



Chen Meiqi carves a woodblock under the guidance of her father, Chen Yishi. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Carving a story of skill

Woodblock printing transformed virtually everything about the written word centuries ago. Three generations of one family have continued to inscribe its legacy on publishing. **Yang Feiyue** reports

Chen Yishi's presbyopic glasses magnify the Buddha emerging from beneath his chisel as he wields the tool to whittle the image into the ebony woodblock he is holding.

The septuagenarian retiree from Hangji town on the outskirts of Yangzhou, East China's Jiangsu province, still takes orders and is creating the Buddha block for a cultural company in Southwest China's Sichuan province. He also produces works purely for his own interest, such as his recently completed woodblock-printed classic anthology, *Three Hundred Tang Poems*.

"I need to keep my fingers nimble, or I'll get rusty," he said.

The artisanship for the folk art, which made the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006 and was inscribed on UNESCO's list in 2009, requires not only meticulous training but also great talent.

Typically, 2-centimeter-thick blocks are hewn from fine-grained pear or jujube wood before they are polished and engraved.

Drafts of the Chinese characters and images are then brushed onto extremely thin paper and proofed for mistakes before they are pasted onto the blocks. These designs provide guides for the artisans, who etch them into the wood to generate the raised borders of words that will be coated with ink and then applied to paper pages.

Woodblock printing was initially used to publish Buddhist texts amid the religion's zenith in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

It is considered one of ancient China's four great inventions, along with papermaking, gunpowder and the compass.

The oldest surviving woodblock-printed text is a scroll of the Chinese version of the *Diamond Sutra*, which dates back to 868 and was discovered in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, Gansu province, in the early 20th century.

Woodblock printing enjoyed unprecedented development in Yangzhou during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), when Emperor Kangxi commissioned an official named Cao Yin to establish the Yangzhou poetry bureau. The bureau brought skilled artisans to Yangzhou, where many quality private woodblock workshops sprang up in the following centuries.

Hangji town in particular stood out as a woodblock-printing center. Chen's grandfather opened Hangji's biggest woodblock-



From top: Artisans carve a block of characters. A reproduced version of an ancient book. An illustration of a "door god". A woodblock-printed scroll of the Chinese version of the Diamond Sutra dating to the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Woodblock produced by the Guangling printing house.
ZHANG PEIYANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

printing business during the reign of Emperor Guangxu.

Chen's father later took over the enterprise and produced many collector-grade classical books.

The country emphasized cultural heritage following New China's founding in 1949, leading to the establishment of Yangzhou Guangling Ancient Book Engraving Co Ltd, which has fulfilled its mission to preserve the ancient craft.

Chen's father began working at the publisher, and Chen studied under him, starting from the age of 14. He has developed expertise in carving various Chinese calligraphy styles, such as cursive, seal and official characters.

The artisan and colleagues at Guangling have also restored many historical books and documents, and brought watercolor-block printing back from the verge of extinction.

Indeed, he has devoted himself to preserving all the ancient methods used in the trade that, centuries ago, resulted in a paradigm shift for written language that ultimately transformed the world.

"The most commonly used wood comes from wild fruitless pear trees," he said. "It has a moderate hardness and fine grain, and its size doesn't change much when it's soaked or dried. These qualities make it relatively easy to carve and good for applying ink."

Blocks are soaked in water for six to seven months to remove the sugar, so they do not rot or get eaten by bugs.

"The secret is to make sure that while they're soaking they don't leave the water for even a second until it's time to dry them out completely. Otherwise, even an instant of exposure to air can cause convection cooling that can compromise the wood's structure," Chen said.

They're then dried in the shade for a month before they're resized and reshaped.

A light layer of paste is slathered on the dry blocks before pieces of thin paper with written characters or sketched images are placed atop the area that will be engraved once the adhesive dries.

Brushstrokes are specially

executed to enable precision cutting of the blocks to ensure every character is clear and graceful.

Images are the trickiest, Chen said. "The wood grain runs horizontally. So, when carving the expression in a person's eyes, for example, you have to pick a place to etch vertical lines, so the eyes appear particularly dark when printed to make them vivid and lively."

"The lines must be smooth to present the face, the hands and even the motion of the fingers."

A craftsman may only be able to carve a dozen characters a day, and a 100-page book could take an experienced artist a year or two to finish.

When Chen's father was on his deathbed, Chen promised he would carry forward the craft. He has since extended this legacy to his daughter, who has worked at Guangling since 2001.

In 2007 the Ministry of Culture and Tourism named Chen a national inheritor of woodblock printing.

His daughter, Chen Meiqi, initially worked as a jade sculptor before her father persuaded her to instead carve woodblocks as the number of practitioners of this ancient printing method

dwindled.

"My father had 20 students before 2005, but only one continued his training. I could feel he desperately wished I could carry on this legacy," she said.

"The learning process is arduous. Different fonts require different levels of detail."

Quoting her father, she said, "There are no shortcuts or tricks to mastery — just continuous practice."

Chen Meiqi heads the learning center Guangling founded in 2007 to enable anyone who is interested to study and appreciate the craft under experienced artisans' guidance.

The Guangling printing house is also striving to come up with new applications for the ancient craft.

"It can be used to print in a variety of traditional styles, such as modern books that use old binding methods, or to reproduce ancient Chinese books for collectors," she said.

Villagers give monkeys a taste of the good life

By **YANG JUN**
and **WANG SONGSONG**

Like the fabled monkeys that live on Huaguo Mountain in the ancient Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, Francois' langur monkeys live happily in Guizhou province, thanks to species migration and poverty alleviation relocation projects.

This was not always the case. Many local residents recall how the monkeys posed a threat to farmland in the 1980s, when crop cultivation was expanded to produce more food. The expansion resulted in a shrinking habitat and food shortages for the primates.

Li Yongfa, a former resident of Xuehua village, in the core area of Mayanghe National Nature Reserve, said the monkeys often stole corn for food. In response, the villagers used traps and bonfires to scare them off.

In 1987 Mayanghe National Nature Reserve was established, and the monkeys were spotted in the area a short time later.

The reserve administration quickly worked to raise awareness of animal protection and educate local villagers, who were compensated for crop losses. Gradually the relationship between the villagers and the monkeys improved.

"Nowadays local people's awareness of environmental protection is rising and they are willing to vacate land for the monkeys, which also gives the residents an improved and larger space for development," Li said.

In 2018 the administration and the local government started ecological migration and poverty alleviation relocation projects. About 4,600 people who lived in the reserve moved to Dengta industrial park in Bijiang district of Tongren city, as well as neighboring communities in other factories and newly built communities in nearby villages.

Wu Ankang, director of the administration, said that after the residents left, trees were planted to provide fruits such as peaches, plums and pears for the monkeys to eat.

"We have improved our efforts to publicize, observe and study the monkeys, and also established a five-tier forest and river chief system. Fifty-one rangers are responsible for protecting forest resources and preventing fires

and hunting. A special team has been set up to measure changes in numbers of monkeys and other animals in the region."

According to reports in Tongren Daily, the measures have resulted in the number of Francois' langur monkeys rising from 395 in 1987 to 763 at present.

Wu is planning an experimental zone: primary and middle school students will learn about the environment via science education and research tours, and by watching the monkeys from 1 or 2 meters away.

Villagers' lives have also improved. The main industry in Shangba village used to be flue-cured tobacco.

However, a coal shortage caused by poor transportation resources and outdated technology meant villagers had to fell trees to use as fuel to bake tobacco leaves, which caused serious damage to forest vegetation.

"Now we can get rich without felling trees," said Mao Xichun, who migrated from Shangba to Xianjin village.

In 2003 the nature reserve's status was upgraded to that of a national-level facility, and the villagers abandoned the tobacco industry.

In response the reserve administration reclaimed the forest at a price of 4,850 yuan (\$670) per 0.66 hectares (equivalent to 1 *mu*, a traditional measurement) and Mao's family received 480,000 yuan for their 7.2 hectares of contracted forest.

The administration also offered villagers annual environmental compensation at 16 yuan per 0.66 hectares. By 2020 Shangba's residents had received 15 million yuan in compensation.

"The environmental protection compensation mechanism will be further improved to aid economic development and environmental protection," Wu said.

Shangba's villagers have also benefited from other industries. In 2021 their total revenue from growing green tea was about 200,000 yuan. They have also planted more than 120 hectares of herbs used in traditional Chinese medicine, and about 100 households keep bees to produce honey.

"Move ourselves, and we have a brighter future," Li said. "Make room for the monkeys, and they have a larger habitat."



Two Francois' langur monkeys hold their infants in the Mayanghe National Nature Reserve in Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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