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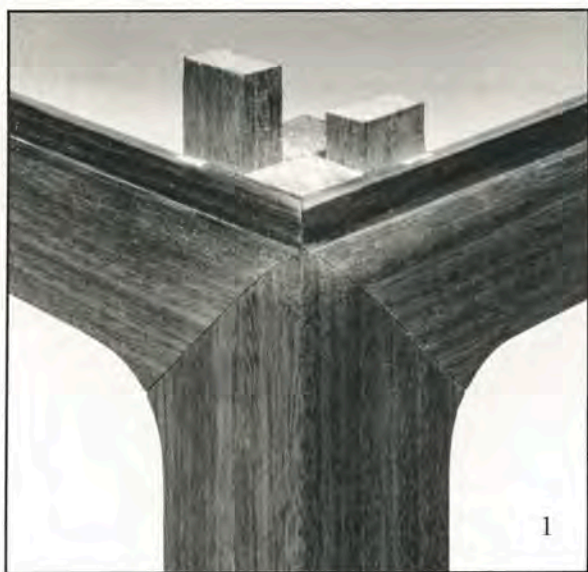
# Integrity and Joinery in Chinese Furniture

## Corner Leg Construction on Waisted Furniture

Curtis Evarts

*“The Chinese handle inflexible wood in such masterly fashion that, almost unaware, one receives the impression of design in a living medium.”*  
George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*

One essential aspect of the appreciation of Chinese hardwood furniture is an understanding of its joinery. To the aesthetically inclined observer, the study of joinery may seem at first an unusual approach, yet the techniques employed play an important part in the overall effect of a piece of Chinese



furniture. The harmony that we feel when looking at masterpieces of Chinese furniture is often the result of a unity that lies beneath the surface. We are not simply looking at pieces of wood connected together to form a functional object, but at a whole realized from parts assembled with integrity. The Chinese system of joinery is ancient and permeated their ingenious technological culture as well as their timber

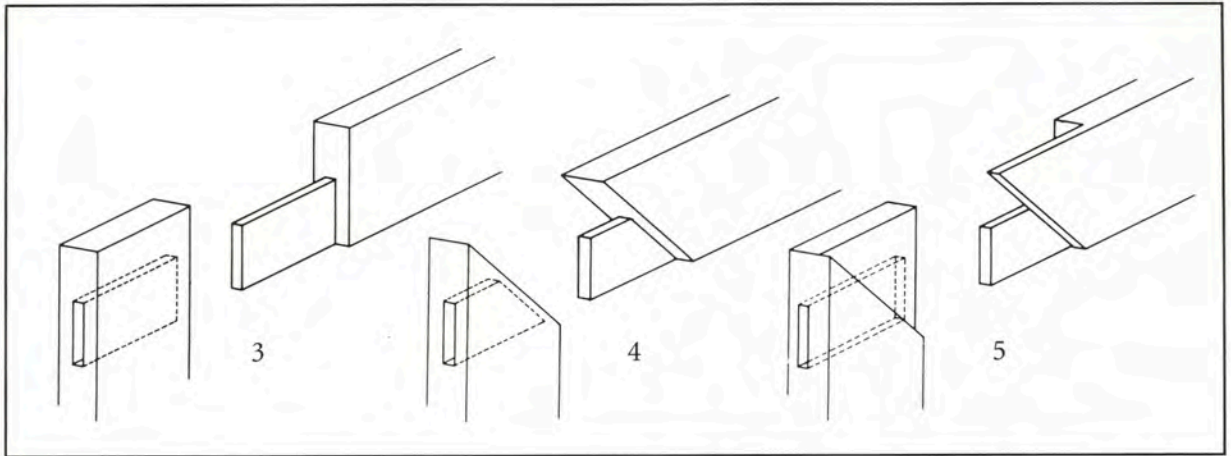
architecture, yet it reached a height of sophistication and refinement during the Ming and early Qing dynasties in the manufacture of hardwood furniture.

Complex joinery can be difficult to understand, yet by unraveling its intricacies a new level of appreciation for Chinese furniture can be found. In waisted furniture, the construction of a corner leg with double-lock tenons and a dovetail wedge that attaches to a housing cut in the apron seems particularly complex, yet when the construction is analyzed to show its separate parts and their individual functions, its complexity begins to disappear (fig. 2). Essentially, the join is designed to hold three parts together securely at right angles to one another, with only clean mitered joints showing (fig. 1). A plain mitered joint is the most visually pleasing way to connect pieces at right angles, yet it is by itself a structurally weak joint, as can be seen in the common picture frame. Usually nails and glue are used and the joints hold until some stress is placed on the frame. Then the joints loosen and the frame collapses.

The simple mortise and tenon joint is the basis of Chinese joinery and is one of the strongest and most secure joints (fig. 3). It has been used by Chinese craftsmen since at least the Warring States period (480-221 B.C.), and still is used on many devices—from wind-powered wheelbarrows to plowshares—where the strength of the joint is crucial.

As the aesthetic sensitivities of craftsmen evolved, joints were developed that combined structural integrity with beauty. The mitered mortise and tenon joint (fig. 4) and the half-lapped miter joint (fig. 5)



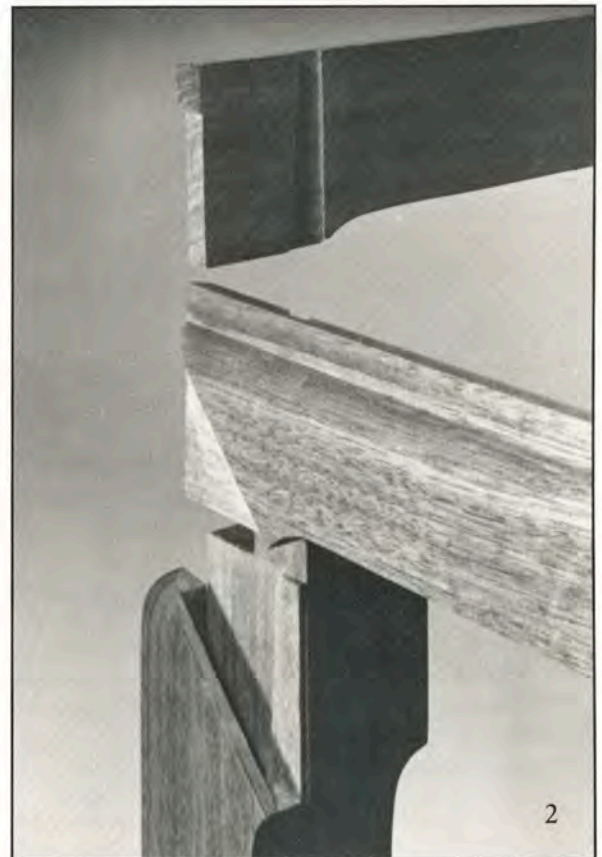


both naturally follow as refinements of early basic structural joints. In the corner leg joint that we see on furniture of waisted construction, we find also the addition of a dovetail key much like the transverse brace used to secure panels and tabletops (fig. 6). The dovetail is another joinery technique that can be dated to the Warring States period, as evidenced from tomb excavations. In our joint, however, we see a sophisticated development in the dovetail key: its wedge shape, which fits loosely until tapped into final position, simultaneously drawing the miters tightly together. Now the apron is securely joined to the leg, with its tenon in a mortise and its dovetail slot locked into a dovetail key. These pieces were undoubtedly shaped to their final contours after the joints were fitted, allowing the line to be drawn and sculpted as a fluid whole, further unifying the form.

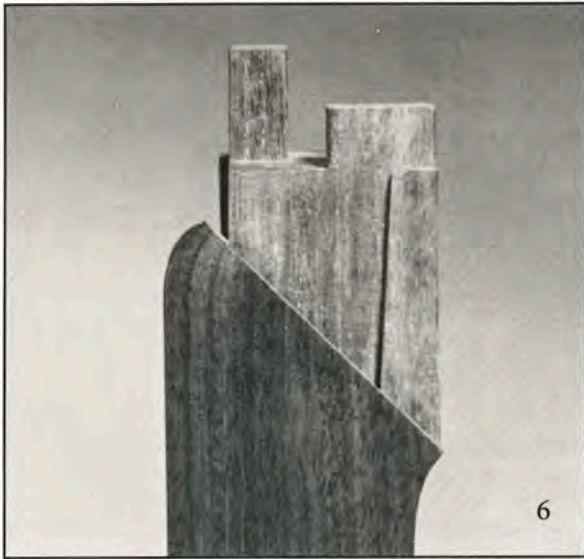
From the eighteenth century onwards, craftsmanship tended to deteriorate and carpenters relied more often on glue to secure joints. In his *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, Wang Shixiang states, "The truth is the overall superb quality of sixteenth and seventeenth century furniture had declined by the mid-Qing dynasty. . . . It has also been observed that specific joints were more common during the earlier period. Examples include . . . the blind mortise and tapered dovetail joint on table legs . . . By the mid-Qing these joints and features had become more and more unusual" (Vol. I, 169). Since the dovetail key is normally hidden from view, it is difficult to discern its presence without partially disassembling the join or using X-ray photography. However, the aprons will usually tend to have a little extra thickness to allow for the dovetail housing, and sometimes there will be a slight visual hint of the

dovetail key from the underside of the leg where it curves into the apron. Many of these joints have been damaged due to improper disassembly procedures. The apron must slide off the leg vertically and not horizontally as one might naturally think.

On a circular incense stand with three legs we see an even further development and sophisticated variation in the joinery of a leg to the apron (fig. 7). Here the craftsman is no longer working with famil-

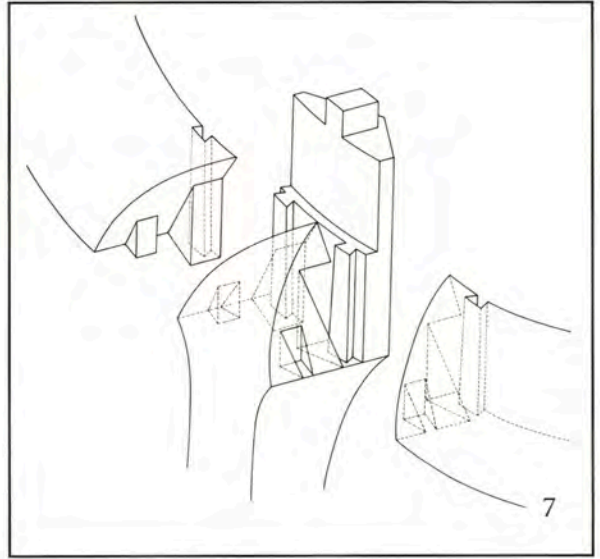






iar right angles, but has entered into the more complex realm of circular and curvilinear geometry, requiring mastery in calculation and three dimensional visualization. The additional thickness of material used here requires double dovetail tenons; the join, however, remains functionally the same, securely unifying legs and aprons with a structural soundness that enables the piece to be sculpted in the round.

Unlike lacquered furniture, with its brightly decorated coating unifying the whole, Chinese hardwood furniture achieves a natural beauty through abstract grain patterns cut from the finest hardwoods



and through the play of changes in grain direction as pieces join to one another. And the beauty of classical Chinese furniture is further enhanced by its internal structure, which radiates a quiet and gentle inner strength that we can sense and appreciate by deepening our understanding of Chinese joinery.

#### WORKS CITED

- Kates, George. *Chinese Household Furniture*. New York: Dover Publications, 1962.
- Wang Shixiang. *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*. 2 vols. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 1990.

## In the Following Issue

*The Spring 1991 issue of the Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society will include the following articles:*

**A Jichimu Platform-type Daybed** by Wang Shixiang

Wang Shixiang discusses a *jichimu* daybed in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Renaissance, California, using it as a point of departure to study the origin and development of the platform-type daybed.

**Continuous Horseshoe Arms and Half-Lapped Pressure-Peg Joins** by Curtis Evarts

Curtis Evarts explores the sophisticated joinery that allowed Chinese craftsmen to construct the curved rails of the graceful horseshoe-back armchair.

**Carriers of Light: The Chinese Lampstand and Lantern** by Sarah Handler

Sarah Handler surveys the development of lighting devices in old China, from ancient bronze lanterns to the elegant hardwood lampstand of the Ming dynasty.

**A Chinese Folding Chair in the Escorial** by Margaret Medley

Margaret Medley examines a folding chair that made its way to Spain during the time of Philip II and may have been reserved for the king's personal use.

**En Route to the West: Chinese Furniture in Hawaii** by Henry Piltz Kramer

Henry Kramer traces the important role that designers, collectors, and scholars living in Hawaii have played in the importation and connoisseurship of classical Chinese furniture.