

THE US FOUNDERS AND CHINA

The Origins of Chinese Cultural Influence on the United States

By Dave Wang



Figure 1. The Sculpture of Confucius along with Moses and Solon above the east entrance of the Supreme Court building.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/qg8ng>. (Photo: Jeff Kubina)

Walking from the east entrance up the steps to the Supreme Court building, one can see a sculpture of Confucius along with Moses and Solon. The sculpture may serve as an indicator of the impact of Confucius in the formation of American culture. Indeed, Chinese cultural and technological influence on what would become the United States started even before this country was born.

Chinese culture became important when some of the US founders looked for resources that could be mobilized in their efforts to build a new nation after declaring independence from Great Britain. Chinese contributions to early America were varied. In their efforts to cultivate personal virtue and to educate the younger generations to be virtuous, several founding fathers sought guidance from Confucian philosophy. The founders also adopted Chinese inventions to facilitate the social and economic development of colonies and introduced elements of Chinese agriculture to North America.

Facing British trade sanctions after the Revolutionary War, US political leaders initiated efforts to build direct economic connections with China. Robert Morris and George Washington were directly involved in the opening of trade with China with support from other American founders. One important reason behind Thomas Jefferson's quest for westward expansion through the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 was the search for a shortcut to China, and late in his presidency, he communicated the desirability of creating something like a US-China policy.

THE FOUNDERS AND CONFUCIAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

In the years preceding the American founding, several prominent Americans, most notably Benjamin Franklin, disseminated Confucian ideas. Franklin probably read *The Morals of Confucius* as early as his 1724–1726 stay in London. From his autobiography it appears that, partially influenced by Confucius,



Figure 2. Benjamin Franklin published some chapters from *The Morals of Confucius* in the 1737 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 14–21, 1737, 8: 484.

Franklin agreed with Confucius that a man should not only cultivate personal virtues, but also disseminate them to others, including political leaders.



Benjamin Franklin.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/dri2n>.

Franklin focused on the cultivation of personal virtue as early as 1726. Confucius designed the path for virtuous perfection—from oneself to one’s family, to the state, and then to the whole empire. In 1737, Franklin introduced this notion to the colonists when he published some excerpts adopted from *The Morals of Confucius* in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*:

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.¹

Franklin agreed with Confucius that a man should not only cultivate personal virtues, but also disseminate them to others, including political leaders. In a 1749 letter to George Whitefield, one of the most influential of all colonial clergy, Franklin advocated that knowledge of Confucian ideas could even foster social tranquility:

The mode [Confucius’s mode of teaching moral principles] has a wonderful influence on mankind; and there are numbers that perhaps fear less the being in Hell, than out of the fashion! Our more western reformations began with the ignorant mob; and when numbers of them were gained, interest and party-views drew in the wise and great. Where both methods can be used, reformations are like to be more speedy. O that some method could be found to make them lasting! He that shall discover that, will, in my opinion, deserve more, ten thousand times, than the inventor of the longitude.²

Confucius yearned to see people, especially rulers, adopt better morals and more compassion. For him, virtue was the foundation of a good and flourishing empire. Confucius asserted that rulers should behave appropriately in court and at home because they would certainly be imitated. During the Revolutionary War, Franklin worked hard to promote this important principle. After the American victory, some veterans wanted permanent recognition for their triumph through formation of an order of hereditary knights. Franklin raised objections to this idea by using Confucius’s principle of social promotion:

Thus 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 intitled to all the same Ceremonies of Respect from the People, that are established as due to the Mandarin himself; on this 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 had no Share in obtaining it, is not only groundless and absurd, but often hurtful to that Posterity, since it is apt to make them proud, disdaining to be employed 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.³

Confucius maintained that law and punishment were the minimum requirements for order, but social harmony can only be achieved by virtuous behavior. In his enormously influential *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, most of Franklin’s advice for readers stresses virtues such as hard work, frugality, and attention to family.

Jefferson, concerned about his reputation and honor, was highly conscious of his behavior and regarded the well-loved and respected Chinese Prince Wei, featured in *The Great Learning*, one of the canons of Confucianism, as an exemplary role model for other leaders. In his 1794 *The Age of Reason*, the famous polemicist of republicanism, Thomas Paine wrote that Confucius, like Christ, was a great moral teacher. Paine reiterated this point in an article he wrote a decade later for *The Prospect*, a New York magazine:

As a book of morals there are several parts of the New Testament that are good, but they are no other than what had been preached in the East world several hundred years before Christ was born. Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, who lived five hundred years before the time of Christ says, ‘acknowledge thy benefits by the turn of benefits, but never revenge injuries.’⁴

Dr. Benjamin Rush, an ardent patriot, in a 1798 essay on education in the new republic, asserted that “the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.” Having expressed his veneration for Confucianism that “reveals the attributes of the Deity,” Rush declared that he had rather see the opinions of Confucius “inculcated upon our youth, than see them grow

up wholly devoid of a system of religious principles.”⁵ John Adams, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, criticized the English theologian and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley for ignoring Confucius in his writing, even though Adams thought Christ the greater moral teacher:

*Priestley ought to have given us a sketch of the religion and morals of Zoroaster, of San-choniathon, of Confucius, and all the founders of religions before Christ, whose superiority would, from such a comparison, have appeared the more transcendent.*⁶

James Madison, father of the US Constitution, even hung a portrait of Confucius at his home. It was probably not a historical coincidence that Confucian moral ideals were respected in an era when some US leaders sought to liberate American culture from what they viewed as failed European ideologies.



Gouverneur Morris, prominent founder of the republic, studied China’s Grand Canal. With his encouragement, the New Yorkers built the Erie Canal, connecting New York to the Middle West.

CHINESE TECHNOLOGY

Chinese innovations in areas such as heating technology, silk production, porcelain ware, manufacturing, navigation, canal construction, and even regarding construction of the Great Wall of China found their way to North America via Europe as the founders realized this information could be used to promote social and economic development. In 1763, Benjamin Franklin, in an effort to promote the creation of a colonial silk industry, sent prominent American academic and Congregationalist minister Ezra Stiles copies of Chinese prints illustrating silk production. Scarce energy resources also stimulated Franklin to examine Chinese technology. By the 1740s, the growing colonial population resulted in noticeable diminishment of the great forests, which supplied fuel. The heating of houses was growing more expensive, wood utilization was inefficient, and much of the heat—83 percent, Franklin estimated in many cases—was lost up the chimney. Franklin carefully studied the Chinese technology of heating their houses in the cold winters and found that

*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.*⁷

Franklin in part used these principles to invent the Pennsylvania Fire Place, which was later improved upon and became the famous Franklin Stove. Better heating technology made the cold winter less harsh and induced more colonists to move to the North, which later contributed greatly to its development as a manufacturing center. Franklin also carefully studied China’s ship construction and publicized the Chinese practice of water-tight compartment construction.

During the French and Indian War, 1754–1763, Franklin introduced the notion of a defensive wall, similar to the Great Wall of China, into the public debate, maintaining that building an American Great Wall was the most efficient way to protect the thirteen colonies. Franklin again raised the notion of the Great Wall during the Revolutionary War.⁸

Gouverneur Morris, prominent founder of the republic, studied China’s Grand Canal. With his encouragement, the New Yorkers built the Erie Canal, connecting New York to the Middle West. The canal played a role in New York City’s rise, triggered an explosion in canal building, facilitated economic growth, and linked the Northeast with the region of the new nation that would later be known as the Midwest.

A few Chinese technological innovations were also used to advance certain political agendas even before American independence. For example, some colonial leaders viewed porcelain manufacturing as essential to national economic self-reliance. Chinese porcelain, like tea, had been a major colonial import. Rush was among the first group of people who advocated building a porcelain factory in North America with the intent of overcoming the colonies’ dependence on British imports. The excerpt that follows from one of Rush’s letters illustrates porcelain to be but one component of a grand strategy:

*Go on in encouraging American manufactures. I have many schemes in view with regard to these things. I have made those mechanical arts which are connected with chemistry the particular objects of my study and not without hopes of seeing a china manufactory established in Philadelphia in the course of a few years. Yes, we will be revenged by the mother country. For my part, I am resolved to devote my head, my heart, and my pen entirely to the service of America, and promise myself much assistance from you in everything of this kind that I shall attempt through life.*⁹

Gouverneur Morris.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gouverneur_Morris_1753.png.



Figure 3. The Great Wall of China. The author, dressed in a traditional Chinese general’s uniform, is holding the map of the defensive wall devised by Benjamin Franklin during the French and Indian War. (Photo: Dave Wang)



George Washington plate, circa 1780, porcelain, Chinese, for export to the American market. Source: Antiques and the Arts Online at <http://tinyurl.com/3js6joa>. (Photo: Will Brown)

The colonists' pursuit of domestic Chinese porcelain ware became a powerful call for patriotic support of American economic independence. Franklin, in London when Rush was promoting colonial porcelain production, echoed this sentiment in a letter to his wife: "I am pleased to find so good progress made in the China Manufactory. I wish it Success most heartily."¹⁰ The American China Manufactory in Philadelphia became noted for its quality, and more importantly, succeeded in cultivating patriotism as it challenged Britain's monopoly of the product and indirectly contributed to the struggle for independence.

Explicit examples of Chinese architectural influences are present in one of the US's most historic buildings. Jefferson developed a new type of architecture by incorporating certain Chinese designs into his famous Italian style house, Monticello. Jefferson used Chinese lattice in many buildings, including Barboursville, the Orange County, Virginia, home he designed. Jefferson also planned to build a Chinese pavilion when he remodeled Monticello in the last decade of the eighteenth century.



Figure 4. Thomas Jefferson put Chinese railings on the top of Monticello. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monticello>.

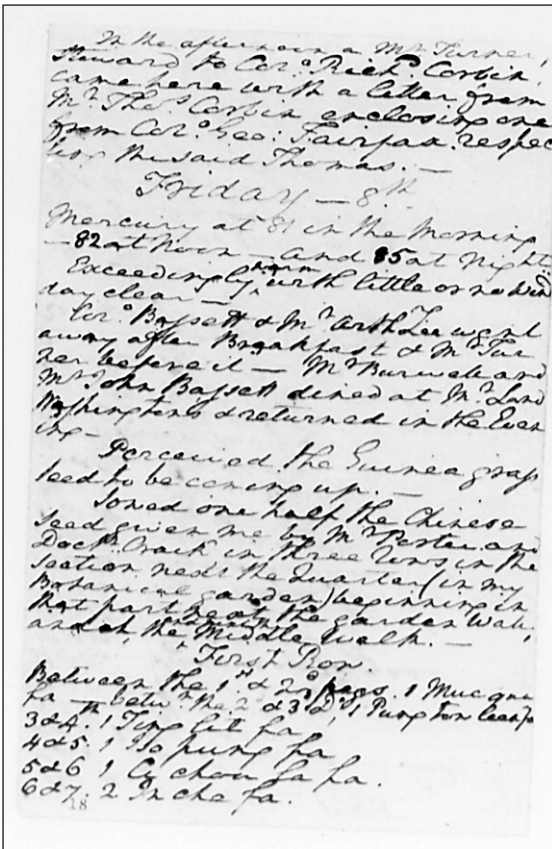


Figure 5. George Washington's diary, in which he recorded in detail his planting of Chinese flowers. Source: Library of Congress, <http://tinyurl.com/3vafe88>.

THE FOUNDERS AND CHINESE PLANTS

The greatest service which can be rendered any country is, to add a useful plant to its [Agri]culture, especially a bread grain. —Thomas Jefferson

Agriculture was the major component of the colonial economy and employed 90 percent of the workforce. As the founders searched for foreign plants to improve agriculture, China was considered a rich source of possible valued additions. Some colonists realized that many valuable trees, unknown in Europe, grew in the northern provinces of China and could be transplanted. Thus, numerous plants were brought into North America. For instance, paper mulberry was introduced in 1754.

In 1765, Franklin encountered Chinese soybeans in England and sent the soybeans to John Bartram, a famous colonial botanist. In 1772, Franklin also sent Chinese rhubarb seeds and Chinese tallow trees to North America. Tallow trees, which were highly useful in the manufacturing of candles, soap, cooking oil, and herbal remedies, spread widely throughout the South. George Washington, owner of Mount Vernon plantation, had a lifetime preoccupation with agriculture. Washington worked hard to plant Chinese flowers and recorded his experiments in his diary in detail, suggesting how much he valued his effort.

THE FOUNDERS AND CHINA MARITIME TRADE

Embodying Americans' hopes to improve the depressed post-Revolutionary War economy, the *Empress of China*, the first American international commercial ship after national independence, left New York for Canton, China on February 22, 1784. About a month after the *Empress of China* departed, Washington told Jefferson that "From trade our citizen will not be restrained."¹¹ Washington's words had significant meaning for the fledgling United States. The successful sailing of the *Empress of China* symbolized not only the hope of trade itself but made a statement to the world—the United States is now a nation.

Efforts to build direct commercial relations with China began during a critical period following the American Revolution. The new national government, operating under the Articles of Confederation (1781–1789), was grappling with the consolidation of thirteen independent states while the economy and nation's finances were on the brink of chaos. With traditional trading partners now closed to the fledgling nation, new ones had to be cultivated, or otherwise, political independence might well have proven to be a barren victory.

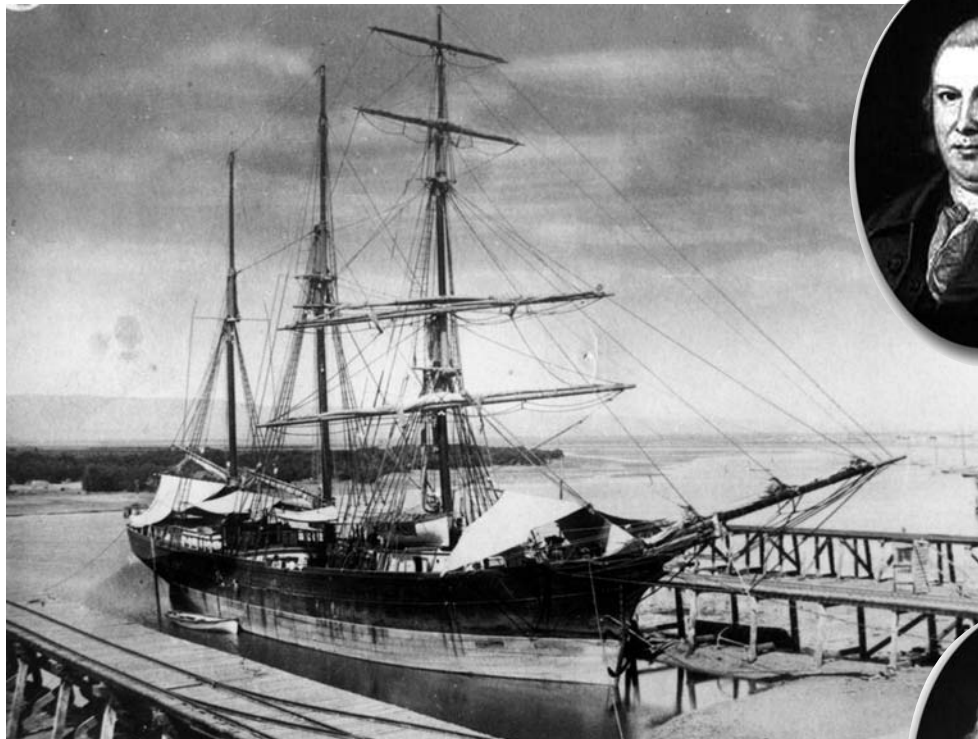


Figure 6. The *Empress of China* started her journey to China on February 22, 1784. She just left the harbor on the East River.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empress_of_China_%281783%29.



Robert Morris took the lead in arranging the *Empress of China* venture by personally financing much of the voyage.

Robert Morris. Source: <http://tiny.cc/7buc2>.

France, Holland, and other European countries were willing to export goods to the US but not purchase American products, which attracted some Americans to China. Superintendent of Finance Robert Morris took the lead in arranging the *Empress of China* venture by personally financing much of the voyage. Washington also contributed to the effort by recommending Samuel Shaw (1754–1794) to be the ship’s supercargo—the officer in charge of the critical task of sales and purchases of cargo.

As soon as the *Empress of China* returned to New York, American founder Richard Henry Lee wrote to Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, and James Madison about the event. In his letter to Jefferson, Lee stated:

*The enterprise of America is well marked by a successful Voyage made by a ship from this City—A ship has gone to, and returned from Canton in fourteen months with a valuable Eastern cargo and met with the most friendly treatment from the Chinese—Other Vessels are gone and are expected back in the continuation.*¹²

Later, Lee informed Samuel Adams that the success of the sail was “a proof of American enterprise, and will probably mortify, as much as it will injure our old oppressor, the British.”¹³

Encouraged by the profit of the *Empress of China*’s voyage, Lee even planned to open up the Potomac River and the James River to build ports for the China trade on each of them. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton also closely followed the US-China trade and requested that Thomas Randall, the American vice consul at Canton, provide him with specific information on the trade. Randall, who had served as the “joint supercargo” of the *Empress of China*, sent very detailed reports to Hamilton.

After this first successful commercial American voyage to China, Washington became even more interested in US-China trade and attempted to collect as much related information as possible. On July 6, 1789, President Washington ordered his subordinates to provide a list of American ships that traded in China. As president, Washington continued to understand the significance of the flourishing China trade. In a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, Washington wrote that profits to individuals who were engaged in the China trade were “so considerable as to induce more persons to engage in it continually.” He then described some examples:

*A single vessel just arrived in this port pays \$30,000 to government. Two vessels fitted out for the fur trade to the northwest coast of America have succeeded well. The whole outfits of vessels and cargoes cost but \$7,000. One is returning home loaded with India produce, the other going back to the coast of America; and they have deposited \$100,000 of their profits in China.*¹⁴



George Washington
Source: <http://tiny.cc/4t8o2>.



Samuel Shaw.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/39f1>.



Richard Henry Lee.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/n0sh3>.

Thomas Jefferson used successful American trade with China as an opportunity to move toward establishing a distinct American national identity in China that was clearly separate from the United Kingdom.



Thomas Jefferson.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/b5Hlw>.

Thomas Jefferson as well had substantial interest in US-China trade. While serving as American representative in France in 1785, Jefferson obtained a complete report concerning the *Empress of China*. As Washington's secretary of state, Jefferson suggested exploration to find a shorter trade route to East Asia. Later, shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, President Jefferson sent the famed explorers Louis and Clark west in hopes of finding a quicker route to China. During Jefferson's administration (1801–1809), US-China trade reached new heights, with the number of involved American ships having increased from two in 1785 to forty-two in 1806. US-foreign trade was severely limited in the brief period after President Jefferson signed the 1807 Embargo Act, supposedly prohibiting all American exports, in his attempt to keep the US out of the war between Great Britain and France. Even though only eight American ships sailed to China between 1808 and the first months of 1809, Jefferson realized China's significance to the new nation and viewed strengthening US-China trade as a strategy to coerce European countries to recognize American interests.

In 1808, a specific event occurred during the second year of Jefferson's Embargo Act that afforded the president the opportunity to opine on China and the US. With Jefferson's permission, New York-based merchant John Jacob Astor succeeded in getting one of his vessels to China despite the current trade embargo. Jefferson firmly believed that Astor's deed provided the United States an opportunity, and he expressed his opinion in a letter to Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin:

*The opportunity hoped from that, of making known through one of its own characters of note, our nation, our circumstances and character, and of letting that [Chinese] government understand at length the difference between us and the English, and separate us in its policy, rendered that measure a diplomatic one in my view, and likely to bring lasting advantage to our merchants and commerce with that country.*¹⁵

Jefferson's pronouncement remained fundamental in American dealings with China long into the future. At least one authority on US-East Asian relations acclaimed the statement as "the nearest to an official opinion on American policy."¹⁶

The American success that began with the *Empress of China* not only was profitable but also contributed to the new nation's international economic and political ascendancy. Fueled by political support and entrepreneurs' responses to a huge domestic demand for Chinese products, US-China trade grew rapidly. By 1795, only a little over a decade after the *Empress of China* voyage, the US had already passed all European rivals except Great Britain in the volume of its China trade. Port cities like Salem, New York, and Boston benefited significantly from the China trade, earning investment funds for new industry. Factory towns sprang up, and Americans began to experiment with the techniques of mass production. The United States began to lay the groundwork that contributed to post-Civil War industrialization.

China trade helped to change the US political map, moving much of American power from Virginia to New York City and New England. In the early 1790s, in part because of China profits and newly affluent business concerns, Hamilton had the power to establish a stronger financial role for the federal government. This strengthened New York and New England commercial and financial elites and weakened the previously powerful great Virginia planters.

The China trade was a joint effort by the founding fathers. Robert Morris financed the first American commercial ship to China; George Washington helped choose the business manager; Richard Henry Lee and Rufus King supported the first attempt of the efforts to build an economic relationship with China; and Thomas Jefferson used successful American trade with China as an opportunity to move toward establishing a distinct American national identity in China that was clearly separate from the United Kingdom.



Rufus King.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/d68dd>.

THE FOUNDERS' LEGACY

Chinese cultural influence reached North America and influenced the American founders as they pondered how to build a new nation. Chinese agricultural, philosophical, and architectural beliefs and practices affected the US in both material and nonmaterial ways. The timing of China's impact is particularly significant given that it occurred in the formative age of the United States.

Why did such American notables as Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington pay close attention to China? One simple answer is that China, as one of the most stable, and certainly the most long-lived state in the world, could provide the architects of the new nation with valuable food for thought. Charles Thomson, known as the "Samuel Adams of Philadelphia" and a close associate of Franklin, mirrored his mentor's feelings in recognizing the connection between China's success as a society and its large population:

*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 in time become as populous as China, which is allowed to contain more inhabitants than any other country, of the same extent, in the world.*¹⁷



Canton Harbor and Factories with Foreign Flags, c. 1805, China reverse painting on glass. Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum.

Source: <http://tiny.cc/xtwxq>. (Photo: Jeffrey R. Dykes, 2007)

Although significantly influenced by Europe in many ways, the American founders did not want to blindly follow in Europe's footsteps. Washington articulated the desirability of at least some American isolation from Europe in his 1796 farewell address, telling the American people and their leaders:

Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.

Jefferson also echoed Washington in expressing the “desirability of Chinese isolation and of the need to place an ocean of fire between us and the old world.”¹⁸ In realizing this goal, the founders needed a new resource outside of Europe, such as China, which they could use for their efforts.

The use of positive elements from Chinese civilization in building the nation helped create a special pattern for integration of elements from other cultures into American culture. Today, as has been the case in the nineteenth, twentieth, and now the twenty-first centuries with China learning from the US, Americans of all ethnic backgrounds consume intellectual and technological innovations. Today, Americans have accepted acupuncture, martial arts, Tai Chi, and meditation. This cross-cultural interaction started with the founders of this great nation. ■

NOTES

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DAVE WANG, PhD, is Manager of Queens Library at Laurelton, New York and an Adjunct Professor at St. Johns University. In recent years, he has focused on the study of the US founders and Chinese civilization. He has delivered lectures and speeches on the topic at universities in Lisbon, London, New York, Rome, Singapore, and Tokyo. He is the author of over twenty articles on the influence of traditional Chinese civilization on the early development of the United States. His most recent publication is “How China Helped Shape American Culture: The Founding Fathers and Chinese Civilization,” *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* (2010).