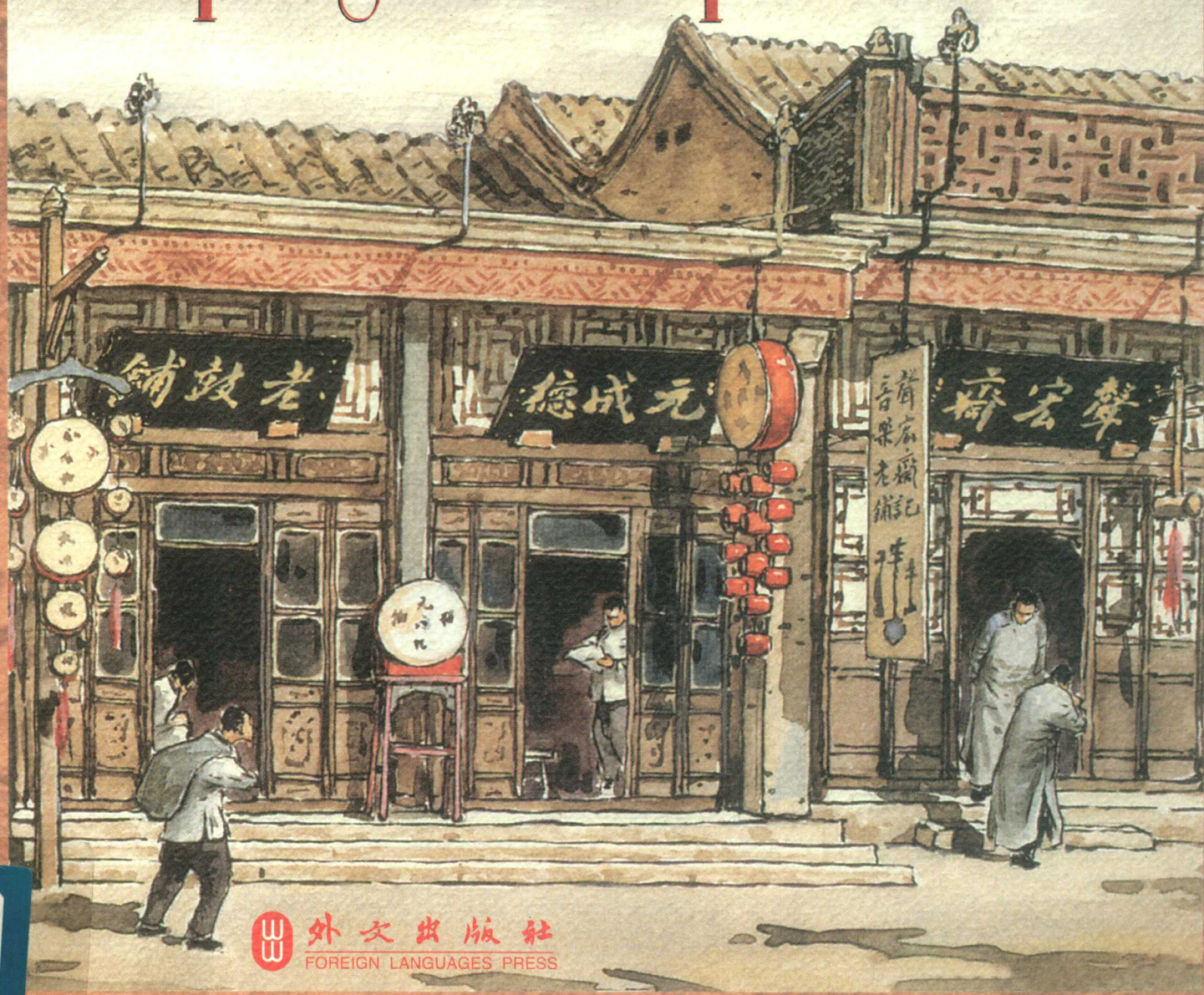
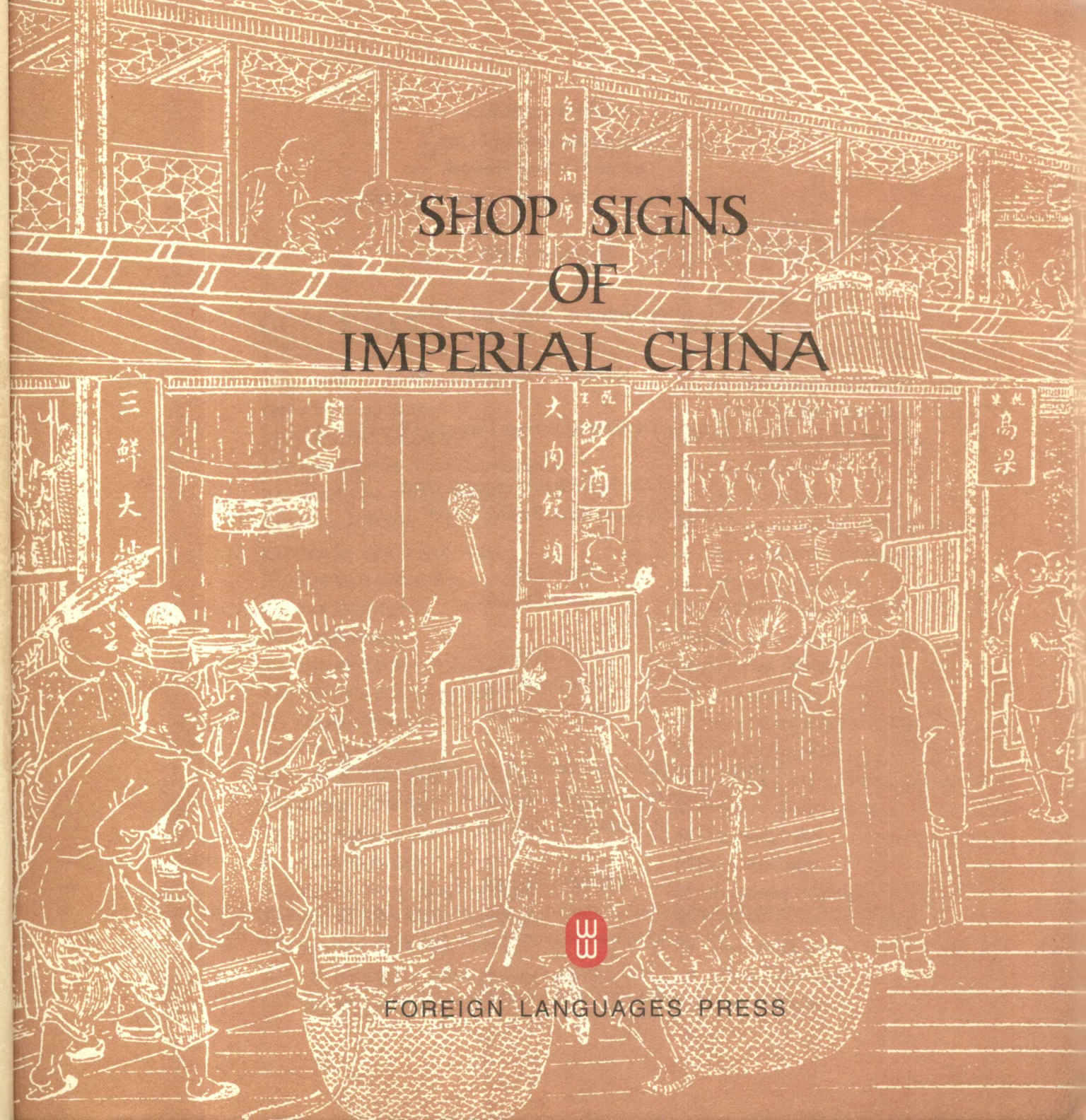


Shop Signs of Imperial China



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SHOP SIGNS OF IMPERIAL CHINA


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Text by Wang Shucun
English translation by Li Xin
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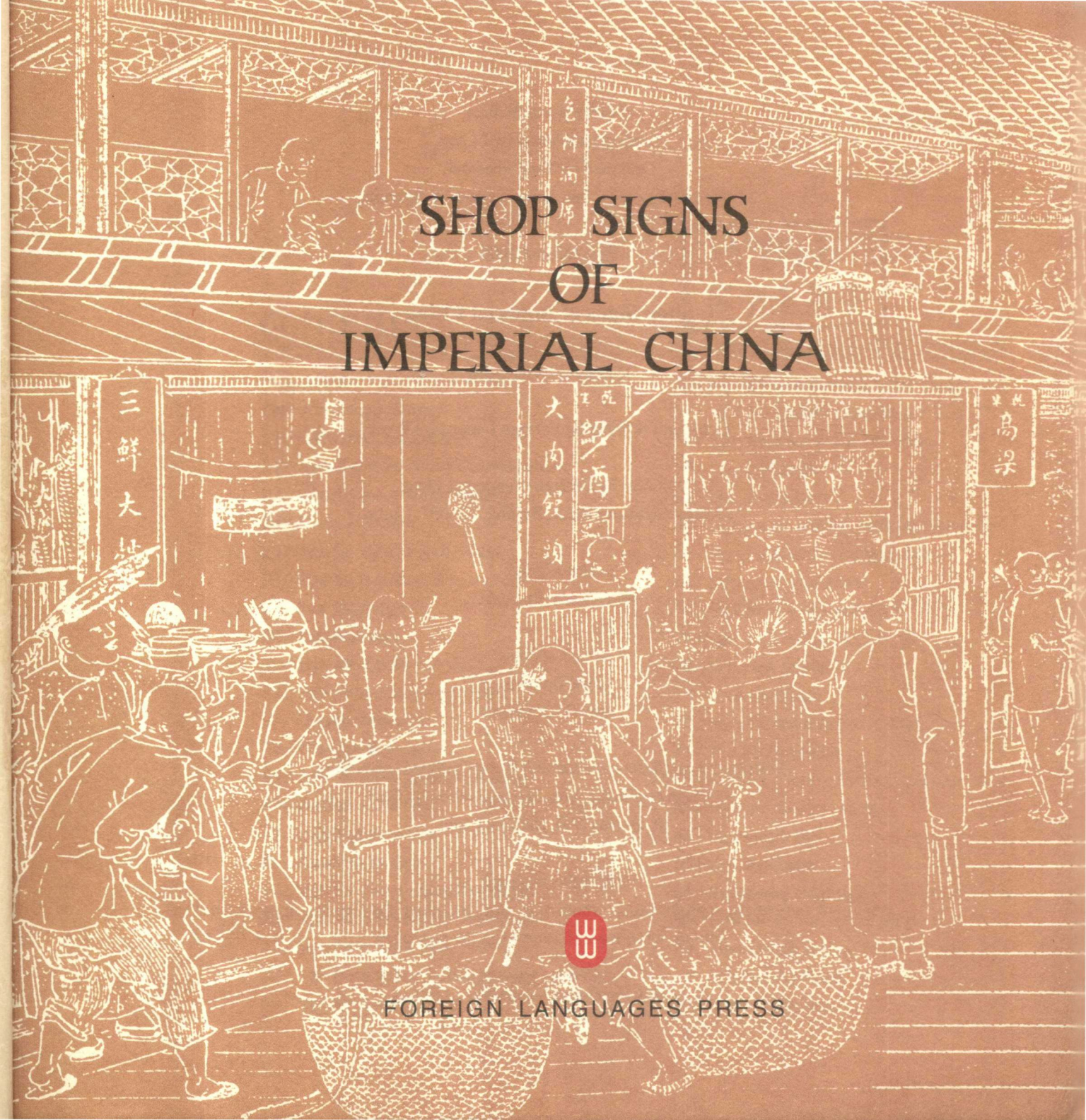
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Preface

Signs, using either words or visuals, are emblems for traditional Chinese shops and trades.

Signs were made of inscribed boards, couplets, plates or posts written with the names of the shops. Either hung on the upper part of the doors, pillars or walls of shops, or fixed on the ground outside or on the counters inside shops, they were a part of the features of shops. In addition to inscribed words, some signboards were marked with designs and drawings. The choice of the form of the signboard was determined by the line of business, scale and façade style of the shop. A juxtaposition of several forms could be used, or simply one or two forms. No rules were ever fixed concerning the use of signs.

Visual symbols, serving as marks of trade, would inform customers of the business's scope and its variety of goods by displaying articles, models, pictures, words or special signs. With the purpose of soliciting business, they belong

grouped with shop signs.

For the convenience of customers, shops and trades would take on accepted designs and forms passed down from successive generations. However, when it came to the choice of materials, as well as the conception

and installation of signboards, these shops and trades would take great pains to be as original and creative as possible, in order to be most effective in establishing their brand, promoting their products and attracting customers. This pageantry of eye-catching signs



The word sign is the most common form of shop sign; made of good-quality wood, bearing inscriptions done by notable figures, either with the written characters in gold on a black lacquered background or black on a gold background.



A scene from a 17th-century market, as seen in the Qing-dynasty painting "Emperor Kangxi Tours the South."

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lining the streets not only embellished the shop fronts, but also shaped distinctive scenes of traditional Chinese shopping streets. As for the numerous signs held by hand, carried on shoulders or hung on the ends of shoulder poles, belonging to walking vendors, these also made for a flowing, constantly changing scene.

Over thousands of years, local Chinese perhaps became inured to these signboards, taking them as no more than a common sight. It was the foreigners who, setting foot in China for the first time, were most amazed by the beauty of Chinese streets dotted with various signs, and by the folk culture embedded in them. Since the 20th century, a number of overseas sinologists and lovers of Chinese culture have occupied themselves with collecting shop visuals, signboards, inscribed panels, wrapping paper, and accounts books, regarding all these as authentic materials for the study of commercial and economic development, and even writing theses about Chinese shop signs. Some scholars have regretted the discarding of the original folk characteristics found in Chinese shop signs. An American author expressed in 1926: "These distinctive and symbolic signs are quickly disappearing from the commercial quarters, as all Chinese streets have replaced them with stereotypical shop signs. The streets and lanes with a unique Chinese beauty are

noticeably vanishing."

The oldest signboard - the wine banner

Traditional Chinese signboards, which began to decline during the early 20th century, may be traced to the later period of primitive society. At that time, humankind had developed from the fishing and hunting stage to the farming stage, with small amounts of surplus products. When coming to fetch water in the mornings, people would bring their limited surplus along to the well, for display and for trade. This practice was called "fair well" (marketplace). This was how fairs or the trading places of later times acquired the term "fair well." According to ancient literature, Shennong or the Divine Farmer, the legendary sage who discovered farming and medicinal herbs, at one time had instructed people about trade. The Chinese classic "Xi Ci Xia" of *Zhou Yi* clearly documented this:

After the death of Fuxi, Lord Shennong rose... the fair was held at noon, where people from all over the world gathered with their goods. After transactions were made, they left the fair, each to their own homes.

To date, this is the earliest description found of commercial transactions in prehistoric times. As early as 11th century BC, some cities had established a relatively rational market management system under the

supervision of professional officers. Moreover, archaeological studies have proven that China possessed coins prior to the 13th century BC. Evidently, early trade transactions, whether through barter or the means of currency, could only be conducted by the displaying of articles, aided by hawking, to communicate supply-and-demand information. This primitive yet most straightforward means of soliciting business, is still widely applied at fairs because of its simplicity and convenience.

Following the primitive signs displaying goods, there emerged signs showing more abstract designs. The earliest commodity sign, which appeared during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (770-221 BC), was the wine banner. A type of trade sign in the form of a banner, it was then referred to as "zhi" (meaning "banner" or "flag") or "biao" (meaning "memorial"). In *Han Fei Zi*, a book on philosophy written at the end of the Warring States Period (476-221 BC) and the *Yan Zi Chun Qiu*, a book recording the words and deeds of Yan Ying, a minister in the Kingdom of Qi during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), can be found such descriptions as "wine shops hung their banners high" and "their memorial was quite long."

In 221 BC Emperor Qinshihuang, or the first emperor of Qin, built up his empire, making China a unified centralized feudal country. For nearly a thousand years afterwards, successive central governments implemented a policy of discouraging private commercial merchants while favoring

of the Zhou Dynasty, the capital city was divided into nine districts, with a layout resembling the Chinese character “井”(“well”). The central district was the ruler's palace. The district in front of that was the outer court and the market was placed at the back, an arrangement known as “the court in

example, Chang'an, the capital city of the Tang Dynasty (AD618-907) had three markets in all. At ancient markets, there were gates on four sides that were opened at fixed times for merchants to enter and trade goods. Apparently, signs were not a necessity then, as all the goods on display served as the most direct sign. People would simply come and spread out their goods for sale and return home when the markets were closed. For this reason, the only commercial symbols extant prior to the 10th century, as confirmed by historical studies, were market towers, boards and wine banners. Market towers were landmarks of the markets, while market boards were signs of decree given by market administrators. Only wine banners deserve the title of “signs” in an authentic sense.

At first, the wine banner, also called a wine sign, was a piece of cloth without words that was hung high above the wine shop. Since people could catch sight of it from afar, it picked up another name, “Wang zi”, meaning “something seen,” gradually becoming mistakenly pronounced as “Huang zi,” a near homonym of “Wang zi.” So we can conclude that not only are wine banners the oldest form of signs, but their name was also derived from “Wang zi,” the other name for wine banners. As a matter of fact, all types of shop signs in later periods were derived and developed from the wine banner. Even



A wine banner seen outside a present-day tavern

official merchants. Consequently, the private business sector encountered a number of restrictions, while official merchants received exclusive treatment. Trade in the cities was conducted at specified times and locations.

As early as the Zhou Dynasty (1066-256 BC), markets were delimited to the capital city. In accordance with the rules

front and the market in the rear.” During China's feudal period, all the old dynasties had followed these layout rules when building up their capital cities. With the development of the commodity economy, the pattern of “one city one market” was gradually broken. Some cities opened up new markets outside the rear markets; for

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the advertising banners and huge advertising scrolls hung outside shops, that are a common sight on today's streets, are legacies of those wine banners.

Signs preserved in poems, paintings and writings

Signs, as they were mostly made of wood, paper or cloth, and hung in the open air, would wear away easily. Shops would discard old signs during renovations. Consequently, authentic treasures handed down from ancient times are rare. Fortunately, their traces may still be found in poems and paintings, literary jottings and novels of past dynasties.

The Tang Dynasty saw Chinese classical poetry reach its apex. It was a time when large numbers of poets and numerous masterpieces came forth. A *Complete Collection of Tang Poems* and *Sequel to a Complete Collection of Tang Poems* alone recorded over 2,000 poets and over 51,000 poetic works. Moreover, since many Tang poets had a special liking for wine, poems on wine drinking were extremely common. The term "wine banner" frequently occurred in these poems. "On the Dike", by Zhang Ji, related: "By the dike, wine banners are in sight; / A sea of masts of a sea of towers." In "Spring South of the Yangtze River" by Du Mu: "Orioles sing in green trees set off by red blossoms; / In waterside villages and

mountain towns wine banners flutter in the breeze." In "Spring Scene in Hangzhou", Bai Juyi wrote: "Pretty girls embroider persimmons on silk; / Blue wine banners frolic among pear blossoms." These are just a few outstanding examples. Thus, we may say that during the Tang Dynasty, there

capital of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279):

The wine shops in cities and rural towns all have large cloth signs hung outside the door. The banners were made of linked spans of white and blue cloth. Smaller wine banners were adapted to the height and size of the



Festival of Pure Brightness on the River, painting (detail)

were blue wine banners that were compared with the designs of the calyx and receptacles for persimmons, woven on silk fabric.

Some writers' literary notes give more detailed descriptions of ancient wine banners and wine signs. In his *Essays of Rongzhai Study*, Hong Mai (AD 1123-1202) gave an account of the styles of wine banners in Lin'an (today's Hangzhou, in Zhejiang Province),

shops. In villages, wine shops hung bottles, ladles, or brooms outside the door. Such signs come up repeatedly in Tang-dynasty poems. This custom, however, dates back to long ago.

From this we may gather that during those times, there were not only wine banners made of blue and white cloth, but the village wine shops also used bottles, gourd ladles and broomsticks as signs.

The 10th century marks the end of the isolated marketplace system and the beginning of an unprecedented prosperity in China's urban economy and culture, industry and commerce. The commercial and business sectors took on over 170 trades. Zhang Zeduan, a 12th century artist, in his masterwork *Festival of Pure Brightness on the River* portrayed the actual street scenes of Bianliang (today's Kaifeng, in Henan Province), the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty. In his painting, the streets are lined on both sides with restaurants, teahouses, wine shops, apothecaries, candle shops, silk stores, grocers, etc., with over 20 types of signs. Some used signs with words, such as "Stay Awhile at Officer Wang's (Inn)," "Uncle Liu mounts fine calligraphy and painting," or "Wang's Silk and Gauze Shop." Others were wine banners inscribed with the shop name and the characters "New Wine." Still others were embroidered flags, signs affixed into the ground, as well as inscribed boards and couplets. At this point in time, China's commerce had gone beyond the morning bartering by the wells. Shops were closely lined up, side by side, along all of the streets in the city, with signs touching upon each other. Commercial advertisements, too, appeared at this point. Among the collections of the Shanghai Museum is a piece of copperplate used for printing by Liu's Needle Shop in Jinan around

the 10th century. It is engraved with an image of a "rabbit pounding medicine in a mortar" and the characters "identify this place by the rabbit at the door." From this we may surmise that the signs of this needle shop must have been engraved with the image of a rabbit as its trademark.

The Yuan Dynasty (AD1271-1368), established by the Mongol aristocracy, made Dadu (today's Beijing) its capital. Commercial centers shifted to the north, and the number of foreign merchants living outside the city increased. At this point, both shop façade ornamentation and signs took on new forms. The *Records of Xijin*, written by Xiong Mengxiang in the middle of the 14th century, gives a very detailed account of the forms of signs for all trades in the capital Dadu. For example, he wrote: "Wine shops usually had pictures of the four famous princes, namely, Prince Chunshen, Prince Mengchang, Prince Pingyuan and Prince Xinling, in front of their gates." These four princes were nobles, from the Warring States period, who liked to entertain guests as well as who cherished friendship and were fond of drinking, thus wine shops would use their images as signs. Furthermore, "a barber's shop was marked by color pictures of teeth; the pediatrician's office used as its sign a wood carving of a child wrapped in silk swaddling in front of the house; the midwife's had a pair of big shoes in a



Wine banner bearing written characters, on a mural at the Yongle Palace

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Suzhou Street in the Summer Palace, rebuilt in 1986

basket wrapped in red paper; the veterinarian's had a big wooden carved pot on the ground in front of the house, painted in ochre with a picture of a big horse; the baker's shop had a long shaft supported on a big branch, hung with painted steamed-bread over the street."

Using images, symbols or the goods for sale as signs, none of the aforementioned had any Chinese characters written on them. Some scholars attribute this to the fact that, with the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty, a large number of Mongols and Semus from the northwest migrated to Dadu. Since most of them knew little written Chinese, different trade shops took visuals of goods and paintings as signs, for easy identification. However, this was not always the case. Among the wall paintings found in Yongle Palace, a Daoist temple of the Yuan Dynasty in Ruicheng, Shanxi, a long banner written with the words, "delicious enough to attract customers far and wide," flew over the roof of a wine shop. In 1976, among the wall paintings found in the Yuan tombs in Sanyanjing in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, there was also a wine banner written with the three characters "Chun Feng Guan" (Spring Breeze Tavern) for a village tavern.

For several hundred years after the 13th century, China was at its peak in terms of classical novels, dramas and legends. A great number of these works

were engraved, printed and disseminated. There are no extant scientific works or new and old novels, legends or dramas engraved and printed in the 16th and 17th centuries that were not crowned with the characters' portraits, or attached illustrations. In some illustrations of novels depicting social conventions and human affairs, images of signs were omnipresent, signs for wine shops, silverware shops, teahouses, inns, butcheries, apothecaries, hospitals, drapers, silk stores, grocers, to name just a few.

At the peak of the Qing Dynasty (AD1644-1911), some court artists painted a body of huge scrolls depicting the peace or tranquility of the society or documenting royal celebrations and inspection tours of the rulers. These paintings recorded the characteristics of the cities, marketplaces, trade, the living conditions of the people, and local customs of the period. One example, *Birthday Celebration* by Wang Yuanqi and Zhu Daoguang, reflected the prosperity of the markets in Beijing, including the signs of businesses such as apothecaries, wine shops and tobacconists. In another example, the *Prosperity of Suzhou* by Xu Yang, gave a thriving picture of Suzhou from the outskirts to its trading center during the 18th century. It detailed over 300 signs in the painting, covering a range of over 50 different industrial and commercial trades. It is said that the trade street by

the rear lake of Qingyi Garden (predecessor of the Summer Palace), built during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (AD1736-1795) in the Qing Dynasty, was modeled after the trading-center streets along Changmen in Suzhou, hence its other name - Suzhou Street. Suzhou Street was 300 meters in total length, lined with dozens of shops by both sides of the rear lake, crisscrossed by 8 small bridges. The shop names, storefront decor and styles of signs were mostly imitations of famous old shops in Beijing. For example, the snuff shop was a counterpart of Wen Yi Xiang (Scenting Exotic Fragrance) on Chongwenmen Street; the Colorful Feathers Warm Hat Shop reproduced the sign of the Imposing Bearing Studio outside Di'anmen... each shop with its own prototype. Suzhou Street was burned down by the allied forces of Britain and France in 1860. What visitors see today is a reconstruction on the original site, built in 1986 based on relevant documents and historical literature.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, writings grew in number and depth about marketplaces and the goods sold in famous shops. *Records of the Imperial Capital through the Year*, written by Pan Rongbi and published in 1758, gave a detailed account of the sites and names of all the shops in Beijing along with the goods they sold, yet there was no mention of the styles