

# Orientations

Chinese Furniture 1984-2003



Detail of *huanghuali* canopy bed with railings, p. 103

The Chinese Bed	Sarah Handler	4
What is Chinese Furniture?	Craig Clunas	16
The Changing Western Image of Chinese Furniture		
Classical Chinese Furniture in the Renaissance Collection	Sarah Handler	26
Proportion and Joinery in Four-part Wardrobes	Sarah Handler	36
Development of Furniture Design and Construction from the Song to the Ming	Wang Shixiang	42
Chinese Furniture in the Honolulu Academy of Arts: The Fredric Mueller Bequest	Stephen L. Little and James Jensen	56
Lost Interiors: Woodblock Prints and the Evidence for Chinese Furniture	Craig Clunas	65
Whose Throne Is It Anyway? The Qianlong Throne in the T.T. Tsui Gallery	Craig Clunas	73
Gustav Ecke	Tseng Yuho Ecke	80
Notes on Chinese Furniture	Gustav Ecke	81
Appendix to 'Notes on Chinese Furniture'	Tseng Yuho Ecke	90
Additional Examples of Classical Chinese Furniture	Wang Shixiang	96
Ming Furniture: Some Examples of Fakes and Forgeries and Their Methods of Detection	Grace Wu Bruce	107
The Novel <i>Jin Ping Mei</i> as a Source for the Study of Ming Furniture	Craig Clunas	116
An Early Treatise on Furniture Making: The <i>Lu Ban Jing</i>	Klaas Ruitenbeek	125
Examples of Ming Furniture in American Collections Formed Prior to 1980	Lark E. Mason, Jr.	130
Appraisal of Ming Furniture	Tian Jiaqing	138
Recent Acquisitions and Projects of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture	Curtis Evarts	142
The Elegant Vagabond: The Chinese Folding Armchair	Sarah Handler	146
Early Qing Furniture in a Set of Qing Dynasty Court Paintings	Tian Jiaqing	153
A Lacquer Table Screen in the Hermitage Museum	Maria Menshikova	162
Outstanding Pieces in Private Rooms: Chinese Classical Furniture in New American Collections	Sarah Handler	166
The Artistry of Chinese Furniture Joinery: A Manifold Expression	Curtis Evarts	174
Chinese Furniture in Hong Kong	Robert P. Piccus	179
Antique Chinese Furniture - A Restorer's Notes	Christopher Cooke	183
Chinese Bamboo Furniture Its History and Influence on Hardwood Furniture Design	Ronald W. Longsdorf	185
Zitan and Zitan Furniture	Tian Jiaqing	193
Side Tables, a Surface for Treasures and the Gods	Sarah Handler	200
When Vernacular Meets Fine: Thoughts on Chinese Furniture Studies	Nancy Berliner	210
The Art of Decorative Carving on Qing Dynasty Furniture	Tian Jiaqing	217
Enduring Traditions of Shanxi Furniture	John Kwang-ming Ang	222
Ming and Qing Furniture in the Collection of the Beijing Museum of Art	Wang Tong	232

Chinese Lacquered Wood Furniture: Two Examples from the Collection of Mimi and Raymond Hung	<i>Michael Knight</i>	236
Patination and Its Role in the Restoration of Classical Chinese Furniture	<i>Christopher Cooke</i>	246
Roses, Bamboo and the Low-back Armchair	<i>Sarah Handler</i>	250
A Seventeenth Century Folding Horseshoe-back Chair in The Minneapolis Institute of Arts	<i>Christopher Cooke</i>	257
Four High Yoke-back Armchairs Reunited as a Set	<i>Rose Kerr</i>	263
Alluring Furnishings in a Chinese Woman's Dominion	<i>Sarah Handler</i>	264
The Aesthetics of Chinese Furniture	<i>John Kwang-ming Ang</i>	274
New Directions in Chinese Furniture Connoisseurship: Early Traditional Furniture	<i>Curtis Evarts</i>	284
The Canopy Bed in the Light of Chinese Architecture	<i>Sarah Handler</i>	292
Dating and Attribution: Questions and Revelations from Inscribed Works of Chinese Furniture	<i>Curtis Evarts</i>	300
Regional Chinese Furniture	<i>Richard J. Latham</i>	308
Charlotte Horstmann at Eighty-two: Twentieth-century Evolution of Western Interest in Asian Art	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	318
Interview with Bob Piccus		326
Learning from the Past: Understanding More About Chinese Furniture	<i>Ruby Chan</i>	329
Exhibition Reviews:		
'Friends of the House: Furniture from China's Towns and Villages', Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	330
'Beyond the Screen: Chinese Furniture of the 16th and 17th Centuries', Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	<i>Valerie C. Doran</i>	331
'Special Exhibition of Furniture in Paintings', National Palace Museum, Taipei	<i>Curtis Evarts</i>	334
'Splendor of Style: Classical Furniture from the Ming and Qing Dynasties', National Museum of History, Taipei	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	335
Book Reviews:		
<i>Classic Chinese Furniture, Ming and Early Qing Dynasties Chinese Furniture</i>	<i>Margaret Medley</i>	338
<i>Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture: Ming and Early Qing Dynasties Dreams of Chu Tan Chamber and the Romance with Huanghuali Wood: The Dr S.Y. Yip Collection of Classic Chinese Furniture</i>	<i>Sarah Handler</i>	340
<i>Classical and Vernacular Chinese Furniture in the Living Environment - Examples from the Kai-Yin Lo Collection Chan Chair and Qin Bench: The Dr. S. Y. Yip Collection of Classic Chinese Furniture II</i>	<i>Craig Clunas</i>	344
<i>C.L. Ma Collection: Traditional Chinese Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region</i>	<i>Craig Clunas</i>	346
<i>Living with Ming: the Lu Ming Shi Collection</i>	<i>Lark E. Mason, Jr</i>	347
<i>A Leisurely Pursuit: Splendid Hardwood Antiquities from the Liang Yi Collection</i>	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	348
<i>Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture</i>	<i>Nancy Berliner</i>	349
<i>Ming Qing jiaju, vols 54 and 55 of Gugong bowuyuancang wenwu zhenpin quanji</i>	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	350
<i>Ming Qing jiaju, vols 54 and 55 of Gugong bowuyuancang wenwu zhenpin quanji</i>	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	351
<i>Living with Ming: the Lu Ming Shi Collection</i>	<i>Robert P. Piccus</i>	352
<i>Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture</i>	<i>Curtis Evarts</i>	353
<i>Commentaries</i>	<i>Margaret Tao</i>	354
Chinese Furniture - A Shrinking Problem	<i>Christopher Cooke</i>	356
Chinese Furniture: Overheated or Undervalued	<i>Ronald Longsdorf</i>	357
How Far to Go?	<i>Christopher Cooke</i>	358
Bibliography		359

Published by Orientations Magazine Ltd, 17th Floor, 200 Lockhart Road, Hong Kong

Tel: 2511 1368 Fax: 2507 4620 E-mail: omag@netvigator.com

All rights reserved. Copyright © 2004 Orientations Magazine Ltd. Printed by Magnum (Offset) Printing Co Ltd

The descriptions and attributions of pieces advertised are the responsibility of the individual advertisers.

Opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the publisher and editors.

Visit the *Orientations* World Wide Website at <http://www.orientations.com.hk/>

ISBN: 962-7956-28-7

# Dating and Attribution: Questions and Revelations from Inscribed Works of Chinese Furniture

Curtis Evarts

Some sixty years ago, having observed the confidence with which a dealer of antique Chinese furniture ascribed dates such as 'early Ming', 'late Ming', 'seventeenth century', 'late Kangxi' and 'Qianlong', Gustav Ecke posed the question, 'What marks enable him to make these attributions?' (Ecke, p. 29) Since then, Ecke and others have attempted to identify parameters for dating. However, little progress has been made, other than general speculations upon evolution and periods of material usage. Moreover, when specialists are pressed on the point, the word 'impossible' inevitably arises. Nevertheless, confident attribution continues to be expressed by dealers, museum curators and a growing number of authors who expound on the subject.

Experts have consistently pointed out the pitfalls that can prevent reliable assessment of dating (Ellsworth, pp. 15-16; Kates, pp. 11-18 and Wang, p. 163). Such obstacles include:

1. the lack of distinct dynastic or period style
2. the absence of furniture-makers of renown who wielded overwhelming influence
3. a thread of stylistic development which is obscured by simultaneous reproduction of traditional, archaic and regional styles
4. sparse literary reference due to a lack of interest from the cultivated elite
5. an insufficient number of signed or dated pieces to provide a reference group of securely dated objects

Undeniably, any approach to dating Chinese furniture faces complex hurdles.

It was not without challenge, when George Kates wrote: 'Some day, when we know more of wood, joinery, finish and other technical details, and have assembled perhaps a few dozen critical pieces, some of which – as occurs almost by accident – have been dated, we may more confidently move on to firmer ground' (Kates, p. 18). Over the last decade, as an abundance of furniture and related decorative art has been brought to light, furniture scholarship has penetrated many specific areas. More importantly, a collection of traditional works with datable inscriptions can now provide the first critical group for reference and analysis. To this end, we are indebted to C.L. Ma for his determination and resolve in setting aside over forty such works. When studied with numerous examples which I have documented in recent years, over 120 works of traditional furniture may now be reliably dated to reign periods or specific years throughout the Ming (1368-1644), Qing (1644-1911) and Republican periods.

The objects fit within a multilateral time frame that is providing shape and focus to a heretofore nebulous subject. Moreover, patterns emerging from a study of the variety of forms and style that have been produced throughout the centuries are also raising some significant questions that challenge traditional knowledge and assumption. It is hoped that a de-

tailed analysis of these works and their inscriptions will be published as a reference work in the near future. Serving as an introduction to the greater work in progress, this article draws from representative selections to discuss a few significant issues.

The occasional inscription marking an article of furniture reflects an ancient Chinese tradition of memorializing historical record and literary thought through the written word. Although generally more mundane, the purpose of furniture inscriptions can be classified under several categories. One group appears to be a craftsman's record of completion of work. These are often the marks of a lacquer specialist rather than a carpenter, as the application of lacquer is the final step in furniture production, and furthermore, the tradition of adding reign-mark inscriptions also has a long association with the lacquer craft. A second type appears to have been added at, or shortly after, the time of acquisition and seems to be unassociated with the craftsmen who created the work. Many such inscriptions are written in ink, and their grammatical style and content – date, party responsible for the acquisition, the placement location, and/or cost – suggest a record of purchase or ownership. A third category includes miscellaneous inscriptions that range from the filial memorial to those that spew out curses to anyone tempted by theft. Aside from valuable dating reference, such incidental information also lends historical provenance to individual works and extends our knowledge of traditional furniture into the living culture that surrounded it.

The current study of date-referenced furniture also draws upon material from dated tombs and archival records that impose a *terminus ante quem*. Such was the furniture entombed with the deceased Prince Zhu Tan in 1389 at Zhou county, Shandong province. The excavated miniature models and full-size objects represent a range of early Ming furniture. The style of a miniature horseshoe armchair – with thick, curved armrest set at a nearly horizontal plane, and large, scrolled handgrips – bears a greater resemblance to the Japanese model, a form originally derived from Chinese imports of the Tang (618-906) and Song (960-1279) periods, than to most extant examples with Ming and Qing attributions (see Addiss, p. 65). Of particular interest are the full-size wine tables constructed of *nanmu* timber with puddingstone panels and red-lacquer finishes (Fig. 6a). Notable early characteristics include the articulated style of the pierced *ruyi*-shaped aprons, the long-side aprons that terminate without short-side end caps and the high-arched humpback stretcher with carved decoration. Simplified variations of this pattern continued to be produced well into the Qing period (Fig. 12; see also Evarts, 1999, pl. 84).

With the exception of a few imperial works, such as a frequently cited carved lacquer altar table (Wang, cat. no. B139) and a filled-lacquer cabinet of flush-panel construction (Wang, cat. no. D135) with Xuande period (1426-35) inscriptions, dated fifteenth century furniture is virtually non-existent. Moreover, the unprecedented modernity of these examples suggests



(Fig. 1) Lamp stand  
Longqing period (1567-72), 1568  
Various softwoods  
Private collection

that palace traditions were isolated from the mainstream. For evidence of the latter tradition, secondary reference material must presently fill the gap. Thus, it is contemporary depictions of furniture such as those found in the illustrated children's character study *Xinbian duixiang* (see Goodrich, 1967) or faithful representations in paintings that may more accurately characterize popular styles.

Dated sixteenth century works are also relatively rare. However, the ten or so known examples appear to reflect traditional patterns. Such was the architecturally styled 'high waist', which is evident among tables with Jiajing period (1522-66) inscriptions (see Lee, pp. 315 and 318). A lamp stand with a Longqing period (1567-73) inscription dated to 1568 is likewise constructed with a high-waisted platform (Fig. 1). The sculpted crestrail of the lampstand may be compared to the humpback stretcher of the Hongwu period (1368-98) table (Fig. 6a). The use of pierced *taohuan* (ornamental) panels is also evident amongst works of earlier date (see Lee, p. 318 and Wang, cat. no. B138). The material-efficient 'subdivided panel-and-frame' was also commonly employed throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as evidenced in visual reference material as well as extant cabinets bearing dated inscriptions (Wang, cat. no. D28 and Beurdeley, p. 102). While these early characteristics are also found among eighteenth century works, such sculpted and architectural elements were gradually transformed into smooth linear expressions during the late Ming and early Qing period.

The seventeenth century was a period of innovation and transition in China. Dated works from this period range from steadfast traditional patterns to innovative works attempting to break the mould of conformity. The coffer in Figure 2 is of an early traditional form in Shanxi, and belongs to a group bearing inscriptions dating to 1633. Respective marks with the Chinese characters 'wu hao' ('no. 5') and 'jiu hao' ('no. 9') on this coffer and another documented piece suggest an original group of ten or more. The subdivided framework and narrow panels with relief-carved 'begonia' (*haitangshi*) motifs are also early features. The florid carving of the spandrels and cabriole leg feet



(Fig. 2) Coffer  
Chongzhen period (1628-44),  
1633, Shanxi province  
Chinese locust (*huaimu*)  
Height 88 cm, length  
110.5 cm, width 62.5 cm  
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing  
(Photography courtesy of C.L. Ma)



(Fig. 3) Detail of a table  
Wanli period (1573-1620), 1619, Anhui province  
Lacquered softwood  
Height 79 cm, length 223 cm, width 62.5 cm  
Private collection  
(Photograph courtesy of Putiyuan)

is robust and natural. The door-pull rings attached to double-loop mounts may be found on a number of cabinets with Wanli period inscriptions (see Beurdeley, p. 102; Dupont, pl. 12 and Low-Ber, p. 36). The Tianqi reign period (1621-27) coin which serves as an original drawer escutcheon mount, was of a type probably in circulation when the coffer was constructed. The use of reign-marked coins as auspicious furniture mounts was customary in the Shanxi region (Evarts, 2000, p. 57). The way in which the dating of the coin corresponds with the inscription further demonstrates the potential of original coin mounts for dating reference.

An early classical style is reflected in a lacquered side table with everted ends, the underside bearing a carved Wanli inscription dated to 1619 (Fig. 3). The style and finish of this table are characteristic of furniture from Anhui province during the late Ming period. Open-end aprons in the shape of an architectural bracket are also seen on tables excavated from the tomb of Zhu Tan (see Fig. 6a and Wang, cat. nos B38 and B138) as well as a miniature table excavated from the tomb of Pan Yunzheng (d. 1592) in Shanghai (Fig. 6b). The *yin-yang* contrast of rigid geometrical elements in the leg panels and rounded and softly modelled aprons, a decorative technique evident in many seventeenth century works, can also be seen in the table in Figure 3.

A high-waisted incense stand with a Chongzhen period (1628-44) inscription dated to the year 1637 reflects the continuity of traditional style (Fig. 4). However, a degeneration of the earlier finely articulated style is apparent in the soft profiling of the leg flanges and feet – a once fashionable trend that also appears as washed-out detail in other works of early seventeenth century date (see Wang and Zhu, pl. 172). Similarly amorphous profiling of apron-heads and hanging *ruyi* also appear in a long side table with everted flanges (Fig. 5). According to the neatly carved inscription on the underside, the table was ‘made in Kangzhu [a prefecture in western Guangdong province] during the winter of the *gengchen* year of the Chongzhen reign [1640]’. Angular scrolled beading, typically assumed to be a



(Fig. 4) Incense stand  
Chongzhen period  
(1628-44), 1637  
Lacquered softwood  
Height 52 cm,  
diameter 32 cm  
(After Lee, p. 323)



(Fig. 5) Detail of a table  
Chongzhen period (1628-44), 1619, Guangdong province  
*Tielimu*  
Height 89 cm, length 343.5 cm, width 50 cm  
Palace Museum, Beijing



(Fig. 6a) Detail of a wine table  
Hongwu period (1368-98)  
From the tomb of Prince Zhu Tan (d. 1389), Shandong province  
*Nanmu* with red lacquer and paddingstone panel  
Height 94 cm, length 109.5 cm, width 71.5 cm  
Shandong Provincial Museum

Qing-style decoration, is juxtaposed with softly profiled aprons. These combined elements appear to reflect a new late Ming/early Qing style.

The standard 'recessed-leg' table, which has remained virtually unchanged throughout the centuries, is the epitome of a perfected classical form. A miniature table excavated from Pan Yunzheng's tomb is one such example, and, as previously noted, is detailed with open-end aprons in an early style (Fig. 6b). A full-size table of similar form, with an inscription dated to 1595, is the earliest recorded item of Ming hardwood furniture (Fig. 6c). Constructed with *huanghuali* and a framed *tielimu* panel, it is evidence that different hardwood timbers were used together during this period. The line of the aprons and spandrels is fluid, with well-rounded corners. The end aprons, which are securely attached with exposed dovetail joinery, reveal an early technique rarely encountered among many similar examples dated to the late Ming. *Huanghuali* tables with inscriptions dated to the Qianlong (1736-95) and



(Fig. 6b) Detail of a miniature recessed-leg table  
From the tomb of Pan Yunzheng (d. 1589), Shanghai  
*Jumu*  
Shanghai Museum



(Fig. 6c) Detail of a recessed-leg table  
Wanli period (1573-1620), 1595, Jiangsu Province  
*Huanghuali*  
Height 82 cm, length 143 cm, width 75 cm  
Nanjing Museum

Tongzhi (1862-74) periods further demonstrate the production of classical-style hardwood furniture well into the Qing period (Figs 6d and g).

The revision of trade policies in 1572, permitting the importation of exotic timber from Southeast Asia, established the beginning of the hardwood furniture era. Assumptions regarding a changed stylistic preference and exhausted sources of hardwood have led to the supposition that such production had fallen off by the Qianlong period. However, numerous works of hardwood and softwood furniture in the so-called 'Ming' or 'classical' style with inscriptions dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are beginning to challenge such assumptions.

While furniture connoisseurs often disparage the eighteenth century as a period when the decorative arts fell into decline under the foreign rule of the Manchus, historians allude to the era as one of the most glorious in pre-modern Chinese history, particularly under the dominant influence of the Qianlong emperor, when China was probably the strongest and wealthiest nation on earth. The numerous works of domestic furniture with eighteenth century inscriptions certainly support the view that



(Fig. 6d) Detail of a recessed-leg table  
Qianlong period (1736-95), 1739, Hebei province  
*Huanghuali*  
Height 81.5 cm, length 193 cm, width 52.5 cm  
Private collection



(Fig. 6e) Detail of a square table  
Qianlong period (1736-95), 1748,  
Guangdong province  
*Tielimu*  
Private collection



(Fig. 6f) Detail of a side table with giant's-arm braces  
Qianlong period (1736-95), 1793, Jiangsu province  
*Jumu*  
Private collection



(Fig. 6g) Detail of a recessed-leg table  
Tongzhi period (1862-74), 1865  
*Huanghuali*  
Private collection

the period was one of prolonged economic prosperity and social stability. Moreover, the predominance of classical-style furniture with Qianlong inscriptions raises significant questions concerning the assumed preference of style outside imperial circles.

The elaborate decoration that is associated with the Qing period is a misconception fostered by a narrow focus on the imperial fashion and the assumption that the emperor's aesthetic preferences permeated all levels of the population. While imperial provenance is apparent in works such as a finely carved *zitan* incense stand dated to 1744 in the Sackler collection (see Drummond, p. 64), far more examples of classically styled furniture from Shanxi, Jiangsu and Guangdong provinces with contemporaneous inscriptions would suggest otherwise. Examples include the chairs and tables crafted in *tielimu* and lacquered softwoods in Figures 6d to g, 7, 10, 11 and 12. Similarly styled furniture is also realistically depicted in paintings of the period. A curious comparison may be made between the furniture of minimalist form and restrained style seen in a shop depicted on a scroll of the Qianlong emperor's southern tour in 1770 and that depicted in a Nanjing market scene painted 150 years earlier (Figs 8 and 9).

According to its inscription, the *huanghuali* table in Figure 7 was manufactured in the fifth year of the Qianlong reign (1739) at the cost of 8,000 cash of official coin. Without inscription, such a work would have been dated at least a

century earlier. Record of a restoration some 110 years later during the Daoguang period was added. Now, more than 150 years later, restoration is again required.

A finely carved *huanghuali* twelve-panel screen bearing an inscription dated to 1736 was recently offered by Christie's Hong Kong (see Christie's, *Important Chinese Art*, 29 and 30 October 2001, lot 738). Over three metres high, the screen is a typical example of many that have appeared on the market and in published collections over the last few years, apparently works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The availability of timber this length would seem to preclude the view that sources of *huanghuali* had been exhausted. The myth of changing fashion and timber shortage – never actually demonstrated – is exposed by numbers. The high ratio of classical-style furniture produced with softwood and lacquer to Qing-style pieces during this period, and the fact that dated Qing period works in *huanghuali* exceed Ming works, raises interesting questions which oppose the readily accepted seventeenth century attributions of traditional works in *huanghuali*.

The inscription on the age-worn *huanghuali* table in Figure 7 raises yet another issue about wood furniture that is assumed to have survived three to four centuries. While conditions of care and neglect may vary through generations of use, even hardwood furniture is not exempt from natural aging and abrasive wear. Age-generated patination may also be considered a



(Fig. 7) Recessed-leg table  
Qianlong period (1736-95),  
1739, Hebei province  
*Huanghuali*  
Height 81.5 cm, length  
193 cm, width 52.5 cm  
Private collection



(Fig. 8) Detail from *Lanterns of the Shangyuan Festival*  
Wanli (1573-1620) or Tianqi (1621-27)  
period, c. late 16th/early 17th century  
Handscroll, ink and colour on silk  
Private collection

measure for dating, but is frequently overlooked when attention is only given to form and style. Given that traditional forms of so-called 'Ming-style' furniture were reproduced throughout the Qing period, such measure must be given its proper weight.

Age in terms of 'depth of patination', can thus provide yet another important criterion upon which to judge the age of an object. In a broad sense, patination indicates surface accumulation and wear that results from use over a prolonged period as well as surface transformation and deterioration resulting from exposure. Allowing for the extremes of abuse or non-use, familiarity with the characteristics and range of such patination can also aid in the assessment of dating. For example, abrasive wear on a chair is most strongly pronounced along the armrest and handgrip, the front edge of a seat frame and the foot stretcher. A group of five yoke-back chairs in the C.L. Ma Collection, from right with inscriptions indicating ages of approximately 100, 150, 200, 250 and 300 years, visibly demonstrates the graduated increase in depth of wear throughout the generations of normal use (Fig. 10). Connoisseurship of age-

earned patination is also essential to distinguish the increasing number of reproductions and fakes being sold from the genuine antiques.

A Qianlong period side chair from this group exhibits a mature classical style (Fig. 11). From the inscription, we know it was one of thirty identical chairs produced in 1744. The cost of production has also been itemized, including carpentry work at 4.2 taels of silver; timber, materials, nails and fish glue at 2.3 taels of silver and lacquer work at 2 taels of silver, totalling 8.5 taels each. Such expense is consistent with other cost-recorded works throughout the Qing period, including coffer-style cupboards acquired for 10 taels of silver in 1685 (see Evarts, 1999, pl. 104) and 3.5 taels of silver in 1727, a small walnut side table in 1821 at 3.5 taels (*ibid.*, pl. 79), a carved walnut table screen with stone panel in 1793 at 3.2 taels (*ibid.*, pl. 145), a small lacquered cabinet with food dishes in 1752 at 2.5 taels, and a finely carved biscuit mould in 1776 at 0.3 taels. It is significant that the expense for a single chair of lacquered elm exceeded that of the huanghuali table (8,000 string cash price being



(Fig. 9) Detail from *The Qianlong Emperor's Southern Tour*, scroll 6  
By Xu Yang (act. at court c. 1751-76), 1770  
Handscroll, ink and colour on silk  
Height 68.8 cm, length 1,994 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
The Dillon Fund Gift (1988.350)



(Fig. 10) Yoke-back chairs

From front: Guangxu period, 1902; Tongzhi period, 1864; Jiaqing period, 1797; Qianlong period, 1744, and Kangxi period, 1701

Northern elm (*yumu*)

Heights 124 cm, 122 cm, 122.5 cm, 121 cm, 121.5 cm

C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

equivalent to eight *taels* of silver); this suggests that value was placed on labour rather than solely on material. Craig Clunas has also drawn attention to this emphasis in his discussion of inventoried furniture confiscated from the corrupt minister Yan Song during the Jiajing period (Clunas, p. 25).

The red-lacquer table in Figure 12 bears a Qianlong period inscription dated to 1745. Wine tables excavated from the tomb of Prince Zhu Tan are early examples (see Wang, cat. no. B139) with similar proportion and style. Such tables are also frequently depicted in late Ming woodcuts as dining or 'wine tables' for one or two. The popularity of wine tables of 'inserted shoulder joint/sword leg' style is further suggested by several works bearing Wanli period inscriptions (see Wang and Zhu, pls 172 and 181). Examples with Qianlong period inscriptions from the Shanxi and Jiangsu regions also demonstrate the continuity of another traditional pattern well into the Qing period. Wang Shixiang's comments made some ten years ago regarding the early style of the Qianlong table in Figure 12, alludes to an important problem which has largely been ignored: 'If this table were judged only by its appearance, it would be dated mid-Ming or earlier...this proves yet again the difficulty of correctly dating Ming furniture without supporting information' (Wang, cat. no. B120). The poetic inscription carved into the lacquer tabletop commemorates a prized possession and demonstrates the limitation of function-oriented terms such as 'painting', 'lute' (*qin*) and 'wine' tables:



(Fig. 11) Side chair

Qianlong period (1736-95),

1744, Shanxi province

Northern elm (*yumu*)

Height 121 cm,

width 53 cm,

depth 41 cm

C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

(Photograph courtesy

of C.L. Ma)



(Fig. 12) Wine table  
Qianlong period (1736-95),  
1759, Jiangsu province  
Lacquered softwood  
Height 83 cm, length 103 cm, width 50.5 cm  
Yangzhou Municipal Museum

The decorative style, inspired by an ancient cart  
The craftsmanship, modelled after a jade stand.  
When you lean upon it  
Misty clouds arise.

And not only for one occasion:  
Paintings to the left, histories on the right,  
Sometimes a lute laid across  
Or an occasional libation of sweet wine.

Cherishing its radiance,  
Praising its quintessential mould  
I bequeath its use to sons and grandsons  
On this account I respectfully submit.

Tenth year of the Qing Qianlong reign,  
Summer of the *yichou* year  
Inscribed by Wang Tingzhang.

In *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Ecke noted that 'Even a hundred years ago, Ming tradition lingered on in Soochow [Suzhou] families...' (Ecke, p. 32). It may well have been limited exposure and/or the narrow focus on hardwood furniture that prevented Ecke and others like him from seeing that furniture of traditional style and form was being produced throughout the 1930s and 1940s – a phenomenon evident from works with twentieth century inscriptions. Old craftsmen from the Lu Ban Guan in Beijing will occasionally let slip tales of how new *huanghuai* works were sold as antiques to foreigners at that time. In the last few decades, with the development of China's economy and her international reputation for classical furniture-making, there has been renewed momentum in the reproduction of Ming-style furniture. Today, furniture and antique markets are filled with reproductions and newly made fakes, and not surprisingly, furniture with fake inscriptions is also making an appearance.

While the study of datable furniture is a labyrinth laden with traps, it nonetheless exposes significant myths and simplistic notions that impede objective assessment. Though long considered an impossible task, there is now a new impetus for schol-

arship and connoisseurship to pursue the challenge of dating and to instil the field of Chinese furniture with greater credibility and respect.

Curtis Evarts, formerly curator of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, is an independent consultant and researcher in the field of antique Chinese furniture. His numerous contributions may be found on the website [www.chinese-furniture.com](http://www.chinese-furniture.com).

Unless otherwise stated, all photography is by the author.

#### Selected bibliography

- J.M. Addis, *Chinese Ceramics from Datable Tombs*, London and New York, 1978.  
Michel Beurdeley, *Chinese Furniture*, Tokyo, New York and San Francisco, 1979.  
Craig Clunas, 'Furnishing the Self in Early Modern China', in Nancy Berliner, *Beyond the Screen: Chinese Furniture of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Boston, 1996, pp. 21–35.  
Maurice Dupont, *Les Meubles de la Chine*, London, 1926.  
William Drummond, 'Chinese Furniture: The Sackler Collections', in *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society* 3:3 (Summer 1993), pp. 54–66.  
Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Rutland, 1962.  
Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, *Chinese Hardwood Furniture in Hawaiian Collections*, Honolulu, 1982.  
Curtis Evarts, *C.L. Ma Collection: Traditional Chinese Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region*, Hong Kong, 1999.  
—, 'New Directions in Chinese Furniture Connoisseurship: Early Traditional Furniture', in *Orientations*, January 2000, pp. 50–57.  
L. Carrington Goodrich, *15th Century Illustrated Chinese Primer Hsin-pien tui-xiang szu-yen: Facsimile Reproduction with Introduction and Notes*, Hong Kong, 1967.  
George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, New York, 1962.  
Lee Yu-kuan, *Oriental Lacquer Art*, New York and Tokyo, 1972.  
Fritz Low-Ber, 'Chinese Lacquer of the Middle and Late Ming Period', in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 24, 1952.  
Wang Shixiang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 2 vols, Hong Kong, 1990.  
— and Zhu Jiajin, *Zhu mu ya jiao qi, Gongyi meishu bian*, vol. II, *Zhongguo meishu quanji*, Beijing, 1988.