

by Ma Weidu, China Architecture and Building Press

Ever since I saw big doors displayed for the first time, it has been love at first sight. Those familiar with the videos on doors and windows will already have seen some handsome examples. The doors in the video came from Shanxi province, likewise most of the windows. Mr. Ma has collected examples from many other provinces as well.

The first thing you will note about this magnificent book is its size. 15" long, 10 1/2" wide and 1 1/2" thick, you will want to open this book on a good size desk or table. This is definitely not one to prop up on your stomach to read in bed.

The second thing to notice is that the book is written both in Chinese and in English. I wish I could read Chinese; I must be content with English; I do wonder what I might be missing as I'm unsure that all the Chinese text is completely translated. The major import of the book, however, is its glorious photographs, all in marvelously meticulous detail. Not only does Mr. Ma capture the totality of the door or window, but he also gives us close up views of the carved panels. Watch carefully for the fold out pages which can be easy to miss. Page 212 begins the first of a three part fold out picture of 18 doors. Absolutely magnificent together, each of the 18 doors has its panel separately photographed on subsequent pages.

For those interested in the symbolism of the carved panels, Mr. Ma identifies the theme such as "Episodes from the Romance of Three Kingdoms..." It is up to us as readers, however, to learn more of that tale or series of tales to explain the meaning of the carving. One can be content, however, just to appreciate the beauty of the design and the skill of the maker. As most of you know, it is virtually impossible to know the names of any specific craftsman. It is enough, however, for us to appreciate, admire, and value his work.

Those who recognize the "Shou" or "longevity" character and other familiar characters such as "double happiness" will find magnificent examples in the book. The "longevity" character is beautifully executed by the "joining and inserting" methods of window construction pictured on page 209.

Mr. Ma has written some highly informative and enriching text. This text is preamble to the great photos which take up the bulk of the book's volume. I would urge you not to neglect the text, tempting as it is just to study the great photographs.

The text contains the following chapters:

1. Introduction
2. Relations Between Doors and Windows and Construction
3. Evolution of Doors and Windows
4. Decorative Technical Characteristic for Doors and Windows
5. Cultural Implications of Doors and Windows
6. Aesthetic Significance of Doors and Windows
7. Conclusion

As I have already noted, the text is hugely helpful. The glory of this book, however, is in the photographs.

If you want to add this book to your library, I would ask Paragon Books in Chicago if they can get it for you. I was fortunate enough to acquire my copy in Beijing.