

# Confucius and Benjamin Franklin

*Summary of Dr. Dave Wang's remarks to the second day of the conference on April 14. Dr. Wang is the managing librarian of the Queens Library at Laurelton, in Queens, New York City, and Adjunct Professor, St. Johns University.*

Good afternoon. I, like everybody here, enjoyed Dr. Patrick Ho's presentation. I learned a lot of about Chinese culture and the new initiative the Chinese have started.

Before I start my presentation, I should express my appreciation to Bill Jones, and to John and Renée Sigerson from the Schiller Institute, who made this presentation possible. I don't think I can really do a thorough presentation of my research. I will briefly introduce you to my publications on Chinese cultural influences on the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In one of my early papers about the Chinese cultural influence on the United States, I said that we talk about the American Dream. The American Dream started with China. Even before the colonists landed, Chinese influence had begun. Because the Virginia Company supported the exploration of North America, the company had to choose where to place the landing. It wanted to land somewhere close to a place from which it could get to China!

France supported the American Revolution. Why? The French didn't believe that George Washington's guerrillas could win the War of Independence without international support, basically from France. One of the main reasons France supported the war, was that it didn't want the British to monopolize the opportunity to trade with China.

Benjamin Franklin used the idea of China's Great Wall in the French and Indian War (1754-1763),<sup>2</sup> Frank-



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Dr. Dave Wang

lin thought we should build a wall, like the Chinese wall, to protect the United States. He mentioned this wall twice, once in the French and Indian War, and again in the Revolutionary War. It's obvious this wall would protect the newborn United States.

I wrote about Benjamin Franklin and Confucian moral philosophy, and that Franklin used the principles of Confucius to cultivate his virtue. In 2011, I published "The U.S. Founders and China: The Origin of Chinese Cultural Influence on the United States,"

which includes a picture of the Supreme Court Building, and there is Confucius right there. When you go to the United States Supreme Court, if you go to the east gate, you can see Confucius right there.

Franklin published an essay on the morals of Confucius in 1737 in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*. He published several chapters of Confucius' moral philosophy in 1737. In a 1747 letter to George Whitefield, a very well-known pastor, Franklin wrote, "Confucius was my example. I followed Confucius." Twelve years later, Franklin published Confucius' works.

In 1784, after the Revolution, some veterans hoped they could hand down their glories, their titles, to their descendants. They organized the Cincinnatus Society for this purpose. Franklin was not happy about the idea of handing down your title, your glory, to the next generation—that's the inheritance system, or the aristocratic system of the Europeans, which was just what our Revolution opposed. What's the meaning of the Revolution, if we restore the European aristocratic inheritance system? That's totally wrong. We should adopt the Chinese merit system, and people with talents will be selected to serve the public.

Naturally not all scholars agree with my conclusions. Professor David Weir of Cooper Union published a book in 2011 in which, in part, he did agree. He said indeed, Benjamin Franklin learned a lot from Chinese culture, especially from Confucius' philosophy. However, he

1. See Dr. Wang's weblog at <http://foundingfathersandchina.blogspot.com/>

2. "Defending the American Colonies: Benjamin Franklin's Great Wall, 1756-1776," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies*, Vol. 17 (2015), pp. 213-220.

said, the influence of Confucius' ideas suddenly stopped. After the Revolution, there was no more Confucian influence.

I thought, that's not right. So I wrote a lengthy paper to him about Confucius in the founding of America and discussed how the Founding Fathers—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and the others—tried to build a new virtue with the new nation. They thought Confucius' ideas would be good—that we can use those ideas to build a new virtue. So we cannot continue our old virtue.

I discuss the journey of the United States to adopting the merit system in the selection of government officials in a paper I finished several days ago, "A Journey of Adapting the Confucian Merit System from Benjamin Franklin to the Pendleton Act of 1883." Since I work in a public library, one of my tasks is to provide materials for my customers to prepare for the civil service examination, in order to get a government jobs. And that's an idea from China. Franklin mentioned it in 1784. But his proposal wasn't adopted then. Why not?

In 1881, President James Garfield was assassinated by a job-seeker, Charles Guiteau. Why did he kill him? Because he thought he should have gotten a public job. He had supported Garfield's election and he had made a great contribution to Garfield's victory. At that time, from Thomas Jefferson until James Garfield, the United States system for selecting government employees was the "spoils system." Under the spoils system, anyone who made a contribution to the victory of a political candidate would get a government job—all my friends, all my relatives, get government jobs.

And then, the public decided, "We've got to stop it. We cannot do this any more." We've got to get Franklin's idea back; we have to select public officials through the merit system. Everyone has to pass a public civil service examination. Now there are about 4.5 million public employees in the United States; 80% had to pass civil service examinations. For the United States to adopt this system, it took a century, from Franklin in 1784 to 1884, one hundred years, to pass the Pendleton Act, to make the merit system official.

I'll conclude by reading something by the late Dr.



Wilton Dillon, perhaps one of the best cultural anthropologists in the world. He wrote, "The Research on China and Our Founding Fathers,"<sup>23</sup> in which he says:

"I met Dave Wang at an Aspen Institute meeting of Friends of Franklin. Meeting this Chinese scholar from St. John's University in New York opened up a floodgate of new insights about Chinese influence on our founding fathers and colonial North America. Prof. Wang travels the world now to share his new findings. I have given copies of some of his papers to former U.S. Senators Larry Pressler, Republican from South Dakota, and Harris Wofford, Democrat from Pennsylvania, when they lectured in China on 'the two party system.' Celebrating one nation's cultural gifts to another—and especially, the capacity to receive—makes for good diplomacy.

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" 'How China Helped to Shape American Culture: The Founding Fathers and Chinese Civilization' is the title of Wang's 2010 summary of his findings, published in the *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* (2010). Confucian philosophy, tea, porcelain, wallpaper, rhubarb, soybeans, house heating, canal and ship building, ideas about reason, rocketry, and alternative medicine, were among many cultural contributions coming from China. Franklin designed a wooden wall inspired by the Great Wall to protect Philadelphia from Indians after the French and Indian War. Jefferson's architecture showed hints of Chinese design. Wang traces Chinese influence on Thomas Paine, John Bartram, Benjamin Rush, and Jedidiah Morse, among others. . . .

"Lines need to be drawn between pandering for political, economic, and security goals on one hand, and historical studies of cultural contact on the other. Western, particularly U.S. influence, has helped to revolutionize Greater China. The Asian idea of *yin* and *yang* would help both interdependent parties to feel more comfortable with each other."

Thank you, everybody.  
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3. In Dillon's book, *Smithsonian Stories: Chronicle of a Golden Age, 1964-1984*, Transaction Publishers, 2015.