



Discovering China

# BAMBOO IN CHINA

Arts, Crafts and a Cultural History

BY SHEN MIN

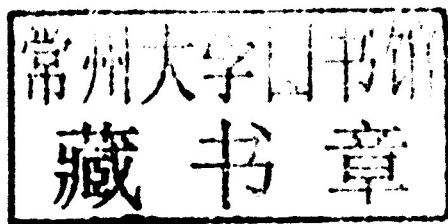


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Arts, Crafts and a Cultural History

BY SHEN MIN



Better Link Press

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## Preface

**A**mong plant species that have produced far-reaching influences on Chinese culture, bamboo richly deserves to be placed at the top of the list. Bamboo grows in many parts of China and occurs in a wide variety of genera and species. When our trailblazing, pioneering forefathers, dressed in primitive clothing, first started to “open up mountains and forests...hauling carts made from bamboo and twigs” (from China’s first chronological history *Zuo Zhuan* or the *Chronicle of Zuo*), bamboo already figured prominently in their daily life. The



Bamboo is plentiful in China. More than 500 tropical, subtropical and high-elevation, high-latitude bamboo species are native to China. Due to differences in climate, soil, terrain and species, bamboo distribution exhibits a marked zone- and region- specificity.



Bamboo-woven containers are common in Chinese homes.

Chinese gradually deepened their understanding of bamboo through thousands of years of farm cultivation. They started out by using it as food and then making it into tools before acquiring an aesthetic appreciation of it, and incorporating it into poetry and painting. Eventually their fondness and reverence for it had become so ingrained that they make use of it in myriad aspects of life, adding beauty to their surroundings and depth and sublimity to their spiritual being. In addition to its practical uses, this bestowed an aesthetic, spiritual and symbolic value to bamboo.

Bamboo is one of the fastest-growing plants, easy to cultivate and quick to propagate. It is extremely functional because of its hard, resilient texture and lightweight flexibility. This combination, along with its superiority to wood in a number of mechanical, physical and chemical properties, makes it an ideal raw material to use in food, clothing, furniture, transport and utensils. Nowadays, bamboo has been put to innovative use. Natural bamboo fibers are processed into clothing fabrics with superior sweat-absorption properties and health benefits. In bamboo spas, the subtle aroma of bamboo soothes and calms the mind to better help it to increase mental focus. In our





*Triple Joys of Spring (chun hua san xi tu)*, by Bian Jingzhao, Ming dynasty

Bian Jingzhao, court artist of the Ming dynasty, known for his bird-and-flower paintings; of Longxi (in present-day Gansu Province) origin, he lived in Shaxian of Fujian Province. His birth and death years are unknown. He was credited with a generous nature, erudition and mastery of poetry. In this painting a festive mood is conveyed by the triple motifs of bamboo, azalea and magpie.

ecology-minded age, bamboo has joined the ranks of much sought-after luxury items. Its dependability and popularity have endured thousands of years to become a part of modern fashion.

Bamboo is a favorite subject of poets and painters. Its form exhibits a virile beauty that is sometimes thick and robust, and at other times, fine and subtle. It is noted that its dynamic beauty is best observed in a bamboo grove as the wind ripples through and raindrops pelt its leaves. Thus, bamboo has inevitably become an essential ornament in Chinese gardens and a recurrent theme in Chinese poetry and painting.