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Legend on a Bicycle

Wang Shixiang, the internationally renowned Chinese scholar and author of *Classic Chinese Furniture*, will be 83 this year. He rises at six each morning and rides his bicycle to buy fresh produce at a market just outside the walls of the Forbidden City near where he lives with his wife and scholarly companion, Yuan Quanyou. Doing his research is not quite as easy as it used to be; eye problems have developed and now Wang relies on his wife's eyes for reading. But still he rides the bicycle. For Wang Shixiang (pronounced wang shih-sheeang), it is an indispensable scholarly tool. He has been using one for 50 years to travel the countryside in search of the antique furniture that he has brought to the world's attention in his books. On occasion, when he bought a piece of furniture, he took it apart and bound up the parts to carry them on his bicycle like a bundle of firewood. Such inconspicuous transport was sometimes more than a convenience: while Wang has been fighting to preserve and describe classical Chinese furniture, others have at times been as busy breaking up such high-style antiques either for precious materials or because they were "anti-revolutionary" symbols of the pre-Communist past.

Wang Shixiang's life has been full of reversals as well as accomplishments. He was raised within a family of privilege and rank, inheriting a large courtyard compound with numerous rooms where he could display his collection of Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture as it grew. He was educated in Beijing, but fled the Japanese occupation during World

War II. Upon returning in 1945, Wang received an official post with responsibility for identifying cultural relics looted by the Japanese during the war. He also began gathering materials related to a new interest—the history of Chinese furniture.

Under the new Communist regime in the late 1940s, he was appointed Head of Exhibitions at the Palace Museum. But in 1953, during the Movement Against the Three Evils, Wang was accused and dismissed. Undaunted, he finished his draft of *Ancient Chinese Furniture from Shang to Early Qing*, and in 1961 he

one point, the two of them slept inside a large cupboard with the doors removed.

The image of Wang inside the cupboard is apt, since his scholarship has illuminated the inside as well as the outside of Chinese furniture. His books are full of lucid line drawings (in addition to superb photos) that convey the essential anatomy of each piece of furniture. To understand old furniture, Wang bicycled around to restoration shops, gaining first-hand knowledge from old furniture craftsmen with links to the past. Returning home, he would sometimes



received tenure to teach the history of Chinese furniture at the Central Academy of Arts. But then, amid the general persecution of scholars during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, Wang's antique furniture and research materials were confiscated. So was his house. And he was interned in a work camp to tend pigs and oxen. After being released, he and his wife were permitted the use of one room in the family house. Their impounded furniture was returned a piece at a time. With quarters so cramped, Wang and his wife disassembled many of the pieces to store them more compactly, and at

recreate a newly discovered joint by carving a turnip, which his wife would then use as a model from which to produce a drawing of the joint for publication.

Resourceful and resilient, Wang has shown that extraordinary work can be carried out with humble tools. Over the last decade, classical Chinese furniture has joined the ranks of the world's great furniture traditions—and this is due in no small part to one man on a bicycle. *Curtis Evarts is a furniture historian and consultant now living in Taiwan. He was associate curator of the former Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in California.*