
JOURNAL OF THE
CLASSICAL CHINESE
FURNITURE SOCIETY



VOLUME TWO
NUMBER ONE

WINTER QUARTER 1991

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A Report on the First International Symposium of Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture

Curtis Evarts

The first International Symposium of Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture was held in Beijing last year, 11-13 November. It was organized by the association recently formed in Beijing—the Council on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture—under the auspices of China's National Committee of Arts and Crafts. The symposium aimed to stimulate further research into the field of classical Chinese furniture, to promote international academic exchange, to commemorate the forty-seventh anniversary of the

publication of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and the twentieth anniversary of the death of its author, Gustav Ecke, and to publicize the reproduction Ming-style furniture currently being manufactured throughout China. Two exhibitions of Ming and early Qing dynasty furniture were also assembled and ran concurrently with the symposium.

The symposium commenced at the China Arts and Crafts Museum, with the participants lined up under bright lights while television cameras and



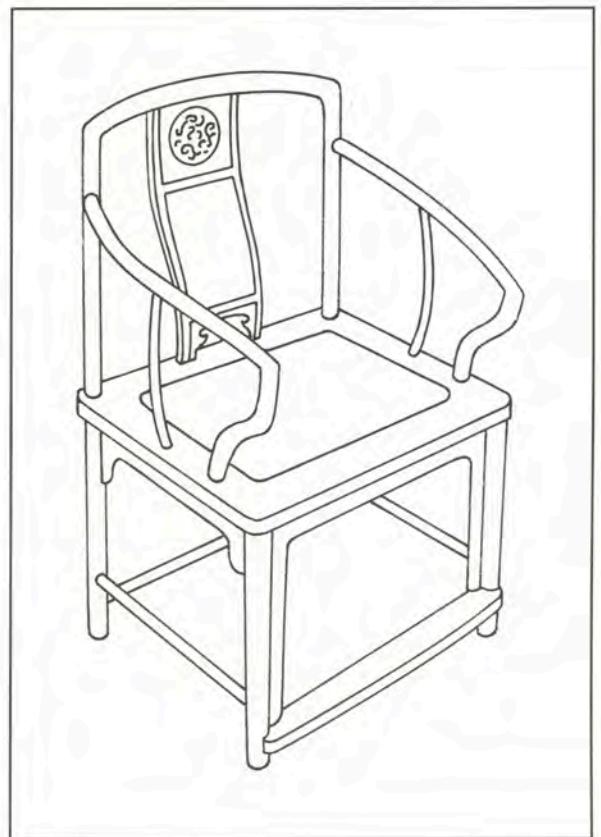
Participants of the First International Symposium of Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture

photographers' flashes recorded the opening ceremonies. Congratulatory speeches were given by Chen Zengbi and Tseng Yuho (Betty) Ecke among others. Chen Zengbi is Chairman of the Council on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture and professor at the Central Academy of Arts and Design. Tseng Yuho Ecke, wife and colleague of Gustav Ecke, was recently named Honorary Chairman of the Council on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture. Huang Zhou, Honorary Chairman of the National Committee of Arts and Crafts and a celebrated painter, performed the ribbon-cutting rites that officially opened the symposium. All participants were then invited to visit the exhibition of old and new furniture on the fourth floor of the museum.

The Chinese in attendance included furniture researchers, designers, and manufacturers from most of the provinces. Tseng Yuho Ecke was chiefly responsible for organizing the Western participants, among whom were furniture enthusiasts, collectors, and dealers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, and Europe, as well as members of a China art tour group that Mrs. Ecke had organized to coincide with the symposium.

Upon entering a large exhibition hall, we were greeted by booths and representative displays of new furniture. Several hundred examples of new Ming- and Qing-style reproduction furniture, fashioned primarily in rosewood, blackwood, and elm using traditional carpentry techniques, were available for purchase or order. As part of a new reform movement in the crafts, the Council is encouraging a rebirth of traditional craftsmanship in the hope that increased skill and sensitivity will enable cabinet-makers to create new domestic furniture adapted to contemporary life, thus perpetuating the legacy of Ming domestic furniture.

The new furniture was easily distinguishable from the display of antique furniture, which was located at the far end of the exhibition, and dominated by a large, seventeenth-century *huanghuali* canopy bed. It was the largest piece in a group of more than fifty pieces gathered from private collections in Beijing. Most of these pieces had never been exhibited or published. Unfortunately, however, no catalogue was available nor was photography of the antique furniture allowed. The six-posted canopy rested on a high-waisted platform with cabriole legs. Low-relief panels in the waist were



divided by bamboo-shaped struts and carved with floral motifs and birds, symbols of joy and happiness. The decoration above paralleled that below, with cloud-shaped *ruyi* medallions interspersed with birds and floral motifs in the lattice railings and panels carved in openwork around the top, giving the bed an overall feeling of femininity. The top canopy was a lattice frame with a *wanzi* character at the center, symbolizing eternal happiness.

Placed on the bed was the skillfully carved, high-waisted *huanghuali* kang table illustrated in Wang Shixiang's *Classic Chinese Furniture* (Wang 1988.118). Several other pieces exhibited and also illustrated in *Classic Chinese Furniture* included a large pair of *huanghuali* stools with curved legs (Wang 1988.65, pl. 21), between which stood a recessed-leg table with a beautifully figured mountain landscape marble panel (Wang 1988.171). The table was made from excellent material and the archaic, jade-like phoenix spandrels were masterfully

Fig. 1. Drawing of a southern official's hat armchair. Huanghuali. Central Academy of Arts and Design, Beijing.

carved. A *huanghuali* bench with humpback stretchers and low horsehoof feet (Wang 1988.74, pl. 35) was also exhibited. Wang catalogued all of these pieces as belonging to the Beijing Timber Factory Collection.

A *huanghuali* washstand with towel rack, similar to one in the collection of Mrs. Chen Mengjia (cf. Wang 1988.252), was a noteworthy piece. The towel rack terminated in thickly carved *lingzhi* fungus and cloud-head shapes. The supporting spandrels were artistically carved in openwork as budding foliage. The central panel was a cloud medallion shaped from *ruyi* heads. The finials took the form of strongly carved lotus buds. The stand appeared to have lost three to four inches from the bottom of its legs, probably through deterioration from sitting on damp earthen floors. Still, it remains one of the finest examples of the few remaining washstands.

Another exceptional piece was a very large, waisted, *tielimu* painting table made from excellent material. Its thick legs terminated in beautifully drawn and inwardly scrolled feet. Each leg was further supported with a giant's arm brace extending from a dragon's mouth.

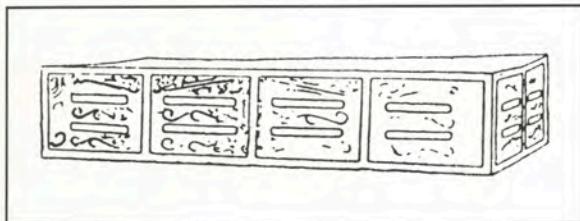
A group of pieces exhibited belonging to the Jin Oubo Collection included an eighteenth-century *zitan kang* table. The top surface was ingeniously inlaid with coconut shell and silver wire in a cracked ice and plum blossom design, a popular theme during the Kangxi period.

The symposium was held in the Zijin Hall at the Grand Hotel Beijing. The hotel and its rooms, where many of the visiting Westerners stayed, were completely furnished with reproduction Ming-style furniture. Some pieces were carefully copied in rosewood from the measured drawings by Yang Yao that illustrate Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Coinciding with the symposium was the release of the first Chinese translation of Gustav Ecke's celebrated work. The original artwork, including negatives and Yang Yao's drawings (which were actually painted on silk), had been preserved by Chen Zengbi during the Cultural Revolution. The plates in the new publication have a greater clarity and detail than those softened by the colotype process used in the rare first edition.

Chen Zengbi opened the symposium by honoring Gustav Ecke as the pioneering scholar of



Ming furniture, the man whose activities and achievements had laid the foundations for subsequent research. His considerable contributions were outlined and reviewed. Ecke was the first scholar to systematically research Ming furniture and to publish his work in a monograph. In it he made the



first comparative studies on the cross-cultural influence of Chinese furniture and indicated a possible evolution of the Ming furniture style that remains undisputed today. His work produced the first accurate drawings of Ming furniture and its joinery and was the first to propose rules for recognizing and dating it. Chen Zengbi suggested that "[w]hile the upsurge in the researching and collecting of Ming furniture has been greater and greater these years, it is deeply significant for us to memorialize its founder, Professor Ecke."

A series of Chinese papers followed, which were roughly translated for the benefit of the non-Chinese participants. The papers included: "A General Description of Han Dynasty Furniture" by Xuan Ji; "The Evolution of Ming Furniture through the Process of Cultural Development" by Luo Wuyi; "A Study of the Dunhuang Caves and Classical Chinese Furniture" by Yang Hong; "Ecke and Ming Furniture" by Chen Zengbi; "A Tentative Study of the Culture of Furniture, Part 1: Furniture and Etiquette" by Hu Wenyan; "The Style and Character of Ming Furniture" by Liang Qifan; "A Tentative Study of Chu-Style Furniture" by Zhang Yinwu; "The Design of Ming Furniture" by Tao Hong; "Traditional Ming-Style Furniture of the Minorities" by the Furniture Design Department at the Forestry

Institute in Nanjing; and "The Conditions of Traditional Furniture in Today's World and Methods of Development in the Present Age" by Tang Kaizheng. Over the next year many of these papers will be published in the *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*.

The following morning, papers were read by the Western representatives. Ernest Jackson, a colleague of Gustav Ecke at the University of Hawaii, read his sensitively written "Homage to Gustav Ecke" (see this issue, pp. 69-72). Sarah Handler gave a presentation entitled "Ablutions and Washing Clean: The Chinese Washbasin and Stand" (see Handler 24-37). I gave a slide presentation entitled "The Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture," which was intended to inform our colleagues about the museum's collection, its activities, research, publications, and future plans (see Evarts 86-89).

In a special appearance, Robert Ellsworth read a paper by Wu Tung, who was unable to attend, on chair-level seating that existed in Japan before the Tang dynasty, in which Wu Tung suggested that it was the influence of the Chinese that returned them to sitting on mats. Ellsworth then gave an interesting

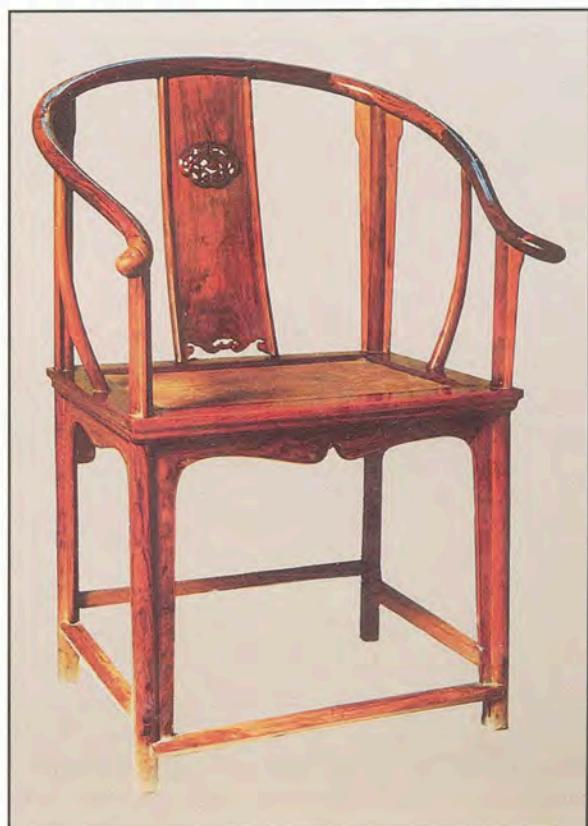


Fig. 2, facing page. Lute table. Huanghuali; height 79 cm, length 144 cm, width 47 cm. Central Academy of Arts and Design, Beijing. After Ecke 1991, pl. 15, pc. 14.

Fig. 3. Drawing of Tuan-fang tray, 1300-1000 B.C. Bronze. After Ecke 1991. 15.

Fig. 4. Horseshoe-back armchair. Huanghuali. Central Academy of Arts and Design, Beijing. After Ecke 1991, dust jacket.

presentation on a *huanghuali kang* table with a removable gallery from his own collection, comparing it with a detail from a lacquered screen depicting a merchant sailing vessel. The detail illustrated a similar table with railings furnishing the captain's quarters. The railings would have prevented items from falling off the table during rough seas. He further illustrated other pieces that might have been made for sailing vessels, including heavily reinforced chests, and knockdown tables that could have been stowed away when not in use.

The following morning participants were invited to visit the Central Academy of Arts and Design and view a special exhibition of twenty-eight pieces of Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture from the Academy's collection. Again photography was not permitted, but a catalogue of the collection is being prepared for publication in 1992 and will include other pieces not exhibited because of limited space. Nineteen previously unpublished examples were displayed, including an excellent pair of *huanghuali* yokeback armchairs with four protruding ends. Their yokes had a slightly exaggerated tilt at the ends that was quite successful, and were also

unusually through-tenoned where they joined the rear posts. Below the seat frame the round vertical members became square in section, with softly shaped convex surfaces.

Also exhibited were a pair of *huanghuali* low-back southern official's chairs possibly from the same workshop as the four in the Summer Palace (cf. Wang 1988.91) with the slight variations of carved medallions rather than jade plaques on their splats, and the addition of C-curved side posts (fig. 1). Between these chairs stood a *huanghuali* recessed-leg side table with beaded cloud-motif spandrels and double stretchers with perfected proportions (cf. Wang 1990.II, 77, fig. B35). The austere yet delicate *huanghuali* "psaltery table" or lute table, once in the possession of Gustav and Betty Ecke, is now in the Academy's collection (fig. 2). It has probably not been restored since Ecke owned it, as its present fragile and unstable condition justifies his concern regarding its insufficient structure, which he documented in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*: "For the sake of clarity and reserve all securing devices were occasionally abandoned. Table 14 (Pl. 15) with its high and slender legs is a distinguished example of



Symposium participants give closing remarks. From left to right: Curtis Evarts, Tseng Yuho (Betty) Ecke, Hans Siegel, Chen Zengbi, Li Xiao-ling, Liu Youyuan, and Fan Baozhen



Curtis Evarts

this; and, just as a psaltery table, perhaps firm enough. The plainness observed in this design reminds us again of the primitive Tuan-fang bronze stand... This over-simplified construction, however, does not inspire confidence. Such design rather than the ancient frame and panel tray [i.e., the Tuan-fang stand, fig. 3] would deserve to be cast in metal" (Ecke 1962.10). Perhaps the work of a good restorer could have restored his confidence in its minimalistic form.

Several pieces illustrated in Wang Shixiang's *Classic Chinese Furniture* were also exhibited, including a single *huanghuali* stool, double-molded with wrap-around stretchers framing decorative interlocking circles (Wang 1988.60, pl. 13), as well as a pair of *huanghuali* stools with humpback stretchers and horsehoof feet (Wang 1988.61, pl. 15). A pair of elaborately carved *huanghuali* rose chairs (Wang 1988.82-83) matched a third single chair in the Dr. S. Y. Yip collection, suggesting that they were part of an original set of four or eight. And an inspection of the rare *jumu* low chair (Wang 1988.96) supported Wang's opinion that the chair retains its original form and has not been cut down.

The *huanghuali* horseshoe armchair that appears on the dust jacket of the new Chinese edition of Ecke's book was also on view (fig. 4). Its unusual

splat was fashioned with two vertical stiles framing a solid panel, which was carved with an open-work medallion at the top and a beaded cloud-shaped opening at its base. The long spandrels flank both sides of the rear posts and the front side of the front posts and extend to the seat frame. These elements, combined with the strongly outcurved side posts, make this chair a unique example of its type.

After returning to the Grand Hotel Beijing in the afternoon, the closing ceremonies were conducted by Liu Youyuan, Deputy Managing Director and Senior Economist of the Council. They commenced with the bestowal of honor on four venerable master woodworkers in attendance, including Li Jianyuan, Peng Alung, and Zhu Lianpeng, the carpenter who helped to restore Wang Shixiang's pieces. Accolades applauding the success of the symposium were given by Chen Zengbi and Fan Baozhen, who had collaborated to organize the symposium. Then Betty Ecke, Hans Siegel, and I gave closing remarks thanking the organizers for their hospitality. I was delighted with the enthusiasm for classical Chinese furniture that we had encountered, and expressed the hope that our colleagues in China would create their own permanent exhibition where all could come and draw inspiration from the beautiful forms contained within this rarified medium.

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Note: After the success of the First International Symposium on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture in Beijing, the Council on Ming Domestic Furniture is now planning to follow with a second symposium on Ming furniture, in memory of Yang Yao, to be held in Suzhou in late August 1992.