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Curtis Evarts Media Links

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# The Enigmatic Altar Coffer

Curtis Evarts

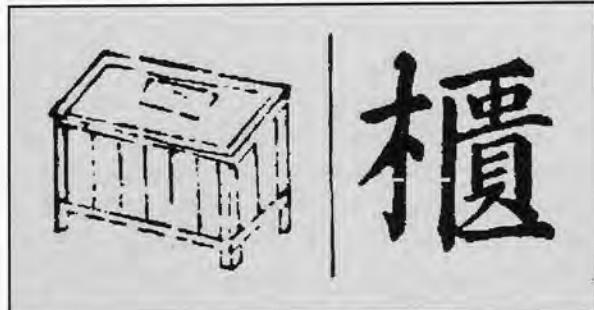
Of all the popular forms of classical Chinese furniture, the handsome and useful Ming-style coffer has been a particular favorite of twentieth-century furniture collectors. It is also the most problematic. The Ming-style "coffer" or "altar coffer" (see fig. 1)—characterized by drawers, a hidden, lower storage compartment, and a recessed-leg, table-like construction with or without everted ends—has left relatively little trace in the traditional sources, both visual and textual, used in furniture research. To compound the confusion, modern Chinese terms for coffers cannot readily be traced to any early texts, and

the connection between coffers and altars has never been clear. Finally, more than ninety percent of extant *huanghuali* coffers appear to have been constructed from reused hardwood timbers, or to have thin veneers over a softwood core—a significantly higher proportion than that found in any other type of *huanghuali* furniture. While no definite answers to these perplexing questions can be given, the following observations may help us to better understand the background from which the enigmatic coffer arose.

Fig. 1. Three-drawer coffer. Huanghuali; length 158.5 cm, depth 58 cm, height 82.5 cm. Private collection.



The concealed storage space beneath the drawers of the coffer, which is accessible only after the drawers are removed, may be considered a defining characteristic of this furniture type. While it seems awkward to Westerners, it probably developed from ancient strongboxes for holding money or other valuables. The mid fifteenth-century children's primer, *Xinbian duixiang*, matches the pictograph *gui* (櫃) with an illustration of the chest-like coffer that was still in use during the Ming dynasty (fig. 2).



Like the strongboxes, this coffer was accessible only through a small opening in the top, which was easily secured with a lock, and apparently the Chinese did not consider it to be inconvenient. Through this opening, valuables were presumably deposited and withdrawn, as indicated by the Chinese binome, *yagui* (押櫃), meaning "deposit." The pictograph is formed by combining the wood radical on the left (木) with *gui* (貴), signifying expensive treasures, contained within the *xi* radical (匱), which means "box" or "to conceal." Thus, it is clear that *gui* (櫃) originally denoted a wooden construction for concealing treasures. The character *gui* (櫃) is also found in earlier texts, without the wood radical but with the same meaning.\* The Ming dynasty carpenter's manual, *Lu Ban jing*, gives construction details for a similar chest-like coffer (*gui* 櫃), and provides a clear link to the pottery models of coffers that were placed in tombs during the Ming, the form of which can be traced back to the Eastern Han.

Well over a millennium before the coffer was illustrated in the Ming children's primer, a wooden, frame-and-panel, chest-like coffer was engraved on a stone decorating a tomb in Shandong dated to the Eastern Han (A.D. 25-220)(Handler 5). The coffer depicted in this stone carving is remarkably similar to that in the Ming woodcut, providing yet another example of the longstanding traditions that plague

\*Another term used for cabinets, *chu* (櫥), which is today interchangeable with *gui*, was probably originally associated with a cabinet for food storage. One of the earliest depictions of an upright cabinet is found in a Han tomb painting depicting a kitchen scene (Li 27). *Chu* is similarly written with a wood radical on the left adjacent to *chu* (厨), the character for "kitchen."

*Fig. 2, left above. Woodblock print illustration of a coffer (gui), from the mid fifteenth-century children's primer, Xinbian duixiang. After Ruitenbeek 266.*

*Fig. 3, left center. Miniature pottery coffer, Eastern Han dynasty. Length 25.5 cm. British Museum, London.*

*Fig. 4, left below. Miniature coffer, Tang dynasty (618-907). From the tomb of Jin Jiagou in Loyang City, Henan province. Sancai-glazed pottery; height 17.6 cm. Henan Provincial Museum. After Zhang 1985, 156.*

*Fig. 5, facing page, above. Miniature coffer, Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Sancai-glazed pottery; length 16 cm, depth 10 cm, height 12.8 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.*

*Fig. 6, facing page, below. Qiu Ying (c. 1494-c. 1552), "Spring Festival Along the River," Ming dynasty. Detail. Handscroll. National Palace Museum, Taipei.*



those of us who persist in attempting to date Chinese furniture. The dating of the carving may be in question, however, as several miniature green-glazed pottery coffers from the same approximate time period have been also been excavated from tombs not far to the southwest of Shandong, in Henan province (Pirazzoli 59; Henansheng bowuguan 87). Although similar in form, the model strongbox/coffers in this group are much heavier in proportion than the light frame-and-panel coffer depicted in the stone carving. They all have four short legs to elevate their box-like construction off the ground, and are occasionally decorated with animal masks (fig. 3). The stubby legs, combined with the armored bodies studded with decorative bosses, give these models an armadillo-like appearance. The small, lidded opening at the top is secured with a lock plate mounted on the front.

Excavations of Tang dynasty (A.D. 681-906) tombs have also yielded a number of *sancai*-glazed pottery coffers that illustrate an evolving form with stylistic developments. The short legs of the Han strongbox/coffers have here grown into longer, sturdy legs of square section, as seen in typical examples unearthed in Henan (fig. 4) and Shaanxi (Zhang 1983, 73); this conforms with the general trend from the Han to the Tang period, in which furniture became increasingly higher and more separate from the ground level. The upper parts of the legs are decorated with large boss heads, which also are found around the top and bottom of the coffer box. Although decorative, these boss-head nails probably correspond to an actual construction

method; several wooden cabinets from the same period, housed in the Shōsōin at Nara, have panels attached with rows of uniformly placed boss-head nails (Evarts 1994, 30; Kimura 51, 53, 55). The Tang pottery coffers retain the characteristic small lid on top, and could be secured with a spring lock placed through loops attached to both the lid and front panel of the chest (cf. Ellsworth 75). The short sides of the coffer top are also fitted with interesting pieces at each end that curve upwards like the ridge beam used in traditional Chinese architecture; these strips may be forerunners of the everted or “flying” ends found on many Ming-style coffers, and may have served some yet to be discovered purpose. The energetic spirit of the Tang period is reflected in the combination of lively decorative appliqués of frogs, animal masks, and lotus blossoms on the four sides and the incised geometric patterns of the top, as well as in the colorful glaze.

Pottery models of coffers continued to be placed into Ming tombs and graves, and the modeling of frame-and-panel construction reflects further developments in joinery. The top of the model shown in figure 5 is incised to resemble a mitered frame with two transverse stretchers and one cross stretcher. A deposit slot is found in the panel on the right-hand side, and access is gained by withdrawing the lock on the front to release the central top panel (Evarts 1993, 36). For a Westerner, these slotted money boxes evoke an immediate association to the child’s “piggy bank.”



Judging by the dimensions given in the *Lu Ban jing*, coffers had increased in size considerably by the Ming and, unlike the early examples, could no longer be easily lifted by a single person. Large ones were more than two meters in length and more than a meter in width, while the measurements given for "small" ones were only reduced by approximately eighty percent. These dimensions seem to correspond to several coffers depicted by the Ming painter, Qiu Ying, in his version of the Song painting, "Spring Festival Along the River," where shopkeepers sit behind table-height coffer/counters that have the characteristic small, lidded opening on the top (fig. 6). The Chinese term for counter is *guitai* (櫃檯). Although these coffer/counters must have been relatively heavy when holding coins or bullion, the *Lu Ban jing* informs us that their feet were sometimes fitted with wheels so that they could be easily moved (Ruitenbeek 264). Rolling chests with drawers and hidden compartments can be found among both Korean and Japanese furniture types, and may represent a further evolution of these Chinese counter/chests.

In this survey of Han to Ming dynasty antecedents, the small, armored, strongbox-coffer has developed into a large, frame-and-panel, chest-coffer. To arrive at the Ming-style coffer with drawers, however, it is necessary to step back to the Song dynasty, when the recessed-leg table form began to appear. A late Song or Yuan dynasty pagoda recently discovered at a site in northern Ningxia contained a small coffer-like table as well as an unusual, low armchair with protruding ends carved like *ruyi* cloud-heads and a tri-sectional splat painted with colored designs. The table is in the recessed-leg form with a long spandrel running down each leg; a framework between the legs houses two rows of panels richly carved with flowers and painted in bright colors ("Ningxia" 23). It is likely that such specialized tables with richly carved frontals evolved from the custom of draping ordinary tables with frontals of finely brocaded fabrics to add formality to sacrificial ceremonies or special occasions.

A full-size altar table of Ming design was photographed in the Qiansheng Hall in the Forbidden City just after the turn of the twentieth century (fig. 7).<sup>\*</sup> The heavy proportions of the table are balanced with

\*The Japanese commissioned photographers and artists to document the imperial buildings in and around Beijing.



a mastery of line realized in the curvilinear shaping of the powerful "leopard legs" and apron (Evarts 1993, 40) and the strongly upturned table ends. The consistent theme of *ruyi* cloud-head decoration also unifies the design. The front and back sides are tastefully divided into a series of beaded panels. Wang Shixiang, China's foremost scholar of classical furniture, recalled having seen several altar tables like this within the Forbidden City, lacquered red with high-

*Fig. 7, above. Altar table, Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Wood, red and gold lacquer. Palace Museum, Beijing.*

*Fig. 8, facing page. Table with drawers, Ming dynasty, Xuande period (1425-1436). Carved cinnabar lacquer on wood; length 119.5 cm, depth 84.5 cm, height 79.2 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

lights of gold. He stated that, although they had no concealed storage compartment, long drawers were fitted into each end for the storage of incense sticks. These tables were used to hold offerings during the numerous sacrificial ceremonies that occurred throughout the year.

Drawers added to the space under table tops begin to be seen in the Yuan period in the high-waisted, Song-style forms (Wang 1991, 63). The earliest known full-size piece of furniture with drawers is a carved lacquer table (fig. 8), probably of imperial origins, with an inscription dating it to the Xuande reign (1425-1436). The richly textured surface of dragons, phoenixes, and auspicious flowers indicates that it is unlikely to have been intended for everyday household use. As both front and back were equally decorated, it is likely that when used for ritual ceremonies, the side with the functional drawers was turned away from the participants. In form and construction, this table is clearly a predecessor of the later hardwood coffers, differing only in the absence of a bottom panel to enclose a concealed space beneath the drawers. Later designs are similar in many details, including the shaping of the legs (round on the outside and square on the inside), as well as the finishing of all four sides and the double-mitered framework that divides the spaces between the legs. Nevertheless, the pure strength of design and the refined classical proportions of this early Ming piece suggest that it is a fully realized form.

While it is generally believed that the traditional domestic Ming-style coffer with recessed legs, drawers, and concealed storage compartment developed during the later half of the Ming dynasty, substantiating evidence is sparse and difficult to interpret. The only known depiction is found in the Wanli (1573-1619) carpenter's manual *Lu Ban jing* (fig. 9), and the lack of any illustrations in the large body of Qing reference material is hard to understand. The *Lu Ban jing* illustration is thought to bear no relation to the accompanying text,

which is generally considered to be of an earlier date. However, as Klaas Ruitenbeek has noted, one entry in the text, simply titled "table" (*zhuo*), could be interpreted as describing a form similar to the Xuande lacquer table: "Divide the central space (between the legs) into two empty spaces (*zhong fen liangkong*). The space below the top can be divided into two or three openings and fit with drawers five or six inches (*cun*) deep. Make the lower stretchers the same width as the leg (*xia tajiaofang yu jiao tong da*)."<sup>1</sup> The term *tajiaofang*, which could mean footrest, foot-stretcher, or perhaps simply stretcher, is critical to the interpretation of this passage, and has been variously translated (Wang 1990, 208, Ruitenbeek 234). If, in fact, these "lower stretchers" were placed high enough between the legs to create two empty spaces (*kong*) of equal size, with drawers filling one and a panel concealing the other, the Ming-style coffer form would be readily produced. A definitive interpretation of this passage may not be possible, however, given the outdated terminology and rather spare text.

A pottery, coffer-like table of recessed-leg form recently acquired by the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California, is the only such example known to the author at this time (fig. 10). Although it has yet to be analyzed for more precise dating, its body and glaze are typical of the large



body of miniature pottery furniture excavated from Ming tombs. The two drawers below the table top have cartouche-shaped recesses and ring pulls at the center. Below the drawers are two panels, and long, flange-like, curvilinear spandrels extend from below the table top down each leg. A strongly cusped and arched apron is modeled below the panels. Interestingly, however, as with the Xuande table (fig. 8), neither the *Lu Ban jing* illustration (fig. 9) nor the Museum's pottery table has any indication of locking mechanisms. This is particularly noteworthy because locks are found on almost all extant coffers to secure the drawers and hidden space. Locks are also found on another table with two drawers illustrated in the *Lu Ban jing* (fig. 13) next to the coffer illustration, as well as on numerous pottery tables with drawers (fig. 24). Thus, it is difficult to determine if the two early coffer forms depicted in figures 9 and 10 contain concealed storage compartments.

Craig Clunas has noted that late Ming dynasty writers such as Wen Zhenheng, Gao Lian, and Li Yu, who commented on aspects of connoisseurship and comportment, seldom mention any storage furniture other than that associated with the pursuits of the male-dominated literati; domestic matters (managed by the women of the household) were not considered worthy of attention (Clunas 55). In a chapter devoted to various types of furniture, Wen Zhenheng notes under the heading, "Altar cabinet/altar table" (*fuchu fuzhuo*), "Utilizing red and black lacquer ones is absolutely the most beautiful, and furthermore, they are not so feminine. Those decorated with carving for the depository, the antique ones with crackled lacquer, and the furniture of Japanese manufacture, all are natural and have an an-



tique elegance. Also, the recently manufactured ones made up from crackled lacquer pieces are not bad. Even I can use them!" (Wen, *juan* 6:4ab). Here, the classification of pieces other than those lacquered black and red as "feminine" (*zhifengqi*) reflects the deeply rooted attitudes of sexual segregation of the Ming period. Men and women lived in different quarters of the household, which had their own respective furnishings.

Thus, the lack of literary references to coffers may in part be due to its connection with the women's quarters. Traditionally, the bride was given a dowry of furniture to furnish her own rooms, and it usually stayed in her possession even if the marriage ended. However, in an episode from the novel *Jin Ping Mei*, noted for its realistic contemporary portrayal of late Ming culture, the wanton widow Jin Lian was only allowed to take one piece from her trousseau of extravagant lacquer furnishings—a simple table with drawer(s) (*choutier zhuo*)—when she was finally booted out of Ximen Qing's household (*Jin Ping Mei Cihua* 86/11a). In an illustration to

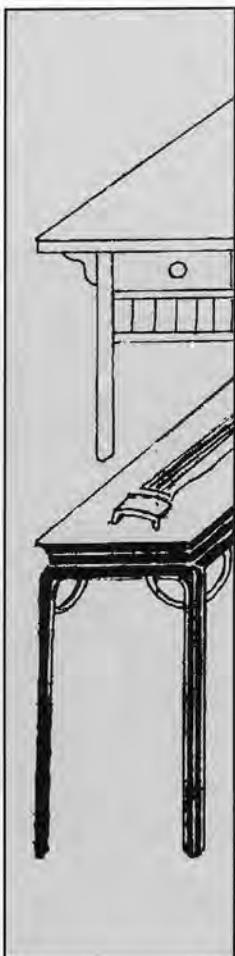


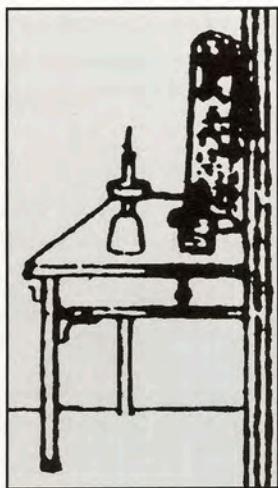
Fig. 9, left. Woodblock print illustration of a coffer, from *Lu Ban jing*, Wanli period (1573-1619). After Ruitenbeek II 83.

Fig. 10, above. Miniature coffer-like model, Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Green-glazed pottery; length 17.8 cm, depth 13 cm, height 13 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.

Fig. 11, facing page, above. Detail of table arranged with a domestic shrine. Woodblock print illustration to *Jin Ping Mei*, Chongzhen reign (1628-1644). After *Jin Ping Mei Cihua*.

Fig. 12, facing page, below. Table with drawers, late Ming dynasty. Huanghuali; length 140 cm, depth 42 cm, height 83.5 cm. Robert and Alice Piccus collection, Hong Kong.

the same novel, such a table is arranged like a domestic shrine with a wood tablet, candle, and incense outside the bedroom of one of Ximen's consorts (fig. 11). A recently discovered *huanghuali* example of similar size with flying ends may have been put to the same use (fig. 12). Bearing no evidence of reused wood or alterations aside from the commonly replaced paktong hardware, this table may quite plausibly be roughly contemporary with the Chongzhen (1628-1644) illustration to the *Jin Ping Mei*. Another illustration found in the late Ming edition of *Lu Ban jing* depicts a scene in which a maid attends her mistress at a dressing table with drawers (fig. 13). Once again, a rare, corresponding, and also



particularly fine *huanghuali* example has recently come to light, with decoration that is quite appropriate for a lady's dressing table (fig. 14). The two drawer fronts are carved with birds among wild tea flowers and magpies perched on blossoming plum branches, both expressing the wish for "eternal joy in the rejuvenating radiance of spring."

Closely related to the above *huanghuali* examples is a group of *huanghuali* table/coffers with straight legs and a blind compartment below the two drawers (see fig. 15; cf. Cameron 15). With their large bodies, outlined with curvilinear spandrels and aprons and supported by small straight legs, they often resemble big, woolly sheep. The consistent theme found in the decoration of the drawers, lower panel, and long flanking spandrels of figure 15 suggests that it, too, was part of a bridal dowry. There the unanimous wish of family and friends—that the new bride bear a son—is expressed in the rather maternal-looking dragons, each of which nurses an emerging, nymph-like, *chi*-dragon son. The motif carved on the





decorated, with long flowing spandrels of open-carved dragons and *lingzhi* fungus, and deep aprons carved with more dragons, *shou* characters, and the blossoming lotus with open seed pods. Many of these exhibit a style of ornamentation characteristic of the mid-to-late Qing dynasty. All of these decorative motifs could be expected to be found on dowry furniture, and express the traditional desire for sons who will bring fame and prosperity to the family line, and, perhaps more important, provide long-term security for the ancestral spirits. The strong link between such coffers and bridal trousseau furniture in general is confirmed by Wang Shixiang, who noted that coffers are also referred to as "dowry chests" (*jiadi*, 嫁底). "On the coffer were placed a clothes chest, a clock, a vase and a hat stand or mirror stand,

*Fig. 13, above. Detail of table with drawer used as a dressing table. Woodblock print illustration to Lu Ban Wanli period (1573-1619). After Ruitenbeek II, 43.*

*Fig. 14, facing page, above. Two-drawer table, Ming dynasty, seventeenth century. Huanghuali; length 114.5 cm, depth 52 cm, height 87 cm. David Lin collection, Taipei.*

*Fig. 15, facing page, below. Two-drawer coffer. Huanghuali; length 112 cm, depth 59 cm, height 89.5 cm. After Wang 1988, pl. 154.*

apron below—a scrolling vine with lotus flowers and exposed seed pods—adds an omen for the early arrival of children. Finally, the wish-fulfilling, *ruyi* cloud-head motif is neatly integrated into the design of the carved drawers, on which paktong pulls and sliding locks are mounted so that all within can be secured.

A nother large group of coffers is even more highly de-

all of which were held in place by a red string. Two people would carry it and walk in a procession to the parents of the bridegroom's home" (Wang 1990, 92).

Gustav Ecke informs us that splayed tables similar to Ming-style coffers and constructed of unfinished elm wood were still being used in Peking in the 1930s, placed at the entrance of open-front shops (Ecke 39). This placement and usage echo those depicted by the Ming painter, Qiu Ying, in "Spring Festival Along the River" (see fig. 6). Although the coffer-like tables that Ecke described may have resembled Ming-style coffers, Wang Shixiang later commented that this type actually had no hidden compartment (Wang 1990, 92). Perhaps it is such a piece that is shown in the front of a pharmaceutical shop in an eighteenth-century illustration to *Jin Ping Mei* (fig. 16). As all four sides of these storefront fixtures are exposed to view, the necessity of finishing every side is evident. This is again, interestingly, a distinguishing feature of most Ming-style coffers as well.

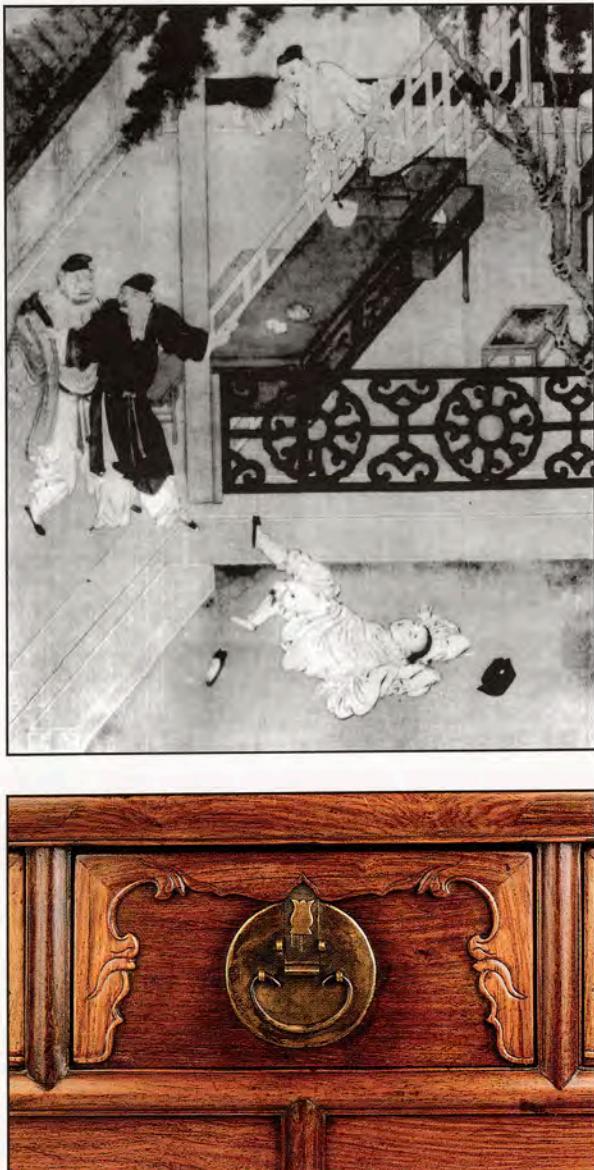
The decorative aprons facing the drawers of the tables depicted in figures 13 and 16 are also commonly found on coffers (fig. 1), and are called "kitchen hearth fire doors" (*zaohuomen*, 爐火門) by modern cabinetmakers. According to Wang Shixiang, this three-sided apron, carved with flames flaring from within (fig. 17), resembles a type of opening found on domestic Chinese kitchen stoves (Wang 1990, 92). Although it is also found on shop counters and dressing tables, the use of this hearth-like decorative motif on a table may have associations to the family altar. An image of the kitchen god and protector of the family, Zaoshen (竈神), was traditionally hung over the kitchen hearth where he could monitor the family activities, which he reported to the Jade Emperor (ruler of the spirit world) at each New Year. Thus, before Zaoshen's departure for the heavens, sacrificial meats, fruit, and wine were set out, prayers and thanksgiving were offered, and evil spirits were dispelled with firecrackers. Finally, before the image of Zaoshen was set afire to ascend to the upper regions, his lips were coated with honey so that only sweet words could be conveyed. A new image was hung for his return, and food was again offered to secure his goodwill. Households also kept a shrine for ancestral worship that displayed—on a written list or on carved wooden tablets—the names

of relatively immediate ancestors for whom offerings were made and incense was burned. Just as the emperor had various temples for sacrificial rites, and great families had their own more modest ancestral hall or shrine, so ordinary families, on a yet more reduced scale, set up small altars in their main rooms (Gernet 206). These handsome tables with drawers were no doubt quite suitable for use as small domestic altars.

The Ming-style coffer with concealed compartment can thus be seen to include components of the ancient strongbox, the coffer/chest, the merchant's counter, the table with drawers, and the ceremonial or altar table, and was well suited to a number of purposes. What such pieces were called, during the late Ming period, other than "a table with drawers," is unclear. Twentieth-century furniture scholars have recorded the colloquial terms used in the early part of the century; they reflect the usage and construction of these coffers but have no apparent link to older textual material. Gustav Ecke and Yang Yao recorded the term *menhuchu* (門呼櫥), literally, a "door cabinet," which seems to reflect the traditional placement of the coffer/counter at the entrance or "door" of open-front shops. Later, Wang Shixiang, questioning this terminology, suggested that the *men* of *menhuchu* should be *men* 閃 ("hidden") rather than *men* 門 ("door"), thus referring to the hidden storage cabinet. He did not explain, however, nor is it understandable, why the term for coffer should include the character for *hu*, which also means "door." Coffers with

doors rather than a hidden space are called *guichu* (櫃櫥), and are generally considered to be a relatively late development. Modern craftsmen have adopted a different terminology that differentiates coffers by their length: "coffers with two (drawers) in a row" (*lian er chu*) or "coffers with three (drawers) in a row" (*lian*





*san chu*). Those with only one drawer are also called *guisai*, 櫃塞 (literally, “plugging the gap between two cabinets”) when they are placed between a pair of cabinets (*gui*, 櫃), sometimes under a window or with a portrait or other type of painting above (Wang 1990, 92). The term *gui* (櫃), with its graphic compo-

Fig. 16, above. Anon., “Cao Liske Bullies Jiang Zhushan,” eighteenth-century illustration to Jin Ping Mei. Detail of table with drawers used as a shop counter. After Qinggong zhenbao [shuang]baimeitu.

Fig. 17, center. Drawer of a huanghuali coffer, detail of figure 1.

Fig. 18, facing page. Three-drawer coffer, late eighteenth/nineteenth century. Elm; length 138 cm, depth 47 cm, height 85 cm. Private collection, Taipei.

nents indicating a space to conceal treasures, has thus lost its specialized meaning and is now used interchangeably with *chu* (櫥) to designate a broad range of storage furniture.

In 1979-80, when Wang Shixiang traveled in Suzhuo and Guangzhou to compile materials for his book, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, he found Ming-style coffers still in common use, often located in the bedroom with valuables stored inside. Few could be said to be more than a century old, and most were made of miscellaneous indigenous woods that had been lacquered (Wang 1990, 92). A variety of unusual coffers of late date are also found in Shaanxi province today, such as a late eighteenth- or nineteenth-century elm wood altar coffer that was originally finished with a thin layer of black lacquer before it was refinished in accordance with more popular taste (fig. 18). This piece is constructed like a recessed-leg altar table, with decorative panels between the legs carved with large *ruyi* cloud-heads, foot stretchers, and flying table-ends. The central section is divided horizontally into two spaces, and the top space is again divided with vertical struts into three spaces for drawers, which are all hidden behind corresponding panels. The center panel, the only one with a bail handle, is lifted out with a small lateral movement to reveal a drawer behind. The two drawers on either side become accessible only after the sliding panels that conceal them are moved into the central space. A long *huanghuali* table in the Palace Museum, Beijing, is similarly constructed, with sliding panels that appear to be five drawer-fronts. Only the central space contains a drawer, however. When it is removed, the other four panels are free to slide open, revealing hidden cubby-hole storage spaces. All five storage areas can thus be secured with the lock on the single drawer (Wang 1990, 122).

Ming-style *huanghuali* coffers with splayed legs are usually made of reused materials. The legs frequently show traces of having been taken from another table. Traces of dovetail mortises that once housed transverse braces are almost always found in the top, front, side, and back panels of *huanghuali* coffers. These traces indicate that the panels were salvaged from other tables, or from the doors and side panels of cabinets. One coffer examined by the author had a plain *huanghuali* front panel concealing the hidden space below the drawers. When one of the

drawers was removed to inspect the interior, however, the back side of this plain panel was seen to be luxuriously carved with confronting dragons, suggesting that it had once been the large apron of a compound wardrobe. Flying table-ends, or everted flanges, are found on more than sixty percent of extant Ming-style *huanghuali* coffers. These small, separate, raised ends are almost invariably attached to the top of the end table frame member with slide-lock tenons and/or glue, appearing to have been "added on." The flying ends of altar tables or side tables of presumably the same period are, more often than not, integral with the end frame member and completely shaped from one block of wood.

Chinese architectural principles have always emphasized the economical use of materials and the salvaging of waste. The deeply rooted Chinese virtues of frugality and resourcefulness are reflected in architectural relics of the Hemudu culture that are six to

seven thousand years old, in which reused materials are found. Wooden boards from a staircase had been made from old columns, which show the traces of misplaced tenons and mortises. From similar traces found on many other structural members and timber planks, it was obvious that many timbers had been used over and over again, sometimes without any modification, and sometimes reshaped into timbers or planks (Institute of the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences 9). Several millennia of architectural experience were eventually compiled in the Song "Treatise on Architectural Methods" (*Yingzao Fashi*), including a section that stipulates methods for the most efficient cutting of timbers and utilization of waste. As the timber frame buildings were often in need of repair and maintenance, an official rejects yard was established to handle and inspect all waste construction materials inside and outside the capital. Those of suitable di-



mensions were classified as reusable building materials, and the rest was destined to become firewood (Institute of the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences 487).

Resourcefulness and frugality are virtues that generally stem from necessity and constraint. Yet much extant Ming-style furniture achieves its highly valued sculptural effects precisely from the generous use or “wasting” of precious materials—such as in the large C-curved legs of a *chuang*, or the deeply arched aprons of a table with strong and powerful hoof. Where did the salvaged materials from which so many coffers were made come from, and why does only this category of furniture reveal such a high percentage of reused wood?

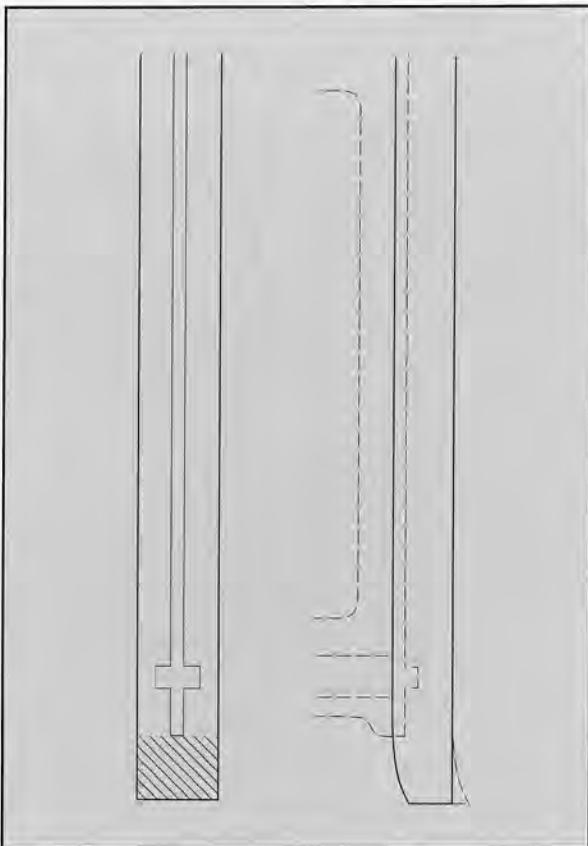
We know that Chinese cabinetmakers are proficient in reusing furniture woods. For example, Wang Shixiang noted that a law enacted after 1949 prohibiting the export of antique hardwood furniture resulted in the dismantling of many pieces simply for the precious material, which was then remade into other smaller objects that could be more readily sold in China or exported (Wang 1991, 38). The predominant use of reconstituted material in *huanghuali* coffers suggests a period in which there existed a consumer demand for “antique” coffers that exceeded the demand for antique *huanghuali* tables and cabinets, and that old materials were thus salvaged from less popular furniture types because the available new material was too easily distinguishable to make convincing “antiques.” The first three to four decades of the twentieth century was such a period, and it was then that Gustav Ecke recorded that antique furniture dealers stressed the necessity of differentiating *lao* (old) *huali* from the *xin* (new) *huali* that was being used to copy old furniture (Ecke 33–35). He did not note the reuse of old *huali*, however.

Ecke himself may have fallen prey to craftsmen and dealers capitalizing on the first wave of enthusiasm for “Ming-style” *huanghuali* furniture during the early part of the century. A well-proportioned, two-drawer coffer acquired by Ecke in Beijing is a classic example of furniture made from recycled *laohuali* (fig. 19). Furthermore, the traces of reuse are

Fig. 19, facing page. Two-drawer coffer. Huanghuali; length 170 cm, depth 57 cm, height 90 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. After Ecke, pl. 97.

Fig. 19a, right. Drawing of transformed altar table leg.

so clear that we can easily trace the origin of the salvaged material. The inside faces of the legs have long, narrow grooves which have been filled, indicating that the legs were taken from a long, narrow table with end panels, and were simply reshaped round on the outside and left square on the inside. The side panels and aprons of the coffer conveniently fit into the original groove. The legs originally flared out slightly at the bottom and were fitted with end panels; this can be detected because, although the flared portion of the outside face of each leg has been shaved off so that the leg runs straight to the floor, the inside face of each leg still curves inward at the bottom (fig. 19a). The legs and the top with its flying ends may once have been part of the same table, but this can only be speculation. The two horizontal members across the front of the coffer, which divide the drawers, storage compartment, and apron, are each composed of two long, laminated strips containing filled mortises, indicating that the craftsman was severely limited in his materials. A coating of semi-transparent pigmented lacquer could have concealed these traces of reuse; however, they are clearly visible in the photograph that was made pre-



vious to Ecke's publication of the piece.\* This coffer, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, underwent further alterations when it passed out of Ecke's hands. The hidden coffer space, originally accessed by removing the upper drawers, was made into a large single drawer by a later Western collector, who retained the original panel for the drawer face. Thus the present version is the result of a series of transformations—from what was perhaps a long, narrow altar table to an altar coffer to a Western sideboard—and can be used as a model case to understand other reconstructions.

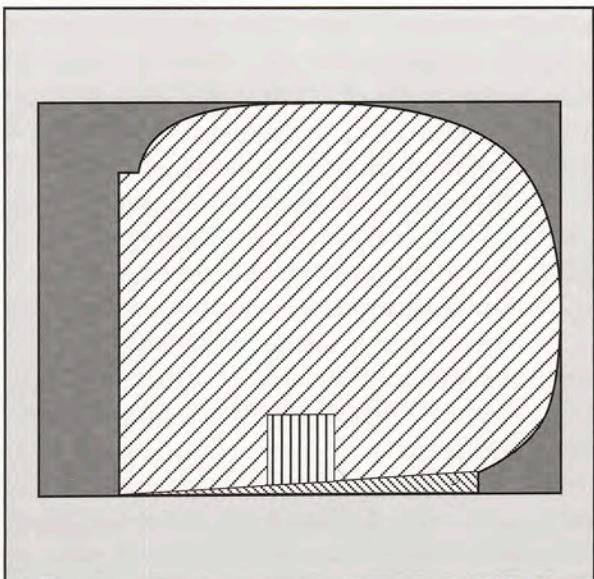
To disguise the obvious traces of reused wood, a thin strip of wood or veneer was sometimes laminated onto the inside of each leg to conceal grooves and mortises (figs. 20, 20a). The thickness of the veneer corresponds to the depth of the beading on the outside edge, and is beveled to meet the inside corner, making detection difficult. With the passage of time, however, the lamination will lighten in color, as

\*The most recent edition of Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, by SMC Publishing Co., Taipei, and Beijing Press, contain reproductions made from the original negatives, which are much clearer than those in previous editions.

we see in the detail in figure 20, exposing the point at which the original legs began to flare out. Nonetheless, the craftsman who created this coffer had remarkable sensitivities to proportion and design. The splayed frame of the structure is magnificently balanced to support the full-bellied body, whose line is continued in the deep apron. The light, open-carved dragons in the apron begin a line of support and ascension that extends the everted ends of the top.

The three-drawer *huanghuali* altar coffer in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture is a masterpiece of superb proportions (fig. 21). The sleek design echoes that of the Xuande cinnabar lacquer table (fig. 8), differing only in the long, single panel below the drawers, which accentuates the strong horizontal line, and the flying ends, which lighten the mass of the undecorated body. The material is uniform throughout and, although the backs of coffers are traditionally finished with small panels of miscellaneous woods, this is a rare example of one entirely finished with *huanghuali*. The distribution of the seven panels reveals the sensitive eye for design that prompted George Kates to acclaim the Chinese as "masters of rectilinear space division."





The Museum's coffer is also made from reused materials, and the legs, which show traces of filled areas, may have originally been part of a recessed-leg table. The oval legs of recessed-leg tables were sometimes reshaped square on the inside with beading; the process can expose pithy areas that then require filling (fig. 21a). Both the underside of the coffer body and the underside of the top panel have been covered with a heavy lacquer and fiber coating. Traces of a red, semi-transparent lacquer can also be found in the recesses of the beading and on the upper portions of the legs, and this lacquer appears to have once coated the entire piece.

Ink drawings of a rhinoceros horn and a leaf-like *ruyi* were discovered on the underside of one of the drawer runners, concealed there by the maker (fig. 21b). In the Ming period, carpenters were known to hide amulets during house construction that could bring either good fortune or evil into the household. The *Lu Ban jing* informs us, "A cassia leaf hidden in a block brings with it a first degree at the examinations" (Ruitenbeek 298). The rhinoceros horn, a lucky symbol associated with the scholar, and the wish-fulfilling *ruyi* that are hidden inside this coffer may have served the same purpose as the auspicious omens that are more often carved on the exterior.

Wang Shixiang now feels that, although the Ming-style coffer form may have developed during the late Ming period, few examples have survived, and that the large body of *huanghuali* coffers made with reused wood are creations of the late Qing (1820-1912) and Republican periods (1912-1949). Craig Clunas, author of *Chinese Furniture*, agrees

*Fig. 20, left below. Detail of figure 1 showing veneered leg.*

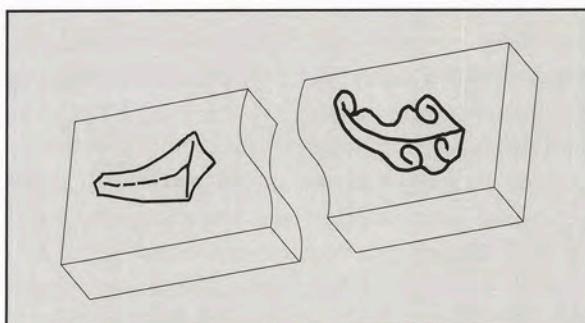
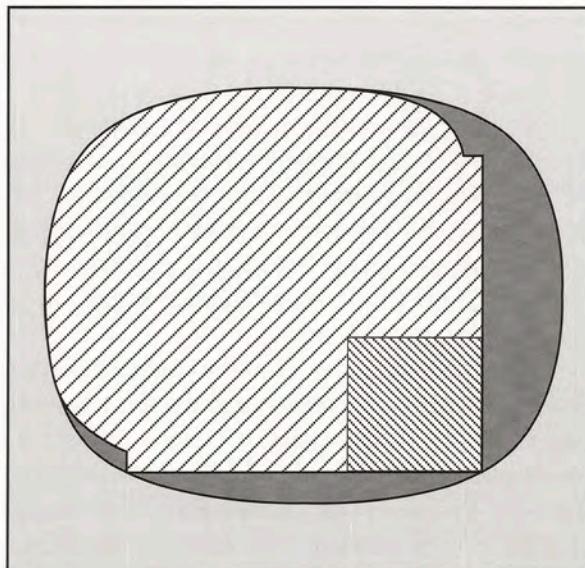
*Fig. 20a, left above. Drawing of section of veneered leg, showing how square legs from a recessed-leg altar table with end panels can be converted to coffer legs. The wedge-shaped strip of veneer conceals the groove that originally held the end panels.*

*Fig. 21, facing page, below. Three-drawer coffer. Huanghuali; length 193 cm, depth 54 cm, height 81 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.*

*Fig. 21a, facing page, above. Drawing of section of a coffer leg (fig. 21), showing how oval legs from a recessed-leg table can be converted to coffer legs. The reshaping revealed pithy areas on the inside corner of the leg, which were then filled.*

*Fig. 21b, facing page, center. Representation of the ink drawings on the drawer runners inside the coffer (fig. 21).*

with this assessment, and credits long-established Hong Kong furniture dealer and writer, Grace Wu Bruce, with first raising the question concerning the dating of extant coffers. At this point, however, it seems highly questionable whether the “Ming-style coffer” is in fact even a late Ming form. This theory is indirectly supported by an inexplicable absence of evidence. There is an obvious lack of high-quality lacquered coffers produced during the late Ming and early Qing periods, although numerous examples of such altar tables, cabinets, and wardrobes have survived. The same omission is found throughout Ming and Qing paintings and woodblock print illustrations, which almost never depict coffers of any kind, even in representations of bridal trousseaus or in erotic scenes set in bedrooms, where coffers would most likely have been found. And, unlike other categories of traditional furniture, no link can be found between the modern terminology used for coffers and that apparently used during the Ming for related coffer-like chests and counters. Finally, the predominating use of previously used materials in *huanghuali* coffers suggests that these pieces were not made during the “golden age” of Chinese furniture, when the supply of tropical hardwoods was sufficiently abundant that lavishly sculpted furniture was created without regard to waste. It was surely during a much



later period that precious materials were salvaged from useless old furniture and fashioned into more popular forms. Finished with the dark lacquer coatings popularly found on later furniture, the traces of reused wood on these coffers would have been imperceptible to their owners. Thus, the enigma of the Ming-style coffer can perhaps only be understood when broadly viewed as a late Qing/Republican composition of and from well-established older forms that had multiple functions.

This fragmented survey of the enigmatic coffer remains incomplete, however, and the mystification that persists probably reflects a cultural difference. The Western insistence on verifiable dates and "authenticity" is unsympathetic toward the romantic connoisseurship practised in the East, which values objects made of precious materials and classical forms that are clearly imbued with an antique spirit, even if they are not certifiably and significantly aged. Perhaps, too, these reconstructions were not initially made to deceive, but rather to utilize materials that were valued for their durability and resistance to insects and dry rot. The dark lacquer coatings popular during the late Qing period would have made the visual distinction between various woods a less important factor. Once the preoccupation with age is put aside, we are free to appreciate this unique category. Rather than dismissing pieces made of reused woods, we can admire the ingenuity and skill with which the craftsman utilized the limited materials at his disposal to create refined and useful objects. Like the other types of classical Chinese furniture, the finest coffers exhibit ancient antecedents, an inspired use of splendid woods, a strikingly beautiful balance of space and mass, and a deep understanding of the principles of classical design.

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