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Classical Chinese Furniture in the Piccus Collection

Curtis Evarts

Since early 1968, Alice and Robert Piccus, both Americans, have lived in Hong Kong, where Alice is director of Christie's art auction house and Bob is a business consultant. During their twenty-five years of residence in the city, they have formed several important collections of Oriental antiquities, including Anamese porcelain, Mongolian and Tibetan silver wares, Chinese and Tibetan carpets, wooden scholar's objects, and classical Chinese hardwood furniture.

Shortly after moving to Hong Kong, the Piccuses had the good fortune to meet and form a friendship with the collector and dealer Charlotte

Horstmann (Piccus 82), who was then living in a beautiful home filled with her collection of Ming and early Qing furniture. During those early years, the Piccuses spent many enjoyable evenings listening to Charlotte reminisce about life in Peking while seated on her *huanghuali chuang* (acquired in 1972 by the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City), and were inspired by the superb examples of furniture that she had gathered.

Bob Piccus recalls, "Of course, in those days it was assumed that classical furniture no longer existed in China, and so we had to be content with visiting museums and looking through the books by Ecke



and Kates. Bob Ellsworth's monumental work, published in 1970, provided a scholarly basis for understanding the development and structure of the furniture, but again, it was assumed at the time that what was saved from the turmoil of civil war in China was already in collections in the West. Nevertheless, Bob Ellsworth was a frequent visitor to Hong Kong, then as now, and an endless source of knowledge and



anecdotes about Chinese furniture. This further whet our appetite, although we never expected to be able to satisfy our collecting urges."

As a result, they turned to collecting small hardwood scholar's objects, particularly brush pots, scroll pots, and boxes. Some of these pieces were eventually cataloged in *Wood From the Scholar's Table*—a book that Piccus and a small group of fellow collectors published—and appeared later in the catalog of the 1986 Hong Kong Oriental Ceramic Society exhibition, *Arts from the Scholar's Studio*, which was the largest exhibition held to date on the subject of the Chinese scholar. In forming the collection, the Piccuses looked for beautiful wood grain and ingenious construction, which would indicate that the materials had been selected and handled with the greatest intentionality. One example is the finely constructed seventeenth-century *huanghuali* album box (fig. 1), whose top is formed from an unusually wide single panel. The two parts of each side were formed of carefully selected single pieces of well-figured *huanghuali*, which were cut afterwards to retain their matching grain. All the joinery is concealed,

Facing page. Robert and Alice Piccus in the library of their Hong Kong home, 1992.

Fig. 1, above. Album box, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; length 51.4 cm, width 39.5 cm, depth 11.4 cm.

Fig. 2, right. Scroll pot, nineteenth century. Burl; height 31.7 cm, diameter 39.4 cm.

with no metal reinforcements to hide faulty craftsmanship. The *baitong* lockplate and hinges echo the simplicity and restraint of the joinery, creating a special box inside of which one might expect to find even greater treasures.

One of Piccus's favorite scroll pots (fig. 2) is of the burl or root wood of *jumu*, whose main body is composed of a rather open and porous gnarled growth. This natural formation appears to have been skillfully cut from a tree with its potential maximized by leaving just enough remaining solid wood around its upper edge to form a perfect bonding ring, and thus uniting this otherwise fragile rarity of nature. The base was filled with an applied thickened lacquer to solidify the lower edge. While the album box re-

flects the admiration of the Chinese literati for quiet discipline and intentionality, this scroll pot reflects their taste for spontaneity and naturalism.

Although the Piccuses were able to find beautiful scholar's objects during the 1970s and early 1980s, collecting furniture in Hong Kong during that period



was much more difficult, as the market only offered the elaborately decorated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furniture that suited the Cantonese taste. Piccus recalls, "We had to be content with blackwood and the occasional *zitan* piece made 'in the Ming style.' We were also able to have a few good

Ming-style reproductions made during the final period in which Charlotte Horstmann operated her furniture factory, employing the same craftsmen she had first engaged in the 1950s. The reproductions were made with a wood the Hong Kong craftsmen call *bai tsun tzi* or 'white blackwood,' whose grain

resembles that of *huanghuali*. Again, at that time, conventional wisdom had it that *huanghuali* was extinct, and that no old wood was available either.

"In 1971 we unknowingly bought our first piece of *huanghuali*, the throne chair (fig. 3), from the father of Albert Chan, the present owner of Chan Shing Kee, the oldest and probably most well-established dealer in Chinese furniture. As was common with blackwood, the throne chair had been stained with purple permanganate dye to resemble *zitan* and had then been lacquered. As a result, we couldn't tell that the wood was *huanghuali* and, in fact, we thought it was blackwood. It was only about twelve years later that a dealer friend noticed the stain was fading in places and told us it was *huanghuali*. We then spent about a year laboriously removing the lacquer and stain by hand to reveal the *huanghuali* that was hidden beneath."

Although not considered by most to be an example of "classical Chinese furniture," this unusual chair remains in the collection primarily as a conversation piece and an example of the early period of furniture collecting. In a recent conversation, Wang Shixiang said that similar seats were used to carry lightweight figures of Buddha—formed of ramie and

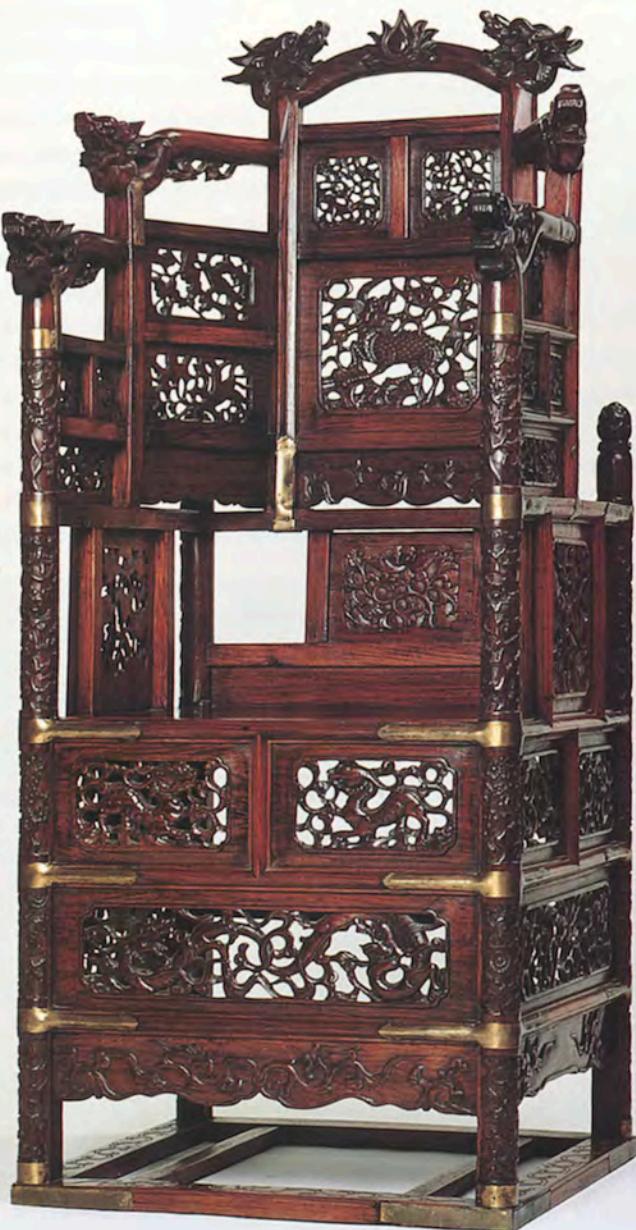


Fig. 3, left. Throne chair, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; overall height 127 cm, seat height 49.5 cm, width 53 cm, depth 50.1 cm.

Fig. 3a, facing page, above. Detail of figure 3, openwork panel of ducks swimming among lotus.

Fig. 4, facing page, below. Folding stool, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. One of a pair. Huanghuali; height 49.5 cm, width 54 cm, depth 48.9 cm.



lacquer—through the streets during certain religious ceremonies. This chair also resembles a chair with carved panels illustrated in one of a series of paintings entitled “Eighteen Lohans” (Ge 124). The painting depicts a lohan seated on a throne chair similar to the Piccus chair in its narrow width, high seat, and carved panels and terminals. The crest rail on the *huanghuali* chair is flanked with spirited dragon heads confronting a flaming pearl. And, similar to a design common in imperial throne chairs, two lively dragons step down and around on each side to empower the seat with authority. The four vertical uprights are carved in relief with *lingzhi* fungi, chrysanthemums, plum blossoms, peonies, and lotus. The front and side panels directly below the seat each contain two open-work carvings of confronting *qilins* carrying stalks of sacred *lingzhi* in their mouths. Below these, a single panel displays confronting dragons with entwined tails. The two corresponding side panels are especially well composed, depicting the lotus in various

stages of bloom while a mandarin duck swims on waves among their stems (fig. 3a). The main panel at the back is carved with a horned *qilin* among rocks and clouds. Perhaps one day the symbolic iconography of this chair will be deciphered by a knowledgeable scholar, giving further indication of its original use and the status of its user.

The Piccuses first realized that Ming furniture still existed in China when they met and became friends with Wang Shixiang in 1983. At that time, Wang was just completing his catalogue, which was to reveal hitherto unknown pieces in outstanding Beijing collections such as his own and that of Chen Mengjia. Piccus now has no doubt that the *huanghuali* furniture market was stimulated by the release of Wang’s *Classic Chinese Furniture*, which served a totally unplanned use as a reference manual for dealers who began seeking out and buying pieces in China for sale abroad. The book featured many new examples in all categories of late Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture of a more ornate style (Wang 1986, pls. 24, 43, 66, 76, 84, 91, 109, 110, 113, 128, 137), which were quite different from the Bauhaus-inspired collections formed by Westerners in the 1930s and 1940s and further romanticized by early Western scholars. Soon after its release, many of these new examples began to appear on the Hong



Kong antique furniture market. A case in point is the *huanghuali* folding stool shown in figure 4, one of a pair that the Piccuses discovered on the Hong Kong market in 1988. They match the large, unusually constructed single stool at the Tianjin Museum of Art, which was cataloged by Wang. It is of interest that Wang states in his description of the stool that "in the last several decades I have only seen one piece of this type" (Wang 1986, fig. 32).

The unique construction of these folding stools allows the seat to fold upward with pivoting frame



members. Although they do not fold as compactly as the traditional folding stools with woven seats, they nevertheless fold flat enough to be efficiently stored. On each stool, the rectangular seat frame shares a central frame member with two pivot tenons extending from each end. Both ends of this member are wrapped with a *baitong* band to reinforce the pivots. A frame is tenoned into the underside of this central member, which supports the seat frame in its open position. The seat frame is beaded, with its lower edge shaped in a lively curvilinear line. Dragons are carved in relief between the beaded edges, and, in an innovative design, their tails wrap around the curved corners of the seat frame. The *baitong* hinges at the juncture of the crossed legs are in the form of escutcheon plates with *ruyi*-head ends and chrysanthemum-shaped washers, and are pinned together with faceted knobs finishing both ends. The ground

stretchers are also reinforced with *baitong* straps bearing *ruyi* heads. The footrest is lavishly ornamented with *baitong* cut with cloud-head and *ruyi* designs and a triple lozenge at the center, similar to those found in several other folding chairs (cf. Wang 1986, pl. 58). Large boss-head pins secure the metal-work to the *huanghuali* footrest, giving a lively appearance. The slatted-wood seat is comfortable to sit on, and is undoubtedly more durable than the normal woven seat on a folding stool. It is also strong enough to function as a step stool for mounting horses, as suggested by Chen Zengbi (Chen). In 1983, Chen discovered an early Qing album illustrating the biography of Yu Shenxing, a famous Wanli scholar. One of the album leaves depicts him mounted on a large white horse, surrounded by four attendants. One is following closely behind, carrying a folded stool almost identical to the Piccus stool, ready to help his master dismount.

The folding stool was an ancient and universal seat of status and dignity. Extant examples of beautifully sculpted folding stools from ancient Egypt are datable to the second millennium, and evidence from Near Eastern seals and reliefs allows us to trace their use to as early as the third millennium (Wanscher 69). Although evidence from a fragment of an Eastern Zhou bronze indicates that even in ancient China stools were used for ceremonial purposes (Handler 1983, 53), the earliest evidence of the existence of the folding stool in China occurs much later, in the second century A.D., when it is referred to in texts as being of foreign origin (FitzGerald 10). In early China, the folding stool was also adopted as a seat of symbolic and ceremonial status. By the Song dynasty, when the general shift from mat- to chair-level seating had occurred, the folding stool was more commonly used, although those of distinctive size, material, and craftsmanship were still most likely

Fig. 5, above. Folding stool, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. Huanghuali; height 38 cm, width 35.5 cm, depth 31.7 cm.

Fig. 6, facing page, above left. Stool, seventeenth century. One of a pair. Zitan; height 49 cm, width 48.9 cm, depth 41.3 cm.

Fig. 6a, facing page, above right. Detail of figure 6. Drawing of underside of seat showing the dovetail wedge/strut that tenons into the seat frame.

Fig. 7, facing page, below. Stool or low table with flush panels, eighteenth century. One of a pair. Huanghuali; height 45 cm, width 62.8 cm, depth 38.1 cm.

used by those with high status. In a group of *sancai*-glazed Ming tomb pottery processional figures in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California, one of the figures is carry-

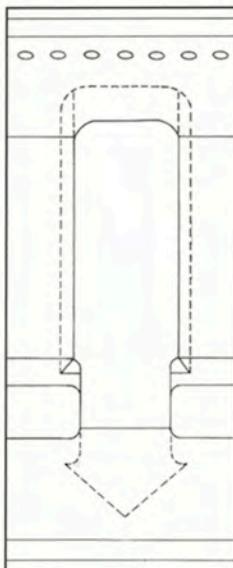


ing a folding stool over his shoulder that resembles the small *huanghuali* folding stool with woven seat illustrated in figure 5. In this example, an elegant refinement has been brought to a common form through the sensitive shaping of its slender members.

A pair of *zitan* stools in the collection appears at first to be of standard waisted form with horsehoof feet (fig. 6). Subtle design elements may, however, have been inspired by early Chinese bronze forms such as the *fang ding*. The long, narrow openings created by the high placement of the stretcher, which is also divided with a doubled-mitered strut, are reminiscent of a *taotie* mask. The wood is a light-colored *zitan*, possibly bleached from several centuries of exposure to light. (While some lighter woods tend to darken after long periods of exposure to light, strongly pigmented woods such as *huanghuali*

and *zitan* often become lighter.) The craftsmanship of these stools, as is typical of *zitan* pieces, is of exceptional quality. The openings are finely beaded, and the concave waist section and apron below are fashioned from one piece. The double-mitered struts between apron and stretcher display a unique construction technique. A view from the underside (fig. 6a) reveals that each strut continues through the back of the apron and ends in a dovetail key to tenon into the seat frame. One element therefore fills two roles: the strut is both a decorative piece and a structural wedge-shaped peg that locks the apron in place, effectively blending form with function.

Chinese furniture is often more multifunctional than our categorical minds are inclined to admit, which may explain unresolved questions such as that regarding the use of the *huanghuali* stool and/or low table illustrated in figure 7. Whether or not this pair of small, waisted pieces are stools or low tables, they



nevertheless reflect the Piccuses' predominant taste for simple forms. The apparent confusion concerns their size and their basic stool-like form. They have flush-panel tops that are more typical of tables than stools, but they are somewhat high to be considered

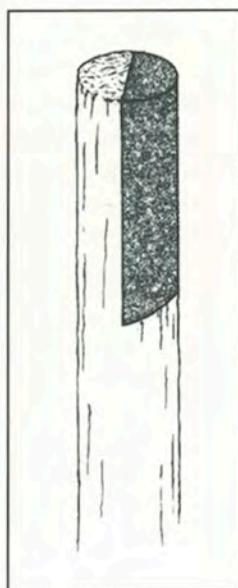


kang tables. Although there are no reinforcing stretchers or braces, which would be typical of stools, their one-piece aprons are thick enough to securely join the legs with large, well-fitted tenons, obviating the need for stretchers, which would otherwise interfere with the simple, silhouetted openings. In reality,

however, there is no reason why they could not have been used as stools, small tea tables, or both.

In his *Connoisseurship of Classic Chinese Furniture*, Wang Shixiang states that drum stools are extremely rare (Wang 1990, 34). The stout *huanghuali* drum stool in figure 8 can be compared to the *zitan* drum stool of similar form at the Chengde Palace, Beijing (Wang 1990, A33), which Wang also uses to illustrate the merit of wholeness in his "Merits and Defects of Ming and Early Qing Furniture" (Wang 1992, 46). The rectangularity of the openings in the Piccus stool, however, may date it somewhat later. Sixty bosses were carved in relief around the top and bottom, and, as the Chinese calendar is based on cycles of sixty days and sixty years, that number may have been chosen here to signify completeness. It is not clear why the top panel is removable and whether it is original. Perhaps this piece was also used as a large vase stand, similar to the incense/vase stand in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture (Handler 1990, 9). Or perhaps, as in the case of some drum stools from a later period that have panels of marble or porcelain tile, the original was lost or broken.

During recent periods of political turmoil in mainland China, shortages of material goods were quite common. Piccus recalls that during the late 1970s Alice Piccus's uncle, an electrical engineer living in Anhui, needed a cabinet, yet it was not possible simply to buy one. He was able to find a log, however, and made a significant effort to transport it to Shang-





hai, where he was acquainted with some cabinetmakers. After cutting the log into boards, they were able to make the cabinet for him. This incident may help us understand the unusual condition in which Chinese furniture is often found, and particularly the Piccuses' large *huanghuali* meditation stool (fig. 9). It is a typical double-molded stool with round legs and leg-encircling stretchers framing oval struts. A close examination, however, reveals that the legs were extended in its recent history, most likely to create a square table at a time when new furniture was not available. The evidence lies in the large half-lap mortises that were cut into the end of each leg. Four timbers cut with complementary joints would have allowed each leg to be lengthened, transforming a large stool into a makeshift square table. Now, restored to its original form, the bottom of each leg has a filled half-lap mortise, yet retains half of its original foot (fig. 9a), as seen by the visible deterioration due to a long life of standing on damp surfaces.

A small *huanghuali* yokeback armchair in the collection is quite austere in its design, yet still quite comfortable (fig. 10). Small chairs of this type may have been made for women. The chair at first appears

somewhat stiff; a closer inspection, however, reveals few right angles and quite delicate proportions. All of the vertical members are subtly tapered and splayed, and the legs and stretchers are octagonally shaped below the seat frame. These refined features, combined with the swept-back curvature of the rear posts, the humpback yoke, and the front stretchers, produce a satisfying effect.

The overall height (122 cm), of a pair of *huanghuali* yokeback armchairs with four protruding ends (fig. 11) is as high as any other known

Fig. 8, facing page, above. Drum stool, late seventeenth century. *Huanghuali*; height 45.7 cm, diameter 44.4 cm.

Fig. 9, facing page, below left. Meditation stool, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. *Huanghuali*; height 49.7 cm, seat 80 x 80 cm.

Fig. 9a, facing page, below right. Detail of figure 9. Drawing of foot from an angle to show the lapped join.

Fig. 10, above left. Small yokeback armchair with humpback stretcher and octagonal-shaped legs, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. *Huanghuali*; height 101.6 cm, width 53.8 cm, depth 42.7 cm.

Fig. 11, above right. Yokeback armchair, late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. One of a pair. *Huanghuali*; height 122 cm, width 60 cm, depth 47 cm.

yokeback armchair of traditional design and size. Within this standard form we can see a master's handling in the liveliness imparted by the subtle shaping of the parts. The naturalness of the curvature in the arms and in the front and rear posts is particularly pleasing. Their S-shaped splats are also well-figured. Not only are these splats generally more comfortable than straight or C-curved ones, but the grain patterns revealed also tend to be more abstract, maximized by the S-shape cut through the concentric growth rings of a timber. The full aprons frame the front and sides with lively, *kunmen*-shaped openings, and are joined with a sophisticated sliding dovetail and half-lapped miters. Assembled into a unified whole, these chairs reflect the strong moral character idealized in their time.

Piccus occasionally collects unorthodox yet intriguing pieces, such as a single *huanghuali* yokeback armchair with continuous arms (fig. 12). Its protruding yoke and continuous arms make it appear to be an exception to the rule for this category, and indeed, a new category is beginning to develop as other, simi-

lar examples surface (cf. Ellsworth 115, pl. 7; Grindley 56; Pu) and are confirmed by depictions in Ming dynasty woodblock prints. A bamboo chair of the same form (fig. 13) is illustrated in the late Ming encyclopedia, *Sancai tuhui* (Wang Ji 1329), as one of three types of non-folding

chairs. And a Wanli woodblock print (Fu 346) from *Hong Li Ji* (Records of the Red Pear) also depicts a pair of chairs of similar form (see this issue, p. 28), clearly illustrating the existence of the type and the fact that one cannot be too dogmatic regarding furniture forms. Piccus enjoys telling the story of a furniture dealer with whom he has done business for years. After Piccus showed him this latest unusual acquisition, the dealer criticized its seemingly hybrid form and inadvertently boasted that he had recently acquired a better and more classical example of a *huanghuali* southern official's hat chair. Piccus was later able to acquire that chair as well! The yokeback chair is quite heavy in weight, with thick members throughout, yet it does not have a heavy appearance. The wood is of good quality, and the S-shaped splat is exceptionally well figured, with a whorling grain pattern providing an abstract impression suitable for imaginative contemplation. The plain aprons, exposed tenons,

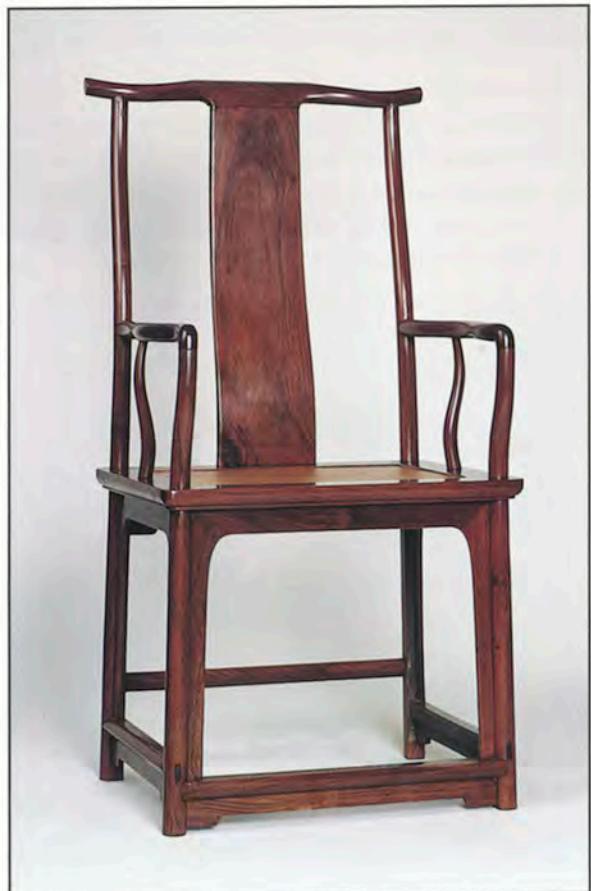


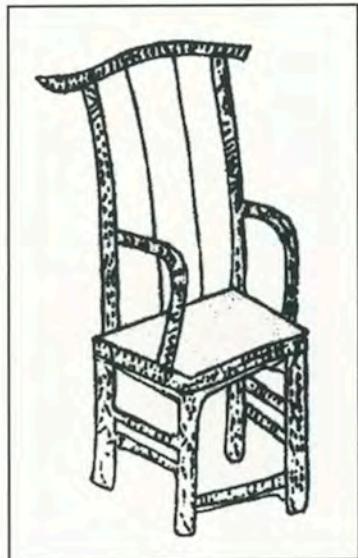
Fig. 12, left. Yokeback armchair with continuous arms, late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 120.6 cm, width 60.3 cm, depth 45.2 cm.

Fig. 13, above. Woodblock print from *Sancai tuhui*.

Fig. 14, facing page, below left. Southern official's hat armchair, late sixteenth century. Huanghuali; height 121.3 cm, width 60.3 cm, depth 45.7 cm.

Fig. 14a, facing page, above. Drawing of the apron join, detail of figure 14.

Fig. 15, facing page, below right. Southern official's hat armchair with burl seat panel, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. One of a pair. Huanghuali; height 109.8 cm, width 58.4 cm, depth 45.2 cm.





and otherwise classical configuration of this chair suggest a late Ming date for its construction.

The high-back southern official's hat chair (fig. 14) also has an unpretentious character, with no decoration. Its form and simplicity of line can be

compared to the wooden miniature southern official's hat chairs excavated from the Pan family tomb (dated to 1531). The joinery of the three-piece aprons is also of particular interest, utilizing a mortise and tenon hidden behind a cosmetic half-lap miter. The tenon shaped on the vertical member protrudes about $1/4"$ through the mortise in the horizontal apron to fit into a reciprocal mortise cut into the underside of the seat frame. This is typical of the perfected forms of late Ming furniture, in which the joiner's creativity is often completely concealed in sophisticated variations of joints (fig. 14a). The chair was found completely intact with no replacements, and therefore it may serve as a study model for those parts that are frequently missing, such as the lower aprons.

Another southern official's armchair is also minimally decorated, yet its fluid lines and the warmth of the *huanghuali* from which it was fashioned lend it an elegant and refined character (fig. 15). Unlike classical yokes that rise at the center, this one dips slightly and curves back as it meets an S-



shaped splat. The splat is extremely comfortable, seeming to fit the curvature of the spine perfectly. The yoke is fitted to the swept-back rear posts with pinned pipe joins. All of the joins are pinned and appear to be original, as are those of a related chair published by Ellsworth (114, pl. 6). The sinuous armrests are similarly joined to S-shaped front posts that sweep back to join the seat frame. Another unique feature is the original hard seat. The seat panel is recessed without finishing strips and made from *nanmu* burlwood. It is supported underneath by two transverse braces, and the entire under surface is covered with the original red lacquer coating. No wood was spared in the shaping of the four deep humpback stretchers under the seat frame. They are shaped from single pieces of wood and each measures 3-1/4" in width. The well-worn footrest is testimony to the chair's successful design and the comfort that it undoubtedly brought to its previous owners. Recently, Piccus was able to pair this chair with a matching one. It is interesting to note some subtle differences in the construction and



thickness of frame members as well as in condition, which could indicate that the two were not made at the same time, yet are both products of the same workshop that produced the Ellsworth chair.

Pairs of chairs are increasingly difficult to find, and, as the supply of furniture diminishes, single chairs of high quality are becoming more acceptable to serious collectors. A single horseshoe-back armchair (fig. 16) was added to the Piccuses' collection because of its bold proportions, finely figured *huanghuali*, and beautifully drawn and carved front apron,





whose miter is unusually carved with a *ruyi* and cloud-head lappet (fig. 16a). To his surprise and delight, about a year later Piccus was offered a matching chair from another source, with identical carving and a sequentially cut splat. Although the first chair was initially criticized by some for its unusually designed apron, the second chair confirms the original design. These reunited pairs are an encouraging indication that other pairs or even sets of chairs may still be discovered.

The pair of *huanghuali* continuous horseshoe-back armchairs was one of the earliest of the Piccuses' acquisitions (fig. 17). After the throne chair in 1971, they were the next

Fig. 16, facing page, above. Horseshoe-back armchair, seventeenth century. One of a pair. *Huanghuali*; overall height 99.8 cm, seat height 50.8, width 60.3 cm, depth 46.3 cm.

Fig. 16a, facing page, below. Detail of figure 16, showing the apron carving.

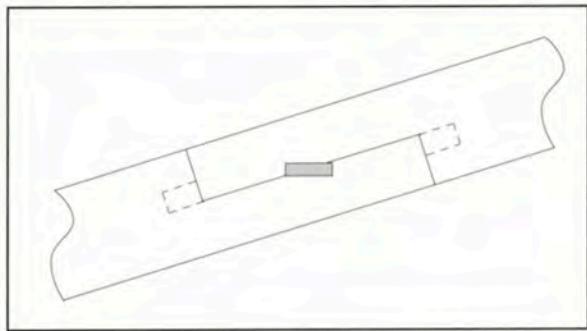
Fig. 17, right. Continuous horseshoe-back armchair, seventeenth century. One of a pair. *Huanghuali*; height 97.1 cm, width 58.4 cm, depth 45 cm.

Fig. 17a, above. Detail of figure 17, showing the medallion and wavy-grain figure of the splat.

pieces of *huanghuali* furniture to enter the collection, and were found in 1984, when the first new wave of *huanghuali* furniture arrived in Hong Kong. It is remarkable that their beauty was perceived, for they were purchased as a bundle of sticks in a burlap bag. The chairs are exquisitely curvaceous in form—even the rear posts bulge slightly outward to cradle the spherical void. The sinuous armrests are supported with long, tapered S-shaped side posts before curving downward into the front posts. Their deeply curved, S-shaped splats are beautifully figured with curling and whorling grain, cut in series from the same timber, and each is embellished with a spiraling dragon emerging through a cloud-shaped medallion (fig. 17a). The round legs have a loose tenon inserted to provide a bracket-like support for the seat frame. Additional support to the center of the frame mem-



bers is given by two vertical struts on the humpback stretcher, which is tenoned into the legs. The legs follow the general principle of splaying outward to the dimensions of the seat frame, giving the chairs excellent balance and proportions. Regrettably, all the legs except one have lost considerable height, probably due to damp conditions. This rather common type of damage was often corrected by adding material to the bottom of the feet, and then wrapping them with *baitong* to conceal the restoration and protect them from further damage. The height of



these chairs, however, has been restored by adding cylindrical wooden pieces that range from 1/2" to 1-3/4" in length. Even so, these beautifully executed chairs remain masterpieces of their type.



Another small, single, *jichimu* continuous horseshoe-back armchair (fig. 18) was probably part of a larger group, and can be compared to a set of four *huanghuali* chairs of nearly identical form, size, and construction currently offered by Grace Wu Bruce Co., Ltd. (*Arts of Asia* 20). Both chairs have three-piece horseshoe arms joined with the same half-lap joint utilizing blind tenons. This signature of a common workshop is further confirmed by the intelligent use of unique pressure pegs, which are set at an angle to impart even greater compression, firmly drawing the joint together (fig. 18a). This chair is one of few that retains its original soft-cane seat. Made of finely split cane, the mat was woven directly on the seat frame over an underwebbing of palm fiber, using the same holes drilled along its inside edge. The weaver was able to produce a variety of patterns, whose warp and weft playfully reflect the light. This art seems to have been lost, as chairs' seats have for some time been replaced with caning cut from large sheets of prewoven matting. They are cut somewhat oversize so that the extra material along the edges can be unwoven. These loose strands are then tightly fixed in place with softwood wedges driven into the drilled seat frame.

The pair of lacquered folding yokeback armchairs in the collection are quite rare (fig. 19). They may be compared to a similar pair of softwood folding chairs, also lacquered, in King Philip's apartments in the Escorial in Spain (Medley 34). The light weight of the Piccus chairs indicates that they were also constructed from a softwood. The chairs are coated in a dark lacquer once adorned with red lacquer ornamentation, which is now barely discernible. Writhing dragons painted in lacquer once brightly decorated the crest of the upright yokes. Below them, the splats are divided into three panels framed with curved uprights. In the center of the top panel is a *ruyi*-shaped medallion carved in openwork

Fig. 18, left. Continuous horseshoe-back armchair, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. Jichimu; height 85 cm, width 54.6 cm, depth 45 cm.

Fig. 18a, above. Drawing of arm join of figure 18, showing angled pressure peg.

Fig. 19, facing page, above. Lacquered folding yokeback chair, seventeenth century. One of a pair. Height 100.3 cm, width 66 cm, depth 54 cm.

Fig. 20, facing page, below. Side table with flush mitered construction, late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 84.5 cm, width 55.4 cm, length 193 cm.



with entwined vines. The four corners of the panel are painted with *zabao* (mixed treasures) or "Buddhist emblems," including crossed rhinoceros horns, a branch of coral, a flaming pearl, and a double loz-

enge. The central panel illustrates a typical *shan shui* landscape scene, with a dwelling, people, water, trees, mountains, and clouds. The bottom panel bears a *kunmen*-shaped opening at its base, and is also decorated with treasure emblems. In a hardwood chair, the bottom of the splat is usually joined at the seat frame. Here, however, the splat is joined to an additional stretcher placed just above the seat stretcher, possibly to better distribute the forces in the weaker softwood. Between these two stretchers, a long narrow panel is inserted with a *haitangshi*-shaped opening. These chairs were apparently once quite common, judging by the number of them we see in Ming dynasty woodblock prints and paintings. They were also frequently reproduced in miniature by potters to be placed in tombs, insuring comfort for the deceased in the afterlife. Unlike horseshoe folding armchairs, these chairs seem to be designed to actually fold, measuring only 7-1/2" in depth when collapsed.

A recent acquisition to the collection is a long, rectangular *huanghuali* side table in the austere flush-construction form (fig. 20). Features such as its wide single panel, heavy frame members, and generously radiused corners where the thick legs join thick aprons suggest a late Ming date for its construction,



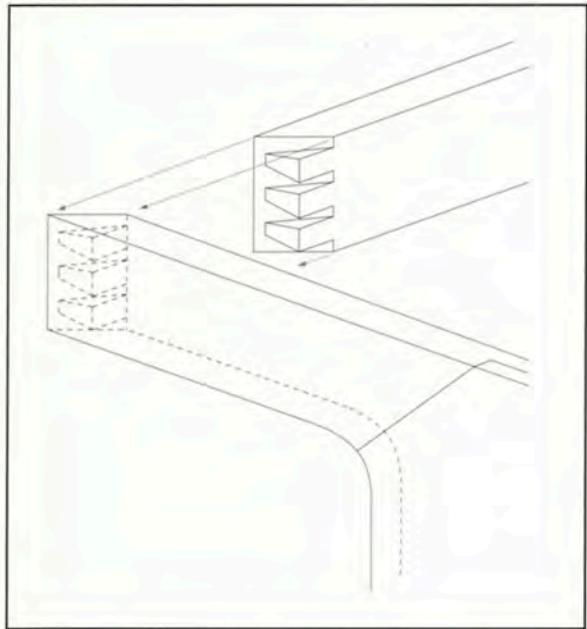


when an abundant supply of *huanghuali* was at hand. Though frequently depicted in Ming woodblock prints, tables of this type are now relatively rare. One can perhaps explain the disappearance of this once seemingly ubiquitous form by examining its construction, which Ecke termed "over-simplified." The condition of this table before restoration confirms his description. On all four sides just below the

aprongs, elm stretchers had been added to stabilize its wobbly legs, a condition that probably developed after years of lateral loading focused on its critical corner-leg join. A similar clumsy restoration of a typical late-Ming waisted square table with horsehoof feet was noticed by the author during a recent second visit to the mosque in Xian. During the nine months that had lapsed after first visiting the mosque, four softwood stretchers had been added just above the horsehoof feet, tenoned into the legs by some well-intentioned craftsman who lacked the necessary knowledge. A table's corner-leg mortise-and-tenon joint will invariably loosen without the benefit of additional reinforcing devices such as spandrels, stretchers, or curved corner braces to distribute the forces multiplied by the leverage of its long leg. This gradually leads to a condition of instability that even Ecke admitted "does not inspire confidence" (Ecke XXII), when referring to his own lute table of similar form (Ecke, pl. 15). Now, with its joinery tightly refitted, the stretchers removed, and the added mortises filled, the Piccuses' table is restored to its original form and emanates the minimalist style of the late Ming dynasty.

The most common table form among extant examples and in Ming woodblock prints is the recessed-leg table with double stretchers and its subtle





variations. Derived from classical post-and-beam architecture, its relatively simple engineering was based on time-tested principles. The character representing recessed-leg tables, *an* (案), can be divided into *mu* (木) and *an* (安), which can be loosely translated as “tree, board” and “install, stability, peaceful, calm” respectively, reflecting the long horizontal tops and supporting splayed legs of these tables, which when properly proportioned convey a quiet sense of balance and stability while harmonizing with the physical laws of nature. Piccus’s preference for this form over the corner-leg form is seen in the number he has collected—four examples in different sizes.

The largest is a recently acquired and rare painting or writing table with stout proportions and work-bench construction (fig. 21). The frame and legs are of an unknown tropical hardwood with a strongly striated figure, resembling some zebra woods, while the panel is a single piece of *huanghuali*. Its 25" width is the widest single piece of *huanghuali* that this author has seen. Because of its width, additional cra-

dling with a central longitudinal brace as well as closely spaced transverse braces were utilized to insure a stable and solid working surface. The entire underside is completely coated with an undisturbed thick lacquer. This special panel was framed with a wood with striped figure from a dense hardwood tree of small diameter growth (fig. 21a). Not one member, including the frame, legs, or aprons, is wider than 2-3/4", and several have cream-colored sapwood remaining on one edge. The unusual light-to coffee-brown color of its heartwood is broken by striated dark-brown to black veining. Perhaps it is the tiger-stripe wood (*huban mu*) indigenous to Hainan Island mentioned in the *Ge gu yao lun*, an early Ming text on connoisseurship (David 153). The two-piece spandrel heads are joined to one another with two dovetail keys and are in turn joined to the aprons with a dovetailed tenon (fig. 21b); the end aprons are securely joined with blind dovetails (fig. 21c). This table is truly a special piece meant to serve a diligent and discriminating scholar.

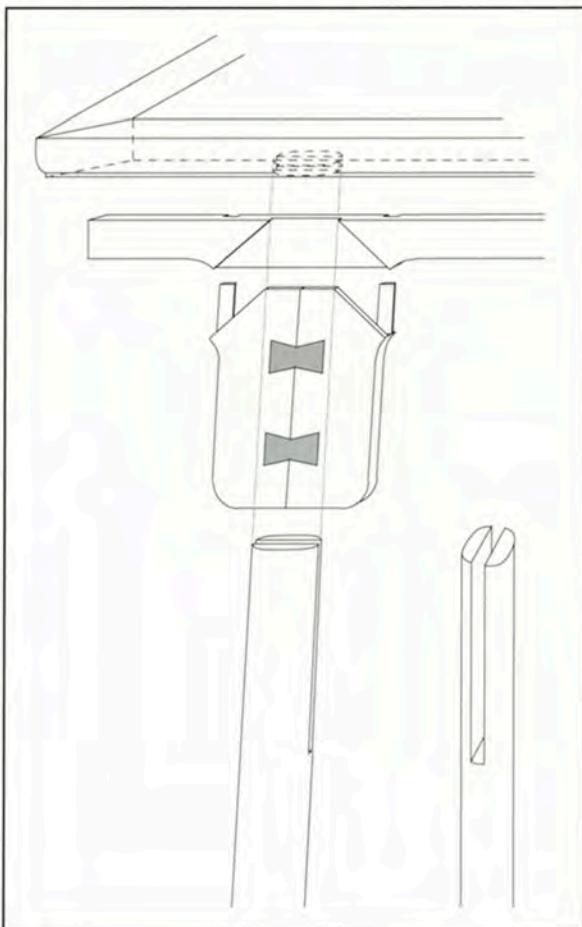


Fig. 21, facing page, below. Recessed-leg painting table of unknown wood with huanghuali panel, late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. Height 79.4 cm, width 75.5 cm, length 178.4 cm.

Fig. 21a, facing page, above. Detail of figure 21, spandrel.

Fig. 21b, right. Drawing of bridle joint, detail of figure 21.

Fig. 21c, above. Drawing of mitered apron with blind dovetail joint, detail of figure 21.

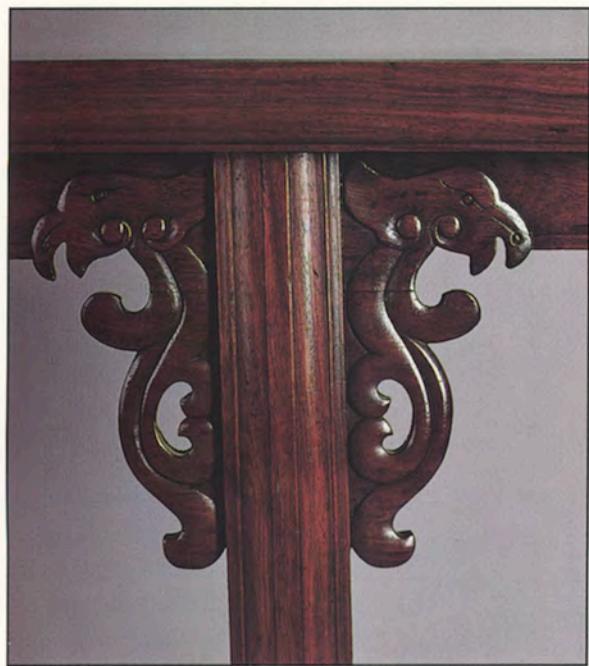


One of the largest pieces of burlwood that this author has seen is the *nanmu* burl panel of a *huanghuali* recessed-leg side table with phoenix

spandrels (fig. 22). Again, its successful design originates from a well-proportioned form. An appearance of sharp linearity was added by the shaping of the concave beading and moldings on the aprons, legs, and stretchers. Finally, a quality of lively attentiveness has been imparted to the carved spandrels, which are in the form of stylized phoenixes, imitating those found in archaic jades (fig. 22a). These features are masterfully combined to achieve a crisp and elegant variation without straying from a long-established form.

The *huanghuali* side table is a simple yet elegant example of this common form (fig. 23). Other than the unbeaded cloud-shaped apron-head spandrels, which, with the aprons, are generously cut from the same piece of wood, no other





refinement was necessary to adorn its near-perfect proportions. In an eighteenth-century variation—a *zitan* table with a burlwood panel (fig. 24)—more

attention has been paid to the use of precious materials than to strength of form. Compared with the previous example, the amount of splay given to the legs of this table has been reduced, with a resulting sacrifice of its balance and stability.

The *huanghuali kang* table (fig. 25) is notable for its small size. Most *kang* tables are too large to fit comfortably on *chuangs*, and were therefore probably used on the larger raised *kangs* or directly on the floor or ground. This one may someday fit comfortably on the *chuang* that the Piccuses hope to acquire. The unusual convex molded waist, however, is a deviation from the classical *zumizuo* form (Evarts 36), and probably exemplifies the decline from the peak

Fig. 22, facing page, above. Recessed-leg table with nanmu panel, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 79.4 cm, width 57.4 cm, length 182.8 cm.

Fig. 22a, left. Detail of spandrel of figure 22.

Fig. 23, below. Recessed-leg lute table, late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 78.1 cm, width 41.9 cm, length 129 cm.

Fig. 24, facing page, below. Recessed-leg table with burlwood panel, eighteenth century. Zitan; height 78 cm, width 42.5 cm, length 86.3 cm.



of the classical period in Chinese furniture making, when cabinetmakers and their clients, no longer content with already perfected forms, experimented with hybrid forms.

Enclosing the legs of a recessed-leg table would have been a logical and pragmatic solution to the problem of insufficient storage space, a symptom of the increasingly materialistic culture of the late Ming period. It was during this time that the coffer form evolved. A variation of straight-leg coffers also developed, although many



of the remaining examples appear somewhat awkward in their proportions. In an interesting example of a *huanghuali* straight-leg coffer (fig. 26), however, the designer was able to resolve the top-heavy tendency by pulling the central mass of the coffer downward, which also provided a more efficient use of space. Rather than the typical carved drawers and panel to conceal the difficult-to-reach storage compartment below, the designer utilized two flush-framed doors with matched panels, which can be lifted off their lower supporting rectangular *baitong* hinges when swung fully open. The enlarged interior space was made much more accessible by reducing the width of the apron and



Fig. 25, above. Kang table, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. Huanghuali; height 28 cm, width 68.6 cm, depth 50.8 cm.

Fig. 26, facing page, above. Cabinet with table top, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 85.3 cm, width 52 cm, length 87.6 cm.

Fig. 27, left. Bookcase, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 182.2 cm, width 122.7 cm, depth 45 cm.

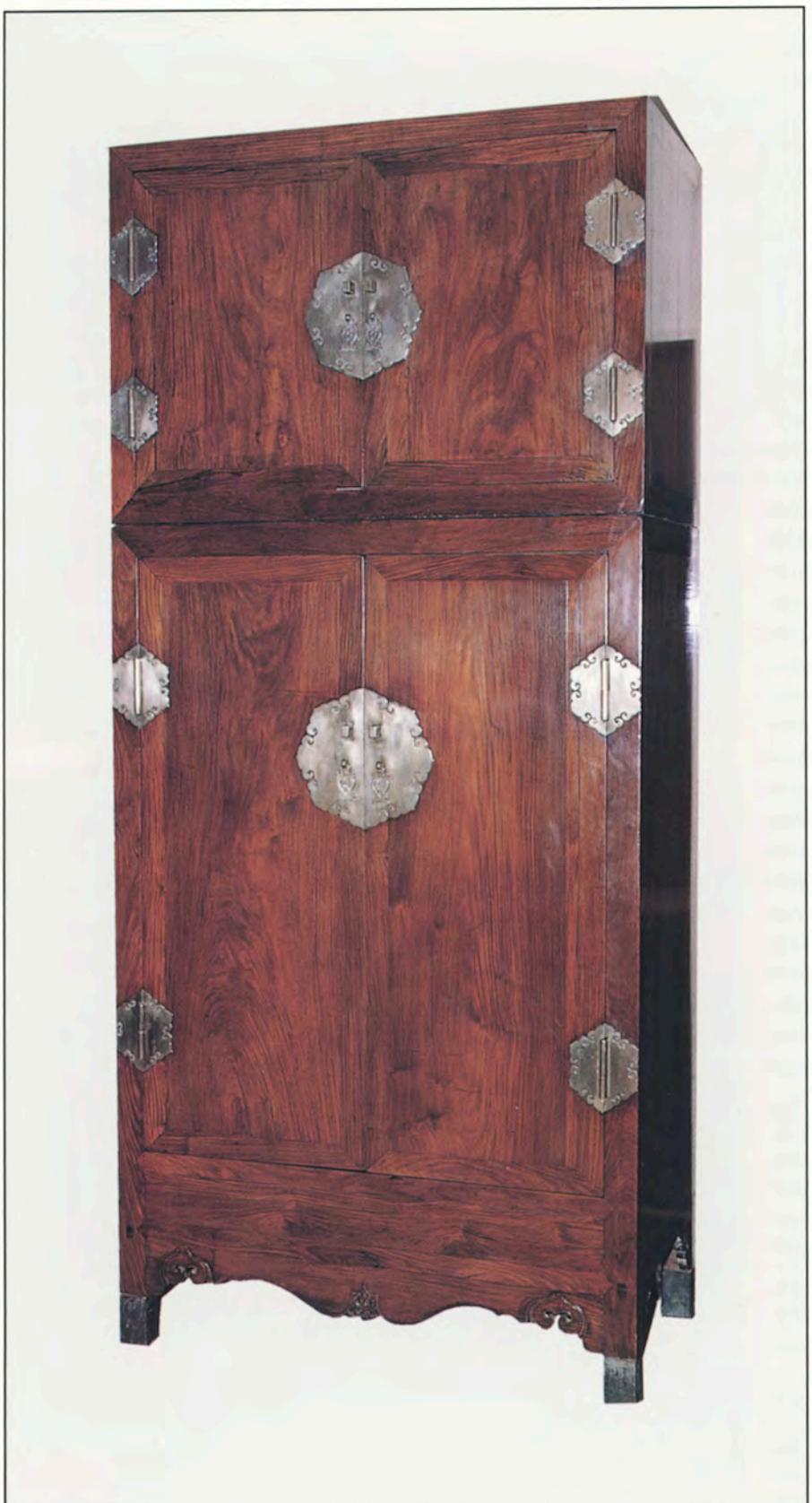
Fig. 28, facing page, below. Chest with doors, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 87.6 cm, width 85.7 cm, depth 46 cm.

pulling the lower horizontal member closer to the ground, and then adding a shelf. The top, extending beyond the sides, is visually supported by long, narrow flanges lightly embellished with beading and tendrils; the flanges have been extended to a point just below the lowest horizontal frame member. These modifications lower the center of gravity to a position that is visually undisturbing, and, together with the uniformly high quality of the materials and the restraint exercised in ornamentation, have been tastefully combined to produce a noble household servant.

The *huanghuali* bookcase with three drawers illustrated in figure 27 is massive, yet simple. Unlike many delicate examples that could more appropriately be called display cases, this bookcase has an aura of strength that has not diminished during its long service. Its simplicity is derived from the softly rounded frame members and curvilinear, yet unbeaded, lower aprons. Interestingly, this quality is not sacrificed by the unusual surrounding humpback rails, whose quiet reinforcement solidifies the whole. Each rail appears as a configuration of double humpback stretchers with a solid apron butt-joined below. The apron and apparent stretcher above are, however, shaped from one piece of wood into which was carved a parallel line imitating the independent humpback stretcher above.

The *huanghuali* chest with two doors may have also functioned as a small bookcase (fig. 28). Inside, it has two shelves





and a pair of drawers just below the top. The sturdy construction would have easily allowed heavy books or other objects to be transported. The sides are joined to the top with dovetail joints and the two shelves are securely joined to the sides with their four wedged tenons exposed on each side. The cabinet is made entirely of *huanghuali*. The original drawers are lost and, as with nearly fifty percent of cabinets and chests coming out of China since the Cultural Revolution, the original hardware was also removed at some point and has been recently replaced.

The large single compound wardrobe (fig. 29) reflects Piccus's taste for classically proportioned furniture with a tendency toward the thick and substantial. Its rather austere and solemn form is offset by a strongly curved apron and the original ornamented *baitong* hardware. The beaded apron is carved with cloud and tendril designs, and on the sides, the beading of the spandrels flows into the lower horizontal frame members. The octagonal sides of the lock-plates and hexagonal hinges are shaped with cloud and

Fig. 29. Single compound wardrobe, late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. Huanghuali; height 253.3 cm, width 114.3 cm, depth 56.6 cm.

ruyi designs, and their outlines are highlighted by an etched border. The pulls are shaped in the double-fish motif, and the faces of the lock studs are etched with figures of mandarins. The exceptional thickness of the hardware adds to the substantial feeling of this piece. Large frame members were also used throughout, and no attempt was made to conceal the joinery of the frame. The overall effect is one of solidity and purpose, balanced with a tasteful amount of embellishment. The inside surface of the cabinet was once completely coated with lacquer, most of which has peeled away after years of neglect. Although the original shelves were also lost, they have been replaced to give new life to a stately cabinet, which now provides storage for some of the smaller treasures in the Piccuses' collection.

Like Charlotte Horstmann, the Piccuses live with and use their Chinese furniture. Their objective was to build a collection of furniture that would fit harmoniously into their home, and would also reflect the environment of the traditional Chinese scholar. The wooden scholar's objects that they first collected are an integral part of this tradition. They wisely recommend that anyone considering the collection of Chinese hardwood furniture begin with the smaller scholar's objects. For it is with these that one can develop a sensitivity for the subtleties of Chinese aesthetics and learn to evaluate the quality of materials and craftsmanship, as well as what constitutes originality of condition. As one learns to appreciate masterfully executed objects, one can begin to sense the artisan merging with the artist, striving for both aesthetic spontaneity and intentionality. This sensitivity the Piccuses now apply to the collection of classical Chinese furniture.

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