

Botanical Detective Story . . .

MYSTERY PRODUCT LINKS
TAXIDERMISTRY TO HAIR-DOBY EDITH M. VINCENT
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TAXIDERMISTS at Chicago Natural History Museum often use a curious material for dressing furs of animals being prepared for exhibits. The same material, Chinese shavings, is used by commercial



'SAVE THE BOX TOP?'

A package of Chinese shavings with label showing a young lady using the shellac-like substance to hold her hair in place much as it is done in our own beauty shops.

furriers to produce a glaze for women's coats. The shavings are from wood of some kind, but what kind of wood is it?

Chinese shavings are about two or three feet long, three or four inches wide, very thin, and of a definitely woody structure. They come in bundles with labels on which are printed characters and the picture of a Chinese girl. The characters, translated for us by a Chinese student working in the Department of Botany, give directions for preparing the solution but say nothing about the kind of wood used in making the shavings.

At least we knew that the shavings came from China and apparently were a well-known article of commerce there. Surely some of the Chinese botanists, especially those about the useful plants of that country, would give some account of them. Because most of the books were indexed only for the scientific names of the plants and not for their uses, they proved disappointing

until the last one consulted (which was almost discarded because it had no index) was looked over casually. It was a very small book by Augustine Henry, entitled *Notes on the Economic Botany of China*, and as I leafed through it, my eye was caught by the words "shavings, *P'ao-hua*."

USED IN CHINESE HAIRDRESSING

Reading more carefully, I found that these words were part of a letter to Dr. Henry from the Director of Kew Gardens in England, asking information about a "wood used by Chinese ladies for dressing the hair which is sold in the form of shavings, *P'ao-hua*, which, when put into water exudes a clean glue. The Paris Exhibition Catalogue tells us that the tree occurs in Kwang-tung, where it is known as the spittle tree."

The Director of Kew Gardens asked Dr. Henry to try to get specimens of the tree and more details about it because he had found no information in the Chinese botanies he had consulted. The letter ended with the query, "How long has the practice of using this glue been in vogue with the Chinese ladies? I am not aware that any one has paid attention to the subject of fashion in China."

Now I had both a Chinese and an English name to look for, but none of our books listed either of them in their indexes. However, the inquiry to Dr. Henry had come from Kew Gardens and I recalled that they publish a series of bulletins about plants. If Dr. Henry had replied to the request, maybe it had been published in one of these bulletins. Starting with 1893, the date of the Henry book, I searched the indexes for "*P'ao-hua*," "spittle wood," and "Chinese shavings," none of which I found. But when I came to the index for the 1897 volume, there was a listing of "Chinese Bandoline Wood," which sounded as if it might be the same or a similar product.

This article repeated the facts about the glue-producing qualities of the wood and its use by Chinese ladies as a hairdressing and went on to say that it was exported from Canton to Peking under a Chinese name meaning cosmetic glue shavings. From leaf specimens sent to Kew by the British Consul at Ningpo the tree was identified tentatively as *Machilus Thunbergii*, a species originally described from Japan by Siebthorp and Zuccarini. A drawing made from these and later specimens, showing flowers and fruits, was published the same year in Hooker's *Icones Plantarum*.

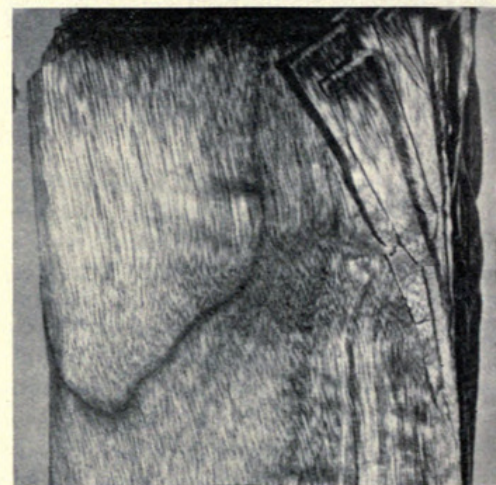
IDENTITY ESTABLISHED

Apparently this settled the identity of the tree, but the description was not sufficiently detailed to be completely satisfactory; and I went on to see if there were more recent accounts. *Tropical Woods*, a magazine published by the Yale School of Forestry, was the most likely place to find them. My search was rewarded by several

short articles about the wood known to them as "pau-hoi," a variation of the name "p'ao-hua" used by Dr. Henry. These notes were by various authors who differed as to the proper name for the tree but were unanimous in their accounts of its mucilage-producing quality.

In 1930 there was a final article by Ryozo Kanehira, a botanist then connected with the Taihoku Imperial University of Formosa. He said that the earlier articles had raised the question as to whether or not the Chinese "pau-hoi" had been correctly identified. In trying to settle that question he had made microscopic examinations of authentic specimens of "pau-hoi" and of *Machilus Thunbergii* that showed differences of structure; also the specimen of *M. Thunbergii* did not yield a gluey solution when soaked in water. He had received reports that shavings from several other species of *Machilus* as well as from trees of other genera were being sold as "pau-hoi."

After carefully examining specimens of all of them he came to the conclusion that they were commercial substitutes or adulterants. However, the "pau-hoi" that yielded the gluey solution definitely belonged to the genus *Machilus*, though not to any of the published species. Accordingly he gave it the new name *Machilus pauhoi*. It is an



FOR COIFFURES AND TAXIDERMISTRY

Opened package of Chinese shavings showing how they are peeled off for use. One or two shavings soaked in water yield a sort of shellac used in China for dressing women's hair and in the Museum for treating animal skins.

evergreen tree belonging to the laurel family, which is native in southeastern China. It grows as high as 90 feet, is about two feet in diameter, and has smooth gray bark. The leaves are a shiny dark green above and light green underneath. It has clusters of fragrant creamy-yellow flowers and deep-green round berries.

The only Madagascar ethnological collection of importance in the United States and one of the most complete in existence is exhibited in Hall E.



Vincent, Edith M. 1952. "Mystery Product Links Taxidermy to Hairdo." *Bulletin* 23(2), 6–6.

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