

China and the Founding of the United States

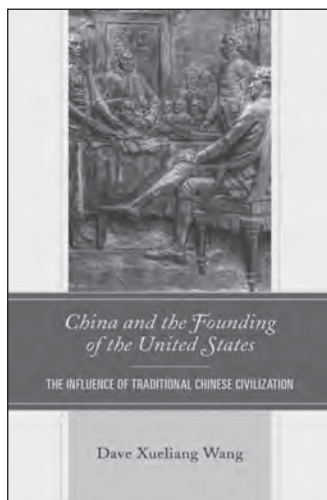
The Influence of Traditional Chinese Civilization

BY DAVE XUELIANG WANG

LANHAM, LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2021

365 PAGES, ISBN 978: 1793644350, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by Peter K. Frost



“The mere thought of Chinese cultural influence on the founding of the United States,” Dave Wang’s states in his very first sentence in this quite extraordinary book, “is unimaginable to some.” The rest of the book is dedicated to combat what he considers “misconceptions,” that are at least partially “colored by protest [and] biased assumptions in the West . . .” (iv)

Education About Asia readers may well have learned about Wang’s concerns by reading his 2011 *EAA* article “The US Founders and China: The Origins of Chinese Cultural Influence on the United States.”¹ That article starts with, if you will pardon the pun, an

interesting statue of Confucius standing alongside Moses and the Greek statesman Solon on the frieze above the eastern entrance to the United States Supreme Court. Wang then suggests three areas where Chinese influence was key: what he calls a “Confucian moral philosophy,” commercial trade interests and technological borrowing. Wang’s book expands these categories to five areas: Confucian moral philosophy, technology, plants, material culture and trade.

Briefly put, trade reflected the Founding Father’s desire to establish markets less susceptible to British blockades and tariffs. Imports included not only tea but also items such as silk and pottery. Exports included the medicinal herb ginseng, a highly profitable way for American merchants to make money in the still fragile post-Revolution economy. Wang even suggests that trade issues encouraged the United States to expand to the West. Material culture included an appreciation of Chinese porcelain, furniture, silk and even wallpaper that led to some efforts to reproduce these items in the United States. The plants’ chapter reflected Franklin’s attempts to import Chinese potentially useful species such as the mulberry tree needed to grow silkworms. Ornamental flowers were eagerly collected by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Technological influences, Wang claims, ranged from Franklin’s invention of what we now call the Franklin stove and his suggestion that the American military use a kind of Chinese Great Wall to protect the nation to the digging of the Erie Canal.² Even if the exact degree of Chinese influence cannot always be exactly measured in these areas, Wang’s assertions are impressive. Indeed I wish that I had known this content when early in my career, I was asked to teach sections of a US History course that my college’s history majors were required to take.

Because I am primarily an Asian Studies professor, on the other hand, Wang’s comments in the section on “Confucian Moral Philosophy” left me wishing that he had at least briefly pointed out the degree to which the Founding Father’s rosy view of China in the middle of the Qing Dynasty (1640-1912) differed from the reality. While this is obviously not the point of the book, Confucius’ famous “Let the Ruler be Ruler and the Subject Subject,” for example, was appealing because it seemed to require that Chinese Emperors had to live up to the high standards of Emperorship or lose their legitimacy. While noble in intent, when Emperors were actually deposed, it was not by a simple appeal to Confucian morality, but by force, inspired by another philosophy: legalism. Confucian justifications only came after a major military victory.

Similarly, China’s carefully constructed three tier system of civil service examinations seemed to both the British and the Americans to be a highly sensible alternative to the “spoils system” that traditionally had picked not always competent bureaucrats by personal connections and/or bribes. It also seemed “objective” enough (graders did not know whose essay they were reading) to foster social mobility and thus change the definition of a “gentleman” from inherited rank and military power to someone who knew the Confucian classics. Although the examination did foster some exceptions, its strict demands mostly meant that successful candidates came from rich Chinese families who could afford to give their sons the tutors they needed to pass the exams. Also not mentioned is the fact that at least until the very end of the dynasty, the exams contained no questions about contemporary issues. Nor did the emphasis on memorization of the classics and good calligraphy lead to questions that might reward what Americans would call creative thinking. Wang, in my view, should also add that Chinese women were not allowed to take the exams.

Another concern I have is that dividing the Chinese influences by topic causes wonderfully creative people such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas

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Jefferson and James Madison—who, Wang notes, had a portrait of Confucius in his house—to appear in scattered references throughout the book. Wang presumably writes by topic because this allows him to cite many other individuals in each topic as well, but *EAA* readers who want to use Wang’s extensive information in limited class time might consider conveying Wang’s information by discussing the multiple influences on just one or two of the Founding Fathers.

My final concern is Wang’s almost encyclopedic amount of material. Chapter One “The Ideals of the East,” for example, is only 23 pages long but has 176 footnotes, or almost eight a page. Chapter Six “Confucianism in the Making of U.S. democracy” is longer (61 pages) but lists 400 footnotes or almost seven a page. All this surely documents Wang’s assertion that some translations of Chinese works, Chinese influence on the thinking of European thinkers such as Voltaire and John Locke and, reports by missionaries and travelers was influential, but it also leads to a fair amount of repetition and a few minor errors. His discussion of the American battles over the spoils system in American history also goes on too long. Thus while I find it hard to recommend the book as a quick fix for hard pressed teachers or a rich source that could be excerpted for students, the book could be used as a kind of compendium or encyclopedia. Whether *EAA* readers read the book or not, they should know that Wang’s dedicated work should surely end any misconceptions about the Qing Dynasty’s important and interesting influence on early American history. ♦

NOTES

1. Wang’s article was published in *Education About Asia* 16, no. 2, Fall 2011. See page 64 of this issue for more information on the article.
2. The purpose of a Franklin stove was to heat a room, not send most of the heat up the chimney.

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