transportation. He made an effort to find out the component of the painted candles made in China and the ingredients of a kind of Chinese vinegar. He even learned information about the “Eclipse of the Moon near Canton.”<sup>82</sup> In the following section, I will concentrate on Franklin’s study of Chinese applying technologies, including silk industry, heating system and navigation technology.

### **Chinese Silk Cultivating Technology**

In the spring of 1763, Franklin visited Ezra Stiles’ home in Newport, Rhode Island, to discuss with him the latter’s experiment with raising silkworms. The

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<sup>81</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “Notes on Reading an Account of Travel in China,” in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 10, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1966, p.182.

<sup>82</sup> We know that Franklin had studied the eclipse for a long time. During his voyage home from England at the age 20, Franklin calculated his location by analyzing a lunar eclipse. See Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Singapore: Simon & Schuster, 2003, p.28

minister's 3,000 worms were just beginning to cocoon. Stiles was working hard to gather large amounts of mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms.<sup>83</sup>

In order to help Stiles' experiment, Franklin, in December the same year, sent him some prints "copied from Chinese Pictures concerning the Produce of Silk."<sup>84</sup>

Two years later, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the silk industrial development in China, Franklin studied the history of silk in China.

About 2500 years before Christ, the Empress Siling began the Culture of Silk in China, where it was confined near 2000 Years, before it reached India and Persia.

A.D. 555, This Silk Culture first brought into Greece, particularly Athens, Thebes, and Corinth.

1130 Roger, King of Sicily, established it at Palermo and Calabria, by Workmen brought from Athens and Corinth, at the Time of the Crusades.

1300 The Italians received it from Sicily.

1600 It was established in France.

1740 Begun in America. The best Levant Silk is brought from Shirvan and the other Northern Provinces of Persia, about the Caspian Sea, the same Climate as Pennsylvania.<sup>85</sup>

The silkworm in North American came from Europe. Franklin used his opportunity in Europe to further learn the silk affairs in order to help the colonists in North America develop their silk industry. He noticed that, "The European silk is all yellow, and most of the India silk. What comes from China is white."<sup>86</sup>

Franklin also carefully scrutinized cultivating technology in China. He noticed that the Chinese in Chekiang (Zhejiang):

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<sup>83</sup> For further information on Stiles' experiment with the production of silk, see Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795*, New Haven and London, 1962, pp.147-151.

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "To Erza Stiles," in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 10, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, , 1966, p.389.

<sup>85</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Memoirs of the Culture of Silk," in Leonard Lafaree ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 12, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1968, pp.11-12.

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "To Cadwallader Evans, London 18, 1771," in John Biglow ed., *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, Vols. IV, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1887, p.413

prune their mulberry-trees once a year, as we do our vines in Europe, and suffer them not to grow up to high trees, because through long experience they have learned that the leaves of the smallest and youngest trees make the best silk, and know thereby how to distinguish the first spinning of the threads from second, viz: the first is that which comes from the young leaves, that are gathered in March, with which they feed their silkworms; and the second is of the old summer leaves. And it is only the change of food, as to the young and old leaves, which makes the difference in the silk. The prices of the first and second spinning differ among the Chinese.<sup>87</sup>

Franklin endeavored to obtain information on how to grow and cultivate mulberry trees and on silk processing. In February 1772, he sent Cadwalader Evens some Chinese drawings demonstrating “the process of raising silk, from the beginning to the end.”<sup>88</sup> In July 1772, Franklin learned that in “one of the Provinces of China, where the climate is very likely that of North America. A great deal is produced (of the second Crop)”<sup>89</sup> He told the managers of the Philadelphia silk filature, that they should try to see if they could do the same thing. “If the Practice of two Crops is not found attended with any great Inconvenience, it might be a great Addition to your annual Quantity.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Chinese Heating System**

There is a long and cold winter in the northern section of North America. During colonial times, most people warmed their homes by building a fire in a fireplace, even though it was dangerous and much wood was needed. Franklin

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp.413-414.

<sup>88</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To Cadwalader Evans, London 6, February 1772, Reprinted from Jared Sparks, ed, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*.(10 vols. Boston, 1836-40) viii, 3-4) in William Willcox ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 19, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1975, p.69.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “To the Managers of the Philadelphia Silk Filature, in William Willcox., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 19, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975, p.136.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



figured that there had to be a better way.<sup>91</sup> By the 1740s the growing population of the Colonies resulted in noticeable inroads on the great forests, which supplied fuel. The heating of houses was growing more expensive, while the wood used was very inefficient, much of the heat - five sixth, Franklin estimated in many cases - being lost up the chimney.<sup>92</sup>

Franklin told the Viennese physician, Johannes Ingenhausz, that “Europeans may still learn something about the use of stoves “from the Chinese, whose country being greatly populous and fully cultivated, has little room left for the growth of wood, and having not much fuel that is good, have been forced upon many inventions during a course of ages, for making a little fire go as far as possible.”<sup>93</sup>

In the process of working on a new and efficient heating system, Franklin studied Chinese heating technology. In August 1785 he learned:

It is said the northern Chinese have a method of warming their ground floors, which is ingenious. Those floors are made of tiles, a foot square and two inches thick, their corners being supported by bricks set on end, that are a foot long and four inches square; the tiles, too, join into each other, by ridges and hollows along their sides. This forms a hollow under the whole floor, which on one side of the house has an opening into the air, where a fire is made, and it has a funnel rising from the other side to carry off the smoke. The fuel is a sulphurous pit coal, the smell of which in the room is thus avoided, while the floor, and of course the room is well warmed.<sup>94</sup>

As in other cases, Franklin did not just copy the Chinese technology. He examined it first, and then adopted the most suitable part from the technology. He noticed that the Chinese heating technology had some problems. For instance, “as the underside of the floor must grow foul with soot, and a thick coat of soot

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<sup>91</sup> *Benjamin Franklin: Glimpses of the Man*, it can be accessed through <http://sln.fi.edu/franklin/philosop/philosop.html>

<sup>92</sup> Robald W. Clark, *Benjamin Franklin: A Biography*, Random House, New York, 1983, p.55.

<sup>93</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.88.

<sup>94</sup> John Bigelow ed., *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, New York: C.P. Putnam's Sons, 1888, pp, 243-245.

prevents much of the direct application of the hot air to the tiles.”<sup>95</sup> Franklin found the cause of this problem.

“I conceive that burning the smoke by obliging it to descend through red coals, would in this construction be very advantages, as more heat would be given by the flame than by the smoke, and the floor being thereby kept free from soot would be more heated with less fire.”<sup>96</sup>

Franklin was not satisfied with finding the reason; he continued to work to find the solution. For the purpose of making the Chinese heating system more efficient in the United States, “I would propose erecting the funnel close to the grate, so as to have only an iron plate between the fire and the funnel, through which plate, the air in the funnel being heated, it will be sure to draw well, and force the smoke to descend.”<sup>97</sup>

On the basis of his assimilation of the Chinese heating technology, Franklin invented a fire place, which was called the Pennsylvania Fire Place. He dealt with the problem by incorporating a number of passages and vents so that the apparatus drew in cold fresh air from outside the building and, after warming the air in a passage kept hot by the escaping gases of the fire, finally discharged it into the room.<sup>98</sup> The main advantage, Franklin maintained, was that “your whole room is equally warmed, so that people need not crowd so close round the fire, but many sit near the window, and have the benefit of the light for reading, writing, needle-work, &c. They may sit with comfort in any part of the room, which is a very considerable

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.244.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp, 243-245.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p.244.

<sup>98</sup> Robald W. Clark, *Benjamin Franklin: A Biography*, Random House, New York, 1983, p.55.

advantage in a large family, where there must often be two fires kept, because all cannot conveniently come at one.”<sup>99</sup>

### **Chinese Navigation Technology**

Franklin found that some Chinese technologies were very valuable in improving American technology. At the age of seventy-eight, he was amazed by Chinese technology in navigation. He was very impressed by “the well practice of the Chinese, to divide the hold of a great ship into a number of separate chambers by partitions tightly caulked.”<sup>100</sup>

We noticed that Franklin applied his study result on Chinese ship-making technology into practice. He applied the technology of “the division of ships into watertight sections to a proposal to institute passenger service between France and the United States.”<sup>101</sup>

Franklin wrote, “

As the vessels are not to be laden with goods, their holds may without inconvenience be divided into separate apartments after the Chinese manner, and each of those apartments caulked tight so as to keep out water. In which case if a leak should happen in one apartment, that only would be affected by it, and the others would be free; so that the ship would not be so subject as others to founder and sink at sea. This being known would be a great encouragement to passengers.”<sup>102</sup>

On the basis of his study, Franklin decided to “write down in a remarkable letter to a friend some of the ideas about ships and the sea had come to him in the seven times he had crossed the Atlantic.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.88.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, pp.7-8.

Besides the ship building technology, Franklin also researched the Chinese technology in rowing a boat. For Franklin, rowing a boat was not something new. He had showed his capability “to manage a boat” when he was a child.<sup>104</sup> In old age he began to study the Chinese way of rowing a boat. For him, the Chinese method “differed from that customary in the West.” In the Chinese way, “the oars being worked two a-stern as we scull, or on the sides with the same kind of motion, being hung parallel to the keel on a rail and always acting in the water, not perpendicular to the sides as ours are, not lifted out at every stroke, which is a loss of time, and the boat in the interval loses motion.”<sup>105</sup> Finally, Franklin concluded, “they see our manner, and we theirs, but neither are disposed to learn of or copy the other.”<sup>106</sup>

## **Franklin and Chinese Plants**

During Franklin’s era, North America was an agricultural society. Agriculture was the basis of the colonial economy. “It employed 90 percent of the working force and was responsible for much of the wealth in the colonies.”<sup>107</sup> In order to promote the development of North America, colonists made efforts to obtain plants from other lands. China was considered a rich source of new plants and was viewed as “a botanical and zoological wonderland.”<sup>108</sup> Some colonists had realized that “many valuable trees, unknown in Europe, grow in the northern provinces of

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<sup>104</sup> Louis, P. Masur, p.34.

<sup>105</sup> A Owen Aldridge, pp.88-89.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.89.

<sup>107</sup> Jason H. Silverman, *American History before 1877*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1989, p.55.

<sup>108</sup> Thomas H. Etzold, ed., *Aspects of Sino-American Relations since 1784*, New York and London: New Viewpoints, A Division of Franklin Watt, 1978, p. 5.

China... that climate, though in 40 degrees of North latitude, “is liable to more severe cold than” North American colonies in winter. Trees from northern China “would thrive well” in the colonies.”<sup>109</sup> The colonists made their efforts to introduce China's agricultural plants into North America. Numerous Chinese plants were brought into North American colonies. For instance, paper mulberry was brought into North America in 1754.<sup>110</sup>

Franklin showed an extensive interest in agriculture and farming. He introduced various plants from China. In “A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America,” Franklin tried to induce “all new-discovered plants, herbs, trees, roots, their virtues, uses, etc; methods of propagating them, and making such as are useful, but particular to some plantations...new mechanical inventions for saving labor, as mills and carriages, all new arts trades, and manufactures, introducing other sorts from foreign countries;”<sup>111</sup>

In 1772, Franklin sent from London to North America, Chinese Rhubarb Seeds. He was confident that the seeds would be “Thriving well in our Country, where the Climate is the same with that of the Chinese Wall, just without which it

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<sup>109</sup> John Ellis (1784) "Directions for Bringing over Seeds and Plants, From the East Indies and Other Distant Countries, in A State of Vegetation: Together with a Catalogue of Such Foreign Plants as Are Worthy of Being Encouraged in Our American Colonies, For the Purposes of Medicine, Agriculture, and Commerce." in E. Charles Nelson ed., *Aphrodite's Mousetrap: A Biography of Venus's Flytrap with Facsimiles of an Original Pamphlet and the Manuscripts of John Ellis, F.R.S.*, published by Boethius Press, Aberystwyth, Wales in association with Bentham-Moxon Trust and the Linnean Society, 1990, p. (2).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.(13).

<sup>111</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America, in Frank Donovan ed., *The Autobiography and Other Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963, p.303.

grows in plenty and of the best Quality.”<sup>112</sup> Sending the seeds over to North America didn’t satisfy Franklin. He was concerned about their cultivation. In October 1772, Franklin told John Bartram, “I hope the Rhubarb you have to sown and distributed will be taken care of.”<sup>113</sup> He told Bartram, “Remember that for Use the Root does not come to its Perfection of Power and Virtue in less than Seven Years. The Physicians here who have try’ d the Scotch, approve it much, and say it is fully equal to the best imported.”<sup>114</sup>

In October 1772, Franklin sent John Bartram from London some “Seeds of the Chinese Tallow Tree.”<sup>115</sup> Again, Franklin advised Bartram to have good take care of the plant. “I hope they may grow under your skilful Care.”<sup>116</sup> In order to make sure the Chinese Tallow tree would thrive in North America, Franklin, from London in October 1772, sent Wimberly Jones in Savannah, Georgia “a few Seeds of the Chinese Tallow Tree, which will I believe grow and thrive with you. ‘Tis a most useful plant.”<sup>117</sup> The tallow tree spread widely throughout the south.<sup>118</sup>

In 1765 Franklin encountered Chinese soybeans in England. In the same year he sent the soybeans-- “Chinese Garavance” to John Bartram, the famous botanist in North America.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Benjamin Franklin “To John Bartram, London, August 22, 1772,” in William Willcox ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 19, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1975, p.268.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p.317.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Benjamin Franklin “To Noble Wimberly Jones, London, October 7, 1772,” in William Willcox ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 19, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1975, p.324.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.63.

## Summary

The above examination demonstrates that Benjamin Franklin made extra efforts to study Chinese civilization. From the way he studied it we can tell his study pattern was as follows, “In general, he would begin a scientific inquiry driven by pure intellectual curiosity and then seek a practical application for it.”<sup>120</sup> His study scope of the civilization was so wide that it included all substances from Confucius philosophy, governmental system and industrial technologies to agricultural plants. A reader may ask why Franklin spent so much time and energy on studying Chinese civilization. We can list some reasons to answer this question. However, I surely believe that no answer could be better than the answer given by Franklin himself. Franklin loved studying history, for he believed that “what assurance of the Future can be better founded than that which is built on Experience of the Past?”<sup>121</sup> Franklin attempted to obtain experience and wisdom from Chinese civilization for he had realized that China was “the most ancient, and from long Experience the wisest of Nations”<sup>122</sup>

For Franklin, obtaining positive elements from Chinese civilization was important for developing the American way of life. The American Philosophical Society, founded in 1768 by him, told the American people; “Could we be so fortunate as to introduce the industry of the Chinese, their arts of living and

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<sup>120</sup> Walter Isaacson, p.130.

<sup>121</sup> Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, The University of Chicago Press, 1954, p.13

<sup>122</sup> The Founders' Constitution, Volume 3, Article 1, Section 9, Clause 8, Document 4 [http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1\\_9\\_8s4.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_9_8s4.html)  
The University of Chicago Press, Albert Henry Smyth ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 vols. New York: Macmillan Co., 1905--7.

improvements in husbandry, as well as their native plants, America might be as populous as China, which is allowed to contain more inhabitants than any other countries, of the same extent, in the world.”<sup>123</sup>

I want to show the reader that Franklin’s study of Chinese civilization had a direct impact on the development of the United States during his age. Franklin played a key role in the successful voyage of the *Empress of China*.<sup>124</sup> First, it is likely that the persons who named the ship the *Empress of China* got a hint from Benjamin Franklin. As early as 1765, Franklin envisioned the scene of the trade between China and North America. In an article published in a London periodical, he wrote, “Agents from the *Emperor of China* were at Boston in New-England treating about an Exchange of Raw-Silk for Wool, to be carried in Chinese Junks through the Straits of Magellan.”<sup>125</sup>

We know that the main cargo that *the Empress of China* shipped to China for exchange of Chinese industrial products and tea were mainly composed of *Ginseng*. Franklin was the first person who reported that *Ginseng* was available in the Middle Atlantic colonies.<sup>126</sup> Without Franklin’s information, it would have been difficult for merchants to gather large amounts of *Ginseng* and ship them to China.

The above examination shows us that Franklin had a very clear purpose in his mind when he studied Chinese civilization. Franklin was primarily concerned with the search for human happiness, for both individual citizens and society as a

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<sup>123</sup> Kenneth Latourette, *The History of Early Relations between the United States and China*, New Haven, 1917, p.124.

<sup>124</sup> Dave Wang, “The Voyage to Win the United States a Place in International Commerce,” in *Journal of Chinese American Studies*, Spring 2006.

<sup>125</sup> A Owen Aldridge, p.91.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.



whole.<sup>127</sup> It was to quicken the development of North America morally, economically and socially. Franklin was looking for China to provide the people in North America with the resources that they could use in their efforts to build North America into a better place in the world. For that purpose, he tried to educate the younger generation to cultivate their virtues. It is probably not coincidental that Franklin gave his formula, in passages he was adding to his autobiography, at about the same time (1784) that he wrote a pamphlet of advice, “To Those Who Would Remove to America.”<sup>128</sup> In terms of learning from Chinese civilization, Franklin was absolutely right, for during this century, China was the most developed country in the world. Chinese arts of life were “superior to anybody else in the human race.”<sup>129</sup> “China was a stronghold of creativity, knowledge, and wealth.”<sup>130</sup> The most favorable notions about China included “the industry of its people, their high standard of living, their skill in agriculture, and their great population.”<sup>131</sup>

Franklin’s efforts of drawing positive elements from Chinese civilization have produced an important and lasting impact on the development of American civilization. The plants he helped transplant to North America have contributed greatly to American agricultural development; the heating technology he borrowed warmed thousands of homes in North America during cold winters. The virtues Franklin promoted, including industry, respect for other people, frugality and thrift,

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<sup>127</sup> Nuechterlei, American Dreaming, in *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Republic Life*, January 2000, Issue 99, p.12.

<sup>128</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, Poor Richard’s New Year, in *New York Times*, December 31, 2002, p. A19.

<sup>129</sup> Crane Brinton, *Civilization in the West*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall: Inc 1973, p.315.

<sup>130</sup> United States, Executive Office of the President, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Week Ending Friday, October 31, 1997, Washington D C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997

<sup>131</sup> A. Owen Aldridge, p.87.

have become part of American civilization. Most importantly, Franklin's attitude towards Chinese civilization has been expanded into Americans' attitudes towards foreign culture. Looking back the road the United States has traveled through we can proudly say that Franklin's legacy has become the legacy of the whole nation. It is in large part because of the founding fathers' great vision, represented by Benjamin Franklin, of incorporating positive elements from foreign culture, which the United States developed from "a weak, underdeveloped country" into the most powerful nation in the world in about 200 years.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Warren I. Cohen, "American Perceptions of China," Michael Oksenberg and Robert B. Oxnam ed., *Dragon and Eagle: United States-China Relations: Past and Future*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973, p.56.