

# Balanced, Focused, and Upright: The Tapered Cabinet

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The tapered cabinet is one of the most pleasing forms of Chinese furniture (fig. 1). It stands tall with an exposed framework that tapers inward from a stable-footed base—an effect which accentuates its verticality and lightens an otherwise bulky mass. Burnished metal lockplates positioned against the warm tonalities of figured woods or polished lacquer surfaces invariably adds a satisfying effect of calm focus and perfected balance. This essay will explore the historical development, use, general construction and subtle stylistic ranges of the classical tapered cabinet.

## HISTORY

Generally speaking, Chinese cabinets are curiously scarce amongst historical reference materials. Unlike many other categories of traditional furniture that can be visually referenced for style and use from the volumes of woodblock print illustrations or paintings, cabinets are rarely illustrated. Furthermore, within Chinese literature, terminologies seldom qualify style, type, or size.

The modern terms *chu* 櫥 and *gui* 櫃 have been used since ancient times in reference storage containers. Their etymology suggests some former distinction between storage units for valuables (*gui* 貴) and those for more functional household or kitchen (*chu* 廚) use. However, by the Ming dynasty, these terms were interchangeably used, and sometimes appear as the compound *chugui*. Functional qualifiers such as “clothes” cabinet (*yichu*), or “book” cabinet (*shugui*) are more frequently used. Some modern scholars have noted a preference for *chu* in the South, and *gui* in the North; however, an inventory of cabinets confiscated from Jesuit priests in the southern city of Nanjing suggests that both terms were common to this southerly region during the Ming period; included were eighteen *chu* cupboards and ten *gui* cabinets:

- 6-clothes cupboards (*yichu* 衣櫥)
- 1-book cupboard (*shuchu* 書櫥)
- 7-gold lacquer cabinets (*jinqi chu* 金漆櫥)
- 1-comb-head cupboard (*shutou chu* 梳頭櫃)
- 2-dish cupboards (*wan chu* 碗櫥)
- 1-plain cabinet (*bai shen chu* 白身櫥)
- 5-book cabinets (*shugui* 書櫃)

- 2-large red lacquer cabinets (*da hong gui* 大紅櫃)
- 1-large plain cabinet (*da bai shen gui* 大白身櫃)
- 1-cabinet made of boards (*ban gui* 板櫃)
- 1-cabinet/chest filled with flower vases (*huaping yi gui* 花瓶衣櫃)

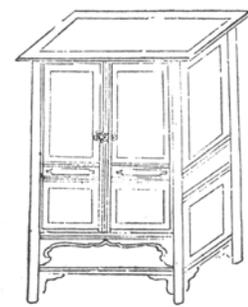
These descriptions suggest some functional attributes and, in some cases, generally describe finishes, yet little is revealed relative to form. The difference here between a book cupboard (*shuchu*) and a book cabinet (*shugui*) is also indistinguishable.

Today, cabinets are generally divided according to two traditional construction methods—those with a framework splayed outward toward the base are called “tapered cabinets”; those of box-like construction are called “square-corner cabinets.” Although traditional Chinese terminologies for the tapered cabinets, such as “round-leg cabinet” (*yuanjiao gui* 圓腳櫃) or “noodles cabinet” (*miantiao gui* 麵條櫃), may have been passed down through time, these qualified terms have yet to be discovered in any pre-twentieth century literature.

Many of the forms associated with “Ming-style” furniture were well developed by the Song dynasty. Cabinets, however, may have been an exception. Although evidence for pre-Ming cabinets is sparse, the little that exists suggests that early cabinets were generally of rather diminutive scale.



A small cabinet one meter in height listed in the 756 AD inventory in the Shōsōin likely reflects a style characteristic of the Tang period (fig. 2). Perhaps more closely related to the tapered cabinet form is the small table-top cabinet with pivot hinge doors delineated in a Southern Song (1127-1279) scroll painting illustrating methods of sericulture (fig. 3).



The earliest illustration of a tapered cabinet form appears in a publication (d. 1436) of the children’s primer *Xinbian duixiang* where it is termed *chu* (fig. 4). The mid-section of the paneled doors are divided with a narrow panel. Although the scale of this representation cannot be discerned, its rather squatty proportions are distinct. However, the proportions and construction style are also quite similar to a large red lacquer cabinet whose lacquer has been carbon dated the early Ming period (fig. 5). Cabinets of similar style are also depicted in a furniture-making shop in Qiu Ying’s (1494-1552) in version of *Spring Festival along the River* (Qingming Shanghe tu) (fig. 6) as well as

examples illustrated the late Ming encyclopedia *Sancai tuihui* (d. 1607) (fig. 7), the latter revealing doors divided with *haitangshi*-style *taohuan* panels and the use of a central stile.

Two small tapered cabinets dated to the late sixteenth century are also of note. One in the Palace Museum Collection, Beijing bears an inscription dated to the Longqing reign (1567-1572) (fig. 8).



It has round legs, multi-paneled doors and sides, and a central stile; the space below the doors is divided into three smaller panels. The panels and frame members are all richly carved in high relief with dragon and clouds. The other, housed at the Oesterreichisches Museum in Vienna, bears a Wanli inscription dated to 1585 (fig. 9). Its general style is similar to the earlier Beijing piece, but its surfaces of red lacquer on a yellow ground incised with dragons, clouds, and floral are decorated in somewhat more subdued, yet more refined style. A number of large black lacquer cabinets were also discovered in the Dongshan region west of Suzhou, the style of which can be considered to be 16<sup>th</sup> century or earlier (fig. 10). Their beaded panels, and large round legs are similar to the cabinets found in both Qiu Ying’s painting and the *Sancai tuihui*, but also reveal fine gold-painted (*miaojin*) decoration. All of these examples have subdivided frameworks, which suggest a common construction pattern used throughout most of the Ming period.

Descriptive detail for a “clothes cabinet” (*yichu*) found in the late Ming dynasty *Lu Ban jing* also provides evidence of the tapered cabinet form:



The cupboard is 5.05 *chi* (151.5 cm) high, 1.65 *chi* (49.5 cm) deep, and 4.4 *chi* (132 cm) wide. (The space between) the two (front) posts is divided equally. Each post is .16 wide x .14 *chi* thick. The bottom rail is .14 wide x .13 *chi* thick; the top rail is .14 wide x .12 *chi* thick. The

door frame members are each .14 wide x .11 *chi* thick. The top of this cupboard tapers .12 *chi*.

The reference to tapering (*shao*) gives a clear indication of the tapered cabinet form, and its measured proportions illustrated in figure 11 reveal a somewhat more vertical form than the *Xinbian duixiang* illustration. However, the style of construction is indiscernible.

However, a distinct evolution of style is clearly evident from the miniature tapered cabinets excavated from the tomb of Pan Yunzheng (d. 1589) (fig. 12). They exhibit a simplified style and a new, refined appearance with single, full-length panels fit to the with door and side frames. The Pan Yunzheng tomb was found in Shanghai; the simple, elegant style of these miniature cabinets also reflects the general refined level of craftsmanship for which the greater Jiangnan region was renown.

With the lifting of the trade embargo in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, so did the popularity of furniture crafted from imported tropical hardwoods such as *huali*, *zitan* and *jichimu*. And as craftsman competed with one another in the thriving marketplace, so did more and more refined designs appear. During the transitional 17<sup>th</sup> century and early Qing period, many new subtleties appeared within the basic design; variations developed in the molded profiles of the frame members, the shaping of the aprons, the placement of drawers, and the use of precious materials. Although the tapered cabinet became established as a traditional form that survived well into the Qing dynasty, its popularity was eventually was succeeded by the square-corner form whose rectangular shape was more convenient for division into countless arrangements of drawers, compartments, and shelving configurations.

## SIZE AND USE

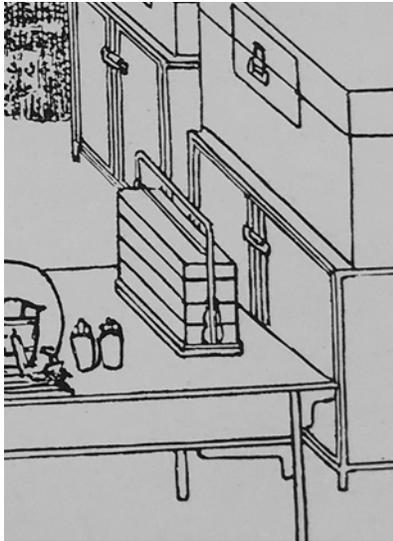
Tapered cabinets were made in various sizes; generally speaking, they can be divided into four groups.

**Very small cabinets**, 50-60 cm in height, were used on the table top for storage of stationary items, etc. (fig. 13). Because they were to stand in the open, these cabinets are typically finished as neatly on the back as on front.



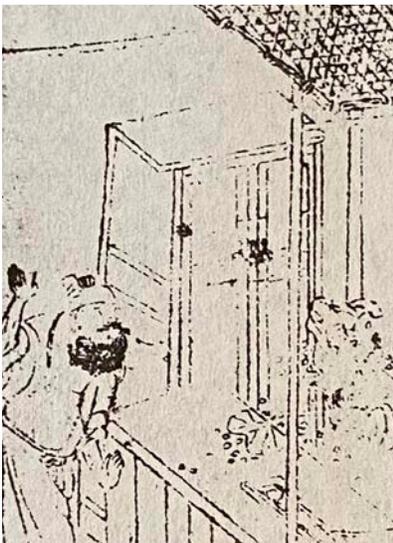
**Kang, or low cabinets**, range in height from 80-120 cm. In northern regions of China where the long winters were bitter cold, daily life was often focused around the heated brick platform (*kang*) upon which low furniture was placed. Records from the Imperial workshops indicated that the majority of cabinets made for the Palace during the Yongzheng reign (1722-1735) were of low height for such use. Low cabinets were used to store clothes, books, medicines, teaware, etc.

Low cabinets were not restricted to the *kang*. Wen Zhenheng, a native of the southern metropolis of Suzhou during the late Ming period, suggested the placement of a small cabinet, arranging the sleeping quarters for a gentleman where incense, medicinals and curiosities for amusement could be stored. More functional items were to be placed out of view behind the bed. While the scene (fig. 14) from the late Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei* hardly portrays the elegant sleeping quarters of a gentleman, two low cabinets stacked with chests are found—placed in front of the bed. The tapered



style is evident from the overhanging top and wood pivot hinge doors; each is fit with a central stile and secured with a lock. Here the chests and cabinets may store clothing, blankets, and other personal items. Such stacked arrangements may offer some explanation for the roughly finished top panels that are commonly to many surviving low cabinets. In the studio, small cabinets were also suitable for storing small bronzes, jades and other antiquities. Those with flush panel tops also served as stands to display flowers in a vase or support a night lamp.

**The medium-sized tapered cabinet** averages around 150 cm height, a dimension which roughly corresponds to the height of the *Lu Ban jing* clothes cabinet. During the Ming period, it is likely that this prototype was found throughout shops in the marketplace as well as domestic residences where, as a practical storage unit, it served ten thousand uses. A rare illustration of a standard-sized cabinet is found an illustration accompanying the late Ming novel *Shuihu zhuan* (*Water Margin*) (fig. 15). It stands against the back wall of a butcher's shop, where secured with a padlock, it appears to safeguard money and other valuables. The construction with three-panel doors and sides as well as a central stile is clear. Such a scene recalls Wen Zhenheng's comments regarding the suitability of cabinets for the studio, "Those found in the marketplace and the pharmacies must be avoided!"



**The standard full-sized tapered cabinet** is around 180 cm height, and larger examples reach well over 200 cm. Large red lacquered cabinets of tapered construction were commonly found in the sutra halls of temples where Buddhist texts were stored. Large cabinets were also used storing the voluminous Classics. An illustration from the novel *Lieguo zhi* (*Annals of the Nations*) partially depicts a pair of large tapered cabinets along the back wall of a study of a historian (fig. 16) that may well have been filled with chronicles of the ages.



Because moisture from the ground was a problem, especially in the southern and coastal regions of China, cabinets were also commonly placed on stands. For this reason Wen, a native of Suzhou, also suggested the use of stands two feet in height high—

termed *chudian*—on which to place cabinets where books and paintings were to be stored; alternatively, the legs of cabinets were recommended to be over one foot in height.

In 1992, while wandering through the narrow lanes of Suzhou, this author chanced upon an open gate where a large red lacquer cabinet stood visible in a small room. To one side was a canopy bed; to the other, a smaller cabinet stacked with several chests. A low stand on which the cabinet stood

elevated it from the ground a few inches and also provided an open shelf where shoes, a brazier pan, and other miscellaneous were placed.



The customary use of cabinets stands was in the coastal regions, where tapered cabinets have been found with elegant stands, which are also sometimes fitted with drawers fitted with drawers (figs. 17-19). Although surviving cabinets with stands are relatively rare, it likely that many were originally paired with stands. Cabinets with short legs and aprons that come close to the ground, yet show little evidence of loss of height due to deterioration, may have originally been mated with stands. Such stands were generally shaped with a raised edge around the perimeter of the frame, or carved with sockets at the corners to prevent the cabinet from slipping off the edge. It is also possible that some of the low tables with “drip edge” moldings were in fact originally stands for cabinets that have since become separated.

### **TYPICAL CONSTRUCTION**

With regard to construction, the tapered cabinet can be considered to belong to the “recessed-leg” family. Its basic frame-work follows that of the recessed-leg table pattern to which panels and doors provide space enclosure. The top is constructed with a panel in a mitered frame; usually, this panel is recessed; when visible, the panel is often fit flush to the frame to create an attractive and usable surface like that of a table top. The four vertical supports tenon into this framed panel at points recessed from the corners so that it appears to protrude with a slight, but distinctive, cap-like overhang. These frame members splay outward toward the base where they are joined with horizontal stretchers that fix the base width approximate to that of the overhanging cap frame above. Intermediate stretchers are added according to the size. The side and back panels fit into narrow grooves slotted into these frame members. The upper edge of the side panel is generally grooved directly into the underside of the cap frame; on larger cabinets, a horizontal stretcher is sometimes added at the top which completes a frame around the side panel—a technique for the convenience of

modular panel assembly and ease of transportation as broken-down components. Plain aprons are typically fitted below the lower stretchers. This is the basic pattern of the tapered cabinet.

### ***Splay***

The impression of balance, which is characteristic of the tapered cabinet form, results from its splayed 'A-shape' form. This technique was also typical of temple architecture during the Song and Yuan periods, in which the corner columns were canted inwards to provide visual stability to counter-balance the large roof overhangs. In cabinet construction, the amount of splay varies from piece to piece. As a general rule, the dimension of the protruding cap frame is more or less equal to the distance the legs are set apart at the base; having been inset at the top, the leg/frame members are thus splayed.



### ***Hinges***

The doors of tapered cabinets are typically hinged with wood pivots, an ancient technique traditional to doors and windows, and one that also permitted convenient removal. The hinge-side frame member extends beyond both ends, and these protrusions are shaped as pivots; mating sockets are bored into the cap frame and front stretcher below (cf. fig. 20). The doors are typically fitted such that when fully opened, the panel may be lifted upward approximately one centimeter so as to release the lower pivot from its socket. The bottom of the panel is then pulled outward to clear the lower stretcher, after which the upper pivot is free to fall from its socket—thus, the door panel is removed. In any other position, the “additional molding” attached to the underside of

the front upper frame member prevents the doors from being lifted and removed. Some small tapered cabinets are constructed without this “additional molding”, and only when the entire top frame is removed can the door pivots be freed.

### ***Central Stile***

A central vertical stile was used to provide a firm point to which a lock can be attached to keep the doors neatly shut. When the cabinet doors are open, this post, which is shaped with an open-sided mortise at the bottom, is also easily removed to provide full access the shelves. This feature was especially convenient for storing long bolts of fabric or scroll paintings. Occasionally, the back edges of the central stile are shaped with a stop to ensure a better seal between the doors.

Many cabinets are not fit with central stiles. Modern furniture restorers from Zhejiang province note this as a typical characteristic of the tapered cabinets from Subei, the region of northern Jiangsu province. However, cabinets without central stiles are also found in other regions. These two traditions may possibly be related to the stability of regional climatic conditions; extreme changes humidity noticeably affect the movement and warping of wood panels. In an environment with unstable conditions of humidity, the central stile would tend to keep the two doors aligned with one

another. (The miniature model from the tomb of Pan Yunzheng (fig. 12) reveals an extreme case.) In regions where the humidity was relatively stable, the central stile may have been considered unnecessary. Nevertheless, its use is still a more effective technique in keeping the doors tightly closed.



### ***Molded Styles***

A common characteristic of the Ming dynasty cabinets cited above is the use of round legs, or rather, rounded over on the outside and square on the inside. The traditional terminology—'round-leg cabinet'—may well be associated to this longstanding style. The legs may also be oval in section, which was an aesthetic technique employed to render the size of the frame members in complementary proportion to the cabinet's width and depth. The cap- and door frames of the 'round-leg' style are typically molded with simple beaded, half-round profiles (cf. fig. 20). While this pattern can be considered to be a style traditional of the late Ming, it is also a style that continued to be faithfully reproduced well into the Qing period.

The 'square-member' tapered cabinet, termed "noodles cabinet (*miantiaogui*)" may have been another

standard late Ming style (cf. fig. 1); however, this form, framed with squared members of rectangular or square section, is somewhat less common. A simple variation of this style is when the square-cut frame members are shaped with concave-molded surfaces, sometimes called 'thumb-molding' (fig. 21).

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as furniture-makers realized the potential of dense tropical hardwoods, more and more subtle refinements appeared. With regard to tapered cabinets, the molded profiles of frame members tended to become increasingly refined. Such are those based on an octagonal profile with concave shaped facets (cf. fig 22) or those shaped with double concave molded surfaces (cf. fig 23). Even more unique are the moldings with crisply raised corners balance the broadly shaped concave surfaces (cf. fig. 24). These examples, with crisp, sharp elements and broad, round elements to bring about a balanced *yin/yang* relationship.

### ***Panels***

The earliest examples and illustrations of tapered cabinets consistently depict the use of subdivided

frame members with multiple panels (cf. figs. 4-10). The doors and side panels are divided with transverse members which both rigidify the frame as well as create spaces for decorative panels that were held into place with tongue and groove joinery. In order to make single-panel frames that were rigid, the use of transverse braces with the sliding dovetail key had to be adopted, which both rigidified the frame as well as invisibly secured the panel from the backside. Thus, the development of the transverse brace was integral with this transition.

The trend towards the use of single panel doors may well have been associated with the fashion for hardwood furniture which arose during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Tapered cabinets, perhaps better than any other piece of furniture, are especially suited to feature the beautiful grain patterns of figured woods. The connoisseurship of wood grain imagery dates to antiquity when no less than Prince Liu Sheng the Western Han dynasty (202 BC-23 AD) romanced upon their manifold rich impressions in his “Ode to Fine-Grained Wood”. Bai Juyi’s poem “A Figured Cypress *Chuang*” also extols upon the abstract imagery of finely figured timber. Such imagery, which surfaces from patterns in natural materials, continues to delight and fascinate our eyes.



The mostly highly prized cabinets feature matched single-board panels whose uninterrupted grain patterns provided a complete, wholesome impression. Tapered cabinets of *jumu* were prized for their “pagoda pattern” (*baotawen*) with layered graining that also appears like mountains rising in the distance (cf. fig. 25).

Door panels may be “bookmatched” or “slip-matched”. The former refers to panels having initially been sequentially cut from the same timber, yet oriented like an open book and—side by side—appearing with mirrored markings (cf. fig 17). The latter terminology refers to parallel orientation of panels having initially been sequentially cut from the same timber; the panels appear as though slipped apart when arranged side by side, and thus, appear with repeated parallel markings (cf. fig. 13).

However, because of the difficulty of finding wide boards without defects, and moreover, the problems of splitting and cracking during the drying process, many door panels are comprised of two or more joined pieces (cf. fig. 21).

### ***Variations of Panel Materials***

Many materials were esteemed for making cabinets. For Wen Zhenheng, small cabinets made of speckled bamboo, *nanmu* burl, *chishui*, or *luomu* exhibited an air of antiquity; those of cracked black lacquer were also considered first rate.

For storage of paintings and books, cabinets of *nanmu* and *nanmu* burl were prized for a warm



lustrous appearance, as well as resistance to decay, boring insects, and book worms. *Nanmu* burl, appearing as a mottled cluster of curls containing tiny “grape-seed” patterns, has been highly appraised since antiquity (cf. fig 26).

Cabinets of speckled bamboo rarely seen. However, a pair of small *huanghuali* cabinets featuring panels of speckled bamboo (*xiangfei zhu*) are housed in (fig. 27). Speckled bamboo, with its allegorical associations to filial piety, has long been a favorite of scholars.



Since antiquity, decorative lacquer was the most traditional furniture finish, and is commonly evident on antique tapered cabinets. Aside from those mentioned above (cf. figs. 5, 9-10), a 17<sup>th</sup> century tapered cabinet from the Suzhou region retains traces of gold-painted landscape scenes on a black lacquer ground (fig. 28). And another 17<sup>th</sup> century example exhibits inlaid decoration with painterly scenes of ‘birds and flowers’ composed with variegated semiprecious materials in the tradition of Zhou Zhu, a late Ming craftsman attributed with the development of what became known as the *Zhouzhi* inlay technique (fig. 29).



Although relatively rare, door panels were also occasionally decorated with decorative stone panels (cf. fig. 30).



### ***Cabinet Interiors***

The interiors of tapered cabinets are generally fit with functional drawers and shelves. The standard pattern is a drawer unit that is supported by the interior transverse stretchers of the side panels. This unit serves as a shelf and is fit with two drawers. An additional shelf is generally arranged above (cf. fig. 31).

Another variation is found with those cabinets that have a horizontal panel below the doors. This space in the bottom of the cabinet was sometimes used as a concealed storage compartment that was accessible after removing the false bottom panel.

Many cabinets retain lacquer coatings on interior surfaces as well as exterior surfaces where secondary woods were employed. The tradition of applying seal coatings to the interior surfaces suggest that exteriors were also originally sealed with perhaps a more refined clear or semi-transparent lacquer. Balanced protection from moisture penetration

is an age-old technique to prevent wood panels from warping and twisting. Thus, unrefined lacquer thickened with binding powder made from various materials—horn, bone, shell, stone, brick, pottery, charcoal, etc. —was mixed with fibrous organic material and applied to secondary surfaces. Strips of loosely woven fabric were embedded into the thickened lacquer mixture along joints where movement was likely to cause cracking. Sometimes the complete surface is pasted with fabric before the lacquer was applied. Some cabinets are found with rather rough finishes; others are more

smoothly finished with successive coatings of thinner colored lacquer, of which black, red, yellow, or green lacquer have all been noted.

Cabinet interiors were also lined with paper or fabric. Cao Zhao recommended lining the doors and shelves of book cabinets to make them air tight and also noted an old technique used to repel book worms in the application of a fragrant paste to the interior surfaces. Records also indicate that Hangzhou silk was used to line huali cabinets produced in the Yongzheng Imperial Workshops. The influence of such Imperial refinement is suggested by one early Qing scholar who recommended lining book cabinets with Xuande white damask patterned with small clouds and birds; he further suggested that the lining be pasted over mixture comprised of sandalwood sawdust and fresh cotton wadding which “not only added a sweet fragrance, but also repel insects.” With regard to storing paintings, however, Wen Zhenheng was adamant about not using any sort of lacquer or lining whose color might bleed to stain a painting.

The tapered cabinet was eventually succeeded by the square-cornered cabinet, whose form was better suited to the multi-shelf and -drawer configurations which realized more efficient use of space. Nonetheless, the tapered cabinet did not fade into oblivion, but continued to be used and reproduced. Having transcended the law whereby “form follows function” and that whereby old styles are cast aside, the tapered cabinet has endured as a classic form. Moreover, its status in world furniture traditions has reached to an unprecedented height, where with upright stance, it quietly radiates focus and balance.

## Illustrations

- Fig. 1 Tapered cabinet, late 16th/early 17th century. *Huanghuali*; 75.5 x 40 x 116.5 cm height. Former Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture collection.
- Fig. 2 Drawing. Cabinet in the Shosoin, (ca. 765).
- Fig. 3 Drawing. Small table top cabinet from Southern Song (1127-1279) painting, Heilongjiang Provincial Museum.
- Fig. 4 Cabinet (*chu*). Woodcut illustration from the children's primer *Xinbian duixiang siyan* (d. 1436).
- Fig. 5 Red lacquer cabinet, lacquer sample carbon dated early Ming period. Collection of the author.
- Fig. 6 Detail of tapered cabinet in a furniture-making shop, from Qiu Ying (1494-1552), *Qingming Shanghe tu*. National Palace Museum, Taiwan.
- Fig. 7 Cabinet (*gui*). Woodcut illustration to *Sancai tuhui* (*Pictorial Encyclopedia of Heaven, Earth and Man*), 1607.
- Fig. 8 Small tapered cabinet, Ming Longqing period. Palace Museum
- Fig. 9 Small tapered cabinet, Ming Wanli period. Oesterreichisches Museum, Vienna.
- Fig. 10 Tapered Cabinet, Fir and Lacquer, 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Suzhou Region.
- Fig. 11 Drawing. Scaled illustration of a tapered cabinet according to dimensions described in *Lu Ban jing*.
- Fig. 12 Miniature tapered cabinet. Excavated from the tomb of Pan Yunzheng (d.1589). *Jumu*, 23 cm height. Shanghai Art Museum.
- Fig. 13 Table top tapered cabinet, *longyan* wood, 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. Fujian Province. Collection of the author
- Fig. 14 Bedroom with tapered cabinets. Woodcut illustration from Chongzhen (1628-1644) period edition of *Jin Ping Mei*.
- Fig. 15 Butcher's shop. Woodcut illustration to a Wanli period (1573-1623) edition of *Shuihu zhuan* (Water Margin).
- Fig. 16 Studio with tapered cabinets. Woodcut illustration to a Kangxi period (1662-1723) edition of *Lieguo zhi* (Annals of the Nations).
- Fig. 17 *Jumu* tapered cabinet on stand, Qing dynasty, Jiangsu province.
- Fig. 18 *Hongdou* tapered cabinet on stand, Qing dynasty, Fujian/Zhejiang province.
- Fig. 19 *Jichimu* tapered cabinet on stand, Qing dynasty, Fujian province.
- Fig. 20 Round leg detail, *jumu* cabinet, 18<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 21 Concave-molded leg detail, cabinet, 18<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 22 Octagonal-concave-molded leg detail, *jumu* cabinet, 18<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 23 Double-molded leg detail, *jumu* cabinet, 18<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 24 Corner molded leg, *huanghuali* cabinet detail, 18<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 25 Pagoda pattern wood grain detail, *jumu* cabinet, 17<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 26 *Huanghuali* cabinet with *nanmu* burl panels, 18<sup>th</sup> C. MD Flacks collection.
- Fig. 27 *Huanghuali* cabinet with speckled bamboo panels, 18<sup>th</sup> C. MD Flacks collection.
- Fig. 28 *Miaojin* decoration detail, black lacquer tapered cabinet, 17<sup>th</sup> C. Collection of the author
- Fig. 29 *Zhouzhi* inlay decoration, detail from a black lacquer tapered cabinet, 17<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 30 Tapered cabinet with stone panels decoration, 17<sup>th</sup> C.
- Fig. 31 *Jumu* tapered cabinet interior, 18<sup>th</sup> C.