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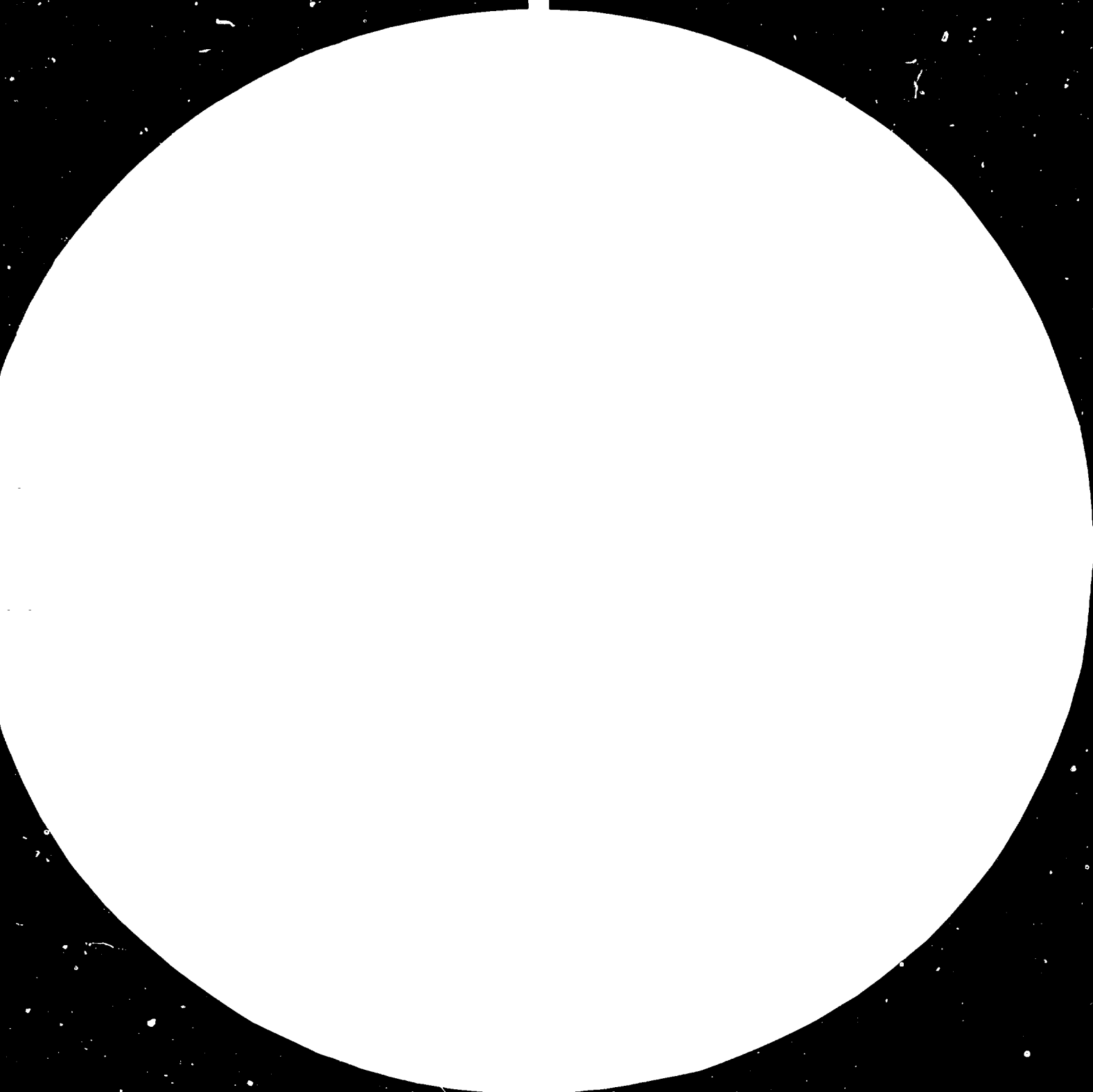
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AN INTRODUCTION TO CHINA'S FURNITURE INDUSTRY*

by

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China's furniture industry is an important industry under the administration of the Ministry of Light Industry. Following the principle of different products under different levels of administration, the wood furniture, steel furniture and steel-and-wood furniture are under the control of the Ministry of Light Industry and other products such as bamboo furniture, cane furniture etc. are under the control of the local administration.

China's furniture industry has altogether more than 2,100 enterprises in the different parts of the country with a total employment of more than 270,000 people. The products are mainly for the local market. In 1980, the total production of furniture of the country was more than 33 million pieces, among which more than 21 million pieces were household wood furniture, more than 5.1 million pieces were steel furniture and more than 7.2 million pieces were steel-and-wood furniture. In addition, a great number of bamboo furniture, cane furniture, etc. were made in different places. The annual consumption of wood by the furniture industry was about 2.3 million cubic metres and that of steel more than 120,000 tons. In 1980 the gross value of the furniture industry accounted for 1.5 billion yuan (RMB)^{1/} in which around 13 percent was exported.

Our furniture industry is a traditional industry with a long history. As early as in the period of Spring and Autumn and the Period of Warring Kingdoms (770-221 B.C.) there were already tables and desks. The Sui and Tang Dynasties (589-960 A.D.) saw a big increase in its variety, and in the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties (960-1279 A.D.), there were already pretty complete range of varieties and shapes of furniture. By the 17th century, the furniture in the Ming Dynasty, attained a very high artistic level and became our characteristic national style. This can be considered to be the artistic peak of the furniture history of our country, with a fine combination of high art and production technology. It has the characteristics of beautiful design, balanced

^{1/} Approximately US\$ 1 billion

dimensions, impressive and natural contours and profiles, regular and reasonable construction, and fine and delicate decorations, thus enjoying high appreciation and reputation throughout the world and imparting considerable influence to the design and art of furniture in the world. Although the furniture industry of our country has a long history and once enjoyed high international reputation, it had no real chance to develop during the long feudal society, and the production technology has been backward and stagnant for a long time. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, with the attention and help of the State, the furniture industry has got a new life and through the efforts of more than thirty years, great changes have taken place in our country's furniture industry.

In the first place, individual artisans employed handicraft workers and private owned enterprises have been organized according to the principle of voluntary participation into furniture factories with collective ownership as basic ownership, thus eliminating exploitation, increasing scale of production, carrying on production through division of work and collaboration, achieving the adjustment of the products, promoting the development of productivity and creating the conditions for the gradual realization of technical reform and specialization in production.

Secondly, hand operations have been gradually developed into the present semi-mechanized or mechanized operations. At present the production of the whole country is about 40 percent mechanized and in some places as high as 60 percent. Superheated steam, infrared, microwave, energy storage welding, light-solidifying paint, mechanization of painting and some individual automatic machines, automatic lines, etc. have already started to be used and developed.

Thirdly, the raw materials used have already been extended from natural wood to such industrial materials as wood based panels, steel and aluminium alloys, plastics, etc. which are already used to a considerable extent. Within the frame of the furniture industry, there has been a rapid development of multi-purpose utilization of wood wastes and shavings to produce blockboards, particle board and fibreboard on a considerable scale. Therefore such raw

materials are being used in the furniture industry in increasing percentages.

Fourthly, there has been a great increase of the varieties and types of furniture. Apart from the tremendous increase of the varieties of the traditional furniture, modern wood furniture and furniture using local indigenous raw materials such as bamboo, cane, willow, etc., we have also started to manufacture steel furniture, steel-and-wood furniture, aluminium alloy furniture, furniture using different materials and plastics furniture. The construction of modern furniture has developed from frame type to knock-down panel type. Furniture of folded construction, combination and multi-use construction is manufactured. Some varieties such as those specifically used in hotels, airports and ships, are also developing and increasing step by step.

Fifthly, the industry for making accessories are being strengthened. Two factories of considerable size for making accessories for the furniture industry of the whole country have already been established, producing in big quantities hardware fittings and decorative parts for various types of furniture, which have already been extensively used in export furniture. The backward state of the manufacturing of furniture accessories is changing for the better. Some provinces and cities have even established a number of factories making paints, adhesives, etc. specific for the needs of the furniture industry, resulting in making it more complete. As far as machine and equipment manufacture is concerned, the country has planned a number of factories to manufacture various woodworking machines and small capacity complete particle board plants to improve multi-purpose utilization of wood and provide the furniture industry with positive services for technical modifications.

Sixthly, research and information services are being improved. In order to carry out actively the transfer of technology, a technical information centre for the furniture industry for the whole country was founded and has published a trade magazine entitled "Furniture". Besides, there is a furniture industry standardization centre, which has issued four ministerial standards: (a) drafting of wood furniture; (b) basic dimensions for popular furniture; (c) wood furniture and (d) steel furniture and some other standards are currently being edited. Some of the ministerial standards have narrowed the gap between

the advanced international level and ours. Research institutions are being gradually strengthened and there are now twenty-eight regional furniture research institutes in the whole country, carrying out research and development aiming at solving the local production problems.

Seventhly, the education of staff and workers has started to be improved. The Government has set up a furniture design specialization in the Central College of Arts and Crafts, training specialized personnel for the furniture industry. In addition, the Ministry of Light Industry and the furniture companies of the provinces and cities concerned often sponsor national or regional short term training courses on special subjects according to their respective conditions and needs. In some areas where it is possible to do so, technical schools for training skilled workers have been created. A workers' university for the furniture industry has been established recently; it is still operating on an experimental basis. In order to facilitate the education of young workers, the Ministry of Light Industries is assigning some engineers and technicians to compile common teaching materials to be used for all the country's technical schools for the furniture industry.

Eightly, the administration system for the furniture industry has been strengthened and there are now fifty four furniture industry corporations throughout the country. These corporations have improved, since their establishment, the leadership of the furniture factories of the various places and played an active role in developing the furniture industry in a planned way.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the furniture industry of our country has witnessed a great development during the past thirty years or more, but due to its weak foundation and delayed development, there are still many things to do, such as the processing and use of raw materials, production technology, development of machinery and equipment, research and development, personnel training, management and administration, etc.

At present our national economy is passing through a period of readjustment. During this period, the main tasks of our furniture industry are to improve the quality and production technology, increase varieties and mechanization, and develop positively our furniture industry to meet better the demand of the domestic and international markets by tapping the existing potential and making technical innovations and modifications. We must save our natural resources and raise our capability and processing level to assure a rational and full utilization of these wood resources. Bearing in mind the actual conditions of our country (big population, big demand for furniture, and limited wood resources) we are putting our emphasis for future development on panel furniture based on particleboard, wood based panels cum metal furniture, improving the quality of finishing and increasing the production of knock-down, foldable, combination and multi-use furniture. At the same time, we have to increase the production of traditional furniture, make fuller use of our inheritance in this field and develop the unique designing skills and high production techniques of Ming furniture, while combining it with modern furniture to raise its artistic level and increase exports. Besides, we have to further strengthen research and development, personnel training, and international exchange and co-operation and to absorb and introduce into our country the international advanced technologies and scientific management methods so as to raise the level of the furniture industry of our country to meet the demand of the modernization of socialist construction.

