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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S LEGACY:
PRINTED MATERIALS FROM BEFORE 1870 RELATING TO
CHINESE CULTURE, GEOGRAPHY, LANGUAGE, AND SCIENCE
AT THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY IN PHILADELPHIA.

Roy E. Goodman
American Philosophical Society Library

Benjamin Franklin has been associated with many things, but rarely with China. An
examination of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1959 to date), however, reveals numerous examples of Franklin's sinological inter­
est. Ginseng, language and writing, population statistics, silk, windmills and
Chinese industry and frugality are among the many topics broached in these
volumes.

The American Philosophical Society (APS) was conceived in 1743 by Franklin. Its
primary objective was the "promotion of useful knowledge." This "useful knowledge"
encompassed the areas of agriculture, cartography, ethnography, geography, science,
and technology. Modeling themselves after their counterparts in the Royal Society
of London, APS members explored American and foreign developments in these
various fields.

All of the works cited in this paper are to be found in the APS collections. Manuscripts relating to the personalities described also offer the researcher a
plethora of topics to investigate. The Library holds about 1,000 books and pam­
phlets on pre-1870 China.

John Bartram, a founding member of the APS and the first native American
botanist, actively promoted the discovery and knowledge of American ginseng in the
1740s and 50s. Highly acclaimed for its curative powers, the American plant became
a prized tonic for the Chinese. Bartram's discovery of ginseng growing by the
Susquehanna River in eastern Pennsylvania was reported in Franklin's newspaper,
the Pennsylvania Gazette, on July 27, 1738.

Between 1750 and 1764 there was tremendous interest in England in ginseng's
botanical features, its trade potential, and the American efforts to cultivate this
plant. The North American ginseng trade with China and England was seriously
affected by the flooding of the market during the 1760s. Nevertheless, Sino­
American contacts, in particular links between Canton and Philadelphia, were
established and nurtured under the auspices of APS members.

Franklin had his own notions about practical plants which might benefit America.
In October 1772 he sent from London some seeds of the Ou Cow or Chinese tallow
tree. The recipient, Noble W. Jones (a Savannah, Georgia planter), also received a
quantity of upland rice from Cochin China.

Franklin believed that the white wax which encapsulated the seed could be gleaned
and moulded into candles by enterprising Georgians. Today the tallow tree, which
often reaches fifty to sixty feet in height, can be found from North Carolina to the
Texas lowlands. While the tree never became the commercial success Franklin had
hoped for, he is responsible for its dissemination.
The APS Transactions, v. 2, 1786, reprints a letter from Franklin to his friend, Jan Ingenhausz, physician to the Emperor at Vienna. Basically, it was a "state of the art" report on heating and chimneys. Included is a description and illustration of a northern Chinese method for warming ground floors. By placing tiles above hollows and ridges in the earthen floor, and by burning coal, the Chinese enabled the smoke and odor to escape underground through funnel-like passages.

The Repository (London) in May 1788, reprints a "Letter from China" in which Franklin relates a British sailor's picaresque adventures there. Although this is one of Franklin's many literary fabrications, it describes Chinese customs and material culture, especially those of Canton. It has been suggested that Franklin wrote this traveler's allegory to attack certain practices in Christianity.

Andreas Everard Van Braam Houckgeest (Van Braam hereafter) was the first American at the imperial Chinese court in Peking. A Dutch diplomat appointed consul to the Carolinas and Georgia in 1783, he became an American citizen prior to his Oriental venture. As second ambassador representing the Dutch East India Company, he arrived in Canton in 1794. Van Braam's was the third and last embassy undertaken by the Dutch and the eleventh in the history of China's relations with the West. His trip is documented in an amazing two volume work entitled Voyage de l'Amblsslde de la compagnie des Indes Orientales Hollandaises vers l'Empereur de la Chine, dans les annees 1794 et 1795; ou se trouve la description de plusieurs parties de la Chine inconnue aux Europeens, Philadelphia, 1797-1798. This impressive description was published by Moreau de Saint-Mery, a French emigre who also translated the original Dutch text and provided scholarly commentary using resources from the libraries of the APS and The Library Company of Philadelphia (the oldest public library in the United States, founded by Franklin in 1731). Promptly translated and published in London, Haarlem, and Paris, the American edition was the only complete edition. Van Braam's work on China provides, through a layman's eyes, the first comprehensive account of the Chinese art and artifacts exhibited in the United States.

The engravings included in Van Braam's Voyage are: the Viceroy's reception at Canton; bridges; Chinese chess; modes of transportation, such as boats, wheelbarrows, sails, and carts; pagodas; palace buildings in Peking; a plow and drill for sowing; the road up the Mei-Ling-shan; tomb enclosures; and one of the two mechanical pieces presented to the Ch'ien-lung Emperor. These engravings derive from varied sources. Some are copied from paintings, while others, like the agricultural instruments brought to Philadelphia as part of Van Braam's collection, were most likely drawn from life. Peale's Museum, then housed on the ground floor of the APS, displayed these artifacts to thousands of curious visitors. This collection of natural history specimens and other curiosities was considered to be America's first science museum. Incidentally, Van Braam was elected to the APS shortly after his return to America in 1797.

"China Retreat," Van Braam's home, was a landmark until its destruction in 1970. Located on the west bank of the Delaware River in Croydon, fifteen miles north of Philadelphia, it was best described by Moreau de Saint-Mery:

The furniture, ornaments everything at Mr. Van Braam's reminds us of China. It is impossible to avoid fancying ourselves in China, while surrounded at once by living Chinese, and by representations of their manners, their usages, their monuments, and their arts.

Van Braam's library housed about 2,000 drawings of China and its people. After suffering serious financial setbacks he moved to England in 1798. Most of Van
Braam's collection was sold at auction by Christies in London on February 15 and 16, 1799. The fate of his eight Chinese servants, believed to be America's first resident Chinese, is unknown.3

Peter A. DuPonceau, who served as APS president from 1828 to 1844, was a linguist whose most notable publication was "A Dissertation on the Nature and Character of the Chinese System of Writing," APS Transactions of the Historical and Literary Committee, v. 2, 1838. In this 375-page work DuPonceau hoped to prove that Chinese characters represent the sounds of the words. His interest in linguistics benefited the Library's collection.4 Many items were acquired because of DuPonceau and two eminent European members, Heinrich Klaproth and Friedrich von Adelung.

Nathan Dunn's "Chinese Museum" had the greatest impact in introducing Chinese culture to Philadelphians. From 1839 to 1842 more than 100,000 people flocked to see the 1,200 Chinese objects. Several hundred paintings by Chinese artists working for the export trade, including several of the largest port paintings ever executed, were also displayed. During the first few months of the exhibit 50,000 copies of the Descriptive Catalogue were sold.

Philadelphia social reformer and minister, Enoch Wines comments:

Dunn in the collection he now offers to public examination, has done more than any other man to rectify prevalent errors and disseminate true information concerning a nation every way worthy to be studied by the economist who searches into the principles of national prosperity and stability.5

Jonathan Goldstein's seminal work, Philadelphia and the China Trade, 1682-1846: Commercial, Cultural, and Attitudinal Effects (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978 121p.), investigates the economic ties using the papers of merchant Stephen Girard, yet another APS member.6

In conclusion, it is apropos to note that when the Chinese government recently negotiated with CBS television for a year's worth of programming, one request was made by Peking. Of special interest was programming about Benjamin Franklin, considered to be a "model revolutionary." CBS responded by providing six hours of programming--a video legacy.
ILLUSTRATION (following)

PAGODA AND LABYRINTH GARDEN
Northeast of Fairmount on south side of Coates Street (Fairmount Avenue).
Built 1828 from designs of John Haviland (1792-1852); demolished shortly thereafter.

From a lithograph by Hugh Bridport (1794-c.1868). Printed by William B. Lucas.

Atkinson's Casket (November, 1828) describes in some detail the opening of the Pagoda and Labyrinth Garden, which probably closed the following year. On the basis of old maps, the Pagoda does not seem to have been standing after 1834. Haviland's Pagoda and other "Oriental Forms in American Architecture 1800-1870" are discussed by Clay Lancaster in The Art Bulletin for 1947.

NOTES


5. Enoch Wines, A Peep at China, in Mr. Dunn's Chinese Collection... Philadelphia, 1839, vii-viii.
