

Orientalations

Chinese Furniture 1984-2003



Detail of huanghuali canopy bed with railings, p. 103

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

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Ming Qing jiaju, vols 54 and 55 of *Gugong bowuyuancang wenwu zhenpin quanji*
Edited by Zhu Jiajin with captions and contributions by Hu Desheng
296 and 340 pages; colour illustrations
Shangwu Yinshuguan, Shenzhen, 2002
ISBN 9620753569 and 9620753577
Price: HK\$420 per volume (hardback)

In 1995, the Palace Museum initiated a venture with the Shangwu Yinshuguan (Commercial Press) to publish the hoard of cultural treasures stowed away within the Forbidden City. Approaching 1,000,000 objects, some 12,000 were selected for systematic publication in sixty volumes. Volumes 54 and 55 are entitled *Ming Qing jiaju* (*Furniture of the Ming and Qing Dynasties*). While the predominant use of Chinese might deter the English reader, the wealth of new material, with illustrations of a quality unprecedented for a mainland publication, provides a visual feast.

Editor Zhu Jiajin, a prominent historian and research fellow at the Palace Museum since 1943, has touched upon the subject of Chinese furniture throughout his career, with perhaps his most significant contribution appearing in the publication of records from the Yongzheng period imperial furniture workshops. Zhu's introductory material, which traces the development of Ming and Qing furniture styles, closely follows that set out by Wang Shixiang, with further elaboration in areas of his own expertise. Co-author Hu Desheng, a deputy researcher at the Palace Museum with curatorial responsibilities more directly associated with the furniture collection, has written several books and articles on the subject. His captions provide typical descriptive detail as well as occasional insight drawn from palace records related to the original placement of works.

Some 450 pieces of furniture housed in the Palace Museum collection are documented in these volumes. While the majority are fine hardwood and lacquer examples, the inclusion of numerous items of bamboo, root, ceramic and softwood furniture is a refreshing break from the tedium of publications devoted to hardwood. The Palace Museum collection reveals the splendid variety and range of high-quality furnishings suited for the imperial realm. Furthermore, having been sequestered within the Forbidden City, it retains a high degree of immunity from the relentless questions of restoration and reconstruction that haunt many others. A few pieces, such as a black lacquer canopy bed (pl. I:3) and *luohan chuang* (pl. I:4) from Shanxi, represent works added to the collection over more recent years. Zhu also explains the inclusion of a token amount of lacquered elm as being representative of the most widely used furniture – not only in the homes of commoners, but also by those who, in various capacities of service, lived outside the inner sanctum of the Forbidden City.

The division into two volumes perpetuates the formative dating system based on quasi-Ming/Qing stylistic characteristics. Zhu identifies the early and middle Ming period as the 'pre-hardwood era of lacquer furniture', when traditional patterns established during the Song and Yuan dynasties continued to be produced. Examples include two previously unpublished incense stands with Xuande period (1426–35) inscriptions. Zhu also asserts that although production of hardwood furniture emerged during the late Ming period, high-quality lacquer furniture continued to hold pride of place throughout the Ming and Qing periods, especially for court ceremonies and temple settings. Lacquer works with Wanli, Chongzhen and Kangxi period inscriptions also serve as benchmark reference pieces. Zhu further states that,

although without datable inscriptions, a significant amount of lacquer furniture of Ming period or earlier date still survives in such places throughout China. While the broad-ranged attribution of 'Ming period' is used throughout the catalogue, Zhu expresses the view that hardwood furniture was virtually non-existent prior to the Wanli period, and that such Ming-style furniture continued to be produced during the Qing dynasty.

While this publication maintains the status quo relative to dating, the inclusion of numerous objects with datable inscriptions inadvertently inches the study of dating forward. Herein irreconcilable differences of style appear when juxtaposed with objects attributed to a similar period. The publication of archival records also frequently demonstrates inconsistent dating methods. For example, a *zitan* rose chair with a very dubious Ming attribution retains its record as furnishing the Daode Tang, a residence established for imperial concubines during the Qing dynasty (pl. 40). Continued exposure and investigation of such factual evidence will lead to more objectivity in the area of dating appraisal.

Zhu, contending that the Manchu culture itself was relatively unsophisticated, sees the emergence of 'Qing-style' furniture as a phenomenon dissociated from direct influence of dynastic change. Reiterating Wang Shixiang's assessment, he also sees the emergence of new styles resulting from the broader circumstances of a developing economy, changing aesthetics, as well as a few individuals such as Liu Yuan, Li Yu and Da Shan who wielded significant impact throughout the transitional 17th century to set new trends. Were Zhu to back from the strictly sinocentric viewpoint, he might also note that a relaxation in the barriers of traditional Chinese convention under foreign rule may have permitted new-found creative expression, especially within the imperial realms. It is curious, however, that Liu Yuan – who managed the Yongxin Temple workshops during the Kangxi period – is repeatedly cited as an individual associated with changing style. Zhu quotes a contemporary of Liu, who recorded: 'These days everyone uses the ink cakes, ceramics, wood articles and lacquer objects made according to the old traditional patterns; however, no one realizes they are coming from Liu Banruan's [Liu Yuan] designs.' One wonders, how it was, after all, that Liu Yuan's designs were distinguished. Overshadowed in discussions of Ming/Qing stylistic development is the underlying pattern of reproduction that is endemic to Chinese culture.

While much of the textual detail is only available in Chinese, some concession to the English reader is made with translated caption headings and a token glossary. However, interpretations of wood terminology are loose – 'mahogany' for *hongmu* (blackwood), 'beech' for *jumu* (southern elm), 'red sandalwood' for *zitan*, 'cedar' for *nanmu*, and black bamboo for palm. This laxity contrasts with Hu Desheng's effort to distinguish furniture made from *huali* (rosewood) and *huanghuali*. Having identified nearly a quarter of the Palace Museum's Ming-style 'huanghuali-like' furniture as *huali* will certainly stir the murky debate surrounding wood identification. Hu states that both were used during the Ming and Qing periods. *Huanghuali* is defined as a species principally associated with Hainan island; *huali*, or *caohuali*, is differentiated as a distinct species which produces a timber somewhat lighter in colour than *huanghuali*.

Dating and wood identification are old issues that will be debated for years to come. More important are the objects themselves, which will outlive our ideas about them. In this, *Ming Qing jiaju* certainly provides a refreshing new look at Chinese furniture, and should be considered a 'must have' for any serious student of the subject.

Curtis Evarts