

LOOKING EAST

The Story of Wood

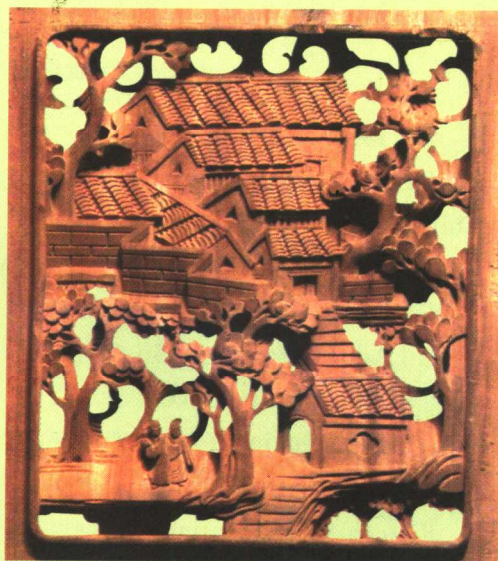
By Shi Yingzhao



Foreign Languages Press



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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

木头里的东方 / 石映照著; 章挺权译. — 北京: 外文出版社, 2006
(东西文丛)

ISBN 7-119-04458-3

I. 木... II. ①石... ②章... III. 木材—文化—中国—英文

IV. S781

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2006) 第 049146 号

作 者: 石映照

责任编辑: 崔黎丽

助理编辑: 薛 芊

英文翻译: 章挺权

英文审定: 邵海明

封面及内文设计: 天下智慧文化传播公司

制 作: 天下智慧文化传播公司

印刷监制: 张国祥

木头里的东方

*

© 外文出版社

外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄大街 24 号)

邮政编码 100037

北京外文印刷厂印刷

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行

(中国北京车公庄西路 35 号)

北京邮政信箱第 399 号 邮政编码 100044

2006 年(小 16 开)第 1 版

2006 年 12 月第 1 版 第 1 次印刷

(英)

ISBN 7-119-04458-3

7-E-3716P



Wood has been regarded by the Chinese as an important material for a wide range of uses since ancient times. When making furniture and articles of daily use, and constructing buildings and gardens, wood has long been the favorite natural material of the Chinese people. Wood is an eloquent instructor helping people to understand China's ancient civilization. This book tells the story of wood in China down through the ages.





LOOKING EAST

The Story of Wood

The Story of Bronze

The Story of Gold

The Story of Silk





Foreword

I

Foreword



L.B. Namier, a British scholar, once told an amusing anecdote about an association founded in England in the 18th century, open to people who had visited the East. Later, finding that some people who had never been to the East had insinuated themselves into it, the association amended its articles to include "people who wish to visit the East".

Going to the East. For quite a long time it was virtually a longing of educated people in the West to visit China. However, their expectation that "China would always remain an antique country", as Lu Xun said, reflected nostalgia somewhat similar to that for ancient Greece or Rome. Moral sympathy often constitutes discrimination in a concealed way. Don't think that there is no such discrimination today. In Europe and the United States there are still many people who think that people still wear long robes and long plaits in China. Just like their predecessors, some people think that the Great Wall is a symbol of fear. Some think that people here can all do kungfu. Some others think that China is just a huge factory, or that this ancient civilization is like a piece of centuries-old porcelain ware which looks nice but is fragile. Anyway, the East is somewhat uncertain or mysterious.

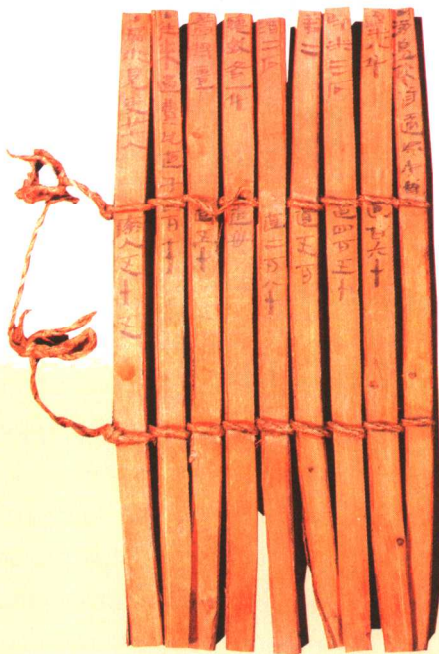
Contacts between China and the West began over 1,000 years ago. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907) as many as 100,000 foreigners resided in the capital Chang'an (now Xi'an), but real records concerning such contacts began with Marco Polo in the

Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368). This traveler's era was immediately followed by the period of the Christian missionaries, starting with Matteo Ricci, during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. The third wave of visits to China was the period of the explorers of the Western Regions (areas west of the Yumenguan Pass, including Xinjiang and parts of Central Asia) in the late 19th century and early 20th century. In this long course of contacts, there was no lack of people who were intensely interested in China, such as Thomas Browne, William Temple, Giambattista Vico, Nicolas

Malebranche, Baron de la Brede et de Montesquieu, Francois Quesnay, Francois-Marie de Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Victor Hugo and Romain Rolland. However, even if some of them wrote books like *On Chinese Characters and Others* (by Vico), *On the Chinese Political System, Law, Ethnics and Others* (by Montesquieu), as well as *South China in the 16th Century* and *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses*, none of them had a profound understanding of Chinese culture, and most of their works are nothing more than superficial informal discussions or travelers' notes on China. Later, the British admiral Lord George Anson led troops to China twice, and wrote *A Voyage Round the World*. He sharply criticized the corruption of the Chinese government and the inherent weakness of the nation (this poured

■ Root carving
Bank of the Yellow
River.





■ Inscribed wooden slips dating from the Han Dynasty unearthed at Juyan, northwest China.

cold water on the "China fever" in Europe at the time, and had a considerable influence on the views of Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Hegel and even Karl Marx). Nevertheless, Chinese silk, porcelain, architecture and horticulture, as well as the administration system, customs, religions and writing all began to attract the attention of Westerners, some of whom came to China with a serious purpose. One of the latter was William Chambers who conducted a 10-year study in Guangdong and other places, and wrote two books: *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* and *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*. In the period 1757-1762, Chambers designed Kew Gardens in London, a garden known as one with the most distinct oriental flavor and Chinese style in Europe. Chambers' visit was followed by the unsuccessful mission to China of the first British diplomatic team led by Lord George Macartney (1737-1806).



■ The gateway to the Confucius Mansions, Qufu, Shandong.

Furniture and utensils for daily life, as well as buildings and gardens can be regarded as "entrances" to Chinese civilization. And when entering the long passageway of Chinese civilization, it was very likely that wood, like a language, played an important mediatory role. Compared with the hardness, heaviness, sturdiness and tidiness of stone buildings, wooden buildings are soft, natural, simple, affectionate, friendly, and have a more natural life taste and human appeal. Westerners use stone and make it rational and systematic, but the Chinese have wedged something called the "character of wood" deeply into their cul-

ture and lives. If one has a good understanding of this, one can have a better understanding of the Chinese tradition.

Legend has it that during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), a man in Henei (north of the Yellow River in today's Henan Province) called Ding Lan often missed his parents who had died in his childhood. He carved their figures out of wood and treated them as though they were alive. Before he started eating at every meal, he offered the food first to his "parents". He used to report to them before leaving home, and greet them again after returning home. After this had gone on for a long time, Ding Lan's wife pricked the finger of one of the wooden figures with a needle, out of curiosity. To her consternation, the finger promptly shed blood. When Ding found out about this, he divorced his wife.



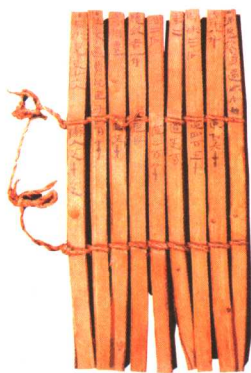
The Chinese would not doubt the true feelings of the man in this fable. What I want to stress is that since Chinese culture stresses wood so much, you may use the "tool" of wood to understand many aspects of Chinese culture. Wood can also be the background to an ancient Greek story: A man used a small piece of wood to make a stringed instrument, with the idea that "everything is numerals". After making repeated experiments on the instrument, he found all the elements in music. In China, in the remote past, the book *Zhuangzi* postulated another "wooden" keynote: If you cut a stick in half each day, you can keep on doing it forever.

V

Foreword



■ Sculptured Redwood bed, Qing Dynasty.





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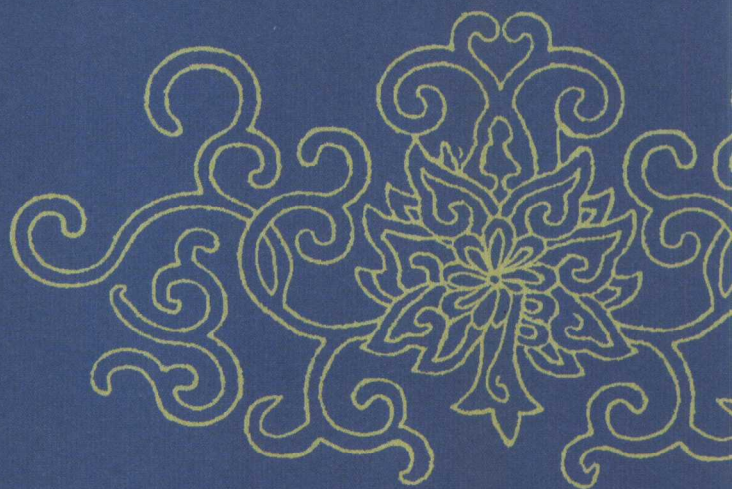
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Chapter 1

Wood, a Favor with Man



Entrance to the East

The history of every nation has its own story about wood. Indeed, ever since the human race emerged, it seems that every tree has been obliged to record something for mankind.

Of course, much of the labor done by the trees has been neglected. The reason for this is that the trees can live longer than man. Also, man keeps moving, whereas trees stay in the same place. For a tree, even if it dies, its wooden character (or divine character) remains. Wherever a tree strikes its roots, it automatically gets into contact with the earth.

Trees, big or small, stand where they are, in either an orderly way or a scattered way. Like human beings, they believe in God. But this is often overlooked. Some trees have a specific gender, such as the date, coconut and papaya trees. One single tree does not bear fruit, but when two trees grow together, they can bear fruit. In this secret there is a complicated mechanism similar to the sexual transformation of the red snapper. Perhaps the wind, sunshine or water can know something about their secret intercourse underground.

Many of us like to sniff the smells of different tree leaves. Many kinds of trees can release a certain chemical matter

