



## **Benjamin Franklin and Chinese Civilization**

**Dave Wang** 5 September 2007

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*Dave Wang is Manager of Hollis Library and Adjunct Professor of St. Johns University*

Scholarship on the study of Benjamin Franklin for the past two centuries shows that Franklin's "legacy had a distinctive place in American culture." He is a figure we want to understand if we want to understand the American character. 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. In the long process of "the breaking of the old world," Franklin wanted to turn himself from being a European "to be American." How to be an American? Or put it in another way, how to build an American civilization? I believe that Franklin's efforts to draw positive elements from Chinese civilization in the course of building an American

civilization carried much weight in Franklin's contribution to the formation of American civilization. With the great vision in the "narrow eighteenth-century ideas about other cultures," 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." Franklin told us that he "was very fond of reading about China." His statement was very true. His correspondence and miscellaneous papers throughout his life indicate that he was amazed in Chinese culture. He explored almost every aspect of Chinese civilization, from spiritual to material. In this paper I will mainly examine Franklin's efforts to draw positive elements from Confucius moral philosophy and Chinese industrial technologies.

## **CONFUCIUS MORAL PHILOSOPHY**

On July 6, 1749 Benjamin Franklin proclaimed that he regarded Confucius as his example. In his letter to George Whitefield, Franklin stated:

*When he [Confucius-author] saw his country sunk in vice, and wickedness of all kinds triumphant, he applied himself first to the grandees; and having by his doctrine won them to the cause of virtue, the commons followed in multitudes. The mode has a wonderful influence on mankind.*

I have found that Franklin's letter actually was written on the basis of his personal experience derived from the process of using Confucius moral philosophy as his guideline in his effort to improve his virtue and

promote others to cultivate their virtue. He constantly turned to the philosophy and found enlightenment in it. Under the guidance of Confucius moral philosophy Franklin devised “a systematic approach to virtue that emphasized a gradual, bit-by-bit approach toward perfection.”

Confucius designed the path for virtuous perfection—from oneself, family to state and the whole empire:

*This is what Confucius proposed to the princes, to instruct them how to rectify and polish first their own reason, and afterwards the reason and person of all their subjects. But to make the greater impression, after having gradually descended from the wise conduct of the whole empire, to the perfection of the understanding, he re-ascends, by the same degrees, from the illuminated understanding to the happy state of the whole empire.*

Franklin exactly followed the above Confucius moral path. He cultivated his own virtue, and then promoted others to cultivate their virtues; finally he made his efforts to promote virtual cultivation in the whole world. Confucius always maintains that “it is not enough to know virtues. It is necessary to love it; but it [is] not sufficient to love it, it is necessary to possess it.” To gain the virtues had become Franklin’s main concern. As early as in 1726 Franklin was determined to cultivate his virtue. Franklin stated:

*I have never fixed a regular design in life; by which means it has been a confused variety of different scenes. I am now entering upon a new one: let me, therefore,*

*make some resolutions, and form some scheme of action, that, henceforth, I may live in all respects like a rational creature.*

On October 11, 1726, after about three month's life on the ocean, Franklin returned to Philadelphia. It was about this time he started his "bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. He stated that "I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into." Shortly Franklin compiled a list of thirteen virtues he thought to be the most important elements that would contribute to the development of his virtue. The thirteen virtues constitute the main content in Franklin's drive for moral faultlessness. According to Franklin himself, this system of behavior made him "not only successful but a better person." It is worthy to examine the sources of the thirteen virtues.

In the following paragraph the readers can read Franklin's thirteen virtues adopted from his autobiography, each of them is followed by the quotations from *The Morals of Confucius* and school manners.

### **The thirteen virtues and the sources of the thirteen virtues**

01) Temperance—Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.

*Eat not for the pleasure thou mayest find therein. Eat to*

*increase thy strength; eat to preserve the life which thou hast received from heaven.*

02) Silence—Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.

*Silence is absolutely necessary to the wise man. Great discourse, elaborate discourse, pieces of eloquence, ought to be a language unknown to him, his actions should be his language. As for me, I would never speak more.*

03) Order—let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.

*Franklin's own*

04) Resolution—Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.

*We must reduce to action, sincerely and constantly perform and execute, to the utmost of our power, the good resolution which we have taken.*

*He says that after we know the end to which we must attain, it is necessary to make toward this end, by walking in the ways which lead thereunto; by daily confirming in his mind the resolution fixed on for the attaining it, and by establishing it so well, that nothing may in the least shake it.*

05) Frugality—Make no expenses but to do good to others or yourself, i.e., waste nothing.

*He that seeks pride in his habits and loves not frugality, is not disposed for the study of wisdom; thou oughtest not even to hold correspondence with him.*

06) Industry—Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.

*He would have us avoid idleness. Combat night and day against vices. When he undertakes any affair, he ought to be diligent and exact, prudent and considerate in his words.*

07) Sincerity—Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

*To be serious, and not precipitate in our answers. He is moderate and reserved in his discourses; he speaks with circumspection; if to him occurs a great affluence of words, he presumes not expose it, he restrains himself.*

08) Justice—Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

*The first regards the justice that ought to be practiced between a king and his subjects.*

09) Moderation—Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

*If we abandon ourselves to an immoderate joy, or to an excessive sorrow, it cannot be said that our mind is in the state wherein it ought to be, that it has its rectitude and uprightness. He says it is not only necessary to observe moderation in general, as oft our passions are stirred, but that also in respect of those which are the most lawful, innocent and laudable, we ought not blindly to yield up ourselves thereunto, and always to follow their motions; it is necessary to consult reason.*

*Acknowledge the benefits by the return of other benefits, but never revenge injuries.*

10) Cleanliness—Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloths, or habitation.

*Be always cleanly.*

11) Tranquility—Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.

*Franklin's own*

12) Chastity—Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.

*The third recommends conjugal fidelity to husbands and wives.*

13) Humility—Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

*Endeavor to imitate the wise and never discourage thyself.*

In addition to the above thirteen virtues, another virtue – charity, love of one's fellow man, deserves to be mentioned here. It has been regarded as the “great principle” of Franklin's life. The fact that Franklin did not include this important virtue into his moral cultivating principles has induced scholars' curiosity. One of the convincing answers to the question provided by Professor Morgan is widely accepted by Franklin scholars. According to him, Franklin's omission was that Franklin wanted to “affirm[ing] to himself the superiority of a ‘moral perfection’ that has nothing to do with Christianity.” The above comparison has showed

clearly that eleven out of Franklin's fourteen values are inspired by *The Morals of Confucius*.

## **CHINESE INDUSTRIAL TECHNOLOGIES**

Keeping the necessary needs of North Americans in mind, Franklin in the process of learning Chinese technology 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." 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 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. 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." 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.

Lacking of direct contact between China and North American, the silkworms in North America 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.” Franklin also carefully scrutinized cultivating technology in China. He noticed that the Chinese in Chekiang (Zhejiang), “prune their mulberry-trees once a year” and through long experience, the Chinese “have learned that the leaves of the smallest and youngest trees make the best silk”. He also learned that “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.”

Franklin endeavored to obtain information on how to grow and cultivate mulberry trees and on silk processing. In February 1772, he sent Cadwalader Evans some Chinese drawings demonstrating “the process of raising silk, from the beginning to the end.” In half year later, 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)”. 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.”

### **Chinese Heating Technology**

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 figured that there had to be a better way. 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 sixths, Franklin estimated in many cases – being lost up the chimney. In the process of working on a new and efficient heating system, Franklin studied Chinese heating technology. He examined the “ingenious” heating technology used by “the northern Chinese.”

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 minor flaws. For instance, “as the underside of the floor must grow foul with soot, and a thick coat of soot prevents much of the direct application of the hot air to the tiles.” Franklin found the cause of this problem. Franklin was not satisfied with finding the problem; he continued to work to find the solution. For the purpose of making the Chinese heating system more efficient in the United States, Franklin built “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.”

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. The main advantage, Franklin maintained, was that “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.”

### **Chinese Navigating Technologies**

Franklin 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.” 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.” He told American ship builders that “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.” Because this technology would make the ship safer, the adoption of it “would be a great encouragement to passengers.” 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. 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.”

## **SUMMARY**

Benjamin Franklin’s interest in Chinese civilization was so wide that it included all substances from Confucius philosophy to industrial technologies. Then the question is why Franklin spent so much time and energy on studying Chinese civilization. Franklin believed that “what assurance of the Future can be better founded than that which is built on Experience of the Past?”. Franklin’s strive to draw wisdom from Chinese civilization was based on his belief that China was “the most ancient, and from long Experience the wisest of Nations”. 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 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.”

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 whole. 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. 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.” “China was a stronghold of creativity, knowledge, and wealth.” 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.” Franklin’s efforts of drawing positive elements from Chinese civilization have become a permanent legacy of American civilization. The Confucius virtues that Franklin promoted, represented by his thirteen virtues, have been assimilated into American civilization. The industrial technologies Franklin borrowed from China have promoted the economical development of the United States. Most importantly, Franklin’s open attitude towards Chinese civilization has been expanded basically into Americans’ open attitudes towards foreign cultures.

*More information on Benjamin Franklin and Chinese Civilization can be found on the Official Website for Benjamin Franklin’s 300th Anniversary*

